

The World Isn't Linear or Additive or Decontextualized

PLURALISM AND MIXED METHODS IN
UNDERSTANDING THE EFFECTS OF ANTIPOVERTY
PROGRAMS ON CHILDREN AND PARENTING

Thomas S. Weisner and Greg J. Duncan

Understanding how work-based support policies might improve the lives of parents and their children is fundamental for informed social policy. We use the example of the New Hope antipoverty intervention to illustrate the plural pathways and diverse responses of working poor parents and families to a well-designed and well-implemented support program. As members of the MacArthur Foundation's Network on Successful Pathways through Middle Childhood directed by Jacques Eccles, the authors, Aletha Huston, and Vonnie McLoyd were part of the program's evaluation team. Robert Granger, then at MDRC, was also a member and provided us with opportunities to add family- and child-based content to the evaluation. Key program publications include Bos, Duncan, Gennettian, and Hill (2007); Duncan, Huston, and Weisner (2007); and Weisner (2012a).

New Hope was a policy experiment that operated for three years in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. It was created by a coalition of community activists and business leaders who believed that work was the best route out of poverty. New Hope provided a set of work supports for full-time workers—parents and nonparents, men and women—that would lift them out of poverty as well as provide subsidies for essential benefits in the form of health insurance and child care subsidies for people who needed them. If a participant was unable to find a job owing, say, to lack of work experience or a criminal record, the program provided opportunities for temporary community-service jobs (CSJs) that paid the minimum wage but still entitled that person to program benefits. All participants had access to help from a caseworker who provided information about jobs, educational opportunities, child care, and other community resources in an atmosphere of respect.

Taken together, New Hope offered a cafeteria of benefits from which participants could choose—a feature that could allow families with diverse needs and circumstances to tailor the program to their own unique situations. In fact, New

Hope benefits were available for any eligible adult, but the New Hope family and child study focused on adults with children aged 1 to 10 living in their household when New Hope started.

Some of the work-support programs developed in the 1990s to support work and reduce poverty, such as New Hope, share some common characteristics (Morris, Huston, Duncan, Crosby, & Bos, 2001). In contrast to such distal policy changes as tax reform or eligibility rules for a program, they engaged directly with low-income adults, with professional staff supporting and monitoring the participants. Some offered a suite of benefits and supports that participants could choose from, rather than being fixed. Program participation and benefits depended on participant actions—in the case of New Hope, working 30 hours or more a week, submitting pay stubs, and maintaining program contact. Also important to some poverty reduction programs, and especially true for New Hope: New Hope's strong focus on making low-wage work "work out" for low-income families made it the most likely to benefit children. Child care and health care benefits are direct examples of such supports, but increased income of course could also benefit children.

At the same time, however, some aspects of the New Hope program might have made it tougher for parents and less beneficial for children. For example, increased work outside the home without available child care might have pressured parents to find care or to leave children at home without other caregivers. The stress of low-wage work could have spilled over into parenting behaviors or further reduced already-fragile and barely sustainable daily routines for these households. The additional income might have gone for purposes other than those directly or indirectly benefiting children. Hence, our study intended to test potential costs as well as benefits for children.

New Hope was relatively generous in its suite of benefits available if participants worked. Other work support programs might offer only help getting a job or only income supplements, for example. A comparison of 10 work support programs showed that those with both employment support and income supplements were more successful in boosting family income and leading to school achievement gains for young children (Morris, Gennetian, & Duncan, 2005). The broader context for these work support programs were proposals to improve existing welfare programs to both support families and children and increase employment and income.

How we initially thought impacts on children might happen is depicted in the logic model shown in Figure 8.1; on balance, we proposed positive impacts. New Hope's work incentive provisions were expected to improve children's resources and contexts in a number of ways. Higher family income was expected to improve children's material well-being by reducing episodes of food insufficiency, improving housing and neighborhood conditions, and enabling parents to buy books and other beneficial forms of cognitive stimulation for their children. Child care subsidies should enable parents to arrange for higher quality child care and participation in community programs. Health care subsidies should increase access to needed health care services. All of these features, plus New Hope's supportive

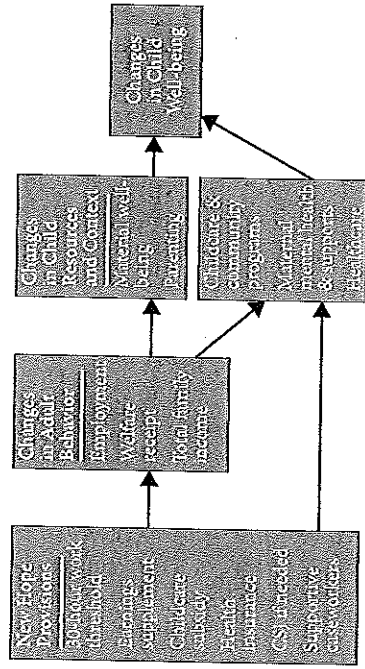


FIGURE 8.1 New Hope's theory of change (CSJ, community service jobs).

counselors, were thought likely to improve maternal mental health and parenting. Children could benefit from any of these improvements.

As we planned the evaluation, we considered the model depicted in Figure 8.1 as providing the most promising basis for our conceptual thinking and empirical procedures. We thought that if we could measure the components of adult behavior, child resources and contexts, and child well-being identified in Figure 8.1 and then estimate program impacts on these components and outcomes, we should be able to gauge which of the direct and indirect paths in the model accounted for New Hope's impacts on children. Those calculations might reveal, for example, that most of New Hope's impacts on children came about because of improvements in children's living standards (e.g., less hunger or residential instability) or because of improvements in parents' mental health and parenting beliefs and behaviors. These ideas were consistent with research showing that both family stress and parental investment could potentially be pathways for child impacts, both positive and negative (see McLoyd, Mistry, & Hardaway, Chapter 7).

These kinds of logic models are common in the program evaluation literature. They implicitly assume a prototypic program participant whose attainments and behaviors may change in response to the program and whose actions, in turn, may help (or harm) her children's developmental trajectories. Individual participants may react in different ways to the program's incentives or mandates, but this "treatment heterogeneity" is largely ignored and almost never conceptualized fully or explicitly included in the logic model. Instead of anticipating contextual and individual diversity, most models search for the one set of pathways that best account for the program's treatment. This largely implicit presumption of the "averaged, generalized effect" of an intervention and the "average, generalized, normative" subject (e.g., the average parent and child in the analysis) as the focus for research findings is very common in biomedical research, as well as in social evaluation programs.

We proposed that the imagined average subjects who would be so affected, and the homogenous, main-effect model that explains why, are, in reality, exceptional.

Useful for analytic purposes? Yes. Useful for full scientific understanding? Very insufficient. Hence our title: the world is not linear or additive or context-independent. It is fair to say that most researchers, policy makers, practitioners, and participants alike all know this. Yet this is too seldom an integral part of our research in the poverty field and many other areas covered in this volume as well. Modeling and providing evidence for these complex factors could improve our theory and policy/practice alike. Fortunately, for being able to address these issues, it is relatively well understood how heterogeneous the poor and working-poor populations are in the United States today and still more so how diverse they are from an international, European, or global, cross-cultural perspective (Brown, Larson, & Saraswathi, 2002; Rainwater & Smeeding, 2003; Sutcliffe, 2001; UNICEF, 2012).

Our mixed-method investigation of New Hope led us to embrace rather than ignore program treatment heterogeneity. At every step, we discovered a story of diverse pathways rather than unsullied main effects leading to the hoped-for program outcomes. We describe several such ways in which even strong, well-implemented interventions like New Hope might expect a range of pathways from program launch to long-term follow-up impacts.

These surprises began with participants' take-up of the New Hope program itself. What low-income family *would not* take up New Hope's \$5,000 worth of annual earnings supplements, health care and child care supplements, and assistance from program specialists? As it turned out, lots of them. Although the vast majority of families eligible for New Hope's benefit package took up at least some of the benefits at least once during their 3-year eligibility period, less than one-third could be considered persistent program participants. We describe how the prior experiences and current lives of New Hope participants affected New Hope program use, and why spells of program use and nonuse did not translate directly into the times in which children may have benefited from the program.

More generally, we highlight the empirical findings of diverse pathways from New Hope program to New Hope outcomes because uncovering such findings are the exceptions rather than the rule in evaluation research. This has significant implications for the ability of further demonstration studies to build on their results. Many successful programs have the potential to be expanded or scaled up in other communities, agencies, cities, counties, states, or nationally. Yet actual instances of scale-up based on programs with strong evidence followed by fidelity of subsequent scale-up are rare. Understanding what happens in the "black box" of a program—the intervention, community responses, households and families, employers, classrooms, and so forth—is essential for knowing how to extend it to the next site, as well as replication on a larger scale (i.e., across multiple sites or nationwide). Granger, Tseng and Wilcox (Chapter 13) point out that practitioners who do want to use the results of research look for such contextually informed evidence, not simply averaged, generalized, decontextualized results. The New Hope program and research team attempted to find out what actually happened when the New Hope intervention engaged with participants, their families, and their

households. Our efforts to so do supported our scientific understanding of the study findings, led to possible revisions in our theory and logic model, and even suggested analyses to discover how the program was working.

New Hope's Evaluation

Evidence of New Hope's effectiveness comes from a random-assignment evaluation commissioned by the New Hope Board and conducted by the nonprofit policy evaluation firm MDRC. One-half of the 1,357 individuals who applied for the program were randomly selected to participate in New Hope for 3 years ($n = 678$); the remaining half formed a comparison group that was excluded from New Hope ($n = 679$). Potential applicants were told about the program and then offered the chance to be in a lottery with a 50–50 chance of being in New Hope. Most agreed and became the 1,357 study individuals. All lived in Milwaukee's two poorest zip codes and continued to be eligible for all other federal, state, and local programs (and to be subject to the rules of those programs) during a period of rapidly changing welfare and poverty policies in Wisconsin and across the nation. Both groups enjoyed the fruits of Milwaukee's strong economy in the mid-1990s, and both could claim the increasingly generous federal and state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) that supplements the earnings of low-income workers.

With work, poverty, and welfare dominating the public debate over welfare reform at the time, the New Hope research team monitored the implementation of the program and tracked patterns of employment, earnings, and receipt of Food Stamps and cash assistance through administrative records (Brock, Doolittle, Fellerath, & Wiseman, 1997). Two, five, and eight years after participants entered the program, adult participants, school-aged children, and their teachers were surveyed about a variety of topics, including job histories, family changes, economic circumstances, mental health, and child well-being.

For a close-up view of how the program was affecting families, part of the evaluation team conducted in-depth interviews during 3 years of periodic family visits to a representative group of 44 parents and their children, selected at random from both the program and control groups. An additional visit was made 5 years after the program ended (i.e., 8 years after baseline). In all, an average of seven home visits were conducted with each family; most visits involved conversations about the study topics, using the ecocultural family interview (EFI) (Weisner, 2011b), as part of a focused, family-level ethnography (Weisner, Gibson, Lowe, & Romich, 2002).

The conversational format EFI interview takes the parent through his or her daily routine of activities, focusing on the features of each key activity and its importance for the participant (Bernheimer & Weisner, 2007). The EFI is a guided conversation rather than a question-response format, as in a survey instrument. Prompts around topics important to our study, as well as those identified as important to the

participant, were used to guide the conversation. There were no false negatives: if a participant did not bring up a topic, the EFI prompted the participant about that topic. For example, if an informant did not bring up her children's fathers or the roles of fathers in their lives, we raised the topic. Fieldworkers also took field notes following each visit, and sometimes took parents and children to lunch or shopping. Several of our fieldwork team members also were involved in the analysis of the quantitative data and assisted in the integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence. Data analysis was facilitated through use of the web-based qualitative software, Dedoose.com, that enabled all team members access to the field notes and interviews, and to index and code them online (Lieber, Weisner, & Presley, 2003; Lieber & Weisner, 2010).

For each part of the New Hope story, we were able to draw on the qualitative data from our 44 families to help us understand the story of the program and how participants experienced New Hope in the contexts of work and family life. Weisner (2012) points out the rapid growth of mixed-methods research in anthropology and throughout the social sciences, and Yoshikawa, Weisner, Kalil, and Way (2008) review the use of such methods and designs specifically for human development and intervention studies.

In the case of New Hope, we used these qualitative data in a variety of ways. We discovered patterns in the lives of the qualitative family sample that then led to analyses using the full quantitative/survey sample. Findings from the analyses of the full quantitative study were sometimes puzzling, did not turn out as anticipated, or showed impacts that were not easy to explain. We turned to the qualitative family stories to explicate these results. We used exemplar families to illustrate findings from the full study in full holistic context—describing what the parents and children and households were like who fell into different outcome patterns. We also analyzed the qualitative data on its own: How did parents deal with budgeting? What did they do with household members with disabilities and health problems? What were their experiences with job discrimination, or having to work nonstandard hours? What were their stated goals and values around the work-family well-being balance in their lives? We talked to the children at the 8-year follow-up (when they were between ages 9 and 19) as well, asking them about family, school, work and other goals, and things they liked and did not like. In the following sections, we provide examples of these kinds of mixed-methods analyses, along with the overall New Hope impact story.

Summary of Program Impacts

New Hope's impacts were assessed through comparisons of outcomes between New Hope families and children in the experimental group and those families and children in the control group. New Hope's random assignment design enabled us to attribute any program-control group differences we observed in child and

family well-being to the effects of the New Hope program rather than to individual, family, or other local factors.

Averaged across the first 3 years of program operation, New Hope increased employment for program group parents relative to controls by about 5 percentage points and annual earnings by about \$500. New Hope attracted both nonworkers and full-time workers, and employment impacts varied accordingly. For adults who were working less than full time when they signed up for the program, New Hope boosted payroll-based employment by 7 percentage points and annual earnings by about \$1,000. New Hope's community service jobs played an important role in these impacts, accounting for about a third of the gains in employment while the program was in operation because many adults were ready for employment and, once there, could access the New Hope benefits. For those already working full time when they enrolled, the program generally sustained employment, although fewer New Hope participants than members of the control group worked more than 50 hours per week, which suggests that some full-time workers used program benefits to finance reductions in overtime or multiple jobs. This finding provides a valuable example of how to select and interpret our outcomes from interventions like New Hope. If the focal outcome is increased work hours and earnings, then full-time workers in New Hope show a negative program impact. But if we recognize that work-family balance for low-wage workers, as for all workers, is important, and if workers themselves describe their intentions in this way, then a reduction of work hours can be understood as a positive result for this group of participants (Bos, Huston, Granger, Duncan, Brock, & McLoyd, 1999).

Based on administrative information on earnings and transfer income, poverty rates were dramatically lower for New Hope than for control families with young children—17 percentage points lower in the first year, 12 points lower in the second and third years, and 8 points lower in the 2 years after New Hope benefits stopped (Huston et al., 2003). Although New Hope failed to eliminate poverty among all of its families, it was clearly more successful in lifting families out of poverty than were the collection of programs available in Wisconsin in the mid-1990s. Poverty reduction was perhaps the most important goal for New Hope's designers.

Arguably, New Hope's greatest success was its positive impact on school achievement and positive behavior among children, especially boys. Expressed in SAT-type standard deviation units, teachers ranked the average child in a New Hope family 25 points higher in achievement than the average child in a comparison family after 2 years of program operation. The impact on boys' achievement (+33 points) was considerably larger than the impact for girls (+12 points). Teachers also rated the boys in New Hope families much more favorably than boys in control families on such indicators of social competence as obeying rules in school, being admired and well-liked by other students, and being self-reliant. They reported fewer disciplinary problems and less frequent behavior problems—less arguing, disturbing others, social withdrawal, or sadness. Impacts for girls were often smaller than those observed for boys and not

statistically significant; indeed, teachers rated New Hope girls as somewhat more disobedient and aggressive than girls in control families. Notably, the teachers who provided these evaluations of children in their classrooms were unaware of which children were in the New Hope program or control group (Huston et al., 2001, 2005).

At the point of the 8-year follow-up, some 5 years after the end of the program, New Hope children outperformed control group children in terms of social skills, parent-child and peer relationships, and emotional well-being; however, there were no enduring impacts on delinquency or problem behavior (Huston et al., 2001). New Hope youth viewed work more favorably and were more optimistic about their educational and occupational prospects. They were also more likely than control group youth to be gainfully employed and learning the rudiments of money management (e.g., by having a bank account; McLoyd, Kaplan, Purtell, & Huston, 2001).

Despite these generally positive results, New Hope's impacts were, in fact, selective: it assisted some parents and children, but not others, and those it assisted were helped in different ways. The New Hope benefits were also selectively taken up and used by participants, even though all had access to a full complement of fairly substantial benefits (as intended by the designers of the program). One might have thought that the cost-benefit calculation from program participation would have led many more parents to fully participate in New Hope. However, many did not, and our analyses looked for reasons why.

These and other results from the New Hope study were often unexpected and surprising. Expressed as averaged, generalized program impacts on averaged, generalized normative participants, New Hope did well and showed that it could operate in the real world of work and poverty programs in Wisconsin. But a closer look at which groups benefited from which elements of New Hope tells a far more nuanced, nonlinear, and nonadditive story. The discovery of what happened in New Hope, and understanding how and why it affected families, depended on a strong study design that integrated qualitative and quantitative methods and considered the meanings, ways of reasoning, and everyday practices of the parents and children in the assessment and their understanding of the program (Duncan et al., 2007; Yoshikawa, Weisner, & Lowe, 2006; Lowe & Weisner 2004; Weisner, 2005).

Findings from Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Evidence Both Complicates and Helps Explain the New Hope Experiment

Figure 8.2 illustrates a combination of impact analyses, correlational outcomes, and qualitative, mixed-methods findings from our study. Although we are not able to detail all 10 findings in this chapter, Duncan et al. (2007) and Yoshikawa et al.

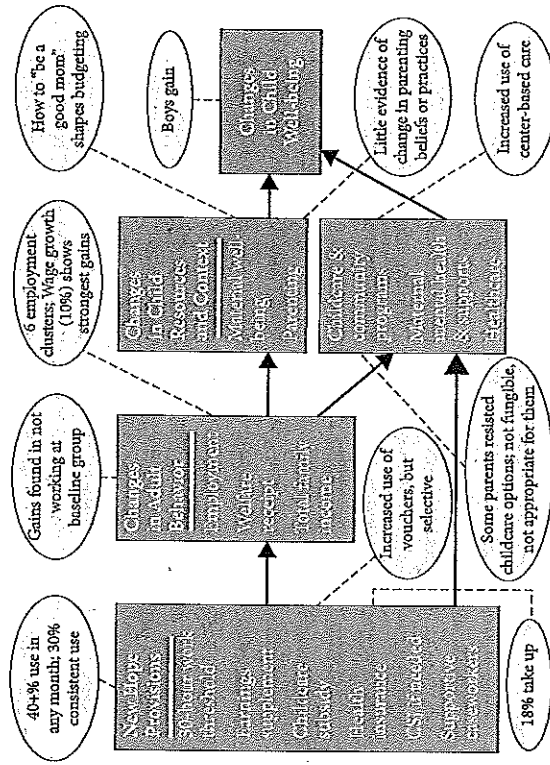


FIGURE 8.2 New Hope's theory of change with some study findings added (CS), community service jobs.

(2006) present these and other findings, placing the overall successful impacts of the New Hope experiment in context.

- In any given month during the intervention, only 40% to 45% of participants were using any New Hope benefits, and those who did were not using them all. About 30% used New Hope fairly consistently, but even this group did not typically use all of the benefits or use New Hope during the full period it was operating (Gibson & Weisner, 2002). About 15% had lives too troubled and chaotic to take up New Hope, and about 20% did not understand the program clearly. Another 35% or so were strategic users, and the remaining 30% tried to use New Hope regularly.
- New Hope had the greatest employment impacts on adults who were not working when New Hope started, at baseline, but then used the supports to obtain and sustain work. New Hope parents employed full time when the program began actually reduced their work hours relative to their control group counterparts. Our interviews with the treatment and control families in the ethnographic sample helped suggest why. Parents working full time at baseline sometimes used New Hope supports to cut back from working two jobs or working overtime in order to stay home more with their children or for other personal reasons, and to spend more time in other activities that mattered to them a great deal, such as church and family. Some already had benefits at their jobs and so did not

need New Hope benefits, and others working nonstandard hours (nights, swing shifts, weekends) decided to do so less often.

- Fieldworkers noticed that families with one or two circumstances keeping them from working seemed to be more likely to take up New Hope and sustain employment. Barriers to sustaining work included not having a high school diploma, having criminal justice system records, having several young children to care for, having children in their household with developmental or other troubles requiring extra care and attention (Bernheimer, Weisner, & Lowe, 2003), and having little work experience. Katherine Magnuson, then a fieldworker and graduate student at Northwestern University, created a set of indicators identifying work barriers and used the survey data on families to confirm that those with one such barrier were the most likely to use New Hope and demonstrate gains from the program, compared with those with no barriers or more than two barriers (Magnuson, 1999). Those with many work barriers struggled to get and keep employment, which of course is part of New Hope's social contract with participants, and many also needed supports that New Hope could not itself provide. Those with no work barriers sustained work without needing New Hope supports in many cases.

- Parents selectively used the available child care vouchers (Lowe, Weisner, Geis, & Huston, 2005). Some did not feel they could or should leave their younger children (Hispanic parents were more likely to say this in our qualitative conversations). Looking to the far lower right of Figure 8.2, however, shows that there was more use of center-based child care for those parents who started off using the vouchers. New Hope participation significantly increased the use of center-based child care from 29% to 44%. Many told us that they now were more likely to use such care and, in fact, did so in our longitudinal follow-ups.

- There were diverse trajectories of employment over time—the six employment clusters shown in one of the circles in Figure 8.2 include about 10% who not only kept employed but were in jobs in which their wages rose. But another 10% rapidly cycled from one job to another for only a few months at a time without wage growth. Even larger groups kept full-time work but wages remained below average, others kept stable work, and still others worked part time off and on. Younger, better educated adults with cars available were more likely to show wage growth and stable work (Yoshikawa et al., 2006).

- Mistry and colleagues (Mistry & Lowe, 2006; Mistry, Lowe, Benner, & Chien, 2008) explored how parents' budgeting for their households and particularly spending for children was motivated by their need to meet monthly bills, but also by cultural and identity issues. Parents sometimes wanted to be good enough parents in part by being able to take their kids out to restaurants once in a while, go to the malls or on other shopping

trips together, and buy them clothes and toys that they believed mattered. This is what some parents described as what a "good mom" does in America. Doing these things often meant deferring other expenses (phone, gas and home heating services, repairs) that might seem more important to an outsider for the ongoing conditions of everyday life and therefore more pressing, but which to parents fit with their preferences.

- It was gratifying to see that some children whose parents were in the New Hope group showed school achievement and behavior gains. It was surprising, however, to find that New Hope led to increased engagement in school and higher aspirations for boys, although not for girls (Duncan et al., 2007; Huston et al., 2003). Our qualitative interviews suggested some of the likely reasons for this. Parents expressed more fears for their sons' safety and progress in school and saw more danger in their neighborhoods for them. Parents were somewhat more likely to invest resources in boys, put them in after-school programs, and monitor them. A number of parents appeared to make different investments in boys and girls based on their unfortunately well-founded concerns about the dangerous neighborhood and peer contexts facing their boys. These differences in risks for boys (and the relative gains for boys whose parents had been in New Hope) persisted into adolescence, well after the New Hope program ended.

Conclusion

Our mixed-method work led us to rethink the logic model depicted in Figure 8.1, at least for this population and this program. Some of the paths anticipated in Figure 8.1 did not matter. The parenting path, for instance, proposed that New Hope participation would have a direct effect on parents, which then might benefit children indirectly. We had expected that parents might feel more positive about their work experiences or more effective or empowered as regular wage earners, and this might lead to more positive parenting. Conversely, we also thought parents might be more stressed and have less time for their children due to increased work hours, work hassles, nonstandard hours required for their work, and so forth, and so New Hope participation could lead to more negative consequences. Yet, neither pathway was found in New Hope; there was little evidence that mothers in the New Hope program group, even that subgroup with increased work hours and program participation, changed their parenting beliefs to any extent compared with control mothers. More broadly, the work, family, and other goals and values we asked parents about did not vary a great deal and did not determine program outcomes in and of themselves, when taken out of context. As more than one mother said about the kinds of jobs they hoped for and family goals they had, "I just want what everyone wants" (Weisner, 2006).

Figure 8.2 suggests what a revised pathway model would need to incorporate—and this only includes the selected findings we have mentioned in this chapter—there are more! Furthermore, if we dimmed down the quantitative associations that were not confirmed and added other pathways that were found, a different version of Figure 8.2 would emerge. This is, after all, our research goal—namely, to look not only for the impacts of a program like New Hope but to enhance and revise the theory and conceptual framework based on the research, to better anticipate and understand work-family-parenting-human development connections going forward.

New Hope's designers, its funders, many participants, and the New Hope research team wanted New Hope to be a success. We all shared the goals of reducing poverty in working-poor households and bringing the strongest suite of methods and analyses we could to the study. The moral core of New Hope "contained the principle that a full-time working mother should not be poor, uninsured, or forced to entrust young children to unsafe or uncaring child-care providers because she cannot afford to pay for better child care" (Duncan et al., 2007, p. 66). We shared a commitment to answer two common questions: Could New Hope reduce poverty and improve family and child well-being and, if so, how? Integrating qualitative and quantitative evidence helped answer these common questions. Because the world we hope to better represent is not linear nor additive nor independent of context, an integrated mixed-methods approach using quantitative and qualitative data is likely to better represent that world and so advance our scientific understanding.

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Edited by

Elizabeth T. Gershoff,

Rashmita S. Mistry,

and

Danielle A. Crosby

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