“Tyesha’s Dilemmas: Anthropological Ruminations on the Consequences of Welfare Reform”**

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© May 1998

** Support for this research was generously provided by the Russell Sage, Rockefeller, Ford, Spencer, and William T. Grant Foundations. Comments from Greg Duncan and Christopher Jencks improved this work greatly.

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Introduction:

There are many ways to approach the study of welfare reform and its consequences. Most of them will rely upon large data sets, capable of tracking AFDC recipients over the long haul. While the best of these studies will undoubtedly link the outcomes experienced by recipients in the labor market with the family circumstances they must simultaneously contend with, the focus of most of the large scale research efforts will be limited to the employment dimension. This is where the interests of most state governments will lie, for if it turns out to be the case (as critics of welfare reform assert) that large numbers of recipients will not find jobs, local authorities will face a crisis to which they will have to respond.

The concerns that motivate this conference – the fate of children in poor families whose lives have been drastically altered by the imposition of time limits – are not front and center in this debate. Yet if the nation's real concern is not simply how to off load a fiscal obligation today, but how to crack through the problem of persistent poverty for future generations, it is incumbent on researchers to focus on what happens to the children of former welfare recipients as their parents go to work or fall through the cracks in the labor market.

Large scale surveys will give us the best purchase on these questions if we are satisfied with extensive, but relatively superficial, answers. If we want to know what proportion of these children drop out of school, whether children in working families are better off in terms of standard scales of psychological well-being than those in non-working families, or what child care options families coming off of welfare have found, the survey research approach is the best method to pursue. Indeed, the numbers produced out of those efforts will be profoundly important, since they can reach across the particularities of millions of recipients and their families and show us the patterns. Resource questions facing the states – where best to spend the dollars they have in meeting the needs of recipients – must necessarily flow from these survey studies.

There are two reasons why we should not stop there, however. First, at the most pragmatic level, when it comes time to return to the public debate over what welfare reform has really accomplished or what monumental problems it has bequeathed to states and cities, numbers alone will not do the trick. Neither politicians, nor the general public, can interpret logistic regressions. They are not moved or influenced by chi squares. And all too often, the findings of survey research are inconclusive or contradictory so that, like many a nutritional study (eat butter, don't eat butter), they end up exhausting the patience of their intended audience. This is not to suggest they should

be abandoned, for that would be a disaster. It is to suggest that if the social science community wants to weigh in with its assessment of welfare reform, it would behoove all of us to couple survey research, especially panel studies, with qualitative research that can speak to a broader audience.

Secondly, it is the rare survey that can tell us why the patterns survey researchers document exist: what are the social processes that squeeze children out of school and what do they have to do with the stresses their parents face as a consequence of welfare reform? What is it about work which makes children in working poor families better or worse off than those in families drawing on public benefits (a more honored identity? Hopeful future? Income? Or time poverty?)? How do families think about child care: what governs their choices, what choices do they really have, how stable are their alternatives and if child care arrangements fall through, how effectively can they scramble to patch together alternative? What is the relationship, if any, between the moral messages the government sends its people through policy change and the messages that are received, internalized, and acted upon? These kinds of questions demand more context, texture, and nuance to answer. They go to the heart of *why* we see the patterns the surveys will show us.

This is what anthropology does best: it attempts to dig deeply into the daily lives of those on the receiving end of government policy to ask *social structural questions*: what resources families draw on in adapting to economic shocks and how successful that adaptation process really is; how the internal dynamics of a family intertwine with the demands and protections afforded by the wider kinship and friendship networks in which they are embedded; and *cultural questions* about the internal consistency (or lack thereof) in normative expectations; the relationship between values and behavior; and the patterned variations between race, ethnic, and class cultures in the subjective experience of poverty, exclusion, and economic self-sufficiency.

Such an intensive inquiry almost always precludes the kind of extensive coverage and attention to representativeness that is the hallmark of survey research. Hence questions are routinely, and appropriately, raised about the generalizability of anthropological findings based on studies with a small number of "informants." We may learn a great deal from *Tally's Corner* about the culture of poor black men, but how many corners are there like Tally's? Do street corner denizens in Newark in the l990s have the same beliefs and behaviors as those Elliot Liebow described for Washington DC in the l960s? And if not, what produces the differences? Ethnographic methods rarely address these questions. Yet for policy makers these are issues that cannot be sidestepped.

How then to make best use of the rich insights that ethnography can provide while taking seriously the need for generalization? In recent years we have seen the emergence of a blended methodology that embeds ethnographic "samples" inside survey research designs. Intensive interviews, participant observation, discursive diaries, household studies, and ethnographies of neighborhoods are all built within a sampling framework generated by a larger survey project. The Chicago Neighborhood Study sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation is probably the richest (in every sense of the word!) study of this

kind. But the New Hope study, William Julius Wilson's new study of welfare reform in three cities, Kathryn Edin's work on low income mothers, and my own studies of Harlem's low wage workers all utilize this multi-method research approach that embeds ethnographic work inside a survey design. This is clearly what will be needed for anthropological work to count in the arenas where we most want it to be heard.

That said, what should the "thick description" be describing? What are the substantive domains where anthropologists have made or could make major contributions to our understanding of welfare reform? And in what respects can prior studies inform us about likely outcomes for children in poor families as their lives are transformed by welfare reform?

It may be helpful, in answering these questions, to consider the situation inside one "welfare family" on the eve of the introduction of time limits. If we can understand the pressures building up in such a family, and then consider how they might be studied as time limits descend upon them, we can then stand back from this case and ask what anthropology could contribute to the study of children and families under welfare reform.

Tyesha's Dilemmas

Between 1993-95, my research focussed on the work and families lives of minimum wage workers in central Harlem employed in the fast food industry. My interests focussed on the working poor and explicitly sidestepped the welfare issue as it was my view then, and remains the case now, that we would do well to spend more time worrying about low wage workers than AFDC. Nonetheless, the two domains – as Kathy Edin and Laura Lein have shown us – are not so separable. About 25% of the fast food workers we surveyed in Harlem were living in households where someone, usually their mothers, were receiving public aid. Hence any policy directed at changing the behavior or life chances of welfare recipients was likely to have major implications for the low income workers in their households.

This was most certainly the case for Tyesha Smith, a 21 year old fast food worker living in a Harlem housing project. Tyesha had worked for five years by the time we met, but was earning less than $5 an hour despite the skills she had built up over that period of time and the high school diploma she had earned, against the odds she would say. As the kinship chart on the next page (Figure 1) shows, Tyesha lived in an apartment as the oldest child in a family headed by Dana, a forty-one year old black woman with six children still living at home. Dana had been a continuous AFDC recipient since she had her first child, Tyesha's oldest brother (Reggie), at the age of 15. During the course of my research, Dana gave birth to her seventh child who was several years younger than Dana's youngest grandchild. Dana did not graduate from high school. Her experience with formal employment was of very brief duration and a very long time ago. She is, for all practical purposes, a career recipient of AFDC. Hence Dana is precisely the kind of person that architects of welfare legislation had in mind as

the target of their reform efforts. Indeed, during the two years I studied this family[1], welfare authorities had come after Dana in an effort to enroll her in a workfare program, which she deflected on the grounds that her youngest child was too young (and then too ill). Pressure was clearly building for Dana to enter the labor force.

Had she done so, problems would immediately have cropped up for Tyesha. For this young worker had a child of her own, Anthony Junior, then two years old, whose full time child care consisted of Dana, period. Dana took care of her own young children and added Tyesha's son to the mix. In exchange, Tyesha deeded over some of her earnings to Dana. Given Tyesha's low earnings, she would have been hard pressed to pay for commercial or even subsidized public child care, no matter how inexpensive or available it might have been – and in New York City day care was neither. Dana's availability made it possible for Tyesha to remain in the labor market. Indeed, in the summer (thanks to Dana's connections), Tyesha picked up a second job doing cleaning and maintenance around the housing project where they live.

Dana was not the only welfare recipient (or state-funded child-care worker, depending on how one looks at her real position) whose status affected young Anthony Junior. Through the kinship ties of his father, Anthony Senior (a fellow worker in the fast food trade), the little boy had access to another grandmother. Anthony Senior's mother, Graciela, born in Puerto Rico, but a long time resident of the South Bronx, took her grandson in on weekends. This permitted Dana to take a bit of a break and gave Anthony Senior a chance to spend time with his son. Like Dana, Graciela had been a long time welfare recipient. Unlike Dana, however, she stopped having children long ago, so that when the authorities came looking for her to join the workfare program and, eventually, to push her off of AFDC altogether, she had no shelter from their demands. Gone was the weekend childcare for little Anthony. Anthony Senior, like his ex-girlfriend Tyesha, was in demand as a weekend shift worker and since he faced what he regarded as voracious requests for support from Tyesha and from his own mother, Anthony wasn't much use as a child care possibility.

It bears notice that the other members of Tyesha's extended family, her step siblings by a common law father who comes and goes from the family's life in a rather irregular pattern, were neither old enough to provide child care nor to be fully on their own. Indeed, in the best of all possible worlds, Irene (age 11), Juney (7) and Jimona (6), and their foster sister, Sandra (5), would themselves benefit from adult supervision in the after school and evening hours. This need would most likely go unmet if Dana were unavailable.

Looking closely at Tyesha's family tree, however, it is clear that there are resources to be tapped in her extended family network. We commonly assume that poor

[1] The project from which this account emerges began with a survey of 200 workers, continued with an intensive life history sample of 60 recruited from among them, and finally focussed a year long fieldwork effort with 10 of those 60. Tyesha's family, her friends, workplace, and neighborhood were the focus of this final phase of the research. (See Newman, Katherine [1999] *The Working Poor in the Inner City*. New York: Alfred Knopf/Russell Sage Foundation.)

residents of inner city neighborhoods are "persistently," inter-generationally poor. Yet a close read of this family's occupational history shows that among the oldest living generation one sees a fair number of people who have had solid careers. Evie, Dana's mother, has worked for the postal service for her entire adult life. Her husband had a job parking cars in a commercial garage. On the strength of their income, they were able to move out of the city to a segregated suburb on Long Island. Some of their children (Dana's siblings) have done quite well also: one daughter (Mary) is a medical secretary; Beth is a corrections officer, Nell married a truck driver. Yet others have no formal employment.

Even those who have worked fairly steadily occasionally fall on hard time and land back in Evie's arms, seeking shelter from an inhospitable job market. The most important point to notice here, though, is that Tyesha represents a downwardly mobile generation, which has come through a much harder economic period than her grandmother, product of the expansive 60s. Where government jobs (and military opportunities) were plentiful for Evie's generation and even for Dana's siblings, they have become much harder to find in Tyesha's.

Tyesha's father, who died some years ago, was a Greek immigrant who had had many children by another wife. Some of these step-siblings on Tyesha's father's side have done well for themselves as well. Several have become postal workers, others have gone into the military. Yet it is noticeable among her step-siblings on all sides, that those men who did not find their way into the military have found themselves in jail. Three of Tyesha's step brothers have been or are presently in jail for drug convictions. One of them continues to deal at a high level and makes a great deal of money by Tyesha's standards, though Tyesha and Dana both consider these ill-gotten gains "dirty money" and not welcome in their home. Some of her sisters make a living braiding hair or babysitting, underground jobs that keep them on the right side of the law. The variation in the occupational outcomes of Tyesha's siblings is noticeable, but not remarkable. Most of the poor families I have studied over time show the same kind of variation in sibling sets, with success stories mixed in with sad cases in a pattern that challenge explanations emphasizing environmental context.

Standing back from the ethnographic detail of Tyesha's kinship chart, it seems clear that on the eve of welfare reform, her own household was "holding it together" on the basis of a stable, but delicate balance. The combination of Tyesha's low wage work, Dana's welfare and subsidized public housing, was working reasonably well, but only because all these pieces were in place. That said, there were reasons to be concerned about the long term viability of the arrangements even without the threat of welfare reform:

- The children were safe and fed, but not exactly prospering. Dana's preferred mode of babysitting, plunking the kids in front of a TV tuned to day time soap operas, was not likely to ready them for school with the kinds of social skills, understanding of letters and numbers that more advantaged children might have.

- While Tyesha, at 21, was reasonably content with her situation most of the time, tempers were rising in her household as she and her mother vied for authority over her son, sparring over the question of "who is really in charge here." Given her low wage job and child care needs, Tyesha could not imagine a time when she would be able to move out and form an independent household.
- Tension was growing as well over Dana's increasing demands for a larger contribution from Tyesha's wages. Tyesha had taken to hiding her tax refunds so as to have a nest egg of her own.
- Dana's restiveness over her own childcare responsibilities was growing, particularly now that Graciela, the grandson's other grandmother, was out of the picture. She was especially unwilling to do weekend babysitting, which meant Tyesha could no longer work so many hours, which both cut her wages and diminished her value on the shop floor.

The situation in Tyesha's household would not be unfamiliar to many of the working poor we interviewed over the past five years. Intertwined with welfare recipients, many of whom were intermittant workers themselves, they had evolved a brittle set of survival strategies. They function as long as all the pieces were well oiled. The loss of even one piece of the puzzle, however, would have been destabilizing unless replaced by a better alternatives – a high paying job, more earners in the household, and/or reliable support from the non-custodial fathers of their children.

The New Context of Welfare Reform:

How likely is it that someone like Dana would be able to be able to find a job given her profile: a long-time welfare recipient, high school dropout, with no recent work experience[2]? What are the chances Tyesha could replace Dana's childcare services given her low wages? The consequences of welfare reform differ dramatically depending on the answers to these questions, answers which vary considerably based on labor market conditions and childcare availability which differs from one poverty area to another. In New York City, the picture is not encouraging. Although the city's economy is doing much better than it was l0 years ago, it is fair to say that it has never fully recovered from the recession of the early l990's. Unemployment remains quite high: a city average of 9%. In this New York differs dramatically from communities like Milwaukee or Boston, where labor markets have tightened markedly.

Yet the inner city neighborhoods, even of these boom towns, still sport high levels of unemployment, even as conditions around them have improved. Unemployment in central Harlem during the period we were collecting data was 18%, nearly double the city wide average, a reflection of racial segregation and low levels of educational attainment. Couple these conditions with the nation-wide collapse in demand for low skilled workers, and we find that even minimum wage jobs are highly sought after. The central Harlem labor market was showing all the signs of saturation, long before welfare reform was on

[2] Newman, Katherine and Chauncy Lennon (1995) "Finding Work in the Inner City: How Hard is it Now? How Hard will it be for Welfare Recipients?" Working Paper #67, Russell Sage Foundation. 112 East 64th Street, New York, NY 10021.

the table. My research shows that the ratio of job seekers to successful job recipients for fast food employment in central Harlem was 14 to 1.[3] Employers could be picky under these circumstances and the incumbents of these entry level jobs reflected this advantage. High school graduates and older workers were favored over high school dropouts like Dana. Very young workers (like Tyesha's younger siblings) were losing out to more experienced and stable applicants in their mid twenties. Over half of this minimum wage labor force was over 25 years of age.

Wages were dragged down by this oversupply. Tyesha had worked for one fast food restaurant for five years and was only earning 25 cents above the minimum wage even though she was regarded as an indispensable worker. The only pressure to increase her income developed because of the federal increase in the minimum wage. Absent this, neither Tyesha nor any of her fast food friends would have seen an improvement in their earnings. There are simply too many people standing outside the door, ready to take her place, and too few better places willing to take a chance on her.

Ironically, the very same job on Long Island was paying $3 per hour more than Tyesha earned.[4] In an all-too-familiar pattern of mismatch, job growth has been dramatic in the suburban communities surrounding New York. Tight labor markets in Connecticut, New Jersey, Long Island and Westchester country have sent employers scrambling to find workers. Innovative busing programs are bringing workers from inner city Hartford into Connecticut suburbs. Westchester businesses are recruiting from southern Connecticut towns.

Yet it is unclear how much of this good news is changing the labor market conditions in Harlem, the south Bronx, or Bedford-Stuyvesant. Workers from these neighborhoods are still at the bottom of the queue. And within them, employers look upon immigrants with greater favor than native-born minorities, especially African-Americans.

Despite these negative conditions, New York has seen a dramatic drop in the welfare rolls. Figure 2 shows that between 1995-1998, the population on AFDC has dropped from approximately 1.2 million to 810,000 (more than half of whom are children). Even before the imposition of time limits, bureaucratic hurdles to access AFDC were increased[5]. Workfare became the order of the day, with recipients forced to work in menial jobs lest they lose their benefits. These forces (combined, to be sure, with

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[3] This is but a distal measure of labor market saturation. To measure this more accurately, one would need to know the total number of jobseekers and the total number of jobs they were after. Among the 14 people applying for every one of these fast food jobs, most were applying for multiple jobs, and their search patterns ranged well beyond Harlem's borders.

[4] It is not clear that fast food workers living on Long Island were therefore better off. There is no public housing in these suburban communities and private rents exceed those in subsidized city housing. The private housing markets are probably comparable; indeed, city rents, even in ghetto neighborhoods are probably higher than many suburban rentals.

[5] Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (l971) *Regulating the Poor*. New York: Vintage Books cites this kind of bureaucratic tightening evidence for the "restrictive cycle" of welfare which, they argued, tends to develop when unemployment falls. They suggest that the state's role in the stabilization of capitalism favors market discipline which is aided by making welfare harder to access.

increasing employment opportunities for the more skilled), pushed the welfare rolls down.

If those decreases reflected improving life chances for recipients leaving the rolls, that would be genuine cause for celebration. However, the best available data (not good, but the best we've got) shows that most of those leaving the rolls have not found employment. Among the adults who came off the welfare rolls in New York City between July 1996 and March l997, only 29% found full time or part time jobs (defined as earning $100 or more within three months of leaving the rolls).[6]

The results are better than this on a state-wide basis, where slightly more than l/3 found work. The difference suggests, as we might imagine, that the prospects for welfare recipients living in large, urban ghettos are less favorable than they might be for those in smaller towns, suburbs, or rural areas. For people like Dana, however, the news is not comforting. She is not in a very competitive position to find work. Should she be fortunate enough to land something, it is not likely to pay enough to make up for the increased costs she would incur in going to work (child care, transportation, clothing, etc.)[7]

It is quite likely, given these conditions, that it will take many years of sustained tight labor markets (including severe restrictions on low skilled immigration) before the employment picture for people like Dana will improve. She is much more likely to be among the 2/3 of the city's former AFDC recipients who do not find work at all. Yet even if Dana escapes this unhappy fate and finds work, her situation is likely to have important consequences for the people in her family that, at present, depend upon her to be home. Either way, there are problems on the horizon that anthropologists should be in a good position to chronicle.

Anthropological Forecasting

Each of the social sciences could train a different set of lenses on the question of welfare reform. What are the distinctive contributions Anthropology might make? From a substantive perspective, there are two domains that would make appropriate targets of anthropological investigation. First, there are questions we might loosely label "social structural": how has welfare reform effected the internal dynamics of households and families as they confront economic change? What role do kin networks (within

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[6] Survey of the NY State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. Reported in "Most Dropped From Welfare Don't Get Jobs" *New York Times* March 23, p. A1. (byline: Raymond Hernandez). This study doesn't track flow into underground economy; those who left the state; or those working for employers who delay in reporting their new payroll entrants, so the study may understate job finding. Yet it defines "working" as anyone who earned $100 in the three months following exit from the rolls. This threshold is so low that it probably exaggerates employment

[7] Indeed this is the point made so well by Edin and Lein (1997). Many of the welfare mothers they interviewed had dropped out of the low wage labor market because they were poorer while at work than they were on AFDC. Making such an alternative impossible is clearly one of the goals of welfare reform, which is another way of imposing the market discipline Piven and Cloward discuss.

geographic communities and overseas in the form of transnational families) play in buffering the negative effects of change? How will welfare reform impact the ability of poor household heads to participate in sharing networks and other forms of private "safety nets"? These questions all revolve around social organization, the distribution of roles and responsibilities and the ways in which they change when the resource base shifts dramatically.

A second substantive domain, and one for which Anthropology has become better known since it took a "symbolic turn"[8] raises questions of meaning, of the ways that ordinary people make sense out of their lives. What message did the intended "targets" of welfare reform take from the policy shift? Do they understand the society they live in to be welcoming them into the ranks of the employed, shredding the stigma of the undeserving poor? Or do they feel, as Gans once put the matter, like victims in a "war against the poor"? And once we have understood the "reading" which welfare reform has been given, we might ask what difference these meaning systems make for the way people behave. In sum, what is the relationship between messages sent and messages received? And how does that interpretive pathway matter – if at all - in what people do about family formation, child rearing practices, or attachment to work.

Whatever else welfare reformers were hoping to accomplish, they were out to force a shift in what they perceived to be a negative value orientation. They argued that AFDC fostered childbearing outside of marriage, cleared the way for irresponsible fatherhood, and created the structural conditions under which generation after generation of "welfare queens" perpetuated poverty. Researchers long ago pointed out that the vast majority of first-time AFDC recipients were short-stayers, with small families, living outside of the ghetto. But it was the minority of long-time recipients of AFDC – benificiaries of the largest welfare cash outlays - who caught the attention of the public and set the stage for the debate over the relationship between public programs and private behavior. To the extent that reformers were attempting to shape the values of welfare recipients, it bears asking whether there is any empirical evidence that normative beliefs, expectations, or aspirations are shaped in any respect by policy regimes. Indeed, many researchers (including this one) question whether there is any evidence to suggest that the values of welfare recipients differ in any respect from those of working people (especially since the vast majority of AFDC recipients have been workers at many points in time).[9] But it would be wrong to set this issue aside and refrain from investigating whether this potentially sharp "shock" in the policy climate has an impact on the norms and values of the non-working poor.

If we think of the anthropological contribution as divided between structure and culture, we can spin out several questions that ethnographic studies, embedded in survey research designs, might attend to in each domain.

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[8] Ortner, Sherry (l977) "Anthropological Theory since the 60s" Journal of Social Science and History
[9] Herbert Gans (1995) *The War on the Poor*. New York: Free Press. Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein (l997) *Making Ends Meet*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Welfare Reform and the Social Structure of Poor Households and Communities

I have described the inter-dependencies in households like Tyesha's as brittle. The whole "system" works when all the pieces are in place: Tyesha's wages are central to the survival of the family; her mother's AFDC and subsidized housing makes it possible for the three generation family to have a roof over its head despite very low income; and Dana's "free" labor makes it possible for Tyesha to remain in the labor force while her son (and Dana's own pre-school age children) are cared for. What will happen to this household when Dana re-enters the labor market?

It is unlikely that Dana will find work that pays above the minimum wage. Like the majority of long term recipients, she has few skills and even fewer credentials.[10] Moreover, given the crowding in the labor market in the area where she lives, she will be in competition with people who have more education and recent work experience, which means she is even less likely to find a good job. Chances are Dana will end up with nothing more than an entry level, minimum wage position, if that.

The consequences of prolonged unemployment with no real safety net would be quite catastrophic for Dana and her household. They would be forced to leverage resources from ancillary members of the household and/or family and friends who have yet to show an abiding interest in their economic well-being.

Yet the outcomes we might expect if Dana did find work are not that much more appetizing. Immediately, Dana herself would face childcare dilemmas for her own children. Moreover, Tyesha, now securely ensconced in a job she values, may have to quit in favor of a stint on TANF if she cannot find affordable child care, a commodity in short supply in New York City. Indeed, recent reports from the city's Human Resources Department show that there is a shortage of nearly 30,000 child care slots for children of welfare mothers who are required to enroll in workfare programs[11] The city has a powerful incentive to respond to this crisis; it has no particular incentive to step up efforts to create childcare for someone like Tyesha, who will be struggling to stay in the labor market.

Given these constraints, Tyesha would first try to patch together an arrangement for her son, but probably one that is less reliable and steady than the childcare Dana has been able to provide. Undependable childcare would have ramifications for Tyesha's own reliability on the job. She has had a track record as a dependable worker, but if that were to change, her own job security and future mobility would be in question.

The tale of Dana and Tyesha illustrates the need to develop a research agenda that focusses not upon individuals, but on the ecological relations between them: on the dynamics of households, kin groups, and even transnational networks of friends and family in order to understand how the policy changes aimed at one part of this dynamic

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[10] Newman and Lennon, ibid.

[11] New York Times, "Mothers Poised for Workfare Face Acute Lack of Day Care" p. A1, April 14. Reporter: Rache L. Swarns

system may unhinge (or possibly boost) the prospects of the others. This in turn requires a data collection strategy that emphasizes (at a minimum) household groups and the exchange networks in which they are embedded. Figure 1 is an illustration of the kind of baseline data which would be needed to track over time the changes in the composition of poor households. When augmented by interview data that gives us a sense of how families like this one inter-connect (or don't as the case may be) with related households, we will be able to understand better how the changes in the life fortunes of one person impact upon others who are not the intended target of welfare reform and the ways in which kinship and friendship resources are brought into play in the adaptation process.

To continue with the ecological metaphor, I would suggest that we try to understand the "carrying capacity" of these social networks. In ecological analyses, the term refers to the limits of population density that can be sustained in an eco-system. Exceeding these limits usually implies sustained damage. What is the carrying capacity of a social network? How do we measure the buffering capabilities of an extended kinship system? We need to develop measures which capture ratios of resources (income, time, space, goods) to needs (with due attention not only to dependent children but also dependent adults). These measures have to stretch across household boundaries as well as capture the dynamics within households. Our ecological measures need to give us a fix on dynamic systems under stress so that we might be able to forecast (or at least track in a descriptive sense) how shocks to the system will be absorbed and/or how the damage done (or positive outcomes) unfold.

Of course, a number of social science displines can contribute to the study of household and extra-household systems. An anthropological approach would be distinctive in that it would focus not only on income/time/help potentially available, but the circumstances under which assets become accessible. The mere existence of a resource does not guarantee its availability to those who might be in need. The research I have done on working poor families in inner city Harlem suggests that a social gap can open up between the success stories and the "failures" in extended families with many poor members. Families who have been on welfare for a long time are often defined as losers by their more successful kin, a stain on the family honor. Moreover, successful families often move out of the ghetto and are geographically separated from their poor relatives. This may mean that their social contact over the years is more limited than the kinship tie might suggest.

This does not mean that more affluent family members refuse all responsibility for the wellbeing of their struggling kin. While some may turn a blind eye on moral grounds or a sense of social superiority, others open the gates. Most part the door a bit, only to discover time and again that the demands on their resources are relentless. If they offered help to everyone among their kin who need it, they would quickly be overwhelmed.[12]

[12] Carol Stack's classic work, *All Our Kin* (New York: Basic Books [1973]), illustrates this point. One of her main characters inherits a modest sum of money and is instantly besieged by requests for assistance from her many less fortunate friends and family members. Not wishing to disconnect herself from the

Tyesha's family is a case in point. Evie, her grandmother, has a stable job with the post office, and until relatively recently owned a three bedroom house in a segregated suburb of Long Island. Most of Evie's children are doing well, and few are on AFDC. Still, several of her children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews have fallen on hard times: they have lost jobs, fallen out with spouses, developed drug problems. For a number of years, Evie took them in, one by one, and sheltered them so that they could try to regain their balance. The burden was overwhelming. After all, while Evie has a good job by her family's standards, she is not a wealthy woman. She finally gave up her house, sold it off to one of her more successful daughters and moved into a small apartment, for the express purpose of being able to "say no" when everyone in trouble came calling for her help. Even so, Evie has one of her grown daughters and her children living with her.

From one perspective, then, a "carrying capacity" approach would tell us that there are resources to which Tyesha and Dana could turn if welfare reform destablized their household and pushed them deeper into poverty. What an ethnographic approach adds, however, are the nuances and details that help us understand when a potential resource becomes actual and when it remains out of reach.

This observation should lead us as well to a more comprehensive data collection strategy than we might otherwise entertain. Ethnographers should consider interviewing extended family members, close friends, fictive kin, and male partners of those affected by welfare reform. How do these people define the situation? How do they assess the legitimacy of welfare reform, its impact on the people who might turn to them for help? How do they see their responsibilities to those less fortunate? Or do they see any? For both kin and friends, it is important to learn as much as possible about the activation of networks for job finding, child minding, financial rescue. This is a variation on the theme of "carrying capacity." It is about the *mobilization* of ties, about the relationship between whom you know and whom you can count on.

Accessing Institutional Resources

Mobilization of bureaucratically controlled resources will also be critical to understanding the successes and failures of families moving off AFDC. New programs to provide medical insurance for children in poor households, job training for adults, subsidized child care for new entrants to the labor market – all of these programs will require initiative and energy to access. The ability to manuever in what can be a bewildering blizzard of paperwork and a forest of new agencies may spell the difference between families that can hold their heads above water and those that go under.

Ethnographers should be paying attention to this new institutional climate, chronicling the learning curve as families learn to negotiate the bureaucratic environment. What kinds of skills does it take to lay claim to job training? How do poor people learn

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sharing networks on which she depends, she begins to respond to their requests and within a short period the money has evaporated.

from one another about the ins and outs of these procedures? What makes the differences between pro-active adults, who seek out every possible support for their children or themselves and those who find the transition to TANF overwhelming from this institutional point of view? These are questions which ethnographers can speak to as they observe the transition over time.

To the extent that cities and states respond to the need for additional childcare or health insurance, what determines take up rate? We know already that far fewer families enroll in children's health insurance programs than the number of eligibles. What we don't know much about are the sources of skepticism and resistance that may be producing the lower take up rates. How willing are families to use institutional resources (e.g. formal daycare over home care) once they are provided, and if they are reluctant, why? It is likely that there will be quality control problems as day care systems come under stress to provide more slots than they have traditionally opened. We need to pay some attention to parental evaluation of child care facilities. How much of a worry is poor quality childcare and how does this influence labor market participation rates? Does the threshold change depending upon the richness of private supports – grandmothers like Dana, teenage children who can be pressed into taking care of their young siblings? The relationship between public or private programs and kin-based support structures needs to be examined from every possible angle.

Developmental Burdens

In most middle class families, women like Tyesha would be looking forward to an independent adulthood in short order. A working girl with five years of experience under her belt, she should be positioned to make the transition out of her mother's households in the near future. In a better economy, one that paid a living wage to someone like Tyesha, this is probably what would transpire. Yet between the wage depression that has afflicted the low-skilled labor market and the forces of welfare reform, which cannot help but intensify the downward wage trends in inner city communities[13], millions of young adults are likely to find that they cannot "graduate" to adult status. Tyesha can only dream of the day she will have her own apartment and full control over her own life. Even if she did not have a young child whom she must struggle to support, her meagre earnings would make it hard to move out of Dana's house and move along the pathway that leads to full fledged adulthood in this society.

It might be argued that it has always been hard for low wage workers to graduate to adult independence. In earlier generations, the problem might have been solved by early marriage. Tyesha's bond to her natal household is only partly a function of limited economic opportunity. It reflects as well changing norms regarding marriage which make it less likely, among whites and blacks, that low wage workers pool their resources and make a go of it on their own. The burdens may be particularly high in expensive cities like New York where the costs of independence are especially daunting. With a

[13] Jared Bernstein (1997) "The Challenge of Moving from Welfare to Work: Depressed Labor Awaits Those Leaving the Rolls." Washington DC: Economic Policy Institute, Brief #116.

combined pre-tax income of $9 an hour, Tyesha and her baby's father would not have been able to afford an independent household even in Harlem.

I am not aware of recent studies that concentrate on the impact of economic constraints on maturation in the late 'teens and early twenties. This was an important topic of investigation during the Great Depression when severe unemployment forced many young adults back into the arms of their families. Some of sociological classics of that era – The Unemployed Man and His Family (Komarovsky 1940), Marienthal (Jahoda et al 1933) – explored at length the increasing frustration in working class households as the expectations of whole generations were exploded by economic constraints. As Bill Wilson (l997) has pointed out so persuasively, blighted communities on Chicago's south side, Newark's inner city, and Bedford Stuyvesant, are experiencing their own great depressions. Hence we should not be surprised to discover some of the same problems of generational transition and independence cropping up within them.

The tether that keeps Tyesha by her mother's side is only partly tightened by the low wages she earns. Equally important is the need her mother and siblings have for her earnings. Here, too, her experience echoes much of what we know about the l930s. It was often young adults, women, and young children who could find work in the Depression – adult males were often the first let go and the last to be rehired when the economy began to revive. Pressures built up in these households to garnish the wages of all the earners present and prevent any of them from leaving the family fold. Carol Stack's *All Our Kin* (1973) reports a similar phenomenon in a poor black community of the midwest some thirty years ago: much as marriage was valued in general, partners were often torn by the insistent demands of their natal kin for their earnings. A mother who wanted a son's income to remain "in house" would circulate gossip about his intended bride, hoping to undermine the marriage prospect. If the end of AFDC means sharp declines in household income, we might forecast increasing pressure to hold young adults at home and prevent them from forming independent households.

What will this mean for Tyesha? If she never has the chance to be on her own, set her own rules, mother her son without grandmotherly interference, in short do all the things "normal" adults do as a matter of course, how will this affect her psychological well-being? If such a situation produces increased conflict within Dana's household, what will this mean for little Anthony Junior?

Developmental psychologists should have a lot to say about these dynamics. Anthropology can add to our understanding, however, through participant-observation at the household levels, interviews with multiple members of families, and some attention to the cultural definitions of adulthood at work in poor communities. Here we see the intersection between social structural studies and cultural approaches. The structural side leads us to think about how economic constraints shape the patterns of movement in and out of natal households. The cultural analyst asks how these patterns matter, what they mean, how they are evaluated in a subjective or symbolic sense.

Cultural anthropologists might also ask themselves about the society-wide process of re-calibrating the boundaries of adolescence, the social acceptability of remaining a "dependent" past the mid-twenties in a society which not so long ago assumed that 18 meant adulthood. As Phillip Aries has shown in *Centuries of Childhood*, our ideas about childhood have altered over time as industrialization replaced agrarian economies. So too have the boundaries around adulthood changed. This does not mean they are infinitely elastic, however, and even when change is in the offing, it is not a seamless or conflict-free process. Tyesha is chafing at the limitations of her situation because her own generational culture leads her to expect that by this age she should be free of them. We may, however, be observing a new developmental pattern of very prolonged adolescence that Tyesha's generation may be forced to contend with. We would do well to explore this issue through age-stratified interview samples that would help to establish expectations, economic realities, and the conflict between them.[14]

Migration Patterns of the Poor

Tyesha and her extended family are descendants of the Great Migration that brought millions of African-Americans out of the rural south to the industrializing north. It has been several generations since anyone in her family has lived in the south. Insofar as she knows, all of her relatives are in the New York area now. She has neighbors, friends, and co-workers who are of more recent vintage in the big city. Migrants continue moving from the southeastern seaboard states to New York (and many have returned back to the south[15]). Immigrants from various parts of the Caribbean continue to arrive in New York in large numbers. Indeed, the outflow from the nation's largest city continues to be replenished by immigrants so that the overall population has hardly changed.

Tyesha and her family are now rooted in the city and show no signs of looking elsewhere for opportunities. Indeed, given the elaborate support structure that underpins Tyesha's life, she is not even in a position to move to her own apartment in Harlem, much less to another part of the country. Economists tell us that labor market opportunity stimulates migration as workers seek their greatest advantage. Yet ethnography tells us that there are multiple "brakes" slowing the outflow of poor families, even when they know opportunities are opening up in other states. We know that single adults are most responsive to these opportunities, since they are least burdened by the demands of family needs. What do we know about the internal migration patterns of poor *families*?

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[14] See Katherine Newman (1993) *Declining Fortunes: The Withering of the American Dream*. New York: Basic Books for an example of anthropological research that takes a generational approach to the study of social norms. See also Katherine Newman (1996) "Ethnography, Biography and Cultural History" in *Ethnography and Human Development*. R. Jessor et al, eds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[15] We have only just begun recognizing the extent of return migration to the rural south. Some speculate that economic opportunity and a changing racial climate are bringing African-Americans back to the South. Carol Stack argues that kinship obligations are a stronger pull, often causing northern Blacks to abandon decent jobs and economic security in favor of a hard life in poor rural counties in order to care for elderly relatives. Carol Stack (1996) *Call to Home*. New York: Basic Books.

At the same time that I began to study Tyesha's family, I was also collecting data on a fellow fast-food worker, Ilana Pima. Ilana was born and raised in the Dominican Republic. She came to New York when she was a teenager, finished high school there, working in minimum wage jobs all the way through her final years of high school. Ilana is part of a very large extended family, comprising some seven or eight households in all, who lived in a single apartment building in Washington Heights. They had all arrived, in a chain migration fashion, and working as an extended unit had fostered one another into jobs, while spreading responsibility for child care and basic expenses (food and rent) among the 30-40 people who comprise this family network.

Today, very few of the Pima clan are still in Washington Heights. A year ago, one of Ilana's aunts left New York for Grand Rapids, Michigan, where factories have been reviving at a rapid pace. She called her sisters and brothers weekly once she arrived to tell them about the $17/hour jobs that were going begging. Slowly but surely, virtually all of them decamped, children in tow, for the midwest. The network has now almost entirely reconstituted itself in Michigan where they earn a King's ransom by Dominican standards.

What makes the differences between Ilana's family and Tyesha's? Why do some poor families pull up stakes and head for the gold country, while others remain to face a saturated labor market and limited prospects for the future? Is it just a matter of information? (Tyesha knew nothing about the midwest auto factories and their hiring practices.) What role does the availability of an extensive support network play? One might hazard a guess that the wages Ilana's aunt secured were high enough for her to take the risk that she might have to survive without the help of her large family and that only a gap of this magnitude would spur such a migratory pattern. Part of the answer must lie along these economic lines. Yet ethnographic work would probably provide a different set of hypotheses ranging from fear of moving away from an elaborate support network to racial differences that might make an African-American like Tyesha hesitate to move out of Harlem, while a Dominican like Ilana's aunt might feel more comfortable. (If anyone had told Tyesha that she could earn $17 an hour she simply wouldn't have believed them!)

Time limits will thrust to the fore questions about the capacity of the low wage labor market to absorb a large number of unskilled jobseekers lacking recent work experience. While no one seems to have a solution (other than tightening labor markets or Gatreaux-like projects) to the declining wages in the low-skilled sector, we do know that some parts of the country are much worse off than others. Central Harlem is not a good place to look for work, since it cannot absorb the large number of jobseekers who were pounding the pavement before welfare reform. Clearly, anything that would facilitate the capacity of poor workers to move to job-rich or wage-rich areas would make a big difference. Ethnographic work could help policy makers understand better what the barriers are to moving. What role does information play? How big a wage differential is needed before families can afford to risk the loss of support networks? Is the problem wage rates or job stability, or both? How deep are the cultural attachments to inner city neighborhoods where the job market is the worst? (If social isolation theory is to be

believed, people with choices beat it out of these enclaves as fast as they can. If this is true, should we discount attachment to place as an explanation for unwillingness to move?)

Remittances sent by family members from the U.S. to family members in their countries of origin amounted to some $70 billion earlier in this decade. While much, if not most, of this money is earned through hard labor, presumably the welfare system played some role. If welfare reform cuts the income in households that used to send money abroad, how will this impact migration flows? What will the consequences of a sharp drop in income be for the economic viability of households in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Mexico, Cuba and a host of other countries that depend on remittances?

Families with overseas ties who find themselves in dire straits in cities like New York may send their children "home" to be raised. We know this happens even now among parents who cannot afford to live in safe neighborhoods, or those who are suspicious of American culture and want their kids raised in more traditional settings. Welfare reform may cause an increase in migratory children. Ethnographers working with immigrant populations need to bear these possibilities in mind if we are to understand how welfare reform intersects migration.

Kids and Schools

How should we understand the impact of welfare reform on the schooling of children in poor families? We know that school performance is critical for children in poor families and that those who have trouble in this domain are at greater risk for a lifetime of poverty themselves. It is possible that welfare reform will make no difference in this equation. But it is equally likely that the economic destablization and/or time pressure that some families will face will indeed have an impact on their children's school lives. We should be alert to either prospect and shape our research agenda accordingly.

Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur[16] have shown that children in single-parent families are not only more likely to experience higher levels of residential instability than kids in two-parent families, they are more likely to move for involuntary reasons 34% of single parent families who moved in their study did so "because they were evicted or could no longer afford the rent." If this pressure were to increase as a result of welfare reform and unemployment, we might expect to see that percentage rise, and along with it an increase in the instability of school enrollment.[17] Shifting schools can subject a child to confusion: he may lack the background knowledge that students who have been in the same school all along possess; he has to reconstitute peer groups, often at times that are

[16] Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandafur (1994) *Growing Up with a Single Parent*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

[17] We know that low income children move more frequently and that they perform poorly on standardized tests. It is hard to sort out how much of that performance is attributable to frequent moving above and beyond the difficulties that poverty itself imposes. However, it appears as though there is some evidence that moving itself sets children back. See Linda Kaminski, "The Impact of Frequent Moves on Urban Children's School Performance," unpublished paper, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

awkward. These difficulties can impact school performance, leaving the frequent mover at a cumulative disadvantage.

For schools that have a high proportion of movers, the consequences can be daunting. Teachers find that they have to backtrack and review for a longer period of the school year when they cannot assume a common, grade-appropriate background. This may limit the amount of new material they can introduce. Schools with high turnover rates among the student body, then, may find that holding everything else constant, they fall behind in academic achievement simply because of the organizational cost of losing and reconstituting the audience every year.

It is possible that welfare reform will cause such a significant decline in income that families will no longer be able to afford the rents in the neighborhoods where they live. Should that transpire, we should be on the lookout for the ways in which income losses impact residential stability and in turn how this affects schooling.

Problems of the Working Poor

Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein (l997) have greatly enhanced our understanding of how families on welfare and families with low wage workers fare. They have shown us that, as between the two, working poor families have it harder. Their standard of living is lower than those on AFDC because the costs involved in going to work (child care, transportation, medical care, clothing, etc.) are higher and wages do not climb far enough above welfare stipends to make these trade-offs more affordable. Only if child care subsidies were generous enough and long enough in duration to tip this equation could we expect this unfortunate paradox to abate. As such, absent a massive policy shift, we might expect deeper poverty to follow from re-entry into the labor market and to persist unless the minimum wage rises considerably or tight labor markets persist for an unprecedented period of time.

For children, the impact of parental departure for the labor market is likely to be a "mixed bag," as others have pointed out. Tyesha's son, Anthony Junior, may well lose the most consistent day-time caregiver he has ever had. Dana's children will see far less of their mother and will experience some other kind of child care for the first time. Yet, it is possible that formal child care will be an improvement for him over the at-home situation he has experienced thus far. As I have argued in my forthcoming book, the kind of family day care Anthony Junior has had thus far has been more custodial than educational. To the extent that his situation is the norm, it may well be that a massive increase in institutional day care would advantage children from poorly educated households.

Indeed, if the nation were to seize this opportunity to address the need for a massive increase in the resources we devote to early childhood education and high quality day care, we could be looking at an historic opportunity to increase the school-readiness of poor children. This would truly be a silver lining in the cloud of welfare reform. If, however, we see no change in day care availability or, even worse, a movement to

weaken licensing requirements in order to accommodate accelerating demand, we could be looking at some troubling patterns among children whose parents have been pushed into the labor market. The data on low quality child care is not encouraging. If children like Anthony Junior end up in lousy day care and simultaneously experience increasing income and time poverty in the household, we should not expect his long range prospects for schooling or labor market experience to be very good.

At the same time, it is possible that Anthony will benefit from the enhanced self-respect that may follow from his grandmother's employment. He already has a working mother, who communicates rather loudly that she believes in the dignity of work and would never stoop to welfare herself. If this becomes a more consistent message in little Anthony's home, if the adults he spends his time with come to approximate more closely the American ideal of the full-time worker, there would no doubt be beneficial changes in store. Whether they would outweigh the costs he would incur – reduced time with adults, an uneven childcare situation, perhaps less support during his entry to school – is hard to forecast.

Ethnographic methods can help us understand these dueling possibilities. First, we must pay systematic attention to the difficulties households face if they drop below the poverty line even when the adults within them are working. Second, since low wage jobs are often also unstable jobs (seasonal, subject to cutbacks in hours) we have to understand how fluctuating resources impact families. Finally, no small number of entry level positions require shift work, weekend hours, and night work. Understanding how households adapt to these demands, or fail altogether to cope, will require intensive participant-observation (rather than just the self-reports we might get in survey research).

For those households that are unsuccessful at landing jobs and cannot lean upon a network for long-term assistance, we can anticipate the following consequences for children that should be chronicled through intensive case studies:

- Increasing homelessness among families (unless rents decline precipitously in the face of a capital flight out of poor neighborhoods).

- Some children who are not properly fed or clothed.

- Children left unsupervised at too young an age.

- Older children pressed into the care of younger children, to the detriment of both.

Researchers familiar with the relationship between poverty, stress, and mental health outcomes would tell us to be on the lookout for rising rates of physical and psychological disorders. To the extent that these problems remain untreated, given the health insurance problem (esp. of working poor adults), we might expect to see some serious incapacity among families who cannot make the leap from AFDC to the new regime. If we want to follow through on these hypotheses, we will want to join forces with those who focus on

health care in order to track the incidence of hypertension, diabetes, asthma, and depression.

A similar point might be made about depression, child abuse and domestic violence. We have already witnessed steep increases in child abuse cases in New York City, a phenomenon which we know bears some relationship to economic insecurity. The domestic violence problem strikes me as particularly important under these circumstances. No small number of men unable to make a living on their own have found it convenient to live under the roofs of girlfriends, sisters and mothers who have been able to eke out a living on AFDC. When these resources are no longer available, it may well be the case that was once a tolerable burden will become insupportable. Already, I have seen some evidence of pressure to eject non-working men from households living on the edge of their resources. If this difficulty is exacerbated by declining household income, we may see increasing social tension which often produces domestic violence. We know that a violent household is a lousy place for children. We should devote ethnographic attention to this issue, by following changing household composition, the changing emotional climate in families, and the consequences for children when it erupts.

As with most other problems in the lives of the poor, I would expect that those who have larger, more accessible, and more reliable support networks – particularly extended families – will do better in managing these problems than those who are relatively isolated from social support. It would be important to pursue this hypothesis, not only because it matters for our basic understanding, but because there are policy levers that can be pushed if we can make the case that these networks matter. Public housing can give priority to the physical proximity of extended kin, for example, to make it easier for members to assist one another.

In general, social scientists of all stripes will want to organize comparative studies that examine outcomes according to variations in levels of state investment in child care, job training, housing subsidies, and the like. We will all want to know how much difference tight labor markets make in how children fare post welfare reform.

The Fate of Men

While welfare reform was obviously targeted mainly mothers, men were the subject of the child support enforcement provisions. These efforts to enforce fiscal responsibility have caught the attention of many governors who see delinquent fathers as a revenue source that can stem the outflow of tax dollars for dependent children. Yet we know that there is a real limit to what we can expect (extract?) from poor fathers, who are most often the absent parents of children in poverty-level single-parent families. We will undoubtedly learn more from Kathryn Edin's new research on non-custodial fathers in this regard, but it is unlikely that the bad news in the low wage labor market will have improved their ability to funnel much more money to their children.

What then might we expect to see happen to men, if anything, as a consequence of welfare reform? It seems clear from all of the ethnographic and panel study data I have seen, that men – especially young black men - have born a special burden as the result of declining demand for low skilled workers.[18] They tend to have less education than women; employers take a dim view of them as potential workers[19]. My fieldwork suggests that even in the underground economy, the legal means of earning a living tend to be predominantly in the hands of women (hair braiding, babysitting, etc.) while men are deeded over to the high-risk illegal occupations (principally the drug trade). The wide divergence of outcomes among siblings points to the difficulties men face: among Tyesha's siblings and step-sibs, a few men have made it into the military. Most have ended up on the wrong side of the law and, partly as a result, are estranged from their natal family. Her sisters, on the other hand, have largely found employment in the formal economy or are doing typical under-the-counter women's work.

As William Hawkeswood's (1997) ethnographic work shows, black gay men often do step into the gap and work hard to help their sisters and aunts take care of children. They are often a mainstay in Harlem households. But among those men who cannot provide a steady contribution to the collective pot (legal or illegal), we will no doubt find many who are rejected outright by the "sharing networks" that poor families depend upon for day to day survival. With welfare out of the picture, it may become too costly to maintain a dependent male population.

What will they do instead? Researchers will want, once again, to pay attention to the before and after picture in "welfare households" that have been supporting older sons, brothers, and unemployed fathers. It is possible, especially in cities with tight labor markets, that the social pressure building in those households will spur men to look harder to find employment, though it is unclear that unskilled men will find much. Among those who find work, we may see greater resolve to stick with it if the safety net below them and their children wears too thin. It is possible men (and women) will dedicate themselves to building up more human capital. (Indeed, we already see increasing rates of high school graduation in cities like New York). It is also possible, gender norms notwithstanding, that we will find more men involved in childcare – either of their own children or the kids in their extended families – as the women are pressed into the labor market. There is some evidence for an increasing trend toward male involvement in child rearing among middle class families.[20] It is not unthinkable that the same (albeit very modest) trend will surface among the poor. It is also quite likely that mothers will put more pressure on non-custodial and non-resident fathers to help support their children as the time limits become reality. Whether this will make much of a difference is hard to say.

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[18] Paul Osterman (1980) *Getting Started: The Youth Labor Market*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. .
[19] Wilson, WJ (1997) When Work Disappears. NY: Knopf.
[20] Rosalind Barnett (l996) She Works/He Works. San Francisco: Harper. See also 1998 Families and Work Institute Survey reported in New York Times, "Men Assume Bigger Share at Home, New Survey Shows"" p. A18, April 15, 1998. Reporter: Tamar Lewin.

Most of all, we need to pay attention to what I predict will be an increasing level of tension between the demands of common-law partners and those of the natal families from which non-custodial fathers come. Anthony and Tyesha are a case in point. On the strength of his minimum wage job, Anthony has been able to make fairly consistent, albeit very limited, contributions to the support of their son. He also contributes to the support of his own mother's house. What will happen when his mother hits her time limits, and Tyesha's mother does the same? Anthony will be torn between the increased need of his (own) mother's household and those of his child's. In most of these situations, I would imagine the non-custodial father will cut back out on whatever he has been able to provide his children in favor of his mother.

Obviously the condition of the local labor market will make a difference. In central Harlem, it is not likely that an unskilled and poorly educated Puerto Rican like Anthony Senior will find it easy to get a better job. Were he in Grand Rapids, Michigan, however, the story might be different. Hence we should pay due attention in our ethnographic studies to inter-city differences in labor market conditions that will impact the capacity and flexibility that non-custodial fathers will have in responding to increased demands.[21]

Neighborhood Ecology

Much of the focus in studying welfare reform will be on families and individuals. We should also be attentive to impacts on neighborhoods, to the contexts within which children live. In neighborhoods with high levels of welfare utilization, we can expect to see significant change, but the direction is hard to predict. Clearly, in areas where large numbers of families become destitute, we can expect to see a spiral downwards: more child abuse, more domestic violence, more despair. Areas where adults have been more successful may see a kind of renaissance, with stores moving back in to take advantage of the cash flow, a better spirit in the air.

I am in the process of doing a study focussing on the working poor in the context of welfare reform that is both a longitudinal interview-based project and a comparative

[21] The same effort should be put into understanding the relationship between labor markets, welfare reform, and crime rates. Richard Freeman (NBER working paper) has argued that as the low wage labor market has worsened, the benefits of crime have risen faster than the costs. Crime pays – not well, but better than the kind of employment available to low skilled workers. Crime rates have dropped, he argues, not because the underlying crime rate has really fallen, but because of vast investment in incarceration, an investment that is not paying off in the drop off in crime that we should expect if the underlying rates were actually declining. Instead, we've seen an enormous rise in the number of African-American men in jail, on parole, and on probation. How does this connect to welfare reform? If reform adds millions more adults to the low wage labor force, we might expect wages to drop even further (absent additional increases in the minimum wage), which might also exacerbate the lure of criminal activity for men who are associated with poor households. Alternatively, if wages rise at the bottom (and there is some evidence they have started to), will we see declining involvement in crime? Some left leaning scholars have argued that one reason labor markets are tightening is that we've locked up a lot of people who would otherwise be out there competing for jobs. It's an artificial tightening. In any case, William Julius Wilson (l987, 1997) has argued that unemployed men fall out of the marriageable male index, which in turn could have an impact on family structure.

neighborhood study.[22] The latter part of the project is intended to examine ecological impacts that are visible in schools, churches, social service agencies, police records, etc. The effective marriage of quantitative and qualitative research can go beyond interview-based studies or participant-observation in homes to include ecological studies that focus on how whole neighborhoods are adjusting to the change. In particular, I think it's important to ask how the withdrawal of a significant portion of a neighborhood's income affects its commercial and residential trajectory. Already we are seeing journalistic accounts of merchants who have closed up shop as food stamps cuts and time limits become a reality.[23]

Welfare Reform and the Culture of Poor Communities

Anthropology can contribute a great deal to the study of social structure and behavior. But in recent decades, it has become better known for the study of culture and meaning. There is room in any study of welfare reform, to take subjective perspectives seriously and much to be gained in studying the unintended consequences of this policy shift by doing so. We tend to put relatively little energy into thinking about how the targets of a reform program think about their lives. We generally proceed with policy changes without trying to understand how they are likely to interpret or respond to the "rational" incentive structures put before them. Yet long-term experience should tell us that these subjective understandings really do matter.

Moral Messages

If financial burdens were the main motivating force behind policy change, welfare reform would surely have been low on the list of reform priorities. It absorbs a paltry proportion of the federal budget. Middle class entitlements like social security and medicare are far more serious budgetary issues. But this is clearly not what was driving the welfare reform debate. In an era when millions of middle and working class mothers of young children have joined the labor force, it has become politically awkward to provide state support so that mothers on AFDC can stay at home. This, plus the ever-present American distaste for public support of the "undeserving poor" provided the political muscle behind reform. The convictions of liberal reformers that the welfare system had broken down into an eligibility and check-writing operation and needed to be resurrected into a job training and placement operation added to the mix. As David Ellwood has explained, the intentions of progressive reformers were caught in the oncoming headlights of a conservative Congress in l994, which stripped most of the training and public service employment carrots, while preserving the stick of time limits.[24]

At the end of the day, the message that emerged was one that emphasized the traditional American preoccupation with work as a moral obligation. Having young

[22] Supported by the Foundation for Child Development and the MacArthur Foundation Network on SES and Health.
[23] Wall Street Journal (August 14, 1997, p. A2) "For Businesses Catering to People on Welfare, Cutbacks Hit Hard"
[24] David Ellwood (1996) "Welfare Reform as I Knew It," American Prospect Number 26, March-June.

children in the home is no longer a justification for staying out of the labor force. The cultural question we need to answer now is what aspects of that message were received? What did the poor families on welfare understand by this new regime? And how does their interpretation of the policy mission change their behavior, if at all?

Do they accept the conservative view that "we" are trying to "help them get out of poverty?" Do they embrace the liberal view that we are "making war on the poor?" Is welfare sufficiently stigmatized for recipients to want to do almost anything to get off of it anyway? Or does that stigma lack the bite it once had, appeal only to a few, or make no difference since the labor market does not offer a meaningful alternative? Mark Rank's study of welfare offices and recipients suggests that welfare recipients already detest the whole enterprise and prefer to work. A goodly number of them suffer physical disabilities that make work difficult, have children with chronic illnesses that require attention, or face wages that are too low to make a go of it. But his research was conducted in the context of an AFDC system that is no longer with us. We need to go back to this drawing board to see whether the personal calculus has changed.

My research suggests a significant penetration of social science models and concepts into the ordinary vocabulary and "folk analysis" poor people maintain about their own lives. Ideas about role models, about deprivation and its consequences, about values, are all common parlance now. This language is often invoked by the poor to explain the twists of fate that have brought them to where they are. But I have not focussed on welfare recipients and therefore do not know very much about how they themselves define these problems. Certainly their close cousins, the already-working poor, have bought into a highly condemnatory language of blame that focuses on the moral weakness of welfare recipients (including members of their own families).[25] There is clearly more to be discovered about the whether or to what extent the message being sent by government, by the comfortable citizenry, is the message being received.

It would also be worthwhile to know about what kinds of invidious distinctions develop in poor neighborhoods to explain who is doing well and who is failing in the wake of welfare reform? Does a cultural explanation emerge? Does it draw on these social sciency explanations? Does it draw on conspiracy theory (which one often hears, eg. AIDS is genocide, drugs are a government plot, etc.)?

Apart from the qualitative interview research that would be required to address these cultural questions, we should also focus ethnographic attention on the role of welfare offices and case workers in shaping aspirations and facilitating employment. It has come as something of a shock to case workers used to processing benefit checks to discover that they are responsible for job placement. We could use a set of studies drawn from the rich institutional/ethnographic tradition of Michael Lipsky's *Street Corner Bureaucracy* or Mark Rank's *Living on the Edge* in order to examine how these bureaucracies have adapted to new challenges, put into play new messages, and helped or hurt their clients as they scramble to adjust. This is another culture in need of study.

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[25] Newman, Katherine (1999) The Working Poor in the Inner City. New York: Knopf/Russell Sage.

Marriage and Child Bearing Behavior

There is very little evidence to date to suggest that marriage or childbearing behavior shifts as a consequence of policy changes. David Ellwood's (l988:60-61) book, *Poor Support*, showed long ago that AFDC had no influence on the growth of single parent families, and that the highest percentages of children in female headed families were in the states with the lowest benefits. He argued quite convincingly then that changes in family structure were largely unrelated to the social policies that underlie welfare. The ethnographic evidence supports his perspective. From Eli Anderson's work on "baby clubs"[26], to Kaplan's work on teenage mothers[27], to Stack's findings on childbirth[28], there is a mountain of evidence pointing away from economic incentives toward emotional needs.

While all of this work refutes the notion that welfare plays much of a role in the motivations for having a child, it must be said that this research was all done under one set of economic conditions: welfare enabled young, unskilled mothers a way to manage (albeit at a very meagre level). Non-custodial fathers were virtually absent from the policy landscape, save efforts to increase child support (which is unlikely to have an enormous impact on men who are already poor). Nonetheless, while welfare was not a motive force, it would be fair to say it certainly an important contextual feature that made it feasible, though not comfortable, to satisfy psychological and emotional desires for parenthood without facing the worst consequences of homelessness and total deprivation.

Will the converse, the end of welfare, create disincentives that are powerful enough to dissuade single women from becoming pregnant (esp. if their own mothers have to work as well and are therefore not available for child care)? Perhaps no single goal was more powerful among conservative welfare reformers than this. Were they correct in assuming the incentives could be shifted so sharply that a major change in childbearing behavior would follow? I don't think we know. Recognizing that welfare is not a carrot that induces out of wedlock birth does not tell us what happens when the "sticks" are *this* significant. Past evidence does not lead one to imagine the differences will be profound, but it is possible that the negative incentives were not powerful enough to yield that outcome.

After all, if we look back to the last period when we had a huge economic shock and very little in the way of a social safety net – the Great Depression – we do see quite

[26] Anderson argues that young women are drawn to childbearing for the status it gives them with respect to female peers. They create "baby clubs" so that they can admire the clothing of their infants as a group. Elijah Anderson (1990) Streetwise. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[27] Kaplan suggests that young girls have babies because they feel estranged from men, isolated from their mothers, and generally emotionally abandoned. They are looking for someone to "love me back" and have babies to find that anchor. Elaine Bell Kaplan (1997) Not Our Kind of Girl. Berkeley: University of California Press.

[28] Carol Stack suggests that very young girls are looking to improve their status in their households, to move up out of childhood, to a rank that carries its own bedroom, for example. Children from those early years are most likely to be raised by their grandmothers and to think of their biological mothers as something like sisters. She argues that in later years, young women look much like their middle class counterparts :they have children inside marriage and adopt the usual mothering role.

profound impacts on fertility. Birth rates plummeted, and quickly. Moreover, when the post-war boom heated up, we see just as profound a change in the opposite direction: the baby boom, the largest generation in our history. Clearly birth rates are not impervious to economic influence. But those were "shocks" of a very serious sort. I do not think we can tell, at this point, whether welfare reform will induce such dramatic and terrifying changes in family income such that we will see significant change in childbearing behavior. Too much depends upon general labor market conditions that, at the moment, are about as favorable as they could be, even if they have not penetrated very far into the ghetto.

If the deterrent effect conservative reformers were after materializes at all, my guess is that it will take a generation or two to surface. For some time people will not believe the cutoffs will actually happen. The escape hatches (exemptions for states for 20% of their caseloads, variations in state policies on time limits, disability classifications, etc.) may confuse the message. The hardships that emerge will take time to work their way into the cultural messages that young people might internalize, if they do at all. It is hard to imagine that significant change would be visible in less than five or six years. But these are speculations. What we need is data that examines the following

- What do young women know/believe about the seriousness of time limits? Where does their information come from and through what experiential lenses is it filtered?

- What kind of cultural valence does childbearing out of wedlock have now? Has the disappearance of AFDC entered the picture at all as men and women think about having babies?

- Do mothers who have been on welfare themselves and now face time limits, increase the stridency of their opposition to their daughters' having children? All of the ethnographic work tells us that mothers have long warned their daughters about the dangers and hardships of adolescent pregnancy. But does the end of AFDC incline mothers to be more strident? Do they refuse to shelter their daughters if they stray from the path?

None of this speaks to what I regard as the most serious social policy question of all: what happens to the children in homes where virtually all (legal) income disappears? How much damage will they suffer, regardless of what messages their parents are force fed through the machinery of time limits? These too are moral questions, but not ones that appear to have been front and center among those who pushed hard for these reforms.

Conclusion

Anthropology has a lot to offer students of welfare reform. Its focus on households as opposed to individuals, on networks of friends and family, on the texture of daily life, and on aspirations/expectations/norms needs to be well represented if we are to understand

what this historic change has really meant. I noted in the introduction that to make ethnographic research matter in policy circles (and among quantitative social scientists), anthropologists need to pay attention to sampling, to comparison, and to data collection over time. These are concerns that are often far from the ethnographer's plate since anthropologists often favor depth over representativeness and leave the question of generalizability to others. This probably won't do in this context, or at least it will fall short of what is really needed.

Fortunately, many of the large scale studies (New Hope, MDRC, etc.) are following this embedding strategy and that is all to the good. In endorsing this approach, however, I think it's important not to lose sight of the special contribution qualitative research can make here. Ethnographic work is not simply about "hypothesis generation." It isn't just there to illustrate quantitative findings. It can be useful for both of these purposes, but has the potential to make more thorough-going contributions than that.

Ethnographic work brings to the surface, underlying questions that are often hard to access through other means: how households work in consort; how the interests of individuals within them may be subordinated (and possibly damaged) by the needs of the collectivity; how the shifting prospects of one person (e.g. a welfare recipient) are shaped by those of others in her network. These questions have to be understood through "extensive" ethnography, projects big enough to consider:

- Differences by race and ethnicity
- Differences between states that are generous and those that are mean
- Differences between families living in tight labor market areas and those in places with high unemployment
- Differences between families with transnational ties and obligations and those who have severed them.
- Differences between families with multi-generational ties (esp. those that are nearby) and those that have become more "nuclear" (and geographically separated).

And all of this has to be studied over time. It will take a year or two beyond the time limits for the resources of most families and their networks to run aground. We will not know how they have adapted in any final way for some time. And, of course, the consequences for children can take many years to take their toll, positive or negative.

Still, if we want to know how Tyesha solves, or fails to solve, her dilemmas, we would do well to spend the kind of intensive time with people like her that it will take to capture the complexity of her family life, her labor market experience, and the fortunes of her child, her mother, and the many other people who constitute her social universe.

Figure 1: Tyesha Smith's Family Tree—1995

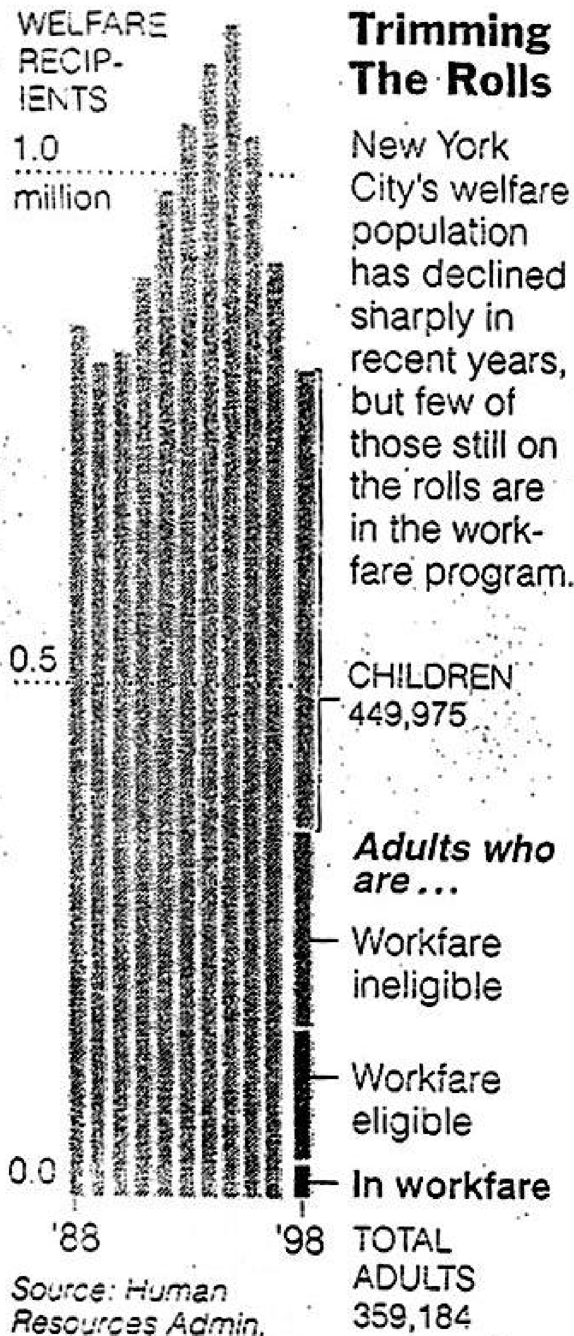
- All of Dana's sisters and her mother, Evie, live in the same town in Long Island, but they all grew up in the project where Dana now lives. Dana, Cara, Mary and Nell were born in Virginia.
- Evie and Harry formerly owned a home in Long Island. They sold it to Beth for $100,000 and moved to an apartment complex. Evie kicked out all of her children but Therese, her youngest daughter, because they were too much to handle. Nell and her family have since moved back in.
- Harry was like a father to most of Evie's kids.

KEY:
- = Married Couple
- ≠ Divorced Couple
- ~ Consensual Couple
- ≁ Formerly Consensual Couple
- ?~ Either Consensual or Married (not sure)
- [dashed box] Household Unit

Corey (dec.)
Douglass
MELVA • Works in a nursing home • Lives in Tyesha's building
Niko (dec.) (Greek)
Harry (65) • Parked cars in same Manhattan garage for years
EVIE (57+) • Mail carrier
WILLIAM SMITH (Lives in VA)
Kathy (lives in VA)
Sonny (dec.) • Was in the military • Left money to Evie and Sonny, Jr.
Sonny, Jr.
Courtney • Preacher
Frankie • Mental health problem
Stuart • in the military service
Edith • Drug Problem
Kirk
Nyla
Adam • in the military service
Colette • No Job
Adam, Jr.
Victor • basketball player in Mid-west
Ilene • Vice president, major bank in NYC
Sheena • Attends Penn State
Therese (25) • No job • Once worked with retarded people
Donald • Served at Ft. Bragg • Training to drive truck with Jordan
Daniel
Bobby
Kashina (dec)
LARRY (deceased) • Worked in a garage • Owned a candy store at one time • Drug problem
(Unkn)
(Unkn)
(Unkn)
Janine (40) • Has an office job in NYC
Brian (38)
Mark (36) • Was in the military service
Triplets
Pete (21) • Drug dealer
Lima • Public assistance
Betty
Dora (31) • Has 1 son • Postal worker
Doris (31) • Has 3 kids • Public assistance
Diana (31) • Has 1 daughter • Works at World Trade Center
Matt (28) • Was in the military service
Jeanie (27) • Does hair
Dean (24) • Postal worker
Kendra (22) • Housing cop • Attends John Jay Law School • Married to an accountant
Marvin (30s) • Drug dealer
Alfred (19) • Drug dealer • Now in work release program upstate
Andre • Cook in same restaurant as Tyesha
TYESHA (22) • Crew-trainer in fast food restaurant
Andre, Jr. (2)
Irene (11)
Louise (Infant)
Jimona (6)
Jimmy (3)
Sandra (13) • Foster child since 9/94
DANA (41) • Public assistance
Jim • Bus driver (Greyhound)
Emmett • Drug problem
Alex (25) • Cleans trains for LIRR
Diane (25) • Works for music distributor
Reggie (26) • Drug dealer
Tina • Public assistance
Mary (43) • Medical secretary
Andy • Veteran
Cara (40)
Walter • In college • Plays football
Nina (21) • Public assistance
Reggie, Jr. (5)
Joseph (1)
Darryl
Beth (35) • Correction officer
Jordan • Truck driver
Terrence
Ray
Nell (38) • No Job
Jack • Truck driver
Nat
Jackie
Martin • drug dealer
Jill (34) • Braids hair
Bill • Contractor
Jeremy (dec.)
Melvia
Anna

Katherine S. Newman/Catherine Ellis
Columbia University

FIGURE 2



Source: Alan Finder, "Evidence is Scant that Workfare Leads to Full-Time Jobs," New York Times (April 12, 1998; p. A1)