

## INTRODUCTION

This book is about the Ontario Works program and the problems it creates in the lives of people on social assistance. Ontario Works is the work-for-welfare (workfare) program that was implemented in Ontario in 1996 as part of the neoliberal restructuring of the welfare state. Workfare is a broad term used to refer to many different programs, the basic characteristic of which is that recipients of social assistance are required to work for their benefits, either through employment, community placements or educational initiatives (Quaid 2002: 3). Workfare programs are usually implemented under the guise of helping people “transition” from social assistance into paid employment, and they are almost always mandatory and coercive.<sup>1</sup>

There are a number of complaints and problems that arise within discussions about the Ontario Works program. This book focuses on the work-for-welfare requirement and the “employment assistance services” that were implemented as part of the program. My analysis shows that the actual objective of Ontario Works has nothing to do with helping people on social assistance or providing people with “real jobs,” as is claimed in official discourse. Rather, the program has to do with facilitating an attack on people on social assistance more generally, while providing subsidized labour for some companies and social agencies. This labour is provided in precarious and transient forms that are not going to produce any major benefits in the lives of people on social assistance.

My interest in the Ontario Works program stems from my personal experience with a similar program. After completing my bachelor’s degree and relocating to a new city to follow my partner, I started receiving Employment Insurance. During this time, I voluntarily signed-up for a program where I worked thirty-five hours a week for a local organiza-

tion and my EI benefits became in effect my paycheque. Despite having volunteered for the program, I could not leave without losing my “eligibility” for benefits, even though I found the experience not very useful as I spent much of my time doing tedious work, such as stuffing envelopes and photocopying. Furthermore, the hours I spent in this program impeded my ability to search for a “real” job.

This book is based on my master’s thesis, which was an institutional ethnography of the Ontario Works program. The foundation of this book rests upon the experiences of six social assistance recipients, who shared with me their experiences with the program. My aim was to take up their critical standpoint in relation to the Ontario Works program and the problems it creates in their everyday lives. I also spoke with people who work in administering part of the program (brokers) and with people from participating organizations (organizations that “host” Ontario Works placements).

In total, I interviewed seventeen research participants for this project: six social assistance recipients, three brokers and eight people from participating organizations. I conducted semi-structured in-person interviews with all participants using three separate interview guides — one for each group of respondents. I chose a semi-structured interview format to enable the flexibility to explore topics as they arose (Smith 2006: 23).

I started by interviewing two Ontario Works recipients in order to construct a standpoint of how the program worked from their perspective. My third and fourth interviews were with people from participating organizations, and the next three interviews were with brokers. This staggering of interviews allowed me to start with an understanding of the program from the point of view of recipients and to begin to see how problems were organized in their lives. Starting with their experiences allowed me to identify institutional relations that are important in coordinating people’s experience and to further explore these in subsequent interviews with participants from different social locations. The remaining interviews were a mix of recipients and people from participating organizations.

This book also uses quantitative information from secondary sources to complement some of my arguments. It is important to note that the statistics included are only as good as the methods used to collect them. Also, some of the figures are provided from institutional standpoints and

so their language and definitions can be problematic.

I recruited people to participate in this study through personal contacts, who then forwarded the invitation to other people from the groups I was targeting. I encountered some difficulties in recruiting Ontario Works recipients and the method that yielded the best response was having people referred to me through their friends and acquaintances. Once my contacts were made, they were certainly very open in teaching me about the Ontario Works program. All but one of them invited me into their homes, and nobody hesitated to answer any of my questions about how the program works.

I was interested in speaking both with people from organizations that had accepted placements from Ontario Works and people from organizations that, for whatever reason, chose not to. This group was certainly the easiest to recruit because of my own social location; working for a social service agency, I had numerous contacts with other organizations.

The group that was hardest to recruit were people who worked in administering the program. I tried to speak with people from this group to gain an understanding of how the program operates from their work perspective. I only managed to speak with people who worked as brokers (and thus only administer part of the program) because senior administration would not allow Ontario Works case workers to participate in my project (and senior administration did not return any of my follow-up phone calls). Inside sources tell me that the reluctance came from the fact that the Ontario Works program is a provincial program and that the program itself is very prescriptive. In other words, I would learn all I need to know about how the program operates from reading the program directives (guiding program documents). In speaking with the research participants, I learned that although the program is prescriptive, there are opportunities for discretionary decision-making in how the program is applied. It is therefore unfortunate that I was not able to speak to Ontario Works case workers directly. Because of this, I was not able to learn about the practical work-based knowledge they use in their work and how they activate or bring to life the program directives (Smith 2006: 82). All three brokers interviewed were from the same broker agency and the interviews were conducted at the broker agency itself.

The book explores what these interviews and other information have

shown me about how the Ontario Works program is socially organized from the standpoint of social assistance recipients. In chapter one, I briefly situate welfare within the capitalist system and give an overview of the origins and development of the Ontario Works program. In chapter two I begin critically analyzing the Ontario Works program from the standpoint of the social assistance recipients with whom I spoke, exploring some of the social relations that pushed them onto social assistance and some of the problems they face specific to raising children on assistance. I also provide some insight into the problems they experience in their everyday lives as a result of the Ontario Works program.

Chapter three explores how the Ontario Works program comes to serve the needs of the ruling relations of capital at the expense of people living in poverty. This is achieved by examining how the Ontario Works program serves to enforce work norms by a series of administrative obstacles that make it difficult for people to obtain or stay on social assistance, by using social assistance recipients to provide a lesson to people who work for wages that their fate on social assistance would be worse than in any low paying job and by pressuring social assistance recipients to work for low wages.

In chapter four, I discuss some of the conceptual practices behind the Ontario Works program as they are revealed through key texts from the program. This is achieved largely through an examination of the priorities that emerge from a critical textual analysis of the program and from speaking with people who work in administering the program. This chapter highlights that the actual intent of the program has nothing to do with helping social assistance recipients. Here I explore how Ontario Works is part of a broader neoliberal attack on people living in poverty that is based on disciplining the poor and regulating their morals.

Chapter five builds on the knowledge of people working for participating organizations and discusses what they revealed about how the program is socially organized. The participants have shown me how state regulations attempt to involve these organizations in the moral regulation of people on social assistance and they highlighted a number of problems with practices in the Ontario Works program. This chapter also explores some of the early struggles against workfare.

In the final chapter, I summarize the main findings from the research and examine the main contributions it makes. This includes a social

map of the Ontario Works program and a review of the main social relations that serve to organize the program, and to which the program contributes. I also highlight the implications of this study as they relate to the lives of social assistance recipients and social assistance and workfare programs. Finally, I provide recommendations for change.

## NOTE

1. Quaid (2002: 23) argues that there has been a widening of what programs fall under the term “workfare” and that the “new-style” workfare “now refers to a wide range of strategies that help able-bodied welfare recipients make the transition from reliance on welfare to economic independence” (these include both mandatory and voluntary programs).