Human Service Organizations
Management, Leadership & Governance

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wasw21

The Caseworker as a Source for Program Information: Understanding the Importance of the Work Environment

Rebekah K. Selekman

Mathematica Policy Research, Princeton, New Jersey, USA

Published online: 13 Jun 2014.

To cite this article: Rebekah K. Selekman (2014) The Caseworker as a Source for Program Information: Understanding the Importance of the Work Environment, Human Service Organizations Management, Leadership & Governance, 38:3, 228-245, DOI: 10.1080/23303131.2013.878014

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23303131.2013.878014

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
The Caseworker as a Source for Program Information: Understanding the Importance of the Work Environment

Rebekah K. Selekman
Mathematica Policy Research, Princeton, New Jersey, USA

The need to ensure that welfare recipients receive accurate information regarding the interactions of child support and welfare participation is critical to the economic well-being of low-income, single-parent families. This study draws on observations of caseworker and client interactions at four Wisconsin welfare agencies to examine the information that caseworkers provided to their clients and how the provision of that information was related to the caseworker work environment. The results of this study provide support for the importance of considering the caseworker work environment and how this consideration can help inform future policy innovation and implementation.

Keywords: child support, coping mechanisms, frontline workers, TANF, work environment

INTRODUCTION

Child support is an important source of income for families who participate in cash welfare programs. In general, the receipt of child support is found to reduce the likelihood of being on cash assistance and is a potentially significant source of income after receiving cash assistance (Ha, Cancian, & Meyer, 2011; Miller, Farrel, Cancian, & Meyer, 2004; Sorensen & Zibman, 2000). Despite the importance of child support income to low-income families, and the tight connection between the welfare and child support programs, researchers have found a lack of communication and understanding between child support and welfare agencies, and have noted that welfare workers spend little time providing child support information to their clients (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Inspector General, 2000). Moreover, in addition to the tendency not to provide child support information to clients, welfare workers generally lack understanding of the child support program (Nam, Cancian, & Meyer, 2009). The lack of child support information for welfare clients affects the take-up of welfare service (Ybarra & Kaplan, 2007; Ybarra & Noyes, 2009).

The need to ensure that welfare recipients receive accurate information regarding the interactions of child support and welfare was recently motivated by provisions of the 2005 Deficit Reduction Act (DRA). The DRA allowed states more flexibility in applying child support pass-through rules to former and current welfare recipients with the hopes of improving child support compliance, complementing other work support and antipoverty policies, and benefiting state and federal governments (Legler & Turetsky, 2006). Research on policy implementation documents the importance...
of understanding the work environment and coping mechanisms of caseworkers in order to understand the existing gaps between policy goals and policy outcomes (Brodkin, 1997; Keiser & Soss, 1998; Lipsky, 1980; Martinson & Holcomb, 2002; Palumbo & Calista, 1990; Riccucci, 2005). Additionally, research on program take-up has found that having complete program knowledge is critical to the participation decision-making process (Bertrand, Mullainathan, & Shafir, 2004; Cancian, Meyer, & Nam, 2005; Center for Children and Families, 2009; Currie, 2004; Daponte, Sanders, & Taylor, 1999; Dion & Pavetti, 2000; Liebman & Zeckhauser, 2004; Meyer, Cancian, & Nam, 2007; Rovitch, 2006). Together, such research indicates that if the work environment of the welfare workers constrains their ability to convey the new child support policies to their clients, then, in turn, welfare clients will not make informed decisions about program participation and the policy changes within the 2005 DRA will have limited impacts.

In this study, I examine the implementation of the 2005 DRA provisions that took place in Wisconsin beginning in 2009. Recognizing the importance of accurate child support information for welfare participants and with upcoming changes to the welfare policies regarding child support receipt, the Wisconsin state child support and welfare agencies participated in the Collaborative Strategies Project, a demonstration project aimed at improving the economic well-being of low-income children and their families by increasing (1) their access to accurate and complete information about child support policy and (2) the interaction of the child support and welfare systems. One component of this demonstration project included a statewide, in-person training of welfare and child support workers. This training focused on helping workers understand the welfare and child support programs and the benefits of cross-program collaboration.

As part of this project, a number of visits were made to welfare agencies in Milwaukee and Dane county, the two counties that hold the majority of welfare cases in Wisconsin, to examine the role of welfare caseworkers in conveying child support program knowledge to clients (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2013). These observational data offer the opportunity to examine the information that caseworkers provide to applicants and how the provision of that information is related to caseworkers’ jobs and the observed “coping mechanisms” they use in exchanges with clients. I consider the results of this case study to understand how the context of the caseworker can help inform future policy innovation and implementation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Work Environment

For decades, researchers have studied the process through which policy is implemented at the ground level. A considerable body of research has investigated the role of frontline workers in public policy implementation, typically with the goal of understanding the gap between policy intent and policy outcomes (Brodkin, 1997; Keiser & Soss, 1998; Lipsky, 1980; Martinson & Holcomb, 2002; Palumbo & Calista, 1990; Riccucci, 2005). This vein of research has found that, although legislators create large-scale policies, frontline workers actually implement policy at the local level. These frontline workers, or “street-level bureaucrats,” wield a great deal of discretion about who receives which benefits and how. Generally, studies have found that a number of institutional and personal factors, including ambiguous policies, over-tasked agencies and workers, and personal beliefs, lead workers to use discretion (Brodkin, 2003; Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Oberfield, 2010; Scott, 1997).

In the seminal work on street-level bureaucrats, Lipsky (1980) proposed that the caseworker work environment can be characterized by limited resources, ambiguous goals, and constrained client interactions. More specifically, these work conditions could be applied to social service providers such that (1) limited resources often result from high caseloads and understaffing of programs,
(2) ambiguity stems from conflicting programmatic goals and a lack of clearly defined goals, and (3) client interactions with caseworkers are highly routinized and constrained.

This framework has been applied in a number of studies over the years. Studies of welfare reform implementation often reported caseworkers struggling to meet their clients’ needs because of their high caseloads (Smith & Donovan, 2003; Brodkin, 2011). In a study of the implementation of the Family Violence Option in New York, a policy that allows women to obtain welfare services even if they are unable to comply with requirements as a result of family violence, workers remarked that the paperwork and time involved in filing a Family Violence Option waiver was so great that they rarely discussed this option with clients in order to save themselves time to fulfill the other responsibilities of their job (Lindhorst & Padgett, 2005). Furthermore, studies have found support for the technical and goal ambiguity that categorizes the work environment of welfare caseworkers. In a study of the implementation of welfare reform, researchers found that the dual goals of providing assistance and ending dependency resulted in great variation in practice within the sample of welfare agencies (Riccucci, Meyers, Lurie, & Han, 2004; Morgen, 2001). Moreover, it was found that performance measures further complicate ambiguous program goals. Brodkin (2011) described how performance measures directly affected caseworkers’ behavior. In Brodkin’s study, workers described how they were motivated by the strict performance measures related to participation rates and caseload reductions.

Finally, the largely involuntary nature of participation leads to constrained client interactions. Typically, welfare is a last resort for low-income families and, thus, although they are not mandated to participate in welfare, these clients have often reached a point in their lives where they see no alternative. Additionally, caseworkers serve as gatekeepers to program benefits. Participants must interact with caseworkers in order to access the benefits they need. Furthermore, in many cases, clients are unable to choose where they receive services and thus cannot find another service provider if they do not like the services they are receiving. Consequently, in some ways clients are a captive audience with no alternative options for services. Although welfare participation is voluntary, caseworker–client interactions are involuntary; clients must interact with caseworkers to access benefits. Workers can wield their discretion to manage the constraints they face, and clients are mostly disempowered to challenge them (Hasenfeld & Weaver, 1996).

Coping Mechanisms

To manage their work environment, caseworkers find ways to reconcile the constraints they face and their ability to meet the requirements of their jobs. Lipsky (1980) posits that in order to cope with their constrained work environment, workers “ration” their resources by modifying their practice, controlling their clients, and modifying the way in which they see their clients and their jobs.

As stated earlier, time is one of the most limited resources for caseworkers, particularly due to rising caseloads. Studies of program implementation have found that caseworkers create ways to cope with time constraints. In a study of welfare workers in California, workers reported providing limited information to their clients in order to maximize the time they had for each client (Meyers, Glaser, & Donald, 1998). In a study of welfare workers in Chicago, caseworkers reported using shortcuts, such as assigning clients to programs based on home zip code rather than needs, because they had limited time to assess the clients’ needs (Brodkin, 2011). Workers also seek to manage their time by using strategies to modify clients’ behavior. Researchers found that caseworkers commonly control clients’ behavior by imposing sanctions on noncompliant participants (Hasenfeld, Ghose, & Larson, 2004; Schram, Soss, Fording, & Houser, 2009; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011; Wu, Cancian, Meyer, & Wallace, 2006). Sanctions are used to restrict participants’ access to services and reduce benefits, thus weeding out clients who may take up a great deal of a worker’s time, and can also cause clients to behave in ways that take up less of the caseworker’s time. Although there has been mixed evidence on the effectiveness of sanctions for creating long-lasting behavioral
changes among clients and the appropriateness of applying them to all clients, workers continue to use sanctions to cope with their work environment. (Hasenfeld & Weaver, 1996; Lens, 2006).

Studies have also found evidence that caseworkers cope with their constrained work environment by modifying their conceptions of their clients and their jobs. Many studies have examined how clients’ characteristics influence caseworkers’ behavior toward them (Bullock, 2004; Keiser, Mueser, & Choi, 2004). Furthermore, studies indicate that workers develop opinions about whether clients deserve services as a way to justify the amount of time and quality of help they provide to them (Sandfort, Kalili, & Gottschalk, 1999; Scott, 1997). Research has also found that workers cope with their constrained work environment by redefining their own job responsibilities. A study conducted in Michigan found that, when program goals were unclear, workers defined the program goals and conducted their job to achieve those goals (Riccucci, 2005). Together, these coping mechanisms help workers navigate their complex work environment.

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT: CHILD SUPPORT AND WELFARE IN WISCONSIN

In 1975, the Office of Child Support Enforcement was created in order to reimburse the government for the costs associated with providing welfare benefits to families. Since then, cooperation with the child support program has been a requirement to receive cash assistance. As part of this cooperation, welfare recipients have a portion of their child support payments siphoned off and paid to their state and federal government. The portion of child support that stays with the custodial parent is known as the pass-through amount, and since the creation of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in the 1980s and through the welfare reform era, most welfare recipients have had little to no pass-through of their child support, with a majority of their child support being sent to the government. As of 2012, 24 states had no pass-through policy and the state and federal government kept all child support paid to the family during the family’s welfare receipt. The remaining 26 states and the District of Columbia had policies that varied in the amount of child support that was passed-through to the custodial parent during welfare receipt (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2013).

Wisconsin has been a leader in enhancing child support and welfare interactions through innovative policy development, perhaps most notably by pursuing a unique policy of full pass-through of child support for welfare participants as part of the state’s original welfare plan (Meyer, Cancian, & Bartfeld, 2001). Under this policy, welfare recipients were able to receive their full child support payments in addition to their welfare benefits. Although the original policy was phased out by October 2006, Wisconsin has continued to develop policies designed to enable single-parent families to combine income from the state’s welfare program with child support. Beginning in 2009, Wisconsin implemented a series of policy changes that would allow welfare participants to keep more of their child support during and after welfare receipt.

Throughout the application process, Wisconsin welfare workers are to communicate the child support cooperation requirements to individuals applying for welfare benefits, referred to as “applicants.” However, past research on the Wisconsin welfare application process has found that welfare caseworkers were disseminating inaccurate child support information to applicants. Furthermore, this research found that the information applicants received about the impact of welfare participation on child support receipt influenced applicants’ decisions to participate in welfare (Ybarra & Kaplan, 2007; Ybarra & Noyes, 2009).

At the time of this study, the welfare application process included a series of group and one-on-one meetings with caseworkers over 10 days. During these meetings, workers provided applicants with information about participation in the welfare program, evaluated applicants’ eligibility, and assigned the applicants activities to complete in order to enroll in the program. If an applicant was found to be eligible and compliant with program requirements during the application process, he or
she would receive a placement in the program. If not, the applicant would not receive a placement in the welfare program; these applicants are referred to as “dropouts.” At any point in the application process, an applicant could decline services or be denied services. Applicants could decline services because of something they learned about the requirements of program participation. They could be denied services if they were found to be ineligible or noncompliant, or if they missed an appointment without rescheduling it. Because of the importance of child support for the economic well-being of families, and the impact of child support information for welfare participation, it was important to critically re-examine the provision of child support information to applicants in light of the upcoming child support policy changes.

**RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODS**

This article reports findings from one part of a larger effort to evaluate recent changes to Wisconsin child support and welfare policies, which allowed welfare recipients to receive more of their child support during and after welfare participation. While state leadership recognized the potential importance of these policy changes for the economic well-being of families, they also recognized the lack of impact these policy changes might have if workers did not communicate these changes to participants. Thus evaluation efforts of this project included observations of the welfare application process in order to observe the information that was conveyed to clients from caseworkers.

This observational data offered the opportunity to examine not only the information that caseworkers provided to applicants but also how the provision of that information related to (1) conditions of caseworkers’ jobs and (2) “coping mechanisms” caseworkers used in exchanges with clients. I consider the results of these observations as a way to understand how the context of the caseworker can be used to inform future policy innovation and implementation. This study specifically aims to understand how the work environment of caseworkers influences the program information provided to applicants.

Milwaukee and Dane County were the focus of the study, as these two counties make up about 70% of the total state cash assistance caseload. Over three weeks in October and November 2010, I conducted several days of observations in three of the five welfare agencies in Milwaukee and in the only welfare agency in Dane County. In Dane County I observed 15 one-on-one orientation meetings conducted by 2 workers and 6 intake meetings conducted by 3 workers. In Milwaukee County I observed 7 orientation sessions conducted by 4 workers, 21 intake appointments conducted by 7 workers, and 9 follow-up appointments conducted by 4 workers. The length of these meetings varied. Orientation meetings in Milwaukee were generally an hour long, while orientation meetings in Dane County ranged from under 30 minutes to an hour, depending on the caseworkers’ assessment of the applicants’ familiarity with the welfare program. Similarly, intake and follow-up meetings with caseworkers in both counties varied depending on how interactive the client was, the information the worker needed to obtain from the applicant, and the complexity of the applicant’s case. Prior to the agency observations, a checklist of important aspects to observe was created; however, this checklist was not used during the observations as it was only a starting point for general observation components.

As part of the larger study, all workers were asked by department leadership to cooperate with the research efforts and allow for observations of their caseworker–client interactions. In addition, each worker was asked to verbally consent to being observed at the time of the observation. Agency managers selected the first observed worker, and then that worker would find the next available worker for observation. Despite the convenience nature of the sample, the majority of the workers at each agency were observed at some point during the observation period. Additionally, as clients were brought back for one-on-one meetings, their verbal consent to be observed was requested. There was only once instance in which an applicant asked that I not observe the meeting.
All observational data were handwritten in field notes. Because of the group setting of the orientation meeting in Milwaukee, detailed notes were written during this meeting. During one-on-one meetings, short notes were jotted down during caseworker–client interactions so as to limit the extent to which workers and clients altered their behavior. Immediately after a one-on-one observation, more detailed notes were written about that session. No software was used to analyze the observational data. All field notes were hand-coded for themes related to the work environment, coping mechanisms, and child support information.

Additionally, during visits to the agencies, I obtained a number of documents used by workers or provided to clients during the application process. These documents were supplemented by a review of other welfare-relevant documentation available online. The documents were used primarily to gain a nuanced understanding of the caseworkers’ job responsibilities and the application process. In particular, documents on performance measures were used to understand the standards that might motivate worker behavior. For this study, I focused on documentation related to the Milwaukee Eligibility and Assessment Agency (EAA), the agency that applicants interacted with before enrolling in the welfare program. The EAA was responsible for providing the orientation meeting, and the workers who conducted the initial intake appointments with applicants were EAA employees. As noted previously, these appointments were expected to provide applicants with child support information that would directly affect their enrollment decision, and, therefore, it was the information related to this agency that was most relevant for this analysis. Because Dane County falls under the purview of the Balance of State, I examined the Balance of State documentation as well. Balance of State documentation differs from that of the Milwaukee EAA in that the Balance of State focuses on case management before and after placement is determined. Documents were also hand-coded for themes associated with the work conditions of the eligibility workers, the coping mechanisms employed, and the dissemination of child support information to applicants.

Given my theoretical framework (informed centrally by Lipsky, 1980), I expected a priori that the data would provide examples of resource inadequacy, goal and technical ambiguity, and constrained interactions with clients as the main characteristics of the work environment. Also based on the theoretical framework, I expected that workers would employ coping mechanisms, such as modifying their practice, their conception of their job, and their conceptions of applicants, and that these coping mechanisms would have consequences for the dissemination of child support information. However, I allowed additional patterns to emerge naturally from the data during analysis.

Some components of Lipsky’s (1980) framework could not be addressed. Potential evidence consistent or inconsistent with his theoretical framework could only be provided within the context of the available data. For example, the observational data and content analysis results cannot confirm caseworkers’ claims about the work environment. Thus, this study is unable to verify whether a caseworker’s claim about caseload size is the reason she did not provide child support information. However, the available data can directly address the behavior exhibited by caseworkers. For such a study, it is arguable that actual behavior is the most informative data.

RESULTS

In this section I present the results of my observations of child support information dissemination from caseworkers to clients. I examine the specific junctures within the application process during which child support information could be provided. I then report my observations of the work environment and the coping mechanisms that workers use to respond to the work environments. I also consider the work environment and coping mechanisms as they relate to child support information dissemination.
Observations of Child Support Information Dissemination

The welfare application process provides a number of formal and informal opportunities for child support information to be provided to applicants. In this section, I describe the possible points throughout the application process at which an applicant might receive information regarding child support and welfare participation. I also provide examples from the observational data of the provision of child support information at these junctures.

Resource Screening

At this meeting, the resource specialist should check an applicant’s case history and ensure that there are no child support sanctions in place and, if appropriate, that paternity has been established. Thus, this meeting is a juncture at which information about the interaction of welfare participation and child support can be provided to an applicant. In most agencies, resource screeners do not have one-on-one meetings with clients. Instead the workers check the client’s information while the client is in the waiting area. Consequently, there were no observations of child support information being provided to applicants at this juncture. However, in the one agency where the resource screening is conducted in one-on-one meetings, the worker specifically reported that one of her responsibilities was to provide applicants with a child support brochure offering details on the interaction of child support and welfare participation.

Orientation Meeting

At this point, the worker should describe cooperation with child support as a requirement of welfare participation. It would be appropriate for the worker to explain to applicants how their child support receipt will be affected by the decision to participate in welfare. In every observed orientation meeting, workers specifically noted that cooperation with child support is a requirement of welfare participation. In most instances, this brief mention of the child support cooperation requirement was the extent of the child support information provided. In 2 of the 15 orientation sessions, facilitators provided more information. In one meeting, the facilitator provided the information in the context of encouraging work over welfare participation, stating that work is preferable to welfare because welfare recipients receive only 75% of their collected child support, while those who are employed receive 100% of those payments. The description provided by the facilitator caused some confusion among the applicants and led to other child support questions. One applicant specifically asked why the state was taking any of her child support. The facilitator stumbled over the questions and in the end instructed applicants to pose their case-specific questions to their eligibility worker after the orientation meeting. In this case, the provision of child support information created a great deal of confusion. In another orientation meeting, the facilitator provided inaccurate policy information. In that meeting, the facilitator indicated that the state could take up to 58% of child support, whereas the policy was recently changed to a 75% pass-through rate.

Initial Caseworker Meeting

Applicants are required to sign the Notice of Assignment and Good Cause forms. Workers should explain to clients what assignment of child support means, and what are good cause reasons for not cooperating with child support. Additionally, workers are required to check that the applicant is currently in compliance with child support. Workers can also (1) ask applicants about the information on the absent or noncustodial parent and (2) discuss child support as a source of income (while

---

1In Dane County, the resource screening, orientation meeting, and initial worker meeting are included in a single one-on-one meeting with a caseworker.
THE CASEWORKER AS A SOURCE FOR PROGRAM INFORMATION

reviewing income eligibility). During these meetings, all workers discussed child support, but only within the context of explaining that cooperation with child support is a requirement of welfare participation and that applicants are required to sign the Notice of Assignment and Good Cause forms. In almost every observation, workers would simply state that the two forms indicate that an applicant must cooperate with child support unless they have a good cause reason for not cooperating. I did not observe any instance of a worker explaining what the specific good cause exceptions were, and in one case a worker stated that the Good Cause form indicates all of the reasons a person must cooperate with child support, while the form actually lists the reasons for not cooperating with child support.

Similarly, no worker explained the actual details of the Notice of Assignment form, which states that welfare participants must forgo a portion of their child support while they receive benefits. In the few instances when an applicant raised a question about child support, the worker would instruct the applicant to get in touch with his or her child support worker. In one instance, an applicant divulged to a relatively new worker that she was concerned about her cooperation with child support. Although she needed the money, she had a history of domestic violence with the noncustodial parent and was concerned that her address was on all of the child support documents. The worker was unaware of the privacy protection provisions that are available through the child support program and instead suggested the applicant talk to her child support worker.

Follow-up meeting. A follow-up appointment may be scheduled for a variety of reasons, including a child support–related issue (e.g., needing to establish paternity or resolving a sanction). This would be a reason a worker should talk to an applicant about the interaction between child support and welfare participation. Also, because a placement may be made during this appointment, workers should reiterate how welfare participation can affect child support. In almost every case, these appointments were used to ensure that applicants had complied with job search and other assigned activities. If the applicant had complied with the assigned activities, this meeting was used to open a placement for the applicant and to transfer the case to the ongoing case management agency. In the cases where applicants had not complied with the assigned activities, workers would assign them to additional activities and schedule the next follow-up appointment. In no case did the workers reiterate the impact of welfare participation on child support receipt when assigning the welfare placement. In only one case was child support mentioned during the follow-up meeting. In this meeting the applicant was pregnant, and the worker asked if the applicant had been in touch with child support yet. The applicant had not yet been in touch with the child support office, so the worker provided the applicant with the necessary contact information.

Working Conditions

Despite the many opportunities that workers have to discuss the implications of welfare participation on child support receipt, I observed only two instances of workers specifically describing the impact of welfare participation on child support receipt during orientation and observed no instances of this information being shared during intake or follow-up meetings. There are many reasons that workers may not provide much information. An analysis of caseworker observations, as well as documents related to performance measures and agency structure, suggests that considering

---

While there were instances in which workers misrepresented the child support and welfare interactions, in most cases this misinformation did not pose a direct threat to the applicants. In these cases, I refrained from interjecting or correcting the caseworker. However, in the case in which the worker was not aware of the privacy protections for participants with a history of domestic violence, I did inform the applicant that there were ways to receive child support and have her privacy protected. In this case, at the end of the meeting, I suggested that she contact a child support representative to ensure that her private information was being protected from the noncustodial parent.
working conditions, as conceptualized by Lipsky (1980), may help explain this lack of child support information dissemination.

**Resource limitations.** At a basic level, there appeared to be an inadequate number of staff to fulfill all staff responsibilities in some of the Milwaukee locations. This was most evidenced by the fact that, in two of the three Milwaukee agencies, the responsibilities of the resource screener were conducted by staff members at the front desk who took the Request for Services applications. Additionally, staff in another agency specifically mentioned having the highest caseloads in the city and feeling as if there were not enough staff to handle all the clients. Specifically, one worker said that she felt “scatterbrained” because she never “has a chance to catch up on anything.” Observations of the application process and a review of the documentation provided by the Milwaukee and Dane County welfare agencies provided examples of the amount of information that is to be shared with clients in a limited amount of time. For instance, during the hour-long orientation appointment, workers are to review a presentation of 27 slides with background information about welfare participation, including participation requirements, program placements, welfare time limits, structure of the program, importance of education and skill building, child support cooperation, child care subsidy availability, and other available assistance programs.

Notably, child support is just one component of the welfare orientation presentation. In addition to providing program information, workers ask applicants to complete several forms during the orientation meeting, including a resume outline, a career assessment survey for nontraditional employment options for women, a driver’s license screening survey, a learning needs screening tool, and an orientation evaluation. Furthermore, the time workers have to provide information can be limited when the job placement specialist attends the orientation meeting to advertise recent job openings and encourage employment over welfare. In these instances, workers must split the orientation time with the job placement specialist. Thus, workers may not share information about child support because of the competing information they must cover in a limited amount of time.

At the subsequent intake meeting, as with the orientation meeting, workers must cover many other details of the welfare program. During this meeting, workers conduct informal and formal assessments of applicants in order to determine their job readiness, appropriate placements, and appropriate participation requirements. The informal assessments include reviewing and discussing applicants’ education, work history, skills, interests, goals, attitude, and needs, and any necessary accommodations. Caseworkers also ask applicants to complete the Barrier Screening Tool (BST) to help identify any formal barriers to employment. Applicants must also complete other forms during this meeting, including a participation agreement stating they understand the rules and requirements of the welfare program; a child support assignment agreement, stating they acknowledge the state will collect and pass through court-ordered child support in order to pay back the federal cost of welfare payments they receive; a form indicating that they understand that cooperation with child support is a requirement of welfare participation unless there is “good cause” not to cooperate; and an agreement to complete or decline the BST, which is designed to help identify potential barriers to reaching employment goals. Some agencies require applicants to also complete (1) a welfare time limit fact sheet acknowledging that they understand the time limits and have been provided with the status of their own welfare time usage, and (2) a child care waiver form, which indicates that applicants who decline the receipt of subsidized child care during welfare participation will be unable to use a lack of child care as a reason for nonparticipation in required activities.

A review of the documentation related to the objectives of the application process meetings and observations of the application process provide support that workers are required to convey a great

---

3While Dane County workers are not required to do the same presentation, they still cover much of the same information during their resource screening meeting.
deal of information in a limited amount of time. Because of the limited resources caseworkers have, they must use discretion regarding what material (and the extent of detail) they will cover with clients.

**Goals and performance measures.** Directly related to the discretion that workers employ when allocating their limited time are the program goals and performance measures they face. Lipsky (1980) suggests that for many street-level bureaucrats, particularly in social service programs, programmatic goals tend to be ambiguous. At the same time, workers are held to set performance measures. Thus, workers must employ their discretion to balance ambiguous goals and strict performance measures. According to the 2010–2011 Wisconsin Works (W-2) Request for Proposals, “All W-2 Contract Agencies are expected to provide high quality services that result in positive outcomes for the family receiving [welfare]” (Wisconsin Department for Children and Families, 2009). Performance measures for the welfare program are separated for Balance of State (in counties other than Milwaukee County) welfare agencies and Milwaukee welfare agencies. Within Milwaukee, there are separate performance measures for agencies that oversee eligibility and assessment (EAA), employment (WEA), and the Social Security Income program (SSIA). Both the Balance of State and the Milwaukee agencies are provided with primary and secondary performance standards. Primary performance standards are totaled over the course of the year. These points are used in consideration for future welfare program contracts. Secondary performance standards are used as a monitoring system for welfare contract managers and are not considered for future program contracts.

**Milwaukee EAA Performance Standards.** According to the 2010–2011 Request for Proposals, Milwaukee EAA contracting agencies are required to meet five primary performance measures. These performance measures include having an initial intake meeting within three days of an applicant’s request for assistance; conducting a welfare placement within 10 days of a request for assistance; having a formal assessment of a W2-T placement (Wisconsin placement for those with barriers to work) prior to transferring a case for ongoing case management; completion of the BST; and customer satisfaction. The secondary performance measures are (1) the percentage of applicants who have an informal assessment completed and documented within seven calendar days before or after the welfare placement begins and (2) the percentage of EAA placement decisions turned over by WEA or SSIA.

A review of the performance measures for Milwaukee EAA indicates that these agencies are being measured on their ability to quickly and accurately place applicants into the appropriate welfare tier. All of the performance measures focus on the length and processes involved in the application process, incentivizing caseworkers to move applicants through the application process efficiently. These performance standards are not clearly linked to the overall program goal of “achieving positive outcomes for clients.” Thus, workers must navigate the disconnection between the vague program goals and the strict performance measures.

**Dane County Performance Standards.** The performance standards for Dane County are different from those in Milwaukee County because the Dane County welfare workers handle a case from eligibility determination all the way through ongoing case management of placed applicants. Thus, unlike the Milwaukee County EAA, Dane County is also evaluated on its clients’ participation outcomes. Consequently, the primary performance standards for Dane County relate more to participation outcomes than to the efficiency of the application process. Dane County workers are evaluated on job entry rates, earnings stabilization, customer satisfaction, job retention, educational attainment during welfare participation, completion of job skills trainings, and the percentage of participants who are placed in a W2-T tier and receive SSI/SSDI benefits.
These performance measures suggest that Dane County caseworkers are primarily evaluated on their ability to help find applicants new employment, which may be more directly related to achieving positive outcomes for clients. Additionally, the earnings and job retention of these new positions are considered in evaluating the welfare program. There is less emphasis placed on customer satisfaction and the ability of the welfare program to increase the skill level of participants. Unlike the Milwaukee EAA, efficiency and accuracy of the application process, including provision of child support information, is not a focal outcome for Dane County welfare agencies. Instead, such measures are only secondary performance standards, along with a number of additional outcomes that measure longer-term employment outcomes after welfare participation. Because the primary performance standards for Dane County focus on job attainment and retention, while the secondary performance standards capture other aspects of participation, including the application process, Dane County caseworkers may understandably focus less on these process outcomes.

Notably, in both Dane County and Milwaukee the provision of child support information is not a benchmark of caseworker performance. Additionally, there are no standards that relate to the quality of any information provision. Because child support information dissemination is not a performance standard, there is little incentive for caseworkers to dedicate time to providing child support information. Furthermore, the vague programmatic goals of achieving positive outcomes for clients do not obviously signal the importance of information dissemination. Even if the improved provision of child support information is supported and encouraged by supervisors and state-level officials, the fact that performance measures do not reflect this focus reduces the effectiveness of the message. The lack of child support–related performance measures suggests that child support information is not a critical component of the application process that should be discussed with applicants.

Client interactions. As is the case for many recipients of public assistance programs, the eligibility and participation requirements of the welfare program are such that an individual would likely only seek assistance from this program if few alternative options are available. In addition to the nonfinancial eligibility requirements that stipulate an applicant must be a U.S. citizen, a custodial parent, not convicted of a felony, and a number of other conditions, there are also financial eligibility requirements. To be financially eligible for welfare, a single mother with two children cannot earn more than $1,776 per month ($21,309.50 per year) or 115% of the federal poverty line (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2012). Consequently, only families facing high economic barriers are eligible for cash assistance.

Lipsky (1980) explains that, because client participation is rarely voluntary, workers are not highly accountable for their treatment of their clients. Knowing that a client in need will accept any treatment allows workers to focus on their own job requirements, rather than attempting to satisfy their clients. It is important to note that the involuntary nature of clients’ participation does not mean that all workers will treat clients poorly or leave their needs unmet; however, the involuntary nature of the clients’ participation enables workers to choose how to balance the needs of their clients and their own job requirements.

Client interactions are also commonly fragmented, such that different workers are responsible for different aspects of a case. For example, because of the division of eligibility determination and ongoing case management in Milwaukee, each worker is responsible for just a few highly specified tasks, and thus different workers take the applications for assistance, facilitate the orientation meeting, conduct the initial assessments, and provide skills training. Within the EAA, then, at almost every juncture of the application process an applicant may interact with a different worker. The constant transfer of clients to new workers creates challenges to forging trusting relationships between the worker and client and alienates the worker from the client. The alienation between caseworkers and clients may make it easier for workers to wield their discretion in ways that benefit themselves rather than their clients.
In sum, as proposed by Lipsky (1980), limited resources, reliance on extensive and detailed goals and performance measures, and client interactions that impose contact with many different workers are all components that made up the work environment of a welfare worker in Wisconsin during the observation period. Together, these conditions create an environment in which it may be unreasonable to expect full and complete provision of child support information to all applicants. In the next section, I examine how workers were observed to cope with their constrained work environment, and how these coping mechanisms relate to child support information dissemination.

Coping Mechanisms

In the face of the constrained work environment, workers create ways of navigating and adapting to their work environment. According to Lipsky (1980), caseworkers modify their patterns of practice to cope with their limited resources. They also attempt to control the behavior of their clients through formal and informal mechanisms. Finally, workers modify their conceptions of their jobs and their clients in order to cope with their limited capacity to address the problems that they are presented with by clients.

My observational data suggest that, while some components of the overall application process do seem to have the direct intent of diverting participants away from the welfare program (such as the assignment to work activities prior to receiving a placement into the program), the coping mechanisms that are observed do not appear to stem from that motivation. Instead, caseworker behavior seems to be overwhelmingly motivated by pressure to fulfill performance standards. Workers do not seem to be giving inaccurate information about child support with the hope of diverting would-be participants, nor trying to control any particular aspect of client behavior. More commonly, rather, and in accordance with Lipsky’s third proposed coping mechanism, I witnessed workers framing their work and clients such that the workers waived their responsibility to provide full child support information.

Modifying behavior. As mentioned previously, the performance standards of the Milwaukee EAA focus on timely and accurate placement of clients. To that end, I observed that the workers in Milwaukee focused heavily on meeting application process deadlines and completion of the BST. Focus on meeting application process deadlines appeared to be important for workers in the resource specialist role and for intake workers, while completion of the BST was only relevant for the work of intake workers.

The resource specialist position tasks are mainly associated with ensuring that a case would be appropriate for a welfare placement given some pre-eligibility requirements related to having open food assistance and child care cases with the Ccounty, as well as accurately recording the application start dates. During my meetings with resource specialists, two of the four resource specialists emphasized the importance of meeting the 10-day application benchmark and the 3-day intake meeting deadline. One resource specialist stated that her job responsibilities included keeping track of appointment dates in order to meet the 10-day benchmark. To do so, she pastes a sheet with the target follow-up meeting dates inside the applicant’s folder for the caseworkers to reference. Additionally, there is a spreadsheet that she and the other workers can access to enter meeting dates so the benchmark can be captured. The other resource specialist described how she reviews an applicant’s case with the county to ensure that there is an open county case and that there are no pending issues. She stated that, if there are any problems with an applicant’s county case, she tries to schedule an appointment for the applicant with a county worker. If that appointment cannot be scheduled for the next day, she requests that the applicant re-apply for assistance once the issue has been resolved. She stated that this is due to meeting the benchmark of having a caseworker meeting within three days of the application completion. These scheduling benchmarks were not discussed in the orientation meetings and were not included in the orientation slides.
During intake and follow-up meetings, I observed two specific instances where the 10-day benchmark was an obstacle for the applicant to receive a placement. In one instance the applicant had been unable to verify her address with Milwaukee County and, until that was rectified, her case would be unable to be opened. Because of the length of time it can take to verify an address with the county, the worker was concerned that the applicant would not be placed within 10 days of her application. The worker planned to help the applicant verify this information, but the case would ultimately need to be closed if the address could not be verified that same day. Again, in the other case, difficulties verifying information with the county made it difficult to adhere to the 10-day benchmark, and the applicant was at risk of having to reapply for services once the issue was rectified.

More generally, during intake appointments, workers would remind clients that their cases will be closed if their activities are not completed within the specified time frame. Though there is a constant reminder of the application process time frame, workers shared that this focus was a result of the performance measures rather than a way to divert or deter applicants from participating in the program. Thus observations of Milwaukee EAA workers indicated that they modified their behavior in a way to meet the strict performance measures. Similarly, in Dane County, the worker who conducts the resource screening meeting also asks clients whether they have an open food assistance or child care case. In this meeting, the worker asks about barriers to work and suggests specific verifications to bring to the first meeting so that a placement can be made as quickly as possible. Although workers in Dane County also encourage clients to have any outstanding issues resolved before meeting with their caseworker, they seemed to place less importance on quick placements, possibly because timeliness of placement is only a secondary performance standard in Dane County.

I also observed instances of workers modifying their behavior to meet the BST performance standard. This performance standard requires that applicants must be offered the BST, in Milwaukee, or complete the BST, in Dane County, within 30 days of their application. To achieve this performance standard, workers throughout the application process emphasized the importance of the BST. During orientation meetings, three of the four facilitators consistently emphasized and encouraged clients to complete the BST so that workers can help to identify the most appropriate placement. During the intake meetings, every worker was required to obtain an applicant signature confirming or declining to take the Barrier Screening Tool. In every case, the BST is framed as a tool that helps clients receive the most appropriate placement. During three conversations with workers, it was noted how important it was for clients to complete the BST.

In two instances, workers in Milwaukee had their clients sign the consent form to take the BST without explaining what the BST was and what it would be used for. One worker specifically divulged to me that, because of the benchmark, the worker did not ask applicants whether they wanted to complete the BST. Instead, this worker had clients sign the paper without a full explanation and then proceeds with the screening. While these are extreme examples of behavior modification, all workers I observed did mention how important it is to have the BST completed. Additionally, this particular worker illustrated how performance standards can cause workers to greatly modify their behavior. Like the performance standards related to timing of placement, Dane County workers encouraged clients to complete the BST; however, consistent with this being a secondary performance standard, the workers did not see this as a large component of their job responsibilities.

These examples support my contention that workers modify their behavior to meet specific performance measures. As there is no performance measure related to child support information dissemination, it is expected that workers would not allocate their limited time to address this information. It is important to note that performance measures alone do not influence workers’ behavior. Personal beliefs about the importance of child support for welfare applicants may also play a role in the likelihood of caseworkers discussing child support with their clients. However, performance measures do appear to work to reinforce messages about which aspects of program participation are important. Thus, while the lack of performance measures related to child support information
provision is not the sole motivator of worker behavior, it does reinforce a message that the dissemination of this information is not critical to the program. For the most part, workers discuss child support only as a requirement of welfare participation. Generally, they provide very little detail about the interaction of child support and welfare participation. Instead, workers direct their attention to providing information related to achieving official performance standards.

**Conceptualizing clients and work.** As discussed previously, caseworkers also employ psychological coping mechanisms that help them to reconcile competing programmatic goals and the frequent inability of a program to successfully help clients. According to Lipsky (1980), some psychological coping mechanisms include modifying their conceptions of their jobs and of their clients. In my observations of caseworker and client interactions, I found examples of the use of both of these strategies.

Generally, workers appear to believe that discussing child support to any great extent is beyond the scope of their job responsibilities. In all the interactions I observed where a child support issue was raised, every worker directed applicants to discuss their child support–specific questions or issues with their child support worker. In one observation of a resource screening meeting in Dane County, the worker discovered that there were existing child support sanctions on the applicant’s case. The applicant was unaware of these sanctions and did not know why her case had been sanctioned. The worker instructed the applicant to contact her child support worker to get the issue resolved. Upon further discussion with me, the worker stated that there was not time to “dig that deep into every case.” In another case, an applicant had paternity established for two of her three children. After the meeting, I asked the caseworker why she did not ask the applicant about the paternity establishment of the third child. The worker replied that if it was a serious issue, the child support liaison would have addressed it prior to the intake meeting.

Thus, other than being told that cooperation with child support is a requirement of the welfare program, applicants received very little direct information about child support and welfare interaction during the application process. In some Milwaukee County agencies, a child support agency representative is located at the welfare office. In these cases, a child support liaison will review the orientation attendance list and check the cases of all the applicants to ensure there are no outstanding child support issues. While this can be advantageous for many reasons, a potentially unintended consequence is that workers in these agencies often defer to the child support liaison.

In addition to perceiving child support information dissemination as beyond the scope of their job responsibilities, some workers also modified their conception of the client in such a way that child support information was irrelevant to applicants. In one instance, for example, a worker describing to me a child support sanction on an applicant’s case noted that the client would have to get the sanction resolved before she applied for any child care subsidies or welfare services. However, the worker did not inform the applicant that she would have to get her sanction resolved before applying for child care subsidies; rather, she explained that she assumed that the applicant would know to take that step. This might have been an unreasonable assumption, as this applicant also did not know that she had a child support sanction on her case. The worker may have been conceptualizing the client as more informed than she really was in order to justify not providing complete information.

In two other instances workers were asked their opinions of the child support policy changes. One worker replied that the information would be important to individuals who were new to the program, but existing clients probably just assume that their child support receipts had increased because the noncustodial parent was working more. This worker assumed the level of knowledge and information that participants have about the child support program. Another worker responded that it does not matter to clients if they get 58% or 75% of zero. In this case, the worker believed that participants do not receive much child support, so the increase in the pass-through rate would be irrelevant to their overall economic well-being, thus providing support for workers to skip over child support–relevant information when discussing the welfare program with clients.
DISCUSSION

Policymakers often employ a forward mapping perspective of policy implementation, such that policymaking begins with politicians’ policy aims and then moves down to the front lines of organizations for implementation, without much consideration of the ability and resources necessary to implement the change. Alternatively, backward mapping begins with considerations of the ability of implementing organizations and considers the design of an intervention from the ground up (Elmore, 1979). Lipsky’s (1980) framework provides a context to examine an organization’s ability to implement policy.

Lipsky posits that constrained work environments lead workers to modify their behavior in order to cope with their work environment. Specifically, this body of research finds that resource limitations, ambiguous policies, and constrained client interactions characterize the work environment, and frontline workers respond to this environment by modifying their own behavior, controlling their clients, and modifying how they see their clients and their jobs. Research examining policy and program implementation finds that by understanding the work environment and coping mechanisms, we can better understand and respond to the world in which programs and policies are being implemented. This article aims to apply Lipsky’s theoretical framework for understanding the street-level bureaucrat to the case of the welfare worker in Wisconsin, specifically to understand the context in which these workers provide child support information to their clients.

I found many of the work conditions outlined in the literature to be reflected in the welfare caseworker environment in the observed Wisconsin welfare agencies. Welfare workers operated in a work environment characterized by limited time and staff, strict performance measures, and disjointed client interactions. In my analysis of coping mechanisms, I found that welfare workers referred conversations about child support to child support agency staff rather than providing the information themselves. While the lack of child support information dissemination from workers to clients did not seem to be motivated by a desire to reduce the demand or take-up of services, caseworkers appeared to provide limited information about child support to protectively manage the limited time they had to discuss all required information and fulfill the extensive performance standards on which they were measured. Additionally, I found that caseworkers modified their conceptions of their job and their clients to justify the lack of information dissemination.

There are two main limitations to this study that require consideration when interpreting results. First, although the Milwaukee and Dane County agencies observed make up the majority of the welfare caseload in Wisconsin, the experiences in these agencies cannot be generalized to other agencies across the state; that is, Wisconsin’s welfare system is state-run and county-operated, which results in a great deal of variation in agency practices. The second limitation is the study’s reliance on a convenience sample of both the workers and the types of cases observed. Because it was part of a larger project, this study relied on the immediate availability of workers for observations, as well as whatever type of case meeting was being held at the time the worker was available. Although I tried to observe a variety of workers and a variety of types of meetings, the ability to dictate who and what I observed was limited. Future research should examine more closely the work conditions of the balance of state welfare agencies and examine how the work conditions of these agencies and the coping mechanisms of the workers differ across the state. Future work should also allow for longer periods of observations in order to capture all workers and observe a wider variety of case types.

Despite the limitations of the study, this article explores a specific application of the street-level bureaucrat framework and analyzes the findings for implications for future policy work. This work is also unique in the policy area that it examines, as little research has applied the street-level bureaucrat framework to the intersection of welfare and child support policies. Thus, despite the limitations, this study adds to the policy implementation literature.
PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

One lesson learned from this study is the importance of performance measures for caseworker behavior. Future efforts should consider how to incorporate performance standards as a way to measure the loyal implementation of, and not merely select outcomes from, new interventions. As an example from this study, incorporating information dissemination into performance standards might have motivated changes in workers’ behaviors in two ways. First, workers might have changed their behavior in response to an enforcement component of the performance measure, if they had known they would need to meet the requirements to keep their jobs. Second, including information dissemination in the performance standards would have signaled to workers that providing full and accurate information to clients was important to the state.

Additionally, identifying that welfare workers more commonly referred clients to child support workers for child support-specific questions has potential policy implications. Although it would be ideal for caseworkers to have and be able to communicate accurate child support policy information to clients, given the work environment in which they operate, perhaps the best outcome is to have workers recognize their lack of knowledge and refer clients to other workers who have more knowledge in a particular area.

The results of this study have implications for training efforts, as well. The observations of caseworker–client interactions were conducted within the context of the Collaborative Strategies Project, which aimed to increase client access to accurate information by increasing welfare workers’ knowledge about the child support program. The focus of the training component of the project was to encourage caseworkers to collaborate with their child support counterparts and to provide accurate information to clients; however, workers received few suggestions on how to incorporate these new activities (collaboration and increased information provision) without taking up more of their limited time. Furthermore, there was little discussion during the training of how the provision of accurate information is important to their job responsibilities, even if it is not reflected in performance measures. The findings of this study suggest that the relative absence of any consideration of caseworkers’ working conditions might have limited the success of the training and potentially the policy changes.

Moving forward, future trainings might incorporate more concrete examples of behavior modifications that caseworkers can employ and a more thorough discussion of how the provision of information is part of their job responsibilities. Potentially, caseworkers could apply the lessons they learned at a higher rate than was observed for this training. At the same time, observations of caseworker–client interactions indicate that workers commonly referred clients to child support workers for child support–related information. This referral behavior indicates that there may have been some acknowledgement of the importance of getting accurate information to the client within the context of the constrained work environment.

This study illustrates the importance of fully considering the environment in which workers are operating prior to developing an intervention. Rather than beginning with the policy goal as envisioned by policymakers and researchers, future policy changes should consider prevailing conditions of the frontline work environment before launching any policy development or training efforts. Without incorporating the realities of the current environment, policy changes may have limited effects.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

A previous form of this study was published as the author’s dissertation, “Evaluating the Collaborative Strategies Project.” This report has been prepared as part of the Child Support Research Agreement between the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families and the Institute
for Research on Poverty. The project analyzed here was supported as part of the “Enhancing the Child Support Knowledge of TANF-Eligible Families and TANF Caseworkers: A Collaborative Strategy for Improving Outcomes for Low-Income Children and Their Families” project, a collaborative project of the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Grant Number: 09FD0159). The author would like to thank Maria Cancian, Jennifer Noyes, Anna Haley-Lock, Daniel R. Meyer, and Judith Bartfeld for helpful comments. Opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the sponsoring institutions.

REFERENCES


