

# THE DIALECTIC BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE LEARNING FROM WELFARE REFORM

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## ABSTRACT

Bridging the gap between academic researchers and those creating and implementing policy and programs involves understanding the research/practice dynamic from both sides. Using a series of vignettes based on work in Philadelphia from 1992 through 1997, this chapter shares insights about policymaking and welfare program development from an anthropologist working as a social service organization administrator. Scholars of complex policy issues like welfare reform must not only “study up” by focusing on policymakers (Nader 1974), concentrate on marginalized peoples, or study the “in-between” of local programs. Effective study of welfare reform must look at all three levels, as well as place them within the larger context of the U.S. and global capitalism. We should concentrate on the dialectic among these various systems, not just the effects of one level on the other. The chapter discusses the dynamic between research and practice in three arenas: state level policy, work with public assistance recipients, and non-profit agencies contracted by government to offer programs to help people escape

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poverty. Conclusions reflect on the dialectic between theory and practice as it relates to academic work on these issues and teaching.

The dynamic between research and practice is never clear cut. While research often contributes to framing public policy like welfare reform, researchers often complain that their studies are ignored by policymakers or program administrators. Program and policy administrators, in turn, state that academic research either does not address their concerns or does not provide results in a time frame which they find useful. Bridging the gap between academic researchers and those creating and implementing policy and programs remains a critical issue.

My goal here is to share what I learned about policymaking and welfare program development as an anthropologist working as a social service organization administrator. My job involved working with welfare recipients, non-profit agencies, and policymakers on a regular basis to translate anthropological research into policy and programs. I found myself in a unique situation where I could create programs using my past research, participate in coalitions of service providers with direct access to Commonwealth of Pennsylvania policymakers in the process of formulating welfare reform, and work with college students on ongoing welfare reform research. This experience taught me much about the advantages and limitations of non-profit agency and government programs.

Constantly translating research for these audiences, I discovered how anthropology provided special insights for practitioners. Turning research into practice also reshaped my theoretical conceptions of society, reinforcing many of the lessons from the academy while calling into question many academics' approach to problems of poverty.

Using a series of vignettes, I hope to share some insights from this experience. I suggest avenues for future research as well as ways that scholars can effectively participate in policy arenas and program implementation. The traditional methodology of anthropology involves living and working in a particular community as a participant/observer. In essence, this work experience consisted of classic anthropological study as I participated in policy forums, program efforts, and research as a practitioner. I also functioned as an applied researcher, developing studies to analyze issues of concern both to the various agencies involved in welfare reform efforts and to me as an anthropologist who concentrated on race, class, and urban issues. In this role, I served as a "marginal communicant" moving between the worlds of program practitioners and the academy (Neville 1978). This chapter draws on this experience to discuss research dynamics from an anthropological perspective. I argue that scholars of complex policy issues like welfare reform must not only "study up" by focusing on policymakers (Nader 1974), concentrate on marginalized peoples, or study the "in-between" of local programs. Effective study of welfare reform must look at all three levels, as well as place them within the larger context of the United States and global capitalism.

We should concentrate on the dialectic among these various systems, not just the effects of one level on the other. As an example, I discuss the dynamic between research and practice in three arenas: state level policy, work with public assistance recipients, and non-profit agencies contracted by government to offer programs to help people escape poverty. Conclusions reflect on the dialectic between theory and practice as it relates to academic work on these issues and teaching.

## ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Anthropology is a social science which approaches problems such as poverty holistically. Best practices anthropology looks at the role of both macro-level and micro-level factors in creating, sustaining, or changing a particular situation. Anthropology focuses on the interaction among the various institutions and actors in a given environment, revealing how process leads to certain outcomes. In the role of participant observer attempting to learn a new environment as it is lived, this research model should give everyone involved the benefit of the doubt. The goal becomes discovering how various people and institutions understand a given system and *why* they behave or think the way they do.

My goal as a practicing anthropologist is to portray this complex research environment to several audiences. I hope to help the participants in programs that I study understand the larger context of their experience. I endeavor to portray program dynamics to people outside of a given system. This involves giving voice to those who are not heard in the welfare reform debate. It also includes showing both program participants and policy or program administrators the parameters under which policies are implemented. Finally, this role involves creating programs which can foster positive change and advocating for systemic policies which influence more narrowly focused initiatives. As a teacher, translating back practice to theory necessarily includes showing just how complex these systems are.

## THE RESEARCH

This paper draws on both practical and research experience. From 1992 through 1996 I was assistant director at a small non-profit organization in Philadelphia. The agency had a mandate of civic education, advocacy, and direct service for the disadvantaged citizens of the city. My job included running three direct service programs: a community service work experience program for welfare recipients, an adult basic education program, and a service learning program for college students.

Over the years, the community service program became a mandatory workfare program for two parent families on public assistance.<sup>1</sup> We kept our original model

combining education with work experience, advocating to the Private Industry Council and Commonwealth administrators to expand program contracts to include the additional services offered by this program. We also sought to change adult basic education and skills training program contracts to involve more experiential education.

My role also involved fostering coalitions of organizations and individuals to change welfare reform policy. Ongoing activities ranged from creating forums for exchange, a hearing for local legislators, and statements on appropriate policy directions. As welfare reform in Pennsylvania intensified with the election of Republican governor Ridge and passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility, Work Opportunity and Medicaid Restructuring Act, I participated in numerous ongoing meetings between Philadelphia-based training providers and commonwealth officials creating or implementing welfare reform.

Research activities also continued during this time. While I had taken this job in order to learn about non-profit administration, I quickly found that I was highly valued as a researcher as well. Within weeks of starting with this agency, the executive director of another Philadelphia non-profit doing training asked me if I could analyze over 300 questionnaires that she had collected from everyone enrolled in her training program for the last five years. This opportunity led to creation of a series of research projects looking at career and training paths for disadvantaged populations, the role of non-profits and government in various strategies of public assistance recipients, and the role of social networks in the lives of various populations which accessed welfare. Largely relying on college student researchers through our service learning program, I developed eight projects in all. A short description of these projects is included in the Appendix. Findings are available in several policy and academic publications (Schneider 1997a, 1997b, 1997d, 1999a, 1999b).

I generally use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods in research projects, maintaining anthropology's holistic, systemic approach in my analysis. Reports usually combine statistics and ethnographic portraits. The statistics give the research credibility for many program administrators and policymakers while the ethnographic stories make the data real.

## THE POLICY CONTEXT FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

U.S. policymakers have been trying to reform welfare for several decades. As the public assistance population has grown and its racial composition changed, policymakers have become increasingly concerned that people were becoming dependent on public assistance. The public assistance roles grew from 2 million in 1950 to 11 million in 1975 (Handler and Hasenfeld 1991, p. 113). At the same time, AFDC (Aid for Families with Dependent Children) changed from a program

which served mostly whites to one which in 1993 was 38.3 percent white, 36.6 percent black, 18.5 percent Hispanic, 2.9 percent Asian, 1.3 percent Native American, and 2.2 percent unknown.<sup>2</sup>

Strategies to change welfare have swung between (1) providing more services to help people move from public assistance to self-sufficiency and (2) making efforts to mandate work through required participation in work-related programs. Liberal approaches generally focus on human capital development (Rose 1995) while conservatives focus on instilling the “work ethic” (Mead 1992; Murray 1984). The last welfare reform initiative: the Family Support Act of 1988 has been portrayed as an unsuccessful example of the liberal approach. In reality it represented a conservative/liberal compromise which focused on developing the human capital of public assistance recipients while mandating their participation in employment and training activities. It was never fully implemented.

Most of the research described here occurred while the Family Support Act of 1988 was in effect. Many of the education and training programs with which I worked and whose students participated in the research projects were funded by the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program created by this legislation. This program funded a wide array of education and training programs, requiring that an increasing number of AFDC recipients spend 20 hours a week in some form of employment, education or training program. JOBS also mandated that two-parent families on public assistance (known as the AFDC-unemployed parents initiative or AFDC-U) perform 16 hours per week of community service in order to receive their cash grant. In order to receive full funding for the education and training component, states needed to show that an increasing percentage of their AFDC-U families were performing community service.

In the early 1990s, the welfare reform pendulum swung back to a focus on employment as the solution to poverty. Like the Family Support Act, this more conservative legislation stressed mandating participation in activities assumed to lead people out of poverty in order to receive government aid. The Personal Responsibility, Work Opportunity and Medicaid Restructuring Act of 1996 cuts off benefits for welfare recipients not engaged in work-related activities and limits public assistance benefits to five years over a lifetime. Labeled the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) Act, this legislation ended any entitlement to public assistance and gave states wide latitude in creating programs to move welfare recipients into the paid labor force. While most states stress getting people into the paid labor force, community service has become an increasingly important component of many programs because it provides a work-like activity which theoretically offers current work experience and provides a mechanism for public assistance recipients to “do something productive” for their welfare check. The legislation only allows states to count training as a work-related activity for one year and limits the amount of job search time considered a “work-related activity” to six weeks.

The debate over which strategies best help welfare recipients escape poverty continues. Research both supports and refutes most of the major strategies for moving welfare recipients into family supporting jobs (Hull 1992; Mead 1992; Berg, Olson, and Conrad 1991; Freedman and Friedlander 1995; Harlan and Steinberg 1989; Herr and Halpern 1994; Grubb 1995; Romero 1994; Ricco, Freedman, and Harknett 1995; Riemer 1997; Schneider 1996, 1997b; Gueron 1987). Even the goals of welfare reform have shifted in some states to simply caseload reduction as opposed to moving people out of poverty.

The Philadelphia non-profits were heavily involved in lobbying efforts related to this legislation. Once the federal law passed, the advocacy and education focus shifted to the Commonwealth administrators responsible for creating the Pennsylvania TANF plan. As discussed below, the center piece for Pennsylvania's plan was a short-term job search strategy which has become mandatory for people seeking public assistance and for an increasing number of people currently on the rolls. As mandated by federal law, the program also provided medical assistance, transportation assistance, and child care for welfare recipients moving into the paid labor force. Education, training, community service, and other programs to help public assistance recipients find long-term, family-sustaining employment were available only after a recipient had completed the job search component. During the time that I was working in the area, there was much confusion over when and how participants would have access to training once they found paid work or were placed in community service.

## RESEARCH PROJECT FINDINGS

The research projects conducted during this time provided data for these advocacy and education efforts. In keeping with the research model discussed above, the projects looked at the employment and training system at several levels: (1) the life experience of individuals who access public assistance; (2) the activities of local level non-profit and government programs designed to assist low-income people, particularly basic education, employment and training programs; and (3) the role of local and national policy in the lives of public assistance recipients and in creating and implementing programs for low-income people. All of these studies look at the interaction among these various levels in seeking to understand the social and economic conditions of people who use welfare-related programs, and the ways that various programs and policies help or hurt their chances to find family-sustaining employment.

In brief, this research led to the following findings:

- *The public assistance population in Philadelphia consists of four distinct populations: (1) people with limited work experience, (2) low-skill workers, (3) displaced workers and (4) immigrants and refugees. Each population has different work history patterns and experiences with training.*

Those with limited work experience had worked only one job for less than a year or never held a job. As in national studies of the public assistance population (Bane and Ellwood 1994), this group constituted less than 25 percent of the study population in each of the research projects. While many of those with limited work experience lacked a high school diploma, education was not their primary barrier to employment. People in this group had in common family, neighborhood, or personal characteristics which isolated them from employment networks and had other issues such as family members who needed care or substance abuse which kept them from working.

Low-wage workers fit the profile of most welfare recipients (Bane and Ellwood 1994; Edin and Lein 1997). In most of my studies, roughly 50 percent of the sample population fell into this group. They alternate between low-wage, service sector jobs with few benefits and welfare. Most of these people would spend between one to three years at a time on either welfare or working. They left jobs due to changes in the economy, or family or personal situations that prevented them from working such as lack of childcare, the need to care for a family member, or lack of medical insurance.

Displaced workers had stable employment histories, primarily in blue collar occupations, clerical, or professional jobs. Approximately 20 percent of the people in each of the research studies fell into this group. They lost jobs due to downsizing and global restructuring, finding that they could not locate employment again after their employment benefits and savings ran out. With the exception of some older workers, who had trouble finding employment, this group stayed on welfare the shortest periods of time and had the easiest time finding employment again.

Immigrants and refugees were the smallest group in this research, constituting between three percent (Rapid Attachment Study) and eight percent (Social Network Study) of the various survey populations.<sup>3</sup> These people had a range of experience, including doctors, lawyers, and engineers, people with very limited education and unskilled work experience, and everything in between. Most were on welfare because they had limited access to mainstream labor markets due to language barriers and lack of connections.

- *Training serves as an important stepping stone for people with good basic skills, related work experience, an ability to cross racial/class boundaries and connections. Training often leads nowhere for the most disadvantaged populations.*

Contrary to assumptions among some academics and policymakers that public assistance populations lack training, between 50 percent (Rapid Attachment Study) and 83 percent (Social Network Study) of these study populations had attended some form of post-secondary or vocational training. Between 52 percent (CWEP Anonymous Survey Analysis) and 72 percent (AWEP evaluation) had completed high school. The kind of training ranged from less than three-month

vocational programs—such as nursing assistant, security guard, or food service—to graduate level college degree programs.

These studies found that each of these four populations understood and used training differently. Those with limited work experience and many low-skilled workers went to training programs which led to low-wage jobs or lacked the social networks to find good jobs after completing training. Displaced workers, on the other hand, often used training either as an entry into the labor market or as a way to move up in their careers. None of these studies provided an objective way to evaluate the quality of the educational or training programs attended by study populations, but the ethnographic data suggested that displaced workers had the cultural and social capital to better evaluate training programs, successfully complete programs, and make productive use of their training in their careers.

- *Social networks provide both benefits and drawbacks for various populations on public assistance.*

Much social welfare policy for low-income populations focuses on either building work experience (Mead 1992) or human capital (Harlan and Steinberg 1989). My research found that social capital is often the key missing ingredient which keeps low-income populations out of family-sustaining employment. As discussed in detail elsewhere (Schneider 1997a, 1999c), social capital refers to the resources in the form of connections, social supports, and material resources on which individuals have to draw in order to reach their life goals. Social capital also includes knowing the social cues and behaviors of a particular group which signifies that an individual is a member of a particular network and has the right to access that network's resources. For example, a person from a middle or working-class background may have older relatives or friends who can help them find an appropriate training program or job. This individual knows how to dress and behave in order to convince an employer to hire him or her. A person whose family and friends have never attended advanced training or worked outside the service sector may not have these kinds of social resources to help them succeed. They may also lack knowledge of appropriate dress and other social cues which would help them find and keep good jobs.

As discussed in *All Our Kin* (Stack 1974), social networks also involve obligations to family and friends. For many low-income populations, strong social capital resources provide the mechanism which allows people to survive in a world of low-wage, unstable employment (Stack 1974; Edin and Lein 1997). My research suggests that the mutual obligations of social capital provide both benefits and obligations which can compete with work for people throughout our society. Building social capital for low-income populations involves not substituting "better" networks for existing ones, but helping people build additional networks and learn to cross between these different worlds.

- *Non-profit and government programs play a complex role in this process.*

As described in detail elsewhere (Schneider 1999b), education and training programs both help and hinder low-income populations in their attempts to move into family-sustaining employment. The non-profit and for-profit agencies contracted to provide training exist within their own communities (Milofsky and Hunter 1995) and are subject to the regulations set by the state, local and national governments that grant contracts (Smith and Lipskey 1993).

- *Lack of universal benefits such as health care, affordable child and elder care and transportation impact profoundly on any welfare-to-work strategy. The local economy and social geography of race and class also play key roles.*

All of these studies underlined the fact that factors related to work influenced both the ability of individuals to take jobs and the role of paid work in removing a family from poverty. People chose if and where to work depending on the availability of health insurance for themselves and their families. Some left jobs because they could only get Medicaid to pay for care needed for a sick family member if they were not working. Lack of child care, elder care, and transportation also influenced decisions to work or working hours. Low-income people who had problems with child care or transportation were much more likely to lose jobs.

The nature of the local economy and the social geography of race and class also played key roles in the work histories of various individuals. The limited opportunities in the Philadelphia city economy profoundly affected the number and kinds of jobs available to the people in these studies. People who did not have contact with people different from themselves in terms of class and race seemed to have more trouble finding work in “mainstream” jobs. Lack of transportation, local jobs, and other social resources in various neighborhoods also impacted on work and training histories.

These findings led me to advocate for the following welfare reform strategies:

- Diverse populations deserve diverse strategies to help them escape poverty. Welfare reform should involve a menu of programs for participants with different needs, and front line case managers with the sensitivity and training to work with participants to identify appropriate supports.
- Neither training nor work experience alone provide the skills needed for people to compete in today’s labor market. Strategies which combine training and work experience, along with attention to communication issues, work best for most people.
- Social networks are essential resources for job seekers and families attempting to negotiate their various needs. Social network enhancement and support is an important, and often missing, ingredient in welfare reform strategies.
- Various kinds of agency programs work best for different populations. Government contract designs should allow for flexibility, partner programs with different strengths with each other, and create contract goals and incentives which encourage best practices rather than bottom line placement targets.

- Effective welfare reform requires universal benefits for health care and significant transportation and child care support.

Neither research, advocacy nor practice occurred in a vacuum unrelated to each other. As discussed below, research helped me and others with whom I worked to develop programs, policy, and advocacy. Practice set the directions for research. The remainder of this chapter uses vignettes to explore the dynamics between research and practice which I gleaned through this experience. In order to discuss how research can best be used in the service of the community, I focus on lessons for academic researchers which come out of my combined experience as practitioner and non-academic researcher.

## WHICH MESSAGE IS HEARD? THE PRIVILEGES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF ACCESS

This first vignette focuses on Commonwealth of Pennsylvania policymakers. I discuss the experiences that policymakers bring to their work. I also look at the dynamic between policymaker and advocate, considering ways that researchers can best communicate with policymakers.

A dozen non-profit training program administrators and key agency board members, as well as the Philadelphia Private Industry Council (PIC)<sup>4</sup> representative, were meeting with the Commonwealth administrator designing the State's welfare reform program, a deputy administrator, and a representative from the Commonwealth Department of Labor. The centerpiece of Pennsylvania's welfare reform state plan is a "work first" program, which insists that public assistance recipients participate in job search for eight weeks before they are eligible for another service such as education or training. The Commonwealth hoped to get most of its public assistance population into "entry-level" jobs which would be the first step into permanent employment. Those who did not find jobs would be assessed for other options, including training. However, only one year of training was "allowed" through government-funded programs for this population. The purpose of this meeting was to express concerns that this policy would not provide welfare recipients with the training and supports to leave poverty behind.

In order to make the point that most welfare recipients had work experience and needed several different kinds of support to find work which would lead them out of poverty, I handed around copies of an op-ed piece that I had done for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* entitled "Welfare Recipients Want to Work" (September 25, 1995).

The article was written with participants in the *Alternative Work Experience Program*, telling the life stories of people on public assistance from different backgrounds, and giving voice to the kinds of support they felt they needed to return to the paid labor force. It stressed most of the points discussed above.

The Commonwealth administrator glanced at the article and said, "Oh, I know this article. I love this article." A few months later, I sent her a report on one program, asking if it would be possible to discuss policy implications with her. When I called to follow up, her secretary immediately said that she had been waiting for my call and scheduled an appointment for later in the week.

I was surprised that a conservative administrator, architect of a program whose aim was to get everyone on welfare into jobs in eight weeks and restrict access to training, would like this piece. I was both pleased that I had access and worried that my words were being misinterpreted into a conservative agenda which could hurt the people I was trying to aid. As I met with this administrator several times and watched her actions as the program evolved, I learned much about the state level policy making and implementation process, as well as the background resources of this administrator. I also discovered ways to effectively approach policymakers and the limitations on the kinds of changes I could suggest.

First, let me examine the background and perspective of the individuals responsible for Pennsylvania's welfare reform. Scholars often assume that policymakers are the privileged middle-class with no experience of the lives of the poor (Wozniak 1996; Weatherford 1985). This often leads to conclusions that researchers should educate these people on the life experience of people in poverty. If the policymakers only understood the culture of welfare recipients, they would design policies which helped them escape poverty. Others highlight the fact that policymakers represent a state bent on keeping women in poverty (Gordon 1990, 1994). These scholars portray welfare reform programs as meant to punish the poor, not provide people with a way out of the system (Katz 1989).

While I agree that government policy often results in more poverty, not less, and that many conservative thinkers intend to control the "lazy poor" by requiring work (for example, Mead 1992), these administrators' motivations and background experience were much more complex than many academics assume. However, the portrayals of legislators and legislative aids as ignorant are often true. In fact, this population would benefit from education on the lives of the poor.

However, this image is less likely for people actually designing and implementing policy. For example, the administrator discussed here spent a number of years running a regional Department of Human Services Office and has a Ph.D. in Education. Other Ridge Administration policymakers come from similar backgrounds. She is smart, listens well, and genuinely wants to reduce poverty. However, like many front line public assistance workers (Kingfisher 1996, pp. 98-130), she sees many welfare recipients as unreliable and in need of a push to leave assistance. She does not need education about the public assistance population, but clear thinking on the ways that certain policies affect various groups in poverty.

This administrator serves as an organic intellectual for the faction of the ruling class in power at the moment (Gramsci 1971). Her interpretation of the needs of the poor comes from her lived experience within a society where "meanings and values which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming" (Williams 1980, p. 38). Simply telling her that her policies are wrong would not work because she draws from her own experience in forming opinions and designing programs. She can also use the results of a number of studies to support her position, as well as the opinions of leading conservative intellectuals such as Lawrence Mead (1992) to bolster her program design positions.

However, her comprehension of the social problem of welfare is complex and contradictory (Gramsci 1971, p. 333). Her strategies turn out to be more complicated than many advocates assume. Her message is that once the “job ready” find employment, there will be more money left to work with the more disadvantaged part of the population. The fact that the policies include acknowledgment of multiple needs and a diverse population creates room to advocate for changes in program implementation. As an intellectual representing a different faction within our society, I attempt to use these contradictions to advocate for positive change.

Influencing administrators also involves understanding the systems within which they function. The Federal Personal Responsibility, Work Opportunity and Medicaid Restructuring Act of 1996 provides enormous flexibility to the states to design welfare reform legislation, but it also requires that states place an increasing portion of their population on assistance into work-related activities. States face huge financial penalties if they do not meet these requirements. Turning public assistance into a block grant also means that states which reduce their caseloads have much more money to work with to assist the remaining population in need, but that state and local authorities will be forced to cover costs if the needs exceed the block grant amount. Since the federal government will pay for assistance for only five years over a lifetime, states also potentially face huge financial impact in a number of social programs, as well as significant reduction in the quality of life of their citizens, if their programs lead to only short-term employment.

This policy context means that states must reduce caseloads in order to meet federal requirements. Programs like Pennsylvania’s job search program are a common first resort strategy in order to meet this mandate. Given the potential social and financial implications, if this strategy does not work, many administrators are also conscious that they need to do more for the public assistance population than simply put them back into low-paid, service sector jobs without health insurance.

As it turns out, by stating the simple truth that most people on public assistance want to work, I offered her common ground with her position. My strategy for discussing policy with her was to acknowledge that a certain part of the public assistance population would benefit from job placement services. In fact, displaced workers often only need a referral to an appropriate job. After that, I discussed how finding people just any job would not work for others. I also stressed the need for health care and child care services.

Combined with advocacy of many others, discussion based on research did lead to some changes in these programs. The contracts included provisions for remedial education, internships, and other services. When I last participated in a policy forum in Pennsylvania, requests for proposals were in the workings for programs offering retention services through community-based organizations. Advocates had not succeeded in completely changing policy—an impossibility given both

the federal mandates and the program goals of these policymakers—but we had succeeded in moving these policies in the right direction. More importantly, this approach created access to policy makers, which allowed opportunity to continue to influence the direction of policy.

## **WHOSE CAREER ARE YOU BENEFITING? CONNECTING RESEARCH TO EVERYDAY LIVES**

In policy arenas, I served as a representative of program participants struggling to escape poverty and non-profit agencies attempting to assist them in reaching their goals. In this role, I saw myself as a radical scholar going outside of my own class interests to work for people who are often denied access to policy circles. However, my education, race, and position as a program administrator meant that I was also an outsider to the community in poverty. This next section looks at the dynamics between me as researcher and the people in poverty I hoped to assist in reaching their goals of stable, sustaining employment.

When I asked participants in the Alternative Work Experience Program to respond to the third revision of a questionnaire as part of a pilot group, Mary led a rebellion, telling people that this research was not benefiting the program participants and asking what we were going to do with information on them anyway. The implication was that data were going to be used somehow to hurt program participants.

If Mary had been a newcomer and I, as researcher, had not explained the purpose of the study, her reaction would have made automatic sense. However, Mary had participated in the development of the op-ed piece, participated with policymakers and academics in welfare reform conferences, and had been around for early development of the survey. She also worked as an intern in our office, seeing on a daily basis the results of research in program and policy development.

Mary's reaction to the survey illustrates several points about research among public assistance recipients. She reminded me yet again that research has often been used to hurt poor people, and that African Americans, especially, have reason to distrust the research community. The fact that she knew me and saw the results of this work did not eliminate the gulf of trust that people in poverty rightly feel toward the academy.

As we spent the next few months working through her concerns, she reminded me that research relationships are always an ongoing negotiation. She also clearly showed me that research must not simply provide insight which might help someday in some vague way, but that we have an obligation to think of how we can apply our findings on an ongoing basis. Again, these were often small steps such as encouraging changes in program structure so that participants could more easily manage their family needs and program requirements.

Mary's concerns also illustrated the gulf between me as program administrator and professional researcher, and her as a person on public assistance struggling to get by as well as get off the system. Part of her reaction came from the fact that I had recently presented several academic papers on this research, products which clearly benefited my career but had no direct effect on the program. She saw the fact that I had been "hiding at home" to write and traveling as illustrating how the same rules did not apply to me in her work environment as did to her.

This experience also had reminded her that she was a participant in a mandatory welfare-to-work program, under rules implemented by me. I became "them," a representative of the system, as opposed to "us" who are victims of its policies.

As a researcher, Mary's accusation of "using" program participants to benefit my career spoke volumes about the role of academic research in the communities in which we work. Of course, she was correct; presenting meeting papers did benefit me. The academy also has a long history of not giving back to the people who share their lives with us.

Her concerns reminded me of another similar incident from the Changing Relations Project (Goode and Schneider 1994). In that case, the sponsoring foundation had funded filmmakers to create a video related to the project. As the filmmakers entered one site, the director commented, "Here comes the Smithsonian."

As in this incident, Mary saw research as scientists using her as an object of study. Her experience would be dissected, objectified, and put in a museum for others to see. In this context, my work did not help her find a job or feed her family, but only provided lessons for academics or the more fortunate on the lives of the poor.

In fact, the direct service program design always tried to meet those concrete needs. The welfare-to-work program endeavored to hire as many program participants for research and practical work as possible. We also sought to include participants in policy discussion by offering opportunities to participate in conferences, media presentations, and online discussions. Like all such efforts, these initiatives helped only a fraction of those in need. Like any other program, we were limited by the boundaries of funding and our economic and social system.

She was also reacting to the fact that the language of discussion in the academy often reaches beyond the day-to-day concerns of the people whom we hope to help. We are not only translating their experience, but we are placing it within a larger context. Recognizing these facts, I realized that responsibilities to program participants must include bringing these insights back to the people we study.

My response to her concern was twofold. First, I showed drafts of meeting papers to participants, asking them if I got it right. This gave me an opportunity to check my observations against their reality. I became more conscious of my role as presenting program participants' experiences in forums where they often feel uncomfortable or unwelcome because of the chasms in race, class, and power between themselves and the audience. As a presenter, I was conscious that the

privilege of my education, class, and color opened doors for me which were closed to most welfare recipients. The responsibilities of privilege included doing the best job possible of presenting the hopes and fears of program participants.

However, both academic and policy papers interpret the experience of people on welfare, not just present it. As an educated outsider, I bring several different levels of information and insight to my work. Outsiders bring an important perspective to study of any group. One of the skills of anthropological training involves approaching research as an outsider endeavoring to learn insider rules. My goal is not to become an insider in this context, but to develop a foothold in both the world of study participants and my own world. The outsider perspective allows me to see this world in ways that may be missed by someone who lives entirely within it. I strongly disagree with post-modern perspectives that only people from a supposed group can study that group (Roof and Wiegman 1995). I see myself not as speaking for either the world of the academics, program administrators and policymakers to which I naturally belong or the people in poverty but speaking *between* these several worlds.

Part of my response to Mary's concerns was to make a greater effort to translate back from my academic comprehension of welfare to those experiencing it. I used the dissemination strategy of sharing papers to explain the larger factors which influenced their world. The process became part of a "soft college" teaching strategy with program participants meant to help them gain the larger systemic knowledge which middle-class, college-educated people bring to social problems like poverty. Helping welfare recipients learn to understand economic, political, and government systems showed them clearly the inequalities of these systems, the limitations of various programs designed to aid the poor, and the many strategies that they could use toward individual and institutional change.

In many ways Mary's rebellion represented a very positive example of empowerment. The fact that she also could sit down and talk with me about it felt like a real victory. Again, we had found common ground. But, as always, it was tenuous and partial. Mary never participated in research projects again.

This example also shows some of the reasons that social service programs can not easily live up to their contracted goals. Mary's refusal to participate clearly shows the free will of participants. I could talk forever about how the research could lead to better programs and policy, but she will ultimately believe what she wants and behave as she chooses.

Administering social service programs was a daily lesson on the many factors which influence the outcome of programs. In this job, I was greatly privileged to be able to turn my past research into actual programs. We had many successes. However, there were also numerous times that people ignored our advice, refused to participate, or did not take advantage of any number of program options. Sometimes failures showed us problems in our programs which we may or may not be able to change. Sometimes program participants could not participate in a program aspect due to other issues like family problems or interference from the

Department of Public Welfare. Other times it was due to personal limitations or simple choices. Programs can only present options, not mandate change in people's beliefs or behavior. At bottom, welfare recipients are free agents like anyone else.

The people in these kinds of research settings come from a larger world steeped in many years of unequal history and flagrant abuse by people with more resources than they have (Stack 1974; Omni and Winant 1986, Gordon, Edwards, and Reich 1982; Hill and Jones 1993). Sometimes program "failures" represent individuals responding to a program regardless of its intent, based on their comprehension of racism and social inequality in this country. Examples included program participants who walked in the door assuming that the program staff were all racists bent on making them work off their welfare check. The fact that most program staff were people of color hired out of welfare-to-work programs, or that we placed participants only in agencies with a commitment to social change was sometimes irrelevant. I saw the agency which hired the most program participants accused of racism and "using" community service workers as free help. In part, the using free help part is true; most non-profits could not survive on their budgets without volunteers. However, this agency provided clear career paths for many people in poverty, hired mostly people of color, and consistently worked with all people in the neighborhood. However, some participants were not able to hear or see these facts. Each element in society draws from its historical and present-day experience to interpret the world around them (Williams 1980). As with policymakers, alternative views often only have partial success in being heard.

Both research and practice must look beyond the dynamics of a given setting to understand these larger ideological, historical, and structural contexts. Research needs to show how these factors influence any program or policy.

Mary also reminded me that any non-profit program funded by government is ultimately an agent for government. No matter the benevolent intent of a given program, it also must ensure program participation and strive to achieve its contracted outcome goals. As scholars of contracted services remind us (Salamon 1995; Smith and Lipskey 1993), government always has the ultimate control in these relationships. Even innovative model programs can only maneuver so far around these mandates.

As anthropological studies of training programs illustrate, programs often fail to provide a ticket out of poverty due to providers' expectations of program participants and the nature of the jobs available for recipients of certain kinds of short-term training (Riemer 1997; Hull 1992). However, as discussed elsewhere (Schneider 1997b), training program design and outcomes are limited by the nature of the communities which sustain them and governing regulations. Since between 70 and 100 percent of the funding for most training programs for welfare recipients in Philadelphia, as well as the majority of the funding for welfare to work programs, come from government, research must also examine the impact

of these systems on program design and implementation (Schneider 1997b). Analysis of welfare reform strategies must simultaneously look at the lives of welfare recipients, the dynamics within programs, and the relationships between any given program and the political, economic, and ideological structures that it must respond to in order to carry out its work.

## **BITING THE HAND THAT FEEDS US AND TRYING TO GET BY: NON-PROFIT AGENCIES AND RESEARCH**

Program participants and policymakers represent two ends of the welfare reform process: the creators of policy and those it is designed to serve. In this process, non-profit and for-profit agencies often become the middle-men who provide direct service. They represent a third system in the welfare reform process and another constituency for study.

The non-profit and for-profit agencies, which become the front line agents carrying out policy designed to move welfare recipients from government aid to stable employment, thus find themselves in a difficult and complex situation. Most genuinely want to create programs which will succeed in providing opportunity to people in need. However, they also function in a world of limited funding, ever-changing government regulations, program participants with various skills and expectations, and an economic system beyond their control (Salamon 1995; Smith and Lipskey 1993). They are also limited by their own knowledge and ideology (Riemer 1997). What role does research play for these organizations? What is the relationship between researcher and agency host?

As with Mary's suspicion about the goals of my research, some agencies were leery of researchers looking at their programs or participants' histories. For example, the Social Network study gathered information on work and training history from participants in a number of programs. Questions included queries on the cost of various training programs, whether or not students finished programs, and student loan debt. At one private business school, a high level administrator refused to let his students participate because income and loan debt questions "invaded student's privacy." Even though this agency has a good placement record, I suspect that he did not want anyone to know how much debt his students incurred. While this kind of refusal for access could infer wrongdoing on the part of the provider, it may as well simply reflect the sensitivity that these programs feel toward research on program outcomes in an era where schools lose their accreditation or funding due to low placement rates or high default rates (Bograd 1995).

Especially in schools which may have questionable practices, researchers are often viewed as suspect evaluators who might do an expose on the program. As with participants, it became essential to be clear about the goals of the research,

how it would be shared with participating programs, and how it will address confidentiality issues.

Agencies also factored in the amount of time and energy a research project would cost them when deciding whether or not to participate. This involved several factors. First, any research project costs staff and administrative time for a participating agency. For participant observation projects, this meant finding a role for the researcher, providing mechanisms to share records and maintain confidentiality, making time for conversations with the researcher, and time explaining to staff and participants what the researcher is doing. Survey projects involve staff time to understand the research, taking time out of a program to administer a questionnaire, or in cases where program staff are asked to give the survey to participants, time for training and administering surveys.

Explaining research to program participants also can take agency time and energy. As the vignette with Mary illustrates, program participants have many concerns about an outsider doing research on them. Even for a short-term project, agencies must negotiate the many questions which participation in research raises for program participants. Given that agencies may also be in the process of building trusting relationships with their program participants, the presence of a researcher may impede this process by reinforcing a sense of program acting on the participant. Programs which are regularly involved in research may also become concerned that, like Mary, their participants get researched out.

I have had very supportive agencies with a long history of participating in research projects decline to allow research because they are overwhelmed by funding cuts or deadlines. Programs have been selective on project participation to make sure their relationship with their participants is not endangered. Researchers need to be aware of these factors when asking for access.

Most agencies, however, were eager for research data. Like the agency head who handed me surveys to analyze, many had tried their own efforts and welcome trained help. The most innovative and effective programs drew on the most sophisticated academic research available, showing that programs want and need research insights.

That said, I became quickly aware of the immediate needs that agencies had for research. Program administrators were hungry for data which confirmed their understanding of their participants work, life, and training experience. They also appreciated data which showed program limitations, which strategies worked, and the relationship between participant characteristics, program strategies, and outcome. The majority of these agency staff, however, were more interested in research which could directly help them lobby for change in government or Private Industry Council policy, or show them what they could do to improve their programs, than broad brush descriptions of the relationship between program participants and the economy, government policy, gender, or race dynamics.

The lack of interest in general statements about policy and inequality occurred not because agencies did not care; in fact, many based their work on changing

these kinds of inequalities. Like the government administrator discussed in the first example, these people also knew these facts from experience—that kind of research was not telling them anything new. Research that concluded that programs failed because of the nature of work available to participants or limits of training gave agencies nothing that they could change. It did help them illustrate how difficult their jobs were. However, research which could provide answers to their major concerns was particularly welcomed.

Respect for time limitations and my mandate to work with agencies for positive change led to several strategies in developing and carrying out research with non-profits. First, agencies were involved in project development from the beginning. I always include addressing issues of concern to the agency in project design. I also try to include ongoing feedback to programs about research findings throughout the project. This provides them with hard material they can use in a timely fashion, as well as ways to extend understanding of the research problem.

Agencies used research in advocacy and some aspects of program design. As in the meeting discussed in the first example, we were often biting the hand that feeds us: the Private Industry Council or the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. This meant that research needed to be methodologically solid and results could not take the form of blaming the government or suggesting that programs would always fail due to systems beyond agency control. Advocacy always tried to get those points across, but it took the form of pointing out programs that worked and factors which could not be controlled, and offering alternative solutions. I rapidly learned that packaging the message properly was critical to get results.

The research audience also influenced research methods. Most of my work combines qualitative and quantitative methods. I found that policy makers would easily dismiss purely qualitative work as “that worked for a few people, but I’m trying to deal with thousands.” However, policy makers were equally baffled by pure statistics. For example, one PIC administrator responded to a preliminary discussion of survey results with a request for ethnographic example to make the numbers real. I found that combining small-scale ethnography with surveys and public use data analysis such as census figures, Welfare Department Data, and Department of Labor statistics provided the most effective research reports.

## **CONCLUSION: ANTHROPOLOGICAL PRACTICE AND ACADEMIC THEORY**

I brought to work in the community sophisticated theoretical training which emphasized the dialectic between the state, the economy, history, and individual lived experience, which both reproduced our current system and contained the seeds of change (Gramsci 1971; Goldman 1976; Williams 1977, 1980). Factions of the ruling classes ultimately sustain power through hegemon influence over government, media, education, and other systems which govern socialization and

policy formation. However, control is partial, fragmented, and negotiated with various others in society (Gramsci 1971). Ideology, action, and consciousness for people at all levels are profoundly influenced by the material realities, history, and social processes of this lived reality (Williams 1977, 1980). If anything, work as a practitioner has reinforced this view of U.S. society. Work with policymakers, agencies, and public assistance recipients highlighted maintaining a multiple focus on macro-level systems, the interaction among several regional or local systems, and the dynamic between individuals and systems. As Goldmann (1976, p. 112) reminds us, “a phenomenon can be comprehended only by first inserting it into the broader structure of which it is a part.”

This experience also showed that analysis must portray complexity, contradictions, and struggles between systems and individuals. Goldmann (1976, pp. 31-40) speaks of potential consciousness, where people change their view of society by slowly expanding their view from what they already know. Actions like talking with policy makers, agency staff, and program participants use this concept to move toward radical change. Hope exists in small everyday acts of resistance or creativity (Scott 1985). It is equally impossible to understand the process of welfare reform without looking at the dynamic between the structures of capitalism, racism, and national policy and these local efforts.

I have become concerned with the way that much current academic teaching and research focuses more on systemic factors or romanticizing one side of the welfare debate. As an administrator, I hosted numerous college students interested in aspects of poverty. These students performed much of this research. In many cases, they arrived with a view that public assistance recipients were the victims of macro-level forces. Some had heard much about creative welfare rights approaches to poverty issues and were convinced that only this kind of grassroots activity could lead to “real” change. I have recently witnessed similar arguments on a welfare reform listserv where people claim that only long-term training will lead to change and that the focus really must be on the economic system, sexism, and racism.

While the systemic analysis actually provided important lessons which any poverty researcher needs to heed, simplified statements like these often do not lead to real change. Romanticizing the poor often creates another—albeit more positive—stereotype of poor people which has little to do with the day-to-day exigencies of people’s lives. Policymakers like the administrator described in the first example can easily dismiss these arguments as meaningless, or ignore the very complicated issues which come from working with a diverse population that makes choices based on many different factors, as the example with Mary illustrates.

This view also misses the fact that local advocates may have their own agendas. On numerous occasions I have seen welfare rights advocates coopt researchers, liberal advocates, and particularly college students into work which benefits one part of the population in poverty, sometimes at the expense of others. Paying

attention to all these actors and multiple processes becomes particularly important in this scenario. The kind of systemic perspective of the best practices anthropology which I describe at the beginning of this chapter gives the most insight for both the academy and practical efforts toward welfare reform. We help no one by offering simplified, doctrinaire positions.

Holistic research in the service of program administrators, people attempting to escape poverty, and policymakers should be our goal in our efforts to address problems of poverty in the years to follow. This involves designing studies which take into account macro-level factors in our social system; the dynamics of the political, organizational, and ideological systems in which local-level agencies and individuals function; the process within each system and program; and the tensions between individual will and systemic process. Research aimed at influencing local efforts must involve the various study participants in design and provide concrete, ongoing feedback. Policy efforts should keep macro-level goals in mind while focusing on best practices methods which will gradually push national policy toward systemic change.

Finally, we must remember that theory and practice are themselves a dialectic. Our goal is to comprehend our social structure using all of the tools available. As we bring this practical research back to our classrooms and the discipline as a whole, we should remember that sharing these insights into the processes of poverty with the next generation of policy implementers and theoreticians—our students and colleagues—serves the goal of combating poverty as much as applied efforts to influence the process of welfare reform.

## APPENDIX

### Description of Research Projects

This report includes findings from eight studies conducted between 1992 and 1997 by the author with the help of college students from several institutions under the auspices of the Institute for the Study of Civic Values. The projects combined survey research with ethnographic research methods such as reviewing government and media documents on workforce development and welfare reform; interviewing students in training programs, government officials, service providers, and advocates; and participating in programs. The projects are as follows:

(1) *Social Networks, Career and Training Paths for Participants in Education and Training Programs for the Disadvantaged* (Social Network Study) is a statistical study of 338 people enrolled in nine training programs or community college in Philadelphia. Study participants came from a stratified sample of people in training programs which served the range of low-income individuals in the Phila-

delphia area. The programs included training that drew both men and women and a combination of schools which offered adult basic education, job specific skills, and college education. The project also included a mandatory community service program for two-parent families on welfare and a mandatory job development program. The questionnaire included career and training histories of study participants, public assistance use, and demographic information. Eighty-three percent of the participants were on welfare at the time of the study and, 94 percent had been on public assistance at some point in their life.

(2) *Life Experience of Welfare Recipients* is the qualitative companion project to the Social Network Study including life history interviews of 20 individuals and participant observation of over 100 public assistance recipients in various education and training programs offered by the Institute for the Study of Civic Values.

(3) *Community Women's Education Project (CWEP) Anonymous Survey Analysis* is a statistical study of 373 people enrolled in the CWEP workstart program over five years. The sample included everyone who participated in CWEP programs during this time. CWEP is an innovative adult basic education and career preparation program for women. Sixty-nine percent of the study population were on welfare at the time of the study and 76 percent had been on welfare at some point in their lives. Questionnaires included work and training history, welfare use and demographic information.

(4) *The Alternative Work Experience Program Evaluation* is an evaluation of a model service learning workfare program for two-parent families on welfare, based on program statistics for 154 individuals and ethnographic observations of that program from 1993 through 1995.

(5) *Economic, Racial and Educational Census Mapping Project* analyzes census maps of Philadelphia and the Philadelphia region.

(6) *Survey of Training Providers in Philadelphia* is a questionnaire study of 29 training programs in Philadelphia which was conducted in 1992-93. Questionnaires were sent out to most programs in Philadelphia providing education and training under contract to the Philadelphia Private Industry Council or through Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Adult Basic Education funds.

(7) *The Education and Training System in Philadelphia* is the companion anthropological study to the Survey of Training Providers examining Philadelphia PIC and Commonwealth and Federal documents on training and welfare reform, as well as my notes on working with training programs.

(8) *The Rapid Attachment Study* is a statistical study of an administrative database for a short-term job readiness and job placement program in Philadelphia. The database includes demographic information, work and training history, and job placement information for 718 people who participated in this program from February 1996 to February 1997. All program participants were on welfare. Analysis focuses on the relationship of previous work and training experience to placement and the relationship between where participants live and where they work.

## NOTES

1. The Family Support Act of 1988 mandated that two-parent families receiving public assistance (AFDC-unemployed parents initiative) perform 16 hours per week of community service in order to receive their cash grant. This “workfare” component was a very small part of the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills program created by this act. Most of this legislation covered the cost of education and training programs for welfare recipients. In order to receive full funding for the education and training component, states needed to show that an increasing percentage of their AFDC-U families were performing community service. Our agency was contracted to provide community service placements which met this mandate from 1993 through 1996.

2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services statistics. This change reflected several trends. First, efforts by civil rights activists helped open up public assistance to eligible recipients who had been excluded due to discrimination or various regulations in the past (Katz 1989). Second, African Americans moved to northern cities at the same time that manufacturing jobs—which had long provided employment to newcomers to cities like Philadelphia—left (Summers and Luce 1988).

3. The AWEPP program immigrant and refugee population was much higher—roughly 30 percent of our program population at any one time—because of my ties to the Eastern European refugee community and a program commitment to serve the Spanish-speaking population in Philadelphia.

4. Private Industry Councils were created by federal legislation as public/private partnerships to oversee workforce development programs. In Philadelphia, the PIC is a non-profit organization responsible for implementing federal funds for job training through several federal or state programs as well as skills development money for public assistance recipients. The PIC subcontracts most of its programs to non-profit or for-profit agencies throughout the city.

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