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Welfare Reform: The Positioning of Academic Work

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Keywords

qualitative research

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**Welfare Reform:
The Positioning of Academic Work
by
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Abstract

Current welfare reform legislation raises a number of questions about how the field of human services will broaden its analytical and educational functions in a context of uncertainty about what welfare will look like in the years to come. How can information and insights about the distribution of welfare dollars and the process of leaving welfare by a heterogeneous population of clients become the basis of contrastive analysis? We describe information sources which can provide a framework for positioning academic work to use longitudinal quantitative tracking sources to lay out qualitative inquiry suggestions for collecting process data that will emerge over time. We suggest that such data will be valuable to practitioners working with persons composing their own histories in the face of the admonishing welfare construct "get off welfare."

Introduction

On October 1st 1996, the federal government took another step in its 60 year attempt to set out the content criteria and the procedure criteria in producing government welfare policy¹. [PL 104 - 193](#), also known as The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, was passed during the 2nd session of the 104th Congress and was signed by President Clinton on August 22, 1996. This law transfers control of most federal welfare programs to the states, requires people to work, and imposes a five year limitation on welfare benefits.

When historians look back on the 20th century, they will likely represent it as a era of increased recognition of the lack of a universally accepted definition of a "welfare" state. Their evidence for this representation will likely be multiple examples of the distribution rules and claim structures that continue to evolve in attempts to handle the historic process of increased attention to entitlement ([Rein](#), 1983). More dramatically, current popular discourse calls attention to the patterns and ruptures related to institutional life in this society through publishing news headlines such as: "Judgment Calls, R. I. P.: The War on Poverty."

The assertion and metaphor in this news headline provide a context for this paper. We want to suggest how the centrality of qualitative inquiry can be pursued through the development of conceptualizations of the new era of social relations of welfare that will be constituted in local, state and community settings in the years to come. We also want to point out some information resources that may be useful as the next generation of comparative studies of how the social service system functions are designed and implemented. As current professional preparation and

development themes are described across publications and conference announcements, the unanswered questions that motivate research and clinical practice today include: What will successful human service organizations of the coming decades look like, and, How will the vast store of instantly available information be understood and used ([Wallat, 1996](#)).

Our interest in these questions is how researchers and practitioners will take advantage of legal and economic indicators (statistics) that are available, and how their approaches to pursuing answers can add to the small but growing body of literature arguing about interpretation, presentation and politics of academic work. The questions that hold our attention are: How our representations of individual and social identity have been made into "objects" of reform², How the Bureau of the Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics are dealing with growing awareness about race and ethnicity as social and political categories³, and How health, education and welfare departments are trying to deal with decategorization, devolution, and decentralization policy instruments.⁴

Connecting observations to understandings makes visible the rules by which certain types of phenomena and social relations [such as health, education and welfare have been] made into "objects" of reform. Such connections also make "visible the conditions of power contained in these constructions, and the continuities and discontinuities that are embodied in their construction" ([Popkewitz, 1991](#), p. 16). But understanding contemporary institutional and professional reform as a social and political practice is not limited to dealing with conceptual issues in the literature.

Public rhetoric in the media regarding the problems and possibilities in constituting a new era of social relations of welfare also sets the stage for moving beyond the completion of surveys of traditional indicators of economic consequences and organizational effects. Public media is setting the stage for contextual information. The importance attached to locally generated knowledge of welfare reform is reflected in the content of media predictions. Some predictions include the assertion that the remaining years of this century will continue a "crisis" as states cut services and get caught up in "a race for the bottom" in their downsizing of state administration of welfare. Other predictions suggest that "increased latitude will produce innovation and experimentation" ([Edwards, Cooke, & Reid, 1996](#), p. 473). The middle ground between problem and possibility positions is stated in the following way in popular discourse in the elaboration of the national news headline "Judgment Calls, R.I.P. : The War on Poverty."

The War on Poverty is over, and the poor lost. In one sense this is old news. Clearly, all of the funds poured into social programs since the '60s did not end poverty. But it is new news politically: the poor have lost their national constituency. That's the meaning of this year's debate on "welfare reform." ... If the nation now has an anti-poverty strategy, it is this: ... the federal government keeps most responsibility for the elderly and the disabled. ... Romantic visions are gone; cost control is driving change. Someday there may be a political exchange. States may assume all costs for the younger and the federal government may assume all costs for the old. The new welfare system is a work in progress, and only time will tell whether it's a work of progress. ([Samuelson, 1995](#), p. 59)

One place to begin to address the question of whether the welfare system that began legally on October 1st 1996, is a work of progress is to consider legal and economic findings that are rarely mentioned in reports on Congressional welfare reform action.

Welfare Reform: Legal "Progress" since the 1980's

Legal research points out that states began to consider possible strategies to alter the way education and other children's services are governed, financed, and delivered, over two decades ago. Since the passage of the 1974 amendments to the Social Security Act states had been free to set their own rules such as income cutoffs for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and Medicaid. Later, in 1981, the nation's governors told President Reagan that they were ready to negotiate a further phase out of federal aid to the states. At the close of the National Governors Association meeting in August, 1981, 30 governors approved a resolution to "sort out" overlapping functions and to work with the administration and Congress toward a phased in reduction of federal support ([Broder](#), 1981, pp. 1, 16).

By the beginning of the 1990's, additional efforts were undertaken to fix the price tag on how much currency the nation was willing to transfer to the development of human capital among the nation's poor. Content analysis of the Federal Register pointed to rules and regulations of 500 categorical programs indexed as "welfare" ([Jansson & Smith](#), 1996). The General Accounting Office answered specific categorical price tag questions when asked by Senate Subcommittees and the Committee on Appropriations. For example, GAO analysts pointed out that over 90 early childhood programs existed in 11 agencies within 7 federal departments. Within this total, 27 programs are considered as both early childhood development and family support programs and serve 2 million families at an annual cost of 3 and one - half billion dollars. ([U.S. General Accounting Office](#), 1994). In answering the committees' questions on eligibility criteria for available programs, GAO reported that one disadvantaged child was potentially eligible for 13 early childhood care programs.

Such combinations of reframing the extent of federal power as a price tag, and representing the American welfare state as a patchwork of multiple programs and overlapping target groups, contributed to the passage of [PL 104](#) - 193 which is known in public discourse as welfare reform. However, as mentioned earlier, the new welfare system is a work in progress; only time will tell whether it is a work of progress.

The October 1st 1996, death knoll for the war on poverty will push any state that may have lagged behind into constituting new mixes of funding sources within a more deregulated environment. But the question remains, Will the elimination of AFDC and the creation of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families be enough to usher in a new era of progress in health, education, and social service for children and families?

We now have at least a dozen Congressional mandates that are based on the assumption that conceptualizations of how power operates in contemporary institutional life for children and families can be reframed. Congressional legislation encourages the development of integrated service delivery systems through laws that include such clauses as

1. incorporate mechanisms to ensure responsiveness to local needs,
2. include an ongoing procedure for coordinating programs and services, and
3. support statewide coordination and communication among eligible entities for funding authorizations ([PL 103](#) - 252).

Other legal clauses dealing with research and data collection as a condition to receipt of funding also have the potential to provide new insight on forms of community and communication across state levels ([Wallat](#), 1995). Such clauses include direction to provide

1. a description of how linkages will be developed through information, and /or
2. a description of how funding will be coordinated with other public and private human service resources ([PL 103](#) - 322).

In other words, the building blocks for positioning academic work to develop insight on the consequences of legislation mandating, regulating, or providing incentives for states to implement these social objectives are available. This hypothesis is supported in the responses of social service providers in national surveys. Social services personnel report that their fiscal responsibilities and staff roles have changed along with the "progress" of legal work demanding restructuring state, local, and community based human services relationships ([Ewalt](#), 1996; [Weil](#), 1996).

Welfare Reform: Economic "Progress" since the 1980's

Fiscal profiles of state investments in education, AFDC and other children's services suggest that adjustments in the structures of financing education, AFDC, Medicaid, and other programs for children and families has been extensive since 1985 ([The Finance Project](#), September, 1995). For example, the cumulative work at four centers provides information that is available to researchers and clinicians as they consider ways to position their work for the future. The Center for the Future of Children, the American Academy of Pediatrics Ad Hoc Working Group on Integrated Services, the National Center for Children in Poverty, as well as The Finance Project, are collecting information on the variety of forms of community systems for children and their families.

Such centers are a valuable information resource on the location of current and future programs relating to basic legal language clauses intended to modify social behavior and to deliver sets of health, educational and social services. Base line information from such centers lends itself to considering distinguishing variables such as type, number and purposes of human services provided; ages of target populations; type of staff available, program accomplishments and problems encountered; and type of governance and funding arrangement.

Welfare Reform: Academic and Clinical "Progress"

The preceding summaries of legal and economic "progress" since the 1980's point out that many resources for comparative analyses of new human organizations are available. Comparative analysis will be especially useful as states deal with conflicting values such as shaving billions off projected Medicaid spending over the next seven years vs. increasing advocacy for

comprehensive community - based or school - based educational, health, and social services for children youth and families (cf. Rose, L. C., October 28, 1992, *Education Week*, p. 15;⁵ Thomas, S., September 24, 1996, Knight - Ridder Washington Bureau, *Tallahassee Democrat*, pp. 1, 10; [U.S. General Accounting Office](#), 1993).

The increase in advocacy opinions may reflect public awareness that poverty is not a homogenous static phenomenon, is not isomorphic (identical) to low socioeconomic status, or to the social and political categories of race, gender, or ethnicity (cf. [Huston, McLloyd, & Coll](#), 1994).

Taking note of such value conflicts, future studies in the social relations of welfare can be based upon the qualitative inquiry hallmark of being alert to how processes are different for individuals with different institutional life biographies ([Forman](#), 1994; [Morgan](#), 1994). Such attention to defining the value of alternative and innovative analyses can also address current unanswered questions about how financial resources, comprehensive services, and parent - child interactions are interrelated for families making transitions out of poverty across supportive and non supportive environments ([Garrett, Ng'andu, & Ferron](#), 1994, pp. 342-343).

Based upon the availability of information resources such as the above, we believe that the ingredients for repositioning academic and clinical work are in place. As [Martha Raske](#) (1997) elaborates in a recent issue of *Social Work*, teaching clinical interventions can emphasize the exploration of innovation analysis, methods, and useful resources for contextualizing welfare reform. Whatever the public and private price tag limit may be, newfound insights about clinical experiences can continue to accumulate by facilitating exchange of policy information and locally generated knowledge.

Just what that exchange needs to be is evident in recent critiques of the social sciences. In the face of critique of how their work contributes to the design, implementation or assessment of policy choices for welfare, health and education reform, the social sciences have been charged with reconsidering their communicative functions (Wallat & Piazza, [1991](#); [1997](#)).

For example, [Roe's](#) (1994) case studies of environment use and policies provide a set of steps for what academics and clinicians can do with practice and research materials, including accounts provided by participants in settings affected by social policies. Academics and clinicians are advised to take as their object of investigation first person accounts of experiences.

They are responsible for finding the stories (and "nonstories") in policy controversies and using these narratives to produce a kind of synthesized story that is more amenable to both analysis and policy resolution. The key step in this methodology is the creation of a "metanarrative" that is built upon both the dominant conception of the policy problem [such as straight cost benefit analysis and decision analysis] as well as latent and often unreported stories. The idea is that the new story, the metanarrative, can help identify ... the underlying assumptions, help resolve uncertainty and polarization in highly charged situations, and create a "tractable" policy debate where none existed previously. ([Lawlor](#), 1996, p. 115)

To grow and prosper as vital professions they must enact the means to construct new frames based upon locally generated knowledge. This includes attracting audiences that will listen to and respect its "products" (Wallat & Piazza, 1991). The combination of public media interest in telling its audiences "Who gets what," available information resources to allow comparative interpretations of "How the welfare system is organized and functions," and the challenges to attend to locally generated knowledge, sets forth an expanded agenda for qualitative inquiry. Multiple qualitative resources on narrative analysis (e.g., Briggs, 1995; Mishler, 1986; Riessman, 1993) are available to consider alternatives to elucidate the way in which social systems work. Knowledge is developed as a means of hearing social and political assumptions in the signs, symbols, phases and communication of stories associated with the unanswered questions we seek to solve whatever the public and private price tag may be (Peacock, 1994).

As Peacock's conclusion illustrates, many proponents of qualitative inquiry agree with Roe's (1994) "insistence that policies can be analyzed for the better" (p. 148) by encouraging multiple interpretations of what form power and politics are really taking in the context of service delivery. For example, for several decades the fields of education and clinical practice have been demonstrating that construction of metanarratives based upon the multiple perspectives and interpretative frames of reference of clinicians, patients, family members, teachers and students can be converted into policy guidance (e.g., Chenail & Morris, 1995; Lipkin, Putnam, & Lazare, 1995; Wallat, 1987; 1991). In addition to analysis of variable forms of asymmetry displayed in face to face communication across institutional settings, qualitative inquiry has also pointed out how specific forms of organization that numerous youth policy and program decisions have attempted to constitute since the 1980's are reflections of competing disciplinary, political, and professional concepts of gender and ethnicity.

The conceptions of ethnicity or gender adopted by programs and organizations devised for youth matter to young people only as they themselves assign relevance to these efforts and to the selves they celebrate in these contexts. Understanding the organization and activities that inner city youth judge to be effective requires appreciation of the evolution and contextualized application of ethnicity and gender in theory and in practice. (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993, p. 14)

Recent efforts to combine multiple reactions to policies, strategies and programs as they are constituted is exemplified in a current project called "Time Work Narrative Policy Analysis."⁶ Adopting five steps suggested by Roe (1994), a group of researchers at the University of British Columbia have constructed a web site to (1) identify the dominant positions taken by individuals and groups on how to deal with the issue of job creation, (2) identify other positions that run counter to the dominant policy narratives interests, (3) generate a convergence of plausible arguments (i.e., a metanarrative) found in the literature - document review during step one and the counter positions identified in the email collection during step two, (4) generate scenarios based upon existing quantitative economic projections and models and qualitative descriptions of job creation trends, and (5) add to the narrative analysis proper by applying conventional economic and public management policy information strategies which are in place to monitor change in the labor market. Given that the U.S. sources mentioned earlier are monitoring and translating conventional economic and public management information related to [PL 104](#) - 193, it seems to us that the University of British Columbia's projected 20 year study of the issue of job

creation through enactment of a narrative policy analysis provides the clearly accessible ingredients for positioning academic work on welfare reform.

Summary

A social commentator, summing up ideological, political and economic actions that lead to "ending welfare as we know it," says "we've started welfare as we don't know it" ([Alter](#), 1996, p. 44).

The question of how practitioners, educators and researchers can navigate through the rapidly changing organization and financing of health, education and social services has received attention. Professional development conferences as well as special issues of research and practice journals have recognized that anticipating and accommodating to policy changes in entitlement requires suggestions for enhancing professional education and practice. For example, within the framework of two special issues of *Social Work* on social work in an era of diminishing federal responsibility, contributors combined the lenses of policy analysis, practice research and curriculum change in order to position academic work as states struggle to get welfare plans in place. Arguing that the new era of welfare requires new efforts and new methods of integrating policy and practice, many suggestions for enhancing education and practice have been formulated.

This article built on these suggestions for keeping abreast of evolving political - economic - technology shifts across the complex social system represented in the metaphor "welfare reform." Political shifts can be ascertained as interpretations and actions materialize from legislation which encourages new forms of community and communication in the provision of human services. Economic shifts can be ascertained from comparative data being collected across multiple research centers. Finally, the shift in information access from four computers connected to one another in 1969 to an information highway that contains millions of interconnected computers in 1997 increases the likelihood of positioning academic work to advance knowledge even faster as we enter the 21st century. There is every indication that history could record this time as one in which clinicians and educators "accepted the challenge to increase its application of and contribution to its knowledge base to improve the health and quality of life of the nation, including its most vulnerable people" ([Elliott](#), 1996, p. 589).

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Addresses

Contact information for the sample of policy and analysis groups mentioned in the paper appear below. These groups have organized themselves to monitor professional and policy developments associated with the delivery of education, health, and social services. Information on the reports, working papers, and / or newsletters, as well as the primary purpose of each of these groups, can be obtained by writing to the following addresses.

American Academy of Pediatrics
Ad Hoc Working Group on Integrated Services
601 13th St. N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20005 USA

National Center for Children in Poverty
Columbia University School of Public Health
154 Haven Ave.
New York, NY 10032 USA

The Center for the Future of Children
The David and Lucile Packard Foundation
300 Second Street, Suite 102
Los Altos, CA. 94022 USA

The Finance Project
1341 G. St. NW, Suite 820
Washington, DC 20005 USA

Footnotes

¹For the past two decades, a well financed conservative network of public policy analysis think tanks and scholarly institutes focused on constructing knowledge about federal welfare policy. During this time frame, similarities took shape in the criteria on which the basis of policy content and policy procedure questions were framed ([Clark & Astuto, 1996](#)). Newsletters, periodicals, lecture circuits, conferences, and seminars reminded readers and listeners that the administration of education and welfare -- quote -- as it was meant to be --- unquote, had already been framed. First, the criteria of content across the 60 think tanks and institutes financed by 9 foundations with assets of over one billion dollars (Morgan, D., January 4, 1981, *Washington Post*, pp. 1, 14 - 15), and 22 centers and media groups financed at 36 million by one member of the Mellon family (Rothmyer, K., July 12, 1981, *Washington Post*, pp. C 1, C4), converged on how the federal level should operate. Moving responsibility from the federal level to the states became a

common theme. The procedure criteria was devolution and deregulation. The U. S. Constitution specifically laid out the functions of the federal government: to raise a militia and to issue a currency. All functions not mentioned rested with state and local communities. Second, the criteria of what education and welfare should be about, and the procedures to deal with policy development and administration, also rested on tradition and constitutional authority. Education and welfare should be about character education and basics. Further explanations of content and procedural criteria point out that up until the 20th century, the federal government managed to contain interpretations of its currency functions to funding war pensions. It was only 60 years ago, during the 1930's, that currency function was elaborated to allocating public funds towards work relief programs for the unemployed, and in 1935 elaborated to regulating the distribution of currency through administration of Social Security. By the 1960's, the federal currency function was extended to funding 160 categories communicated and indexed in public discourse as "welfare."

²[Popkewitz](#) (1991) summarizes the development of conceptualizations of social relations as "objects."

The belief that the social and material world has qualities that can be changed or positively influenced through people's intervention dates back to the 17th century. Change became additive; modification of the human condition could be obtained as individuals became responsible not only for their own faith but for the development of material and spiritual goods that improve one's life. There was a shift in attention from idolatry of those at the top of the social hierarchy to an individualistic focus on those at the bottom. Such objects could be surveyed, observed, and controlled. People became defined as populations that could be ordered through the political arithmetic of the state, which the France called statistique. State administrators spoke of social welfare in terms of biological issues such as reproduction, disease, and education (individual development, growth, and evolution). Human needs were seen as instrumental and empirical in relation to the functioning of the state. (pp. 35-38)

³ Bureau of the Census papers related to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) February, 1994 Directive to reevaluate standards for race and ethnic classification include: McKay, R. B. & de la Puente, M. (1995). Cognitive research in designing the CPS supplement on race and ethnicity. In *Proceedings of the Bureau of the Census 1995 Annual Research Conference* (pp. 435-445). Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office. The U. S. Department of Labor technical information documents include: News Bureau of Labor Statistics. (October 26, 1995). *A test of methods for collecting racial and ethnic information* (USD L 95 - 428). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor Technical Information Service (202 606 7371).

⁴ See the Finance Project working paper series: *State investments in education and other children's services: Fiscal profile of the 50 states*; *State investments in education and other children's services: Case studies of financing innovations*; and, *Beyond categorization: Defining barriers and potential solutions to creating effective comprehensive, community based support systems for children and families*.

⁵ A recent annual Gallup / Phi Delta Kappa Poll of public's attitudes towards public schools revealed that, 77% of respondents support the idea of using schools as centers for the provision

of health and social welfare services by various government agencies. In addition 67% of the public favor keeping buildings open on weekends and 86% of the public favor keeping buildings open after the school day officially ends (Rose, L. C., October 28, 1992, *Education Week*, p. 15).

⁶ TimeWork's Narrative Policy Analysis Page
(<http://mindlink.net/knowware/narrate.htm>).

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