# 14

# Human Service Organizational Technology

## *Improving Understanding and Advancing Research*

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Within organizational studies, scholars use the concept of "technology" to refer to the work done within organizations. While common usage of the term now denotes new innovations in computer systems, handheld organizing tools, or Web-based innovations, organizational theory highlights the importance of many different tools, techniques, and actions in carrying out the central work of organizations. Organizational technology is the process used to transform inputs into outputs (Daft, 2006; Goodman & Sproull, 1990; Scott, 1981). Inputs, often conceptualized as raw materials, can be people, other living things, material resources, objects, or symbols. Similarly, outputs can take many different forms. If organizations are recognized as systems for doing work, organizational technology is their central, defining characteristic (Hulin & Roznowski, 1985; Perrow, 1967).

Within manufacturing organizations, it is not difficult to specify the core technology. Raw materials can be seen, measured, and analyzed. Tasks important in the technological process can be standardized and evaluated. In fact, within private industry, the whole field of operations management provides concepts and tools, such as supply chains and project management, to analyze and improve an organization's technological processes. In contrast, there is a surprising dearth of attention to defining, discussing, and understanding the technology of human service organizations. In part, this is because this process is much more difficult to define and enumerate. The primary raw material—clients—have diverse characteristics and motivations. The programs and tasks important in the transformation process are changeable, often requiring professional judgments that are difficult to predict or standardize. Program

execution often requires many different elements to be dealt with simultaneously (Scott, 1981). In fact, some argue that human service organizations—such as mental health clinics, child care centers, welfare-to-work agencies—employ technologies that are inherently indeterminate, ambiguous, and complex (Hasenfeld, 1983; Hasenfeld & English, 1974; Nuehring, 1978; Savage, 1987; Weaver, 2000).

There are, of course, important variations among the technologies of such human service organizations (Hasenfeld, 1972). Some technologies are intent on processing people. In these organizations, work focuses on controlling access to a range of services, such as what occurs in university admissions offices, credit bureaus, or welfare organizations (Hasenfeld, 1978; Prottas, 1979). Core tasks center on classifying clients, linking them with external resources, and disposing of cases; as a result, the duration of the intervention tends to be fairly short. Other human service organizations employ technologies focused on changing people. The tasks of these organizations, such as mental health clinics, child care centers, or schools, are to provide treatment, education, or socialization to alter the physical, psychological, social, or cultural attributes of clients (Goffman, 1959; Vinter, 1963; Willis, 1977). Because staff play a central role in developing and deploying treatment, moral categorization of clients may determine the types of services they receive (Hasenfeld, 1992; Pesso, 1978; Roth, 1971; Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Soss, Schram, Vartanian, & O'Brien, 2001). In both settings, those with "people-processing" and "people-changing" technologies, staff interactions with clients are central to program implementation.

One key question put forward by scholars interested in better understanding organizational technology is its relationships to structure (Barley, 1990; Fry, 1982; Glisson, 1978, 1992; Hickson, Pugh, & Pheysey, 1969; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1986; Mohr, 1971; Perrow, 1967; Savage, 1987; Scott, 1981; Shrader, Lincoln, & Hoffman, 1989). Organizational structure is the coordination mechanism that enables work to be done (Perrow, 1967; Scott, 1981). Originally, based on Weber's bureaucratic theory, structure was conceptualized as that which created specialization, standardization of tasks, formalization, and centralization (Pugh, Hickson, Hinings, & Turner, 1968). Organizational theorists also see organizational mission, hierarchy, departmental arrangements, and intra-organizational task forces as structural elements. Many functional management areas, such as financial management practices, human resources management, facilities, and evaluation, also create the structure supporting program technology (Scott, 1981).

Contingency theory suggests that a predictable relationship should exist between an organization's technology and structure, and considerable research explores this relationship (Glisson, 1992; Lawrence & Lorch, 1986; Perrow, 1967; Scott, 1981). More variable and ambiguous processes demand more flexible structures than routine and concrete practices. However, while some research argues that structural characteristics predict technological variation, others contend that variations in core technologies predict structural forms, and empirical investigations reveal ambiguity in how to understand the relationship between each (Adler & Borys, 1996; Barley, 1986; Glisson, 1992; Mohr, 1971). In the end, this stream of research is unable to explain why similar organizational technologies are carried out in difficult structures or why similar structures often surround distinct technologies.

This intellectual impasse has not stopped the development of a rich and vibrant field focused on understanding the technology of private industry. In fact, in this arena, there is growing attention to the "duality of technology" (Orlikowski, 1992). Rather than being the product or cause of structure,

some scholars direct our attention to organizational technology that is simultaneously produced by and constrained by human action (Barley, 1990; Feldman, Khademian, Ingram, & Schneider, 2006; Orlikowski, 1992; Pozzebon, 2004; Roberts & Grabowski, 1999; Weick, 1990; Yanow, 2004). To explore this idea, they engage with the work of social theorists (most notably Giddens, 1984, 1990; Latour, 2005) who grapple with the relationships between macrostructures and human agency.

In this chapter, I explore the implication of this line of scholarship for the work of human service organizations. I do so for theoretical and practical reasons. As others have noted (Borden, 1992; Emirbaye & Williams, 2005; Rino, 1985), our understanding of social welfare administration can benefit from a deeper engagement with sophisticated theories. The theory that informs this analysis is particularly relevant to social welfare since it grapples with understanding how human activity—insight, innovation, meaning, and leadership—creates and is constrained by larger, structural forces. Research with frontline human service professionals or managers reveals considerable insight and energy being spent on program delivery and refinement. Yet at the same time, their actions are often hindered by larger structural forces, such as organizational rules or public policy. How can this theory help us better understand this empirical reality?

Practically, it also is essential for human service professionals to better understand the work within our organizations. Although technology is often seen as a "black box," there is much to be gained from refining our conceptual understandings. In human service organizations, program refinement is too often driven by external funder requirements rather than close analysis by program staff. Letts, Ryan, and Grossman (1999) describe this as the dearth of program capacity within nonprofit organizations. Yet the capacity to understand, monitor, and refine program elements is an important dimension of organizational effectiveness (Sowa, Selden, & Sandfort, 2004). How can a theoretically informed understanding of technology improve the programmatic capacity of human service organizations?

## Modeling Program Technology

A number of characteristics differentiate the technology of human service agencies from that of other organizations. For one, many times the treatment methods and intervention techniques being used are not based on scientific understandings of the presenting problem (Rossi, 1978). In some instances, this is because there is little definitive research about interventions. Other times, there is resistance to incorporating evidence-based practice in frontline work (Gira, Kessler, & Poertner, 2004). The knowledge staff and managers develop from years of day-to-day service delivery, providing counseling, educating children, and verifying eligibility for welfare programs, often has incredible validity because of its direct relevance to the tasks at hand. Finally, funders and others in the external environment may pressure agencies to adopt the techniques and tools used by other organizations whether or not they are based on documented evidence of effectiveness (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Zucker, 1987).

Second, there is considerable complexity when working primarily with human beings, who are the raw materials of an organization's process (Hasenfeld & English, 1974, 1983). Because people have distinct attitudes, motivations, and goals, they rarely passively accept the imposition of an organization's treatment protocol. Instead, human service technology is often negotiated through day-to-day interactions between frontline workers and clients. Organizational staff and clients can experience conflicting

goals, unequal knowledge, and contested control (Handler, 1992; Hasenfeld, 1978; Lipsky, 1980; Meyers, Glaser, & MacDonald, 1998; Rosengren & Lefton, 1970; Sandfort, Kalil, & Gottschali, 1999). Yet, paradoxically, both parties are mutually dependent on each other. Staff depend on clients to focus their work efforts, provide feedback, and respond to offered treatments. Clients depend on staff to provide the services they are seeking.

Finally, in private businesses, slippages in organizational technology decrease productivity and efficiency, both central concerns of management. In contrast, human service managers' attention is often focused on securing and maintaining the resources necessary to carry out programs (Letts et al., 1999; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). With the increased role of government as a funder of many human service organizations, the process of securing and managing resources can become extraordinarily complex. Each funding stream carries with it rules, reporting requirements, and fiscal constraints that must be reconciled and managed (Gronbjerg, 1993; Smith, 2005). Managers must grapple with the constant tension between deepening program expertise and developing new programming ideas to capture private funders' interest. Yet managers must work against these forces to ensure that their limited resources are applied in ways that bolster program effectiveness to focus on strategies most likely to change the clients' circumstances.

As noted earlier, operations management within business has developed many tools to manage organizational technology. While the unique characteristics of human service technology makes direct application of many of the operations management tools fraught with difficulty (Jaskyte & Dressler, 2005; Savage, 1987), a simple project management tool and process diagrams can help human service managers understand and monitor the basic process elements in their programs. These diagrams simply create visual representations that capture the steps and sequences involved in program delivery. Figure 14.1 illustrates the use of such process diagrams in two types of human service organizations: (1) welfare-to-work providers and (2) early-childhood education programs.[1] Unlike private business, public policy often mandates key elements of program delivery in human service organizations to varying extents. At the time I conducted research in these organizations, welfare-to-work agencies were largely *people-processing* organizations. Public policy mandated contractors to focus on finding jobs for welfare recipients through a "Work First" model, rather than providing education or training (Brown, 1997). According to state policy, a successful outcome for the contractors was placing clients in minimum-wage employment for at least 20 hours a week. In contrast, preschool providers provided a more fundamental *people-changing* technology, supporting 4-year-old social and emotional development so that children could succeed in school. Public policy encouraged high-quality care and education and ensured the provision of additional health and family support services. Figure 14.1 represents the program mandates of both the welfare-to-work and early-childhood education policies. As such, they illustrate how program implementation is conceptualized by policymakers.

Program requirements specify how a client enters each organization for service. In the welfare-to-work example, client referrals are made from a county welfare office. In the early-childhood example, children are enrolled at the beginning of the program year, on a first-come, first-serve basis. The visual diagrams also denote the various program tasks mandated by policy directives. In welfare-to-work, rules require that all organizations do orientation and "job search support" to encourage those who can get work to find it. Those who aren't successful must have access to more focused program elements called "job readiness activities," which presumably allow

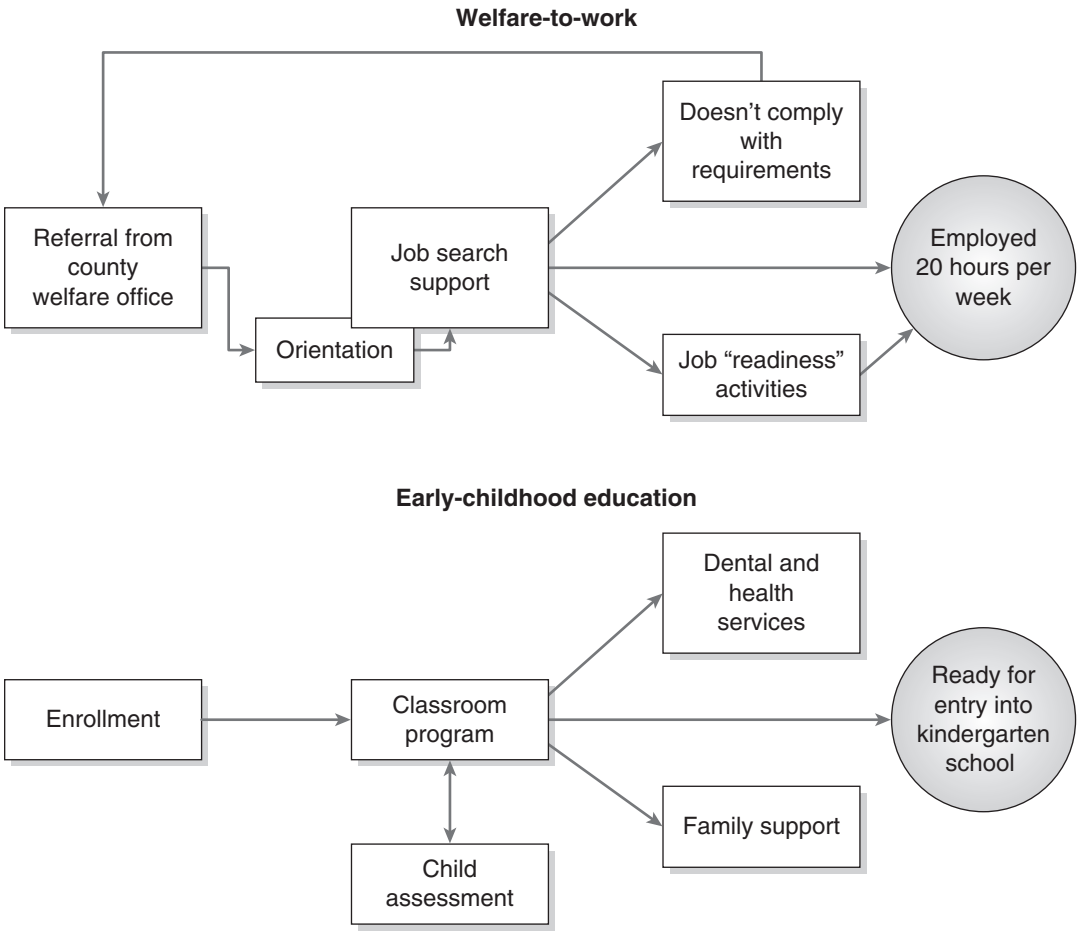


**Figure 14.1** Welfare-to-Work and Early-Childhood Program Technology as Envisioned by Public Policy

skill deficiencies to be addressed. If clients do not comply with the 20-hours-a-week requirement of engagement, they will be referred back to the county welfare office for punitive action. In early-childhood education, the core program element is classroom instruction, although public policy requires it be supplemented by child assessment, health services, and family support.

Such diagrams can be used to model the way policymakers assume that the program directives will be carried out. Yet they also can document the variations that exist in practice, as diverse program operators interpret these directives and carry them out within their own organizational contexts. They can shine light into the black box of human service technology and reveal variation that is important for program delivery, policy implementation, and research. For example, Figure 14.2 illustrates the implementation of welfare-to-work programming in three organizations clustered in two Michigan counties. Figure 14.3 illustrates the program technology in three other organizations providing early-childhood education in New York State.[2] Both are representative of the technological variation found across the multiple sites examined in both of these studies. While the organizations were implementing the programs under the same policy mandates (those illustrated in Figure 14.1), each interpreted the mandates differently.

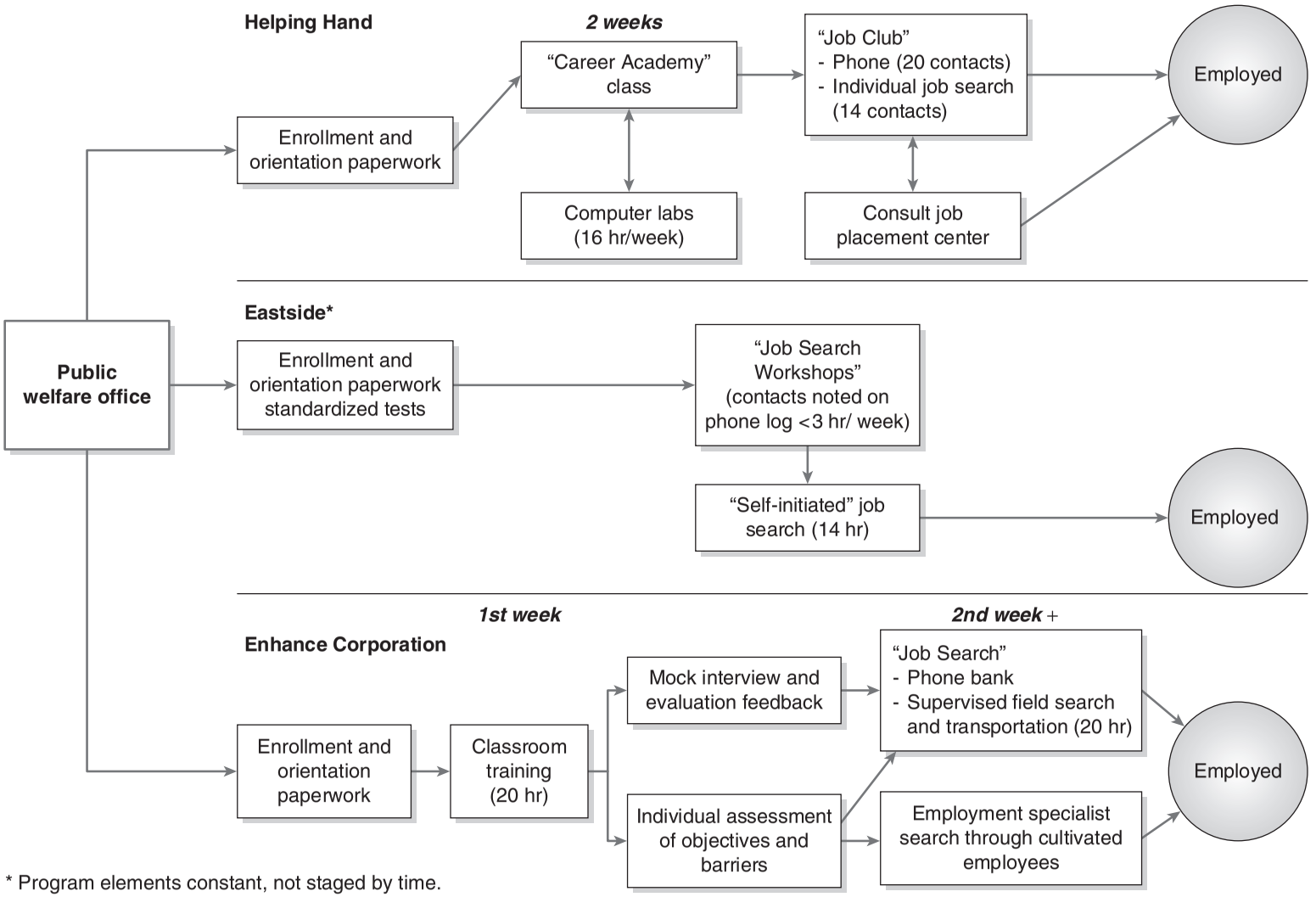


**Figure 14.1** Enacted Program Technology in Three Welfare-to-Work Organizations

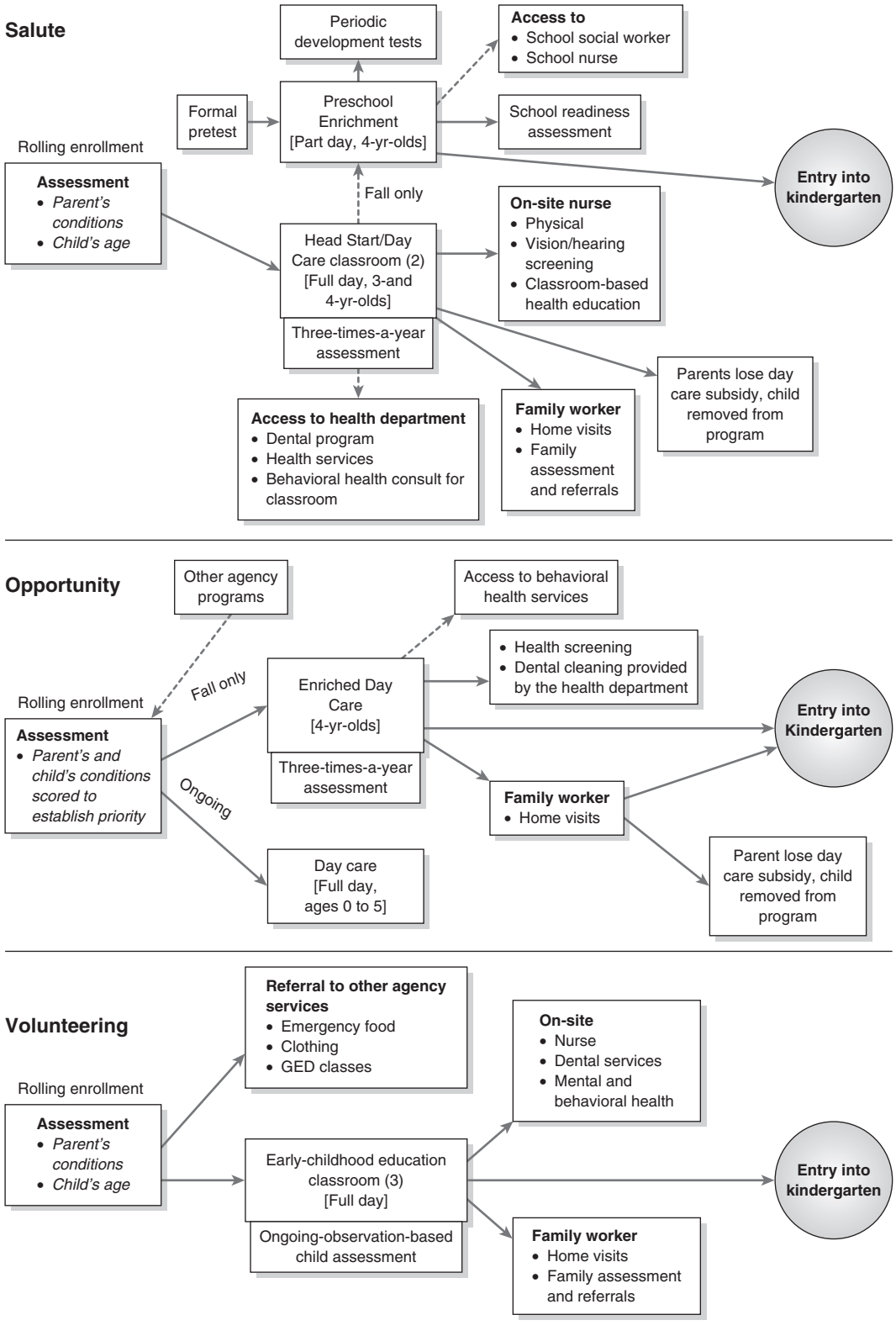


**Figure 14.3** Enacted Program Technology in Three Early-Childhood Education Organizations

In the welfare-to-work example, organizations were given latitude to develop their own approach to Work First and evaluated according to their performance, measured by the numbers of clients they moved into employment. A statewide study of 100 welfare contractor systems at the time found that there were four distinct models being used (Sandfort, 2000; Seefeldt, Sandfort, & Danziger, 1998). When interviewed in that study, the managers in all three organizations illustrated in Figure 14.2 claimed that their agency was operating the same model, a "job-seeking support" approach. However, actual observation of daily operations revealed significant variation in the technological process (Sandfort, 2003). In early-childhood education, federal Head Start and state preschool regulations do not encourage experimentation; the policy dictated more specific program elements, including child assessments, health and dental services, and family support classes or casework. As Figure 14.3 illustrates, however, there still was significant variation in the technological process across the three organizations highlighted.

These examples support assertions that human service technology is inherently indeterminate. Contested goals, insufficient technical knowledge, and resistant clients lead organizations to develop various processes. Staff develop program interventions that might not be related to achieving the desired policy outcomes. Yet they somehow are logical from the vantage point of the front lines, among staff in both people-processing and people-changing organizations. In fact, many interesting questions are raised by these examples. What contributes to the significant differences between the programmatic directives of policy and local service technologies? How can we understand the variation among local programs? If interventions are only partially based on scientific knowledge, how is human service technology developed and sustained? How do staff develop practices for dealing with clients who are important forces in shaping the consequences of the program? To answer such questions, we must look in the realm of social theory. If we are interested in building more programmatic capacity, in improving the connections between the work of human service organizations and desired societal goals, we must explore them.

## Enhancing Our Theoretical Understanding of Human Service Technologies

As alluded to earlier, most initial research on human service organizational technology conceptualized it as an objective force that would determine or be determined by other organizational attributes, such as structure or the environment (Glisson, 1978; Hage & Aiken, 1974; Hasenfeld, 1972; Savage, 1987). Another stream of research focused on individual discretion and the institutional contexts important to front-line, "street-level bureaucrats" (Lipsky, 1980; Meyerson, 1991; Roth, 1971; Smith & Donovan, 2003; Vinzant & Crothers, 1998). Institutional theory stresses the explanatory power of organizational environments (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Zucker, 1977) and suggests that most human service organizations face circumstances where there is great pressure to decouple core organizational technology from other structuring forces (Meyers & Rowan, 1977). Rather than attending to program delivery, this theory posits that organizations gain legitimacy and power by mimicking structural elements, such as financial management metrics, human resource practices, marketing, or fund development. In this frame, the success of an organization is determined by how well it appears to be delivering services. This can involve mirroring conventional systems of classifying and diagnosing clients and sorting them into understandable groupings for treatment. However, the popularity of

institutional theory as a tool for nonprofit analysis has led to a gap in scholarly attention over the questions raised by the variations in program delivery among organizations in the same institutional environment, such as those illustrated in Figures 14.2 and 14.3.

While human service organizations do face incredible pressures to legitimate themselves within the environment, the actual process of program delivery must not be overlooked. For one, technology is the distinguishing aspect of a human service organization—it is the way the organization tries to influence, help, or support the people it is serving. It is the mechanism an organization uses to contribute to socially desired outcomes. Second, institutional theory overlooks the real agency people demonstrate by continually trying to improve their service delivery (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Fligstein, 2001). In spite of the many disincentives, countless frontline human service staff try to adapt their practice so it is most effective with clients. Similarly, managers do not passively adopt the prevailing "best practices" in human resource management or financial management any more than they are passive adopters of programmatic directives within public policy. Staff and managers are thinking, testing, and adapting individuals who try to align these structures with their organization and its core operations. Finally, a new set of pressures facing many human service organizations makes program process improvement important; the international focus on performance management requires organizations to improve internal program effectiveness and document the results of their activities for various stakeholders (Barzelay, 2002; Kettl, 2005; Light, 2000; Moynihan, 2006). This emphasis requires a more sophisticated understanding of how the technology of human service organizations is carried out and contributes to socially desired outcomes.

To develop more robust explanations, we can benefit from examining social theories exploring individual agency and social structures. One of the most troubling issues in social theory, in fact, is how the actions of individuals are related to the structural features of society. Rather than assuming either the deterministic viewpoint of structural functionalists (Parsons, 1956) or the relativistic viewpoint of phenomenologists (Garfinkel, 1967), a body of theories try to bridge the deterministic macro and the relativistic micro in order to address how humans exert agency within social settings (Ritzer, 1992). Some explore these concepts using the concept of structuration (Giddens, 1984, 1990; Sewell, 1992; Whittington, 1992): Others (Callon, 1998; Latour, 2005; Law, 1993) focus attention on the unfolding process of interactions, through which people continuously reassemble the social in actor networks.

Although there is much that distinguishes these bodies of thought, for our purposes here, it is important to see what they share. For one, they both focus attention on *social context* as a site of scholarly inquiry. Rather than assuming that context can be captured as discrete variables and controlled for in predictive models, they push us to move away from dominant social science paradigms that try to document causality. Instead, they suggest that social science can be most fruitful if it takes as its central premise the need to lend deeper insight into the social. To Latour (2005), social inquiry is more fruitfully understood to be "a science accounting for how society is held together, instead of using society to explain something else" (p. 13).

These theories also have significant implications for the *conduct of empirical research.* They all draw attention to the important role both people and nonhuman forces play in the actual creation of social structures. People are agents. They shape the contexts of their work. Each acknowledges the way objects shape social interaction and fundamentally shift them. Overall, this paradigm stresses that the ideas, frames, and resources used by those being studied

should remain more significant than the analytical categories of social science. Rather than being regarded as purely "subjects" of scrutiny and interpretation, "informants" must be recognized as skilled social actors whose ways of thinking and being are shaped by and shape the social settings. By attending to the local knowledge and tools found in a particular context, empirical research can shine a light inside processes that too often are understood as simply "black boxes."

While any school of thought within this theoretical tradition could be used to analysis organizational technology, let us focus on the work of Anthony Giddens (1984, 1990), whose theory is widely used in organizational studies (Bresnen, Goussevskaia, & Swan, 2004; Haugen, 2006; Jones, Edwards, & Beckinsale, 2000; Orlikowski, 1992; Sarason, 1995; Stones, 1991; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2006; Whittington, 1992) of private industry to bridge "dichotomous logic" Pozzebon, 2004, p. 247). This logic traditionally has separated scholars focusing on predictive models to explain structural variation from those espousing strategic management as a way to shape structures. In Giddens's (1984, 1990) terms, the social contexts in which people find themselves are considered their "social systems." Social systems do not inherently possess structure but rather are structured by people to organize and understand their actions, to make sense of the circumstances in which they find themselves. Like the other theorists operating in this vein, Giddens believes that humans are knowledgeable about the conditions within which they operate. We do not passively respond to structural forces; we possess the ability to alter the social structures that shape our lives because we are skillful agents. Our skill lies in the implicit knowledge we possess about our context, our social systems (Fligstein, 2001). We can reflect on the consequences of our actions, share them with others, and make revisions when faced with a similar situation. The social systems construct has great conceptual appeal because of its general applicability to multiple levels of analysis and various substantive areas. To use social systems to bring more analytical precision, however, it is important to define it concretely; in the application here, we are specifically concerned with the frontline social systems of human service organizations.

Giddens's (1984) analysis of structure unpacks social systems by differentiating between "rules" and "resources." Rules are the virtual norms or conventions of social life, and they exist on multiple levels. The deepest are those used in the replication of societal institutions, such as language, time, or marriage. On another level, rules convey the norms of social interactions, such as greetings, relaxed conversation, or heated debate. On still another level, rules are the knowledge that people develop when operating within a particular context, such as an organization. Rules at this level become important to our discussion of human service organizational technology. Rather than being formally written or stated, social rules are informal and implicit. They are the knowledge that people develop out of experience and practice and share with each other during routine actions. As such, they are the deepest level of organizational culture, the underlying assumptions that guide collective work (Riley, 1983; Schein, 1990). Rules provide a shared background of mutual understanding that allows us to exist in an orderly manner in organizations Ranson, Hinings, & Greenwood, 1980).

For Giddens, resources are anything that serves as a source of power in social interactions. They include human attributes, such as physical strength, authority, or knowledge. They also include concrete objects, such as budgets, formal plans, and other management tools, that can help accomplish the work at hand. Resources both exist within social systems and can be brought in by members. In terms of human service

technology, resources can be critically important in determining how core processes are developed and carried out.

Giddens's theory posits that by drawing on the salient rules and resources of a context, individuals actually create the structure of their social systems. Usually, this structuring is not deliberate. People regularly use normative standards and conventional beliefs to interpret experience, not questioning whether these standards should apply in that particular instance. By routinely adopting dominant rules and drawing on resources in ways that support those beliefs, their salience is reinforced within the social setting. They become structural. This structure, in turn, provides a shared way of interpreting events, understanding experiences, and conveying appropriate behaviors. So although structures emerge from the social process, they, in turn, limit the range of plausible actions in that setting because certain options become irrational. This notion of structure provides a helpful insight into the daily program delivery in many human service organizations; oftentimes programs operate the way they do because they seem to work "well enough" given the resources (people and materials) present in the organization.

Through the lens of structuration theory, however, structures are not purely objective; they do not rule out the potential of other possible courses of action. They can be changed. Sometimes this change happens unintentionally, as people come to develop new understandings of an issue because of changing norms or events in the larger society. Sometimes structures change through the imposition of new mandates from outside the organization or the availability of new resources. However, structural change can also occur when individuals recognize how their own actions support the existing structure and make a commitment to acting differently. Structures emerge from social processes. Because they are an outcome of human choices and actions, people can always recognize and exert their own agency to try and change them.

## Exploring the Structuration of People-Processing and People-Changing Organizations

To illustrate how structuration theory can deepen our understanding of the technology of human service organizations, let's turn to more in-depth consideration of the welfare-to-work and early-childhood education agencies described earlier. The welfare-to-work organizations work short-term with most clients in Work First programs. The staff process clients and monitor their activities until each can secure 20 hours a week of employment. The early-childhood education sites provide education and care 5 days a week, 52 weeks a year, focusing specifically on 3- and 4-year-olds; they explicitly try to change the young children they work with and prepare them for kindergarten. Yet in spite of these differences in aims, the managers and frontline staff running both types of programs develop particular social structures. They use these structures to mediate the imposition of program elements as envisioned by policymakers.

In the welfare-to-work cases, all organizations were delivering a model that presumed referral from the public welfare office, orientation, and placement into "job search support" and, if needed, "job readiness" activities until employment is secured (see Figure 14.1). Field research, however, reveals significant variation in how this policy idea was carried out. At Eastside, for example, "Job Search Workshops" last only a few hours a day, three times a week, even though policy requires client engagement for a mandated 20 hours a week until employment is secured. Even during those few hours, client attendance is not closely monitored. Clients sign in to identify three potential employers in the phone book or newspaper and note them on a contact log.

Once it is filled in, the supervisor signs the list, and the client is free to leave. On random days, clients might be asked to complete mock applications, listen to lectures on personal hygiene, or report back to the group about the employers they had contacted. Clients flow in and out through the door during the entire morning, most spending little more than 20 minutes at Eastside. Although clients are instructed to do 14 hours of individual job search—picking up applications, inquiring about opportunities, attending interviews—these activities are not monitored or even discussed with the program staff at the site.

The two other Work First programs highlighted in Figure 14.2, Helping Hand and Enhance Corporation, have more structured activities. However, not all are always focused directly on getting clients into jobs. At Helping Hand, in the fancy-titled "Career Academy" class, clients are directed to complete paperwork, do route assessments, and construct resumes, without any customized assessment of their work readiness, ability, or interests. To comply with the 20-hour attendance requirement, clients are mandated to do 8 hours in the computer lab, brushing up on basic skills or exploring career interests. After 2 weeks, they move into the "Job Club" in which they must come to the site 3 days a week for 2 hours to make phone calls. During each session, they need to make and document 20 phone contacts. Attendance is closely monitored, and if the clients complete their phone calls within 30 minutes, they still need to stay at the site until the end of the 2-hour period. The rest of Job Club focuses on individualized contact with potential employers (which needs to be documented) and access to job placement staff.

In both organizations, these activities and the staff actions that supported them are justified—in fact understood to be the only reasonable option—by the frontline social structure. Eastside was a community college, and the staff strongly believed in the benefits of formal education. All had previously worked at the school before it received the welfare-to-work contract. They perceived Work First as, in the words of one staff member, "a temporary fix to a long-term problem." As a result, the staff believe that they must take a "humanistic" approach, providing a haven for clients, a place where people care about what happened to them. At the school, teachers have considerable autonomy in defining what is done in their classrooms, and it is assumed that the same is true for the welfare-to-work program; there is little management attention, and the staff are used to making programmatic decisions themselves. As a school, Eastside also has few concrete resources to support job search activities—no computers for enhancing clients' skills, no telephones for making calls to potential employers, no materials to enhance job search skill development. These limited resources and the rule that clients need merely a safe haven justify the lack of substantive job search assistance.

In addition to legitimating the limited-service technology, the frontline social structure at Eastside also shapes other activities. Because contact with clients occurs only a few hours a week, other tasks, such as paperwork, expand to fill the time. Rather than assigning paperwork to one staff member, each of the five program staff at this site is responsible for it. When asked, they estimate that 90% of their time is taken up with paper and data entry. One day, as the staff sat organizing files and complaining about the never-ending deluge of paper, I asked why they spent so much time on it. With an incredulous look, Tricia responded, "It's our job." Then, after a minute, she asked self-consciously, "Do you think we spend too much time doing it?" Before I could respond, her colleagues jumped in with immediate justification—they needed to make sure the files were up-to-date in order to stay organized, to manage the volume of clients, and to satisfy the state

monitors. Within this social system, the structure the staff developed sustains their attention to paperwork even when they resent the monotonous routine.

A similar process, although with different specifics, can be found at the Helping Hand welfare-to-work program. This is a community-based site of the county government's human services office, and in comparison with Eastside, the staff have many resources at their disposal. Filled with shiny, new furniture and modular cubicles, the office has up-to-date computers lining the walls for client skill development. Bright posters extolling the value of employment and providing information about resumes, cover letters, and career options pepper the walls. Yet the staff complain that these resources are not well suited for the program technology: The construction and arrangement of the offices makes it impossible to have confidential client meetings; while the large classroom is appropriate for a large group, it limits staff ability to work with smaller groups or customize programs. So although the resources appear excellent, they constrain staff action. In fact, the mismatch between the utility of the resources and the program tasks reinforces a frontline rule shared by the staff—the county government is inefficient, and they are fortunate to operate in a more autonomous satellite office.

When asked in interviews, the staff voice significant doubts about the viability of the Work First model, although they clearly believe that welfare recipients should find employment. In this county, the economy is strong. Clients' success seems to depend more on their inherent motivation than on whether or not they attend the Work First program. As Theresa said,

> There's no real point to go into the Work First program for a lot of people. If people who are on welfare are interested in getting a job, . . . they go and get a job. . . . If they're not, then they don't want to come to a program that's going to have them 20 hours on the job.

This belief, reinforced with each story of a client who found a job before attending the program orientation or each newspaper headline about the county's low unemployment shared in the lunchroom, has come to be a rule of this social system. Although there are considerable resources available—computers, telephone banks, access to county services, the staff do not mobilize them to help welfare clients get jobs.

The program technologies at Eastside and Helping Hand differ dramatically from that used by Enhance Corporation to move welfare recipients into the workforce. At this site, activities focus on achieving the policy goal of client employment after a short program interaction. In the first week, participants attend a structured "classroom training," where instructors strive to develop relationships and build trust with each individual client through skits, testimonies, and stories. On the final day of classroom training, the staff meet individually with all the participants to both identify sectors for targeted job search and conduct mock interviews. Throughout the agency, from management to support staff, there is a deeply held belief that to become self-sufficient, clients just need to start with one job, any job. This rule is explained by Clarice:

> Everyone is employable. . . . The only thing you have to do is stop and think, "What type of employers hire high school students?" . . . It might be some of the lower skilled places—McDonald's, Burger King—but it's at least getting their feet in the door.

In this organization, the staff develop and use tools, such as extensive employer lists and files of applications, to help them carry out their responsibilities. These important resources help them find employment for clients. In contrast to other organizations, this frontline social structure helps the staff focus their actions through a service technology that engages clients and builds their desire to find employment and leave welfare far behind.

Yet the Enhance Corporation staff do not believe that they can work miracles with resistant or multiproblem clients. In contrast to the lax participation monitoring at Eastside and the obsessive attention to in person attendance at Helping Hand, the Enhance staff expect that clients will exert effort and engage in the job search process. If they do not make this effort or if they have problems such as drug dependency or mental instability, the staff do not hesitate to refer them back to the public welfare office. In this frontline social system, the interactive methods of classroom trainers, the individual assessments, and the mock interviews are all logical and legitimate actions. As in other sites, this technology also structures the nature of the staff's day-to-day tasks. The staff meet weekly in teams to discuss the progress of each individual participant in the program and strategize about how to find appropriate employment for that person. If appropriate progress is not observed or if other social issues are discovered by the team, they do not hesitate to refer clients back to the public welfare office for sanctions. This action was never discussed as a viable, routine strategy by the staff in the other two welfare-to-work sites.

Although these three welfare-to-work providers are all responding to the same policy mandates, operating a similar program model, receiving comparable levels of funding, and being monitored by the same outcomes, they have developed unique core technologies for delivering this program. As structuration theory suggests, these technologies are structured by the shared rules staff develop about the nature of their work, their clients, and the validity of policy mandates and by the way resources are deployed within these contexts. A similar analysis can help explain the variation in people-changing technologies within early-childhood education settings. As Figure 14.3 illustrates, the components of this technology are more complex. Federal Head Start rules and state preschool regulations mandate that some services, such as health and parental support, be available. All these sites operate full day, full year to provide care and education to low-income children and their parents. Yet each organization configures these services differently, with important consequences for the client's access and service intensity.

Early-childhood organizations must contend with the reality that parents looking for child care have unique circumstances and abilities to pay. The organizations in our study received public funding from at least three sources—child care subsidies (from the county), Head Start (from the federal government), and preschool dollars (from the state) Sandfort, Selden, & Sowa, 2008). Parents who successfully access rare child care vouchers enable organizations to get reimbursed for services from the county; very low-income parents with 3- or 4-year-old children are eligible for Head Start programs; still other parents pay directly but—as citizens—are eligible for part-day, publicly funded preschool for 4-year-olds. These complex eligibility conditions are reconciled in unique ways according to the rules and resources of the social system in each site. Let's focus on one element of the programming—initial assessment and classroom assignment—to illustrate how frontline structuration occurs in these people-changing organizations. At all three sites, staff do rolling enrollment into the program throughout the year; when eligible families come to the sites, they are assessed, and their child is placed in a classroom. While child development principles would suggest that technology focus on providing care continuity for children, this research-based knowledge is not what drives decision making. Instead, other factors are more significant in directing staff action and program delivery.

When parents come to Salute inquiring about care, the staff ask a standard set of questions. If they meet the income eligibility criteria, parents are told that their child

can enroll in one of two "Head Start/Day Care" classrooms. If their child is 4 years old, she will be pulled out for a half-day "Preschool Enrichment." In the Preschool classroom, she will interact with other children from more diverse backgrounds since income limitations are not operative. There are clear distinctions made between the substantive programming in the Head Start/Day Care and the preschool classrooms. Each teacher brings in her own perspective. The Head Start/Day Care teacher has an early-childhood credential and years of Head Start experience; she believes that her work is to provide a critical early intervention into the cycle of poverty. In contrast, the Preschool Enrichment classroom is run by a teacher from the local school district; she has a 4-year degree in education and is only on-site because of a formal partnership between the school district and Salute. She sees her job as part of the larger educational system and essential for getting children ready for school. These beliefs are reinforced by staff meetings, professional development opportunities, and performance assessments and have come to be a rule within the social system: These classrooms exist for distinct purposes. This assumption causes all the staff within the organization to direct unique resources to each classroom: distinct child assessment tools, special curricula, unique materials, even different parental engagement and family support services. While this structure guarantees that neither teacher will encroach on the other, it also guarantees that each operates as a silo, even though they are working with many of the same children. The teachers do not regularly meet to think about how to comprehensively serve children. Instead, 4-year-olds move back and forth between the classrooms for part of each day, often receiving duplicate, rather than comprehensive, services.

Intake assessment has different implications for classroom assignment at the Opportunity Child Care Center. At this site, referrals for early-childhood education often come from the other human service programs operated by the agency. Although referrals happen throughout the year, program enrollment is not constant. If a 4-year-old's name is received before May, his parents meet the income requirements, and he can wait to start until August, he is placed in the organization's full-day "Enriched Day Care" room. In this room, he can access an array of services, including health screening, referrals to behavioral health services, and dental cleanings. If a referral is received at a different time of the year or any of the other criteria are not met, the child is placed in the "Day Care" room. Even though this sorting causes systematic underenrollment in the Enriched room, the staff do not challenge or change this practice. Within the organization, managers and staff deeply believe that public rules mandate their programmatic setup. They evoke manuals, training events, and other resources to justify it. Even when waiting lists grew for their Day Care room and underenrollment persisted in the Enriched classroom, they did not change this sorting practice. Ultimately, the Opportunity Child Care Center closed this early-childhood site because it was unable to financially sustain it with this classroom configuration.

Operating under the same policy mandates and accountabilities, program delivery at the Volunteering Center is shaped by other frontline social structures. Enrollment is supported by an important organization-wide resource: A client management computer software allows for easy identification, tracking, and billing of clients and/or public-funding sources. This resource, and the shared belief that public-funding streams should support the agency's full programming, allows the organization to operate a program that gives many children access to an array of services. At Volunteering, the staff do not create separate classrooms to segregate children because of the characteristics of their families or the public-funding

source. Instead, family workers fill out the required paperwork associated with public funds and navigate conflicting rules, intervening on behalf of parents rather than allowing such restrictions to become a barrier. The director, in fact, thought to secure initial funding for this service from the larger organization because she realized that this service could help link parents to other Volunteering services, such as emergency food, clothing, or general educational development (GED) classes. Over time, the cost of these family workers was covered, in part, by private paying of parents' fees.

At Volunteering, there are three, full-day early-childhood classrooms for 3- and 4-year-olds. The teachers in all three classrooms use the same curriculum, provide child assessment, and share additional teaching assistants. All children access on-site health and dental services, and referrals to mental and behavioral health care are made regularly. Within the organization, there is a palpable sense that they are working together toward their common mission of providing high-quality education and services to families. This belief is reinforced by the various resources found at the site—family workers, research-based assessments, standard curriculum, materials for gross motor play, and client management computer software. The social structure in this organization supports the provision of seamless early-childhood services. That same structure—in turn—supports certain staff practices. For example, teaching staff from various classrooms regularly work together to develop educational activities, freely trading ideas gleaned from conferences and training sessions. Case conferences between family workers and teachers of siblings regularly occur because the staff presume that they should all be focused on trying to work most effectively to support the entire family.

In all these cases, the technologies enacted by these human service organizations—be they people-processing technologies, such as the welfare-to-work agencies, or people-changing technologies, such as early-childhood education—emerge from the frontline social systems. These structures evolve out of the unique ways staff come to understand policy mandates, often mediated through their own beliefs and experiences. They influence how resources are developed and directed to support the program technology. These structures also direct staff action and can sustain activities even when they have a negative consequence, such as mindless paperwork completion or systematic classroom underenrollment.

## Implications for Future Research

Giddens's (1984, 1990) structuration theory as well as other practice-based social theories suggest that the variation found among organizations charged with carrying out the same public policy mandates is a direct outcome of frontline social processes. This theoretical tradition is useful for analyzing the black box of human service organizational technology. Current trends in social welfare research focus on identifying evidence-based practices or model programs and then assessing fidelity to the model in subsequent replications (Gira et al., 2004; McGrew, Bond, Dietzen, & Salyers, 1994). Yet my welfare-to-work and early-childhood education examples challenge the assumption of this approach. Within human service organizations, program technology is not merely an ideal to be discovered and replicated. While core program elements causing desirable social outcomes are important, technology is an ongoing process, accomplished by particular social actors within organizational settings. They make decisions about the utility of these core program elements and bring them to bear at relevant moments, in light of their other ways of knowing.

While practice-based social theories can inform research in many organizational

settings, there is a particular appeal in using this approach to analyze the work of human service organizations. In an interview for the early-childhood education study, one senior manager suggested a plausible proposition:

> The majority of [staff] really do want to provide good, high-quality services. Yet, many [agencies], . . . particularly those that provide services to low-income children and families, have had to depend upon . . . subsidies far below market rate. Many of them didn't have the resources they needed to be able to do programming differently, do programming at the level at which it should be done. It wasn't lack of knowledge. It was lack of resources. One of the reason we have so many different models is, to quote Malcom X, "by any means necessary."

In resource-starved human service organizations, the structuration process may be particularly significant. In these settings, there is often limited understanding of models proven to create the desired outcomes. Shared belief systems that inform what staff believe they can (and can't) do have great significance in direct staff action and collective interpretation of events, new management ideas, and policy mandates. Such beliefs often emerge from practice-based knowledge gleaned from years of experience and are passed on to less experienced colleagues as the legitimate way to get things done; as a result, they often have more salience than lessons from research or professional claims of evidence-based practice. Instead, as staff strive to reconcile their own shared beliefs with the reality of limited infrastructure, they and their managers are left to create technology "by any means necessary."

As the examples of the welfare-to-work and early-childhood programs illustrate, however, social structures can hinder staff's abilities to actually learn from their experience or carry out policy intent. Welfare-to-work staff embrace paperwork rather than question the fundamental premise of their program. Early-childhood staff underenroll children in their enhanced program rather than crafting practices that allow them to act more consistent with policy intent. Although frontline staff try to reconcile the ambiguity of human service provision by creating social structures, they unknowingly contribute to it. The unique structures that develop in each service provider make sense to those in the social system, yet they often have limited generalizability; they are hard for clients, policymakers, and even staff from other organizations to understand.

So in resource-limited human service organizations, particularly those where practice-based knowledge is upheld more than professional values of evidence-based interventions, the specific of context matters significantly. Rather than labeling technology in these settings as merely ambiguous, insight can be gleaned by analyzing the social process at the front lines (Lin, 2000). While devolution of programmatic authority, limited scientific knowledge of program efficacy, client motivations, and the unavoidable discretion of frontline workers does make it difficult to specify technology, structuration points to an underlying process that plausibly explains how staff in organizations actually carry out human service work. Rather than evoking larger institutional forces, individual worker discretion, or amorphous differences in organizational "culture," an analysis of structuration focuses attention on the shared beliefs in organizations, the rules that develop from practice. It explores the resources of the context and how, together, they actually create structures that allow staff to understand, justify, and sustain their own actions, even in light of policy mandates. Structuration theory highlights how staff simultaneously create, sustain, *and* operate within the particular parameters of their organizational contexts. It also opens the possibility of capitalizing on discretion to improve program capacity and effectiveness from the street level.

In fact, there are many avenues for future research that are opened up from this new understanding of human service technology. For one, not much is understood about the way in which managers and agency executives can build programmatic capacity. Managers and leaders may suggest beliefs and interpretations of events, reinforce them, and garner resources—computer systems, training opportunities, consistent performance measures—that can shape frontline social systems. The welfare-to-work program at Enhance Corporation and the early-childhood education interventions at Volunteering both illustrate how management attention can help align the frontline social system in human service organizations with desirable outcomes. Yet little research systematically investigates such dimensions of management practice and considers their consequences within human service organizations.

Second, a structuration lens challenges the growing movement in social work to focus on evidence-based practice and assess organizational technology in relation to its faithfulness in model replication. This paradigm pushes researchers to see organizational technology not as a means of replication but as a process of translation. It takes seriously both the social context of the organization and the need for research methods that attend to it. Only through such inquiry will we gain insight into how the variation of technology—under similar environmental circumstances—is created and maintained

Future research on human service organizations can benefit from paying attention to the social theories of Giddens, Latour, and others who explore the relationships between individual agency and social structures. As is found among scholars of business organizations, a "dichotomous logic" exists within social welfare research. Considerable attention focuses on trying to isolate the social structural factors—such as race, class, gender—that can predict client- or organizational-level outcomes. Yet social welfare is filled with important examples of individuals who defy such predictive factors, individuals who create social movements, organize communities, or work as citizen leaders. Some scholars are beginning to discuss how both larger social forces and human agency can be reconciled at the multiple levels of social work practice (Cooney, 2007; Emirbaye & Williams, 2005; Kondrat, 1999; Mullaly, 2007; Sandfort, 2003). It is hoped that others will be motivated by my attempt to further this development by applying such theories to improve our understanding of human service organizational technology.

## Notes

1. These illustrations come from two field-based studies of human service organizations (see Sandfort, 1997; Sandfort et al., 2008; Selden & Sowa, 2004, for more details about each research project).

2. See Sandfort (1997) and Selden and Sowa (2004) for more details about each research project.

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