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The third level of US welfare reform: governmentality under neoliberal paternalism

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US welfare reform involves more than dramatic caseload reductions and a shift from cash assistance to services. Its operations today reflect significant changes in poverty governance as a disciplinary regime. Welfare policy has been transformed by the rise of a 'new paternalism' that is deeply entwined with the globally ascendant market-centered philosophy of 'neoliberalism.' In this paper, we explain how 'governance' under this new system enacts a particular logic of 'governmentality' in which the state acts through nonprofit and for-profit agents to advance the project of 'governing mentalities' in low-income target populations. In this system, diverse policy tools are deployed to produce a form of self-discipline that is consonant with the need for compliant low-wage workers in a globalizing economy. Relying on field interviews of case managers in the state of Florida, our analysis follows a chain of disciplinary relationships which runs from the national government through states, down to local contract agencies, and finally to frontline workers and clients. We highlight how performance management systems function to discipline private provider agencies and welfare case workers. Likewise, we explain how sanctions (financial penalties for client noncompliance) figure prominently in such systems as tools deployed to teach self-discipline to recipients. Our field research, however, shows that the new system of poverty governance is one that is fraught with its own tensions and contradictions. We conclude by considering whether poverty governance today relates to what is being called the 'pedagogical state.'

Keywords: welfare reform; neoliberalism; new paternalism; governance; governmentality

Welfare programs for low-income Americans have changed dramatically over the last two decades. Their operations today reflect significant shifts in the logic of poverty governance as a disciplinary regime. Of course, US welfare programs have always been characterized by a reformative emphasis on 'improving poor people' by teaching them appropriate behaviors (Katz 1997). As they have distributed aid, they have functioned as mechanisms for 'regulating the poor' as a potential threat to the social order (Piven and Cloward 1971). Indeed, the degrading conditions and stigma associated with welfare have never been incidental to the purposes of public aid; they have served as an object lesson, instructing

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low-income populations that even the meanest wages and work conditions are better than the shameful status of the 'welfare poor.'

In the 1960s and 1970s, welfare rights victories in the United States forced a partial but significant attenuation of these dynamics. Access to public aid increased and, until the mid-1990s, welfare caseloads persisted at relatively high levels. Recipients came to have quasi-entitlement rights to assistance, and the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program operated primarily to provide minimal amounts of cash assistance to needy families with children (mostly headed by lone mothers). From the mid-1970s onward, however, the AFDC program was a politically vulnerable policy that offered only meager relief from poverty and labor-market pressures. Benefits were set at low levels and allowed to decline in all states; recipients were treated with suspicion; and due-process protections served as little more than a weak stand-in for substantive rights grounded in citizenship status. Welfare came to be perceived as a 'black program' as nonwhites became over-represented on the AFDC rolls and in media stories about poverty (Quadagno 1999, Gilens 1999). Calls to 'reform' welfare rose steadily and ultimately came to fruition in 1996, when President Bill Clinton signed the Republican-drafted Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA).

The new law imposed a tough new regime for welfare recipients that formalized and nationalized changes that had been developing in the states for some time. Federal lawmakers abolished AFDC and replaced it with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a program that gives each state a fixed block grant to provide aid to poor families in a manner focused on moving adult recipients from welfare to work. The new program substantially reduced access to cash assistance and placed far greater emphasis on enforcing behaviors deemed to be 'civic obligations'. Receipt of aid was now subject to time limits and conditioned on compliance with work requirements. Sanctions were adopted in all states to ensure that recipients would suffer financial penalties if they failed to follow the 'individual responsibility plans' that charted their course to employment.

Welfare was now welfare-to-work, charged with the task of regimenting recipients into the low-wage labor markets of a globalizing economy. To achieve this objective, welfare programs became more focused on practices designed to discipline the poor, placing a lower priority on the goals of redistributing income or helping parents meet the basic needs of their families. In the state of Florida, where we have conducted an intensive study of the Welfare Transition (WT) program, poverty alleviation is not even considered an official policy goal. Instead, WT is designed to help 'people go from welfare to work' in a manner that 'ensures that Florida's businesses can hire the well-trained workers they need'. Toward this end, the old practice of 'telling the poor what to do' is now resurgent in welfare programs (Mead 1998); however, its operation reflects a neoliberal paternalist rationality that is far more than a mere return to the past.

Five key shifts have converged to reorient disciplinary practice in poverty governance today:

- (1) Under 'the new paternalism,' welfare provision has adopted a more overt and muscular approach to using direction, surveillance, instruction, and penalty as therapeutic tools for transforming the subjectivities of the poor (Mead 1997).
- (2) Under neoliberalism, market roles have been elevated as the most essential civic roles; efforts to groom welfare recipients as job-ready workers have been recast as equivalent to – and necessary for – the production of subjects who can adequately fulfill caregiving obligations and civic responsibilities (Korteweg 2003).

- (3) Welfare programs have been restructured to operate according to market logics, to cultivate market rationalities in service providers and aid recipients, and to serve as arenas of labor commodification that are continuous with local markets (Krinsky 2007).
- (4) Administration and management systems have been redesigned to enhance the scope of lower-level discretion and, as a corollary, to ensure that social-service personnel (embedded in new contractual and performance-based systems) will be self-disciplined in their uses of discretion (Soss *et al.* 2011).
- (5) Welfare systems have become more thoroughly entwined with carceral systems, and their disciplinary operations have shifted toward a more penal logic characteristic of the 'culture of control' in an 'era of mass incarceration' (Gustafson 2009, Wacquant 2009).

In what follows, we suggest that the neoliberal disciplinary project functions as a 'third level' of welfare reform, driving but often obscured by two more visible levels of system change: caseload reduction and the shift from cash assistance to services. The disciplinary project we describe weds the normative enforcement of the new paternalism (Mead 1997) to the market rationality of neoliberalism (Brown 2003, 2006) and is implemented through the organizational reforms associated with the 'new public management' (Kettl 2005). The new organizational forms reflect a turn toward modes of 'governance' (Bevir 2007) that enact governmental power in a more 'fluid and cooperative fashion' via private institutions and market mechanisms (Walters 2004). The new system operates as a regime of 'governmentality,' in the sense that Foucault (1991) uses this term: it is a configuration of practical techniques oriented toward the 'conduct of conduct'; it pursues state purposes through the promotion of 'governing mentalities' at multiple levels of the system (Campbell 2000); and it operates as a form of productive power, cultivating forms of self-discipline that lead actors to 'freely' adhere to normative standards for acceptable behavior (Dean 1999).

Our analysis explores the sources and operations of disciplinary practice under contemporary welfare reform. To do so, we draw on field research investigating the systems that structure practice for frontline workers and welfare clients. Our interviews illuminate both the power and the limits of new administrative systems to cultivate self-discipline among case workers and move recipients from welfare to work. At the same time, we offer an empirical analysis of welfare sanctions as instruments that are explicitly used to discipline clients – both in the shallow sense of one actor punishing another for a violation and in the deeper Foucauldian sense described above. We conclude by reflecting on the future prospects of poverty governance in relation to what some are calling the 'pedagogical state' (Pykett 2009).

Neoliberal poverty governance in an age of globalization

To understand contemporary poverty governance in the United States, one must locate it within broader changes to governance and citizenship in an age of globalization (Morgen and Gonzales 2008). Welfare operations in the United States today reflect what Sassen (2006) refers to as a general shift away from the 'national capitalist state' and toward the 'global capitalist state' that has emerged under contemporary globalization. Although this development can easily be overstated as a contrast of opposites, the general direction of change is from efforts to ameliorate the inequalities of capitalism and shield citizens from market pressures toward uses of policy that actively maximize integration into the global economy and 'acceptance of the verdict of the marketplace' (Mead 1986, p. 87).

The guiding spirit of this transformation has been neoliberalism, a form of market fundamentalism that may be usefully contrasted with *laissez faire* (Brown 2003, 2006). Under the familiar logic of *laissez faire* ideology, markets are conceptualized as natural spaces, and pro-market agendas focus on bounding and reducing the interventions of the state. Market actors emerge and thrive when human nature is freed from the distortions of state action and allowed to flourish in market settings. By contrast, neoliberal ideology emphasizes the constructive and intentional application of market principles to diverse social relations that extend beyond economic markets. Its proponents seek, not to limit the state, but to restructure the state so that it operates according to market logics, becomes more reliant on market actors to achieve its purposes, and can be used affirmatively as a tool for constructing markets, serving well-positioned market actors, and enforcing compliance for poorly positioned market actors. Rather than presuming that humans naturally behave as rational market subjects, as in *laissez-faire* philosophy, the neoliberal project adopts a more constructivist stance emphasizing the need to instill specific competencies and mentalities consonant with assimilation into market relations.

Under neoliberalism, the welfare state is not 'rolled back' in the sense of being reduced; it is 'rolled out' to diverse locales and nonstate actors (Peck and Tickell 2002), and it is 'rolled up' in a transformative disciplinary project of market rationality (Brown 2003). Throughout the developed world, social welfare programs have been redesigned to be more 'active' in instilling market values and prodding the poor into jobs (Schram 2006). 'Conditional' aid is the new *modus operandi* (Mead and Beem 2005). In the United States and Europe, public assistance has been made contingent on the fulfillment of behavioral obligations and the pursuit of labor-market incorporation (Torfing 1999). In developing countries, conditional cash transfers (CCTs) provide cash for taking appropriate actions, such as getting your children inoculated or keeping them in school. International organizations supported by the United States have spread CCT policies to over 42 developing countries in recent years, where they have been elaborated in forms that are now being reimported to sites such as New York City (Bosman 2009, Peck and Theodore 2010).

Yet, claims of global convergence in social policy are often overstated (Gilbert 2002). The 'three worlds of welfare capitalism' identified by Esping-Andersen (1990) continue to exhibit distinctive policy regimes in important ways. And even where policy designs have converged, their implementation continues to reflect the diverse political geography of welfare provision (Martin 2004). The Anglo-liberal political economies most approximate the American style of welfare reform, while the continental-corporatist welfare states are more supportive in their approaches to labor activation policies. Scandinavian countries continue to maintain a robust welfare state while simultaneously trying to move more public assistance recipients off disability, unemployment, and welfare by helping them find employment when possible.

Thus, globalization and neoliberal ideology should not be mistaken for inexorable forces necessitating a single mode of social provision (Hay 2006, Schram 2006). All developed countries are experiencing global market integration and feeling political pressures to adopt neoliberal reforms, but they are responding in their own ways. The United States, with its long-standing emphasis on market-conforming welfare policy and reliance on private agents of provision (Hacker 2002), has been the predictable epicenter of a global turn toward neoliberal poverty governance that is taking different forms in different polities.

To understand the relationship between neoliberalism and welfare reform, one must engage the former as a shift, not only in the state, but also in the meaning and practice of citizenship. Citizenship is an inherently relational status, defined by the ways members of a

polity are positioned vis-à-vis nonmembers, one another, the state, and other major societal institutions. Thus, as the state has been restructured to operate according to market rationalities, citizenship too has shifted toward an economic register of identity and practice. The status of the democratic citizen, positioned as one who must decide and act collectively with others to gain preferred policy outcomes, has been eroded and partly displaced by the individualistic market roles of consumer, worker, and paying customer (Crenson and Ginsberg 2002). Citizens, in this guise, are synonymous with 'taxpayers' who have a contractual right to expect efficient and effective institutional actions that produce a good return on their investment. They are positioned, through vouchers and choice programs, as 'consumers' who pursue better goods from the system by exercising their individual freedom to seek goods from other providers (exit) rather than by joining together to participate in or demand improvements in the institutions they share (voice). They are encouraged to help others, not by deciding together how to organize their communities in a just manner, but by pursuing individual work as volunteers and charitable givers and virtuous providers of services.

At the same time, the obligation to work and function as a 'self-sufficient' actor in the market is recast as the primary responsibility of the citizen and, indeed, as a necessary precondition for 'moral standing' as a member of society who merits equal respect, possesses full rights, and can be presumed competent to fulfill other civic obligations (Mead 1997). Under neoliberalism, citizenship is, as Brown (2006) observes, 'reduced to self-care;' self-care is reduced, in turn, to the singular project of ensuring that one's needs are met through one's contributions to the market. Uses of policy to make 'better citizens' thus become indistinguishable from efforts to produce docile subjects who comply with market needs and political authorities. Neoliberalism, in this sense, entails the 'governmentalization' of citizenship (Dean 1999).

The consequences of this shift for welfare provision are profound because public aid in the United States has always been debated and used as a tool of *civic* incorporation. Its implementation has both reflected and defined prevailing terms of societal incorporation – including the distinctive terms associated with differences of race, class, and gender. Today, welfare programs remain just as rooted in the meanings and practices of citizenship. But it is the citizenship of a neoliberal era in which diverse civic responsibilities are collapsed into the obligation to work and applied to poor women as much as to men. Poverty governance today is characterized by what Chesney-Lind (1995) has called 'gender equality with a vengeance,' a historical pattern 'whereby the replacement of gender difference with sameness led to the more punitive treatment of women' (Haney 2004, p. 340). Yet it is a mistake to see this change as a simple matter of wage work coming to be viewed as a normative expectation for 'women in general'. Now as in the past, race matters greatly for the relationship between gender and the enforcement of civic obligations in welfare programs. Welfare's iconic status as a program for 'poor single mothers of color' has combined with persistent cultural stereotypes of this group to smooth the way for neoliberal reforms that are premised on the idea that policy tools must be actively deployed to motivate particular groups of recipients to work and act responsibly (Gilens 1999, Hancock 2004). Indeed, the design and practice of discipline under neoliberal welfare reform have varied significantly depending on the race of low-income target populations (Schram *et al.* 2009).

The third level of welfare reform: neoliberal paternalism

The major consequences of welfare reform are typically discussed at two basic levels. First, as public aid has become more conditional and limited, the number of welfare

recipients has plummeted. The number of welfare recipients in the United States declined by about 72% from its high point before the passage of PRWORA to the end of 2008 (HHS 2009). Welfare reform was, in this sense, a classic effort to pare the welfare rolls, consistent with a long history of efforts to achieve the contraction of relief during periods of weak political opposition (Piven and Cloward 1971).

Second, dwindling number of recipients has been accompanied by dramatic changes in the focus of welfare expenditures. By 2001, just five years after the passage of federal reform, the US welfare system had reached the point where over half of federal TANF block grants to the states were being spent on noncash services designed to promote and assist transitions to work. Thus, just as welfare recipients have become a dwindling percentage of the poor, so too has cash income support become a more meager component of welfare provision (Allard 2009). Services focused on overcoming 'barriers to work' have taken center stage in state decisions about how to prioritize and spend federal welfare funds.

To be sure, these changes are important developments in their own right. Yet the narrow focus on them has served to obscure a third, more fundamental, level of change in poverty governance. Declining welfare caseloads and shifts toward expenditures on services are, in our view, surface manifestations of a more profound turn to a neoliberal disciplinary logic. To understand this shift, it is useful to locate it in relation to the classic analysis of welfare provision and social control advanced by Piven and Cloward in *Regulating the poor* (1971). At the core of Piven and Cloward's analysis is the idea that the welfare state functions as a 'secondary institution' serving the often-conflicting needs of institutions and actors in states and markets. Thus, welfare provision can be used to shore up state legitimacy and build political followings, to restore social order in times of unrest, and to enforce work norms and behaviors that support labor markets. Building on this insight, Piven and Cloward present a detailed historical account of how poor relief has been deployed to fulfill such functions.

In our view, welfare programs today continue to serve the same basic functions that Piven and Cloward specified in 1971, but the operations that fulfill these functions have shifted in important ways. Welfare programs continue to play a key role in 'regulating the poor' in precisely the ways suggested by Piven and Cloward, yet they are also organized to 'discipline the poor' in ways that go beyond their landmark analysis.

For much of the modern history of welfare, the behaviors of the poor were regulated through a variety of practices tied closely to the principle of 'less eligibility'. Because welfare programs provided politically defined spaces of needs-based provision outside markets (Stone 1984), work enforcement was pursued primarily by keeping benefits below the wages of the lowest paying jobs and limiting access to welfare. The extent to which welfare programs 'decommodify' labor in this way is, of course, always a matter of degree (Esping-Andersen 1985). To the extent that welfare programs lay more squarely outside the market, their labor-regulating functions will depend more on efforts to keep benefits below wages and control the expansion and contraction of welfare caseloads.

In the contemporary era, however, welfare programs operate as market arenas in their own right. They are less sharply delineated as spaces where individuals face reduced pressure to offer their labor as a commodity and, in significant ways, are designed to ensure that labor stays on the market. Low-income people who apply for welfare today enter an arena that is organized to serve as a resource for employers: its purpose is to groom workers for hiring, make them as available as possible for employment, and actively push them into jobs. In this mode of 'disciplining the poor,' recipients are not just pushed into jobs by benefits that are too meager to compete with the worst wages – or even

by forms of administrative *legerdemain* that deny access to benefits. Welfare programs are constructed to provide the poor with an experience of market incentives and logics and to teach self-discipline to workers who are expected to adapt to their plight on the lower rungs of the labor market.

Thus, while the principle of less eligibility remains important to poverty governance today, the relationship between benefits and wages has become less decisive for labor discipline and the relationship between labor markets and welfare programs has become less oppositional. This disciplinary shift is perhaps most evident in the growing proportion of welfare funds that are spent on welfare-to-work services rather than cash aid. TANF programs today offer meager income support; most of their funds are spent in an effort to 'overcome' recipients' 'barriers to work' and to put clients through classes on how to dress for success, write resumes, use computers, and so on. Neoliberal paternalist welfare reform is, first and foremost, about instilling market competencies and teaching recipients how to conduct themselves as workers.

In this sense, it would be a mistake to suggest, as some have, that the new regime simply assimilates welfare provision to the practices of punishing the poor found in the criminal justice system (Wacquant 2009). Although welfare provision has become deeply entwined with incarceration, and draws today on many of its rhetorics and practices, the major direction of change is not from 'regulation' to 'punishment' *per se*. It is, to draw on Foucault's (1979) classic distinction in *Discipline and punish*, a shift toward a historically specific disciplinary project that employs punishment as one among many techniques. Incentives and educative programs are, in this regard, no less important than penalties. The cultivation of market discipline lies at the root of neoliberal-paternalist poverty governance, and it is pursued through diverse technologies. The explicit features of the regime, such as work requirements and time limits, are only the most visible facets of a disciplinary project enacted through a wide array of services, classes, incentives, benefits, and sanctions that all aim to turn welfare clients into suitable candidates for low-wage employment (Stone 2007).

As a result of the shift, the subject position occupied by clients in this system is captured less faithfully by the concept of de commodification (Esping-Andersen 1985) than by the concept of liminality (Turner 1967). Welfare clients are not stable occupants of a harbor outside the market; they are unstable subjects in an active state of becoming. Their identities are defined by their state of passage from the degraded role of 'dependent' to the valorized role of 'worker' – from disordered and irresponsible drains on society to orderly subjects who function as self-sufficient actors in markets and communities (Schram *et al.* 2009). As such, they represent a kind of semi-citizen in transition (Wolin 1989), subject to the enforcement of obligations yet not possessing the full rights of entitled membership. Discretionary control over their passage falls to case managers, who serve as 'deputized guides . . . there to expedite the process and serve as mentors' during the disciplinary rites that lead from one status to the next (Hopper 2003, p. 20).

To carry out this disciplinary project, welfare provision in the United States has been restructured, root and branch, to conform to the 'new public management' – a reform movement that has sought 'to replace traditional rule-based, authority-driven processes with market-based, competition-driven tactics' (Kettl 2005, p. 3). Thus, welfare policy authority has been dispersed to a wide variety of locales and actors through devolution and privatization (Gainsborough 2003). At the same time, new systems of performance-based competition and management have been used to discipline the use of discretion in this more decentralized policy environment (Schram *et al.* 2008). The new organizational forms create a more flexible, decentralized system that allows aid recipients to be

disciplined according to local conditions and needs but, at the same time, pressures local providers in a variety of ways to bring their practices into line with centralized program goals.

Indeed, the new welfare system is perhaps best understood as a decentralized chain of disciplinary relationships which runs from the federal government down to states, down to local regional boards, down to contracted service providers, down to frontline workers, and ultimately down to welfare clients. At each point in this cascade, benchmarks for outcomes are established and monitored, and managerial techniques, incentives, and penalties are used to discipline actors below. Thus, state officials exercise freedom of choice when it comes to policy means, but they must choose from a subject position tied to federal funding streams and their goals. Local officials are encouraged to innovate as they compete for contracts and bonuses, but their creative energies are channeled by the relentless pressures of performance systems that reward only the mandated program goals. Case managers are given discretion to allocate benefits, services, and penalties, but their choices are monitored and constrained because they must remain focused on moving recipients from welfare to work. TANF clients sign Individual Responsibility Plans as free market actors entering a contractual exchange of benefits for work activities, but their freedom is little more than the opportunity to succeed or fail in complying with these mandated program requirements.

Examining the whole chain of governance at once, it quickly becomes apparent that welfare reform is not just about bringing market discipline to clients; it is equally about imposing market discipline on welfare provision itself. The new tools of governance (Bevir 2007), such as performance systems, are instruments for a deeper project of governmentality (Foucault 1991), designed to produce self-disciplining governing authorities by cultivating appropriate 'governing mentalities' (Campbell 2000). In significant respects, this shift in poverty governance preceded welfare reform, gathering momentum during the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George Herbert Walker Bush and emerging in full form during the early 1990s in the movement to 'reinvent government' (Osborne and Gaebler 1993). Today, with the new public management firmly entrenched, the personnel of the welfare system are subjected to a neoliberal disciplinary regime so that they will ensure that clients of the welfare system are subjected to the same.

By extending the reach of government via contractual relationships with market and civil-society organizations, the new system of governance enables the power of the state to grow even as the public sector itself shrinks. Deploying market mythologies, the new public management promises that contracted local actors will be freed to go their own ways and then, later, will be judged by their performance and given the information they need to improve. The reality, however, involves a more complex interplay of structure and agency (Moynihan 2008). The focusing effects of outcome benchmarks, the pressures of competition, the prospects of incurring rewards or penalties, the awareness that one is being closely monitored: these features of performance management do more than just make agents accountable; they reconstitute agency itself. Under this system, local providers learn quickly that they must make active use of disciplinary tools in handling clients if they are to achieve program goals and maintain profitability. Within the 'business model,' clients and administrators alike must work within a market logic, responding to incentives and penalties and behaving in ways that conform to market pressures.

Strained efforts to recast identities in market terms are, in fact, a defining feature of contemporary welfare offices as social and physical spaces. In the Florida WT program, where we have conducted extensive field research, welfare recipients are officially labeled as 'customers' or 'candidates,' as in job candidates, and welfare case managers are titled

'Career Counselors.' The public space of the welfare 'one-stop center' is recast as a site of market transaction where norms of professionalism demand that case managers and clients look and behave as if they are working in a professional, corporate environment. As one senior state official in Florida explained: 'We're supposed to be business friendly. And I hate to tell you, that does not mean having a bunch of kids running around at the one-stop [when clients come to see their case managers].' Some of the best-funded one-stops in Florida have been carefully scripted to mimic corporate environments and celebrate market aspirations. Flat-screen televisions show pictures of well-dressed women walking with briefcases and cycle through a variety of resume tips and motivational statements. Many of the one-stops we visited had meeting spaces with titles such as 'The Excellence Room' and 'The Opportunity Room'. Small, rural offices are rarely able to match the business-like environments of the larger operations. But they participate in the same aesthetic on a reduced scale. The Opportunity Room looks a bit more beleaguered, and the tips for success appear on a white board instead of a flat-screen, but the message conveyed to clients is largely the same: you are competing in the business world, and we are in the business of making you more competitive.

The message throughout the TANF system is that motivated people will be able to work, and people who work will be able to succeed as self-sufficient citizens. More often than not, though, the client's passage through this system ends with something other than self-sufficient market success. Large numbers of clients are sanctioned off the rolls for noncompliance, a fate that is disproportionately common among 'hard-to-serve' clients who make it more difficult for local providers to meet their performance benchmarks and pay points (Soss *et al.* 2011). TANF clients who leave welfare for work make wages that average only about \$7.50 per hour in jobs that offer no medical insurance or pensions (Litt *et al.* 2000). Even in Wisconsin, which has one of the most celebrated TANF programs in the country (Mead 2004), program leavers in late 1999 earned an average of just \$8,306 during their first year out (with 81% below the poverty line) and an average of only \$11,577 in their fourth year out (with 73% below the poverty line); their most common job placement was with a temporary help service (Schultze 2005). Nationally, the percentage of 'disconnected' low-income mothers (who are neither receiving welfare nor working) has doubled since 1990 and is now as high as 25% by some definitions (Blank and Kovak 2008).

Case managers: a phenomenology of governmentality

Case managers present an especially important and informative group. On the one side, they are positioned as the culminating targets of efforts to discipline service provision. Because they hold discretion in their work with clients, and because their decisions enact policy, poverty governance today depends greatly on efforts to instill self-discipline in this group. In this sense, case managers offer an indispensable bottom-up perspective on the governance of service provision. On the other side, case managers are positioned as the 'face' of the welfare system for low-income clients (Soss 2000). They are the key agents of the communications and actions that policymakers hope will turn welfare recipients into orderly and successful market subjects. In this sense, the case manager can be seen as a fulcrum for the system as a whole, connecting the disciplining of service providers to the disciplining of clients. Market pressures imposed on implementing organizations rain down on the case manager from above, and it is the case manager who, in turn, must work to secure market compliance from the client.

The subjective experience of governance for case managers is rooted in three key features of their organizational position. First, case managers are subject to strong,

ongoing performance pressures and, because their actions affect measured performance, their behaviors are closely monitored through information systems. As a result, case managers worry about performance almost continually. As one put it, 'It's just weird, I mean it really is. And I don't know how to explain how, um, you know, we [case managers] all run around and we're like, "where are you at now with your [participation numbers]?" "Oh, I'm at like 20 percent." "Oh man!" So we're all just stressed!' The stress felt by case managers can be traced partly to their belief that performance numbers matter for job security and trajectory. Few expect to be 'fired' if their numbers drop. But most know that if they produce weak numbers, they will be subjected to greater supervision in a way that will make their work more stressful and difficult.

Moreover, in a system that includes for-profit contracting, most are keenly aware that performance numbers drive profits, and declining profits could lead their current employer to downsize the staff or even to sell the operation to another company whose retention of old employees is uncertain. As one case manager put it, 'for-profit is about profits period, bottom line and then some.'

Second, under welfare reform, case management is organized as a deskilled, low-wage position with a strong emphasis on documentation and data-entry tasks. Few case managers have anything resembling social-services training and, in fact, a considerable number have received welfare in the past (Schram *et al.* 2009). In a group interview with senior regional officials, one told us flatly that 'You don't hire a "people person" anymore for a career manager position. You hire a clerical computer person. You can teach them the social work stuff easily. The job's all about time, accuracy, and files now. There's a person [client] down there somewhere. But the technical stuff is what matters.' Another responded, 'If you talk to any case manager here, they will tell you they're not a case manager; they're a technician. They spend about 10 percent of their time on their clients. Their time is about being a technician, and that's the way the program is written. They're doing what they have to do under this system.'

Indeed, the case managers in our study typically describe a workday that is reactive and clerical, focused on the performance-driven tasks of documenting client work activity hours and entering the results into the One Stop Service Tracking data system. Almost without fail, they begin their days by logging on to the information system so they can address the slew of new alerts that arrives each morning. The alerts focus on two kinds of actions: documenting work participation hours for clients and pursuing disciplinary sanctions when such documentation is lacking. From this point forward, the daily round consists mostly of efforts to do one or the other, punctuated by face-to-face meetings with clients that often focus on the same two issues. The women and men we interviewed are labeled 'career counselors' and given wide discretion in handling cases, yet they are not supplied with the skills, tools, or time needed to work with clients on issues beyond the realm of work enforcement and documentation. They have no training as social workers, they have few options for matching clients to the services they need, they have no time to work intensively with individuals, and they are essentially powerless to change clients' broader opportunities and life conditions.

Third, of all the administrative actors who participate in contemporary poverty governance, case managers are positioned to experience the clash of social needs and market pressures most intimately. They work in organizations that strive to operate according to the 'business model,' to serve local employers as much as TANF recipients, and to limit their mission to 'the business of moving people from welfare to work.' In both official and informal communications, the legitimacy of this business model is cemented through symbolic contrasts with a naive solve-the-problems-of-the-world orientation that

is disparaged as 'old school' (or 'social work') and equated with a failed and discredited system of handouts practiced prior to welfare reform. Yet at the same time, case managers spend their days in the presence of people whose problems are both real and deep, who are suffering from poverty and anxious for their children, and who have come to them for help. They want their difficult daily work to have a meaning and purpose that is deeper than data entry and, in this regard, value traditional images of case workers as counselors who offer much-needed social services and help people solve their problems. As a result, a strong counter-discourse of social service, counseling, and care-giving runs beneath the dominant discourse of the business model, seeding ambivalence in individuals and sometimes conflict between co-workers.

In an important field study of professional identity among welfare caseworkers, Watkins-Hayes (2009) contrasts what she terms 'efficiency engineering' and 'social work' orientations, and suggests that tensions between them are almost inevitable given the presence of organizational and policy cues that legitimize both. Our interviews with case managers in the Florida WT program point to a similar tension, but they also underscore that the business model, as a governing mentality, is most prominent and about more than just efficiency. It is rooted in powerful norms regarding how one should act as a market subject, and it reflects a substantive (specifically, neoliberal) vision of what welfare programs and their implementers should accomplish. The counterpart to the social work ethos in our interviews had less to do with efficiency *per se* than with responding to competitive performance pressures, operating like a business, and serving market needs.

In this sense, neoliberal rationality supplies case managers with a source of professional identity. When asked to describe her role as a WT case manager, one woman we interviewed emphasized its importance to the local community and said it consisted of 'trying to develop more jobs, more business for people, more employees, more goods and services, bringing more tourists into the economy, and bringing that labor market information . . . [As a result of what we do in WT] the unemployment rate goes down . . . which is better for the market, for the economy.' The sense of self expressed here resonates with Maynard-Moody and Musheno's (2003) account of street-level bureaucrats who see themselves as 'citizen agents' acting on behalf of the community. But in this rendering, the community is reduced to its market relations, and the agent construes herself as acting in and for the local economy.

When the 'pull' of this sense of self and mission combines with the 'push' of pressures to meet performance goals, market logics conspire to erode the connection of human to human in the casework relationship. As client compliance becomes a means toward multiple ends, the client's status as a person becomes secondary and case managers develop a practiced stance of indifference that many find hard to reconcile with their conceptions of human compassion.

Our interviews underscore the pull of competing professional identities that is at the heart of Watkins-Hayes' (2009) account. The neoliberal turn in welfare provision has not imposed a seamless and uniform governing mentality on case managers; it has produced an era in which case manager identities and commitments are shifting and contested. In the WT program, the business model is embraced by case managers to varying degrees, with conflicted emotions and senses of self emerging as the most common response. One of the most common refrains in our interviews is captured by the quotation below: a desire to offer clients more substantial help, a sense of regret about the limits imposed by performance pressures, and a feeling of resignation about the bottom-line mentality that the market logic requires.

[Welfare in Florida] is no longer a social service; it is a business... I find it to be the difference between herding cattle and herding sheep. A cattle herder is just running people through, not taking time to look after them. A shepherd takes care of the sheep, tends after them, cares for them. It is not my nature to herd cattle and now I have to learn to do that.

The case manager's feeling of 'running people through' has deep roots in the work-first philosophy of welfare reform and reflects a mode of poverty governance organized to operate as a feeder for low-wage labor markets. In favorable new-paternalist accounts of welfare reform, case managers were once document handlers carrying out invariant procedures; they are now more active in pursuing individually tailored forms of engagement designed to build competence (Mead 2004). WT case managers describe the experience of enacting poverty governance in terms that are sharply at odds with this image. Indeed, it is precisely the lack of personalized engagement and skill building that they lament as they describe the truncated palette of tools at their disposal and the limits imposed by a confluence of time constraints, work-focused goals, and performance pressures. When asked whether they have time to 'work on skill development,' case managers frequently give responses similar to this one: 'No, you do not. [...] You just have to refer 'em out, and, well, call this number, and see what you can find. [...] It takes me [time] to look on the internet for, you know, the [Easter Seals] and this and that and give 'em all this information. I'm thinking '[oh man], good luck,' you know? So they'll tell us we're not, you know, social workers, we're just, employment, you know.'

The market rationality that underlies this rote invocation of work as the answer to diverse problems was identified more explicitly by a case manager who referred to herself as 'Ms. Cookie Cutter' because of the one-size-fits-all approach she was practicing in the WT program.

This program is structured the way that it is and the bottom line, I guess, is money... It's like it [WT] is a cookie cutter approach, okay, to people who are individuals that have different needs, who have different barriers and they're forcing us to put them in the same type of process... It's like, putting a band-aid over a bullet wound.

In the Florida WT program, an adult client with one child is required, depending on the region, to complete and document 120–160 h of work activity each month in exchange for \$240 in cash aid. Moral exhortations and promises of self-sufficient success are useful tools in case managers' efforts to meet this standard and, in the process, hit their performance benchmarks. Ultimately, however, benefit sanctions function as the fail-safe in the system, ensuring that client noncompliance will result in material penalty. In the system's broader disciplinary project, sanctions represent the most overtly punitive tool. As a result, case managers' views of sanctions provide an important window into the mentalities that govern conduct at the frontlines of welfare provision.

Many case managers expressed a resigned acceptance of the idea that sanctions are 'just how the program works' – that offers perhaps the most important insight into the mentality that governs case management in the WT program. In contemplating the workers who carry out the agenda of neoliberal welfare reform, it is easy to get caught in a false opposition of freedom versus coercion (Hayward 2000). On the one side lies the image of case managers who 'buy in' to the neoliberal agenda, enacting it as their own free will – perhaps after internalizing it as some sort of hegemonic ideological frame (Ridzi 2009). On the other side lies the image of resistant workers at the frontlines, forced to carry out an agenda they oppose. The reality is more complex and also more mundane. It does not pivot on the question of whether case managers agree with neoliberal goals or endorse paternalist authority relations. The more decisive fact is simply that case managers work in institutions that are organized around these principles.

The case managers we interviewed tended to be deeply conflicted about their work. They were ambivalent participants in systems designed to move low-income adults into local jobs. To understand the mentalities that guided their actions, one must reach beyond questions of ideological ‘buy in’ and even beyond the rich field studies devoted to the street-level bureaucrat as a distinctive policy actor. One must consider the subjective standpoint that case managers share with other low-wage occupants of deskilled positions in the global economy. The duties they carry out are ‘just how the program works.’ They are anxious about performance evaluations and sometimes worry that they might lose their job. They try to handle their cases in ways that they and the people around them consider appropriate. They try to retain their humanity and treat people well, but also remind themselves that they do not make the rules and, in the end, have a job to do.

The neoliberal and paternalist principles that guide contemporary poverty governance provide case managers with important discursive resources for making sense of their work and feeling that it is important. Ultimately, though, the actions of case managers flow less from their agreement or disagreement with these principles than from the ways that these principles have organized the contexts in which they work. To enact the agenda of neoliberal paternalism, case managers do not need to become neoliberals or embrace paternalism. They need only do what strikes them as permissible, reasonable, and right as they put in their workdays at organizations that have been structured to pursue this approach to poverty governance. At the frontlines of welfare reform, neoliberal rationalities do not govern mentalities by imposing all-encompassing worldviews; they do so by organizing fields of practice so that the ambivalent subjects who occupy them can be relied upon to do the work of disciplining the poor.

Neoliberal paternalism and the pedagogical state

In recent years, a number of observers have raised concerns about how new forms of governance are creating opportunities for the exercise of ‘pedagogical power’ (Pykett 2009). On the horizon looms the possibility of a pedagogical state, which through its educative interventions, imbues citizens with worldviews and forms of knowledge which are consonant with the dominant order. Our account of welfare reform suggests that its neoliberal-paternalist rationality entails educative components but, as theorists of the new forms of pedagogical power would emphasize, should not be misconstrued as an instance of governing through pedagogy. Indeed, to ask whether frontline workers ‘buy into,’ or whether clients ‘internalize,’ the ideological lessons of neoliberalism is to begin with the wrong questions. Neoliberal governance enacts market rationalities, not primarily by imparting lessons to workers and clients, but by restructuring the terrain that these actors must negotiate in order to be successful under prevailing systems.

Consider, for instance, how the work participation requirement for WT clients functions as a form of what Handler and Hasenfeld (2005) call ‘myth and ceremony.’ The guiding myth of welfare reform is that, by meeting paternalist requirements to attend classes and engage in other reformative endeavors, recipients will learn the habits of mind associated with the world of work. At the frontlines of welfare provision, however, the pedagogical myth results mostly in administrative ceremony. When asked in our field interviews how the welfare-to-work system could be improved, a common mantra among case managers was ‘more activities’ that clients could complete to fulfill program requirements, such as attending resume writing or computer classes or participating in job club and job searching sessions. Our caseworkers frequently described struggling to find enough of these ‘activities’ for clients to fulfill their participation requirements. Few case managers see these ‘activities’ as meaningful steps to

employment, or even as tools for teaching the self-discipline necessary to be a compliant worker. They are simply countable things for clients to do. And yet, despite their ambivalence about this 'make work,' case managers work diligently to ensure that clients do what must be done – so that they avoid sanctioning poor families and so that they can meet their own performance benchmarks for the client participation rate.

In this sense, the myth of pedagogy is not internalized by case managers as a lesson; it is enacted by case managers as a ceremony required by their job. To policymakers and the public, the ceremony may signify that welfare-to-work programs are teaching clients how to work and helping them get jobs. But 'in the doing,' it is experienced as something closer to an empty gesture whose importance lies in the bare fact that clients can be counted as being active, as they must under current policy. Whether these activities teach lessons that are good for the client or anyone else is, at best, secondary. The charade may exist because of the tutelary goals of paternalist policy reformers, but its performance is mostly a matter of caseworkers and clients busily pursuing requirements and benchmarks as ends in themselves. It is a classic form of the bureaucratic behavior called 'goal displacement' (see Merton 1957), or what followers of Max Weber have called the substitution of 'instrumental rationality' for 'substantive rationality.'

Neoliberal paternalism, in this sense, is poorly understood as an ethos or worldview that authorities instruct and case managers and clients internalize. It is a practical rationality, which is to say that it is the mode of reasoning that underlies the contemporary regime of poverty governance and, thus, organizes the ways that actors apprehend what they should do and how they should do it. Welfare reform's disciplinary logic is enacted through incentives and penalties, benchmarks and documentation procedures, organizational routines and client Individual Responsibility Plans. The WT program is organized around a 'business model' of provision that shapes the calculations and choices of diverse actors, many of whom are deeply ambivalent about the regime they are working within. To carry out their work, these actors do not need to embrace the business model or understand themselves as occupying a pedagogical role in relation to clients. And to 'succeed' as welfare-to-work participants, clients do not really need to internalize any particular ethos or lesson. They need only discipline themselves to conform to what is being demanded of them in the day to day.

Under the logic of neoliberal paternalism, one might say that welfare reform is a disciplinary system that aspires to be pedagogical. Certainly, the image of teaching the poor to work hard and exercise personal responsibility has been important to its political success. Yet its disciplinary agendas and effects do not, ultimately, depend on successful educative interventions into the lives of case managers or clients. They do not require pedagogical acquiescence, in the sense of consciously accepting new lessons – only operational quiescence, in the sense of following the organizational logic defined by neoliberal paternalism. How this logic will be disrupted, and what will take its place, only time and politics will tell.

Notes

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