

***Who Cares?***  
***Finding a Sustainable Research Agenda in Non-Sustaining Times***

A Speculative Essay in Progress  
to be presented and elaborated upon at the  
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By  
Ann Withorn, PhD  
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This paper is a kind of “prequel” to a research agenda-in-progress. By virtue of the BUSSW invitation to focus my thinking with old friends and a presumably friendly audience of engaged academics and students I hereby attempt to share some part of my personal agenda setting process. At the least, I hope the effort helps me prepare a passable sabbatical proposal (although at this point my University will probably grant me a sabbatical just to go away) and to attract some new graduate students to share my quests. At most, I imagine this paper will inspire others to face the hardest questions of any research – Who cares about what I am trying to say? What difference can my hard earned information and analysis mean to anybody outside my small circle of colleagues, comrades and friends? How can a leftist social welfare researcher find any honest sense of relevance in increasingly unsocialized times?<sup>i</sup>

I expect this short paper to open up three discussions.

- Why not simply continue the satisfying but only-partially finished research on the impact of welfare reform on social agencies across the US?<sup>ii</sup>
- Why do I find myself preferring to write as a social welfare historian and social critic rather than as a social researcher, and what does this mean for my future work?<sup>iii</sup>
- Who cares about social welfare policies, social welfare history, much less social policy research and how do we respond to this lack of responsiveness?

The goal for this paper, then, is simply to provide readers with a digest of my thirty year history of social welfare research and writing as a base for considering what might come next. As well, I hope to discuss how surrounding intellectual and policy developments influence current dilemmas in social welfare research.<sup>iv</sup>

**Background: keeping one increasing research/action question**

Since my early days as a New Left activist in the late sixties I have been consumed with questions of poverty, especially family poverty in the USA. I wanted not so much to explore why such poverty exists, even though my generally structuralist, Marxist, Keynesian theoretical base has continued to offer basic insights, but much more I have kept worrying about why we as an “advanced” society remain so cruelly inept and punitive at alleviating social and individual consequences of poverty. I have looked first, last and always to low income people, anti-poverty activists, feminists and the labor

movement for guidance and direction in envisioning and demanding direct change. Much of what I wrote was not research in a tight sense, but a means of giving voice and support to low income women, direct service workers and the movements we were a part of.<sup>v</sup>

But for years it also seemed like research and committed writing could help. Qualitative research, along with feminist social criticism, did and could bring the real world of challenges facing poor women to light – beginning with the earliest work of Robert Coles and Carol Stack through the continually useful work of Barbara Ehrenreich. The results were there for anyone to “find:” women with children were especially vulnerable to poverty and neither husbands nor jobs were the answer. It was clear to many of us for a long time that without significant social investment women and children would be perpetually “at risk.”

With this assumption as a base, my own advocacy research work focused on the structure of and purposes for providing services and resources. How could social welfare policies best serve Andre Gorz’ radical reformist imperative – to provide real assistance that simultaneously engaged workers and “clients” in meaningful efforts to mediate social pain while revealing the absolute need for ever more deepening change. This led me to examine social movement services and to try to explain the dynamics of the less politicized but deeply grassroots oriented community services that emerged from the 1970s through the 1990s. Most specifically for my purposes here, my question led me to examine, with W.K.Kellogg Foundation funding, just how something as radically damaging as “welfare reform” effected the practice and purpose of community based services and those who attempted to work within them.

## **So why not simply continue the satisfying but partially finished research on the impact of welfare reform on social agencies across the US?**

It is this research that is still alive but on a back burner for now, for reasons I only partially understand. The project originally involved written and phone surveys undertaken with administrators in “innovative” agencies that had received W.K.Kellogg Foundation funding to develop and enhance services at the local level during the late 1980s and throughout much of the 1990s. My research associate, Pamela Jons, and I wrote a report, “Worrying about Welfare Reform” that asked agency staff at these agencies a range of questions about the awareness of their clients and program staff regarding welfare reform and how their workers and their agencies were responding to it. Later, in a follow-up study, “Let’s Pretend” another graduate student researcher, Kat Keenan, and I selected representative agencies from the original survey and conducted a brief phone interview followed by a two day site visit to the base agencies and others they recommended in their communities.

By the end of the second project I realized that factors such as high staff and client turnover, other regressive reforms like immigration policy, “workforce development” priorities, and faith based initiatives, meant that many program staff, except for “old timers,” simply did not think in terms of “post welfare reform”. Most people had just moved on, and almost of third of the original agencies could not be found three years later. At one point I wanted to entitle the follow-up book, “Don’t Look Back.” But instead I chose the title *Still Working for justice?* (Rather than present a summary of this research I have attached the accepted book proposal that summarizes the work and the plans, see the Appendix)

The research has been informative and enriched my teaching. I have a still a set of audio tapes and field notes that are rich and suggestive for use in the book. Appropriate audiences like to talk about it. So, I *can* come back to this work – indeed I have never left it in terms of my teaching, reading and lecturing. I even have a plan to do another follow-up to see how the agencies I visited are faring now and have sporadically begun this research via the web. It remains interesting, at least to me. And it addresses important questions about what happens on the ground to poor families and the agencies expected to help them when major policies change. It made me aware of what happens when we stop keeping track of some things and start funding others. I could, and can go on and on about the questions raised by this work.

But somehow I have lost heart for this research. In part it is because even the major, extremely well-funded Devolution Initiative and the “New Federalism” research haven’t seemed to make any difference to the policies aimed at address the situations facing poor women. What we said over and over again as much as ten or twenty years ago is still true, and now researchers who are studying it seem to be focusing more and more narrow questions. In regard to my own small studies, as I said in my conclusions then, I was disheartened to see with how quickly programs adapted to “new realities” and how legitimate old fears and old worries just seemed to fade away -- as long as replacement funding arrived or agency mergers “worked” for management at least.

My purpose here, however, is not to devalue research aimed at learning policy lessons from the most significantly regressive social policy change since 1935, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Rather my intent is to admit that I no longer think that if I do this new research and finish this book, it will make any difference to low income women, to human service workers and certainly not to any new schemes that would “more efficiently” provide community services to “vulnerable families.”

Other more wide ranging research on former welfare recipients has shown that people don't die without welfare, they mainly go off the social agency grid and attach to the margins of “working poor”. Their kids grow up and we know less and less about other families just like them. Now poor kids are being born without their mothers thinking that the public income, higher education and support options to which welfare once linked people could ever be options again. We do know people work at a series of jobs that are ever less economically and socially rewarding, that their disabilities get worse and their expectations for any meaningful social relief shrink. It's sad and few beyond the small circles of aging activists seem to care or want to know how bad it is.

I keep asking myself, do I want to continue to document the decline and fall of our already weak and reluctant welfare system? Why continue to treat the nonprofit community sector as anything more than a set of over-regulated, under-funded marginal programs that are, although now an integral part of societal obligation to “promote the general welfare,” rapidly becoming as unloved and self loathing as the rest of the welfare state in this country? I have begun to think that the problem is not with the knowledge to be gleaned from research such as mine, but with my framing question. Maybe it is the history of such efforts itself that matters, not any immediate lessons we can learn about policy impacts, doing better, or about what services are the best responses to which needs.

**So, is it reasonable that I find myself preferring even more than ever to write as a social welfare historian and social critic rather than as a social researcher?**

I have always wanted to know the history of things, in chronological order. I attended a doctoral program in American History, at Harvard, no less. And I have always wanted to know old fashioned history: who did what, under what leadership and what happened to whom as a result? It seems to matter, if not now and least in the future.

Every since I left the traditional field of political and social history behind I have been amazed with how little historical record is kept about what happens in the welfare state, especially after the policy debates are over and programs are implemented at the state and local level. Try to seriously research any topic in social welfare history and one very quickly runs out of secondary sources, The Social Welfare History Journal and the Journal of Policy History are about our only consistent refereed historical sources, and the social welfare history library at the University of Minnesota founded by the dean of social welfare history, Clarke Chambers, is well recognized for helping would-be

scholars begin their work. But very quickly one is thrown to the winds of primary collections in state archives, some sectarian agency records and odd accumulations in the libraries of different schools of social policy and social work. The “newspapers of record” are useful for those rare times when social welfare programs are caught, as they so predictably will be, “failing” to solve problems associated with poverty. But we know little of the story of how all these policies are implemented, who does what, how it differs across programs and states, etc.<sup>vi</sup>

Even historical dissertations, which are useful, seldom document and comment on the overall patterns or program specifics, instead they naturally write to highlight an issue or to find the forgotten voices, but we simply do not have in place a common accepted historical record of the structures and practices that show effectively what we as a society do to provide for ourselves at the state and local level. Narrative accounts are lacking about such basic issues as: the changing structures of government provision, the role of licensure and unions, the changing available workforce, the impact of distance and the internet access, the connections between national and state political culture, how interagency “collaboration” works and so on and so on. Students who get serious about such questions are usually deeply surprised about how little record we keep of the actual behavior of the “local state”.

Over time social welfare scholars have tried to develop case study models and to keep overall history and records within the agencies they oversee, even if some of the history is seeking professional heroes to honor, rather than structures and dynamics to explain.. But at this time in history we need to know more fully and consistently what public money pays for if we are to understand why and how to launch counter-arguments to common assertions that “private” is always better than public; that government funded programs always fail, are always bureaucratic and inevitably both “throw money at problems” and withhold needed benefits.

So what I want to do first, starting this summer with student researchers, is to write a history of the Massachusetts social state from 1978 to 2006. The main audience will be Duval Patrick and his leadership team, as well as any of us who are trying to figure out what it means to have “hope” that we can do something about poverty. I can use my research on the non profits after welfare reform, my earlier history and my ABCD work as a base. I can interview students and alumni of the various schools of social work and human service, using my networks and those of many of you in this room.

I did this once much earlier when I was younger, in a 1982 U. Mass. Press book, when I had with more energy but with less long time contacts. Now I want to do it again, to trace the changing agency roles, the people who played leadership roles and the people who were “clients” and workers across different areas. Just creating a full time line and uncovering the patterns of changing participation and management models, along with the evolution of differing models for participation and community based services seems worth knowing. Initially I will hold small meetings where I try to get a general picture of when non-profits starting talking about their agencies as “companies” and how exactly the Republican appointees in EOHS agencies viewed their roles. I want to know what

happened with unions and client advocacy during this period? How specifically did it matter that Republicans held the Governorship for the past 16 years? What happened to the the Dukakis people? Why do I want Harry Spence to stay in DSS? Or do I?

In other words I find myself really wanting to trace the history of all public social programs, no matter how delivered, through public or ‘private agencies’ and see that story they tell. I earlier called this system and process *The Circle Game*. I am not sure I would do so again even about that period much less the recent one. Still I am looking for continuity, human agency and change and to create a sharper sense of how people experience the systems they are in. When Robert C Hayden and I collected oral histories for ABCD I was a bit frustrated. I wanted more time to examine documents and internal publication and to tell the story that that emerged from a fuller range of actors. What I want to do now, as a historical narrative not a research study, is to examine evidence what happened why and participant accounts of success or failure. Of course there will be analysis but it will still be about the historical record. We will interview people and get written permission to quote them. Many worker and client interviews will be anonymous for obvious reasons, but not because they are ‘human subjects.’ I will *not* seek IRB approval..

With even more interest I envision starting with people like you some kind of organized effort to re-invigorate primary historical research among social policy researchers in the area. We can’t pretend that we know this history, even when we think we do. Maybe we should start a Massachusetts Social State History Seminar with Joan Wallace Benjamin and Hubie Jones and Kip Tiernan and Steve Collins (from SEIU) and a set of low income activists as founding mentors so that we can be telling a whole lot of stories to each other, to students and to the media. Such a group could give local area graduate students encouragement to write state and local histories as historical dissertations. Somehow I have more ideas and energy regarding all this than I do about researching the ongoing impact of Welfare Reform on community based agencies.

### **Who cares about social welfare policies, social welfare history, much less social policy research and how to respond to this lack of concern?**

At least ten years ago now Hubie Jones told me that he only wanted to speak at events where the media was present. He said he was tired of never reaching anyone but people who agreed with him and couldn’t change anything. He may not think this now, he may not even have meant it then. But it impressed me. Then I thought he was mistaken, that it was as good or better to sharpen ideas and build a base with those who wanted similar changes....that reaching a wider audience meant watering down ones message. Now I think maybe he was right, at least about not presuming it is enough to address only a small professional or narrowly compatible audience.

One book that has most affected me over the past ten years has been *Poverty Knowledge* by Alice O’Connor. Building on her work with a major foundation, she brought together a humbling historical story about the dubious impact of poverty research, even the best of it, as conducted by respected academics in acclaimed institutions. She offered a

convincing story about how the political environment, the sources of funding, the illusion of “scientific” objectivity in essentially political matters, along with the simple need to keep generating more research studies all together meant that almost all social researchers “pulled their punches” especially when it come to poverty issues. She also built upon the case made by other critics of right wing think tanks to argue that the liberal avoidance of outright advocacy research had hurt the anti-poverty cause.<sup>vii</sup>

My experience in trying to get well known poverty researchers like William Julius Wilson to take public stands against welfare reform also deepened my inherent skepticism here. When several of us at U.Mass.Boston tried to push him to use his major three city study to argue against the end of income maintenance, he was visibly offended. “I don’t do advocacy” he said in a tone that implied we were trying somehow to corrupt him. I came away from that conversation, and others like it within the Boston area Academics’ Working Group on Poverty, deeply chastened about our collective ability to affect broad social policy debates via mainstream or advocacy research. Now I would rather try to influence policy that through direct political/social organizing and action. At least such work doesn’t force me into illusions of influence that then subtly push me to make my analysis “acceptable”. It is a tough, not often clear dilemma that I am personally tired of.

The final influence on my retreat from research has come with the ability of the Christianist fundamentalists to gain legitimacy via the infusion of “faith based” requirements into social funding initiatives. When the Republicans in Congress first began pushing for this in the 1990s many of us thought it was a joke. There was clearly no reason to upset the rules that allowed religious charities to deliver services, but under guidelines that limited the power of agencies to use religiously based standards for hiring, and for intervention methods. Now the involvement of doctrinally based service has become accepted practice and criticism of it in principle has been silenced.

This shift deeply affects my hope for rational research around poverty. Once respect for faith and religious tolerance are used to undermine the primacy of public, non-sectarian, reason based policy then where are we? Back to faith hope and charity, where any questioning of the basic merit of faith based arguments is seen as uncivil?<sup>viii</sup>

I end this essay with a modest plea, both self directed and externally aimed, that as social welfare academics and citizens of the world we work harder to

- view historical documentation and narrative analysis as equally valuable an intellectual and political contribution as standard social policy research.
- document and share stories and time lines and insist that records be kept accessible about what happens in the actual delivery of services.
- share examples of human service leaders at all levels who are still fighting the good fight as well as of those who are bringing respected community institutions down and discrediting hard fought “alternative” models via irrelevant elitist “standards.”

- think of ways to help each other to create and carry out a principled practice of research and activism that is never secret about its social implications and assumptions

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<sup>i</sup> As conceived, there are three reasons why it does not make sense for this paper to assume a standard professionalized form. First, for reasons that I will try to contextualize in the follow-up talk, I currently have even greater doubts than I have ever had about accepting the efficacy of traditional social science research presentation methods. Second, I wish to signal readers that this paper is an essay about research plans and choices, not even minimally pretending to be any kind of summary of formal research results or research proposals. Third, recently I have been experiencing the onset of utterly delightful “senior moments,” the effect of which is that there are few things that I can make myself write, say or do that I really don’t want to do.

<sup>ii</sup> This work was prepared for the WKKellogg Foundation in two parts and I have received a contract from Temple University Press to present it as a book, see Attachment.

<sup>iii</sup> I have never been able to think or write without a historical base, as can be seen from all my writing. But now the urge to produce more institutional history feels even more imperative.

<sup>iv</sup> Throughout this whole effort, the writing of Alice O’Connor, Frances Fox Piven, Sanford Schram and Michael Katz have been a deep informing presence.

<sup>v</sup> See especially both volumes of *For Crying Out Loud*

<sup>vi</sup> Not all textbooks fail, some are quite good, like Bruce Jansson’s *The Reluctant Welfare State*. But it remains hard to find state level policy implementation studies that cover more than a short period of time or the range of social policies.

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<sup>vii</sup> I tried to write about this more fully in my piece ‘Fulfilling Fears and Fantasies,’ see Withorn Sources below.

<sup>viii</sup> Here I fault the lowest common denominator thesis behind today brand of liberalism, communitarianism, but this is another discussion for another day.

Relevant Withorn Publications, (in chronological order, of course)

Books and anthologies

1982. *The Circle Game: Services for the Poor in Massachusetts 1966 – 1978*.

University of Massachusetts Press.

1984. *Serving the People: Social Services and Social Change*. Columbia University Press.

1986. edited with Rochelle Lefkowitz, *For Crying Out Loud: Women’s Poverty in the United States*. Pilgrim Press.

1996, edited with Diane Dujon, *For Crying Out Loud: Women and Poverty in the United States*. South End Press.

2002, edited with Randy Albelda, *Lost Ground*, South End Press. Includes my article “Friends or Foes: Non-Profits and the Puzzle of Welfare Reform”.

2003, with Robert C Hayden “*Changing Lives, Changing Communities*.” collection of oral histories with participants in Boston’s forty year old anti-poverty poverty agency, Action for Boston Community Development, published by ABCD 200 Tremont St Boston Massachusetts

Articles and Research Studies