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Author(s): Robin H. Rogers-Dillon and John David Skrentny

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Administering Success: The Legitimacy Imperative and the Implementation of Welfare Reform*

ROBIN H. ROGERS-DILLON, *Yale University*

JOHN DAVID SKRENTNY, *University of Pennsylvania*

Based on a case study of Florida's Family Transition Program (FTP), the first time-limited welfare program implemented in the United States, we argue that extra-legal "rules" and popular definitions of success can constrain bureaucratic action and shape policy outcomes. On paper, the FTP permitted considerable discretion in the administration of post-time-limit benefits and included a job guarantee for compliant participants; yet, as the program was implemented both the job guarantee and the benefit extensions were virtually eliminated through administrative procedures. In contrast to what we would expect from current theories of bureaucracy, the unwillingness of administrators to make use of their formal capacity could not be accounted for by the actions of interest groups or street-level bureaucrats, nor could it be explained solely by a lack of resources. Using a combination of insights from historical institutionalism in political sociology and neo-institutionalism in organizational analysis and bringing a new emphasis on the power of the media to define programmatic success, we argue that the legitimacy of the FTP would have been threatened if administrators made use of some of the policy options permitted by law. We conclude by offering three hypotheses on the relationship between media attention and bureaucratic action.

Administering Success

As the national debate over welfare reform escalated in the mid-1990s, state and county welfare administrators tested many of the most radical reform ideas in small pilot programs. One of the most important of these was Florida's Family Transition Program (FTP), the first time-limited welfare program in the United States.¹ By law (as modified by federal waivers), FTP participants who reached the time limit on cash benefits were guaranteed jobs if they complied with the program.² As of February 1998, however, not one of the 221 recipients

* This research was conducted while the first author was a consultant to the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC). The findings and conclusions presented in this paper, however, are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of MDRC. In addition to MDRC, the authors would like to thank Edwin Amenta, Robin Leidner, Robert Lieberman, Lawrence Mead, Kelly Moore, Steve Teles, Don Winsted, and the anonymous reviewers from *Social Problems*. We would also like to thank the participants in the Robert Wood Johnson Scholars in Health Policy Research Program at Yale, particularly Michael Graetz, Alvin Klevorick, Theodore Marmor, Jerry Mashaw, and Mark Schlesinger for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Of course our greatest debt is to the staff, administrators, and participants involved in the Family Transition Program. Direct correspondence to Robin H. Rogers-Dillon, P.O. Box 208207, 89 Trumbull Street, New Haven, Connecticut 06520-8207. E-mail: holly.rogers-dillon@yale.com

1. At this writing, the Family Transition Program is still in operation. We use the past tense to describe findings from the research period.

2. Participants in the FTP who are "compliant" (a term never defined) are guaranteed a job or "work opportunity" that would provide them with at least what they were receiving from welfare plus \$90 from work expenses (AFDC+90) when they reached the time limit. In Florida, the average family of three on welfare receives \$303 per month. Thus, for the average (complaint) family, the program guaranteed a post-time-limit monthly income of \$393. The law also permitted short-term cash benefit extensions to clients who faced "extraordinary circumstances." Finally, if the program were found to be negligent, the law permitted voiding a participant's time limit.

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who reached the time limit had qualified for a publicly provided job.³ The fact that the job guarantee was never used was probably due in part to a strong economy in the region and the intensive case management provided in the FTP. As we will show, however, administrative procedures also made eligibility for the job guarantee virtually impossible; only unemployed “compliant” participants were guaranteed a job, and “compliance” was defined in part as a participant’s ability to secure a job by the time limit. We argue that a combination of insights from historical institutionalism in political sociology and neo-institutionalism in organizational analysis provide the best analytical tools for understanding why the Family Transition Program administrators did not make use of the public jobs provision.

While we focus on a single case study in welfare reform, we believe that our findings have more general applications in the study of policy and in political and organizational sociology. Our analysis suggests that external definitions of “success” and media pressures shape implementation, particularly in politically-important, high-profile policy initiatives. In the following pages, we seek to develop a synthetic approach to policy analysis, emphasizing political institutions, legitimacy concerns, and media influence. After a discussion of methodology, we present the background of the Family Transition Program and discuss its implementation. Having laid out key elements of the FTP, we then review theories of government and administrative action in terms of their usefulness for making sense of the puzzle presented by the FTP’s failure to implement the job guarantee. We conclude by offering three hypotheses on the relationship between media attention and bureaucratic action.

Methods

This paper is based on a case study of the Family Transition Program. Field observations of the FTP⁴ were conducted from June 1996 through September 1996. Review Panel hearings, which determined whether a participant was “compliant” and thus guaranteed a job by the time limit, were observed for over 100 cases. The goal was to assess how the Review Panel handled the cases that it was sent. In particular, we were interested in dynamics within the panel and among the panel members, staff, administrators, and participants. Thirty interviews, out of a possible 52, were conducted with Review Panel members.⁵ The interviews were open-ended and typically lasted from one to two hours each. Interview questions focused on panel members’ perceptions of their roles and responsibilities within the FTP, their understandings of FTP policy, and their general opinions about welfare recipients and welfare reform.

A self-administered survey was developed using information gathered in the interviews and observations. The survey was sent to Review Panel members and had a response rate of 63 percent. Between the interviews and survey, information was collected from 88 percent of the Review Panel members. Formal interviews were conducted with the program’s three highest-ranking administrators and three of the six supervisors. These interviews served primarily to clarify information received through the observations and Review Panel interviews.

A sample of 50 Review Panel cases was also analyzed. This sample was obtained by selecting every sixth name on an alphabetical listing of the approximately 300 cases that had been sent to the Review Panel. The case record review served two functions. First, it permitted us to see if the panel’s recommendations departed in any way from the recommendations given

3. The program classified most (136) of these participants as “non-compliant.” Nineteen participants left the state, got married, became ineligible through increased child support payments, or withdrew. The remaining 66 participants were ineligible for the job guarantee because they were employed and earning at least \$90 above what the state had paid them under AFDC.

4. The Family Transition Act established two Family Transition Programs, one mandatory and one voluntary. The voluntary program attracted few participants and was abandoned by Florida as a model for welfare reform. Because of the voluntary model’s small size and political marginality, the federally mandated evaluation of the FTP chose to focus on the mandatory model. This research focuses on the mandatory model of the FTP implemented in Escambia County.

5. Time constraints limited us to 30 interviews. Only one panel member declined to be interviewed.

to the panel by FTP staff prior to the hearings. We were thus able to assess whether the panel served an independent function or primarily certified decisions made by FTP staff and administrators. Second, the Review Panel records let us assess what proportion of the participants who went before the panel were found to be “compliant” and provided additional information on the criteria used to determine “compliance” in the absence of a formal definition. By using inductive reasoning and recursive methods, we were able to identify key issues through observations and interviews and then seek confirming and disconfirming evidence in survey data, administrative records, and additional interviews.

To situate the FTP in its historical and political context, we analyzed archival materials. Tapes and written material from the Florida House and Senate on the Family Transition Act are used to discuss the legislative intent of the program. In addition, we used correspondence between the state of Florida and the Department of Health and Human Services in the discussion of the waiver negotiations. National press coverage of the FTP is also cited to provide the political context of the program’s implementation.

Competing Models: Florida and the Federal Government

In the Florida legislature, Family Transition Act (FTA) sponsors appealed to both liberals and conservatives by creating a program with enriched social services and a firm time limit. In addition to time limits, key elements of the FTP included intensive case management, enhanced social services, and expanded child-care. (FTP line staff typically had caseloads of 30 to 40 families rather than the 150 or more cases handled by welfare workers in most AFDC programs.) The program’s premise was that, with appropriate casework and the assistance of a citizen Review Panel, nearly all of the participants would be able to find jobs by the time limit. Participants employed at the time limit would be considered “self-sufficient” and have their cash benefits terminated. Participants who were not employed at the time limit would have their cases reviewed by child welfare to determine whether terminating benefits would *directly cause* the children to go into substitute care such as foster care.⁶ All benefits to families determined not to be at risk would be terminated. In extraordinary circumstances, the Review Panel would have the power to grant participants up to two, four-month extensions or to void their time limits. The bill passed with broad bipartisan support.

When Florida applied to the federal government for waivers from AFDC regulations, Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) officials questioned whether everyone in the FTP could become self-sufficient in two to three years. To address this concern, HHS suggested that a transitional employment program be added to the Florida Family Transition Program. The transitional employment program amounted to a job guarantee for all FTP participants who were “compliant” with the program. In the program, as amended by the waivers, participants failing in the program were to go to the Review Panel. The panel would determine whether the participant was “complying” with the program.⁷ Those who were

6. In these few and extreme cases, the children’s benefits are administered through a protective payee and are not given to the parent. We view this form of benefit extension to be a part of the child welfare system, rather than the Family Transition Program. (See Bloom, Kemple and Rogers-Dillon [1997] for a more detailed discussion of this provision.)

7. Although there was no formal definition of compliance, many participants who were brought to the panel were non-compliant by nearly any standard. For example, one woman was brought to the panel after missing 25 appointments. More typical were participants who had missed half a dozen to a dozen appointments for various reasons. Other cases, however, were less clear cut. One participant, for example, was brought to the panel because she had left her job as a waitress due to documented medical problems, another was brought for failing to present documentation that she had been in a car accident (the documentation had been provided by the time of the hearing), and still another was brought to the panel on the grounds that she was too focused on family problems and not showing sufficient motivation in the program. Informally, FTP staff explained that they were likely to take any participant who might not have a job by the time limit to the panel.

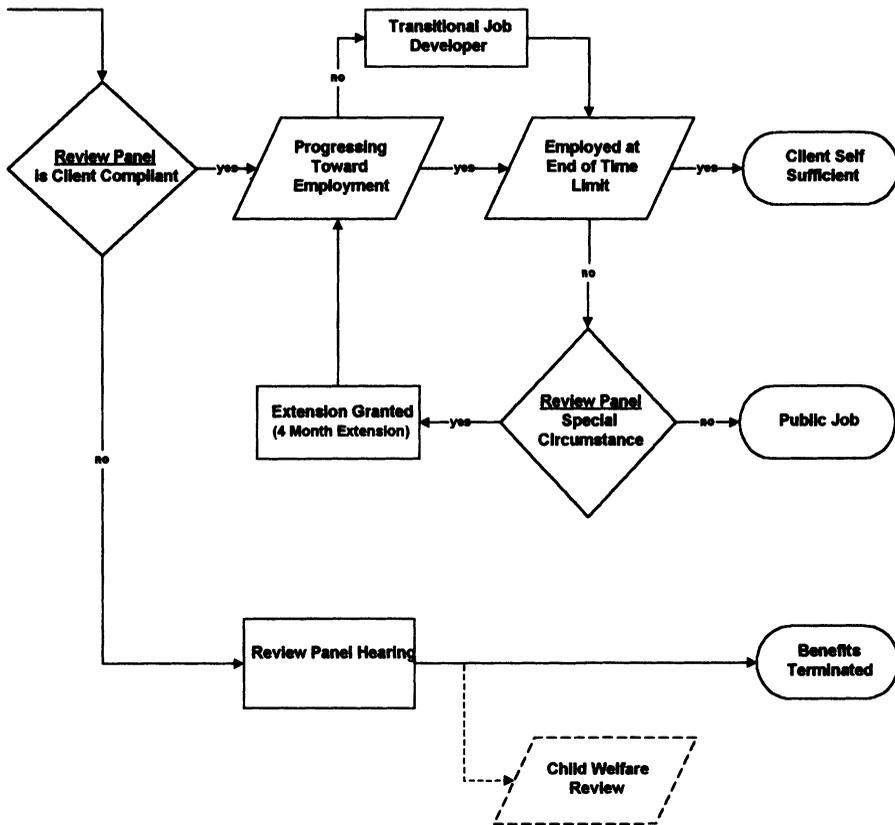


Figure 1 • Flow of Clients Through Florida's Family Transition Program as Amended by the Federal Waiver

“compliant” would be eligible for transitional job development—an enriched job placement program. If these participants had not found jobs when they reached the time limit, they would be placed in public or private sector jobs by the FTP (see figure one). Florida officials accepted the job guarantee as a condition of the waiver.

The actual program looked very different from the one outlined in the waivers. Case managers determined which participants were “non-compliant” based in part on how likely they were to be employed at the time limit and then sent these participants to the Review Panel. The Review Panel hearings⁸ served to certify “non-compliance” rather than to determine it and the job guarantee was never used (see figure 2). To understand why the job guarantee was never implemented, it is important first to examine the political context in which the program operated.

8. During the research period hearings were typically held four days a month in Pensacola. The FTP established a pool of over 50 panel members. Each panel sat one-half day and panel members did not receive any pay or reimbursement. Most panel members volunteered only once every month or two. The Review Panel liaisons, therefore, found it difficult to put together panels of seven and most hearings were held with four or five panel members. Some hearings were held with as few as two panel members.

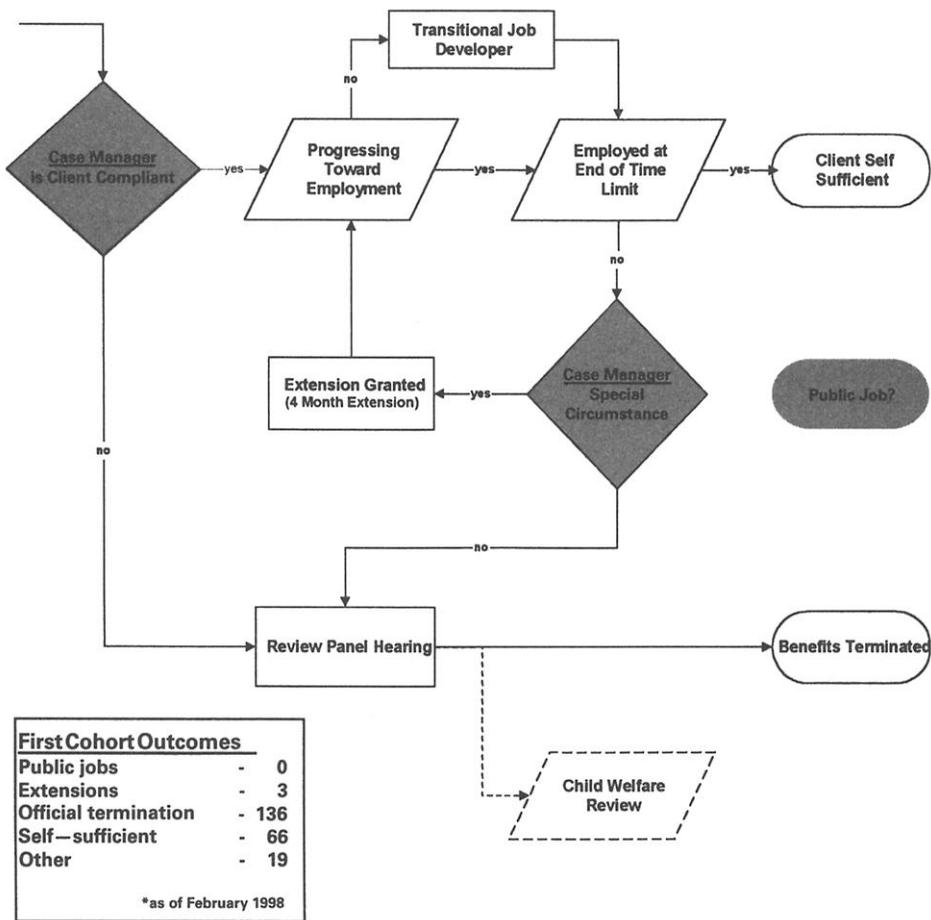


Figure 2 • Flow of Clients Through Florida's Family Transition Program As Implemented

Political Context of Implementation: Standards of Success and the Salience of the News Media

The Family Transition Act passed shortly after the 1992 presidential election in which Bill Clinton had made “ending welfare as we know it” a central issue. Widespread public dissatisfaction, even anger, over AFDC (Farkas et al. 1996; Garin, Molyneux and DiVall 1994; Kaiser/Harvard Program on the Public Health and Social Policy 1995) made advocating welfare reform politically useful. As one journalist noted right before the 1992 election “Bill Clinton’s call for time limits on AFDC benefits hits the right political notes and places him in the forefront of an emerging political consensus” (Kosterlitz 1992:2189).

The Florida state legislature knew that it was at the cutting edge of national welfare reform. The summary of the Family Transition Act (as passed), prepared by the House of Representatives Committee on Aging and Human Services, opens by stating “This bill establishes the Family Transition Program. FTP is a national trend-setting program that provides short-term intensive services designed to move a person from welfare dependency to employment

and self-sufficiency." George Albright, a sponsor of the Family Transition Act, noted "[T]his bill will be, we will be, the first state in the nation to have time-limited benefits. There are no other states. Mr. Clinton's proposal mirrors what we are doing."⁹

The administration's approval of Florida's experimental welfare program was widely covered by the media, increasing national scrutiny. The *Los Angeles Times* reported:

The Administration approved an experiment in two Florida counties Thursday that will give poor people a taste of the reforms that President Clinton is advocating for the entire country. The experimental programs will put a two year time limit on public assistance benefits and require recipients to work, two of the basic principles of Clinton's welfare strategy. (Shogren 1994)

The same day the *Orlando Sentinel* reported, "A senior administration official said that Florida's demonstration project is significant because it mirrors President Clinton's . . ." (*Associated Press* 1994). Based on an *Associated Press* report, similar stories ran in newspapers throughout the country. A few weeks later, the *Washington Post* ran an in-depth article entitled "North Floridians are Pioneers In Clinton-Like Welfare Program" (Claiborne 1994). On June 14, 1994, the Family Transition Program was featured on CBS's *Eye on America*. Dan Rather introduced the segment by emphasizing the relationship between the FTP and President Clinton's welfare reform plans:

Earlier in this broadcast, we reported about President Clinton's plan to overhaul the welfare system. A key element in the Clinton plan is a lifetime limit on cash benefits. The key question: can it work? For answers Congress and the administration may be looking to Florida. Correspondent Sharyl Attkisson reports tonight's *Eye on America*. (CBS News Transcripts)

It was under this intense scrutiny that the FTP began. A high level Escambia County administrator explained, "It was an almost instantaneous spotlight involved from the very first client. The media cranked. The politicians cranked. . . . I mean, almost boom, instantly." The District Administrator echoed the sentiment, "Hell, we were declared a success before we started." The FTP's Program Administrator, overwhelmed with media attention, was forced to hire a person to handle requests for speaking engagements and other news media relations, as well as "put out an FTP newsletter and do some other kinds of publicity things."

The Family Transition Program had numerous start-up problems widely acknowledged by administrators and staff (Bloom, Kemple and Rogers-Dillon 1997). One top administrator explained:

The Governor all of a sudden one day said this is the day we'll start. We took in our first participant. I know you've heard that old story. We didn't have the computers. We didn't have the space. . . .

Despite the start-up problems, only a few months into the FTP, Governor Lawton Chiles proposed to expand the program to other Florida counties, proclaiming that "[t]he Family Transition Programs have been nationally recognized for their successful, aggressive reform" (*St. Petersburg Times* 1994a).

The success of the FTP was politically important for Chiles, as welfare reform has been for other governors (Shaw and Lieberman 1996).¹⁰ During the tight gubernatorial race between Chiles and Jeb Bush, the *St. Petersburg Times* ran a series of articles on the candidates' positions on the top ten issues that readers ranked as being important. Welfare reform was the second issue covered (1994b). In a year when an historic proportion of Democratic incumbents lost

9. In fact, the FTA contained a "benefit termination" model time limit rather than the "work trigger" model advocated by President Clinton. "Work trigger" model time limits include post-time-limit job provisions, "benefit termination" time limits do not. It was only after the federal waiver negotiations that the FTP policy actually mirrored the Clinton plan.

10. "[M]any state welfare reform innovations have received tremendous publicity and have catapulted governors—Michael Dukakis, Tommy Thompson, John Engler, and Bill Clinton himself, to name a few—onto the national political stage" (Shaw and Lieberman 1996).

and in a state that was shifting to the political right, Lawton Chiles defeated Jeb Bush by a slim margin.

In the media spotlight and underprepared, the Family Transition Program began operating in February 1994, just one month after the federal waivers had been granted. It was not until May 1994 that the FTP was well enough established to begin taking in significant numbers of participants. As the FTP staff and administrators struggled to build a new program, they were constantly being asked to provide information to the media. From the beginning, it was clear that the FTP would succeed or fail very publicly. As state Senator Tom Rossin, Democrat, West Palm Beach commented, "Hopefully it [the FTP] works. If the expectations are this high, you can really fall off a cliff" (Ash 1995).

Implementation

The procedures developed in the Family Transition Program aimed at getting welfare recipients off the rolls by the time limit. First and foremost, the FTP staff worked to get participants employed. They provided intensive case management, job training, and child-care. If it appeared that a participant might fail to find a job in time, however, staff were instructed to send the participant to the Review Panel. One case manager commented, "If they are progressing with no job, that is scary. We will probably staff them [in preparation for the Review Panel]." Once a participant had been to the Review Panel, she was considered to be at least partially non-compliant and thus ineligible for a public job.

Supervisors were extremely concerned about having a participant reach the time limit who was unemployed and had never been to the Review Panel. When asked what would happen if such a client reached the time limit, one supervisor shook her head and replied, "I wouldn't want to be the supervisor on that case. Let's put it that way. Oh God . . . I don't know what would happen. I would not want that to happen." Such sentiments were widespread; the supervisor's comment reflected the common understanding that having an unemployed, compliant participant would reflect a failure within the program. Though the state of Florida agreed to the post-time-limit job provision, utilizing it became an administrative taboo.

The Political Context of the Review Panel

At the time the Family Transition Act passed, Florida was in the midst of creating numerous citizen-based panels and boards. As a high level administrator explained, "Tallahassee, the legislature, the Governor, and all was really pushing community involvement." A central reason that Governor Chiles and the Florida state legislature wanted to institutionalize community involvement with social service agencies was to increase public awareness of, and support for, social welfare programs. An Escambia County administrator noted:

The public perception of what we do is real skewed. But when people become involved with us, they become advocates. . . . What Governor Chiles tried to do, which I fully support, was to localize this with the creation of the boards.

The same administrator went on to note that citizen-based boards and panels play an important role in building political support for social service agencies and individual programs, such as the FTP:

I think the major advantage [of the Review Panel] is a political advantage, and that is it gives you a certain amount of built-in community buy-in. From both points of view, from either a very conservative point of view or a very liberal point of view. You still have that community buy-in. Either you have the community protection of the poor people or you have the community looking at all these bleeding heart social workers. And to me, of course, that makes my job that much easier in dealing with the public and the media.

Community involvement had been central to the FTP from the start. The *Final Report: Study Commission on Employment Opportunities and Self Sufficiency* (1992), the foundation of the FTA, was drafted by a study group with diverse membership including representatives from Legal Services, Catholic Community Services, and the Urban League. Members of the business community, state Representatives, and social service agencies were also involved. An outcome of this involvement was that the model Review Panel included representatives from various segments of the community that roughly paralleled those involved in drafting the report. Interest groups involved in drafting the law, however, did not follow through and make sure that their representatives held seats on the panel.

The Review Panel was part of a larger strategy to increase legitimacy and political support for social service programs in Florida.¹¹ It is possible that one reason interest groups ultimately paid so little attention to the implementation of welfare reform in Florida was that they felt that their agendas had been adequately encoded into the law and would be advanced by members of the Review Panel. The panel, which could have been an avenue for interest group involvement in the program, became almost entirely a symbolic body. The institution of the Review Panel therefore built crucial legitimacy and support for the Family Transition Program without fundamentally shifting power away from the FTP administrators.

Making the Review Panel "Work"

While there was little interest group involvement in the Review Panel, it did draw its membership from a cross-section of the local community. Three-quarters of panel members were white and one-quarter black. Fifty-nine percent of the panel members were female and 41 percent male. Household incomes were diverse.¹² Most panel members held "pink-" or "white-" collar jobs¹³ and a considerable number had personal experience with being on welfare. Twenty-seven percent reported having received public assistance, defined as AFDC, Food Stamps, SSI, WIC, or Medicaid, and fifty-five percent reported that they had close family or friends who had received public assistance.

Early on, administrators had some concern that the Review Panel members would be too soft on the participants, that they would not understand the "appropriate" response to situations. One administrator commented:

The first one [Review Panel hearing] that we held [was] terrible. There was a conversation to the lady [client] about, 'oh you poor thing.' And it was almost like, 'gee, I don't know why they put you in this program. You just got so many barriers.' I mean, we started out with that kind of concept and then the [hearing took] two hours. Obviously, it is not going to work. That became very clear. [Several administrators] said, 'now let's sit down. We [have] seen how it works. Now we need to talk about how it is going to work better.'

The Review Panel procedures were carefully developed by the FTP administrators to make the Review Panel process "work." One high-ranking administrator explained, "[W]e just started to develop different kinds of forms. . . . We developed a form and re-developed a

11. The origin of the Review Panel is unclear. One unsubstantiated rumor was that the idea originated between two welfare department officials on a long airplane ride as something of a joke, taking the then-current vogue for community involvement to an extreme and allowing the community to terminate welfare recipients' benefits at the time limit. Whether or not this story is true, it illustrates the connection between the Review Panel and the larger movement toward community boards that was occurring in Florida when the legislation passed.

12. Six percent of Review Panel members reported annual household incomes of between \$0-\$9,999; 18 percent reported household incomes of between \$10,000 and \$29,999; 42 percent reported annual incomes between \$30,000 and 69,999; and 33 percent reported annual incomes between \$70,000 and \$149,999. No one reported an annual household income of over \$150,000.

13. Jobs likely to require a high school education or some college, such as administrative assistance, were coded as pink-collar. Jobs likely to require at least a college degree and some graduate education or extensive work history, such as middle management, were coded as white-collar. This coding system is not precise and is only meant to give a rough picture of the types of jobs held by panel members.

form and re-developed a form, until we finally got something.” The FTP Review Panel training sessions stressed that the panel was supposed to advise the staff on what the participants could do to improve their lives and support their families, rather than to assess whether the participants had complied with the program enough to merit a post-time-limit job or extension.

There is considerable evidence that many panel members viewed participants at the hearings as non-compliant by definition. One panel member noted, “All we know is the ones that are not doing what they are supposed to do. That’s the reason they come before the board, if they are not compliant.” A second panel member made the same point:

We don’t see the ones that are in compliance. We seldom talk about them. Once in a while word comes in that out of 100 people, 90 are in compliance and 10 are not. But you never hear about the ninety. You only hear about the 10.

Observations of the Review Panel hearings and the review of panel records also indicate that all cases brought before the panel were treated at least as partially non-compliant. Out of the fifty case records reviewed, not one participant was found to be wholly in compliance.

Some of the procedures developed by the FTP sharply limited the independence of the panel. In addition to providing training, the FTP also prepared all of the written information on each case sent to the panel. The participant document, called a “summary of activities,” provided information on the participant, including personal and family history of welfare receipt, the participant’s age, the number and ages of the children on the grant, and occasionally information on more personal matters—such as the number of men named as potential fathers of a child in the household. These documents also included the activities scheduled for the participant, the number of appointments missed, and an assessment of what the participant needed to do to become self-sufficient. Summaries were sent to the panel members prior to the hearings but not to the participants. Many participants spent most of the brief hearings reviewing the case against them. The procedure for distributing information to the panel members, therefore, maximized the credibility of the FTP and minimized the credibility of the participants.

At the start of each hearing, the case managers offered a brief statement of the case history. The panel then asked questions of the participant. These questions often focused on the participant’s personal life rather than on her interactions with the program. Hearings typically lasted ten to fifteen minutes. After the hearings, an FTP staff member—not the volunteer Review Panel chairperson—wrote up the panel recommendations using a form letter developed by the FTP administrators. The structure of the recommendation letters led the panel to think in terms of the ways in which a participant was non-compliant, rather than to view themselves as determining a participant’s compliance status. The letters typically stated that the participant was “non-compliant” and made recommendations for the participant, such as that she complete her G.E.D. or receive substance abuse counseling. Later, the panel chairperson reviewed what the FTP liaison had written for accuracy and initialed the findings. In some cases, the findings were initialed by the liaison on behalf of the chairperson. One Review Panel chairperson reported seeing recommendations that he did not remember making. An FTP administrator also reported occasionally adding recommendations to the panel’s findings.

In the chaotic, politicized context described earlier, the FTP administrators developed a Review Panel process that supported and legitimated the termination of benefits to all unsuccessful participants. Once a participant was identified by staff as problematic or likely to be unemployed at the time limit, benefit termination would follow as a matter of course. Case managers understood that they should bring all participants who were having difficulty in the program to the Review Panel where they then were officially labeled “non-compliant.” Based on the Review Panel’s finding of non-compliance, these participants were ineligible for the job guarantee. Through this process, it became nearly impossible for a compliant participant to reach the time limit without employment and qualify for a public job.

Was the Family Transition Program Committed to the Job Guarantee?

In a staff survey, only 44 percent of FTP staff strongly agreed with the statement: "FTP's policy is to provide a job to everyone who complies with the program but is unable to find a job on their own by the time they reach the time limit" (Bloom, Kemple and Rogers-Dillon 1997:57). Many Review Panel members were also unaware of the job guarantee. When asked what would happen if an FTP participant who was compliant reached the time limit without a job, a panel member responded that "the FTP has no choice but to cut them off." The fact that so few staff and Review Panel members were aware of the job guarantee is not a reflection of poor communication within the Family Transition Program. On the contrary, the FTP was tightly run, and program staff met routinely to go over individual cases and FTP policy. The staff meetings, in preparation for bringing participants to the Review Panel, were extensive and time-consuming. Review Panel training sessions permitted ample opportunity to convey basic information to panel members. In fact, information was being transmitted in the Family Transition Program. The message was that participants who were not progressing toward self-sufficiency *by the time limit* were not compliant.

In a front page *New York Times* article on the Family Transition Program, Jason DeParle reported:

[T]he program pledged public jobs to recipients who cooperated by seeking work or training but remain unemployed. Forty-seven out of one hundred and thirty people who have exhausted their limits have shown such cooperation. But to officials' surprise, *not one* has needed a public job. (DeParle 1997a:A18, emphasis added)

Since "compliance" was partly defined as being able to secure a job by the time limit, the success of the Family Transition Program in moving "compliant" participants into jobs is less surprising than it might seem at first glance. Regardless, the phrase "*not one* has needed a public job" simply and clearly conveys the message that the Family Transition Program successfully changed welfare.

Understanding Government Action

To understand why the Family Transition Program's job guarantee was administratively eliminated, we draw from historical institutionalism in political sociology and neo-institutionalism in organizational analysis and put a new emphasis on the importance of the media in public administration. First, we briefly review the usefulness of several competing theories of bureaucratic politics in understanding why the Family Transition Program job guarantee was never implemented.

Interest Group Domination

Studies of bureaucratic politics often explain the difference between policy expectations and program implementation by the influence of external pressures, especially interest group "capture" (Bernstein 1955; Lowi 1979; Wilson 1995). Did political interests capture the Family Transition Program? This hypothesis in particular seems plausible. The Review Panel was a built-in mechanism for interest groups to dominate the Family Transition Program. The panel was a place for non-state actors to assert their views with, at least on paper, considerable power to influence participant outcomes. Moreover, interest groups clearly did play a role in the creation of the Family Transition Program. Yet, they were conspicuously absent in the phase of administration. If interest groups wanted to "capture" the FTP, they missed the perfect opportunity to do so. No matter how plausible an explanation interest group capture might be at first glance, it does not explain why the FTP never implemented the job guarantee.

Street Level Bureaucracy

The differences between policy expectations and program implementation have also been explained as resulting from discretion exercised by “street-level bureaucrats”—frontline workers such as caseworkers, police, and teachers—whose actions create policy as it is experienced by members of the public (Brodkin 1986; Lipsky 1980). In the same vein, scholars have focused on the ways discourse and constructed realities emerge from everyday interactions of caseworkers and participants (Miller 1991; Miller and Holstein 1996). Clearly, staff discretion was important in key areas of the FTP, including whether a participant was sanctioned for a given transgression or had access to particular job training programs and support services. But street-level discretion did not affect the provision of post-time-limit jobs. The rules surrounding benefit termination were highly formalized and left no room for staff to influence whether or not a participant received a public job. Therefore, theories of street-level bureaucracy, while undoubtedly valuable in explaining other aspects of the FTP, do not explain why the job guarantee was never implemented.

Historical Institutionalism

Historical institutionalism is more useful, but alone cannot fully account for why the FTP never implemented the job guarantee. Historical institutionalists have made great contributions by demonstrating that state actors shape policies as they pursue career interests or favored ideas, and that administrators’ actions are constrained by historically contingent factors such as personnel, access to information, and administrative capacity (Amenta 1998; Cauthen and Amenta 1996; Leiberman 1998; Skocpol 1985, 1992; Weir, Orloff and Skocpol 1988). While we agree that these are important factors, the question remains: why is capacity developed in some areas and not others? For example, why did FTP spend money on child-care and intensive case management, but not on post-time-limit benefits? The FTP paid for expenses that contributed to a participant’s employability, including car repairs, taxi fares to jobs, books, child-care, uniforms, and interview clothing.¹⁴ In fact, a few case managers complained that some FTP payments were inappropriate, particularly for car repairs, and that clients were taking advantage of the program’s generosity (Bloom, Kemple and Rogers-Dillon 1997:60). In contrast, \$100,000 was appropriated each year for post-time-limit jobs, but this money was never used.

A second historical institutionalist explanation of the FTP might be that administrators were embedded in an institutional structure in which the governor’s office and the state legislature directly influenced the program’s implementation. The difficulty with this interpretation is that, after the initial rush, the FTP had virtually no contact with the governor or the legislature. When asked how much contact Florida politicians had with the FTP regarding how the program functioned, a key FTP staff member replied “Zero.” The governor’s office, however, did request that successful FTP participants be sent to Tallahassee for a media event with Governor Chiles. The administrative details of the FTP were not politically important. The public perception of *success* was important. The impact of political interests on the FTP, therefore, must be understood as having been shaped by a cultural understanding of what constituted “success” in welfare reform.¹⁵

Neo-Institutionalism

If the case of the Family Transition Program does not fall neatly into these prominent theories of government and administrative action, how are we to understand what happened?

14. The final cost analysis of the Family Transition Program has not been completed. It is, therefore, not yet possible to know exactly how much money was spent in which areas and how this compares with the spending for AFDC. Preliminary assessments suggest that Family Transition Program spending was considerably greater in these areas than in traditional welfare, particularly spending for child-care.

15. Political interests, of course, also shaped these understandings of success. In our assessment, policy success standards are defined in a feedback loop among politicians, the media, and the public as voters and media consumers.

First, we turn our attention to the cultural aspect of administrative constraints and borrow from the neo-institutionalist sociology of organizations (Powell and DiMaggio 1991) the concept of the legitimacy imperative. Neo-institutionalism asks us to understand organizations not only in terms of their resources and instrumental goals, but also in terms of the “rules-of-the-game” by which organizations (and actors within those organizations) must play (Meyer and Rowan 1991). These efforts may be unreflective, with rules built into the decision-making processes (Dobbin 1994a) or they may be more active and strategic (Morrill and McKee 1993).

The legitimacy imperative puts a premium on symbolic actions—actions that can communicate legitimacy to those audiences that are perceived to be able to impose sanctions if rules are violated (Skrentny 1998; see also Edelman 1992). Administrators thus seek to avoid “the pain of visible public failure” (Pressman and Wildavsky 1979:170; see also Wilson 1980:375), and, if at all possible, to achieve demonstrable “success.” This is clearest in a newly created agency since “a newborn agency is surrounded by its political parents—people and groups eager to applaud behavior that is consistent with the zeal of those who won the fight to create the agency” (Wilson 1989:67-68). In other words, in politics, the legitimacy imperative is also a “success” imperative, and it will be strongest for a new program like the Family Transition Program.

The Media, Success, and Public Policy

The role of the news media in institutional studies of policymaking has been recognized but not made central; for example, Peter Hall (1992, 1993) stresses its importance in a paragraph or two but does not give theoretical justification for its importance, while James Q. Wilson’s (1989:88, 280) wide-ranging review of the literature on bureaucracy mentions the importance of the news media in passing, but never develops the point. We follow Hall’s (1992:105, 1993:228) early steps in stressing the role of the media as a “magnifying glass” which gives special attention to certain views and models of understanding. Baumgartner and Jones (1993) add that the media also simplify and avoid complexity, while Hilgartner and Bosk (1988:61) stress that political actors know this and will cast issues in “dramatic and persuasive terms” emphasizing “‘cold hard facts’ and an image of technical expertise.”

Ronald Reagan stated in 1986 “the success of welfare reform should be judged by how many of its recipients become independent of welfare” (quoted in Teles 1996:124). Highlighting the drop in welfare rolls was an effective, simple (media friendly) way for politicians to transmit the message that welfare reform was succeeding. If welfare was bad, a decline in welfare use was good. During the debates over the Family Transition Act, one representative suggested a performance-based pay incentive “if you’re a field worker and you can get folks off welfare.”

Clinton/Gore 96 campaign materials on welfare reform boasted, “President Clinton’s effort to assist [welfare] reform in 38 states is working. . . . Welfare caseloads have declined by 1.4 million since March 1994” (Clinton/Gore 96 1996). Based on the same statistic, President Clinton stated in August 1997 “I think it is fair to say the debate [over welfare reform] is over. . . . We know that welfare reform works” (Broder 1997). The *New York Times* noted that the governors also claimed credit for caseload reductions: “As the nation’s governors gather here [in Washington, D.C.] this weekend for their winter meeting, many are crediting their programs for the reduction in caseloads” (DeParle 1997b). The news media promoted the idea that success was best measured using the quantitative language of American politics: Successful welfare reform meant the number of people on “the welfare rolls” would go down.¹⁶

The expectation that successful welfare reform would mean fewer people on the welfare rolls was also rooted in cultural expectations. Every piece of legislation is partly the result of a

16. Following Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder’s (1988) research, we should not be surprised that such quantitative standards of policy success should take hold. They show that quantitative news, such as the unemployment rate and the consumer price index, has a greater influence on new consumers than do photographic vignettes about a particular person. We thank Michael Schudson for bringing this to our attention. On the importance and prevalence of quantitative thinking in American politics, see Kingdon (1995).

cultural model or “policy paradigm” of how the world works, including ontological assumptions of who relevant actors are and their causal interrelations (Boli 1989; Dobbin 1994b; Hall 1993). The model that gave logic to the FTP has shaped American poverty discourse for years. In this model, the poverty of the poor “is to some degree a matter of personal responsibility, and its alleviation requires personal transformation, such as the acquisition of skills, commitment to the work ethic, or the practice of chastity” (Katz 1989:7). The social problem targeted by welfare reform was not poverty but welfare dependency. Therefore, a successful welfare reform program was defined as one that got people off welfare, and preferably, but not necessarily, into work. The “rules” of welfare reform derived from this popular understanding as much as they derived from formal legislation.

We are not suggesting a determinant or static model for understanding policy implementation. Shifts in public opinion or media focus could clearly change the extra-legal “rules” for policy administrators. More importantly, other factors such as resources, personnel, and direct political intervention, may at any given time or in any given program be more important than the media-magnified rules for success. Additionally, since not all public policy is the subject of such keen attention or has such a dominant criterion for success as welfare reform, the importance of the media may vary considerably. By building on neo-institutionalism’s focus on legitimacy and emphasizing the power of the media to convey appropriate administrative action and define policy success, however, we believe that sociologists can better understand why policies targeted at eradicating social problems are often implemented in unexpected ways.

Discussion

Family Transition Program administrators took pride in being part of the most radical welfare reform in decades; they knew that if the new welfare looked like the old welfare—high costs, bureaucracy, and people still receiving benefits after the time limit—the FTP would not be seen as a success. In order to avoid failure, high-level administrators defined the category of “non-compliant” very broadly, encompassing over 60 percent (as of February 1998) of the people who reached the time limit. The broad use of the categorization “non-compliant” allowed for unproblematic benefit termination and continued maintenance of the cultural model of competent citizens who for whatever reasons chose poverty.

We have argued that because it is easier to report short sound bites than it is to explain complex, technical issues of policy and administration, media attention can act as a pressure on administrators to implement policies bluntly. This may be particularly true for policies targeted at stigmatized populations, such as criminals (‘three strikes and you’re out’) and welfare recipients (‘two years and you’re off’). Following President Clinton, the media initially defined “two years and you’re off” as successful welfare reform. The failure of the first time-limited welfare program in the country to meet that standard would have been widely covered by the media. Such publicity could have drawn negative political attention to the Family Transition Program and jeopardized its institutional support.

It is impossible to say how important legitimacy is in policy implementation overall by looking only at the Family Transition Program. The level of detail permitted by a case study, however, makes it possible to generate grounded hypotheses, and we posit three: 1) Administrators concerned about media attention (as in the FTP) will be more likely to create programs that meet media-simplified standards of “success” than administrators less concerned with media attention; 2) high-profile programs, particularly pilot programs, are more likely to diverge from written policy to meet media-defined criteria for “success” than low-profile programs; and 3) media power to define legitimacy rules is stronger when interest groups are absent. In Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), for example, we expect that media attention to particular types of welfare recipients (e.g., victims of domestic violence or women

with functional impairments) will create pressure on welfare administrators to grant those recipients continued benefits. However, if the media transmits conflicting criteria for success, emphasizing the importance of welfare roll reduction in one story and the vulnerability of a particular welfare family in the next, the importance of media attention may be diminished. (Andrew S. McFarland [1987] makes a similar point by arguing that conflicting interest groups increase agency autonomy.)

We do not expect media pressure to affect all programs in the same way or to the same degree. We view the media as one of many factors affecting implementation. Resources, state law, agency policy, political intervention, bureaucratic culture, interest group involvement, and participant demographics are all likely to affect how each program is administered. The Family Transition Program was a high-profile program, high in administrator concern about media attention, and low in interest group attention. This combination is arguably the most likely to create a program that conforms to media expectations. As policies mature, we suspect media attention diminishes and becomes more diffuse, thereby reducing the pressure on individual programs to produce particular outcomes. Therefore, we expect the media to have the greatest impact on pilot programs, with considerably less impact on established programs.

We conclude on a cautionary note. Currently, there is considerable hope that the states can be "laboratories of democracy" (Osborne 1988) in which policy ideas are tested. The devolution of power to the states is supposed to create a pool of knowledge from which all states can draw when developing new policies; however, there is a problem in assuming that policies are implemented as written. This is particularly important if states try to duplicate programs by importing written policies without full knowledge of how the programs were actually implemented. Pilot programs do not operate in a sterile, clinical environment—they operate in highly political contexts. Moreover, they do not operate under scientific assumptions. Administrators have incentives to be pragmatic rather than scientific, and to depart from the written policy when it seems appropriate to make a program "work." As we evaluate new policy initiatives, we need to take seriously the influence of extra-legal "rules" and popular definitions of success on policy outcomes. We need to recognize that administration takes place within a broader political and cultural environment.

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