

## **REFORMING WELFARE REFORM**

Mark A. Mattaini  
*University of Illinois at Chicago*

**ABSTRACT:** The United States is currently engaged in a wide-scale social experiment: the dismantling of entitlement programs in the name of welfare reform. While behavior and cultural analysts have been only minimally involved in these efforts, there are many contributions that they might make that could potentially improve aggregate outcomes for everyone involved, including poor children, their parents, and the larger society. Both technical and social justice issues, all embedded in interlocking cultural contingencies, need to be included in an effective analysis. Many current experiments are grounded in rationales inconsistent with the science of behavior, and many are not being adequately evaluated. This paper outlines steps that behavior and cultural analysts could take that could contribute meaningfully to improved sociocultural outcomes.

### **Reforming Welfare Reform**

Does welfare reform work? This is a tricky question; we are, as a nation, embarked on 50 or more separate, uncontrolled social experiments, and there is often a remarkable lack of interest in evaluating them. The mayor of New York City and the executive branches in several states, for example, have actively opposed any effort to evaluate their programs, taking the position that lower welfare rolls are in themselves the only meaningful measure of success, and that obviously those no longer on welfare are now self-supporting. In Utah, as soon as it became clear that the federal government did not require an evaluation, a statewide effort to look at outcomes was precipitously abandoned. Similar examples are found elsewhere.

Some data are nonetheless emerging, however. In Idaho, for example, the welfare rolls have dropped by 77%, among the largest reductions in the nation (Egan, 1998). The maximum family benefit in Idaho is \$276, regardless of the number of persons in the family, and there is a family lifetime cap of two years for receiving benefits. As the result of a number of interlocking cuts, many families have already lost benefits, long before that deadline. Lacking a carefully designed evaluation, it is difficult to be certain of the outcomes, but even the Republican

#### **AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

Please address all correspondence to Mark A. Mattaini, Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois at Chicago, 1040 West Harrison St., Chicago, IL 60607. Email: [mattaini@earthlink.net](mailto:mattaini@earthlink.net).

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governor has expressed concern that these changes may account, at least in part, for several other recent, negative social changes. For example, the number of reported child maltreatment cases in Idaho has escalated dramatically, and is now three times the national average. The association between child maltreatment and poverty is well established and not difficult to explain (Olds, 1997), so this escalation is consistent with current knowledge. Grade school reading levels in Idaho are dropping, and the prison population is climbing rapidly (an escalation of a long-term trend in the state, where the prison population has increased 10-fold in the past 25 years). Interestingly, the business community has opposed the expansion of good-paying jobs, due to fears of driving up wages (Egan, 1998).

A core, but untested, premise of most welfare reform efforts is that the threat of loss of benefits will move people to self-sufficiency, from welfare to work. This assertion has been challenged from the earliest stages of the welfare reform debate, both for structural and behavioral reasons. Gans (1995) estimated that nationally there are six to ten times as many poor, jobless persons as there are vacancies that require the level and types of skills those individuals possess. Not surprisingly, then, less than 10% of those who have participated in the New York City workfare program apparently found (much less kept) regular jobs (Firestone, 1996). Only 29% of those who lost welfare benefits in New York State found regular jobs in which they earned at least \$100 in the 3 months after they left the rolls (Hernandez, 1998). Of the childless adults on Home Relief (General Assistance) in New York City, only a fifth of recipients who lost benefits have found such employment (Hernandez, 1998).

Given the strong Wisconsin economy, many of those who left welfare at the beginning of the "Wisconsin Works" program found some level of employment at least for a time, but about a third sometimes experience problems feeding their families, and nearly 40% were not employed after some months; many are at high risk for homelessness and other troubling outcomes (Dresang, 1999). Nationally, there has been a 44% reduction in the number of recipients during the first months and years of welfare reform efforts, but reductions are now leveling off as those who are better prepared for economic independence have left, while those who remain often face larger challenges in terms of skills deficits, substance abuse, and other problems (Meckler, 1999).

The original purpose of welfare programs, of course, was to ensure adequate resources for "dependent"—poor—children. One of every five children lives in poverty, and this has been true since 1981 (Dalaker & Naifeh, 1998). The rate for Black and Hispanic children is almost twice the national average. Sixty percent of children living with single mothers are poor. So far, the evaluation data suggest

that welfare reform efforts have not decreased these rates; in some places they clearly have increased. The long-term cultural implications of these data are profound, and the personal experiences aggregated in the numbers are deeply disturbing to those who recognize collective responsibility for our children.

Most welfare policy decisions have been based primarily on "values" and rhetoric rather than outcome data (Klein, 1996; Mattaini & Magnabosco, 1997; Nackerud, Waller, Waller & Thyer, 1997; Thyer, 1996). Research indicates that some programs do better, particularly those based on incentives (reviewed in Opulente & Mattaini, 1993, and Mattaini & Magnabosco, 1997), but empirical findings have largely been ignored in favor of more punitive alternatives (e.g., Kohlbert, 1997). Although punitive, coercive approaches produce reliably worse outcomes than do incentive-based strategies, the former are currently far more common. Where do we go from here?

### **Cultural Analysis: An Alternative Vision**

A more interesting and important challenge for the scientist-advocate (Biglan, 1995; Seekins & Fawcett, 1986) is hard to imagine. It is long past time to begin examining such issues from a rigorous culture analytic stance, and to take action based on those analyses. For example, an analysis of the necessary structural antecedents required to support employment for a single mother clarifies that one is adequate childcare. (See Figure 7.2, Mattaini & Magnabosco, 1997, for a graphic depiction of the interlocks involved). Such care is often not available for welfare mothers, despite political assurances to the contrary. For example, for mothers required to participate in the New York City workfare program, adequate care is lacking for 61%; and children are often placed in substandard care situations as a result of (illegal) threats and intimidation by eligibility workers who themselves are under enormous aversive pressures to move people into workfare, and ultimately off welfare (Swarns, 1998). Of those who have left the welfare rolls in Wisconsin, a third cannot afford adequate childcare (Dresang, 1999).

Something is wrong; in fact, many things are wrong. With regard to outcomes, one problem is that the issues have often been framed as involving choices between three supposedly competing goals: (1) protecting poor children, (2) encouraging "self-sufficiency" (or, perhaps better, social contribution) for their parents, and (3) using public money efficiently. A healthy society, however, clearly requires all three. The science of cultural analysis suggests the possibility of an alternative approach in which society can begin by identifying the multiple aggregate outcomes desired, then move toward the construction of metacontingent interlocks that will support them.

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The key lies, as in many other behavioral realms, in taking a "constructional" (Goldiamond, 1974) rather than an adversarial or palliative approach. We have outlined possible steps of such an approach elsewhere (Mattaini & Magnabosco, 1997). One crucial dimension involves providing adequate structural antecedents for valued action like child care and transportation. While Malott's (1998) analysis indicates that such supports may not be sufficient, they clearly are often necessary, and their importance should not be minimized. For example, many inner city mothers resist going to work, because, with considerable justification, they believe that they need to be available to supervise and protect their children in a dangerous environment. Secondly, every well-designed experiment in welfare reform that has tested incentive-based strategies has found that they are effective.

Malott's (1998) analysis appears to suggest that providing small but unavoidable aversives as part of a well-designed performance management system (a negative reinforcement paradigm) will be required to increase levels of positive, productive action. Interestingly, however, programs that emphasize incentives, in which participation in school or work programs produces improved financial outcomes, have demonstrated consistently positive effects, while those that rely on sanctions have not (see review in Mattaini & Magnabosco, 1997). However, this is not to suggest that Malott's analysis is incorrect; the active contingencies in most employment arrangements involve avoiding loss of paychecks (Skinner, 1986/1987), probably through a process very much like that described by Malott. Opportunities to do better (and risk of losing those opportunities), however, may be more effective, and may be experienced as less aversive than sanctions, which produce the negative side effects that Sidman (1989) predicts for such contingent relations: anger, depression, and countercontrol—resistance. Learnfare experiments support this assertion. In Wisconsin, single teen mothers who failed to attend school had benefits cut; by contrast, in the LEAP program in Ohio, those who did attend could receive a bonus, while those who did not had benefits cut. The Wisconsin experiments failed to increase school attendance at all, while the Ohio program did, if modestly. The critical difference appears to be the use of incentives (see Mattaini & Magnabosco for further data and discussion).

It is essential to view these arrangements in terms of historical oppression to understand them clearly. Imagine, as in Malott's example, that a poor black single mother is told by her white, middle-class eligibility worker that she (the worker) has a new plan for her (the mother). The plan is that the mother will lose a portion of the very limited money available to feed her children or even to make her furniture payment each time the mother fails to do what "the system" wants her to do. Under these circumstances, resistance should not be surprising to the

behavior analyst. The worker probably already participates in equivalence relations involving oppression, which this experience may strengthen. This may be true for many of those living in poverty, and particularly for people of color. Such equivalence relations, and rules that assert, essentially, that those in power do not have my interests at heart, need to be considered in policy and programmatic planning.

For example, consider two possible interventive approaches with the young single mother who has had some struggles with substance abuse, as described by Malott (1998). One, described by Malott and perhaps generally consistent with common public policy practice, is to wait for her to near her two-year deadline or to become involved in a drug-related offense. At that point, one can establish a performance management plan in which she loses some of her benefits each day she doesn't take the steps outlined by the worker (like exploring job leads), and loses them all forever if she provides a urine sample indicating that she has used drugs. A second strategy might be to begin at the beginning of the two years, provide a 10% increment in benefits for every week in which she takes the same steps, and to offer her participation in a community reinforcement program (<http://www.nida.nih.gov/TXManuals/CKA/CRAI.html>) in which she can earn redeemable vouchers or small amounts of cash for clean urines (a program with very strong outcome data). Which of these alternatives is likely to lead to independence more quickly? Which is likely to cost less? And which is likely to ensure more resources for the children involved? The data supporting incentive-based strategies suggest the second (see Mattaini & Magnabosco, 1997, for a review). Even this may not be an optimal strategy, however, since approaches that provide additional education may in fact produce better outcomes for all concerned, especially if the mother is young. (Malott may be right that many welfare recipients, like many behavior analysts, may require the assistance of a performance manager for an extended or indefinite period.)

### **Taking Action**

An adequate cultural analysis begins with a vision that encompasses all three of the outcomes identified above (protecting poor children, encouraging social contribution by adults, and using public money efficiently). The next step is to construct the interlocks required to support the practices and scenes that can produce those outcomes, and we are beginning to have the tools available to do so (Mattaini, 1996). There are currently at least 4 steps that cultural analysts can take that could contribute to improved outcomes for welfare reform:

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1) Cultural analysts could offer our science, pro bono, for the design of incentive arrangements supported by current data and well-established theory (it may be most effective to offer this assistance to policy analysts who have something to gain immediately from success and other stakeholders including advocacy groups, rather than just to those involved in administering programs, who have often already made strategic commitments). Legislators are a special case; Malott (personal communication, 2/99) suggests that they are most likely to be influenced by money or votes. Constituent opinion, perhaps especially that of business interests, is highly correlated with those variables, so constituents who can be shown that they have a stake in the outcome of welfare reform efforts may be important intermediate actors.

2) Cultural analysts could participate in the construction of feedback loops (including indices) that could make the links between interlocking cultural practices and their aggregate outcomes clear to policymakers and the public. One valuable approach might be a report card that *simultaneously* reports levels of child poverty, parental self-sufficiency, and public cost, encouraging those reading the indices to attend to all together.

3) Crucially, cultural analysts could participate in the analysis and testing of possible establishing operations to potentiate the consequences of attention to those indices (in some ways, this is the most interesting scientific challenge). Are there, for example, certain approaches for presenting child poverty that are more likely to potentiate its aversiveness, and therefore to increase behavior associated with reducing such poverty? Are there ways to increase motivation among policymakers for acting to ensure that new initiatives are empirically tested?

4) Cultural analysts can design "consequence analysis" (Sanford & Fawcett, 1980) instruments that may be useful in helping stakeholders (policymakers, voters, and others) to make more thoughtful decisions. The World Wide Web may offer particular opportunities here; for example, Behaviorists for Social Responsibility (<http://www.bfsr.org>) is currently testing such instruments online. If completing such online instruments were associated with chances to win cash awards or other reinforcers, they might prove to be useful tools for increasing thoughtful participation.

A more detailed discussion of the current science, and a preliminary analysis of how behavior and cultural analysts might pursue the four strategies identified above is found in Mattaini and Magnabosco (1997). As cultural analysts, we are in a position to contribute and to help others contribute to the collective construction of more functional cultural alternatives. Out of this constructional sharing of power (Mattaini & Lowery, 1998), we are likely to find that "this country can

afford to feed, shelter, clothe, and educate our children. And we cannot afford not to" (Mattaini & Magnabosco, 1997, p. 165).

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