

Horror Stories, War Stories or (Un)Happy Endings: Locating Social Service Workers in Neoliberal Plots

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ABSTRACT: As a grounded account of a neoliberal reform project, this article explores efforts to shape and reshape the “conduct of conduct” in social services. To investigate the ways that neoliberal commonsense enters the life worlds of social service workers, this article explores the narratives disseminated in State-sponsored social movements, promoted by government insiders and contractors, funded by private foundations, and aimed at garnering support for reinventing the welfare state. The author argues for paying attention to the narrative structures that are deployed to enlist social service workers in “rolling back” or “rolling out” the often contradictory policy innovations of neoliberal reform. The narratives told to and by workers in the context of reform can be analyzed as “cultural schema” offered to serve as guides to action and sources of meaning for social workers. Tracing narrative structures can help to connect local and extra-local efforts at reform; following narrative threads and discontinuities may also help identify shifts and changes in neoliberal reform efforts over time. Finally, examining the stories of reform in context may shed light on the ways that neoliberal reform rhetoric that appears from a distance to be “self-actualizing” is in fact propelled by narrative; enforced through a related set of incentives, threats, opportunities and coercions; and thus, potentially vulnerable to challenge and resistance.

KEYWORDS: governmentality, narrative, neoliberal, social service workers

Introduction

In the 1990s, the State of Michigan became a laboratory for neoliberal social policy reform. This article draws on my ethnographic study of reform in Michigan – a project that I initiated in the mid-1990s. I focused my study on changes in policies and services to young people. Given the centrality of notions of childhood and youth to the U.S. welfare state, reconstructing the social contract in the 1990s required reshaping shared understandings of what the nation does and does not owe to young people. As the government eliminated children’s entitlements, tightened oversight of poor families, and intensified punitive intervention into the lives of youth, I began

fieldwork, motivated in part by curiosity about why opposition to these reforms was remarkably limited and ineffective. It seemed that even constituencies with historic commitments to child protectionism – social workers, teachers, judges, and struggling parents and caretakers – were resigned to reform that retracted care or harshened treatment of young people. While the appeal of tax cuts, program cut-backs and privatization to elite interests may appear self-evident, the question of what makes neoliberal reform appear compelling or at least acceptable to people with vested interests in the well being of poor and working-class children is more puzzling.

This article is an effort to contribute to an emerging body of ethnography that illuminates the transforming neoliberal movement and its processes, practices and relationships (Clarke et al. 2007; Goode and Maskovsky 2001; Kingfisher 2003; Li 2007; Nybell et al. 2009; Shore and Wright 1997). As a grounded account of the “messy actualities” of neoliberal projects (Larner 2000), this contribution explores efforts to shape and reshape the “conduct of conduct” in social services, focusing especially on efforts to “change the mindsets” of social service workers. To investigate the ways that neoliberal commonsense enters the life worlds of social service workers, I studied one State-sponsored social movement, promoted by government insiders and contractors, funded by private foundations, and aimed at garnering support for the express purpose of reinventing the welfare state. The particular movement I describe – which promoted an innovation called “wraparound services” – was one of several related efforts that explicitly took aim at changing the ways that social service workers viewed their roles and responsibilities (VanDenBerg 1999; Vandenberg & Grealish 1996).

Drawing initially on data from 1997, I document the way government insiders and contractors concerned with social service reform organized state-sponsored social movements that generated new narratives of social service work, disseminating stories that offered workers relief from “shame and blame” for the failures of the bureaucratic welfare state in exchange of participation in new, community-based, voluntaristic and entrepreneurial configurations of help. In 2009, I revisited the site of one of these movements to try to understand how stories of social service work have shifted or changed as neoliberal certainties are reconsidered as financial collapse, spreading social distress, and uncontrollable environmental disaster threaten the futures of the nation’s young people in 2010.

This article makes a case for paying attention to the narrative structures that are deployed to enlist social service workers in “rolling back” or “rolling out” the sometimes contradictory policy innovations of neoliberal reform (Peck and Tickell, 2002). The narratives told to and by workers in the context of social service reform can be analyzed as “cultural schema”

that serve as guides to action and act as sources of meaning (Ortner 1989:14). Tracing narrative structures can help to connect local and extra-local efforts at reform; following narrative threads and discontinuities may also help identify shifts and changes in neoliberal reform efforts over time. Finally, examining the stories of reform in context may shed light on the ways that neoliberal reform rhetoric that appears from a distance to be “self-actualizing” (Peck and Tickell 2002) is in fact propelled by narrative and enforced through a related set of incentives, threats, opportunities and coercions. Dissecting the stories of reform and examining the particular instruments and practices of power that instantiate them may open policy reforms to greater challenge and resistance by those expected to enact them.

But before describing the wraparound movement, and the stories told in it at two different historical moments, the next section of this article briefly places wraparound in the broader State policy context.

The Michigan Policy Context

In 1991, Michigan voters elected John Engler to the first of three terms as governor, an important landmark in the history of social service provision to the State’s citizens. Not yet midway through his 12-year governorship, Engler’s 1996 state of the State address celebrated a “tectonic shift” in policy-making of surprising speed and scope:

It was just five years ago that I stood here in this Capitol, this symbol of democracy, and addressed you for the first time. No one – including myself – foresaw how far we’d come, how much we’d accomplish and how dramatically Michigan would re-emerge as a national leader. The changes we have wrought are more than incremental; they are generational. [Engler 1996]

Engler also perceived that the change was not only in rolling back benefits or terminating programs but also constructing a new frame of reference through which to assess the work of government.

More important than changing any rule or law, we have changed Michigan – and in the process we have changed the terms of the debates. Our focus

is not only on what government should do...but what it should not do. Not on how to spend more money...but on policies that help families become independent...but on which to cut. [Engler 1996]

The success his administration experienced in the first five years of his tenure encouraged Engler to “advance on all fronts.”

Where taxes are still too high, we’re going to cut them. Where red tape still gets in the way, we’re going to roll it back. Where government is still too bloated, we’re going to shrink it. Where thugs and punks are still terrorizing our streets, we’re going to lock them up. [Engler 1996]

Under Engler’s leadership, Michigan pioneered approaches to tax reduction, privatization of state services, and welfare retrenchment. Boasting of a victory over welfarism, Michigan abolished its “Department of Social Services” and replaced it with a “Family Independence Agency.” The State installed “Work First” programs to supplant Aid to Families and Dependent Children (Public Sector Consultants 1998c). Public concern for poor children was supplanted by debates over and documentation of the work efforts of poor women (Schram and Soss 2001). From the perspective of citizens of Michigan, passage of the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act in 1996 was a sign that the State’s policies were not exceptional but in fact the forerunners of national policy directions (Seefeldt et al. 2003).

As the government eliminated welfare entitlements for poor children, and dramatically reduced the numbers of young disabled young people who qualified for assistance, the State’s involvement in the lives of delinquent youth intensified and increasingly focused on punishment rather than guidance or rehabilitation for young people. In a mounting impatience with troubling youth, proponents of “get tough” and “zero tolerance” policies essentially evicted offenders from the conceptual category of “children,” treating them now as fully responsible for their actions. The State’s 1996 Juvenile Justice Reform package made it easier to try children as adults, stiffened sentences and funded the construction of a privately operated “punk prison” (Public

Sector Consultants 1998a). School districts across the country enacted school discipline policies that enforced “zero tolerance” in schools. In Michigan, a Mandatory Expulsion Law enacted in 1995 seemed to take on a life of its own, as evidence arrived of more and more districts removing children from school under the law on the basis of vague offenses with vague criteria for re-entry (Zweifler 2009). All of these reforms greased the skids that headed impoverished young people toward a prison-industrial system that has been expanding since the 1980s – substantially in advance of the rollback of benefits and entitlements under Engler. Exceeding national trends, Michigan’s incarcerated population exploded in the last decades of the twentieth century, leaping from 13,272 in 1982 to over 40,000 in 1996 to nearly 50,000 at the end of Engler’s term in 2002. While spending on higher education of the State’s young people increased by 27 percent between 1985 and 2000, Michigan increased spending on corrections by 227 percent during that same period (Justice Policy Institute 2002).

Much of this news supported the suspicions of some child-researchers that modern notions about the innocence and vulnerability of children were being replaced with “child-hostile” policies in the U.S. at century’s end (Jenks 1996; Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998; Stephens 1995). In fact, all neoliberal reform was not “child hostile” in tone or intent. However, the “second chances” and “special needs” once considered the perquisites of “normal childhood” were increasingly reserved for an expanding group of children considered disabled or mentally ill – a population whose ranks grew. In Michigan, provision for children who were disabled or mentally ill was the provenance of the Department of Community Health – a “mega-agency” which swallowed up the previously autonomous state administrations of Medicaid, mental health, substance abuse, and aging.

Under the leadership of Chief Operating Officer Jim Haveman, the Department of Community Health undertook a sweeping agenda, much of which didn’t directly address the needs of children but centered instead on remaking the way the State “did business” on behalf of its most vulnerable citizens. The Department eliminated thousands of public

human service jobs (Citizens Research Council of Michigan 2004); closed mental health institutions (Public Sector Consultants 1998b); and, following the Governor's order to "Fire, ready, aim," pushed through an ambitious managed care program for nearly 800,000 Medicaid clients in less than two years (Weissert and Goggin 2002). Under Haveman's regime, the State of Michigan limited the roster of drugs – or formulary – that physicians can describe for Medicaid patients and went to federal court to defend its right to withdraw federally mandated Medicaid screening and prevention services for children (*Westside Mothers v. Haveman*) – a key case in a broader national effort to rollback Medicaid entitlements (Rosenbaum and Sonosky 2002).

However, the Department of Community Health under Haveman also spun a softer thread of reform that wove together notions of community and childhood. As the State rolled back and privatized the provision of benefits, it simultaneously and enthusiastically introduced new models of service that centered specifically on care for trouble or troubling children in the context of community. A range of community initiatives, models and demonstration efforts were enthusiastically disseminated to social service workers beginning in the 1990s, and wraparound was one example. In the context of cutbacks and retrenchments in public services and increasingly authoritarian and punitive interventions into the lives of poor families and children in the mid-1990s, social service workers were directed to attend to the hopeful potential of new "collaborative, seamless, locally-controlled, family friendly" community-based initiatives, described in compelling and sometimes sentimental terms. The proverb "it takes a village to raise a child" encapsulated a stream of reform that envisioned caring for troubled or troubling children wrapped within networks of local concern (for example, Clinton 1996; Comer et al. 1996; McKnight 1995; Schorr 1997).

Wraparound was one of 19 different collaborative community based initiatives that had been recently introduced in Michigan (State of Michigan 1995). With the support of the federal government and grants from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the State

launched a series of wraparound demonstration projects across the State (State of Michigan 1995). According to its proponents, wraparound was, on one hand, a value driven, grassroots movement. On the other, it was a model – a "team based planning process intended to provide individualized, coordinated, family driven care to meet the complex needs of children." As the adherents note,

Wraparound requires that families providers, and key members of the family support system collaborate to build a creative plan that responds to the particular needs of the child and family. Team members implement the plan and continue to meet regularly to monitor the plan and make adjustments. [National Wraparound Initiative 2007]

As a model of practice, wraparound is a collection of less than novel technologies, including teams, behaviour plans, flexible funds, risk assessments, satisfaction questionnaires, and so on. As a resource for generating new narratives of social service work, however, wraparound offered its participants considerably more.

Locating Human Service Workers in Neoliberal Plots

Despite the explicit celebration of local control in community-based initiatives, what was striking was the way these efforts drew local social service providers into novel state and nationwide networks. National consultants were enlisted to visit local demonstration project sites. Local wraparound team members attended quarterly training and technical assistance meetings and produced evaluations and reports according to state protocols. And it was the Annual Wraparound Conference, more than any other event, that energized Michigan's "wraparound movement" and circulated its stories. This three-day meeting was convened each spring between 1995 and 2006 and then revived in 2009. I attended the conference as part of my study of the wraparound movement in 1997, 1998, and 1999, and then I returned to the most recent annual conference in 2009.

1997

For over a decade, participants gathered each spring

for the Annual Wraparound Conference at Shanty Creek, a northern Michigan mega-resort with conference meetings halls, dining areas and guest rooms overlooking golf courses and ski hills. Shanty Creek was owned and operated by ClubCorps – the world’s largest network of golf courses, private clubs and resorts. The dramatic success of ClubCorps enabled its founder Robert Dedman Sr., to accrue a net worth of \$1.2 billion dollars (New York Times 2002) and to join Michigan Governor John Engler as a member of the elite team of “Pioneer” fundraisers for George W. Bush (Heller 2000). In the 1990s, the self-consciously remote, corporate and privileged resort space with its sense of collective retreat (“Shanty Creek – we overlook nothing but all of Northern Michigan”) was favoured by the State in the 1990s as a site for conferences and meetings. The setting provided a clear break from the structure of feeling in local human services offices, with their modest cubicles, closely monitored budgets and tightly supervised work days and from the often overstressed lives of parents struggling to care for children with serious problems. Experienced social service workers who spent the earlier years of their careers gathering for meetings in public buildings in the State’s urban centers now drove through rural northern Michigan to arrive at Shanty Creek’s stunning lakeside setting. Relocating social service workers in this way dramatically altered their perspectives on the State of Michigan, and conveyed new messages about their relationships and presumed desires within it.

The 400 participants who attended were a deliberate mix of paid social service workers, recipients of service and volunteers. In a State environment consumed with cost-cutting, managed care, and reducing public employment, the Annual Wraparound Conference conveyed a high-spirited, upbeat attitude. Participants enjoyed the views and free meals provided at breaks, crowded the bar in the afternoon, and celebrated on the dance floor at night. Meanwhile, the plenary sessions and smaller breakout meetings served as forums for story telling. National consultants spoke about children, families and communities they knew, and parents and children shared accounts of their personal experiences. Workers traded accounts of their efforts and struggles.

Gary Fine, whose work explores the role of story telling in social movements, argues that movements consist of “bundles of narratives” and suggests that movement stories are of three general types: (1) affronts to the movement actor, or “horror stories,” which are often recounted to justify one’s participation in the movement; (2) collective experiences within the movement or “war stories,” which are often told to encourage participants to continue the struggle; and (3) stories that affirm the value of the movement through accounts of “happy endings” (Fine 1995:135-136). Each of these stories typically centers on a different protagonist featured in overlapping and interconnected storylines. Examples of each of these kinds of stories circulated in the wraparound conference. “Horror stories” generally featured the child failed by the system. Horror stories mobilized support for the movement; workers were goaded into action, for example, by the tragic story of a young troubled youth who is imprisoned, and, who was, as the headline over his photo read, “Nowhere after \$1 million in care.” “Happy ending” stories centered on families reunited or sustained by wraparound, while “war stories” typically featured a practitioner who faced and sometimes overcame obstacles in the wraparound movement.

At the first National Wraparound Conference, one of the original “national wraparound consultants,” Karl Dennis, offered a story that serves as a prototype for the kinds of happy ending stories that consultants told in Michigan each year. Dennis’ story illustrates prominent patterns in wraparound stories. The story goes:

Allen was a young 16-year-old juvenile who had been rejected from several residential treatment centers. He was now being rejected from a correctional setting where he was considered too difficult to handle after tearing a door off an isolation cell. Everyone thought that he was incorrigible. Yet no matter where he was placed, no matter how far from his home or neighborhood, it was noted that his mother faithfully visited him twice a month. Based upon the strength of this apparent relationship, Kaleidoscope designed an individualized service plan for Allen.

Despite the fact that she was extremely devoted to this son, Allen's mother was adamantly opposed to his return home; in fact, her state caseworker also counseled her not to let Allen come home. Undaunted by Allen's mother's resistance, Dennis prevailed upon her sense of hospitality to let him come in and "play a little game." This game was: "If he could wave his magic wand, what would it take for Allen to be able to come home?" If she would just do this for 10 minutes, then Dennis would leave and not return. Eager to get rid of this uninvited visitor, Allen's mother agreed to participate.

With each wave of the wand, Allen's mother came up with another condition for her son's return:

- Someone to come to their home and get Allen up for school;
- Someone to be with Allen in school to help him control his temper;
- A therapist who wouldn't be afraid or give up on Allen, even if it meant having a companion sit in on each session to help control Allen's violent outbursts;
- Someone to give her a few free hours of time each day when she came home from work;
- A 24-hour crisis plan for evening, weekends, and holidays to ensure her safety when Allen became agitated.

Allen returned home the following week, but this time his mother had the support services that she had helped to design. There were still crises, but they were anticipated, and everyone had agreed in advance how they would be handled. Ultimately, Allen was able to move into transitional community housing and participate in a supported work program. [Katz-Leavy et al. 1992:5-6]

Dennis' story shared many characteristics of the schema offered to social service workers in the wraparound movement, particularly, an opening characterized by the oppressive and ineffective structure of government programs (with institutions serving as the metonym for those), followed by a transformation that takes place as clients are reconfigured as consumers – responsible for themselves, creatures of freedom and autonomy, making independent – and cheaper – choices. It is important to

note the ways that stories like these mobilized the guilt and shame of social service workers in relation to past failures – where they are entered into the plot as the state caseworker opposing Allen's homecoming. This dynamic of guilt and shame is illustrated in the story of John Bachman, a Michigan county agency administrator and wraparound proponent who took the podium and told a story of his own, inserting himself into the role of the misguided worker. John explained:

I was the worker that sent a child named Scott to Ohio. He was about five when he started getting in trouble. Somehow he stole a car and his family washed their hands of him. They sent him to his uncle. It's what happened to Scott that gives me emotion, passion, conviction about what's wrong with the system. What I should have done is ask his parents, what do you need to keep Scott at home? It is an art to interest them in this, not to provide solutions but to engage parents and kids as the leaders of the process... Unfortunately, Scott's uncle in Ohio tied him up and abused him. Scott descended into hell. When the social workers got involved down there, they found he had been abused. He didn't have a winter coat. I was part of the system that [brought this about]... When I began to work in Johnson County with wraparound it gave my life validity. I was beginning to think that my years in social work didn't make any difference at all. [Nybell 2002]

In this story, John evokes an experience that is both shared and feared by most social workers. Social work practice with troubled children and families requires managing the constant anxiety about making terrible mistakes that damage the lives, minds and bodies of young people that they aim to protect. This fear is given force by tragic reality when children come to harm and it is underscored by public outrage about the failures of child-caring bureaucracies. Wraparound stories gave public voice to a deep undercurrent of private anguish within social service work and linked this anguish to the project of neoliberal reform. And at the same time, the wraparound story offered workers the opportunity to "trade places," leave the "state caseworker" role behind

and re-imagining themselves as the family-trusting, wand-waving wraparound worker, a liberating and self-actualizing role which offers hope that the burden of social service work may be easily lightened. As wraparound worker Georgia explained:

I have been doing this for seven years. I have loved watching the results. I love being a part of a cause. It comes closest to fervor...to the 60's, a sweeping reform of the way that people are handled by the government. I have...a sense of cause. I feel like we are changing the world. It's not just us. What a cool thing.

I also have relationships. I feel like [in traditional services] families are treated disrespectfully. You went in and played God. This is such a different way. It's magic, it really is. It's success in little tiny pieces. I'm always celebrating. I think... Nobody's a failure. [In previous jobs] I had the weight of the world on my shoulders. With wraparound it's so much easier. When it is working. I care about people; I let them care about me. I think of clients as "my people." [Nybell 2002]

So while workers shared "war stories" within wraparound, their efforts were affirmed by all the indications of significance that the Conference provided – including the participation and presence of some of the State's highest-ranking social welfare administrators. Each year of the mid-1990s, Director of Community Health Jim Haveman closed the conference. In an illustrative address to the 1997 Annual Wraparound Conference, Haveman was introduced by one of his staff as a "creative man who does not tolerate bureaucratic or 'no can do' attitudes." Haveman proudly informed the audience that the Michigan Department of Community Health agency spends "7.1 billion dollars of public funds a year, 25 million a day, a million an hour." But, he explained, he was reshaping that budget. He recounted a story told by an employee who attended a weekend class on decoys given by a woodcarver. When asked how to carve a decoy, the artist replied, "Just carve away everything that doesn't look like a duck." "That," said Haveman, "is what we are trying to do. We're trying to cut away everything that doesn't look like a duck."

Haveman's attendance at the annual event

signified that wraparound was part of the new configuration of State social policy, along with institutional closures, privatization and cutbacks. Haveman turned to the attendees at the Annual Wraparound Conference for support for his efforts to close these institutions. "People who are advocating for these (institutional) programs are ignoring wraparound, and the other home-based, interdepartmental activities that are going on. We need you to help us with this. You have to advocate for your program." And Haveman offered an expanded vision for the future of wraparound, extending its reach that went well beyond children with mental illness to serve disabled people, and the chronically ill elderly as well. Haveman's message paired the "carrot" of expanded wraparound with the "stick" of competition. He hinted that if existing social agencies were ineffective, the competition would be extended to Michigan non-profit and profit-making providers. "People get so frustrated with these (mental health) programs that they just bid them out. Look at Texas, where Martin Marietta is bidding on the welfare system, along with EDS."

Despite Haveman's pleas for support, promises of expansion and threats of competition, his presentation did not inspire a warm reaction from the audience. The themes of cost containment, institutional closure and competition did not mobilize the community mental health workers, parents, or teachers who had gathered to talk about saving one troubled kid at a time through community-based care. Still, Haveman's presence at the State-sponsored Annual Wraparound Conference wedded the administration's broader policy agenda to wraparound narratives, however uneasily. Through this State sponsored social movement, these disparate agendas were assembled as a collection of "best practices" in an unstable and even contradictory arrangement of convenience.

2009

When I returned to the Wraparound Conference in 2009, the exuberant attitude that characterized the cause in its earlier years had waned. Though the views of northern Michigan from the resort at Shanty Creek were unchanged, the resort itself bore signs

of trouble that lurked just below the surface in 1997. ClubCorps sold the resort to local businessmen that year, just as the discovery of a vast underground toxic plume of groundwater contamination flowing from an old industrial site to just north of the property became known to local residents (Schneider 1999). By 2004, the new owners defaulted and Shanty Creek was bankrupt (McCool 2006). By 2009, the resort had found another owner, but shuttered resort shops, signs of wear and disrepair, and a small, overstretched and impatient staff indexed decline at Shanty Creek. Even the marketing strategists seemed to implicitly acknowledge hard times, as they plugged “Shanty Creek – Now more than ever.”

Former Director of the Department of Community Health James Haveman was missing, too. Haveman’s success in neoliberal policy-making had briefly boosted him into what became a controversial assignment far from his Midwestern home. In 2003, Engler recommended Haveman to deputy secretary of defense Paul Wolfowitz. Wolfowitz engaged Haveman to oversee the rebuilding of Iraq’s health system under Coalition Provisional Authority led by Paul Bremer. Haveman arrived a week after the fall of Baghdad, replacing Frederick M. Burkle, Jr., a physician recognized as one of the “most experienced post-conflict health specialists working for the United States government” (Chandrasekaran 2006). According to *Washington Post* reporter Chandrasekaran, Haveman replaced Burkle “because the White House wanted a loyalist in the job” (2006:239). In a stunning illustration of how local stories can be exported onto an international scene, Haveman centered his efforts on endeavours designed to “shifting the mindset of Iraqis” regarding health care (Chandrasekaran 2006:39). His plans included instituting co-pays for hospital visits and mounting efforts to encourage Iraqis to prevent their own health problems, through efforts like anti-smoking campaigns. He directed his energies toward limiting the number of approved drugs that doctors could prescribe in preparation for privatizing Iraq’s drug procurement system – a strategy for which he had won notoriety among advocates for the poor in Michigan. Chandrasekaran argues that Haveman focused on altering mindsets while more compelling

priorities – preventing disease, providing clean drinking water, improving care at hospitals and obtaining drugs and medical supplies – were neglected.

By 2009, Haveman had long since returned to private life in Michigan. Wraparound continued to operate in Michigan but with less visibility or celebration. No member of Governor Jennifer Granholm’s cabinet attended the annual Wraparound Conference. Continuity depended on the mid-level bureaucrats who organized the Conference, as they had done in all the previous years, and in the mostly stable roster of “national consultants” who addressed important plenary sessions of the meeting. The program, with its national consultant keynotes, parent and family presentations and youth panel, were built closely on the structure of past efforts. Participants were fewer in number, but they still came identified as “parents,” “professionals” or “kids.” Most participants paid \$200 to take part in the Wraparound Conference in contrast to earlier years when participants’ expenses were fully underwritten. Some complained about the limited choice of food and lack of desserts. The bar was almost always empty, or nearly so. There was no music or dance floor.

In this context, it fell to Ned Bailey, a “national wraparound consultant” to offer the keynote – a talk that amounted to an extended explicit commentary on what might have happened, but didn’t, or what should be, but isn’t. Bailey’s keynote address began:

My topic is “Team: the illusion and the reality.” We celebrate the notion of team. As an illusion it is that shimmering place we want to get to. In reality, meetings get cancelled. We do not have interlocking aims.

My first reflection is that the illusion is that teams are a fun and easy way to get things done. We will get along. We will have easy meetings. But the reality is, it is hard work, we fight a lot, sometimes we fall apart. Three to ten people have that many different opinions. Teams fall apart. You have fewer people than you hoped. People begin to stop participating...

My second reflection is that the illusion is that teams make great decisions because there are more brains involved. But teams are capable of making

terrible decisions. Or no decision. Some teams have three months of no decision.

Illusion says we can; reality says I hope you can. Yes, keep your eye on the ball. But what if the ball doesn't go anywhere?

Reflection number 3. The illusion is that teams are indispensable elements of good planning. But the reality is that these are artificial arrangements trying to take the place of real community and real support. It is an artificial arrangement because we don't know what to do except act like it means something.

When we talk it has been undergirded by values. What we need to touch base about is, what is after the values? "Inclusive teams are good" is a value. But we need to move from values to stay clear about the tasks. It is the way we do the tasks that matters.

We need to work toward the illusion while we are grappling with the reality. [Nybell field notes, July 20, 2009]

In this talk Bailey was refusing the convention of story telling and the role that storytellers played in the government sponsored neoliberal movement that was wraparound. Bailey's talk seemed an effort at what Gerald Prince (1988; 1992) has called "disnarrating," referring mainly to a legacy of crushed hopes and erroneous suppositions.

The narrative progresses here by discounting as much as recounting (Prince 2003), by acknowledging dreams that had failed and goals that had not been reached. No longer a movement, wraparound becomes a model. Many wraparound conference workshops emphasized "fidelity" to the wraparound model – a goal that was determinedly set forth by national consultants but honored mainly in the breach in practice" (Suter and Bruns 2009).

But this emphasis on fidelity to the technical aspects of wraparound did not fill the emotional or narrative void that now occupied the center of the once vibrant wraparound movement. The question that Bailey raised, "What is after the values?" seemed to echo through the proceedings. I joined a "parents-only" session, where parents of children who had received wraparound services talked about their hope that their participation in this initiative might

generate employment opportunities for them, but there was no sense that they placed great confidence in this possibility. "What we have to think about," one parent said, to the affirmative nods of her colleagues, "is what comes AFTER wraparound?" One of the youthful speakers took this tack, too, and said the skills that he learned in wraparound were most helpful "after wraparound was over."

Wraparound, once a vision of the desired end state of reform, was repositioned in the 2009 conference as a technology – a model with an uncertain place in the unknown future of social services for children. In the face of the profound and spreading economic and social distress facing thousands of children and their families in Michigan in 2009, it is not surprising to document a loss of energy within a state-sponsored social movement promoting voluntaristic, community-based solutions. What was more unexpected was that commentary on the crumbling infrastructure of support for child well being – like income supports, or housing, or health care, or viable schools – was never offered, from the podium or from the floor. The leadership offered no account of what would come next, and the participants overtly expressed little anger or frustration or fear over conditions as they now stand. Instead, there was emptiness as wraparound proponents retreated from "movement" to "model." What resounded in the silence about the crushing evidence of children's material needs was the echoing presence of neoliberal goals unaccomplished, and visions unrealized.

Conclusion

This article has been an effort to illustrate that ethnographies of neoliberal projects can contribute to a more precise and nuanced understanding of how neoliberalism is conceived, imposed and reproduced. Thus, hopefully, situated ethnographic study can expose the contradictions and vulnerabilities of the neoliberal movement. In this brief contribution, I have turned to the stories told to and by social workers as a way to index the thickness, thinness, malleability and "ellipses" in the neoliberal "common sense" that has dominated social policy-making in recent decades. In the process, I have discovered the possibility of tracking the movement of narratives

across sites as a way to link local to extra-local developments. Attention to narrative connects local and extra-local projects of reform, and allows insight into how and where narratives are generated, introduced in local sites, potentially transformed and recirculated. While the assumption is often that reform agendas enter local spaces from “above,” a study of Michigan reveals the way local communities and governments served as laboratories for larger efforts. As revealed by Haveman’s effort to export “mindsets” forged in Michigan to Iraq, stories of reform flow from local sites to extralocal settings – as well as the reverse.

In addition, this brief account illustrates the ways that narratives are given authority by their association with power, and how they are potentially emptied of meaning and vulnerable to challenge. Stories of wraparound illustrate the ways that narratives of reform are revised and revamped as the storytellers and their listeners encounter new conditions. And, as the contrast between the halting stories told at the wraparound movement at present with its rich and generative earlier moments, studying narratives may help to illuminate the vulnerabilities, uncertainties and resistances as the messy project of policy reform transforms over time. The disnarration of wraparound in 2009 may signal a “non-hegemonic” moment that is ripe for new, more progressive stories to guide meaning and action for social service workers.

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