Moving Beyond Discretion and Outcomes: Examining Public Management from the Front Lines of the Welfare System

Jodi R. Sandfort
Syracuse University

ABSTRACT

This article investigates front-line conditions within two sectors charged with the delivery of social welfare programs—public bureaucracies and private contractors. I examine two traditions of public management that operate in these organizations and focus on how each tries to direct front-line action. Drawing upon ethnographic data, I discover a disjuncture between these management frameworks and day-to-day front-line operations. A body of social theory that posits that individuals both create and are constrained by social structures is used to understand these findings. The application of this theory both suggests that there is an ongoing social process not capitalized upon by existing management approaches and offers a new explanation for the persistence of certain management challenges in these sectors. The article concludes with a discussion of research propositions and management techniques that emerge from this inductive analysis.

As a field, public management is in a period of substantial, far reaching changes. The new public management is reorienting the field by offering new paradigms, new goals, and new processes to practitioners and researchers (Ingraham and Romzek 1994; Kettl 1997; Osborne and Plastrik 1997). Increasingly, private organizations are relied upon for the delivery of public services (Kramer 1994; Milward and Provan 1993; Smith and Lipsky 1993; Salamon 1994). Public managers are told they will need new skills to navigate complex organizational networks, respond to increasing environmental demands, and operate with restricted budgets (O'Toole 1997; Rainey 1997).

In the face of all this change, it is important to step back and examine how management ideals are actually being implemented in practice. This article provides such an opportunity by investigating conditions within organizations that deliver social
welfare programs. Because of the critical role street-level workers play in translating public policy into concrete programs in this sector (Brodkin 1997; Hasenfeld 1992; Lipsky 1980; Vinzant and Crothers 1998), it is important to examine how management ideals influence daily front-line actions. In social service delivery, two of the most common public management strategies are traditional public administration and new public management (Lynn 1996). These traditions of management, however, embody contrasting philosophies about how to focus the actions of front-line workers.

On the one hand, traditional public administration is often utilized in large public bureaucracies that are designed to minimize programmatic variation, increase efficiency, and centralize control (Weber 1947). To carry out this mandate, this management approach relies upon minute regulations and standardized forms to curb supervisors’ judgements and control front-line workers’ discretion (Mashaw 1983; Wilson 1989). In fact, within the field of public administration, an extensive research literature has developed to examine the factors that influence how street-level workers exert discretion (Pesso 1978; Prottas 1979; Lipsky 1980; Kelly 1994; P. Scott 1997; Keiser 1999; Lynn, Heinrich, and Hill 1999). In this tradition, discretion—defined in Webster’s Dictionary as the “ability to make responsible decisions, individual choice or judgment”—is a threat to democratic accountability. It subjects clients to the whims of individual bureaucrats, increases the probability that workers will breach public trust, and introduces individual biases into the delivery of public programs.

On the other hand, as more diverse organizations are charged with administering public programs, performance management has become a more prominent public management technique. In fact, a goal of the new public management is to reduce the red tape and regulations developed earlier to control individuals’ discretion and to substitute quasi-market control mechanisms (Kettl 1997; Plantz, Greenway, and Hendricks 1997; Dawson 1999). Rather than concentrate attention on individuals, performance management is focused on overseeing organizations through the assessment of outcomes and other tangible indicators of performance. Decentralized systems with multiple service providers are common and program variation is encouraged. While these principles hold great salience and promise, the research literature that explores performance management is not well developed in the United States. Most articles merely report characteristics of cases deemed to be successful at reinvention, innovation, or the new public management without investigating how such concepts are being implemented in typical cases.
Public Management in the Welfare System

(Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Light 1994; G. Scott, Ball, and Dale 1997). Others provide hints to managers without any empirical support for these recommendations (Behn 1995b).

This article examines how both types of public management techniques are operating in front-line organizations of the United States public welfare system. At the present time, two sectors are responsible for delivery of welfare related programs. Public organizations are charged with determining eligibility for public assistance programs, issuing cash assistance, and monitoring compliance with program rules. Private organizations receive contracts to operate programs designed to move clients from welfare to work. In a policy context that has imposed time-limited cash assistance, both sectors must convey messages to clients that stress movement off the welfare rolls and into sustainable employment. Yet these sectors embody two competing public management strategies for directing the actions of front-line workers and achieving these ends.

The data presented in this article were gathered for an extensive study of five front-line welfare organizations that looked at the many factors important to policy implementation (Sandfort 1997). The differing management approaches in these two sectors provide a unique opportunity to investigate how daily front-line actions compare with the assumptions embedded in traditional public administration and new performance management regarding front-line activities. Drawing upon ethnographic data, I will generate new hypotheses about the forces that shape front-line actions in both public bureaucracies and private contractors.

This analysis suggests that there is a generalizable process occurring at the front lines of both sectors that is not capitalized upon by existing management approaches. Street-level workers in both contexts exert more agency than is conventionally recognized. Through daily experiences, staff generate collective schema that help them to understand their work and efficiently utilize organizational resources. In the implementation of social policy, these factors create parameters that staff use to interpret future events and justify their actions. Drawing upon the work of social theorists such as Anthony Giddens (1984), William Sewell (1992), and other organizational scholars (Ranson, Hinings, and Greenwood 1980; Riley 1983; Willmott 1987; Orlikowski 1992; Feldman 1999), I argue that this social process has structural significance.1 The structures, though, are not imposed through organizational charts, formal procedures, or written rules that staff passively enact. Rather they arise from the collective, daily experience shared by front-line workers.

1Other public management scholars have argued that social science theories, such as these, can provide a heuristic that supports the development of testable hypotheses and new theory in public management research (Lynn, Heinrich, and Hill 1999).
This interpretation provides a new understanding of factors that persistently plague management efforts in the two sectors of the welfare system. On the one hand, it offers a new explanation for why front-line staff resist change within the public bureaucracy. On the other, it provides a new understanding for how ineffective services are sustained in the decentralized, performance-based welfare-to-work system. Rather than continuing to assume that traditional public administration or performance management accurately directs front-line actions, this analysis provides a new explanation for why we must develop alternative management techniques that capitalize upon the social process that occurs at the front lines and harness the energy of street-level workers for the achievement of public ends.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

During the 1990s, there was a drastic reorientation in welfare policy in the United States. Beginning in 1935, minimal cash assistance was guaranteed to very poor families with children if they met strict eligibility criteria established by the federal and state governments. While welfare administration and services delivery had been reformed numerous times (Sosin 1986; Bane and Ellwood 1994; Hasenfeld 1997), very poor American families were able to fall back on the minimal cash safety net during times of need. In the 1990s, states began to experiment with more substantial reforms of their welfare systems by securing waivers of federal regulations and developing service innovations. In 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act was signed into law, ending individuals' legal entitlement to cash assistance by imposing a sixty-month life-time limit and creating a new block grant funding mechanism. Although the new law gave states increased latitude to define their welfare systems, thirty-eight states already were engaged in significant experimentation with reform at the time of its passage.

Michigan was one state that had begun to reform its welfare system long before the passage of federal law. In the mid-1990s, Michigan abandoned its welfare-to-work strategy that stressed educational advancement and, instead, adopted a quick labor-force attachment technique called Work First (Brown 1997; Seefeldt, Sandfort, and Danziger 1998). Whereas the prior initiative was administered by the state’s public welfare bureaucracy through contracts with private agencies, administrative responsibility for Work First was moved into a new cabinet-level agency, the Michigan Jobs Commission. The Jobs Commission embodies many principles of the new public management. For Work First, the Jobs Commission develops policy guidelines, loosely monitors service provision, and generates reporting requirements. The

---

1Created in 1994, the Jobs Commission was formed to improve the business climate in the state through a range of economic development initiatives, including workforce development.
actual administration, though, is left to a decentralized quasi-governmental system called *Michigan Works*. Services are provided by mostly private, contracted agencies rather than by public bureaucracies. Instead of mandating the provision of certain services, the Jobs Commission allows local programmatic variation to flourish. Most Work First agencies provide job search assistance to welfare recipients with the goal of helping them find, at the least, minimum wage employment for twenty hours a week. Some agencies offer brief training for job search that covers such topics as resume writing and application completion, as well as additional support once clients have begun their job search. Others require clients to immediately begin their job search with little training or support (Seefeldt, Sandfort, and Danziger 1998). Local organizations are assessed by indicators of their performance—the rates of employment placement and ninety-day employment retention.

Since 1994, this decentralized, outcome-based system has been paired with the public welfare bureaucracy to deliver Michigan’s welfare-related programs. A traditional, state-wide bureaucracy, the Family Independence Agency (FIA), is responsible for determining and monitoring eligibility for public assistance programs. All county offices operate under the same administrative policy and utilize standardized paperwork issued from the central administrative offices. These offices use the same service technology—completing an intake interview, requesting client verification, processing this paperwork to determine eligibility, and maintaining cases once they are open—to provide cash assistance to the poor. These processes are dictated by complex administrative rules designed to curb front-line discretion (Brodkin 1986).

In this study, I examine the implementation structures (Hjern and Porter 1981) involved in delivery of welfare-related programs in two Michigan counties, Dutchess and Dunn. In each county, I examine the local office of the Family Independence Agency and related Work First programs. I utilize a comparative case study research design and ethnographic methods to understand the conditions within five front-line organizations in these counties. I employ a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1994) that stays close to the conditions and meanings within each organization, while I strive to develop analytical categories and hypotheses that transcend the particular cases.

Data were collected through a number of intensive periods between March 1995 and May 1997. I utilized multiple ethnographic methods: semi-structured interviews, focus groups,
participant observation, and content analysis of written materials. In total, seventy interviews and thirteen focus groups with frontline staff and local managers, 485 hours of participant observation, and hundreds of written documents were gathered and analyzed in the course of this project. The semistructured interviews and focus groups were conducted with staff responsible for the provision of income support or welfare-to-work programs and lasted between forty and eighty minutes. Each interview and focus group was audio recorded, transcribed, and the transcript reviewed for errors. Extensive notes were also kept from participant observation in each organization (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995).

Data analysis involved a recursive process of collection and analysis. Initial analytical themes were identified through reading and rereading the volume of interview transcripts, field notes, and official documents. The data were then entered into a qualitative computer software package, QSR Nudist, that facilitated more rigorous analysis (Richards and Richards 1994; Gahan and Hannibal 1998). Through systematic coding of the qualitative data, this software assisted in the inductive analysis and exploration of interdependent themes. Rather than requiring that coding categories be determined a priori, QSR Nudist allowed for the continued modification of the coding system. This flexibility allowed for the systematic exploration of emerging hypotheses with reference to the entire database; given the volume of data collected in these case studies, such a process would not have been feasible without the use of computerized data management. As is common in a grounded theory approach, additional field-based data were collected following initial data analysis to further explore emerging hypotheses.

UNPACKING PUBLIC MANAGEMENT ASSUMPTIONS FROM THE FRONT LINES

The public welfare bureaucracy and private welfare-to-work contractors embody two approaches to public management. On the one hand, administrators within the public welfare bureaucracy have worked for the past twenty-five years to craft an organizational technology that minimizes individual workers' discretion. Individual functions are highly specialized. Overtly, day-to-day tasks are dictated by extensive policy manuals, standardized forms, and assessments of individual timeliness in disposing assigned cases. Administrative rules try to dictate how clients are assessed and processed within local offices. On the other hand, the privatized welfare-to-work system embodies principles of performance management. Experimentation is encouraged by minimizing governmental red tape and not specifying the
Public Management in the Welfare System

functional tasks of workers. State administrators provide little programmatic oversight to contracted organizations but rather let them develop unique service technologies to move clients into the labor market. Organizations are monitored by the proportion of clients who locate and retain jobs for ninety days.

The challenge arises in that neither of these management approaches is implemented as state administrators assume. In fact, the cases that are examined here raise questions about whether conventional management techniques for influencing front-line work are based on institutionalized beliefs rather than on actual organizational conditions.

Examining Front-line Practices in the Public Welfare Bureaucracy

In the public welfare bureaucracy, management techniques are focused on minimizing variation in individual work and curtailing discretion regarding how staff respond to clients. In the two local offices that were examined in this study, River Heights and Jewett, income maintenance workers are assigned to either intake or ongoing responsibilities and assembled in work units with similar functions. Intake workers conduct initial interviews with twelve to seventeen clients during an average week, determine their eligibility, and input required information into a computer system that calculates grant amounts and authorizes payments. Once a case is opened, it is passed to an ongoing worker who maintains the case by responding to emergencies, monitoring any change in clients’ circumstances, and conducting annual client interviews to verify their eligibility.

Extensive policy manuals sit on each worker’s desk in binders or special three-foot-wide frames that hold them end-to-end for easy consultation. Each quarter, new administrative rules issued from the central administrative office must be inserted into these manuals. An astounding volume of standardized forms are generated from central office to assure that identical information is gathered in each pending case. A mere list of all the forms available is thirty-three pages long, three columns of small, index-type print per page. Staff must be proficient in conducting interviews, utilizing policies, and managing these forms to open and process welfare cases. The timeliness with which they complete these tasks is constantly monitored. Biweekly, workers are evaluated by their supervisors through reports that document their standard of promptness in disposing of cases within the mandated thirty to forty-five days.
If these techniques successfully minimized worker discretion, you would see little variation in the practices of intake and ongoing workers regarding how they process standardized forms or utilize administrative rules. With average caseloads in the River Heights and Jewett offices hovering around 240, front-line staff do have to focus their attention on organizing the seemingly infinite case files and managing the volumes of paper forms. However, workers develop particular tools to help them with these tasks; some create summary sheets to identify key aspects of the file, others create elaborate filing systems or use carbon paper to minimize repetitive tasks. Since new administrative policy is issued frequently, many workers fall behind on inserting the changes into their thick manuals and, as a result, quickly lose grasp of current policy. Even those who faithfully attend to these changes struggle with the complexity of wording, minute changes, and special exceptions written into the fine print. In practice, most workers consult the policy manuals or other experienced staff only when they encounter some case that falls outside the norm, such as a disabled child who needs a specialized medical insurance program or an applicant who has quit a job because of a threat to his life. When asked about the policy manuals, one income maintenance worker retorted, “It’s like the Bible. Everybody interprets it differently.”

The constant press of cases, the challenge of organizing forms, and the repeated issuance of new administrative rules means that workers must make choices about the relative importance of various tasks. Alan summarized the experiences of his colleagues working at the front lines of the public welfare bureaucracy: “The fact is, the job as it’s given to us to do is impossible. It’s simply impossible. Staff accomplish the job by cutting certain corners. . . . If you ask [me] what is important, you will not get an answer because legally we are required to do everything that’s in the manual. But that’s an impossibility. So you pick and choose what you can and can’t do—and hope no one discovers what you have left out.” Within the safe confines of the public welfare bureaucracy, other staff acknowledge the reality of his statement. Two internal reports in the early 1990s, titled “The Work Not Done,” noted that income maintenance workers would complete 901 tasks to optimally manage their caseloads (Department of Social Services 1990 and 1992). Yet it is impossible for workers even to come close to completing these tasks, given the number of cases they must process. Workers are left to their own devices to determine which tasks are never completed and which rules are never enforced. Some routinely skip mandated information when verifying client eligibility; others alter dates on the computers so as not to appear behind on their casework. Given the immediacy of paper forms and the
Public Management in the Welfare System

continuous wave of clients, most front-line workers minimize their direct contact with clients, reducing it to merely a means of gathering information needed to process the case.

In addition to reducing variation in worker practices, the specialized tasks, uniform paperwork, and extensive policy manuals are designed to standardize the way clients are assessed and to reduce discrimination. In some respects, these constructs are successful; for instance, uniform eligibility standards are utilized for the various public assistance programs. Yet this does not mean that workers do not exert individual discretion when they work with clients. Some may blame clients for their problems, while others merely offer a resigned acceptance. If a worker is angered by a client's constant phone calls, he might respond and process the case in order to stop the assault. Another worker might just put this case file at the bottom of his pile of applications, effectively punishing the client for her persistence. For a client who is personable or friendly in the intake interview, the worker might do a less thorough investigation to open the case more quickly or make referrals to other social services, such as soup kitchens or shelters in the community. If another client is suspected of withholding information, every aspect of the case will be scrutinized carefully. This process—sorting clients based on various traits—may be an inevitable condition of front-line human service work (Roth 1971; Hasenfeld 1978 and 1992). However, it is important to document that the extensive rules of the public bureaucracy are not effective in eliminating this problem.

Although the public welfare bureaucracy is focused on eliminating the discretion of front-line workers, it is not successful. This finding is reinforced by other research (Prottas 1979; Brodkin 1986; Pynoos 1986; Wilson 1989). It may be, as suggested by one public management scholar, that our inability to fully understand what motivates public employees causes us to merely rely upon regulations to prohibit them from doing anything wrong (Behn 1995a). However, as scholars, we must strive to better understand what motivates these workers and develop alternative management techniques that capitalize upon these factors. The social theories used in this analysis, namely structuration theory, offer a powerful lens for accomplishing both of these tasks. Before turning to this task, let us first examine front-line conditions within the private welfare-to-work contractors. These contractors are governed by a different public management approach, one that is focused on documenting organizational performance and encouraging variation rather than promulgating standardized rules and paperwork.

737/J-PART, October 2000
Public Management in the Welfare System

Examining Front-line Practices in Welfare-to-Work Contractors

In the privatized welfare-to-work system, public managers intend to increase program quality and outcome attainment by allowing local organizations complete latitude in defining the functional specialization of their staff and the types of services provided to move clients to work. In this study, daily operations in three organizations, Helping Hand, Enhance Corporation, and Eastside School, are examined. Each receives contracts from the quasi-governmental Michigan Works! system and is assessed by its ability to move welfare recipients into the labor market.

The service technology used by these three Work First programs and others in Michigan to help clients find employment varies considerably (Sandfort 1997; Seefeldt, Sandfort, and Danziger 1998). In the Helping Hand and Enhance programs, clients attend workshops designed to provide them basic training in job search techniques such as completing applications, conducting interviews, and constructing resumes. Once clients begin to search for work, they report to the programs for continued skill development, transportation support, or job leads. In contrast, Eastside employs minimal strategies to help clients move into employment. Each day, staff meet with groups of clients and ask them to identify three potential employers to contact during their job search. No additional support is given and no additional structure is provided in the program; clients are left to their own devices to find a twenty-hour a week job, as mandated by the welfare reform rules.

As is consistent with the principles of performance management, rather than require standardized services or promulgate rules that attempt to minimize such variation, Work First administrators assess outcome measures.³ This approach is often publicly justified by claims that program quality will be heightened if local operators are free to innovate and respond to particular local circumstances, such as economic conditions and client characteristics. However, in the cases examined in this study, this is not borne out. Enhance Corporation—which provides the most extensive and high quality services to support clients looking for work—exists in the same county, receives client referrals from the same public welfare office, faces the same local economy, and receives the same payment from the contracting agency as does the Eastside program, which provides no substantive services to its clients. As we will see, variation in service technology is sustained by a more complicated set of factors.

³Each Work First contractor must track the number of clients who attain the desired outcome of twenty weekly hours of minimum-wage employment and who retain employment for ninety days. According to state-wide data, only 29 percent of the clients referred to Work First found jobs and only 15 percent kept jobs for that ninety-day period during the year of this investigation (fiscal year 1996).
The three cases also help to expose additional assumptions embedded in the new performance management and to question its applicability to human services. For example, this management approach is built upon the premise that the services that organizations provide cause or contribute to the attainment of desired organizational goals. Yet in the case of labor force attachment programs such as Work First, it is easy to see that many factors are outside of the control of the local program. Clients' education, prior work history, and child care availability all affect whether or not a welfare recipient finds and keeps a job. (Harris 1996; Meyer and Cancian 1998). In addition, the Work First intervention is purposively brief (Brown 1997). Even in the most extensive programs, clients attend structured job clubs for two weeks and then embark on more individualized job searches. In fact, staff in all three Work First programs readily acknowledge that they cannot help clients who are not ready to help themselves. As one worker in Helping Hand reflected: “There’s no real point to go into the Work First program for a lot of people. . . . If people who are on welfare are interested in getting a job, or are really motivated, they go and get a job given the current economy. If they’re not, they don’t want to come to a program that’s going to have them in attendance for twenty hours a week.” In this county, the local economy is booming. When staff in this program look at the demand for low-skilled workers, they often feel that their program does not do anything more for resistant clients than providing "hoops" that keep them busy.

Because staff recognize the limited ability of the programs to move all clients to work, they develop alternative definitions of organizational success. In fact, although the officially sanctioned goal of the Work First intervention is to move welfare recipients into part-time, minimum-wage employment and to encourage the packaging of welfare grants and earned income, front-line staff in all three organizations agree that this goal is inadequate. Instead, orientation to the program stresses the benefits of leaving the welfare rolls: clients will not have to take time to pick up Food Stamps; they will not have to comply with state programs; they will not have to open their lives to scrutiny by strangers. Once off assistance, people have more autonomy, more self-respect, and more ability to be positive role models for their children. Through these clear messages, front-line workers articulate their own desired outcome of the Work First program—providing clients the ability to become self-sufficient and leave welfare dependency far behind.

These actions contradict the assumptions of performance management. In this paradigm, it is assumed that front-line staff focus on maximizing officially sanctioned outcomes rather than
Public Management in the Welfare System

developing their own measures of success. Administrators worry about staff focusing their attention on clients who are easiest to assist, often called *creaming* (Smith and Lipsky 1993). While staff in all three Work First contractors agree that motivated or experienced clients are easier to assist in finding employment, this does not cause them to focus their actions on helping these clients. Instead, workers from all organizations agree that it is distasteful to treat clients as mere numbers; in fact, such actions would be contradictory to the professional responsibility they believe they have to help as many clients as possible leave the welfare roles. When they are asked about the most rewarding aspects of their jobs, staff in all three organizations are quick to respond that it is their ability to help clients start a new life. When a client comes to the site and announces, with pride in her voice and tears in her eyes, that she has found a well-paying job, staff feel affirmed. As Marjorie explained, “In addition to finding a job, you know there is a ray of hope. Some sunshine beyond all the darkness.”

Conditions in these front-line organizations of Michigan’s welfare-to-work system challenge the assumptions underpinning performance management. While substantial programmatic variation exists, this variation is not caused by local conditions. To assess organizational effectiveness solely on policy outcomes seems disconnected from what motivates front-line practices. In fact, front-line staff deny that formally identified policy goals are sufficient to motivate their actions. Rather, it seems a more complex process motivates front-line workers and sustains front-line practices in these organizations.

ANALYZING FRONT-LINE PRACTICES

In both the public welfare bureaucracy and privatized welfare-to-work systems, front-line practices strain the premises of the public management techniques designed to direct and influence them. Although the public welfare system employs many techniques to eliminate the discretion of workers, staff still exert judgement and develop unique practices. Although the reinvented welfare-to-work system tries to enhance program quality and maximize program outcomes, staff still rely on their own frameworks to sustain their practices. When we investigate how public management techniques are actually instituted, these cases suggest that there is a gap between management ideals and daily front-line realities.

As I noted earlier, the data for this multiple-case study were collected using ethnographic methods. Scholars using this methodology explicitly try to document the factors that informants
believe are essential in defining particular contexts and, at the same time, strive to identify more generalizable processes that transcend particular cases (Patton 1990; Schwartzman 1993; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). This approach—which privileges informants' experiences, beliefs, and actions—looks at the specific details of a case or multiple cases and tries to understand how these details are connected to a larger process. It is taken to develop new understandings and hypotheses for further investigation.

Using this technique, the data collected in this study document that front-line workers exert agency not acknowledged or capitalized on by conventional public management approaches. While the research literature examining front-line discretion with public organizations focuses on human agency exerted in opposition to formal rules, this study reveals a more fundamental type of human agency. The ethnographic methods show that front-line workers in both the public welfare bureaucracy and private welfare-to-work contractors actually define the parameters that, in turn, shape their actions and interpretations.

Luckily, a body of social theory offers a lens through which we can better interpret these data and understand the disjuncture between management frameworks and front-line conditions. For the last twenty years, social theorists such as Giddens (1984), Sewell (1992), and others (Ritzer 1981; Archer 1988; Bourdieu 1990) have been wrestling with trying to understand how individuals can both constitute and be constituted by social structures. Rather than focus on the systems and infrastructures that shape individuals' actions or on individual actions that occur within systemic contexts, these theories try to examine both simultaneously. Thus these theorists do not subscribe to either the deterministic or the relativistic viewpoint, which characterizes much of social science research. Instead, they try to understand how individuals exert agency even while they operate within larger, structural contexts.

From this theoretical perspective, people exist within social contexts—societies, communities, organizations—that do not possess an inherent structure. Instead, the structures emerge from humans' desire to make sense of the circumstances in which they find themselves. Structures are constituted by two factors. The first are the schemas: the norms, collective beliefs, and shared knowledge that people develop when operating within a particular social context. The second are the resources: the concrete objects, authority, and tools valued within a particular social context (Giddens 1984; Sewell 1992). By drawing on the salient schemas and resources of a context, people create the structures

7While the particular term utilized for this construct is debated in the literature, I adopt schema as suggested by Sewell (1992).
Public Management in the Welfare System

of their social systems. This structure, in turn, constitutes meaning—it helps people know how to interpret an event or understand their experiences—and sanctions particular modes of social conduct. Social structure both emerges out of peoples' experiences within a particular situation and limits the range of possible interpretations and actions acceptable within that context. It both enables and constrains daily action. Through this lens, structure and action are recursive and inseparable.

As this theory is applied to the front-line welfare organizations, the particular meanings of schema arise from staff experience within each organizational context as they carry out the responsibilities of their jobs, interact with managers and coworkers, and respond to clients. While certainly individuals develop their own meanings from these experiences, schemas explicitly refers to the beliefs and knowledge that are shared by all front-line workers. As a consequence, schemas affect the way local office resources, such as computerized databases or job search videos, are used. Together the operative schemas and resources form the structures that guide front-line action. Thus, structure is not imposed through management mandate or formal rules but rather is developed among workers and internalized as they go about their day-to-day tasks.

These social theories posit that this process transcends organizational differences between large public bureaucracies and small private contractors.

8 In public management, some scholars discuss similar phenomena in terms of an organization's culture. However, as others have pointed out, it is difficult to operationalize culture (Khademian 1997) and, furthermore, to investigate how it is connected to daily action. The structuration theory used here is a more precise way to understand similar phenomena and to connect shared beliefs to workers' actions.

9 In other work (Sandfort 1997 and 1999b), I provide a more complete elaboration of the various schemas that develop in these front-line contexts, the utilization of resources, and the process whereby these factors structure staff action. In this article—because of my interest in the applied public management concerns—I explicitly focus on the consequences of the structuration process and the implication it has for theory development and management practices.

742/J-PART, October 2000
Public Management in the Welfare System

A similar process occurs on the front lines of the welfare-to-work contractors. Although formal structure is fairly weak within these organizations because of the limited rules and hierarchy, staff also develop their own parameters to direct their daily actions. While public management assumes this direction comes from the desire to respond to local environmental circumstances or to maximize organizational outcomes, front-line conditions challenge this assumption. Instead, these workers also develop collective knowledge from daily experiences—working with resistant clients, observing the inconsistency between policy objectives and actions of public welfare staff, and talking with local employers. In this decentralized system, the shared knowledge and particular resources differ in each local contractor. In fact, as we will see, this variation helps to normalize and sustain drastically different program technologies within each of the three organizations. Yet the process that workers go through—drawing on practice-based knowledge and organizational resources to create structures that help them to interpret events and act decisively—is generalizable across these differing organizational contexts.

This theoretical lens, then, provides a way to interpret why front-line conditions in the United States welfare system do not correspond to the assumptions embedded in the public management techniques utilized by the systems. In the cases examined in this study, staff in both the public welfare bureaucracy and the private welfare-to-work contractors engage in a social process that has structural characteristics—it provides framework for interpreting events, justifying daily actions, and rationalizing inaction. Because this process is embedded in day-to-day experiences, the structural parameters that emerge are more legitimate than management initiatives that often seem random to front-line workers and disconnected from their reality. As staff operate with these structural parameters, they become more embedded and institutionalized. Unfortunately, this social process—while essential and ongoing—is overlooked by conventional public management approaches used in these social programs. Yet it is precisely why some management challenges found in both the public bureaucracy and private contractors persist.

The Consequences of Front-line Structures in the Public Bureaucracy

In contrast to the variation among Work First contractors, front-line conditions are fairly similar across local offices in this state-wide public bureaucracy. The unique challenges of wrestling with inscrutable administrative policies to determine clients' eligibility, facing social disdain because they work for the
Public Management in the Welfare System

welfare office, and enduring prior failed efforts to reform the welfare system have given rise to similar schemas, similar shared knowledge of how "work is done around here." Regardless of their local office, staff are given the same types of resources to carry out their tasks—piles of standardized forms, massive policy manuals, complex computer screens. The schemas that emerge from daily experiences and the resources present to accomplish tasks make up structures that actually direct workers' day-to-day activities. In this context, these structures cause front-line staff to be isolated from other human service professionals, resistant to even small attempts at change, and unable to adapt existing practices to altering demands.

For example, staff make a clear distinction between those who understand front-line reality and those who do not. Staff believe that unless individuals have worked at the front-lines, they will not really understand the challenges of delivering welfare programs, of listening to clients' stories of adversity, and of seeing all the contradictions embedded in welfare policy. State-level managers who work in the central office of the public bureaucracy are regarded with skepticism because they neither share the same understandings as workers nor understand how to use the resources so critical in front-line work. Front-line perceptions of those outside the organization are fraught with even more mistrust. Workers regularly report that most contact with other human service staff is adversarial.

These shared beliefs provide a focused lens through which staff interpret contact with those in the external environment. When a local manager receives two different interpretations on a new policy from two state-level administrators, staff interpret the event as additional evidence of managers' incompetence. As one worker retorted to her colleagues, "It's almost like there's this sadist person that's making up this policy [saying] 'How can we make this as complicated as possible?'" When social workers from private agencies call on behalf of clients to inquire why a certain action on a case has not been taken or why additional verification is required, staff interpret such inquiries as threatening and unprofessional. Rather than recognizing that such calls might be a necessary part of the others' job, public welfare staff consider such actions to be confirmation that others do not understand the technical work of eligibility determination. Each such event strengthens the isolation staff feel from the external environment and further reinforces those structural parameters that direct their actions (Sandfort 1999a).

The structures of front-line work also make staff resistant to instituting even minor changes in local office operation. In one
Public Management in the Welfare System

office that was examined in this study, the district manager decided to merge the tasks of intake and ongoing income maintenance staff into a generalist position. Within this office, this step was considered to be a significant and bold change by managers and workers. In fact, when asked in focus groups about the most significant change in the office during that year, staff uniformly named the implementation of the generalist position. Ongoing workers complained that they could no longer plan or control their work load. They struggled to expand their knowledge of all the relevant administrative policy. Intake workers thought ongoing tasks were repetitious and boring. Rather than integrate the tasks, a number of staff just kept distinct the routines of each, doing intake tasks in the morning and ongoing tasks in the afternoon. A few refused to learn the new responsibilities. When they were asked about this resistance, staff provided clear justification. Kelly's words reflect the sentiments of her colleagues:

I think the more specialized you are, the better service you can give [clients]. You can't be all things to a client. You can't know 24 Medicaid programs, food stamps, AFDC, state family assistance programs. You can't possibly keep up with all the changes, service your client, and give them all the information about these different programs. It's impossible. . . . Somebody who specializes in intake is going to be able to open [particular] cases more quickly than somebody who has an ongoing load. . . . [T]here are things that you need specialists for. I think you need specialists in the field of welfare.

The structures of the social system—the collective belief that specialized tasks and technical knowledge are essential, the significant resources of existing forms and policy manuals—provided a framework that allowed them to legitimately resist the imposition of this rather minor alteration in work responsibilities.

The structures of front-line work also create a skepticism about new policy initiatives and allow staff to resist changing their daily practices. Although staff clearly support the goal of making clients more independent, they express ambivalence when they are asked their opinions of specific policies designed to achieve this goal. Years of working within the system—seeing grandiose policy makers' speeches rarely translated into administrative rules—makes them believe that welfare reform is political rather than substantive. There is a deeply shared skepticism that true change will ever occur. This skepticism, in turn, shapes staff understanding of and enactment of new reform initiatives. Take, for example, a new policy that eliminated the child care deduction for working clients and provided a new direct subsidy to defray the cost of care. Although state policy makers saw this change as a way to reward clients' work efforts, staff focused on...
its negative implications when they discussed this new policy with each other. Although the change caused many cash assistance cases to be closed and shifted to the day care subsidy program—a change deemed positive by state-level planners—front-line staff interpreted this change as negative. In their minds, many clients liked the safety net that cash assistance provided. Furthermore, the new procedure seemed more costly and offered more potential for fraud since verification requirements were relaxed.

These collective interpretations and the existing resources of standardized forms and procedures justified staff inaction in light of the new policy. Although a huge influx of child care cases occurred, staff did not adjust their daily practices to process the applications quickly. They continued to precisely complete detailed forms, calculate hours of child care utilized during a two week period (adjusting for the erratic hours and part-time care used by many families), and receive authorization from front-line supervisors. While these practices were feasible when caseloads were small, they quickly became unmanageable with the increased press of cases. Five months after the implementation of the new policy designed to make “work pay” for welfare clients, workers were over three months behind in reimbursement for day care costs. Three hundred applications were pending. They were plagued with persistent phone calls from clients and providers who demanded payments. The collective knowledge that welfare reform is symbolic and thorough eligibility verification is essential was reinforced by the role that standardized forms play as essential resources in this organizational context. These structures caused staff workers to fall severely behind in their casework and made them unable to think outside of these parameters to creatively develop a viable alternative. Rather than merely adjusting their practices, workers continued to plod on through the piles of paperwork on their desks. These actions do not occur because workers are unwilling to exert discretion; rather they are sustained and reinforced by the very structures that staff have developed from their daily experiences within the front-line social system. In turn, these same structures impede orchestrated efforts to make changes within the public welfare bureaucracy.

This analysis suggests that front-line staff within the public welfare bureaucracy depend on their collective knowledge and organizational resources to develop the structure within which they operate. This structure provides them a way to interpret events and justify inaction. It helps to sustain the isolation of front-line public welfare work from the external environment, to justify staff resistance to minor changes in tasks, and to blind them to alternative ways of responding to more substantial policy
changes. This social process—where staff draw upon shared knowledge developed from experience and tangible organizational resources in a way that shapes their understanding and actions—provides a new explanation for why some of the problems public managers in the public welfare office experience persist in spite of focused efforts at change. As we will see, the structures of front-line work within Work First providers have different consequences.

The Consequences of Front-line Structures in Welfare-to-Work Contractors

Unlike the public welfare bureaucracy, the schemas and resources that come to structure front-line staffs' interpretations and actions in welfare-to-work contractors are not uniform across sites. These organizations are merely contract organizations. Staff in each develop unique understanding of their experiences and utilize different resources to carry out their day-to-day tasks. As a result, the structuration process has unique contours in each front-line organization. However, the process has similar consequences. Because all three of these programs are evaluated according to their outcomes—the proportion of clients who find employment and retain it for ninety days—managers in each repeatedly stress the importance of maximizing this output. Yet, as was discussed earlier, front-line staff in all three organizations resist this orientation. Rather than develop services that push clients into jobs, they draw upon their collective beliefs and organizational resources to develop what they believe are appropriate services. This process subverts managers' entreaties to improve organizational performance and sustains unfocused program technologies.

In Helping Hand, for example, the county's strong economy and the short-term nature of the Work First intervention causes staff to doubt whether their actions have any impact on clients' abilities to find employment. They regularly discuss this ambivalence with each other at lunch, in meetings, over coffee. They draw upon this knowledge when they are confronted by difficult clients or new management initiatives; fundamentally, staff do not believe they can do much to help clients "work first." Although blessed with many concrete resources—videos and computers to use in training, spacious training rooms, adequate secretarial support—the collective schema inhibit the effective utilization of these tools.

Classroom sessions and job search workshops are held each week but most meetings are unfocused, strangely disconnected from the official program goal. Although case managers are
considered to be the primary contact for clients as they search for employment, there is no formal assessment by case managers built into the program model. While employment opportunities are regularly posted on the job board, staff responsible for job development do not assess clients’ employment goals or develop contact with employers in the community who need semiskilled workers.

Rather than exhibit practices that are viably connected to improving organizational outcomes, staff have seized upon monitoring client attendance as a strategy for focusing their own work. Although official policy requires that clients participate in Work First for twenty hours each week, local providers decide how closely this guideline is followed. At Helping Hand, staff have developed extensive tools to monitor attendance—attendance forms, job search documentation, and computerized tracking systems. These tools act as resources that reinforce each day the importance of closely documenting clients’ participation. If a classroom session ends early or a client completes the required number of phone calls, he/she must wait at the site—talking, reading the newspaper, looking blindly out into space—until the time has passed, so as not to fall under the required twenty hours. In a program where staff question the viability of Work First in achieving its desired outcomes, monitoring attendance provides a relatively easy way to focus staff energy.

This careful monitoring of attendance does not occur in other Work First programs. In fact, at Eastside School staff run what they call a humanistic program and rarely assess client participation. This site has few concrete resources to help structure job search activities—no computers for enhancing clients’ skills, no telephones for making calls to potential employers, no materials to enhance job search training. While the program’s written materials state that a “job search classroom” is offered for two hours a day, four days a week, rarely does it last for more than an hour, three days a week. Typically, clients come to the site, identify three potential employers by looking in the phone book or newspaper, and leave. Sometimes they are asked about these efforts in the classroom and, occasionally, there may be a group discussion. However, there is no curriculum or even any planned activities. The staff member who is responsible for developing job possibilities with employers in the community does not carry out this responsibility.

The reduced classroom time, undeveloped classroom sessions, and lack of job development are justified by staffs’ doubts about the short-term nature of the Work First intervention. Whereas staff supported the prior welfare-to-work program that

748/J-PART, October 2000
provided education and vocational training, they perceive Work First as a short-term Band-Aid. As one staff member stated, "It's just a temporary fix to a long term problem." Instead of developing an intervention that improves organizational outcomes, staff focus on the completion of paperwork. In fact, staff estimate that 90 percent of their time is taken up with paperwork and data entry responsibilities. While they may complain about this volume, staff believe they must keep up-to-date files and manage the many forms associated with referrals to satisfy state auditors. This belief is reinforced by the limited resources in the program. Unlike other providers, schools have few clerical staff available, and programmatic staff are left to carry out this function. As a result, staff are confronted by a constant press of paperwork that must be completed. In this context, they have no time to focus on improving the more substantive aspects of job search preparation.

Within the final organization that is examined in this study, Enhance Corporation, the schema and resources shared by workers structure their daily actions in ways more consistent with public policy goals. In this organization, an assumption is shared throughout the agency—from management to administrative support staff—that, inherently, all people are employable. As one worker expressed, "It is up to us to try and bring out in people the desire to work and to show that to employers. That is what impresses . . . especially in semi-skilled and unskilled jobs." In this environment, a more thorough program technology has been developed.

Classroom facilitators initially assess the needs of individual clients and build their trust in the program. Although they cover topics conventionally included in such classes—applications, interviews, workplace behavior—front-line staff utilize resources, such as videos and resume activities, and employ practices, such as group activities and role playing, to engage clients in the classroom. At the end of the week-long session, the facilitators meet individually with each client to identify three potential areas for job search and discuss any barriers to employment. Once clients actively begin to search for work, Enhance utilizes two approaches simultaneously to assist Work First clients find employment. Three career planners are employed to interface with the private sector for Work First clients. Each maintains a nonduplicative list of employers; hotels, laundries, and other employers with a high demand for low-skilled female labor are coveted members of each career planner's list. In addition, other staff supervise independent job search activities, helping clients identify places to call, coordinating transportation services, and providing assistance in completing applications or selecting appropriate interview clothing. In this program, staff mobilize
agency resources—such as the motivational videos, networks of employers, files of applications, and transportation services—to assist clients find employment.

These practices are not sustained because of managers' emphasis on maximizing organizational outcomes. Instead, staff have internalized the belief that to become self-sufficient—to be free from the yoke of the welfare system—clients must start with one job, any job. To be successful, clients need only to be willing to work, to learn the skills necessary, and to work their way up the ladder. Yet, as one worker recognized, "Everybody who comes through the door is not at the time and place [in their lives] to be helped." Rather than focusing on the limited viability of the Work First program to address these clients' problems—as occurs at Helping Hand and Eastside—staff at Enhance are clear that intensive engagement is not their mission. In this organization, the social structures support daily practices that are consistent with the quick labor force attachment model of Work First.

As in the public welfare bureaucracy, front-line staff in these welfare-to-work providers draw on the knowledge gleaned from their daily experiences. The challenge of trying to assess client skills, motivate them to participate, and connect them with appropriate jobs generates shared beliefs in each organization. In Helping Hand and Eastside, staff question the viability of the Work First model and depend on the unique resources of their particular organizations to provide a structure for their day-to-day tasks. In Helping Hand the prevalence of sophisticated computers allows staff to develop sophisticated mechanisms for tracking client attendance; in Eastside, the lack of such resources leads staff to focus their attention on the routine completion of paperwork. In Enhance the enthusiastic support for Work First's goal and savvy utilization of organizational resources cause staff to focus their energies on maximizing the possibility that all clients will find an appropriate job. In all three organizations, the process is the same: staff draw upon the unique schema and organization resources to create structures that actually shape how services are provided to welfare recipients.

This process prevails in spite of managers' entreaties to maximize organizational outcomes. Whereas managers in the public bureaucracy must wrestle with the constant challenges of isolation and resistance to change, managers in private organizations struggle to offer clear direction and inspire motivation. New public management asserts that this direction and motivation can be gained by focusing on organizational outcomes. Yet this analysis suggests that—just as the attention to rules in traditional
Public Management in the Welfare System

public administration is misguided—this focus on outcomes is disconnected from the actual process that exists at the front line of human service organizations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC MANAGEMENT RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

This empirical investigation suggests there is a generalizable social process occurring at the front lines of the welfare system that is not capitalized on by current public management techniques. Within their unique organizational contexts, front-line staff develop shared knowledge and collective beliefs from their day-to-day experiences. They develop and utilize organizational resources in ways that reinforce those schemas and give rise to the unique structures of their social systems. This social process has causal implications for how work is carried out. It helps to explain why public welfare workers are isolated from other human services professionals and how they feel that it is legitimate to resist minor organizational changes. It explains workers' skepticism about new welfare reform initiatives and shows why they are unable to alter their own practices to effectively implement such initiatives. This social process also helps to explain how the staff of private contractors feel justified in adopting service techniques that have little hope for improving organizational outcomes, even while their managers are extolling their importance.

To readers of this journal, the absence of local managers or familiar management infrastructures in this analysis is probably notable. While managers were interviewed and observed for this project, it was striking how they seemed to occupy a distinct sphere within the organizations. Rather than struggling with the raw materials of front-line practice—dealing with frustrated clients, completing mounds of paperwork, soliciting jobs for clients—these individuals were concerned with different tasks and distinct goals. In fact, managers' attention to administrative rules and performance indicators—the very tools that are supposed to focus front-line action—helped to convince front-line staff of their separateness. When reflecting upon their shared experience, staff in all five organization felt their practice knowledge was more legitimate than their managers' perspectives. As one staff member from Enhance stated, "A lot of [management concepts] are idle talk and talk is cheap. Sure, it sounds good but if you don't understand how the real work is done, what is the point?" From the perspective of front-line staff, local managers did little to affect their beliefs, change their interpretations of events, or motivate their actions.

751/J-PART, October 2000
Public Management in the Welfare System

These conclusions are drawn from a detailed analysis of ethnographic data. This data was gathered to develop new hypotheses about the relationship between conventional management practices and front-line actions. In the course of this inductive analysis of field-based data, I have uncovered some propositions that merit further investigation:

**Proposition 1**: Current public management techniques are based on assumptions about how to focus the actions of front-line staff that are not supported by empirical investigations into front-line conditions.

**Proposition 2**: Front-line staff develop collective beliefs and understanding from daily experiences. They rely on this collective knowledge and on organizational resources to shape their interpretation of events and provide a standard for rational action.

**Proposition 3**: This social process has structural implications for how staff carry out their assigned tasks in the delivery of public programs.

These propositions draw attention to the ongoing process found at the front-lines of the welfare system. Additional research must be conducted to see if the process identified here has salience in other organizations, in other arenas of social policy, and in other policy areas.\(^\text{11}\)

This analysis also points to other avenues for empirical research on public management and program implementation. Rather than assume a priori that our management concepts are objective social facts, researchers could investigate how our management tools are understood by the people who work within the organizations where they are implemented. This charge could yield important information about why management ideals rarely are realized. In addition, we may be missing important social processes by focusing on either individuals or organizations as our units of analysis. By focusing on the collective, day-to-day experience of individuals and drawing connections to larger structural forces, additional research that utilizes contemporary social theories to integrate micro- and macrolevels of analysis could be helpful. Finally, this study raises important questions about how front-line workers demonstrate agency. How is agency exerted? When does it translate into systemic forces within the organization? How does agency alter the existing social structures within the organization over time?

In addition to opening up new avenues for research, this analysis has potential normative implications for public

\(^{11}\text{Arguably, social policy may be a fairly unique arena of public management because of the contested goals, ambiguous technology, and diversity of client circumstances (Hasenfeld 1992). In fact, as others have pointed out, the administration and execution of welfare policy is a particularly political, subjective, and moral task (Brodkin 1987; Hasenfeld 1997). It is quite possible that the process identified in this investigation has the most significance in the delivery of social programs where front-line structures can determine how vague political ideals are enacted in practice.}\)
management practice (Behn 1995a; Lynn 1996). The social process described here occurs as front-line staff go about their daily tasks—making choices, responding to events, reflecting on their actions. Managers would be wise to remember that these activities do not occur in isolation. In the public welfare bureaucracy, rules that attempt to curtail individual discretion ignore the larger social context within which individuals exist. In the private welfare-to-work contractors, managers who try to focus organizational operation by articulating program outcomes overlook the collective beliefs that staff develop about the purpose of their work. Whether in public bureaucracies or private contractors, street-level staff retain human agency. Popular management books, whether they articulate it in terms of learning organizations, high performance teams, or intentional revolutions (Senge 1990; Mason 1996), provide some techniques for harnessing this collective agency and directing it toward organizational ends.

In spite of the appeal of these and other management tools and paradigms, managers should never assume that their techniques influence how staff conduct their day-to-day tasks. In the delivery of human service programs, front-line knowledge that is developed from experience is often more valid than abstract management concepts. Focused inquiry through staff meetings, surveys, and informal conversations may help managers become aware of the salient impressions shared among front-line workers.

Because the social structures shape workers’ understanding of and receptivity to new ideals, managers also must discover the terms of those structures when they introduce new initiatives. If this step is not taken, new management initiatives can easily be subverted (Lin 1997). In the cases that are analyzed here, front-line staff in the public welfare bureaucracy used their front-line structures to justify their resistance to minor changes in tasks and more substantial policy changes. Similarly, welfare-to-work staff used these frameworks to resist managers’ direction and sustain ineffective practices. These structures are enduring because they are built from days, months, and sometimes years of experiences. Managers must know the terms of these beliefs and must help staff to think beyond them; they must value front-line experience yet cultivate an ability for staff to think outside of those parameters (Langer 1989).

Rather than relying on the assumptions of either traditional public administration or new performance management, it is critical to examine how the beliefs and actions of ordinary individuals who deliver public services actually create larger structural parameters.
Public Management in the Welfare System

REFERENCES


Public Management in the Welfare System


Patton, Michael Quinn. 1990 *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods.* Newbury Park, Calif.: SAGE.


Plantz, Margaret; Greenway, Martha Taylor; and Hendricks, Michael. 1997 “Outcome Measurement: Showing Results in the Nonprofit Sector.” *New Directions for Evaluation* 75:15:30.


Public Management in the Welfare System

Schwartzman, Helen.
1993 *Ethnography in Organizations.* Newbury Park, Calif.: SAGE.

Scott, Graham; Ball, Ian; and Dale, Tony.

Scott, Patrick G.

Seefeldt, Kristin; Sandfort, Jodi R.; and Danziger, Sandra.

Senge, Peter.

Sewell, William.

Smith, Steven Rathgeb, and Lipsky, Michael.

Sosin, Michael.

Strauss, Anselm, and Corbin, Juliet.

Vinzant, Janet Coble, and Crothers, Lane.

Weber, Max T.

Willmott, Hugh.

Wilson, James Q.

756/J-PART, October 2000