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3.	Au: Please consider changing the sentence "... also distinct from policy analysis done to inform ..." to "... also distinct from policy analysis, which is carried out to inform a specific decision."	
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11.	Au: Please clarify the sentence "A second way of policy research lacks governmental content is that the institutions tends to missing from policy research in the style of equation (2)."	
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## Policy Research: The Field Dimension

Lawrence M. Mead

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*Field research, defined as an unstructured contact with public problems and programs, is essential to realistic policy research. Research linking governmental action to good outcomes is rare, because those who study government and those whose who analyze public problems are seldom the same. Field inquiry can help give policy research more governmental content. A lack of field contact is one reason why much of the research surrounding welfare reform has been incorrect. Ideally, the connections between policy and outcomes that respondents claim during field research should be verified by statistical analyses that use program data. Unfortunately, field research is discouraged by academic incentives favoring rigor at the expense of realism.*

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### Introduction

Field research is an essential component of realistic policy research.<sup>1</sup> By “policy research” I mean inquiry into the nature and origins of problems that public policy aims to solve. Policy research is distinct from purely academic research, which that seeks only theoretical knowledge. It is also distinct from policy analysis done to 2 inform a specific decision. However, policy research supports policy analysis by 3 identifying the causes of problems that policy might change (Hargrove, 1975, 9–11).

By “field research” I mean inquiry into programs or policies through direct contact, such as by interviewing clients or staff, observing operations, reading government documents, or inspecting program data—what I call laying hands on the institutions. Field research emphasizes unstructured learning about a program, as well as serendipity—discovering the unexpected. It is guided only, to a limited extent, by prior hypotheses. Above all, field research is unstructured by prior research or established databases. If it includes quantitative analyses, these will address hypotheses derived from the field and will be based on program data.

A paucity of field inquiry has weakened recent policy research on the problems of poverty and welfare. Inquiry into these questions consists mostly of statistical models estimated from academic or government databases, without a hands-on sense of what is going on. Such modeling shortchanges the political and administrative forces that often drive change. These forces dominated welfare reform, that is, the institution of work requirements in Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)/Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) in the late 1980s through

the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> As a result, some social research that omits these factors has been 4 misguided.

In the next section I first situate public policy research within political science. The policy field has failed to meet expectations because of a lack of governmental content, among other problems. More field inquiry is one means of changing that. I then give several instances where field research in social policy brought into question findings that were based on other methods. I then consider ways of making field inquiry more rigorous. Finally, I describe the academic incentives that discourage this.

### Public Policy Research

I understand public policy as a subfield within political science. It is often located within American studies, but it need not be. Its defining feature, in my view, should be that it seeks to improve actual public policy. The ancients treated politics as the master science, that is, the highest means by which a community could achieve the good life. Politics had value in itself, but principally it was a means for realizing the good society.

To fulfill that vision, political science must show how government can promote good outcomes for the society. In the policy field, political science becomes a form of policy analysis—a reasoning that uses government to achieve an improved society. Public policy seeks to understand government and politics, but ultimately as a means to social advancement. Much in this spirit, the earliest thinking about public policy, by Harold Lasswell and others, understood it as a catholic form of reasoning about how to reach public goals, which themselves had various meanings (Lasswell, 1970; Lerner & Lasswell, 1951).

The general model of public policy is thus:

$$\text{Government} \rightarrow \text{The good society} \quad (1)$$

With regard to a specific problem, policy research must show which public policies will achieve good effects, however “good” is understood:

$$\text{Public policy} \rightarrow \text{Good effects} \quad (2)$$

For this connection to hold, however, government must be able to generate the desired policies. That means both making policy and implementing it:

$$\text{Government} \rightarrow \text{Effective public policy} \quad (3)$$

For government to accomplish this, it is required to have effective policymaking processes. These will include some form of policy analysis, or deliberate reasoning about how beset to solve public problems, followed by procedures for policymaking and administration. If policy research seeks general knowledge about how to solve public problems, it must combine equation (2) with equation (3), for only then can it realize the vision of model (1), the master science.

The policy field has not approached this ideal, largely because of developments within social science. The most fundamental problem is that most political scientists

do not embrace equations (1) or (3). They do not appraise government in terms of policy performance. They are interested in politics or government for themselves, not as means to policy ends. Policy is not important in itself, but only as a score-card for the political process.

Most political scientists who are policy specialists study the policymaking *process* rather than how to improve policy. Their modeling is increasingly sophisticated, but it is not different in kind from what other scholars of politics do outside the policy field (Hill, 1997; Sabatier, 1999). Policy research may focus on policymaking, whereas other specialists focus on the presidency or Congress. But neither group is interested in improving policy as such. This version of public policy research is not policy analytic. Only a handful of political scientists are known as policy experts.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, most policy research done by political scientists is of little interest to actual policymakers (Palumbo, 1992; Rogers, 1989).

Conversely, most of those who do seek to improve policy in the sense of equation (2) take no interest in government. Most experts in policy areas such as poverty, national security, or the environment have backgrounds in economics or some other technical subject. They study policy problems and make recommendations for their solution. They are usually more comfortable doing this than political scientists are. But government itself is not part of their analysis. That is, features of government or politics are not usually given as reasons for preferring one course of action to another, nor are changes in government proposed to make possible better policies.

Thus, while political scientists typically study government without telling it what to do, policy experts tell government what to do without studying it. Neither group makes the connection shown in equation (3). But without this, policy reasoning consists only of equation (2), and the master science suggested by equation (1) cannot be realized.

These tendencies lead to the bifurcation of the policy literature as a whole. There are works about how government makes policy, written almost entirely by political scientists, and there are works about how to handle various policy problems, written almost entirely by economists and other technicians. There is very little research that tries to do both, first making arguments for policies on-the-merits, as suggested by equation (2), and then adding governmental analyses about how to generate such policies, as suggested in equation (3). Only this small literature even attempts to realize equation (1).<sup>4</sup> 5

One reason for the division is academic specialization. To connect political with policy analysis takes a wider range of knowledge than most academics claim today. Perhaps only senior scholars with unusually broad backgrounds can do this. To practice the master science, policy researchers may need some government experience; however, most of them never work outside the university or think tanks. 6 Another cause is the long-standing reluctance of political scientists to take positions on policy issues, lest they be seen as trenching upon the democratic process (Nelson, 1977).

A more recent cause is the tightening grip of the journals on academic recognition. Peer-reviewed research places the value of rigor and precision above all others. Policy research addresses important issues and, potentially, has a large audience,

but these values are secondary to reviewers. Any inference connecting government to policy outcomes is always more judgmental than inferences about political behavior or policy alone. So most political research today focuses on the precise modeling of processes within government, neglecting effects on the society. The recent vogue for game theory and other quantitative methodologies has intensified these trends. Similar pressures prevent economists and other policy experts from adding political or governmental factors to their policy arguments. Policymaking as suggested by equations (1) or (3) is simply too broad an enterprise to be acceptable to today's academe.

### Governmental Content

Another way to put the problem is that most policy research lacks governmental content. That is, the characteristics and influence of government itself, as against its policies, is not part of the analysis. This shows up in two ways.

#### *Institutional Constraints*

First, as mentioned, most research that recommends best policies is confined to the logic of equation (2): It argues what sort of policy would best solve some problem, but there is no reasoning in the form of equation (3). That is, there is no serious discussion of how politics or administration might constrain or expand the options available to decision makers.

Policy reasoning that is comprehensive should discuss policies that are optimal, but then it should *go on* to discuss what options are actually politic or administrable.<sup>5</sup> The effect is to include political and bureaucratic factors as part of policy analysis. Often, there is tension between what one would like to do "on the merits" and institutional constraints. In order to improve policy outcomes, one might propose changes in the institutions. But equally, in light of political realities, one might alter one's goal for what government should do.<sup>6</sup> There is an interaction between policy and political reasoning:

$$\text{Policy} \rightarrow \text{Politics} \quad (4)$$

Policy reasoning becomes a form of systems analysis that seeks to reconcile goals with means, or what Dror (1968, chapter 14) called "metapolicymaking." At its best, such work approaches equation (1) and the master science.

A lack of this governmental dimension has seriously weakened social policy analysis. Antipoverty experts have repeatedly recommended expanded benefits for the poor, only to have the proposals dismissed out of hand in Washington. This was true of proposals in the 1960s for a negative income tax, later embodied in the Nixon and Carter welfare reform plans, which Congress rejected. The same fate befell proposals for public jobs programs in the 1970s; a limited expansion occurred under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), but it was killed in the Reagan budget cuts of 1981. In the 1980s, proposals for an assured form of child support, which might replace welfare, failed to advance, and in 1991 the National

Commission on Children's plan for a universal and refundable child tax credit received no serious attention (Garfinkel, 1992; National Commission on Children, 1991).

Policy researchers tend to blame these disappointments on conservative politicians who ignore arguments on the merits (Featherman & Vinovskis, 2001). However, the defeats occurred when liberals and Democrats controlled more of Washington than they do today. Rather, advocates focused on the benefits of their proposals to the intended recipients. They failed to take seriously the preferences and priorities of the rest of the community. Politicians resisted partly on grounds of cost, and partly because the proposals slighted public concern that the working-aged poor do more to help themselves. Some of the proposals created new opportunities and incentives for employment, but none required it. Even the public jobs proposals treated work as a benefit to be given to the poor, not as an obligation that they owed to the society. CETA also failed because of serious administrative problems and a lack of positive evaluation findings.<sup>7</sup> By the end of the 1970s, further programming to help the poor seemed unattainable (Aaron, 1978; Rossi, 1987, 3–20).

But if well used, governmental forces can expand options as well as limit them.<sup>9</sup> In the 1990s, policymakers began to use welfare to promote employment rather than avoid it. This policy was so popular that it permitted spending more on welfare and related services than ever before. Substantial sums were invested in welfare work programs, state-level work incentives, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and child and health care for families going to work. Mandatory work programs tied to welfare became far larger and costlier than voluntary training programs. Virtually a new welfare state grew up around promoting and enforcing employment for the working aged. All this led in the last decade to a dramatic fall in the welfare rolls as legions of welfare mothers went to work, usually improving their situation. Had experts and their political allies appreciated the potential, these changes might have occurred 10 or 20 years earlier than they did.

Why are institutional constraints and potentials commonly ignored in policy research? Part of the reason is political. Most policy experts are left of center, particularly those in the universities. Most find distasteful the recent vogue to enforce work and other good behaviors on the poor. If endorsing that policy is the price of expanding aid for the disadvantaged, some will refuse to pay for it. But more important, probably, are disciplinary constraints. As mentioned already, political scientists understand government best, but they usually eschew policy arguments. Conversely, experts who do make policy arguments tend to come from disciplinary backgrounds that neglect institutions.<sup>8</sup>

Policy experts, especially if they are economists, tend to reify government into a unitary actor who already has the authority to make policy. This "Model 1" assumption, as Allison and Zelikow (1999) call it, construes the policymaker's problem as choice rather than power. The policy analyst then advises the decision maker about how best to choose. The logic is all that of equation (2). In fact, in a Madisonian political system with dispersed initiative, policymakers must first assemble the power to act. At best, that means defining public problems so that they cut with the grain of politics and the bureaucracy rather than against. At worse, it

means compromising with political opponents or agency incapacity so that at least something can be achieved (Allison & Zelikow, 1999). In short, equation (3) must be solved even to get equation (2). Policy research typically ignores these judgments.

### *Institutional Influences*

A second way policy research lacks governmental content is that the institutions tends to missing from policy research in the style of equation (2). This is a more serious omission, because it affects our very understanding of the problems that government aims to solve. In social policy research, the dependent term is usually some condition that affects people who are poor or disadvantaged, and the explainers are various factors thought to determine that condition. The model is usually some version of:

$$P = \alpha + \beta_1 E + \beta_2 S + \beta_3 B + \varepsilon \quad (5)$$

Here  $P$  is the problem of interest. Its explainers include  $E$ , a vector of economic conditions;  $S$ , a vector of social or demographic conditions; and  $B$ , a vector of benefits provided by government. The unit of analysis could be geographic or governmental units such as census tracts, in which case all the variables would describe these units. If the unit was the individual,  $E$  might be demographic features that determine employability,  $S$  other attributes of interest, and  $B$  benefits received.

Benefits may include AFDC/TANF, Food Stamps, the EITC, and so on. But governmental influence in any other sense seldom appears. Especially, we seldom see measures for whether the locality enforced work or child support or was tough on crime. Suasions of these noneconomic kinds have a lot to do with the behavior of the poor and dependent today. Models that omit them are underspecified. I give examples in the following discussion.

Again, the reasons include the reluctance of most academics to discuss behavioral enforcement as well as the neglect of institutions in economics and other technical disciplines. But the largest cause is simply that the surveys used by social policy researchers seldom measure institutional influences. The Census or the Panel Study of Income Dynamics includes data on whether an individual or family received income from welfare or other programs, but on whether they faced pressure to work, or pay child support, or do anything else in return. Such surveys promote a view of social problems in which disembodied individuals respond to impersonal social and economic forces. That vision omits the political and programmatic context that is driving change today, especially in connection with welfare reform.<sup>9</sup>

Even the surveys used to track the effects of reform omit governmental factors other than benefits. This is true of the government's Current Population Survey, the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), and the Survey of Program Dynamics (SPD). An expansion of SIPP, SPD focused on the effects of welfare reform. It is also true of the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF), a private survey conducted by the Urban Institute (UI) that focused on family status. UI's Assessing the New Federalism project, of which NSAF is a part, also includes case

studies of how 13 states implemented PRWORA and associated child-care and health policies. These cases have a good deal of governmental content. But they are detached from the survey used to analyze the effects of reform and have received much less attention.<sup>10</sup>

Political research on policymaking that lacks a policy argument draws little interest outside political science. Orthodox policy research in the mode of equation (2) generally draws more interest, but it is also often ignored by policymakers. One reason is that it makes a policy argument but says little directly *about government*. The models may suggest that certain changes in a public policy or benefit would improve the condition of some social groups. But the analysis usually does not show how to enact or implement that change, and these are public officials' chief concerns.

### Field Research

Field inquiry restores governmental content to policy research. It gives a more realistic picture of the forces surrounding social problems, and this can open the way to fresh solutions. Field contact can break the grip that survey-based inquiry has on policy research today, at least in social policy.

### *Survey Research*

Survey-based research generates accurate depictions of the poverty or welfare populations. But surveys simply measure the economic and social attributes of people. Research that is based on surveys tends to be atheoretical, embodying little understanding of why social problems arise.<sup>11</sup> It is in fact difficult to account for much of the behavior of the seriously poor and dependent. Why do many appear to pursue lifestyles that defeat their own ends? Especially, why do few poor adults work regularly? Confronted with these mysteries, much of poverty research responds with description. It portrays the poor or dependent population in withering detail but does not explain their situation.

For want of any more specific theory, survey-based research tends to project an economic psychology onto people. Respondents are said to act so as to maximize their utilities, defined usually in terms of material interests such as money. They respond to "incentives" according to our assumptions about economic actors. They will work or not according to the substitution and income effects. Their capacities or incapacities to work represent "human capital." The programs that give them benefits are assumed to be economic entities, powered by budgets and generating income along with incentives, and so on.

Researchers who are economists make these assumptions naturally. Other researchers make them insensibly, simply because economics has become influential in academe. Yet on its face economism in social policy is implausible. Economics is a science of market behavior, but because of being jobless and low-income, most poor adults live largely outside the market. To understand them requires a more complex psychology (Mead, 1992, chapter 7).

Survey-based research tends also to be conservative in the sense of incremental. Each analysis of the surveys uses essentially the same variables and categories as before. Research that analyzes new data inevitably takes its departure from what has gone before. Hypotheses derive from “the literature,” meaning past research, a tendency also promoted by peer review. New inquiry either confirms or disconfirms those suppositions. But it is difficult to ask a new question.

### *Questioning Economism*

Field inquiry frees the researcher from these constraints. It brings scholars into direct contact with the people involved in a social problem. One no longer views them through the filter of databases or prior research. One must explain behavior initially on the basis of observation, setting aside the academic edifice. The result is initially a more journalistic understanding, based on what one sees and hears from people, rather than on statistical inferences. As I note below, fieldwork may also lead to more valid statistical inferences that are based on program data.

Interpretation of social problems and programs gained from the field tend to conflict with economism. The influences on behavior will seem various, some of them stemming from the economy, but others from institutions or private life. The motivations of people will also seem diverse, hardly confined to optimizing incomes. Economists will object that they assume optimizing behavior, not because it describes actual psychology, but because it predicts behavior (Friedman, 1953). But in social policy, at least, economism is often not even predictive. It misleads policymakers about what measures can best improve lives for the seriously poor.

Field inquiry tends to force researchers away from economic understandings of poverty. For example, the view that work is commonly unavailable to the poor is strongly held by many antipoverty scholars. Elijah Anderson is one who believes that the disappearance of jobs from the inner city is the underlying reason why black youth from these areas tend to misbehave—they lack legitimate opportunities. But he observes youth directly in these neighborhoods, and his accounts of their behavior make little reference to economics. Rather, he attributes the patterns to a breakdown of social authority—an inability by the police and the community to enforce order (Anderson, 1990, 1999).

Katherine Newman began her study of low-wage workers in Harlem out of a conviction that blacks shared the same work ethic as the rest of the population. If many poor blacks did not work regularly, the reason must be the deficiencies of the labor market, not, as some conservatives said, an indulgent welfare system. She did find that there were 14 applicants for every job at a fast-food restaurant in Harlem; employers often preferred hiring people from outside the area. But she also found that most of the workers she interviewed had long employment histories. Their difficulty was not so much to find work as to keep it and get ahead. And one of their chief obstacles was that other youth in the area often opposed their taking low-wage jobs. This, again, traced the problem more to social factors than to opportunities (Newman, 1999).

Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein began their study of poor single mothers believing that these mothers could not make enough to live on either welfare or work. Based on their welfare benefits alone, the single mothers they interviewed would have had incomes of just 53 to 84 percent of the poverty line, depending on their state (U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Ways and Means, 1992, pp. 636–37). This comports with the idea most poverty researchers have that welfare mothers live well below the poverty line. However, Edin and Lein found in their interviews a different reality. The welfare mothers averaged incomes of \$10,596 a year, which was 97 percent of the federal poverty line in 1991 (interviewing took place in 1989–92). The working mothers averaged incomes of \$14,712, or 134 percent of the poverty line. In addition, the mothers had multiple income sources—child support and charity of various kinds as well as welfare and work. Thus, they had more options than they seemed to have at the outset. Especially, whether to work or not was a choice, not something dictated to them by necessity (Edin & Lein, 1997).

Whereas databases convey social and economic conditions, field research highlights informal and institutional suasions that are not so easily measured. In all the studies mentioned, the world of the poor is structured by the rules governing the workplace and child support as well as welfare. Those forces would be even more important today, because it was chiefly changes in work rules that drove the recent welfare revolution. Another change is tougher enforcement of child support as a result of major changes in that system (Mincy & Pouncy, 1997). This is just the institutional content that policy research needs in order to realize the vision of a master science.

### *Serendipity*

Above all, field research allows one to ask new questions. Because of the complexity of what one learns in the field, ideas about causes and cures of problems that fall outside the existing literature may emerge. That allows the researcher to pose hypotheses that are genuinely new. These in turn can be the basis for a more realistic quantitative inquiry.

For example, before the 1990s, the usual view of employment programs was that they are economic in nature, driven by resources and incentives. Their effects depended on how many clients they were funded to serve. Each had a limited number of “slots.” Recipients were chosen for these slots and then were “invested” in by the program. There was thought to be a trade-off between serving many clients minimally and serving fewer more richly. This perspective treated the clients as passive receptacles of social resources (Gueron & Pauly, with Lougy, 1991; Hagen & Lurie, 1994). But in the late 1970s, studies were conducted on the Employment Service and the Work Incentive (WIN) programs, relating their performance, in part, to how well they were run. WIN was the first of several mandatory work programs instituted in AFDC to put employable recipients to work.<sup>12</sup>

During the WIN interviewing, local staff gave me quite a different image of their task. It was not to invest in passive clients. Rather, it was to get the clients to help themselves by going out and getting a job. Whether the program could do that

depended more on its authority than on its funding. Staff said the clients would go to work if they were clearly told to do so, but that the program usually could not do this because of restrictive rules. I followed up this idea in my own studies. These showed that whether a program obligated its clients to participate, and whether it put them in job search, strongly predicted the job placements it made, even when controlling for the employability of the clients and the local labor market. This finding was consistent with evaluations of work programs in the 1980s showing programs that enforced participation had the largest impacts (Mead, 1983, 1985b, 1988).

In the fieldwork for these studies, further possibilities came to me: The number of clients who actively participated in a program was a measure of its authority. Maximizing participation required an administration where staff oversaw clients to ensure that they fulfilled their obligations—an approach I called paternalist. By these means, effective work programs could drive up employment and reduce case-loads. That potential was dramatically realized in Wisconsin (Mead, 1997, 1999). In all these studies, statistical analyses that used program data verified field impressions, but the original ideas came from the field. They could not have come from prior research, because until the 1990s, virtually nothing in the poverty literature treated work as a problem of enforcement.<sup>13</sup> Rather, low work levels among the poor were seen as an economic problem rooted in the labor market.<sup>14</sup> It took direct contact with the problem unmediated by prior research to reveal the key role of the institutions.

### Where Research Erred

In several instances related to welfare reform, impressions of social problems given by conventional social research were contradicted by field research as well as by policy experience.

#### *Can Welfare Recipients Work?*

Was it possible for welfare mothers to work? Prior to reform, many experts doubted this. Most studied the employability of the poor statistically, using various databases to examine the features of needy adults who did and did not work. They found that the nonworkers had less education and work experience, more children, and more personal and family problems than others who were employed. They treated these correlations as “barriers” to employment. They concluded that government should not demand greater effort from single mothers, unless it first eased the “barriers.” That meant providing recipients with better education and training and more child and health care. Some experts suggested that even if welfare mothers could work, there was little point in their doing so because the jobs they could get would still leave them poor (e.g., Cancian & Meyer, 1995; Heymann & Earle, 1998; Michalopoulos & Garfinkel, 1989; Nightingale & Haveman, 1995).

A typical conclusion was that “. . . the wages and job options available to less-skilled women are extremely limited; increased hours of work do not produce large

economic returns. Female heads of households . . . face complex child care issues, and the welfare of their children could be seriously harmed by further declines in AFDC benefits and any arbitrary termination of welfare support." Indeed, a work demand "may be the proverbial 'last straw'—one more pressure on an already strained situation in families already stretched to the limits of their coping ability" (Blank, 1994, p. 203; Spakes, 1982, p. 688). 13

Some other research, however, suggested that work by welfare mothers was quite common, even if much of it went unreported to the welfare department to avoid grant reductions (Harris, 1993; Rein, 1982, chapter 6). Edin and Lein's research revealed that whether to work was a choice that low-income single mothers made depending on circumstances, not something they were barred from by the environment. Since even the "welfare-reliant" mothers in this study sometimes worked, it was not clear why more could not do so regularly. In the 1990s, policymakers decided that the majority could in fact work, and events confirmed their judgment. The rise in work among poor mothers is discussed further later in the article.

Some recent academic studies appraise the employment prospects of welfare adults more positively. It now seems that positions are widely available to them. Wages, coupled with remaining government benefits such as EITC, can raise their incomes substantially. Provided they take jobs and work steadily, they can escape poverty and move up to higher incomes over time.<sup>15</sup> These studies, however, came in the wake of welfare reform, when it was easier to see the potential for employment.

#### *Are Jobs Available?*

As mentioned above, many experts doubt that jobs are available to the poor of the inner city, whether women or men. Many support the "mismatch theory," or the idea that for economic reasons jobs have tended to leave the inner city, where most urban poor reside, and shift to the suburbs, the South, or overseas. Or if jobs still exist in the center city, they demand more skills than the poor usually have. This idea is the centerpiece of the complex theory of urban poverty developed by William Julius Wilson and his followers (Wilson, 1987, 1996). Although the statistical evidence for this theory is generally weak (Holzer, 1991; Jencks & Mayer, 1990), a few recent studies are in favor, keeping the theory alive (Bound & Holzer, 1993, 387–96; Ihlanfeldt & Sjoquist, 1990, 267–76). This is a case where some field impressions—low work levels in poor areas—may seem to support the theory.

The bulk of observational evidence, however, cuts the other way. Wilson mounted a large study of poverty in Chicago in the 1980s, but it failed to find clear evidence that jobs were lacking in the inner city. Rather, interviews with inner-city fathers showed that work levels varied strongly by ethnicity. Mexicans had the lowest human capital, yet 93 percent of them were employed, compared with 82 percent of whites. Blacks had human capital nearly equal to whites', yet only 66 percent of them were working (Aponte, 1991). In addition, the Wilson project commissioned an interview of employers in and around Chicago who frequently hired low-skilled labor. They were hostile to hiring blacks from the inner city, claiming to

have found them unreliable (Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991). Heavy immigration by the unskilled from Latin America and Asia is the best evidence against the mismatch theory. For the native-born poor, basic work discipline, not jobs, is what appears to be lacking.

This evidence applies to the 1980s. The economy was still in better shape later. When radical welfare reform hit the cities in the mid-1990s, the nation enjoyed the best labor market in 30 years. It was a period marked by massive job creation and low unemployment as well as a recovery of earnings growth even for the low-skilled workers, whose wages had fallen for two decades.

Nevertheless, while work levels for poor black women rose sharply in the 1990s, employment for black men continued to fall. That trend cannot be explained by economics. A more important factor appears to be tighter legislation and enforcement of child support—just the sort of institutional factor that is usually left out of antipoverty research (Holzer & Offner, 2004, 74–5; Holzer, Offner, & Sorensen, 2005, 329–50).<sup>14</sup>

#### *Why Did Caseloads Fall?*

After national welfare caseload peaked in 1994, they fell by 60 percent through 2002.<sup>16</sup> The collapse accelerated with the passage of PRWORA in 1996 but began well before it. It was easily the steepest decline in the history of AFDC/TANF. The most dramatic policy change in the period was the institution of serious work requirements in AFDC/TANF. Yet several economic studies attribute the bulk of the decline to the excellent economic conditions of the 1990s, demoting welfare reform to a secondary role (Bell, 2001; Council of Economic Advisors, 1997, 1999; Ziliak et al., 1997). Some other studies give reform a greater role (Bishop, 1998; Ellwood, 1999; Grogger, 2004; O'Neill & Hill, 2001), but overall, economic causes dominate this literature.

That is surprising, given that tight labor markets in the past did not see a similar decline in the caseload. Indeed, in the 1960s the rolls grew relentlessly despite forceful economic growth. In the boom of the late 1980s, they changed little, then grew by a third during 1989–94, an expansion that began before the recession of the early 1990s. Journalists' and field researchers' observational accounts of the recent fall trace it principally to welfare reform, which welfare mothers took seriously as an alternative to welfare. Jobs also had to be available, and they were,<sup>15</sup> but what triggered change was the new work policy (DeParle, 1997, A1, A16; Nathan & Gais, 2001).<sup>16</sup>

In Wisconsin, the state with the sharpest caseload fall, 53 percent of the decline over 1987–96 was due to a favorable economy, only 11 percent was due to welfare reform, according to one economic study.<sup>17</sup> However, when I asked state and local welfare officials in 1995 what was driving the caseload down, 52 percent cited the economy, 58 percent cited increased work requirements, 37 percent pointed to changed political expectations surrounding welfare, and smaller percentages cited other policy changes such as increased support services and improved child-support collections. Respondents said that mere controversy over welfare reform

had begun to drive the rolls down, as recipients heard talk about self-reliance—even before reform was legislated, let alone implemented. Overall, policy and political causes clearly outweighed economic ones.<sup>18</sup>

The difference probably reflects the fact that the economic studies cannot measure welfare reform as well as they do economic conditions. They gauge reform very imperfectly, that is, in terms of whether a state had waivers from Washington to run experimental programs prior to PRWORA. As a result, some of the credit for change that should go to welfare reform is attributed to economic variables. If one measures policy more accurately using program data, the importance of reform in explaining caseload change appears greater.<sup>19</sup> Field research is vital to appreciate how reform transformed welfare. It was more than a change in certain indicators that showed up in regression equations. Rather, an entire political system mobilized to transform welfare, and it succeeded.

#### *Why Did Work Levels Rise?*

Linked to the caseload fall was a dramatic rise in work levels among the poor. In 1993, only 44 percent of poor mothers with children had worked at all, but by 1999 the number increased to 64 percent; then declined to 55 percent by 2003, probably because of the recession.<sup>20</sup> Again, one might attribute this change to welfare reform, since raising work levels by poor parents was one of its leading goals. However, two prominent economic studies attribute the increase mostly to the EITC, which was expanded in 1990 and 1993. The authors wondered what need there was for “punitive measures” such as work enforcement when improved work incentives sufficed to cause poor parents to look for jobs (Grogger, 2003; Meyer & Rosenbaum, 2001).

Again, the finding contradicted earlier policy experience. In the 1970s and 1980s, giving work incentives to welfare mothers (that is, allowing them to keep part of their earnings if they worked, rather than deducting all earnings from grants) had shown little power to raise work levels (Moffitt, 1992). This was one reason why policy shifted toward administrative work requirements—demands to work as a condition of aid. In the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), incentives and requirements to promote work together had much stronger impacts on employment and earnings by long-term single mothers than incentives alone (Miller et al., 2000, 83–113). Early studies of the expansion of the EITC suggested that the effect on work levels would be palpable but small (Dickert, Hauser, & Scholz, 1995; Eissa & Liebman, 1996, 605–37). How then could the EITC become the dominant cause of work increases in the 1990s?

The result is also contradicted by field evidence. In the Wisconsin interviews mentioned earlier, not a single respondent—out of 60—mentioned the EITC as a cause of the caseload decline—even though the state had added its own wage subsidy to the federal one. I also asked several senior officials involved in welfare reform in both Wisconsin and New York whether they had ever heard of an EITC role in the caseload fall; most denied any such effect.<sup>21</sup> If no one had heard of these subsidies motivating respondents to leave the rolls, how can we believe the large

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effect claimed? Again, the likely explanation is that quantitative studies cannot measure welfare reform accurately, so that some of its effects are wrongly attributed to the EITC or other economic variables.

The economic account presumes that recipients heard about the EITC, thought that it made work worthwhile, then went out and got a job. Journalistic observations in Wisconsin suggest, however, that recipients went to work chiefly because they were pushed by welfare reform, and also because jobs were available. They then heard about the EITC and received it as a windfall. Either they filed for it after they had begun working, or it was sent to them by tax authorities because they appeared eligible (DeParle, 1999, 1, 20; Sherman, 2000, 38–9). Thus, higher work levels drove up EITC claims, not the other way around. Again, field observation clarifies realities missed by the most elaborate statistical analysis.

### Optimizing Field Research

The limitation of survey-based research is that it obtains precision and generalizability at the expense of oversimplifying reality.<sup>22</sup> Only attributes that are easily measurable can be included in large databases, and these may overlook the institutional forces that increasingly structure the world of the poor. The whole governmental effort to promote welfare work and child support falls largely outside these data.

Field research has opposite limitations. Hands-on contact does convey a fuller picture of reality, but drawing conclusions is more judgmental. Fieldwork can become a form of journalism, where impressions of a problem are knit together out of diverse comments from the people one happens to interview. The picture may not be wrong, but we cannot know that it is right without comparing it with other, more systematic research. The subjectivity comes partly from judgments about whom to talk to, partly from how one sums up what people say. 18

One solution is to make the respondents in field inquiry as representative as possible. This is done by first defining the universe of officials or recipients that one wishes to include in the study, and then choosing a sample that captures the full range of variation. For staffs, it is seldom feasible literally to draw a sample; at each site, one has to interview the people available on the day; but one can at least choose people from a variety of positions inside the organization. In a program with multiple offices, interviews should be carried out at all sites if possible, otherwise at a selection that is representative of the offices under study. Such a sample usually has to be constructed rather than randomly chosen, since the number of sites is likely to be small.<sup>23</sup> The goal is to obtain the full range of variation in the program dimensions that one believes might influence performance. 19

Most important is to verify the picture of problems and solutions that comes from the field in some more rigorous way. Research premised on “the literature” may foreclose serendipity. But equally, once the field has offered up new hypotheses, they should be verified statistically if possible. Do the connections that respondents assert between certain policies and results really hold; and if they hold at one site, are they valid across the entire program? This is possible if the program

dimensions of interest can be measured and thus related to performance measures, and if one can control for other influences.

The testing of hypotheses usually requires program data, as only this can capture the institutional or policy features highlighted in interviews. In my welfare work studies, respondents identified the program's authority as a crucial determinant of performance. I measured it using the participation rate, while the proportions of clients assigned to varying activities captured the program's emphasis on job search versus education and training. Staff suggested that high participation and an emphasis on job search tended to produce more job entries, and the statistics confirmed this. It was also essential that the programs provide data on the demographics of their caseloads, to generate control variables. Labor-market controls were available from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data. The effect was to change equation (5) into:

$$P = \alpha + \beta_1 E + \beta_2 S + \beta_3 B + \beta_4 A + \varepsilon \quad (6)$$

Now, alongside variables expressing economic and social conditions, or benefits, we have a vector that expresses various administrative dimensions of the program. This model is much more able to capture all the influences on the clients and hence on outcomes.<sup>24</sup>

Interview findings backed up by statistical analysis are a powerful combination for understanding how programs affect social problems. Just as the numbers serve as a check on the interviews, so were the interviews vital to explaining the numbers. Unlike survey-based research, this sort of modeling is tied into bureaucratic context. It brings to the surface the role of the institutions in shaping outcomes, just as standard modeling tends to conceal it. The combination of the field and program data begins to demonstrate the sort of connection seen in equation (3). Governmental content is restored to policy research, and the master science of equation (1) becomes imaginable.

One might say that looking at the connection between policy and outcomes is the job of evaluators. At their best, as in well-run experimental trials, evaluations do test the effects of some program on a clientele. Recent evaluations on welfare work programs contributed much of the institutional content that social policy research does have. But evaluations usually reveal little about how the institutions function. They can show the impact of a policy, but programs are complicated, and it is seldom clear which of their elements produced the effect, or how.<sup>25</sup> By comparing the effects of different client assignments on performance measures, statistical models help researchers to break into the "black box." That is true even though the results are not strictly speaking of an evaluation; they compare subunits within a program, rather than the program against no program at all.

The "new public management" has recently proposed a more ambitious form of program modeling. This school, developed by Laurence E. Lynn, Jr. and his collaborators, aspires to link features of organization more rigorously to outcome measures than has traditionally been done in public administration. The group uses hierarchical modeling to relate both the services provided to clients and higher-level features of a program to its results (Heinrich & Lynn Jr., 2000; Lynn Jr., Heinrich, &

Hill, 2001). In some cases, performance is stated in terms of impact, not just outcomes, because the data come from experimental evaluations (Bloom, Hill, & Riccio, 2003; Heinrich, 2000, 233–61).

In principle, this is an advance over the simpler modeling suggested above, but all depends on whether researchers can measure the dimensions of interest. In many instances, modeling has been confined to peripheral aspects of organizational performance because these were the only source of data. In some cases, measures of service provision are calibrated by using interviews rather than program data, there is no demographic data on caseloads, or there is no field dimension to the research at all (Lynn Jr. & Ingraham, 2004). These studies suffer from some of the same validity doubts as did other academic research on social policy. There is no substitute for field inquiry backed up by program reporting that can measure the major determinants of interest. Without these resources, improved modeling techniques cannot achieve much.

### Why Field Research Is Rare

Field inquiry is vital to bringing governmental content back into policy research, and thus realizing the promise of the master science. But academic resistance to doing this is strong. Notwithstanding the inability of survey-based studies to understand the recent revolution in welfare, I see no tendency for more researchers to go out into the field and find out what is going on.

When I began my research into welfare reform in Wisconsin, I expected that I would have many competitors. The state was too prominent for other scholars who are out there laying hands on the institutions. But in months of fieldwork in the Wisconsin counties, I never encountered another researcher doing similar work, nor heard of any. I was also virtually alone in studying the politics of reform in the state.<sup>26</sup> The other people who came to Wisconsin to study the reform directly were all journalists or welfare officials from elsewhere in the country, or overseas—not researchers. 21

Many scholars at the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and elsewhere did want to study the reform. But their interests was chiefly in the social and economic effects of the reform. Requests for data or for permission to interview clients were so heavy that the state had to create a special body to process them.<sup>27</sup> Nearly all these scholars operated from behind their computers. I had the political and administration dimensions of reform—the chief forces that drove change—all to myself.

Again, one reason was politics. IRP was largely excluded from the planning of welfare reform in Wisconsin because its researchers mostly disagreed with the conservative tenor of that change. One reason I could do fieldwork in Wisconsin was that as a recognized conservative I could gather the data and permission to interview, whereas other scholars might have been denied entrée. Access is a precondition for field research, and it is far from automatic.<sup>28</sup>

The greater fact, however, is that for most researchers improving public policy is not a high priority. Even many of those who do policy research in the universi-

ties or think tanks are not, in my experience, centrally interested in equation (2), let alone (3) or (1). Other things are more important, and one of these is disciplinary respectability. All the social sciences today have modeled themselves on the hard sciences. They seek theoretical knowledge, as the various disciplines understand that. By these lights, most policy research appears “applied” and low-tech.

Even more important is rigor, or the derivation of results that are precise and unquestionable. There is a trade-off between rigor and realism. Achieving bullet-proof findings usually requires simplifying information sources—most often to standard databases—so that one can give an exact account of how inferences were drawn. Realistic policy research, however, involves multiple information sources. Integrating them to form conclusions is necessarily judgmental. That is particularly true with field research, which is more suggestive than conclusive. Such inquiry faces skepticism from peer reviewers. To them field research can easily appear to be a little better than journalism or consulting. This makes the work less eligible for journal publication, which is the coin of the realm in today’s academe.<sup>29</sup>

For these reasons, most researchers today who claim to pursue policy subjects are primarily mathematicians. Only such people can make it in academe or the leading think tanks. Their strength is in sophisticated forms of data analysis, and they display it by doing survey-based research. However, the contribution that this work makes is largely to method, not to policy substance. This research community is alive with acute intelligence and intense methodological rivalries, but it is remote from reality, because it involves very thin information sources.

The issue between field research and academia goes to the nature of knowledge. Do you believe that there is a reality “out there” that can be simply observed, or do you believe that knowledge is created by method? Field research asserts the former. It raises dangers of subjectivity that need to be countered in the ways I have suggested. But reality is nevertheless seen as something waiting to be discovered. Academia, however, tends to believe that truth must be constructed by some deliberate procedure. It has no reality apart from statistical inference.

Field research places faith in stamina and shoe leather, not mathematical methods. One leaves his or her computer and goes out into the world with open hands, and without strong hypotheses. One is assaulted by information from many sources, in many forms. One struggles to assimilate those pieces of information and integrate them. It is like the moment in “The Wizard of Oz” when the tornado transports Dorothy into the magic kingdom, and the screen turns from black and white to color. One encounters real government, which is alive with energies and complexities invisible to the databases. It is out there in the real world that the battle for better public policy must be won. To support that quest, policy research must lay hands on the institutions. Or the master science cannot be realized. 22

## Notes

- 29 1. This article builds on Lawrence M. Mead (1996, 2001, 2004a).
2. The changes were driven by the Family Support Act of 1988 and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), although work demands in some states went back earlier. PRWORA recast AFDC as TANF.

3. In social policy, those few would include myself, John DiIulio, Charles Murray, and James Q. Wilson. Of course, Wilson is also prominent as a political scientist outside the policy field, a measure of his unusual achievement.
4. Examples include my books on poverty and welfare reform (e.g., *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligations of Citizenship*, New York: Free Press, 1986) and Allen Schick's books on the federal budget problem (e.g., *The Capacity to Budget*, Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 1990). But the best example is Derek Bok's (1996) ambitious study of the federal government in which he appraises the government's performance in policy terms, and in 2001 he traces its problems back to features of the regime and its politics. 30
5. The following is based largely on Lawrence M. Mead (1985a, 1995).
6. The need to limit goals in social policy to those government could achieve was a theme of Aaron Wildavsky (1979).
7. Mead, *Beyond Entitlement*, chapters 3, 5.
8. I realize that there is a "positive" economics that seeks to explain politics and bureaucracy, but it is seldom practiced by the economists who study policy issues. One may also question whether economists' views of how government works are realistic.
9. For a rare attempt to add indicators of state "requirements" to individual-level data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, see Robert D. Plotnick (1990).
10. There are also 21 case studies TANF implementation that were carried out by the State Capacity Study at the Rockefeller Institute of Government at the State University of New York. These cases are even richer in governmental content, but again no clear connections to policy outcomes are made. However, I used both the UI and Rockefeller cases to try to relate governmental features to at least the implementation of TANF. See Lawrence M. Mead (2004c).
11. I refer here to the main social surveys mentioned above. Some other surveys, such as political science's National Election Studies, embody a more specific psychology.
12. Mark Lincoln Chadwin, John J. Mitchell, Erwin C. Hargrove, and Lawrence M. Mead (1977); and John J. Mitchell, Mark L. Chadwin, and Demetra S. Nightingale (1980). A summary of the WIN study appeared as Mark Lincoln Chadwin, John J. Mitchell, and Demetra Smith Nightingale (1981): pp. 372–80.
13. One exception: Valerie Englander and Fred Englander (1985): pp. 33–41.
14. Until at least the late 1980s, most experts rejected the idea that welfare work programs had to be mandatory to succeed. See Laurence E. Lynn, Jr. (1989): pp. 284–306. In the wake of welfare reform, few would dispute that idea today.
15. Gregory Acs, Norma Coe, Keith Watson, and Robert I. Lerman (1998); Harry J. Holzer (1999): pp. 449–72; Harry J. Holzer and Michael A. Stoll (May 2000); Susanna Loeb and Mary Corcoran (2001): pp. 1–20; LaDonna Pavetti and Gregory Acs (2001): pp. 721–36; Sheldon Danziger, Colleen M. Heflin, Mary E. Corcoran, Elizabeth Oltmans, and Hui-Chen Wang (2002): pp. 671–92.
16. Caseload data from the U.S. Administration of Children and Families.
17. Ziliak et al. (1997) *Accounting for the Decline in AFDC Caseloads*, pp. 22–6.
18. Lawrence M. Mead (2004b), pp. 178–81. Respondents might cite any of these factors, so the percentages add to more than 100.
19. Lawrence M. Mead (2000a, 2003). However, these are cross-sectional studies and thus are not strictly comparable to the economic studies, most of which use pooled models.
20. March 1994 Current Population Survey, Table 19; March 2000 Current Population Survey, Table 17; March 2004 Annual Demographic Survey, Table POV15.
21. One official said that job placement staff used the EITC as one argument to persuade recipients to take jobs, and several said that the EITC might help families stay off welfare once they have begun working. But these mechanisms are distinct from the recipients learning of the credit and then deciding independently to go to work, which is what the economic studies assume. Rather, these reasonings set the recipients in an administrative context created by welfare, the very thing omitted from the standard economic methodology.
22. This discussion draws on Gary King, Robert D. Keohane and Sidney Verba (1994), pp. 151–5.

23. In my welfare work studies I either interviewed all local programs (New York City), visited some and talked to others by phone (New York State), or visited a constructed sample of ten counties meant to be representative of 72 counties in total (Wisconsin).
24. Unfortunately, the reporting now available on welfare work programs today is less adequate than in the WIN era. See Mead (2004a) pp. 123–6.
25. An experimental evaluation can isolate the effect of specific program elements only if there are multiple program groups so as to estimate the effect of each aspect of the treatment. MDRC has accomplished this in some of its evaluations, notably in MFIP (see Miller et al., 2000, *Reforming Welfare and Rewarding Work*) and in the comparisons of “labor market attachment” and “human capital development” programs in the National Evaluation of Welfare to Work Strategies.
26. Michael Heaney, a graduate student at the University of Chicago, also researched the politics. His methods were more systematic than mine, but he drew conclusions similar to mine, which were reported in Lawrence M. Mead (2000b).
27. Mead (2004b), *Government Matters*, pp. 153–5.
28. Mead (2004b), *Government Matters*, pp. 56, 60, 107–8, 256; Mead (2004a) pp. 121–3.
29. The research for Mead, *Government Matters*, generated nine academic articles. But only one of them appeared in a major political science journal. In most cases, the obstacle was inability to meet canons of rigor set largely outside policy research. All the other articles appeared in public policy outlets.

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