Basic Concepts and Definitions

This entry discusses the relationship between welfare policies and recent changes to them (usually called welfare reform) and the field of work-family studies. While the term welfare has been used broadly internationally, in the United States it most often refers to the cash assistance program currently known as TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families). This program replaced the former AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) in the wide-ranging 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). States enacted sweeping changes to welfare policies both before and after the enactment of TANF. AFDC was enacted in the 1935 Social Security Act. At that time, the legislation recognized that at least white mothers were not expected to be employed and that lone mothers were very unlikely to earn enough to support families (Gordon, 1994). Welfare policies most directly affect single-parent families with children. To be eligible for welfare, families must have children, be poor and have few or no assets. Prior to 1990, states could exclude payments to poor two-parent families. Income eligibility is set by each state but most set them at or below the official poverty income threshold (in 2002, this annual amount was $14,072 for a family of three).

The TANF program provides block grants to the states (which states must match some portion or lose a portion of the grant) for time-limited cash assistance and other supports to poor families. The program, while providing enormous leeway to the states, nonetheless specifies several requirements that must be met, including work requirements for those receiving assistance. The CCDF (Child Care and Development Block Grant) provides states with a block grant to provide child care for “needy” families. Both grants were set at early 1990s levels under the former AFDC program and have not changed since.

At the time of the 1996 passage of PRWORA, 12.6 million people (4.8 percent of the U.S. population) received AFDC, the average family size of those receiving assistance was 2.8 persons with just under two-thirds families that included a child under the age of six. About 10 percent of adult women and 20 percent of men were employed while receiving welfare (although the vast majority had previous work experience). About 57 percent of children receiving AFDC were in families in which the parent was unmarried. Just under 40 percent of adult women had less than a high school education. About half of
AFDC recipients had been on welfare for longer than two years, with 20 percent longer than 5 years. The average monthly AFDC payment was $371 (34 percent of the poverty income threshold for that year) - although families could combine AFDC with housing assistance, Food Stamps, school lunch programs, and Medicaid (all data are from U.S. House of Representatives, 1998).

Those promoting changes to AFDC and crafters of the federal welfare legislation argued that it is better for families if parents are married, that able-bodied adults should be employed, that public assistance itself causes poverty-producing behaviors (e.g., out-of-wedlock births, non-marriage, and unwillingness to be employed) which are then passed onto to the next generation of children, and that the size and scope of the federal government was too large. Thus, the main goals of federal and state welfare legislation has been to substitute government assistance to poor families with own earnings or family support (from fathers of children or by marrying), to provide states with considerably more leeway in structuring their programs for poor families, and to require employment of those receiving public assistance. Those advocating the types of changes to welfare programs in the 1990s presumed that child support, marriage, and/or employment will also reduce poverty, although poverty reduction is not a stated goal of federal legislation.

The main parameters of welfare programs in the states to date typically (although not always) include an emphasis on short-term training and education to promote quick employment (often referred to as "Work First") coupled with time-limited benefits, time-limited supplemental support for employment (such as child care subsidies, health coverage, transportation subsidies, and not reducing welfare grants dollar for dollar as earnings income increases), increased pressure on mothers to disclose identity of fathers as well as increased pressure to obtain financial support from fathers, and penalties (full or partial benefit sanctions) for a range of behaviors from having a child to missing appointments with case workers. A comprehensive list of state provisions can be found at The Finance Project web site at http://www.financeprojectinfo.org/win/spd_reports.asp.

Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

Many work-family scholars and activists have been concerned with the particular demands faced by low-income families, however, the difficulties faced by married-couple families and workplace policies used by individual employers seem to garner more attention. In a parallel fashion, much of the research on welfare has not focused on work-family tensions. Indeed, welfare policy debates have projected the notion that poor women have too much family and not enough work.

However, U.S. welfare reform has thrown new light on the work and family bind. It has done so by demanding economic "self-sufficiency" from poor families by imposing work requirements on the women who head those families. The difficulties of balancing work and family for low-income families, especially
for single-parent families, stems from the nature of the labor market for women with low educational attainment, the difficulties in finding affordable child care or providing appropriate supervision for older children, and the difficulties of one adult meeting the demands of being both a primary care giver and breadwinner for a family. Over 75 percent of low-income single mothers are employed in four low-wage occupations -- service; clerical, operatives, and sales (Jones-DeWeever et al., 2003). So, while employment rates have increased since welfare reform measures in the 1990s among low-income mothers, total family income has not risen by much at the same time public assistance has fallen considerably. Low-wage jobs tend to have inflexible work hours, making dealing with routine family interruptions such as school vacations, doctors' appointments, or taking care of a sick child very difficult. Further, sales and service sector jobs often have unpredictable schedules; working during non-traditional work hours often makes finding and keeping reliable child care extremely difficult. Finally low-wage jobs often have few employment-related benefits such as health insurance, paid sick time or vacation which means a lost day of work caused by routine interruptions corresponds to a reduction of pay. If these interruptions happen frequently or schedules change too much, it can often result in lost employment.

The difficulties that poor single mothers face in juggling low-wage work and taking care of their families are not new. Traditionally, poor single mothers have had a very difficult time managing employment and raising children, often moving between welfare and employment or packaging income producing opportunities with public assistance (Spalter-Roth et al., 1995; Edin & Lein 1996). Many poor single mothers have relied on some forms of public assistance until their children are grown, or they are able to get the education or training necessary to get better jobs, precisely because of the difficulties of being the family breadwinner and primary caretaker. A recent study examining low-income single-mother families (defined as having income 200 percent or less of the poverty threshold) over 24 month periods in the decade prior to welfare reform, found that over the two years, a little less than half had received welfare over the two years. About 27 percent of all low-income single-mother families relied primarily on welfare (although even among this group there was employment income), 54 percent relied almost exclusively on employment income, while the rest relied on both (Hartmann et al., 2003). Comparable longitudinal data after welfare reform is only now becoming available.

In looking at welfare reform and poor mothers, the field of work-family is stretched to examine the types of employment and child care supports that need to be in place to accommodate the work/family issues faced by low-wage workers who are also caregivers.

**State of the Body of Knowledge**

There is an extensive literature on the impacts of welfare. Prior to 1996 welfare changes, much of the research focused on the efficacy of education and training programs on earnings for women on welfare and those leaving it (see Friedlander & Burtless, 1995 for a review of that literature) and the impact of
welfare on women's fertility (see Moffitt, 1992 for a review of that literature). This literature confirms that there is a positive association between education and training and higher wages for women on or leaving welfare, but the earnings increases are largely due to increased employment rather than increased wages, unless the education and training is more intensive or long-term. Further the level of increased income, while statistically significant, rarely amounts to much (about $500 annually). There is general agreement in the literature that welfare benefit levels have little or no impact on women's fertility.

Feminist sociological and economics literature have focused on different aspects of welfare that are more closely aligned with the issues raised in the work-family literature. These researchers have suggested (both before and after welfare reform) that the ways in which a lone parent in a poor family manages being a primary caregiver and breadwinner entails complex strategies involving family networks, packaging public assistance and paid work (some legal and some not), and sacrifice (e.g. Stack, 1974; Harris, 1997; Dodson, 1998). This literature tends to emphasize the role gender and race plays and in particular looks at constraints low-income women face that may differ from other women such as the conditions of low-wage work, the additional difficulties of raising children in poverty, and the way in which public assistance is structured to stigmatize receipt and keep many families in poverty.

There has been an explosion of research on the effects of welfare since the passage of PRWORA in 1996. Major studies involving extensive new data collection have been undertaken by the Urban Institute (http://newfederalism.urban.org), various studies by a range of researchers under the auspices of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Program and Evaluation of U.S. Department of Human Services on welfare "leavers" (http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/hspwelfare.htm), the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Project (http://rcrw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/), the Women's Employment Study at the University of Michigan (http://www.fordschool.umich.edu/poverty/wes/index.htm), and the Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three City Study (http://www.jhu.edu/~welfare/). In addition, the Manpower Development Research Corporation (MDRC at http://www.mdrc.org), Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (http://www.mathematica-mpr.com), Institute for Women's Policy Research (http://www.iwpr.org), and Child Trends (http://childtrends.org/HomePg.asp), have conducted extensive research on the impacts of welfare reform on employment as well as some preliminary research on family well-being. The Research forum on Children, Families and the New Federalism provides a comprehensive catalog of this and other research (http://www.researchforum.org/).

The concerns on impacts on employment and earnings (see Bloom & Michalopoulos, 2001 for a recent review) and fertility continue, but there are new interests, including understanding the causes of dramatic caseload reduction in the 1990s, changes to family structure (including marriage and birth rates), and general family well-being (see Blank, 2002 for a review of some of that literature). Most find welfare changes have contributed to some of the caseload reductions and increased employment among all single mothers. It is less clear that family well-being is much improved with more employment and fewer
people receiving public assistance. This literature addresses well-being in relationship to welfare reform's influence on maternal employment, family structure, and family income. The three outcomes are related and often difficult to tease apart. Further, it is not clear that evaluations of welfare reform or large-scale data sets collect the information needed to answer some of these questions.

Researchers particularly concerned with impacts of mothers' employment on children include the previously mentioned "Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Project", the "Women's Employment Study", MDRC's "Children and Families" research, and the "Welfare, Children, and Families Project". New studies emerge monthly, although the results are mixed and together are still inconclusive. Some have found adverse implications for adolescents (e.g., Gennetian et al., 2002) but another study argues that there may be positive effects (Dunifon & Kalil, 2003). Employment seems to have little or slightly positive results for younger children, provided families have sufficient income levels (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003; Morris et al., 2002).

While researchers have begun to examine the factors that influence marriage or cohabitation rates among poor families (Fein et al., 2003), there is no evidence that welfare reform has increased marriage rates or reduced childbearing among welfare recipients (Fein et al., 2002). One distressing finding, however, is that welfare changes seem to have resulted in an increased number of children not living with a parent and increased placements in foster care (Paxton & Waldfogel, 2002), suggesting that for some parents welfare changes have created a trade-off of work for family.

While family income levels have gone up with increased maternal employment, so have costs and many studies suggest not only increased hardship among the bottom quintile of low-income single families but also considerable income instability (Boushey et al., 2001). Poverty rates among all single mothers have dropped, although about half of all families leaving welfare are still poor for as much as five years later. Further, welfare rolls have dropped much faster than poverty. For example, child poverty rates have fallen by 20 percent between 1996 and 2001, while the child caseload has fallen by 50 percent. Further, the percentage of poor children receiving welfare has fallen since 1996 from 58 percent in 1996 to 36.1 percent in 2000 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2003: Appendix A).

**Implications for Practice and Research**

Welfare policy changes in the 1990s that have targeted employment and marriage formation have yet to be fully understood. Research on the impacts on family formation and child well-being outcomes is relatively new with much more to learn. Employment effects and patterns have been well studied, however, most of the dramatic changes to welfare occurred during a remarkable expansionary period. As the economy faltered in the early 2000s and state budgets have imploded, the policies of employment promotion and financing work supports become more problematic. Further, time limits have only just
recently come into effect in many states. Longitudinal data that allows for comparisons of the post-1996 welfare reform's impact on employment and family structure to those before 1996 are only now becoming available. Few researchers have explored the impacts of welfare changes on communities and this is an area ripe for research.

While work-family literature and welfare-to-work studies are often seen as distinct, the two can inform each other fruitfully (Albelda, 2002). The lens of work-family concerns is one that can be effectively used to understand the multiple and complex impacts welfare-reform has at work and in families. Similarly, looking at low-income single parents presents an opportunity for work-family researchers to create a holistic framework for thinking about employment, government, and community policies and strategies that work (see Bailyn et al. 2001 for a blueprint of this type). One good example of the kind of research that approaches welfare changes from a work-family lens is that of the group of researchers at the University of Chicago, School of Social Service Administration. Their projects "Lower Wage Jobs and the New Realities of Work and Family" and "Study of Work-Child Care Fit" use interdisciplinary methods to gather information on low-income women, their employers, and child care providers to understand the difficulties all three face in making welfare-to-work work (http://www.ssa.uchicago.edu/faculty/facresearch.shtml).

Welfare-to-work policies that emphasize quick placement in low-wage jobs and provide time-limited work supports like child care, health care, and transportation are not likely to alleviate the work-family tensions that in the past led many women to welfare in the first place. For poor parents, "work-family" struggles are in many ways similar to those faced by other families - such as finding time to spend with families and finding the right caregivers when at work. But because most cannot afford to purchase quality child care, reliable transportation, and other household services (like cleaning and prepared foods) that other stressed parents buy to help alleviate the work-family tensions, the pressures and pressure-valves are different. Further because low-wage jobs often lack health-care benefits, vacation or sick time, and flexible work arrangements the consequences of work/family pressures can be much more severe than for those in higher wage jobs. If a child gets sick, misses the school bus, has multiple doctor visits, or child care arrangements break down, a parent in a low-wage job might very likely have to miss work (as well as a day's pay) or ultimately lose a job. The thinning of the safety net also means there are fewer or no income alternatives if employment is lost. Understanding the commonalities and differences can help in constructing new community supports, public policies and employer practices. Public policies that address the issues facing low-income employed parents will not only help poor mothers, but are also likely to help other workers as well.

The ability for poor women to raise their families and find family-sustaining employment involves policies and practices at the individual, family, workplace, community, and societal levels. Welfare reform's
employment imperative has the potential to shed new light on the work-family dilemma and points to the need for a range of employer-sponsored and publicly provided services.

References


Other Recommended Readings on this Topic:

Books and articles


Web sites

http://www.jhu.edu/~welfare/
The Welfare, Children and Families research study evaluates the consequences that families face as a result of welfare reform now and as it evolves. The study is based in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio. The web site contains links to the full text of published articles and working papers produced from the study.

http://www.mdrc.org
MDRC is a social policy research organization conducting projects including: welfare reform in urban communities and barriers to employment. This nonprofit, nonpartisan organization posts each project's agenda, scope, goals and important publications on their web site.

http://www.mathematica-mpr.com
Mathematica is a policy research organization that has conducted research in various fields including disability, health and welfare. The web site includes specific information from different studies including: Welfare-to-Work Transitions for Parents of Infants; Strengthening Families; and How Families Fare When Cash Benefits End. The site also holds links to other state specific welfare studies.
The Institute for Women Policy Research is an organization, "dedicated to informing and stimulating the debate on public policy issues of critical importance to women and their families." Areas of research focus include; Poverty, Welfare, and Income Security; Work & Family; and Health & Violence. Project details and important publications can be found on the web site.

The Research Forum's web site includes a searchable database of small and large scale research project summaries. The web site is updated daily and currently contains 65 reviewed and 259 un-reviewed projects. The Research Forum focuses on topics like welfare reform, child and family well-being, and community/neighborhood issues.
**Locations in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Studies**

The Editorial Board of the Teaching Resources section of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network has prepared a Matrix as a way to locate important work-family topics in the broad area of work-family studies. ([More about the Matrix ...](#)).

Note: The domain areas most closely related to the entry’s topic are presented in full color. Other domains, represented in gray, are provided for context.

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**Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains**
About the Matrix

Sloan Work and Family Research Network
Resources for Teaching: Mapping the Work-Family Area of Studies

Introduction

It was appropriate that the members of the Founding Editorial Board of the Resources for Teaching began their work in 2000, for their project represented one of the turning points in the area of work and family studies. This group accepted the challenge of developing resources that could support the efforts of teaching faculty from different disciplines and professional schools to better integrate the work-family body of knowledge into their curricula. The Virtual Think Tank began its work with a vision, a spirit of determination, and sense of civic responsibility to the community of work-family scholars.

A fundamental challenge emerged early in the process. It became clear that before we could design resources that would support the teaching of those topics, we would first need to inventory topics and issues relevant to the work-family area of studies (and begin to distinguish the work-family aspect of these topics from "non work-family" aspects).

The members of the Virtual Think Tank were well aware that surveying the area of work and family studies would be a daunting undertaking. However, we really had no other choice. And so, we began to grapple with the mapping process.

Purpose

1. To develop a preliminary map of the body of knowledge relevant to the work-family area of study that reflects current, "across-the-disciplines" understanding of work-family phenomena.

2. To create a flexible framework (or map) that clarifies the conceptual relationships among the different information domains that comprise the work-family knowledge base.

It is important to understand that this mapping exercise was undertaken as a way to identify and organize the wide range of work-family topics. This project was not intended as a meta-analysis for
determining the empirical relationships between specific variables. Therefore, our map of the workfamily area of study does not include any symbols that might suggest the relationships between specific factors or clusters of factors.

**Process**

The Virtual Think Tank used a 3-step process to create the map of the work-family area of studies.

1. **Key Informants:** The members of the Virtual Think Tank included academics from several different disciplines and professions who have taught and written about work-family studies for years. During the first stage of the mapping process, the Virtual Think Tank functioned as a panel of key informants. Initially, the Panel engaged in a few brainstorming sessions to identify work-family topics that could be addressed in academic courses. The inductive brainstorming sessions initially resulted in the identification of nearly 50 topics.

Once the preliminary list of topics had been generated, members of the Virtual Think Tank pursued a deductive approach to the identification of work-family issues. Over the course of several conversations, the Virtual Think Tank created a conceptual map that focused on information domains (see Table 1 below).

The last stage of the mapping process undertaken by the Virtual Think Tank consisted of comparing and adjusting the results of the inductive and deductive processes. The preliminary, reconciled list was used as the first index for the Online Work and Family Encyclopedia.

2. **Literature review:** Members of the project team conducted literature searches to identify writings in which authors attempted to map the work-family area of study or specific domains of this area. The highlights of the literature review will be posted on February 1, 2002 when the First Edition of the Work-Family Encyclopedia will be published.

3. **Peer review:** On October 1, 2001, the Preliminary Mapping of the work-family area of study was posted on the website of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network. The members of the Virtual Think Tank invite work-family leaders to submit suggestions and comments about the Mapping and the List of Work-Family Topics. The Virtual Think Tank will consider the suggestions and, as indicated, will make adjustments in both of these products. Please send your comments to Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes at pittcats@bc.edu
Assumptions

Prior to identifying the different information domains relevant to the work-family area of study, members of the Virtual Think Tank adopted two premises:

1. **Our use of the word “family” refers to both traditional and nontraditional families. Therefore, we consider the term “work-family” to be relevant to individuals who might reside by themselves.** Many work-family leaders have noted the problematic dimensions of the term “work-family” (see Barnett, 1999). In particular, concern has been expressed that the word “family” continues to connote the married couple family with dependent children, despite the widespread recognition that family structures and relationships continue to be very diverse and often change over time. As a group, we understand the word “family” to refer to relationships characterized by deep caring and commitment that exist over time. We do not limit family relationships to those established by marriage, birth, blood, or shared residency.

2. **It is important to examine and measure work-family issues and experiences at many different levels, including: individual, dyadic (e.g., couple relationships, parent-child relationships, caregiver-caretaker relationships), family and other small groups, organizational, community, and societal.** Much of the work-family discourse glosses over the fact that the work-family experiences of one person or stakeholder group may, in fact, be different from (and potentially in conflict with) those of another.

Outcomes

We will publish a Working Paper, “Mapping the Work-Family Area of Study,” on the Sloan Work and Family Research Network in 2002. In this publication, we will acknowledge the comments and suggestions for improvement sent to us.

Limitations

It is important to understand that the members of the Virtual Think Tank viewed their efforts to map the work-family area of study as a "work in progress." We anticipate that we will periodically review and revise the map as this area of study evolves.

The members of the panel are also cognizant that other scholars may have different conceptualizations of the work-family area of study. We welcome your comments and look forward to public dialogue about this important topic.
Listing of the Information Domains Included in the Map

The members of the Virtual Think Tank wanted to focus their map of work-family issues around the experiences of five principal stakeholder groups:

1. individuals,
2. families,
3. workplaces,
4. communities, and
5. society-at-large.

Each of these stakeholder groups is represented by a row in the Table 1, Information Domain Matrix (below).

Work-Family Experiences: The discussions of the members of the Virtual Think Tank began with an identification of some of the salient needs & priorities/problems & concerns of the five principal stakeholder groups. These domains are represented by the cells in Column B of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individuals' work-family needs & priorities
- Individuals' work-family problems & concerns
- Families' work-family need & priorities
- Families' work-family problems & concerns
- Needs & priorities of workplaces related to work-family issues
- Workplace problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs & priorities of communities related to work-family issues
- Communities' problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs and priorities of society related to work-family issues
- Societal problems & concerns related to work-family issues

Antecedents: Next, the Virtual Think Tank identified the primary roots causes and factors that might have either precipitated or affected the work-family experiences of the principal stakeholder groups. These domains are highlighted in Column A of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individual Antecedents
- Family Antecedents
• Workplace Antecedents
• Community Antecedents
• Societal Antecedents

**Covariates:** The third set of information domains include factors that moderate the relationships between the antecedents and the work-family experiences of different stakeholder groups (see Column C in Table 1).

• Individual Covariates
• Family Covariates
• Workplace Covariates
• Community Covariates
• Societal Covariates

**Decisions and Responses:** The responses of the stakeholder groups to different work-family experiences are highlighted in Column D.

• Individual Decision and Responses
• Family Decisions and Responses
• Workplace Decisions and Responses
• Community Decisions and Responses
• Public Sector Decisions and Responses

**Outcomes & Impacts:** The fifth set of information domains refer to the outcomes and impacts of different work-family issues and experiences on the principal stakeholder groups (see Column E).

• Outcomes & Impacts on Individuals
• Outcomes & Impacts on Families
• Outcomes & Impacts on Workplaces
• Outcomes & Impacts on Communities
• Outcomes & Impacts on Society

**Theoretical Foundations:** The Virtual Think Tank established a sixth information domain to designate the multi-disciplinary theoretical underpinnings to the work-family area of study (noted as Information Domain F).
Table 1: Matrix of Information Domains (9/30/01)

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