

Observation in poverty research

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Nearly every aspect of a welfare program is affected by caseworker-client interaction. Caseworkers become agents of the policymakers and give a program model its concrete meaning. They provide the link between the client and the program by applying legislative and regulatory direction about who must participate, in what ways, and what support services they should receive. How case managers complete these tasks affects the program outcomes experienced by their clients. By design, public service workers have substantial discretion in their work; they are entrusted to make decisions that affect their clients' life chances. In the case of welfare policies, this means affecting the likelihood of achieving economic self-sufficiency.

Despite this possible influence, very little of what we "know" about caseworker-client interaction is learned through direct observation. When caseworker-client transactions are studied, data sources typically include self-reports from clients, caseworker interviews or focus groups, and agency administrative data including client file reviews. In this article I contend that observation is an important methodology critical to understanding caseworker-client interactions. I use an example from a welfare program study to show caseworker-client interactions can be empirically examined.

Observation as a critical methodology

In participant observation, the researcher is in a face-to-face relationship with the observed and gathers data in a natural setting. The goal of this observation is to obtain data about behavior through direct contact and minimal researcher interference, while also allowing for replication and/or verification.

It is often assumed that there is a simple correspondence between the occurrence of an event and the researcher's recording of that event. However, the process of observation is actually a succession of steps. These are (1) the split second subsequent to the event, during which an occurrence is registered; (2) an interpretation of its sig-

nificance in the context within which it occurred, resulting in a more expanded awareness of the event; and (3) the event is transcribed. Thus, observation is an analytical process of registering, interpreting, and recording.¹

The benefits commonly ascribed to participant observation include obtaining a deeper understanding of the subject than can be acquired by solely relying on participants' explanation of their actions and motivations. In poverty research, this is particularly relevant to understanding caseworker-client interactions.

Caseworkers and clients often have varying interpretations of key events including, for example, how program eligibility guidelines were explained, how assessments were performed, why sanctions were imposed, and reasons for case closures. Both caseworker and client reports can be subject to errors in recall, and biased towards providing socially desirable answers to sensitive questions. Caseworker responses to questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups may be affected by their desire to demonstrate both fair and consistent treatment of clients and a mastery of program policies. Similarly, client responses may be affected by their desire to present themselves as responsible, compliant, and cooperative to researchers.

Agency data is another common information source in welfare research, but it also has important limitations. Data may be missing or incomplete and definitions of data elements unknown or inconsistent. It may also be impossible to accurately link clients across agencies and over time.

Observations have important limitations as well. Researchers may misinterpret events, retrospectively expand or narrow an observation beyond its original occurrence, or become too involved or attached to the subjects. Subjects may also alter their behavior in the presence of the researcher.

A common concern across all of these data collection techniques, including observations, is the loss of objectivity. Research can be strengthened by using more than one source and considering how each source verifies or contradicts information from other sources, and by assessing the likelihood of losing objectivity. Researchers can use techniques such as making observation checklists using multiple researchers to address any concerns about objectivity.

Observing caseworker-client interactions in Wisconsin's welfare program²

Every welfare program must develop a client-assessment process to identify the appropriate services and participation expectations for its participants. The process of assessing and assigning clients to activities deserves attention because it affects the level of income support that the applicant receives (and that the agency must pay). Though caseworkers may later learn more about the circumstances and employability of participants and thus change activity assignments, the initial decision is important because it sets the ground rules under which a family enters the welfare program. Under Wisconsin's welfare program, Wisconsin Works (W-2), this decision must be made quickly during an intake interview also designed to impart general information about the program to clients.

The W-2 case manager has multiple responsibilities. In addition to interpreting and explaining policies that govern W-2 eligibility, the caseworker has primary responsibility for eligibility determination, assessment, employability planning, service referral, and ongoing case management. Initially, the caseworker conducts an informal assessment of the applicant's recent job search efforts, work history, education, skills, interests, and abilities to determine whether the applicant is ready for unsubsidized employment. In making placement decisions, the caseworker reviews the information collected in the W-2 application and considers the person's potential barriers to employment.

Researchers conducted field research on the intake and assessment procedures in Milwaukee County at several points in time, seeking to understand the assessment process and to compare observed practice with possible measures of good administration or appropriate service to applicants. The research questions included:

- Was the structure of the intake interview conducive to an exchange of important information?
- Were important topics discussed?
- Did the interview strike a balance between eligibility determination and service assessment and planning, or did one function dominate?
- Were issues that the applicant raised acknowledged?

The unit of analysis for the study is the transaction between the caseworker and the applicant.³ The field researcher served as an unobtrusive observer, using an observational form to document the general setting of the interview, the topics discussed, and how decisions were made. After each intake interview, a semi-structured interview was conducted to collect some background information about the caseworker and to understand the rationale behind any caseworker decisions made during the intake interview.

In this article I discuss what we found concerning the caseworkers' and applicants' discussions of specific program (income support) policies during the intake interview; I also consider our findings about the interview flow. These findings were particularly easy to assess because the *Wisconsin Works Manual* provided a general sense of the topical areas that may be discussed during the intake and assessment interview.⁴ The full study discussed in the paper from which this article is drawn also provides detailed findings on the assessment process, the interview setting, caseworker-client discussions, and the caseworkers' decision making process. Given the clear W-2 policy goal of allowing caseworkers discretion, we did not expect to find uniform coverage of any topic. Rather, we set out to identify and examine patterns of topic coverage that may vary based on agency norms and individual case circumstances.

Explaining key program areas

The caseworkers in this field research used one of three presentation styles to explain Wisconsin's welfare policy: written, written with verbal highlights, and written with extensive verbal comments. A few caseworkers used the written approach; they provided printed materials about W-2, asked the applicants to review the documents, and asked whether they had questions. The written-with-verbal-highlights approach proceeds similarly but adds the discussion of specific programmatic aspects, such as time limits. This presentation style was the most common.

Our field research examined how caseworkers explained specific components of the welfare program including the emphasis on work as the primary goal, the payment cycle, time limits, and sanctions. Some of our key findings include:

Emphasis on work. The message that the state's TANF program is focused on promoting work as the primary means of securing economic self-sufficiency was clearly conveyed in the vast majority (85 percent) of intake interviews observed. The majority of the caseworkers' questions to applicants related to employment. For example, applicants were asked about their employment history, recent job search activities, barriers to work, and short- and long-term employment goals.

Cash benefit payments. When the topic of the benefit payment cycle arose, as it did in nearly two-thirds of the intake interviews, applicants asked questions. Wisconsin's welfare program operates on a tier system with different payment levels. The payment amounts associated with each tier were routinely discussed during most of the intake interviews. Applicants expressed frustration with how long they had to wait to receive their first payment. Many applicants go to a W-2 agency when they are confronting an immediate financial hardship, so the payment cycle is an important concern.

Time limits. Time limits were discussed in about half of the intake interviews. According to state policy, caseworkers are required to review the participant's time-limit status at every review and at every new placement. Most discussions of time limits focused on explaining the differences between the federal 60-month lifetime time limit and the 24-month time limit for W-2 employment tiers. Caseworkers also emphasized to applicants the importance of keeping track of the number of months remaining and of saving months for when they are most needed.

It is unclear why time limits were not discussed more frequently during the intake interviews. In some cases, applicants were given printed materials that provided information about time limits, and it was implied that they could review it and ask their case manager questions during a future meeting. These materials included visual aids such as illustrations of clocks detailing the time-limit policies.

Sanctions. Sanctions for noncompliance with W-2 rules were discussed in about 30 percent of the intake interviews. W-2 participants who are placed in certain tiers and who fail to participate in assigned work-training activities have their payment reduced by \$5.15 per hour unless there is good cause for nonparticipation.

Under W-2 policy, caseworkers have discretion in deciding whether to waive nonparticipation sanctions for "good cause," and caseworkers seem to have developed individual criteria for making this decision. One caseworker's sanctioning policy was the following: "It's just like a job. I have to treat you like an employer. The first problem with attendance, you come in and discuss it with me. Second problem, we discuss it and we put it in writing. The third problem, we will have to impose hourly restrictions." Another caseworker took this approach to sanctioning: "If you have to miss an activity for any reason, I don't want to be the last to know. Sometimes what participants do is wait until after the adverse-action date to bring me a bunch of excuses. It's too late then, they have already been sanctioned." Yet another caseworker explained, "I don't sanction people right away. I will follow up with you even at your home before I take steps to take your money away."

Interview flow

W-2 intake interviews are frequently interrupted, usually by incoming telephone calls. More than 55 percent of the intake interviews we observed were interrupted at least twice. Across all of the interviews, interruptions typically occurred up to four times during the intake session, and 58 percent of the interruptions were caused by incoming phone calls. Other interruptions included inquiries from within the agency by another case manager, supervisor, or county worker. Interruptions can break the flow of the intake session, especially if the caseworker and applicant

are discussing sensitive topics. Interruptions may also increase the overall time needed to cover the details of W-2 and assess the applicant.

Although it may seem simple enough not to take incoming phone calls during an intake interview, doing so involves a trade-off to which caseworkers appear sensitive. Besides conducting intake interviews with W-2 applicants, a caseworker is also responsible for providing ongoing case-management services to enrolled W-2 participants, for whom the case manager is the central point person. Most of the observed intake interviews concluded with the caseworker providing contact information and encouraging the client to call with questions. Throughout their day, caseworkers frequently respond to phone queries, and they often end up playing "phone tag" with callers. Over time, W-2 applicants and participants have expressed frustration about the difficulty of getting through to their caseworkers by phone; thus promptness of responding to queries is now a common component in evaluating a caseworker's job performance. Although caseworkers typically schedule a block of time each day to respond to phone calls, they may not be able to reach callers during that time block, and thus have to find additional time to return calls.

The caseworker initiates most of the discussion in an intake interview, usually by asking the W-2 applicant a question, to which applicants reply briefly, often with a one-word response. During our post-observational interviews with caseworkers, some mentioned that they like to involve applicants in some aspects of decision making because it increases participation in activities after enrollment. When applicants do initiate a discussion, their concerns most often center on the W-2 payment cycle, current housing problems, medical issues, or applying for a Job Access Loan.⁵

In 17 percent of the observed intake interviews, discussions led to contention between the caseworker and the applicant, usually relating to child care issues, the W-2 payment process, or required documentation. A few applicants were reluctant to place their children in child care. Caseworkers generally explained that, in order to be eligible for W-2, they must engage in activities which would require them to be away from home at times. Applicants usually agreed to assess their child care options and make an appropriate placement.

Applicants also expressed dissatisfaction about delays in receiving their first payment. Caseworkers generally restated and explained the payment policy, after which some applicants compared W-2 to an actual job, commenting, "W-2 is worse than a job" or "I should just go get a job."

Discussions about required documentation and forms were also sometimes contentious. Applicants expressed

frustration about having to submit the same documents to both their caseworker and their county worker (who determines eligibility for Food Stamps and Medicaid). They did not understand why it was not sufficient to present the documents either to one caseworker or the other. Caseworkers usually responded by explaining the different functions of the county workers and caseworkers, and applicants reluctantly agreed to submit documentation as needed to both.

Conclusions

How did observing caseworker-client interactions increase our knowledge of Wisconsin's welfare program? We were able to directly examine what actually happens in policy implementation. We were able to see how clients and caseworkers relate to each other during the (then-early) phase of a new welfare reform program. In order to appropriately evaluate program outcomes, it is important to know whether a program has been implemented as intended. What aspects of the program are being explained? Is this congruent with policymakers and agency administrators' expectations? How are caseworkers making decisions about assessments and placements? What is the overall structure, flow, and list of topics discussed across interviews? How may program participants be experiencing the same program differently?

In addition to providing a direct assessment of program implementation, these observations yield important data for senior program administrators. For example, this study suggests that, given the competing demands on a caseworker's time, it may not be realistic to expect caseworkers to simultaneously manage face-to-face interviews and telephone inquiries. Senior administrators can learn from these observations and make adjustments to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery. Similarly, observation can be used to better understand how the client actually experiences a welfare program and whether this experience is as intended.

Although there is great potential benefit in increasing the use of participant observation in poverty research, it has been rather infrequently used. Significant obstacles to its use include the need for an extensive field presence, adequate budgetary resources, and careful training to ensure consistency across observers. However, many poverty studies have overcome similar challenges. A more important impediment may be the lack of well-developed techniques for taking program implementation issues into account in program evaluation. Observation may also reveal unwelcome truths—for example, that poverty programs were not implemented as intended, or that implementation has varied by racial or ethnic group or by clients' fluency in English. The difficulty of adjusting for such complications may undercut evaluators' appreciation for observation research and may account for its relatively rare use. More work is needed to devise methods that allow program evaluators to productively incorporate findings from observation. ■

¹M. S. Schwartz and C. G. Schwartz, "Problems in Participant Observation," *The American Journal of Sociology* 60 (1955): 343–53.

²This section is based on an MDRC study, abbreviated from S. T. Gooden, F. Doolittle and B. Glispie, *Assessing Welfare Clients: How Agencies Match W-2 Participants with Services in Milwaukee*. New York: MDRC, November 2001. The field research was done during May through August, 1999; 100 intake interviews were observed.

³In each observed intake interview, the interviewee was applying for welfare services (we did not track whether this was the person's first W-2 application). Each agency had a high percentage of applicants who did not appear for scheduled appointments, which made random selection based on scheduled appointments impractical. Instead, to minimize selection bias, the researchers attempted to observe the first applicants who met with a caseworker for an intake appointment, regardless of scheduling status.

⁴The Wisconsin Works Manual is available at: http://www.dwd.state.wi.us/dws/manuals/w-2_manual/default.htm.

⁵Job Access Loans are short-term, no-interest loans designed to assist eligible individuals in meeting emergency needs related to obtaining or maintaining employment.