
Application of Conflict Theory to Welfare Policy

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Conflict theory represents a useful perspective in the conceptualization of welfare policy. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward (1971) theorized that government distributes financial assistance (e.g., welfare) in response to conflict (e.g., rioting by the poor masses). Thus, welfare is a mechanism of control used in an effort to squelch rebellious poor people's movements. The goal of this paper is to analyze the validity of Piven and Cloward's thesis through a review of empirical literature that supports and challenges this thesis. Conflict theory will be utilized in a discussion of how it may inform further research in the field of welfare policy.

Conflict Theory: Concepts, Principles, & Assumptions

Conflict theory seeks to explain the emergence of conflict, its varying forms, and its consequences (Allan, 2007; Strandbakken, 1996). The theory envisions power as the central feature of society presupposing that a conflict of interest arises between individuals and social groups. Lewis Coser, Ralf Dahrendorf, and Randall Collins are particularly useful when conceptualizing conflict theory.

Lewis Coser contended that the need for conflict is instinctually embedded in the human psyche and is a functional aspect of humans' daily lives (Allan, 2007; Coser, 1956). The inequitable distribution of scarce resources (e.g., wealth, power, and prestige) may represent the catalyst for conflict (Allan, 2007; Bartos & Wehr, 2002). Building on Coser's belief that conflict is instinctual, Ralf Dahrendorf contended that conflict is ever-present in all interactions and is the foundation for all social change (Allan, 2007; Schellenberg, 1982). Contrary to Karl Marx, Dahrendorf believed that class extends beyond economic resources to authority and power in general. Power is a key component regarding the definition of societal roles, norms, and values (Allan, 2007). Those with power hold the ability to define these societal roles, norms, and values. Thus, these tenets may be expressed through welfare policy aimed at controlling certain societal subgroups. Dahrendorf contended that structure-changing social movements are often gradual and not necessarily grounded in class relations (Schellenberg, 1982; Strandbakken, 1996).

Randall Collins echoed Coser in his assumption that conflict is the result of the inequitable distribution of scarce resources, including economic, power, and status or cultural resources (Allan, 2007; Collins, 1993). These potential conflicts are actualized with heightened emotional, moral, and symbolic mobilization resulting in group solidarity. Conflict breeds subsequent conflict and countermobilization. The threat of countermobilization leads to heightened group solidarity and strengthened feelings of group membership.

Utility of Conflict Theory as Applied to Welfare Policy

Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward (1971) provided a historical context for the welfare boom of the 1960s. They contended that increased urbanization of poor African Americans to the North coupled with lack of employment opportunities led to relative deprivation and urban riots. In an effort to extinguish rioting and appease the unemployed, political leaders chose to widen social assistance eligibility requirements. The belief is that increased conflict (i.e., rioting of the poor) leads to increased government interventions intended

to decrease the level of conflict. In times of low conflict, social assistance levels decrease to expand the low-wage labor supply. To test the utility of Piven and Cloward's thesis, it is beneficial to examine the welfare rolls in concert with historical context to determine whether welfare rolls increased in response to heightened conflict.

Supports

Literature that supports Piven and Cloward's thesis would find that welfare rolls increase as a result of increased conflict. Subsequently, conflict would decrease due to heightened welfare enrollment. The research of Betz (1974), Isaac and Kelly (1981), and Schram and Turbett (1983) supported this theory's utility, while the research of Hicks and Swank (1983) showed mixed support for this theory's utility.

Betz (1974) studied the 43 largest cities in the United States to determine whether or not riots and government response (i.e., welfare) were correlated. Betz (1974) examined the percentage change of welfare expenditures for 23 major riot cities versus 20 minor or non-riot cities during the period of 1960 to 1969. He found that, on average, government expenditures increased by 6.2 percent in major riot cities and increased by 3.3 percent in minor or non-riot cities during this time period. Among the 16 cities that experienced riots in 1967, welfare expenditures increased at a rate of 57 percent from 1967 to 1968; whereas, welfare expenditures decreased by .3 percent for the control group during this same period. This evidence lends credence to Piven and Cloward's thesis.

Isaac and Kelly (1981) predicted that racial conflict severity would have a greater impact on welfare case rolls than conflict frequency. Further, they hypothesized that the federal government would respond at a greater rate than state or local governments. The researchers concluded that racially-focused rioting heavily influenced the expansion of welfare expenditures in the short-term, which supports Piven and Cloward's thesis. Additionally, riot frequency was found to have a greater impact on welfare case rolls than riot severity.

Schram and Turbett (1983) contended that civil conflict results in increased welfare assistance, which results in high implementation rates by high-conflict state governments. They found that conflict severity was a greater predictor of welfare growth than conflict frequency. Their research found that states, rather than cities, had the capacity to liberalize Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) requirements resulting in welfare as a method of social control.

Hicks and Swank (1983) hypothesized that urban riots were resolved by Community Action Agency activities that increased awareness of AFDC benefits and subsequent AFDC enrollment. The researchers found mixed support for Piven and Cloward's thesis holding that need, apart from conflict, generates caseload growth. Further, Piven and Cloward's thesis that welfare assistance and social conflict are related was strongly supported by Hicks and Swank (1983).

Challenges

Literature that challenges Piven and Cloward's thesis would find evidence contrary to the belief that welfare rolls are increased to decrease conflict. The research of Albritton (1979), Jennings (1983), as well as Chamlin, Burek, and Cochran (2007) do just that.

Albritton (1979) examined Piven and Cloward's thesis and the plausibility for alternative explanations for the association of conflict and caseload. The researcher examined possible relationships between "social disorders" (e.g., riots and crime) and welfare caseloads as well as

“social disorders” and increases in populations consisting of people of color. The researcher found no significant relationships between the aforementioned variables. Thus, Albritton (1979) contended that extraneous variables or chance alone may explain the association.

Jennings (1983) challenged Isaac and Kelly’s (1981) two hypotheses, which are stated above. The researcher found that the Isaac and Kelly (1981) study measures lacked reliability, and that the study contained inconsistent variables. Jennings (1983) found that conflict (i.e., riots) *did* result in higher benefit levels; however, the level of need was found to be heavily associated with public assistance. Additionally, the researcher demonstrated that welfare gains did not diminish as conflict decreased.

Chamlin, Burek, and Cochran (2007) hypothesized that the transition from AFDC to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) should result in two outcomes: (1) Increased labor supply above ongoing social processes and (2) Decreased welfare population size. The researchers found that the switch from AFDC to TANF had no effect on Wisconsin’s labor supply, but that it briefly resulted in decreased welfare caseload. Moreover, the welfare caseload actually increased to pre-intervention levels six months after the introduction of TANF. Thus, these findings stand counter to Piven and Cloward’s contention that government officials manipulate welfare policy to control the labor supply.

Informing Research in Welfare Policy

Conflict theory is useful in informing welfare policy research. As described above, conflict theory informed Piven and Cloward’s (1971) thesis that government programs (i.e., welfare) are implemented to squelch conflict of the lower-classes. Only one article was found that explores this theory post-TANF. Research is needed that explores a correlation between level of conflict and TANF caseload. If Piven and Cloward are correct, then the decrease in welfare caseload combined with low-paying employment for welfare leavers would result in heightened conflict. Additionally, government officials would expand the welfare rolls to extinguish this heightened conflict.

Research is needed that examines the degree to which these government programs actually exacerbate social conflict. Therefore, research is needed that explores the degree to which conflict resonates around entitlement versus means-tested social programs. Research may explore the degree to which social welfare programs actually separate the lower and working classes. Conflict may arise between those that are poor and qualify for social welfare and those that are poor and do not qualify. Research could explore this divisiveness between subgroups and how this divisiveness impacts group solidarity and mass mobilization.

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