The 'Great West' Experiment

Neo-Liberal Convergence and Transforming Citizenship in Canada

AMBER GAZSO
York University
SUSAN MCDANIEL
University of Lethbridge

Abstract

Over the period 1993–2004, the western Canadian provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan, with governing political parties ranging from left to right, experimented with the restructuring of their social assistance policies and programs. By 2004, benefits were no longer provided on the basis of social rights of citizenship but conditional on the recipient's actual or potential *employability*. Analysis of the annual reports of the provincial ministries responsible for social assistance over this time period reveals that the specific policy assumptions and strategies that create benefits conditional on employability fall into four inter-related dimensions: restriction; enforcement; surveillance; and sharing responsibility. Qualitative differences were found in the provinces' restructuring trajectories across these dimensions. In this paper, based on our findings, we advance the argument that these dimensions of restructuring ultimately converge into a larger project of solidifying market citizenship through the conditioning of employability, and where neo-liberal market logic is superimposed on non-market facets of everyday lives (including parenting and care-giving) with problematic societal consequences.

Key Words: neo-liberalism, western Canada, social assistance reform, employability, citizenship.

Résumé

Au cours d'une période allant de 1993 à 2004, les provinces de l'Ouest canadien de la Colombie-Britannique, de l'Alberta et de la Saskatchewan, ayant au

gouvernement des partis politiques de droite comme de gauche, ont expérimenté avec la restructuration de leurs politiques et de leurs programmes d'aide sociale. À la fin de 2004, les avantages ne sont plus décernés en fonction des droits sociaux de la citoyenneté, mais subordonnés à l'employabilité du bénéficiaire actuel ou potentiel. Les analyses des rapports annuels des ministères provinciaux responsables de l'aide sociale durant cette période révèlent que les hypothèses et les stratégies politiques spécifiques à la création d'avantages subordonnés à l'employabilité correspondent à quatre dimensions interdépendantes : la restriction, la mise en application, la surveillance et le partage des responsabilités. On a trouvé des différences qualitatives dans les trajectoires de restructuration des provinces à travers ces dimensions. Dans cet article et en nous basant sur nos résultats de recherche, nous formulons l'argument que ces dimensions de restructuration convergent ultimement en un projet plus large de solidification de la citoyenneté du marché qui passe par la subordination à l'employabilité et où la logique néolibérale du marché se superpose jusque dans les facettes non commerciales de la vie quotidienne (y compris du rôle parental et de soignant) avec des conséquences problématiques sur le plan social.

Social assistance programs in Canada and elsewhere have been transformed from the early 1990s to prioritize active responsibility for one's economic security. A market-oriented approach, commonly known as welfare-to-work or work-first in the United States (U.S.), has changed income support policy and undermined its previous social citizenship orientation (Breitkreuz, 2005; Pollack, 2009; Pollack & Caragata, 2010). People are no longer perceived to have social rights to income support on the basis of need alone and instead their entitlement to social assistance benefits is contingent on market citizenship, conceptualized here as their 'employ-ability' efforts (e.g. mandatory participation in employment and education training programs, or active seeking of employment) (Gazso & McDaniel, 2010; Kershaw, 2005; Mead, 1986; Pulkingham, Fuller, & Kershaw, 2010; Ridzi, 2009). Notably, care-giving responsibilities for young children are eclipsed in this market-oriented conceptualization of entitlement to income support.

The requirement of paid work obligations in eligibility for social assistance is not unique to Canada but coincides with neo-liberal assumptions shared across post-industrial societies such as the U.S. and Great Britain. Conditioning employ-ability is thought to teach individuals that they can, and should, solve their income insecurity. Further, it is argued that a market orientation balances obligations with entitlements, thereby integrating the disadvantaged into the mainstream (Mead, 1986). In fact, with the proliferation of neo-liberal ideology, there has been remark-able convergence on the goals of emphasizing employability in welfare-to-work policies in the Canadian provinces, despite social assistance being a provincial

responsibility and regardless of the very different political orientations of the governing parties in each province.

Our paper compares how the three neighbouring, but politically contrasting, western provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan restructured their social assistance programs to solidify market citizenship as a condition of benefit receipt in what we call a 'great west' experiment. Two inter-related objectives define our comparative policy analysis. First, we examine shared dimensions of social assistance restructuring (e.g. policy assumptions and reform strategies) across the three provinces over the period 1993–2004 to see if and how they ultimately *converge* into a larger project of prioritizing market citizenship via the conditioning of employability. Second, we seek to understand the implications of giving primacy to neo-liberal market logic over all other life responsibilities, including parenting and child care. Social assistance policy restructuring may have not just reshaped expectations of employability but also the parenting performed by those on income support, with problematic consequences. Our central argument is that the 'great west' experiment of social assistance restructuring was driven by the ubiquitous ideology of neo-liberalism, an ideology that has crossed borders both geographic and political, and swept up all political persuasions in its wake.

Theorizing Context: Provincial Restructuring of Social Assistance and Neo-Liberal Change

In the mid-1970s to the late 1980s, a crisis mentality about the welfare state flourished (Pollack, 2009; Pollack & Caragata, 2010). This was not limited to Canada but international in dimension (Pierson, 2007; Ridzi, 2009). The primary challenge that over-rode all others in determining the future of the welfare state in Canada was the existence of both federal and provincial deficits (Battle, 1998). Continued spending increases in social programs, increased costs associated with higher levels of unemployment, reduced revenues from slower productivity growth, reduced corporate taxes, and growing taxpayer resistance to higher taxes were all cited as factors contributing to the federal fiscal deficit (Brown, 1994; Simeon, 1994). Globalization additionally was thought to undermine the ability of governments at all levels to be nimble in responding to fiscal challenges (O'Connor & Robinson, 2008).

Baker (1997), among others, maintains that this crisis orientation was consistent with an ideology of economic rationalism, presuming government expenditures must be reduced for future benefit and that the scope of the existing welfare state was largely to blame. Rice and Prince (2000: 109) observe that by the late 1980s, there was a" rightward shift in the dominant discourse of politics and policy making towards promoting markets." The state was less understood as a mechanism through which social policy could protect against market risks, and instead

understood as a mechanism through which markets could be expanded. By the early 1990s, neo-liberalism and its attendant assumptions of individual responsibility, free market democracy, and a reduced role of the state (Mahon, 2008) was firmly established as driving the response to the fiscal crisis of the Canadian welfare state (Gazso & McDaniel, 2010; Kershaw, 2005).

Increased interest in, and allegiance to, neo-liberalism in Canada was not surprising given its considerable influence in other liberal welfare states. Governments in the U.S. and Great Britain, for example, also experienced the pressures of globalization, demographic change, and post-industrialism and thus conditions were ripe for the retrenchment and/or restructuring of welfare regimes (Pierson 1996). Internationally, there was considerable agreement that the post-1990s 'new' politics of welfare states had to be different than in the past (Myles & Quadagno, 2002, p. 35–7; P. Pierson, 1996). Political differences, especially historically contextualized, contributed to diversity in state responses to these pressures (Myles & Quadagno, 2002; C. Pierson, 2007). In particular, neo-liberal ideology centred attention on income security programs in western welfare states. Bashevkin (2002) finds that different social policy histories did not deter Canada, the U.S., and Great Britain from each creating contingent citizenship rights to income support, or, what she terms, "duty states." Peck (2001) also shows neo-liberal policy convergence in implementing workfare1 in the three countries, but highlights the different pathways pursued in each country.

As we have observed elsewhere (see Gazso and McDaniel, 2010), the neo-liberalization of western welfare states is about more than responding to financial crises and creating opportunities in international money markets. Its rise to prominence since the 1970s is echoed by concurrent transformations in citizenship, especially the replacement of social rights of citizenship with market citizenship, or as Mead (1986) argues, the coupling of serious work and other social obligations with the receipt of benefits. In using social policies for creating market opportunities, or social integration for disadvantaged individuals, neo-liberalism supplanted the collectivist and redistributionist approach of post-war social risk protection. Under neo-liberalism, social rights of citizenship (e.g. to a basic standard of living that is state supported if necessary) are replaced with responsibilities to provide for oneself with only minimal temporary support, or, ideally, with no state support at all. The notion of collective risks entangled in systems of social protection is replaced with that of individual risks to be managed alone. A similar logic has been operative with respect to pension savings. Under neo-liberalism, the 'passive' post-war welfare state which offered risk insurance but with strings attached, is replaced with an 'active' welfare state that prioritizes economic growth, accumulation of human capital, and employability efforts. Market citizenship rather than social citizenship determines individuals' eligibility for any state support, no matter the need. The road to integration into society, from the social separation of

disadvantage, is through participation in the paid labour market (Mead, 1986).

With respect to social assistance policy in Canada, we see this neo-liberal shift in citizenship take place with the replacement of the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) with the Canadian Health and Social Transfer (CHST), what has been termed a "watershed in the history of social policy" (Battle & Torjman, 1995: 408). Under the CHST, provinces could no longer rely on shared federal funding of social assistance programs, nor were they any longer mandated to provide income support when needed (Klein & Montgomery, 2001). Although provinces did experiment with employability programming under CAP especially in the 1980s (Evans, 1995), participation in these programs was largely voluntary and was not punitively enforced. Hence, as will be discussed in the next section, the loss of CAP was a significant policy change that created financial opportunities for the provinces to experiment with reform strategies.

Analysis of the 'Great West' Experiment

The primary research question of our study is: How do dimensions of social assistance restructuring (e.g. policy assumptions and reform strategies) across the western provinces ultimately *converge* into a larger neo-liberal project of prioritizing market citizenship via the conditioning of employability? We situate our study in answer to this question in the tradition of comparative welfare state research that focuses on macro-level comparisons of policy ideologies and/or doctrines but is simultaneously sensitive to meso-level differences. We incorporate an additional level of specificity in our study by narrowing our comparative focus to three neighbouring jurisdictions in one country, with contrasting political regimes.

While most research on social assistance reform in Canada is specific to the province of Ontario[2], our study focuses on the western provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. We place our focus here because social assistance reform materialized in all three provinces through a shared interest in deficit reduction. As Booth and Reid (2001) show, the western provinces began their shared experiment of deficit reduction in earnest, in the year 1992/1993. Throughout the 1990s, all three provinces embarked on the strategy of social assistance reform in response to the pressures of fiscal deficits, increased social assistance caseloads, and the 1995 replacement of the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) with the Canadian Health and Social Transfer (CHST). Lastly, we focus on the western provinces because the three provinces could not be more diverse in terms of their political philosophies, their initial approaches to social policy, their historical evolution, and their early to mid-1990s political leadership. For example, Alberta has a long history of single-party, right of centre government. Saskatchewan has a similar long history of one party left of centre government, interspersed with short periods of liberal or conservative governments. British Columbia has a mixed

political history of governance by various political parties with left of centre gov-
ernments for a number of years.[3]

We took our data from publicly available policy documents of the relevant
ministries in the three provinces over our time period of interest, 1993–2004.[4]
We collected all annual reports and/or fact sheets from the ministerial and govern-
mental libraries in each province and organized them according to province.
We analyzed the qualitative data by sorting the documents into themes. We first
focused on the data specific to each province. We coded it according to four
themes: objectives for reform, timing of reform, reasons for reform, and changing
department mandates and visions. Second, we undertook a systematic comparison
of these themes across the three provinces. Through this process, we identified
how themes were organized by higher level themes that were shared across the
provinces. We thematically grouped shared policy assumptions and reform strate-
gies, what we saw as dimensions of social assistance restructuring.

Our findings were that despite different political philosophies, all three provinces
took a similar neo-liberal path when it came to social assistance reform. They relied
on similar words and themes in reforming social assistance. Each province trans-
formed social assistance to emphasize employability and undermine social rights
of citizenship. Specifically, we found that the policy assumptions and reform strate-
gies used by all three provinces could be classified under four key dimensions, i.e.
restriction, enforcement, surveillance, and sharing of responsibility.[5] Below, we
describe the assumptions and strategies that underpin these four dimensions.

The Four Dimensions

Reduction and Restriction

Reduction and Restriction emerges as the first dimension in ministry discourses
indicative of a shift toward making benefit receipt contingent on employability.
Each province used *restriction of benefit amounts* as a strategy to promote the prin-
ciple of "less eligibility." Alberta was the first province to use it. In 1990, Alberta's
Supports for Independence replaced Social Allowance (Reichwein, 2002)[6] (see Table
1 on page 23). It was said to offer a more comprehensive focus on client independence
and self-sufficiency and with stricter eligibility criteria that addressed the province's
impending financial crisis that had been exacerbated by increasing assistance case-
loads (Alberta Family and Social Services, 1994). The creation of a means- and asset-
tested program and new ministerial goals introduced in 1993/94 was said to signal
the "... the shift from a passive welfare system to an active system focused on helping
people regain independence through employment and training" (Alberta Family
and Social Services, 1994, p. 5). In 1993, further reduction of benefits included:
reductions in standard allowances and shelter payments, restrictions on assets, and
the outright elimination of some benefits (Alberta Family and Social Services,

1993). Benefits were reduced by 19 per cent for single individuals, by 13 per cent for single parents with one child and by 12 per cent for couples with two children (Klein & Montgomery, 2001).

In BC, restriction in benefit amounts occurred in 1995, two years after the Alberta changes (see Table 1). When the BC *Benefits Act* replaced the 1972 *Guaranteed Available Income for Need Act*, benefits were cut by 8–10 per cent for welfare recipients who were deemed employable and without dependents (Klein & Montgomery, 2001). This reform strategy was also used in the second wave of social assistance restructuring in 2002 when the Liberal government announced the replacement of BC *Benefits Act* with the BC *Employment and Assistance Act* (British Columbia Ministry of Human Resources, 2002) (see Table 1 on page 23).[7] Benefit rates were cut by $43 for lone mothers with one child and by $90 for two parents with two children. Employable couples with one child, aged 18–54, experienced a $47 reduction whereas parents with two children experienced a $45 reduction (compared to 2001 benefit rates). In addition, shelter allowances were reduced for families with three or more people, other cuts followed (e.g. the capping of crisis grants for food and clothing), and earnings exemptions were eliminated (Klein & Long, 2003).[8] Justifications for a second wave of reform to social assistance included the perception of people cycling on and off assistance and the likely increase in caseloads due to population growth and aging (British Columbia Ministry of Human Resources, 2003). In sharp contrast, restriction of benefit amounts was not a popular reform strategy used to create employability in Saskatchewan, at least in the 1990s and early 2000s. According to Warnock (2004), benefit rates have been more or less frozen since 1982 with only very modest increases occurring in the 1990s.

A common approach to restricting benefits for all three provinces was to make changes to programs other than social assistance, including family maintenance, and child benefits programs. Through family maintenance programs, each province began to more sharply enforce ex-spouses' provisions of spousal or child support. To be clear, parents did not benefit from these payments as they were reduced dollar for dollar from their social assistance payments. The implementation of child benefit programs did not necessarily improve parents' economic situations either. In 1995, BC was the first Canadian province to introduce the BC Family Bonus as part of the Child Tax Benefit initiative.[9] Three years later, Saskatchewan followed with the Saskatchewan Child Benefit under the *Building Independence* initiative, and Alberta introduced the Alberta Child Benefit. At the policy and political level, these programs were promoted as key to reducing the stigma children from low-income families felt as a result of their and others' knowledge that their family is 'on welfare.' The benefits were to provide children with the means to access other social services, such as recreation. However, all three provincial child benefit programs also meant a dollar for dollar reduction in social assistance benefits paid to parents, meaning that they were

not much better off than they were before their children were 'moved off of welfare.'

Restriction of access to assistance is based on the idea that it offers incentives for employment. Government officials and policy makers across the western provinces shared the assumption that the harder they made access to assistance, the more likely parents, and especially lone mothers, would find alternative ways of providing for themselves and their families. Of the three provinces, BC stands out as the province most adept in using this strategy (see also Gazso, 2006). Under *BC Benefits*, the ministry imposed a three month waiting period for individuals applying for assistance despite the then CAP provision that residency requirements were not permitted.[10] Moreover, in 1996, it offered applicants transportation fare to return to their province of last residence if they did not meet residency requirement (Ministry of Social Services, 1996). Potential recipients who were not parents were also restricted in access to *BC Benefits* by the reduction of asset levels for eligibility. Finally, all individuals who refused to accept work or who had quit their last job were no longer eligible for hardship assistance, regardless of their reasons for not being available to work (including parenting demands).

Under *BC Employment and Income Assistance* even more strict eligibility criteria were imposed. Potential recipients over age 19 had to be financially independent for at least two years in order to qualify for assistance (Klein & Long, 2003).[11] If this two year independence test was waived, however, potential recipients still had to go through a three week waiting period in which they had to search for a job before being told whether they were eligible. According to the policy manual, the three week work search was intended to stress the importance of employment even before recipients were designated eligible (British Columbia Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, 2005).

In Alberta, there was no obligatory job search during a waiting period. However, in a study of the impact of Alberta's earlier reforms in 1993–96, Boessenkool (1997) explains that applications for assistance typically involved a two-step process, one stage of outright denial (except in extreme circumstances), followed by a second stage where the applicant had to show caseworkers that they had, indeed, exhausted all other forms of support.

Changes to Saskatchewan social assistance introduced in 1998 (see Table 1) did not involve excessive interest in restriction of access; little discussion took place about changing the benefit levels. Nonetheless, one change to the *Saskatchewan Assistance Plan* (the result of the 1992 consultation paper *Changing Directions*) was the standardization of basic allowance rates in 1993 across family structures (Saskatchewan Social Services, 1993).

Despite their difference uses of restriction over time, Alberta and Saskatchewan, like BC, shared an interest in almost continual social assistance reform in the 1993–2004 period. In 2004, the *Income and Employment Supports Act* (originally Bill 32) was introduced in Alberta in response to a five-member MLA committee

which recommended that a single, integrated program be created to meet needs in a more simplified manner (MLA Committee to Review Low-Income Programs, 2001). According to then Minister, Clint Dunford, "Bill 32 builds on our belief that social programs must offer a hand up, not a handout. It is about making programs work for people instead of trying to fit people into programs that do not always match their particular needs" (Government of Alberta, 2003, p. 1). The new Act, *Alberta Works*, replaced *Supports for Independence* (see Table 1). The *Alberta Works* program explicitly links income support with employment training in social assistance and other programs, such as child care. Under this program, the Alberta Adult Health Benefit was introduced and parents' earnings exemptions were increased to up to $230 per month before their benefits were reduced. In Saskatchewan in the mid-1990s, the discussion paper *Redesigning Social Assistance: Preparing for the New Century* cited the demise of CAP along with reduced federal funding for Employment Insurance, changes in the economy, and increasing poverty and dependency rates as factors that suggested the need for social assistance reform (Government of Saskatchewan, 1996). Redesign was implemented with the introduction of the *Saskatchewan Training Strategy: Bridges to Employment* and by 1998, the commencement of the *Building Independence* initiative, which consists of eight programs designed for individuals in needs of temporary income support.[12]

Table 1: Summary of Major Changes to Social Assistance Programming by Year (1993–2004)

British Columbia	
1995	Introduction of B.C. Benefits
2002	Replacement of B.C. Benefits with B.C. Employment and Assistance
Alberta	
1993	Dramatic reforms to existing Supports for Independence (SFI)
2004	Replacement of SFI with Alberta Works
Saskatchewan	
1998	Introduction of Building Independence programs to complement the existing Saskatchewan Assistance Plan

Enforcement

Enforcement was a second type of reform strategy used by the three provinces over the 1993–2004 period. People in need of social assistance were now expected to be employable or to participate in employment training as a condition of eligibility. This is particularly problematic for parents of young children, especially women. In all three provinces, various characteristics of recipients' home-life situations, including the age of the children and whether or not they have medical conditions (e.g. addictions, mental health problems, disability), were used to classify beneficiaries as employable or unemployable. Under the 2004 social assistance policy in

BC, employable parents were expected to seek paid work when their youngest child was age three. The cut-off age had been seven under the previous *BC Benefits* program (1995–2002) and twelve under the *Guaranteed Available Income for Need Act* (1972–1995) (Ministry of Human Resources, 1998). In Alberta, parents were only exempt from being deemed employable if their children were under six months old, a policy in place since the early 1990s (Schafer & Clemens, 2002). Saskatchewan's parents on assistance were entitled to remain at home if their youngest child was under age six in the 1990s (Saskatchewan Social Services, 1993) but by the early 2000s they were deemed employable regardless of the age of their children or family structure, at the discretion of caseworkers. There was no age limit at which time parents were expected to work (Tweed, 2004).

Once classified as employable, adult beneficiaries (with or without children) were subjected to a variety of practices that reinforced the rule that their eligibility was contingent on actively seeking work. Under the BC *Benefits Act*, employment-related programming was introduced in the form of *Welfare to Work* and *Youth Works*. Participation in *Youth Works* (Gorlick & Brethour, 1998) was mandatory for young adults aged 19–24, who were on social assistance. For those over the age of 25, the *Welfare to Work* program required that they participate in job training or seek work in order to remain eligible for benefits. They were not obligated, however, to participate in training programs if they were seeking work. The latter occurred in the subsequent restructuring of *BC Benefits*. As stated in the 1997-98 annual report, recipients of income assistance and youth allowances "must either be actively searching for employment or be participating in an approved employment-related program" (Ministry of Human Resources, 1998, p. 3). One of the ways active job searches or participation in training was enforced under *BC Benefits* was to require applicants to attend an orientation session and use job search resources (Ministry of Human Resources, 1999).

By 2004, the strategies used to restrict access to assistance in BC were complemented by strategies to enforce parents' employability efforts once they were on assistance. If a recipient conducted an unsuccessful work search during the three week waiting period and were granted income support, they were required to develop a legally binding 'employment plan' with caseworkers. The enforcement of employment plans was achieved through setting time limits. BC remains the only jurisdiction in Canada that limits employable social assistance recipients' benefits to two out of five years. As of 2002, single, employable recipients over the age of 19 are expelled from the caseload once they reach the two year mark in accessing benefits (Reitsma-Street, 2002). Once their youngest child turns three, parents designated as employable have two years to find employment. If their youngest child reaches age five, however, and they had not been actively seeking employment, their benefits are reduced (by $100 for lone parents and up to $200 for two parent families) (British Columbia Ministry of Human Resources, 2004c; Gazso,

2006). In February 2004, the ministry reduced the harshness of this enforcement measure by introducing twenty-five exemptions "... designed to ensure that no one who is unable to work or who is actively seeking work will lose assistance" (Ministry of Human Resources, 2004, p. 1).[13]

In Alberta and Saskatchewan, the enforcement of employability also occurred through obligatory orientation sessions and employment plans. Both the earlier 'employment plan' introduced with the 1993 reforms and the more recent 'client investment plan' (*Alberta Works*), require Alberta benefit recipients to come up with a series of steps to move back into the workforce as soon as possible (Government of Alberta, 2004). As of 2000, new applicants to the *Social Assistance Plan* in Saskatchewan were required to attend a First Step orientation session "... which outlines the rights and responsibilities of social assistance clients and the expectation that they will work toward becoming self-sufficient"(Saskatchewan Social Services, 2003, p. 12). In 2000, 'case plans' with intake interviews, that had been in place since 1995, were replaced with 'transition plans' that reinforce client efforts to become self-supporting as soon as possible (Gorlick & Brethour, 1998). According to the 2003 *Saskatchewan Assistance Policy Manual*, recipients were to be referred to employment or training opportunities as part of their transition plans regardless of whether they had been designated as employable or not (Department of Community Resources and Employment, 2003).

Surveillance
Surveillance, our third emergent dimension, refers to the ways provincial social assistance programs subject recipients to routine monitoring. All recipients, including single recipients and those with children, were required to document their employability efforts through the completion of monthly reports on job searches and/or agree to undergo eligibility audits and/or fraud inspections. In all three provinces, women and men had to report monthly to the ministry detailing their earned income, changes in assets, gains/losses in employment, attendance in training or educational programs, and any changes in their family structure or residence. Assessment of these reports determined whether they would receive income support in the following month. In BC, mandatory monthly job search cards were introduced in 1993 under the *Guaranteed Available Income for Need Act* (Ministry of Social Services, 1994). Under the 2002 *Employment and Income Assistance* program, recipients still filled out a monthly report required by their employment plans and time limits. Recipients who were designated as employable but did not commit to an employment plan or comply with its conditions were no longer deemed eligible for assistance (British Columbia Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, 2005). Failure to comply with specific conditions of social assistance, such as failing to search for employment or leaving employment without just cause, could result in expulsion from benefits (British Columbia Ministry of

Human Resources, 2004d; see also Gazso, 2006). In Alberta, if recipients did not follow through with their client investment plan (similar to BC's employment plan) or meet expectations associated with their access to assistance, their benefits could be cancelled, reduced or suspended. They may be required to pay back some money, or face charges or other penalties (Government of Alberta, 2004). As in BC and Alberta, benefits in Saskatchewan could also be withheld if recipients were unwilling to participate in employability efforts (Schafer & Clemens, 2002). Ridzi (2009, p. 151) describes comparable approaches in the U.S. context as introducing a medicalized-therapeutic paradigm in which caseworkers take a "tough love" stance, demanding penitent and rehabilitated clients who do not relapse into dependency on the system.

Since the early 1990s, fraud control divisions also serve as the primary surveillance mechanism to ensure that recipients are indeed 'deserving' of support and not defrauding the government. In 1994, Alberta introduced the Fraud and Error Control Program and BC introduced the Prevention, Compliance and Enforcement Branch. Saskatchewan, in contrast, has not implemented a fraud division but established an accountability principle in 1996, which entails audit and verification of ongoing eligibility (Saskatchewan Social Services, 1997).

Sharing Responsibility

Our final dimension, **sharing responsibility**, captures the re-shuffling of the responsibilities of each ministry concerned with social assistance with the programs of many other governmental and non-governmental departments (e.g. child benefits) involved in supporting employability as a basis of benefit receipt. There has been obvious growth in the number of welfare-to-work programs (e.g. educational upgrading, job readiness programs, etc.) as governments increasingly spread responsibility for their provision and management.

Beginning with BC Benefits, the ministry engaged in a relationship with the (then) Ministry of Education, Skills and Training (now Ministry of Education) to provide training for Youth Works and Welfare to Work recipients (Ministry of Human Resources, 1998). The ministry has since partnered with the Ministry of Children and Family Development and Ministry of Health Services in the provision of other services (e.g. health benefits) (British Columbia Ministry of Human Resources, 2005). Both the Ministry of Family and Social Services and later Human Resources and Employment pursued options to share responsibility with education for Albertans in economic need. Since 1995, the Canada-Alberta Services Centres have provided 'one window' service for provincial and federal labour market and income support programs, and are managed by a partnership between Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development (AECD) and federal Human Resources Development Canada. Alberta's child and health benefits program, as in BC, requires partnerships with other provincial ministries, including the Alberta

Health and Wellness ministry. Similarly, the development and implementation of the Provincial Training Allowance and Youth Futures program, initiatives developed according to the *Saskatchewan Training Strategy*, were delivered by the Department of Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training (Saskatchewan Social Services, 1998). The family health benefits administered through the ministry of social services also required the involvement of the Saskatchewan health ministry (Saskatchewan Social Services, 1999).

Finally, in all three provinces, new partnerships with outside, private sector or non-profit agencies were developed over the 1993–2004 period. Through contractual relationships, these outside agencies provided employment and education programming on behalf of the ministries. For example, BC *Employment and Income Assistance* introduced streamlining, the development of performance-based contracting frameworks which tied payments to actual results by outside agencies', including successfully connecting clients to jobs and reducing caseloads (British Columbia Ministry of Social Development and Economic Security, 2001). *Jobs First*, piloted in 2000 in Saskatchewan, involved the ministry sharing responsibility with the Department of Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training and the funding of outside community organizations to provide services (Saskatchewan Social Services, 2001).

Convergence, Divergence, and the Neo-liberal Conditioning of Employability

Despite differences in degree and profound differences in governing party politics, each of the western provinces restricted benefit amounts and/or access to social assistance during the period of our study. While these strategies were employed in the early 1990s in Alberta and earlier in Saskatchewan, they faded in importance in the 2000s. In contrast, restrictions of benefit amounts and access have consistently been used punitively in both waves of reforms in BC over the period 1993 to 2004. The message of BC policy is more starkly deterrent than in Alberta and Saskatchewan: people in economic need should not expect a 'hand out' and can only anticipate a meagre 'hand up' if it is accompanied with a focus on employability. Once applying or receiving assistance, individuals in all three provinces are subjected to moral regulation through enforcement; benefits are made conditional on the display of mandatory, employment-oriented behaviour. When deemed employable, recipients, especially those who are parents, are rarely allowed to choose how they will pursue paid work while at the same caring for young children. In using these strategies, all three provinces engaged in teaching an important moral lesson: a strong work ethic is the only way a person can become deserving of social assistance. A care ethic or a policy of valued care for a young generation is conspicuously absent in contemporary social assistance policies of the western provinces.

Coinciding with these dimensions, surveillance ensures that recipients'

behaviours are consistent with the goal of 'active' programming: moving people off social assistance and into the workforce as quickly as possible. Sophisticated mechanisms of surveillance have been developed to correspond with the pejorative assumption that recipients are more likely to de-fraud the system through bad choices — including 'the bad choice' by lone parents to care for a young child full-time — rather than engaging in 'the good choice' of employability. Recipients' employability must be monitored, otherwise they will, it is thought, 'take advantage' of the system. Finally, each province's enforcement and surveillance thrusts are exacerbated by the sharing of responsibilities among departments, a situation that is ripe with contradiction. At the same time as each province consistently stresses the need to reduce dependence on income support, especially the dependence of lone mothers, each is also paradoxically creating webs of structural inter-dependency amongst departments and crossing public and private sector boundaries. Recipients' employability efforts are subject not to just one gaze from the ministry responsible for social assistance but to gazes from several others

Like much welfare state research in cross-national comparison, we find that comparing provincial policies within one country yields important findings. Differences do emerge in political persuasion and the specificity of social assistance policy reforms. However, we also found remarkable similarities in how the three western Canadian provinces reformed social assistance. Over the period 1993– 2004, benefits have become detached from the post-war commitment to the collective common good, and, instead, enmeshed with incentives and penalties to create employability (see also O'Connor & Robinson, 2008). One is only a citizen with rights if, in fact, one works for pay, or unless one is a *married* woman who depends on a husband well off enough to support her and their children. The growth of employability as a condition of benefit receipt over our period of interest echoes what Dwyer (2002) terms "creeping conditionality" to refer to the process of increasing contractualism surrounding receipt of income support benefits in Great Britain. Creeping conditionality is best exemplified by the following quote from a BC document: "If the person can work, he or she is required to look for a job or participate in a job placement or training for jobs program *as a condition* for receiving assistance" (British Columbia Ministry of Human Resources, 2004a, p. 1, italics added).

Neo-liberalism emerges in the western provinces as the over-arching idea motivating reform to achieve recipients' market citizenship relationships with social assistance policy. The four dimensions therefore ultimately converge into a neo-liberal larger project of consolidating market citizenship as the means by which citizens accrue income. For policy makers and government officials, welfare reform in the west has been about changing the paid work consciousness of those in economic need, not about correcting the macro-economic situations that have created individuals' economic insecurity in the first place (see also Freire, 1970, p. 55). Specifically, all three western provinces reformed social assistance in tan-

dem with the neo-liberal ideology of individual responsibility and, thus, designed social assistance programs and policies in ways that individuals must conform to the image of the ideal-type market citizen: an employable, autonomous, self-reliant citizen who is not dependent on the state.

Problematic Consequences

Some may argue that the benefits of this 'great west' experiment have been many, including reduced dependence and stronger, more competitive provincial economies. We see the results of this experiment differently. The transformation of citizenship is a troubling effect, one that is connected with other social costs that far outweigh any perceived benefits of neo-liberal reform. Here, we conclude by highlighting two crucial social costs of the transformation of citizenship in social assistance policy in the west.

First, the introduction of welfare-to-work policies and programs not only make employability and/or market citizenship a condition for benefit receipt but also make the absence of secure attachment to the labour market as synonymous with poverty and dependence. During our period of study, parents and children on social assistance in the western provinces were particularly poor. In 2003, parents' total assistance incomes (i.e. including national child benefits, provincial benefits, GST credit, etc.) were not enough to pull families with children (no matter what their composition) above Low Income Cut Offs (LICOs) (National Council of Welfare, 2004). All three western provinces had child poverty rates in 2002 above the national average (Campaign 2000, 2004). Several years past the time period of this study, total social assistance incomes continue to be below the LICOs in each of the western provinces. In effect, if one is in economic need and already poor, whether working for pay and/or trying to raise a family alone, receipt of social assistance in the west guarantees worsened and prolonged poverty. Total social assistance income provides unemployed parents of young children with zero financial resources to draw on for child care and transportation should they enter the labour market. When we understand this basic fact, rigidly enforcing the employability of a lone mother or father of an infant or young child makes little sense. Social assistance policy that prioritizes employability above all else punishes parents who find themselves in a position of income insecurity. Research from the *Lone Mothers' Building Social Inclusion* project shows that policy assumptions about, and constraints on, mothers' choices about caring for children and labour market entry do more to contribute to their feelings of stigma and being trapped than immediately improving their income situations (Centre for Lone Mothers: Building Social Inclusion, 2008).

Second, the shift toward market citizenship in neo-liberal social assistance policy comes at the cost of devaluing social rights to care. Whereas individuals'

social rights to welfare service provisions were historically achieved through war, paid work *and* reproduction (Turner, 2009), the neo-liberalism of the 2000s has ratcheted up the primacy of paid work to the point that activities outside the labour market are no longer socially valued or seen as worthy of state support. In fact, the obliviousness of policy to the need for care of young children (as in Alberta especially) is an acute example of how employability as a responsibility takes over all other aspects of life. Market citizenship, in essence, trumps other social rights of citizenship. The favouring of responsibilities over rights transforms norms surrounding social justice for those who experience low income — whether they are mothers or fathers — specifically by making practices such as workfare normative (Evans, 1995; Peck, 2001) and everyday responsibilities like care-giving as morally questionable. When the emphasis on conditionality becomes so entrenched in social assistance policies (White, 2003) parents' basic rights to income support in times of need simply disappear.

Ultimately, with these shifts, society is in effect saying that the care-giving provided by poor parents, because they are poor and on social assistance, is no longer a social justice concern. We invite others to continue to examine this disturbing effect.

Notes

1   Workfare refers to compulsory programs and requirements of recipients in order to receive their benefits with the objective of "enforcing work while residualizing welfare" (Peck, 2001, p. 10). Welfare-to-work or in the U.S. policy lexicon, "work-first" (Ridzi, 2009), is synonymous with workfare.

2.   We acknowledge that there is an emerging wider lens of scholarship on social assistance reform, notably due to the *Lone Mothers: Building Social Inclusion* project (see Pollack 2009; Pollack & Caragata 2010; Pulkingham, Fuller et al., 2010).

3.   Over the period of our study (1993–2004), the Conservative party was consistently re-elected in Alberta as was the New Democratic party in Saskatchewan. In British Columbia, the Liberal party replaced New Democrats in 2001.

4.   We chose 1993 as our starting point based on Boothe and Reid's (2001) observation that all three provinces shared the fiscal year 1992/1993 as the time at which they commenced the 'great west experiment' of policy restructuring. The choice of 2004 as the end point for our study is arbitrary.

5.   We recognize that our findings share some similarities with Elton, Sieppert, Azmier, and Roach's (1997, p. 4) analysis of 1993–1996 Alberta welfare reform, which revealed five directions: 1) the pursuit of employment and training; 2) partnerships; 3) tighter eligibility criteria and improved error and fraud detection; 4) welfare as a last resort program and increased expectations and placement of responsibility upon clients; 5) benefits do not exceed low-income working Albertans' wages.

6. *Supports for Independence* (SFI) was one of several income supports programs administered by Alberta Family and Social Services. Since the focus of this study is social assistance, discussion will only centre on *SFI*, and later *Alberta Works*. Other income support programs under *SFI* included, at various times, the Widow's Pension, Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped, Alberta Assured Income Plan, Family Maintenance, Employment Initiatives, and Fraud and Error Control. *Albert Works* includes Employment and Training Services, Income Support, Health Benefits, and Child Support Services.

7. Aside from Income Assistance, the following programs are included in this Act: Disability Assistance, Protecting Children at Risk, Child Care, Family Bonus, Healthy Kids, and Detecting Fraud and Abuse ((British Columbia Ministry of Human Resources, 2004b).

8. Earnings exemptions were available to persons on assistance in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

9. The Child Tax Benefit replaced Family Allowances in 1993 and was designed to aid parents with incomes under a certain threshold in the care of their children.

10. In 1997, the three month residency requirement was withdrawn.

11. 'Financial independence' was usually defined as participation in employment. Income from student loans or training allowances does not satisfy the independence test. Potential recipients were exempt from this test for a variety of circumstances, e.g. fleeing an abusive relationships as in the case of lone mothers; medical conditions such as pregnancy (British Columbia Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, 2005).

12. These programs included: Saskatchewan Child Benefit, Saskatchewan Employment Supplement, Family Health Benefits Program, the Provincial Training Allowance, Jobs First, and Transitional Employment Allowance, Child Day Care Subsidies, Employment Supports for Persons with Disabilities.

13. To provide a few examples of the exemption criteria: persons with persistent multiple barriers, pregnant women, children under the age of 19, and lone mothers with a child under the age of three (British Columbia Ministry of Human Resources, 2004a) (see http://www.mhr.gov.bc.ca/factsheets/2004/timelimts.htm).

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