Social Policy & Administration issn 0144-5596
DOI: 10.1111/spol.12326
Vol. 52, No. 3, May 2018, pp. 593–610

Contradictory Logics in Asset-building Discourse: Habits, Identities and Discipline

Guy Feldman

Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

Abstract

Asset-building as an anti-poverty policy emphasizes helping the poor to save and accumulate wealth so as to promote future financial well-being. This article focuses on how asset-building discourse is practiced at the frontlines and its implications for how workers come to address issues of poverty. Drawing on qualitative data from a case study of a matched savings programme in the USA, the study finds that asset-building discourse as enacted by workers is fundamentally contradictory: it promotes the idea that the poor can acquire financial literacy, but simultaneously works to discipline the poor to thoughtlessly save out of habit. More priority is placed on inculcating the habit of saving rather than teaching economically rational decision-making. These findings indicate that asset-building is consistent with a neo-liberal outlook that focuses on disciplining the poor to be market compliant irrespective of whether their participation in market-based activities effectively addresses the challenges of living in poverty.

Keywords

Poverty; Social welfare policy; Asset-building; Discourse; Neo-liberalism

Introduction

Social welfare programmes for poor people have undergone a major transformation in recent decades. As an essential element of neo-liberal governance, these programmes have shifted away from an emphasis on protecting the poor from economic insecurity towards one that focuses on facilitating more effective market participation by the poor in order to utilize what is seen as the potential of markets to improve human lives (Katz 2013). One of the main ideas reflecting this market-oriented approach to poverty alleviation is asset-building, which has become the centre of academic and professional attention in the USA, Britain and elsewhere (Prabhakar 2009). Advocates of asset-building have argued that with some financial education and savings, the poor could start building wealth that would ensure their

Author Email: guyfeldman@tauex.tau.ac.il

economic security (Sherraden 1991). To achieve this goal, advocates have promoted Individual Development Accounts (IDAs), which are matched savings accounts that largely rely on government funding. The savings the poor accrue while in the programme are expected to help them acquire specific assets such as a home or a small business. Because it emphasizes developing the poor's capacities (rather than increasing their consumption), asset-building is heralded as a promising social policy that has the potential not only to strengthen families financially, but also to revamp the bankrupt welfare state (Sherraden 2003).

Studies of asset-building and IDAs in particular have used quantitative methods that measure outcomes in order to assess programme effectiveness (e.g. Grinstein-Weiss *et al.* 2011; Schreiner and Sherraden 2007). Recent scholarship has also analyzed the theoretical roots of an asset-based approach to social policy (Prabhakar 2009). What seems to be missing in the literature is a critical analysis of how workers at the frontlines understand and use asset-building discourse, and how these discursive practices reflect and adapt to broader discourses of neo-liberalism that prevail in our present era. This article fills this lacuna by examining how asset-building discourse is deployed by workers at the frontlines and how it affects their work with clients. To do so, I present findings from a case study of one particular IDA programme operating at one particular agency (which, for purposes of confidentiality, I call 'Neighborhood Assets') in a large city in the USA. I draw on in-depth interviews with workers, direct observations of the everyday practice at the agency, and key programme documents and directives. My analysis highlights the tensions that lie at the heart of asset-building policies. By doing so, the article contributes, first, to the literature on asset-based approaches to combating poverty; and, second, to the literature examining how neo-liberal discourses have penetrated into various social welfare arenas and the implications for how social actors come to address poverty.

Neo-liberalism as a Disciplinary Project

Today, there is a broad agreement among scholars that neo-liberalism is the dominant political-economic rationality of our time (Brown 2015; Mirowski 2013; Schram 2015). Much like classic economic liberalism, neo-liberalism champions markets as the central mechanism for allocating resources in society and valorizes the pursuit of individual freedom (Mirowski 2013). Yet, in contrast to classic liberalism, neo-liberalism takes things a step further as it extends market rationalities across a growing number of social, economic and political fields. As Schram (2015: 4) aptly notes, neo-liberalism 'disseminates economic rationality to be the touchstone not just for the market but for civil society and the state as well'. While neo-liberalism has evolved along a number of specific dimensions, this article circumscribes to two interrelated dimensions: promoting market-complaint behaviour and developing the identity of the entrepreneur. Both of these dimensions are rooted in Michel Foucault's (2015) concept of 'disciplinary power', a hidden form of power that governments use to cultivate and instil particular habits needed to sustain the existing social order. These habits, Foucault (2015: 238) notes, are 'what people must submit to'.

Inculcating market-complaint behaviour is one of the pillars of neo-liberalism (Schram 2015). Contrary to the natural character of market order envisioned in classic liberalism, neo-liberal thought does not view markets as natural or self-standing. Rather, neo-liberalism conceives of markets as social and political constructs founded on specific institutional frameworks, which enable their existence (Mirowski 2013). In that, markets, including people's tendency to participate in them, must be constructed and continuously maintained, with the implication that market logics have to be applied as an organizing principle to an ever wider range of spheres and human activities previously thought as non-market spheres. In this regard, Peck, Theodore and Brenner (2009: 51) note that neo-liberalism 'has in practice entailed a dramatic intensification of coercive, disciplinary forms of state intervention in order to impose versions of market rule and, subsequently, to manage the consequences and contradictions of such marketization initiatives'. This insight suggests that the neo-liberal project has remade state operations and charged the state with the task of extending market logics and imposing market-compliant behaviour on state and non-state actors.

The project of marketization is particularly evident in the field of social welfare provision. In the pre-neo-liberal era, particularly following the Second World War, social welfare programmes were designed to redistribute income and offer protection to vulnerable groups from the insecurities of the market. The neo-liberal state, however, has rolled back these Keynesian programmes and in their place rolled out programmes that are structured to impose market discipline (Peck 2010; Wacquant 2009). Through privatization, contracting out and outsourcing, market logic has become an organizing principle in the management and delivery of social welfare programmes. At the frontlines of welfare provision, processes of marketization have contributed to the rise of the New Public Management approach, which pressures service providers to adopt market-oriented and competition-based practices that focus on the measured dimensions of work (Ferguson 2007). In turn, service providers within various settings have focused on modifying their clients' behaviour so that it aligns more closely with the market and the idea of personal responsibility. In the case of US welfare reform, for example, Soss, Fording and Schram (2011) find that case managers in welfare agencies work in a highly competitive performance system and use sanctions as a disciplinary tool to ensure that clients comply with welfare rules, mainly that they participate in the work force. In Denmark, Suvarierol (2015) shows how an instructor, who works in a civic integration programme, disciplines migrants to become responsible citizens who look and apply for a job. Neo-liberalism therefore involves an effort to immerse both caseworkers and clients in market experiences so that they will conduct themselves in ways that serve market interests.

Alongside the emphasis on market-compliant behaviour, neo-liberalism has also promoted a distinctive form of political reason, a governing rationality, that remakes the subject. Foucault (2008) is arguably the first thinker who theorized this new stage in the development of capitalism. Foucault (2008:

226) argues that the neo-liberal subject is an 'entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings'. The neo-liberal subject, for Foucault, is an economic creature who can be invested in so as to produce profit. Wendy Brown (2015) extends Foucault's work by showing how one field after another has been restructured to promote a model of subjectivity in which citizens are positioned as rational and profit-driven entrepreneurs. Brown notes that in the neo-liberal era, 'we are only and everywhere *homo oeconomicus* … today's homo oeconomicus is an intensely constructed and governed bit of human capital tasked with improving and leveraging its … competitive positioning and with enhancing its portfolio value across all of its endeavors and venues' (Brown 2015: 10). In other words, the entrepreneurial citizen is a key political figure in the neo-liberal era. In every sphere of life (e.g. education, employment and family), citizens, no matter how impoverished, are expected to engage in strategies of entrepreneurship and invest in their human capital so as to maximize return on investment and increase their value in markets. State operations and practices, Brown (2015) reminds us, play a crucial role in fabricating this particular subjectivity.

In short, neo-liberalism is a disciplinary project dedicated to imposing market rule. Two key features of neo-liberalism include promoting market-complaint behaviour and building the character of the market-savvy entrepreneur. I argue that asset-building is a paradigmatic case of these two converging streams of neo-liberalism, as it operates to instil habits of thought and behavioural compliance that connect the poor to our market-based society. The overall goal of asset-building is to transform the poor into subjects who think of themselves as market actors and 'freely' choose to act in ways that reflect market principles. Asset-based approaches to combating poverty will be misunderstood if we fail to shed light on their neo-liberal character and locate them within this broader political-economic context. At the same time, the ongoing neo-liberalization of social welfare programming will be misunderstood if we ignore its emphasis on building savings and assets as an effective way to reduce poverty.

Asset-building Comes to Town

In the context of neo-liberal hegemony, asset-building policy has come to play an increasingly important role in welfare provision across the developed world. It was first introduced by the American social work scholar, Michael Sherraden, in his much-debated book *Assets and the Poor* (Sherraden 1991). Although the initial idea had some universal elements, asset-building is targeted by and large towards poor people. It is designed to help the poor save money so they could start to accumulate assets and achieve long-term economic security. In other words, asset-building aims to create structures for asset accumulation among the poor by providing subsidies for saving. Sherraden proposed asset-building because he believes that in order to reduce poverty more is needed than just giving the poor income to spend now. 'The pathway out of poverty', Sherraden (2001: 3) argues, 'is not through income and consumption but through saving and accumulation'.

One of the first policy initiatives created to support savings and asset accumulation by the poor is IDAs, a programme which offers matching grants for clients' savings, up to a certain amount (Sherraden 1991). The overall savings accrued can be used only for asset-based investments, including purchasing a home, acquiring post-secondary education or professional training, opening a small business, or doing home repairs. Savings are kept in a special savings account that clients open in one of the financial institutions that partner with the agency delivering the programme. Alongside this, IDAs also provide clients with formal financial education in order to improve their financial knowledge and decision-making. Throughout the programme, clients work closely with case managers who follow their progress in the programme and counsel them. Participation in the IDA programme is voluntary and clients can leave any time they like and withdraw their money (without the matching grant) along the way.[1]

IDAs are most often public-private partnerships between the government, the non-profit sector and the for-profit sector. They are largely operated by non-profit agencies and rely on both public and private funding. In the USA, which is the focus of this study, there were 570 IDA programmes in 2015 (Corporation for Enterprise Development 2015). The largest source of funding comes from federal grants (Boshara 2005). Within the federal government, the largest source of funding for IDAs is the Assets for Independence (AFI) programme, which provides up to US$125 million over a period of five years to non-profit organizations and local government agencies that offer asset-building programmes to communities across the country. From 1999 to 2013, AFI grants were awarded in the total amount of US$327 million (Falk 2013). At the state level, most states have created IDA programmes, although not all are currently active (Corporation for Enterprise Development 2013). Alongside the federal funding they receive, states also use their own general funds to support IDAs. Lastly, IDAs also receive funding from private sources such as foundations and banks (Corporation for Enterprise Development 2007). Estimates of the level of private funding are currently not available.

IDAs have received considerable scholarly attention in recent decades. Most studies employ quantitative methods and focus on three major areas of research: the effects of IDAs on participants' savings behaviour; the effects of the programme on clients' outlook on life; and its long-term impact. Studies find that the average level of savings is very modest: each IDA participant saves about US$16 per month (Schreiner and Sherraden 2007). After adding the matching funds to their net savings, the average participant accumulated a total savings of only US$1,609 over almost three years. Studies of the impact of the programme on outlook on life find that participants in IDAs reported that they 'felt more confident about their futures … and more in control of their lives' (Moore *et al.* 2001: iii). Longitudinal studies of IDAs find that the programme has no impact on asset-based outcomes such as home-ownership, educational attainment and business ownership (Grinstein-Weiss *et al.* 2011).

In spite of all this research, IDAs and asset-building in general have largely escaped critical analysis. As with other social welfare programmes, asset-building does more than simply provide the poor with material benefits. It also serves as a site for fostering governing mentalities according to which people involved in the programme come to understand, judge and experience the social world (Campbell 1999). The governing mentalities that asset-building promotes are actualized in perceptions, identities and habits. Yet, little is known about the distinctive governing mentalities that asset-building cultivates and how they reflect broader political rationalities. The analysis provided in this article focuses on the governing mentalities for the workers who implement IDA programmes.

This analysis finds inspiration in a growing literature that relies on discourse analysis to examine how frontline workers in social welfare programmes and their low-income clients talk about poverty and welfare in today's neo-liberal era (Carr 2010; Møller and Stone 2013; Woolford and Curran 2013). Møller and Stone (2013), for example, show how Dutch caseworkers, who administer disability benefits, rely on the discourse of labour activation to distinguish between good and bad caseworkers. Workers' stories illustrate that a 'good' worker is someone who pushes her clients into the labour market rather than someone who is there to help them and address their needs. Carr (2010) shows how case managers in an addiction treatment programme in the USA rely on therapeutic language to portray clients and how they evaluate progress in the programme according to how clients talk about themselves. Woolford and Curran (2013) find that service providers in Canadian non-profit organizations adapt to what the authors call 'neo-liberal dispositions' as they try to make sense of how to do their job and how their organizations operate in the face of a changing political and economic environment. Workers talk about how their organizations rely on a business model, and describe how they work with clients on becoming more responsible and helping them fit in the neo-liberal order. My study contributes to this literature by shifting the attention to asset-building discourse and examining how it shapes workers' understanding of their clients' poverty.

Methodology and Research Site

The research design for this study is a case study of one IDA programme operating at Neighborhood Assets, a human service agency in a large city in the USA. The study employs discourse analysis as the primary means of interpretation for understanding the case. Case study allows for an in-depth observation of social interactions, activities, and processes within a particular context, hence providing up-close and detailed knowledge of the subject being studied. While a case study of one agency cannot possibly represent (in a statistical sense) all IDA programmes in the USA, Flyvbjerg (2006) maintains that if researchers carefully select their case studies, these cases can be generalizable to some extent. One strategy for the selection of a case is choice of a 'critical' case study, which is a case that highlights significant dimensions that are important to the issue or problem being studied. Flyvbjerg (2006: 230) notes that by selecting a critical case, a researcher can increase the generalizability of his study because 'if this is valid for this case, it is valid for all (or many) cases'. Flyvbjerg's work informed my selection of Neighborhood Assets and its IDA programme in particular as my case study. Neighborhood Assets is a well-established and widely recognized organization that has been implementing a variety of asset-building programmes for over two decades. Furthermore, its IDA programme is practically identical to the IDA programme evaluated by past research (e.g. Schreiner and Sherraden 2007). The case of Neighborhood Assets is therefore a good example of a critical case study of asset-building.

This particular case study employs a particular version of discourse analysis, which begins with the idea that discourse is a set of discursive practices that comprise talk enacted through action on the ground in actually existing social relations (Foucault 1972). Yet, this case study goes further in being premised on the idea that discourse is more than the statements said or written down, but actually an underlying structure of intelligibility that creates an interpretive context informing how social actors talk about what they are doing, even if it influences them unconsciously and implicitly (Schram 2015). As manifested in the discursive practices of social actors, discourse operates much like an unquestioned common sense that people partake of as if it were natural because it has become the common way to articulate one's understandings of a particular concern. Discourse analysis is therefore useful for better understanding how workers in IDA programmes talk about their work and the discursive moves they employ to make sense of how to help their clients overcome poverty in a neo-liberal era. Alongside discourse analysis, I also used a grounded approach as an additional interpretive approach to the case. A grounded approach is based on the principle of *emergence* and is rooted in the actual experience of social actors; hence, it 'lets the people speak' (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

The IDA programme at Neighborhood Assets is the first matched savings programme to be implemented in the state where the agency operates. The programme is funded by the state and federal government, as well as by one of the largest non-profit organizations in the country. Participants in the programme can choose the amount they would like to save, but they must save at least US$10 per week (or US$40 per month). For every dollar saved, they receive another dollar. Most participants can either save up to US$2,000 over a period of at least 13 months and then receive a maximum match of US$2,000, or they can choose to save up to US $1,000 over a period of 12 months and then get a maximum match of US$1,000. Participants have up to 24 months to complete the programme. Eligibility for participation includes being a resident of the state, having net worth that is less than US$10,000, and having an annual household income that does not exceed 200 per cent of the official Federal poverty level. According to agency documents from 2014, since the inception of the programme in the mid-1990s, 575 clients have successfully completed the programme.

Findings come from three sources of data: in-depth interviews with workers in the agency; direct observations at the agency; and programme-related documents. For the purpose of the interviews, I prepared a sample of four workers that included all of the workers in the agency who were involved in the programme. In other words, I interviewed the entire programme staff. More specifically, the sample included the agency's head, the manager of the IDA programme (who also occasionally worked as a caseworker), and two caseworkers. All study participants were women who came from diverse professional backgrounds, especially social work, journalism and human services. Two of them had real estate licenses at the time of the study. The interviews took place in 2015 and I conducted them myself. Each interview lasted between an hour and a half and two and a half hours. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

During the interviews, workers were asked to describe the goals and requirements of the programme, their roles and responsibilities, interactions with clients in the programme, their expectations of clients and clients' expectations of them, typical problems they encounter during the programme (both programme-related problems and clients' poverty-related problems), their evaluation of the impact of the programme, and their ideas about poverty. Workers were encouraged to express themselves in their own terms so as to increase the trustworthiness of the findings.

Alongside the interviews, direct observations at the agency offered an opportunity to witness interactions and conversations that I could only hear about in the interviews or that I never would have been aware of had I directly observed them. I conducted 49 observations over the course of a year, from August 2014 to July 2015. On my visits to the agency, I attended the monthly orientation sessions held for potential clients and the intake meetings with new clients. I also spent time at the caseworkers' office and observed their daily routine (e.g. making phone calls to clients, going over their files). When workers did not directly interact with clients, I often asked them informal questions about their activities and the programme in general. I typically scribbled short notes during my on-site observations, and composed extensive field notes after I left the agency. To corroborate information gathered in the interviews and observations, I also collected hundreds of programme documents. Documents included application forms, training materials, programme rules, grant applications, surveys, media reports of the programme, and relevant policy memos.

Data analysis was driven by both a deductive and an inductive approach. My analysis paid close attention to key terms from the literature on asset-building, such as: savings; assets; debt; and homeownership. I was interested to see not just whether these terms were used but, more important, how they were interpreted and enacted by the workers. I also used open coding to capture emergent themes from the data. As the data analysis process progressed, the distinction between the *a priori* codes and the inductive codes disappeared. All data was coded and analyzed with the aid of Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software. To enhance the credibility of my findings, I discussed emerging findings with colleagues and used their feedback to identify areas of convergence and divergence with my own interpretations of the findings. I also carried out triangulation of data by using three sources. Lastly, I conducted prolonged engagement, which means that I spent a great deal of time (about a year) at Neighborhood Assets in order to gain a deeper understanding of how workers make sense of, and enact, the discourse that informs the programme.

Findings

Individualizing clients' problems

To understand how asset-building discourse gets enacted at the frontlines, we must first look at how the workers in the programme view the sources of their clients' poverty-related problems. Clients in the programme are framed as deficient individuals, especially when it comes to practicing economic rationality and making sound financial decisions. Workers largely erase the distinction between individual characteristics and structural conditions, treating both instead as individual client traits. One of the caseworkers illustrated this framing of clients' problems. On one of my visits to the agency, the caseworker told me about a new client who attended the orientation a week earlier and came to an intake meeting held earlier that day. The caseworker made reference to the client's appearance and described how she came to the meeting dressed in fancy clothes and flashy accessories. The client was asked about her outfit and told the worker that she spends a couple of hundred dollars each month on clothing. The caseworker described her response:

> *'I got mad when I heard how much money she spends and told her that she shouldn't spend so much money on clothes because she could save it instead. So I told her: "You continue on this way, you'll never get to anything." I told her that from now on every time she would walk into a store to buy something the alarm at the store would turn on [laughing] … she behaves in such a way because her mom didn't teach her how to manage money and she knows nothing else.'*

The worker refers specifically to a culturally rooted lack of thriftiness as a key source of the client's problems and puts most of the blame for her condition on the client's shoulders. She assumes that helping the client escape poverty requires, above all, changing her priorities and behaviour, especially her undisciplined approach to household finances and her feckless spending behaviour. The worker does not keep to herself her view of clients' financial problems as resulting from an individual and cultural deficiency, and she communicates it to clients. At one point during one of the orientation sessions that she conducted to recruit potential clients, the worker told the audience that *'we set up a special savings account for you because we don't want you to take the money you've earned and spend it at Macy's'*. By assuming that all clients who come to the programme spend the little money they have instead of carefully managing it, the caseworker implies that clients' behaviour is irresponsible and attributes their financial hardship to their lack of financial discipline.

Other related cultural explanations, which emphasize the influence of the community, were also used by workers to explain clients' financial hardship and lack of savings more specifically. The following exchange with the Agency Head provides a typical example:

> *Agency Head: 'I don't think the clients have been taught how to save by their parents, their school, the community. I watched my mom save, she was very resourceful …*

people are not going to save if the values in the community are that you buy the most expensive shoes or do your hair.'
Interviewer: 'When you talk about values in the community, are you referring to any specific communities?'
Agency Head: '[Whispers the name of the receptionist, who is a low-income African-American mother]'
Interviewer: 'What's that?'
Agency Head: 'There are just cultural differences where people have different statuses that they have to … you know … it depends upon where you grew up, what the school is, and what the norms are, right?'

The Agency Head undoubtedly was invoking cultural background as something people relied on for making financial decisions and suggested that clients needed to overcome any cultural deficiencies that had taught them the wrong pecuniary values. She, however, did not stop there, but went on to explicitly build a racialized image of a black client who is culturally deficient (i.e. has the wrong values). Although the literature on asset-building is devoid of explicit racialized references, the image of the client as black and culturally deficient nonetheless found its way into the discourse informing the IDA programme at Neighborhood Assets.

Interestingly, some workers relied on structural explanations to explain why poverty exists in the USA, and what policies can better confront it. In their responses, they framed poverty as a social problem with structural causes that requires national solutions. The manager of the programme, for example, emphasized the lack of a generous welfare state for the poor. She said as her voice became louder: *'Something is really wrong with the policy of this country … give this poor woman a leave, so she can take care of her baby … we have poverty, but it's something larger, something structural'*. It is noteworthy that these words came from a worker who said earlier in the interview that clients do not save and remain poor due to lack of 'will' and because they do not have a 'model' that they can look up to. Another caseworker explained at one point in the interview that low-income families find it hard to save because they 'live beyond their means'. However, in response to a question on the persistence of poverty in the USA, she said:

'The gap between the poor and the rich is very big … The problem is that it's a capitalistic country and so many people work full-time but they still get subsidy from the government … If you are poor, it's expensive for you to live in this country because you don't have options, you don't have resources.'

These findings show that workers frame their clients' poverty problems in ways that go beyond blaming them for their poverty to a resigned sense of there being no alternatives to the inequitable capitalist system and even though the system is unfair clients have no choice but to try to become disciplined economic actors on their own. Hence, workers' discourse was complicated, but nonetheless gave priority to individuals becoming disciplined economic actors on their own independent of the social structural and economic circumstances in which they endured.

Cultivating financial literacy

In the IDA programme at Neighborhood Assets, workers invoke the notion of financial literacy, especially since it is clients' deficient pecuniary values and practices that are the source of their failure to overcome poverty. Promoting financial literacy is designed to make clients more knowledgeable about their finances and how the market operates so they could make informed financial decisions that best serve their interests. A policy brief written by programme staff, for example, notes that 'financial literacy is one of the most significant problems faced by people struggling for self-sufficiency in the United States today'. The programme therefore provides financial tutoring designed to 'equip participants with the skills, knowledge, and personal insight they need in order to succeed as long-term savers and, ultimately, as asset owners'. The emphasis put on the goal of promoting financial literacy was also evident in the interview transcripts. Workers described how clients who enter the programme are 'unable to do the budget' or 'don't know how to manage themselves', and expressed the importance of helping them 'make educated decisions about their own specific goals'. Workers also emphasized that this is something that clients expect of them. As one caseworker said: *'Clients look for my expertise so that they are not getting ripped off or making bad decisions that will affect them negatively in the future'.*

The tutelary dimensions of the programme go beyond one-one-one casework. Caseworkers also help clients become financially literate by ensuring that they receive additional knowledge and instruction, either through formal financial education classes or one-on-one financial counseling (both are delivered by professionals who come from other organizations). One of the caseworkers described this aspect of her job: *'We usually start by telling clients, "Hey, you need to attend the classes …" they [also] need to meet with a financial counselor … to have a kind of one-on-one counseling'.*

The financial education classes are held every month and last for two hours. Clients are required to complete four of them (a total of eight hours). The instructors come from various financial institutions and non-profit organizations across the city. The schedule for 2014–15, for example, indicated that the lecturers came from two banks, a small business offering tax preparation and other financial services, a community development organization, and an advocacy organization working to improve outcomes for working people. The classes during that year covered the topics of saving and money management, banking products and services, taxes, credit and budgeting, investments and risk, and first-time home purchase. During the 'Credit and Budgeting Workshop', for instance, participants learned about what is a credit score, how to improve one's credit score, what it means to have a lack of credit history, how to manage debts, and how to deal with and avoid identity theft. Clients who over the course of the programme are not able to attend the financial education classes are given a CD which includes interactive financial education sessions that they can complete on their own time.

Building the habit of saving

Saving is the core of the programme at Neighborhood Assets. Clients are expected to deposit money into their savings accounts according to a 'Savings

Program Action Plan' they have developed with their caseworker when they joined the programme. There was a general agreement among workers that saving is important. As one of them noted: *'I think saving is very important … I think that overspending is the biggest mistake in creating wealth and the key to financial independence is that you live below your means and save'*. This worker not only thinks that saving is important but also that people can break out of poverty through saving. Workers convey to clients the importance of saving in myriad ways. For example, during one of the orientation sessions held for potential clients, the caseworker who led the session told her audience: *'It's important that everyone save; don't wait until you join the programme. You need to start tightening your belt now and be ahead of the game!'*.

Yet, findings show that the discourse of saving in the IDA programme is about more than just increasing savings or making deposits. It also emphasizes that clients are expected to save consistently and over a long period of time, turning the act of saving into a *habit*. All workers agreed that the programme aims to get clients into the habit of saving. One of the caseworkers, for example, told me that *'the programme's goal is to assist as many people to acquire the skill of saving consistently … to help families to begin to save regularly and to continue even after they have completed the programme'*. The worker reiterated this point in an intake meeting when she told her new client that *'the government wants to make sure that folks are saving and that they do it over time because then it becomes a habit'*. Similarly, the manager of the programme conceives of her job as getting clients to become self-disciplined when it comes to saving: *'Clients in the programme learn how to become more disciplined because they know that they need to pay themselves first through saving … they are doing it [saving] like a second nature, like an automatic'*. Workers in the IDA programme, then, invoke the discourse of the habit of saving to portray clients as disciplined subjects who save automatically.

The overriding importance of practicing the habit of saving

The findings presented thus far suggest that asset-building discourse as enacted in the setting of Neighborhood Assets is organized according to two conflicting logics: the logic of practicing financial literacy and the logic of building the habit of saving. These logics are contradictory because a person who saves out of habit, on automatic pilot, is not someone who makes informed and conscious decisions in light of his or her financial literacy. In other words, practicing the habit of saving contradicts making financially informed decisions that are guided by conscious economic computations. My findings, however, not only expose a key contradiction in asset-building discourse, but also show that workers often emphasize disciplining clients to practice the habit of saving *at the expense* of teaching them to practice economic rationality and make decisions that are in their best financial interests.

During one of my visits to the agency, for example, I witnessed a phone call between one of the workers and one of her clients. The client called the worker to ask her how much time she has left to save while still in the programme. The client currently rents an apartment that she is very satisfied with. She reminded the worker that her asset-based goal is to purchase a home and went on to share her worries that the money she has saved would allow her to buy a house in a poor condition and in a 'bad' neighborhood (an eminently economically rational assessment of home ownership as not *ipso facto* a guarantee to asset-building). Yet, the client's hesitation about buying a home was never affirmed by the caseworker, who instead offered her ways to improve her low credit score so that the bank would improve her mortgage and implored her to continue saving. In other words, the client was demonstrating she had the ability to practice economic rationality, but that was not followed up with support from the caseworker, who instead merely offered a more efficient way to improve her ability to qualify for a mortgage and ensured that she stayed committed to saving.

In the IDA programme, disciplining clients to practice the habit of saving also involves actively monitoring them. Before they begin the programme, clients are required to sign a 'Savings Program Contract' in which they authorize the financial institution where they hold their savings account to provide the agency information on their account. Workers frequently told me during my fieldwork that they regularly monitor their clients' deposits by pulling up information on their monthly deposits. If a client does not make deposits for a few consecutive months (usually between three to four months), workers need to make a decision about whether the client should be dropped from the programme. Clients as a result know that 'somebody's really watching them', as one caseworker told me. Another worker elaborated:

> *'We need to kind of put our eye really closely on each client because we want to make sure that people in the programme actually diligently save. If they're not saving for two or three months, we need to give them warning and tell them, like, "If you don't save the next month, we are going to give your slot to someone else."'*

Indeed, during one of my visits to the agency, one of the caseworkers told me, as she went over the deposits her clients had made: *'I'm seriously considering dropping [a client] from the programme'*. After closely examining the client's monthly deposits since she had joined the programme, the worker said: *'She (the client) is not dependable, her deposits are either slow or missing'*. When the worker spoke with the client about this issue over the phone, the client explained that she is a 'procrastinator' and asked for some more time. The worker nonetheless decided to eventually drop the client from the programme. She later explained: *'A person will get dropped from the programme by not meeting their commitments, meaning, that they are not saving'*. As this example illustrates, workers enact asset-building discourse in ways that emphasize monitoring clients to ensure that they practice the habit of saving at the expense of stressing financial literacy that can be used to make economically rational decisions.

My interviews with the workers validate the finding that disciplining clients to save overrides the goal of ensuring that clients make informed financial decisions. Workers told me that they expect clients to demonstrate resilience during the process of saving and figure out how to overcome their saving challenges. In this sense, workers assume that the individual client needs to be strong in the face of her complicated challenges. This expectation was well-illustrated by the manager of the programme:

> *'I expect clients to see the light at the end of the tunnel. You know it's going to be very hard at the beginning, just like when a small kid learns how to fast, right? "It's not difficult," my mom said. "I cannot eat this and this but I want this, this and this." It involves a lot of punching here and there, like "no, I want this." The same thing is happening to all these clients. It's not difficult to restrict themselves, and they need to restrict themselves to be able to achieve their goal.'*

The worker uses the concept of 'fasting' as a metaphor for the hardships that clients are expected to endure while they save. Across all religions, fasting is a practice that requires people to suffer and develop self-restraint. Despite the difficulties, millions of people around the world fast every year. Just like those who fast, the worker expects clients in the programme to abstain from spending their money, and as a result suffer and control themselves, in order to accomplish the larger goal of meeting their savings goal. Sacralizing savings as a personal sacrifice moves asset-building further from reflexive economically rational decision-making towards cultural investments acted out on the basis of faith, under challenging circumstances.

The prevalence of the logic of the habit of saving was evident in interviews with other workers as well. It reared its head as one of the caseworkers described her expectations of clients:

> *'I expect them to be focused and to not renege on their own goal … We do have clients that will, you know, life happens. Some people will call: "I need my money. I have a bill that has come up" or "I have to put this house off to the side because I have to meet this in order for me to live." So I expect them to try to make some other arrangements, and I offer them some other options to avoid them from doing that [stop saving and withdraw their money] and, again, putting back in front of their face the big picture.'*

Although she acknowledges that her clients face unexpected challenges in their lives, the worker nonetheless expects of them to stay committed to saving consistently. For this worker, saving is considered 'sacred' and as a result she sometimes convinces her clients to rethink economically rational decisions that they want to make (e.g. paying for necessities) in order to refrain from breaking the habit of saving.

Caseworkers reported that some of the unexpected challenges that their clients face while they are in the programme include job loss or reduction in their hours of work by their employer. As a result, these clients cannot save or save less than the monthly savings goal they set with their worker when joining the programme. In such cases, one of the workers explained that she asks clients to borrow money from family or friends so they could continue in the meantime to save:

> *'We have a lot of clients that are losing their job lately … Or they tell us, "my hours were reduced, therefore I'm going to drop out from the programme …" If clients can't save, we will help them to find another way that they could save, for example, they can borrow money from their families … I tell them, "you could borrow money from your friends and then put it in the savings."'*

Encouraging clients to borrow money from family or friends to address non-emergency expenses, just so they could stay committed to practicing the habit of saving, underscores once again that asset-building discourse as enacted by workers is more about inculcating saving habits than promoting economically rational decision-making.

Discussion

This study has focused on how asset-building discourse is enacted on the frontlines and its implications for how workers come to address their clients' poverty-related problems. The study finds that asset-building discourse as enacted in the agency is organized by two opposing logics: financial literacy and habitual saving. The former is reflexive and consistent with the idea of economic rationality as a self-conscious practice of calculation; the latter suggests a route activity executed without forethought. To clarify the findings and to better understand the neo-liberal character of asset-building discourse, this study builds on a theoretical framework that is grounded in a critical perspective on neo-liberalism. Drawing on Foucault (2015), neo-liberalism is conceptualized as a form of disciplinary power that is carried out through a set of habits which are imposed on people, who in turn must submit to them. This set of habits 'links one to an order of things, to an order of time and to a political order' (Foucault 2015: 239). Findings show that asset-building discourse cultivates two kinds of distinctly different types of habit that reflect a neo-liberal rationality. One side of neo-liberal asset-building discourse is dedicated to instilling habits of thought, such that the 'free-thinking' client will reliably arrive on his own at the 'rational' and 'financially literate' conclusion that saving and asset building are the right thing to do. The other side of neo-liberal asset-building discourse is dedicated to cultivating habits of behavioural compliance, especially saving, so that no conscious thought is needed for the body to take the 'right' and 'appropriate' actions. Ultimately, these two habits are intended to shape the way clients conduct themselves and connect them to the existing neo-liberal order.

At the heart of these mentalities of rule that guide IDA workers, however, lies a profound contradiction. Promoting the habit of saving as something that can be done automatically contradicts the idea of teaching clients how to practice financial literacy in their conscious decision-making and personal choices. Findings show that financial literacy was supported *in name only* operating as a legitimating device more than an actual form of instruction empowering clients. In its place, workers focused more on disciplining clients to save out of habit in a less thoughtful way. While the literature on asset-building is devoid of explicit references to the logic of the habit of saving and its overriding importance in IDA programmes, such references were nonetheless encoded in asset-building as reflected in the findings. These findings add to the literature on asset-based approaches to reducing poverty.

These findings also offer insights into the duplicity of neo-liberalism writ large. Arguing that the purpose of welfare today is 'people changing', Wacquant (2009: 308) notes that while neo-liberalism 'embraces laissez-faire at the top … it is anything but laissez-faire at the bottom … as it endeavors to direct, nay dictate, the behavior of the lower class'. Findings are consistent with Wacquant's argument as they indicate that asset-building promotes the subject position of the 'free-thinking' entrepreneur as an ideal to be championed, while in practice offering a disciplinary treatment for those on the bottom of the socio-economic order, who do not meet the threshold requirements for being able to be successful market actors (like the upper class) in the increasingly inequitable economy. And findings offer support for the claim that Soss, Fording and Schram (2011) make that the poor are being disciplined to be market compliant *irrespective* of whether their participation in market-based activities effectively addresses the challenges of living in poverty. In their discussion of these disciplinary dimensions of social welfare policy, Wacquant and Soss and his colleagues focus on workfare programmes that force the poor to accept low-wage jobs. My findings extend the scope of the disciplinary regime for managing poverty from workfare programmes to asset-building programmes.

The priority that workers in this study put on submitting to the habit of saving is backed by the power of the state. Within the social welfare arena, the neo-liberal state is active as it *rolls out* programmes that impose market discipline on the lives of the poor (Peck 2010). The empirical materials presented in this article demonstrate how asset-building discourse indeed reflects a neo-liberal mode of state intervention that launches programmes which emphasize a disciplinary regime of behaviour change rather than one focused on reallocating resources via income assistance and other benefit programmes. The emphasis of asset-building discourse on disciplining clients to save habitually in order to make market investments is a stark example of how the neo-liberal state, which oversees and funds IDAs across the country, intervenes in order to ensure that the poor engage in market-based activities. As part of this neo-liberal form of state intervention, publicly funded social assistance (i.e. match money) is legitimate as long as it is provided in exchange for market-based activity (i.e. diligently saving and investing in assets).

In one important way, findings do not reflect the disciplinary nature of neo-liberalism: some workers portrayed the persistence of poverty in the USA as a problem with structural roots. While they did not apply this critical perspective to the IDA programme and what was expected of clients, their interpretation of what kind of problem is poverty illustrates how neo-liberalism is vulnerable to resistance by people who do connect their critique to the programme. That theoretical possibility looms large as a site for potential political activism. More generally, these findings indicate that there is still a small space in which workers resist the neo-liberalization of the efforts to reduce poverty and challenge the dominant tendency to discipline people in poverty according to the economistic logic of neo-liberalism. The disciplinary project of neo-liberalism is therefore incomplete because, as Foucault (1978: 95) aptly noted, 'where there is power, there is resistance'. Neoliberalism is at times challenged and criticized (if unconsciously) by the people who are often most affected by it, even as it continues to operate as the uncontested logic of our time.

One limitation of this study is that IDAs are not the only asset-based policy that gets implemented today. Children Development Accounts (CDAs) are another exceedingly popular asset-building policy. This means that the findings cannot be considered as a full representation of the asset-building approach to combating poverty.

Going forward, policymakers and practitioners can build on this research to push for changes in social welfare policies that do not re-inscribe the disciplinary dimensions of asset-building, but lay the groundwork for empowering the poor to combat their poverty on their own terms that are more sensitive to who they are and the obstacles they actually confront.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Sanford Schram and Joe Soss for their valuable comments that contributed to improving the article. The author would also like to thank the editor and the reviewers for their helpful comments.

Notes

1. Alongside IDAs, Children Development Accounts (CDAs) were also proposed as an asset-building policy. CDAs are universal savings accounts for children that enable families (poor and non-poor) to save money for their child's future. This life-long programme deposits an initial cash gift into each new account and (similar to the IDA programme) provides matching funds for deposits made by poor families. In other words, IDAs are selective and CDAs are universal, but both programmes use incentives to encourage poor families to save. This study focuses on IDAs because, among other reasons, this is the only asset-building policy for the poor that has been funded by the federal government in the USA and implemented at the national level.

References

Boshara, R. (2005), *Individual Development Accounts: Policies to Build Savings and Assets for the Poor*, Policy Brief, Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.

Brown, W. (2015), *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, New York, NY: Zone Books.

Campbell, N. D. (1999), Regulating 'maternal instinct': Governing mentalities of late twentieth-century U.S. illicit drug policy, *Signs*, 24, 4: 895–923.

Carr, E. S. (2010), *Scripting Addiction: The Politics of Therapeutic Talk and American Sobriety*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Corporation for Enterprise Development (2007), *Individual Development Accounts: Providing Opportunities to Build Assets*, Washington, DC: Corporation for Enterprise Development.

Corporation for Enterprise Development (2013), *State IDA Program Support*, Policy Brief, Washington, DC: Corporation for Enterprise Development.

Corporation for Enterprise Development (2015), http://cfed.org/programs/idas/directory_search (accessed 7 December 2015).

Falk, G. (2013), *Individual Development Accounts (IDAs): Background on Federal Grant Programs to Help Low-Income Families Save*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service. Federal Deposit Insurance

Ferguson, I. (2007), *Reclaiming Social Work: Challenging Neo-liberalism and Promoting Social Justice*, London: Sage.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006), Five misunderstandings about case-study research, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12, 2: 219–45.
Foucault, M. (1972), *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language*, New York, NY: Pantheon.
Foucault, M. (1978), *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, New York, NY: Pantheon.
Foucault, M. (2008), *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979 (Lectures at the College de France)*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
Foucault, M. (2015), *On the Punitive Society: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1972–1973 (Michel Foucault, Lectures at the Collège de France)*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
Glaser, B. G. and Strauss, D. (1967), *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Co.
Grinstein-Weiss, M., Sherraden, M., Gale, W., Rohe, W. M., Schreiner, M. and Key, C. (2011), *Long-term Follow-up of Individual Development Accounts: Evidence from the ADD Experiment*, Research Report, Washington, DC and St Louis, MO: Brookings Institution and Center for Social Development Washington University in St Louis.
Katz, M. B. (2013), *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty*, 2nd edn, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
Mirowski, P. (2013), *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*, New York, NY: Verso.
Møller, M. Ø. and Stone, D. (2013), Disciplining disability under Danish active labour market policy, *Social Policy & Administration*, 47, 5: 586–604.
Moore, A., Beverly, S., Schreiner, M., Sherraden, M., Lombe, M., Cho, E. Y. N., Johnson, L. and Vonderlack, R. (2001), *Saving, IDA Programs, and Effects of IDAs: A Survey of Participants*, Research Report, St Louis, MO: Center for Social Development, Washington University in St Louis.
Peck, J. (2010), *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
Peck, J., Theodore, N. and Brenner, N. (2009), Neoliberal urbanism: Models, moments, mutations, *SAIS Review*, 29, 1: 49–66.
Prabhakar, R. (2009), The assets agenda and social policy, *Social Policy & Administration*, 43, 1: 54–69.
Schram, S. F. (2015), *The Return of Ordinary Capitalism: Neoliberalism, Precarity, Occupy*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
Schreiner, M. and Sherraden, M. W. (2007), *Can the Poor Save? Saving & Asset Building in Individual Development Accounts*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
Sherraden, M. W. (1991), *Assets and the Poor: A New American Welfare Policy*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
Sherraden, M. W. (2001), *Assets and the poor: Implications for Individual Development Accounts and Social Security*, Invited testimony to the President's Commission on Social Security, Washington, DC: Social Security Administration.
Sherraden, M. W. (2003), From the social welfare state to the social investment state, *National Housing Institute*, 128, http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/128/socialinvest.html (accessed 23 May 2017).
Soss, J., Fording, R. C. and Schram, S. F. (2011). *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
Suvarierol, S. (2015), Creating citizen-workers through civic integration, *Journal of Social Policy*, 44, 4: 707–27.
Wacquant, L. (2009), *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Woolford, A. and Curran, A. (2013), Community positions, neoliberal dispositions: Managing nonprofit social services within the bureaucratic field, *Critical Sociology*, 39, 1: 45–63.

