



January 2001

# Using African American Narratives to Analyze Social Policy

Roberta R. Iversen

*University of Pennsylvania*, [riversen@sp2.upenn.edu](mailto:riversen@sp2.upenn.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://repository.upenn.edu/spp\\_papers](http://repository.upenn.edu/spp_papers)

---

## Recommended Citation

Iversen, R. R. (2001). Using African American Narratives to Analyze Social Policy. Retrieved from [http://repository.upenn.edu/spp\\_papers/26](http://repository.upenn.edu/spp_papers/26)

Reprinted from *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, Volume 21, Issue 3/4, 2001, pages 7-28.  
Publisher URL: [haworthpress.com](http://haworthpress.com)

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. [http://repository.upenn.edu/spp\\_papers/26](http://repository.upenn.edu/spp_papers/26)  
For more information, please contact [libraryrepository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:libraryrepository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

# Using African American Narratives to Analyze Social Policy

## **Abstract**

This paper explores how African American literature can enrich the analysis of social policy in social work graduate courses. The historic debate between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois about black progress, and its reflection in subsequent works by Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Shelby Steele, and Cornel West, illustrate that the debate remains present in contemporary affirmative action and welfare reform policies. Using ethnic narratives can expand adult students' ability to analyze the purposes, consequences, and values underlying social policies and help social workers formulate, document and buttress new policy positions. Such abilities are especially critical for social policies in which race remains a critical influence.

## **Keywords**

african american literature, social policy, social african american literature, social policy, social

## **Comments**

Reprinted from *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, Volume 21, Issue 3/4, 2001, pages 7-28.

Publisher URL: [haworthpress.com](http://haworthpress.com)

# Using African American Narratives to Analyze Social Policy

Roberta Rehner Iversen

**ABSTRACT.** This paper explores how African American literature can enrich the analysis of social policy in social work graduate courses. The historic debate between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois about black progress, and its reflection in subsequent works by Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Shelby Steele, and Cornel West, illustrate that the debate remains present in contemporary affirmative action and welfare reform policies. Using ethnic narratives can expand adult students' ability to analyze the purposes, consequences, and values underlying social policies and help social workers formulate, document and buttress new policy positions. Such abilities are especially critical for social policies in which race remains a critical influence. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2001 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

**KEYWORDS.** African American literature, social policy, social work education, racism, adult learners

---

Roberta Rehner Iversen, PhD, LSW, is Assistant Professor and Clinician Educator, University of Pennsylvania, School of Social Work, 3701 Locust Walk, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6214. (E-mail: riversen@)ssw.upenn.edu.)

The author wishes to thank the JTSW reviewer for very helpful comments.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Sociological Society in 1998 and at the National Black Family Summit Conference in 1999.

Social policy is essentially cultural values in action—the ways in which social values about opportunity for progress and the welfare of the populace are translated into laws and programs (Iversen, 2000b). Thus, examining the value premises of a policy and its underlying ideological assumptions are crucial aspects of policy analysis. In addition, historical analysis helps to identify the evolutionary nature of a policy, illustrating how values and ideologies persist and/or change over time (Karger & Stoesz, 1998). Essentially, analysts must grapple with the meanings of policy text and context.

Whether autobiographical, fictional, or essay in form, narrative literature also presents values of a culture, reflecting both contemporary and historic ideologies. Some critics consider ethnic narratives fundamentally unique in the American canon because the cultural and historic context is so strong (Maitino & Peck, 1996). Personal narrative in particular demands both emotional engagement and sustained reflection (Hall, 1999); the reader's learning and understanding depends on active engagement with the text. This pedagogical mode is particularly appropriate for adult learners such as social work graduate students (Belensky et al., 1986).

Policy analysis and a liberal arts perspective are key components of contemporary social work graduate education. According to the Curriculum Policy Statement of the Commission on Accreditation (CSWE, 1994): "Students must be taught to analyze current social policy within the context of historical and contemporary factors that shape policy . . . the process of policy formulation, and the frameworks for analyzing social policies in light of principles of social and economic justice" (p. 141). In addition: "Students . . . must be capable of thinking critically about society, about people and their problems, and about expressions of culture such as art, literature, science, history, and philosophy" (p. 138). Unfortunately, most scholarship about the use of ethnic narrative in cultural analysis is oriented to undergraduate students (Kroll, 1992) and focused on teaching literature courses (Hall, 1999; Maitino & Peck, 1996).

In this paper I explore how ethnic literature can enrich the analysis of social policy in graduate social work courses. I use the classic debate between Booker T. Washington and William Edward Burghardt Du Bois about black educational and occupational progress, and its reflection in subsequent ethnic literature, to illustrate that the debate remains present in contemporary affirmative action and welfare reform policies. Chapters from Washington's *Up From*

*Slavery* (1901), Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), and four subsequent African American narrative works illustrate how the competing positions were perpetuated over the 20th Century. The four additional works are: Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940); Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952); Shelby Steele's *The Content of Our Character* (1990); and Cornel West's *Race Matters* (1993).<sup>1</sup>

The goal of this examination is both pedagogical and activist. Analysis of textual material can expand general understanding about how policy development reflects and contributes to persistent racial and ethnic discrimination. Such examination can identify hidden or disguised implications of policy for marginalized or disenfranchised persons in particular, opening the door for counterproposal or revolt. Historical analysis also may help policy makers avoid perpetuating subtle discriminatory and stereotypical assumptions in subsequent policy formation. In the classroom, examining policy through literary works can broaden student knowledge about both policy formulation and the scope and persistence of racism. Students discover how authors repeat historical themes to underscore their observations or beliefs and, similarly, how policymakers draw upon such historical representations in order to justify their preferred positions.

As this exploration is based on literary deconstruction of the narrative texts, the discussion may overstate similarities and understate the complexity of the rich intellectual presentations of the writers. Yet as with most explorations, it is also valuable to note what stands out starkly and obviously. A subsequent examination should include work by black female intellectuals to incorporate gender in the analysis. African American women have historically been workers and the objects of much social policy, but seem to be the "Invisible Woman" in these texts.<sup>2</sup>

### ***THE WASHINGTON-DU BOIS DEBATE***

Education and work are considered core contributors to African American attainment, yet opposing views about how they are associated with opportunity have persisted for over one hundred years. Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois represent the two prominent streams of thinking in this controversy.

In brief, Washington's directive for black progress in *Up From Slavery* was vocational education, massive improvement of personal

character, work that was valuable to whites, and general accommodation to white sensibilities and demands. A half-century later, Ralph Ellison followed to some degree in the Washington tradition. While literary critics may argue that as a whole, Ellison's views in *Invisible Man* were more akin to those of Du Bois (O'Malley, 1994), Ellison is quoted most frequently by those drawing upon Washington for the origin of their position. Shelby Steele's *The Content of Our Character* is particularly reminiscent of Washington in its central emphasis on individual initiative and assumption of general societal fairness.

In contrast, Du Bois's mandate for black progress in *The Souls of Black Folk* was classical education among the able, vocational education for the masses, development of leadership among the educated elite, and concurrent development of political and civic rights and power. In *Native Son*, Richard Wright also viewed individual initiative and responsibility as embedded in social and historical realities. Cornel West's *Race Matters* similarly reflected concern about the impact of social hardships on black progress and warned that a focus on black supremacy "still allowed white people to serve as the principal point of reference" (West, p. 99), thus restricting attainment. In haunting echo of Du Bois, West rued the perpetuity of the "problem" ideology:

Nearly a Century later, we confine discussions about race in America to the "problems" black people pose for whites rather than consider what this way of viewing black people reveals about us as a nation. (West, p. 3)

Ultimately, W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, and Cornel West propounded that societal responses to race or color were the root variables influencing black attainment. This view was repeated often over the century using Du Bois's frequently quoted maxim: "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (Du Bois, p. 209).

As complex, contentious, and at times magnified out of proportion as the disagreement was between Washington and Du Bois (Lewis, 1993), the debate was most simply about how African Americans could progress in American society. As this debate is not yet resolved, the following sections amplify how the two streams of thinking are reflected in contemporary affirmative action and welfare reform policy. Analysis of the purposes and objectives, ex-

pected consequences, and underlying value assumptions of these policies (Rein, 1983) is illustrated by selected material from the six narrative works.

### ***AFFIRMATIVE ACTION POLICY***

Although many think that affirmative action originated in the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s, the Freedmen's Bureau established by President Abraham Lincoln in 1865 was in many respects an early affirmative action program. The Bureau was a vehicle for the federal government to "assist affirmatively the social and economic progress of the recently emancipated African Americans" (Kemp, 1995). Policy objectives were to educate, socialize and legislate between them and the free society. In practice, these objectives were limited to providing some opportunity for skill building, predicated on the belief that educational opportunity alone would equalize individuals' economic positions. Further limiting federal responsibility for such equalization, after Lincoln was assassinated President Andrew Johnson promised to veto any bill that proposed to do more for "black Americans" than for "whites" (Kemp, 1995).

One hundred years later it was clear that constructing the American labor force and black economic progress were antithetical goals. Sustained federal involvement with affirmative action began in 1941 with President Franklin Roosevelt's Executive Order that barred discrimination against black contractors in the government and war industry, and continued with President Kennedy's Executive Order in 1961 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. These legislative actions were essentially passive attempts to stop race-based discrimination in hiring or contracting, designed to preserve the American myths of "color-blindness" and "equal opportunity."

Anti-discrimination became a more proactive paradigm after President Lyndon Johnson's famous Howard University speech in June 1965 where he declared: "You do not take a person hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, 'you are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair" (Skrentny, 1996). This speech spawned a contentious period of preferential treatment to right inequalities of the past: in essence, equality of opportunity *and* result. Designed initially to remedy African American

inequalities, affirmative action policies eventually expanded to include gender, age, and disability. Fractious civil rights legislation, court actions, state ballot initiatives, and emotional debate persists into the 21st Century.

### ***Purposes and Objectives of Contemporary Affirmative Action Policy***

#### *Equality of Opportunity vs. Equality of Opportunity and Result*

*Washington stream.* Both periods of policy formation echoed the Washington claim that equality of opportunity was the objective of prescriptive efforts for blacks. Broadly, Washington believed that opportunity for progress would occur naturally for individuals who earned it:

The time will come when the Negro in the South will be accorded all the political rights which his ability, character, and material possessions entitle him to. I think, though, that the opportunity to freely exercise such political rights will not come in any large degree through outside or artificial forcing, but will be accorded to the Negro by the Southern white people themselves, and that they will protect him in the exercise of those rights. (Washington, p. 155)

Although Steele supported federal measures for equality of opportunity, his opposition to preferential treatment reflected Washington's position about the primacy of individual initiative:

It leaps over the hard business of developing a formerly oppressed people to the point where they can achieve proportionate representation on their own (given equal opportunity) and goes straight for the proportionate representation. (Steele, p. 115)

As a result, Steele rued the negative effects of affirmative action in both educational and work arenas. He called educational advancement a "revolving door" and believed that "preferential treatment does not teach skills, or educate, or instill motivation" (Steele, p. 121).

*Du Bois Stream.* In sharp contrast, Du Bois believed that the program and policy objective for emancipated blacks was equality of op-



portunity and result. While proclaiming that public schools were “the greatest means of training decent self-respecting citizens,” Du Bois outlined financial inequities that disadvantaged black education in the South: “Of every five dollars spent for public education in the State of Georgia, the white schools get four dollars and the Negro one dollar” (Du Bois, p. 331).

Similarly, West emphasized that progress necessitated both structural and behavioral features, as he critiqued and approved of different aspects of affirmative policies. Although like Steele he acknowledged that at times, “mobility by means of affirmative action breeds tenuous self-respect and questionable peer acceptance for middle-class blacks” (West, p. 52), he underscored “the fact that affirmative action policies were political responses to the pervasive refusal of most white Americans to judge black Americans on that basis [quality of their skills]” (West, p. 52).

While West ultimately favored class- over race-based affirmative action, he readily acknowledged the gains some women and minorities made in educational and work spheres following the 1960s legislation. Characterizing this initial legislation as minimal but enforceable, he suggested variations on the general theme rather than discarding all affirmative measures. West’s recognition of “America’s historically weak will toward racial justice and substantive redistributive measures” (West, p. 64) formed the base for this compromise position, reminiscent of the like concerns of Du Bois and those of present-day supporters of affirmative action.

### *Expected Consequences of Affirmative Action*

#### *Imbalances Corrected by Market Forces vs. Imbalances Corrected by Legislation*

*Washington Stream.* Washington expected that market forces would correct imbalances in opportunity, as do many opponents of affirmative action. The basic principle underlying Washington’s imperative for industrial education was that “the individual who can do something that the world wants done will, in the end, make his way regardless of race” (Washington, p. 112). Adherence to market mechanisms such as supply and demand would forward black progress:

Wherever one of our brickmakers has gone in the South, we find that he has something to contribute to the well-being of the community into which he has gone; something that has made the community feel that, in a degree, it is indebted to him, and perhaps to a certain extent, dependent upon him. (Washington, p. 111)

Similarly, in Steele's view structural reparation would hinder black progress:

Blacks cannot be repaid for the injustices done to the race, but we can be corrupted by society's guilty gestures of repayment. Affirmative action is such a gesture, It tells us that racial preferences can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. (Steele, p. 119)

Washington's and Steele's faith in the primacy of individual and market forces is reflected in the strength of public support for recent ballot initiatives in California and Washington (Holmes, 1998) that prohibited use of racial or gender preferences in public education, employment, and state contracting.

Further, echoing Washington's and Ellison's fears about the dangers of alienating whites, Steele warned about the danger of backlash: that affirmative action promoted a kind of "white innocence" that "means seeing themselves and blacks in ways that minimize white guilt" (Steele, p.8). The Regents of California v. Bakke case in 1978 that spawned the rhetoric and legal action of "reverse discrimination" by some affirmative action opponents reflects this strain of thinking.

*Du Bois Stream.* In contrast, Du Bois perceived that legislation was necessary to correct imbalances in opportunity, similar to those forwarding affirmative policies. He credited the Freedmen's Bureau for affirmative accomplishments on behalf of freed slaves, but also critiqued its insufficient appropriations, discriminatory organization, and inadequate follow-through: "half-hearted steps taken to accomplish this" (Du Bois, p. 225). A similar critique pertains to anti-discrimination court decisions before the 1960s. Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 loosely specified the implementation of public school desegregation at "all deliberate speed" (Graglia, 1994), but did not define or enforce "speed."

Fifty years later, Wright's pessimism about the likelihood that reparative efforts alone would equalize opportunity for blacks was expressed through the voice of the Southern newspaper editor in *Native Son*:

We of the South believe that the North encourages Negroes to get more education than they are organically capable of absorbing, with the result that northern Negroes are generally more unhappy and restless than those of the South. If separate schools were maintained, it would be fairly easy to limit the Negroes' education by regulating the appropriation of moneys through city, county and state legislative bodies. (Wright, p. 324)

That Wright essentially believed such views to be vituperative and inhumane was demonstrated through the editor's rhetorical characterization of Bigger as an "ape" and a "beast" who should be lynched and killed. Wright's view, together with West's aforementioned comments about America's historically weak will toward racial justice, illustrate why proponents of post-60s affirmative action assert that however flawed, legislative support for such policies remains essential for black progress (Wilson, 1996). More recently, William Julius Wilson's (1999) ideas about "affirmative opportunity" emphasize both the compensatory and moral nature of opportunity-enhancing policies and programs.

### *Value Assumptions Underlying Affirmative Action*

#### *Individual Merit vs. Societal Responsibility*

*Washington Stream.* Washington's assumption that blacks will progress through merit rather than societal intervention is at the core of contemporary opposition to affirmative action. Although he attended cursorily to the "obstacles, discouragements, and temptations" (Washington, p. 48) unique to black youth because of their slave legacy, Washington emphasized that "mere connection with what is regarded as an inferior race will not finally hold an individual back if he possesses intrinsic, individual merit" (Washington, p. 50).

Nearly a century later, Steele echoed Washington's values about minimal societal and maximal individual initiative. Steele urged

blacks not “to focus on racism and to neglect the individual initiative that would deliver them from poverty—the only thing that finally delivers *anyone* from poverty” (Steele, p. 16). Despite major changes over the century in the scope of government, Steele asserted that Martin Luther King, Jr. “understood that racial power subverts moral power” (Steele, p. 19) and that King’s statement that “blacks were ‘behind in a footrace’ . . . because of history, of few opportunities, of racism” was primarily a “challenge” (Steele, p. 138) to black personal responsibility, not a call to government and individuals together. That American society was a meritocracy was assumed.

*Du Bois Stream.* In contrast, foreshadowing the pro-affirmative action position, Du Bois assumed that progress for freed men must involve societal mandates:

Such men feel in conscience bound to ask of this nation three things: (1) The right to vote; (2) Civic equality; and (3) The education of youth according to ability. (Du Bois, p. 248)

Illustrating the complexity of Ellison’s positions about black progress discussed above, his assumptions about the need for social supports were more reminiscent of Du Bois than Washington. *Invisible Man* concluded that “Yessing” the majority was the only route to progress because blacks:

Had no money, no intelligence apparatus, either in government, business of labor unions; and no communications with our own people except through unsympathetic newspapers, a few Pullman porters . . . and a group of domestics. (Ellison, p. 51 1)

West reiterated Du Bois’s and Ellison’s position that federal intervention remained necessary to black opportunity:

Given the history of this country, it is a virtual certainty that without affirmative action, racial and sexual discrimination would return with a vengeance. (West, p. 64)

Du Bois also emphasized that economic redistribution was essential to black progress:

This class [of black landlords and mechanics] is not nearly so large as a fairer economic system might easily make it. (Du Bois, p. 325)

West saw similar need for economic mechanisms, viewing affirmative action as part of an important redistributive chain that must be strengthened to confront and eliminate black poverty:

Yet in the American political system, where the powers that be turn a skeptical eye toward any program aimed at economic redistribution, Progressives must secure whatever redistributive measures they can, ensure their enforcement, then extend their benefits if possible. (West, p. 64)

### **WELFARE POLICY**

Most 20th century welfare policies were based on a mythic construction of “proper” gender and work roles (Gordon, 1994). Essentially, men’s primacy in the public sphere of work was balanced by women’s relegation to the private sphere of home and family. This construction ignored the realities of race and class in that women of color have had historically high rates of labor force participation and working-class men and women have never had the choice to not work. Nevertheless, the social and economic needs of the “single mother” and how to define her role have been a central focus of welfare policy for at least a century.

The earliest welfare policies for single women, Mother’s or Widow’s Pensions (1910-1935) and Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), part of the Social Security Act of 1935, were designed to enable deserted or widowed mothers to stay at home to care for their children, emphasizing that women’s proper “labor” was mothering. In reality, the level of aid seldom sufficed to keep these mothers out of the labor force. Moreover, society’s growing ambivalence about which women were and were not deserving of aid was exemplified by the ADC eligibility requirement of a “suitable home.” This requirement also allowed the racial prejudices of welfare investigators to influence determination of “suitability.”

Under the Public Welfare Amendments of 1962, the name of ADC was changed to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Along with new social, educational, and vocational ser-

vice provision in the context of a strong economy, work as the antidote to poverty emerged as a policy emphasis. AFDC legislation now measured the goal of “strengthened family life” in terms of recipients’ material rather than maternal success. For the first time, women’s “proper” role was worker as well as mother.

In the 34 years between the enactment of AFDC and its successor, The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), the marital status and reproductive behaviors of poor women became a preeminent societal and policy concern. Accordingly, this period of welfare policy was accompanied not only by expanded social services and counseling programs, but also a proliferation of legislated work programs. Escalating welfare rolls, rising social welfare expenditures, severe cutbacks in social services, and periods of economic recession in the 1980s hastened the legislation of the mid-1990s commonly known as “welfare reform.”

PRWORA emphasizes work, not education or public assistance. Replacing AFDC’s means-tested, continuous federal grants, state-administered block grants called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) were instituted. TANF requires adults in families to participate in work activities after receiving assistance for 0-24 months, depending on the state, and assistance is limited to a maximum of 60 months of lifetime receipt. TANF programs in many states are guided by “work first” philosophies that eliminate most pre-work educational and job training efforts. Essentially, public assistance has been reoriented from income maintenance to job placement (Hughes, 1998, p.4). Moreover, although welfare policy is not overtly aimed at African Americans, welfare supports constricted as the proportion of blacks on the rolls rose.

### ***Purposes and Objectives of Welfare Reform***

#### *Work First vs. Development and Work*

*Washington Stream.* Washington’s goal was that:

Students themselves would be taught to see not only utility in labor, but beauty and dignity, would be taught, in fact, how to lift labor up from mere drudgery and toil, and would learn to love work for its own sake. (Washington, p. 108)

His rigorous industrial and behavioral focus was designed to counteract the negative attitudes about work that African Americans formed in slavery: “The whole machinery of slavery was so constructed as to cause labor, as a rule, to be looked upon as a badge of degradation, of inferiority” (Washington, p. 38). Thus, Washington eschewed education that did not teach manual labor, asserting that personal character was strengthened by labor and not by abstract learning. Presaging PRWORA’s “work first” philosophy, *Up From Slavery* illustrated Southerners’ fear that education among freed men would counteract work productivity:

The idea was too prevalent that, as soon as one secured a little education, in some unexplainable way he would be free from most of the hardships of the world, and, at any rate, could live without manual labor. (Washington, p. 71)

Ellison reflected Washington’s caution about the dangers of non-vocational education through *Invisible Man*’s academic journey that resulted in expulsion rather than triumph. Blacks and whites both advised Invisible Man to forget about his education and get a job instead: whites from whom he sought jobs, the black factory engineer, and the Brotherhood. However, in a plight that is remarkably similar to that experienced by many TANF recipients, the only job Invisible Man could get was financially inadequate and personally exploitative.

*Du Bois Stream*. Du Bois openly condemned Washington’s emphasis on vocational education: “Mr. Washington’s programme practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races” (Du Bois, p. 246). Du Bois argued a counter position that development and work were the objectives for freed men: they needed both to work and to think. Du Bois’s objective finds contemporary voice in welfare demonstration programs that show how education and skill building contribute to job retention (Haimson, Hershey & Rangarajan, 1995; Herman, 1997).

The disjunction between the minimization of education in PRWORA and research that finds education critical to the development of self-sufficiency (Silvestri 1997) reflects Wright’s more pessimistic view about black progress. Through Max’s impassioned plea to understand Bigger’s behavior in a larger social context, Wright concurred with Du Bois that real social and economic op-

portunity was the key to black progress. However, Max believed that racism severely limited Bigger's opportunity:

He attended school, where he was taught what every white child was taught; but the moment he went through the door of the school into life he knew that the white boy went one way and he went another. School stimulated and developed in him those impulses which all of us have, and then he was made to realize that he could not act upon them. Can the human mind devise a trap more skillful? This Court should not sit to fix punishment for this boy; it should sit to ponder why there are not more like him! (Wright, p. 458)

Contemporary findings that the quantity of available jobs for TANF recipients is insufficient (Pease & Martin, 1997), that recipients often earn below-poverty wages (Cancian et al., 1999) largely due to inadequate skill levels, and that policy implementation has resulted in "invisible barriers" (Iversen, 2000a) reflect Wright's and Du Bois's position that development, work and opportunity are all essential to progress.

### ***Expected Consequences of Welfare Reform***

#### *Self-Esteem vs. Self-Sufficiency*

*Washington.* The Washington stream of scholars presaged contemporary views that receipt of public assistance destroys motivation and personal character (Ginsberg, 1998; Murray, 1984). Washington viewed negative work attitudes as a byproduct of slavery: "labor was something that both races on the slave plantation sought to escape" (Washington, p. 38). Similar assumptions about human behavior are reflected in PRWORA: people need externally-imposed motivation to move from welfare to work and incentives to work will be strengthened by improving individuals' characters. Policy imposition of fixed time limits and program and employer emphasis on "life or soft skills" embody these assumptions.

In the same vein, the work emphasis of PRWORA is expected to maximize self-esteem and dignity among new workers. For example, referring only skeletally to how the federal government could have done more to advance the work efforts of freed slaves, Washington urged blacks to develop dignity through labor:



At Hampton I not only learned that it was not a disgrace to labour, but learned to love labour, not alone for its financial value, but for labour's own sake and for the independence and self-reliance which the ability to do something which the world wants done brings. (Washington, p. 68)

Even more ardently, Steele warned about the “anti-self . . . the unseen agent of low self-esteem” (Steele, p. 41) that is vulnerable to discriminatory societal beliefs and actions if individual behaviors do not counter them. This form of “racial anxiety . . . can . . . increase our self-doubt and undermine our confidence so that we often back away from the challenges that, if taken, would advance us” (Steele, p. 39). Steele felt that racial anxiety was the primary deterrent to black progress: “as strong or stronger even than the discrimination we still face” (Steele, p. 39). Using PRWORA's “soft skills” rhetoric, Steele averred:

Oppression conditions people *away* from all the values and attitudes one needs in freedom-individual initiative, self-interested hard work, individual responsibility, delayed gratification, and so on. (Steele, p. 69)

The “temporary” aspect of assistance under TANF is designed to dispel such attitudinal barriers to work attachment. Moreover, contemporary proponents in the Washington stream have not addressed whether the high rates of initial job loss experienced by former welfare recipients (Hershey & Pavetti, 1997) also affect the expected gains in self-esteem.

*Du Bois Stream.* In contrast, critics of PRWORA decry the legislative focus on immediate work and promote a longer-range focus on obtaining jobs with the potential for self-sufficiency (Burtless, 1997). These critics conceptualize progress as a complex result of forces such as education, personal development, higher wages, and increased job availability (Wilson, 1996). Du Bois similarly outlined the complexity of black economic progress one hundred years earlier:

But I insist it was the duty of some one to see that these workmen were not left alone and unguided, without capital, without land, without skill, without economic organization,

without even the bald protection of law, order, and decency. (Du Bois, p. 324)

For others in the Du Bois stream, the “work-first” emphasis of PRWORA presents an unduly simplistic view about how individuals move from public assistance to the labor market. In particular, “work first” elides the subtle intersection of opportunity and racism. For example, Wright attributed the persistence of economic and employment disadvantage among blacks to the fact that businesses in their communities were owned and run by non-blacks:

He passed a bakery and wanted to go in and buy some rolls with the seven cents he had . . . He would wait until he came to a Negro business establishment, but he knew that there were not many of them. Almost all businesses in the Black Belt were owned by Jews, Italians, and Greeks. (Wright, p. 288)

In further echo of Du Bois’s rhetoric about the color line, Wright described the price-gouging inherent in racially-segregated communities: “He came to a chain grocery store. Bread sold here for five cents a loaf, but across the ‘line’ where white folks lived, it sold for four” (Wright, p. 289).

Similarly, Cornel West viewed the goal of self-sufficiency within a context of poverty and macro economic change. He embedded black unemployment in “the exodus of stable industrial jobs from urban centers to cheaper labor markets here and abroad” (West, p. 5), that together with housing segregation, white fear of black crime and an influx of immigrants, “all have helped erode the tax base of American cities just as the federal government has cut its supports and programs. The result is unemployment, hunger, homelessness, and sickness for millions” (West, p. 5). Opponents of welfare reform voice like concerns.

### *Value Assumptions Underlying Welfare Reform*

#### *Individual Responsibility vs. Societal Responsibility*

*Washington Stream.* Perhaps the pre-eminent value disparity in the Washington-Du Bois debate about black progress was their different weighting of individual initiative, similar to the pro- and anti-PRWORA positions. Like the simplified “get a job” thrust of

welfare reform, Washington told blacks to “get an industrial education.” For Washington, individual responsibility was the valued component of progress:

That any man, regardless of color, will be recognized and rewarded just in proportion as he learns to do something well . . . however humble the thing may be. (Washington, p. 181)

Foreshadowing PRWORA’s devolution of welfare from federal to state levels, Washington cautioned that government interference would reduce individual competence:

Among a large class there seemed to be a dependence upon the Government for every conceivable thing. The members of this class had little ambition to create a position for themselves, but wanted the Federal officials to create one for them. (Washington, p. 76)

Steele’s additional focus on the individual’s psychological interior philosophically and rhetorically reflected the legacy of both Washington and Ellison. Attending to the importance of becoming an “individual,” Steele wrote:

One of my favorite passages in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is his description of the problem of blacks as [the] task . . . of making ourselves individuals . . . We create the race by creating ourselves and then to our great astonishment we will have created something far more important: we will have created a culture. (Steele, p. 30)

The precedence of “Personal Responsibility” over “Work Opportunity” in the legislation’s title perpetuates the Washington stream’s elevation of individual over societal responsibility for black economic progress.

*Du Bois Stream.* Foreshadowing the position of PRWORA critics, Du Bois attributed continuing racial discrimination and inadequate policy efforts directly to Washington’s individualistic prescription for black progress:

His doctrine has tended to make the whites, North and South, shift the burden of the Negro problem to the Negro’s shoul-

ders and stand aside as critical and rather pessimistic spectators; when in fact the burden belongs to the nation. (Du Bois, p. 251)

Further, Du Bois believed that the economic success of African Americans was vulnerable to the actions of unscrupulous Southern whites, suggesting that stronger legal controls were needed to eliminate such customs:

I have seen . . . an ignorant, honest Negro buy and pay for a farm in installments three separate times, and then in the face of law and decency the enterprising American who sold it to him pocketed money and deed and left the black man landless, to labor on his own land at thirty cents a day. (Du Bois, p. 325)

Wright echoed Du Bois's position that opportunity among blacks would not happen by merit alone through Bigger's dilemma about whether or not to accept the Dalton job:

He could take the job at Dalton's and be miserable, or he could refuse it and starve. It maddened him to think that he did not have a wider choice of action. (Wright, p. 12)

TANF time limits and sanctions coupled with off-hour and poor-paying jobs put many welfare recipients in similar positions.

For Wright, Bigger's uncertainties, and his consequent emotions, were immediately and firmly embedded in a pervasive context of white racism: "I could fly one of them things (airplanes) if I had a chance" (Wright, p. 17) . . . "Goddamnit! They don't let us do *nothing* . . . the white folks . . . Why they make us live in one corner of the city? Why don't they let us fly planes and run shops . . ." (Wright, p. 20-21). Critics of PRWORA worry similarly that controls against discrimination, a suspected contributor to job loss among former welfare recipients, are insufficient in the new legislation (Holzer, 1996). The Du Bois stream's belief that economic progress needed personal, social, and government supports is reflected in only scattered responses to TANF: attempts to expand the types and amounts of post-secondary education that count as work (Kalil et al., 1998) and advocacy for the development of a range of community service employment opportunities for those unable to enter the labor market (Savner & Greenberg, 1997).

### CONCLUSION

Two streams of thinking about African American progress are represented by Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* and W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*. These opposing positions, known as the Washington-Du Bois debate, persisted throughout the 20th century in African American narratives and contemporary affirmative action and welfare reform policy.

Booker T. Washington's stream was dominated by the conviction that individual initiative and vocational education were the central components of black progress. Currently, the opponents of affirmative action policy and proponents of welfare reform represent Washington's individualistic position and its later iterations in the narratives of Ralph Ellison and Shelby Steele. In contrast, proponents of affirmative action and critics of the 1996 welfare policy represent W.E.B. Du Bois's more complex, contextual conviction that individual and societal factors are necessary for progress. Related reflections of this position are found in the narratives of Richard Wright and Cornel West.

The persistence of opposing positions in the Washington-Du Bois debate for over one hundred years can be interpreted as signaling the core ambivalence in America, if not downright antipathy, about black economic progress and genuine equality between blacks and whites. Even in potentially enlightened academic environments, social work graduate students frequently overestimate African American gains from the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960's and underestimate the pervasive and detrimental influence of racism on educational and occupational outcomes (Feagin & Feagin, 1999; Wilson, 1996; 1999). The range of opinion in any classroom or social discussion about affirmative action or welfare reform exemplifies these mis-estimations.

Ethnic narratives provide a particularly rich medium for policy analysis by adult social work learners. The six narratives used here, together or in historical pairs, can expand students' ability to analyze the purposes and objectives, expected consequences, and value assumptions that underlie personal views and social policies. Such analyses can also help social workers formulate, document and support developing policy positions. Ultimately, an understanding of repeated historic patterns and their related rhetoric can be used in combination with knowledge-building to affect the direction of human interchange and policy

development—especially critical for those interactions and policies in which race remains a critical influence.

## NOTES

1. The editions used for this paper are listed with an asterisk in the References section. West's is the hardcover edition; the other five are the paperback editions. For a 6-week module, I either assign the full texts or the following: Washington—Preface and Chapters 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15; Du Bois—The Forethought and Chapters 1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 10; full texts of Ellison and Wright; Steele—Introduction and Chapters 1, 5, 7, 9, and Epilogue; and West—Preface, Introduction, and Chapters 3, 5, 6, 7.
2. I am grateful to the *JTSW* reviewer for this insight.

## REFERENCES

- Belenky, M.F., Clinchy, B.M., Goldberger, N.R. & Tarule, J.M. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing*. New York: Basic.
- Burtless, G.T. (1997). Welfare recipients' job skills and employment prospects. *The Future of Children*, 7: 39-51.
- Cancian, M., Haveman, R., Meyer, D.R., & Wolfe, B. (1999). Before and after TANF: The economic well-being of women leaving welfare. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Institute for Research on Poverty.
- Council on Social Work Education. (1994). *Curriculum policy statement for master's degree programs in social work education*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- \*Du Bois, W.E. B. (1903/1965). *The souls of black folk*. In J. H. Franklin, (Ed.), *Three Negro classics*, pp. 207-399. New York: Avon.
- \*Ellison, R. (1952/1990). *Invisible man*. New York: Vintage.
- Feagin, J.R. & Feagin, C.B. (1999). *Racial and ethnic relations*, 6th edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Ginsberg, L. (1998). *Conservative social welfare policy*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Graglia, L.A. (1994). Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964: From prohibiting to requiring racial discrimination in employment. In N. Mills, (Ed.), *Debating affirmative action*, pp.104-114. New York: Delta.
- Gordon, L. (1994). *Pitied but not entitled: Single mothers and the history of welfare*. New York: The Free Press.
- Haimson, J., Hershey, A. & Rangarajan, A. (1995). *Providing services to promote job retention*. A Report Series of the Postemployment Services Demonstration. Princeton: Mathematica Policy Research.
- Hall, J. C. (Ed.) (1999). *Approaches to teaching Narrative of the life Frederick Douglass*. New York: Modern Language Association of America.

- Herman, A.M. 1997. *Report on the American workforce*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor.
- Hershey, A.M., & Pavetti, L.A (1997). Turning job finders into job keepers. *The Future of Children*, 7, 74-86.
- Holmes, S.A. (1998, May 4). "Washington State is Stage for Fight Over Preferences." *The New York Times*, A1, 15.
- Holzer, H.J. (1996). Employer demand, AFDC recipients, and labor market policy. Discussion Paper: DP No. 1115-96. Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Institute for Research on Poverty.
- Hughes, M.A. (1998). *Critical issues facing Philadelphia neighborhoods: Welfare reform*. Report from the Vice President for Policy Development. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.
- Iversen, R.R. (2000a). TANF policy implementation: The invisible barrier. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 27, 139-159.
- Iversen, R.R. (2000b). Welfare reform, reproductive reform or work reform? In J. Barnett, (Ed.), *Planning for the new Century*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Kalil, A., Corcoran, M.E., Danziger, S.K., Tolman, R., Seefeldt, K. S., Rosen, D., & Nam, Y. (1998). *Getting jobs, keeping jobs, and earning a living wage: Can welfare reform work?* Research Report from Center on Poverty, Risk, and Mental Health and Program on Poverty and Social Welfare Policy. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.
- Karger, H.J. & Stoesz, D. (1998). *American social welfare policy*, 3rd edition. New York: Longman.
- Kemp, J. (1995). "A New Approach to Honor the Past: Affirmative Action Based on Need." *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 9/13/95, p. A1 1.
- Kroll, B.M. (1992). *Teaching hearts and minds*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University.
- Lewis, D. L. (1993). *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a race 1868-1919*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Maitino, J.R. & Peck, D.R. (Eds.). (1996). *Teaching American ethnic literatures*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico.
- Murray, C. (1984). *Losing ground*. New York: Basic.
- O'Mealley, R.O. (Ed.). (1994). *New essays on Invisible Man*. New York: Cambridge University.
- Pease, J. & Martin, L. (1997). Want ads and jobs for the poor: A glaring mismatch. *Sociological Forum*, 12, 545-564.
- Rein, M. (1983). *Social policy*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- Savner, S., & Greenberg, M. (1997). Community service employment: A new opportunity under TANF. CLASP. Available: <http://epn.org>.
- Skrentny, J.D. (1996). *The ironies of affirmative action*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Silvestri, G.T. (1997). Occupational employment projections to 2006. *Monthly Labor Review*, 120, 58-83.
- \*Steele, S. (1990). *The content of our character*. New York: Harper Collins.
- \*Washington, B. T. (1901/1965). *Up from slavery*. In J. H. Franklin, (Ed.), *Three Negro classics*, pp. 23-205. New York: Avon.

- \*West, C. (1993). *Race matters*. Boston: Beacon.
- Wilson, W.J. (1999). *The bridge over the racial divide*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Wilson, W.J. (1996). *When work disappears*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- \*Wright, R. (1940/1993). *Native son*. New York: Harper Collins.