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Family as Excuse and Extenuating Circumstance: Social Organization and Use of Family Rhetoric in a Work Incentive Program

The family discourse perspective is used to analyze social relations in a Work Incentive Program (WIN). Family discourse in WIN was an organizationally embedded ideology and rhetoric that staff members and clients used to justify their practical interests. Their family discourse turned on whether portrayals of reported family troubles were legitimate extenuating circumstances that justified exemption of clients from WIN activities or excuses that clients used to avoid their WIN responsibilities. The analysis focuses on the ways in which WIN staff members oriented to and assessed family as an excuse and extenuating circumstance, instructed clients on the organizationally preferred relationship between WIN and family, and responded to clients whom they assessed as making excuses.

The purpose of this article is to analyze how the folk concept of family was rhetorically organized and used by staff members and clients in a Work Incentive Program (WIN). Rhetoric is political discourse, as Burke (1950) states, that is intended to persuade others to adopt and act on one's preferred understandings of social reality. Rhetoric is a major way in which human service professionals anticipate and seek to manage potentially "troublesome" others, including their clients who often act in ways that human service professionals de-

scribe as inappropriate, if not overtly hostile (Miller, 1991; Miller and Holstein, 1991). Human service professionals' rhetorical efforts also involve assigning preferred identities to themselves and others in their work worlds, such as by describing their clients as "good" and "bad" family members (Burke, 1950).

WIN is a government-sponsored and operated welfare program that provides help in finding jobs and related social services (such as personal counseling, funds to cover some job-seeking expenses, and training in job-seeking skills) to selected recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) (Coudroglou, 1982; Johnson, 1973; Rein, 1974, 1975, 1982; Segalman and Basu, 1981; Stein, 1976). AFDC serves the children of poor families by providing a financial base for meeting their families' basic subsistence needs and keeping family members together. The purpose of WIN is to help AFDC recipients become economically self-sufficient by finding jobs and, thereby, to reduce the government's welfare costs.

Most of the clients enrolled in the WIN program studied were required to participate in order to receive their AFDC grants. The only exceptions were those who met one of the following conditions of exemption:

> children under [the] age of 16 or attending school; those ill, incapacitated, or of advanced age; those so remote from a project [WIN office] as to preclude participating; those caring for a member of the household who is ill or incapacitated; a mother in a family where the father registers; and a mother of a child under

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age six. [Rein, 1974: 115]

The analysis extends recent studies of family discourse as an aspect of contemporary human service organizations (Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1982; Gubrium and Holstein, 1987, 1990; Gubrium and Lynott, 1985; Holstein, 1988; Miller, 1986, 1987). Family rhetoric is analyzed as ideology that is embedded in public policies intended to ameliorate the problems of unemployed welfare recipients. While family rhetoric and ideology are aspects of many laws and programs concerned with the poor and unemployed, the policies of concern for this analysis are those established by local WIN staff members in defining and responding to their clients' troubles. As Lipsky (1980) notes, the practical meanings and consequences of abstract and general policies are established as human service and social control professionals deal with the diverse and practical issues that emerge in their work relationships.

FAMILY AS ORGANIZATIONALLY EMBEDDED DISCOURSE

Studies of family discourse analyze the diverse ways in which the folk concept of family is defined and used in everyday life. Family is an interpretive framework that "people use to define social bonds" (Holstein, 1988: 261). Family images are rhetorically formulated and expressed as political orientations to practical issues. They are intended to advance speakers' and writers' interests, which range from those of politicians in dealing with troublesome publics (Edelman, 1977) to those of parents in telling family stories to their children (Stone, 1988). Family discourse is more than a straightforward description of "objective" reality, then—it is a discourse for creating and justifying realities having practical consequences for persons' lives.

Analyzed as discourse, family is not just a legal category or concrete social group that is located in a household, but a cultural resource that interactants use to make sense of situations and take actions within them. Family is a usage, not a thing. Family is constituted *in situ* as interactants describe themselves and others as family members and classify diverse social relationships into types of families. Further, family discourse is pervasive in contemporary human service and social control organizations where family is treated as a sign and cause of clients' troubles (Gubrium, 1987). Within

such organizations, family is constituted as a matter of public interest and intervention.

An example of how family is constituted in organizations is Emerson's (1969) analysis of family discourse in a juvenile court. Court officials treated the juveniles' family situations as practical and moral contexts having implications for juveniles' behavior and court officials' responsibilities in responding to the behavior. The court officials' family discourse involved descriptions of juveniles' families as "good" and "bad." As Emerson (1969: 129) explains,

> Juvenile court personnel assume that "something wrong in the home" is a cause and sign of a future delinquent career. . . . If nothing is done in such a case, it is felt, the child will grow up uncared for, uncontrolled, and perhaps even warped in personality by the treatment received at the hands of his parents. Under such circumstances, the court feels obligated to intervene in order to correct the situation and prevent the probable drift of the youth into increasingly serious delinquent activities.

The court officials studied by Emerson are similar to other human service and social control professionals who also orient to their clients' family situations as objective conditions that exist separate from their portrayals of the situations. They formulate and express the orientation by describing clients' family situations as observable conditions that exist outside of human service and social control organizations and as having relevance for organization officials' decisions and actions. Looked at another way, however, human service and social control professionals' orientation to family situations as objective conditions is a justification of their interest in assessing and intervening in aspects of their clients' lives. Put in Foucault's (1975) language, the orientation is central to human service and social control professionals' *gaze* through which they interpret, monitor, and direct their clients' activities and relationships.

Human service and social control professionals "gaze upon" family by describing it in organizationally and professionally approved ways. The descriptions are ways of constituting family as something that they can observe, assess, and respond to in preferred ways. To say that family is embedded in contemporary human service organizations, then, is to point to how family is both a discourse (or rhetoric) and an artifact of organizational processes. It is produced through human

service and social control professionals' work, including their interactions with others in their work worlds (Miller and Holstein, 1989, 1991). Family rhetoric is partly embedded in contemporary human service organizations as ideology; that is, as a normative discourse that promulgates officially sanctioned images of proper human relationships and roles (Bernardes, 1985a, 1987).

Family ideology is frequently used to justify the nuclear family, but it is also used to justify such social values as employment, individualism, and gender and age distinctions. As Bernardes (1985b) states, family is ideologically described as an idealized division of labor based on gender and age distinctions. Such a portrayal of family is idealized because it does not take account of the variety of ways in which social roles and relationships are organized in everyday life or how mundane, practical problems are defined and managed in human groups. The description becomes normative and prescriptive when each family member is held accountable for fulfilling his or her responsibilities in the idealized family's division of labor, including the responsibility of one or more adult members to provide for the economic needs of their dependents.

The rest of the analysis is concerned with the rhetorical organization and uses of family ideology in a Work Incentive Program. We begin with the methods and setting. Later sections analyze staff members' orientations to and instruction of clients about WIN, family and clients' employment troubles, assessments of clients' employment troubles as potential family problems, and responses to clients whom staff members portrayed as uncooperative. Finally, we consider some of the implications of the study for analyzing family discourse as an aspect of human service and social control organizations.

METHODS, SETTING, AND ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

The analysis is based on 13 months of field work in a Work Incentive Program in a small midwestern city. The program was jointly administered by officials from the local office of the State Job Service, who monitored and directed clients' job-seeking activities, and social workers from the County Welfare Department, who counseled clients about family and emotional problems that staff members portrayed as impediments to cli-

ents' finding jobs. The WIN staff totaled 11 persons, 7 of whom of were actively involved in monitoring and directing clients' job-seeking activities. The research involved observing staff members' routine activities and staff-client interactions in the WIN office. Depending on the circumstances of the meetings, the data reported here are based on field notes taken during staff-client and staff-staff encounters or reconstructions made shortly after the interactions.

Staff members stressed that WIN was intended to ensure that clients "earned" their AFDC benefits by looking for jobs and engaging in other employment-related activities. They partly justified this formulation of WIN purposes by portraying clients' employment troubles as family troubles. Specifically, staff members described family as a division of labor involving differing responsibilities by family members. The family responsibility that staff members emphasized in their dealings with clients and each other was parents' obligation to provide financial support for their families. Staff members used this formulation of family rhetorically and ideologically to cast their clients as partial failures as parents and assign reponsibility for solving clients' troubles to clients.

For staff members, a major step in clients' remedying their employment troubles was participation in WIN. Further, staff members treated clients' responses to their WIN assignments as tests of clients' motives in seeking government aid and of their commitment to getting off of welfare. According to staff members, one of their major responsibilities involved monitoring clients' job-seeking activities and taking actions intended to hold "uncooperative" clients accountable for their failure to fulfill WIN expectations. Staff members held their most uncooperative clients accountable by terminating the clients' participation in WIN or, as staff members often stated, by "firing" clients from their WIN jobs. Depending on their welfare status, clients fired from WIN lost all or a substantial portion of their AFDC grants.

Staff members portrayed clients' WIN jobs as the fulfillment of all assignments made by the staff. The assignments included regular meetings with staff members, going to the Alternative Education Center to take various examinations intended to diagnose clients' vocational and educational aptitudes, and working in nonprofit organizations in order to gain work experience and local

job references. Clients were reimbursed for a portion of their job-seeking expenses (based on the number of miles that they traveled in looking for jobs), paid a nominal salary for working in the nonprofit organizations, and sometimes given money to pay for car repairs needed to continue looking for jobs and/or to purchase tools, uniforms, and other specialized items that are required to hold some jobs.

As a practical matter, staff members defined adequate clients participation as fulfilling all of their WIN assignments in documentable ways. For example, clients were required to list all of the jobs for which they applied on a WIN form, which clients then gave to staff members at their regular meetings. Staff members used the documents to assess whether clients were making sincere efforts to find jobs, and to calculate the amount of reimbursement that clients deserved. Clients who failed to keep their WIN appointments, showed little job-seeking activity on their WIN forms, or, from the staff's perspective, made unrealistic mileage claims were warned that their actions were unacceptable and, if the actions continued, could result in the clients' termination from WIN.

Clients whom staff members portrayed as seriously and chronically uncooperative were referred to conciliation meetings where staff members made formal complaints against them and they were sometimes terminated from the program. According to staff members, termination of clients from WIN was a last resort (Emerson, 1981; Emerson and Messinger, 1977), which they sought to avoid by warning clients of the possible consequences of their continued uncooperative actions and countering clients' accounts about why they could not fulfill their WIN assignments or made "unrealistic" mileage claims. Staff members treated such client accounts as excuses that clients used to avoid their WIN responsibilities. Staff members stated that one of their major professional responsibilities involved identifying and countering clients' excuses.

But staff members did not treat all such client accounts as excuses. They stated that some clients suffered from "real" problems—such as physical and mental disabilities—that made it impossible for the clients to look for and keep jobs. Staff members described such clients' problems as job barriers and responded to them by referring the clients to physicians, psychiatrists, and other specialists for help in dealing with the barriers. Staff members exempted from all WIN participation clients whom they assessed as unlikely ever to overcome their job barriers. They explained that referring clients to specialists and exempting them from the program were humane and realistic responses to some clients' life circumstances. Staff members also portrayed their actions as part of their professional responsibilities in WIN, to which they were held accountable by their organizational superiors.

In sum, a major professional concern of staff members involved distinguishing between clients who had legitimate problems that made it difficult (if not impossible) for them to fulfill their WIN responsibilities and those who were making excuses. The concern was an aspect of virtually all of the staff members' interactions with clients and deliberations about clients' troubles. It was also central to staff members' orientations to family as an aspect of their clients' employment troubles. Thus, staff members' orientations to family were intertwined with their definitions of clients' employment troubles and their professional responsibilities in WIN.

STAFF MEMBERS' ORIENTATIONS TO WIN, FAMILY, AND UNEMPLOYMENT

According to the staff members, most WIN clients were responsible for their employment troubles because they held unrealistic attitudes toward employment, adulthood, family, and welfare. Staff members justified the claim by noting that many clients' employment histories involved a variety of short-term jobs between which the clients were often on welfare. They described the clients' employment histories as unstable and contrasted them with the stable employment histories of other—"normal"—adults who, according to the staff, seldom need welfare assistance. In so describing their clients, staff members cast them as deviants and defined one of their own major professional responsibilities in WIN. It involved breaking the unemployment-welfare cycle by making clients like "normal" adults.

The descriptions were also rhetorical and policy-making activities because staff members used the descriptions to justify their preferred responses to clients' employment troubles. A major aspect of staff members' policy-making activities involved family rhetoric that they used to explain

the causes of clients' employment troubles and justify their preferred responses to them.

Unemployment and Family

Staff members stated that clients' employment troubles were related to their family circumstances, which they portrayed as different from those of "normal" families. For example, staff members portrayed some WIN clients as uniquely troubled family members because of their location in their families' social structure. Consider, for example, the following staff member account of how the third oldest male child in a family with four children (only one of whom is female) is likely to end up on welfare.

> I find that number three kids in a family of four with one girl is often a problem. They have no place in the family. Not the oldest, youngest or a girl. It happens all the time. Even three college graduates and one on welfare. It's the third child.

Staff members also explained their clients' differing responses to the stresses of unemployment by describing some clients' families as effective support systems and others as ineffective. This was the case in the following staff member account of unemployment and the extended family.

> I think the extended family is important. It cushions people if they're close to relatives. It gives them psychological, social and financial support. The . . . WIN people [clients] who are part of extended families aren't so vulnerable.

Most frequently, however, staff members explained the sources of their clients' employment histories by describing clients' families as sources of antiwork values and practices. Staff members stated that persons with long-term employment histories were committed to work and self-sufficiency as a way of life. To that end, they developed values and lifestyles that placed their employment obligations above others and emphasized dependability in their dealings with employers. Staff members partly distinguished their clients from long-term employees by describing clients' families as involving values, lifestyles, and commitments that deemphasized employment as a social value. The following staff member explanations for their clients' employment troubles are examples of how they rhetorically formulated and used the concept of family in this way.

> I talked to a [client] the other day. She said her

son comes home for supper between four and ten [o'clock] every night. [She said,] "It's hard to keep his meal warm." I said, "My God, can't he come at a certain time?" She said, "No, boys and men are like that. There's nothing you can do." Well, it's obvious what an attitude like that means for work. They don't care.

> Some of these people will go off to [another state] to a funeral and stay two or three weeks. The family gets together and has a reunion. When they lose their jobs, they get mad and don't understand. Like the employer is supposed to hold their jobs for two or three weeks. Good jobs.

While staff members usually described clients' families as sources of antiwork values and practices, they did not always do so. Indeed, staff members sometimes countered this formulation of family and clients' troubles by raising questions about the appropriateness of WIN's emphasis on job seeking and employment as the best solution to clients' troubles. The alternative formulation emphasized the noneconomic—particularly, family—troubles faced by clients that might be exacerbated by full-time employment. Staff members rhetorically used this formulation of family and clients' troubles to justify decisions and actions that deemphasized job seeking for some clients. As in the following staff member statement, they also used the formulation to portray their professional responsibilities in WIN as including the protection of clients' families.

> I know that work [job seeking] is important but I'm not sure that it is *that* important. There are other things, like the family. I believe that we should protect the family too, especially in this day and age with everything going on [problems with young people]. I think the mother should be in the home with her kids, especially in the summer. They say that these people aren't good parents, but who's to say that the other [employed mothers] would be better?

While the above formulation of family and clients' troubles might be used to challenge the legitimacy of the WIN program's emphasis on job seeking as the best solution to clients' troubles, staff members did not do so. Rather, they used such descriptions of clients' family circumstances to justify assignments that could be portrayed as inadequately emphasizing job seeking and employment. Family was an account that staff members used and others honored in explaining their decisions and actions. Thus, staff members' in-

terest in family was practical and related to their interest in fulfilling their WIN responsibilities in professionally approved ways.

Clients also formulated and used family to define their troubles and justify their preferred responses to them. We next consider clients' family rhetoric and how staff members responded to it.

Family as an Excuse and Extenuating Circumstance

Clients' family rhetoric involved describing their life circumstances as dominated by family troubles and responsibilities that made it impossible for them to fulfill some or all WIN expectations and assignments. Described in this way, clients' WIN and family obligations are opposed circumstances and responsibilities to which clients are accountable in their everyday lives. Clients used family rhetoric to justify requests for exemption from WIN activities by describing their family troubles as conditions that overrode their WIN obligations. The claims were potentially problematic for staff members because staff members portrayed one of their WIN responsibilities as identifying and taking account of clients' special problems, including family troubles, that might keep them from looking for or holding jobs. Thus, the claims were not matters that staff members could ignore or dismiss out of hand.

Staff members fulfilled their professional responsibilities by assessing clients' claims to overriding family troubles as potential excuses and extenuating circumstances. According to staff members, the assessments were necessary because some clients cited "fictional" family troubles to justify their uncooperative actions. Staff members stated that clients' excuses ranged from claims that they could not find baby sitters to look after their children while they fulfilled their WIN assignments to claims that they needed the money provided by WIN to cover some of their job-seeking expenses to meet their families' basic living expenses. They added, however, that other clients suffered from "genuine" family troubles that made it impossible for them to fulfill their WIN assignments.

Staff members responded to clients' claims that they assessed as excuses by requesting documentary evidence for the claims and attempting to undermine any similar claims that clients might make in the future. They sought to undermine future client claims by granting clients' initial requests, but only on the condition that clients ful-

fill all of their WIN assignments in the future. On the other hand, staff members responded to clients' claims to family troubles that they assessed as extenuating circumstances by referring clients to area human service organizations for help, exempting clients from job-seeking assignments, and sometimes exempting them from all WIN activities.

Staff members also anticipated and sought to forestall clients' use of family as an excuse by instructing new clients on their WIN and family obligations. One aspect of the staff's rhetoric and instruction was the claim that the "real" interests of clients' families were best served through clients' participation in WIN.

INSTRUCTING CLIENTS ON WIN, EMPLOYMENT, AND FAMILY

Staff members' instruction of new clients was intended to introduce clients to the practical "facts of life" associated with being unemployed welfare recipients. The instruction was both a rhetorical and policy-making activity because staff members used it to introduce clients to and justify their preferred understandings of WIN purposes, the relationship between clients' WIN and family responsibilities, and how clients' troubles could best be remedied. Staff members' rhetoric and policy making centered in describing (producing) social conditions associated with clients' troubles and assessing clients' participation in WIN. Staff members used the conditions to anticipate and/or counter clients' alternative descriptions of their life circumstances (including family troubles and responsibilities) and requests for exemption from WIN activities.

One aspect of staff members' instruction and rhetoric involved portraying WIN as a job and clients' responsibilities in the WIN program as similar to those of employees in conventional employment settings. Staff members used the portrayal of WIN to instruct clients on their preferred definition of staff member–client relations (they are like conventional employer-employee relations) and to produce conditions for treating some clients' claims to overriding family troubles as excuses. The instruction sometimes began during staff members' first encounters with new clients. As in the following staff member response to a client's request to be exempted from job seeking because of family troubles, staff members denied

such requests by describing clients' justifications of their requests as unacceptable in employment settings and, therefore, unacceptable in WIN.

> Well, I don't know if that is a legitimate job barrier. I mean, if you had a job and you said you couldn't come in [to work] because you have to give your mother-in-law her insulin, that wouldn't be a legitimate excuse, would it?

Staff members also used their initial interviews with clients to question clients about their family circumstances, which they treated as possible signs and causes of clients' employment troubles. They treated clients' responses as information about their general orientations to adult roles and responsibilities. Consider, for example, the following question a staff member asked of a new client.

> I notice that you have decided not to increase your family. . . . Why don't you want more children? Are you avoiding a commitment?

Staff members reiterated and elaborated on these themes in subsequent meetings with clients, particularly in orientation meetings intended to introduce clients to WIN expectations and procedures. The instructions emphasized how clients' employment troubles centered in their inabilities to fulfill their obligations to provide for their families. The instructions were one way in which staff members used family ideology to cast clients as partial failures in fulfilling their parental obligations, and to assign responsibility for clients' employment troubles to clients. Staff members also stressed that their interest in helping clients get jobs was consistent with clients' families' interests in getting off of welfare.

Further, staff members used their initial instructions of clients to justify their intervention into clients' lives, and they produced social conditions for responding to clients who failed to fulfill their WIN assignments. The latter clients could be accused of not "doing their part" in solving their economic troubles and, therefore, not caring about their families' well-being. An example of how staff members did so is the following statement made at the outset of an orientation meeting.

> Well, okay, let me start with the purpose of WIN. The federal government has an interest in your children. It has an interest in seeing to it that all children have enough food and shelter and they're protected from these problems. They don't want to see children hurt when their parents are unemployed and can't take care of them. The federal government invests a lot of money in giving your kids a stable home. And most of your money is coming from the federal government, so it has an interest in you. I mean it is doing what you can't do for your kids right now. Because of that, the government has two interests in you. First, it has an interest in finding jobs so that you won't be on welfare anymore, so you can take care of your kids on your own. Second, it has an interest in ensuring that parents do their part in looking for a job, so they won't just sit around and not do anything. Okay? [pause] This is where WIN comes in, to help with these two things, that's why it was started in the first place.

Staff members also sought to forestall troubles with clients by describing organizationally approved conditions under which clients might legitimately fail to fulfill their WIN assignments. Staff members stressed that legitimate excuses were limited to emergencies and other matters over which clients had no control. They further described such "predictable" and "controllable" family needs as child care as illegitimate excuses. As in the following statement, staff members justified their classification of clients' excuses by equating WIN expectations with those of area employers.

> WIN expects from you what an employer usually expects. We expect you to keep all appointments, to be on time, unless you have a good excuse. If you can't keep an appointment, you are expected to call your WIN worker in advance. A good excuse is a court appearance, illness or something like that. You are expected to accept child care, if it is needed [in order to look for jobs]. . . . You are expected to faithfully look for work.

In sum, staff members' instruction of clients about WIN and their troubles involved interpretive procedures for constituting family as an external and objective condition in which staff members had a legitimate interest. It was a major way in which staff members introduced clients to an organizationally preferred and embedded family discourse. Staff members and clients used the family discourse to organize and negotiate practical issues emergent in interactions that turned on whether clients' claims to overriding family troubles were excuses or extentuating circumstances. Staff members elaborated on their initial portrayals of WIN and family in their subsequent interactions with clients. The elaborations were intended to show the practical meaning and implications of WIN policies for clients' participation

in WIN and to justify staff members' insistence that clients fulfill their WIN assignments.

ASSESSING CLAIMS TO FAMILY TROUBLES

According to staff members, their assessments of claims to overriding family troubles were related to their professional responsibilities to take account of troubles that might keep clients from fulfilling their WIN assignments while holding uncooperative clients accountable for their actions. Staff members fulfilled their professional responsibilities by demanding that persons claiming overriding family troubles substantiate their claims. As a practical matter, then, claims to overriding family troubles were excuses until staff members were persuaded otherwise. Staff members were persuaded by documentary and other "evidence" that they could cite in clients' WIN files in justifying their decisions to exempt the clients from some or all WIN activities. Staff members' demand for evidence was one way in which they anticipated and sought to counter others' criticisms of their decisions.

For staff members, the preferred appeals of clients to family life as an extenuating circumstance involved documentable conditions that could be cited as meeting one or more of the conditions for exemption specified in WIN policies. One such appeal involved pregnant clients who requested exemption from WIN. While staff members could have required the clients to participate in WIN until the births of their children, the clients were routinely exempted upon receipt of medical confirmation of the clients' claims. Staff members justified their actions by portraying the clients as generally meeting the WIN policy that exempted clients with preschool-age children from WIN.

While documentation of clients' family troubles served staff members' practical interest in justifying their decisions and actions, staff members could not always insist that clients formally verify their claims because the claims involved circumstances that were of no interest to local social service, legal, and medical agencies. For example, clients' claims to being unable to find adequate child care were not formally verifiable, and consequently, staff members used another approach in substantiating such client claims. The approach centered in producing social conditions for testing clients' claims and motives. It was both a practical

response to a recurring issue in staff-client interactions and a policy-making activity through which staff members distinguished between "cooperative" clients and those with "genuine" family troubles.

Experienced staff members instructed new staff members on the importance of this response in dealing with undocumentable client claims and the techniques associated with it. An example is the following instruction given by the WIN supervisor to a new staff member regarding his response to a client's claim that she could not attend a job-seeking skills class because she could not find a baby sitter. The supervisor stated that the client's claim sounded like an excuse, and in any case, the new staff member should not accept such client claims without first verifying them. The supervisor explained,

> You shouldn't make these snap judgments. Go back and get all the information that you need and then think about it, consider all the information. It's her [the client's] responsibility to find child care, you know. Find out if child care is available. . . . If she can't make it for this class, see if she can go to the next one. You could tell her that she doesn't have to go to this one, but she should use the next two weeks to find a baby sitter. Don't just let her off. . . . You just shouldn't make snap judgments like this on the phone, though. You need to consider the facts.

This instruction shows how staff members responded to clients' claims to overriding family troubles by eliminating conditions that clients might cite in the future to justify not fulfilling their WIN assignments. Specifically, the WIN supervisor stated that, if the staff member's investigation showed that child care was not available, then he should instruct the client to find a baby sitter. Staff members also used the response to produce social conditions for testing clients' motives in requesting special treatment. Clients "failed" the test if they persisted in claiming that they could not fulfill their WIN assignments. In the above case, for example, when the client persisted in claiming that she could not find a baby sitter, the staff member treated the client's claims as evidence that she was making excuses. Staff members used evidence produced in this way to justify referring clients to conciliation meetings.

Staff members' tests of clients' claims and motives also involved questioning clients about their options in managing their family troubles.

The questions were intended to identify ways in which the clients could participate in WIN. Clients who responded in ways that staff members assessed as inadequate were portrayed by staff members as making excuses, placed in WIN programs involving job seeking, and told that they would have to obtain written confirmation from appropriate authorities before staff members would act on their requests. For staff members, persuasive client responses showed how the options raised by staff members would exacerbate, rather than remedy, clients' family troubles.

Consider, for example, the following staff member–client exchange involving a client who requested exemption from WIN because of a variety of family troubles. In describing her circumstance, the client stated that her alcoholic husband was never home to help her manage other family matters. The client justified her request by describing divorce as exacerbating, not solving, her family problems.

> *Staff member:* Do you plan to continue this situation?
> *Client:* Well, yeah, I don't see how I can change it. If I divorce him, then his daughter goes back to a foster home, she's been in one already. And his mother is alone and she'd be deserted.

While client responses such as this might be taken as conditions justifying exemption from WIN, staff members did not respond in this way. Rather, they first sought further evidence to support the clients' claims and requests. Sometimes they did so by referring clients to local social service, legal, and medical agencies, but they also tested clients' claims by requiring that the clients participate in WIN for a short time. Staff members described the response as not hurting the clients and providing them with additional information for assessing clients' family circumstances and requests. In the above case, for example, the client was told that she was "being shit on in [her] marriage" and would probably be exempted from WIN at some future time. The client was then assigned to a program involving job seeking and told that she would have to "get a taste of WIN" before staff members could consider exempting her.

Although they did so much less often than clients, staff members sometimes raised the possibility that clients' family lives potentially represented extenuating circumstances. They raised the issue in dealing with clients who had been in

WIN for some time and had reputations among staff members as mildly troublesome. Staff members portrayed such clients as not warranting official complaints but, nonetheless, having "bad" attitudes toward WIN and employment that were reflected in the clients' long-term dealings with the staff. The issue was raised as part of staff members' reconsideration of the causes of clients' troubles. Specifically, family life as a potentially extenuating circumstance was offered as an alternative explanation to the bad-attitude explanation.

Staff members justified the new explanation by treating their recent interactions with clients as providing new information and insight into clients' employment troubles and past behavior. Staff members also used explanations of clients' family lives as extenuating circumstances to justify new responses to clients' employment troubles. The responses involved reducing the job-seeking demands made of clients by staff members. The rationale used by staff members in justifying their decisions was that clients with family troubles need services that are not needed by clients with bad attitudes. For example, one client was assessed by his supervising staff member as probably having a bad attitude toward WIN and employment on the basis of his demeanor in their meetings, which the staff member described as apathetic.

The staff member changed her assessment of and orientation to the client when he asked that their meetings be moved to a later time in the day because his wife preferred to sleep late in the morning. The client explained that he found it difficult to wake, clean, dress, and feed his children before his early-morning WIN appointments. The staff member treated the client's explanation as new information, which she used to redefine the cause of the client's past behavior. She stated, "He may have a problem in his marriage if his wife sleeps so late and he has to do all this work." In so describing the client's family circumstance, the staff member assigned new meaning to the client's past behavior and cast family as a sign and cause of the client's troubles. She also recommended that a social worker visit the client's home to provide counseling.

Thus, in formulating and assessing family as an excuse or an extenuating circumstance, staff members produced social conditions that made their relationships with clients complex and prob-

lematic. The complexity centered in staff members' ongoing interpretive work concerned with whether clients had "real" family troubles, an issue that was always potentially open to reconsideration and change. But staff members stated that their professional obligation to consider clients' claims to overriding family troubles as potentially extenuating circumstances did not extend to all clients. Rather, they were only obligated to consider the appeals of clients who might be telling the truth, not those of clients who regularly failed to fulfill their WIN assignments.

COUNTERING UNCOOPERATIVE CLIENTS' USE OF FAMILY AS AN EXCUSE

Family issues were raised rhetorically by clients in conciliation meetings to explain the circumstances associated with their behavior. Staff members responded to the explanations by treating them as excuses and assigning undesired identities to the clients. Staff members did so in four major ways. The first response was observed only once and involved a client who stated that she was being unfairly singled out for harsh treatment by her WIN worker, who required that she report to the WIN office every morning. The client cast her complaint as a family issue by stating that "other people with kids don't hafta come in. I feel like I'm being picked on." The client's WIN worker responded by stating,

> You're not alone. If you'd come in in the morning, you'd see that you're not alone. There are other people having to do this.

In so responding, the WIN worker ignored the "family" aspect of the client's claim and portrayed his actions as fair because other clients with children were required to come to the office every day, and argued that, since the client had not kept any of her WIN appointments, she could not know whether she was being picked on. The staff member's response was intended to hold the client accountable for her WIN and employment troubles and to create conditions for eliciting a promise from the client that she would fulfill her future WIN assignments.

The second and more frequent staff member response involved portraying WIN as a job and clients as accountable to their WIN workers in the same ways that employees are accountable to their employers. The response was intended to impress upon clients the importance of keeping their WIN workers informed about their family circumstances. Staff members used the response to cast as illegitimate the clients' portrayals of their family troubles as private matters. The following example is a staff member's response to a client who stated that she failed to fulfill her WIN assignments because she could not find a baby sitter and that solving the problem was her responsibility.

> No, . . . it's our problem too. If you can't go to the Alternative Education Center, we need to know why. The government is giving you money and we have a right to know. If you work for somebody, they have a right to know why you're not coming to work. We can help you.

Third, clients sometimes portrayed themselves as caught in an impossible bind involving their families' and WIN's opposed interests. For example, some clients stated that their families needed the money that had to be spent in fulfilling their WIN assignments, including the bus fare that was spent to get to the WIN office to keep their WIN appointments. Clients justified their actions on the grounds that they were primarily concerned with the well-being of their families. Their actions, they said, were intended to "put their families first" in their lives. Staff members responded to such client claims by denying that there was a conflict of interest between WIN and clients' families.

Specifically, staff members described clients' families' primary interest as the maintenance of their AFDC benefits and countered clients' claims by describing their actions as hurting their families. The response was intended to hold clients responsible for their actions and to assign an undesired identity to clients who refused to promise to change their behavior. The following responses of staff members to clients' claims of placing highest priority on the welfare of their families are examples of how staff members responded to clients' family rhetoric.

> How much do you care about your family when you can't make it down here in the morning to keep your grant? That's not putting your family first, is it?

> What'll your kids do for food if you lose your grant? You will, you know, if you don't look for work.

Finally, staff members sometimes described the negative consequences of clients' continued uncooperative behavior for themselves and their families. The descriptions were intended to persuade clients to change their orientation to WIN by threatening them with new family troubles based on their inadequate WIN participation. They were expressed as scenarios of how clients might lose their families if they were terminated from WIN, and as statements of staff members' intention to inform the local court monitoring the clients' child support payments concerning their failure to cooperate. The latter clients were allowed to pay reduced child support so long as they were seriously looking for jobs. Clients assessed by the court as not looking for jobs could be arrested and jailed.

Through these rhetorical procedures, then, staff members countered clients' family rhetoric and fulfilled their professional responsibility to hold uncooperative clients accountable for their behavior.

CONCLUSION

This study raises questions about the usefulness of conventional sociological approaches to family that treat family as existing separate from persons' interpretations and portrayals of it, and common-sense portrayals of family as partial and/or biased. Such approaches fail to consider the diverse ways in which family is constituted discursively as interactants describe aspects of their everyday lives and justify their orientations to practical issues. Descriptions of family are more than simple expressions of interactants' perceptions; they involve interpretive procedures for organizing social relationships and realities. Conventional approaches to family also gloss over the ways in which family rhetoric is embedded in contemporary organizations, and the practical implications of organizationally embedded formulations and uses of family.

The study may be extended and generalized by considering at least two related questions about family rhetoric and organizational process. The questions involve the ways in which (*a*) human service and social control professionals constitute family rhetorically as an object of professional interest and intervention, and (*b*) public policies concerned with family are assigned practical meanings in human service and social control

organizations. The questions focus on how family is an organizationally embedded discourse and provide a basis for developing comparative analyses of family usage in human service and social control organizations. I conclude by considering the questions briefly in turn.

While some aspects of WIN staff members' orientation to family were unique, their treatment of family as a relevant context of their clients' troubles was not. The significance of this contextualization of troubles is reflected in the wide range of issues that are portrayed and treated as types of family troubles. They include various physical ailments, troubles involving children and adolescents, feelings of depression, and unemployment. Further, as this study shows, human service and social control professionals' interests in and formulations of family as contexts for their clients' troubles are related to their interests in properly fulfilling their professional responsibilities.

A beginning for the comparative analysis of human service and social control professionals' interests in and uses of family involves their portrayals of preferred family life. The approach might focus on the ways in which family is ideologically and nonideologically formulated and used in human service and social control organizations. WIN staff members formulated and used family in ideological ways by portraying "normal" family life as centered in economic self-sufficiency, a normative standard that welfare recipients cannot meet. Staff members' family rhetoric was also prescriptive because they used it to assign responsibility for solving clients' troubles to clients. They did so partly by treating clients' claims to family troubles as excuses and taking actions intended to hold uncooperative clients accountable for their behavior.

But not all human service professionals formulate and use family in this way. For example, Miller's (1987) study of family rhetoric in a family therapy agency analyzes how the therapists sought to remedy their clients' troubles by using their clients' depictions of family to redefine the troubles. The therapists portrayed their clients and clients' families as normally capable of managing their troubles and clients' involvement in therapy as a sign that they were temporarily "stuck," meaning that clients and their families were only focusing on the ways in which their lives and relationships were troublesome. According to

the therapists, their major professional responsibility to clients did not involve holding them accountable to a single normative standard, but helping clients get "unstuck." The therapists partly did so by using clients' portrayals of their families to help them develop new perspectives on their lives and troubles, which the therapists portrayed as sources for the development of new behaviors and relationships.

In sum, comparative studies of family discourse in human service and social control organizations promise insights into the diverse ways in which family is used to contextualize troubles and justify different responses to them. Such studies also promise insights into the relationships between human service and social control professionals' portrayals of their professional responsibilities and family discourse. Finally, comparative studies of family discourse in human service and social control organizations may be used to analyze policy making as a major work activity of human service and social control professionals.

Human service and social control professionals assign practical meanings to general policies (including those concerned with family) as they make sense of and respond to practical issues emergent in their mundane work relationships. WIN staff members did so by assessing portrayals of clients' family situations as possible excuses and extenuating circumstances, requesting documentation of clients' claims to overriding family troubles, and testing clients' motives in requesting to be exempted from WIN activities. They also assigned practical meanings to WIN policies and family by portraying clients' WIN assignments as ways for clients to fulfill their obligations to support their families financially by earning their AFDC grants. WIN staff members' formulations of family and policy making may be contrasted with those of the British child protection professionals studied by Dingwall, Eekelaar, and Murray (1983).

Dingwall and associates analyze how the child protection professionals made and implemented public policies by emphasizing the ways in which parents accused of mistreating their children were good parents. The professionals achieved their ends by showing how rules intended to hold neglectful and abusive parents accountable did not apply to most of the cases they investigated. Thus, studies of family rhetoric and policy making in human service and social control organizations provide insights into how the concept of family is sometimes used to cast individuals and groups as deviant and warranting state intervention into their lives or, other times, to neutralize rules which might be so used.

While the questions raised here do not exhaust the ways in which family may be analyzed as organizationally embedded discourse, they are a beginning for developing comparative analyses of family as an artifact of organizational process. Such analyses promise fresh insights into issues that have long interested sociologists of the family, including the ways in which family is defined as a social problem and the practical implications of public policies concerned with family issues. The achievement of these insights, however, depends on family sociologists' willingness to rethink many of their assumptions about family and language use. As Gubrium and Lynott (1985) state, studies of family discourse focus on the "power of language" by analyzing how family is a rhetorically constructed social order.

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