

“If You Work in This Country You Should Not be Poor, and Your Kids Should be Doing Better”: Bringing Mixed Methods and Theory in Psychological Anthropology to Improve Research in Policy and Practice

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Abstract New Hope (NH) was a successful poverty reduction program that offered a positive social contract to working-poor adults. If you worked full time, you were eligible to receive income supplements, childcare vouchers, health care benefits, a community service job, and client respect. NH did reduce poverty and increase income and earnings for some participants, and improved outcomes for some children. But in spite of relatively generous benefits, NH was only selectively effective. Only those not working when NH began and those with few barriers to work were positively affected by the program through achieving more work hours, poverty reduction, and income gains. Boys in program families benefited, girls did not. Take-up of NH benefits was typically partial and episodic; for instance, some parents would not use childcare programs for young children. Ethnographic evidence was essential for understanding these sometimes-surprising program impacts and their policy and practice implications, and was effectively combined with an experimental, random-assignment research design. Psychological anthropology can bring its traditions of integrating qualitative and quantitative methods and its focus on experience, context, and meaning to understanding and improving policies and practices within a scientific frame of the committed, fair witness. [mixed methods, policy and practice, family, poverty, adolescence]

There is wide support in the United States for helping children and parents in poor families, but there is much less consensus on how to do that, and who should be given support. In this article, I describe the New Hope (NH) work-support program to reduce poverty. A wide range of qualitative and quantitative evidence was collected by the NH study team. Parents' cultural models of work and parenting goals and practices were important for understanding responses to the program, as has been shown in other psychological anthropological studies of poverty (Strauss 1992, 2002). The NH study followed a group of children ages one to ten for eight years, from 1995 to 2004, during and after the NH program itself was in operation (1995–98). Children were nine to 19 at the final eight-year assessment. Some NH program impacts persisted into the adolescent years—an important result given the repeated finding that generally it is difficult to sustain positive effects of support programs.

Yet NH was selectively successful: it assisted some kinds of parents and children, and not others, and those it assisted were helped in different ways. The program benefits of NH

were also selectively taken up and used by the participants in the program, although the potential benefits NH participants could have obtained (in the eyes of program designers) by full program use were substantial. Participation in NH had academic and behavioral benefits for boys, but not for girls. These and other results from the NH study were often unexpected and surprising. The discovery of what happened in NH, and understanding how and why, depended on a strong study design, the use of integrating qualitative and quantitative methods, and the inclusion of the meanings, ways of reasoning, and everyday practices of the parents and children in the program (Duncan et al. 2007; Lowe and Weisner 2004; Weisner 2005; Yoshikawa et al. 2006). The theories and methods in psychological anthropology are very well suited to such policy and practice-relevant research. The use of a wide range of methods in the study of context and mental life continues to be a hallmark of psychological anthropology. The NH integration of psychological, sociological, and anthropological–ethnographic methods avoids the weaknesses of fragmented, discipline-centric, decontextualized methods that sometimes are used in policy and practice research. I believe that the units of analysis and designs for research in psychological anthropology specifically, and anthropology more generally, are essential for the strongest research possible in the policy and practice fields.

Models for Doing Policy and Practice-Relevant Research in Psychological Anthropology

The NH study illustrates a particular framework for doing policy and practice-relevant work: holistic understanding as an engaged, committed but “fair witness.”¹ The fair witness cares deeply about the social issues (in this case, poverty reduction and improved circumstances for working-poor families and children), and brings the best methods and theory possible to understand how and why a serious attempt to alleviate poverty might work, and how such attempts can be improved.

The NH research, including the ethnographic and psychosocial studies, is part of an experimental intervention, the NH project, intended to improve the well-being of working-poor adults directly, and their households, families and children indirectly. The central goals include understanding the processes and mechanisms through which NH improved well-being, the reasons why it did not, and analyzing its relevance for policy and practices to support the working poor. The holistic understanding of poverty reduction for working-poor families and the fair witness frame are both well suited to traditions in psychological anthropology, and well suited for the most productive dialogue with those in other disciplines and those working in the practice and policy world. For example, the founders of the NH program (described below) advocated work supports, and researchers believed work supports could help increase work hours and stability, and make work pay—that is to achieve the goal that “If you work in this country you should not be poor.” The addition of considering impacts on families and children (not in the original NH program goals, but part of the NH child and family study) further says “and your kids should be doing better.” The research frame around the NH study was not directed toward advocacy for major structural

changes in society (other than recognizing how those structural conditions often negatively influenced the circumstances of the working poor). The research and analytic frame, rather, was to ask whether, how, and why NH did and did not work. Hence, the NH study stance is more a fair witness one than it is either advocacy or a priori critique of U.S. politics and poverty policy, although it offers a foundation for such critiques and in itself constitutes an experiment in poverty reduction. The fair witness perspective asks how well NH did in actually reducing poverty through work supports, and thereby, hopefully, improving the well-being of working-poor adults, their families, and children. It does not assume a program like NH will work wonders (although no doubt many hoped it would). It takes seriously the experiences and meanings of working-poor life and parenting, and participation in NH, as part of understanding how to improve well-being.

NH operated in the real world political context of welfare reforms and funding constraints, which is a context that is fiercely contested, complicated and changing (DeParle 2004; Handler and Hasenfeld 2007), with a long and unique history in the United States (Katz 2001; Quadagno 1994). NH's planners and board worked under real world constraints in launching and operating NH, not in an imagined political world in which social investments and public and political goals and values might be or should be dramatically different than in fact they are. They had to raise funds and keep track of the costs of their work and compare those costs to the benefits achieved for poverty reduction and family well-being. Where did NH succeed and fail? Why? What program or other changes would be needed to do better?

Engaged Research in Psychological Anthropology

There continues to be strong interest in engaged policy and practice research in Anthropology.² Jeremy Sabloff appealed for more public intellectuals and outreach in his 2010 AAA Distinguished Lecture, Low and Engle (2010) reviewed the current landscape of engaged and practicing anthropology, and Daniel Lende recently offered a template for doing so (2010). Another review of practicing anthropology proclaims approvingly that “Nearly every scholar has become politicized in the past decade or so. . . . The question of whether or not engaged scholarship has won over anthropology has apparently been settled, with every corner of the discipline concretely confronting the politics of anthropological insight” (Mullins 2011:235). Mullins’s review claims that “nearly everyone” in anthropology is intensively focused on “interrogating” just what engagement, collaboration, activism, advocacy, public, community, and other terms and positionings of research for policy and practice mean. In contrast, the committed, fair witness model is an alternative actually favored by a great many anthropologists and other social scientists collaborating with anthropologists. The committed fair witness is neither foregrounding politicization, nor interrogating the positioning of all involved. Rather this approach is applying the best designs, methods, and conceptual frames possible to provide the strongest research we can offer to understand important problems and improve well-being.

Psychological anthropology surprisingly is not perceived as having contributed to engaged, policy or practice work, although it has made and continues to make contributions to policy and practice-relevant topics almost since its inception (Korbin and Anderson-Fye this issue). Margaret Mead, a founder of the Society for Psychological Anthropology (SPA), is arguably the most recognized public figure in Anthropology (Shankman 2009). Walter Goldschmidt, a founding editor of *Ethos*, wrote *As You Sow* (1947), a study of the effects of agribusiness and smaller, family-owned farms on the social life of two California Central Valley communities. Goldschmidt was attacked by corporations and conservative interests in the U.S. Congress and California because of the policy implications of this work; this pressure caused the Bureau of Agricultural Research, which supported the study, to disband soon after his study was completed. The study still is cited today. Most recent presidents of the SPA (White, Holland, Weisner, Luhrmann, and Strauss) do research that has direct engagement, practice, and policy connections. Arthur Kleinman, Melvin Konner, and Richard Shweder among many others in our field, continue writing for general audience publications. Rebecca Lester, Douglas Hollan, and many others, combine clinical practice and research.

Research does not have to be directly about policy and practice topics or be public anthropology in order to increase scientific and public understanding, because contributing strong scientific evidence and theory about a topic that in turn might be relevant to policy is a basis for any policy research (Nutley et al. 2007). Providing a basic knowledge base against which more specific policy questions are framed is the fundamentally important “enlightenment” role of research (Weiss 1979). For example, LeVine and colleagues (2001) and LeVine and LeVine (2002) studied basic developmental questions in a series of studies explaining the cross-cultural associations between women’s and girls’ formal education on the one hand, and reductions in fertility, changes in childcare practices, and increased use of health services on the other hand. The positive associations between education and fertility and health were known; the mechanisms and processes that linked these—why these strong correlations exist—were not well understood as a basic scientific question. After their work was completed, they took their findings to the UN and other policy arenas to both educate and suggest research and program directions to improve the well-being of girls and women. This work led to greater understanding of and justification for, the health, parenting, and fertility benefits of educational programs for women.

Another example of basic research with a policy context is the Elinor Ochs–led UCLA Sloan Center for the Everyday Life of Families, which has created what is arguably the best current source of rich, mixed-methods data on family life in the social sciences in the world today (centered around over 40 hours of systematically collected video data on each household; see Ochs et al. 2006). Bradd Shore, a former SPA president, directed another Sloan Center at Emory, “Myth and Ritual in American Life.” An overarching policy agenda of the Sloan Foundation initiative is to improve the work–home balance for families, particularly for women. The Sloan research program explicitly aims to use its research insights to foster positive social change through workplace and national and state work policies. These centers produce new research on families and work clearly providing basic knowledge important for, but distinct from, the specifics of the policy agenda.

Carol Worthman's work in public health (Worthman and Kohrt 2005) and Charles Super and Sara Harkness's work in Bangladesh (Ahmed et al. 1993) illustrate basic research with a clearly applied public health agenda as well. Such research provides enlightenment through providing basic scientific understanding that then infuses general understanding of a problem. It generates knowledge that in the case of education and fertility decline, or the work–family balance today, or public health and child development, identified a problem clearly, and provides evidence for mechanisms of cause and consequences, which then could lead to a push for improved actions to promote women's well-being, child health, and other desired outcomes.

Studies done in the United States also contribute to practice and policy in the family and poverty field. Katherine Newman's work on the psychosocial consequences of downward mobility (1988), or the holistic understanding of the lives of working poor in Harlem (1999), contributes to our understandings of the communities, families, and lives of the economically distressed, and working poor. Edin and Lein's (1997) influential *Making Ends Meet*, is another example of such work, focused on how single mothers on welfare (the AFDC program as it was at that time) struggle to find the additional income and resources to survive, when public assistance payments alone are not sufficient to maintain a household. In this work, there are clear policy and practice relevant implications, spelled out in the framing and in the discussion, closely tied to their findings on how the resource gap facing these poor households was being closed.

Other work offers frank advocacy for deprived, excluded, or vulnerable groups. These studies emphasize structural forces impeding the disadvantaged, and the political context and broad economic policies affecting them. Critiques of policies and institutions are then used by political groups and advocacy organizations to push for (more strongly—to insist on, or demand) major structural, policy and practice changes in society (Morgan and Maskovsky 2003). Sometimes the researcher is affiliated with the group pushing for change (a union, immigrant support organization, women's rights group, etc.). Piven and colleagues (2002), for example, advocate policy recommendations to reduce poverty through encouraging a broad social and political movement to counteract “neoliberal” policies. Such policy proposals, few of which have been adopted by States and by Congress to date, include major enhancements to the safety net of assistance, housing, health care, SSI, and food stamp programs; reforming the nature of low wage work by improving its quality, adding comparable worth pay, and enforcing nondiscrimination; valuing and supporting unpaid care work; raising established guaranteed minimum wages, and fundamentally “transforming wage work” in many other ways. Scholars participating in this kind of advocacy and politically driven research may investigate and unearth current practices affecting the working poor that are negative for them and their families, and that have not necessarily been brought to light. These studies are morally charged critiques of structural policies and politics. Some of this work is closer to the politicized, activist model, sometimes including analysis of the positioning of all actors.

More generally, research evidence can affect the problem stream (bringing attention, focusing on salient indicators and events, pointing to new problems); the policy stream (what

are possible solutions, affordability, what already exists, are there community values and what are cultural models of these, what is technically possible); the political stream (what is possible at a given time and place); and the actual decision agenda and processes (being at the table, bringing a problem, policy and politics together; see Kingdon 1984). The problem and policy streams perhaps are the most amenable to evidence. Evidence can also influence better implementation and practices. Evidence-based studies of practice—how to implement better practices with strong evidence for them—is a key and growing research area that psychological anthropology can contribute to: “Research to better practice” as a goal, more so than research to (large-scale) policy and politics as a goal (Fixsen et al. 2005).

The NH Study

NH exemplifies both a basic research–enlightenment model, and a more applied–program practice model of policy relevant work—neither the politicizing nor the interrogating described by Mullin. Of course all involved in this type of research are hardly naïve about political positions and are aware of others’; but worry over those issues is not the foreground. The founders of NH and the research team studying NH both were committed to improving the lives of working-poor adults and children; they were also committed to research of the highest quality possible to understand if, how and why NH achieved those goals. “If you work in this country you should not be poor” crystallized many of the goals of NH, a successful work support program developed in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and active from 1994 to 1998. NH was a community-initiated antipoverty program operating in two low-income neighborhoods, one predominantly African American and the other more mixed-race ethnicity with a large population of Hispanic families. NH founders came from backgrounds in community organizing and policy. They were dissatisfied with the welfare system of that time (Riemer 1988) and prepared a suite of supports for adults that capitalized on the positive work goals of their program participants. The NH program encouraged support for full time work to reduce poverty and to support families, because work already was common among so many of the poor. (Full references to the NH program, qualitative and quantitative data, and all results can be found in Bos et al. 1999, 2007; Duncan et al. 2007; Huston et al. 2005; Weisner 2008; and Yoshikawa et al. 2006.)

NH offered five benefits to eligible participants in the program (eligible meant living in one of the two neighborhoods and with income not over 150 percent of the federal poverty level). First, if the participant works full time (over 30 hours a week) they receive a wage supplement that brings their earnings to 150–200 percent of the federal poverty level for their household circumstances (wage supplement plus a child allowance formula). Second, participants can enroll in a health care HMO for their children and pay a relatively small copay per month. Third, participants are eligible to receive vouchers for childcare services provided by any licensed provider in the state (center-based or home care) for their eligible children. Fourth, for those not already working full time support from program staff is available to assist in applying for and finding work; this includes eligibility for a Community Service Job (CSJ)

which a client can hold for up to six months, with a maximum of three such CSJs. CSJs pay minimum wage and whatever benefits are available. Those taking a CSJ are eligible for the other NH supports as well. Finally, clients in the NH program can expect a service staff that treats them with respect, provides a place for their children to play while at the offices, accessible service providers, and operates responsibly such that their files and records are not lost.

The Positive Social Contract Model of Public Support

NH is a “positive social contract” type of program. If the participant works 30+ hours a week, they are eligible to access all the program supports and benefits. If not, NH will assist them in finding work so that they can become eligible. The participant and the program strike an agreement and both contribute to the program goals. This model is important to the NH philosophy and was a part of the program organization and goals. David Riemer, a NH designer, and author of *Prisoners of Welfare* (1988) said:

New Hope is literally you and me across a table. You are a low-income adult and have some needs. I am here to offer you some tools that will connect you with the labor market. . . . If you’d like to take up this offer, we’ll help you. If not, that’s fine. You can always come back. And if there are other things you’re interested in that I don’t offer, then maybe I can refer you to those. [Duncan et al. 2007:113]

Julie Kerksick, one of the founders of NH, commented:

The social contract is very clear and is framed as both New Hope and the participant bringing something to the table. We are not about assessing them and telling them what they can or can’t do. That is the whole premise of most welfare reforms: the individual is something to be acted upon. New Hope’s premise is what we can offer you in return for your work effort. [Duncan et al. 2007:25]

Most Americans say in polls—and these views are reflected in public political discourse generally—that they are favorable to versions of social contract type supports, and such programs receive public and political support in the United States (Gilens 2000).

Social contract, work-based programs like NH do not imply that “If you don’t work, you should be poor.” Other kinds of supports (social and economic safety nets, education, addressing long-standing structural issues such as work conditions, discrimination, etc.) are needed as well, and are in fact assumed, in the NH social contract model, to be available at some level. Eligibility for other supports was not affected by NH program participation. Hence, there is every reason for those advocating more basic structural and safety net changes that could also benefit low-income working families to support a program like NH.

Would NH be Used and be Effective?

Would NH incentives in fact reduce barriers and draw participants into work, particularly among those who have not moved out of, or far from, poverty-level income? Would NH participation in fact reduce household poverty? Would children benefit? Before turning to some results of the NH program, consider what the prior assumptions and expectations about the results of offering NH to hundreds of working-poor men and women should be. NH benefits were relatively generous. If all the benefits were taken up, they could easily be worth \$1,000 or more a month for a family with two or three young children using childcare. Using NH benefits could help move many households well above the poverty line. What would theory and prior evidence predict about the use and impact of these supports? What proportion of those in the program would take up the various benefits for instance? What impacts would NH have on work, earnings, children's well-being, parenting, and family and household organization?

Most of those involved, including program designers, thought that impacts would be substantial and that use of NH, although not complete, would be high given the fact that NH was a well-implemented program and seemingly offered much needed supports for working-poor adults. Potential gains both in work hours and in earnings were expected to result from NH incentives to work. However, expectations about effects on children were more mixed. For example, would mothers (over 85 percent of all participants in NH with young children in their households were single women) struggle more with the stresses of work (assuming NH increased work hours), and would this adversely affect their parenting and therefore their children? Or would the increased resources from work and from additional NH supports ease financial and other burdens and perhaps make parenting easier, and so benefit children?

Through which Pathways Might NH be Effective?

How might NH affect parents and children? NH could have improved the well-being of children and parents directly through the provision of more resources; through changes in parenting beliefs or practices, which in turn affected children; or through changes in the ecocultural circumstances of the family (e.g., changes in household composition, changes in the settings children and parents engage with, or other changes in contexts around parents and children). Each path could affect children at any age; all three clearly could improve the well-being of adolescent boys and girls.

The resource path could influence parents and children through the provision of more income and resources and supports for those in the program (if indeed the program led to more income gains). If some of those resources were used toward child investments, directly or indirectly, then NH might show positive effects on children's well-being. The parenting path proposes that NH participation would have a direct effect on parents, which then might benefit children indirectly. For example, parents might feel more positive from their work experiences, or more effective or empowered as a regular wage earner and this might lead

to more positive parenting. However, parents might be more stressed and have less time for their children because of increased work hours, work hassles, nonstandard hours required for their work and so forth, and so NH participation could lead to more negative consequences.

A third pathway through which NH could influence parenting and children's development is through changes in the family daily routine and activities, and the ecocultural contexts of family life; those setting changes in turn might have beneficial or detrimental influences on parents and children in the family context. For instance, parents may change how they monitor their children's activities, place them in after school programs, decide to leave their current partner or spouse or move in with a new partner because their finances are better, or otherwise alter the home context because of NH program participation. Those changes in contexts could then change parents' or children's well-being for the better or the worse. An ecocultural perspective captures the cultural models of parents and service providers, and the locally rational actions of parents and children making choices in the face of the often very difficult economic and social conditions facing them (Weisner et al. 2002). NH program supports (income, childcare vouchers, healthcare for kids, help getting work) might have helped some to put together a more meaningful, sustainable, stable and predictable family routine, which in turn could improve parents' and children's well-being.

It is fair to say that all three pathways (resources, parenting, ecocultural-contextual) found some support in accounting for NH's outcomes, but none of them were dominant main effects (Duncan et al. 2007:98-99). The ecocultural path was an important part of the story of what happened. Families with different employment backgrounds, family and demographic circumstances, and obstacles to work used the program in different ways for example. Hence the ethnographic study of the ecocultural circumstances of how and why NH benefits were taken up and affected participants is a particularly important component in understanding NH. More generally, qualitative and contextual data proved important for learning how and why policy and practice initiatives affect parents, families, and children. Furthering this task is one way that psychological anthropology can have an important research contribution, and such evidence might well be its comparative advantage among the other social science disciplines and methods also competing for a voice in policy and practice.

The NH Sample, Design, and Methods

Potential participants ($n = 1,362$) who came to a neighborhood community center to inquire about NH were randomly assigned to the program or control group. Participants came after receiving flyers about NH widely distributed at their homes, churches, community groups, welfare offices, and through word of mouth. After signing in, participants entered into a "lottery" in which they knew that they had a 50-50 chance of being in the NH program. A computer program then randomly assigned each participant to NH or to the control group. Those entered into the NH program were eligible for NH benefits plus other supports available in the community; the control families were eligible for community supports as well of course, but not for NH. Thirty percent of all participants (NH and control group) were

employed full time, 71 percent had received some kind of public cash allowance or assistance in the past year, and 71 percent had children in their household. African Americans made up 51 percent; a varied Hispanic population made up 27 percent; and Euro-Americans, Native Americans, Hmong immigrants, and others the rest of the sample (22 percent). Women were 72 percent of the participants. The 71 percent of participants with one or more children in their households were the focus of the child and family study of NH described here. But it should be remembered that another 29 percent were single men and women who also were involved in the NH study (and who ultimately benefited from the program).

The NH study team collected extensive survey information from mothers; assessed children in the homes for their current cognitive and developmental levels; asked children's teachers about how the child was doing in school achievement and in classroom behavior; used administrative records to track employment, wages, and receipt of services and supports; and followed the families for eight years after baseline recruitment. The NH program was fully operational for the first three years; the longitudinal study followed parents and children for another five years after the program ended to see if there were longer-term effects. Both the NH program and control group families were followed.

We also did an ethnographic study of 44 families nested within the 745 adults in the full child and family sample, half randomly selected from the program and half from the control group. We made an average of seven visits to each family; most home visits were conversations about the study topics, using the ecocultural family interview as part of a focused, family-level ethnography (Weisner et al. 2002). The conversational format interview takes the parent through their daily routine of activities, focused on the features of each key activity and its importance for the participant (Bernheimer and Weisner 2007). Fieldworkers also took field notes following each visit, and sometimes took parents and children to lunch or shopping. Fieldworkers were graduate students, postdocs, and independent researchers in the social sciences living in or near Milwaukee. Several of our fieldwork team members also were involved in the analysis of the quantitative data and assisted in the integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence. We used an early version of the web-based qualitative and mixed-methods software, Dedoose, so that everyone on the research team could use the field notes and interviews, and index and code them online (Lieber et al. 2003; Lieber and Weisner 2010).

The NH study used a randomized design, which the ethnographic sample was nested within. The random-assignment experiment allowed for very strong causal inferences about the impact of the NH program, because we were able to compare changes after baseline in the NH program group compared to changes after baseline in the control group. In our study, for example, if we say that boys whose parents were in the NH program had significantly fewer behavior problems at school as reported by their teachers (which indeed was a finding), this means significantly fewer behavior problems compared to the number of behavior problems teachers reported for boys whose parents were in the control group. Hence NH program participation caused fewer behavior problems in boys (although how it did so remains to be understood). The context of the experimental design strengthened the value

of both the qualitative evidence and the survey and child assessment data, and led to deeper understandings of the impacts of the NH intervention program (Duncan 2008:770–772). Our qualitative and ethnographic evidence helped uncover how the program worked, whom it worked better for, and the ecocultural circumstances that influenced NH impacts.

This mixed methods approach and experimental design helped us to understand the three broad pathways (resources, parenting, changes in context) through which NH had effects. There were some quantitative main effects of income and resources on parents, children, and family circumstances. However, there were few such main effects of the program on parenting (e.g., changes in parent beliefs and practices, which in turn affected children). Ecocultural circumstances (e.g., changes in context), however, often mattered for accounting for NH findings. The effects of NH, positive as they often were, appeared for some subgroups of families but not others, or led to effects in surprising and unexpected ways. For this reason, contextual analysis of subgroups proved important for understanding NH impacts (control vs. program differences) and outcomes (longitudinal and cross-sectional associations among NH, family, and other factors, and child or parent characteristics).

Why and How Did NH have Impacts on Children and Families: The Importance of Family Context

There were a number of important and surprising findings from the NH study that illustrate the contributions of family learning environments and ecology to the take up and impacts of NH supports on children and adolescents.

Participant Use of NH Benefits was Partial, Selective, and Episodic

In any given month, only 40 to 45 percent of participants were using any NH benefits, and those who were did not use them all. About 30 percent used NH fairly consistently, but even this group did not typically use all the benefits or use NH the full time. Only about 18 percent used the health care HMO on a regular basis. NH program staff were surprised and concerned about this selective uptake of possible benefits. A cost-benefit economic preference model of choice would expect a high uptake of NH benefits to gain the large resource return that would follow. But the actual use was selective, and episodic in many cases, influenced by parental goals not directly related to work, rather than a primarily cost-benefit calculus (Gibson and Weisner 2002).

About 15 percent of all sample adults could not have taken up NH because their lives were too troubled and chaotic (because of household disruptions, noise, crowding, domestic violence, drug or alcohol abuse, mental and physical health problems). They needed services that NH itself did not provide, although NH referred participants to other services. Another 20 percent of parents either had not understood the nature of NH, despite what program designers considered clear and well implemented outreach (Brock et al. 1997), or they did not want to be bothered with the transaction costs (signing up and staying up to date with

their records at the NH office). Another group, perhaps 35 percent or so, wanted to work but perhaps not full time, or not regularly. They were strategic users; they used NH selectively when they worked, but not on a regular basis. Some only wanted one or two benefits (the income or the childcare help) and not the others. Other participants only wanted to work part time, or they wanted to move in and out of work as their goal. The remaining 30 percent of participants by and large attempted to work full time and used benefits more often.

In most public welfare programs, requirements are stringent and clients have little or no choice in procedure. Perhaps the NH cafeteria of benefits worked well given that working-poor adults and families constitute such a diverse group and selected what they wanted. Another conclusion could be that perhaps more of the program group could have been supported to take up more benefits, if the NH program would have been modified to permit supports to last longer between periods of work (such as continuing day care or child health care benefits through the full school year). Whichever interpretation for policy and practice, the results showed that the working poor are very heterogeneous in goals, motivations, and family and personal circumstances, and that even a strong program like NH would only fit with some participants some of the time (Weisner 2006).

Boys Benefited if Parents were in NH, Girls Did Not

NH was designed to support parents who worked (actually any eligible adult, but the NH family and child study focused on adults with children ages one to ten living in their household when NH started). It would have been a significant additional policy success if NH could improve the well-being of children as well as lift adults out of poverty (the program's main objective). It was gratifying to see that some children whose parents were in the NH group had better performance in reading (although not math). Boys' positive classroom social behavior and fewer behavior problems in school also were related to NH participation by their parents. It was surprising however, to find that NH led to increased engagement in school and higher aspirations for boys, although not for girls. For girls, teacher reports of school behaviors may have worsened slightly (Duncan et al. 2007:72–79; Huston et al. 2005). We wondered if girls with parents in the NH program group had been given more home responsibilities than girls with control group parents, and so perhaps had less time for school activities, but this was neither borne out in quantitative analyses of parent questionnaires, nor ethnographically. Boys were overall not doing as well in school as girls were on average, so boys may have had more room to gain from NH than girls. However, girls had plenty of room for improvement too.

There were no clear patterns in the quantitative data to suggest why there was a pattern of gender differences in the experimental-control impacts, but the ethnographic families provided some suggestive evidence. Parents were more fearful for their sons' safety and progress in school, and saw more danger in their neighborhoods for them. Parents were more likely to invest resources in boys, put them in after school programs, and monitor them somewhat more. A number of parents appeared to make different investments in boys

and girls based on their often unfortunately well-founded concerns about the dangerous neighborhood and peer contexts around boys. These differences in risks for boys (and the relative gains for boys whose parents had been in NH) persisted into adolescence, well after the NH program ended.

Increased Earnings, Work Hours, and Reduced Poverty Rates Were Achieved for Those Not Working when NH Began, but Not for Those Already Working when NH Began

NH did not lead to significant gains in work hours and reductions in poverty levels for the entire sample, an initial result that distressed staff and researchers alike. But when the sample was divided into those working when NH started, contrasted with those unemployed at the start of NH, a key set of findings emerged. Parents in the NH program who were not working at baseline earned \$2,400 more during the three years the NH program was operating than did control group parents who also were not working at baseline. By five years after baseline, they had earned \$5,800 more. Poverty rates among families randomly assigned to the NH program were 14 percent lower than families assigned to the control group, and eight percent lower even five years later for this group.

Those employed full time from the experimental group when NH started actually showed some decreases in work hours compared to controls who were also working when NH started. Here again, our interviews with the treatment and control families in the ethnographic sample helped suggest why. Those working full-time at baseline sometimes used NH supports to cut back from working two jobs, or working overtime, to stay home more with their children, or for other personal reasons. Some already had benefits at their jobs and so did not need NH benefits, and others working nonstandard hours (nights, swing shifts, weekends) decided to do so less. But those not working at baseline used the NH supports to get started working and in some cases to continue along a work pathway.

Furthermore the pathways for employment varied among the participants in the NH program and among the control group as well (Yoshikawa et al. 2006). About ten percent of adults had a trajectory during and after NH of increasing wages (almost \$4 more an hour gained, on average, after 24 months of the NH program in operation), significantly higher wage rates overall, and relative stability and continuity of employment. Significantly more parents in the NH program group were on this trajectory compared to control group families, and their children were among those showing gains in achievement and behavior. These parents with marked NH success were more likely to have a car, to be somewhat younger, and to have had only one barrier to employment at the time NH began. Their goals for work and family are not unlike other parents in the other work trajectories that were identified, but their ways of working and dealing with family issues were more strategic, using local networks of employers, friends, and family more often, and they typically had better tactics for keeping jobs and moving between them. Cluster analyses of other work trajectories, in contrast, found that some parents had work trajectories where they rapidly cycled from

one job to another but did not gain in wages (and this group also reported more childcare problems), some worked steadily but at low or unchanging wages, and others only worked part time at relatively low wages. Women and children in these groups were less likely to have a car available; had somewhat less education; held more low-skill and temp jobs; and had children with fewer or no significant gains on academic and behavioral outcomes.

If the impact of NH were to be assessed solely based on the number of work hours (more being the desired program outcome) or increased income and NH service use (more being the desired outcome) the finding that there were adults in NH working fewer hours with lower income, and so using fewer NH services would be seen not as a program success for that subgroup. But considered from the family and household point of view, and from the points of view of low income workers trying to fit work, family and personal life together, cutting back somewhat in work could well be seen as a positive program outcome and positive policy finding. These families were sometimes able to gain a better purchase on balancing work and family.

Participants' overall circumstances and histories of course also influenced their perceptions of NH and take up. Fieldworkers noticed that families who had one or perhaps two circumstances keeping them from working, seemed to be more likely to take up NH and sustain employment. Barriers to sustaining work included not having a high school diploma, having criminal justice system records, having several young children to care for, and having little work experience. Katherine Magnuson, then a fieldworker and graduate student at Northwestern University, created a set of indicators identifying work barriers, and used the survey data on families to confirm that those with one such barrier were the most likely to use NH and showed gains from the program compared to those with no or more than two barriers. Those with many work barriers struggled to get and keep employment, which of course is part of the NH social contract to get NH services, and many also needed supports that NH could not itself provide. Those with no work barriers sustained work without needing NH supports in many cases.

Adolescents

Adolescents growing up in minority households with low and unpredictable incomes, in neighborhoods also predominantly minority and low income, are at risk for academic problems, disengagement from and leaving school, and social and behavioral problems (Fuligni 2011). The teens in the Milwaukee neighborhoods in our sample were no exception, unfortunately. Because the NH child and family study selected participants with one or more children age one to ten at baseline, and then followed the parents and households for eight years thereafter, the children were nine to 19 at the last follow-up in 2004. How did they fare as adolescents? The adolescents in the NH sample as a group, whether they had parents in the control or experimental group, showed declines on a variety of measures as they reached adolescence. This was broadly true for school achievement and school behavior, dropout or stopout (leave school for a period of time with the intention of returning) from school,

behavior problems including drug and alcohol use, involvement with the criminal justice system, and other indicators.

It is not necessarily likely that NH would have made a statistically significant difference in outcomes for parents or children five years after the NH program ended, given all the other changes in the economy, in welfare support policies, in the households and parents themselves, and because of the partial and periodic take-up of NH by participants. The NH program would have had to produce a difference amid the overall struggles faced by these parents and the often underresourced and struggling schools and other institutions they were in. In spite of the many structural reasons not to expect long-term impacts, there in fact were some differences between the teens whose parents had been in the experimental and control groups. NH sometimes stemmed the overall declining trends for the whole group. This means that NH did not produce large gains in teen outcomes compared to national norms or average school measures, nor did the direction of outcomes move upward. However, the adolescents whose parents were in the NH program evinced slower declines in a variety of measures compared to the control group adolescent sample (Duncan et al. 2007; Huston et al. 2005).

For example, comparing the NH teens to control group teens, there were fewer NH teens with grades in school at the very lowest levels; there were fewer that had repeated a grade or were repeating at the time of the follow-up, and there were fewer who had been placed in special education programs. There were somewhat more teens in the NH group who reported more involvement in school, who reported higher hopes for school success and further education and work goals, and teens who were more aware of community resources such as afterschool programs. Some teens talked about the benefits of after-school programs, church participation, or having gone to Catholic schools as benefits they said helped them, for instance. These teens were somewhat more likely to be employed part time as well. However, teens with parents in the NH program were just as likely to have had problems with delinquency and with other problem behaviors compared to teens in the control samples.

We interviewed most of the teens in 2004 along with their parents. Berridge and Romich (2011) found some teen boys participating in housework, with a parental motivation to promote gender equality.³ Among the minority single mothers in this study were many who had their sons doing household work and making sure they were competent at doing it. These women by and large had not grown up with males who did such work and their own current and former partners did not do much either; but they said they did not want such a pattern to repeat again with their own boys. “Boys’ household work is key to families’ day-to-day routines, and . . . having sons that do housework is also important symbolically for the mothers with whom we spoke. In challenging the notion that housework should be ‘women’s work,’ these mothers try to raise sons to be good husbands” (Berridge and Romich 2011:4). These data suggest that there is intentional socialization for more equality-oriented gender pathways in some of the single working mother households (Romich and Gao n.d.).

Cultural Models of Budgeting and Good Parenting

There are a number of other findings from the NH study that involved the use of qualitative methods to understand NH experimental impacts. For example, Mistry and colleagues (Mistry and Lowe 2006; Mistry et al. 2008) explored how parents' budgeting for their households and particularly spending for children was motivated by the needs for meeting monthly bills, but also by cultural and identity issues. Parents sometimes wanted to be good enough parents in part by being able to take their kids out to restaurants once in awhile, go to the malls or other shopping trips together, and buy them clothes and toys that they believed mattered. This is what some parents described as what a "good mom" does. Doing these things often meant deferring other expenses (phone, gas and home heating services, car repairs) that might seem more important to an outsider for the ongoing conditions of everyday life and therefore more pressing, but that to parents fit with their preferences.

Family Care and Childcare Decisions

The moral core—the committed belief—of NH "contained the principle that a full-time working mother should not be poor, uninsured, or forced to entrust young children to unsafe or uncaring childcare providers because she cannot afford to pay for better childcare" (Duncan et al. 2007:66). Family care obligations provide another example of the use of integrated ethnographic work leading to new findings in the NH study. Many parents in this sample were caring for at least one child in their household with a significant health problem or behavioral problem, including behavioral or physical disabilities (a higher proportion than had been identified by the NH quantitative survey and questionnaire items). These were care-giving responsibilities that were costly and could be burdensome, and NH turned out to help those parents to some extent (Bernheimer et al. 2003).

NH participation also significantly increased the use of center-based childcare from 29 to 44 percent. Participation in center-based childcare was related to gains on the child assessment measures for some of the children, and NH children were more likely to be in such care compared to control families. Yet some parents could not take advantage of the childcare vouchers NH offered, or preferred not to use them (Lowe and Weisner 2004; Lowe et al. 2005). Some parents were suspicious of childcare programs where they did not personally know parents or staff. Some felt that being a good mother did not include leaving their young child with strangers. Others pointed out that vouchers and kin care were not equivalent and interchangeable. If a mother stopped having her sister or close friend help her with childcare and went to a voucher-paid program, what happens when the mother loses her job and can't keep receiving vouchers? That sister or friend may no longer be available. These findings, and others, benefited from an in-depth understanding, based on our ethnopsychological data of the everyday decision making of these parents, of participant beliefs about work and parenting, including how they put these beliefs into practice in their daily routine, the emotional meanings of work to them, cultural models of their parenting practices, and their family goals.

Discussion

NH increased the odds that children, adolescents, and parents would fare better. But some children improved and some did not. The same is true for parents, families, and households; some used the NH supports and moved out of poverty and some into a wage growth and stable work trajectory that benefited their overall life quality and well-being, but many others did not. The ethnographic evidence was important for understanding how and why this happened. Those findings suggested how future versions of NH programs could be better designed.

The NH study used ethnographic evidence in the context of an experimental, longitudinal design and mixed methods. The cross talk between the evidence from the ethnographic families nested within the larger sample, was important for understanding impacts (experimental-control differences), pathways (how the NH program made a difference overall and for different subgroups, including processes shaping those varied paths), and outcomes (changes over time other than experimental-control group differences). These three kinds of empirical evidence (impacts, pathways, outcomes) are different and need to be carefully distinguished, and all three are valuable and have been instructive for policy and practice implications.

Policy and Practice Implications

There are policy implications to draw from NH regarding how funding intended to reduce poverty and support work should be allocated, how laws and regulations should be written, and how programs should be structured to do so. But the policy implications are complex (Bos et al. 2007; Duncan et al. 2007:100–121). NH's policy implications in the first instance should be contrasted with a number of other work support programs that were also in place around the same time frame, because no single study by itself should drive large policy changes. NH was in fact compared to 11 other such programs with varying kinds of work support models (Hamilton et al. 2001), and NH was among the most effective in moving families out of poverty and improving child and teen outcomes. A unique strength in NH was its income supplements for full-time work, community service jobs to help some participants get started, and a suite of benefits that were flexible given the wide variety of circumstances among working-poor adults and their families. Programs that only offer work supports, such as training programs, for example, are less effective, compared to NH with income supplements, childcare, and other work supports.

Costs for expanding NH model programs require calculation as well before broad policy implications are appropriate. At \$3,300 per participant per year as the approximate net cost of NH, both states and the federal government would need to invest new resources in programs like NH to make them viable, or shift funds from other programs into NH models. Social savings owing to NH could well be significant in future years, and might well fully pay the costs of NH-type programs (e.g., because of savings gained from reductions of high-risk youth involved in the criminal justice system or special education; savings

from taxes paid by workers; other support programs, like welfare, not needing to be used). Expanded NH programs could reduce other funding currently going to other, less effective, programs. However the likely savings in public costs that will occur in the future are often insufficient, by themselves, to persuade politicians with short-term time horizons to make such investments. Nonetheless, the evidence from the NH studies taken as a whole would justify increased public investments because of long-term monetary as well as social benefits.

The NH model also competes with other poverty reduction proposals for policy attention (the Earned Income Tax Credit; urban empowerment zones; major tax code reforms; general health insurance proposals among many others). A policy question is not only whether to commit to poverty reduction policies at all, or whether to commit funds to a particular program like NH, and at what cost, but also to decide which among many competing antipoverty and family support programs with partially overlapping goals to support (e.g., the Bos et al. 2007 review, a Brookings Institution study for the Hamilton Project). Other state, local, and federal programs and agencies often compete for scarce funding. Programs often operate in their own institutional “silos” that have other funding streams and constituencies, but are not work–family support programs. Policy analysis at this kind of scale requires designs and evidence seldom available in psychological anthropology or anthropology more generally (unless, as in the case of the NH study, it is partnered with other evidence and involves policymakers).

In any event, policy is not necessarily made based on research evidence primarily, or even at all, but, rather, on considerations such as the societal and political values of constituents, who holds power, existing institutional pipelines and funding streams, funding constraints, legal issues, and, yes, perhaps evidence (or more broadly information or data) of various kinds as well. Nonetheless, NH’s random assignment design, large sample, and integrated use of qualitative along with quantitative methods, was an unusually strong test of whether NH led to changes in work, earnings, parenting, and child and eventually adolescent well-being, and why it was effective. Our results clearly justify the development of further, larger-scale NH programs, perhaps in a number of states that could be interested in further testing and developing such programs.

Conclusion

Psychological anthropology methods, conceptual frameworks and contextually rich evidence can contribute to understanding larger-scale policy and how it influences local communities and programs. Some of the findings of the NH study also contributed to theory and methods in the field of work–family influences generally. The evidence also showed how adult life goals and family goals can significantly affect work trajectories and therefore program impacts. Some parents were thwarted by the often difficult conditions of low wage work; others found successful work trajectories; still others traded work hours for more time with family, even though NH benefits were contingent on work. In addition to these contributions, cross-cultural and international studies will continue to be essential to bring

comparative fieldwork evidence from cultures around the world (not just European data) to improve theory and evidence in Western social science, and psychological anthropology is well positioned to do that as well.

The contributions of psychocultural and ethnographic evidence for understanding the NH program included evidence for how NH worked, why its impacts were selective, and the processes and mechanisms in the program and in families that mattered for NH success and failure. The qualitative findings from fieldwork can influence how future versions of NH might be more effective, how staff could be trained, how participants could be better integrated and so forth. That is, those data helped focus on practice implications of NH as well as large-scale policy implications. Improving program practices is not easy to do and requires careful analysis of behaviors in context, often over time. A committed fair witness framework can be useful for practice questions, because practices occur in particular contexts that require fieldwork and the experiences of participants to understand them and to drive change. Practitioners know well that they could be doing better and would like to know how to do so. In many respects it is just as critical to the success of programs and interventions to understand how a policy works in practice in local settings and in communities as it is to focus on policy in general, and the close study of local contexts often is where psychological anthropology is strongest and has the most to contribute.

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Notes

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1. The “fair witness” phrase has been used by the science fiction writer Robert Heinlein, who used it in the novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1991). It describes the observer who only reports what he actually sees and hears without any inference or interpretation, drawing no conclusions, and using trained eidetic memory. This is of course not the definition intended here.

2. The AAA has an interest group—the Interest Group for the Anthropology of Public Policy (IGAPP; igapp.net), which fosters the work of anthropologists studying public policies and policy making as social, political and cultural phenomena. IGAPP does not take action on issues. This approach may be illustrated by Shore and Wright’s *The Anthropology of Policy*, for example: “an anthropological approach to policy treats the models and language of decision-makers as ethnographic data to be analyzed rather than as frameworks for analysis” (Shore and Wright 1997: xi). The AAA also has the Committee on Public Policy for the association. The National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA) is a professional organization of those practicing anthropology often in the public or policy sector. The Society for Applied Anthropology (<http://www.sfaa.net>) “promotes Anthropological perspectives and methods in solving human problems throughout the world, to advocate for fair and just public policy based upon sound research.”

3. Parents described the home chores and family obligations of boys ages 11 to 17 who had at least one younger sibling. This group included ten African American, eight Hispanic, and three biracial youth, and they also included data from another focus group sample of mothers of teens not in the NH sample.

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