Ideas and Welfare Reform in Saskatchewan: Entitlement, Workfare or Activation?

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Abstract: Many provinces have enacted substantial reforms of their social assistance regime in the 1990s. However, we know surprisingly little about the ideas that underlie welfare reform in Canada. In particular, few empirical studies have directly examined the ideas of policy actors. This article presents a retrospective case study of a major policy initiative, namely Saskatchewan's *Building Independence* (BI), and examines its alignment with three paradigms of social assistance. Data come primarily from interviews with policy actors. This study concludes that the policy ideas informing BI align closely with the activation paradigm, but also share some similarities with the entitlement and workfare paradigms. The significance of this finding is then discussed in light of three issues: 1) Aboriginal people, 2) the perspective of social assistance clients, and 3) Third Way ideology. To conclude this article, a research agenda on ideas and policy change is proposed.

Résumé: Plusieurs provinces canadiennes ont mis en œuvre des réformes substantielles de leur régime d'aide sociale dans les années 1990. Or, nos connaissances à propos des idées qui sous-tendent ces réformes sont étonnamment limitées. En particulier, peu d'études empiriques ont directement examiné les idées des acteurs de politique. Cet article présente une étude de cas rétrospective d'une initiative saskatchewanaise majeure, soit la réforme *Building Independence* (BI), et examine sa congruence avec trois paradigmes d'aide sociale. Les données proviennent d'entrevues avec des acteurs de politique. Cette étude conclut que les idées sous-jacentes à BI sont étroitement alignées avec le paradigme de l'activation, mais présente certaines similitudes avec les paradigmes du droit social (*entitlement*) et du *workfare*. Ce résultat est ensuite discuté à la lumière de trois enjeux : 1) les autochtones, 2) la perspective des prestataires d'aide sociale, et 3) l'idéologie de la Troisième voie. Des pistes de recherche sur les idées et le changement de politique viennent conclure cet article.

Keywords: Social assistance; welfare reform; activation; workfare; welfare-to-work; social policy; ideational approach; policy paradigm.

Introduction

For the last 30 years, powerful economic, social, political and ideological forces have led governments in developed countries to reform their social assistance (welfare) regimes (Esping-Andersen, 2002b; Huo, 2009; Peck, 2001). In Canada, where social assistance falls under provincial jurisdiction, institutional change at the federal level has contributed to place the issue on the agendas of many provinces. While the federal government used to fund half of provincial social assistance expenditures under the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), this funding formula was replaced in 1996 by the Canada Social and Health Transfer (CHST), a significantly less generous block transfer for health, education, welfare and social services (Boychuk, 1998).[1] Moreover, the National Child Benefit introduced in 1998 had a direct influence on the perceived need and opportunities for reform among policy makers. This federal-provincial-territorial initiative aimed to reduce child poverty and the work disincentives of welfare clients — the so-called "welfare wall" (Battle

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and Mendelson, 2001), also known as "welfare trap" or "poverty trap". In particular, this policy allows provinces to "reinvest [the money that was formerly used to support children on welfare] to enhance existing programs or implement new programs or services aimed at reducing child poverty and supporting low-income families with children" (HRSDC, 2013). Thus, provincial welfare regimes have been touched by major institutional changes in the 1990s and early 2000s, justified by "the new discourse of welfare reform [which] speaks of breaking dependency on welfare, making work pay, and encouraging self-reliance" (Rice and Prince, 2013: 162).

Bringing "Ideas" Back in the Study of Welfare Reform

Many insightful analyses of social assistance in Canada have been conducted from a variety of perspectives (see Banting, 2005; Boychuk, 2006; Dufour et al., 2003; Graefe, 2006; Gazso, 2007; Kneebone and White, 2009; Pulkingham et al., 2010). However, few studies are exclusively or, at least, primarily devoted to the ideas which underlie specific social policies (a few exceptions: Jenson, 2004; McKeen, 2006; Peck, 2001). In particular, there is a dearth of empirical studies that go beyond political discourse and that examine the ideas held by Canadian policy makers on social assistance.

Ideas are essential to our understanding of social assistance. On one hand, ideas (as conveyed by concepts) serve to characterize social assistance, which means going beyond the facts to produce "descriptive inferences" (Keohane, 2009). For instance, claiming that a given social assistance regime is "residual" (see Boychuk, 1998) implies establishing a relationship between a set of observable facts and certain ideas. On the other, ideas are an important factor driving policy making (Béland, 2009; Parsons, 2007). Indeed, welfare reform is not only about interest and institutions, but also about how policy actors "play with ideas," frame policy problems and policy solutions, as well as about what values they put forward (Hemerijck, 2002: 187-188). Ideas first serve a *cognitive* function: in bringing attention to what matters and in helping characterizing events, ideas help policy makers interpret and make sense of reality. Second, ideas serve a *normative/programmatic* function (Béland, 2005). Values and principles such as "equality of opportunity" act as a moral compass which guides decision makers. Third, ideas serve a *persuasive* function as "discursive weapons" in the political game (Béland, 2009); they are mobilized by political actors to build a supporting coalition for an initiative or to discredit alternatives (Cox and Béland, 2013).

Policy paradigms are a particularly potent type of ideas or, more accurately, set of ideas (Daigneault, 2013; Hall, 1993). The influential nature of paradigms derives from the fact that their content is coherent and widely shared by in the policy community; they are "ideas on steroids" (Baumgartner, 2014: 476). Moreover, the ideas within a paradigm can exert one or more of the three functions outlined above (Daigneault, 2013; Béland, 2005). However, many empirical studies of "paradigm shift" treat policy and ideas as equivalent (i.e., a significant change in policy is equated with a paradigm shift; see White, 2012). This leads to obvious circularity problems in analyzing the impact of ideas on policy change (Daigneault, 2013). Moreover, in descriptive analyses, the variety of policies that are compatible with a given set of ideas is underestimated. Therefore, we need more empirical studies that attempt to *directly* measure and analyze policy actors' ideas, by contrast with the policies they adopt (Daigneault, 2013).

Three Paradigms of Social Assistance

This study relies on the typology of social assistance paradigms to analyze policy ideas (Daigneault, 2014). The three paradigms, which are ideal types, provide a "yardstick" to characterize the ideas of policy actors ideas and measure the extent of the "fit" with each paradigm (on using ideal types in case studies, see Gerring, 2004). This typology is unique in that it emphasizes the ideational nature of policy paradigms and operationalizes them along four ideational dimensions. The content of the three paradigms — the entitlement, workfare, and activation paradigms — is freely inspired from Levitas' (2005) discourses of social exclusion and a selective review of the literature (for more details, see Daigneault, 2014). Whereas a detailed discussion of the three paradigms is beyond the scope of this article, Table 1 presents schematically their main characteristics.

TABLE 1
Three Paradigms of Social Assistance

Dimensions of Policy Paradigms	Entitlement Paradigm	Workfare Paradigm	Activation Paradigm
Values, assumptions and principles			
Ideological roots	Social democratic thinking	Conservatism with accents of neoliberalism	"Third Way" with accents of neoliberalism and of a social investment perspective
Paramount values	Solidarity and egalitarianism	Individual independence and responsibility	Reciprocity, equality of opportunity, prioritarian egalitarianism and productivity
Balance of rights and responsibility	Emphasis on individual rights: welfare is a social right	Emphasis on individual responsibility: welfare is a privilege	Balance between individual rights and responsibilities: welfare is a contract
Policy problem			
Policy focus	Economic insecurity, poverty and inequality	Culture of dependency	Insufficient incentives to work and lack of human capital
Origin of policy problems	Primarily structural: socio-economic transformation and economic downturn	Primarily individual: clients' inadequate values and attitudes which result, in part, from prolonged welfare use	Primarily policy-based: disconnect between social and economic policy
Policy ends			
Main objectives	Reducing poverty by guaranteeing a decent level of income and decommodification	Improving the work ethic, attitudes and self-esteem of welfare claimants	Boosting the economic activity rate, enabling to work and reducing poverty in work
Policy means			
Generosity of social assistance benefit	High	Low: "less eligibility" principle	Moderate: low basic benefit but relatively generous income supplements
Preferred policy instruments	Unconditional cash transfers	Cash transfers are conditional upon work-related requirements (including workfare) and control measures	Unconditional cash transfers, conditional income supplements and active measures (e.g., training, job search assistance)
"Targeting" (i.e., who is targeted by policy)	Low: few distinctions are drawn between clients (i.e., broad-based or universal eligibility)	High: segmentation of assistance between "deserving" and "undeserving" clients	High: income supplements are restricted to clients who comply with work-related conditions

Source: Daigneault (2014), "Three Paradigms of Social Assistance." *Sage Open*: 4 (4): 3. doi: 10.1177/2158244014559020. Article originally published by Sage. © The Author.

Purpose and Rationale

This article presents a retrospective case study of welfare reform centered on the policy ideas that prevailed under the Saskatchewan's *Building Independence: Investing in Families* (BI) initiative. The purpose is to identify these policy ideas, to examine their "paradigmatic alignment" in light of the above typology and to discuss their significance.

In 1998, the Saskatchewan's New Democratic party (NDP) government, led by Roy Romanow, officially launched BI, a major social policy reform that had been in preparation for a few years before (Saskatchewan. Government of Saskatchewan [SK], January 1996, March 1997, n.d.). This policy initiative comprised four main programmes[2] aiming to "assist low income families to meet the costs of raising children and reduce barriers to work for families on social assistance" (SK, n.d.: [2]). The first programme is the Saskatchewan Employment Supplement (SES), which supplements, on a monthly basis, the income from employment or child maintenance of low-income parents. Second, the Saskatchewan Child Benefit (SCB) consisted of a monthly allowance that assisted lower income families with the cost of raising children. The amount received under the SCB and SES depends on both the family's level of income and the number of children. For families on social assistance, the SCB and NCBS entirely replaced what they would have received for their children but does not provide them with more money. The idea was to remove children's benefit from welfare; the SCB would thus "travel" with parents who leave welfare. The SCB was a temporary program designed to be phased out as the NCBS increased; the provincial benefit was

discontinued in 2006 when the federal benefit reached maturity. Third, the Family Health Benefits (FHB) extends the supplementary health benefits such as dental services received under social assistance to low-income working families. Fourth, the Provincial Training Allowance (PTA), which was introduced in 1997 but was brought under the aegis of BI in 1998, provides a monthly allowance, replacing social assistance for low-income learners enrolled in basic education and related courses. These four programmes constitute the original BI initiative ("phase I") on which this study focuses, but other elements that came later, notably Jobs First, the reorganization of service delivery around call centres, and the Transitional Employment Allowance (TEA), are sometimes considered "phase II" of BI (see n.2).

This case of welfare reform was selected because of its potential to improve our understanding of policy ideas. Most accounts of the Saskatchewan approach have indeed pointed to a significant shift from a "traditional" orientation to welfare to a tightened relationship between welfare and the labour market, alternatively characterized as workfare, welfare-to-work, or activation (see August, 2006, forthcoming; Boychuk, 1998; Dyck, 2004a; Hunter and Donovan, 2007; Morton, 2006; OECD, 1999 as cited in Snyder, 2006). Moreover, Saskatchewan appears particularly suitable to examine the ideas of policy actors because BI was a coherent and high profile reform — the "Big Bang" according to an interviewee — that involved public consultations and considerable planning by the provincial government. BI (its first phase at least) does not appear to fit well the "relentlessly incremental"[3] mode of reform that has characterized social policy in the 1990s in which "strings of reforms, seemingly small and discrete when made, that accumulate to become more than the sum of their parts" (Battle, 2001: 51). BI therefore represents an ideal case for examining the presence of a policy paradigm. Finally, this study contributes to our understanding of social assistance beyond the four most populated provinces which have received most of scholarly attention (see Bernard and Saint-Arnaud, 2004; Peck, 2001; Proulx et al., 2011).

Methods

Data for this study mainly comes from semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 14 key informants.[4] Potential respondents, who were identified through official documents, secondary sources and referrals, had to possess an intimate knowledge of welfare reform in Saskatchewan and, taken together, be representative a variety of ideological and organizational perspectives. New respondents were solicited until collecting new data would provide not further analytical leverage (on "informational redundancy", see Sandelowski, 2008). The final sample (Appendix A) appears sufficient for generating rich and robust descriptive inferences, although an overrepresentation of political actors closely involved with the NDP must be noted.[5] Interviews were transcribed by this researcher and validated by respondents. Transcripts were analyzed thematically using NVivo 8 (QSR, 2008). Data were organized through a set of codes derived from the interview themes and refined as coding progressed. Once the first round of analysis was completed, a second one was conducted on a portion of themes using the concept of policy paradigm as a template. Slightly edited interview quotes are used to illustrate the findings. When appropriate, disconfirming evidence is provided to allow readers to assess the validity of the findings. Feedback from respondents on an earlier version of this article was also used to improve validity. While not analyzed with NVivo, relevant official documents and secondary sources were used to enrich research findings.

Findings

Which paradigm best characterizes the ideas of policy actors with respect to the original BI welfare reform? The analysis reveals that BI's ideas are closely aligned with the activation paradigm (Table 2). Moreover, the ideational base of BI appears to display a high level of internal coherence and to have been shared by a significant number of policy actors.

TABLE 2
Alignment of Building Independence's Ideas with Three Paradigms of Social Assistance

Themes	Entitlement Paradigm	Workfare Paradigm	Activation Paradigm
Independence is a mutual responsibility	(light)	(medium)	(dark)
A "productive" lifestyle	(light)	(medium)	(dark)
The search for a "Third Way"	(light)	(light)	(dark)
The "welfare wall" is the main policy problem	(light)	(medium)	(dark)
Welfare dependency is the ultimate policy problem	(light)	(dark)	(light)
The need to invest in children	(medium)	(light)	(dark)
Independence through employment	(light)	(medium)	(dark)
Financially supporting low-income families who are active on the labour market	(medium)	(light)	(dark)
Helping people into work, not forcing them	(medium)	(light)	(dark)

Note: darker shading represents greater alignment with a given policy paradigm, while lighter shading represents smaller alignment.

Values, assumptions about the world and philosophical principles

Becoming independent is a mutual responsibility. The interviews reveal a need to recast the rights and responsibilities of the individual in a way that emphasizes a real balance between the two. Whereas personal responsibility is deemed important, as in the workfare paradigm, welfare clients are not left to struggle by themselves or coerced in becoming "independent." Indeed, the emphasis on personal responsibility is clearly balanced with a positive role for the state focused on supporting welfare clients, that is, helping them help themselves rather than punish them for being on welfare. These quotes, from two different respondents, illustrate the original orientation behind BI: "personal responsibility, a social contract, supported by resources with support, with a plan that allows people to truly transition"; "I think the philosophy behind the Building Independence initially was 'Let's support people and get them a hand up'." Moreover, some respondents insisted on the importance of providing educational and employment opportunities to welfare clients, in particular younger people, for instance:

> The biggest factor […] was to make sure that people are protected — everybody is protected — to get the necessities of life and to be able to enjoy a little bit of it all but it's a dead end if we couldn't build into it meaningful opportunities for enhancement…

The importance of a "productive" lifestyle. A recurrent theme in the interviews is the importance of work as a criterion to assess the value of a lifestyle for both individuals and society. Most respondents pointed to what they perceived to be a widely-held conception among policy makers, "that there is no intrinsic value of being on welfare" and that "it's important *how* people get their money." There are two sides to this coin. The first, which directly relate to the theme of mutual responsibility, raises the ethical problem of having to depend on welfare to make a living. The following quote, atypical in its critical tone, illustrates this idea: "it's not fair to the public at large if people can volunteer not to work and live on the earnings and productions of others." Yet the idea that each must do his or her part, must contribute to society through work, is also explicit in other interviews which mention "meaningful contribution," "doing something worthwhile," "underutilized human resources," and of being an "active, productive member of society." The other side of the coin is the conception that being on welfare has deleterious consequences on clients in terms of health outcomes and their sense of self-worth, as conveyed by this quote: "if you're capable of working five hours a week then you're better off than not working at all in a whole bunch of

different respects, not just from income but […] [also in terms of] psychological well-being, feeling of satisfaction, self-respect, esteem in your community." Even critical comments such as "the whole concept was based on the idea: if you work, you're good, if you don't you're bad" corroborate the work-oriented conception of BI.

The search for a "Third Way" beyond social democracy and neoliberalism. Ideologically speaking, influential actors within the NDP government were increasingly dissatisfied with its traditional, social-democratic position. The alternative ideological position of the actors could be characterized as "Third Way *avant la lettre.*" Indeed, Anthony Giddens' (1998) influential book, which was familiar to many NDP policy makers, was published the same year than BI was adopted and the expression "Third way" was not used widely then. Some respondents nevertheless used it to describe the social policy of the Romanow government: "[For] a few people in Cabinet and the premier, there was a belief that there could be a Third Way. We weren't gonna go to workfare […] we rejected that; we rejected the old style welfare so try to find a new way, a Third Way that would really be effective". Similarly:

> I think the British Labour Party was through the international movement of socialism […] European-based… They were facing some of the problems that we were. And *our* Third Way was basically one which said you have to be socially sensitive, but also understanding that this is now, for good or for bad, an internationalized economic and fiscal environment which played by different rules […] so you had to find a Third Way. [emphasis added]

Conception of the problem

In a general sense, the problem that policy actors faced in the years that preceded the adoption of BI was an increase in the number of people on social assistance — the figure of 40,000 households (not to be confused with individual clients), for a total population near 1 million for Saskatchewan, came up repeatedly in interviews — which significantly drove up the costs of this programme. As one respondent put it:

> Social assistance caseload was growing so much during the recessions of the early 1990s […]; it was placing such a burden on provincial expenditures that that's what really served as a catalyst for some thinking: we got to do something different here, we can't continue to do it this way.

Exploding caseloads were due to many factors, including the decision of the federal government to stop supporting First-Nations people as they moved from reserve, the tightening of Employment Insurance eligibility criteria which drove unemployed people to welfare, and the difficult economic situation of the early 1990s. There was also a transformation in the characteristics of welfare clients as the proportion of employable people on the welfare rolls was growing and became a concern for many policy actors (though, clearly, not every welfare client was employable). A respondent compared welfare to "a trap that catches but does not release," whereas another explained the transformation of clients' characteristics:

> I mean there was a real threat. What we had seen was not only a rise in caseload; every time there was a recession, the caseload sort of ratcheted up a bit and when the recession ended, it never quite went down to pre-recession levels. And so there was a fear that that's how we were gonna exit this recession as well and although the caseload started decrease prior to Building Independence — in 1997 or 1996 it was starting to fall a little bit — […] there was a concern that it wasn't gonna fall as far as it might if these reforms weren't put into place.

The "welfare wall" is the main policy problem. The issue that BI sought to address is multifaceted, but there is a consensus among interviewees that this policy was first and foremost a policy response to the "welfare wall," which refers to the disincentives to work created by the size of the welfare benefit one receives compared to the minimum wage level (Battle and Mendelson, 2001). As a respondent said: "the wage at that time wasn't enough to defeat the welfare benefit" and "you can't solve the politics of income support […] the rate issue is always […] increasing the friction between the benefit and work." However, the welfare wall was not a concern for all categories of welfare clients but mainly for families, single-parent families in particular, and was not restricted to wages. The perception among interviewees was that most families found themselves better-off on welfare than working full-time at minimum wage, once taken into

account the work-related expenses, as well as the loss of the supplemental health coverage (e.g., dental services) and other benefits such as school supplies that sprung from the decision to leave welfare to take-up employment:

> [T]he disincentives were very strong to not choose work and stay on social assistance because of what they can earn typically in the labour market, what their health care cost [and] daycare cost would be for their kids, all those kinds of things were disincentives for families to move.

The welfare wall is considered a policy-induced problem. Whereas interviewees mentioned a mix of social, economic and psychological/cultural factors responsible for welfare use, there is also a recognition that the main "culprit" is the government itself, as the following quotes illustrate: "we're producing the very outcome that we don't want," "we have twisted around the intent of helping these people" and "the existence of that level of dependency is policy-driven: [...] if it's policy-created, it can be policy-changed." The perception that the welfare wall creates dependency resonates well with the "perversity thesis" (Somers and Block, 2005) that characterizes the workfare paradigm (Daigneault, 2014). Yet, the policy actors' conception of welfare clients is undoubtedly more positive than what is to be found under the workfare paradigm. Indeed, they were perceived as inherently rational, as signalled by the use of expressions such as "economic benefit," "incentives," "cold economist kind of approach" and "microeconomic relationship of the family to the workforce." Like the ideal-typical *homo economicus*, clients are perceived to compute the costs and benefits related to remaining on social assistance and taking up employment, and hence adapt their behaviour accordingly:

> If you're on welfare, receiving social assistance, and you have an opportunity to earn some income for your own economy, we're happy about that up until 125$ [...] per month. Now, if you should exceed that, on your own initiative, well we will deduct it from your welfare check. Now, any accountant in the world will say: "Well, earn your 125$ and go home. Why invest your labour for no return to move beyond the system?"

Many respondents consider the rationality of welfare clients as evidence that they are like everybody else (that is, "normal"), as various respondents argued:

> I was meeting people, often single moms, on assistance, who remained there because the moment they went off of social assistance, they lost all of their health benefits for the children. [...] Now, understandably, any *reasonable* person in that circumstance would say "Well, I better preserve benefits for my children. So, why would I make any effort to move beyond the system." [emphasis added]

> Who is responsive when there is no incentive? If you're a business, you're not gonna expand if there is no incentive so why should people on assistance be treated any differently?

These views are consistent with a neoliberal model of citizenship which holds that citizens are "entrepreneurs who can maximize personal interests" (Frankel, 2013: 276). Although the conception of welfare clients as rational beings was mostly interpreted under a positive light, there was a discordant voice. The philosophy behind BI was indeed considered "poor-bashing" by a respondent because it assumed that people would stay on welfare unless "forced or given some supports to leave it" (implying that they have no work ethics despite lack of incentives). Though recognizing that BI aimed to tackle the issue of the welfare wall, some respondents argued that the real policy problem to them is not "on/off welfare" but rather poverty and the inadequacy of current benefits.

Welfare dependency is the ultimate policy problem. BI was mainly directed at solving the welfare wall issue. Yet welfare dependency — the idea that some people depend on social assistance on a recurrent or extended basis for maintaining themselves as a result of not only lack of economic opportunities but also attitudinal, moral or cultural factors — was also a derivative concern among policy actors: "It was [...] the welfare wall. We were creating... — and that's how we came to call this Building Independence — ...because we were creating dependence; and when you create that intergenerationally, it's a tough cycle to break." The following statement by Lorne Calvert, then Minister of Social Services, when discussing the introduction of the BI reform in 1998, also illustrates this policy-induced dependency: "We've had a system where I believe the system itself has almost forced dependence or kept people behind what we sometimes call the welfare wall" (Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan, 1998: 1536).

When prompted to characterize whether BI sought to address (i) cultural factors such as bad work ethics; (ii) structural factors such as insufficient economic opportunities and human capital; or (iii) the policy-induced welfare wall, a respondent argued that it is "primarily focused on the third conception, but holding too much of the values of the first." A particular concern with dependency is the fear — justified or not — that it will continue from one generation to the next. The following quote, which admittedly reports anecdotal evidence, clearly illustrates this fear:

> Many single parents are second generation, third generation [...] I've sat in focus groups and heard people telling their stories [...]: 'When I got pregnant, I've decided I was going to keep that baby and we could do this because my mom was on welfare... my mom was a single parent and lived on welfare and I can do it too'. So you can see how the expectations get lowered [...] and your assumptions about your entitlements get built into your lifestyle.

Whereas the cultural origins or consequences of welfare dependency are usually the purview of people on the right of the political spectrum, the interviews reveal that this was also a concern for centre-left policy makers: "it was to make sure that you support the next generation to get out of welfare, so you didn't have everybody in that welfare cycle" or "children having children is one of the biggest contributors to the welfare caseloads." The ideas behind BI were not aligned with a "blame-the-victim" logic, however. These ideas were empathetic to the situation of clients and grounded in the belief that people generally do not want to be on social assistance: "When you're this close to a financial collapse and a health issue or something that puts all of us in a situation where you need help. But, *yes*, there was some, I think, some growing culture of dependency that becomes intergenerational."

The need to invest in children. Child poverty and, more generally, the inadequate opportunities provided to children raised in families dependent on welfare, was another issue that motivated policy makers to launch BI: they were concerned by the "next generation." The issue was particularly salient following the 1989 House of Commons resolution to put an end to child poverty by the year 2000, during which time many advocacy initiatives were undertaken (e.g., Campaign 2000). The language used by many respondents in that regard suggests a social investment perspective, according to which social spending early in life can prevent costly social, economic and health problems later in life (Esping-Andersen, 2002a; Jenson, 2004). A respondent mentioned: "the idea behind [BI] was [to] spread the net around very widely in order to affect not only the breadwinners who are on social services but their kids: it all comes back to the children, the future." Another explained:

> ...[T]his is where the issue of child poverty comes into it [...] because, by that time, there was a lot of evidence as to the impact on children, and that was why the traditional form of welfare was considered to be so damaging, in part, and that we had to in a sense change the dynamics to create a different environment.

BI was expected to have a "trigger effect [on children] because the more people work, the more positive role models we have". Furthermore, there was an attempt — not always successful — to move the debate beyond welfare reform, and frame it as a larger social policy initiative. Despite the perception that child poverty was a real problem — "the drive was really to help families, low-income families [...] it wasn't to look good" — the emphasis on child poverty in the political discourse was also a "political lens to tap into people's empathy," that is, a way to frame the issue to maximize political support. In fact, a survey conducted at the time revealed that 83% of respondents "approve of the government assisting families to move off welfare, or helping them stay off welfare by supplementing their work income" (SK. Ministry of Social Services, July 8 1998, n.p.). The following quotes illustrate this idea:

> Folks are very interesting in this province. They might have a perception about that person on welfare that is just lingering around watching television and enjoying the good life. They have quite a different perception when they talk about families and children. [...] This province, in majority, wants to support children and families. [...] for the purpose of introducing and gaining public acceptance beyond their bent, we carefully talked about children and supporting families.

> Building Independence had to be based on a positive philosophy for [Roy Romanow] to survive through critique on the left.

> Responding to child poverty is very appealing to the base of that [NDP] party and for most people it's hard to make an argument against it.

Whether sincere or strategic with respect to its concern for child poverty, BI was one of the rare instances where Canadian politicians were successful in making political capital by advancing good social policy: "I haven't seen it before or since [...] a government that actually pursued more sensible social policy as a viable political strategy." The social investment perspective was important in justifying the need for reform, but the lack of human capital in the *adult* population was only occasionally mentioned by respondents. Although training, learning and skills development for the adult workforce were frequently discussed, these topics were rarely approached explicitly in reference to a perceived problem of lack of human capital. "This sort of cradle-to-grave kind of thinking around learning and investments" was clearly a prevalent idea in the 1990s, but interviewees discussed human capital as a way to frame the appropriate policy response rather than as being part of the policy problem.

Ideas about policy ends and objectives

Independence through employment. A key objective of BI is to help welfare clients become independent or self-sufficient, defined as relying on employment for a living rather than social assistance. Expressions such as "labour force attachment," "leveraging to the workforce" and "moving people into work" illustrates unambiguously this bias toward work. Independence is perceived as advantageous for both the citizen and the community: citizens gain experience in the labour market, improve their self-esteem and skills, while the provincial finances improve. As Lorne Calvert, then Minister of Social Services, explained to the Members of the Legislative Assembly:

> What these programs are trying to do is change that traditional welfare system so that it is advantageous for families to access that economy, to access the employment opportunities, to access the education opportunities, to get out there and secure some of those minimum wage positions even as a start to independence. (Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan, 1998: 1536)

These quotes, from two different interviewees, testify to the objectives behind this social policy reform:

> I am oversimplifying it but a programme which rewarded those on social services [social assistance] toward *work*, help them to get educated or trained *to work*.

> One of the things that Building Independence was trying to get was this relationship between good social policy and good economic policy; trying to bring the two together and so it was not only a provision of supports, but a provision of supports to an end — the end being *independence* — and [...] the objective being independence through employment.

Financially supporting low-income families who are active on the labour market. Many respondents argued that the policy intent behind BI was to help low-income families improve their standard of living. Contrary to the broad-based redistributive orientation of the entitlement paradigm, however, BI was targeted at parents who were active on the labour market, whether part- or full-time. Comments from interviews such as "these programmes were really intended to [...] ensure that there were sufficient incentives for people to see that there is better opportunity for them — more resources — *if they could become gainfully employed*" [emphasis added] exemplify this orientation. This declaration from Gerard Aldridge, a Liberal MLA of the opposition, also supports this interpretation: "we do intend to keep a watchful eye to see that they [the BI programmes] are indeed providing the hope and helping to eliminate child poverty as well as the many burdens that are now facing the working poor in this province" (Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan, 1998: 1430).

Ideas about Appropriate Policy Means

Helping people into work, not forcing them. This theme, derived from an in vivo code (a code based on what a participant said in an interview), captures the idea that BI was based on a "positive" policy instruments such as in-work financial supports for low-income parents and active measures (for instance, training, work search counselling). BI emphasized "carrots" (financial incentives) and "sermons"

(information-based instruments) over "sticks" (coercion, regulations and controls) (on policy instruments, see Bemelmans-Videc, Rist and Vedung 2003). Moreover, implementation was highly targeted as only parents active on the labour market would benefit from it (the exception being the PTA, which is offered to all low-income learners enrolled in basic education courses). Regulations and controls were not absent from this policy initiative which was premised on conditional benefits (people have to behave in a certain way to get access to those benefits). Yet, the "stick" only had a secondary importance within the whole BI scheme — especially when compared to the tough approach to welfare reform taken by Devine's Conservatives in the 1980s (MacKinnon, 2003; Ralph and Stobbe, 1991; Riches and Manning, 1991). Not only was the "stick" not an option politically (the Saskatchewan NDP caucus members and supporters would not have accepted it), but also because there were concerns about its effectiveness and appropriateness: "people respond better to incentives than to punishments […] punishments also create stigma and the stigma is wrong." Rather, the *leitmotiv* was "helping families through work" motivated by the belief that "the best investment was helping people into work." As a respondent explained, BI emphasized "drawing people off" by contrast with "pushing them off" welfare, and this "pull" strategy was based on education, training and financial incentives. There are discordant voices within the data associated to this theme. Indeed, the BI reform, in particular the way people on welfare were dealt with, epitomized "an attempt to push people off the system […] as much as possible." As a policy, BI is characterized by ideas favourable to a low basic welfare benefit, but this point was not frequently discussed explicitly by respondents. In that respect, the decision of the Saskatchewan government not to pass the NCB Supplement to people on assistance was not punitive in intent, according to a respondent, but "was consistent with this [active] philosophy". The "big picture" revealed by the interviews was that the original (phase I) BI reform was largely based on a supportive philosophy in terms of policy instruments, that is generous income and educational supports.

Discussion and Conclusion

The BI reform is a major social policy initiative implemented in Saskatchewan in the second half of the 1990s. The interviews conducted for this study revealed that the ideas associated with this reform are closely aligned with the activation paradigm, while displaying some similarities with the workfare and entitlement paradigms.

The contribution of this study consists in going beyond what policy makers say (i.e., political discourse) and do (i.e., actual policies), to probe what they think and believe, using in-depth interviews with key respondents. Rigorous methods, including triangulation of respondents, member check and iterative analysis of the interview transcripts, were used to ensure credible findings. However, the findings should be considered "an" account rather than "the" account of ideas held by Saskatchewan policy actors at the time of BI. Indeed, data for this study come disproportionately from "insiders" who might have an interest in justifying their position and in orienting findings; research knowledge is, after all, a "discursive weapon" in the political struggle (Béland, 2009). Moreover, social science research is not a value-free enterprise; researchers minimally decide what is studied, why and how. In particular, three issues that have not been addressed in detail so far deserve further attention: (1) the Aboriginal dimension of reform, (2) the perspective of social assistance clients, and 3) Third Way ideology.

The Aboriginal Dimension of Reform

With 15.6% of its population claiming an aboriginal identity in 2011, Saskatchewan is the province with the second highest proportion of Aboriginal people (Statistics Canada, 2013). Was this a significant factor behind the specific tenor of Saskatchewan welfare reform? On the one hand, the decision by the federal government in 1993 to offload its financial responsibilities for off reserve First Nations peoples requiring social assistance was clearly a major impetus for the BI reform, as it increased provincial expenditures by $40 million (SK, January 1996). The evidence derived from many interviews also points to the crucial role of the federal government's decision, for instance: "we were also staring in the face some significant changes. The federal government had made changes in terms of depriving support for First Nations off-reserve. They

just simply stopped!" On the other hand, data are insufficient to assess whether the BI reform has had a racial dimension *beyond* the financial impact that the federal decision had on the provincial budget. The presence of a racial dimension to BI would not be surprising since, historically, the relationship of Aboriginal people with social assistance had been characterized by colonialism:

> Income support for First Nations was originally justified, and explicitly designed, as a tool of cultural and economic assimilation. […] While the assimilation paradigm is long gone, the dual historical role of social assistance as a last resort measure and a powerful acculturation tool still resonates in many communities. (Papillon, forthcoming: n.p.)

This view is echoed by a respondent who stated that "the high percentage […] of Aboriginal people who were recipients […] is a special problem because it speaks also to racial dimensions and historical dimensions as well — products of the reserve system, the lack of recipients' education and the lack therefore of job opportunities." Another argued that there are misconceptions among the Saskatchewan public: "the popular perception though is that […] when you're looking at social assistance, you're looking at young, First Nations men and women." Aboriginal peoples represent a high proportion of welfare clients in Canada and in Saskatchewan in particular (see e.g., Leski and Thériault, 2007: Papillon, n.d.; Wardhaugh, 2007) and a common assumption in Saskatchewan is that "aboriginal people do not value work and education like 'the rest of society'" (Dyck (2004b: 9). However, the evidence collected for this study is insufficient to suggest that this dependency discourse is most readily attached to Aboriginal people. A plausible hypothesis would be that there *is* an aboriginal dimension as to how welfare dependency is conceived, but that this dimension remains implicit, that is, hidden in the background of the official debate. This interpretation is consistent with a study of popular attitudes toward Saskatchewan welfare recipients from 1970-1990 which concluded that "First Nation welfare issues were viewed as separate from the dominant society" (Wardhaugh, 2007: 69), possibly because those who live on reserve are under the jurisdiction of the federal government.

The Perspective of Social Assistance Clients

The purpose of this study is not normative; yet, most policy actors made clear in their interviews that they believe that BI is, overall, a "good and worthwhile" initiative. Although discordant voices were presented when appropriate, this study's focus on policy makers might have resulted in a neglect of administrative practices and their impact on social assistance clients, which is an understudied yet fundamental facet of welfare reform (Herd, Mitchell and Lightman, 2005; see also Peck, 2001). Empirical studies conducted from the perspective of clients after the implementation of "phase II" of BI, for instance Dyck (2004b), Leski and Thériault (2007) and Kerr, Frost and Bignell (2004), add nuance to the portrait of welfare reform presented in this article. First, welfare benefits for those unable to work did not keep up with inflation in the 1990s and early 2000s for most categories of clients, including parents, and were insufficient to cover basic needs (Kerr, Frost and Bignell, 2004). Again, "if you work, you're good; if you don't you're bad". Second, BI's focus on employment neglect the contribution of clients who contribute *outside* of the labour market by caring for children or performing volunteer work (Leski and Thériault, 2007). Third, many clients complained about the way they have been treated by the system or caseworkers (Dyck, 2004b; Kerr, Frost and Bignell, 2004). Thus, while BI may represent an improvement over prior policy for low-income parents who are active on the labour market, the results are clearly not as bright for every client. A social assistance regime modelled along the lines of the entitlement paradigm (Table 1) would probably be perceived as an improvement over BI by most clients.

Third Way Ideology

The ideas that underlie "phase I" of the BI reform are closely aligned with the activation paradigm, which is, in turn, associated with Third Way ideology because of its focus on restructuring passive assistance and introducing enabling to work measures (Huo, 2009: 3). As John Kay argued, "welfare-to-work […] most clearly epitomises the Third Way" (1998: 35, as cited in Peck, 2001: 262). Thus, the findings from this study support the work of McGrane (2008), who found that "while the term 'Third Way' was rarely used by Saskatchewan NDP politicians in the 1990s and early 2000s to describe the party's ideology, it is the best

theoretical apparatus available to conceptualize the transformation of the Saskatchewan NDP's ideology during the Romanow and Calvert governments" (2008: 144).

Now, the Third Way has been extensively criticized for its disconnect between political language and actual policy (e.g., Levitas, 2005; Peck, 2001). A case in point is Arestis and Sawyer (2001), who described the Third Way as being "no more than 'neoliberalism with a human face'" (275; as cited by Frankel, 2013: 277). In Canada, Hunter and Miazdyck (2004) have characterized BI as "similar to workfare in the United States, [but] explained with Third Way justifications" (26). Similarly, Frankel (2013) argued that the Manitoba government used Third Way rhetoric as a legitimizing tool for its poverty reduction initiative called "All Aboard":

> The third way can make governments politically vulnerable. The need for a government identified as of the Left, but focused on fiscal responsibility and market solutions, to effectively manage impressions in avoiding negative political outcomes both from a base which may support more decisive poverty reduction and from other supporters who oppose welfare state growth may be a defining factor of All Aboard. Just enough must be done to reinforce the loyalty of the former, but not too much to alienate the latter. (Frankel, 2013: 296)

Is BI simply "workfare dressed up in social democratic clothes"? This study calls into question this interpretation. As already noted, the ideas associated with BI were mainly aligned with the activation paradigm and only secondarily aligned with the workfare paradigm. Compulsion, which is a fundamental dimension of workfare, was not a central element of the original BI initiative; rather, economic incentives — the "carrot" — were the main policy instrument. This is in sharp contrast to the British case, where the New Deal mandated the participation of young and long-term unemployed people in training and job search activities (Peck, 2001: 302). Moreover, BI was not premised on a "blame-the-victim" logic. Beyond rhetoric, the initiative also included a real preoccupation for fighting child poverty, albeit one that was limited to low-income families active on the labour market.

While seemingly contradictory, the account of BI presented in this study can be reconciled with the critical accounts of Third Way initiatives presented above. First, the typology used in this study allows for fine-grained analysis of policy ideas because it does not lump together ideas that depart from social democracy under the same "workfare" label. As defined here, the activation paradigm displays elements of neoliberal thinking but still significantly differs from workfare (see Daigneault, 2014). Second, many left-wing critics do not like BI and it may explain why they characterized it as "workfare", admittedly a loaded term. By contrast, the contribution of this study is empirical, not normative. Indeed, the alignment of actual ideas with a certain paradigm says absolutely nothing about the desirability of this state of things. Third, there was an attempt in this study to directly measure the motivations of policy makers, rather than infer those motivations from the policies they adopted or secondary sources. Fourth, this study focuses on "phase I" of BI, while Hunter and Miazdyck (2004) have written at a time when "phase II" was just launched. The latter, TEA in particular, received the brunt of the criticisms of activists and intellectuals; for instance, a respondent spoke of "a sea of shame that was born under their [the NDP government] watch". One could question to what extent this so-called "phase II" was motivated by the same policy ideas than the original BI initiative; perhaps that the use of this label was simply a way to capitalize on the favorable public opinion towards the original initiative (see SK. Ministry of Social Services, July 8 1998). In that regard, two respondents suggested that BI "ran out of steam" and/or drifted away from its original intent. Even if the evidence on that matter is limited, the decision to distinguish between the original BI initiative and subsequent developments ("phase II") is entirely justified.

Research Agenda

Beyond Third Way ideology, however, further empirical research on social assistance in Saskatchewan is clearly needed from an ideational perspective. For instance, to what extent the ideas held by NDP policy makers in the late 1990s differed markedly from those held in under the previous Conservative and subsequent Saskatchewan Party governments? Were these different periods marked by a paradigm shift? These questions are significant because ideas are an important determinant of policy change, alongside the "usual suspects" of interests and institutions. Because of their influence on policy making — they are "ideas on steroids" (Baumgartner, 2014: 476) — more research is needed on policy paradigms in particular.

Analyzing the impact of ideas on specific policy decisions is challenging, however (Béland, 2005; Daigneault, 2013; Parsons, 2007). Through its attempt to directly measure the ideas held by policy makers with respect to social assistance, this study represents a stepping stone towards more rigorous causal analysis on policy dynamics.

Notes

1. Since 2004, the "social" component of the CHST has been separated from the health component and named the Canada Social Transfer (CST) (McIntosh, 2004).

2. Accountability measures and "Youth Futures", a pilot project targeting youth aged 18-21 who require financial assistance to ensure that they are involved in productive activities, are sometimes described as components of BI (see SK, 1997). Jobs First provides services to assist people in finding and accessing local job opportunities. TEA is a separate income support programme for employable individuals which aims to deliver benefits to them in a cost-effective way, so that they can focus more on job search activities than on financial reporting requirements. Eligibility for TEA was initially limited to four months (with a possible extension to five months), but there currently is no maximum eligibility period. Benefits of TEA were comparable to those of the regular social assistance program, but it did not include as many provisions for special needs or any earning exemption (it did include a job start allowance, however).

3. "Relentless incrementalism" is quite similar to the concept of "directed incrementalism" proposed by Rice and Prince (2013).

4. Face-to-face interviews were conducted from August to December 2012 and lasted slightly more than an hour on average. All interviews were conducted individually, except for a group interview with three respondents from the same organization for convenience. Six persons declined or did not reply to the invitation to participate in this study. Informal email exchanges with a few key informants with whom it was not possible to conduct a formal interview also took place. These exchanges contributed to enrich and corroborate the interpretations derived from interviews, but they were not a source of data strictly speaking.

5. This overrepresentation was intentional since BI was designed and enacted by the NDP. Moreover, it was difficult to locate or convince political actors from the opposition of the time to participate in this study. Many reasons may account for this, including that it was more than 15 years ago, that the previous conservative welfare reforms were very controversial and that there are now few people willing to defend their legacy of the Saskatchewan Progressive Conservative party and Saskatchewan Liberal party.

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Appendix A: List of Interviewed Respondents

Respondents are presented in alphabetical order with a brief description of in what capacity they were interviewed.

- **Rick August** is a consultant with more than 35 years of experience in strategic policy and programme design. He was Executive Director, Strategic Policy Branch, Saskatchewan's Ministry of Social Services (2002-2006).

- **Sydney Bell** is a member and past co-chair of the Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition, an advocacy group of concerned persons and organizations who are dedicated to addressing the causes and effects of poverty. She is also the current co-chair of Poverty Free Saskatchewan.

- **Lorne Calvert** was Premier of Saskatchewan (2001-2007) and the Minister of Social Services of Saskatchewan (1995-1998).

- **Bonnie Durnford** is a consultant in the field of social policy, education and labour market policy. She held a number of senior positions in the Saskatchewan civil service, including Deputy Minister of Social Services and Deputy Minister of Advanced Education and Employment.

- **Peter Gilmer** is an advocate with 25 years of experience. He works for the Regina Anti-Poverty Ministry, which advocates and educates with and for those seeking social and economic justice.

- **Con Hnatiuk** is a consultant with extensive experience in children welfare, social services and health. He held various senior positions in the Saskatchewan civil service including Deputy Minister of Social Services (1991-1997) and Deputy Minister of Health (1997-1999).

- **Greg Marchildon** was a Saskatchewan civil servant who served as a Deputy Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs (1994-1996), Cabinet Secretary and Deputy Minister to the Premier (1996-2000) and Executive Director of the Royal Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada (the Romanow Commission) (2001-2002).

- **Dan Perrins** cumulated more than 35 years of experience with the Saskatchewan civil service. He started as a frontline social worker and held a number of senior positions in Social Services, Health, Education, Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training. He concluded his careers as the Deputy Minister to the Premier and Head of the Public Service.

- **The Honourable Roy Romanow** was Premier of Saskatchewan (1991-2001) and Deputy Premier of Saskatchewan (1971-1982).

- **Doug Scott** is Director of Analytics, Research and Evaluation, Strategic Management Branch, Saskatchewan Ministry of Social Services.

- **Gord Tweed** is Executive Director, Program and Service Design, Income Assistance and Disability Services Division, Saskatchewan Ministry of Social Services.

- **Bob Wihlidal** is Assistant Deputy Minister, Income Assistance and Disability Services Division, Saskatchewan Ministry of Social Services.

- **Two anonymous respondents.**