based stereotyping. Crime rates drive the overrepresentation of Blacks as stop-and-search targets (whether walking or driving) and, consequently, Black overrepresentation in arrests for such minor offenses as marijuana possession. Although there is a decent body of research on racism in the US criminal justice system, few researchers have explored this seminal period and its statistics-based racial criminalization discourses the way Muhammad has.

Dr. Muhammad is Director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library, and his book won the 2011 American Studies Association John Hope Franklin Publication Prize. I highly recommend it for advanced students of criminal justice, race in the USA, and urban studies.

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ALEJANDRA ROS PILARZ  
The University of Chicago, School of Social Service Administration

This is a thorough and thought-provoking account of the transformation in poverty governance from the 1970s to the present by professors of political science, public policy, or social work. For four decades, the book’s authors argue, the convergence of two elements of political reform movements—neoliberalism and paternalism—have shaped poverty governance, which, as a result, emphasizes discipline, surveillance, and work compliance while attempting to make poor people self-governing market actors. This disciplinary turn in poverty governance, the authors note, is a product of the 1970s conservative countermovement against liberal government programs of the 1960s, a countermovement that strategically targeted the poor as a way to regain political control of the national state. Disciplining the Poor traces the rise of neoliberal paternalism and its influence on policies targeted at the poor, highlighting the role of race in poverty governance.

The book builds on prior research, particularly work by Piven and Cloward (1971) and Wacquant (2001). Poverty governance today, Joe Soss, Richard Fording, and Sanford Schram show, is both rooted in and a departure from previous efforts to govern the poor. As in earlier eras, poverty governance is predominantly local, privatized, and serves to regulate work behavior. Yet, under neoliberal paternalism, it also involves a restructuring of the state to serve labor markets. Today, instead of providing a reprieve from inequitable market conditions, the welfare system’s “work first” programs “train” recipients to be self-governing market actors—that is, low-wage workers disadvantaged by market disparities. Furthermore, today’s poverty governance establishes a distinctive symbiotic relationship between the welfare and penal systems. Consequently, penal systems enforce work compliance among poor men (e.g., by increasing the cost of working in the underground economy), while penal logics inserted into welfare systems monitor and discipline poor women.

A major strength of the book is its diversity of methods and evidence, which include results from quantitative analyses of national survey data and state-level administrative program data, as well as from qualitative interviews with welfare caseworkers in Florida. By examining neoliberal paternalism’s effects on welfare and penal systems over time and across levels of government, the authors fashion a comprehensive account of factors shaping the disciplinary turn in poverty governance. At the national, state, and local levels, three factors consistently emerge as predictors of disciplinary poverty policies: partisan control of government, a largely low-skilled labor market, and the racial composition of policy targets. The authors’ multivariate analyses suggest that,
between 1992 and 1996, states with a Republican governor, low market wages relative to welfare benefits, and African Americans making up a large proportion of all welfare caseloads were significantly more likely to adopt an Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) waiver to implement behavior-oriented welfare reforms, such as family caps that deny aid to children born after enrollment. Moreover, the authors demonstrate how interstate differences in policy choices after welfare reform disproportionately expose African Americans to welfare programs with the greatest number of disciplinary policies, such as family caps, but disproportionately expose Whites to programs without them.

Soss, Fording, and Schram supplement quantitative analyses with a case study of Florida’s Welfare Transitions (WT) Program to understand how poverty governance operates “on the ground” in a state that adopted all of the defining features of neoliberal paternalist poverty governance, including a decentralized and privately operated welfare system. In-depth interviews with program administrators, observations of program operations, and a state-wide survey of caseworkers allow the authors to focus on the use of client sanctions as disciplinary tools and find evidence that privatization and devolution in the welfare system have a significant impact on sanction rates. Under performance management systems, the state continually monitors any local provider’s progress toward meeting performance goals. In turn, performance pressures to gain additional state funding or avoid penalties increase sanction rates, leading for-profit providers to sanction clients at higher rates. Although caseworkers exercise discretion, performance pressures and organizational factors strongly influence their sanctioning decisions. In particular, the transformation of casework into largely a matter of doing clerical and data-entry tasks limits any caseworker’s ability to employ alternative policy tools in dealing with clients. Thus, the authors uncover the mechanisms that contribute to sanction rates by tracing the effects of neoliberal and paternalist poverty governance from state-level policies to individual caseworkers’ decision-making processes.

Thorough examination of the role of race in poverty governance is another important contribution of Disciplining the Poor. In an era when overt racism is no longer tolerated and minority groups have gained access to political institutions, the authors argue, a new model of race relations is needed that goes beyond analysis of discrimination and prejudice by White people in positions of power. As an alternative, they propose the Racial Classification Model (RCM), which posits that decision makers are unconsciously influenced by underlying, socially constructed assumptions about the policy targets (e.g., welfare recipients). Decision makers are more likely to use racial classifications when racial minorities represent a majority of the target group, and the emergence of racially patterned policy outcomes depends on the extent to which racial stereotypes are activated. In tests of the RCM, the authors consistently find convincing evidence that race significantly shapes decisions at all levels of policy implementation, from state-level welfare programs to caseworkers’ sanctioning decisions. The RCM is a useful framework for examining racial disparities in policy outcomes and offers a more compelling explanation than models based on race relations theories that emphasize overt racism.

Disciplining the Poor demonstrates the extent to which poverty governance today continues to produce racialized outcomes in the welfare and penal systems, but, more importantly, it uncovers the mechanisms that produce these outcomes. Race, politics, and public policies still play powerful roles in reproducing social inequality. This book serves as a powerful reminder for university teachers and students as well as general audiences that much work remains to be done to “level the playing field.”

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ADAM S. MEHIS
University of Texas at Austin, College of Education, Cultural Studies in Education