

more than 30 hours and viewed the program's benefits as a way of making work and family demands more manageable. If anything, experimental-control differences in the labor supply among these families were negative. In contrast, families not working full-time at baseline viewed New Hope as a way of facilitating a transition to full-time work. On balance, experimental-control effects on labor supply were positive for these families, although stronger in the first than second year of the program.

Qualitative interviews pointed to important heterogeneity among this latter set of families. Some, perhaps one-fifth, had multiple problems (e.g., drug dependence, children with severe behavior problems, relatives in ill health) that New Hope's package of benefits could not be expected to overcome. Others had no such apparent problems, and in these cases, both experimental and control families could be expected to do well in Milwaukee's job-rich environment.

A third group, however—those who were only one or two barriers away from making it—might well profit the most from the New Hope package of benefits. Extensive quantitative work on barrier-defined subgroups showed this to be the case.⁵ Program effects on the labor supply among families with a small number of barriers were large and, if anything, larger in the second than the first year. This key set of findings would simply not have been discovered were it not for the qualitative work.

Use the Same Individuals to Gather and Analyze Both Kinds of Data

Although hard to prove, our experience suggests that it is vital to integrate the two methods of data collection. For three graduate students who both gathered and analyzed qualitative data and analyzed the survey data, the integration was complete. We cannot imagine the same degree of integration between two groups, each specializing in one form of data collection and analysis. Individuals trained and actively engaged in both methods must constantly confront the productive tensions resulting from the two methods. The qualitative dimension provides a deeper level of meaning to the quantitative variables and analysis, while the larger quantitative sample provides needed perspective on the relatively small and potentially idiosyncratic nature of families in the qualitative study. We have many instances where the synergy between the two methods deepened our understanding of family process and child development in New Hope families.

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⁵ Katherine Magnuson. "Appendix K: The Barrier Indicator Index." In Bos et al. *New Hope for People with Low Incomes* (n.2 above), pp. 345-55

Understanding Better the Lives of Poor Families: Ethnographic and Survey Studies of the New Hope Experiment

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■ an there be any doubt that we need to mix variable-based and person-centered knowledge to help us understand what is really going on in families' lives? Fieldwork helps us understand families' concerns and adaptations under the difficult circumstances that they face. Ethnographic data provide depth across levels of analysis (ecological, social, cultural, psychological), breadth across all the topics of concern to a family, contextual complexity, and an understanding of the whole life experience of our participants. In mixed-method research, the challenge is to harness the strength of ethnography in a way that is approachable and useful for the entire team. Duncan and Gibson summarized insights gained from the interaction of quantitative and qualitative data in the New Hope evaluation. We discuss the elements necessary for an effective ethnographic study embedded in a larger evaluation, as ours was in the larger New Hope project. These elements include coordinating a research team, selecting a sample, and understanding the findings.

Team Elements

A shared research goal is important

An important shared goal of our research team was to understand the lives of economically poor families and their

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children. To accomplish this, fieldworkers listened closely to families, sat with them in their living rooms, and tried to grasp the world as they saw it and described it. It also meant understanding the survey findings, the significance of New Hope as a policy experiment, and the goals of those who imagined and created New Hope as an organization to help families. The research team did not share an equal commitment to a certain ideology, epistemology, or discipline. Nevertheless, our desire to understand what was truly happening in the lives of families cut across any potential ideological or theoretical conflicts.

The ethnographic team should include non-fieldworkers as well as fieldworkers

Our team benefited greatly from the contributions of those who were not themselves conducting the interviews. For example, one person was responsible for establishing our web site, on which all fieldworkers posted their field notes, searched for topics, and linked the field notes to the survey data. Our project field manager, who had experience with such teams from other studies, sorted out myriad problems and worked to keep us on track. Others not on the fieldwork team—New Hope staff members, researchers responsible for the quantitative report, and colleagues with a variety of policy and ethnographic experiences—came to our meetings. This permitted an exchange of ideas and added insights that would not have been possible if we had limited our team to fieldworkers only.

Have a plan for fieldwork based on shared research topics

The New Hope ethnography is a focused, rather than a comprehensive, ethnography. A comprehensive ethnography would have included a holistic description of the way of life in a community. Instead, we focused the ethnography with particular themes and topics that guided our visits. These topics covered concerns of the New Hope child and family evaluation: work history, family finances, child care and child monitoring, take-up and use of the New Hope services and other resources, family history, roles of fathers and partners in mothers' lives, and many other topics. Using a shared set of topics makes integration with the survey data easier and more flexible as the study progresses. In addition, it was of great value in providing a common core of systematic, shared information for the team.

Sample Elements

Choose a representative sample

Our ethnographic sample was randomly selected from families in New Hope who had school-aged children. We successfully recruited 78% of the families we attempted to

contact, and 87% of those who still lived in the Milwaukee-Chicago area. This sample allows us to compare our patterns of findings with the survey, and minimizes, although not entirely eliminates, selection bias.

We also selected some exemplar cases—families that had certain characteristics that we wanted to understand better, but that might not have appeared in the random sample. This includes, for example, single fathers, community activists, or successful community service job participants. However, we do not include these cases in the random sample when we summarize ethnographic findings for comparison with the survey.

In our view, ethnographic studies should choose samples on a more representative basis. Samples do not necessarily have to be randomly drawn from a known population as in the New Hope study (this may be impossible in many circumstances), but more careful consideration of sampling would improve integration of qualitative and quantitative work, as well as the generalizability and believability of ethnographic samples.

Include control-group families in an ethnographic study

Ethnographic studies are not usually done using random assignment experimental designs as a sampling frame. The ethnographic team has found including controls to be very valuable to understanding the effects of New Hope. The randomized study design is also valuable in integrating survey and ethnographic findings because both data sets can make experimental-control analyses and compare results.² As noted by Duncan and Gibson, however, ethnographic methods cannot by themselves indicate effects of statistical significance. However, they can suggest processes, mechanisms, and beliefs families hold that might account for statistical findings.

Findings Elements

Field notes should be public to the research team and should be linked to quantitative data

We developed a secure web-based system for posting field notes using a modified version of the computer program *Filemaker Pro*. Notes are posted in their entirety after a visit, and also posted under current themes and topics. There is also space for new topics and themes. Fieldworkers can search this text database and do so continuously. The field notes are also linked to the survey data and other demographic information on families in *Filemaker*. This "distributed ethnography" is an

²T. S. Weisner, L. Bernheimer, C. Gibson, E. Howard, K. Magnuson, J. Romich, and E. Lieber. "From the Living Rooms and Daily Routines of the Economically Poor: An Ethnographic Study of the New Hope Effects on Families and Children." Presented at the biannual meetings of Society for Research in Child Development, Albuquerque, New Mexico, April 16, 1999

important innovation and makes quantitative-qualitative integration easier and more powerful.

Survey and ethnographic data will not necessarily match

Predictable inconsistencies appear when fieldworkers compare what parents said on the survey or what appears in administrative records with what they observe and hear from parents. Any notion that what parents say on a one-time survey fully reflects the complex world parents experience is quickly brought to reality. For example, the survey question "Who is living in your household now?" will likely inadequately capture the complex and ever-changing mix of children, cousins, in-laws, and romantic partners involved in a household. In addition, previous research has shown that income is not always reported to survey interviewers or others.³

Because fieldworkers were sometimes also analysts of the survey data, this engagement in the inconsistency and complexity of family life was valuable. It clarifies what a survey can and cannot reveal, and it leads to a healthy caution about inferring what parents actually are like based on the means in a table. It helps us to not falsely imagine homogeneity among all parents with a code of "2" on a particular survey item. Ethnographic data can spur one to think of alternative ways of coding quantitative survey data that are more directly tied to "lived" phenomena.

Allow ethnographic findings to inform follow-up surveys

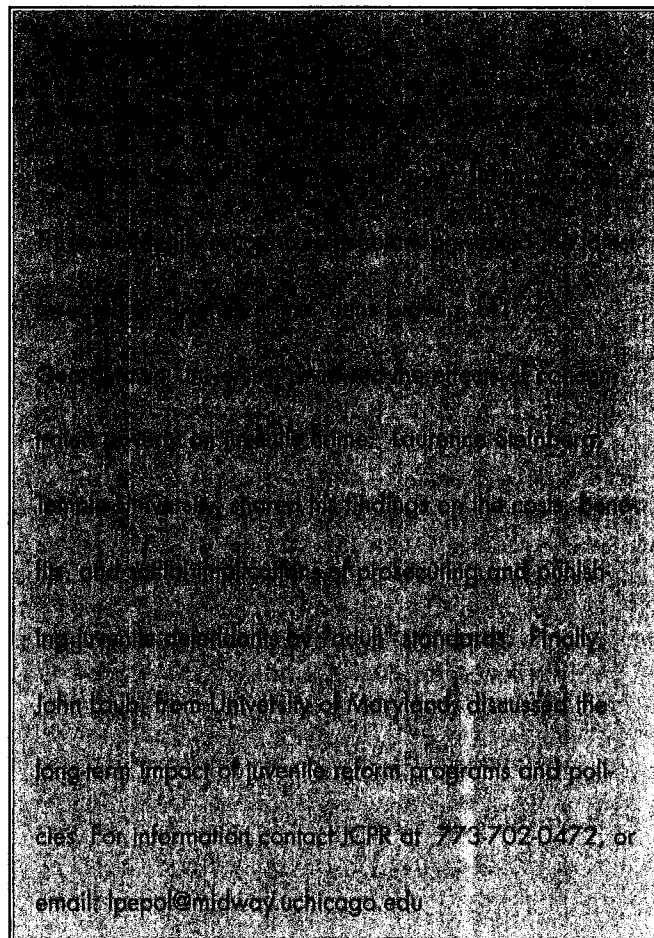
Our ethnography revealed that important aspects of family functioning were not captured by the two-year follow-up survey. The five-year follow-up survey will thus include measures that we have developed from our ethnographic research. We have created items that examine flexibility in work; roles of male partners in women's lives; beliefs about the "system" and what it means for poor and minority communities; and the ability of families to sustain a daily routine that is meaningful given scarce resources. It is vital that surveys include ethnographic topics and items, even if (or precisely because) they may not be "standard" survey items. Otherwise, critical aspects of family well-being may be ignored.

Ethnography is a good method for capturing ambivalence

Longitudinal ethnographic work can capture a very common psychological state that is often overlooked in surveys or questionnaires: ambivalence. Participants were ambivalent about the desire for full-time work, the advantages of day

care, and of the merits of the New Hope project itself. For example, many parents did not "hear" the specifics of the New Hope offer correctly and had incorrect beliefs about the program and so did not participate when they well might have, or they stopped participating when they could have continued. Some were suspicious of New Hope policies for no rational reason from the perspective of staff (or fieldworkers). These are messy findings about parents, families, and the real world that are best captured by longitudinal ethnographic work.

It is fair to say, however, that some researchers may want to remain ignorant of the complex world of low-income family life. Perhaps this is why ethnographic work and its methods are sometimes not taken as seriously as quantitative methods. Ethnography may be threatening to the validity of the neat categories yielded by quantitative work, or its methods yield information that is too subjective. We think that just the opposite is true. Such everyday realities of parents' and children's lives are where any policy intervention has to "live." It is where many well-intentioned policies flounder. Local, situated, "family-up" programs need to know this world and integrate family perceptions and everyday life into quantitative studies. ■



³ K. Edin and L. Lein. *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997.