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Online publication date: 26 March 2010

To cite this Article Hasenfeld, Yeheskel(2010) 'Organizational Responses to Social Policy: The Case of Welfare Reform', Administration in Social Work, 34: 2, 148 — 167

To link to this Article DOI: 10.1080/03643101003608976

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03643101003608976
Organizational Responses to Social Policy: The Case of Welfare Reform

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I argue that worker-client relations and their consequences are the actual manifestation of people changing policies. A theoretical framework is presented to explain the path from the policy to its outcomes, which includes the policy design, the institutional and political economy of the local community in which the policy is implemented, the strategic choices made by the organization, the responses and adaptations of the workers, and the resulting worker-client relations and their consequences. The framework is applied to the implementation of welfare reform, demonstrating why there is an inherent disjuncture between the policy design and the actual organizational practices.

Social policies that aim to change behavior, such as welfare-to-work, include four sets of assumptions. First, they socially construct the target population, such as welfare recipients, by attributing to it common values, images, and behavioral problems (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Related, the policies adopt a causal explanation of problem behaviors (i.e., diagnosis) such as lack of work ethic as cause of welfare dependency. Third, the policies articulate a desired behavioral outcome (i.e., prognosis) such as self-sufficiency. Fourth, the policies specify a set of instruments, such as welfare-to-work, that are expected to produce the desired outcomes (i.e., treatment).

Underlying these policies are moral assumptions. For example, in the case of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the legislation makes the following moral pronouncements about marriage to guide the policy:

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(1) Marriage is the foundation of a successful society. (2) Marriage is an essential institution of a successful society which promotes the interests of children. (3) Promotion of responsible fatherhood and motherhood is integral to successful child rearing and the well-being of children (U.S. Congress, 1996, p. 6).

Yet, such moral assumptions, especially those aimed at changing populations constructed as deviant or dependent, can be quite contentious and fraught with ambiguities. Again, in the case of welfare, there are conflicting moral assumptions about the degree to which poor single-mothers are responsible for their own predicament or are victims of circumstances beyond their control (Handler & Hasenfeld, 2007). Moreover, rarely can the policy assumptions be verified or validated empirically in an unambiguous way. As a result, the policy effects are likely to be complex and to produce unintended consequences (Thacher & Rein, 2004).

Therefore, the translation of people changing policies into organizational practices and their resultant consequences are likely to be complex and highly dependent on external and internal organizational forces. To understand how the policy is ultimately experienced by its target population and the organizational factors that shape the paths from policy to outcome, I propose a theoretical framework that resembles a Russian nested doll (see Figure 1). The outer shell or sphere is the policy design. While setting external boundaries, it leaves considerable space and discretion to local officials responsible for the policy implementation. Policy makers at the national or state level tend to buffer themselves from the conflicting policy goals and moral assumptions by delegating the implementation to the local community via the logic of decentralization, devolution, and privatization. Policy makers prefer to distance themselves from the actual resulting practices as long as the programs affirm broad policy assumptions through myth and ceremonies that certify “deservingness,” affix the assumed causes onto the target population, and confirm the desired outcomes. Therefore, it is within this context that the local human service organizations implementing the policy design become the arena in which the conflicting and ambiguous moral assumptions are played out in the day-to-day encounters between workers and clients.

The second nested shell consists of the institutional political economy of the local community in which the policy creates opportunities and threats to different interest groups. They mobilize to influence the organizations designated to implement the policy and attempt to embed their values in their structures and practices. The differential power resources that each group controls, emerging coalitions, and the negotiations among them will influence the strategic choices and constraints the organizations face (Wamsley & Zald, 1976)
These organizations, the third nested shell, make choices among contending moral assumptions or conflicting rules that, in turn, are reflected in their structure and service technologies. Several factors influence these choices. First, the organizations will incorporate in their structures and practices values of dominant interest groups in its environment that will garner them greater legitimacy. Related, they would uphold moral assumptions that enhance the mobilization of critical resources. Third, the organizations will adopt practice ideologies, as reflected in the service technology, to justify the adaptations of the policy instruments to external and internal constraints and exigencies. Therefore, their service technology will reflect the strategic choices they make to adapt and survive.

Within the organization, in the fourth nested shell, are the workers themselves. At the street level, they use their own discretion to develop

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**FIGURE 1** From policy design to policy outcomes: The organizational context.
routines to cope with the conditions of their work such as access to resources, caseload size, and performance measures. They also embed their own personal assumptions and experiences into their daily practices. Worker-client relations are a manifestation of the workers’ personal values and their strategies to manage their conditions of work. These values and strategies are learned and shared with other workers and become, therefore, institutionalized routines in the organization (Feldman & Pentland, 2003).

The practices they develop individually and collectively shape the worker-client relations that are the inner shell in which the actual encounters take place. These encounters determine how clients experience the policy. The content and structure of these relations play a major role in determining the policy outcomes. Studies of such diverse organizations as medical clinics (Moore et al., 2004), mental health services (Lambert & Barley, 2001), schools (Muller, Katz, & Dance, 1999), correctional programs (Palmer, 1995), and child care (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005) show that the quality of the worker-client relations is a key determinant of service effectiveness.

I apply this model to welfare reform (also known as TANF) showing its usefulness in explaining how welfare recipients ultimately experience the reform and how such experiences influence its outcomes. In particular, this framework enables us to understand why there is an inherent gap between the intent of the policy and its actual implementation.

A major purpose of welfare policies that target the “undeserving” poor is to affirm dominant moral beliefs about work ethic, family structure, gender relations, and race and ethnicity (Handler & Hasenfeld, 1991). No matter how welfare departments respond to new legislative mandates, they institutionalize a set of underlying moral assumptions that have remained fairly constant (Handler & Hasenfeld, 1997). First, welfare mothers have always been viewed as “outsiders.” Being poor is always an individual moral fault. Second, the giving of public aid is always seen as a threat to the work ethic. Therefore, the conditions and amount of aid have always forced recipients to work. Third, dependence on aid is viewed as morally corrupting. It encourages cheating, fraud, and laziness. Fourth, welfare is always about upholding the dominant moral code regarding family relations, gender, and ethnicity. This is done through coercive intrusion into the lives of the recipients whether through “home investigations,” setting a “family cap,” or imposing restrictions in how the grant can be used.

These moral pronouncements are seldom non-controversial. Politicians, at the national or state level, enact the broad moral statements and symbols. The local welfare departments are expected to adopt ceremonies that reflect these symbols by distinguishing between the “deserving” and “undeserving,” enforcing eligibility requirements, administering a work test, monitoring
compliance, and sanctioning failures to comply (Handler and Hasenfeld, 1991, p. 20). By delegating to local authorities the responsibility of actual administration, the upper-level politicians buffer themselves from the conflicts that inevitably arise from their implementation. It is at the local community where the moral conflicts of welfare are most keenly felt. There are federal regulations, but there has always been considerable room for local values and political and economic interests to play themselves out in the administration of the local welfare departments (Katz, 1986).

Welfare workers also exercise considerable discretion in the ways they administer the welfare rules (Brodkin, 1997). Formally, welfare workers are subject to voluminous rules and regulations. But as Jody Sandfort (2000, p. 742) points out, “Front-line workers exert their own judgments and develop their own strategies for utilizing administrative rules, completing standard forms, and responding to clients.” The workers’ own personal beliefs and experiences influence how they implement welfare policies. Taken together, these forces lead to considerable variations in how local welfare departments administer welfare. In effect, each county has its own version of welfare policy as it is expressed in the day-to-day practices of its welfare workers.

WELFARE-TO-WORK

The welfare reform of 1996 (and its reauthorization under the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005) signals a reaffirmation of several long-standing moral assumptions about welfare recipients. First and foremost, welfare is no longer an entitlement. By replacing AFDC with block grants, responsibility for the care of poor families has shifted back to the states. True, the federal government sets strict time limits, a work trigger, and participation and spending requirements. Still, the federal government has devolved much of its historic responsibility for poor families to the states. The states, in turn, have made highly diverse and complex policy choices regarding eligibility, level of benefits, work requirements, sanctions, duration of aid, and transition to self-support (State Policy Documentation Project, 2000).

Second, the work test is the cornerstone of TANF. Failing the work test signals lack of deservingness. Almost all states make receipt of aid contingent on participation in work activities. States have some discretion in spelling out what constitutes work activities, as well as exemptions from them, and most of them delegate that discretion to the counties. Still, as I will show, no matter what the particular “work test” each state and county implement, it has clearly become a major tool, coupled with sanctions, in denying aid and reducing the welfare rolls (Cherlin, Bogen, Quane, & Burton, 2002; Rector & Youssef, 1999).
Third, dependence on welfare is viewed as corroding proper parenting roles and as harmful to children. Marriage, paternity, and child-support have to be strengthened. As a result, 21 states have a family cap policy restricting benefits to children born to a recipient parent. Many states require women applying for aid to cooperate with child support enforcement agents and to identify the father. In addition, most states require applicants to sign a “personal responsibility” contract that sets a variety of behavioral requirements such as participation in work activities, child and/or minor parent school attendance, cooperation with child support enforcement requirements, child immunization or preventive health measures, and an agreement to achieve self-sufficiency within a set time period (State Policy Documentation Project, 2000). Failure to meet these requirements can result in sanctions.

Finally, TANF relies heavily on sanctioning recipients to attain their compliance. Noncompliance, without good cause, with either the work requirements or the personal responsibility contract can trigger sanctions. TANF encourages states and counties to use sanctions as a means to achieve compliance, because states that fail to achieve minimum rates of participation by adult recipients (50% for single-parent families and 90% for two-parent families) are themselves subject to penalty. Indeed, states are given considerable leeway to implement stringent sanctions.

Organizationally, TANF devolves responsibility to the local level and encourages the privatization of public assistance through contracts with the private sector (for-profit, nonprofit and faith-based organizations). Local discretion is celebrated and viewed as the most effective way to respond to the problems of welfare dependency. Welfare departments are being changed in order to institutionalize these moral conceptions. New organizational forms are adopted with the overall goal to place recipients in the labor market and to encourage “family values.” The new organizational myth is that welfare departments are no longer in the business of determining eligibility and providing cash assistance. Rather, they are employment agencies, assisting the recipients into the labor market (Handler & Hasenfeld, 2007).

THE WELFARE DEPARTMENT AS AN EMPLOYMENT AGENCY

Welfare reform (TANF) imposes on welfare departments two inherently incompatible goals. The first, and traditional, goal is the determination of and ongoing monitoring of deservingness for aid. The second goal is rehabilitative, enabling recipients to become gainfully employed, encouraging marriage, and reducing out-of-wedlock pregnancies. The first goal calls for a people-processing or bureaucratic technology in which eligibility forms control the interaction and its content. In contrast, helping recipients become self-supporting calls for a people-changing or professional technology
in which the interpersonal relations between the worker and the client are the key determinant of the service outcomes.

In choosing which organizational form to adopt, welfare departments face considerable pressures to retain the bureaucratic over the professional model. As shown by Irene Lurie (2006) in her study of the transformation of welfare departments, the very same external and internal forces that produce the highly bureaucratic structure in the welfare department still exist, and are even reinforced under TANF. First and foremost, the same client ideologies that pervade the welfare department have only been reinforced under TANF. These ideologies continue to define welfare recipients as morally deficient and untrustworthy. The punitive approach—setting time limits on receipt of aid, making aid contingent on mandatory work requirements, and using sanctions to enforce compliance—signals and justifies treating recipients as pathologically dependent on welfare, lacking in work ethic, and as unmotivated and shirking their responsibilities as mature adults and parents.

Second, welfare departments face strong pressures to reduce the welfare rolls, meet the federal quotas, curb costs, and comply with accountability measures based on quantity rather than quality. Related, the de-professionalized welfare workers, lacking any appreciable training in interpersonal skills, continue to have to process a large number of cases and enforce more rules and requirements. Fourth, and most important, the entrenched bureaucratic model used to determine eligibility and to enforce compliance crowds out the professional model needed to provide employment services. As long as welfare departments and their workers must process applicants for aid, certify the eligibility of those on aid, and enforce the work requirements, little room is left for any significant ongoing helping relationship. Indeed, in such an environment, one would expect that the response of welfare departments to the new TANF work requirements will be to incorporate them in their existing bureaucratic practices, put the onus on the recipients to comply with them, and enforce the new work requirements through coercive means. Choosing such a strategy has the advantage of minimizing organizational transformation costs, relying on existing practices, and minimizing organizational risks.

Welfare departments have adopted a “work first” service technology that seeks to move recipients into employment as quickly as possible. With some variations, the core technology consists of mandatory job club/job search in which recipients learn how to prepare a resume, search for jobs, and interview for employment. In addition, recipients may receive support services such as assistance in child care and transportation. Those failing to obtain a job may be required to enroll in short-term remedial education, training, work experience, or subsidized work (Brown, 1997). Even though “work first” results in modest, if any, economic benefits to the former recipients who experience considerable employment instability (Johnson & Corcoran, 2003;
Wood, Moore, & Rangarajan, 2008), it has been institutionalized as the dominant service technology because it has been shown to reduce the welfare rolls and save government money (Riccio, Friedlander, & Freedman, 1994). Moreover, it affirms the myth that welfare recipients lack work ethic and prefer to depend on welfare. It employs ceremonies of sending recipients to job club/job search as confirmation that little preparation, but rather motivation, is needed to find a job. It comports well with the eligibility culture of the welfare departments by providing a readily available “work test” of deservingness. The service technology can be easily routinized. The processing of recipients into job search does not require extensive individualized practices, nor does it entail implementing complex employment services. It precludes the need to invest in extensive worker-client relations. At the same time, it grants workers considerable discretion. Finally, “work first” is relatively inexpensive, requires limited case management expertise, and has the virtue of deterring applications and hastening exit (Youdelman & Getsos, 2005).

DEVOLUTION TO THE LOCAL LEVEL

The implementation of welfare policies at the community level is an expression of locally dominant institutional logics and the local political economy, which includes the political elite in power, local government bureaucracies and practices, and the existence of various interest groups who view welfare as an opportunity or threat. The generosity or stinginess of local welfare officials tends to reflect the ideologies of the political elites in power as well as the perceived threat of the poor. In their study of variations in post TANF state welfare policies, Matthew Fellows and Gretchen Rowe (2004) found that states enacting strict eligibility requirements, more rigid work requirements, and less generous cash benefits have a higher proportion of African American recipients, are ideologically less liberal, have a higher-income representational bias, and are dominated by Republican legislators. Similarly, Joe Soss and colleagues (Soss, Schram, Vartanian, & O’Brien, 2001) showed that states that enact tougher TANF sanction policies are more likely to have a larger number of African Americans in their caseload, higher unmarried birth rates, more conservative government, less vigorous party competition, and smaller welfare caseload per population.

Both local economies and political ideologies combine to influence the capability and willingness of states and counties to invest resources in TANF. States differ in their emphasis on work participation vs. caseload reduction, and in the choice of program strategies to achieve these goals, which may range from restricting access to cash assistance to providing incentives to work through earning disregards or supportive services (Gais, Nathan, Lurie, & Kaplan, 2001). Not only are there variations among the
states, but there also are often considerable differences in how counties or local municipalities within a state implement their welfare-to-work programs. For example, in California, for counties with the largest welfare caseloads, the rate of denied applications for cash aid varies from 31% in Fresno to 54% in Riverside. The rate of sanctioned cases varies from a low of 2.8% in Sacramento to a high of 38% in Fresno.\(^1\) These variations reflect each county’s political climate and its socioeconomic conditions. As Richard Foring and colleagues (Fording, Soss, & Schram, 2007) found in Florida, counties that are more politically conservative and have a higher poverty rate are more likely to have higher sanctioning rates. As a result, county of residence determines the ease or difficulty in getting cash aid, the strict application of work requirements, the menu of available work activities, the availability and access to needed services, and the risk of being sanctioned.

By granting such broad discretion to local authorities, the right of the poor to income assistance becomes contingent on local dominant ideologies, race, ethnicity, and gender politics, and local economies. Since the poor are powerless, their voices are unlikely to be taken into account. Therefore, the politicization of the rights of the poor means that where the poor live, either by choice or by circumstances beyond their control, determines what relief they can expect.

### PRIVATIZATION OF WELFARE: WHO BENEFITS?

Devolution is accompanied by privatization of some or all the welfare department functions that are contracted to private for-profit and nonprofit organizations (McConnell, Burwick, Perez-Johnson, & Winston, 2003). It is estimated that in 2001 at least 13% of all welfare expenditures in the U.S. were spent on such contracts (GAO, 2002, p. 8). The bulk (80%) went to contracts with nonprofit organizations, 8% to faith-based organizations, and 13% to for-profit organizations.

Privatization is rationalized as a way to improve service efficiency and effectiveness, overcome bureaucratic inertia, increase innovation, and individualize services to client needs (Donahue, 1989; Sclar, 2000). For privatization to deliver on its promises, several conditions must exist. The services to be delivered must be specified in advance; the performance of the providers, especially of service outcomes, must be readily measured; unsatisfactory contractors can be readily replaced; and competition is maintained (Donahue, 1989; Donahue & Nye, 2002). In addition, the contractors must have proven knowledge and expertise to deliver the services (Sclar, 2000).

In the case of welfare, as with many other human services, these conditions seldom prevail. The clients to be served have diverse characteristics and multiple needs, making it difficult to specify in advance the service they require. Measures of service quality are particularly problematic because
much depends on the intangible relations between workers and clients. Measures of outcomes are also difficult, especially since the service providers do not have much control over environmental factors that impact the desired outcomes. Not surprisingly, contractors often settle on performance rather than outcome measures. Moreover, contractors have the advantage of information asymmetry by controlling much of the information they generate for government monitoring. Therefore, contractors are likely to overstate positive results. The ability to replace failing service providers is also difficult because the supply of such providers is limited and the start-up costs for new providers are quite high (Sclar, 2000, p. 69).

Most importantly, the underlying motivation to contract public services, including welfare-to-work, is primarily ideological and political rather than economic (Sclar, 2000). It is driven by an ideology that citizenship rights and liberties are best protected by the market rather than the state; a political desire to reduce the role of government; a disdain of the civil service system; and antipathy of public service unions. As a result, although the decision to contract public services, such as welfare, is justified on the basis of efficiency and effectiveness, it is almost always driven by political considerations.

Having set such a political process in motion, it develops its own momentum. Contractors become a significant interest group that can mobilize political resources to exert influence over government, especially in shaping policies and regulations that would favor them. Contractors may use their advantageous position to engage in what Sclar (2000, p. 97) terms opportunistic behavior such as overcharging, diverting payments to non-related activities, or even paying off officials. As the political context changes (e.g., elections, exposure of inefficiencies and corruption), officials may also decide to terminate contracts because they no longer have legitimacy or serve their political interests.

Not surprisingly, many of the issues that plague privatization of social services manifest themselves in contracting out welfare-to-work services. They were clearly seen in Wisconsin, especially Milwaukee, which pioneered in privatizing welfare by aggressively contracting out all of its welfare-to-work functions to private for-profit and nonprofit organizations (Sanger, 2003). Payments were based on cost-reimbursement plus performance-based bonuses.

From the beginning, it became apparent that several of the contractors were failing to provide quality services. As noted by Jason DeParle (2004), the agencies were performing poorly, in part, because they hired case managers with limited qualifications who were poorly trained or supervised. While recipients were assigned to various work activities, mostly job search and motivational classes, it was evident to observers like DeParle (2004, pp. 230–250) that most of them were not getting meaningful services. He also found that clients had a very difficult time contacting their case managers.
According to Bryan Sanger (Sanger, 2003, p. 57) the state auditors confirmed that clients were not informed about the range of services available to them, and that “few had adequate assessment of their needs, had been lifted out of poverty, or had been placed in more intensive education and training programs that might have led to self-supporting jobs. The auditors implied that contract agencies simply did not offer services if clients did not request them.” It was clearly a strategy to reduce costs and increase profit. Still, despite the fact that the contractors had failed to provide adequate services to their clients, they were able to meet their performance standards because these standards “focused on process, not results” (DeParle, 2004, pp. 246–247). Moreover, the performance data entry on the state client tracking computerized system could be easily manipulated to show favorable results (DeParle, 2004, p. 248).

It is not surprising that to ensure that clients are aware of benefits and services they are entitled to, the state reversed course and county workers, under a contract from the state, took over the initial intake and assessment before referring them to the contract agencies (Sanger, 2003, p. 57). This shift to the public sector was obviously designed to mitigate the tendency of the contractors to skimp on services in order to maximize profit.

The volatile politics of privatization, the difficulties in coordinating among different providers, and the problems in maintaining service quality can also be gleaned from the experience of contracting out welfare-to-work services in Miami-Dade County, Florida. A coalition under the leadership of the mayor awarded a contract to Lockheed (a for-profit firm), which partnered with several local agencies to deliver most of the welfare-to-work program. As noted by Thomas Brock and colleagues (Brock et al., 2004, p. 32), “The coalition’s plan fell victim to outside political maneuvering and internal management problems almost from the start.” There was considerable opposition to the contract with Lockheed, and a second round of contracts were issued, mostly to the Miami-Dade Community College District and the County public schools (Brock et al., 2004, p. 32). In addition, the coalition’s board experienced internal management problems with escalating welfare-to-work expenditures while failing to meet the anticipated participation rates. There were newspaper exposés about favoritism and inappropriate hiring by the Miami-Date public schools (Brock et al., 2004, pp. 32–33). The researchers found offices closed during business hours, variations in the information given to recipients, and poor job club instruction. Not surprisingly, the welfare-to-work staff had low opinion about the contractors, feeling that many were “only in it for the money” (Brock et al., 2004, pp. 42–43).

Subsequent legislative changes reassigned the local responsibility for the welfare-to-work program back to the local Workforce Investment Area board, which in turn issued contracts to 28 organizations to operate new One-Stop centers. Yet, about half of these One-Stop centers failed to meet
their performance standards and had to be terminated (Brock et al., 2004, pp. 33–34). Thus in a period of three years, there were major turnovers in the contractors, which did little to improve the quality of the services.

Finally, privatization may actually stifle innovation. A study of contracting welfare-to-work services to nonprofit agencies in Los Angeles County (Hasenfeld & Powell, 2004) found that instead of capitalizing on their distinct service models, the agencies opted to adopt a standard blueprint approach to welfare-to-work, which resulted in little variations among them. Several powerful normative, coercive, and mimetic forces pushed for such programmatic isomorphism. The agencies were expected to comply with the “work-first” ideology which was reinforced through rigid contract requirements and auditing standards. To succeed in the competition for contacts, the agencies emulated the practices instituted by the “leaders” in the field who set the standards for the expected outcomes.

STREET-LEVEL WORKERS: ROUTINIZATION AND DISCRETION

Two key, yet somewhat contradictory, organizational practices characterize the administration of welfare-to-work programs—routinization and discretion. On the one hand, the welfare-to-work program is routinized through bureaucratic mechanisms such as a computerized client information system (Gilliom, 2001), detailed manuals of rules and regulations, and standard operating procedures that reduce the options available to workers. On the other hand, despite these onerous systems, workers have a great deal of discretion because of their ability to control the content and flow of the information from the clients to the system, and because they can selectively ignore or pay attention to certain client attributes in assessing needs that could then justify their decisions. At the same time, to cope with the inherent ambiguities and conflicting expectations of the program, workers respond by developing a set of routines that reflect both the constraints of resources, their assumptions about welfare recipients, and the conditions of their work (Sandfort, 1999).

Studies indicate that workers use their discretion to manage the difficult conditions of their work and that the ensuing daily practices have major consequences on the well-being of their clients (e.g., Brodkin, 1997; Gooden, Doolittle, & Glispie, 2001). Facing large caseloads, difficult clients, limited resources, pressures to meet participation requirements and to reduce the welfare rolls, workers develop their own set of routines to adapt to these constraints. Typically, these routines give greater emphasis to completing paper work over attention to the clients; limit interest in the client biography; typify the clients into a few pre-determined categories; route them into prescribed and predictable service trajectories; provide the minimally
needed monitoring; and give preferences to “good” clients while penalizing those who make demands on their time.

Recipients, of course, have limited recourse to challenge their workers. Although there are official mechanisms to file grievances, clients seldom resort to them precisely because they are powerless; they lack the knowledge and resources to initiate them, and because they depend on their workers they are afraid of retribution (Handler, 1986). Thus, the workers’ own personal and collective beliefs and experiences influence how welfare-to-work policies are implemented on the ground. The workers, in effect, enact policy (Lipsky, 1984; Pavetti, Derr, & Hesketh, 2003).

**WORKER-CLIENT RELATIONS: THE USE OF SANCTIONS**

Sanctions, as a policy instrument, are a defining feature of welfare-to-work, and frame much of the encounters between workers and recipients. The justification of sanctions is coached in both moral and utilitarian terms (Hasenfeld, Ghose, & Larson, 2004). According to Lawrence Mead (1986), the state has the moral right to impose its paternal authority on citizens who depend on it (i.e., welfare recipients) by requiring them to meet their obligations such as work. Failing to do so justifies penalizing them. From a utilitarian perspective, sanctions are seen as an effective mechanism to elicit compliance because they alter the cost and benefits of being on welfare. That is, recipients make a rational choice whether to comply with the work requirements or lose their benefits. Threats and use of sanctions are also seen as an effective way to discourage entry and hasten exit from welfare.

Sanctions can also be an attractive tool in the hands of workers who face the difficult task of eliciting compliance by their clients. For case managers, attaining compliance is a determinant factor in their ability to meet the mandatory requirements of “work first.” Threats of sanctions require far less investment in time and energy to attain compliance than through establishing and maintaining rapport and trusting relationships with the clients (Hasenfeld & Weaver, 1996). Sanctions are widely used. Longitudinal studies of welfare recipients show sanctioning rates ranging from 45% to 60% (Pavetti et al., 2003). A study of sanctions in Wisconsin found that, in the first year of being on welfare, 51% of the women were sanctioned, in the second year the rate increased to 60% and by the fourth year the rate was 64% (Wu, Cancian, Meyer, & Wallace, 2004). In other words, use of sanctions is quite pervasive and characterizes a key aspect of worker-recipient relations.

Vulnerable recipients with greater barriers to employment are more likely to be sanctioned (Hasenfeld, Ghose, & Larson, 2004). Factors such as having more children, limited work experience, limited education, lacking access to childcare or to adequate transportation, or having to care for
disabled family members increase the risk of being sanctioned. These findings have been replicated by several other studies, which also found that recipients experiencing domestic abuse, with health and mental health or substance abuse problems, are far more likely to be sanctioned (Cherlin et al., 2002; Fein & Lee, 1999; Hasenfeld et al., 2004; Kalil, Seefeldt, & Wang, 2002).

A longitudinal study shows that sanctions have not produced the desired behavioral change (Lee, Slack, & Lewis, 2004). Threat of sanctions did not have an effect on either work or welfare use, and actual sanctions reduced the likelihood of being employed and increased the likelihood of shifting to the informal labor market. Most importantly, sanctions increase food, rent, and utility hardships (Lee et al., 2004, p. 391). Therefore, the insistence on using sanctions cannot rest on either its underlying moral or utilitarian assumptions. It is a ceremonial enactment and confirmation of the myths about welfare recipients. At the workers’ level, use of sanctions gives the workers a sense of control over fairly chaotic and difficult encounters with their clients. Workers have to contend with recipients whose lives are fraught with instabilities and frequent crises that impinge on their ability to adhere to the “work first” requirements. To attempt to address these crises would require the workers to mobilize resources that are often beyond their capabilities. They do not have the professional expertise, and they work under organizational rules and constraints that discourage individualized responses. Use of sanctions is a way to typify the clients’ problems as failure to comply. It justifies a fairly standard response, and puts the onus on the recipients themselves.

OUTCOMES

It is extremely difficult to measure the impact of TANF. The desired outcomes are contested, the effects differ by the attributes of recipients, there are major state and county variations, and employment and income results are influenced by environmental forces well beyond the control of TANF. Economists seem to agree that welfare reform, coupled with EITC and a strong economy, has had a significant impact on caseload reduction, increased work participation, and improved income (Blank, 2007), although African American welfare leavers have not seen significant economic gains (Cherlin, Frogner, Ribar, & Moffitt, 2009). What is less in dispute is that the organizational practices of welfare departments have made entry far more difficult and have hastened exit (Grogger, 2004). As a result, the well-being of low income single-mothers and their ability to rely on the safety net at times of need are at greater risk. First, as noted above, a significant proportion of the recipients experience sanctions that do not result in improved employment prospects but probably in greater hardship. Second, there has
been a major reduction in the proportion of poor families eligible for TANF that actually enrolled in it, from 80% in the early 1990s to 48% in 2002. More ominous, the share of poor children receiving cash assistance declined from 62% in 1995 to 31% in 2003 (Parrott & Sherman, 2006, pp. 4–5). Third, there has been a significant increase in the number of “disconnected” poor single mothers who are not working and do not receive any or very limited cash assistance. Rebecca Blank (2007) estimates that 20% to 25% of low income single mothers are disconnected. They are women with multiple barriers such as limited education, substance abuse, mental illness, caring for disabled children, experience with domestic abuse, and living in high poverty areas. In other words, these are women for whom the standard responses of welfare departments are woefully inadequate. In short, the structure and substance of worker-client relations in most welfare departments discourage poor single-mothers from applying, force many of them into the labor market without adequate preparation, and may increase economic hardship.

HAS THE CULTURE OF THE WELFARE DEPARTMENT CHANGED?

The disjuncture between the policy design and the behavior of welfare workers is evident in the myth that the welfare department has been transformed into an employment agency. The titles of the welfare workers have changed, as in Michigan from “Assistance Payment Worker” to “Family Independence Specialist.” In Texas they are now “Works Advisors.” Other symbols are displayed. As described by Thoma Gais and colleagues (2001, p. 46), “A big banner in the lobby of one office proclaimed ‘Welcome Job Seekers!’ Posters in the waiting room said ‘You Have A Choice, Choose a Job—Work First;’ ‘Work First so that your child is not the next generation on welfare.’” Yet, at the front line, rather than seeing a major shift from a culture of eligibility and compliance to a culture of services toward self-sufficiency, most welfare departments have incorporated the new work requirements into the “old” culture. That is, the work requirements are translated into a set of rules that the workers enforce in the same manner they enforce other eligibility and compliance requirements (Gais et al., 2001).

In a study of the TANF application process in 18 states, the researchers found that the process of determining eligibility has not radically changed; rather, it has become more complex (Health Systems Research Inc. & Abt Associates Inc., 2003). Applicants are required to provide more information about their work history, welfare workers include in their routines information about the work requirements and emphasize the importance of compliance with various behavioral requirements. In many offices, additional steps have been added to the application process such as meeting with a career development officer, completing a work orientation session, or going
through job search. In addition, applicants may be referred to or offered various support services.

The increased complexity of the application process and making eligibility contingent on demonstrating willingness to participate in work activities has clearly affected rates of approval. As noted by the researchers, from 1996 to 2000 there was a 19% drop in the number of applications filed and a 24% drop in the number approved (Health Systems Research and Abt Associates, 2003). Thus, with the exception of those offices requiring job search as part of the application process, little has changed from AFDC in terms of the emphasis on eligibility determination, calculation of benefit levels, and prevention and detection of fraud.

Indeed, there is a wide gap between the new organizational myth and the behavior of the welfare workers on the ground. In their study of the implementation of TANF in 11 sites, Irene Lurie and Norma Riccucci (2003) found that, although the espoused goals emphasized employment and self-sufficiency, the frontline staff continued to be driven by accuracy in determining eligibility and benefits and getting the work done on time. The workers themselves saw little change in their own jobs “with the exception of an enormous amount of additional paperwork.” (Lurie & Riccucci, 2003, p. 653) Although the job titles of the workers changed to reflect the emphasis on employment, the researchers found that much of their training focused on the new rules such as time limits, new rules about Medicaid and food stamps, and the Personal Responsibility Agreement. Yet, “workers received little training for conducting new job responsibilities that are unrelated to eligibility processing” (Lurie and Riccucci, 2003, p. 671). Consequently, the processing of applicants has not changed much. As Lurie and Riccucci (2003, p. 672) write, “The eligibility interviews we observed usually mentioned the need to work and always referred applicants to the work agency. However, very little time was spent discussing work or coaching the clients about employment. Discussion of work generally was crowded out by the enormous amounts of information that the worker must collect to complete the application for assistance.”

CONCLUSION

As the analysis of the implementation of welfare reform indicates, social policies that aim to change behavior, such as welfare-to-work, are typically implemented via “people changing” programs in which worker-client relations are the paramount mechanism through which workers attempt to bring about the desired changes in their clients. These relations are organized in a set of structured and often routine interaction patterns between workers and clients. These interaction patterns provide a powerful lens that separates the actual implementation of the policy from its symbolic
and ritualized exercise. These relations are influenced by four sets of factors—policy design, local institutional political economy, organizational responses, and workers’ adaptations to conditions of work. Applied to the implementation of welfare reform, they demonstrate why there is an inherent disjuncture between the policy design, the behavior of the street-level workers, and how clients experience the policy.

NOTE

1. California Department of Social Service, September 2007

REFERENCES

Blank, R. (2007). What we know, what we don’t know, and what we need to know about welfare reform. Working Papers #07–19. Ann Arbor, MI: National Poverty Center


