



Workfare Work: The Impact of Workfare on the Worker/Client Relationship

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This article details the American experience of welfare reform, and specifically its experience instituting workfare programs for participants. In the United States, the term “welfare” is most commonly used to refer to the program for single mothers and their families, formerly called Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and now, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). In 1996, politicians “ended welfare as we know it” by fundamentally changing this program with the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA). The principal focus of the 1996 reform is mandatory work requirements enforced by sanctions and strict time limits on welfare receipt. While PRWORA’s emphasis on work is not new, the difference is its significant ideological and policy commitment to employment, enforced by time limits. When welfare reform was enacted, some of its proponents recognized that welfare offices would have to change in order to develop individualized workfare plans, monitor progress, and impose sanctions. The “culture” of welfare offices had to be changed from being solely concerned with eligibility and compliance to individual, intensive casework.

In this article, I will discuss how implementing workfare programs have influenced the relationship between clients and their workers at the welfare office. I start by describing the burdens faced by offices even before the enactment of welfare reform. Local welfare offices were expected to run programs that emphasized compliance and eligibility at the same time as workfare programs, which require intensive, personal case management. The next section of the paper will focus on strategies welfare offices and workers use to navigate these contradictory expectations. Lastly, I will present information on how clients react to workfare programs and some reasons they acquiesce to workfare contracts despite their unmet needs. I conclude with recommendations of how to make workfare truly work for welfare clients.

1 Burdens on welfare offices in the United States

Throughout its history, the welfare system in the United States for poor mothers and their children has gone through a series of significant changes, all of which influence the relationship between clients and their workers. These changes include sorting the “deserving” from the “undeserving” poor, adjusting to federal reporting requirements, and most recently, instituting workfare programs. The cornerstone of US welfare policy has always been to separate the “deserving” poor from the “undeserving”. The distinction is primarily – but not exclusively – in terms of attachment to the paid labor force. If an able-bodied person does not work, this is considered a moral fault, which is associated with other forms of so-called deviant status and behavior, including sexual promiscuity and drug addiction. Until the 1960s, eligibility requirements and benefits were determined mostly by the states. During this time, case managers were responsible for enforcing state eligibility criteria, much of it created from blocking “unworthy” mothers from receiving aid. Many states, especially in the South,

imposed “suitable home” and “man in the house” requirements. Workers used these requirements disproportionately to block African Americans from receiving aid (Weaver 2000). The sorting of participants is still found in current welfare policies.

In the 1970s, criticism from both liberals and conservatives led to increased federal regulation of state welfare agencies. The composition of the welfare rolls had changed dramatically as civil rights activists reclassified welfare as a “right” and fought to get women who were previously excluded – women of color, divorced, separated, and never married – onto the rolls (Piven and Cloward 1977). Liberals wanted more federal oversight of state welfare offices to ensure that these new groups received the benefits to which they were entitled. Meanwhile, conservatives blamed state welfare offices for being overly generous with welfare benefits (Brodkin 1997). In response, the federal government instituted federal quality control of state records. State agencies responded by directing their workers to focus on paperwork and documentation and away from other tasks such as case management. In other words, they became increasingly focused on eligibility and compliance.

The first federal requirement for local welfare agencies to administer work programs began in 1972. However, welfare offices failed to fully institute the work programs under the Reagan, Nixon, and Carter administrations. Two principal reasons are given to explain this failure – the sheer volume of cases and the increased federal demands for program integrity, i.e. to reduce errors, increase compliance with rules, and the reduction of “waste, fraud, and abuse.” These two pressures force routinization and bureaucratization so that field-level decisions can be more easily monitored for accuracy. All systems of administration must adopt a routine to handle volume and to meet performance goals. To a large extent – never completely – management was able to assert control over line staff by routinizing large parts of the program, instituting strict monitoring controls, and replacing the staff with eligibility clerks and technicians. The emphasis was, and still is, on strict adherence to eligibility and income-maintenance requirements. At the same time, local welfare offices have been hard hit. The staff is undertrained, underpaid, and overworked.

Thus, even before welfare reform, local welfare offices were expected to implement contradictory paths. It was expected to monitor eligibility and compliance for federal reporting, which led to bureaucratization, computerized rule enforcement, and the proletarianization of the workfare. At the same time, offices were expected to implement workfare programs, which require intensive, close caseworker management. In short, agencies were created that are administratively incapable of carrying out work programs, which at least in theory, are supposed to require individualized consultation and assessment, planning, contracts, implementation, supervision, and follow-up. However, under the 1996 reform, offices must make their workfare programs effective enough to get clients off the welfare rolls and to work.

Throughout all of these reforms, state welfare agencies have had to respond to the various welfare-to-work programs that have been imposed upon them over the past 30 years. Evelyn Brodtkin asserts that although the changes instituted varied, workers have always “developed practices that enable them to cope with the difficult conditions in which they must operate” (1997: 3).

2 Welfare office strategies

In promulgating these new programs, what is usually assumed away and otherwise ignored are issues of implementation. Welfare agencies and other human service agencies have to administer these programs. Workfare programs are complex administrative tasks requiring professional knowledge, judgment, and discretion. Agencies have adopted the work program as *an add-on* to the welfare office. The basic job of the welfare office remains administering

the income-maintenance program, itself a formidable task. Now the welfare office is also directed to run an employment program. But it is not an employment service. It does not want to be an employment service; it does not have the expertise, and although it is often given additional resources, they are rarely sufficient. Welfare-to-work programs require recipients to accept offers of suitable employment or participate in various kinds of pre-employment activities (e.g. job search, job preparedness classes, etc.); if, without cause, they fail to do so, they are subject to sanctions. Within these seemingly simple requirements, lie volumes of rules, regulations, standards, and interpretations. There are scores of regulations attempting to spell out every element in the program from what determines inability to work to whether a recipient should be sanctioned for missing an appointment. There is an enormous amount of paperwork; everything has to be documented. Despite the quantity of rules, *a great many of the most crucial decisions require judgment or discretion on the part of field-level workers*. So how do welfare workers cope with the additional requirements?

There is a rich literature on the attitudes of welfare workers towards recipients. The workers practice what Yeheskel Hasenfeld has described as *moral typification*. As mentioned, the core activity of welfare agencies is to process or change people (Hasenfeld 1983). The very nature of selecting, processing, and changing people conveys a judgment as to the *moral* worth of the person. However rule-bound the decision, somewhere along the line, a value judgment has been made about the client. Cultural beliefs determine what values are legitimate and appropriate in working with clients. The welfare agency will attempt to select those clients who fit organizational needs and compartmentalize clients into “normal” service categories. Other client problems will be considered irrelevant. Employment and training programs select and train the most promising students and somehow defer or deflect those who may need the services the most. Welfare agencies punish those who do not or cannot comply. Many workers see themselves as but a short step away from welfare themselves; yet, they work hard, “play by the rules,” and no one is giving them benefits and favors. Workers trained, socialized, and supervised in this manner will apply rules strictly, impose sanctions, avoid errors, and get through the day as quickly and painlessly as possible. Requests for change or required change consume scarce administrative time and run the risk of error. Clients with problems become problems (Hasenfeld 1983).

The culture of welfare offices and values of workers even influence decisions over which the client should have at least some influence, including the creation of their work contract. In theory, a contract should be drawn up between the welfare recipient and the agency that spells out the mutual obligations of both and makes them accountable to the terms of the contract. However, as demonstrated in a study by Evelyn Brodtkin, the state stacks the cards in such a way that the clients have few opportunities to influence the terms of the contract. The caseworkers use their discretionary power to force the clients to comply with their interpretation of the contract. The workers construct their own conception of the welfare contract, which “excluded a client’s right to help in job-finding and denied a state obligation to assure that decent job opportunities existed or could be found” (Brodtkin, Fuqua, and Thoren 2002). During assessment of client needs, the workers fit clients into available slots and ignored information about service needs to which they could not respond. Not infrequently, caseworkers sent clients on job searches even though the clients did not meet the required level of education or literacy proficiency.

The findings by Brodtkin are not surprising and are replicated in many other instances. Yet, it is disturbing that current welfare reformers seem to learn so little from history. As Alvin Schorr reminds us, social contracts were the social work strategy of the 1950s and 1960s (1987). They did not work then primarily because of the bureaucratization of the office, the de-professionalization of the staff, and the pressure of accurately managing a complex

income-maintenance program – in short, for the same administrative complaints that Brodtkin describes forty years later. For the average worker, the pressures are “to cream” – to deal with those clients who more easily fulfill the program’s requirements, and, above all not cause any problems. This means concentrating on the most readily employable. In the past, the workers would deflect the most troublesome cases. Now, they are sanctioned.

3 Three Dimensions of Power: Why Recipients Acquiesce Despite Unmet Needs

The previous section described how workers in welfare offices have adapted to workfare requirements, but what about clients. We have seen that clients are obligated to follow workfare contracts created by workers, even if the contracts are ill-suited to their skills and needs. How can we understand why clients accept these contracts? In this section, I will review the three dimensions of power, as presented by Steven Lukes (1974). I will also define how each of these dimensions presents itself in welfare offices. In this discussion, I will rely on Hasenfeld’s discussion of power in human service agencies (1983; 1992).

3.1 First dimension of power

The standard view definition of power is: A has power to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do (Talcott, 1986: 94). This is the first dimension of power, which focuses on observable behavior. As such, it assumes that grievances and conflicts are recognized and acted upon, that participation occurs within decision-making arenas, which are assumed to be more-or-less open. Non-participation, or inaction, then is not a political problem; “the empirical relationship of low socio-economic status to low-participation gets explained away as the apathy, political inefficacy, cynicism, or alienation of the impoverished” (Gaventa 1980: 7). Quiescence lies in the characteristics of the victims; it is not constrained by power. The first dimension of power assumes an objective conflict of interests; there is a direct exercise of power and a knowing, albeit unwilling, submission.

The first dimension of power is demonstrated when a person applying for welfare completes a series of activities required by the welfare agency. For example, the person will be asked to complete a work assignment, which the person would prefer not to do but feels that she must as the price of assistance. The agency is acting legally or illegally. In either case, it is a direct, observable exercise of power. Assume that the agency is acting illegally – the woman may be legally exempt from the work requirements, the agency failed to follow required procedures (e.g., evaluation, offers of training, etc.). The client knows of the illegality but needs the aid, has no other adequate alternative, and lacks the resources to challenge the agency.

3.2 Second dimension of power

At first, the definition seems unproblematic, especially in the context of the dependent client. The client, at the price of receiving something that is needed, has to do something that the official insists upon – participate in a work program, reveal a matter of privacy, or engage in other kinds of behaviors. Suppose, however, that the client willingly submits. Has there been an exercise of power if B *appears* to do what A wants? Bachrach and Baratz argue that power has a “second face” by which it is exercised upon the participants within the decision-making arenas, but also operates to exclude participants and issues altogether. In other words, power not only involves who gets what, when and how, but also who gets left out and how (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Bachrach and Baratz 1970; Bachrach and Baratz 1992). Apparent inaction is not related to the lack of grievances. Bachrach and Baratz argue that the study of power also has to include the barriers to even expressing grievances.

In the United States, the right to appeal the decisions of welfare offices has been available for a long time. Although clients cannot appeal matters of law – for example, a child is no longer eligible to benefits when he or she reaches eighteen years of age – they can appeal matters of

interpretation, factual determinations, or an alleged use of discretion, as well as claims of discrimination. However, in practice, the right to appeal is largely ineffective. Before an appeal can occur, the following conditions have to be met: (1) the client has to realize that she suffered a wrong; (2) she has to blame the agency for the wrong; (3) she has to have the resources to pursue the remedy; and (4) she has to make a cost-benefit calculation that pursuing the remedy is worth the cost. All of these conditions are serious barriers for dependant people. First, in order to know the decision was faulty, they must be aware of the rules and regulations regarding eligibility, benefits, and options. As mentioned above, even the staff of welfare offices has difficulty deciphering the rules and regulations of the program. Second, many empirical studies reveal that clients internalize wrongs and blame themselves rather than others for any problems (Felstiner et al. 1980-81: 631-654). This allows the client to believe that she is still in control and will do better the next time rather than engaging in a confrontation with a more powerful adversary. Third, clients may lack the resources needed to pursue the appeal. These resources may include everything from legal services to time, social, and psychological costs. Lastly, the client is in a *continuing relationship* with her worker. The fear of retaliation may undermine the client's decision to appeal a decision in a cost-benefit calculation. For all of these reasons, welfare appeals are rarely used in the United States (Handler 1986). Therefore, a client may fulfill activities not because she agrees with the decision, but because the welfare office also controls her ability to file a grievance.

3.3 Third dimension of power

Lukes contends that the two-dimensional view, while a considerable advance, does not go far enough as it fails to account for how power may affect even the *conception* of grievances. The absence of grievances may be due to manipulated consensus. Furthermore, the dominant group may be so secure that they are oblivious to anyone challenging their position – “the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent . . . conflict from arising in the first place” (Lukes 1974: 23). This is the third dimension of power. A exercised power over B not only by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but “he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants” (Lukes 1974: 23). Lukes says this may happen in the absence of observable conflict even though there is a latent conflict between the interests of A and the “real interests” of B.

In human service organizations, there are variations on the third dimension of power. Even if the client thinks she is entitled to welfare, there are competing norms. Multiple studies have documented that welfare recipients think that it is perfectly normal and appropriate that an applicant for assistance should work at a public job as the price of the grant. There is very little support for the idea that one is entitled to a minimum level of support without any corresponding obligations (Scott, London, and Edin 2000; see also Hartmann 1987). The values of work are contrasted by the client's perception of herself as worthy as contrasted with other “lazy, immoral” welfare recipients (Scott et al. 2000). To the extent that the applicant for assistance has internalized these values – the mutual obligations of work, responsibility, and welfare – then the dominant group has prevented even the conception of the grievance.

4 Resistance and Empowerment in Human Service Organizations

While Lukes's three faces of power theory has been very influential, it has been criticized as presenting a view of power that is monolithic, sovereign, top-down – in short, hegemonic. It emphasizes negative, prohibitory power, the denial of sovereignty to sovereign individuals. Building on the work of Foucault, post-structuralists argue that power is not a “thing,” but rather a “property of relations” (Foucault 1980: 98). Because power is relational, there are –

or can be – spaces for bargaining, resistance, manipulation, and deceit (Ewick and Silbey 2002). “Variously referred to as secondary adjustments, tactics, or ‘weapons’ of the weak, these everyday acts of resistance represent the ways relatively powerless persons accommodate to power while simultaneously protecting their interests and identities. Institutional ethnographies – of wards of mental health hospitals, assembly lines, classrooms, bureaucratic offices, barracks, prisons and courtrooms – provide us with evidence of the universality of such practices” (Ewick and Silbey 2002: 2-3). In welfare, clients will hide earned income, child support, gifts, and relationships. Workers know this, they know that families cannot survive on the welfare grant, but they chose to look the other way. Investigating and sanctioning just complicates their day, and how is a family to survive? (Gilliom 2001; Edin and Lien 1997).

There is a rich literature on various forms of resistance by dependant people (Hutchinson 1988; Scott 1990; Ewick and Silbey 1998; Gilliom 2001; White 1990; Winter 1996). And therein lies the problem. While the stories of resistance are moving, and provide a much-needed human dimension to the struggles of dependant people, at the end of the day, they are still dependant. They are still poor; they still exist to a considerable extent on the sufferance of the powerful (Handler 1992: 697-732). In other words, dependant people who are resisting the power of welfare agencies are not empowered. Unless challenged, power will automatically reproduce the existing configurations of rules, and domination will only change when existing practices are challenged. Domination is not challenged that often because clients are embedded within organizations controlled by others. They may not know about the existence of other resources – “they may not know the rules of the game or even recognize the game.” They may be aware, but the cost of resistance is too high. When these relational interests are reproduced, when they become fixed or reified, then power can be “as ‘objective’ as the policeman’s power to arrest” because of the “fixity of stabilized disciplinary powers and discursive practices” (Clegg 1989; Gilliom 2001).

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen that the creation of workfare programs in the United States influences the relationship between workers and clients. Workers are faced with increasing pressures to both enforce eligibility and compliance standards and to create individualized work contracts with clients. However, workers lack the training and time to implement the workfare component of the program. In reaction, they assign clients to activities that fulfill their quotas, but do not fulfill client needs. If the clients do not fulfill the contract, they are sanctioned. Meanwhile, clients accept the welfare contract as a condition to receiving aid. They do not have the resources needed to appeal a decision with which they disagree. More fundamentally, clients accept that they should work in order to receive aid. They see welfare as a temporary measure for themselves, while other recipients are lazy and immoral.

As they currently exist, workfare programs in the United States do not empower clients. However, there are examples of workfare programs that do. In these programs, workers listen to clients, work with them, and share the rewards for success. The client becomes the subject rather than the object. In order for this to happen, four things are necessary. First, workers have to be rewarded for client success, especially those who are hard to employ. Second, workfare offices must be separated from the benefits offices. They are performing very different functions. Third, there should be no sanctions. We have found in our research that workers cannot exercise careful, patient professionalism with sanctions. Lastly, instituting a Basic Income Guarantee would give clients an *exit option* so they would no longer be forced to accept government programs that are ill-suited to their needs.

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