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Research and Welfare Reform

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Abstract

Social science research had an important but limited effect on welfare reform, meaning recent enactments that imposed work requirements on family welfare. Policymakers sometimes ignored findings, but the features of research also limited its influence. Most academics did not accept the conservative goals of reform, many of their predictions proved to be incorrect, and research also lacked sufficient policy content to interest government. These features reflect the recent development of the social sciences. For research to have more influence, it must become more catholic about goals and more realistic, and it must offer more governmental content. Especially, inquiry should rely less on the statistical analysis of databases and more on field observation of how poor communities live and programs operate.

Introduction

What influence did research have on welfare reform? By research I mean studies of the poverty or welfare problems and how to solve them, for example, the evaluations of welfare work programs by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC). By welfare reform I mean the long-running struggle to transform Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the nation's controversial family aid program. That effort culminated in the Family Support Act (FSA) of 1988, which expanded welfare work programs, and in the radical Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA; Pub. L. No. 104-193). PRWORA recast AFDC as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), ended the federal entitlement to aid, limited families to five years on the rolls, and stiffened work requirements, among other changes. By reform here I will chiefly mean FSA and PRWORA at the federal level and parallel efforts by states to implement work requirements and other changes at the local level.

Most observers think research affected reform, but that its influence was limited by ideology, which led politicians to do some things unsupported by research. I agree, but I will argue that the influence of research was also curbed by its own shortcomings. Much that scholars said about poverty and welfare prior to reform turned out to be impolitic, incorrect, or simply irrelevant to government. The limitations chiefly reflect how the social sciences have recently developed.

In what follows, I first describe more fully what welfare reform has meant, then the influence research might have had, then the limited influence it did have, and the reasons for the limits. I conclude with some suggestions for making research more relevant in the future.

The Meaning of Reform

Welfare reform might have addressed any of the perceived shortcomings of AFDC. In the forty years since welfare became a national issue, liberals often criticized welfare benefits (which are set by states) for being unduly low, particularly in the

South. They also attacked welfare for setting up incentives contrary to work and marriage; originally, a welfare mother who worked or married lost most of her public support. More recently, liberals called for improved wage subsidies and health and child care, the better to support single mothers working outside AFDC.

Conservatives share liberal concerns about disincentives, but they also criticize the welfare system for frequent fraud and abuse and for failing to collect child support from the absent fathers of welfare families. Above all, they favor enforcing work on the employable recipients, including most single mothers, as a condition of aid. Like other poor adults, welfare mothers seldom work consistently, and this is often the immediate reason why they are poor and dependent.

Over the course of the welfare controversy after 1960, some steps were taken to address all these concerns. On the liberal side, disincentives were limited in the 1960s by extending some AFDC coverage to two-parent families and improving work incentives. In the 1980s, health coverage for poor families was improved, on and off welfare, and in the 1990s wage and child care subsidies grew sharply. But over time, the conservative approach to reform came to dominate, in part because of the turning of national politics to the right. Washington forced the states to crack down on fraud and abuse and toughen child support enforcement. Above all, FSA and PRWORA sharply raised work requirements. By 2002, the states were supposed to have at least half their cases active in work programs, although few achieved this.

Faced with these federal mandates, localities had to decide which recipients should have to participate in work programs, and what they should have to do. Pioneers such as Michigan and Wisconsin restructured welfare to require the bulk of adult recipients to enter education or training activities, or to look for work in the private sector. Unevenly but inexorably, in the 1990s these work demands spread across the nation. PRWORA accelerated a change that was already underway.

The rolls rose sharply in the early 1990s, peaking in 1994 at more than fourteen million persons, chiefly due to a recession and higher unwed pregnancy. They then fell dramatically by 2002 to around five million people, or by more than 60%. Experts dispute whether the chief cause was welfare reform, the superb economy of the 1990s, or the new wage and child care subsidies. It is at least clear that welfare reform is the strongest influence in the late 1990s (Council of Economic Advisors, 1999; Ellwood, 1999). After 1994, the steady rise of work tests, along with rising public impatience with dependency, changed the political climate around AFDC. Fewer needy families now braved the stigma of welfare to get aid, while more left due to both work tests and available jobs. Those forces strengthened under PRWORA.

The concrete effects of reform to date have been largely positive, more so than any expert predicted. Not only did dependency plummet, but work levels among poor single mothers soared. Follow-up surveys find that most mothers who recently left welfare are working. Most have somewhat higher income, although many are still struggling. Poverty levels have fallen much less than the welfare rolls, but little hardship traceable to reform has occurred. More should be done to raise the incomes of former welfare families and to reconnect fathers to their families. But even as it stands, the recent reform represents a notable success.

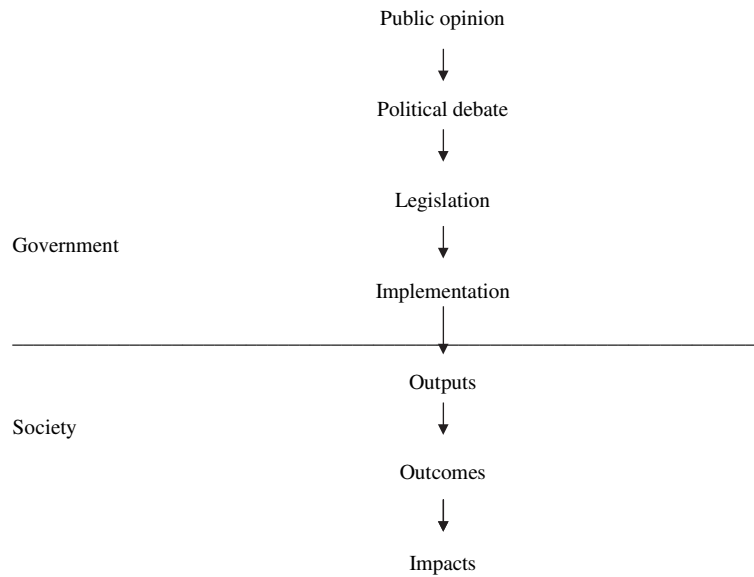


Figure 1. The Welfare Reform Process

Reform was antigovernment in the sense that traditional welfare was indicted as a failure and dependency and costs were cut. But as it evolved, reform was also pro-government. Family welfare has not been done away with, rather, rebuilt around employment. States have changed their benefit levels surprisingly little. Much more, they have attached new work requirements to the benefits, and they have also spent more on the various support services (Gais & Weaver, 2002). The nation is spending more today on the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), a wage subsidy for the working poor, than it did earlier on AFDC. Welfare has been transformed from a safety net for nonworking families into services and benefits chiefly for the working poor.

Figure 1 summarizes the welfare reform process. The public will to “end welfare as we know it” triggered debate about how to reform. That eventually prompted legislation—FSA and PRWORA at the federal level, then more detailed statutes at the state level. The new work programs along with child care and other services were then implemented by local welfare and employment agencies. Those programs generated outputs, or new benefits and services for the clients; which in turn generated outcomes in the form of more job entries and less dependency; which in turn generated impacts to the extent that outcomes improved on what otherwise would have occurred.

What Research Might Contribute

What might research have contributed to reform? First, researchers might simply *describe* the social problem that government faces. Most academic research on poverty and welfare has this descriptive character. Second, research could tell government how to change social conditions through policy. Officials seek to make *instrumental* statements in the form: *If* we change policy in this way, *then* this result

will follow. Of course, analytic input is only one basis for policymaking, and seldom the largest one. Politicians do some things to honor their moral beliefs, regardless of consequences. If policymaking rests on values rather than forecasting, research will play little role.

Research might be used to make instrumental connections at any point in the process depicted in Figure 1. It might illuminate which reforms would resonate with public opinion, or command a legislative majority, or be easy to implement, as well as have good effects. Above all, policymakers need ways to cross the dividing line between government and society. They want to know what government can do to generate favorable effects on social problems. In the welfare context, which changes to AFDC will abate the problems linked to that system, above all, low work levels among the adult recipients? For research to have influenced welfare reform, policymakers had to ask questions like this. Equally important, scholars had to be able to answer them.

Where Research Had Influence

In welfare reform, the one case of descriptive research that clearly swayed decision makers at the national level was studies demonstrating the importance of long-term welfare.¹ Liberal experts had long said that turnover on the rolls was so rapid that excessive dependency should not be a concern. But in the 1980s, Mary Jo Bane and David Ellwood (1983), and June O'Neill and her coauthors (O'Neill, Wolf, Bassi, & Hannan, 1984), used longitudinal data to estimate the distribution of spells on welfare. They found that indeed many families left welfare quickly, but a substantial proportion did not. In Bane and Ellwood, about half the spells ended within two years, but half lasted longer. And the rolls at a moment in time were predominantly long-term. These findings helped convince Congress that basic changes in welfare were unavoidable. That was one impetus behind the drive to enforce work in FSA and PRWORA.

The instrumental research that most influenced reform was the MDRC evaluations of welfare work programs. These were the first studies to demonstrate that requiring welfare mothers to work could have positive effects on their employment and earnings, while reducing their dependency. The key early projects occurred in the 1980s in San Diego. These suggested that impacts were maximized if programs were demanding, requiring recipients to participate and then to work, or else enter public jobs. The studies were more authoritative than most earlier training evaluations because they used experimentation, involving random allocation of subjects to treatment and control groups, rather than more doubtful statistical methods (Goldman, Friedlander, & Long, 1986; Hamilton & Friedlander, 1989). The positive results helped motivate the expansion of mandatory work programs in FSA. In the 1990s, further MDRC experiments showed that programs that emphasized putting clients to work in available jobs, even if low-paid, outperformed those that stressed training or education for better-paid positions (Hamilton et al., 2001; Riccio, Friedlander, & Freedman, 1994). That helped to motivate the shift in policy seen between FSA, which favored remediation ahead of work for most clients, and PRWORA, which strongly stressed "work first."

Broader arguments by Charles Murray, Lawrence Mead, and David Ellwood also had influence. Murray contended in *Losing Ground* (1984) that the disincentives against good behavior created by welfare and other social programs were the principal reason for the demoralization of the poor; the only solution was to abolish most aid for the working-aged. This contention undermined the consensus defending the old welfare system, but few experts found the evidence for disincentives strong enough to justify Murray's extreme conclusion. Mead argued in *Beyond Entitlement* (1986) and *The New Politics of Poverty* (1992) that welfare erred, not in aiding the poor, but in failing to demand work and other civilities from them in return. The answer was, not to spend more or less on benefits, but to demand reciprocity from recipients. While some doubted that work was feasible for many recipients, this argument helped to justify FSA, the work enforcement aspects of PRWORA, and the more demanding welfare work programs at the local level (Mead, 1986, 1992). Ellwood urged in *Poor Support* (1988) that the answer to welfare was to "make work pay" by providing new wage, child care, and health care benefits, as well as better child support, so that single mothers could survive without AFDC. This idea became the basis for the Clinton welfare reform plan, although it was overtaken by PRWORA.

These books had influence because they argued persuasively about how policy might cross the division between government and society seen in Figure 1. All involve some systemic inquiry. Murray reasoned largely from adverse trends in social problems among blacks; these made it seem that the liberal social policy of the 1960s had unhinged poor America. Mead (1988) relied on studies of welfare work programs, suggesting that more welfare mothers would work if they were expected to, even allowing for the labor market and the employability of the recipients. Ellwood concluded from the demographics and psychology of poor single mothers that they simply could not work their way off AFDC unless government provided them a support system outside welfare (Bane & Elwood, 1994, chap. 3).

However, all the authors surrounded their technical findings with broader contentions about the nature of the poverty problem and how to solve it in ways consistent with American politics. It was these elements, coupled with the hard evidence, that allowed them to argue that their recommendations would in fact have the effects claimed. All three authors—especially Murray—drew criticism from other experts. Nevertheless, they argued their cases at a level sufficient to command attention and thus to influence decisions.

The Limits of Influence

For all this, the influence of research on welfare reform was decidedly limited, and not only by politics. Both FSA and PRWORA did some things that flew in the face of research, or which honored values as ends in themselves. FSA insisted that its expanded work programs emphasize education and training for most recipients, even though the evaluations suggested even then that work first was a better policy. In stiffening work tests further, PRWORA raised the activity levels that states were supposed to reach far above what virtually any state had achieved. It also attempted

to promote marriage, although there was no research to show that government could do this (Baum, 1991, pp. 611–612; Haskins, 1991, p. 630; Gueron, 1996, pp. 556–557).

Research was also secondary at lower levels. In implementing TANF, most states consulted their experience rather than systematic inquiry. While officials may have heard of prominent experiments elsewhere, their knowledge of the findings was often sketchy. Governors and senior agency leaders attached greatest weight to their own program history. They also took little direct input from their own electorates. Rather, they decided what to do by their own lights, then sold it to the legislature and the voters. Even the influence of bellwether states such as Michigan or Wisconsin was limited (Gais & Nathan, 1999; Greenberg, Mandell, & Onstott, 2000; Shaw, 2000). One reason for this was probably that decision makers needed research less at the local than at the national level. In Washington, few politicians have direct knowledge of welfare. Research thus helped to educate them about the problem they faced. In states and cities, however, officials have more sense of welfare as a program. They usually have a good idea of what the problems are, and know something about how to solve them, without a need for scholarly guidance.

Most notably, whole genres of academic research appear to have had no discernible influence at either the federal or local levels. This includes the bulk of descriptive research on the politics of reform and its implementation by political scientists and on the social and economic aspects of welfare and poverty by economists and sociologists. Among academics, chagrin that their work was neglected is palpable (Featherman & Vinovskis, 2001).² Why did it happen?

If one compares academic research on welfare and poverty with what welfare reform assumed, three problems are apparent: Compared to government, academics had different goals for reform, their research was in error about many important issues, and often it had little content that was useful to government. Those impressions agree with what I have heard from state and local officials in the course of researching or consulting about welfare reform in twelve states.³ When they commented on why they had ignored research, these were the reasons they gave. In the following sections I elaborate on each of these points.

Political Differences

One reason why most academics were sidelined was simply that most of them opposed reform in the conservative shape it took. The problem was not so much that reformers wanted government to do some things unsupported by research, as mentioned above; rather, it was a basic conflict over goals. Reformers blamed poverty mostly on low work levels and other lifestyle problems that seemed to make families poor. Most academics, in contrast, wanted reform to focus on the economic well-being of the poor, and they looked to government for solutions.

Economic goals had some currency in Washington as long as liberals controlled the social agenda, up through the Carter administration. After that, reform focused much more on lifestyle, and the impasse with the university deepened. From the viewpoint of the academy, welfare policymaking in Washington after 1970 became more and more politicized. Conservative officeholders became impatient with

“honest research brokerage” about social problems. They demanded and received more “responsive” arguments coming from right-wing think tanks (Featherman & Vinovskis, 2001, chap. 1).

The argument for work enforcement, which became the core of reform, was developed mostly outside the university.⁴ It rested largely on the experimental work programs evaluated by MDRC—studies in which university scholars played little role. Ellwood (1988) and other liberals developed the idea of setting a time limit on the receipt of aid, after which a family would have to work, a provision that became part of the Clinton plan and later PRWORA. But this was not the same thing as work enforcement. A work test *told* the poor up front that they *should* work, whereas a time limit postponed employment and left it as a choice.

Academic experts realized that irregular employment was a major cause of poverty. They proposed to raise work levels using work incentives, or allowing recipients to keep some of their benefits if they worked; training programs, so they could get better jobs; and public jobs, provided within government or nonprofit groups, for those who could not find work in the private sector. But all of these approaches were voluntary. Most academics resisted enforcing work as a condition of benefits that the poor needed. In the end, they defended entitlement, or the traditional principle that aid should be available on the basis of need alone. Unfortunately, work incentives, training programs, and public jobs all recorded smaller effects on actual work behavior than did the mandatory work programs tied to AFDC that were evaluated by MDRC. Due to these facts and political trends, policy moved inexorably toward making work a condition of aid.

After 1980, the rejection of academic advice was clearest in Washington. The Reagan administration resisted any efforts by planners, in or out of government, to promote new programs for the poor. Clinton appointed leading academics to his administration to plan welfare reform, but when he signed PRWORA several of them resigned in protest, seeing his decision as likely to harm the poor.⁵ When the Republican Congress drafted PRWORA, few liberal academics were even invited to testify on the bill, although liberal think tanks and advocacy bodies remained active (Winston, 2002, chap. 3).

In prominent instances, academics were also excluded from influence at the local level. In New York City, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani prohibited all academic inquiry into welfare reform in the city, because opposition from academics, journalists, poverty lawyers, and community groups was intense. In Wisconsin, Governor Tommy Thompson rejected input from academics from within the state, importing more conservative advice largely from outside (Mead, 2000, 2002).

Academic advice was impolitic, in large measure, because university experts who deal with poverty and welfare are almost entirely left of center. In their hiring in these fields, the universities have not safeguarded a plurality of views. This means that few conservative academics are available to advise government during conservative eras, such as the present. Just as important, it means that debate within the university is much narrower than occurs in politics, where conservatives play a much larger role. Hence, few academics are experienced in addressing the issues of values and goals that matter to social policy. That inhibits them from making their findings effective in government.

Research Errors

Most academic research about welfare or poverty also lacked influence because policymakers did not believe it. Many thought scholars had misread the nature of the welfare problem or the feasibility of enforcing work. Research made all the steps in statecraft shown in Figure 1 seem more difficult or questionable than they turned out to be.

Public Opinion—Many political scientists misrepresented the public opinion of welfare. One argument was that the public actually supported pre-reform welfare programs such as AFDC and Food Stamps, with the implication that they should not be fundamentally changed (Lomax Cook & Barrett, 1992). Much more prominent have been analyses saying that the public opposes welfare, but that this reflects hostility to the poor. On this view, ordinary Americans mostly blame the poor for their own problems, so government should do little to help them (Feagin, 1975; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Or the voters are willing to be led toward cuts by politicians who “frame” issues so as to stress the “undeservingness” of the poor (Iyengar, 1989, 1990; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). In an influential argument, Martin Gilens (1999) characterizes much of the public hostility to welfare as racist; the voters oppose aid because it is associated with blacks, who are often seen as lazy. The implication is that policymakers should protect welfare against reform demands because the motivations behind them are unacceptable.

However, in light of these interpretations, it is hard to explain why America even has a welfare state, or civil rights laws. A more plausible view is that the public is angry with welfare more than with the poor. Ordinary Americans want government to help the needy, but they criticize the traditional form of cash aid as permissive. They want to help families and children in trouble, but *at the same time* they demand that adult recipients work alongside the taxpayers (Shapiro, Patterson, Russell, & Young, 1986; Sundquist, 1986; Weaver, Shapiro, & Jacobs, 1995).⁶ In the 1980s and 1990s, this interpretation was advanced more forcefully, not by academics, but by the nonuniversity Public Agenda Foundation (Doble & Melville, 1986; Farkas & Johnson, 1996; Melville, Keith, & Doble, 1988). Work tests combined with continued aid was exactly the strategy that reform finally followed, to largely good effects.

Political Debate and Legislation—Political science treatments of political debate over welfare reform have also been unduly pessimistic. The literature was strongly shaped by the dramatic battles that occurred in Congress over the liberal Nixon and Carter welfare reform plans during the 1970s. Both proposals would have raised AFDC benefits and broadened program coverage to the working poor, but they were defeated by spirited conservative opposition. Scholars concluded that welfare reform evoked irresolvable divisions. It was, said Joseph A. Califano, Jr., who was Carter’s welfare secretary, “the Middle East of domestic politics” (Califano, 1981, p. 321; Moynahan, 1973; Lynn & Whitman, 1981). The implication was that it was a can of worms best left unopened.

Some interpreters also find the welfare debate so repellant that any decisions that might come from it would be unacceptable. Conservative politicians seem

driven by hostility to the poor and their programs, expressed for example by the picture of an alligator used by one Republican member of Congress during the debates on PRWORA. Sometimes the animus seemed to be just to cut back support for the poor and save money for the middle class (Bane, 2001; Caraley, 2001–2002; Hecl, 1986, chap. 13, 1994, chap. 15). State politics scholars think recent welfare reform is motivated chiefly by race and by concerns to limit dependency and costs (Lieberman & Shaw, 2000; Soss, Schram, Vartanian, & O'Brien, 2001; Zylan & Soule, 2000).

The impasse in Washington, however, derived largely from the determination of a Democratic Congress to defend AFDC against an impatient public. When that resistance was broken by the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, Congress proved quite able to reform welfare, although it did so now in a conservative direction. The hostility of politicians, like that of the public, was directed much more against the old welfare system than against the recipients or the poor. Passions also ran higher at the national level than in the states, where the focus was more practical, on the best way to restructure welfare (Winston, 2002, chap. 7). As noted earlier, reform did not generally mean cuts in spending, although the pattern of spending changed to support work.

Implementation—Research on the implementation of reform has been somewhat more realistic, but still unduly pessimistic. Until the early 1990s, most interpretations stressed the heavy costs of welfare work programs. MDRC reasoned that these programs involved difficult trade-offs. Those stressing job search could serve more clients but do little to elevate skills and wages, while those that emphasized training might achieve better jobs but cost too much to serve much of the caseload. A large project on the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training Program (JOBS), the new work program mandated by FSA, concluded that lack of funding was the main drag on states' capacity to institute the new work requirements (Gueron & Pauly, 1991; Hagen & Lurie, 1994; Lurie, 1996). Mead's implementation studies, although they anticipated government's power to enforce work, also viewed that mission as so divisive that it might be beyond the capacity of American government (Mead, 1986, chaps. 8–10).

Later events showed that the problems were more political, and more soluble, than this suggested. Under FSA, the will to reform welfare was still nascent. With the politics of reform stalemated in Washington and in many states, neither the welfare system nor the recipients had received a clear message about the need to work. But in the 1990s, Washington encouraged the states to undertake more experiments with welfare under waivers of normal federal restrictions. The will to reform then hardened and things changed rapidly. The rolls peaked in 1994, then fell continuously for most of a decade. PRWORA accelerated a fall that was already underway. The gathering force of work tests joined with a new political climate to discourage dependency. Many recipients left welfare, or were diverted from seeking it, before new work requirements were even enacted, let alone implemented. The caseload fall made reform much more affordable than it had seemed earlier. Meanwhile, after PRWORA welfare administrators implemented new work tests with an alacrity surprising even to seasoned observers of state and local government (Gais, Nathan, Lurie, & Kaplan, 2001, chap. 2).

Employability—The most serious miscarriage of research, however, was that economists and sociologists underestimated the ability of welfare adults to go to work once they were expected to. Chiefly, academics studied the employability of the poor statistically, by examining the features of needy adults who did and did not work in various databases. They typically found that the nonworkers had less education and work experience and more personal and family problems than others who were employed. They generally treated these correlations as signs of “barriers” to employment. So government should not demand greater effort, especially of single mothers, until it did more to alleviate the “barriers.” That meant providing recipients with better education and training and child and health care. Even if they could work, some experts suggested, there was little point in this because the jobs they could get would still leave them poor.⁷

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).

The experience of policymakers, however, told them that many more adult recipients could participate in work programs or take jobs than were doing so. So through FSA, PRWORA, and local decisions, they ratcheted up work demands. And many more recipients did go to work, helping to drive the rolls down. Admittedly, other conditions than work tests also became more favorable in the 1990s. The real wages and availability of positions improved, while Washington did more to subsidize wages and finance child and health care. Still, the transition to work far exceeded what the earlier research would have predicted. Apparently, academics failed to anticipate this because they had ignored the impact of work enforcement in their earlier treatments of poverty.

Some recent academic studies appraise the employment prospects of welfare adults more positively. It now seems that positions are widely available to them. Provided they take jobs and work steadily, they can improve their incomes over welfare, escape poverty, and move up to higher incomes over time (Danziger, Heflin, Corcoran, Oltmans, & Wang, 2002; Holzer, 1999; Holzer & Stoll, 2000; Loeb & Cocoran, 2001; Pavetti & Acs, 2001). But these studies came in the wake of reform when it was easier to see the advantages of employment.

Effects of Reform—Most experts also misjudged the effects of reform. It was widely expected that pressing welfare mothers to work en masse would produce hardship for children and families. More families might be homeless, more children driven into foster care (Bane, 1997; Edelman, 1997; Ellwood, 1996). But poverty rates fell as most mothers left welfare for employment at higher incomes. Child maltreatment is down (United States Congress, 2000). Some mothers who left welfare without working emerged worse-off, but this was also due to a fall in takeup for Food Stamps and Medicaid that was not intended by PRWORA (Haskins, 1991, chap. 4; Primus, Rawlings, Larin, & Porter, 1999). Welfare work evaluations of the

1990s even found some positive impacts on marriage and on younger children's achievement in school, although these were mostly small and transient. The main negative note was that teenagers were more likely to get into trouble after school because working mothers were less available to supervise them, but a more recent study finds positive effects even on adolescents (Chase-Lansdale et al., 2003; Duncan & Chase-Lansdale, 2001; Gassman-Pines et al., 2001).

It is true that most leavers did not escape poverty, at least when they first left welfare. Nor were most able to cope initially without any government support; many continued to draw EITC, Food Stamps, or Medicaid after they had left AFDC or TANF. So if one focuses on the economics of families rather than on whether they were working or on welfare, welfare reform achieved less (Danziger, 2001). Nevertheless, the achievements of reform still far exceed what was anticipated in the light of most research on poverty or welfare prior to PRWORA.

Methodological Problems

One might excuse the researchers if they erred due to rapid change. Social science, like any science, reasons based on data from the past. Many conditions favorable to reform suddenly came together in the 1990s, in a synergy that no scholar could have foreseen. Even conservative experts failed to anticipate all that reform might achieve. Unfortunately, the mistakes were also rooted in the methodological features of the social sciences, as they have recently developed.

Crossing the Line—The most fundamental shortcoming is that very little social research has the instrumental character that is most useful to policymakers. Very little of it can say to them *if you do this, then this will happen*. Very little makes any connection crossing the line that divides government and society seen in Figure 1.

Evaluators do make that connection, and this chiefly explains the influence of the MDRC studies. But experimental evaluations succeed only in showing that a certain program had impact. The treatment usually comprised several services, and it is unclear which of them generated the results. Evaluators are also reluctant to generalize across different studies to say which type of program is best overall, the thing that policymakers most want to know. For showing which treatment produces outcomes and for integrating results across sites, statistical studies can be superior to experiments, even though they do not estimate impact (see further following).

Political scientists prefer to write only about political or governmental processes, eschewing stands on policy issues. They claim no authority to second-guess the decisions of the democratic process. Few political scientists become policy experts who attempt to advise government; they abandon this role largely to economists (Nelson, 1977, chaps. 2–3). Thus, few scholars of the politics of welfare reform assert much about the substance of policy. In terms of Figure 1, few make any connection between what policymakers do and the effects on society.

The nearest thing to a prescriptive political science regarding welfare appears in Richard Nathan's field research studies of welfare reform. Nathan has used teams of researchers in several states to describe in detail how they implemented FSA and TANF. These studies reveal much about the bureaucratic statecraft

surrounding reform. They are implicitly normative in that programs must be carried out before they can have impacts.⁸ But they make no explicit connection between implementation and program outputs, outcomes, or impacts. So this research, although interesting to other scholars, has had little influence on actual policymaking.

Economists and sociologists, for their part, operate largely on the other side of the government/society divide. They are readier to advise government than are political scientists, but their work usually lacks enough policy content to draw interest. Mostly, this research offers descriptive studies of poverty, where whether people are poor, dependent, or employed is statistically related to their demographic features, such as age, race, marital status, or prior education, or to the benefits they receive. Government plays a role in that it might change the variables that influence outcomes. But the research does not address whether and how it could do that. Policymakers largely ignore these findings because, fundamentally, they are not about government; they are about society.

Especially, academic studies seldom consider the political and administrative forces that have recently driven welfare change. Government typically appears in statistical studies only as a source of benefits. The databases rarely capture the suasions tied to benefits that today often try to change lifestyle. They record whether a family receives AFDC/TANF or Food Stamps, but not whether the parents also faced pressure to work or pay child support (Blank, 2002). That connection, if it could be shown, would make the research much more policy relevant than it is.

Descriptive research on poverty also tends to be interpreted in a deterministic way. Because certain features are associated statistically with people being poor, dependent, or nonworking, the assumption usually is that the influences are inevitable. Hence, the usual conclusion that work levels cannot rise, nor dependency decline, unless government first alleviates the “barriers” with some new service or benefit. But the models that suggest this usually explain only a small share of the variation in the outcome of interest. In fact, when welfare reform applied pressure to work, most welfare adults were able to take jobs, or else leave the rolls. The “barriers” that were correlated with dependency were not actually determinative. Researchers failed to anticipate this because governmental suasions were not part of their models, and also because they credited poor adults with less capacity to decide and to change their lives than, apparently, many have.

Some researchers now realize that demographic features measured in surveys indicate only roughly whether welfare recipients can or will work. This may be partly because the data come from the respondents’ self-report. The potential for recipients to work is not yet exhausted. One might expect that, as caseloads fell, the remaining claimants would become less employable, but comparing cases in 1999 with 1997, that does not appear so. Some scholars look for further, psychological barriers that may be missed by conventional surveys (Danziger, 2001; Zedlewski & Loprest, 2001). But such inquiry misses the big story in welfare reform, which is the power of governmental demands to change lifestyle.

Scholasticism—Policymakers also ignore research because it is often overly academic. Of course, officials often lack the knowledge of statistics required to grasp academic research. But more important, inquiry is often aimed at academic concerns

that are of little concern to government. Much descriptive research on poverty is relentlessly technical, absorbed in questions of how best to estimate statistical relationships. The findings may improve in precision, yet they seldom change much from what was known earlier. One recent article showed, for example, that few Americans are poor at a given time but that as many as half may be poor over twenty-five years. The article uses a new analytic method, life table analysis. But substantively, the result is similar to what Duncan and his coauthors showed twenty years ago (Duncan et al., 1984, chap. 2; Rank & Hirschl, 2001). Since policymakers care most about the import of findings, they give such research little attention.

And if research is technically strong, it is often theoretically weak. Most of what it does is just *describe* the social problem, often in withering detail. But as T.H. White remarked, "To measure something does not mean to understand it" (qtd. in Featherman & Vinovskis, 2001, p. 53). Usually, little strong reason is advanced for why one variable should affect another. What theory there is often comes from economics, the assumption that individuals act so as to optimize their incomes. This premise applies poorly to a population—poor adults—whose lives do not generally appear oriented to making money. Most of the research that economists devoted to poverty after the 1960s went into "fact finding." It did not much improve our grasp of why people succumb to poverty, in part because researchers continued to make economic assumptions about behavior (Haveman, 1987, pp. 150–152).

Economists, of example, have devoted much study to the disincentives created by welfare against working or marrying. In economic theory, these payoffs should influence behavior. But the actual effect of the incentives on lifestyle appears slight. Stronger work incentives have not shown much power to move welfare recipients into employment, nor do disincentives deter them. Incentives' effects on marital behavior are even weaker (Moffitt, 1992, 1998). Many states strengthened work incentives in TANF, but this was to reward welfare families if they take jobs, not because incentives actually have strong effects on working. Yet work incentives and disincentives continue to draw intense academic attention.⁹ From a policymaking viewpoint, most of this effort is wasted.

Much of the unreality of academic research reflects the fact that it is usually based on statistical analyses that scholars perform on computers, without any direct contact with the phenomena under study. The most hostile studies of state policymaking for welfare reform are based on statistical models without any direct inquiry as to why officials did what they did. Studies using field research on state politics are much more positive.¹⁰

Research on poverty by economists and sociologists is usually based on databases gathered by others, such as the Current Population Survey or the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. Researchers manipulate these data to construct statistical pictures of poverty or welfare. But, despite myriad variables, the data represent very limited information about their subjects. Not only is data based mostly on self-report, but there is little check on whether inferences are plausible. Researchers usually have no other contact with their subjects. They seldom visit welfare offices or talk to staffs or clients directly. So they easily impose on their subjects economic motivations, or interpret correlations as causal, when a fuller acquaintance would show this to be unrealistic.

An important case is the recent fall in the welfare caseload. Studies by economists tend to emphasize economic causes, such as the boom of the 1990s and the buildup of the EITC and other new benefits. One reason for this is that these are the factors best measured in the databases. In contrast, the studies gauge work enforcement only imperfectly, in terms of whether states had waivers from Washington to pursue experiments in welfare reform, so this factor tends to be underplayed in the results. One noted study attributed 63% of the increased employment of single mothers between 1984 and 1996 to the EITC, only 29% to waivers or to changes in AFDC/TANF (Meyer & Rosenbaum, 1999).

As noted above, prior research on work incentives indicated scant effects on work behavior, so the effects claimed for EITC were surprising (Blank, 2001, pp. 1111, 1116–1117, 1140–1141). Research suggests that the EITC prior to the 1990s did have some pro-work effects, but these were small and applied to single mothers in general, not specifically to those on welfare (Eissa & Liebman, 1996). The larger effects claimed in the 1990s occurred when low-income single mothers showed the largest work increase, but this group also faced rising work tests in AFDC/TANF, so the EITC effect may well be overstated. Studies of work programs that offered higher work incentives with and without work requirements make clear that the latter are the key to raising work levels; incentives by themselves raise income more than they do employment (Blank, 2001, pp. 1147–1152, 1159). A study in California found that, although families gaining more from the expanded EITC after 1993 did go to work at higher levels, whether they did so was unassociated with whether they claimed the benefit on their tax returns. So something else must be driving the work increase (Hotz, Mullin, & Scholz, 2003).

The Wisconsin case has been much studied, because this was the state with the sharpest caseload fall. First-hand accounts stress the role of work requirements and good economic conditions, not incentives, in driving dependency down. One study asked sixty state and local welfare officials in 1995 what was driving the rolls down, and none of them mentioned the EITC. This despite the fact that this state had added its own work incentive to the federal subsidy. Apparently, welfare mothers went to work chiefly because work was demanded and jobs were available; they found out about EITC later and claimed it as a windfall (DeParle, 1997, 1998, 1999; Mead, 1999). On this reading, higher work levels drove up receipt of the EITC more than the other way around.

As this suggests, more realistic findings often come from field studies where researchers observe or interview poor populations in their own settings. This research gives a livelier sense of *why* poor adults live as they do, and how their lives might change (e.g., Anderson, 1990; Edin & Lein, 1997; Newman, 1999). While the authors, like other academics, usually stress labor market barriers, the studies make clear that poor adults can and do exercise choice about whether to work. Culture rather than economics seems at the heart of their problems. They face a milieu that often discourages constructive effort to get ahead, and they face disruptions in their personal lives that lack clear outside causes. Government can influence culture by how it enforces community standards, as mentioned above, but again, this process escapes quantitative research. In some cases, MDRC has sponsored observational studies in connection with its evaluations, but much more

might be done (Furstenberg, Sherwood, & Sullivan, 1992; Quint & Musick, 1994).

However, university researchers generally deprecate observational studies like these because they do not permit the same rigor found in database analysis. Inferences about what causes what are more judgmental, and there are seldom enough observations to permit generalizing to a universe. Academics would rather have a rigorous finding than a realistic one, because this is what journal reviewers are most likely to approve. Rigor is what database analysis permits, even if the findings disclose little about what is really going on and provide few levers for policy. Statistical research also serves academics' needs to demonstrate technical expertise and generate multiple publications with limited effort. In contrast, field research is costly in time, money, and shoe leather.

Changing Research

For research to matter more in the future of welfare policy, major changes would be needed. As to the political division between government and the university, one can only hope that the recent success of welfare reform will make academics more supportive of social policies aimed at changing lifestyle. The realization should eventually dawn that these measures not only have good effects, they actually expand the role of government. Public programs have assumed rising responsibility for the functioning of dependents, not only for their income. University leaders may also be more willing to appoint academics likely to challenge the liberal consensus within the university. Then academic debate will bear more resemblance to differences in the public arena, and the university will be more relevant to policy, however the political winds blow.

The methodological problems require sensitive changes in how academia operates. At the federal level, political research already uses defensible methods—a combination of interviewing and documentary research. At the state level, scholars need to avoid statistical modeling divorced from field inquiry. At both levels, political scientists need to take a more hopeful view of the political process. Above all political research needs to make more connections between politics and government performance. Political reasoning must support policy conclusions. That entails finding a way to cross the dividing line between government and society.

Evaluations can connect policy to results rigorously through experimentation, but at the cost of turning the tested program into a “black box” whose exact nature is unclear. Most likely, political research tied to policy will have to use statistical inference to connect modes of government or administration with outcomes as measured by program performance measures. That is, one studies the way a number of states or localities run a particular program, as well as their performance as measured by that program, and then seeks associations between political or operational style and outcomes, controlling for other factors. Such an inference does not prove impact; it merely shows which approaches generate better outcomes than others within a program, not which improve on having no program at all. But at least performance in some sense can be related to government's actions. This sort of research has developed furthest in mandatory work programs

of just the kind involved in welfare reform, and also in some voluntary training programs.¹¹ It could be extended to other dimensions of welfare or antipoverty policy.

For economists and sociologists, changes are needed to promote realism and make stronger connections between social conditions and policy. The questions that research addresses should be derived much more from hands-on contact with the world of poverty, as in field research, and much less from academic theory or past literature. Researchers interested in some aspect of poverty should first investigate it in an unstructured way, based on a variety of sources, including interviews with caregivers and recipients and direct observation. The qualitative should precede the quantitative. Only after scholars have a better sense of the problem and its possible causes, should they attempt to measure them for statistical inference. Often this means developing one's own databases rather than using existing datasets that are divorced from context.

To increase the policy content of their work, researchers must somehow include in their models indicators of all the governmental factors that now influence poor families—not only the benefit structure, but demands to work, cooperate with child support enforcement, keep one's children in school, and so on.¹² Including these factors makes for more successful explanation, while also making the results more interesting to government. Measuring such suasions may again entail constructing fresh data. That may limit the number of observations and the generality of the inference. But compromises in this direction are justified to obtain realism and relevance. A study of welfare change that was confined to one locality, say, but measured all the influences would be worth more than a much larger study that considered only economic variables.

The potential for field study to illuminate social policy institutions has barely been scratched. Most of the existing observational studies focus on the life of the poor in their homes and neighborhoods, not on the role that programs like welfare or work programs play, or might play, in their lives. Research focused on experimental local programs can sometimes discover promising new ideas that have application more widely, but it is sadly neglected by academe. This is the sort of work that government would value, because it often does support instrumental reasoning.¹³

Researchers who hope to influence policy must also be more willing to make the sort of synthetic arguments that a handful of scholars have used to influence social policy in the past. There is no substitute for hard findings, but showing their relevance to policy usually requires bringing in auxiliary arguments about the nature of the social problem and the politics that surround solutions. The need to do this arises precisely because crossing the dividing line between government and society is hard.

The recommendation here is not that research should be made more “applied” and less theoretical. The point is first of all scientific: Much of academic research simply missed the mark about the politics of welfare and about the nature of the poverty problem and its causes, as welfare reform showed. Theories and models must become more realistic before government is likely to show interest. But the effect of improving explanations should also be to increase the policy content of research. So better research should have more influence as well.

Notes

- 1 The following section is based on Baum (1991), Haskins (1991), and Weaver (2000, chaps. 5–6).
- 2 Here and following I define “academics” to be researchers with a base in the universities, excluding researchers based in think tanks or government staff positions.
- 3 California, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.
- 4 In the 1980s, the only academic work to treat work requirements favorably and in depth was Mead’s *Beyond Entitlement* (1986). Garfinkel and McLanahan’s *Single Mothers and Their Children* (1986, pp. 145–151) endorsed the idea briefly. Some philosophers also favored work requirements on ethical grounds, such as Becker (1980) and Carens (1986), but these arguments were not well known in policy circles.
- 5 They included Peter Edelman, who headed planning in the United States Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS); Wendell Primus, a senior aide with responsibility for income maintenance; and Mary Jo Bane, who headed the United States Administration for Children and Families, the part of DHHS that administered AFDC.
- 6 Gilens, in *Why Americans Hate Welfare* (1999, chaps. 2–8), also says this, but his main point is his racial argument.
- 7 Examples, which could be multiplied, include Michalopoulos and Garfinkel (1989), Pavetti (1992), Harris (1993), Cancian and Meyer (1995), Smith Nightingale and Haveman (1995, chaps. 3–4), and Heymann and Earle (1998).
- 8 The FSA project is summarized in Hagen and Lurie (1994). The TANF project, known as the State Capacity Study, has been partially published in Liebschutz (2000) and Weissert (2000).
- 9 E.g., Wolfe (2002). See the discussion of the Earned Income Tax Credit later in this article.
- 10 Compare the studies by Lieberman and Shaw (2000), Soss, Schram, Vartanian, and O’Brien (2001), and Zylan and Soule (2000), which speak negatively of state motivations, with Winston (2002) or Mead (2000). The former authors have suspicions of state motivations based on statistical associations. Winston and Mead present a much positive picture, based on field research in several states.
- 11 Several chapters in Lennon and Corbett (2003) discuss this sort of research. Inquiry of this type has been developed by Laurence E. Lynn, Jr., and his associates at the University of Chicago under the label of the “new public management”; see Heinrich and Lynn (2000).
- 12 For a pioneering attempt to do this, see Plotnick (1990).
- 13 The New Hope Project was one promising example. See Brock, Doolittle, Fellerath, and Wiseman (1997), Bos, Huston, Granger, Duncan, Brock, and McLoyd (1999).

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