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# Negotiating the discourse of race within the United States welfare system

Vicki Lens and Colleen Cary

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## **Abstract**

The incendiary dynamic between race and welfare in the United States is well-known. An under explored aspect of this dynamic is how recipients of colour navigate the racial undercurrents that permeate welfare and which may result in differential treatment. Drawing from qualitative interviews with twenty-four recipients of colour, this study seeks to understand the ways in which they negotiate their relationships with workers. The study finds that to deflect racial stereotypes, participants monitor their behaviour for traces of anger that could be construed as ‘street’ rather than ‘decent’, and divorce themselves from those that don’t. Participants also rejected the discourse of citizenship, seeking to sooth and placate workers rather than asserting a right to benefits. This discourse replicates historical patterns of powerlessness in the United States, where the need to beseech rather than insist and avoid appearing too angry resonates loudly for people of colour. This serves to reinforce the dominant discourse of undeservingness and racial stereotyping within the welfare system.

**Keywords:** Street-level bureaucracy; poverty; qualitative; institutions; social exclusion; racial discourse.

The incendiary dynamic between race and welfare in the United States is well-known. As Martin Gilens (1999) found in his study of attitudes towards welfare, the public’s perception that most welfare recipients in the United States are African-American and that many African-Americans are lazy explains why welfare, and welfare recipients, are despised. Welfare policy and implementations reflect this racialized view. Intertwined through the history of welfare policy in the United States is what Nuebeck and Cazenave call welfare racism, or ‘the organization of racialized public assistance attitudes, policy making,

and administrative practices' (Nuebeck and Cazenave 2001, p. 36). On the policy-making level, race is, of course, never explicitly mentioned in the law. However, its past and present affect on the policy tools used, from suitable home provisions to family caps to work rules, has been well documented in the literature (Quadragno 1994; Abramovitz 1996; Nuebeck and Cazenave 2001). Such policies are premised on assumptions of cultural pathology and individual weakness, especially among people of colour.

Policies within welfare offices are also implemented in ways that further disadvantage people of colour (Savner 2000). In the United States, case-worker discretion has increased under welfare reform, inviting differential treatment among workers who can now choose between what Mead (1997, p. 24) calls 'help or hassle.' There is some evidence that people of colour are more likely than their white counterparts to receive the latter. Several studies have found that African-American recipients are more likely to be sanctioned for violating work rules (Wu et al. 2004; Houser et al. 2007). They are also more likely to be offered less support, including educational support (Gooden 1998; Chicago Urban League 2000).

An under-explored aspect of the worker-client relationship is how recipients of colour, including African-Americans and Latinos, navigate the racial undercurrents that permeate welfare and may result in such differential treatment. Drawing from qualitative interviews with twenty-four recipients of colour in a large urban city in the United States, this study seeks to understand the ways in which they negotiate their relationships with workers in the context of race and racial stereotyping.

### **Race and welfare in an administrative context**

For welfare participants, welfare means the web of relationships, rules and bureaucratic pathways they must navigate to secure its benefits and avoid its penalties. That pathway is often strewn with hurdles. Welfare bureaucracies in the United States have a long history of bureaucratic disenfranchisement, or the denial of aid to eligible people through excessive and obstructive procedural demands (Lipsky 1984; Brodtkin 1986; Lens 2006). Unlike more consumer-friendly government bureaucracies that serve primarily the middle class, welfare bureaucracies function in an environment of suspicion and distrust (Hasenfeld 2000; Soss 2002). As Hasenfeld describes it, welfare work is 'moral work', and requires workers to distinguish the worthy from the unworthy. While rules and regulations provide guidance and structure, workers also rely on their own practical and moral judgments when dispensing or denying benefits (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). Thus, based on their assessments of people, workers may choose to be helpful, arbitrary or

punitive, and may oscillate between all three (Handler 1986; Watkins 2006). Tangible help may be withheld for intangible reasons, as when workers punish recipients for a poor attitude towards work or a lack of gratitude, or deflect recipients to whom they don't relate or whose behaviour they don't like (Solomon 1994).

For participants, this means not only knowing the rules but also being able to read and understand their workers. They must learn to simultaneously engage and resist workers, and contain and control them. Edin and Lein (1997) document the creative ways in which welfare participants survive, often by concealing sources of income in order to be able to live on a combination of off the books income and meagre benefit checks (see also Seccombe [2007]). Watkins (2005) likewise describes the 'concealment strategy' used by participants, who purposefully decide not to report extra income to workers, often because they believe the system, and by extension workers, unrealistically believe a welfare check is sufficient. Other studies, such as Dodson (1999) and Dodson and Schmalzbauer (2005), illustrate how welfare participants mould their behaviour to avoid angering their workers, staying silent instead of speaking up, or telling workers what they think they want to hear (see also Soss [2002]). Some recipients, as this author (Lens, forthcoming) found, learn to speak up in strategic and sometimes subtle ways. Such strategies are common among the stigmatized and the powerless, who must play a 'double game' of invention and conformity as they manage their lives among the powerful (Bourdieu and Adamson 1990, p. 63; Scott 1990).

These studies, however, do not explore the ways in which the task of managing welfare relationships may have different consequences for people of colour. While all welfare participants may employ some or all of the strategies described above, for people of colour the costs may be higher. In the United States, a dependence on welfare echoes African-American subservience as slaves. Being silent and non-assertive, or loud and angry, has different implications for the recipient of colour. As one social commentator recently explained 'the discomfort with certain forms of assertiveness is too deeply rooted in the national psyche – and the national language – to just disappear' (Staples 2008). Staples was speaking of the need for the first African-American presidential nominee, Barack Obama, not to appear as 'the archetypical angry black man'. But his words are even more applicable to the most powerless of people of colour, those toiling under the double stigma of poverty and race. As Elijah Anderson (1999, 2002) describes in his study of African-American culture in inner city Philadelphia, to survive in a white world, African-Americans will refrain from acting too angry or 'street' when dealing with white institutions, believing it 'will somehow lead to social and economic salvation for themselves and for their loved ones' (Anderson 2002,

p. 1541). Other people of colour, such as Latinos, must adopt similar tactics, as they are also viewed as outsiders and more likely to rely on welfare than others (Fox 2004). Thus, while their historical legacy is different to African-Americans', they also encounter a form of welfare racializing within the welfare system that whites do not.

This study explores how people of colour, both male and female, navigate welfare racism when interacting with welfare workers. It examines how the racial discourse that hangs implicitly, if not explicitly, over welfare relationships affects the ability of recipients to ask for and get what they need.

### **Data and methods**

This current analysis is part of a larger study on complaining behaviour in welfare bureaucracies. This study interviewed sixty welfare recipients in two counties in New York, one suburban and the other urban. These two counties were chosen to allow comparisons of complaining behaviours in two different geographical and organizational contexts; one a large urban bureaucracy, the other smaller and less complex, but both operating under the same state-supervised fair hearing system and laws. Face-to-face qualitative interviews were conducted in 2006 with participants who had been receiving public assistance and had received notices discontinuing or reducing their aid. They were asked a series of open-ended questions that explored their general experiences of applying for and receiving welfare, their relationships with their case-workers, incidents involving the reduction and discontinuance of aid, and the strategies and tactics they used to maintain their benefits, including the use of formal procedures such as fair hearings, and other informal processes. Participants were also asked general questions about welfare reform and welfare policy. Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were tape-recorded. They took place in the researcher's office and in a private space located in the soup kitchen of a local church.

This study draws from the twenty-four recipients from the urban area (New York City) who were members of minority groups. They included nineteen African-Americans, four Latinos, and one who was both African-American and Latino. Consistent with the composition of public assistance caseloads, and especially the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families programme, where women compose 90 per cent of adult recipients (US Health and Human Services 2004), twenty-one out of the twenty-four participants were female. The average age was forty-five. Eighty-four per cent (twenty-two recipients) had received welfare for more than three years. Thirty per cent (eight recipients) had less than a high school education; 26 per cent (seven recipients) had a high school or equivalency diploma and 42 per cent

(eleven recipients) had some college. The primary means of recruitment was through a community-based non-profit agency that assists and advocates for low-income recipients and a church-based soup kitchen. An incentive of thirty dollars was paid. Each interview (except two interviews where the recorder malfunctioned) was transcribed verbatim.

This study uses phenomenology, which is a method for understanding the lived and subjective experiences of a group of individuals sharing a similar experience (van Manen 2002; Creswell 2007); here, the experience of engaging with welfare workers to secure welfare benefits for their families. More specifically, this study uses interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology, which goes beyond the participants' descriptions of their experiences and situates it in its historical, social and political context as it attempts to interpret the meaning of such experiences (Smith 1997; van Manen 2002; Lopez and Willis 2004). Sensitizing concepts and theories, such as the ways in which stigmatized groups interact in environments controlled by dominant and majority groups, were used by the researchers to design the study and interpret the findings. Since both female and male participants of colour share the same stigmatizing experiences emanating from their race or ethnicity, both were included in the sample.<sup>1</sup>

A grounded theory approach was used to conduct data analysis. Grounded theory is particularly appropriate for analysing data about recipients' lived experiences, because it reduces any preconceived biases, letting the data speak for themselves (Berg 1998). It also permits the researcher to 'learn from the participants how to understand a process or situation' (Strauss 1987; Morse and Richards 2002, p. 55). Coding was conducted simultaneously with data collection, and helped inform subsequent interviews. First descriptive codes were attached to lines of data. Focused coding was then conducted, which involved identifying the most significant and/or frequent line by line codes, and choosing codes that best categorized the emerging themes and patterns (Charmaz 2006). Coding was an iterative process, with researchers returning to earlier coded transcripts to confirm, refute, modify and discuss codes as they developed. Analytical memos were used throughout the process, first to define and describe various codes, and then to conduct theoretical coding, which is a way of rebuilding coded data and establishing a conceptual framework by exploring the relationships between categories and subcategories (Charmaz 2006). Significant statements were extracted from the data to illustrate common themes and the essence of participants' shared experiences (Creswell 2007).

Several strategies were used to enhance the rigor of the study. The two authors were involved in both conducting interviews and coding transcripts; thus both remained close to the data and the phenomenon

being studied. The use of more than one researcher enhanced the likelihood that different perspectives would emerge, thus encouraging reflexivity, the process by which researchers examine their own biases, values and experiences and how they may affect their analysis and interpretations of the data (Creswell 2007). Codes were developed, first independently and then collaboratively, with the researchers initially coding several transcripts and then meeting to discuss the development of codes and to compare and combine codes. After developing a list of codes and definitions, selected transcripts were then coded by both the authors, with intercoder reliability of between 80 and 90 per cent reached.

Major categories that emerged from the coding and analytical memos were 'strategies and tactics for negotiating the bureaucracy' and 'nature of bureaucratic relationships'. An example of an initial code that emerged from the category 'nature of bureaucratic relationships' included 'stereotyping and stigma', defined as accounts where participants described being treated as the stereotypical welfare recipient (e.g. lazy, promiscuous or irresponsible), or with suspicion or distrust. Examples of codes that emerged from the category 'strategies and tactics for negotiating the bureaucracy' included 'chilling out/checking emotions', defined as restraining one's emotions, especially anger, when interacting with workers to avoid a negative response; 'making honey' defined as strategically treating workers with kindness, respect and gentleness, and 'asserting differences' defined as describing oneself as different and more 'decent' than other recipients. These codes, among others, were used to develop the major themes, described below, of 'pleading need and worthiness', which included participants' need to prove their worthiness by acting 'decent', and 'smiling on the outside', which included participants' need to stay calm and controlled.

### **Pleading need and worthiness**

Welfare dependency is considered a degraded state in our society. The PRWORA (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act passed in 1996) represented the culmination of a neoliberalism discourse that emphasizes free and private markets and 'personal rather than public responsibility for economic well being' (Smith 2005, p. 216). Welfare is the help of last resort, and considered, both in political discourse and among ordinary citizens, a personal, not a market, failure (Abramovitz 1996). Welfare discourse is laced with stereotypes that depict a plea for help as an admission of failure in the realms of work and home (Seccombe, James and Walters 1998). In short, welfare recipients are considered failed citizens, if

citizens at all, who cheat the system and live unfairly and freely off the labours of other citizens (Davis and Hagen 1996).

Because racial stereotyping often underlies many welfare interactions, recipients who are both poor and people of colour bring additional baggage (Nuebeck and Cazenave 2001). Workers assume recipients, and especially people of colour, are unworthy of aid. They are more apt to say no rather than yes, often in arbitrary and unjust ways. Recipients must respond without further alienating their workers, while also asserting their deservingness. Sometimes this means becoming complicit in the racial stereotypes that structure social relations within the welfare centre. It means not acting in ways they think will reinforce such stereotypes, thus implicitly accepting their power and validity.

As Elijah Anderson (1999, 2002) describes in his study of African-American culture in inner city Philadelphia, people devise strategies for surviving in a hostile world, often divided among black and white. This includes dividing themselves into 'two opposing status groups – "decent" and "street"... Decent is most often associated with the wider, conventional "white" society, whereas "street or" its own descriptive analogue, "ghetto" – is often used as an epithet (especially by those identifying themselves as decent) and strongly associated with the most troublesome aspects of ghetto life' (Anderson 2002, p. 1533). Other groups have their own version of this split; for example Latinos may use the epithet 'project chicks', which is comparable to 'ghetto'. (The analogue in the lingo of social scientists is the terms 'normative' and 'deviant'.)

To survive in a white world and especially within white institutional settings, people of colour often code switch, altering their public behaviour between 'decent' and 'street' depending on the setting. They will also 'at times overcompensate by trying to be more decent than others of their race' (Anderson 2002, p. 1541). As Anderson explains, people draw these distinctions with others of their group in the hopes of securing better treatment.

Within the welfare centre, all recipients – and especially recipients of colour – are 'street' in the eyes of workers. This 'street' label parallels welfare discourse in general, which, as noted above, is framed around an ideology that separates the deserving from the undeserving. Decent people do not ask for welfare; they are self-reliant and self-sufficient. They rely on the private markets, not government 'hand-outs' to survive. Asking for welfare is a mark of personal failure. For people of colour, asking for help is doubly injurious. Already grappling with the stigma of race, they must also contend with the stigma of welfare, in a setting that equates the two. Uma, a fifty-seven-year-old Latina woman, explicitly makes this connection as she describes her experience applying for welfare: 'I [was treated] like I was a low-life,



like a minority. I'm asking for a handout.'<sup>2</sup> Participants like Uma, who have held steady jobs and whose welfare use is episodic or crisis related, are confronted with a conundrum in the welfare centre: how do they prove their decent bona fides?

Stanley, a forty-three-year-old African-American man with a wife and four children, is an example of this problematic. Stanley began his adult life in the military, an institution he 'loved' and which showed him 'you are more than you think'. He worked his entire adult life, either in security or construction, eventually reaching his version of the American dream – owning his own floor-care subcontracting business. About five years ago, he became disabled after a truck hit him. The family lived off their savings for four years, and then spiralled into homelessness when their savings ran out. Seeking emergency shelter, he and his wife applied for public assistance.

Stanley is not treated as the victim of misfortune he thinks he is, but as a potential swindler. He describes how the workers treated him and his wife: 'drilled us, they questioned us, they separated us, they questioned us, asked, trying to catch one in a lie and it was like you're being interrogated'. His sense of independence and agency is shattered; welfare, as he puts it 'has full control over you, full control over your children, you know, the whole nine-yards'. He is humiliated and defeated, as the system makes him 'feel like I ain't trying to do nothing, like I'm a drug addict'.

To counter his feelings of disgrace, Stanley activates the welfare discourse, and tries to claim the mantle of deservingness. He describes welfare as something he is owed: 'I'm a worker, I worked all my life. I pay my tax... I'm a taxpayer; I'm a veteran as well. So I've spent my time.' He briefly deviates from this discourse to express solidarity with his fellow recipients who are also homeless: 'They are not here and homeless on the streets because they want to be... we've been stereotyped and I can say, we, why, because I've lived it.' But then he immediately follows this with the reminder that 'I have a good background.' Later he explains how the welfare system is 'a totally different society because it's not like you are dealing with all the regular class people that are out there that already have a foundation'.

Thus, the welfare discourse provides Stanley with a way to salvage his worth; he, unlike other recipients, is 'regular', 'decent', a worker, and a veteran to boot. He flirts briefly with breaking this discourse – 'we've been stereotyped' – but then reverts back to a narrative of 'us' versus 'them' as he describes those not receiving welfare as 'regular class people' and the welfare reliant as without a 'foundation'. He, now welfare reliant himself, buys into a discourse that emphasizes the personal defects of the poor. It allows him to express his anger at the system, but channels it in a certain way. He should be treated well, not because he is poor, but because he was once not poor. Left

unquestioned or obscured are the reasons why Stanley and his fellow recipients are poor, and the ways in which they are more alike than different.

While Stanley could fall back on his decent credentials, long-term welfare users cannot. Nonetheless, they employ similar discourses to shield themselves from welfare's judgmental sting. To salvage their self-respect, they, like Stanley, differentiate themselves from other recipients; they try to prove they are not 'street'. Simone, a forty-three-year-old African-American woman with five children ranging in age from three months to twenty years, has been on public assistance for twenty-one years, virtually her entire adult life. To 'decent' people she is the archetypical 'welfare queen'. That is not how she sees herself: 'I know some people abuse it [welfare] but I think, I'm not one of them. I just do what I have to do to – I mean, to survive with the children.' She presents welfare not as a choice but as a necessity for a good mother like herself concerned with her children's welfare. So that she can justify her use of welfare, she borrows from what Smith (1997) describes as the 'mothering discourse', which places mothering on a pedestal and emphasizes its centrality. Like Stanley, Simone also employs the welfare discourse, by first judging her fellow recipients as undeserving – 'I know some people abuse it' – and then claiming 'I am not one of them.'

The finding that welfare recipients, black and white, view themselves as atypical has persisted though decades of welfare changes and reforms (Briar 1966; Davis and Hagen 1996; Seccombe, James and Walters 1998). Disassociating from ones fellow recipients serves both a personal and political purpose. On a personal level, it is way of coping with stigma. By proclaiming their difference from other recipients, recipients can salvage their self-worth. On a political level, such beliefs reinforce the view that dependency is a problem of individuals, not the system. It keeps welfare recipients divided from one another and blind to the commonality of their cause (Seccombe, James and Walters 1998). For recipients of colour, who often serve as the public symbol of welfare excess, the bar is higher. A double dose of disassociation is required. They must refrain from acting both too 'welfare-like' and too 'street'. Because of the visibility of race, 'passing' is harder and requires, as described next, a highly tuned monitoring system and the constant restraint of emotions.

### **Smiling on the outside**

Welfare systems are purposely designed to make proving and maintaining eligibility difficult. Documents are continuously demanded and work habits routinely evaluated. Bureaucratic snafus – the ubiquitous red tape bureaucracies are known for – can occur often.

A failure to provide the correct document or demonstrate sufficient work commitment can result in the cut-off of aid. Even when participants have satisfied the bureaucracy's demands, glitches and errors can result in random and arbitrary reductions or denial of aid. Clearing up such mistakes takes time, persistence and patience. It requires participants to maintain a 'decent' persona in the face of often arbitrary and frustrating bureaucratic demands.

To stay within the system's good graces, participants must carefully and delicately manage their relationships with front-line workers. They must figure out how to respond to workers who are often stressed out, overwhelmed and angry. As Laurel explains, workers 'always have on this shield of protection... they always in that type of mood. Their face is angry.' Delilah's description of her worker's greeting after a long wait – she 'sticks her teeth at me' – captures the tension and annoyance that characterize welfare relationships.

Recipients' powerlessness, however, constrains their options. Expressions of anger about system slip-ups or their treatment – however justified – put them at risk of even poorer treatment and of being judged street rather than decent. Stella, a forty-six-year-old African-American woman with two children, learned how to restrain her anger and act the conciliator rather than antagonizer. Like most recipients, Stella had continuing difficulties with what she called the 'maze' of welfare that 'will take your spirit'. Workers, she explained, 'come with their biases' and do not want to help you and/or are ignorant of ways in which they can (in her case an exemption to the work rules because of domestic violence). But as Stella explained, if you 'ruffle his or her feathers' you can end up sitting and waiting for hours. Stella thus put on a veneer of politeness no matter how angry she was. As she explained, while she may be thinking 'what a jerk', she 'was always courteous' and would say 'thank you very much'.

Stella's experience was typical of many other recipients. Anger was to be avoided because it antagonized workers. As Sharlene, a forty-seven-year-old African-American woman receiving welfare for the last ten years, explained, 'there are times when you are so angry and frustrated that you want to lash out. But if you do anything disrespectful, they'll do anything they can to... oh... there's an error in the system, or the computer's fault, or the case got closed by mistake'. Masking one's thoughts and personality is necessary. As Audrey, a forty-year-old Latina woman who has cycled off and on welfare most of her adult life, explains 'I felt a little intimidated because if I felt I expressed my feelings even in a genuine and proper way, I felt like she [her worker] would have a way of mismanaging my food or my food stamps, cash and I had babies to deal with.' Uma, a Latina woman, explains 'a lot of times I had to hold my tongue and just grin and bear it even though I was hurting inside'.

Anger on the inside was transformed to a smile on the outside. This was true among those long-versed in the system's ways, like Simone and Audrey, and those new to it. Laurel was sixty-one years old when she applied for welfare for the first time, after leaving a long and troublesome marriage marred by domestic violence. Like Simone and Audrey, she gingerly handled her workers, suppressing her anger over how she was treated: 'I went with a smiling face and started talking to her and she was just you know like a snake, And I leave there with a smile on my face; I didn't let her get to me because I really wanted to get this help.' Disrespect, a common complaint among recipients, was better met with its opposite – respect. As Sally explained, 'Be calm and respectful. Answer their questions. And then just wait and see.'

Participants not only put a smile on their faces but try to put one on their workers' faces as well. In an inversion of roles, participants sought to take care of workers. Tamsin, a forty-nine-year-old African-American and a long term recipient, describes how she metaphorically switched roles when her worker treated her poorly: 'I told her look, I don't know what kind of day you're having, but take a pill, I'll bring you some Anacin. You know, Tylenol, or whatever it is but don't take it out on me. I'm just here to do whatever I gotta do, whatever you tell me to bring, I'll bring.'

Nathan, a forty-nine-year-old African-American man with a teenage daughter who has been receiving welfare for about a year, also initially plays the helper rather than the helped. He first diagnosis the problem: 'They see cases like mine every day so a lot of them are burnt.' He then administers the cure: 'I'm a very mannerable individual... I try to get people to relax... I'm going to make it easy on you. I'm not going to be one of your headaches today.' After receiving conflicting information about his eligibility for rent arrears payments, he explains to his worker that 'this is my first time... If you talk slowly to me and tell me why, then I can understand.' By casting himself as the meek and obedient ingénue, he makes himself less threatening, less of a 'headache' to his worker. He will not lash out or be too noisily demanding, thus making her job easier.

Placating the powerful and remaining quiet and calm when survival is at stake has a long historical lineage, particularly for African-Americans. It is a theme rooted across time and place. As Deborah Gray White explains in her landmark book, *Ar'n't I a woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, 'slave women understood the value of silence and secrecy... Like all who are dependent upon the caprices of a master, they hide their real sentiments and turn toward him a changeless smile or an enigmatic passivity' (White 1999, pp. 23–4). Slaves were also expected to be docile, respectful and grateful for what their masters provided. The legacy of slavery, the ultimate loss of power, is echoed in the welfare system, where the language of

entitlement has been banished and the powerless and dependent, many of them people of colour, must plead for help rather than demand it.

Aggressiveness is especially to be avoided. An in-your-face bravado that signals one is not to be messed with, appropriate for the 'street', was viewed as out of place in the predominantly white-run public institution of the welfare centre. Recipients who demanded help were looked down upon by other recipients. They had too much 'attitude' or were 'acting out' or 'acting crazy'.

As Stella explained, such behaviour made things worse, not better. As she put it 'profanity, loud speaking or physical gyrations' had no place in the welfare centre. Such participants might get what they needed 'temporarily', but workers would make a 'mental note' of it, causing problems later. Stella emphasized that she 'never went in there acting like other clients', it wasn't 'who I am.' She did not 'give workers a hard time', but instead 'killed them with kindness'.

Sally, an African-American woman in her early forties with two grown children, similarly observed that 'some people go in there and start acting crazy, but it doesn't work, you can't do that'. Nathan echoed her assessment of his fellow recipients: 'A lot of people get caught up in the moment. They let their emotions rule their good sense.' Laurel, an older woman, criticized the 'attitude' of some of the younger women: 'If they don't get what they want and they just make matters worse when they confront them and they talk out.' In contrast, she explained 'I always try and present myself in a decent manner... I don't like the attitude thing. I would say it very peacefully what I have to say or I may say two words... say thank you and walk and go home and may cry.'

'Attitude' could also get you in more serious trouble. Security was omnipresent at the welfare centre, signalling that recipients must be watched and were untrustworthy. The security guards, serving as a message to other recipients not to behave similarly, often escorted out recipients who 'acted out'. As Uma explained, 'I see how they treat people when they fight or argue or even say curse words. They will just hold you back or ignore you... but other times they take the security and escort you outside. I didn't want to be put through all of that.'

Lacy, a forty-five-year-old African-American woman with two children who has been receiving welfare on and off for fifteen years, was one of the rare recipients who refused to smile. Her description of her behaviour in the welfare centre was more 'street' than 'decent': 'A lot of times I had to scream on 'em, holla at 'em.' Instead of backing down when she is told 'I can't come in here and act like that', she adopts the discourse of a citizen and responds 'why not, because you're a public servant, ok, and that's your job to service the client'.

Lacy did not start out behaving this way. At first, she explains: 'I'm coming in and I'm being hospitable to you and you just are being nasty

and ignorant towards me for no reason. And I'm wondering I'm putting all the blame on myself but then I'm looking at the fact that it's not my fault, that's just the way you are really. You don't treat me like I treat you, then I'm gonna say something about it.'

In response to the harsh treatment she receives, Lacy begins to redefine her experience: 'They tell me I can't do it and I say I have every right to do it because the customer is always right. Because I worked retail, so I know the customer is always right just like here. You're getting a paycheck – you supposed to work certain hours, you supposed to service your client. Customer service is job one, so come on.'

Thus, instead of adopting the welfare discourse, Lacy draws on the language of citizenship: 'you're a public servant'; and the language of consumerism: 'the customer is always right'. In so doing, she constructs herself as powerful, rather than powerless. She, not the worker, is the one to be soothed and serviced. In her language and her behaviour, she tries to dispel the sting of subordination. She tries to make the welfare centre into something she thinks it should be, in contrast to what it is.

Like Lacy, other recipients were aware that the welfare office, unlike other government offices, treated them differently. Delilah, a long-term recipient, describes the difference: 'It is so much more calm [in other government offices], you know, in a public assistance office, you feel that you're being attacked all of the time. And when you go to a government office it's like come on in sit down, have a cup of coffee [laughs]. You know it's a very very very different experience there. It's definitely different.' Soss (2002), in his qualitative interviews with recipients about their experiences with both the welfare office and the social security office, found a similar distinction. The latter adopted a more consumer-friendly approach that treated recipients as deserving citizens and welcomed them instead of discouraging them.

However, most recipients, unlike Lacy, did not try and assert their status as citizens in the welfare centre. Justifiable indignation at rude workers and red tape – the expected response from a poorly treated citizen – was not reasonable in the welfare centre. While participants found other ways to challenge workers, including speaking to supervisors, requesting fair hearings and complaining to the Commissioner, none of these strategies altered the basic nature of their interactions with workers. Their welfare relationships remained antagonistic, harsh and distant. In their day-to-day interactions, participants focused on the personal rather than the institutional, believing that if they just got along the bureaucracy could be tamed. The enigmatic smile of the powerless remained, as did the need to suppress anger and restrain emotions. In this way, participants refrained from claiming the mantle of citizenship and the power it implies, instead maintaining their subordination and perpetuating the dominant discourse of undeservingness.

## **Discussion and implications**

While all welfare participants carry the burden of welfare stigma, people of colour confront a double bind. Because welfare often serves as a proxy for race, recipients of colour must do more than others to demonstrate their deservingness. They must prove not only their social worth but racial worth as well. To deflect racial stereotypes, participants monitor their behaviour for traces of anger that could be construed as 'street' rather than 'decent', and divorce themselves from those that don't. Preoccupied with proving they are unlike others of their kind, they mimic the discourse of the powerless, seeking to placate and sooth workers, who ostensibly exist to serve them. Instead of expressing anger when government ties them up in red tape, they quietly and discreetly unravel it. Rather than demanding respect from officials, they give it. In place of asserting a right to government benefits, they gently plead. And instead of asserting their citizenship status, recipients humbled themselves before workers, marking themselves as supplicants rather than citizens, unequal and inferior to the government official who serves them.

While all recipients use such tactics, the need to beseech rather than insist resonates louder for certain groups. For African-Americans, this discourse replicates historical patterns of powerlessness where they were first not citizens, and then second-class citizens. For other people of colour, such as Latinos, it echoes the discourse over immigration, which often lumps Latino citizens with undocumented immigrants, and hence tainting their very right to citizenship.

Thus for such groups, the social relations and discourse that characterize welfare relationships threaten their hard-won and precarious sense of citizenship. Few discourses in our democracy are more powerful than our notion of citizenship. Citizenship bestows belonging and signifies inclusion. It is the antidote to 'otherness', which negates citizenship and consigns certain groups or individuals to outsider or inferior status. It is within government institutions like the welfare centre that people evaluate their status as citizens (Soss 1999). Respect and civility is especially important, and citizens will evaluate the fairness of government authorities by these markers (Tyler 2006). Treating people respectfully acknowledges their citizenship; treating people poorly implies a disregard for it. For the poor, the civic lesson gleaned from the welfare centre is one of exclusion and second class status. For people of colour, the message is double-barrelled and amplified; it echoes and repeats exclusionary messages from elsewhere in the body politic.

To be sure, the strategy employed by recipients has its advantages. By acting 'decent', they align themselves with their workers, thus facilitating a more expedient, effective exchange. It is a strategic, proactive

choice, not a passive one, which helps them survive within the welfare system. But it also pits recipients of colour against each other, as they disown and distance themselves from others of their group. Participants thus unwittingly reinforce their own subordination and racial stigmatizing by acting in ways that emphasize rather than challenge their inferior status.

About half of all Americans living in poverty are African-American and Latinos, even though they comprise only 15 per cent of the total population (US Census Bureau 2008). Thus as the group most affected by the welfare system, they have much to gain by recognizing the bonds between them. As Seccombe, James and Walters (1998, p. 862) explain, by buying into the larger stereotypes of welfare recipients, recipients 'fail to see the shared political nature of their problems'. For recipients of colour, this also means that the racism that permeates the welfare system remains unchallenged.

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### Notes

1. Racial stereotypes do differ by gender; for example the stereotype of promiscuity is more often associated with women than men. While this study revealed the commonality of experiences of men and women of colour in the welfare system, further research is needed to more closely examine how the interplay of gender and race may affect the experience of negotiating for welfare benefits.
2. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, all names are pseudonyms.

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