

ABSTRACT

TAYLOR, TIFFANY. *Dirty Jobs: How Welfare-to-Work Caseworkers Do the Dirty Work of Welfare.* (Under the direction of Jeffrey Leiter.)

How do caseworkers do the dirty work of welfare reform? I examine this question in a case study of a county welfare office in rural North Carolina. Historically welfare has faced threats to its survival. To survive, welfare agencies need to appear effective to tax payers, politicians, and local communities. Caseworkers do the daily work to make this possible, but to do this work they have to convince themselves first. Caseworkers embrace and enforce the goals and rules given to them by federal, state, and county officials, but only sometimes. Caseworkers routinely bend the rules, in ways that benefit the county more than the clients, however. They frequently sanction clients, including movement toward terminating benefits. This creates ideological, emotional, and moral dilemmas for the caseworkers. To solve these tensions, caseworkers focus their attention on redefining themselves as helpers through a “tough love” parenting style. Caseworkers, they say, are trying to teach clients that “the real world has rules” and that there are consequences for not following these rules.

Doing the dirty work of welfare has negative consequences for both the clients and the caseworkers. For the clients, it means they are not effectively being served and their needs for a safety net are not being met. Losing cash assistance can result in the loss of a home or even the custody of children. Caseworkers threaten clients to comply with strict rules and to accept low-wage work with poor prospects for economic improvement. Caseworkers have very little autonomy and so must struggle to gain some gratification and feeling of effectiveness in their work. Further, caseworkers, faced with pressure from their supervisors must, in order to keep their jobs, regularly threaten and punish clients whose life circumstances the caseworkers realize are quite similar to their own. Through punishing poor women, caseworkers take part in the US welfare state system that reinforces gender, race, and class inequality. This is a system that disproportionately punishes poor, women of color with caseworkers forcing these women into the labor force. Caseworkers are not helping clients become self-sufficient. They are helping create a low-wage labor force.

Dirty Jobs: How Welfare-to-Work Caseworkers Do the Dirty Work of Welfare

by
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BIOGRAPHY

Tiffany Taylor was born in Las Vegas on October 20, 1972 to Carol and Doug Taylor. Along with her older brother Sean, she spent the majority of her childhood in North Carolina, graduating high school from Garner Senior High. She then attended North Carolina State University, receiving her bachelors in political science. She was unconvinced that political science was her true calling, so she took a sales position as a headhunter and then placing temporaries. Despite the lucrative nature of her sales career, her dedication to understanding and changing inequality in the United States eventually led her to the graduate program in sociology at NCSU. Her research here has examined inequality in a number of settings, culminating in a dissertation about welfare providers in a poor North Carolina county. She has recently accepted a position as assistant professor at Kent State University, where she will move with her partner, two dogs, and three cats.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In *Tricks of the Trade*, Howard Becker (1998) shares a great trick to help scholars open their research minds. What he calls a “good sociological alternative to the null hypothesis of craziness” means instead of saying “wow, people must be crazy to do X,” you figure out how doing X is not crazy at all to those people. I learned Becker’s tricks a little late, but not too late.

I began this research project with grand ideas about expanding theories of organizational legitimacy and effectiveness. I picked a rural welfare office in North Carolina as my field site and planned to learn how this organization makes the policies and programs of welfare-to-work look effective and legitimate to external audiences. I wanted to see how they make welfare reform look successful. I read work by Blau, Selznick, Weber, Habermas, and key works about organizational legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

It did not take long in the field before I realized I was not on the right track. I went into the field open to changing directions, as qualitative researchers should, and I am glad I did. Effectiveness and legitimacy still ended up being important, but it was not important how organizations constructed themselves as legitimate and effective to others. Rather, what jumped out at me was how the caseworkers worked hard to make the programs seem effective and legitimate to themselves. Very early on in the field, I kept asking myself, how

an these women stand to do this job, to do a job that makes them punish other women? By now, I put it, how can these caseworkers do the dirty work of welfare reform?

Lucky for me, early in my analysis stage I did learn Becker's trick. Instead of thinking of the caseworkers as crazy, which did not fit my emotional connection to them, I began to think about how doing the dirty work was not crazy at all. In fact, I believe virtually anyone would do this dirty work if they were in the position these caseworkers are in. While I do not want to absolve them of responsibility or accountability for their actions, I also want to suggest that readers should honestly think about how they would respond under these conditions.

Recently Andrew Cherlin (2008) called for scholars to produce unbiased research on welfare reform. I do not pretend this dissertation is objective and unbiased. I have a point of view and preferences. All researchers do. I do not think researchers can be totally objective. When you sit across from a caseworker fighting back tears over her frustration, you do not just analyze, you feel something. In another example, one day I spent the day riding a bus that was taking welfare clients around to apply for jobs. The women, all African American of varying ages, called in advance to see if the jobs they would be applying for were still open. However, at several places we stopped, the women were told the place was not hiring. The women questioned nothing, while surely they had to know that there is little chance that job was filled from the time they called to the time they walked in with their application. Seeing first hand the discrimination these women are facing makes you feel something. So I will not pretend I am not biased and I will not pretend I do not have an agenda. As Kleinman (2008)

argues, all researchers have agendas. I personally prefer that people just state it up front instead of hiding behind their objectivity guise. My agenda is to raise awareness over what is actually happening in welfare offices. I want people to understand and do something about the conditions under which caseworkers do their dirty work and clients get punished because they are not properly deferential to authority and rules.

That said, from the beginning of this research I have become more and more concerned with poverty, particularly rural poverty. My father's family comes from rural North Carolina and my mother's from rural Kentucky. This connection to my roots in one way, but also the experience of having been in this county, has changed my life. I wish more people could see what I have seen and I hope more people feel what I have felt. I hope in this dissertation I am able to relate these sights and feelings. While this dissertation is written for an academic audience, I am certain my audience would feel something if they saw what I have seen.

The Focus of this Research

In some ways it seems like yesterday, but welfare was dramatically reformed more than a decade ago. In 1996, after considerable political battling between President Clinton and a Republican Congress, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) was passed by Congress and signed into law by Clinton. This program was a significant departure from prior welfare programs. Under Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), with the exception of some state experimental programs, work was not required to receive cash assistance and there were no time limits. Under the

new system, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), assistance was indeed temporary, and recipients had a limited amount of time to find work or have their assistance terminated.

Additionally, TANF was based on the ideology of devolution. States and county welfare agencies apply to the federal government for block grants. These grants come with accountability requirements and local governments must report a number of statistics, such as caseload, number of people involved in work-related activities, and the number of people hitting time limits, to the state and federal governments. In this new era of welfare, clients are constantly threatened with sanctions. When clients break the rules, those threats often become reality. State and federal governments now also face constant threats of sanctions. If the state and county do not keep their welfare rolls down and if they do not have a certain percentage of their caseload involved in looking for work, they fear they will face economic sanctions. In other words, while county welfare agencies once only administered funds to help the poor, now they are an enforcement agency of the State. The emphasis is on rule following and punishing those who do not follow the rules.

This is merely a snapshot of the policies and history of the current US welfare state. I will offer far more detail throughout this dissertation starting with the next chapter on welfare's history. My focus in this research is how caseworkers do the dirty work of welfare reform. This involves how caseworkers respond to the goals and rules of welfare, but it also involves how they deal with the many contradictions of the punitive system in which they work. How the caseworkers cope with the organizational and institutional environment in

which they work is not unique to welfare. Most workers work within bureaucracies with formal and informal rules. Many more occupations require workers to deal with the public in some way or another. In this sense, there are many parallels between welfare and many other workplaces. Further, while this case study takes place in a rural area devastated by deindustrialization, unfortunately this setting resembles a lot of the United States. Much of the country's geography is rural and many parts of the country are facing the flight of industry to places offering cheaper labor. In other words, this story is about more than a welfare agency in one county.

There have been countless books and articles published on the topic since the 1996 reform of welfare. Nearly all this research focuses on client outcomes (see Corcoran et al. 2000 and O'Connor 2000 for reviews of this literature). In other words, research has focused on issues such as: have clients found work, have their wages increased, have they cycled back onto welfare. This research has been valuable for understanding what is happening to clients once they leave welfare rolls. I hope to add to this research by focusing on people who have largely been ignored in this literature, the caseworkers (see Hays 2003 for an exception). Caseworkers have to administer welfare services under the new welfare regime. Caseworkers also are the people who are kicking clients off of the rolls. Therefore, I hope to add to the literature on welfare by examining how caseworkers respond to the rules of welfare reform. In the next sections, I will detail the methods used in this dissertation and then outline the focus of each chapter.

Methods

In this project, I use a variety of qualitative methods. Marshall and Rossman (1998:57) point to three types of research in which qualitative methods are particularly useful: “research that delves in depth into complexities and processes, research on informal and unstructured linkages and processes in organizations, and research on real, as opposed to stated, organizational goals.” Marshall and Rossman explain that the advantages of qualitative research make it useful for research that is “exploratory and descriptive and that stresses the importance of context, setting, and the participants’ frames of reference” (1998: 58). Therefore, qualitative research was appropriate and best suited to this project since it concerns situated, taken-for-granted processes.

In this study, I use the extended case method (Burawoy 1991). In this method, compared to grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2001), the researcher is driven more by existing theory when entering the field. While I am not using my theoretical tools in ways to test hypotheses, I do use my theoretical training to guide my research. Using the extended case method, the researcher focuses heavily on the potential uniqueness of the setting and therefore, uses historical and archival data to investigate the social, political, historical, and economic context. This allows for the possibility of reconstructing existing theory. While I took theoretical concepts and tools into the field with me, I remained open to the possibility of discovering unexpected patterns and exploring these new patterns. That is exactly what happened. While I remained interested in how caseworkers construct the rules

and policies as effective, their daily life experiences captured my interest and I transitioned to a more inductive process.

Telephone and Face-to-Face Interviews in 34 Counties

In this dissertation I draw, in part, on data collected by a larger research team studying welfare reform in North Carolina. These data include face-to-face and telephone interviews with Work First directors in 34 counties in North Carolina. In early stages of this project seven preliminary interviews were done with Department of Social Services directors in counties of substantive interest (very urban, high numbers of people hitting time limits, very rural, etc.). These interviews were all face-to-face, semi-structured, and lasted about an hour. After we interviewed managers in these counties, we sampled 27 counties for telephone interviews after arraying all 93 counties not previously visited in person in order of their poverty rates. The systematic random sample of these 93 counties reflects the variation in poverty rates in the state.

By phone, we interviewed 25 Work First Supervisors (or an equivalent person of a different title at the supervisory level), and one Deputy Director in 26 of these 27 originally sampled counties. We were unable to contact an appropriate respondent in one county. For this county, we substituted the next county on the sampling list, where we interviewed a supervisor for a total of 27 counties. Phone interviews were structured with specific questions that emerged from the face-to-face interviews. In these phone interviews, we did deviate some from the questionnaire and probed when interesting or unclear answers were given. We merged these phone data with the interviews done in person for a grand total of 34

counties, which constitute just over one-third of all North Carolina counties. I draw on qualitative data from both the face-to-face interviews and the phone interviews to contextualize the analyses of my case study county within all the counties in North Carolina. From these interviews, I selected a county, which I call Smithwick County, as my case study site. The county was selected because of its staggering poverty and high rates of people timing out of welfare. I will say more about the county in the next chapter.

Historical and Document Analysis

As an extended case study, the project uses several methods. First, I have conducted a thorough search and review of the policies and procedures relevant to the area of study. This includes developing an understanding of the historical, social, political, and economic development of Smithwick County. Additionally, I conducted a thorough literature review of the social-political history of welfare policies in the United States since the late 1800s. It was important to place this study in these contexts to properly understand current social processes and policies. Gaining knowledge through historical and policy analysis also increased my rapport in later stages of the research. Caseworkers saw I was trying to understand all the policies and paperwork and they helped me learn it all as they would help a coworker.

Observation

The second phase of my research was observation. In this phase, I observed a number of activities of the county Department of Social Services (DSS) and other county organizations. A number of researchers have noted the importance of qualitative researchers participating in the setting (Tope et al. 2005; Marshall and Rossman 1998; Hammersley and

Atkinson 1995) for increasing understanding of the context through informal interactions, as well as in satisfying the respondents' "demands for reciprocity." In other words, it is very important to *do* something to earn rapport and access to the community in which you wish to study. In my setting it was difficult for me to be a participant observer, so I mostly observed with minimal participation. In an effort to give something, I did assist the workers in moving from temporary office space to a new building over a few days. This definitely helped me gain rapport and also allowed me to see workers interact with one another outside of normal daily routine interactions with clients.

In Smithwick County, I observed trainings and other group-oriented activities and meetings. Observations are crucial to understanding the social processes occurring in this setting. This method was useful in observing taken for granted processes that conflicted with accounts given in informal and formal interviews and discussions with Work First workers. Observation, then, supplemented the other methods to form a more complete understanding of these processes.

Interviews with Smithwick County Work First workers

In addition to these techniques discussed above, I conducted in-depth interviews, which were very useful in gaining insights into how members of the setting view the phenomenon being studied (Weiss 1994; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Marshall and Rossman 1998). Interviews in addition to other techniques such as observation help the researcher double check information and therefore increase the reliability of the research (Weiss 1994; Marshall and Rossman 1998). All interviews with individuals were semi-

structured and based on an interview guide that provided me with a series of questions to ask regarding several pre-selected topics. I deviated from this sheet when the interviewee provided new and interesting information I wanted to examine further. This type of interviewing is preferred over structured interviewing when the researcher is interested in gaining insight into the interviewee's perspective and in investigating processes (Weiss 1994). This stage in this research was crucial in gaining insight into the strategic decisions and discretion individuals use. Further, this method allowed me to explore perceptual differences and taken for granted processes related to legitimacy, authority, accountability, and effectiveness.

Sometimes a weakness of interviewing can come from the researcher not being knowledgeable of the setting and asking poor questions (Marshall and Rossman 1998). While still a possible limitation, I tried to overcome this with data and knowledge from archival and secondary data and from observations. Additionally, interviews were conducted with various peripheral people in the setting, including: government workers with Vocational Rehabilitation and the Employment Security Commission, the county and region boards for economic and workforce development, and local nonprofit service providers.

My analysis concentrates on in-depth interviews with employees of the Department of Social Services in Smithwick County. Fourteen employees are front line caseworkers who interact with clients continually. Of the caseworkers, all are women, five are white and eight are Black. The caseworkers are not professionally credentialed social workers. Four have only a high school diploma or GED, three attended some college, three have associates

degrees, and four have four-year degrees. Caseworkers' salaries are in the low twenty thousand range, even for caseworkers with tenures of more than twenty years. Three caseworkers, all African American, had been clients prior to becoming employed as Work First caseworkers. Interestingly, one caseworker and two supervisors worked evening jobs to make ends meet.

In addition to the caseworkers, I interviewed two employees responsible for interacting primarily with companies in the community and secondly with clients. One of these employees was an African American woman in her thirties who was employed full time with the Department of Social Services. A second liaison was a white woman, also in her thirties, who worked out of the county's Chamber of Commerce, but half of her time and salary was dedicated to Department of Social Services. In addition to spending more than a day each week meeting clients at the Employment Security Commission, these community liaisons were responsible for promoting the "Work Experience" program. This program is intended to help clients gain useful work experience. In this program clients work at companies temporarily (up to 90 days) to gain experience. Companies pay nothing for this labor. DSS employees calculate the number of hours the client must work by dividing the welfare they had received to date by the minimum wage. Minimum wage is used no matter what the "normal" pay and skill requirements are for the job.

Finally, I interviewed four supervisors. One, a white woman who had been with the DSS for more than twenty years, was a high-ranking supervisor who oversees Work First programs in the county. The other three supervisors were line supervisors whom I

interviewed together. Given that these were three talkative supervisors, we often deviated from the interview guide. A benefit of this technique was that the three supervisors fed off of one another and provided a wealth of information about enforcing the rules. Group interviewing is not without weaknesses though. The supervisors (two of whom were white and one African American; all had been with DSS since before the 1996 welfare reform) may have not disclosed information they would have provided in a more private individual interview. This is not a strong limitation given the supervisors seemed forthcoming with their opinions about the policies and their effectiveness (and many times the lack of effectiveness); however, I do acknowledge the supervisors may have provided some information in individual interviews that they did not provide in the group. To overcome this, I had more private informal conversations, though not formal interviews with the supervisors on numerous occasions over the year I was in the field.

Interviews lasted between thirty minutes and two hours and averaged over an hour. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Field notes on interviews and observations were written immediately after leaving the field site. Finally, I used analytic memos to uncover themes that emerged in the data. Most of those themes are reported in this dissertation.

Smithwick County: The Study Location and Why It Was Chosen

Smithwick County is a rural county in North Carolina where the economy has centered on cotton agriculture and textile manufacturing in the 20th century. Several small

cities grew from mill towns, originally constructed when textile manufacturers sought cheap labor that was socially and geographically isolated (Wood 1986). Wealthy southerners essentially invited these firms to exploit the desperately poor white farmers as mill laborers, while using already exploited African American tenant and sharecropping farmers for their supply of cotton. This historical economic development set into motion decades of worker exploitation and extreme poverty (Wood 1986; Anderson, Schulman, and Wood 2000). Smithwick County's racial make-up was attractive to companies at the time, and still today the African American population in Smithwick County is larger than the non-Hispanic white population (more than 50% of the total county population according to 2000 Census data)¹.

Smithwick County is described by startling negative economic statistics. Nearly a quarter of the county's population lives in poverty, and nearly 15% of poor families live on less than \$10,000 a year (2000 Census data). In the last quarter of 2005, the North Carolina Employment Security Commission (ESC) reported Smithwick County's poverty rate at double the North Carolina average. Also, Smithwick County has high unemployment. In 2005, the unemployment rate was nearly 10 percent, the same rate as the prior year, more than double the unemployment rate for the more urban Wake or Durham counties, and much higher than the North Carolina state-wide average rate of 5.5 percent. By comparing the county's 2000 unemployment rate of approximately 5 percent, we see unemployment has doubled in the last five years. The ESC also collects data on wages and finds them extremely low in Smithwick County, with the average wage earner making less than \$500 per week

¹ Numbers are rounded to protect the identity of the county and the workers. Any relation to another county is purely coincidental.

(compared to nearly \$800 in urban Wake County, NC). Further, comparisons to other counties for property values and per capita income have Smithwick ranked nearly last (based on 2005 ESC estimates). These figures show that Smithwick County residents face very tough conditions with little promise of improving. Work opportunities are not plentiful and most jobs that are currently filled offer very low wages.

Luebke (1998) classified some North Carolina elites as being traditionalist (versus modernizers) due to the traditional racist development and lack of industrial diversity in some areas of the state. The county, and almost the entire coastal plain for that matter, never really diversified their industrial base, so they became reliant on the textile industry in which whites worked in the mills and African Americans worked in the cotton fields (Tomaskovic-Devey and Roscigno 1996, 1997). This lack of diversity proved disastrous for the economy by 2000. When the textile industry saw fit to move further south (first to the US Deep South and then to Central America) to exploit cheap labor yet again, many were left without jobs (Anderson, Schulman, and Wood 2000). Plants in Smithwick County began laying workers off in the 1980s and continued layoffs until the plants eventually closed in the mid to late 1990s. Essentially Smithwick County has little prospect for economic growth and a large population living in poverty. A significant number of TANF recipients cannot find work before hitting welfare time limits. The Work First program in this county faced large challenges from the start.

Lichter and Jayakody (2002) have written at length about how welfare programs based on urban economies could exacerbate poverty in rural areas. Faced with few job

opportunities, limited infrastructure (including no means of public transportation), and with a lack of available childcare, welfare-to-work programs in rural areas face considerable obstacles. The authors call for more research in rural areas, and in this dissertation I hope, at least partially, to answer that call.

Smithwick County provides an ideal setting to study welfare reform given the barriers and constraints service providers face. In fact, the NC Department of Social Services report shows Smithwick has one of the largest populations hitting the 24-month North Carolina time limit and the lifetime federal 60-month limit. In this county, around 8% of cases have hit a time limit compared to the state average of 2.48% of cases hitting time limits. In short, this setting was ideal for uncovering the social processes I examined.

TANF in North Carolina and Smithwick County

The main Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program in North Carolina is called Work First, a title with significant meaning. The stated goal of the program is to help clients reach self-sufficiency, which is interpreted in practice as helping clients find any job. The jobs clients find are often minimum wage jobs at chain restaurants, chain hotels, retail chain “big box” stores or sometimes more locally owned businesses. The county has two fulltime employees dedicated to promoting the Work First program to area businesses. The main part of their work involves getting welfare recipients work in temporary positions, which they hope will transition into permanent jobs. Companies get the benefit of a free laborer for up to 90 days. If they choose to hire the welfare recipient, they will receive generous tax benefits. Clients are required to pursue work-related activities (through working

temporary positions, job readiness classes, and job search) for approximately 30 hours a week. The client reports all of these activities weekly. Failure to report the activities or to complete the required hours of work-related activities could result in the county terminating the client's benefits.

If the client does not find employment, they are subject to the state time limit on receiving assistance. In North Carolina, clients can receive assistance for up to 24 months. Once recipients hit the 24-month time limit, they cannot receive cash assistance for three years. When the three years have passed, the recipients are again eligible to apply for benefits when needed. North Carolina also uses "family caps," which prevents a client from receiving any additional benefits if she becomes pregnant while receiving cash assistance under Work First. Additionally, clients are provided with opportunities to get their "tubes tied" courtesy of the state. In these ways, the state hopes to limit the number of children born to poor women. The federal law imposes a 60-month limit on cumulative assistance.

Consistent with the ideology of devolution, North Carolina counties have some autonomy in developing their two-year county plan. The county also can develop and control inter-organizational networks between the county DSS and other service providers within the county. In diagrams that follow, I illustrate the network of organizations providing services to the poor in Smithwick County.

In the first diagram, I show the flow of funding for TANF-related services. Funding originates with federal grants to the states. The state then matches the federal grant and disperses money to the county DSS. Some federal and state money, moreover, is available to

nonprofits through competitive grants. In the Smithwick county area, several nonprofits receive grants directly from the federal and state governments. The second diagram illustrates the flow of referrals in the network of organizations. If clients need a particular service that is not offered in one organization, they are referred to an organization that does provide that service. Note the addition of the business community to the network. This represents the clients who are referred to businesses as part of the Work Experience (workfare) program. In Smithwick County, there are many referrals between the organizations. Various people make considerable effort to refer clients to all the services available in the county.

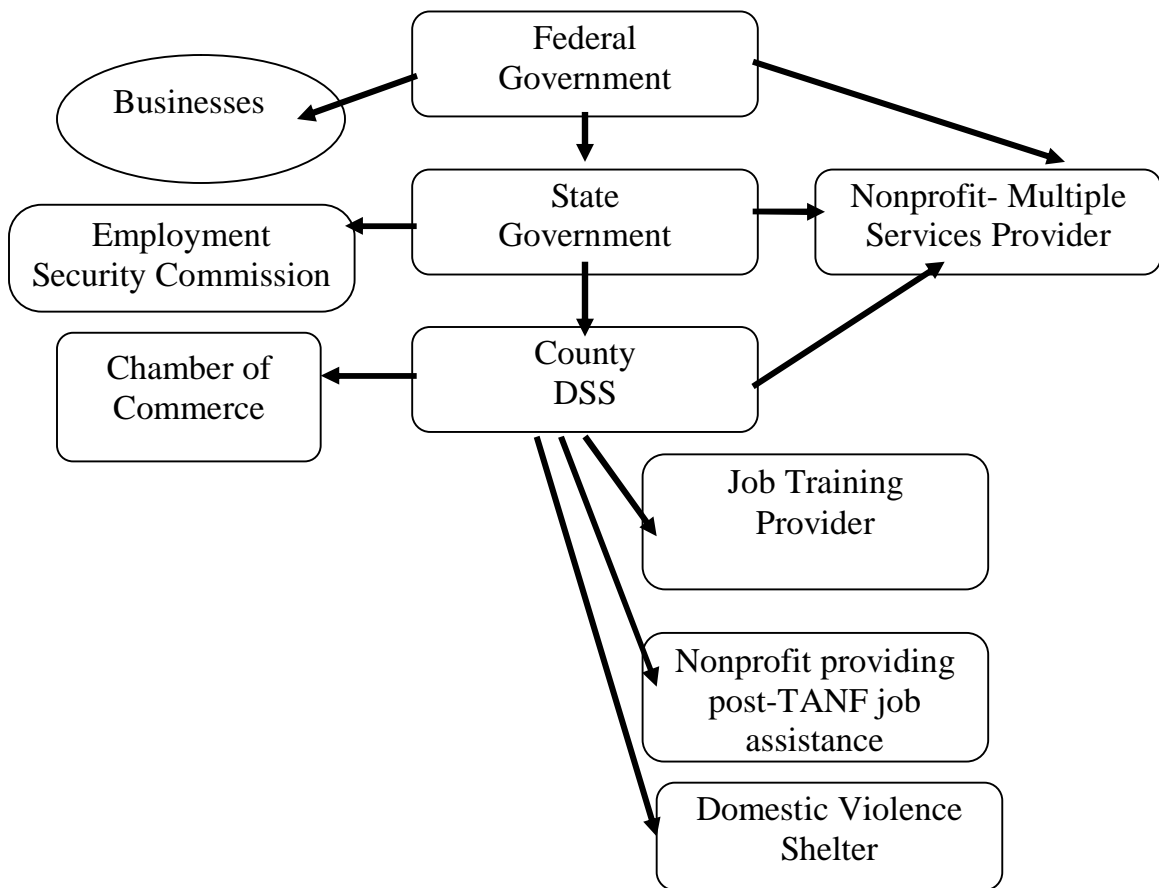


Figure 1. Flow of Funding

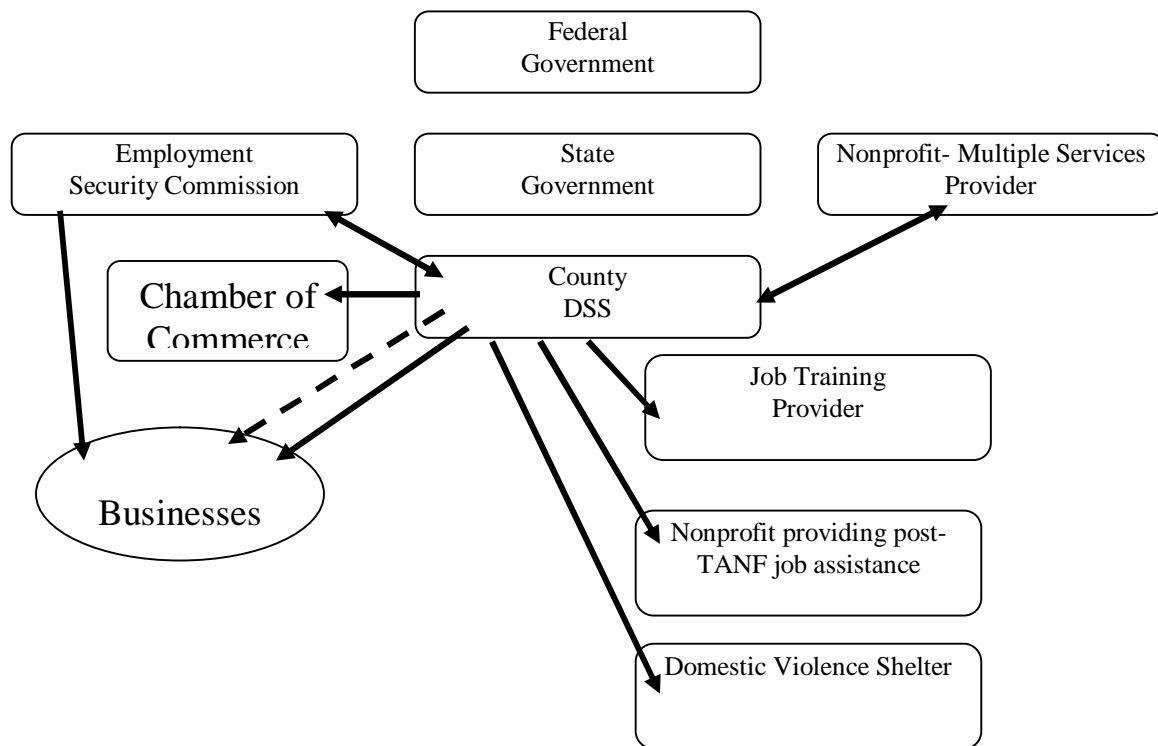


Figure 2. Flow of Referrals. Solid lines show referrals for job openings or services. The dashed line illustrates Work Experience placements.

Comparing the diagrams, we see that money flows from the top (federal and state governments) down to the service providers. While nonprofits can get both referrals and money from the county government, they are also getting money from the state and federal governments. The government and nonprofit organizations do not, however, see themselves in competition for money or referrals. Both nonprofit and county government providers would likely agree that each gets lots of referrals from the other, but not a lot of funding from the powers above. Finally, note that when businesses get job candidates referred to them,

they get free labor in the form of welfare recipients in “Work Experience” temporary placements, and they get generous tax incentives for hiring welfare recipients. Overall, then, businesses seem the largest beneficiaries of the welfare system and may very well represent the greatest welfare expenditure.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into analytic chapters based on historical information and the data I collected in the field. I do not have a theory chapter or literature review chapter. Instead, readers will find the literatures relevant to each chapter reviewed in that chapter. I did this because each chapter draws on a distinct literature. I have drawn on a number of theoretical traditions in this dissertation, including organizational theories, labor process theories, and social psychological theories concerning emotion management and the reproduction of inequality. This research is also influenced by my own training in multiracial feminism and Marxism.

Following this introduction, I begin with a social history of US social welfare policy. My focus in this second chapter is to show major changes in policies and in the perceptions of clients over the last one hundred years. In this historical chapter I also offer an argument about the relationship between welfare reform and capitalism. This historical framing is important when considering the current day conditions in which caseworkers do their work.

In chapter three I focus on the organizational goals of welfare reform. The chapter outlines changes in goals as well as examining how these goals are carried out. The official goal of welfare now is to help client reach self-sufficiency, an intangible goal at best.

However, it is this goal that offers the beginnings of an institutional rhetoric that helps welfare caseworkers feel good about their jobs. It allows them to feel like they help people and make a difference.

In chapter four I shift the focus from the larger picture of policy history and institutional and organizational goals. In this chapter, I see how all the rules that resulted from this policy history and organizational goals are implemented by the caseworkers. The focus is on caseworkers' efforts to use discretion and retain autonomy while under severe constraints. Caseworkers, faced with the fear of losing their jobs, use discretion in ways that help the county and not the clients.

Chapter five examines the emotion management strategies caseworkers use to deal with the many contradictions of welfare reform. Throughout my research caseworkers seemed aware of contradictions in the ideology of welfare policies. They seemed aware that many rules did not work. And they seemed aware that their job was filled with constraint and disappointment. However, a job with the county government is one of the few "decent" jobs in this county. Caseworkers want to keep their jobs, but they also want to feel good about the work they do. To accomplish this, they engage in emotion management strategies to redefine sanctioning (punishing) as helpful to the clients. In doing so, they redefine themselves as helping clients.

In the concluding chapter, I hope to bring these contradictions and coping strategies together. I also end on the note with which I began. While this research is written for an academic audience, and the analysis chapters are more formal than the introduction or

conclusion, I think it is important to bring the emotion back in. The United States has staggering poverty and little is being done about it. Because many of us never have to see it, or because we look away, I fear this trend will continue. This research is a beginning stage of my personal work to address the injustices of poverty and capitalism. I hope reading this research makes people angry enough that they want to do something about it too. I have tried to provide readers with analytic tools and insights that might help them act more effectively in creating change. So that is the agenda.

Chapter 2

The History of US Social Welfare Policy

In this chapter, I summarize more than a hundred years of social welfare policy. This is no easy task since this is a topic on which many other scholars have written at length. In no way, then, do I cover every aspect of this history. My goal is not to be exhaustive, but rather to focus on major moments when welfare and the perceptions of recipients were altered (a timeline of events follows the chapter text). Taken as a whole, this history shows that the 1996 welfare reform should not have come as a surprise. In the last hundred years or more, policymakers' efforts to control poor women's sexuality and labor have waxed and waned. This variation has to do with a number of factors including political ideology, powerful lobbyists, wars, and the ability to manipulate the media. Throughout the last one hundred years, one thing is clear: most poor women have been deemed "undeserving" of support or empathy as they try to cope with the capitalist, racist, patriarchal system that oppresses them daily. In this way, Katz (1989) characterizes this history as less of a "war on poverty" and more of a "war on welfare."

I begin this chapter with a look at the transition from poorhouses to the "Mothers' Pensions" of the early 20th century. Then I describe central events from the Progressive Era into the New Deal era of Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration. Next, I follow events of the 1940s until the 1960s "War on Poverty" and through the 1970s. In the next historical section I look at the "war on welfare" we have experienced from the 1970s until the present. Finally, I end the chapter with a critical sociological interpretation of the history that I have outlined

throughout the chapter. This history has led to the conditions under which caseworkers at county DSS offices do their work.

Poorhouses and Mothers' Pensions

Throughout the colonial era, poorhouses (also called almshouses and indoor relief) were common throughout the colonies. Poorhouses were common throughout Europe as well; many of us are familiar with their conditions through the fiction writings of Charles Dickens (Trattner 1989). It was common in poorhouses for child and adult inmates (the term for residents) to be forced to work in industrial workhouses or as farm laborers. Poorhouses continued throughout the 18th and 19th centuries as it was still common to institutionalize the poor, often in ways that separated widowed mothers from their children. The children became wards of the State and a source of involuntary labor. Further, poor people were separated from the rest of society, which “change[d] the poor from ‘neighbors’ to members of the ‘lower class’” (Trattner 1989: 56).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, middle class and elite white women began to mount a public movement and media campaign to change the perceptions of poor mothers. The activists’ goal was to create “mothers’ pensions” (also called “widows’ pensions”). Mothers’ pensions were meant to provide widows of industrial workers federal assistance to raise their children in their homes instead of in poorhouses. Movements to create the pensions faced some resistance, mostly from private charities and conservative politicians who feared government assistance to the poor would become a public entitlement instead of a private charity (Trattner 1989). However, since death due to industry and railways was very

visible and working conditions were harsh, attitudes towards welfare recipients (who were usually white widows) were usually more empathic (Sugarman 1998, Skocpol 1992; Quadagno 1994; Katz 1989; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001). The growing number of widows of industrial and railway workers was seen as a problem the government needed to help solve. Following the 1909 White House Conference on Dependent Children, President Theodore Roosevelt and others urged the creation of mothers' pensions. In 1911, Illinois and Missouri became the first states with such a policy. By 1935, every state in the union except South Carolina and Georgia funded pensions for widows (Katz 1989, 2001; Trattner 1989; Skocpol 1992). This shift indicates a weakness in the marriage of capitalism and a patriarchal separate spheres ideology in which the home is a haven from the harsh working world. While women within the marital unit helped capitalism work through their support of male workers, the system was not prepared to function if something happened to the man. However, an ideology that these widows are morally fit mothers and deserving of help hides the flaw in capitalism. In other words, while welfare arose out of a failure of capitalism, drawing on the ideology of separate spheres and helping morally fit, deserving women, helps hide this failure.

While a beginning step in creating a safety net for the poor, mothers' pensions were only given to "morally fit" widows. This excluded many women who, by the discretion of social workers, were not seen as fit based on marital status, but also based on parenting styles. Social workers had the sole power to determine whether anyone was fit or unfit (Skocpol 1992; Katz 1989; Quadagno 1994; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001). Even worse,

funding for mothers' pensions was far from adequate. While some states and counties responded by giving smaller amounts to more people, many states and counties determined some eligible while hundreds of other families were relegated to waiting lists. Mothers' pensions marked the beginning of the professionalization of public welfare, as welfare was now administered by government social workers instead of private charities (Abramovitz 1988; Trattner 1989; Skocpol 1992).

From the Progressive Era to the New Deal

In 1921, after considerable floor debate, Congress passed the Sheppard-Towner Act. This act allowed the federal Children's Bureau to administer aid to mothers to help with infant and maternal medical care (Skocpol 1992). Aid provided as a result of the act successfully reduced maternal and infant mortality rates (Trattner 1989; Skocpol 1992). The program lasted for eight years until it came under attack. There were several factors contributing to the defeat of Sheppard-Towner: the failing economy, women's turn from being political active back to the home thereby decreasing the overall power of female voters, and Hoover's opposition to the bill (Skocpol 1992). The bill also came under attack from a powerful lobby of male physicians, backed by the American Medical Association. These male doctors wanted control of children and women's healthcare, which had been largely administered by female midwives (Trattner 1989). Additionally, anti-suffragists felt threatened that "values of women's formerly separate sphere might now reshape the public realm" while other opponents argued the programs were "an imported socialistic scheme" (Skocpol 1992: 506-7). The Sheppard-Towner Act was the first time the federal government

had gotten involved in children's welfare (Trattner 1989; Skocpol 1992). While Sheppard-Towner was eventually defeated, Title V of the 1935 Social Security Act would again provide federal grants to states to administer assistance in maternal and child health (Trattner 1989).

Franklin D. Roosevelt came into office when the country was in an economic depression. FDR largely felt big business had gotten out of control and needed to be regulated. The first wave of New Deal legislation included regulated wages and prices. The second wave of FDR's New Deal legislation focused on creating security for white male workers. Due to formal legal eligibility restrictions and formal and informal administration practices, many of the programs were not open to racial minority men and women or white women and FDR's supposed fair competition program through the National Recovery Administration (NRA) was commonly referred to as the "Negro Removal Act" by African Americans (Trattner 1989).

The 1933 Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) marked a new path in social welfare policy, as the federal government would now offer temporary aid in moments of crisis. Additionally, the 1935 Social Security Act established elderly benefits, unemployment compensation, and survivor benefits (Trattner 1989). However, Roosevelt was focused on creating work and not temporary economic relief, quickly dissolving FERA and replacing it with Work Progress Administration (WPA), one of the earliest welfare to work programs. Seeking to increase the power of unions that would demand higher wages, FDR's administration also created the National Labor Relations Board under the 1935 Wagner Act.

Finally, the 1935 Social Security Act established Aid to Dependent Children, the precursor to Aid to Families with Dependent Children. In 1945, the Federal Insurance Contributions Act (FICA) passed, establishing a payroll tax to fund Social Security. The safety net had been created, but most programs were for those who had not only worked, but worked in jobs that qualified them for the programs. Agricultural and unskilled manufacturing jobs, which were overwhelmingly held by women and racial minorities, were not covered in these programs.

The War on Poverty: From ADC to AFDC

Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) recipients were still typically widows with children (Piven et al. 2002). Policymakers thought ADC would phase out soon after the Social Security Act, but this did not happen (Corcoran et al. 2000). Instead, the program grew in use and became increasingly available to more and more women, such as women who had been abandoned by husbands, divorced, and even women with children born out of wedlock. Eventually in the 1950s and even more so in the 1960s (due to the Civil Rights Act and National Welfare Rights Organization protests), women of color gained access to the programs for which they qualified but had previously been denied access due to racial discrimination (Katz 1989). Despite this, it was common for states to attempt to reduce women's access to ADC, including cutting recipients off during seasonal work periods. Southern states commonly did this during cotton harvest (Quadagno 1992). Thus, the implementation of the policy was enacted in a way that continued to serve the needs of capitalists, preserving the cheap labor supply during times of high demand.

Additionally, “man in the house” rules emerged during this time, restricting women’s access to aid if they were found to be cohabiting with a man. The idea here was if the woman was living with a man, she should be dependent on him instead of the government. This rule also allowed social workers unrestricted access to welfare recipients’ homes to enforce the policy (Quadagno 1992). In this sense, the ideology of welfare had shifted little. Safety nets are only available in the absence of a male. This continues the use of an ideology of separate spheres that supports the patriarchal capitalist model. Men need to work and women need to support their male worker.

Harry Truman’s and Dwight Eisenhower’s administrations from 1945 until 1961 were typically regarded as lacking in social welfare policy. However, during Eisenhower’s presidency, Congress passed legislation initiating several programs. The National School Lunch Program had just emerged earlier in 1946 and was followed by the Housing Act (1949), School Milk Programs (1954), and the Vocational Rehabilitation Act (1954) (Abramovitz 1988). In 1956, social security assistance was extended to the “permanently and totally” disabled (Trattner 1989).

President Kennedy’s administration approved the 1962 amendments to Social Security that increased federal funding to welfare programs to provide more job training, job replacement and other direct services to clients. Kennedy also changed the ADC program’s name to Aid to *Families* with Dependent Children to emphasize an ideology of strengthening families (Abramovitz 1988). Additionally, Kennedy pushed Congress to increase federal funding for mental health services. Indeed, just as Kennedy had initiated civil rights

legislation passed under Johnson, many of the programs considered part of Johnson's "War on Poverty" originated or were proposed under Kennedy (Trattner 1989).

Into the 1960s racial discrimination was commonplace, limiting eligible women's access to welfare services. Some discrimination was direct, as minority women had been considered "unfit" based on the discretion of social workers. But some practices were indirect, such as the interruption of benefits during the cotton harvest, which affected primarily African Americans. The southern agricultural economy relied on the cheap labor of African Americans and southern politicians were powerful enough to make sure farmers had this pool of laborers. Therefore denying eligibility during harvest was a strategy to force Black women into the labor market and deny them benefits (Quadagno 1992).

However, by the mid-1960s, the welfare rights movement, Johnson's War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement were successful in reducing racial discrimination. Over the course of several months in 1966, in cities such as Chicago and Detroit, activists from the National Welfare Rights Organization staged sit-ins, demanding that women have access to welfare services. Groups such as these were successful, and more women gained access to programs, expanding rolls from 7.8 million in 1966 to 8.4 million in 1967 (Quadagno 1992). Growth in the rolls was due to increased access to people who had been previously denied benefits, not an increase in the number of poor (Trattner 1989; Quadagno 1992).

By 1970, the United States was facing a shift to a more competitive, global economy. At the same time, liberal politicians had increased access to welfare programs resulting in welfare rolls expanding to 12.4 million (Quadagno 1992). The global economy demanded

cheap labor and the United States had eligible workers collecting cash assistance. In particular the number of African Americans on AFDC had increased dramatically, providing fuel for a white backlash (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001). US capitalism had always relied on Black women's labor, but now they were receiving welfare. Many states began to attach punitive policies to welfare receipt including sanctioning for failure to complete paperwork and failure to report the names of fathers to child service divisions (Katz 1989). Additionally, it was during the 1960s that "voluntary" welfare to work programs, such as the Work Incentive Program (WIN) became more common (Abramovitz 1988). Johnson's Administration clearly made welfare to work a priority with his programs such as JobCorp and Volunteers in Service to America created from the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act (Trattner 1989). Politicians and capitalists needed cheap labor and they would adapt welfare policies to provide it.

Changing Tides: Attacks on Welfare for Poor Women

Nixon continued the focus on welfare to work programs into the late 1960s and 1970s, even increasing pressures on young mothers with children to go to work (something that, according to Trattner (1989) was considered more radical at the time). Nixon's Family Assistance Plan (FAP), was created by Daniel Patrick Moynihan and considered quite progressive for the time and for Nixon. The program would set a minimum income level for workers. If employers could not pay the full amount, the government would supplement

wages. Thus, the program required individuals to work or be actively seeking work to be eligible to receive federal assistance to supplement their low wages.

Major criticism over the plan concerned the minimum income level Nixon selected for the program. Once a family's earned income reached \$4000, they were no longer eligible for the program. This \$4000 figure was \$2000 below the federal poverty line and \$4500 under what the Bureau of Labor Statistics considered adequate for a family of four. Outrage over the FAP is perhaps best captured by George Wiley, the leader of the National Welfare Rights Organization, when he said the program should be called the "Family Annihilation Plan" and that the program would "Fuck America's poor" (Trattner 1989). Nixon wanted the administration of the program passed on to the states in what he called the "New Federalism." Nixon's focus on work and the New Federalism were predecessors to the ideology of "devolution" and to "Work First."

Nixon stopped his efforts to push the unpopular FAP through Congress with the election approaching (Katz 1989). Despite this, Nixon was able to get Congress to make all AFDC recipients register for work through the Worker Investment Program (Trattner 1989). Nixon was adamant that women, or rather poor women, would work. This did not hold for middle-class and upper-class women. In fact, the President vetoed the Comprehensive Child Care Act, which would have provided federal funds for childcare that would have allowed many middle class women to enter the workforce. Nixon argued that "ladies" should be in the home. The implication was that poor women, who clearly were not ladies, should work. In this sense, "ladies" attached to white males served to support white male productivity in

the labor force. However, poor unmarried women, particularly women of color, were needed to provide cheap labor. Nixon was also the first President to popularize the idea that many welfare recipients were frauds, further illustrating his disdain for poor women (Trattner 1989). Drawing on negative stereotypes of poor women of color, Nixon argued that these women were different: they were lazy liars who should work; they were not ladies. Only a few years later, the public would learn about Nixon's fraudulent ways as information concerning Watergate came to light. Nixon's pardon granting successor, Ford, did little to address poverty while in office.

In 1976, the populist Democrat Jimmy Carter was elected in the wake of Watergate. Despite Carter's claims to focus on human rights, funding to many social programs was cut drastically (Trattner 1989). Further, Carter stated publicly that welfare was doomed and the whole program should be scrapped and started anew. He later unveiled his plan, the Better Jobs and Income Program, in which part-time jobs would be created for those who could work and income maintenance programs would assist people who could not (Katz 1989; Trattner 1989). The amount of cash assistance families received depended on family size and earnings from jobs. Included among those "who could not work" were the disabled and single mothers with children younger than 14 (an age much older than that set by later administrations). Congress entertained Carter's proposal briefly, but never returned to it after a recess (Katz 1989). Carter's time in office would be short lived amidst the gas crisis, inflation, and the Iran hostage affair. His successor launched the strongest campaign against poor women to date, declaring a war on the welfare state.

In the 1980s the Reagan administration brought a market philosophy of deregulation and decentralization to the federal government (Katz 2001). Similar to many countries, this deregulation of markets and labor was accompanied by dramatic cuts to social welfare programs (Peck 1996). A new attitude towards welfare recipients was emerging with this free market ideology based in neoclassical economics. In the US and other countries, an achievement ideology became stronger and stronger. This ideology presumed anyone could succeed if they only tried hard enough. Following this ideology to its conclusion, anyone who did not succeed must not be trying very hard. People who were not trying hard were thought to be taking advantage of the system and reinforcing welfare dependence and the culture of poverty. In other words, welfare recipients were not considered deserving people of need, but were lazy leeches on the system who needed to be motivated, even if that meant public humiliation (Peck 1986; Piven et al. 2002).

The Reagan administration vowed to reduce the funding and size of welfare programs drastically. This reduction was aided by a media campaign that fed on racist images of so-called welfare queens using welfare checks to purchase Cadillacs instead of feeding their numerous children (Quadagno 1994; Collins, 2000; Feagin 2000). Through this media campaign, the administration was able to convince the public of the need to reduce the income level for eligibility and reduce the number of recipients (Corcoran et al. 2000). The Reagan administration also made use of academic research. Charles Murray's (1984) *Losing Ground*, often referred to as Reagan's "Bible" (Katz 2001), argues that US social policy has created welfare dependency, single-parent families, and out of wedlock childbirth. While

many social scientists pointed to the flawed statistics and unsupported arguments, the book was nevertheless a successful and persuasive tool for Reagan's administration (Katz 1989, 2001).

In 1988, Congress passed The Family Support Act, bipartisan legislation written by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan and co-sponsored by nearly 40 senators (Amott 1990). The major focus of the legislation was on collecting child support from absent parents and moving welfare recipients from welfare to work (Amott 1990; Katz 2001; Piven et al. 2002). This voluntary program was not considered successful by policymakers who believed it should be mandatory in order to get recipients to participate (Albelda 2002). During this administration, many states also began experiments focusing on reducing out of wedlock childbirth and creating time limits for welfare assistance (Katz 2001; Rogers-Dillon 2004). Some governors, including Tommy Thompson, who would later be appointed by George W. Bush as the US Secretary of Health and Human Services, were even demanding devolution, as they wanted more control over their welfare programs. They soon would get it.

In 1992, President Bill Clinton vowed to "end welfare as we know it," basing his policy ideas on Ellwood's reform suggestions to improve health benefits, offer tax credits to the poor, and make affordable, quality childcare more readily available (Piven et al. 2002). The market ideology and conservative Congress from the prior administration was successful in reducing program benefits, which resulted in a compromise. The legislation to create the program we now call Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) passed in 1996. After two vetoes of welfare reform legislation and a number of battles with Newt Gingrich's

“Contract with America,” Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. TANF was not based on Ellwood’s work, but more on racist and elitist notions of cultural deficiency (Hancock 2003). A content analysis of the congressional debates on the 1996 welfare reform found references to the “welfare queen” stereotype in 52% of the documents (Hancock 2003). Further, Katz (2001) gives several examples of welfare recipients being compared to animals. For instance, John L. Mica, a Republican representing Florida, held up a sign that read “Don’t Feed the Alligators” and said: “We post these warnings because unnatural feeding and artificial care create dependency” (323). In just over a decade, the tide had changed dramatically, as policymakers had slit the safety net wide open.

TANF policy was a significant change from AFDC, now including time limits, family caps, and work requirements. These policy changes represented reactions to the “welfare queen” stereotype instead of reactions to the actual typical recipient (Albeda and Tilly 1996). The federal 60-month time limit prevents the so called welfare queens from living off the system. They have five years total during which they can receive assistance. Further, in light of racist images of women on welfare having more and more children to receive a bigger check, the policy capped family assistance so that a mother would not receive additional assistance if she were to get pregnant while on welfare. Finally, most adult recipients of welfare would be required to look for work and/or be involved in so many hours of work-related activities. While many welfare-to-work programs had been voluntary, TANF made seeking work mandatory and the centerpiece of the program.

The second Bush administration took office in 2001 and made the “Marriage Initiative” a large focus, promoting marriage as a way for women to escape poverty. Some saw this approach as a way to get single mothers off of welfare, while many viewed it as government promoting middle-class, white family values (Jarrett 1996; Coltrane 2001) and ignoring non-conjugal family structures (Sudarkasa 1981). In 2005, Congress passed the Federal Deficit Reduction Act, which renewed TANF while increasing the work-related activity requirements. States would now have to have a greater proportion of their clients involved in work-related activities or risk being economically sanctioned. Unfortunately for the states, fewer activities counted as work-related. Many community college and trade training programs were cut from eligibility. Additionally, this legislation continued funding for G.W. Bush’s “family values” plans, providing \$150 million each year for “healthy marriage promotion and fatherhood.” Note the change from Marriage Initiative to “Healthy Marriage Initiative,” which was no doubt related to criticisms that the program would force poor women into potentially violent relationships (see, for example, Cherlin et al. 2004). The Administration for Children and Families’ “Healthy Marriage Initiative” website even has a section to address these criticisms stating (all formatting is theirs):

The ACF Healthy Marriage Initiative is Not About:

- Coercing anyone to marry or remain in unhealthy relationships.
- Withdrawing supports from single parents, or diminishing, either directly or indirectly, the important work of single parents.
- Stigmatizing those who choose divorce.
- Limiting access to divorce.
- Promoting the initiative as a panacea for achieving positive outcomes for child and family well-being.

- Running a federal dating service.
- An immediate solution to lifting all families out of poverty.²

And while the Bush Administration reportedly does not wish to “diminish” single parents, they would seem to prefer women become economically dependent on a man rather than be dependent on the government. In fact, Bush was so willing that, in 2002, he proposed the government spend more than a billion dollars to promote “healthy marriages” between men and women. The House passed the measure, but the Senate never voted on it. Eventually, it was passed through the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005.

The War for Capitalism

While Lyndon Johnson had his “war on poverty”, Michael Katz (1989) described the “war on welfare” and Herbert Gans (1995) argued there was a “war against the poor.” This war was enabled by the flexible boundaries of deserving and undeserving to meet the current political, social and economic period. This ideology was rife with definitions of race and gender used to support class inequality. How race, gender, and class intersected depended on whether or not it was advantageous to have women at home or as cheap labor. Thus, I would argue that these are merely casualties of a bigger war, the war *for* capitalism. While certainly welfare recipients have been shamed and despised when policymakers needed them to be, there has always been a minimal, yet tattered safety net. What has often times been more important than saving or punishing the poor is forcing them into the workforce when a reserve army has been needed. My evidence for this assertion flows from a number of

² <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/about/mission.html#background>

historical events that I will outline below. The ebb and flow of work requirements for welfare has almost always corresponded to times when cheap, low wage laborers were needed for agriculture, industry work, and now for the service sector (Olson and Olson 1981; Rose 1993). During the late 1800s during the institutionalization of the poor in poorhouse, they were forced to work on farms and in industrial factories.

Throughout the 20th century, state restrictions on cash assistance were meant to force the poor into the fields for harvest. Now, deindustrialization in a global economy has led to a polarization in jobs, with the shrinking manufacturing sector being replaced by the service sector where many jobs are poorly paid and part time. In order to ensure that employers can fill these undesirable jobs, Work Fare and Work Experience programs, as well as time limited cash assistance, force poor women into these low-wage service jobs. Further, cash assistance programs have consistently come under attack while other programs have managed to remain intact (Katz 2001).

As Katz (2001) argues, social insurance and tax benefits, the other two forms of welfare, have never come under attack. These means-tested programs have always been associated with work and always benefited from achievement ideology. What sort of land of opportunity would America be with such a large population of people working full-time but living well below the poverty line? These hard workers, according to politicians and public opinion, need assistance from Food Stamps and Medicaid. Even under the Reagan administration in which social welfare programs were slashed to the bone, Food Stamps and Medicaid received only modest cuts.

Even more than Food Stamps and Medicaid, Social Security (old age benefits) and unemployment have not faced cuts. In 2002, George W. Bush even extended the time people can receive unemployment for thirteen weeks³, all the while cutting mothers and their children off from cash assistance under TANF. The Republicans with their “Contract with America,” sarcastically referred to as the “Contract on America” by Clinton (Katz 2001), also wanted to offer assistance to the poor, but only those willing to work in low-wage jobs. For instance, Clinton’s Earned Income Tax Credit program was rarely challenged. Similarly the large tax incentives given to companies to hire welfare workers have never been questioned.

What is clear from this history of certain programs being attacked while others manage to stay alive is that the deserving poor are those people who are willing to work unrewarding low-wage jobs that offer no advancement. People who are not willing to do that, people who believe they should get assistance to stay home and raise their children (think comparable worth here), are denied government aid. But is this a war on poverty or a war on the poor? In some ways it is a war on the poor. Clearly these programs punish the poor in ways lawmakers would never punish the rich for ridiculous things such as failing to fill out a form properly or, even more likely, failing to report income. However, what is happening is more about controlling labor and the labor supply than punishing the poor.

Over the last few decades funding for Legal Services for the poor has been all but eliminated. Further, Congress restricted the cases with which Legal Services can assist, excluding challenges to welfare policies (Katz 2001). Additionally, funding for the Equal

³ Temporary Extended Unemployment Compensation Act of 2002.

Employment Opportunity Commission was cut in half under Reagan and has never recovered (Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2006). The agency's power to enforce anti-discrimination laws has been greatly diminished. Also, unions' ability to strike and collectively bargain effectively has been diminished since the Taft-Hartley Act (Fantasia 1988; McCammon 1990). In other words, gradually more and more legislation has eroded workers' rights. And now as somewhat unwilling workers, welfare recipients are being forced into the labor market. The result of welfare reform then, is the suppression of wages and flooding of the market with a reserve army that will only further erode workers' rights (Piven et al. 2002). In this sense, it is not a war on the poor, but instead a war for capitalism.

This war results in a number of contradictions for caseworkers working on the ground floor of welfare reform. They are given goals of helping clients reach "self-sufficiency," an impossible task given the likelihood that clients will only get low-wage jobs. Caseworkers are constrained in how they can use the rules, often only bending them in ways that help the county, not the poor they are supposed to serve. Finally keeping their jobs requires them to sanction clients. To keep sane in their jobs, they must redefine punishing clients as a way to help them. These contradictions are the focus of this dissertation.

Figure 3. Social Welfare Policy Timeline

- 1909** White House Conference on Dependent Children
- 1911** Illinois becomes first state to offer Mothers' Pensions
- 1921** Sheppard-Towner Act passes Congress establishing federal funding to provide maternal and child health services.
- 1929** Funding not renewed for Sheppard-Towner programs
- Stock Market crashes on Black Tuesday marking the beginning of the Great Depression
- 1933** First Wave of President Roosevelt's New Deal legislation passes. The focus of these programs was on wages, prices, and regulating economic markets.
- The US Supreme Court would later find many of these programs unconstitutional, including minimum wage laws.
- 1935** Second Wave of New Deal legislation that included the passing of the 1935 Social Security Act and the establishment of the National Labor Relations Board.
- The 1935 Social Security Act establishes elderly benefits, unemployment, Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), and survivor benefits. ADC essentially makes mothers' pensions a federal program. The US Supreme Court upholds these programs as constitutional.
- By this year all but two states (SC and GA) had Mothers' Pensions programs.
- 1945** Federal Insurance Contributions Act establishes payroll tax to fund Social Security.
- 1950s and 1960s** US Congress amends the Social Security Act over two decades expanding benefits. These expansions were done every two years (election years) due to their popularity with voters.
- 1964** Economic Opportunity Act, the centerpiece of Johnson's "War on Poverty" and "Great Society," passes. The act establishes the Office of Economic Opportunity, a federal agency reporting to the President, and programs such as JobCorp and Volunteers in Service to America.
- Food Stamp Act passes Congress.
- 1965** President Johnson's legislation amends Social Security adding Medicare through the 1965 Social Security Act.
- 1988** Family Support Act passes Congress. The major focus of the legislation was on collecting child support from absent parents and moving welfare recipients from welfare to work.
- 1996** The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act passes establishing Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. This marked a dramatic shift from AFDC with time limits, family caps, and work activity requirements.
- 2005** Federal Deficit Reduction Act passes increasing the requirements for counties and states on the number of clients they needed to have involved in work-related activities. This legislation also provides funding of \$150 million each year for "healthy marriage promotion and fatherhood."

Chapter 3

Celebrating Welfare Reform: Organizational Goals, Rules, and Success

“Well, if the goal of our program, no matter what the situation, is self-sufficiency- and hopefully that means employment- then those [services] are all those things you need... we started working with harder to place [people], maybe people with a limited education. We’re seeing a lot of people lately ‘cause we’re getting- we’ve gotten rid of the cream of the crop.” (Program manager, Smithwick County).

In a broad sense, this chapter examines organizational goals, rules, and success. These three concepts are often overlapping, though they may or may not depend on one another in the ways we expect. Most people believe organizations should have goals and rules and assume achieving rule compliance in pursuit of goals is the means through which organizations become successful. More specifically in this chapter, I examine the goals, rules and success of a Work First program in rural North Carolina. I ask how Department of Social Services (DSS) caseworkers in this county implement goals and rules in an effort to help welfare organizations achieve success.

Over the past decade, much has been made over the success of welfare reform. Politicians and the press alike have claimed welfare reform to be working (Rogers-Dillon and Skrentny 1999). Despite these claims considerable research suggests that there are serious methodological flaws with claiming anything comprehensive about the success of welfare reform (Hao and Cherlin 2004; Lichter and Jayakody 2002). Welfare programs, though federally funded, are under the control of state governments. Then within states, counties control programs, and then caseworkers within counties. In sum, there could be considerable

variation in policies and in the implementation and execution of policies, making measurements and even common definitions of “success” impossible.

Given these complexities, it is difficult to make comparisons between states or even counties within states. This considerable variation also means we must view national trends or averages with caution as some states have very generous benefits while other states do not. Variation by state in the extent and quality of benefits certainly has consequences for the well-being of families. Finally, while some stakeholders have claimed welfare reform to be a success, prior research has largely been unable to isolate the effects of welfare reform from other political, social, or economic trends (for a detailed examination of methodological issues, see Lichter and Jayakody 2002; Hao and Cherlin 2004). The so-called success of welfare may have more to do with these trends in the years since welfare reform began than with effective policies and programs.

Regardless of methodological considerations, we must consider what the program and policy goals are when considering how successful welfare reform has been. If the goal has been to decrease the number of people receiving benefits, then clearly welfare reform has been a success (Lichter and Jayakody 2002). If the goal is to help poor families reach self-sufficiency, then we might be more cautious in celebrating. In general, employment is up, meaning many welfare recipients find employment after leaving welfare. Exact statistics on the percentage of welfare recipients who leave welfare for work is unclear; however, in one estimate employment among *all* unmarried mothers had increased 11.6 percent (to 78.9 percent) from 1994 to 2000 (Lichter and Jayakody, 2002). It is less clear how much of this

increase is attributable to welfare services and how stable the employment is. In fact many recipients have difficulty finding fulltime, full-year employment (Cancian et al. 1999; Corcoran et al. 2000; Hennessy 2005). Perhaps worse is that many jobs available to recipients are low-skill, low-wage jobs that offer very little upward mobility. The most consistent finding concerning the effects of welfare reform on employment is that the number of families classified as working poor has increased dramatically post-TANF (Lichter and Jayakody 2002; Corcoran et al. 2000; O'Conner 2000; Hennessy 2005).

In sum, we should be skeptical about claiming welfare reform a success nationally, but what about at a more local level? Conducting a case study allows me to examine policy and program effectiveness without the methodological difficulties of comparing client outcomes on a macro level. In this chapter, however, my focus is even more specific. Success, we might assume, is derived from effective policies and programs. While I have shown some of the doubts raised by social scientists, my findings suggest that caseworkers and supervisors also have their doubts. Despite this, the organization and its workers stick to the rhetoric of the organizational goal. From the first interview in my fieldwork, I was told by Christy, the program manager that:

It was always communicated among every person at this agency that the goal of self-sufficiency was everybody's goal. It may be assigned to us, but everybody needed to promote that regardless of whether you were an adult services worker, child protective service worker or in administration. The goal was an agency goal, not just a division goal and that it took everybody to do that.

Indeed, in every interview and on many occasions during my observations, I heard a caseworker or a supervisor "promote" the goal of self-sufficiency. My overall interest in this

chapter, then, is in how caseworkers implement policies and rules given to them by the State (in this case the federal government and the state of North Carolina) to achieve the stated organizational goal of self-sufficiency for their clients. To examine this, it is first necessary to see how externally imposed factors such as organizational goals and rules are enforced by caseworkers. That is, the goals and subsequent rules of welfare come from national, state, and county policy makers and then it is the daily job of caseworkers to enforce these rules and support the organizational goals. Caseworkers' success in supporting goals and enforcing rules may very well equal organizational and program success.

In this chapter, I look at three major theories in the organizational literature-- goal displacement, cooptation, and claims of legitimacy-- and assess how each theory helps me examine this issue. Each of these theories offers a lens for viewing the ways in which organizations create and recreate goals and rules, paying particular attention to the organization's environment. In my analyses, I integrate and supplement these theories for a better understanding how "welfare" policies and rules are implemented and enforced. Finally, while these theories reify organizations by focusing on how they interact with the environment, I add a focus on how people, the caseworkers, do this work through their daily enforcement of organizational rules and support of organizational goals. Clearly organizations do not operate in political, economic, and social vacuums, and clearly organizations are not devoid of people. In this sense, I hope to show how individuals are acting within the organization to help the organization meet the demands of powerful people in the environment.

Before turning to the theories, I note that all of them see historical change as important to understanding the social phenomenon being studied. In the next section, I will briefly discuss historical changes in welfare policies and in the perceptions of welfare recipients. As I discuss the three theories, I will refer back to this section. Next I will discuss the theories and their application to the process through which caseworkers implement policies and rules. Organizations are conventionally viewed by scholars as starting with agreed upon goals, applying rules and other policies and practices in pursuit of those goals, and achieving more or less success in meeting these goals. As a baseline for subsequent parts of the analysis, this chapter examines the goals, rules, and success of welfare reform in Smithwick County. We will see that the conventional understanding of organizations must be refined to describe this case.

Historical change in Welfare Policies

Over the course of the 20th century, a substantial change in how welfare recipients are perceived occurred. This had consequences for what is considered a “legitimate” welfare policy or organization. In the early 1900s “welfare” programs termed Mothers’ Pensions began to emerge in different states. During this time divorce was rare, so mothers usually became single mothers as the result of the death of a spouse. Since working conditions were harsh and deaths due to factory and railways accidents were common, attitudes towards welfare recipients were usually positive (Sugarman 1998). Aid to Families with Dependent Children evolved from Mothers’ Pensions in the 1930s. The recipients were again typically

widows with children (Garfinkel and McLanahan 1986; Katz 1986; Ellwood 1988). Further, the policy was seen as a temporary solution that Social Security would eventually address, but this did not happen (Corcoran et al. 2000).

A number of changes in the 1960s and 1970s (social, demographic, and political) led to the rapid expansion in the number of families receiving benefits. As rolls grew larger and larger (11.30 million in 1976; see US Department of Health and Human Services 1999), many conservative policymakers became increasingly concerned about increasing government spending in welfare programs and so-called “welfare dependence.” It was during the 1960s and 1970s that voluntary welfare-to-work type programs emerged. The program foreshadowed future policies mandating that welfare benefits be conditional on clients seeking work.

In the 1980s the Reagan administration worked diligently to reduce drastically the costs and size of welfare programs, including AFDC. This reduction was aided by a large media campaign that fed on white racism through racist images of so-called “welfare queens” using welfare checks to purchase Cadillacs instead of feeding their numerous children (Collins 1998; Feagin 2000). This was persuasive, as most Americans believe the myth that most welfare recipients are single African American mothers (Gilens 1995). Through this media campaign, the administration was able to reduce the income level allowed for eligibility and thereby reduce the number of recipients (Corcoran et al. 2000). Attitudes about welfare recipients and welfare programs were continuing to change dramatically from the days of Mothers’ Pensions.

In 1992 Clinton vowed to “end welfare as we know it.” He based his policy ideas on Ellwood’s (1988) reform suggestions concerning improving health benefits, offering tax credits, and making affordable, quality childcare more readily available. The largely conservative Congress was successful in reducing benefits proposed in the Clinton program, resulting in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. As the name suggests, the focus of this legislation was on welfare recipients “taking responsibility” and more actively looking for work. Many argued the policy was feeding on racist notions of cultural deficiency (Quadagno 1994; Piven and Cloward 1993; Neubeck and Casenave 2001; Willie and Reddick 2003). Hancock (2003) found strong evidence for the argument that welfare policy changes had been fueled with racist assumptions in her content analysis of the congressional debates on welfare reform, finding specific references to the “welfare queen” stereotype in 52% of the documents.

It was clear that both politicians’ and the general public’s perceptions of clients were changing and this clearly had implications for changes in the policy. AFDC recipients no longer deserved assistance or empathy; they were leeches on the system that needed to be discouraged from this behavior. This kind of ideology is exemplified by programs in New York City’s requirement that welfare clients wear Day-Glo orange vests and clean the subways to earn their welfare check (Piven 2002). This is a practice embraced by others; for example, one journalist said welfare recipients should be scrubbing the streets as a form of punishment for out of wedlock childbirth and unemployment (Piven 2002). The hope, it seems, is that this would be a deterrent to others as they witness this public humiliation.

In sum, during the course of the last century policies concerning welfare spending and attitudes about welfare recipients have been largely intertwined. The welfare reform of 1996 would have faced considerably more opposition and possibly not have passed if welfare recipients had not been successfully stereotyped as lazy and irresponsible by prior administrations. If the public and politicians still looked at welfare recipients as deserving, as they did under Mother's Pensions and much of AFDC, the sanction and time-limited programs of today would likely not have been implemented. Instead, welfare has indeed become more of a program concerned with enforcement (enforcing the rules, remaining compliant) than a program about social services (job training, education). This argument will be advanced in the following pages.

The official goal of welfare reform is to help poor families reach self-sufficiency. The rules include a number of eligibility criteria for income and number of children. But beyond this, the rules the caseworkers enforce daily are such things as: that clients be involved in work-related activities; that they conduct their job search for more than thirty hours a week; and that they find a job before the 24-month or 60-month time limits. Success at following the rules, not getting clients to self-sufficiency, leads to proclamations of program success. In fact, getting clients to self-sufficiency is impossible to achieve since success in reaching this goal would require a massive overhaul of our political, economic, and social systems. Most the clients join the ranks of the working poor in low-wage jobs once they leave the rolls (Katz 2001). Given this reality, following the rules takes center stage. This focus on the rules also means that failure at any step, according to the DSS, is usually because the client was

noncompliant. The client did not follow the rules. In the sections that follow I will discuss this process in greater detail.

Organizational Explanations for the Construction of Rules

To examine how workers enforce the rules, I draw upon three organizational theories, each of which aims to explain how organizational policies, procedures and practices are created and transformed. These include two theories from old institutionalism-- goal displacement and cooptation and a third theory from neo-institutionalism that focuses more on organizations performing in ways to appear effective and legitimate. All three of these theories reacted to a more conventional portrayal of bureaucratic structures, including rules, as purposeful commitments to accomplish agreed upon goals effectively. First, I outline key relevant ideas in these theoretical traditions. In the following section I apply these ideas to the issue at hand in this chapter.

Old Institutionalism: Goal Displacement

Goal displacement is part of a larger literature about goal change. Organizations might change their goals because they have achieved the goal – goal succession-- or they might change the goal despite having not achieved the original goal. The latter can occur through goal displacement, the substitution of a new for a stated unachieved goal. Goal displacement can happen for a number of reasons. The organization may be pressured externally in a way that results in a change in goals. This may occur if external sources have the ability to threaten organizations through controlling the flow of resources. Powerful

actors in the external environment may force or at least strongly suggest a change in goals. For example, the Tennessee Valley Authority changed from radical to conservative goals in response to threats to its survival from local elites and organizations (Selznick 1966).

Second, the organization can also be subject to internal pressure from powerful actors within the organization who displace goals to maintain their own power. Often times this is associated with leaders or managers shifting the goals, but there is no reason to think this would not happen at a more local or shop floor level. Scott's (1967) work illustrates that external and internal contingencies created goal displacement among the sheltered workshops for the blind. Economic shifts combined with industry men serving as shelter managers resulted in a shift to wanting to do "big business" instead of provide social services for the blind. Selznick (1943, 1948) suggests that powerful actors within an organization may create an "organization paradox" in which informal networks within a formal organization disrupt the organization's overall success.

Third, goals can also be displaced, as Warner and Havens (1968) suggest, because the original goal was vague or abstract or because there is no means of achieving the goal in the current system. For example, a goal of "ending global warming" might be admirable, but it is not very concrete in the sense of that many people do not understand global warming as a phenomenon or may not think it is even occurring. Even if they do think this is a serious issue, there seems to be no mechanism through which an organization stating this goal could achieve it. In part this is the case because it would take many organizations aimed at many different causes of the problem such as automobiles, cattle, or aerosol cans. In other words,

the problem is complex and requires more systemic change than one or even dozens of organizations could handle. Vague, complex, and/or seemingly unattainable goals may be displaced by more concrete, simple, seemingly attainable ones.

Finally, Merton (1957) suggests that goals might be displaced through a means-ends inversion. This may be the result of internal or external pressures or both. That is, because of bureaucratic structures and bureaucratic personalities within them, people will come to see the means as the ends. In other words, following the rules and completing paperwork become the goal no matter how much these activities differ from and even interfere with the stated ends. Here operative goals completely take over and the goals of the organization (official goals) become displaced. Blau's (1963) case study of an employment service agency illustrates this. Once the employment services workers' job performance was evaluated on standard, statistical measures of the quantity and not the quality of their job placements, they came to act in ways to satisfy the numbers at the expense of the organization's goals of enduring job placements. This case is likely to be quite suggestive for the welfare reform case.

Old Institutionalism: Co-optation

Goals might also become displaced through a process Selznick (1948, 1966) terms cooptation. Given the complexity of the process of cooptation, I examine this in some detail on its own. Cooptation refers to "the process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy-determining structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence" (1948:34). This process can take years to unfold; therefore, here again

historical change is important. Additionally, political change and powerful stakeholders in the environment must also be considered since they often become the shapers of the organization. Selznick's (1966) classic study of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) illustrates this process of an organization battling with its environment. TVA leaders invited local agriculturalists into the decision making process to avert the threat from these local power holders, which resulted in the TVA shifting from being more radical in promoting sustainability and community agriculture to supporting existing relationships between land grant university extension agents and affluent farmers. Ironically, powerful stakeholders in the local environment were allowed to alter the organization through its radically democratic grassroots organizational philosophy.

DiMaggio and Powell (1991) argue that this focus on local elites is unique among old institutionalists, as neoinstitutionalists look to more macro sources of formal authority and power. DiMaggio and Powell argue further that this is due to historical changes in formal organizations and changes over time in which environment is most important. In other words, given current technologies, in many ways the national has become local. Therefore, next I turn to neoinstitutionalists' explanations for how rules are constructed. Additionally, I examine who gets to construct the rules and why they construct them the way they do.

New Institutionalism: Legitimacy and Effectiveness

New institutionalism focuses on organizations working to gain legitimacy to some external environment. To do this, the organization must present a legitimate front to this environment, thereby allowing the organization to guard its technical core from outside

intrusion. But who is doing what to whom and under what conditions? In this section, I will first work through the abstractions of this theory. In the next section, I will examine this question and show who is accountable to whom, for what, and under what conditions. How organizations fend off the environment or buffer the technical core from it is a key process that Meyer and Rowan (1977) discuss as myths and ceremonies. A myth is an institutionalized and taken for granted expectation that organizations should look and “be” a certain way. Essentially, formal organization structures: (1) have technical purposes that are specified in a rule-like way; and (2) must be highly institutionalized in external environment and therefore have to be taken as legitimate.

This may, in effect be purely ceremonial, a presentation of an organization’s “self.” In no way, does this the organization have to actually *be* effective or efficient, they merely need to appear so. Basically, organizations want to look like their “type” of organization (a school, a welfare agency) in form and through formal procedures, but their technical core or daily operations may in fact be quite different. For instance, looking like a trendy high tech company often leads to organizations of that type to come to resemble one another. This process is called isomorphism in this theory. In this sense new institutionalism comes to focus on appearances of cooperation instead of conflict. Further, cooperation is often achieved with production and reproduction of taken for granted ritualized activity—and this focus on the importance of rituals and the taken for granted is a departure from what the old institutionalism offers.

This theoretical area sees the organization as able to adapt and fend off the environment in a cooperative, not conflicting, way (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Selznick 1996). It is important to note an exception, coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). This concept describes the processes of domination and dependence through which actors in the external environment coerce an organization to be like others through, for example, legal regulation or funding dependency. Despite this exception, the more cooperative isomorphisms, mimetic and normative, are by far more common applications of DiMaggio and Powell's typology within this tradition (see Mizruchi and Fein 1999). Both mimetic isomorphism and normative isomorphism are diffusion processes, either through copied responses to uncertainty in mimetic isomorphism or through expert and professional networks created in normative isomorphism.

DiMaggio and Powell (1991) critique old institutionalism, arguing it shows its functional roots by assuming all actors are rational and weigh pros and cons of their every action. Despite this critique and the suggestion that these theories are so distinct, all these theoretical traditions rely heavily on Durkheim's theories of expectations and ritualized behavior to craft their theories. In the next section, I will apply these theories to the case study at hand. In doing so, I hope to bring the people and the accountability back into how goals originate, how they change, and how they come to be celebrated as successes.

Applying the theories to “Work First”

Old Institutionalism: Goal Displacement

Following predictions from goal displacement, we might expect that social service goals of Departments of Social Services have become displaced. First I note the official goal is to help poor people reach self-sufficiency, but how tangible or feasible is this goal? In my case study, many people in the caseload were uneducated-- many without a high school diploma or GED-- and many were inexperienced and unskilled. Beyond the clients, the county had experienced considerable de-industrialization from the flight of textile mills, their only large manufacturing industry. The remaining employers are hotels and fast food restaurants to serve motorists passing through Smithwick County. These employers rarely offer salaries above minimum wage and also rarely offer any opportunity for promotion. Even in this rural county with a low cost of living, minimum wage jobs such as these are a far cry from self-sufficiency. This is something that does not escape caseworkers in the county who often argue to the client that minimum wage is better than welfare. Minimum wage is not a living wage and most caseworkers and supervisors would argue that “self-sufficiency” requires a living wage. Despite this, caseworkers argue that even a minimum wage job provides a sense of “earning your way,” and the income is higher than the approximately \$300 a month a client would get in cash assistance through welfare. For instance, Judy, a former recipient who is now a caseworker said:

...but if you try to explain to the... that 236 or 272 a month is nothing compared to working every week, getting you a check every week. You do more. You have more money instead of waiting 30 days or 31 days for a check to come to you. I realized it and, and I said uh-oh, it's not, not working.

Here Judy is describing her own realization when she was a client that getting a check for \$236 or \$272 a month from Work First is substantially less money than if she worked, even for minimum wage. Her own experience influences the way she interacts with the clients. She tries to use this same reasoning to get her clients off of welfare and into jobs. Also, Judy fuses her experience with that of the clients. This was actually quite common among the caseworkers as they seem, in many ways, to see themselves as similar to the clients. This might be different from county DSS offices where more of the caseworkers are middle-class.

This “anything is better than welfare” line of argument is also quite common among the caseworkers. If nothing else, caseworkers hope these “entry level” jobs will lead to better things. To this end, they celebrate successful client placements anywhere, even at the local Wal-Mart. In this context, then, the goal of self-sufficiency seems intangible and unattainable in contrast to getting any form of employment. Therefore, it is easily displaced. Intangibility of goals, however, is not the only reason for goal displacement.

Means-ends inversion

Merton (1957) describes a phenomenon whereby bureaucratic personalities become so taken with following the rules that the rules become an end in and of themselves. The “bureaucratic personality” embraces the rules in moments of perceived authority while displacing the organization’s goals (the official end). This bureaucratic personality is socially created within the context of the bureaucracy. Bureaucracies must constrain workers through rules so that workers can be monitored efficiently. These constraints lessen the autonomy of the worker, sometimes leading to the worker looking for other avenues to exercise some level

of authority or autonomy. The official goal of current U.S. welfare policy is to move recipients from welfare to work. The state in which I conducted my research was even more direct, calling its policy “Work First.” Many times this title was quoted by caseworkers to me or to clients as almost a mantra. The caseworkers embrace this language of “Work First,” often arguing that it creates a work ethic among otherwise unmotivated clients. Further, any job is presented as being a better than welfare. The quality of the job cannot be questioned by the clients. And in many ways, for caseworkers to keep doing their jobs, it cannot be questioned by the caseworkers. For instance, one caseworker, Nancy, a former recipient said:

They want to just sit at home and get a check every month and it used to be AFDC back in the day where you could get a check every month and don’t do anything. Now we’re trying to make it so you have to do something, that’s why it’s called Work First. We want you to go to work first and then we’ll help you with anything else that we could, with daycare and transportation and all that...

Many other caseworkers would often say, “It’s called Work First, so you need to get to work first.” In other words, skill development, education, and many other activities take a backseat to getting a job. Eventually, through a job, the policy and caseworkers suggest, a former welfare recipient can reach self-sufficiency. Caseworkers frequently talk about the goal of self-sufficiency, not just to me in interviews, but with one another and with clients. In my time in the field, I cannot recall a single interaction between a client and a caseworker over the phone, face-to-face, in the office or in the client’s home, or any other time, in which the caseworker did not mention the goal of self-sufficiency.

This goal is even mentioned at times when it seems out of place. For instance, I spent some time shadowing caseworkers, including observing interviews with new applicants. One

caseworker was unique in my observations in that she would rush around gathering the necessary paperwork and information before an interview. She would say, “We do not want her to wait too long.” On one occasion, an applicant was not in the lobby when we came to get her. The caseworker’s response was, “We are trying to teach self-sufficiency and in the real world you have to wait. At the doctor’s office no one is going to go looking for you in the parking lot or whatever. You need to be in the lobby.” In this sense, every part of the process, including being in the lobby when called upon, is part of self-sufficiency. Further, self-sufficiency is something you learn to do.

This consistent message of self-sufficiency and going to work first to achieve self-sufficiency prompted me to ask caseworkers what they do to help clients find a job.⁴ The caseworkers’ first response was almost always that clients must register with the state employment agency (ESC) through a program called “First Stop.” This program no longer receives adequate funding from the state and several of the supervisors argue workers at the state employment agency do not offer enough assistance to clients because of the decrease in funding. Kim, a supervisor expresses her frustrations with the employment service agency saying:

They [ESC] don’t want to help. They don’t want to do anything they are not getting paid for. So they’re not getting paid to register for First Stop anymore, but we are still required to have them register.

After talking more about the referral process she again comes back to the funding issue:

Their money got cut and their staff and they just don’t want to do the extra stuff so, they have their goals to meet. They have their number crunches they

⁴ My own professional experience in the private sector working as a temporary staffing person probably influenced this interest as well.

have to have. So when it comes to doing something extra to something else, then they are ... and part of their money has been taken away and they used to get money for that. I mean I can understand you know... I mean he says his staff has decreased and he does not have the time. And we have had to put people in there to do it.

Now the DSS rotates two people to work at the ESC a few days a week to pull job referrals for the caseworkers to distribute. This quote illustrates a larger issue of program effectiveness and the relationships between government agencies. The ESC is required by law to provide a service to Work First clients, but they do not have the funding and resources (for enough staff) to provide the service. The consequence of this failure of the agencies to work together and the government to fund services the legally require is that clients do not get services. In this case, welfare clients who are supposed to moving from welfare to work do not get job referrals from the ESC staff. Despite this potential flaw in the policies and rules, caseworkers must still enforce these rules. This dilemma created from enforcing rules that may not be effective will be addressed in remaining chapters of this dissertation.

In addition to registering with First Stop, clients must look for jobs (called “job search”) on their own for thirty hours a week. Caseworkers monitored compliance with this requirement, but it was still unclear what caseworkers individually did to help someone find a job. Next, caseworkers answered that clients attend a job readiness class offered by a local nonprofit. In fact, this class is now mandatory for everyone applying for welfare cash assistance. Participation in this class is considered a “work-related activity,” which helps the county meet expectations for the state (the federal Deficit Reduction Act (DRA) of 2005 requires counties to have half their clients involved in work-related activities). In this class,

clients learn to write resumes and how to interview for a job. Unfortunately, this training may not help clients compete for low-wage jobs that often only accept applications, not resumes, and that often do not require formal interviews. While this training may help clients enter better paying jobs in the future (which may help them become self-sufficient), these are not the jobs available to them now. Given the local job market and their skill level, these jobs may never become available to them since, as the opening vignette suggests, current clients are not the “cream of the crop” and face incredible barriers in a poor labor market.

Still it was unclear exactly what caseworkers themselves do to help clients find work. Based on the policies (and even the names of the policies), the casual observer might assume that caseworkers spend a great portion of their days trying to help the clients get jobs so that they become self-sufficient and move from welfare to work. Finally, after 10-15 minutes of probing and follow-up questions with Kathy, a caseworker, she responded “well, every week Jane [who works as a liaison between the Chamber of Commerce, the state employment agency and Department of Social Services] sends me jobs listed through the [state employment agency]. Then I go through and look for ones that match my clients.” How does she contact the client to tell them about the jobs? Kathy replies that she sends them a letter in the mail during the designated paperwork time of the week when she sends out various letters to clients. In this county, caseworkers block one day a week to send letters and catch up on paperwork.⁵

⁵ In fact, I was set up to interview one caseworker on her “paperwork day,” but she was very annoyed at both me and the supervisor for intruding on this time.

In other words, it might be a number of days before the client ever hears about a job. Do caseworkers ever call a client about jobs out of a greater sense of urgency? She looks puzzled as if this were an odd question and replies that she does not call the clients. Even one caseworker who takes extra effort to go through the job advertisements in the newspaper on weekends mails clients the information. As a rarity, she does call clients, but only when a job fair is coming up. Additionally, she followed this information with:

We can get you there, umm just let us know and we've had job fairs where we've actually set up transportation or they had transportation and they didn't even show up. And of course they got sanctioned because if you don't go to a job interview that we refer you to, your check will stop. And then they'll call and come up with all kinds of excuses but you know, but the thing is you have to do this...

In other words, clients may very well be applying to jobs that are no longer available and are only referred to jobs listed through the state employment agency. Many companies advertise openings in other ways and often in small companies only hire through informal networks (Dobbin et al. 1993; Reskin and McBrier 2000). Job fairs are treated with a greater sense of urgency, but only by one caseworker out of fifteen. Regardless, if clients do not apply to the jobs or attend the job fair, they clearly will be sanctioned.

Depending on the caseworkers' estimations of how they allocate their time, they estimate fifty to about sixty percent of their time is spent doing paperwork. Based on observations, it would seem the estimate that fifty percent of their time is allocated to paperwork is conservative. Paperwork includes sending letters like the ones mentioned above, but it also includes documenting what was said in a conversation and documenting how they spend their time through what resembles a billable hour system. The rest of their

time is spent face-to-face or on the phone with clients of their own or with other workers' clients. Caseworkers rotate intake day, which means greeting clients and doing the initial interview with someone who usually will become someone else's case. Since one day every two weeks is spent doing intake, on average, ten percent of weekly time is spent with the intake of clients.

The remaining forty percent, or sixteen hours, of the week is spent working with existing clients. Caseworkers in Smithwick County carry a caseload of forty to fifty families. If the sixteen hours is spent equally across forty families, then each family gets only twenty-four minutes per week of the caseworker's time. In other words, the caseworker does not have nearly enough time to help the client reach self-sufficiency, since they cannot even help them find a job to apply for in that amount of time. Further, much of the caseworkers' face-to-face and phone time is spent checking that the client is following rules, not working with them to find jobs. Though I did not systematically record counts of the nature of conversations between clients and caseworkers, I was struck by the uniqueness of an event at one home visit.

I accompanied two caseworkers to a client's home. This client had a criminal record and the nature of the charge made it difficult for her to find employment. The caseworker and the client talked about forms of bonding insurance she may be eligible for and then discussed having the liaison to the Chamber of Commerce assist this client in finding a job. So while I did not keep a comprehensive, detailed record that would allow me to generate a frequency distribution, this instance stood in sharp contrast to the many conversations in which the

caseworker and client conversation was only about updating paperwork. Following the rules may or may not help the client get a job, but the caseworker is rarely actively helping the client get a job. Caseworkers have so many rules to follow and reports to fill out to show that the client is trying to find a job that the caseworker has no time to help the client with the actual search. In this sense, the so-called “mutual responsibility” (the caseworker and client enter a “mutual responsibility agreement” when the client applies for Work First) is really the responsibility of the client. The caseworker, then, spends hours documenting the client’s efforts.

In sum, the daunting amount of paperwork becomes an end in itself. In fact, it becomes so much of an end that caseworkers seem to think merely gathering data through client paperwork or sending paperwork to clients is functional in getting the client a job. Caseworkers give accounts of this despite not actually *doing* anything with the information or paperwork they require. This was evident in shadowing caseworkers. They all collect information in the application process (actually the DSS refers to this as an interview and not an application) about prior work history and education. The caseworkers then enter this data into the computer. Clients were never asked about their job goals and aspirations, or even their skills, in any of the interviews I sat in on. Increasing the client’s type or level of skill was never discussed, despite the relevance of these to the official goal of self-sufficiency. However, none of interviews I sat in on were completed, due to clients lacking information necessary for some of the paperwork. Regardless, the emphasis is on getting the client to

work first and then assisting the client with services, as the quote earlier from Frances illustrates.

Strengths and limitations of the theory

On the surface, goal displacement offers a useful lens for viewing this social world. The intangibility of the goals results in means-ends inversion. For instance, the caseworkers' main source of frustration and accomplishment is their paperwork, not their clients. This should not come as a surprise given paperwork is what caseworkers spend the majority of their time on. In this sense, the means come to displace the official goals which are clearly intangible and likely even immeasurable. There is no mechanism or vehicle currently in place that would allow caseworkers to help all poor people reach self-sufficiency. Even if there were mechanisms, the lack of client qualifications and skills, and the poor local labor market, may be barriers too large to overcome. Given this, workers turn to the concrete goals that they are evaluated on, which are hitting their numbers in terms of the percentage of their clients involved in work-related activities and a reduction in their rolls. In Smithwick County, caseworkers give lip service to the organizational goals. However, many really do want to help clients, but ultimately they need to keep their own jobs or suffer a similar fate as their clients.

While this theoretical lens offers some advantages in examining how caseworkers respond to goals and rules, there are some clear limitations to only using this lens. First, often theories concerning goal displacement assume a level of rationality. This theory does seem to suggest that actors are sorting through the pros and cons of operative versus official goals.

While this might be true in some cases, it seems a stretch to assume actors have all the information, or are even aware enough to make these sorts of rational decisions. The caseworkers are constrained in using any sort of discretion to benefit the clients (the subject of the next chapter). Their rationality is severely limited. It is possible that caseworkers are guided unquestioned assumptions and ritualized (or habitual) behavior than by cost/benefit analyses. In light of this uncertainty, this imperfect information, the caseworkers do what they need to do to stay comfortably in their jobs.

Merton (1957) builds upon institutional theorists' structural functionalist underpinnings, advancing his concepts of intended and unintended consequences. In other words, consequences may not always be planned rational outcomes, but instead a perceived functional action may have completely dysfunctional consequences. This, however, seems a weak answer to a major problem with this theory. Ritualistic ceremonial behavior is consistent with structural functionalists' Durkheimian roots. However, old institutional theorists do not seem to take his focus on expectations and rituals like neoinstitutionalists.

Another limitation worthy of exploration is that while clearly the means do become ends, it does not seem to be due to so called "bureaucratic personalities" embracing a small glimpse of authority. This may be the case with a minority of the caseworkers. However, it seems the paperwork becomes a tool for establishing rules and policies as effective and that completing paperwork is a reliable source of gratification for caseworkers who infrequently feel gratified in their work with clients. Both of these issues will be taken up in depth in the next two chapters.

Old Institutionalism: Co-optation

In the prior historical section, I outlined the tumultuous history of “welfare” in the United States. While welfare was once a safety net for the poor, it has now become a program of rule enforcement. Caseworkers often describe the former system, AFDC, as an entitlement and argue quite clearly that feeling entitled to a social service is not a good thing. While entitlement simply means having a right to receive a benefit that you need and that you are eligible to receive, this word has a negative connotation with the caseworkers. This change in the program is evident in the following account by Mary, a caseworker:

I started out of here for 3 years under the AFD [AFDC] thing and then it changed to Work First, ok, which was entitlement as opposed to what they call it now, not an entitlement program, a grant, entitlement where people were entitled because of whatever reason they were entitled. No one is entitled to this. This is strictly on the grounds of based on need...

Mary follows this statement with a discussion of abuse and how time clocks work as a way to enforce rules. However, clearly clients feeling they are entitled to a social service are seen in a negative light. Further, clients under AFDC are seen as not needing the service as is the case with the current system which is “based on need” as opposed to entitlement. In this way the caseworker sees entitlement to programs and services and need as opposites. This type of account is repeated among many of the caseworkers through interviews or in conversations during my observations. They celebrate TANF and welfare reform because it eliminated many of the clients who caseworkers felt did not really need help and felt entitled to live off the system.

In many ways, caseworkers' accounts mirror those in the larger political climate around welfare and welfare reform. As briefly illustrated in the historical overview, the battles have occurred between and within the public and government over many decades. This history led to debates between Democratic President Clinton and the Republican Congress that resulted in the compromise now called TANF. Powerful stakeholders in the environment were successful in "ending welfare as we know it." Like the case of the Tennessee Valley Authority, we see a dramatic change in the organization, in this case, government welfare service agencies. What was once a more radical idea, a social service agency providing a safety net for the poor, became a more conservative enforcement agency system charged with teaching the poor how to follow rules and forcing them into the low-wage labor force. This organization became an enforcement agency instead of a social service agency. The enforcement is then redefined as a service because in low wage work, clients need to follow the rules without protest.

There have been dramatic changes in welfare over the last several decades. Selznick's theory of cooptation suggests these changes could be caused by powerful, threatening outsiders being invited into the organization's decision-making process in order to co-opt them and their threat. In the case of the Tennessee Valley Authority, these invited threats were the local land grant university agriculturalists who were invited into the TVA, took over, and changed the TVA's goals. There does not seem to be a parallel in the case of welfare reform. Certainly, Daniel Patrick Moynihan was an invited outsider in his appointments under Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, but he never represented a threat to the

legitimacy of welfare. Certainly his ideas concerning Black families seemed more influential during the Reagan and Bush administrations. Additionally, conservative ideas, as illustrated in the caseworkers quotes, have entered into the welfare system. In this sense, the theory of cooptation simply is not applicable in explaining how rules and goals are implemented or change. While the environment (politicians, conservative academics, etc.) has penetrated the local welfare office, it has done so without cooptation.

Strengths and limitations of the theory

Using the concept of cooptation allows the researcher to see how external stakeholders can alter the course and goals of an organization. Further, in my case study I see the effects of environmental penetration on the shop floor, through the daily lives of the caseworkers. Caseworkers use the accounts of political leaders to justify their daily actions and to feel like they are helping people who “want to do” (this phrase will become a point of focus later). While the theory is helpful in calling the researcher’s attention to the organization’s environment and to issues of power, this theory requires the organization leaders to have invited “the threat” (politicians or local business leaders, for instance) into the organization. I have not found evidence for this at the national, state, or local level. In sum, while goal displacement was applicable, neither cooptation nor goal displacement really offers an adequate explanation for viewing the case at hand. The next theoretical tradition, neoinstitutionalism, offers a unique approach to understanding how caseworkers implement rules in attempts to help the organization achieve its goals and success. However, we will see that this theory, by itself, also has limitations.

New Institutionalism: Legitimacy and Effectiveness

While goal displacement and cooptation suggest that the environment is successful in penetrating the organization, neoinstitutionalists focus on how organizations keep the environment at bay. This requires some work and often entails supervisors and organizational leaders acting as boundary protectors in the organization, shielding the technical core from penetration by the environment. To achieve this cooperation and to keep the environment at bay, organizations must work hard to present themselves as effective, whether or not they actually are effective.

The ability of county Work First divisions to keep the environment at a distance is actually aided by the way they are monitored. The state relies on quantitative measures that the county division is working to achieve its goals. As long as the numbers are what they should be, the state takes it on good faith that the county's process in achieving these numbers is effective. While this does protect the technical core in many ways, the process is not without its disadvantages. In Smithwick County, as in other counties, workers complain that the state has a "numbers game" and that the state does not acknowledge all the good things the caseworkers do to help clients, such as providing education, substance abuse treatment, and domestic violence counseling. Many caseworkers and supervisors feel the state wants the rolls to go down, no matter what. These feelings are exacerbated by recent federal legislation, the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (DRA). This legislation, while serving

as reauthorization of TANF, now requires that fifty percent of clients in North Carolina be engaged in work-related activities.⁶

In Smithwick County, line managers had what they called a “brainstorming session” to figure out a response to this new requirement. The line managers decided to streamline the labor process, making caseworkers specialize in the type of client they serve. For instance, caseworkers once had child-only cases (cases where a non-parent, legal guardian such as a grandparent gets assistance for the custodial child only), cases pending disability, and employment services cases. Now some caseworkers have only the high maintenance employment service cases (those clients actively seeking employment), while the rest of the caseworkers handle all the other, lower-maintenance cases. The caseworkers who handled these employment service cases in Smithwick County were the ones able to keep up with the paperwork and consistently hit their employment numbers. While they were originally told they would rotate off of these higher stress cases, supervisors and caseworkers both told me they do not see this happening anytime soon. Further, the requirement of such a high percentage of clients to be engaged in work-related activities is also, according to supervisors, impossible to reach, and the state and federal government have threatened that the county with being sanctioned if they do not reach their numbers. While this has yet to occur, caseworkers and supervisors have reason to fear sanctions since they, themselves, use them so readily with their clients. Supervisors express frustration over the threat of sanctions and remain hopeful that their new specialized labor process may help them achieve this

⁶ Details of this policy initiative are available online at http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/manuals/dss/csm-95/man/WF118-05.htm#P455_40785

seemingly impossible goal. In this way, the environment has penetrated the organization and changed the technical core counter to neo-institutional predictions. The threat of sanctions, which can include funding cuts to the county, is a sufficient threat that the counties have altered their technical core.

Additionally, the environment has penetrated the technical core through the use of available “strategies” to help clients. Caseworkers and supervisors often talk about strategies for clients and that the program is not a “one size fits all program.” They say they are working to meet the needs of individual clients, but in actual practice the strategy is typically the same regardless of the client. For instance, since most clients in this county do not have a high school diploma, the caseworker suggests that they take free classes to get their GED. Since many of the clients have little job experience, caseworkers send them to the job search skills class. In many ways, then, there are no special individualized strategies. There are standardized responses to common barriers, and caseworkers have little discretionary power to craft strategies. This lack of discretionary power, specifically how caseworkers claim to embrace a lack of autonomy and standardization, is the subject of the next chapter.

However, while there is some penetration, the county DSS does not completely accept environmental penetration, and neoinstitutional predictions do hold in some instances. Since the recent reauthorization, all clients immediately enter the job readiness class mentioned previously. It does not matter if a client has substantial work experience, a good resume, and interviewing skills; s/he is required to take a class for nearly thirty hours a week that teaches these skills. This class helps the county satisfy the environment’s monitoring

from afar without being subject to monitoring at the technical core. This can happen in two ways. First, clients may not even register with Work First and therefore never go onto the rolls. I witnessed this in an interview with a potential client with substantial work experience. After being told she would have to attend the class, she said she would just go out and get a job herself, but she needed a little help in the meantime. She never came back in and therefore was effectively deterred from getting aid. The welfare rolls are kept down through this sort of discouragement and the poor are further pushed into situations where they must accept any job, regardless of the quality.

Second, clients who proceed with the process enter this work-related activity according to the state and federal guideline, helping the county avoid sanction or monitoring for noncompliance with this requirement. The actual content of the class is not monitored by the environment. Clients spend a great deal of time in this class that could be spent actually looking for a job. In this way, the program runs counter to the environment's expectations. However, class enrollments allow the county DSS to present itself as complying with policies by inflating its work-related activities numbers. In other words, the technical core here is buffered from the external environment with the help of the county supervisors. Many people expect that activities, like these classes, will help clients with substantial barriers find employment. The classes, then, are expected to be parts of welfare-to-work programs no matter what the actual content of the classes. The local DSS fulfills this expectation, and in the process diminishes the number of applicants for welfare and boosts its work-related activity numbers.

We know from neo-institutionalists that “successful” organizations, or rather successful-looking organizations, might not be the most efficient or the most effective, because the rules and practices within an organization may not be efficient or effective. The efficiency and effectiveness might be assumed and the superiority of the organizational form and practice taken for granted. However, in interviews with caseworkers and supervisors, they seem, at times, to be very aware that a number of programs and rules are not effective. It seems most important in this very uncertain environment, that there *are* rules, regardless of the effectiveness of those rules. Therefore, legitimacy can be gained without regard for efficiency or effectiveness (Meyer and Rowan 1977, DiMaggio and Powell 1991). That is, legitimacy can be gained without being effective and efficient in serving your impoverished clients. You just need rules and people to follow them-- and a public that ignores the consequences for the clients and the labor market. All the while, local employers get cheap, deferential, and mostly involuntary labor.

Strengths and limitations of the theory

In many ways neoinstitutional theories of meeting expectations and organizational presentations are valuable tools for understanding how caseworkers use rules to create the appearance of success. There have been threats to the legitimacy of welfare, and welfare organizations have had to adapt and conform to retain legitimacy. Now the organization demands “mutual responsibility” from their clients, but they also work to help them reach “self-sufficiency” according to their mission. To do this they require clients to be involved in “work-related activities.” However, most caseworkers realize self-sufficiency does not

happen with minimum wage jobs-- the ones their clients are most likely to get. In this sense, talk of helping clients reach self-sufficiency is largely ceremonial-- a way to create shared meaning-- and at some level caseworkers and supervisors are aware of this. As the opening quote to this chapter suggests, even the program manager has her doubts, but a goal is a goal nonetheless.

Further, “work-related activities” is really a vague description which in Smithwick County mostly means people attend a job readiness class no matter what their skill level. No one learns actual job skills and caseworkers do not place any urgency on matching clients to available jobs. In these ways, DSS organizations are just going through the motions. There is language and paperwork to suggest they are performing their stated functions (moving people from welfare to work), but largely it is ceremonial and is done to meet the numbers. How caseworkers use language to construct the rules as effective is the subject of the next chapter.

However, the technical core is not free from environmental penetration. There is some monitoring that is done, so that unlike more pure examples of neoinstitutional theory (e.g., Meyer and Rowan 1977), the organization’s technical core is not totally buffered from the external environment. However, Departments of Social Services in counties must report counts to the state and federal governments without actually having to report any content measures. For example, it is not the quality of the work, such as how good a Work Experience placement is for the client skill development, but the quantity of Work Experience placements. The quality of the work-related activity is not important, but the quantity is important. This allows for some decoupling of the technical core from the

environment. In turn, the local DSS can use the unmonitored classes to discourage some welfare applicants and to boost its numbers toward required levels.

Adding to Organization Theory

There is a struggle between powerful stakeholders in the external environment. This struggle led to some goals of welfare organizations being displaced. County Departments of Social Services were penetrated by the environment, but not through cooptation. Supervisors in welfare agencies are able to fend off the environment at least in the sense of reporting counts instead of content outcomes. Taken together in these ways, goal displacement and neoinstitutional theories about expectations and legitimacy offer useful lenses through which to view this case, but these lenses are not enough. Brush (2003) argues that “States are where the power is,” and this governance power is both gendered and raced. Following Brush, I argue the need for a more critical approach to the study of organizations and institutions that brings issues of race, gender, and class and the reproduction of inequality to the forefront.

First, it is important to examine the environment and threats to welfare during the 1996 reform with this critical theoretical lens. The struggle over welfare included: capitalists employers who want cheap labor, the public (of all races) who did not want tax money wasted on so-called welfare queens, a Republican Congress that wanted social services spending cut drastically, a Democratic president who wanted government sponsored job training for the poor, a vocal academic community that protested the policy changes, and welfare organizations that were largely powerless in fighting off the environment. With the 1996 reform, welfare was indeed transformed and the organizations providing the services

changed from social service agencies to enforcement agencies. The social service mission of providing a safety net for the poor lost importance; instead, caseworkers, if they wished to keep their jobs, needed to get clients off the rolls and into jobs, no matter how poor the pay and working conditions of those jobs.

This shift in welfare policy was dramatic. How, then, was this so-called environment able to displace organizational goals, impose rules, and create new measures of success? This is no small accomplishment and has taken decades to occur. Additionally, it has taken a number of people to make this happen. In the paragraphs that follow, I show how changes in the goals (rhetorical and otherwise) have occurred through the actions of people, not just organizations seemingly devoid of people. Further, I will argue the changes in goals have occurred because welfare clients were poor and powerless and the remaining, class privileged public seemed content to vilify the clients as non-deserving of any effective safety net.

Welfare has always faced threats from conservative politicians and groups, but this time something allowed these powerful people in the environment to penetrate welfare organizations and policies. For this shift to occur, politicians and caseworkers came to view clients in a different light. Politicians and caseworkers must stereotype welfare clients so that they can punish them when they do not follow the rules. Caseworkers do this through drawing on popular cultural stereotypes of clients as “welfare queens” who are lazy and irresponsible in their own right or because their mothers taught them these deficient “culture of poverty” values. In Smithwick County, caseworkers and supervisors often spoke of clients having “generational” or “intergenerational problems.” The clients’ mothers had not taught

them the right things, and therefore the caseworkers had to teach the clients (this is the subject of chapter five). These same stereotypes were influential in shaping welfare reform and continue to shape political discourse. Neubeck and Cazenave (2001) use quotes about President Nixon and from President Johnson to illustrate this point. First, an aide close to Nixon wrote in his diary:

[President Nixon] emphasized that you have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the Blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to. Problem with overall welfare plan is that it forces poor white into same position as Blacks.

Additionally, President Johnson, who championed his “War on Poverty” was recorded saying:

The unemployed parents, the ones that just stay up there and breed and won’t work and we’re feeding them. You’ve got two-and-a-half million [dollars] in your budget and I told you that we didn’t want, we don’t want to take care of all those illegitimate kids. And we want to make them [parents] get out there and go to work.

These statements point to heightening of racialized rhetoric used to describe welfare clients.

This rhetoric became commonplace, as evidenced by Hancock (2003) finding references to the “welfare queen” stereotype in more than half the congressional documents concerning the 1996 reform. This discourse is not a relic of a decade past, but continues today. For instance, Tom Coburn (R-OK) uses the term “welfare queen” quite casually as he writes in his website newsletter:

When Republicans railed about welfare queens, they were viewed as the heartless party. When they turned the debate into one about the vicious cycle of dependency and poverty that welfare causes, they captured voters' imagination--they captured even Bill Clinton's imagination--and pushed

through entitlement reform. Today, even the left agrees welfare-recipients should work.⁷

The language used in this statement as opposed to the prior ones is presented as benign, race, gender, and class neutral. In fact, Coburn even paints the Republican Party as victimized for having fought against people who live off of the system. Now, however, according to Coburn even Democrats agree that Republicans were right to have done this. The bipartisan rally against so-called welfare queens should be no surprise given that Daniel Patrick Moynihan, considered a liberal Democrat, was the one to call attention to the “problem of the Negro family” in his famous report (Moynihan 1965). Today, more covert, race coded language is usually used to describe welfare clients. Now we have a system built around believing Blacks are the problem while using coded language such as references to “welfare queens.” This is referred to as color-blind institutional racism.

The goal of helping the poor reach self-sufficiency, as argued here, is difficult at best. Given the difficulties, the goal was set for welfare “through mutual responsibility” to help poor people reach self-sufficiency. The focus on the clients’ “mutual responsibility” for reaching this goal gives the program a scapegoat for not achieving the official goal. Any failure can be considered the fault of the client (now considered noncompliant instead of lazy) who was mutually responsible for becoming self-sufficiency (see Rogers-Dillon and Skrentny 1999 for a discussion of this in Florida’s welfare-to-work program). In fact, as I have shown, the client is completely responsible for reaching self-sufficiency because

⁷ Downloaded September 14, 2007. Article from his March 23, 2007 Newsletter titled “Republican Rx GOP alternatives to HillaryCare.” Available at: http://coburn.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=LatestNews.NewsStories&ContentRecord_id=7efb1f42-802a-23ad-47cd-c51a7a6e8774

caseworkers do not have the time to help them find any job, much less to help them find one that can provide a living wage.

Neoinstitutionalists, such as Meyer and Rowan (1977), certainly pay attention to the reproduction of inequality, but it is not at the forefront of their analyses. However, Meyer and Rowan's ideas ring true as they once argued that no one pays attention to what happens in classrooms because our education system reproduces the status quo, which is to say our education system reproduces inequality. Indeed, no one digs too deeply to see what is going on in welfare offices or job readiness training classes because "welfare-to-work" programs flood the market with an unskilled reserve army. These folks do the "dirty work" for very low wages and keep wages down for more skilled workers. In this sense welfare maintains the status quo (inequality, stratification, capitalism), so no one monitors the organizations too heavily. This situation creates problems and contradictions in the lives of the caseworkers. These problems and contradictions require caseworkers to construct the rules as effective, even when they feel they are not. This also entails caseworkers giving accounts of how discretion and autonomy are bad for both the caseworker and the client. Contradictions and problems in these processes require caseworkers to redefine their situations through identity and emotion work. These processes are my focus throughout the rest of this dissertation.

Chapter 4

No Discretion Required? How Welfare-to-Work Caseworkers Respond to the Rules of Welfare Reform

More than forty years ago, sociologist Peter M. Blau (1963) conducted comparative case studies of a state employment service agency and a federal enforcement agency. He found rules were often stretched and bent to improve individual job performance. Statistical performance evaluations served additional purposes of removing personal feelings and lessening the risk of conflict between supervisors and line workers. Paperwork was often a tool workers in Blau's study used to improve performance evaluations, even if this took a little exaggeration. In this setting of the employment agency, workers looked out for themselves, often at the expense of the client.

Within the last decade, Sharon Hays (2003) focused her attention on two county social service agencies providing Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) services. She found workers would often bend rules in ways they felt would benefit the client. Workers resisted changes to welfare policy in the United States in many ways. They resisted strict reporting requirements for clients, extended time periods, and often refused to sanction clients who broke the rules.

These authors suggest that caseworkers will break the rules either for their own gain or to help clients. In the last decade, the rules regarding TANF participation have become stricter and more prescriptive, often leaving little room for caseworkers to use discretion. When individuals in an organization or county break the rules, they run the risk of the state or

federal government imposing economic sanctions. With this change in the institutional environment and increased pressure over funding, do caseworkers still exercise discretion? This chapter will examine this question.

I began this research with an interest in worker discretion. Having read Blau's (1963) and Hays's (2003) work, I expected to find workers bending the rules, sometimes at least in ways to benefit clients. I thought caseworkers might fight the rules. This is not at all what I found. Instead of resisting rules, caseworkers used discretion in ways that benefited the county Department of Social Services; yet they gave accounts of sticking to the rules. I begin this paper describing the context of constraint in which the caseworkers work. I then outline the apparent contradictions about discretion in terms of what caseworkers say they do and what they actually do. I will also examine caseworkers' accounts of how and why they avoid discretion. Next I look at what caseworkers actually do: use what little discretion they have to benefit the county. Finally, I draw on the work of Burawoy (1979) concerning worker consent and theories of self-efficacy (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983) to help explain my findings. In this chapter, I argue that given caseworkers' nearly powerless status, they bend the rules in ways that benefit the county (instead of clients) because it is one source of self-efficacy in a highly constrained and unrewarding job.

The Context of Constraints: Lots of Rules, but Intense and Not so Intense Monitoring

Just as the clients have many rules to follow, so do the supervisors and caseworkers. Supervisors in Smithwick County discussed being frustrated with rules imposed on them by the state. In an interview with three line supervisors, one said:

But it is frustrating. Sometimes it feels like it-- especially with participation rate-- and you do all you can. It's almost like they set you up to fail. They have unrealistic numbers you have to meet, it is all a numbers game. And we need to get away from numbers. And we need to realize these are people and individuals... it is all numbers and what makes the state look good.

Many Work First supervisors in Smithwick County described “the state” as having a “numbers game,” and said that the state does not acknowledge all the good things they do to help clients, such as education programs, substance abuse treatment and domestic violence counseling. This was echoed in the face-to-face and phone interviews conducted with thirty-four county Work First program managers in North Carolina. Many program managers feel the state wants the rolls to go down no matter what. These feelings are exacerbated, as the quote above suggests, by recent reauthorizations of TANF requiring that 50% of clients in North Carolina be engaged in work and work-related activities (this was referred to in the above quote as “participation rates” and is a result of the US Deficit Reduction Act of 2005).⁸

In Smithwick County, this requirement has resulted in their altering the labor process, making caseworkers specialize in the type of client they serve. Specifically, some caseworkers now have only employment cases, which are cases in which the parent is or should be seeking work. These cases are considered by far the most labor intensive and

⁸ S.1932 is the law passed by the Senate and signed by the President. It re-authorized welfare reform for another five years. For more info: <http://www.cbpp.org/2-9-07tanf.htm>

involve caseworkers checking on employment activities of the clients and even making house visits. Caseworkers said that the more “senior” caseworkers had these cases; however, a supervisor told me the decision was based on who was best at getting the clients out to work and getting their paperwork done on time. Other caseworkers work only with the clients rolling onto disability and child-only cases⁹, both of which are considered “low maintenance” cases, since these require only updating paperwork. Supervisors argue this specialization in caseload will make the county more efficient and effective in hitting the new work-related activity requirements.

Despite this effort and reorganization, supervisors indicate that the new work-related activity requirement is impossible to reach and will result in the county being sanctioned by the state government. They briefly expressed their frustration over this, but remained hopeful that their new labor process might help them achieve this seemingly impossible goal. Interestingly, however, when clients assert that a rule or goal is impossible, the caseworkers and supervisors respond with sanctions and justifications such as “you knew the rules.” This requirement has also lead to a number of instances in which caseworkers use discretion, but in ways more similar to Blau’s findings than Hays’s. They use discretion to make their numbers, with little regard for the consequences for clients.

This was not always the case. Constraints have increased over time and caseworkers have come to resist these changes less and less. In a discussion with supervisors about

⁹ In child-only cases, a guardian (not the biological parent) gets cash assistance for raising a child. For instance, a grandmother might raise their child’s child and receive cash help with related expenses. The guardian is not required to consistently report information like employment clients. Instead, the guardians only give school and doctor’s records annually.

caseworkers' daily interactions with clients, we talked about how difficult face-to-face interactions can be for caseworkers, particularly given the sanction-heavy nature of the current programs. When caseworkers want clients to do something, typically they send the client a letter to notify the client that they must do some action before a certain date or they will be sanctioned. In talking about the letter, one supervisor said,

And [caseworkers] have gotten better with that-- as far as -- they are getting to the mindset now where they don't have a choice. [The letter] is [the client's] second chance. [Clients] call then and [say] 'this happened' and 'my child was sick.' Well, I am sorry. Either you do what you have to do, what you were supposed to by that time or -- we don't have room for leeway anymore. *Kim, line supervisor*

This quote from Kim illustrates changes in caseworkers' perceptions of sanctioning. First, caseworkers must have once been more resistant, but they have now accepted this new "mindset" in which they must embrace sanctioning. Further, the letter is seen as a second chance, a warning. It is now the client's responsibility, even their job, to comply with the rules. If they do not, clients, according to caseworkers, offer excuses. Ultimately, though, it is the client's fault for being sanctioned, because they were warned. The caseworkers can no longer accept the excuses, since the caseworkers, according to the supervisor, do not "have room for leeway anymore."

Contradictions about discretion

When I first entered the field, I was told again and again that "this is not a one size fits all program." I heard this from the program manager down to each caseworker. When caseworkers spoke with me, one another, and with clients they consistently discussed using

“strategies” to fit the needs of clients. After all, as caseworkers told me, clients’ situations are all different and require different strategies. I was also told the county has a “success staffing” meeting where clients, DSS personnel, and leaders of local nonprofits get together and develop strategies to help clients approaching time limits reach “their goal of self-sufficiency.” When I attended one of these meetings, I realized the “strategy” was a laundry list of referrals. The community nonprofit and government agency leaders and DSS personnel would read through the list to see to where the client had or had not been referred. If the client had not been referred to a service or organization on the list, the “success staffing” workers would suggest the client give that service a try. The client’s program was therefore composed of a standardized strategy, but discussed as if it were an individualized strategy. In hindsight, a standardized process was not surprising, but the DSS employees’ discussions of using individualized strategies were convincing to me when I entered the field. This seeming contradiction between what caseworkers claimed to do and what they actually did was puzzling.

Additionally, when clients complained about the rules that are imposed on them, many caseworkers and supervisors said that they were just following the rules imposed on them and that everyone does exactly the same thing when interacting with a client. This contradicted the rhetoric of developing individualized strategies. If each caseworker was developing individual strategies for clients, we might expect that different caseworkers would come up with different strategies. At the very least, they might use discretion in

different ways when interacting with the rules and clients. In the following quote, however, Carol, a supervisor, suggests that everyone will follow the rules in the same way:

Sometimes you really have to tell and get them away from thinking this is a personal thing. Some will say, 'Well, I don't want her as a worker anymore,' and you say, 'Well, ma'am, I am sorry, but they are all the same.' You kind of have to explain it, that no matter who they get they should all be telling them-- they have to do the same thing anyway. *Carol, line supervisor*

Here, Carol speaks of this standardization as a good thing, and a tool that caseworkers can use to reinforce their justifications for sanctioning clients. However, moments earlier in the interview Carol argued that "welfare has never been a one size fits all and it shouldn't be" and that programs need to be individualized so that they can better serve clients. In this instance, Carol is referring to the programs that they can offer people. She wants caseworkers to have extensive time one-on-one with clients because everyone's situation is different. She does not want the state to have such a "numbers game." Carol and other county Work First employees resent monitoring from the state and federal governments. Everyone, caseworkers and supervisors alike, argues that "the folks in Raleigh just don't understand," meaning state legislators do not know the barriers that rural, poor counties face. One caseworker, Angela, even offered her services to help legislators understand, saying, "I'd love to go to Raleigh for three months and help make policy. I sometimes wonder if those people have any idea what we actually do." In this sense the legislators who impose rules and seemingly unreachable goals on the county are considered the enemy, an enemy that threatens the county with financial sanctions if they do not make their numbers.

This gap between what caseworkers say they do and what they actually do may in part reflect the conflicting ideologies of welfare reform. On the one hand, welfare reform relies on the ideology of devolution. This involves the notion that local county governments can best meet the needs of local populations because they understand the local environment. Following the ideology of devolution, people might expect that county governments are given a great deal of leeway in crafting strategies to help clients reach self-sufficiency. However, counties are still accountable to the state and federal government. To ensure this accountability, the state and federal governments monitor the counties, requiring them to report the number of families on the rolls and the percentage of clients involved in work-related activities. In this sense, monitoring is evaluation based on county reports of standardized, quantitative measures. Indeed, monitoring from afar necessitates a level of standardization on the “shop floor” to increase the efficiency of managing workers (Blau 1963; Clawson 1980). While workers and supervisors embrace the notion that they use strategies and therefore retain some autonomy and discretionary power, they also embrace standardization as necessary and fair.

Caseworkers’ Accounts of Avoiding Discretion and Autonomy

Many caseworkers insisted that they did not break the rules or at least that they did not have the leeway to bend rules anymore. There is some fear of the repercussions for not following the rules; however, this only scratches the surface. But why do caseworkers say they do *not* bend the rules? In interviews, when we discussed what rules meant to the caseworkers and

how they use the rules, they gave “accounts” that sticking to the rules is better for them and better for the clients. By “accounts,” I mean rhetorical devices used to justify an action (Scott and Lyman 1968:46-47).

In some ways it is not surprising that the caseworkers claim to follow the rules. As Kanter (1977) illustrated decades ago, “rules-mindedness” is a response to powerlessness and an affirmation for workers with little opportunity for advancement. The caseworkers in Smithwick County in this sense are “stuck” in their jobs since there are very few supervisor positions and the current supervisors have no plans of retiring in the near future. As Kanter notes, following the rules also provides workers with legitimate authority, as the supervisors will always back them up when they invoke the rules. That said, expectations about rule following might be conflicting. On the one hand, following the rules means you are a good worker. On the other hand, following the rules could mean you surrender your autonomy. Caseworkers and supervisors would often complain about rules not being effective, but then talked about rules being important. The caseworkers wanted outsiders to know they were following the rules, even if in practice they were often bending them. In other words, the caseworkers invoked rules to justify and explain their actions, to me and to anyone else who questioned their actions. The following quote captures a number of the accounts caseworkers gave for why they follow the rules and think they are important.

Well, anything that we need to know, we can pull that manual up and most of the time it's there. And so we don't have to wonder about 'should I do it this way or should I do it that way?' And that's why I, where I think the book comes in real good. *Ann, caseworker*

According to caseworkers, they follow the rules for four major reasons: effectiveness, efficiency, avoiding mistakes, and being fair. Overall, the caseworkers argue that going by the book and having a book to go by is better for the caseworkers because they are not burdened by negative consequences of their decision making. Another way to look at this is that caseworkers use the rules as they need to, if anyone questions their actions, they fall back on the rules as justification for their actions. In turn, according to the caseworkers, this is more efficient and helps them avoid making mistakes that could have bad consequences for the clients. In this sense a lack of discretion is better for the clients. Additionally, taking away discretion ensures that all clients are treated the same. Caseworkers argue treating the clients the same is equal to treating them fairly.

More Effective

Caseworkers said they did not bend the rules because it is more effective to have the rules. Using the rules, you always tell clients all the things you are supposed to tell them. Without the manual it would be very difficult for caseworkers to keep track of the complex requirements of welfare reform post-TANF. In fact, the manual, according to the caseworkers, fills “three to four huge binders.” For this reason, caseworkers often just access it online. Several caseworkers showed me the manual as a sign of the incredible amount of information they were required to know. However, they also see this knowledge as an accomplishment (this will be discussed at length in the next chapter). Additionally, caseworkers have to document everything they say to clients to ensure that they say tell clients everything but also to satisfy monitoring requirements.

There are a great number of things clients must be told. As part of the “mutual responsibility agreement” ideology that places more responsibility on the clients, caseworkers must tell the clients their responsibilities. They have to tell the clients, and remind them, about all the rules. Additionally, caseworkers rotate responsibilities each day of the week such that: some days are dedicated to paperwork, some are dedicated to client home visits, and some to client intake. Due to this rotation, clients may be seen by other caseworkers and not the caseworker assigned to their case (caseworkers become standardized and interchangeable in this rationalized labor process). Therefore, following the rules in terms of telling the client what to do and documenting it in the computer system allows any caseworker to interact with any client, no matter who is assigned that client. Caseworkers, then, give accounts that the rules are effective for both the caseworkers and the clients. However, it is not clear that caseworkers always believe this. During my observations and informal conversations, the caseworkers often expressed their doubts.

More Efficient

Secondly, it is more efficient to follow the rules. Instead of trying to decide what to do, the rules will always instruct the caseworkers on what to do. As Ann indicates in the quote above, “we don’t have to wonder about should I do it this way or should I do it that way.” In other words, waffling back and forth wondering if you should do this or that wastes time. Time is certainly not a resource caseworkers have to waste. The demands of the job include face-to-face meetings and phone calls with clients, and caseworkers may have little control

over how much time these take. Additionally, caseworkers have an overwhelming amount of daily, weekly, and monthly paperwork (all of the caseworkers complained about the difficulties getting this work done on time). Further, caseworkers must enter the time they spend on each task into a computer system, much like an hourly billing system, which takes additional time. In other words, caseworkers do not want to waste any time wondering about what to do next. Following the rules saves time they would use making decisions about how to proceed.

Avoiding Mistakes

In the quote by Ann, we also see a worry about making mistakes and especially making mistakes that harm clients in some way. With only one or two exceptions, all of the caseworkers and supervisors placed a great deal of emphasis on doing a good job and doing it right. Caseworkers did not want to make mistakes in general and they certainly did not want to make a mistake that might harm a client. To this end, caseworkers felt following the rules helped them tell the clients everything they needed to know. Obviously the underlying assumption is that telling them everything means you are telling them the right thing. In this sense the rules come to equal correct or right in an uncertain world where what is “right” may not be so clear cut and might not be in the manual. Making a mistake might indicate a “wrong” action” and avoiding mistakes means a right action. However, following the rules is not necessarily the most moral or even effective action. To do what is “right” might require caseworkers to break the rules and this is something that many of the caseworkers seem to be

aware of on some level, especially when it comes to issuing sanctions. Judy, a caseworker who had once received welfare cash assistance, described how difficult it had been to sanction clients, but quickly talked about the necessity of it.

I used to not like to sanction people because I would listen to them, them telling this story and that. And I would say okay, okay and [my supervisor] start getting on me because she said, you are too nice. You need not do that. If they don't do this you need to go ahead- and- and- then I was finding myself getting behind. *Judy, caseworker*

The contradictions of helping by sanctioning creates require some efforts on the part of caseworkers as they attempt to make sense of this dilemma. This effort will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, but some issues are important for this chapter. Judy's emotions are difficult to convey through the quote except for the broken sentences and pauses. Judy was attempting to make sense of the morality of sanctioning clients, and she eventually finds at least some satisfaction in that she had to stop being so nice to avoid her supervisor "getting on" her and so she could keep up with her workload.

Being Fair

Finally, having the rules means caseworkers treat all clients the same. The caseworkers argue that treating them the same is the same as treating them fairly. In this sense, standardization means fairness and a lack of discrimination. Historically there has been some concern over caseworkers using discretion to illegally discriminate against clients (for detailed analyses of this history see Gordon (1990)). The caseworkers seem aware of this criticism and suggest they must consistently document their actions on forms and in the computer databases. In

fact, caseworkers would often say “document, document, document” with a smile. This word had become a mantra for both the supervisors and caseworkers. When I inquired about the importance of documenting, Alice, a caseworker responded, “Well, it’s to, you know, C.Y.A. – cover your ass.” Other caseworkers responded similarly saying it was necessary to document everything in case the client complained and asked for a hearing. The caseworkers wanted to be sure they had told the client and done everything for the client that they were required to do. In this sense, the caseworkers suggest being required to document everything and having things standardized and routinized helps them treat clients fairly. The underlying idea, then, is that the opportunity to use discretion, which might result in discriminating against a client, is reduced or even eliminated through having formalized procedures.

Caseworkers’ accounts are indeed rhetorical devices they use to discuss their behavior. In this section, I have examined what the caseworkers say they do. In the next section, I’ll show how caseworkers do not always practice what they preach.

How the Rules Get Bent

Despite caseworkers’ insistent claims that they always go by the book, there are times when caseworkers *do* bend the rules. In fact, bending these rules is often encouraged by county supervisors. Further, county supervisors and caseworkers have brainstorming sessions concerning ways to bend the rules and then they encourage caseworkers to do the bending for the county. This work is not considered rule breaking, but instead is considered good strategy to “make the numbers.” One supervisor alluded to this, saying,

It is just hard when you are trying to think of ways to make things count for you and you are dealing with a population that is largely under-educated... you know what I am saying—it's not—it is just hard to do. *Carol, supervisor*

Here again we see that workers see the goals as unobtainable so they make efforts to replace the organizational goal of helping clients reach self-sufficiency with the tangible goal of making the numbers (which helps them keep their jobs). After Carol described the difficulties above, she went on to talk about how certain activities, such as job search, could count for the county for only six weeks. If someone takes longer than six weeks to search for a job, they no longer count towards the county's goal. However, since the state and federal governments monitor the counties from afar through statistical measures, the caseworkers are allotted a small pocket of autonomy to use discretion.

Given the caseworkers' and supervisors' views that many of these statistical measures are ineffective or unattainable, the caseworkers elect to use what little discretion they have in ways that help them meet the numbers, despite the consequences for clients. In this way, client-oriented goals are displaced by county-oriented goals in efforts to appease the state. Similar to the workers in Blau's (1963) classic study of a state employment agency, the expectations and demands of the state outweigh those of the clients. Caseworkers are accountable to people in power, their bosses, not to their subordinate clients. Specifically, to meet the numbers, caseworkers regularly bend the rules in three key ways: they determine when to close a case by what they need to meet their numbers; they require more hours of job search than the rules call for; and they place everyone in a job readiness class whether they need the class or not. The first example is clearly a case of caseworker discretion, while the

others are more caseworkers doing the dirty work for the county. The county has decided to bend the rule, and the caseworker's bending is actually complying with supervisors' demands.

When to Close Cases

A key change in welfare since 1996 has been the pressure on counties to reduce the number of cases on their welfare rolls. Counties are required on a regular basis to report the number of cases on their rolls and to update the state and federal government on their efforts to reduce this number. Further, just as each county has goals to get half of their total caseload involved in work-related activities, caseworkers also strive to reach this goal individually. Each caseworker has a list of their cases that details the number of months the client has been receiving benefits and whether or not the client is involved in a work-related activity. As one caseworker described the report to me, she noted which cases were doing what they "should be doing" and which ones, in her words, "ain't doing nothin' for me." By this she means that the client is not involved in work-related activities and therefore is not helping the caseworker reach her goal of half of her caseload involved in work-related activities. When I asked further about these cases, she noted some were cases in which the clients were applying for disability and some were cases the caseworker was considering closing. I later found that caseworkers commonly use discretion to determine when to close a case.

How does this work and what factors influence caseworkers' decisions to close a case? Caseworkers can often decide to close a case during the current month or wait until the

next month. The decision is largely based on whether a client could use another month's check, but instead on what the caseworker needs to make her statistical performance measures, not what clients need to survive. If the current month's goals are already met, a caseworker might delay closing a case until the next month. If the caseworker needed the case to improve the current work-related activity numbers, she would immediately close the case. The window of time is narrow, but this pocket of autonomy is possible due to the paperwork and computer entry lag that is commonplace. In this way, it is more like banking or holding a kitty (a performance number maker) for the next month if the caseworker delays the closing of a case. This language of "banking" or "keeping a kitty" was used by both Donald Roy (1952) and later Burawoy (1979) in their classic ethnographic studies of manufacturing workers controlling their work output. Burawoy describes this output control and workers playing the game of "making out." In this game workers would over-produce to make wage bonuses. However, to avoid being a rate buster, workers would never overproduce too much. In the unfortunate event that a machine broke down or you could not overproduce, the workers benefited from having a kitty-- a completed product that they could count in their rate of production when they needed it. In this sense, the caseworkers engage in a process similar to rate control tactics (e.g., a "kitty") as Burawoy (1979) describes. While an act of discretion in one sense (deciding exactly when to close cases), it is also an act of consent (the case gets closed eventually, which ultimately serves a management goal).

Job Search/Work-Related Activity Requirements

The county line supervisors pressure caseworkers to bend the rules by requiring more hours of job search or work-related activity than the rules specify. By the rules, the number of hours a client must commit to doing job search or being involved in any combination of work-related activities is determined by how long the client has been receiving benefits. The calculation means that the longer a client has been receiving benefits the more hours they need to log. This is computed by dividing the total money received to date by the legal minimum wage rate. The outcome is the number of hours a client must be involved in work-related activities, essentially to “pay back” their cash assistance payments. This paying back can be done through job search, attending the job readiness class, or participating in a “work experience” program in which the client works for an employer in the community for no wage.

Supervisors have caseworkers in Smithwick County require everyone who is physically able to participate in any of these work-related activities for 35 hours a week. The consequences for clients are potentially positive in that more hours spent looking for a job may help them find a job faster. The supervisors and caseworkers all argue that if they did not require clients go “above and beyond,” then the clients would not do it. However, if clients fail to achieve and report this higher rate requirement, they will be sanctioned. Even if clients reach the number of hours of work-related activity actually required by the state and county policy, the caseworkers and supervisors enforce the higher 35-hour requirement. They achieve this by telling the clients they need to meet the higher requirement, and then having

the client sign a form that they agree to do it. At no time do the caseworkers tell the clients they are asking them to do more than the rules actually require. Therefore, increasing new clients' work-related activity hours and using discretion about when to close a case helps both the caseworkers and the county reach their goals for work-related activity. There is another way the county works to achieve their work-related activity goals: by mandating participation in the job readiness class.

Job Readiness Classes

Finally, while the job readiness class was once reserved for people who really needed to gain skills in resume writing, filling out applications, and certain "soft skill" development, supervisors have now made the class mandatory for everyone applying for Work First benefits. In fact, clients are expected to begin attending the class while they are waiting for their application to be approved. Given the number of diversion techniques used under TANF, applicants could easily fear that the failure to attend the class could result in the application not being approved. If the person is currently a client and receiving benefits, not attending the class results in a sanction.

This class requirement serves two purposes for the county. First anyone who would prefer just to go get a job instead of being forced to sit in a class for 30 hours a week will be discouraged from seeking assistance. I observed this as a client weighed her options. Since she had a stable history of employment, she decided she would rather not seek benefits than be required to attend a class that would not be helpful to her. The potential client had

children, and the cons of arranging childcare and losing earnings to go to the class were outweighed by the short-term benefits of getting whatever minimum wage job she could quickly obtain. However, there potentially are long-term consequences. If the woman had been given more time to look for a job, she might actually be able to find a better job.

Making her rush to find a job likely means she will take the first job that comes along. Judy, the caseworker conducting the interview with the potential client suggested to the client that she did not think the class would be very beneficial to someone with her skill set, but that it was now required of everyone. When Judy and I left the interview, I inquired as to how commonly people decided not to finish applying for Work First since they made the class mandatory. She replied that it happened all the time, at least several times a week.

Making the job readiness class mandatory serves a second function for the county. While the first function helped the county keep people from ever going on the rolls, this second function helps the county reach its work-related activity goals. The job readiness class is now one of the few “educational” activities that count as a work activity, thereby helping this requirement helps the county improve its numbers. Again, not everyone coming onto the rolls needs this class. Further, time spent in the class is time spent looking for a job. So while the client is involved in a work-related activity, it is possible that the client might actually prolong his or her job search because of being in the class. In that sense, this act of discretion helps the county achieve one end (work-related activity requirements), while potentially delaying another (clients getting jobs). Given the likelihood that clients will not find jobs, this focus on the county making their numbers is more attainable.

Why caseworkers bend the rules in ways that benefit the county

One of the most debated topics among sociologists concerns why workers do not resist infringements on their autonomy and power to exercise discretion. Implicit in this question is the assumption that workers want autonomy and discretion. Marxists have long believed that it was human nature to want complete power over one's labor. As a "conscious species being," humans want to both conceptualize and execute the labor process. However, Marx (1932) also believed capitalism would corrupt our human nature, making us content with our exploitation. Since Marx, researchers have described management processes of routinization of the labor process (Blauner 1964), deskilling of workers (Braverman 1974), and credentialing to control and differentiate workers (Collins 1979).

The structural constraints imposed by the federal, state, and county social services incorporate all of these processes to control caseworkers. Government workers are, thus, subject to many of the same methods of labor control used in the private sector. Further, caseworkers experience the direct and indirect effects of a capitalist system. Not only do they work in a constrained, routinized labor process in which they have limited control over the outcomes of their own labor, they also indirectly work with clients who are on the margins of the labor market. These clients are thrust into the labor market at the price of welfare cash assistance benefits and thereby become a forced reserve army.

Faced with these conditions and uncertainties, will caseworkers want to resist constraints on their discretion? Most of the caseworkers in my setting come from poor and working-class backgrounds. Three of the fourteen caseworkers once received welfare

benefits themselves. In this county, caseworkers have very little education and are not professional social workers. Carrying only a high school diploma or perhaps an associate degree from the local community college, many Work First caseworkers had once been eligibility workers under Aid to Families with Dependent Children. In other words, their job was to screen incoming people to determine what benefits they might be eligible to receive. Clients coming through the doors are not so different from the caseworkers in many respects and serve as a constant reminder of the conditions the caseworkers themselves might face if they were to enter the job market again.

In short, deskilling and structural constraints result in a routinized labor process in which caseworkers with few skills and coming from poor and working-class backgrounds, lacking professional credentials, are in little position to demand autonomy and discretionary power. Faced with this status and this constraining environment, caseworkers bend the rules to benefit the county. Caseworkers in this sense have consented to management control, but in a way that helps them gain self-efficacy. In the paragraphs that follow, I will examine the process through which consent has been gained. I illustrate how caseworkers gain self-efficacy through consenting to managerial control in this highly constrained work environment.

Manufacturing Consent?

Organizations depend on the consent of workers. Consent can be gained through more or less coercive measures, but ultimately, according to Weber (1958, 1981), workers

must believe the bureaucracy to be legitimate for them to follow the rules. Workers must feel accountable to follow the rules and fear some repercussion if they do not follow them.

Neoinstitutional organizational theorists often focus on the gap between effectiveness and legitimacy. In doing so, they place more emphasis on gaining legitimacy in the eyes of important external people and place less emphasis on management control of internal workers. In contrast, labor process theorists often look at management's control of workers, while paying little attention to the gap between effectiveness and legitimacy of the rules to which workers are consenting. In the analysis that follows, I examine worker consent within both frameworks (see Simpson 1985 for an argument on integrating these frameworks).

Caseworkers are less concerned with the effectiveness of the rules for clients than the potential consequences to the county and themselves resulting from how they use the rules. Within welfare reform, this is even more telling, given that the rules require caseworkers to teach clients how to follow the rules. In other words, caseworkers' deference to the organization requires them to teach welfare clients deference. If either the caseworker or client does not show due deference, sanctions could follow. While the client is dependent on the welfare agency for a check, in a tough labor market, a low-skilled caseworker is also dependent.

In the era of devolution in which welfare funding comes in the form of federal-to-state-to-county block grants, county and state governments are dependent on resources from the state and federal governments. If the county welfare agency does not comply with goals and rules, they can lose funding from the state and federal governments. In Smithwick

County, caseworkers are fearful that the county will be sanctioned. While this has not happened, the threat is significant enough that caseworkers are willing to do their part by using the rules in ways that help the county avoid sanction. One supervisor said “the states are going to start being sanctioned... if a certain level of participation is not being met. It is coming down. It is going to come down real hard.” Again, given the sanction heavy nature of how caseworkers interact with clients, caseworkers reasonably fear that the state and federal government could begin to sanction counties. In fact, many caseworkers echoed these same thoughts of the state pressuring the county to meet work-related activity numbers. Here, then, we see the organization’s resource dependence affecting how caseworkers work with clients. To help the county avoid sanction, they will follow the rules and sanction the clients. In this sense, management (meaning state and federal management) has secured the consent of workers through the threat of sanctions. This is one way management controls workers-- through coercive rules (or more accurately the threat of sanction if rules are not followed) regardless of the effectiveness of the rules to the overall goals of the organization.

The threat of punishment or sanction is not always the way consent is gained. Sometimes incentives in the form of wage increases, promotion, or other rewards are used to gain consent from workers. Burawoy’s (1979) *Manufacturing Consent* shows how workers play the game of “making out.” In this game they produce more, but not too much more, to earn wage bonuses. The process of the game takes strategy and the workers are careful not to produce too much and become rate busters. Through playing the game carefully, workers can satisfy coworkers’ desires to control the rate of production, satisfy their own desire for higher

wages, and satisfy management's desire for a higher rate of production. Additionally, the game gives workers some sense of autonomy. However, this autonomy comes from management imposing a work structure on the labor process. While this labor process and structure allows some rule bending and breaking, ultimately this rule breaking benefits the company through: (1) higher rates of production, and (2) workers who feel they have some autonomy.

Structuring Self-Efficacy

Following the rules serves another purpose for the caseworkers. Caseworkers work in a job that is often uncertain and not gratifying. Being able to follow the manual offers the workers a sense of self-efficacy in an environment in which they have little wiggle room, that is uncertain in terms of interactions with clients, and that is not gratifying in many ways. To aid in this analysis, I follow Gecas and Schwalbe's (1983) discussion of Burawoy's workers as playing the game of making out not just as a means of consenting to corporate control, but also as a way to retain self-efficacy. Gecas and Schwalbe (1983) argue that people generally want to strive to feel efficacious in the workplace. The authors interpret the game of making out as allowing the workers to feel they can exercise discretion within a bubble of autonomy, thus boosting feelings of control and efficacy.

Schwalbe (1985, 1988) argues that autonomy can influence how a worker gains self-esteem within the culture of a workplace. Autonomy, according to Schwalbe, can come in three main forms: through being left alone by the supervisor, through being a problem solver,

and through having physical mobility within the workplace. In the first form of autonomy, the workers see the supervisor leaving them alone as a sign that they know how to do their job. In this sense, being left alone is a sign the worker is competent and responsible. The second path to autonomy involves problem solving. Here again the worker is seen as competent, but they also have special knowledge that allows them to solve problems that other people might not be able to solve. This problem solving brings this type of worker autonomy, but also status. Finally, the third path to autonomy is through mobility in the work environment. The classic example here is the maintenance mechanic versus the assembly-line worker. The assembly-line worker stands in one position, working one machine through a routinized labor process, while the maintenance mechanic moves throughout the plant, fixing machines, and largely being left alone by the foreman and any other manager. This type of autonomy then is about competence and responsibility, but also about specialized knowledge that grants this worker the ability to “fix stuff” and to be left alone.

Clearly the workplace structure and culture matter in terms of what type of autonomy is even available to a worker. In this regard some paths to self-esteem become highly constrained or others become far more possible. Caseworkers in Smithwick County have some access to all three types of autonomy. Caseworkers often said, “As long as you do your job the supervisor will leave you alone,” and for this reason the job was considered better than other jobs they could have. Additionally, recall the caseworkers and supervisors often talked about coming up with strategies, even though the strategies seemed very prescriptive and standardized. In this way, the caseworkers are able to gain some sense of status through

the ability to problem solve. Finally, caseworkers can also leave the office to take a client to an interview, the doctor, work, or wherever. While they discuss this as a service to the client, which it certainly is, it is also a form of autonomy that they are allowed to leave the job. Though the caseworkers certainly are limited in their problem solving and mobility, the presence of this perceived autonomy allows caseworkers access to all three paths to self-efficacy.

The reflected appraisals, comparisons to others, and self-perceptions lead to feelings of competence and morality. Certainly we can view these separately but, for this setting, this seems overly simplistic in many ways. When your job is providing services, particularly to people who are disadvantaged in many ways, the boundary between morality and competence may not be very distinct. Competence and morality can give the worker a few ways to gain self-esteem. For instance, maybe you are incompetent in your work, but you are regarded as a good person and you can retain positive feelings about yourself. On the other hand, you might be extremely competent at your job, but do morally questionable work. For example, your work could be doing cost/benefit analyses on whether the lawsuits resulting from deaths due to a flaw in your product outweigh the cost of retooling the assembly line. You could be very good at this job, but constantly question the morality of your work. Caseworkers are not making life and death decisions to help companies achieve higher profits. However, the decisions that they make and their actions are highly consequential. Caseworkers decide whether or not a family that is extremely poor gets, continues to get, or does not get cash assistance and services that may be vital to that family's survival.

Caseworkers are in a structurally and culturally constrained environment where doing what is “right” morally may not be what is right according to the rules. Caseworkers can be competent and good at following the rules. They can also be good at bending rules in ways their supervisors would approve or strongly encourage (e.g., helping achieve county work-related activity goals). These actions help caseworkers keep their jobs. But in a job with little chance for promotion, being good at rule following can give workers a small sense of autonomy to use discretion (Merton’s (1957) bureaucratic personality; see also Kanter 1977). Given dilemmas around the morality of their actions, , caseworkers attempt to avoid issues of morality by emphasizing competence. Further, when potential moral dilemmas emerge, caseworkers transition almost seamlessly in reacting about the morality to reframing the issue about competence. We saw that with Judy’s discussion earlier. Sanctioning was something she had a hard time doing. She had once received welfare so she knew the consequences of sanctioning. However, she was able to deflect this negativity and neutralize it. Instead of focusing on the emotional and moral dilemma she faces, she turned her focus to being behind in her work and needing to catch up. She had to focus on competence. In this sense, following the rules allows the caseworkers to remain unaccountable to the clients because they are just doing their job. In this way, caseworkers are rewarded directly for following the rules and sanctioning clients. Caseworkers are also rewarded indirectly. Through following the rules, the caseworker removes her own accountability over the consequences of sanctioning the client. Paula describes this more below:

Well those are the rules and you’re either gonna follow the rules or you’re gonna lose your check. That’s pretty much how it is and it’s not that any

workers are trying to take a check from anybody, you know. You're just required to do what you are required to do.

Paula, caseworker

Here Paula shows the emotional and moral suppression caseworkers attempt to create through their consent to organizational rules. In effect, Paula says, 'I am just doing my job. It is not negative kind of thing.' In other words, it is nothing personal. This helps the caseworkers feel less responsible for the consequences of the sanctions they impose on clients. It is not their fault because they did not create the rules. They just have to enforce them to earn their paycheck. This justification work helps the caseworkers avoid morality concerns while also maintaining self-esteem from being competent in their jobs, even if their jobs require them to bend the rules to help the county.

Another example is telling. Stephanie, a caseworker, described her frustration with clients walking off jobs:

...occasionally, yeah because you get drained when you do so much. Like the girl we got the job and she didn't even work 3 hours before she walked out, you know. We took her to the interview, we took her to get drug tested, [and] we took her to the second interview. She had a ride from her uncle that works there. You know, we invested so much time and energy and effort and then when she walked out I was like 'okay you quit a job without good cause, you're going into sanction.' And then she's sick and she has to quit school. Well you quit school, now we got to put you in the world. You're just drained and you're like 'whatever.' But then you're-- I walked to her house Wednesday and I saw her laying on the couch with those tubes coming out of her and I said 'what's that' and she said 'I told you I been sick. I've had eight surgeries in two weeks. That's why they're draining the fluid from me.' And then you see the almost yellow fluid coming out of her into the-- you know, kinda pumping it out of her. Then you kinda got slapped in the face. Then you think 'oh man' and then your whole attitude has to change because then you have to realize that she really is sick and you have to exempt her from employment services.

Stephanie began the story telling how she was frustrated that the client walked off the job. However, then she turned to how she had misjudged the client's situation. She had thought the client was being irresponsible, when in fact the client had been sick. In a later conversation, Stephanie told me she had the ability to size people up when they came in the door. She could tell if a client was going "to do" or if they were someone who was not "going to do." But, Stephanie had misjudged this client. This made her question her ability to "size up" clients. In other words, Stephanie's comment of thinking 'oh man' reflects a few things: the situation of the client being sick, but also her concern about her competence in sizing up clients.

Conclusions

Most people at some level interact with bureaucracies on a regular basis. Many of us work in bureaucratic organizations in which rules are imposed on us from someone up the chain of command. Then we decide what we are going to do with those rules. Will we follow them? Will we ignore them? Will we bend them? For the caseworkers, their job is one in which they are underpaid and undervalued. Eligibility workers now do the work of professional social workers, but without the professional credentials and the power and pay that come with those credentials. County DSS offices have streamlined their labor process, routinizing, standardizing, and specializing everything they can. Caseworkers are monitored enough to feel the threat of what might happen if they break the rules. However, they are given a little wiggle room to bend the rules as long as it helps the county.

Caseworkers celebrate their ability to make some decisions, to drive a client to an interview, and to come up with strategies, even though those strategies are quite standardized. The caseworkers glowed when I asked them what *they* would do to change policies. Many wanted more money for the county to help people, many wanted more money for the caseworkers. Then there is the disappointment and the sanctions. Caseworkers deal with clients who have crises, and this sometimes means the caseworkers cannot get them a job. If clients do not follow every rule, the caseworkers must sanction them to keep their jobs. Given the constraints of their environment, caseworkers do what is asked of them, sometimes bending the rules, but only in ways that help the county. At the end of the day and given this environment, caseworkers have to do what is necessary to keep their jobs. And sometimes this means punishing clients by closing their cases. Sometimes it means making a client go to a job readiness class because the supervisor says all new clients need to go to the class. Finally, sometimes it means you tell a new client that they need to put in 35 hours a week of work-related activities, even though the state rules require far less time. Despite being coerced to do this work for the county, caseworkers put up little fuss. It is sanctioning that really seems to cause the greatest dilemmas for the caseworkers. In the next chapter, I examine the processes through which caseworkers manage their emotions and feel like they make a difference in their jobs.

Chapter 5

The Daily Grind: How Caseworkers Cope with Contradictions and Dilemmas of Welfare

But I will defend [the program]. Because I believe in it and I enjoy my job. And this is a job when I get up in the morning, even though it is Monday, where I don't mind putting my foot on the floor and I know when I am coming here that I know what I have got to do. And I think that we are all committed to it.

Kim, Line Supervisor

It is not easy working in a county welfare-to-work program. Caseworkers and even line supervisors are under scrutiny from everyone. They have to deal with supervisors constantly monitoring them and a public that complains that government spending on welfare is a waste of their tax money. In the quote above, a supervisor answered my question concerning what she thought the general public's view of welfare was. I then probed further, asking what people say when they find out she is a welfare caseworker. The answers to the probe reflected debates caseworkers had gotten into with friends and even strangers. In this situation, as the quote says, caseworkers have to defend the program if they want to defend themselves.

Past researchers have examined how workers cope with dilemmas in their jobs in a number of settings. Smith and Kleinman (1989) showed how medical students learn to manage their emotions to suppress feelings of disgust or arousal when coming into contact with patients' bodies. Lerum (2004) explored how restaurant servers use humor to deal with the stressful, high paced, highly interactive job of waiting tables. A great deal of research has

looked at the emotional demands of such occupations as paid caregivers in nursing homes where some homes provide structured settings encouraging emotional interaction, while other homes discourage interaction (Lopez 2006). Yet more research has even compared men and women's emotional labor in public service sector jobs, finding that, in addition to women's occupations, men's occupations often require that men do emotional labor (Leidner 1993; Steinburg and Figart 1999).

In this chapter, I hope to add to this literature by examining how caseworkers cope with the emotional and moral dilemmas of their jobs. Additionally I ask how they resolve the contradictions and conflicting ideologies of welfare reform. Within this highly constrained work environment, caseworkers recreate and redefine themselves as good workers. But to whom is it important to be seen as a good worker and with what consequences? Caseworkers also want to be seen as good people, people who make a positive difference in the lives of the clients. Therefore, they must redefine their work as helpful and meaningful towards clients while simultaneously punishing them. To achieve this difficult task, caseworkers must manage their own emotions. But, their emotion management techniques do not go unchallenged. Caseworkers must constantly deal with dilemmas from their work environment and from clients who challenge their ability to be good workers and manage their emotions.

In this chapter, I begin by describing the structural and organizational context in which the caseworkers work. Next, I explain the caseworkers' efforts to be "good workers" despite the contradictions they face in achieving this task. These contradictions are created

because being a good worker to your clients is in direct conflict with being a good worker to your boss. I then argue that caseworkers use two key emotion management strategies to help them through these dilemmas: institutionalized rhetoric to legitimate actions and tough love. I conclude by outlining how caseworkers redefine sanctions as helpful to clients.

The Punitive Nature of Welfare: Lots of Sticks and Very Few Carrots

Welfare scholars often refer to some aspects of welfare reform as carrots and some aspects as sticks (Lichter and Jayakody 2002, Corcoran et al. 2000). Carrots can include diversion programs meant to give temporary assistance and keep economically troubled folks from ever going on welfare, including cash or housing assistance (Corcoran et al. 2000). The other side of reform is the sticks, which are negative policies meant to change welfare recipient behavior. These include sanctions for not following the rules and for exceeding time limits (Lichter and Jayakody 2002, Corcoran et al. 2000).

The maximum time an individual can receive federal funding is 60 months (five years); however, states have the ability to limit this to less time. In North Carolina, individuals can receive aid for 24 consecutive months and then enter a period where they cannot receive benefits for 36 months. In other words, recipient can have two years on, three years off until the recipient reaches the federal lifetime ceiling of 60 months. Rules vary from state to state, as does the level of enforcement of the rules. Caseworkers once had a lot of power in deciding to give time limit extensions and in imposing sanctions (Hays 2000; Cherlin et al. 2002). However, this is no longer the case. Much of the discretion in enforcement has been eliminated.

Sanctions, or punishments for not following rules, differ from time limits because they can come sooner than the time limits would and this temporary or permanent termination of benefits can be unexpected. For example, failure to fill out a form proving a child has been vaccinated can result in the temporary loss of cash assistance for several months. A client's eligibility can end permanently if they get a felony drug conviction. Cherlin and colleagues (2002) documented the varied experiences of recipients with sanctions, finding that recipients who were sanctioned were much more likely to have lower levels of education and poorer health, which had influenced their failure to follow the rules. Based on these findings, the authors suggested welfare policies must adjust to consider levels of disadvantage and individual circumstances before just terminating benefits. In other words, there are many types of forms and the client may not be fully aware of all the requirements or the consequences of not following the rules. Even if they are aware, their individual disadvantages and circumstances may make meeting expectations impossible.

In my research, the state and county policies and caseworker and supervisor practices emphasize sanctioning clients. However, not all caseworkers embrace sanctions as effective. At the very least, many do not like implementing sanctions due to the economic burden on the family and the emotional risk to the caseworkers themselves. In many counties in my broader state-wide sample, supervisors discussed caseworkers' reluctance to sanction. In one county the supervisor said they had to convince the caseworkers that sanctioning was a positive thing, saying "*not* sanctioning them isn't going to help anybody. [Sanctions] helps them." Caseworkers' distress over sanctions reflects the conflicting ideologies they must hold

in their jobs. Further, it reflects their position as being an employee who is incredibly constrained by rules they are required to follow, and enforcing rules that may have disastrous consequences for the clients' families. Supervisors provide distressed caseworkers with legitimizing rhetoric they can use to justify their actions.

In some ways, caseworkers see sanctions as something that can be effective, but they also recognize that sanctions can put the family at risk. Many of the Work First workers I interviewed said they wanted to make a positive difference in their clients' lives. This ideology of helping others conflicts with institutionalized ideologies of Work First" time limits, sanctions, and the culture of poverty. These conflicting ideologies create a number of problems for caseworkers, problems they must solve in order to feel like a good person.

Being a Good Worker to Whom? Identity Dilemmas and Conflicting Ideologies

Caseworkers are faced with conflicting ideologies concerning how to be a "good worker" and a "helper." When I asked caseworkers why they became caseworkers, every caseworker I interviewed (with only one exception) said they wanted to help people. This is an identity that is very important to them, but how do they achieve it? On one hand, caseworkers want to be helpful to the clients, and they see this as part of being a good worker. On the other hand, to be a good worker to their bosses, they must punish clients through sanctions. What their bosses say is helpful (sanctioning) conflicts with the negative real life consequences the clients face when sanctioned. In other words, caseworkers' investment in being a good worker by helping conflicts with being a good worker by

sanctioning. Since caseworkers feel they have to follow the rules and sanction clients to keep their jobs, they must come up with ways to legitimate the necessity of sanctioning as a way to help people. In this way, sanctioning comes to be viewed as a lesson, or a way to teach clients how the real world works. How the caseworkers deal with sanctioning is informed by the culture of poverty ideology.

The shift from Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to TANF discussed earlier was fueled by critiques of AFDC as a program that fostered dependence on the government and fed what had come to be known as the “culture of poverty.” This term is often used differently from how Oscar Lewis (1966) or even Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965) intended. Lewis and Moynihan viewed the culture of poverty as being a response to extreme structural constraints, such as adapting to new urban environments or living in economically depressed areas. Overtime, the “culture of poverty” has come to be seen more as a racialized cultural inferiority and less in terms of a reaction to structural constraints (Quadagno 1994; Feagin 2000; Hays 2003). Those embracing “culture of poverty” ideology now use the term as follows: individuals inflicted with the culture of poverty are not white people; they lack good values; they are not motivated, even lazy; they are sexually promiscuous; they do not delay gratification; and do not take responsibility for their own actions. Finally, instead of supporting themselves, they feel the government should support them. In short, people inflicted with the culture of poverty don’t follow the rules. In many ways, caseworkers and supervisors have internalized and reinforced culture of poverty ideology. This ideology then has translated into how they treat their clients.

Despite using the culture of poverty rhetoric, many caseworkers still do not take terminating benefits through sanctions lightly, and clients, of course, do not respond positively to being sanctioned. Amanda, who worked for both the DSS and the Chamber of Commerce, described sending “the letter.” “The letter” as many caseworkers called it, is a notice to the client that they should complete some action (a form, apply for a certain job, etc.) within ten days or their benefits will be terminated. One of Amanda’s responsibilities is to work a few days a week at the local Employment Security Commission (ESC) office. Clients can come to the ESC office where she talks to them about job openings posted at the ESC. However, clients rarely do come to see Amanda, and there does not appear to be a formal mechanism through which interaction between Amanda and clients is fostered.

Amanda goes through all open jobs listed at the ESC and then matches Work First clients to the jobs. The client gets a notice from Amanda, not their caseworker, to apply for the job. If, after several days, the client has not applied to the job through the ESC, Amanda sends them “the ten day letter” stating the client must comply with some request (in this case, apply for the job) within ten days or have their benefits terminated. Amanda commented that people often call her upset once they have received the letter. She stated they do not know who she is and that it is a challenge, but she “... makes sure by the end of the conversation they know that it was their responsibility to follow the rules.” As she said this, I could see that she was visibly affected by these conversations. Her eyes watered and her hand and voice shook. This was a substantial change from her prior polished, chipper demeanor.

The clients' confusion over not having had any prior interaction with Amanda makes these interactions even more difficult. Amanda's motivations for working with the DSS and wanting to help others also matter. Amanda was a teacher for many years but left because she felt she could not make a difference given the many constraints in our education system. Additionally, she was working as a teacher in a county with few resources and all three high schools currently being sanctioned due to failure to meet "no child left behind" requirements. Many times in talking to her she noted always wanting to help people and make a difference. She said she was always that way as a teacher and felt constrained. She felt she could make a difference in her new job. Her job now is to sanction welfare recipients for failing to comply with the rules, actions that seem in opposition to her motivations for taking her job. In fact, in many ways the punitive policies of welfare reform mirror the educational policies of "no child left behind."

While Amanda has these conversations over the phone, caseworkers often have them face to face. Carol, a supervisor, often characterized caseworkers as tender. By this, she meant that caseworkers were tender hearted, that they cared about their clients and doing their jobs well, but that sanctioning was particularly difficult. She also noted the ways in which it is difficult, saying:

I think they get frustrated when someone just does not want to do. But I think on the other hand, some of them, because of the face-to-face, it hurts their feelings when they have to either sanction or terminate someone's case.

This face-to-face interaction or telephone interaction is emotionally difficult for caseworkers and clients in several ways. Caseworkers must explain a seemingly endless number of rules

to clients who are frustrated in trying to keep up with everything. The rules do not always seem fair to the caseworkers or the clients. Regardless, caseworkers say that the rules are the rules and they must be followed (the subject of the previous chapter). Additionally, caseworkers must punish the clients through interactions (versus a letter) that are over the phone, or even worse, in person. This adds to the emotional toll of the job.

Despite caseworkers' frustration with the rules and sanctioning, almost all commented on how useful they felt sanctions were. In fact when I asked one caseworker in Smithwick County what the most effective program or change had been she replied,

Unfortunately, sanctions have been one of our most effective... because if you fail to do, then you will not get a check. And most of the time that does work, which is unfortunate, but that is the way it is. (*Kathy, caseworker*)

This focus on the effectiveness of sanctions at first seems counter-intuitive, but it is not surprising given the pressure on caseworkers to sanction. Again, caseworkers redefine the act of sanctioning as a way to help clients. To the caseworkers, sanctioning becomes the most effective way to get clients to follow the rules. Supervisors encouraged the caseworkers to approach the clients with a disciplinarian attitude. Sarah, a supervisor, echoed other supervisors when she said:

We really enforce that, at least going to the level of sanctions. [Caseworkers] need to do what they are supposed to do. They need to go back in and just get over that. [Clients] need to know they are required to do these activities in order to get their check and if they are not going to do it, then they will be sanctioned. And if they do not step up, then they go to just Medicaid and in a month or two later can be back on [cash assistance].

Carol, another supervisor, added that caseworkers also have "to do." Caseworkers must sanction to do and keep their job. Carol spoke at some detail that they relay this to the clients

as well, saying she tells clients, “state policy requires [the caseworker] to do this action and she would not be doing her job if she did not take this action.” Supervisors relay to the clients that the caseworker is just following the policy and just following the rules herself. This serves several purposes: it enforces caseworkers sanctioning clients; it shows clients that caseworkers also have rules to follow (thereby normalizing rule following); and it is an attempt to depersonalize the act of sanctioning (in a ‘just doing my job’ way).

According to supervisors, it is common for clients “to fail to do” or not follow the rules. Caseworkers need to be prepared for that and they need to withhold checks, sometimes for several months, to punish clients for not following the rules. Given the intensely punitive nature of welfare reform and given the dilemmas, conflicting ideologies and contradictions in their work, how do caseworkers negotiate their good worker identity? This is the focus of the following section.

Managing Emotion Displays to Do the Dirty Work of Welfare Reform

According to Hochschild (1979, 1983), people can manage emotions either through expressing appropriate emotions or suppressing inappropriate ones. What is appropriate or not is situational and based on norms of emotion expression that she calls “feeling rules.” Emotion management can come in the form of surface acting, where the individual alters their emotional display without changing their underlying feelings, or deep acting in which the individual changes their inner feelings in order to create a behavioral response. An example of surface acting is a cashier half-heartedly saying “have a nice day” in a robotic,

scripted fashion. Surface acting can certainly also be more convincing even if the person acting is only changing their emotional display. Deep acting, on the other hand, might require a person to psyche themselves up or even convince themselves of some inner feelings in order to behave appropriately. It is this latter form, deep acting, that caseworkers most often engage in at the Smithwick County welfare office.

To do this deep acting requires a lot of work, but given the serious challenges to caseworkers feeling like helpers and good workers, it is work they must do. Caseworkers use two main strategies to redefine the situation in a way that helps them suppress negative feelings and helps them feel positive emotions. In order to feel positively about their actions, caseworkers use language (including labeling those who do and don't do) to neutralize their behavior. Secondly, caseworkers redefine themselves using tough love to help them feel like good workers, but also like good persons.

Institutionalized Rhetoric: Those Who "Do" and Those Who "Don't Do"

Caseworkers sort clients and label them as those who supposedly want help and those who do not. In Smithwick County, the caseworkers say specifically that there are those who "do" and those who "don't do." By "do," they mean do what you are supposed to do, which means following the rules. The threat of sanctions keeps clients on the "do" path. According to caseworkers, those who get sanctioned either learn from it or they never really wanted help to begin with, thereby blaming the victim. In this way, caseworkers define sanctions as helpful and deserved, and this definition allows the caseworkers to see themselves as good

workers. Caseworkers use this strategy of sorting clients as a way to neutralize their own behavior and avoid the responsibility they have in recreating this work culture, as well as their responsibility for the negative consequences for clients. I have already discussed in detail the nature of the work, so in this section I will focus on how caseworkers attempt to neutralize their behavior. By neutralizing their behavior, I mean caseworkers efforts to make behavior seem objective, neutral, or even positive (Sykes and Matza 1957). This can work to make actions seem neutral or to absolve the worker from their responsibility for the consequences. This neutralizing is necessary for them to recreate sanctions as helpful and to solve their identity dilemma around being both a good worker and a good person.

Language is a powerful tool individuals use in giving accounts that neutralize behavior (Scott and Lyman 1968; Scully and Marolla 1984; Snow and Anderson 1987). Further, language can also be used in ways that help individual's form positive self-evaluations through interaction (Schwalbe 1983; Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996; Schwalbe et al. 2000). For caseworkers, institutionalized rhetoric is very important to feel good about sorting clients into categories of deserving (those who do) and undeserving (those who don't do). The institutionalized rhetoric legitimates and justifies the caseworkers' actions. The institutionalized ideology and rhetoric also help the caseworker form a strong commitment to their group of coworkers who share the same concepts and language and have stakes in feeling good about their work. This group commitment serves as a constant reinforcement and source of support that sanctioning clients and following the rules is

necessary. All of the caseworkers are in this together- they must use the punitive rules in ways that supports the team, which is the county.

The caseworkers, armed with the language of “mutual responsibility,” have the responsibility to punish clients when they are not responsible, which means when the client do not follow the rules. Using the language of “mutual responsibility” and the complementary “refusing to participate” allows the caseworkers to neutralize their own accountability and to blame the consequences of rule breaking on the clients (Godwin 2004 finds this same technique used by parents with “troubled teens”). For instance, as Angela, a caseworker explained:

If they don't do what they are supposed to, then we have to take their check away until they participate. And we do have some that will do very well. Some are making very good. And I have a lot that do not want to do anything and do not believe their check will be cut off.

Using the language of the client choosing to participate helps the caseworkers to feel that any negative consequence of sanctioning is really the client's choice. Also note that the caseworker begins by referring to the clients as “they” and “some,” but eventually does not even refer to the clients directly saying she has “a lot” that do not want to do anything. In a way, she has taken the humanness out of the clients as in our entire interview and in conversations, she very rarely referred to the clients as clients in an individual sense. Her language refers to clients as a group or quantity.

How do the caseworkers refer to clients who do not participate? Angela, the same caseworker quoted above later talked about trying to get clients to report the father of their children to Child Services. The clients are often resistant, resulting in this response,

Um, sometimes we need a little bit of discussion about that. Any of those things [failure to report his name among others] can get you sanctioned. If [clients] refuse to participate, then they lose the check for three months.

Clients who do not follow the rules “refuse to participate.” In other words, they made the choice not to report the father or whatever action that got them sanctioned. The consequences of what happens to the client and her children for the three months they do not get assistance, then, is the client’s, not the caseworker’s responsibility.

Caseworkers live up to their responsibility simply by informing clients of the rules. Not following the rules means the client is falling into the category of “not doing,” so the caseworkers need to remind the client of her responsibility to follow the rules. If the client does not respond, then the caseworker will “help” the client by threatening to sanction them through “ten day letter” or sanctioning them if the client does not comply with the request in the letter. As one caseworker, Julie, said, “You know [be]cause some people, you just got to, you got to be firm with. They just don’t understand it any other way, you know.” The caseworkers say they hope this will teach the client about the consequences of not following rules in the “real world.” Recall Kathy’s discussion of sanctions (quoted earlier) as effective:

Unfortunately, sanctions have been one of our most effective... because if you fail to do, then you will not get a check. And most of the time that does work, which is unfortunate, but that is the way it is.

Caseworkers define this punishment with institutionalized and seemingly less emotionally-driven terminology. For instance, after the above quote, I responded, “a little negative reinforcement to get people to...” and Kathy interrupted and corrected my terminology saying, “yep, monitoring. Uh hum.” Kathy clearly preferred to say “monitoring,” a much

more legitimate term for something a government official would do. Saying “negative reinforcement” obviously calls attention to the punishment in the action and places some responsibility (perhaps in the form of judgment) on the caseworker. The caseworkers prefer officially to “monitor” as if that allows them to detach from the process they help to recreate. Caseworkers do not want to be perceived as judging the clients. They want to maintain a myth of objectivity. As Julie, a caseworker, said,

...you know I don't look at it like I am better than them or anything, you know. It's a fact that we are all people. I'm not here to judge. God will do that. Let him do that. I'm here to do my job and my job is to help people.

Despite this resistance to being perceived as judgmental, caseworkers must judge clients if they want to keep their jobs. To judge clients they adopt the language of those who do and don't do as sort of a watered down version of the deserving and non-deserving poor. In this legitimating language it is not about what the client deserves; it is about the client *choosing* to follow rules. Recall that caseworkers say clients “refuse to participate.”

Therefore, monitoring was important based on many of the caseworkers' and supervisors' orientations toward clients. They often referred to clients as “multigenerational” meaning their mothers and perhaps even grandmothers had been on welfare. For some DSS workers this meant they unfortunately “were not taught the things you and I were taught,” according to Amanda, the person who works as a liaison between the business community (through the Chamber of Commerce) and Work First. For others, like Kathy, a caseworker, this meant clients needed “retraining and rethinking” because some clients were unmotivated.

Regardless of whether the caseworker blatantly described clients as lazy or used more

watered down, subtle ways to describe them as value-deprived, most caseworkers echoed some version of a “culture of poverty” orientation towards clients fused with institutionalized rhetoric to help them justify their actions.

Clients Need “Retraining and Rethinking”: Tough Love

So far, I have shown one technique caseworkers use to neutralize the friction between having to sanction and wanting to be a helper- the use of institutionalized rhetoric. As discussed above, caseworkers use the culture of poverty ideology when defining clients, separating them into those who do and those who don’t do. A second technique comes from caseworkers’ view that sanctioning is a way to teach clients about how the “real world” operates. Helping clients has less to do with assisting clients in finding jobs than teaching them that the real world has rules and low wage workers need to follow the rules if they want to keep their jobs. Caseworkers enact a “tough love” mothering style that is influenced by and reinforces class inequality.

The caseworkers need to feel like they are helpers and that their work makes a difference. They want to be good workers, but also to be good people. To do this, caseworkers have to undo what the client’s mother has done. They must retrain the client not to be dependent on welfare. Because the caseworkers think ‘their mamma never told them better,’ they become a quasi-replacement mother to teach clients values and habits they have not learned. Given the working class roots of the caseworkers, they adopt a “tough love” style of parenting where the rules are the rules and that is it (Lareau 2003; Hochschild 1979,

1983). This tough love style is emotionally trying, and it requires the caseworkers to suppress some emotions while expressing others. Caseworkers need to be tough for the clients. While this does not fit with so-called traditional (meaning middle class) notions of motherhood, it does fit the caseworkers' notions of motherhood. For them, being a mother means your children are clean, properly clothed, fed, and well behaved/deferential to authority.

I will discuss the ways caseworkers reinforce traditional motherhood in the following paragraphs. Then I will illustrate the adaptations caseworkers make to construct motherhood and womanhood in light of the economic constraints in their rural county. This involves incorporating aspects associated with traditional masculinity, such as being a provider. Further, I argue that this compares and contrasts with other conceptualizations of motherhood in the literature. I find women in Smithwick County often evoke aspects of motherhood consistent with working class motherhood found in some prior research (Lareau 2003; Hochschild 1979, 1983). Mothers reproduce class inequality, but they have to prepare their children for the world, even if it is the low wage work world.

Caseworkers reinforce traditional feminine mothering through their interactions with clients, but also in their own family lives. Caseworkers insist that some clients' mothers have not taught them appropriate values and this suggests caseworkers see value teaching as work done by mothers. For instance, Angela describes the situation in an interview as she tells me that Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is:

...welfare for people who have never worked. And there are a few honest to God good reasons that people get that, but if you've got momma and grandma getting a SSI check of \$600 a month, an 18 year old daughter has got a baby and she's only getting \$100 to \$236. She [the daughter/client] has not had the

backbone in the household, the ethics of getting out and working and earning your own money. So sometimes we're the first time they ever heard that. There is pride working. There is pride in earning your paycheck.

According to caseworkers, mothers are supposed to teach their children this. There is pride in working and in earning your *own* money and therefore not being welfare dependent. Mothers should be tough because problems arise when children have "not had the backbone in the family." Finally, it is an ethic, a moral issue, to want to get out and work. Mothers must teach this morality, these ethics.

Some DSS workers even described this moral teaching as nurturance. Amanda, a former school teacher, went out of her way in talking to me to describe how "we" had been "afforded" many things that clients did not get. She said that, for instance, we had been taught at home the importance of education. She said a lot of people had not had that same "nurturance in the home." Unlike many of the caseworkers, Amanda comes from a middle class background. She sees herself as different from the clients and distances herself from them through her comments to me. On the one hand, she attempts to be empathetic and notes that she and I have privilege, which we do. In this regard she makes attempts to bond with me through recognizing our commonalities in race, gender, and class. On the other hand, her well-intended words reinforce the culture of poverty ideology that poor mothers are failures. Beyond this, she reinforces traditional femininity by associating teaching with a nurturing activity. Perhaps this is not surprising given her former job as a teacher.

Caseworkers also reinforce traditional feminine mothering in their own family lives. Over the course of my time in the field, I overheard or had a number of conversations with

caseworkers about getting children dressed and clean and getting children and husbands fed. For instance, one caseworker, in the midst of juggling a number of tasks, stopped suddenly to make a phone call. She had remembered that it was Wednesday night, commonly a night Southern Baptists have church services, and she had to go to church. She had prepared dinner for her husband and stepchildren in advance, but needed to call her husband with instructions on how to heat the dinner up in the microwave. This act was simply taken in stride as a mother and wife's duty, getting your family fed even if you are not at home to serve the meal. Like many working women, these women left a difficult and stressful job to go home to a second shift of making dinner, cleaning house, and childcare. Some caseworkers even did this work for grandchildren as their children went off to work second shift paid jobs. One of the implications of caseworkers balancing work and family is that they expect clients to be able to do the same. They often take on a "if I can do it, they can do it" attitude. In fact, several caseworkers told me this exactly. For instance, Julie a caseworker who is married with children told me:

But it's hard to justify giving a benefit to a person who is 37 years old and had two jobs in their life and worked one hour at one place and a week at the other. You know, okay. So if she gets another job she'll probably quit anyway.... Because I'm 30 years old and I been making it somehow. What happened that you haven't been working? What were you doing before?

This caseworker, who had earlier told me how important it was to not be judgmental, here expresses her frustration with clients not working. After all, she seems to say, she has had to work and she has made it.

Here we see that, mothering is not just about upholding traditional femininity. Being a mother is also about many things normally associated with traditional masculinity, being a provider and a disciplinarian. Being a mother for these working class, rural women in Smithwick County means you do it all. Being a mother means you make sacrifices so that your children get the best you can give them. Caseworkers made this clear to me, each other and to clients on a number of occasions. On one such occasion, the instructor of the county job readiness class described to students what it meant to be a mother and to make sacrifices. The job readiness instructor spoke to the class about her 16 year old son and having to provide for him. She told a story of applying to a fast food restaurant to be a biscuit maker from 5am until 2pm. An employee at the fast food restaurant told her she had too much education to work there. She said she wanted to cry, and did cry once she left. But she said she responded in pride, "Thank you, miss, have a nice day." She said she needed a job and a paycheck and it did not matter what that job was. She would make biscuits and sweep the parking lot if that was what it took. She told the students she would be proud to have a paycheck at the end of every two weeks. Then she said,

You gotta step up to the plate and take it like a woman. You gotta be mama and woman. It's not what you want. It's what you have to do to provide.

Her words are meaningful in many ways. First, she gives the mixed gendered notion of stepping up to the plate, a sports analogy, but taking it like a woman, not a man. This captures the convergence of gendered expectations of being a mother, but also a provider. Being a mama and a woman means you take any job you can take to provide. Further, the underlying notion is that women are to provide. This was echoed by caseworkers who said on

numerous occasions to me and to clients that women should not count on men (something that every caseworker and supervisor told me in these words at least once) to provide for their families. Women need to put themselves in position to provide if they can, even if it means making sacrifices. Taking a job one might think is beneath you is one type of sacrifice to make. More specifically, sacrificing means not doing what you want, but what you need to do in order to provide.

This is somewhat different from what other research has found. For instance, Limoncelli (2002) in her study of Work First trainings in California found that job service trainers worked hard to strip participants of their identity as good mothers and to replace it with a “universal worker” identity. Job readiness trainers urged clients not to focus on the self-esteem they gained from being good mothers, even to the point of arguing to the mothers that children are a lot of trouble. Given this, they argued the clients should learn the value of a hard day’s work (as if being a good mother was not a hard day’s work). In contrast, in my setting, caseworkers and the job readiness instructor urge clients to do it all. They must provide for their family and in many cases be the only provider, but they must also be good mothers. Being a good mother is more than typical feminine nurturing though. Being a good mother means preparing your children for a world of low wage or working class work. This is only speculative, but perhaps Limoncelli’s job training workers were middle class instead of working class like the caseworkers and job readiness instructor in Smithwick County. This may account for some of the differences in our findings.

In many ways, the attempt to balance work and family is similar to what Hays (1997; see also Williams 2000 and Blair-Loy 2003 for similar arguments) describes as “intensive mothering,” but with one strong distinction. Intensive mothering involves not just the stress of balancing work and family, but also retaining and reinforcing femininity through what Hays describes as the “cultural contradictions of motherhood.” According to Hays, women are required to be competitive in the workplace while also doing the second shift of housework at home. Even further though, women must do what Kleinman (2007) has called the “third shift.” They must provide emotional labor and support for their family.

While this is likely common for most mothers, Lareau (2003) finds some distinctions between mothers. In her ethnographic study she finds that middle class parents are different from working and lower class parents. Middle class parents use what she calls the “logic of concerted cultivation” where parents (mostly mothers) do emotion and nurturing work to cultivate their children’s talents. An unintended consequence of this mothering work is that middle class children learn a sense of entitlement and communication skills that they use to question authority and institutions. This contrasts sharply with working and lower class mothering, which Lareau (2003) calls “an assumption of natural growth.” In these families, children are not intensely nurtured or cultivated. Children instead live in a world of freedom in their play lives and learn a world of constraint and what they cannot have or afford. Children learn to distrust institutions and not to challenge authority, just like their parents. Lareau (2003) argues that through these parenting strategies, the unfortunate and unintended outcome is the “transmission of differential advantages.” In this way, it seems the middle

class parenting style is more consistent with Hays's (1997) intensive mothering, while the working class mothers parent differently.

As I have shown, caseworkers do some aspects of intensive mothering. They worry about children and being a good mother. They sacrifice for their children in ways that are consistent with this type of mothering. However, cultivating hidden talents and intensive mothering is not crucial, given the conditions and environment in which these mothers parent (see Kohn 1977 and Kohn and Schooler 1978, 1982 for a discussion of social class and the reciprocal effects of job conditions and personality). Caseworkers and clients must prepare their children for the world of rules. Unlike middle class adults and children, there are serious consequences for even the slightest challenge to the rules and to authority. Over time then, working and lower class parenting, as Lareau (2003) and others before her have found (Komarovsky 1967; Bernstein and Henderson 1969; Hochschild 1979), involves teaching children deference to the rules. Children need to know the real world has rules and even the slightest infraction could result in the loss of a job. When jobs, any jobs, are hard to come by and your family is already living near or in poverty, losing a job is disastrous. As the job readiness instructor said, working and lower class parents have to "step up to the plate and take it like a woman."

Goffman (1979) argues that we learn much about how to treat others through the parent-child relationship. Parents are often the main authority figure enforcing behavior as we grow up. Therefore, we learn from our parents how to treat subordinate others. As adults, we behave in a paternalistic way and infantilize those who seem as if they cannot take care of

themselves, no matter how true this perception is. Kim illustrates this perfectly in our interview when she says,

Either you follow the rules and let us support you and help you become self-sufficient or get out there on your own and do it.

This could be a typical scenario in any home, a parent yelling at their rebellious teenager about the importance of doing well in school or following some household rule. However, Kim adds the “help you become self-sufficient” showing how paternalism is diffused through institutionalized rhetoric. Further, the collective and helpful “us” here is really doing something the child, or client, should be grateful for, giving financial support. In Smithwick County, caseworkers often treat clients like children. To justify this treatment, caseworkers evoke the working class ideas of “tough love.”. This helps the caseworkers’ renegotiate their good worker identities by drawing on their existing class beliefs about appropriate motherhood, as well as drawing on a history of paternalistic practices in a mill town.

Mill towns in the Southeast were created by textile manufacturers. In an effort to support workers, all the while controlling them, textile manufacturers built houses, schools, churches, and whole towns, really, to concentrate former rural farm laborers around the cotton mills (Pope 1965; Hall et al. 2000). Support and protection were exchanged for deference and hard work. Many of the caseworkers in Smithwick County are quite familiar with mill paternalism. While no caseworkers openly claimed to embrace mill paternalism, this historical practice possibly provides a readily acceptable cultural script for caseworkers. They are not trying to control clients. They are trying to help them. Combine this with caseworkers’ “tough love” working class parenting practices, and you have an environment

ripe for the reproduction of class inequality or as Lareau (2003) termed it, the transmission of differential advantages.

Caseworkers also renegotiate the potentially problematic act of infantilizing clients by focusing on what they perceive as the clients' dependence on them for help. Well into our interview, one caseworker began talking about a client as if she were a baby learning to walk.

The exchange follows:

Caseworker: Sometimes you have to make them feel like, you know, 'I'm not here to tell you what to do. I'm here to sit with you on the things I do to help you through. You know I'll hold your hand as long as you need me to hold your hand, but when I start letting go of your hand you need to try and take a few steps on your own, but I'll always be here you know in case you need to call back.'

Interviewer: Ever feel kind of like a mother to clients?

Caseworker: Yes. You have some that call you every day, two or three times a day wanting you to umm tell them what to do. Asking you about stuff and that to me is either the older ones or the real young ones, the real young ones that are trying or the older ones that are trying. The ones that are in the middle are like okay, I'll do what I think and that's it you know.

The caseworker began describing how she helps clients. It is likely she would say this openly to a client because she does not see the harm in comparing an adult client's entry into the labor force with a baby taking its first steps. Even more, she is saying that the client is dependent on her for help, but that she has to eventually break that dependence. Implicit in her comment is that she does enjoy the client's momentary dependence. In fact, caseworkers are very much dependent on clients, though the interdependence is clearly unequal. Without clients, caseworkers would not have their jobs. Further, they get a sense of gratification from the clients' dependence, a sense that they are helping them out. Later in the interview, this

same caseworker described a success story in which a client got a job and then the caseworker called the case “my baby.”

After the caseworker’s initial response using the baby walking metaphor, I asked her if she ever felt like a mother to the clients. Her response again shows the gratitude and rewards caseworkers gain from clients’ dependence. Her response also reveals how caseworkers sort clients into those who supposedly want help and those who do not. The caseworker describes younger and older clients as really wanting help, as shown through their calling the caseworker sometimes several times a day. The “middle clients” are ones that do it on their own. While you would think that caseworkers might like this because it reduces their time on the phone and the potential for conflict in interactions, it also reduces their sense of being needed. Caseworkers want to be needed so that they feel like they are helping.

Finally, the caseworker says that clients call two or three times a day because they want caseworkers to tell them what to do. Again, this makes the caseworker feel needed and it is a signifier to caseworkers that this is a client who wants to “do.” However, at the very same time, the client’s display of dependence justifies the caseworker’s paternalistic and infantilizing behavior towards the client. In other words, clients are incapable of making their own decisions or judgments. They need caseworkers to tell them what to do.

Conclusions: Sanctioning Equals Helping

Throughout this chapter I have mentioned several times that caseworkers say sanctions are effective or that they are helpful. What evidence do caseworkers give for this

assertion? The answer is, none. They don't give any evidence that it is helping people. That said, caseworkers use of institutionalized rhetoric that neutralizes their actions and tough love helps them create the reality that sanctions are helping clients.

Caseworkers do not keep statistics on the rate of success of the act of sanctioning. They do not even tell stories of when they sanctioned someone and that turned the person around. In fact, they give no evidence what-so-ever that sanctioning clients actually is effective or helpful in assisting the clients in any way, much less to help them reach self-sufficiency. But in this sense, it does not have to be logical or empirically proven. They just need to believe it. They need to believe that punishing the clients works just like spanking, or at least threatening to spank, your child works.

In fact, caseworkers do not need even to worry too much about the contradictory logic they use in saying some clients do and others don't do. In many ways, sorting in this way puts blame on the client. More importantly though, caseworkers' sort clients in a way that essentializes the client's noncompliance. This makes it seem as if it is inherent that some clients "naturally" will not follow the rules. However, for sanctions to work, then people need to be able to change, meaning they cannot be inherently or essentially someone who will not do. However, caseworkers are not sociologists and they could care less about our theories of noncompliance being a result of social constructions versus essential natures of bad people. This is not their reality. Caseworkers might say 'Some people do not change because it is in their nature not to do. So what can you do?' Then they might say, 'but some people can change their nature. They just need to see that the real world has rules' and the

caseworker just hopes that the client can turn it around. Caseworkers say they expect disappointment and that most clients will not, however, turn around. Most will fail to do and will disappoint the caseworkers. Like a rogue child, some children cannot be taught no matter how much you try to “retrain” them and try to get them “rethinking.”

The caseworkers would argue this is not their fault by any means. This is really on the client. The caseworker tells them the rules as her end of the mutual responsibility agreement. The client needs to hold up her end and “participate.” Caseworkers did not invent the wheel. They just turn it like they are supposed to. They are doing their jobs and clients need to do theirs. Sometimes they need to be threatened with the consequences of not following the rules. Sometimes they need to be punished to learn their lesson. This is how the real world works for the caseworkers, and it is this version of the real world they enforce on the clients. Caseworkers have to believe in the system if they are to do their job, which is doing the dirty work of welfare reform.

Chapter 6

Conclusions and Implications for Scholars and Policy

When I began this research I was interested in how service providers constructed welfare policies and programs as legitimate and effective. I was not very specific about to whom they wanted to seem legitimate and effective, but I was clearly thinking of an external audience. Establishing their legitimacy seemed like a nearly impossible task, but one they seemed to be pulling off with the post-AFDC reforms. I also wondered, “How can powerful managers and policymakers in the welfare system get women to do this work?” Implicit in this question is the idea that welfare is a punitive system and not a system in which women can help other women. It seemed obvious to me that this system was punitive and this was the key to my refocusing during the early stages of the research. What became interesting was not how caseworkers made welfare seem effective to some external audience, but how they made welfare seem effective to themselves. Caseworkers spend an incredible amount of energy constructing “welfare” as effective for themselves and for their coworkers. This also led me to wonder, “How in the world can caseworkers do the ‘dirty work’ of welfare day in and day out?” This became the focus of my analysis.

Caseworkers face many challenges in doing this work. They face challenges from their clients, from their supervisors, and even challenges within themselves. Faced with numerous contradictions and a punitive decision-making power that can have disastrous consequences for clients, caseworkers have to do a lot of work to feel good about themselves and their work. They have to give accounts and justifications for their actions. Caseworkers must always be on the defensive. They must always be prepared to prove that what they do

matters and is helpful to the people they supposedly serve. Caseworkers need to feel like they make a beneficial difference, though they work in conditions that make that impossible.

Historically, there have been many changes in the welfare system. From poorhouses to pensions to widows, we saw a move to the de-institutionalization of the poor. This really marked the birth of the casework profession, since social workers now administered pensions to widows instead of charity organizations administering services. Changes to social insurance and cash assistance over the years have often been done in ways to offer incentives to those who work and meager assistance to those who do not. It should be no surprise that the attempts to put into place welfare-to-work policies throughout the 1970s and 1980s finally proved successful under a moderate Democrat president (Clinton) and a Republican Congress – both embracing a market ideology. In 1996, welfare-to-work moved from a state-level experiment to a federal mandate. Clients now had a limited time to find work, usually minimum wage work, or be cut off from assistance.

Under the George W. Bush administration this mandate became even stricter by requiring that more clients be actively involved in work-related activities. And those activities included fewer education and certification programs and demanded more job search and temporary employment. The message was clear: get to “Work First,” no matter what the job -- something caseworkers in Smithwick County repeated constantly. The implications and consequences are also clear: fill the market with involuntary low-wage workers. This surge in job-dependent, low-wage workers not only suppresses wages, but also diminishes workers’ power. Employers need not worry about worker demands for better pay and

working conditions when they have a reserve army of workers waiting. In this sense, the welfare reserve army works like scabs in a union drive. In the rural United States, in many places like Smithwick County, jobs are not easy to come by. There are few skilled jobs due to a history of economic development that diminished employer competition for workers (usually a single textile mill company was the only major employer) and kept jobs routinized. Workers are easily replaced in these environments and the workers know it.

This fear of being replaced affects the caseworkers, too. These are not professional, credentialed social workers. In Smithwick County, former eligibility workers, who most often have an associate's degree, are the front-line workers administering welfare services. Some of these caseworkers were once clients themselves, some of them came from night-shift jobs, and some of them even came from fast food jobs. Working for the Department of Social Services with benefits and first-shift hours is a great job for them. This is a job they do not want to lose, of which they are reminded daily by their interactions with clients who are not so lucky. And while some caseworkers claimed with my probing that they do not really fear losing their jobs, I am not sure this is completely accurate.

Here is an analogy many people can likely relate to. I am afraid of flying. I understand the statistics and how unlikely it is I will be involved in any sort of plane crash. In fact, I do not know anyone (and most of us don't) who has been involved in a plane crash. Despite this rationale and the many reasons I should not be afraid of flying, I am afraid. No matter how slight the chance of an accident, there is a chance. I think caseworkers see this too with their situations. A few stories bring this to light.

I spent one day with two caseworkers doing home visits. We drove all over the county from one client's home to another. We sat in their living rooms and discussed forms and got updates on their job hunting prospects. When we took a break for lunch, we ate at one of the many chain restaurants lining the roads just off highway exit ramps. I asked Judy and Stephanie if any of their fellow caseworkers had ever quit because they were tired of all the rules and red tape. Stephanie said people quit because they think "the grass is greener on the other side," meaning they get tired of the work environment and the supervisors. She admitted there was a lot of paperwork and the supervisors were constantly looking over their shoulders. She also said that it is a lot worse in other places, and that if you do your job, then the supervisors will leave you alone. She said most people who leave try to come back within a few months. I asked if the county rehires them. Stephanie responded they do not, because by that point, they have already filled the job. From this story, we see that the jobs are easy to refill. And by local standards, these are nice jobs to have. In view of their options, caseworkers are usually willing to do what they needed to do to keep their job, even if it means punishing others.

A second story points out some of the challenges in their jobs that might be enough to send many people packing if it were not for the conditions of the county that offer few alternative jobs. Angela is a passionate caseworker. Many times when I spoke with her, she expressed frustration when telling stories about the system, clients, and, as she called them, "the suits in Raleigh" who have no idea what caseworkers are up against in rural North

Carolina. I asked her if there were people they could not help and who deserved to be helped.

Here is a portion of her response. I quote at length to capture the spirit of what she is saying:

Most definitely, there are people out there and I see more in crisis because we do that too. It's an awful lot of older folks out there who have to choose every month what it is they are going to have. And I have a heart and I've said it out loud. When an older person comes into my office and they need help with a gas bill with a perpetual payment, I am much more apt, because they have worked all their lives and they had no idea what the cost of living was going to be when they retired. Had no idea that it takes over \$200 to put a tank of gas in your house to heat that lasts 3 weeks for them okay. It's hard umm showing the electric bill in the county is terribly high. For the life of me I don't understand it, but they are. Umm some of the water bills are as high as my electric bill at home okay. I've seen \$40 and \$45 water bills. My water bill is \$15 okay. But a lot of the cheaper landlords won't fix leaks and things like that, okay. Umm I had a client one time and I hadn't been here very long and she came in and asked us to pay her electric bill and at the time we had a questionnaire and I said to her why can't you pay and she said "I'm not going to lie to you." She pulls out a layaway that was a year old. It had board games monopoly, checkers and something else and 4 pairs of socks and she said "I'm not going to lie to you. I finished getting out my layaway. I wanted my [children] to have something Christmas morning." And I must have bought my two a \$1000 worth that year and I looked down at that bill and that dirty ugly layaway slip and I put my pencil down and I looked at her and I said, "have you got any other bills that you need paid right now?" Well as it worked out that was the only one that she had. I could have lost my job, but if I could have taken Christmas presents to her house, I would have dropped them off. Now that's how bad that woman humbles me. And I paid her electric bill and I would have paid any other bill that the money provided that I could have paid for her. I had never been so humbled in my entire life. But every caseworker down here had had that happen at one time or another. Okay -- a lot of times we come across cold and mean, but there are rules to follow.

It is tough to know where to begin in discussing this interview excerpt, but it captures many of the conflicting emotions of caseworkers. Perhaps the most difficult part of this excerpt for the caseworker was the woman with the layaway. The caseworker cried when she told me the story of the woman with her tattered layaway slip. Angela, the caseworker, had raised two

children herself. She talked about her sons all the time and she proudly spoke of the times she was able to help them with medical expenses or in emergencies. Like many of the caseworkers, it was important for them, as mothers and women, to provide things for their children. However, Angela also recognizes the privileges she has in her jobs and even though she wanted to help the woman with her layaway, she sincerely says that she thought she would lose her job if she did.

Finally, Angela discusses how caseworkers come across “cold and mean,” but they have a job to do and they want to keep their jobs no matter what. Again, continuously confronted with clients’ situations, caseworkers are reminded daily about their relatively good fortune in working at the DSS, even if it is emotionally difficult. To deal with these trying conditions, caseworkers need to find ways to solve the contradictions and dilemmas they face.

The Contradictions and Dilemmas and Caseworkers’ Ways to Deal with Them

In each chapter I have analyzed major contradictions and dilemmas caseworkers face. I have also attempted to show how caseworkers deal with these contradictions and dilemmas. In this section, I will briefly summarize key contradictions from the previous chapters. These contradictions begin with an intangible goal that functions more as sound bite and rhetorical device than something realistically to achieve. This goal results in a laundry list of rules that caseworkers must enforce with the clients. The enforcement of these rules does not come easily and caseworkers struggle. Finally, I will discuss how caseworkers cope with this messy situation so that they come away feeling good, or at least not bad, about their work.

From the top down, policymakers at the federal, state, and county-level impose goals and rules on the caseworkers. For the caseworkers, these policymakers are people who do not understand. They are “the suits” who have never seen the things that they see and have never known what it was like to want for something or to have struggled to make ends meet.

It is these policymakers who establish the goal of self-sufficiency, a goal that sounds good as a sound bite but that in reality is impossible to achieve. Despite this impossibility, caseworker after caseworker talked about the goal of self-sufficiency and helping people reach self-sufficiency. What they meant by this was not self-sufficiency, but getting the client a job, *any* low-wage job. The caseworker would hope that such a job was a foot in the door, and that the client could work her way up the ladder -- even though caseworkers knew how short that ladder is likely to be.

With goals come rules to follow, often under the guise that these rules somehow help in achieving the goals. Caseworkers talk about rules in this way, saying people have to follow the rules to achieve self-sufficiency. The caseworkers say they are just trying to get clients to that goal, so they (caseworkers) have rules to follow themselves. They have jobs to do and so do the clients. At the end of the day, though, caseworkers will tell you that rules are ends in themselves. The real world has rules and clients need to know there are consequences for not following the rules. Caseworkers preach this and maintain that they always follow the rules, because doing so is more effective and efficient, reduces mistakes, and yields fair, standardized treatment. That said, caseworkers bend the rules in ways that

help the county meet standardized, statistical requirements for the state and federal governments.

These contradictions do not go unnoticed by the caseworkers, and they do considerable work to avoid the contradictions, solve dilemmas, and justify their behavior. Caseworkers are heavily invested in their belief that they are helping clients. Given the punitive nature of their work, actually helping is hard to achieve. To accomplish this difficult task caseworkers use various emotion-work strategies. First, caseworkers draw on institutionalized rhetoric in ways that justify their actions. In short, if you “monitor” someone who is “mutually responsible,” you are acting as a legitimate, objective official, not as a judgmental bureaucrat who punishes the desperately poor for not getting a form signed. Second, caseworkers evoke tough love to redefine punishment as help. This tough love style is easily accessible as a cultural script given the paternalism of the welfare state and the local mill paternalism that the caseworkers then use as justification for their actions. Further, using their working-class parenting styles, they embrace using strong discipline to prepare children for the harsh work world, a world in which they must stay deferential to rules and authority to survive. Caseworkers help clients, then, by teaching them how to defer to rules and authority. In this sense, caseworkers help produce and reproduce the ideology and behavior that reproduce class inequality.

In sum, changes from Aid to Families with Dependent Children to Temporary Assistance to Needy Families brought about a new goal and a new set of rules. These changes created problems and contradictions concerning the caseworkers’ discretion. In turn, these contradictions make it necessary for caseworkers to resolve the conflicting ideologies of welfare. They must

justify their actions, and they do so through grasping institutionalized rhetoric and embracing a tough love parenting style with clients.

The Big Picture: Implications for Scholars

What began as a look at organizational legitimacy and effectiveness became a focus on the work of caseworkers. Once I spent a few days in the Department of Social Services offices, I knew I was going to stay there. While I am strongly drawn to what I think are the “real life” implications of what I have seen, which I will discuss next, I believe there are some important implications of this research for scholars of work and organizations, of welfare, and of inequality.

My focus was on a welfare office, but there are many parallels to other settings. Most people work in bureaucracies and most people have rules forced upon them by others who have never worked a day in their shoes. These “suits” or “paper pushers” often seem to exist to give us more paperwork and make our lives more difficult, but there are serious consequences to what is imposed. While some “suit” decided that caseworkers must have more clients involved in work-related activities and must sanction non-compliant clients, it is caseworkers who must do that dirty work.

Low-skilled caseworkers desperate to keep their jobs and happy to have even a small degree of autonomy follow the rules, and often bend them, in ways to help the county. This is not without costs for the caseworker and to an even greater extent for the client who has had her assistance cut off. In other words, looking at how formal organizational procedures are actually implemented on the shop floor, helped in uncovering the myths welfare workers

create for those outside the office to consume (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Being in the organization, at the workplace, was the only way to see these contradictions between what is preached and what is practiced. This study, therefore, contributes to neo-institutional theory of organizations.

Lichter and Jayakody (2002) urged scholars of welfare to study rural areas. Indeed, there are things unique to rural areas as they deal with few to no resources for daycare or transportation. This is exacerbated if the county is large and clients have to travel far to get to work or to day care. Rural areas may be coming up with innovative strategies to solve these issues. In Smithwick County, caseworkers worked hard with other organizations in efforts to ease this problem.

This raises a bigger implication for scholars of welfare reform. The ideology of devolution and privatization seeks to put discretion in the hands of the states and in turn the counties. This suggested to scholars that caseworkers have an incredible amount of discretion. Based on what I have seen in Smithwick County, I think this deserves a closer look. Caseworkers' discretion was greatly constrained, and in many ways they were wedded to routinized procedures. That said, what little discretionary power they had, they used to help the county, not the clients. This was a major departure from what Hays (2003) found shortly after the 1996 welfare reform.

In the future I hope to look across counties to examine how and to what extent caseworkers vary in their use of discretion in implementing the rules. I suspect that as the reins are tightening, what I have seen in Smithwick will be more common. In other words, I

do not think Hays's findings and mine differ because of place. I think they differ because caseworkers are losing discretionary power. This could be both good and bad -- good if you think caseworkers tend to discriminate against clients, bad if you think of caseworkers as workers and as people who once were able to give a client the benefit of the doubt and not cut off aid. They can't do that now.

Finally, for scholars of inequality there is a lot here. In fact, inequality is everywhere in this context, and my worry is that I have not drawn it out or made it explicit enough. Working and lower class women are in jobs where, to keep the job, they must punish other women who are in many ways just like them. In fact, in Smithwick County, caseworkers often knew their clients. They were neighbors, former schoolmates, and people they went to church with. One client said this actually made it easier: a friend would know that punishing them is not a personal thing. The caseworkers are just doing their job. However, this takes a toll on these workers.

Parenting has varied by class as parents have tried to adapt to oppressive conditions. Unfortunately these adaptations can reproduce inequality. Working within the context of the paternalistic US welfare state, caseworkers have a number of cultural scripts justifying and even urging them to reproduce the status quo. The status quo is dramatic class inequality. For caseworkers, they are acting like working-class parents, preparing the clients for the real world. For the outside observer, the inequality scholar, they are reproducing inequality without even knowing it. They come to take the paternalistic rules and system for granted and they focus on "helping" the clients through teaching them the real world has rules. These

taken-for-granted processes can happen anywhere as Schwalbe and colleagues (2000) have shown. Following their lead, I argue understanding generic social processes that reproduce inequality is essential for creating knowledge that will be useful for abolishing inequality.

Emotional labor is an important tool in the reproduction of inequality. Caseworkers do the dirty work for the state: they punish other women. This presents challenges for the caseworkers that they need to overcome. The caseworkers have a good job, relative to the area, and they want to keep that job. Therefore, they use emotional labor to help them do what they need to do to keep their job (sanction) while still feeling like they are good people. By sticking to the rules and institutionalized rhetoric, they attempt to depersonalize their actions (I am just doing my job). If clients do not like the rules, it is not the caseworkers' fault. Clients can blame the suits in Raleigh who came up with the rule. The caseworkers are just trying to earn a paycheck.

The second emotional labor strategy the caseworkers use is to feel like a good person in their job is using "tough love" with the clients. Taken from their own working-class parenting styles and combined with the paternalism of the welfare state, caseworkers have a number of cultural scripts from which to draw. Defining sanctions as helpful is a tough task, but evoking a "tough love" attitude enables caseworkers to punish clients (in a sense grounding them) because they argue that is the only way clients will learn. As the caseworkers say, "the real world has rules" and caseworkers show clients what the consequences are if you break rules.

As I have tried to show throughout this dissertation, caseworkers do not take sanctioning lightly. They told me about the potential consequences of a sanction, such as losing an apartment or even losing a child to Child Protective Services. Caseworkers think about these things, but they cannot think about them long or they will not be able to continue to feel like a good person in their jobs. And they need their job. So caseworkers do this work to other women and they work hard, through emotional labor, to convince themselves that they are helping the women. This is just one, of many ways, in which inequality is reproduced.

This leads to another implication for scholars, but also for other people interested in social change. To understand how the social world works, we need to know who is doing what to whom. Otherwise we risk reifying institutions such as “the State” and not getting to where all the action is occurring. Further, in understanding inequality, knowing who is doing what to whom helps us know the people who are accountable for reproducing inequality. One way to do this is to understand what Schwalbe (2000, 2005) has called the nets of accountability. Nets of accountability involve a series of actions. The metaphor of the net is helpful, as we can think of many strands of rope that are joined together at several points through knots. The ropes are representative of people while the knots are where people come together in interaction. In a net of accountability, the focus is on how people are accountable to others across time and context.

This concept is useful in thinking about chains of events, that is, how the actions of one person might lead to the actions of another. This also helps us see how these chains

reproduce inequality. In this dissertation I have shown how caseworkers are clearly constrained and coerced. From one perspective, this does not remove them from accountability for their actions. While I empathize with the caseworkers, they are still agents in the reproduction of inequality. While their discretion is clearly constrained, they do still use discretion and they do not use it to help clients. They use it in ways to help themselves keep their jobs by helping the county make their numbers. Certainly supervisors use coercion and they constrain caseworkers. They do this so that caseworkers worry more about their accountability to their supervisors than they worry about any sort of accountability they might have to clients. So, while I again empathize with the caseworkers, they are not merely victims in this net. They are both victims and agents in this reproduction of inequality.

From another perspective, however, these caseworkers could simply refuse to follow rules they see as having consequences that are harmful to clients. They then would almost certainly lose their jobs. Their non-compliance would have no effect on the lives of their now former clients. As Weber would say, we choose our actions with ends in view. Since, from this perspective, their actions would not influence the reproduction of inequality, it may not be meaningful to talk of their accountability. Little would change if the caseworkers refused to do this dirty work. After all, the caseworkers are largely unskilled and without professional credentials. In this sense, they are easy to replace.

That said, there is no history of resistance and so it is difficult to say what organized resistance, such as a work stoppage, might create. As I am writing this, public mental health workers are collectively resisting changes in the mental health care system due to

privatization and devolution. Hopefully, Work First caseworkers will be moved by this activity. Hopefully, they will see that there is a way for them to resist and not be a part of this reproduction of inequality. Small acts of resistance, or larger planned ones, are ways they can lessen their accountability to this unjust system.

The Big Picture: Implications for Policy

There are a number of implications for policy. First, we have to consider what policy or practice needs to be changed. For instance, should the social change agenda involve reforming welfare, changing practices on the welfare office “shop floor”, or restructuring our economic system? I’ll start with the easier tasks, reforming welfare within our economic system and changing practices on the shop floor. In this sense, I will talk about working within the system. Afterwards I will offer policy implications for working to get rid of the system. To do so, I am going to discuss change as it relates to three phrases, or mantras really, that the caseworkers repeated: the real world has rules; document, document, document; and it’s called Work First for a reason.

“The real world has rules.”

Saying the “real world has rules,” often followed with “and there are consequences for not following them,” is meaningful and worthy of deconstruction. First, it is the *real* world that has rules. The implication is that welfare clients have not been living in the real world. Instead they live in a world of welfare dependency. Second, caseworkers seem to feel

that by teaching clients about how to follow rules, they are helping the clients. Clients therefore need to be threatened with what will happen if they do not follow rules. Caseworkers think this helps clients prepare for their entrance into the *real* world, which ultimately means the working world. Caseworkers retrain clients to get them “rethinking.”

In some ways this is providing a service. Deference to the rules gives clients cultural capital they can use in getting a job and in keeping a job. Getting and keeping a job might be necessary for survival. After all there are time limits to receiving welfare cash assistance benefits now. This rules deference may have helped produce some of the employment outcomes that some researchers use to suggest welfare reform has been more successful than some give it credit for (Cherlin 2008). Indeed, more clients are getting jobs once they leave the welfare rolls. Unfortunately, they are just getting low-wage jobs and have gone from being poor to being among the working poor (Katz 2001).

An unintended or perhaps intended consequence of enforcing deference to the rules is a surge of compliant workers into the labor force. That is, workers who “know their places” and will not come to their employers with demands or resistance. This potentially pressures once resistant workers to comply with authority and the rules or risk losing their job. In some senses, while caseworkers get frustrated with the rules they have to follow and that they have to enforce, if they want to keep their jobs they themselves have to follow the rules as needed. In this way, caseworkers feel that if they can do it (follow rules) and if they have to do it, then clients should have to as well. After all, caseworkers spend most their time having to “document, document, document.” It is difficult to find a solution to this problem, but clearly

having caseworkers interact with clients face-to-face in the office or in the client's home may help caseworkers see clients as people as well as "cases." Caseworkers have internalized some clients as undeserving, which (unfortunately) I did not focus on in this research. Caseworkers need some retraining and rethinking in this area, to use their language, but I will not pretend to have a good solution to this problem.

"Document, document, document"

The caseworkers all laughingly talked about the need to "document, document, document." Supervisors told them this constantly and they joked to each other about it. There was so much to document that caseworkers dedicate an entire day a week to catching up on the paperwork. In fact, the caseworkers spend so much time documenting that have very little time left in the week to actually meet or talk on the phone with the clients without feeling rushed. While caseworkers argue there are many good things that come from documenting events, they also argue that paperwork is a drag on their time and they feel like they duplicate their efforts a lot. I'll begin with the bad things about paperwork, but then talk about the good things according to the caseworkers.

When a client comes in to apply for Work First, they have lengthy application to fill out. Going through all of that paperwork with the client can take several hours. That's just the beginning. Every time a caseworker talks to a client on the phone or in person they take detailed handwritten notes. Then they type those notes into a computer system. The computer system has a number of DOS and Windows based programs that do not interact. Computer systems in one county do not link with any other and they do not link with any other state. In

other words caseworkers spend hours a day entering documentation that only workers in that county can see.

This process is inefficient in many ways, but importantly, time spent doing this documentation is time away from interacting with and helping clients. A practical solution that would help caseworkers (and in turn clients) be more efficient would be for the state to invest in a Windows- or internet-based computer system (several types already exist) that links to other agencies and counties. Train caseworkers to use this system more and spend less time creating written and computer files, duplication that wastes their time.

In an earlier chapter I also talked about the documentation process and caseworkers' limited efforts to find clients jobs. Amanda sends caseworkers job openings she sees at the Employment Security Commission at the beginning of each week. The caseworker then, on their paperwork day, will send clients letters referring them to jobs. The clients then have ten days to apply for the job or be sanctioned. There is no urgency, no push to get the client there before someone else takes the job. There is no personal interaction in matching someone to a job. When I say this is an incredible injustice to the client, I speak from several years of experience in finding people jobs.

As a headhunter (permanent placement) and then a temporary placement person I spent several years hustling to find people jobs. The number one thing you need is a great sense of urgency and you need to know the employer and the person you are trying to match. You need to know how to match them so that everyone is happy with the match. You cannot do this through a letter or as a secondary concern to documenting and paperwork. Finding

people jobs takes a lot of time, but it can be done working with the ESC. In my prior career we worked very closely with ESC to find job openings and to find people to put into the jobs.

Two issues arise here, but the solutions are simple. First, the relationship between the ESC and DSS has become strained because North Carolina no longer funds a program called First Stop. In this program, clients who want to apply for Work First must first register with the ESC as their “first stop.” However, because the program is no longer funded, the ESC workers do not have the resources to invest a lot of time in helping Work First candidates. In other words, they do not hustle for them. They are too busy with other people. Funding needs to be reinstated for this program and more effort needs to be invested, at the state level, in improving how these two agencies work together.

The second issue is that a letter will never find someone a job. This work needs to be at least over the phone, and caseworkers need more face-to-face time with clients. Recently the state has asked caseworkers to make more home visits, to attempt to get to know their clients more. While this is a good idea, what is mostly done on these visits is, that’s right, more paperwork. And after a day of home visits, caseworkers spend a day documenting everything. This should make some sense to researchers; they are doing field notes. However, caseworkers will not be writing research reports with their notes, and an entire day that could have been spent helping clients is wasted.

In many ways, caseworkers talk to the clients through paperwork. If duplicate and unnecessary paperwork were lessened, caseworkers might have more time just to talk to clients, without worrying about completing a form about it. But why do the caseworkers have

all of this documentation to do? It does not really seem to help clients, so what's the point? Caseworkers say that a good thing about the paperwork is it is all linked within the county. So if someone needs to talk to a client on another caseworker's caseload, they can try to help them. While this is good in a way, it also means that caseworkers talk to clients interchangeably and this is less personal for the client. The caseworkers need to interchange because the county has routinized the process, rotating caseworkers in and out of intaking clients so that they can cluster their tasks. This way, one day she does intake, one day they do paperwork, and so on. This is an effort to improve caseworker efficiency, but as I said above, that means job referrals go out once a week in the form of a letter with no urgency. But the rotation means clients do not always get to talk to their caseworker, they could get any one of the 14 on any given day.

The big reason caseworkers say they need to document everything is to ensure they hold up their end of the "mutual responsibility" agreement. This means, they told the client about the rules, about the client having to do something by a certain date to avoid sanction, about having to get their child vaccinated, and about having told the client they only have two months left on their federal lifetime clock. If they do not tell the client these things, document it, sign it, and get the client to sign, the caseworker could get into trouble. Although no one could recall someone getting written up or fired for not documenting, the caseworkers wanted to, as one caseworker admitted, cover their asses. Perhaps this was just to keep the supervisor off their back, which I have shown is a small source of autonomy for the caseworkers. Certainly though, if a client requests a hearing, caseworkers wanted to have

everything in the file to show they did their job. So that is what all the documentation seems to come down to, covering your ass.

Hours upon hours are spent writing and then typing notes, not so much to help the client, but to show that you told someone of a rule and you are therefore justified in enforcing it. So letters are sent about job referrals, not because that is the best way to help someone find a job in the Work First program, but so that when the client does not apply, the caseworker can sanction them. In this way, Work First caseworkers are no longer really providing services. The department is no longer a social service agency. It is an enforcement agency. This enforcement goes along with the “service” of teaching rule deference, as the caseworkers say in another mantra, the real world has rules and there are consequences for not following the rules.

“It is called work first for a reason. You need to get to work first.”

The third mantra the caseworkers often repeated was “it is called Work First for a reason. You need to get to work *first*.” This was a comment repeated constantly. But what do the caseworkers do to help facilitate this? As I showed earlier, they seem to think sending a letter is all that is needed. If they do their paperwork, the client will get a job. This “magic beans” sort of thinking does little for the client. As I argued above, clients need assistance getting jobs and caseworkers need to learn how to find jobs. The solution here is that caseworkers need more training. They need to know how to assess a client’s skills so that they can match them to a job. They need to have direct access to job openings at the ESC

such that they can download the jobs into a Windows-based database. This database would include skill information (among other things) about clients so that caseworkers could run searches that match skill sets to jobs. Then they could match commuting distance, personal job interests, etc. to improve their match.

What I am suggesting is nothing I invented and nothing out of reach. The first thing is the state would need to purchase software. Again, a number of software programs that do this already exist and many temporary staffing companies use such software. The program Smithwick County used was remarkably similar to the program I used as a temporary staffer and it may be capable of filtering and searching as I suggested. Once the state invests in the software, they need to invest further in training caseworkers to use it. Finally, caseworkers need to be trained on making quality matches. Once they begin to have more time with clients, they will start to recognize their job needs. For this to happen, caseworkers need to be rewarded based on the quality of the match (skill development, satisfaction of both client and employer) and not the quantity of matches.

I realize that I am walking a very thin line here. By no means am I suggesting Work First departments become temporary staffing agencies. What I am actually suggesting, since the Work Experience program is about placing Work First clients into temporary jobs, is that it already is a temporary staffing agency. Unfortunately, it is one of the most inefficient and ineffective temporary staffing agencies we could imagine. What I am really suggesting is that, under the current conditions, the agency could be improved in a way that helps clients find jobs and in a way that helps caseworkers have more autonomy and skill. Caseworkers

could actually provide a service to clients instead of only enforcing rules. This would also help caseworkers help clients, something they really want to do. While there are certainly weaknesses in the ideology and practice of Work First, this is a practical solution to a problem working within the existing system.

That leads to a bigger issue. Clients are largely unskilled and jobs are few and poor. Simply giving caseworkers new software programs and matching skills will not result in jobs for everyone. First, clients' skills need to match existing jobs. Secondly, there need to be jobs and not just highly routinized jobs that nearly anyone could do; there need to be good jobs. But to change policy effectively you need to have an idea of what you are trying to accomplish. In other words, is the goal of Work First and welfare as we now know it to help poor people barely survive? Is it to train and educate them to be better, more skilled workers? Or is the goal to throw welfare recipients into the labor force so that they can take our orders at McDonald's and clean our hotel rooms?

We know that educating and training poor clients would be less expensive than cash assistance in terms of our GDP spending (Piven et al. 2000). We also know that better trained workers would help attract companies with semi-skilled and skilled jobs into rural areas without those rural areas having to eliminate their tax base with incentives. I am not suggesting manufacturing companies with low-skilled jobs will magically appear. They will not because they have moved on to take advantage of still cheaper labor. However, there are more skilled manufacturing jobs in many newer industries. In the time I spent with the regional economic development board in the area, they said this again and again. They do not

have the workers to attract the companies, and they do not have funding for the vocational training and certification programs workers would need. Caseworkers also spoke again and again about the need for more education and training. The younger clients have no experience or training and the older clients do not have the skills they need to move into better jobs. Training seems a simple solution for even the most conservative and stingy at heart. Train welfare recipients to be independent skilled workers instead of dependent (using the language of welfare opponents) on the government. This will, in turn, attract employers to de-industrialized rural areas.

Yet, we are not doing this. Federal policymakers have devolved to the counties not only the responsibility for welfare, but also a set of constraints that do not serve local needs. While you would think local leaders would operate in the best interest of the county and its people, this is naïve. Whose best interests matter? Devolving welfare to the local level allows local politicians to control the programs in ways that meet their own needs. Given the welfare-to-work focus, it also allows local leaders to control the pool of labor. Having high unemployment is an advantage in controlling workers and keeping wages down.

Given Smithwick County is in a region of North Carolina that has a long history of attracting employers by promising both cheap and controllable labor, it is not surprising they would continue this trend. That said, given the workers are unskilled, Smithwick County has a hard time attracting employers to the area. Most manufacturing companies can find cheaper, controllable, exploitable labor in other countries. Therefore, Smithwick County cannot compete for these companies and the county cannot change if their labor force

remains unskilled. But this is to suggest that local leaders really want the existing conditions in their county to change. This assumption might be completely wrong. They may prefer the status quo, which privileges them and likely privileges people who vote them into office. Newer employers in Smithwick County, like many counties along freeways, are hotel and restaurant chains. These employers need unskilled, cheap employees to work their jobs. Welfare-to-work programs provide the quasi-voluntary labor these employers need.

The current system, which exists to support capitalism and not to help the poor, needs to be changed. There are several things that need to be changed; however, each change has its tensions. First, caseworkers need more discretion. They are so constrained in the environment that they are using discretion in ways that help the county and not the client. This suggestion does not come without caution. Caseworkers' discriminating against clients is well-documented (see Gordon 1990). With discretion comes the ability to discriminate, including illegally discriminate. The caseworkers argued that limiting discretion meant they treated everyone the same, which was fair. I suspect the caseworkers did not treat everyone the same and that they were not fair to everyone. On the one hand, I want workers to have more power. On the other hand, I know this power has been and could be abused in ways that further injure and exploit clients. This tension makes this a tough call, but I have to go with workers becoming less alienated and having more discretionary power.

Second, the workfare or Work Experience program needs to be totally revamped or scrapped. It is clear in Smithwick County and other counties that this program is a disaster for a number of reasons. Supplying companies with free labor suppresses wages and reduces

workers' ability to demand fair working conditions. If companies can get workers for free, why would they deal with resistant workers they have to pay? Many caseworkers talked about companies trying to abuse this program and keeping workers for free as long as they could. Now the county puts a 90-day limit on how long the company can have a free worker, but it is unclear if this limit is enforced.

Forcing clients to work in an environment where they are not just temporary workers, but free welfare workers, is subjecting clients to horrible working conditions. Full-time workers will likely see them as threatening and be abusive towards them. These are not good conditions under which to learn new skills. To imply that it is a good way for clients to learn skills is insulting. This is a program to show employers that welfare workers are not unreliable so that they will consider them viable options for employees. In one way this is a good thing; lessen stigmatization to help the clients get jobs. In another way, it is simply exposing employers to a new labor force they can exploit.

Finally, all the training and education in the world will not help anyone if there are not more quality jobs available. I do not want to romanticize the notion that if you get workers more skills, manufacturing jobs will magically appear. Obviously, this problem is the most complicated, particularly in rural areas where most people with a bit of education leave. Without decent jobs to for placement, Work First programs can only produce struggle and suffering. I wish I had a solution for bringing more jobs to rural areas, but I fall short on this task.

Paths not Taken and Future Agendas

This research, like any other project, is only part of the story. No researcher can tell every aspect of what is happening in a setting. I have told this story through analyzing the data as I saw them. There are other paths I could have taken and it is likely other people might have taken different paths in telling their story. That said, I made two key omissions, gender and race, that I think are weaknesses in this dissertation.

I chose to focus on class and how the caseworkers deal with the constraints of the bureaucracy. I did not critically examine gender in this process. Even though all of the caseworkers are women and nearly all of the clients are women, gender is still very present. Women have administered welfare to other women for a hundred years. If you consider providing welfare as a form of caring, women are supposed to care for other women. I would argue this is a stretch. The gender story becomes more interesting when you consider this form of welfare compared to others, such as unemployment benefits. While speculation, I have walked into many ESC (unemployment) offices in North Carolina and found the workers there markedly more male. Unemployment, unlike cash assistance, is something that men have received. In other words, the delivery of welfare services is gendered even now when both unemployment and cash assistance are time limited assistance you receive based on efforts to get a job.

Cash assistance to women (so not unemployment cash assistance to men) was not always about welfare-to-work, though. The program used to be about women staying at home with their children. Caseworkers were to judge how “fit” a mother the clients were and

that was largely the basis for determining eligibility for assistance. Now poor women are pushed into the labor market. That said, mothers are still judged as fit, as they must provide evidence of doctor visits, vaccinations, eye appointments, attendance in school, grades in school. They must show that they are doing their motherly duties while also spending 35 hours a week looking for work. In this sense, this is about the government enforcing a first and a second shift for poor women.

There is certainly a gender story between the caseworkers and clients. The caseworkers demand clients do it all. And why wouldn't the caseworkers demand this, they have to do it themselves. Recall the story about Kathy who was in the middle of working when she dropped everything to call her husband with instructions for microwaving that night's dinner. Judy, who had raised her daughter already, now came home at night to raise her daughter's child while her own daughter worked. Another caseworker said, she was thirty years old and somehow she managed to get by. In other words, what was their problem? Finally, as the job readiness instructor said, "you got to stand up and take it like a woman." That seems to be the attitude of all the caseworkers. Being a poor or working class woman in this rural area means you do it all and it means you should not depend on a man for help and you should not depend on *the man* for help. There is much more to tease out in this story.

The second omission in this dissertation is race. While I would argue I do not omit race (except in the policy histories) as much as I do gender, it certainly is not a focus. Here again there undoubtedly is a story to be told. More than half the caseworkers, while only one of four supervisors, are Black. All three of the caseworkers who were once clients are Black.

More striking, more than 80 percent of the clients are Black. Further, this county has a history of racial tension and still has mostly segregated schools. For instance, during the time of this research I had an African American student from the area who described when he was switched from the “Black high school” to the “white high school.” This was unusual and his friends (who were all Black) were afraid he would start “acting white.”

Based on all of this, I expected racial patterns to jump out at me, but they did not. The caseworkers were a very tight-knit group and there were a number of cross-race friendships. That said, there was a new group of three or four caseworkers, all Black, who seemed to keep to themselves more. Interestingly two of the women in that group told the most startling stories of the clients as lazy and value-flawed. It is very possible these stories were told as a form of “defensive othering” (Schwalbe et al. 2000), distancing themselves from the clients. In other words, like gender, there is also a story about race that I did not tell. Even more, there is likely an intersectional story about gender, race, and class that I have not told. This provides fodder for future work from these data that would require reanalysis or possibly re-entering the field to collect more data.

There are other stories I did not tell and reanalyzing the data will show whether or not the stories can be told with the data. I have been very careful to avoid the language of identity and the self in this dissertation. My analysis is heavily dependent on interview data, which is a methodological limitation. In other words, I did not observe enough of and did not focus my fieldnotes on interactions between caseworkers. This focus on interactions in the data collection would be important since identity work and presentations of self are done

through interactions. Because my data are weaker there, I felt I could not pursue that in my analysis with one exception. I did pay attention to the caseworkers' efforts to show that they were good people. However, more work could be done with the data in terms of their attempts to balance competence and morality in exercising autonomy. This will certainly be a topic I take on in future work. In sum, there is a lot more that can be done with these data and more that could be done through follow-ups and re-entering the field. The latter is something I suspected I would need to do, so as I left the field, I secured open access to return.

Final Thoughts

While I have completely focused on the caseworkers in this dissertation, I do not want to leave without talking more about what is at stake. Clearly I am concerned about caseworkers and what could make their lives better. I told their story without talking much about their clients. They were like a backdrop. I would, however, like to talk about them now. There were many times when I was driving home from the field where my anger and frustration over what I was seeing led me to tears. Even as I write this now, I fight back my sadness and anger. Many "Americans," including those of us in academia, are thoroughly insulated from the vast poverty in this country. We live in our suburban or gentrified homes, go to our "big box" stores for shopping on the weekend, and rarely worry about other people's lives. In this election year, I have heard candidate after candidate talk about strengthening the middle class instead of helping the poor. I, myself, have never seen and certainly not experienced the poverty that I saw in Smithwick County.

Each morning I drove to the DSS office in Smithwick County, I stopped at a light at some railroad tracks. Over several weeks I would look at an old farm house that sat right by the tracks. The porch was slanted and the wood siding had lost all of its paint. There were gaping holes in the house where the siding had given way. And in the back of the house were two port-a-potties. I would always look at the house, assuming it to be condemned and thinking about what it must have once looked like. One morning as I sat at the light, I saw an old woman walk out onto the porch with a watering can and a plant. She set the plant on the porch and walked back into the house. I realized that the dilapidated house was a home for this woman. The port-a-potties in the back of the house may very well have been her only toilet.

When I saw this, I remembered a conversation I had with the director of a nonprofit in the county. A white middle-class woman, she told me she was shocked to learn that hundreds of houses there did not have indoor plumbing. She then told me that her nonprofit organization helped an elderly man to build a ramp off of his house. He had hip problems and walked with a cane. The ramp would make it easier to get in and out of his home. What the director did not realize, was that the man wanted the ramp to get to and from his outhouse. While she wanted to help him get a toilet in his home, her limited resources only allowed the organization to help him build a ramp on his home so he could get to and from his outhouse. She said even though she had grown up in the county, with a quarter of its population living under the poverty line, she had never noticed the extent and prevalence of the poverty. She never had to see it before she worked at the nonprofit.

In my time in Smithwick County I saw many dilapidated homes. In visiting clients' homes, I stepped on stairs and decks and floors that dropped several inches under my weight. I saw home after home with broken windows and several with huge holes in the sides. In the middle of winter, I sat in living rooms without heat and listened to clients trying to figure out how to get their gas turned back on. Given this reality, it is difficult not to feel anger and frustration over policies that do not help these folks who desperately need help. Since many people never see this, they are more concerned with middle-class tax breaks, the welfare that they receive so that they (we) can consume more stuff. They are more concerned about the so-called "freeloaders" living off the system.

At the very least, I hope people reading this dissertation get some sense of the depth of the poverty and the great injustices being done to the poor across the United States. The silence concerning these injustices among lawmakers is reason enough to work toward social change. Given the lack of material resources welfare recipients have and the structural barriers they face in enlisting the help of legal services, we cannot expect them to do this work alone. Academics have many resources that can be brought to bear on this injustice, though we need to work hard so that our words are not manipulated by the conservative-owned media.

This raises another issue, the use of media by opponents and supporters of humane and just welfare reform. While opponents from Reagan until the present have used the media in ways to support the existing power arrangements in our capitalist system, let's not forget that the media were once used by supporters of humanist welfare reform. A century ago,

many local newspapers and magazines were employed to gain support for mother's pensions. Further, welfare rights organizations experienced considerable success in the 1960s and 1970s with grassroots canvassing campaigns. The media could be useful once again in creating sweeping welfare reforms that assist, instead of punish the poor. However, these "fixes" will only be short term, and the long-term reality is that, without strong, well-organized opposition, capitalists will always find ways to manipulate labor and the labor supply. In other words, there will always be a reserve army of workers to enrich capitalists. To address this larger issue requires radical solutions, solutions that require capitalists to give up privileges that many people are likely unwilling to consider.

One last note. Throughout this dissertation I have dissected the actions of caseworkers. This work does not come without judgment and my strong feelings of what is right and wrong. However, be clear that I feel great empathy for these women. Given their environment, their job alternatives, the lives that they have led and hope to live, I cannot be surprised by their actions. Few of us, under those conditions, would act differently. These are not heartless bureaucrats. These are not women who wake up in the morning excited about the opportunity to sanction or punish a client. These are women who want to help and who want to make a positive difference for their clients. These are women who value sacrifice and want to make sacrifices for their clients. But these are also women with few choices of their own and countless reminders of how fortunate they are to have the job that they have. And they will do what it takes to keep that job, even if it means doing the dirty work of welfare reform.

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