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Field Network Studies

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When the federal government reforms welfare programs, the institutions operating them—state and local governments and private institutions—face a new set of rules. Because these institutions have some degree of flexibility in responding to the new rules, their decisions influence whether and how the new policy is realized. One method for examining their responses to federal welfare reform, and for examining the responses of institutions to policy changes in other areas, is field network evaluation.

Field network evaluation is a form of comparative case study that was defined, and continues to be defined, by Richard Nathan (1982; Hall and MacManus 1982; Rawlins and Nathan 1982). It is fitting, therefore, to begin with his Note of Introduction to this type of study:

The conduct of field network evaluations began with the general revenue-sharing law enacted in 1972, when a projected surplus in the federal budget prompted the federal government to give general-purpose cash grants to state and local governments. Because these grants came with few restrictions, the response of state and local governments to this large infusion of money, \$80 billion before the program ended in 1986, was difficult to ascertain. Economists were skeptical that learning this was even feasible. At a meeting at the Brookings Institution soon after the law was passed, Arthur Okun, who chaired the Council of Economic Advisers under President Johnson, expressed his doubts. "What would you say," he asked, "if your mother gave you a check for \$30

(then a lot of money) for your birthday and asked you what you did with it?" His point was that fungibility makes it difficult—well-nigh impossible, I think he said—to know what happens to such a gift.

I responded to Okun that I was confident that studying state and local political behavior (both for policymaking and implementation) would tell us a great deal about what different governments (rich, poor, big, little) do with their shared revenue. However, no one seemed satisfied with my response. It was that old conversation between economists and political scientists. Fortunately, Brookings had money from the Ford Foundation to study the effects of the program and we were able to march ahead anyway.

The conclusion I reached two years later when we were in the midst of the field evaluation of the revenue-sharing program was that my instinct in responding to Arthur Okun was correct. We did learn a lot systematically and inductively about the behavior of recipient governments in their use of shared revenue. Many recipient jurisdictions, as it turned out, were wary about adding these funds to their program base—i.e., using the money for ongoing operating purposes. Capital purposes were a big use. This was especially the case for smaller, relatively well off, generally conservative local governments. They feared locking this "found money" into their fiscal base, and later having to raise taxes or lay off civil service workers when the "Feds" changed the rules as they were sure to do, or turned off the spigot, which they eventually did. The prediction of economists, that the fungibility of federal grants would lead governments to spend the money as if it were their own ordinary revenues, was not confirmed (Nathan et al. 1975; Nathan, Adams, et al. 1977).

Not satisfied with focusing exclusively on this fiscal substitution question, the revenue-sharing field evaluation also examined the effects of the program in functional areas of spending and in redistributing income among groups in the population. As a political scientist, I was also interested in their effects on political processes and on the role and structure of different types of governments.

With support from foundations and government agencies, we conducted similar field network evaluations of the effects on state and local governments of other federal programs: the Community Development Block Grant program, the public service employment program under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, and the Urban Development Action Grants (Dommel et al. 1982; Nathan and associates 1979; Nathan and Webman 1980; Nathan, Cook, et al. 1981; Nathan, Dommel, et al. 1977). Later, we studied the effects of all federal grants on large cities and the effects of President Ronald W. Reagan's (1981–89) "New Federalism" cuts and changes in

federal grants-in-aid programs (Nathan, Doolittle, and associates 1983, 1987). Recently, we have studied the start-up and early implementation of the Urban Empowerment Zone and Enterprise Community program. Last, you and I have used the field network approach to study the implementation of welfare reform.

This has been a rich vein of federalism and implementation research, though not everyone would agree. Although the studies are scientific, using numbers and in this sense quantitative as well as qualitative, critics have said they are impressionistic and lacking in rigor, and worst of all, as far as I am concerned, they write them off as "anecdotal." My own view, and no one will be surprised by this, is that we learned a great deal and maintained our independence over many years in which hundreds of academic social scientists performed critical analytical tasks in the field and centrally for these studies. In the final analysis, the body of work produced and its applications provide the basis for assessing this methodology.¹

Starting with Nathan's view is fitting because Nathan not only created the field network approach, but also has directed or been an adviser to many of the prominent field network evaluation studies. With the continuing evolution of federalism and intergovernmental relations, he has modified the approach to address questions raised by new programs and to examine the dimensions of state and local responses that are relevant to answering them. Despite changes in the specific questions and responses examined, however, the essential features of the method have remained the same.

Recently, researchers have used the field network approach to analyze the implementation of federal welfare reform legislation by state and local governments. Jan Hagen and I used the field network approach to study the implementation of the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training Program (JOBS) created in 1988, the final federal reform of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (Hagen and Lurie 1994). Nathan and Thomas Gais (1999) have used the approach to examine the management of state and local welfare programs under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant created in 1996.

Like the other forms of implementation and process studies discussed in this volume, the field network approach is poorly understood by many who have not used it. My purpose here is to describe the process of doing field network research and to assess its strengths and limitations in studying the implementation of welfare reform. To do this, I draw on my experiences as a director of the JOBS study, as a member of the team that

designed the TANF study, and as a field researcher in New York for Nathan's study of the effects of Reagan's budget, which gave me first-hand knowledge of that role. Before moving to New York, I was a Washington economist with little interest in the quirks of individual states and no appreciation of the gulf between the enactment of a federal law and its implementation by states. I approach this chapter not as a methodologist but as a public policy scholar who gained an eye-opening education about the workings of government, especially the welfare system, by using this research approach.

The first section places field network research in the genre of the comparative case study and gives examples of comparative case studies of welfare policies. Subsequent sections discuss the field network analyses of the implementation of the JOBS program and of the management systems for operating the TANF program. The analyses include purposes of the field network method, unit of analysis, analytical framework and research design, staffing and management of the study, data collection, and data analysis. The final section is a critique of the method.

Comparative Case Studies

Sitting in Washington, neither Okun nor Nathan knew how the states were using the federal funds distributed by the general revenue-sharing program. Even if states were to report how they spent the federal money, they might spend less of their own money on those same items—in other words, substitute federal money for state money. To learn whether states were substituting federal money for their own, it would be necessary to examine how states were spending their own money. Someone with savvy about each state government's ability to move money from one purpose to another would need to watch the changes unfold. Nathan could then compare the states' behavior to assess the amount of substitution and the factors that explain variation among the states.

Watching and examining the responses of states to federal initiatives was the original purpose of field network research and remains the purpose today. Nathan has used a variety of terms for this—evaluating, assessing, monitoring, and tracking—but the aim of them all is to answer questions about the responses of state and local governments to a federal initiative. The essence of field network research is that knowledgeable observers close to the scene of the action analyze and report these responses using a common protocol and that analysts in the central staff compare the responses to answer the questions posed by the study. It is a

team effort. The researchers in the field constitute a network to gather and analyze information that the central staff then analyze further to evaluate the consequences of the federal initiative—hence the term *field network evaluation*.

Agranoff and Radin cite Nathan's field network research as an example of the comparative case study approach. As they describe it, this approach consists of multiple case studies designed and analyzed to answer a common set of questions:

The comparative case study differs from the traditional single case study in that it examines multiple situations within an overall framework. Generally, the research proceeds from a common design, involving the same hypotheses or research questions to be investigated in each case. Cases are built individually by careful research design through a combination of methods. After cases are researched and developed, they are analyzed comparatively. Similar to other methods, the approach is designed to look for unique and common experiences, patterning of variables and relationships (Agranoff and Radin 1991, 204).

As Yin does in his book on case study research (1994), Agranoff and Radin offer guidance for increasing the rigor of comparative case study research. They cite notable studies that employ this approach and describe the method by laying out a sequence of research steps. The process of doing a field network study to examine the implementation of welfare policy, which is discussed below, generally parallels this sequence of steps.

In addition to field network studies of welfare policy, comparative case studies of welfare policy have been done by other organizations such as the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), Mathematica Policy Research, and the Urban Institute. The GAO routinely examines and compares the ways that states or localities put federal laws and regulations into operation, often doing this in response to requests by members of Congress or congressional committees (e.g., GAO 1995, 1997, 1998). Mathematica Policy Research compared the projects in the Minority Female Single Parent Demonstration, which consisted of four different employment and training programs for single mothers operated by community-based organizations in the 1980s (Burghardt and Gordon 1990). During the period before TANF, when many states operated welfare reform demonstrations under waivers, the Urban Institute examined five state projects to identify their strategies for increasing participation in work-related activities (Pavetti et al. 1995).

What distinguishes field network research from these other studies of welfare policy is not so much the research method as the people performing the study, the audience for the study's findings, and the source of

funding to support the study. From the beginning, Nathan's network of field researchers was composed primarily of academics teaching in the states and localities under study. This approach to staffing both enabled and required a broadening of the focus of the research from substantive questions about programs and policies to the types of questions about the political process itself that are addressed primarily by academic social scientists. The imperative for academics to publish in books and journals gives an additional social science slant to field network research, as authors frame their findings with more general or abstract questions. Finally, the funding for field network studies has come from both private foundations and government. The Ford Foundation supported Nathan's first study, the Pew Charitable Trusts provided the initial funding for the JOBS study, and the Kellogg Foundation provided the initial funding for the TANF study. Researchers supported by a grant from a private foundation have the time and flexibility not normally available to those working under contract with a specified set of deliverables. Yet the questions posed by field network studies are sufficiently relevant to policymakers that the federal government supported several of Nathan's studies of the responses of local governments to federal initiatives and supplemented the private funding for both the JOBS and TANF studies.

These sources of staff and funds mean that field network research addresses two audiences, the officials and agencies concerned with the effects of the policy *per se* and the academic scholars concerned not only with these effects but also with what they illustrate more generally about the behavior of officials and agencies. With this second audience in mind, field network studies are more broadly drawn than the multiple case studies of the GAO, Mathematica Policy Research, and the Urban Institute by including questions about institutional and political context. Yet they are less motivated by issues of administrative processes and institutional forms than some of the studies reviewed by Agranoff and Radin. Field network studies examine these, but the primary motivation for the studies is to understand responses of states, local governments, and private organizations to specific new, large, nonincremental federal policy changes.

Purposes

The field network method is particularly well-suited to examining the effects of large changes in federal grant programs to state and local gov-

ernments: new sources of federal money, cuts in federal money, or changes in the rules for distributing federal money. The purpose is to learn how states, localities, and other institutions respond to the changes, responses that may be programmatic, budgetary, organizational, regulatory, managerial, and so forth. A study begins by examining the earliest and most apparent responses by these institutions and then looks for responses that are more gradual and subtle. Implicit in the whole exercise is the idea that change is mediated through various political cultures and structures as it is realized in different jurisdictional settings.

Exactly what is examined depends on the federal policy and what the study director and funders think is worth learning about the states' response or lack of response. Two types of knowledge come from the studies. Foremost is an understanding of the programmatic consequences of the federal initiatives: What changes were made by state and local governments and private organizations? Second is an understanding of the process of change, including more general knowledge about the structure and behavior of governments and other institutions: How and why did it happen this way? The purpose of the research is neither to evaluate the effectiveness of the federal policy itself in cost-benefit terms nor to suggest most effective best practices at the state or local level.

In the studies of welfare reform, the primary question was the extent of programmatic and institutional change in local welfare agencies. Both the JOBS program and the TANF block grant were enacted with dramatic rhetoric about giving welfare agencies a mission to reduce welfare dependence by moving recipients into the labor force. But the chain of events between new federal laws and reforms in the programs of local agencies is complex, involving many actors with divergent interests. The history of federal welfare reforms that failed to change the behavior of local agencies made it difficult to predict their response to JOBS and TANF. Like general revenue sharing, it was necessary to go out and look.

Unit of Analysis

Because the purpose of field network studies is to understand the response of state and local governments to federal policy changes, the unit of analysis is an institution rather than a person. Because the studies follow the policy change down to the lowest level of government affected, the local government may be a county, city, or town, depending

on the particular study. Increasingly, as governments contract out for services, the analysis includes nonprofit organizations and, in a few cases, for-profit companies. Because the expectation is that the response of governments will vary, the sample includes multiple states and multiple local governments within each state. The study of federal revenue sharing, for example, examined 19 states and 46 local jurisdictions; the Reagan study included 14 states and three levels of government within a state; the JOBS study included 10 states and three counties within each state; and the TANF study includes 20 states and two counties within each state.

With the goal of selecting states that are broadly representative of the nation as a whole, selection criteria typically include variables such as state per capita income, poverty rate, fiscal stress, dominant political party, degree of urbanization, and geographic region. Selection criteria also included variables of particular relevance to the policy change being studied, such as the level of government responsible for welfare administration in the JOBS study or the strategy for welfare management adopted by government in the TANF study. The criteria for selecting localities depend on the purposes of the particular study. For example, in the study of Reagan's New Federalism, which focused on intergovernmental relations, the sample of local governments consisted of a single county in each state, the largest city within the county, and a town or village within the county. In the JOBS study, where we expected the size of the community to influence implementation, the sample consisted of a large urban area, a medium-sized urban area, and a rural area.

Field network studies are mounted to examine federal policy changes that are big, and governments' responses to big changes play out over time. Program start-up might be slow. Initial reactions might differ from longer-term solutions. Because responses to a federal initiative are often gradual, most studies have been longitudinal, involving more than one round of field observation. In some cases, they involved three or four rounds of field data collection taking place over several years. Field research to study Reagan's 1981 budget initiatives, which made immediate changes in federal grant-in-aid programs, took place in 1981, 1982, and 1984, whereas the field research on the JOBS program created in 1988, but not mandatory for the states until 1990, occurred in 1990, 1991, and 1992.

In the early phases of a study, data reported from the sample of governments permit the central staff to make cross-site comparisons of the

responses to the federal initiative. In later phases of the study, when longitudinal data become available, the analysis can also make comparisons over time. This broad perspective, with both geographic spread and multiple waves of data collection, is a primary strength of the approach. It provides a big picture of what happened, or didn't happen, and why it happened that way.

With this wide lens, the individuals and families affected by the federal initiative are not examined directly. All of the programs examined by the field network approach have consequences for their clients and affect the well-being of groups in the population. The purpose of the research, however, is not to evaluate the impact of the program changes on them. Rather, it is to understand the magnitude and direction of the program changes themselves. Information about the effects of the changes on the population may be gathered from secondary sources, but primarily for the purpose of understanding the political pressures for and against the changes.

Analytical Framework and Research Design

The analytical framework varies from one study to another depending on the policy change and the questions of interest. In the early Nathan studies, the framework was designed to examine whether the states would use new federal funds to increase total state spending or whether the states would substitute federal funds for state funds. Similarly, the study of federal grants to stimulate state and local public service employment examined whether the new jobs created were an addition to existing jobs or a substitute for them. The same framework was used for the Reagan study, this time to examine how states responded to decreases in federal funding and whether the states would use their own funds to replace cuts in federal funds. These studies also included and, in some cases, featured other dependent variables such as the uses, distribution, and political effects of the funds, as in the study of revenue sharing and community development block grants.

The common feature of the analytical frameworks is the view of implementation from the top down. This top-down view begins by enumerating the federal policy changes and then examining whether and how lower levels of government respond to them. In this sense, field network research is a method for studying implementation that examines multiple jurisdictions and compares their responses in an effort to learn

whether and how the purposes articulated in the federal law are realized by the implementing institutions.

The mission of the JOBS program was to promote employment by offering education, training, and employment services, together with child care, transportation, and other services needed to support work effort. In the JOBS implementation study, the first round of research examined the initial state-level choices in implementing the program (Hagen and Lurie 1992). The research was organized around the provisions of the legislation and the tasks involved in building a capacity to meet the provisions. The framework is shown in figure 5.1, which lists the topics investigated by the researchers. The second round of research examined the implementation of the JOBS program by local welfare agencies (Lurie and Hagen 1993). Because those agencies have direct contact with clients, this round distinguished between the design and structure of the system and the processing of clients through the system. The design and structure of the system, and local strategies for shaping this system to create the JOBS program, received more attention than client processing, as seen from figure 5.1. With a few modifications, the third round of research repeated the work of the earlier rounds (Hagen and Lurie 1994).

The TANF study focuses on management systems and goals for the new welfare system: Have states structured their management systems around discernible goals? What are those goals? What institutional structures and management strategies have states used to accomplish the goals? Are the state goals and management systems being adopted and used by local welfare systems? The analytical framework for the first round of research, which examined both state and local responses to TANF, comprised the elements of policy and management listed in figure 5.2. Like the JOBS study, the framework examines structure more than client processing (Nathan and Gais 1999).

The research design consists of a list of descriptive and analytical questions about each element of the framework. The task of the field researcher is to write a report, or case study, that answers these questions. An instrument called a report form lists the questions and gives the field researcher some instructions for answering them. Importantly, the report form is not an interview schedule but a set of questions that requires the field researcher to do research, to both collect and analyze information. The researcher is asked to gather data and, based on the data, use his or her judgment in formulating an answer to the questions posed in the report form.

Figure 5.1. Analytical Framework for the JOBS Implementation Study

State level	Local level
1. Historical context and political response	1. Implementation context
2. Interagency relationships and program planning	2. Intraorganizational leadership and management strategies
3. Strategies for implementing education, employment, and training programs	3. Interorganizational linkages and coordination
4. Response to the JOBS program by other state agencies	4. Content of selected JOBS components
5. Effects on supportive services	5. Availability of education, training, and employment services
6. Organizational structure and management strategies	6. Availability of child care
7. JOBS and client/agency relations	7. Availability of supportive services other than child care
8. Meeting federal mandates for participation and targeting	8. Models of client flow
9. Summary considerations	9. Delivery mechanisms
	10. Client processing
	11. Measures of institutional outputs
	12. Analysis of institutional outputs
	13. Analysis of factors influencing program design and implementation
	14. Meeting current and future goals

Note: JOBS = Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training Program.

Figure 5.2. Analytical Framework for the TANF Study

State level	Local level
1. Program status and description	1. Description of local agency and its environment
2. Institutional roles and structures	2. Workload
3. Budgeting and staff	3. Program design and service mix
4. Control, oversight, and accountability	4. Staffing and training
5. Management information systems	5. Mandates and incentives
6. Overview analysis	6. Observation and description of activities and processes
	7. Data systems and reports
	8. Analysis of state-local relations

Note: TANF = Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

The reports of the field researchers form the primary knowledge base for the subsequent comparative analysis by the central staff. They are written to inform the central staff, not to be the final products released to the public. The report forms, in contrast, have been published as an appendix to the analysis by the central staff so that readers can understand the research design. This practice, which is a good one, was not followed for the second and third rounds of research on the JOBS program. In the first round of research on TANE, the report form was released as a stand-alone document (State Capacity Study Field Research Report Form 1997).

Staffing and Managing the Study

Relying on the judgment of the field researchers requires the study directors to pay close attention to the selection and management of the research team. The field researchers must be familiar with their state's politics and institutions and have some knowledge of the policy area. Established contacts with government officials that enable the researchers to obtain rapid access to information are also helpful, because access can be particularly difficult in the start-up phase of a program. At the same time, the field researchers must be willing and able to report with objectivity. The dilemma here is that most people who go through the trouble of learning the arcane details of institutions and policies either work for government or are advocates on the outside. Because the researchers must be able to act as disinterested analysts, the best solution is to select academics with some expertise and interest in the area of the study. Most commonly, the field researchers are faculty from departments of political science, public administration and policy, economics, and social work. In some instances, independent consultants and journalists have also served as field researchers. The central staff consists of the study director or directors; one or two senior staff, who are often former field researchers; one or two research assistants; and a secretary.

Managing a group of academics who like their freedom requires some team building, which involves creating relationships between the central staff and the field researchers that are collegial as well as contractual. This is done by involving the field researchers in the research design and giving them access to the data for their own research and publications. After the director and central staff build the analytical framework

and draft the questions for each element, they hold a conference with field researchers to refine the questions and reduce the inevitable ambiguities in them. Drawing on their expertise encourages field researchers to "buy in" to the study methodology. Equally important, field researchers can use their substantive knowledge about programs or state institutions to sharpen the research questions. The conference also serves to inform the researchers about the methodology, which is frequently unfamiliar to them.

A second way to encourage academics to participate in the study and to continue participating over multiple rounds of research is to invite them to present their findings at scholarly meetings and to permit them to publish articles or book chapters based on their own research, thereby giving them a stake in the enterprise beyond the financial payment for their report. After the central staff releases the findings from the study, the field researchers are free to publish the information contained in their own reports. Field researchers have also contributed to volumes edited by the central staff. In some instances, field researchers have been given access to the data collected by other field researchers to pursue a particular topic or have become members of the central staff.

At the beginning of the study, the central staff must familiarize the researchers with the details of the federal legislation being examined. Early in the study of President Reagan's budget, the central staff prepared a catalogue of the numerous cuts and changes in grant-in-aid programs made by the budget, which not only instructed the field researchers but became the project's first published volume (Ellwood 1982). To inform the researchers about the JOBS program, Hagen and I wrote a background paper about the features of the program that raised issues to be investigated by the study. Nathan and Gais sent the researchers for the TANF study copies of the federal legislation and a selection of the numerous analyses that had already been prepared by other organizations.

Once the data collection is under way, the study director and central staff members visit the states at least once to accompany the field researchers on their interviews and meet some of the key actors. This is an opportunity to monitor the field researchers and, if necessary, suggest adjustments in their approach. Even more important, getting into the field gives the central staff a "feel" for the states. When the time comes for the central staff to analyze the field researchers' reports, having a visual image of the place brings the information to life.

In most of the studies, the study director did not solicit the cooperation of the state and local governments that are the object of the research. Because the field researchers were familiar with their states, they had the ability to make informal contacts with government officials, who were sometimes also friends, neighbors, former colleagues, and former students. The JOBS study solicited the approval of the state welfare agency because we planned to supplement the field network research with surveys of frontline workers. The TANF study, on the other hand, relied on the contacts and ingenuity of the field researchers to gain access to government agencies.

Data Collection

The report forms instructed the field researchers to collect both qualitative and quantitative information for each of the elements in figures 5.1 and 5.2. Examples of quantitative data collected for the JOBS study are

- Allocation of JOBS funds among program components
- Allocation of JOBS funds among jurisdictions
- Percentage of JOBS funds used by the welfare agency to purchase services from other organizations
- Changes in the allocation of staff
- Number of participants in each JOBS service
- Percentage of Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) participants who are AFDC recipients

Other information requested by the report form was qualitative. For instance, the first JOBS reporting form asked questions such as

"Describe the design of the state's JOBS program, including the sequence of JOBS services and activities, the state's choice of mandatory and optional components, and the degree to which JOBS is tailored to the needs and choices of individual participants. Provide a flowchart showing the sequence of events and describe any deviations that are expected to occur commonly. How uniform is the program expected to be across local jurisdictions in the state? Compared to WIN or the WIN Demonstration program, did JOBS require significant changes? Are new or different types of educational, employment, and training programs being offered to AFDC recipients?"

"What case management services, if any, will be provided to JOBS participants? Are case management services expected to alter the delivery of services to clients? Have case managers been designated for JOBS and, if so, what is their role? Does this represent a significant change from the predecessor to JOBS?"

The second and third rounds of field research were able to ask more focused questions and to employ forms and checklists. Forms and checklists proved most useful, however, when they did not stand alone but rather summarized text. Forms and checklists without text seemed to convey an incomplete picture of the situation and were, of course, unable to capture unexpected arrangements.

Indigenous field researchers were particularly able to provide information about political and fiscal factors influencing welfare reform. To examine political leadership, the first JOBS reporting form included this section:

"How aggressive were state leaders in making JOBS, or its immediate predecessor, a prominent issue? Who have been the main political actors and what arguments have they made for the need to implement work/welfare programs? For example, has the rhetoric focused on opportunities, obligations, or both? Is there a specific strategy for 'marketing' the state's employment and training programs? If so, what is the 'message' and to whom is it being delivered—recipients, the public, legislators, other state agencies, client advocacy and other citizens' groups, employers? What methods are being used?"

The TANF study sought to learn whether policymaking differed from previous welfare reforms:

"Please describe the policy formulation or planning process behind the state's welfare reforms. Please indicate who was involved (including interest groups, state agencies, local government officials). Also, put the process into historical context by indicating whether and how the people, groups, and agencies that developed the reforms differed from the usual persons and organizations involved in state welfare issues."

In addition to answering quantitative and qualitative questions, field associates collected documents such as laws, regulations, budgets, organization charts, plans, contracts and interagency agreements, administrative letters, flowcharts, procedures manuals, forms, and agency reports. They also collected newspaper articles and, in a few instances, videotaped speeches by the governor or welfare administrator.

The report form for the JOBS study strongly encouraged the field researchers to interview a range of people involved in JOBS implementation, including state welfare administrators and policymakers and personnel from other state agencies, such as the JTPA, state education, and the state budget office. Other than asking for diverse perspectives on the implementation of JOBS, we did not give them specific guidance about the job titles of the people to be interviewed; we left the selection of

respondents to their judgment. The one exception to this minimal guidance was sending the field researchers a list of welfare advocacy organizations to be contacted, thereby ensuring that we had their perspective on the implementation of the JOBS program.

Because the report form is a set of questions posed to the field researcher, not an interview protocol, the researchers also had leeway to frame the interview questions. To draw candid responses from respondents, we asked the field researchers to assure them of anonymity, to explain that the report would not be used for compliance or audit purposes, and to avoid using a tape recorder. Although the researchers were encouraged to quote the people they interviewed, they were asked to suppress the source of the quotes. They did, however, attach to their report a list of people interviewed, with their title and organization, so we could learn whom they spoke with. Interviewing without a tape recorder had advantages and disadvantages. The one researcher who used a tape recorder gave us quotes that enriched our own report, but state officials did not tell him about a glitch in the management information system that inflated their participation rate. Maybe they were unaware of this weakness at the time of the interviews, but maybe not.

To supplement the data gathered from the states and localities by the field researchers, the central staff use information gathered by the federal agency administering the program. When we studied the JOBS program, HHS was a source of information about federal and state expenditures on the JOBS program and child care, expenditures on the JOBS target groups, participation rates, and participation of recipients in individual JOBS activities. Expenditure data from HHS was more uniform among states than data in the states' budgets, where different fiscal years and biennial budgeting complicate efforts to compare states. Similarly, HHS required states to report participation data using uniform definitions, which enabled the central staff to make more reliable cross-state comparisons of these variables.

Data Analysis

Like the multiple case study approach described by Agranoff and Radin, the field network methodology requires both the field researchers and the central staff to analyze and interpret information. After the field researchers gather and report information from their jurisdiction, they use it to answer a set of analytical questions. The final sections of the

report form for the JOBS study, for instance, asked them to analyze institutional outputs and the factors influencing program design and implementation:

"Does the mix of services and the participation rate vary significantly among the local sites? Are there other significant differences among the sites? If so, which of the many factors discussed above (for example, environmental conditions, intra-organizational and interorganizational structure, etc.) explain this variation? If some local agencies are more effective than others in providing services to their clients, what factors appear to promote or hinder success?"

"To what extent has JOBS increased or introduced different education, employment, and training opportunities for AFDC recipients? Which changes have been the most significant? Has JOBS been a repackaging of prior work-welfare programs or is it something more, something different?"

"What are the critical issues or major constraints facing the local welfare agencies at this point in their implementation of the JOBS program? What is being done to address these issues or constraints?"

Concluding the state-level section of the report form for the TANF study was a broad analytical question:

"Based on your analysis of the state as a whole, on which types of goals does its TANF/AFDC program place the most emphasis? What, in other words, is the overall state system really trying to do? As emphasized throughout this Report Form, we want you to consider not only official policies relating to families and individuals, but also the goals revealed in management decisions about the allocation of staff, budgets, and other resources; the types of organizations and people assigned to operate TANF/AFDC; the program's reporting and incentive systems; the nature and degree of control exercised by state administrators over service delivery organizations; the capabilities of its management information system; and other aspects of the state's management system."

Based on the reports of the field researchers, the central staff then writes a report that answers the study's primary questions. This report is not simply a summary of the reports of the field associates, but is a comparative analysis that generalizes about the responses of the states and localities to federal legislation and documents and explains variation in these responses. The analysis varies, however, depending on the questions addressed and the disciplines of the analysts.

The studies of JOBS and TANF were both about the magnitude and direction of change in complex systems. The JOBS study sought to learn whether and how welfare systems were requiring employment and preparation for employment. The TANF study focused on management, the capacity of state governments to create management systems and imbue

them with purposes that they then fulfill. Neither of these research questions has a quantitative answer. Unlike Nathan's earlier studies that measured the substitution of federal money for state money, or the replacement of federal money with state money, the studies of welfare reform were fundamentally qualitative. Quantitative data such as changes in expenditures and staff for employment programs were collected, but they were only a few of the many variables indicative of a change in purpose for welfare agencies.

The earlier Nathan studies used a more specific evaluation criterion—the extent of fiscal substitution or replacement—than the welfare reform studies. Although the JOBS and TANF studies were looking for change, the changes were along multiple dimensions. Some of these dimensions were expressed in the legislation and provided implicit evaluation criteria—a higher rate of participation in work activities was “better” than a lower one—but others did not. For example, neither the JOBS legislation nor economic analysis said that job search programs were preferable to education and training. We therefore presented data on the number of participants in each component and discussed the factors that explained the variation among states.

With the information in the state reports on the JOBS program arranged in sections according to the elements in figure 5.1, much of the analysis within sections consisted of looking for similarities and differences among jurisdictions and developing categories for grouping together similar responses. For some of the elements, we identified models that states were using, for example, models of case management. We developed prototype client flow models that illustrated distinctions among the treatment of clients. We also tried, without much success, to develop typologies that would relate one element to another in an insightful way.

My approach to analyzing the state reports was both detailed and holistic. Years of studying welfare have convinced me that reform lies in changes in the fine details of policy and administration, with the smallest nuances acting like seeds for progress or snags for inertia. Yet, I began my analysis by writing descriptive profiles of the JOBS program of each state so I could see the big picture. I assumed that each state had a strategy for implementing the JOBS program whereby it would invest resources in areas it expected to have the greatest return in meeting the participation rate. By examining the fine details in light of the big picture, I hoped to discover that efficient strategy. In hindsight, I see the economist's mindset asserting itself.

In other words, the analysis of welfare reform was primarily inductive. We made sense of what we saw through the lens of our various disciplines. The constructs I used to interpret the data were different from those used by Hagen, who is a social worker, whereas Nathan and Gais, who are political scientists, used yet another set of constructs to interpret their data. When I read the report on TANF written by Nathan and Gais, I was not surprised to learn that political scientists have a vocabulary for phenomena that I saw and struggled to describe. Although some people may disagree, I believe these different lenses are a strength of the field research method, not a weakness. No discipline has a monopoly on policy research.

The JOBS study and the TANF study asked essentially the same question: Did federal welfare reform legislation make a big difference in state welfare programs, or did states continue pretty much with business as usual? The JOBS study found only incremental change in employment programs, whereas the TANF study found profound change in the goals, programs, and institutional arrangements of the welfare system. Caseload data tell the same story. The increase in caseloads in the early 1990s shows that the JOBS program did not amount to a sweeping change in programs to encourage employment, whereas the sharp decrease in welfare caseloads after 1994 is proof that the precursors to TANF, and TANF itself, were a sharp break with the past. But caseload data tell us only that something is different. The field network studies tell a more complex story about the numerous actions taken by states, local governments, and other institutions as they reacted to the federal legislation within their own political and economic environments. They tell us what these institutions actually did that was different.

Critique

We have all heard a piece of research being dismissed as "just a case study," reflecting the low regard for the case study methodology among many social scientists. Agranoff and Radin acknowledge that comparative case studies are similarly demeaned, and Nathan notes above that field network research has been criticized as impressionistic and lacking in rigor. How then can consumers assess the quality of a particular example of field network research, and what guidelines can be offered to help researchers produce high-quality work using this approach? The suggestions made by Yin for judging case studies and increasing their rigor apply to compara-

tive case studies as well. To judge the quality of research designs for case studies, he applies four criteria that are commonly used to assess social science methods: construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability (Yin 1994, 32–33).

Yin points out that case studies are frequently criticized for poor construct validity, meaning that the data about the concepts being studied are collected using subjective judgments or impressions rather than a well-developed set of operational measures. To ensure construct validity, the investigator must select the specific concept to be investigated and then justify why the operational measures reflect this concept. Internal validity is necessary when the research seeks to establish a cause and effect relationship between variables. To ensure internal validity, the investigator must demonstrate that the relationship between variables is causal and not the result of some unidentified other factors. External validity is the generalizability of the research findings beyond the case examined in the particular study, or the range of situations and places to which the findings can be generalized. Research consisting of a single case is particularly susceptible to the criticism of limited external validity. Finally, the reliability of the study is the extent to which it can be replicated, using the same procedures to repeat the study, to produce the same findings.

Judged by these criteria, field network research has much to commend it. To ensure construct validity and reliability, the single most important procedure is the use of the report form to guide the research of the field analysts. The report form describes the constructs and operationalizes them by specifying a framework for collecting the data that will measure the construct. For example, the primary construct for the JOBS study was the extent to which a state's JOBS program was promoting employment among welfare recipients. In the TANF study, the primary construct is the state's institutional capacity to manage TANF programs so that they achieve the state's goals for welfare reform. Both of these constructs have multiple dimensions, requiring the extensive data collection called for in figures 5.1 and 5.2. Although critics can of course disagree with the particular measures chosen to operationalize the construct, the report form specifies the measures clearly and requires all field researchers to use the same ones.

Because the report form is specific about much of the quantitative and qualitative data to be collected, it also promotes reliability, so that researchers replicating the study would be highly likely to collect the same information. It instructs the field researchers to obtain data on expendi-

tures of specific types, to gather and distill the meaning of laws, regulations, and contracts, to describe the structure and organization of government programs and operations, and to observe the political debate in the media. Yin suggests that in addition to following specific procedures in collecting data, case study research should be conducted "as if someone were always looking over your shoulder" (Yin 1994, 37). In field network research, the central staff is there to look over the shoulder of each field researcher. The initial conference to discuss the report form is to ensure that everyone tries to collect the same information, and the field visits by the central staff during the data collection phase are opportunities to reinforce the process. When the central staff members analyze the reports from the field, they can question the field researchers when data are unclear or inconsistent. Finally, whenever possible, a draft of the report of the central staff is sent to the field researchers so they can offer general comments and check that the data from their sites were used appropriately.

The use of a network of researchers to do a comparative case study naturally raises the issue of inter-rater reliability, or the comparability of data collection and analysis among the researchers. This is certainly a concern that must be addressed by the study director and central staff. In designing the report form, attention must be given to the definition of terms, and indeed thrashing out definitions consumes a considerable portion of the conference with the field researchers. The report form should also request information that is redundant to some extent, giving the field researcher and the central staff the opportunity to check for internal consistency. In addition, the field researchers use their data to answer analytical questions, which encourages them to look critically at their own information. There is no denying, however, that some field researchers dig deeper than others when collecting information and have a better understanding of what they find. Finally, if data are available from the federal government, the central staff can check the consistency of the data with the data collected by the field researchers and try to resolve any large discrepancies.

Like the multiple case study method described by Agranoff and Radin, the field researchers do not simply gather information but also analyze and interpret the information they collect. Because they are asked to make judgments about what they observe, and reasonable people may reach different conclusions, reliability may be lower for the questions in the report form that ask the field researchers for analysis and interpretation. The report form instructs the field researchers to base their conclu-

sions on the data they have presented and thus provide a check on their interpretations, but different interpretations of the data are possible. In fact, one of the strengths of the method is that it incorporates the interpretations of seasoned researchers and brings a diversity of perspectives and insights.

Problems of external validity are generally less at issue in a comparative case study examining multiple cases than in a study examining a single case. In field network research, the study directors make an effort to choose a sample of states that is representative of the nation as a whole by selecting states that vary along dimensions expected to influence the constructs under investigation, dimensions such as income level, poverty rate, racial composition, urbanization, region, and political culture. In selecting samples of local governments, the size of the population or the type of government (county, city, or town) is generally a factor, with an effort to include jurisdictions that are systematically different or similar. External validity, or the ability to generalize beyond the particular study, is enhanced as the sample becomes more representative of the universe and includes a larger percent of the cases in the universe. With 10 states in the sample for the JOBS study and 20 states in the sample for the TANF study, the variation among states is sufficient such that it is possible to establish categories of features of welfare programs that can meaningfully describe programs in states outside the sample.

Although a research design with multiple cases enhances externality validity, it does not solve problems of internal validity or the ability to establish cause and effect. Because case studies by their very nature cannot make comparisons with a counterfactual, or what would have happened in the absence of the hypothesized cause, they are generally considered to lack internal validity. Yin argues that this is not a concern when case studies are descriptive and do not seek to establish causality; field network research avoids this pitfall to the extent that it is descriptive. Mohr (1996), after discussing the concept of causation and its implications for social science methodology, concludes that internal validity does not require a counterfactual. He broadens the definition of internal validity by arguing that causal arguments can be made without a counterfactual by what he calls "physical causal reasoning." For example, when you push a switch and a light goes on, you do not need a counterfactual to reason that the switch caused the light to go on. Mohr argues that physical causal reasoning, rather than factual causal reasoning, can give internal validity to case study research. Using this definition, field network

research is explanatory when it reconstructs a sequence of events whose relationship is so close as to be uncontroversial. Process and implementation studies that seek to understand not only what happened but also why it happened can find methodological support in Mohr's distinction between these types of reasoning.

When is the field network method an appropriate research approach? Although it is a flexible approach that can be used in a variety of policy contexts, the types of questions it can answer are limited. The scope of the research questions must be limited to those that the field researchers can answer reliably by the methods they use to collect information. Field network research does not collect primary data on the individuals served by a program, nor do the field researchers do extensive observations of program operations. Institutions are the unit of analysis, not individuals. Although the JOBS and TANF studies included questions about the processing of clients through programs, the method is better suited to examine the institutional structure of programs than to examine client processing. Structural features of programs are revealed in budgets, plans, contracts and interagency agreements, flowcharts, procedure manuals, and other public documents. Obtaining this information requires some cooperation by individuals in the agencies operating the program, but not a high level of effort on their part. But learning about client processing requires data about individual clients and hence either analysis of agency data, observations of clients, or both. Field researchers can interview people in the agencies to gain their impressions, but the results are, well, impressionistic.

The strength of the approach is its ability to get an in-depth understanding of the response of institutions, including states, localities, non-profit agencies and, increasingly, for-profit firms, to new federal initiatives. We can understand their motivations, their strategies, the ramifications of their choices for other programs and populations, and the unintended consequences those may produce. The researchers can get into the field quickly, which makes the approach particularly useful for providing timely feedback about responses to new programs. Also, although the report form structures the data collection, it is sufficiently open-ended to be exploratory. Our report forms always asked, "Are there important issues or aspects of JOBS implementation not explored elsewhere that are emerging in the state?" Having scholars in the field who are capable of using their judgment to report important but unexpected developments is an advantage of the field network approach, especially when big program changes

are occurring. This means that field network research is well suited to studying new programs or large changes in existing programs, particularly when the nature and direction of the responses by lower levels of government are difficult to predict.

NOTES

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