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## Social Service Workers Working Social Policy: A Qualitative Study of Social Policy, Political Culture, and Organizations

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

SOCIAL SERVICE WORKERS WORKING SOCIAL POLICY: A QUALITATIVE  
STUDY OF SOCIAL POLICY, POLITICAL CULTURE, AND ORGANIZATIONS

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

MAY 2012

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To my family and friends, without whom I would be an empty man.

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CHAPTER ONE:  
INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Street-level bureaucrats, or social services workers who work directly with clients, are the point at which policy meets people, according to Michael Lipsky (1980). Within the street-level bureaucracies in which these workers operate, policies surrounding social service provision are implemented on a daily basis. Workers in such a position have some range of discretion in exercising that policy, since they are in effect, the primary gatekeepers of their organizations' services. With such discretion, workers experience a particular kind of tension: a tension between the requirements of the job set out by their organization and the very real needs of the individuals sitting in front of them seeking services. This tension is the result of, according to Lipsky, workers engaging in "husbanding resources," or rationing services to individuals accessing these services. The decisions involved in husbanding resources are made within the context of social policy, political culture and the organizations. Yet few studies have examined how workers at social service organizations navigate this tension. Moreover, as social service provision has shifted to a neoliberal model that links individual moral reform and entrepreneurial action to the receipt of services, social service workers face distinctly new challenges unanticipated by Lipsky.

The purpose of this study is to examine how social policy, political culture and organizational policy affect the social service provision by street-level bureaucrats. Since

this study is concerned with the constraints of policy implementation within the client-staff interaction, utilizing a street-level bureaucratic framework will shed light on understanding the role that frontline staff have in addressing those constraints. Frontline staff, being the point at which policy meets people, are the critical linkage between policy and the targeted population. By examining how frontline workers understand and negotiate these constraints for their clients, this study aims to understand the policy reality that clients experience on a day-to-day basis. In doing so, this study will foster greater understanding of how social policy and political culture operate to reproduce social services through the interactions between staff and client.

The social service programs that I study are situated within a bifurcated system of social service provision. On the one hand, citizens who have worked and are thought to have literally ‘paid in’ to the system via work have the ability to access social insurance programs, like social security and Medicare. On the other hand, those who have not worked enough must rely on means-tested programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Medicaid. This bifurcation explicitly distinguishes between a minority who are understood to be impoverished, while the majority is able to provide for their own welfare. This distinction increases the social and financial distance between the two groups (Esping-Anderson 1990). In addition, means-tested programs are not as well-equipped to participate and advocate for these programs in the political process, as those programs that have more affluent constituents (Campbell 2003).

Underlying this set of U.S. social policies is a liberal individualist ideology that

categorizes the poor as on the edges of citizenship, without full right and status due to those who are seen to be deserving by virtue of their participation in the workforce. Since in the U.S., providing for one's welfare is tantamount to being understood to be a successful citizen, 'failed' citizens access social service programs that help to provide for their welfare. Through cultural classifications and policies, they are relegated to statuses outside the community of citizens and become a part of the undeserving poor (Steensland 2006).

### **Citizenship in the U.S. Liberal Welfare State**

To understand the world of service delivery that social welfare workers face, it is important to understand the social meanings and origins of U.S. welfare provisions. T.H. Marshall's foundational 1964 essay "Class, Citizenship, and Social Development" argued that social class *and* equality were shaped by citizenship rights. For a modern welfare state, argued Marshall, a society stratified through class "...may be acceptable provided the equality of citizenship is recognized" (Marshall 1964:70). Thus, having a society in which one person can earn more income and afford more expensive things is irrelevant in terms of equality, as long as the society equally grants certain rights to its citizenry.

For Marshall, three rights constitute citizenship: civil (the right to engage in contracts freely, i.e. work, marriage, etc.), political (the right to vote and invoke power through some representative body) and social (education, health care, general welfare, etc.). The state articulates the extent of these rights, through social policy mechanisms. An important concept in Marshall's conceptualization of social citizenship granted by the state is the commodification of its citizenry. In effect, a citizen becomes a commodity



through the selling of their labor for a wage. In other words, if a citizenry is granted full social rights, then that citizenry's wage labor and social welfare are decoupled (Esping-Andersen 1990). Within modern welfare states, social policy, then, forms much of the meaning of social citizenship.

By focusing on social rights, this is not to say that civil and political rights are by any means settled. These rights are being contested both formally and informally, through policies and practices such as the de-politicization of criminals and voter intimidation. But the focus is meant to speak clearly to a particular and powerful aspect of citizen meaning-making: the interactions between staff and the people that are relegated to a second-class citizenship status through having to rely on means-tested social service provision.

The bifurcation of social insurance such as transfer payments from the government, and means-tested benefits has been well documented as an enduring and problematic characteristic of the U.S. liberal welfare state since the Social Security act of 1935 (Weir et al. 1988; Quadagno and Street 2005; Piven and Cloward 1997; Esping-Anderson 1990). In the U.S., our notions of citizenship are bound to our perceived and/or actual ability to work. Citizens within the U.S. are not de-commodified and must seek to provide for their welfare through work. Thus the U.S. welfare state "...erects an order of stratification that is a blend of a relative equality of poverty among welfare-state recipients, market-differentiated welfare among the majorities..." (Esping-Andersen 1990:27).

The expansion of certain social programs highlights a significant way in which this

stratification of citizens operates through social policies. Pierson (1994) notes that this expansion can create its own constituencies and institutional logic that perpetuate programs. For example, Ronald Reagan, as part of his smaller government platform, attempted to cut social welfare programs. He was somewhat successful cutting unemployment benefits and housing, but was largely unsuccessful in his attempts on the social security coffers, because of the constituencies, e.g. the AARP, the largest voluntary organization in the U.S., (Pierson 1994; Campbell 2003). Thus social insurance programs create constituents and provide them with resources to directly and actively participate; compare this to means-tested, targeted programs that do less to empower its constituents, who lack the resources, civic skills and income to effectively participate in the political arena (Campbell 2003).

Through dual programs of social insurance and means-tested welfare, certain groups of citizens are empowered while other groups are disempowered or ignored. The basis for the legal and cultural distinctions between these groups is their perceived or actual ability to work. Within the liberal U.S. welfare state the government does not provide social welfare (housing, food, health care) to all of its citizens. Instead, its citizens must act as commodities having to sell their wage labor to be able to afford market-differentiated social welfare. Those who do not or cannot work, for whatever reason, are relegated to seeking targeted, means-tested welfare programs designed to certify its recipients' impoverishment and, with more recent welfare-to-work programs like TANF, set them back on a course for the labor market.

This is not done so cleanly. What happens to people when they are cast outside of the community of working citizens? The forces by which this happens are not found solely in legal-bureaucratic social policy mechanisms. Rather the explanatory forces involved in this process are also within the realm of U.S. political culture. In this vein, Amenta et al. (2001), Manza (2000), and Steensland (2006) have noted the dearth of analysis of culture as it relates to the realm of social policy, while others have called for greater integration between these two related fields (Burstein 1991; Campbell 2002).

### **U.S. Citizenship Meaning-Making through Political Culture**

In analytically approaching political culture, one must be careful not to make the definitional boundaries too far-reaching or too timid. For if the definition encompasses too much or too little, its analytic usefulness collapses under its over-extended or insignificant boundaries. So, in attempting to define ‘political culture’ as an analytical concept, it is important to first begin with a definition of culture.

In terms of analytical utility, the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, defines useful boundaries for the concept, in saying that culture is

...an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life (Geertz 1973:89).

Adding to this definition, culture can be analytically understood as “...all socially located forms and processes of human *meaning-making*...” (Spillman 2007:922). These concepts capture the essence of culture as a means of “historically transmitted” ideas, beliefs, values and norms through a “system of inherited concepts” through which people make meaning out of their existence.

Adding 'political' in front of 'culture', then, narrows the analytical focus to a specific context and manner in which or meaning-making, occurs. The political arena has an orientation to power. The power to influence, make and enforce decisions about how a society governs itself is political power. Regardless of where this power comes from (a representative democracy, an oligarchical body, the barrel of a gun, according to Mao Zedong) these actions must be framed, legitimated and interpreted. Thus political culture is the framing and viewing of culture towards a political orientation. That is political culture is the way in which people frame culture, through action and perception, that shapes and defines the boundaries of what is and how it is politically meaningful and real. Something is in the realm of the political when it is politically meaningful and a part of political reality. Political culture, like culture, is a socio-historical process in that the framing and perception of culture usually manifests in linking past to present and future.

While this definition is concerned mainly with how political culture defines meaning and what is perceived to be real in the realm of the political, there are also implications for meaning and reality for people in general. Thus when people encounter situations that may be normal, everyday situations, they can, if the situation is perceived to be political (consciously or unconsciously), access the political culture available to them to understand, interpret and act in the particular situation.

### **The U.S. Welfare State and Political Culture**

The United States is a nation with liberal individualist and Protestant religious roots (Hartz 1955; Shain 1994; Williams 1999). The roots of American liberal individualism are and have been a powerful force in American political culture. Within

the United States, people draw from this liberal framework to form ideas and attitudes about life and take action. In terms of U.S. political culture, people carve out meanings and beliefs within this liberal, religious framework to shape and define the boundaries of that framework.

Ideology, a mechanism of political culture, has a rich history as an analytical concept beginning with Marx: “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (Marx and Engels 1978:64). Channeling this notion, Thompson (1990) viewed ideology as the way in which the ruling class, both in the material and intellectual sense, used meaning and ideas to perpetuate the division of labor and the material production that served their interests. However this is only part of the picture, specifically the dominant part. While Thompson rightly brings in additional notions of domination, i.e. race and gender, this does not encompass the ways in which subordinate groups voice and serve their interests through meaning and ideas.

Building on Gramsci’s (1971) notions of hegemony and counter-hegemony, which include both dominant and subordinate perspectives, Williams and Demerath (1991) strike a different path by incorporating Marx and Engels (1978) and Williams (1977) to form a distinct definition of ideology:

Ideologies are belief systems – articulated sets of ideas that are primarily cognitive...primarily articulated by a specific social class/group, that function primarily in the interests of that class or group, and yet are presented as being in the “common good” or as generally accepted (Williams and Demerath 1991:426-427)

Within this definition, the focus here is on the systems of meaning or belief systems that people use to shape the political culture or political boundaries to serve a particular

group's interests, both powerful and powerless. Williams and Demerath reinvigorate the political aspect of ideology. Groups use ideology to shape and define the boundaries of political meaning and consciousness through claiming that their interests are or will be, if adopted, universally good for people in general.

Therefore, while the market will produce poverty, "...this is not a fault of the system [which is universally good, especially in a system politically touted as having equal opportunities for all of its citizens], but solely a consequence of an individual's lack of foresight and thrift" (Esping-Andersen 1990:42). The individual not the structure of the market is to blame for poverty. This liberal ideological notion of blaming the individual is at the heart of the stigmatization and the relegation to second-class citizens who must rely on means-tested social service provision.

### **Ideological and Racial Classifications of Poverty**

While this liberal ideology accounts for some of the opposition to the development welfare state, "An anti-government ideology has generated most antagonism to the welfare state when it has been associated with racial issues" (Quadagno 1994:196). For this reason, in terms of American state formation, the exclusion of blacks from full citizenship and the distrust of the state have been two of the most important socio-historical factors influencing welfare state development (Quadagno 1994; Quadagno and Street 2005). Because of these factors, the working class encountered much difficulty in attempting to promote and obtain significant social programs. This is especially the case because an oppressed minority of African-Americans won the major victory for citizenship rights in 20th century, not the working class (Quadagno and Street 2005).

Throughout the development of the U.S. welfare state in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, politicians repeatedly used this antagonism between African-Americans and working class whites in stoking the rhetoric of welfare reform, highly popular with the general electorate. The images touted as those experiencing poverty and draining the welfare system became increasingly represented by blacks. Despite the fact that blacks' share of poverty was less than the media portrayal, the public associated them with the need for welfare reform (Wacquant 2009). The resultant reform replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a social program implemented in the Social Security Act of 1935. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) passed in 1996 and created Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). TANF instituted a five-year maximum allotted to recipients for receive welfare services. Negating the social right to assistance for those in need, TANF replaced it with both passive and active forms of encouraging market participation in mostly low-wage labor positions. After posing the rhetorical question of how could the U.S. do this to people, Wacquant states "...the answer to this query is found in the *moral individualism* that undergirds the national ethos and the tenacious ideology of gender and family that makes poor unwed mothers (and fatherless children) into abnormal, truncated, suspect beings who threaten the moral order" (Wacquant 2009:81).

The case of the failure of guaranteed income proposals is another example of the compounding of social policy and political culture affecting the development of significant welfare programs. In attempting to implement guaranteed income policy programs in the late 1960s and early 1970s, policymakers and politicians responded to

and utilized ideological labels of “deserving” (working-class poor or the unemployed poor not able to work) and “undeserving” (welfare recipients) poor in framing the programs. GAI proposals (and Family Assistance Plan (FAP) as the legislation was called in 1969-71) failed in part because of the conflation of these categories (Steensland 2006). Indeed language “...evokes most of the political ‘realities’ people experience” (Edelman 1977). With this failure, it is important to note the power that language and these labels provide and “...shaping their publicly accepted meanings becomes central to the process of shaping public political consciousness: (Green 1987:3).

These publicly accepted meanings then influence and are influenced by the ability of groups to perpetuate or counter the ideas presented about them. Those who access means-tested programs are not in positions, both in terms of resources and political culture, that allow them to advocate for their programs nor have powerful groups advocate for them. These programs, then, are left underfunded, ignored and open to cuts in their already modest budgets. This is especially relevant in light of the recent 50% cuts to the Illinois Social Services budget (Garcia and Pearson 2009).

Thus far, the effects of political culture and social policy have accounted for how means-tested programs are modestly funded means-tested programs. What has been left unaccounted for are the ways in which staff at social service organizations interacting with social service recipients are thusly constrained by social policy and political culture. Given the amount of cultural inertia acting against groups accessing social services, political culture can, in a very real way, affect how clients experience the welfare system. Further, the workers interacting with these clients directly must, in using the discretion of



a street-level bureaucrat, carry out the expression of that welfare system and make their decisions within the context of these reluctant political cultural and policy frameworks.

### **Organizations, Social Policy and Street-level Bureaucracy**

Social service professionals, or street level-bureaucrats are the point at which policy meets people (Lipsky 1980). As a result social workers have some amount of discretion in interpreting policy. They directly experience any inadequacy in resources, time, money or knowledge in enacting policies and procedures. Indeed, many social workers are "...so inundated with paperwork they are never without a backlog" (Lipsky 1980:30). This shortage of resources, argues Lipsky, causes social workers to 'husband', or ration, their resources, both for the client and themselves. Smith and Donovan (2003) concluded that social workers' actual practices often conflict with expected practices. They found that social workers often focused on clients who are easy to help, as a way to deal with scarce resources. This tension between actual practices and expected practices, however, is not inconsequential. Rather it induces a unique stress on these workers. "Street-level bureaucrats often experience their jobs in terms of inadequate personal resources, even when part of that inadequacy is attributable to the nature of the job rather than rooted in some personal failure" (Lipsky 1980:31).

Hochschild (1983) discusses the interpretation of failure at work as a personal failure, especially in jobs where one attempts to separate one's emotional-real self from their emotional-labor self. And when these emotional laborers "...are asked to make personal human contact at an inhuman speed, they cut back on their emotion and grew detached" (Hochschild 1983:126). And for Hochschild "...the essential problem is how

to adjust one's self to the role in a way that allows some flow of self into the role but minimizes the stress the role puts on the self" (Hochschild 1983:188). From the resultant stress and withdrawing from work emotionally or mentally, "...the tension between capabilities and objectives may be resolved by quitting" (Lipsky 1980: 142). And, because of these tensions, these agencies will effectively sort out those who cannot cope and will be "...left with a work force least bothered by the discrepancies between what they are supposed to do and what they actually do" (Lipsky 1980: 143).

When a worker engaging in the emotional labor involved in social services occupations is asked to provide services with inadequate resources, Lipsky argues that they will leave. He argues that the husbanding of resources that fosters contradictory work objectives will result in turnover. Thus social service organizations will be left with a workforce resistant to the tension involved in these jobs. Within Lipsky's arguments, though, there is not much devoted to understanding the nature of the organizational factors affecting both clients and workers.

### **Organizational Studies of Social Service Professionals**

Many studies have been conducted to understand the relationship between individual workers, social work and organizations. Schulz, Greenley and Brown (1995) claimed to be among the first to build a comprehensive quantitative model of organizational and individual staff factors to explain staff burnout as an organizational outcome. Subsequently, several quantitative models were composed with slight adjustments to the indicators of organizational characteristics (none included resource constraints), but all of them concluded burnout as an organizational outcome (Wright and

Bonnet 1997; Martin and Schinke 1998; Stalker et al. 2007). Other similar studies were done with theoretical models of turnover as an organizational outcome (Mor Barak, Nissly and Levin 2001; Mor Barak et al. 2005; Strolin-Grotzman 2008). Glisson and Hemmelgarn (1998) were among the first to suggest that organizational climates are primary predictors of program. Yoo and Brooks (2005), building off of previous work, concluded that workers who perceive better work conditions are more likely to have better outcomes.

However, few studies have examined the interactions of social service professionals and social service recipients qualitatively. And, as Lipsky suggests, “this situation requires an understanding of the working conditions and priorities of those who deliver policy...” (Lipsky 1980: 25). Thus to examine the constraints and political culture surrounding social service work, I study the interactions of social service professionals and clients through both observation and interviews with frontline professionals who deliver policy on a daily basis. This type of study provides us with a better understanding of examining how workers understand, manage and account for some of their contradictory work conditions.

### **Studying Street-Level Bureaucracy**

The purpose of this study is to utilize a street-level bureaucracy framework to understand how frontline staff experience and respond to constraints. Only a few studies have been conducted using such a framework (Smith and Donovan 2003; Ellis, Davis and Rummery 1999). While no “...particular methodology is associated with a street-level bureaucracy framework, recent studies underscore the gains to be made by addressing

everyday frontline work through both interviews with frontline staff and observation” (Smith and Donovan 2003: 544). This study includes observation, as its main focus is how frontline workers socially construct their perceptions of the effects of constraints through interaction. I utilize the method that Smith and Donovan (2003) used by conducting 13 semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to engage frontline workers in conversation about the impact of specific constraints on them in their job (see Appendix A for interview guide).

CHAPTER TWO:  
THE ORGANIZATION

**History and Locations**

The multiple-facility agency where research was conducted is located in a large, Midwestern city. It has three sites across the city and offers clients three main areas of services: employment training, employment services and housing. It mainly serves individuals that are homeless or at-risk of being homeless, as well as individuals with low-income. While the agency has many components and services, which is a result of mergers of several social service organizations over the years, its executives and administrators trace the organizational history back to a police officer. The officer would wheel around food to homeless people throughout the neighborhood where the main office is now located. Over the years, the police officer moved into a kitchen and began food for individuals who were. The kitchen merged with a food service training program and a supportive service agency, and, in 2001, the agency began to offer housing services.

The main site of the agency, which is, like all the sites, situated near public transportation, is located in a particular neighborhood in Chicago that is both home to many social service providers as well as middle class and upper-middle class residents. This has created tension and unrest within the community. Some see the more recent, wealthier residents as a “revitalization” effort bringing in money and development, while

others see this “gentrification” as a force that is pushing out poorer residents and social service agencies through the rise in real estate prices. Like the main site, the other sites are located in poorer neighborhoods in the city. However, there is not the same type of tension at the other two sites.

On the street that the main agency is located, the sign for the door is inconspicuous and only about four feet wide. Within the building, the organization is on the second and third floors of the building. The second floor houses many of the employment services offices, a reception office and a large cafeteria and kitchen area, decorated with murals of produce on the walls. The walls of the main second floor hallway are usually lined with people, clients waiting to see their case managers or waiting to get into the cafeteria area. Before, during and after meal times (breakfast, lunch and dinner), clients and workers are busy with setting up, cooking and cleaning up for lunch service. The third floor contains much of the administration and executives of the organization. It also houses private conference rooms and some of the trainers’ offices and is much quieter than the second floor, as there is less client traffic. These are field notes describing my first visit to the agency:

We then entered a large room with about 10 people in the area with tables... The larger room had murals painted on an otherwise orange wall. The murals were of fruits and vegetables in bright reds, greens and yellows. Music played on an all-black radio to the immediate right of the entrance to this room... After we entered the room, (My contact in the agency) told me I might get to sing happy birthday to someone... Before I noticed who said it, I heard someone say happy birthday loudly to a man with a red shirt, dark-rimmed glasses, blue jeans and graying, dark hair. Everyone clapped. The people around the large table started singing the happy birthday song... After the song was over, the man said thank you. Someone asked him how old he was. He answered 35 with a smile on his face. (My contact in the agency) offered me a piece of cake, to which I said, “It’s hard to say no to cake.” She laughed.

The other two locations are very similar to one other. Both are not as busy, with much less client traffic and fewer workers. Both locations are housed in older buildings without much decoration on the inside. However, the newer location, i.e. the one where the agency just moved into, was built within the last year, the inside of which has been renovated and remodeled. The main entrances to both of these locations open up into a cafeteria area, which is less colorful than the main agency's cafeteria. Off of these main cafeteria areas, both the traditional classroom and the kitchen-classroom are enclosed and hidden from view of the main cafeteria. The organization has designs to open the newer location up as a restaurant for the working poor once they have enough clients to staff the kitchen area. In both locations, there are also smaller offices that house the trainers and the employment services workers.

Overall, the atmosphere of the main agency, particularly on the second floor is a very welcome and bustling place, while the other locations' atmospheres are somewhat somber and quiet. Mostly this is due to the smaller numbers of clients that frequent the other two locations, but this was also due to the décor of the three locations. For the main agency was very colorful and well-lit. When I visited the other two locations, I noted much less lighting and more solid, darker colors used in decoration. Each time I visited the main agency, both clients and workers populated the hallways and the 'larger room,' or cafeteria area, from my field notes. The only difference I noted between clients and workers when I walked through the main agency was an I.D. that some workers carried. Also many clients would line the hallway of the second floor of the main agency, while workers, if in the hallway, would be walking from one point to the next.

### **Entry into and Programs of the Organization**

People seeking services can enter the organization in several ways. They can be directly recruited or sign up directly for a specific program. After an initial intake to assess a client, an employee will make a determination as to what program fits with clients' needs and desires. The organization also provides case management services to people on a walk-in basis.

Among the three main areas of services, the vast majority of clients begin their tenure at the organization in employment training component. This component has two different tracks: a general, employment-related skills training, and a culinary program. Upon completion of either program, clients are enabled to access the other services of the agency, e.g. employment services and housing. Also, these services are provided to clients indefinitely. In other words, a client can obtain employment or lose employment and return to the employment services to access employment services.

Within the general, employment-related skills training component, the main service provided is a daily, three-hour, four-week workshop to prepare students for actively searching for and obtaining a job. Clients are given the choice to engage in the morning or afternoon workshop. The workshops are held at partner organizations, some of which are scattered across the and at inconvenient locations for some clients who make a two- to four-hour total commute each day. The reason for this is that the morning workshop, to meet grant requirements, is in a different location each four-week course, while. The afternoon workshop is located at the same organization near the agency's main facility.



Employees of this program are called “trainers,” and they have a structured curriculum, in which the class has a different, general focus each week. The first week is a general overview of setting goals, learning to use a computer, budgeting skills. Week two is focused on communication, and the third week’s focus is skills related to seeking and obtaining employment. Finally, in the fourth week, clients in the program are prepared to engage in mock interviews.

For the culinary program, students enroll in a 13-week course. The first four weeks of the program involve learning fundamentals of cooking (e.g. preparing and making sauces, soups, meats, pastas, rice) and sanitation in the kitchen. After completing the first four weeks, students begin a nine-week internship, culminating in testing for a city certification in sanitation and a graduation ceremony for those that successfully completed.

Upon completion of either training program, clients are enrolled in the agency’s employment services and are assigned to case managers in their respective programs. At this point, the organization provides them with resources for their job search (e.g. help writing resumes and cover letters, job leads, strategizing about job search, transportation assistance, paying fees for additional training) as well as other resources (e.g. glasses, referrals for outside services, referrals for housing).

While a client is enrolled in these employment services immediately after completing a training program, the housing services can take up to two years. The organization has three grant-funded programs that house clients: a short-term subsidy for two years, a permanent supportive housing program and a rental assistance program. The

permanent and short-term housing programs have wait lists of up to two years, and, in all three programs, a person must be homeless or at-risk of being homeless. Referrals for these programs come from within the organization, from the city and from other non-profit service providers.

Depending on their position in the organization, a worker can have multiple responsibilities. Trainers manage the curriculum of and conduct the training workshops. Employment services workers take two forms. One form is a case-manager role, or one that workers maintain a caseload of clients. These workers are assigned clients who have completed the training workshop. Once assigned, this type of employment services workers attempts to further the clients' skills in obtaining employment. This can involve anything from completing a resume and cover letter with clients or helping them in receiving grant funding to complete an educational program. The other type of employment services worker attempts to form relationships with outside business to foster channels through which they can funnel agency clients for employment. Finally, the housing services workers' main goal is to "keep clients housed". This can take many different forms. For example, housing services workers both seek out housing for particular clients and engage landlords that are potentially interested in housing clients. Also, these workers "meets clients where they're at" in using a harm-reduction model of engaging clients. Thus, while a client may still want to engage in using illegal or addictive substances, a housing services worker will discuss strategies to do so while staying housed with the client.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRATS

Among the many problems and challenges that workers identified as encountering in their work, three areas came to the fore: client-level issues (directly interacting or working with clients), organizational issues (policies or structure of the organization), and policy-level (policy and infrastructure affecting social services in the city or in the U.S. in general). While they discussed having problems or challenges in all three of these areas, by far, they spoke the most about dealing with client-level issues. Specifically, workers discussed difficulties with changing or transforming clients, working with clients that have a criminal history, perceptions of client commitment, and communication with clients. Also, but much less in depth, they identified problems and challenges related to the organization itself. These included physical space available within the organization, high caseloads, lack of mental health services for clients and limited financial resources. Finally only a few workers identified problems and challenges at a policy or societal level.

#### **Client-level Issues**

All workers who were interviewed discussed problems and challenges at the client-level the most. Within these client-level issues, workers mostly discussed problems associated with attempting to change clients, especially those who come from impoverished or violent backgrounds, and working to help a client with a criminal

history or other barriers in finding employment or obtaining housing. Workers also discussed, although less so, problems in communication between staff and clients as well as issues related to workers' perceived commitment of clients to the program or the program's aims of employment and housing.

### Communication Between Staff and Clients

To receive employment services, a client must meet and engage with the organization's workers face-to-face, in both group or class and individual settings. Within these settings, this interaction is the source for another set of challenges for workers: interpersonal communication. Some workers expressed concern in their ability to relate to clients. Others encountered difficulties in engaging angry or disgruntled clients. An employment services worker explained:

Um, the chef is good at cooking food. But it doesn't [mean] they're really good with people. And the, and so I get frustrated, because many times they wanna see things half, or they do things, or they say things that aren't conducive to the population that we work with. So the chefs, they've worked in the industry, they've been out there, they've been in, and that's one population. But then they don't always seem to be able to, to adjust to a different population.

This worker identifies the difficulties that he encounters when other workers, who work with clients in more of a teacher-student role, don't effectively communicate with his clients. But, as several workers from different departments discussed, being unable to "relate to" their clients was a challenge experienced throughout the organization.

Whether because of clients' mental health issues or unrealistic goals or different cultural backgrounds, workers expressed difficulty in finding common ground with their clients. In asking about challenges she faces, an employment services worker said, "I question a lot if my participants, question like, you know, wh-, although we don't know anything

about each other, maybe they question ‘what does this white girl know what I’ve been through?’.” Similarly, another worker discussed having difficulty in relating to a client’s goal:

...with other people, we just really connect very quickly and get right through it. And then I talk to my supervisor a lot about the ways that I should or am relating to people. Cause there are just some people who I don’t know how to work with. They have un-relatable or unrealistic goals that I don’t feel comfortable saying, “that’s unrealistic”...

Another worker expresses her frustration in what she feels is telling people how to live in this excerpt,

I have a hard time with telling older people or another adult how to live. This population gets complacent. That’s very challenging... I love all of my tenants, even the ones I don’t see eye-to-eye... You just want them to see where you’re coming from.

These workers’ discussions highlight the difficulties they experienced in attempting to relate to their clients.

Some workers also expressed challenges in engaging with clients that were angry and expressive of that anger. This employment services worker discusses this issue when she was discussing challenges in her job:

Sometimes they can even be angry, like if we’re taking them off of transportation because they’ve been on transportation for months and months and months, but we have to have that resource available for new people graduating from the workshop. You know, people can get angry and that’s certainly, I mean it’s difficult.

Some workers gave accounts of clients yelling at them in anger when confronted with similar issues.

For workers, the challenge of communication is the first part of the process for clients to learn how to present themselves, both to workers of the organization and

potential employers and landlords. In fact, both of the training programs include classes on communication meant to focus on both understanding oneself and communicating with others. However, workers found it difficult when clients had different emotional frameworks, values and priorities. In viewing these different worlds of the client, workers focused on the client as the source of the issue, because of their environmental issues/background or their inability to express themselves appropriately. These experiences are used by workers to teach clients, and sometimes staff, about the way to be agreeable and to resolve issues calmly and coolly. One of the trainers, characterized this as, “keeping them on their square”, in which anybody can say anything to them without reacting emotionally or rashly.

The main goal of the organization is to funnel these individuals into the housing and labor markets. In this way, the organization fits in well into the broader, neoliberal welfare structure, a structure that draws from the liberal, individualist ideology and applying it to all aspects of an individual’s life in a constant, ever-changing, ever-progressing ideal. Thus, clients learn how to present themselves in these communication classes and teaching moments by workers. Through this process, clients attempt to disassociate with what they know and learn new lessons in how to be docile, agreeable workers or tenants, effectively attempting to better themselves into neo-liberal citizens that change many parts of their lives in order to participate in markets successfully.

#### Clients with Criminal Histories

For those that work closely with clients on more of an individual basis and less in training groups of people, the main challenge is helping someone find employment

because of their criminal history. Workers never specified what type of criminal activity, e.g. robbery, murder, drug offenses, etc., but used the term ‘criminal background’ to denote a client with some type of official record of criminal activity. Mainly, working with a client with a criminal history was difficult because of its pervasiveness. From being automatically screened out of a candidate pool to the application process to face-to-face interviewing, a client with a criminal background has additional hurdles to finding employment or housing over clients without. Additionally, as an employment services worker notes, “Very often, that’s not a label people can remove very easily.” Indeed, according to some workers, some employers have a seven-year policy for those with criminal histories, meaning at least seven years must have passed since the criminal conviction before even considering them for employment.

In terms of selection for job opportunities, one of the employment services workers that connects clients to outside employers talked about the screening process. This happens both with the clients and with the potential employer, and automatically eliminates some clients from potential job opportunities. When asked about the disadvantage a person with a criminal background has in finding employment, this worker said:

So where my candidate might have the skills, if they have that [criminal] background, the employer might go, ‘Well, you know, I don’t have to worry about that potential liability, because here’s someone who has those same skills and doesn’t have any issues.’ So, that’s been a...challenge more recently in moving people through the process to employment.

Also, a worker of the permanent supportive housing program, which works with landlords to place clients in subsidized apartment units, indicated that they must be very

thorough with landlords in saying "...we get a good idea about what the landlord will and will not accept, and most of that has to do with criminal backgrounds." After this screening process and during the application process, a client's criminal history continues to serve as a barrier into employment, as this employment services worker notes:

They get a voucher where they're able to go to these truck driving schools and programs and get that certification for a CDL. But realistically, if you're recently released or you're not able to get certain endorsements, like a HAZMAT or a Tanker endorsement, um, or if you have certain restrictions where you're recently released where you can't go out of state, you're not gonna get employment. So although the program will pay for this particular person to go to school, you know, what is the school gonna do, deny the person, you know, they-, they're getting paid. Um, he just could not get employment. So th-, talking with him about, "You know, I know that you have this credential, but right now, it's gonna be really hard for you, practically, probably impossible for you to get a position driving, um, a trailer. It's, you know, because that's the industry standard."

And, as several workers suggested, background checks are ubiquitous now. The ease with which they are now accessed in using the Internet creates a very real barrier for their clients. Finally, clients with criminal histories are prepared for the interviewing process by the trainers, as this trainer discusses a classroom encounter:

Um, we asked this one gentleman, "Have you ever been convicted of a crime?" And while they need to say 'yes' they have, he said, (in a slow, formal-sounding tone) "But I slowly detoured away from that position." (I laugh) Everybody's goin', "What!?" (laughs). See by this time, I can say, "Now what did you just say?" ok. But that was the way he talked.

The employment services workers who work with clients individually. Because this is such a difficulty and clients can answer in a way that will eliminate them from potentially being hired, workers prepare clients in what to say in those instances. The extent to which they prepare clients who have criminal histories for the labor and housing markets highlights the overall difficulties in funneling people into those markets.



Clients who have criminal histories were one of the most common challenges experienced throughout all departments. Working with clients who have criminal histories was a problem for workers because of its permanent and immutable nature within modern U.S. society. This history cannot be changed like other parts of a client's history can. However, even with this disconnect between the neoliberal model of progression and change and strict policies and laws surrounding market participation for people with criminal histories, clients with criminal backgrounds are instructed by workers to change what they can and accept what they must in order to be successful.

#### Changing or Transforming Clients

One of the challenges that agency direct service workers identified was attempting to change clients' behaviors and ways of thinking. This was specifically discussed in orienting and connecting clients to the job market, which is the main goal of the program. As some workers discussed, many clients come into the program without ever having worked or applied for a job. Thus, many clients come in without being socialized into the behaviors and ways of acting within and moving through the job market. And under modern, neo-liberal forms of welfare the task of socializing them and changing the client falls to the worker. In fact, such activities are the sine qua non of the welfare state success under neoliberalism. Thus, clients enter the organization with their own life experiences, which are accompanied by their own learned set of behaviors and ways of acting. Of course these behaviors manifest differently for each client, but, in general, they are often called barriers by social service agencies, i.e. something that is obstructing someone from obtaining or achieving something. Barriers in this instance are

mainly focused individually on the client, as opposed to extrapolating these problems from larger, structural problems facing these clients. Also within this definition is included both an internal and external meaning of barriers. In other words, a client's barriers can be what workers called an "external" factor, like not having a place to sleep at night, or an "internal" factor, such as an aggressive demeanor that makes it hard to work with them. The workers sometimes thought of the "internal" factors as structural in origin; at other times they saw them as individual qualities. Barriers were understood in this organization as those things that obstruct a participants' process to searching for and obtaining employment and/or housing. Workers in the program generally focus on the individual to address both external and internal barriers.

As in any training course, there is an expected amount of change that a student will undergo related to the course material. In this agency, though, there is an additional change that trainers expect. Of the three workers of the training program (two from the general course, the other from the culinary program), all of them indicated that they wanted to change their clients in some way. They discuss these barriers as areas of change and transformation for clients in obtaining employment. In and of themselves, both training courses are geared to teach clients how to find and obtain employment. However, in the general employment-related skills training course, employment skills are only a portion of the course, while much is related to personal characteristics and behavior. For example, one of the general employment skills trainers discusses the nature of the course in this excerpt:

...There's a whole lot of material, and there's not an opportunity to go in depth to any one topic. But while we're doing that, it's four full weeks. And through that

they have an opportunity to get depth of how to look at things different, how to be different, how to see themselves differently. That's, to me, where the difference is.

Within this curriculum, then, is an individual-level focus on understanding or becoming aware of personal characteristics and behaviors and, eventually, if they are to be “successful,” changing them.

In talking about the first two weeks of the course, this trainer highlights the type of change that is expected:

So now I'm telling them that they're going to be challenged, because they have to learn how to use a computer. Fear... I'm telling them that they've gotta look at their money differently. That wasn't what they had planned, especially now that they don't have any. That they've gotta set goals differently, they've gotta manage their time differently. And that week works. But when we get into communications (week 2), now it's how do you communicate with yourself, how do you communicate with others, how do you handle conflict inf-, communication et cetera, et cetera. That's the when the pain comes. Ok. Again, I think all of the trainers have to be very mindful of that week, cause we're asking people to change who they are.

In trainers' discussions about clients, this type of change, a personal change or a change in identity, is centered on a notion that clients have personal characteristics and behaviors that are obstructing them from finding and obtaining employment. When clients, either in the classroom or on an individual basis, would continue to act in ways that the trainers saw as “normal,” workers said they became difficult. This culinary trainer explained this as she was discussing challenges in her job:

I hope they would be able to learn professionalism and what kinda attitudes and behaviors are conducive to this industry. You have to be able to bend and be flexible in your personality. Some students have a hard time adapting to certain people. Or you have some people who are in denial, who don't realize that they have a problem. That's the hardest when they don't realize they have a problem. It's obvious to everybody around them and everybody's telling them that they're wrong, but they don't see anything wrong. So that's hard for students to

understand, that your behavior is not acceptable, not normal, or what people expect from you... We don't have it all the time, but every now and then we'll have a student like that... The main problem is not getting people to do the work. It's simple, it's kinda black and white. It's like when you get in the kitchen, you cook or you don't... When your attitude, your personality, all that stuff gets in the way of you doing a good job, then there's a, that's where it's kinda difficult.

This and the other trainers' discussions point to a transformative process that clients are supposed to undergo. While clients go through this process, though, workers experience difficulty in working with and managing clients who retain behaviors that are meant to be transformed.

At the heart of the organization mission is individual level change. Workers are tasked with transforming clients into suitable workers and tenants for the labor and housing markets. This is done explicitly by changing the client, changing "who they are", as the trainer discussed above. As with the other challenges, changing or transforming the client is difficult when someone has trouble adapting or changing to become "normal" or acceptable within the markets towards which they are directed. In fitting with the neoliberal model of constant change, clients are not only expected to change their communication and make themselves more agreeable, even with a criminal background, they are also being asked to reshape their identity to become better workers and tenants. Modern, neoliberal welfare aims to funnel people as much possible into the ever-shifting labor and housing markets. Thus the neoliberal model that the organization engages in by changing and directing clients towards particular markets aligns with these neoliberal welfare goals.

#### Perceived Commitment as a Street-Level Problem

Workers spoke of another set of difficulties in their perceptions of client

commitment, both in engaging with the organization and in seeking employment. Most of the workers that deal with clients on individual, appointment basis, tended to discuss this more than others. The subject of commitment was not just mentioned as a lack of commitment. Some workers also discussed the challenge that came with engaging with clients whom they believe are fully committed but who are unsuccessful in obtaining employment or housing.

Workers draw a distinction between those that are ready or trying to engage with them and obtain employment and those who are not. For most workers, the clients who are not are the ones that don't show up to scheduled appointments, don't adequately emotionally engage workers at appointments or don't appear to be actively job-searching. These clients present a challenge to workers, as an employment services case worker states: "People are coming in for appointments, and they're not ready. And I sometimes don't know how to work with that." Also, during questions about their workdays, many of the employment services indicated that many times they can have several scheduled appointments with clients and all or most of them may not show up.

A housing worker explains her difficulty in trying to work with clients who lack commitment, which means emotion and being on time and prepared for meetings:

My supervisor tells me, you've done what you could have done. But sometimes I feel that that's just not good enough because for two years and their favorite response is "Yeah ok, I know. I know", but what are you doing?

This worker expresses her frustration by rhetorically asking the client "but what are you doing?" As she talked about having to remove the client from the program, she went on to say that

I would be less than human if it didn't bother me that this person has to go back to homelessness... I feel bad either way, if they try or not. I feel more partial to someone whom I know is trying.

In a similar vein, another worker expresses his concern. In commenting on the short amount of time a client has to find employment, he says:

So there are a lot of people who have been working hard for a long time but not getting the outcome that they want. And that's just hard to see. Cause then you wonder, what else could I be doing to get this person employed.

Both of these workers' comments express how this is difficult for them in their work. They are concerned with their ability as workers, and question what more they could have or should have done in supporting the client. Finally, both of these workers spoke to the broader sentiment among workers of seeing a fully committed client be unsuccessful in achieving their goals.

Within all of these client-level challenges identified, the underlying themes were change and self-presentation. The challenge of perceived commitment is one of self-presentation. Like communication, this is especially important within the modern, neoliberal welfare state. Neo-liberal workers must adapt and present themselves differently in different work environments, through the vetting processes of application and interviewing that most, if not all, employers and, now, some tenants engage in to screen out candidates that don't fit their ideal.

### **Organizational Issues**

While the majority of workers mainly discussed client-level problems and challenges, several workers discussed issues at the organizational level that caused them difficulty within their jobs. Among these difficulties, the primary concern was material

resources: physical space in which they could meet and or conduct their work; high caseloads for employment services workers; limited financial resources; and lack of any mental health services or training were also mentioned as impediments to their work by a few workers.

### Material Resources

Several workers discussed the amount of available physical space within the organization. While some expressed concerns over the organization's ability to house their workers and provide them with private and/or adequate offices; others spoke of inadequate facilities to carry out their duties. Indeed, over half of the interviews were interrupted by workers or clients passing through or mistaking the private space as available.

During a few interviews, workers stated that they didn't have enough space to meet privately with clients. Several workers share a big office with only six-foot high partitions separating them. Some workers expressed concern that this makes it difficult to conduct confidential and private individual sessions with clients.

Workers also discussed not having adequate facilities to conduct large-scale meetings, e.g. orientations or the training workshop. For some of these meetings, the organization has started to contract or work with outside agencies to increase their space. While some of these spaces are adequate and well-kept, some of them are not, as the morning workshop trainer notes when talking about the inconsistency of some of the outside agencies:

But I would say, you know, like things like I was teaching, you know, I teach at these random places like social service agencies, just whatever. I was teaching one time and the fire alarm goes off, and I go out to see ‘Ok, did somebody pull it or whatever?’ ‘No, no, no you have to get out there’s gas leak’ you know (laughs). On the sidewalk ‘what do we do?’ you know. I had a roo...uh ceiling fall in from water damage, (laughs).

She went on to say that most of the outside agencies the training workshop contracts with are spread out all over the city, leaving some clients having to decide whether or not they can consistently make the workshop meeting times.

Another worker discussed a specific problem with the agency’s most recent orientation meeting, where clients are introduced to services the agency provides and, if time and staff availability permit, complete intake assessments with staff. The worker states:

So we had it over at the Engagement Center, which is our space on [street name]. And it’s way too small. And it really was not ideal. And I felt really bad for a lot of the people who came out, because normally there’s coffee, water, tea, um, people bring their kids to that, because they don’t always have child care, so we have crayons and stuff. And, at that site, there was just none of that. It was just a lot of people crushed together.

During this interview, the meeting room where they normally have orientations was being remodeled or reconstructed. Thus this specifically is not a normal occurrence. However, once their usual meeting place was out of commission, they did not have access to adequate space at the organization.

The caseloads of those who deal with clients on an individual basis after the training workshop were repeatedly mentioned as being too large to manage effectively. This was discussed as an issue both by the employment services workers themselves as well as by other workers in other departments. Workers explained that part of the reason



for this is that with every new cycle of training workshop graduates, the employment services workers are given seven to eight new clients. These clients can then access services indefinitely. Therefore a person can complete the training workshop, come back two years later after not having accessed the services whatsoever and still receive services.

Several workers mentioned doing counseling-like work without the proper certification. There was also discussion about how the agency at one time housed social workers, but, because of budget cuts, no longer offers clinical services. Thus clients still express need for counseling-like services, which are met by workers who attempt to provide emotional support for the client in difficult situations.

Finally, lack of financial resources was mentioned as an organizational challenge by a few workers. Workers discussed this problem in two ways. Firstly they discussed inadequate pay for workers, which can mean fewer quality workers and not being able to adequately compensate workers for good work. Secondly, some workers discussed having to carefully review their grants and funding as a key concern.

### **Policy/Societal-level issues**

Not many workers identified issues outside of the control of the organization. If workers did discuss an issue at this level, it was rarely explicit. More usually it was the case that they were discussing an organizational or client-level issue that related closely to policy or societal issues. The two issues that workers did identify were the sources of and hurdles of funding (i.e. having to make sure a client can be successful in a program before utilizing the grant and funding dictating where training workshops are held) and

lack of affordable housing for their clients. This is important to note, for it provides further evidence that the focus of social welfare workers under neoliberalism tends to be on the clients, not the broader policy field.

CHAPTER FOUR:  
MANAGING PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

In fashion similar to identifying problems and challenges, workers discussed managing the problems and challenges of client-level issues at length over any other level. Even in some of the discussion about managing organizational or policy-level issues, workers discussed solutions directed towards clients. In contrast to what Lipsky and other organizational studies posited, workers did not withdraw from the emotional labor in their work, and, instead, solved many of their issues by providing emotional support to clients going through the program. This personal engagement, then, suggests a certain form of deportment and orientation toward the client that was not what Lipsky emphasized in his analysis of the concerns over the material resources that workers faced in delivering services.

**Client-level issues**

In discussing how they manage client-level problems and challenges, workers mainly found solutions in focusing on how a client can change and adapt to the labor and housing markets to be successful both in the program and in finding employment and housing. Closely tied to this focus, workers managed to deal with many client-level issues and problems through attempting to understand each individual client. Finally while dealing with these client-level issues, in addition to focusing on a client's changing and understanding a client on an individual basis, workers provided emotional support

and encouragement to workers informally through, what many of them called “counseling” or “listening” to clients’ problems in what clients and workers saw as mostly personal difficulties.

#### Focus on Adapting to Markets

Since many workers identified the criminal background of clients as a major challenge as well as other barriers in doing their work, workers discussed using strategies that focused on clients’ characteristics that would make them more likely to find employment or housing. There were three different but interconnected ways in which workers would accomplish this: thoroughly screening hiring and housing policies of employers and landlords, educating clients on how to approach outside employers and landlords, and reviewing client goals and needs with clients.

In the first case, workers managed by focusing on clients’ adaptation to the labor market. Workers indicated they thoroughly screened policies of employers or landlords with whom they work looking at scale of pay, work environment and necessary skills. One employment services worker also discussed having to ask specifically about what an employer will accept in terms of a client’s criminal history. When asked how she manages working with an employer, in relation to a client’s criminal history, she said:

Making sure you ask a question about what’s their policy. What’s their corporate philosophy about hiring people with a [criminal] background or for that particular position, um, is it something that is considered or what is a disqualifier for someone that has a criminal background. What type of offenses are not accepted? ... It’s screening according, you have to follow that criteria and ask those questions of those employers before you even start, before you even get back in the office and start looking for candidates, you know. And it might not be the first, it’s not the first question, not only with, when I, um, doing an assessment with an employer or getting a job order from an employer, you know that’s way at

the tail end I bring up the background question or what their philosophy or their needs are in that area. Um, but you really need that information.

A housing services worker discussed this same screening process that they go through with a landlord before referring clients to them. This screening is then turned into a checklist that is used to sort through clients for these potential job and housing opportunities.

As an overall goal, beginning with the training workshop, the agency is trying to orient its client to the labor and housing markets, which, currently, involves considerable work on self-presentation to gain employment. Thus, the organization attempts to educate clients on how best to present themselves to an employer or landlord. One of the trainers of the training workshop, in discussing what the training workshop teaches, said this:

...what we promote is the selling of skills, not so much experience on the job. You can be on the job for 20 years and not know much or not being able to sell what you know.

Those who worked with clients on an individual basis discussed this self-promotion in the context of having a criminal offense on their record or other issues (e.g. mental illness, substance abuse) that could potentially bar them from employment or housing. A housing services worker, after discussing a client who explicitly and openly discussed his substance use with a landlord and was denied housing unless he entered into a drug rehabilitation center, had this to say about self-promotion:

I talked to him, and unfortunately I wasn't able to talk with him before he met with the landlords to make sure he said the right things, not necessarily lying but put himself in the best light. I had to move on with him to the next landlord. I explained to him that landlords don't always agree with what we're trying to do. If he wasn't ready to enter into treatment, then we shouldn't push him into it.

While this client was allowed to use substances and receive services in the agency because of its harm reduction policy, the client miscalculated that this potential landlord would be similarly minded. The worker didn't have a chance to inform the client of how best to promote himself without disclosing information that could potentially damage his chances to be accepted into housing.

Finally, clients are told to "be open to change" in terms of their goals/needs for housing. Workers take inventory of the clients' issues and needs. This is especially the case when people are unsuccessful and/or have issues like a criminal history, substance abuse, or mental health issues. This sensibility is organized around the neoliberal goal of participating in risky economic environments, and accepting the emotional and material uncertainties without fighting back against them at a collective level, and accepting the ideology of personal responsibility for failures to succeed.

Thus, while workers take inventory of employer and landlord policy, they do the same with clients, as this employment services worker discusses:

And making sure that if we're going through a checklist in screening that that's one of the main things you screen for, because that's the last thing you want. Not saying that it hasn't happened, I've had people sit right in my chair and tell me, "I can pass a drug test, and I can pass a background check." And sure enough they get to the employer or they may fail, they fail the drug test or they've, something's come up in the background that they weren't aware of.

Other issues outside of these, like environmental factors for the client, are also taken into account. When asked how she manages the challenge of clients' being unsuccessful in the program and finding outside employment, this career services worker said:

So I think like maybe reviewing their goals, and asking them to prioritize a little bit. We have a client whose family just pulls on her so much, and it causes her to lose jobs. And not to say she's making the best decisions, because she's choosing

to get pulled into the family stuff. Asking them to realize or to look at ‘what is that pattern?’ You know, you get a job, family calls on you, you go, you miss work, you lose the job. ‘How many times does that happen?’ So maybe asking them to see if they recognize any patterns.

In all three versions of this solution, the main focus is adapting the client to the labor or housing market. That focus is attempting to align the clients’ goals or characteristics as closely as possible to the landlords’ or employers’ policy of entry.

However, while much of workers’ focus on change was directed towards clients, there was also discussion of how the workers themselves needed to be open to change or to be “flexible.” Both trainers and employment services workers fleshed out the need to be flexible. Among the trainers, being flexible was how they managed dealing with a classroom of clients from diverse and “chaotic” backgrounds. When asked about how she manages working with clients who have, what she called, “chaotic lives”, she said this:

(laughs) You just roll with it. So, you know, it really kinda depends on what’s goin on... We do have attendance requirements. We, as trainers, we don’t advertise this, we have a little bit of leeway. So like if a person is close, like have missed more than they’ve officially been able to, but they’re close, and we really feel good about them, we can like make exceptions. That’s not advertised at all, of course. But then there’s some people where I’m like ‘You really need to, you shouldn’t graduate’ you know (laughs). Not only did you miss all these days, you were a pain in the butt, you know (laughs). Like you didn’t participate and all this stuff, right. So it kinda depends on how they are, you know.

An employment services worker discuss this notion of having to be open to change not only in his work with the client, but as an example to his clients:

I think you have to be open to changing. I have to be open to that If something’s not working, try to find out why it’s not working. And switching it up a little bit ... So being always adaptable, switching up techniques, changing resumes doing more and more mock interviewing, more and more information interviewing, thinking about other training. All that stuff takes a process. My exhibiting openness or flexibility will hopefully influence the individual to see that things are changeable as long as they remain engaged.

For this worker, in helping or directing the client to “switch up techniques” and being open to change himself, he stresses the importance of flexibility, both for the client’s success and his work with the client.

#### Understanding Clients on an Individual Level

While focusing on how a client can change was many workers’ main solution for client-level problems and challenges, workers did not go about changing clients by brute force. Workers employed an empathetic strategy in managing these changes. Clients were discussed as people to be understood and treated differently according to their individual characteristics.

An employment services worker discusses the contrast of one of his co-workers’ approach to interacting with clients:

He is very much sort of up, like, in your face, tell you like it is, but throw in a joke or two, ok. And some people thrive on that, and they think chef [name] is the greatest man in the world, and others think he’s the blue-eyed devil. I mean, because, for some people it works, other people it doesn’t. And that’s his approach, but he doesn’t modify his approach, ok. And so, he just sort of says, ‘Ok, this is how I am.’ And that’s not the approach. The approach is ‘How are you?’ You know, and the meanti-, he can convey the same information, you know, but I can’t do it the same way. Some people I do, I have to sit down, I have to kinda sit them down, I have to have their hand in mine, “Ok, let me talk to you about this.” Other people I can say, “Listen, dude, what is your problem?, you know, are you kidding me?”

This worker discusses his need to “modify” his approach to be able to effectively communicate to his clients, rather than a taking “blanket approach” to all clients. Another worker, in the training department, discusses a similar approach in their work when asked about how she manages dealing with clients who have trouble in the program:



You have to get to know somebody first. You can't help a person change their patterns and their ideas about life, views and cognitive processes unless you understand the person. You have to know the person... You gotta know their story, what's going on with you today. Find out who they are as a person. At least understanding why they do what they do, helps you to work with them. Like, if I have a student who has poor attendance, and they're constantly out. If you don't know if they're living in a shelter, and their kids are underage and they're worried about the safety of their children, then you'd think that this person has poor attendance. That they're just a bad person. They're not really dedicated to this program. But you really have to ask questions. Often when students are absent or late, I sit down with them and find out what happened... And I also try to put myself in their shoes. If my father died, would I be able to come to class? Probably not.

She echoes the sentiment of the employment services worker in that she has to “get to know somebody first” before making decisions or working with them. Another employment services workers stated something similar but with the caveat of “not assuming” what someone has been through, allowing them to be an individual with their own personal characteristics and barriers.

While clients are expected to change, workers use emotional labor to connect with and understand their clients. In keeping with their neo-liberal tendencies, workers still focus on their clients at an individual level. In other words, these are problems and issues related to this particular individual, not a systemic or structural issue. This does not mean that they do not understand these larger, structural issues, but they do not factor in to workers' conversations about empathizing with clients.

#### Providing Emotional Support and Encouragement

Another way that workers managed interacting with client-level issues is by providing emotional support and encouragement to individuals experiencing difficulties, either within the program or in their lives. They mainly provide emotional support by

“counseling” with clients who are experiencing difficulties in life even though many workers feel uncomfortable or helpless, as they are not certified counselors. Additionally, workers encourage clients in face-to-face or group settings when they are adjusting to the program or in having difficulty finding a job.

Both of the trainers talked about setting a supportive environment or atmosphere in the classroom and throughout the course. One trainer indicated that she tries “...to convince the group that we’re gonna become a family, um, by the time the four weeks are over.” The other trainer discussed a similar notion in talking about how she manages dealing with clients who have, what she calls, “chaotic lives”:

...I think the opportunity for them, again, to be in a communal environment so that they feel supported is often times really good. That you know, cause they’ll talk about “Yeah, my daughter’s in the hospital” whatever. And knowing that there are people who are expressing support, that that feels like a safe place to be. And, you know, I mean like there’s nothing I can do if somebody, building falls on em, you know (laughs).

She also called this atmosphere “family-ish” but stated it was “different from” a family. However, the main idea behind her statement is that it’s a supportive environment in which people can bond or connect with each other during difficult times.

In addition to creating this supportive environment, many workers provided what they consider to be counseling-like activities with clients, in that they listened to clients who were going through difficult experiences within their lives. One career services worker discussed this issue when asked about the difficulties in serving clients directly:

...sometimes it’s really painful to hear what people are going through and to not be able to help, um, to really just be like someone who’s there to listen but beyond that, there’s really little that I can do, you know, um, except encourage...

Another career services worker talked about the difficulties he experienced in trying to manage dealing with the emotional toll from his work:

I mean the, the, the, the, what's difficult about the job is really, is really the emotional toll that it takes on you. That's the hard part, because we have like this, we had people like, we had the one, the lady, the last lady who came through, and she ran through there. I mean her favorite grandmother died this week, you know. And I mean, so she's dealing with that. So she's coming and we're talking to her. But then we had another gentleman whose father is about to die. And I mean these guys are in the class, and they're coming to you and they're talking to you, because their families are nuts, you know. And they're looking for someone who they, can sit down and have a, have a, have a human conversation with without feeling like someone's blaming them for something, you know. And that is what takes, that's what takes energy, that's what just drains your battery. That's why you have to have something that recharges your batteries regularly. And that's what I didn't have, um, years ago, was, you know, this recharge, you know, and it just drained me completely

While both of these workers were discussing the challenging aspects explicitly, they were implicitly talking about their solutions to those problems, i.e. listening to their clients.

Other workers had similar things to say in that their clients, who live in these environments and with barriers that they are attempting to overcome in order to complete the program and find gainful employment or stable housing, are coming to them with a need for emotional support that has no formal mechanism within the program to meet their needs. Thus the solution is to do counseling-like activities with them, without a certification or formal training.

Workers sought to find solutions to the client-worker reality that they experienced; their reality: clients expressing difficulties, both personal and 'professional' within the organizational objectives of transformation. Instead of withdrawing from this aspect of their work, as Lipsky and many organizational studies have found, workers solved their challenges by utilizing emotional labor; that was their solution, not quitting

or further husbanding resources. Their solutions, as they spoke of them, were directed toward transforming the client and providing emotional support and understanding to that client within that transformative process.

### **Organizational issues**

Since workers did not discuss issues at the organizational level at any great length, there was not much discussion about managing these issues. However, among the organizational issues workers identified, there were two salient wants in which workers managed these situations. Workers discussed utilizing both external and internal resources and being flexible within their jobs.

#### **Pooling Resources**

By utilizing resources, both within and outside of the organization, workers discussed being able to relieve some of the workload and help clients access services that the worker may not be qualified to provide. For example, a couple of the employment services workers identified a new organizational resource, i.e. a staff member, that would be available to them that previously wasn't. One worker explains how he manages his large caseload by "doing some restructuring."

New staff member, resource specialist within the [his] department. Before, [we] were responsible for providing employment services, helping people with further training and housing assistance and referrals for supp. services. Now [new staff member] is going to be responsible for providing housing resources for grads of [training workshop]. Help with the stress that I'm having. It's not so much like the types that I'm responsible, it's like the types of work that I'm qualified to do. As a [job title], I'm able to help people with employment, but I can't help people with housing. Even though [my] caseload hasn't decreased in number of people, I can focus on employment instead of housing issues.

Another worker, when asked about managing having to provide services he's not qualified for, said something similar when he seeks advice from his supervisor:

And then I talk to my supervisor a lot about the ways that I should or am relating to people. Cause there are just some people who I don't know how to work with. ... But I also can't. Like one person wanted me to go to HR and invest in a foreign exchange market. That was gonna make [the organization] a lot of money. I gently said I don't think that's gonna happen... I draw a lot of support from my boss on how to deal with these situations, where there are these disconnects. My worry is that I'm framing as having MH issues. There are people that I struggle with that are completely sound obviously. But it is a struggle when you know that someone would benefit by a MH screening or even counseling. I can't make that person do that. Even to suggest that, with some people would be dangerous. But I really want them to...

His supervisor, who also has a caseload of clients, stated that they access outside resources as well in trying to move people along in the program and encourages resourcefulness in their clients, meaning that she encourages clients themselves to seek out other resources that the client may need.

### Being Flexible

When confronted with organizational policies or structures that made their jobs difficult, several workers discussed having to or resigning to being flexible and going "along with it," as one worker discussed a particular policy. Another employment services worker discussed that he is "like water" and can and will adjust to organizational policy changes or restructuring, even though it can adversely affect his clients. Lastly, when asked about how she manages having inadequate, unsanitary and possibly dangerous conditions to conduct her training workshop, one worker said "Just do."

### Policy/Societal issues

Of the few workers that mentioned policy/societal problems and challenges,

they all expressed an inability to effectively find solutions to these problems. One worker stated that he “can’t create programs that don’t exist” when discussing the lack of affordable housing. In terms of the issues with funding, a trainer does attempt to encourage clients individually because of the space availability issues, which are dictated by funding. The same trainer explained that she “doesn’t do much about it” but she does complain to her supervisor. Also, another worker, who mainly works in an administrative or supervisory role but also has a caseload of clients, stated she tries to fit clients into grants as best she can.

CHAPTER FIVE:  
ACCOUNTING FOR PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

Again, for the vast majority of the interviews, workers discussed, at length, problems and challenges they encountered at the client-level. Similarly, accounting for the problems and challenges in their work consistently centered on client-level explanations. Mainly the majority of workers spoke of the environmental factors affecting their clients' individual life trajectories. Workers also acknowledged systemic and structural factors as explanations for the reasons clients ended up in these situations. This is interesting considering all of their challenges and solutions were client-focused. Since few workers discussed organizational or policy-level issues, there was also little discussion about the origins of said problems.

**Client-level issues**

When workers were asked about how these client-level problems and challenges have come to be, they mainly pointed to the environment of the clients with whom they worked. Poverty, substance abuse, mental illness, poor family structure and violence were mentioned as the source of many of the problems and challenges at the client-level. Even though this was the main explanation behind the origins of the client-level issues they identified, workers also used structural arguments in accounting for these problems and challenges, pointing to inadequate or ill-conceived policy and cultural frameworks

## Environmental Factors Affecting Clients' Trajectories

Within the discussion of environmental factors, many workers framed clients' environmental and situational choices as a matter of clients' priorities. The reasoning, as they put it, was a matter of coming to the organization for services or finding employment over having a place to sleep on a cold night, as one employment services worker stated, "Job leads aren't as important as the address of a place to eat and take shelter. Another concern for clients that workers mentioned was having to avoid or deal with violence in their neighborhood or at home. An employment services worker, when asked about the environments for some clients, said this:

School isn't important when you're duckin' bullets on the way home, or someone's trying to recruit you or you're having to worry about wearing the wrong colors or because you're not wearing any colors. Those things aren't important.

Another employment services worker commented about clients' priorities after being asked about how, as he said, some people aren't ready:

I think another thing is that sometimes participants aren't ready because of their circumstances and the situations that they're in. A lot of the issue sometimes is a priority for a participant to come up here and meet when there's a lot of challenges in other areas of their lives. I don't think it's only housing, family issues, or domestic violence issues, it's such a wide range of things.

In addition to the limited and severe nature of choices available to clients, workers also indicated that their clients lack adequate support systems, e.g. family and friends, that gives them a disadvantage in the job market. An employment services worker said this when asked about clients ending up in these situations:

A lot of them are born into families where, single parent families...prominently poor families. Areas where education was not important, and they didn't necessarily have parents who said, kinda like the analogy, some suburban white kid who's out there, who never questions going to college... It's because it's expected



and you get raised knowing that. College, what's college? Their expectations are completely different. Their thing is, 'When I was a kid, I wanted to be a pimp; I wanted to have two *ho's*; I was a street pharmacist.' That's what their focus is.

In his experience with clients, the worker links the family as a means of support for a formal education that would have possibly changed their trajectory. Another worker, in a similar vein, stated, "I think a lot of it is how you grew up, what types of support systems you had in your life, your access to education, to healthy family life." Some workers discussed what they saw as links between the issue of inadequate support systems and substance abuse and violence, another set of issues workers discussed frequently. When asked about how people have arrived at these difficult points in their lives, which make it harder for them to find employment, an employment services worker said this:

What I've seen, especially with clients who have substance abuse issues have burnt a lot of bridges. Family and friends won't let them stay with them. 'I have tons of family in Chicago, but I'm in a shelter.' So I think some of those barriers come from just burning up trust.

In her view, this worker sees that many clients' support structures have been dismantled because of their issues with substance abuse. In addition, this worker also discussed how clients have "gangs that become family" which supplant their possibly broken family systems. Another worker, in the housing department, discusses how clients have ended up in these situations with barriers making it difficult for them to find employment or housing:

Mostly I think loss of jobs, not having family support. Then just I think just lack of family support leading into relying on other methods or going to schools and having influences such as drugs or just ending up in these situations where they're easily influenced and not having anything else to fall back on.

Like the worker who mentioned burning bridges with family, this housing services points

to a similar link between the lack of family support and substance abuse, which can also include violent but family-like gangs as a factor.

#### Inadequate Economic and Cultural Frameworks

Outside of these individual environmental explanations, workers also ventured into discussions about larger, more structural explanations for the origins of client-level issues. This took the form of mentioning the ‘system’ as a problem as well as pointing to specific cultural or economic frameworks that have impacted these clients directly. Specifically workers, speaking generally about the United States, discussed misconceptions or overgeneralizations of their clients, shifts in the labor market and cultural perceptions of the working poor.

Workers found that their clients were being stereotyped by outside agencies, both employers and landlords. One employment services worker discussed how having a criminal background or living with homelessness has become a disadvantage for a client:

Stereotypes not there about people with criminal backgrounds or even about people that are homeless. Not really knowing that the person I’m sitting next to on the train who’s dressed up in a suit could actually be homeless or could have a criminal background and go to work everyday. Just associating a certain stereotype with that and never giving that person a chance...not really looking at them the same way.

A housing services worker has a similar comment about misconceptions of people receiving social services in general:

I’m sure a lot of them have this misconception, since people are coming from these programs, there’s something very wrong with them. I think it’s more than just criminal backgrounds. Why is someone in need of a program? Why do they need social services? Do we want to have these people in these kinds of buildings? I mean, it’s an overgeneralization that people have of thinking that homeless people end up in their situation because something they did wrong, not necessarily some structural aspect that forced them into that situation.

Similarly, workers also pointed to broad societal or cultural values to explain the roots of client-level issues. Ultimately, these explanations were geared toward arguing that the infrastructure for the working poor in the United States was inadequate. When asked about how some of the client-level issues had originated, an employment services worker, who also maintains an administrative role, discussed cultural perceptions:

Ok. So I think that, in our culture, we value certain things and we place, of course, value, on all different kinds of things. I think things like transportation are taken for granted. Um I don't think people, the norm, kind of middle-class or, um, upper-class, that you even think about getting around from place to place, and how that can really impact someone if they don't have that kind of freedom, especially in a city like [name of the city], where you really can't walk everywhere you need to go. It's just not possible. And it costs \$4.50 now to travel, um. I think that if you look at other countries, um, in Europe and stuff, you'll see there are a lot less expensive or certain populations within the, you know, certain populations do get free travel, just because it's such a hindrance. If someone misses an interview that can mean whether or not they're going to keep their apartment or not based on when their rent's due and how long they've been unemployed. So I think that, um, we really need to start, you know, as a whole culture, kind of looking at that, and not kind of shying away from, from homeless people in thinking that they're not trying to either get help or they like being homeless. I don't know, there's just so many. Once you start working with the homeless population, you start to realize that really no one is safe.

This worker makes a connection between cultural values and concrete, day-to-day things, like transportation, that are essential to being employable but are “taken for granted”.

Another employment services worker discusses the structural and cultural factors affecting the job market in the U.S.:

The gap between the wealthy and the poor is bigger than ever. I know that working class people, I believe, make less now than they ever have, and the job supply is less now than it ever was as well. So I think there are a lot of systematic features bumping up against each other to create joblessness. I know that there's this perception that any of these people could get a job if they wanted to. I know people who have been working their asses off, and they haven't. It's not as simple as being willing. If it was being willing, we would beat our outcomes in a month, rather than a year.

In this discussion, he problematizes the cultural perception of the ability to obtain employment is tied directly to one's motivation and hard work. He goes on to say that "housing is not a societal value" and that having a proportion of the population without housing is something that the United States has "become comfortable with." In these workers' remarks about culture, they attempt to account for client-level issues through pointing out the direction that cultural values can take when it comes to funding or paying attention to social services.

Lastly, several workers also spoke about the shifts in the economic infrastructure of the United States to account for some client-level issues. Specifically, one employment services worker discussed the shifting of the United States economy from primarily a manufacturing economy to a service economy. This effectively shifted the skills necessary to be able to obtain employment in the modern labor market. Another employment services worker spoke of this issue with the added dimension of the requirements for entry into the labor market have changed, to a more structured and weeding-out process than before, i.e. having a degree, filling out an application and an interview process.

#### Law and Policy

One of the main ways workers identified client-level issues as having legal or policy-level origins was policies that have further marginalized certain populations. For clients who had a criminal history, workers discussed policies that have kept that population from working or being successful upon exiting correctional facilities. One worker discussed that specific occupations automatically barred those with a criminal

history, citing the example of occupations that required HIPPA and other medical disclosures as part of the job. Another worker spoke of the larger policy framework surrounding prisoner reintegration as being non-existent and maintained that this was the reason why recidivism rates are so high. Another worker discussed suburbanization and white flight, with laws that specifically restricted minorities, specifically African-American, families from moving into the suburbs. He also discussed, what he called, restrictive community planning in these suburbs, meaning lack of or no sidewalks for pedestrians and overpasses that were too short for public transportation, i.e. buses, to pass under, as a means of keeping the working poor out of these community areas.

### **Organizational Issues**

Most workers had little to say about organizational issues. However, of those that did, they accounted for these issues in two main ways: funding of the organization and growth. Workers identified funding, both cuts to major programs that offer certain services, i.e. housing or mental health, and the social and physical distance between foundations or boards of directors who control funding to the organization, as an explanation of the organizational issues.

For example, one worker discussed the reasons behind his having to provide Mental Health services without being professionally certified:

Societally, we have de-emphasized Mental Health services. I know that funding has decreased for those services. I think that's, if not the only reason, the primary reason we're seeing a lot of people that are accessing our services that need clinical services but haven't found anywhere to access those services before they've come to us. I think that's fundamentally the biggest part of that.

Concerning the funding of the organization itself, one worker, a workshop trainer,

discussed the social distance between the people who control the funding for the organization and the workers and, especially, the clients:

I think that endowments or whoever wants to give money are removed from actual direct service, so their idea of what's best is not actually reality, you know. Often times, so, our board of directors, none of them really know what we do. We don't even. I would say I I'm more connected than a lot of people. And I know like three board members, you know (laughs).

She went on to discuss her encounter with one of those board members, who volunteers to do mock interviews with clients. The trainer met with him to discuss that he was saying offensive things about how clients should have been able to find work, which ended in his saying that he would visit her workshop.

Also organizational growth was identified as an issue that was used to explain organizational issues, specifically more clients and less space. One employment services worker discussed this issue when asked about the origins of his challenge of having a high caseload:

I think the organization has just grown publicity-wise. More people know about us. We're starting to expand with the location on the [another part of the city] and now expanding to the [a different part of the city]. Our name is getting out. We don't do any outreach, it's just word-of-mouth, doing work with partner agencies, getting referrals from them. I think that's how that challenge came about. A lot of people have heard about the good work we do. It's also trying to grow in a smart way, trying not to grow too large too quickly. I don't know how they decide how many staff members we have, but they do decide.

Workers also spoke of this when speaking about the issue of space since, at the time of the interviews, the organization was renovating a large part of the main site.

### **Policy/Societal Issues**

Since the discussion was mostly implicit around policy/societal issues, there was some overlap in the accounting for the problems. So among the few that did speak of

policy-level issues, the main explanation behind those was major cuts to funding, at both the local and federal levels. Cuts, which workers believe, have not risen to their previous levels since

CHAPTER SIX:  
THE WORK OF TRANSFORMING PEOPLE

As opposed to a top-down approach (working from a structural or policy-level perspective down to the client-level) or a bottom-up approach (examining issues at the client-level, up to the policy level) this study uses a middle-up approach. This approach allows a closer examination of the expression of social policy at the level of the worker, the point at which policy meets people, and how that expression connects to the larger structural and policy-level aspects. Within this middle-up approach, this research shows that workers who are engaging with clients directly, i.e. street-level bureaucrats, are finding problems and challenges within that client-worker interaction. When asked what was challenging about their job or what made it difficult, issues surrounding the clients were the main topic of discussion. Policy-level or organizational issues were only of a secondary concern, if at all. Specifically challenges and difficulties that workers identified were centered on behavioral and interpersonal issues related to the client, e.g. communication, perceived commitment and changing clients' behaviors. Thus engaging and working with the personal characteristics of clients were *the major* difficulty in the job. In a similar manner, a client's criminal history, a specifically individual characteristic, was the focus of the difficulty.

As far as managing the process of changing the personal characteristics and behaviors of clients, workers took a very emotional and supportive role. Workers



engaged in providing emotional support and understanding a client as an individual within a supportive environment. Within this environment and using emotional support, workers would walk clients through the process of adapting themselves or changing themselves into an appealing employee or housing candidate.

The reasons for the insistence that clients have had to adapt to the housing and labor markets, as workers saw it, were the environmental and structural factors that clients have lived with for their entire lives. Workers used these environmental and structural explanations the most in their understandings of clients' situations, both within the program and within clients' daily lives. Thus, interestingly, while workers mainly had an individual, client-level focus in their talk of challenges and managing challenges, they arrived at structural and environmental explanations—yet they did not frame them in terms of large-scale social issues, such as the decline of jobs for less educated workers, changes in taxation systems, the criminalization of the poor, or declines in schools,

Therefore, workers explicitly understood some of the structural problems facing clients and express that understanding in their work. One of the trainers responded to a client who disrupted her class by saying the “system is corrupt”, replied by saying, “Now, yes, I actually think the system is corrupt, and still you have a part in that, and you can navigate that system.” This idea of navigating a faulty “system” of labor and housing markets is the essence of much of their work. Workers have accepted the faulty markets as an unchangeable, immutable system. What becomes changeable and mutable then is the way in which they work with their clients and the clients themselves. Much of the focus of their work is molding the client to become a malleable, ever-changing

commodity within the social, cultural and economic forces that dominate the housing and labor markets, the main institutions with which the organization engages. A client, who has lived with and adapted to adverse environmental and structural factors for their whole lives, now has to rearrange their personal characteristics and behaviors to fit into new ways of being with which they are completely unfamiliar. Hence, some clients do not adapt as easily as others, which manifests the problems and challenges that workers discussed.

Through this process of deep, life-altering transformation, workers, confronted with clients that are facing difficult environmental and structural factors, rely heavily on emotional labor in working with the client. They provide emotional support to clients through “counseling” and seek to understand each individual client by understanding “who they are.” Although only one worker explicitly discussed the issue of the “emotional toll” that their work brings them, many workers spoke of “feeling bad” for clients in, what they saw, as seemingly helpless situations. Echoing some of Hochschild’s (1983) research, workers sought to protect themselves emotionally, by drawing boundaries between clients and themselves, thus attempting to demarcate an emotional, personal self and an emotional, professional self.

Additionally clients also discussed feeling personal failure through this emotional labor work when clients were unsuccessful, reinforcing some of Lipsky’s ideas about the tensions between the reality and the ideal of social services work (Lipsky 1980). However, overall this tension wasn’t necessarily because of husbanding resources to clients in need, although this did overlap in a few instances. Mainly, the tension workers

expressed was focused on a balance of transforming clients versus clients' confronted by adverse environments and/or structures. On the one hand, workers seek to understand their clients as individuals, not only in their personality and characteristics but also in their environment at home and the larger, structural aspects that have affected them throughout their lives. And on the other hand, these workers are employed by an organization that demands that the worker change the client into an agreeable worker or tenant. Simultaneously, then, workers understand clients' adversities and must ask them to overcome those adversities and transform themselves.

Therefore, while burnout or turnover may be an organizational outcome as some have suggested in quantitative models (Wright and Bonnet 1997; Martin and Schinke 1998; Stalker et al. 2007; Mor Barak, Nissly and Levin 2001; Mor Barak et al. 2005; Strolin-Grotzman 2008), this study opens new ground for understanding how challenges manifest and how workers seek to manage them. In this study, the tension was not from husbanding resources but was related to a tension between changing the client and the environmental and structural inertia affecting that client. But, in contrast to Lipsky's findings, workers, instead of withdrawing from their work mentally or emotionally, found solutions to their problems partially through emotional labor. By looking not only at how social policy affects social services work but how political culture operates in tandem with social policy to produce and reproduce social services workers, clients and citizens, this study shifts the focus from workers' husbanding material resources to workers' struggling with the existential resources and issues with which the worker is confronted by having to transform clients within a neo-liberal welfare system.

At this ground-level, workers understand and could discuss structural and environmental factors affecting a client's involvement in the program, the solutions to address those problems were consistently directed toward changing the individual client. This is not by happenstance. To a large degree, modern, neo-liberal social policy mechanisms for addressing many social problems are individually focused as well. But social policy mechanisms are not dreamed up and implemented within a vacuum. Political culture plays a critical role in this process. The liberal individualist ideology that undergirds U.S. political culture, i.e. working hard individually to deserve what you have, compounded with the bifurcated U.S. welfare state, of market-differentiated versus means-tested welfare structures, creates an infrastructure that focuses expressly on the individual. Indeed the organization studied, with its goal of self-sufficiency, geared towards transforming individuals into citizens that work is a modern, neo-liberal expression of the welfare state. TANF, which allows for a five-year maximum allotment of services, and other welfare-to-work programs are meant to funnel an adaptable, malleable low-wage labor force into an ever-changing labor market. Therefore, this organization encourages clients to become neo-liberal citizens and laborers to continually be "open to change" in the face of such precarious markets.

Street-level bureaucrats within this organization, then, not only administer social policy but they also operate under, make decisions within and *are agents of* the prevailing political cultural frameworks. Therefore, the view of a street-level bureaucrat as the point at which policy meets people is only partially correct. *Rather they are the point at which policy and political culture combine to create, produce and reproduce the provision of*

*social services.*

The social policy and political cultural context under which this organization is working, i.e. the modern, neo-liberal U.S. welfare state, is meant to manage poverty and the working poor. The aim of this organization, then, is not to lift the working poor or people living in poverty as a group from poverty, although that may be their mission or overall goal. Rather the aim of the organization is to transform individual persons to become more acceptable to particular markets. As mentioned above, workers manage client-level issues by telling clients to be “open to change” and to “switch up techniques” in trying to obtain housing or employment. Even when clients have a criminal history, a barrier which workers admit cannot be changed, workers seek to change what they can, helping the client to adapt in ways that they can to be accepted into markets that currently do not want them.

While organizations that advocate or address structural and environmental issues that workers mentioned do exist, clients do not interact with these. Thus the social services worker-social services client is the expression of social policy and political culture, both to clients and to workers. Social policy and political culture confront the client in this way mainly, less so through advocacy. Therefore, the organization makes people into citizens; citizens that do not have social rights from their government and, instead, they engage with this organization to become citizens that can access market-differentiated welfare. This is the quasi-religious “path” to employment that some workers mentioned. It is the path to social citizenship within the U.S. For people who have been relegated to second-class citizenship because they are accessing modern

means-tested social programs must force their re-entry into the labor market by transforming themselves. Thus, the work of this organization aligns with the goals of modern framework of the neo-liberal U.S. welfare state by producing neo-liberal citizens that can be deemed citizens because of their ability to constantly change in order to work. This framework accepted to be “in the common good” by being implemented through social policy mechanisms of individually focused social services. Whether or not social service workers are husbanding resources is nearly irrelevant, considering the limited frameworks created by the compounding of social policy and political culture within which social services workers operate. For these limited frameworks compel social services workers to transform clients despite their knowing full well the environmental and structural ills that have guided people that seek social services into such a trajectorial disadvantage. In accepting these frameworks as inevitable or immutable, workers find solutions, costing them emotional labor, that transform clients into neo-liberal citizens that can change themselves to adapt to the social, political and economic whims of markets.

Finally in operating from such a restricted framework, workers and clients reproduce social service provision to be individually focused. However, direct social service organizations do not generally have budgets for advocacy work. This does not have to equate to no advocacy for these organizations. Qualitative studies of clients’ experiences of struggling against their environments and larger, structural level issues can be very compelling. Combining these with administrative or quantitative data can offer strong, documented evidence for social policy reform and awareness. Because

organizations that provide direct services are operated mainly for social service provision, advocacy groups are expressly built for utilizing such evidence in their campaigns for reform. Coalitions across these groups could focus more on exchanging aggregate information that would inform social policy reform. Instead of forcing a transformative process onto individuals, this could help shift the focus of conversation and discussion from the individual and shed light on the larger, structural factors affecting those who seek social services and those who daily implement social policy.

APPENDIX A:  
INTERVIEW GUIDE



1. How did you begin working in the field of social work? here?
2. What do you do here? Responsibilities?
3. Can you tell me about your day at work yesterday? What kinds of things did you do?
4. What are some things that are satisfying about your job?
5. What are some things that are challenging about your job? (Pull from events described in workday)
6. How do you manage these challenges? (Pull from events described in workday and in question 5)
7. How do you think these challenges have happened or how do they become challenges?
8. What are some things that would you help you serve your clients better

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## VITA

From 2002 to 2006, I studied Sociology at McNeese State University. I had no specific interest within Sociology and decided to forego furthering my studies. I waited tables from 2006-2007 until I applied for a position as a substance abuse counselor for the State of Louisiana. From 2007-2009, I worked in both outpatient and inpatient settings, gaining different skill sets from each treatment modality.

My experience working for the State of Louisiana drew me back to my studies as I found myself confronted with questions about inequality and social welfare that I could not coherently analyze. Thus, in August 2009, the Sociology department of Loyola University Chicago accepted me into their graduate program. Simultaneously, I began a fellowship at The Center for Urban Research and Learning as an interviewer for the evaluation of Chicago's Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness.

In proposing and undertaking this thesis, I drew from my experience as a social services worker, a researcher and a student. My goal in analyzing in approaching this subject matter was to understand the nature of the questions that I sought to answer. This thesis is an attempt to provide some direction for those questions by understanding how the larger, structural factors of inequality and social welfare affect social service work on a day to day basis from the individuals at the frontline of social services work.

