

Race-Ing the Bootstrap Climb: Black and Latino Bureaucrats in Post-Reform Welfare Offices

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The substantial incorporation of people of color into government and quasi-government employment raises previously unexplored questions about the significance of race, class, and gender in street-level bureaucracies. Relying on interview data collected from black and Latino supervisors and caseworkers implementing welfare reform, I look at whether and how race and other social group memberships are deployed as tools in the delivery of casework services to black and Latino clients. Contrary to our assumptions about the level of impersonality entrenched in public bureaucracies, I find that most caseworkers and supervisors of color conceptualize and operationalize welfare reform in ways that link their goals and experiences as agency employees, members of racial communities, and implementers of social policy. They identify with the circumstances of their clients, but interpret the politics of welfare through not only racialized but also classed and gendered lenses. Consequently, they support and challenge clients of color in a variety of ways. In order to trace the origins of these strategies, I explore how the combination of institutional politics, environmental phenomenon, and black and Latino bureaucrats' personal histories contribute to their understanding of how they should do their jobs. This article suggests that not only inter-racial but also intra-racial politics inform institutional processes within street-level bureaucracies.

Keywords: welfare offices, African Americans, Latinos, organizations, intersectionality.

Beginning in the 1960s, political and social pressures led many government bureaucracies to diversify their workforces and ensure that their staffs better reflected the demographics of their clientele. Many have since recognized that staff members of government agencies, especially the "street-level bureaucrats" who provide direct services, are important social and political actors serving a variety of symbolic and substantive functions (Lipsky 1983). Their visibility, the relationships they forge with the public, and their ability to navigate the expectations of a wide array of stakeholders are all thought to help to bridge the divide between agencies' missions and the needs of constituents. Hence, many bureaucratic outposts have become sites where nonwhite workers serve multiple informal roles in addition to that of formally implementing public policy. Street-level bureaucrats of color also exist as economic beneficiaries of racial inclusion, resource brokers for economically deprived communities, social regulators of poorer race-mates, and counterexamples to the white bureaucrat-minority client service dyad that often dominates our assumptions (Burbridge 1994; Collins 1983; Lewis 2000; Pattillo 2007).

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How do black and Latino service providers themselves see their professional roles, and how do their personal backgrounds, occupational experiences, and political attitudes inform their understanding of how they should do their jobs? Do they shape their interactions with clients of color in ways that reflect simultaneous commitments as professionals and members of racial and ethnic communities, with perceived interests related to each role?

This article analyzes the professional experiences of black and Latino street-level bureaucrats working in a local welfare office as it implements the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. In 2006, blacks and Hispanics made up 37 percent of those determining eligibility for individuals applying for public resources such as welfare, unemployment benefits, social security, and public housing despite constituting a combined 24.5 percent of the noncivilian labor force (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2007). Welfare offices are important locales in which to explore the incorporation of racial minorities into the public employee ranks because these institutions are politically contested spaces where caseworker-client interactions are often viewed as emblematic of the historical struggles of women, racial minorities, and the poor within state institutions (Abramovitz 1996; Haney 2002; Piven and Cloward 1971). Underlying the seemingly mundane tasks of benefit distribution and the enforcement of work requirements and time limits lays an arrangement of highly charged social and political processes. Caseworkers have been known to exercise power through their interactions with clients in ways that define the terms of citizenship vis-à-vis access to public resources, enforce certain interpretations of social rights and obligations, make moral assertions about the poor, use administrative reforms to economically restrict individuals, and perpetuate interracial inequalities (Brodkin 1992, 1997; Gooden 1998; Hasenfeld 2000; Korteweg 2003; Lieberman 2001; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Soss 2002). It is therefore quite conceivable that in-group politics are negotiated within these agencies as well.

While more and more people of color are administering welfare policy, the racial demographics of caseloads have also changed. In 1992, whites represented 39 percent of families receiving welfare, blacks 37 percent, and Hispanics 18 percent (Lower-Basch 2000). Between October 2004 and September 2005, the rolls were 32 percent white, 37 percent black, and 26 percent Hispanic (ACF 2005).¹ The growing share of racial minorities on the welfare rolls raises important questions about their experiences in welfare offices and how these institutions may or may not adequately address their needs as they pursue economic resources in the wake of the massive alteration to the social safety net in 1996. Under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), its flagship program, TANF provides time-limited cash assistance and in-kind resources that are directly tied to work.² The creation of TANF marked the end of federal entitlements and locally administered federal-state matching grants for recipients. Aided greatly by a booming economy in the 1990s and a generous expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), welfare reform has led to massively reduced TANF rolls, increased work among many low-income mothers, and higher levels of child support collection (Golden 2005).

As these policy and demographic shifts have unfolded, several changes to the organization of welfare casework have also taken place. Welfare caseworkers are no longer expected to simply confirm recipient eligibility, issue cash benefits, and monitor program compliance as they did under the previous era of AFDC (Bane and Ellwood 1994). In addition to tracking many more eligibility benchmarks and enforcing harsher penalties for noncompliance, these bureaucrats are expected to provide new forms of support. This includes connecting clients to the web of community-based programs in their areas; helping them find employment, job training, child care, and other services; and even providing motivational coaching to encourage clients to engage in desired behaviors. The increased power and responsibility assigned to these bureaucrats create a different kind of client-caseworker relationship than existed under

1. Race is typically determined based on the race of the adult recipient; in child-only cases, race is determined based on the youngest child in the unit.

2. This program replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) programs.

the old check-writing function of welfare offices. The tone, frequency, and content of their interactions, as well as the skillfulness with which both parties manage their relationships, become critically important organizational tools that can be positively or negatively manipulated by bureaucrats and recipients alike as they navigate a welfare system that demands more from both groups. The increased drive to counsel, encourage, and discipline clients opens up additional possibilities for workers to tailor and even personalize their messages to clients about work, family, and state involvement. Thus, there are many more opportunities for caseworkers to interject their own views and subjectivities into the caseworker-client interaction.

To be sure, this article does not set out to examine whether black and Latino bureaucrats—male or female, working class or middle class—allocate monetary resources differently to clients of color or are more likely to push for certain concessions related to time limits, work requirements, or other policies within welfare offices. Nor does this article explore whether clients are more likely to leave welfare for work if their caseworkers are of the same or different background with regard to race, class, or gender.³ Such questions will prove beyond the scope of the data on which this discussion is based.

Rather, by looking at the discourses that caseworkers of color elect to use during their interactions with clients of color, I show how intra-racial dynamics inform bureaucratic processes within local welfare offices. Caseworkers and supervisors of color engage in “racialized professionalism” as they integrate race into their understanding and operationalization of their work and their goals for what it should accomplish. A few respondents vigorously seek to divorce the issue of race from their interactions within the organization and their interpretations of the broader implications of their work. For these bureaucrats, there is noticeably less integration of their professional identities with social group consciousness. However, I show that most of these service providers actively deploy race (and class and gender) by shaping the content and tone of their interactions with clients of color in ways that reflect both key priorities in welfare reform implementation and intra-group politics within black and Latino communities. They make strategic choices about when and how to inject their racial group concerns into the service-delivery process, armed with a broader array of tools and edicts under the new policy regime and a fair amount of power by virtue of their class and professional positions. They leverage racial commonality to communicate the social goals and political motives of welfare policy to black and Latino clients and attempt to use occupational authority and social status to articulate why these clients should adopt a certain set of behaviors. As these bureaucrats simultaneously communicate their support and challenge clients of color through a variety of techniques, they deploy in-group politics in powerful ways to pursue what they see as moral and political rescue missions grounded in group-centered ideologies.

The next section of this article builds on previous work on race in the workplace and introduces how we might conceptualize the role of race specifically and intersectionality more broadly in minority workers’ interpretations of their professional roles in public bureaucracies. Following a description of the data and methods used in this analysis, I set the political, social, and occupational context in which these welfare caseworkers and supervisors are operating by exploring how they view their own status as professionals within the agency. I then examine how these bureaucrats understand the political and social context in which their clients of color function as they navigate the current welfare system. This backdrop helps us to understand the relational context in which the power dynamics between bureaucrats and clients of color unfold. Finally, I explore how race, class, and gender emerge as shaping elements during interactions between the two groups, influencing the practice of welfare casework and the messages conveyed as services are delivered.

3. In this respect, I follow the lead of many welfare implementation scholars who focus on what Riccucci (2005) calls “organizational outputs,” the delivery of welfare benefits and services to clients (p. 2). A truly rigorous analysis of the impact of welfare office dynamics on client outcomes will likely need to involve an experimental research design or a large-scale survey of caseworkers and clients that takes multiple variables into account.

Intersectionality at Work: Racialized Professionalism in Public Bureaucracies

Previous research has extensively documented how race influences the hiring and promotion prospects of workers, workforce composition, pay rates, job-acquisition tactics and resources among would-be employees, and everyday interactions among colleagues who must come together to pursue organizational goals (Barnum, Liden, and DiTomaso 1995; Combs 2003; Foerster 2004; Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991; Newman 1999; Nkomo and Cox 1990; Pager and Quillian 2005; Reskin 2000; Reskin, McBrier, and Kmec 1999; Royster 2003; Smith 2005; Smith and Calasanti 2005). Race continues to influence how individuals are slotted into work institutions as well as their experiences as they navigate institutional hierarchies that place blacks and Latinos at a disadvantage (DiTomaso, Post, and Parks-Vankee 2007; DiTomaso and Smith 1996). Researchers have tracked these inequalities among employees of varying occupational skills levels and institutional positions, including low-skill, blue collar, and white collar workers in the higher echelons of corporations (Anderson 1999; Bell and Nkomo 2001; Collins 1997; Thomas and Gabarro 1999).

This research is not without its gaps. First, how does race contribute to how workers of color themselves interpret their professional roles? We know a great deal about how blackness and other minority statuses are perceived by employers and coworkers. Racial ideologies are often *imposed* on workers of color as they traverse these work environments (Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). But we know less about how these actors are in fact agentic as they navigate experiences and perceptions of racial inequality in ways that are often informal but nevertheless strategic. These individuals must determine for themselves what significance they believe their racial backgrounds should play in how they understand their work and interactions with other institutional actors (Lacy 2007). For example, racial group consciousness and group solidarity may operate as key organizing principles for how street-level bureaucrats of color integrate their professional and social locations. Group consciousness shapes and is shaped by actors' political attitudes as it integrates "in-group identification with a set of ideas about the group's status and strategies for improving it" (Chong and Rogers 2005:350). Group solidarity—comprised of self-identification with the social group, a sense of closeness to one's group, and a belief that one's fate is linked to that of the group—also may inform whether and how bureaucrats bring the issue of race into their jobs (Dawson 1995).⁴ As potential sources of cultural pride, collective responsibility, or in-group concern, racial group memberships can thus be *actively deployed* by workers of color to pursue perceived group-based aims within workplace institutions in ways that, according to Pawan Dhingra (2007), both resist and support stratified social patterns. As such, racial systems do not only "bear down" on employees; race can also be tactically leveraged by these same individuals to help form the basis of professional identity.

Second, how is a professional self-conception informed by race also shaped by class and gender? The term racialized professionalism represents the integration of one's racial identity into her understanding and performance of work: beliefs about what workplace activities should accomplish, tools leveraged to meet certain goals, interpretations of organizational processes, and strategies for how the racial dynamics of the environment should be navigated. While race is the organizing category of focus in this analysis, we will see that other dimensions of identity intersect with race to help produce the micro-interactions, professional trajectories, and occupational concerns of street-level bureaucrats. As scholars engaging in intersectional

4. My understanding of group solidarity is more politically inflected than the principle of homophily, the notion within organizational studies that "birds of a feather flock together" and social networks tend to be comprised of people of similar races, ages, and other characteristics (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Group solidarity also differs from in-group preferences in that the latter suggests the presence of preferential treatment, which does not universally apply to the descriptions that these workers are providing for how they relate to race-mate clients.

analyses have argued, race, gender, and class cannot be reduced to individual attributes that are measured and assessed for their separate contributions to various institutional outcomes (McCall 2005; Simien 2007).⁵ They interact with and shape one another in ways that create distinct constraints and opportunities for individuals and groups within organizations (Acker 2006). For example, race is likely leveraged by employees differently, depending on their socioeconomic background or gender. Regardless of background, individuals operating in a raced, gendered, and classed work environment must locate themselves within institutional hierarchies and make choices about how they will explicitly or implicitly leverage, challenge, downplay, or disavow these categories in order to pursue certain goals.

Third, scholarship on race in organizations focuses almost exclusively on private rather than public firms, where institutional motivations are likely to differ and work products and processes are heavily driven by public policies. This is surprising as public sector employment has been an important avenue for expanding the black and Latino middle classes, and thus plays a significant role in the labor market experiences of racial minorities (Greene and Rogers 1994; Hewitt 2004). At the same time, the very policies that these individuals are called to implement often have their own racialized histories, discourses, and motives behind their political support or opposition (Fox 2004; Gilens 1999; Hancock 2004). Nevertheless, there is little scholarship on how the social locations of bureaucrats of color inform questions of access, accountability, opportunity, support, and regulation in this institutional context. Gail Lewis's (2000) work on Afro-Caribbean, African, and south Asian government social workers in the United Kingdom is a notable exception to this critique. She links these workers' access to the field to the increasingly widespread public belief in the 1980s and 1990s that poor black and south Asian families require social regulation through social work, and that it should be done by professionals of color who can offer "ethnic knowledge." Yet while Lewis's conceptualization captures how race is subsequently positioned by these workers as a source of solidarity and support for clients of color, she places less emphasis on parsing out the roots of the regulatory impulses that these social workers also direct toward their charges. These workers' assertions of power potentially arise not only from demands placed upon them by the institution but also imported class- and gender-based cleavages that may be part of these communities of color.

Taking seriously the critiques of Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000) about the overuse and lack of specificity of the term "identity," I borrow from their clarification to posit that street-level bureaucrats create "self-understandings [that] shape social and political action" (p. 9) in important ways. Professional identities represent relatively stable and enduring constellations of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, preferences, and experiences that individuals use to define themselves in an occupational role (Ibarra 1999; Schein 1978). The

5. Williams Crenshaw (1991) is widely credited for introducing the term "intersectionality," positing that it "denote[s] the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences" (p. 1244). Intersectionality, of course, encompasses many more social domains among its areas of interest including families, politics, and public policy, maintaining its central focus on the relationships between race, gender, and class. The majority of this work explores what Simien (2007) describes as "the ways in which race and gender operate in tandem to produce and maintain the unequal distribution of power and privilege" (p. 264). As both political project and intellectual intervention, researchers placed black women at the center of analyses in order to parse out the simultaneity of racial and gender oppression and what Hill Collins (2000) has called the "interconnections among systems of oppression" or "interlocking systems of oppression" (p. 18). More recent work has gravitated towards a wider-ranging understanding of intersectionality, positing it as a "normative and empirical research paradigm rather than a content specialization" (Hancock 2007:249; McCall 2005). As such, any group can be the subject of an intersectional analysis, not solely black women or particularly marginalized groups. McCall (2005) describes intersectionality as encircling "the relationship among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations" (p. 1771). Acknowledging an important intellectual, political, and often personal debt to previous intersectional research coming out of women's, ethnic, and critical race studies—what Hancock (2007) calls "rich, deeply nuanced examinations of groups and populations living at the marginalized crossroads of various categories of difference"—this perspective nevertheless pushes intersectionality to be more comprehensive (and potentially less political) in its approach to the relationship between social location and access (or lack thereof) to power, wealth, privilege, justice, and other resources.

beauty of identity concepts, Stuart Albert, Blake Ashforth, and Jane Dutton (2000) advocate, "is that they provide a way of accounting for the agency of human action within an organizational framework" (p. 14). If the job designs or professional *roles* of welfare caseworkers are dictated by organizational leaders, professional *identities*, as interpretations of these roles, are developed by street-level bureaucrats themselves.⁶ These individuals read institutional cues that address their occupational purpose and objectives and then infuse their own meanings, goals, and commitments to create day-to-day capacities of action. The degree to which these individual interpretations are informed by social identities based on race, class, and gender is the central concern of the current work.

Methods and Background

Because many of the dynamics described in this study—including the articulation and advancement of a set of perceived race-, class-, or gender-based interests—are not advertised functions of these rationalized bureaucracies, I had to find ways to tap into these often difficult-to-observe events. One-on-one interviews in which service providers have opportunities to describe and reflect upon their actions help to tell a story about the meanings they derive from their work and its broader significance.⁷ Many have observed that this "black box" approach, with its emphasis on understanding processes through in-depth case studies, is problematically in short supply in current work on race and organizations (Reskin 2000; Vallas 2003).

The data used for this article are derived from a larger study involving participant observation, archival research, and in-depth interviews with over 70 employees of two local welfare outposts and its central administrative office in Massachusetts. The project investigated the changing professional identities of welfare caseworkers and supervisors under welfare reform; resources and constraints as they implement the new law of the land; and the ways in which race, class, gender, and community memberships shape these dynamics.⁸

For this article, I focus on the experiences and attitudes gleaned from interviews of ten black and seven Latino caseworkers and supervisors in what I call the Staunton office.⁹ In light of ongoing debates within communities of color around a variety of social, political, and economic concerns, in this article I am particularly interested in the encounters that black and Latino street-level bureaucrats report having with the black and Latina clients randomly assigned to their caseloads.¹⁰ Initial interviews were conducted in 2000 and 2001 with 13 black

6. This conceptualization owes an intellectual debt to previous work on administrative roles within bureaucracies as well, defined as a "cohesive set of job-related values and attitudes that provides the public administrator a stable set of expectations about his responsibilities" (Selden, Brewer, and Brudney 1999:175). This scholarship is similarly invested in uncovering and documenting the role conceptions of public administrators.

7. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) describe employee narratives gleaned from interviews as "highly textured depictions of practices and institutions" where individual actions and motives are prominently featured. To be sure, narratives "do not assume that the stories are historically accurate accounts," although they might be just that (p. 336). Rather, narratives give us a sense of norms and beliefs that drive social interaction. These expressed professional self-understandings guide actors' behaviors and help them to convey their places within the institutional environment (Ravasi and van Rekom 2003; Van Maanen 1979).

8. I interviewed respondents for one to two hours on a variety of topics, including but not limited to: their work histories; how they came to work for the organization; attitudes about welfare and welfare reform; perceptions of clients; assessments of the transitions in their jobs and the office over the years; and their beliefs about how their racial, gender, and class backgrounds influence how they approach their work and are perceived within the organization. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Each took place in an enclosed meeting room in the welfare office. Names of respondents and the welfare office have been changed to protect confidentiality.

9. The other office in this study had no black or Latino supervisors or caseworkers.

10. In other work, I explore the intersections of the social and professional identities of white civil servants as well as relations between bureaucrats of color and white clients (Watkins-Hayes 2009).

and Latino frontline staff members (2 black supervisors and 11 caseworkers—6 black and 5 Latino). I returned to the office in 2006 to complete a second round of fieldwork, interviewing two additional Latina and two additional black caseworkers who had transferred into the office from other local offices in recent years. As a check for the consistency of my findings over time, I also re-interviewed two of the original interviewees who had served as key informants in 2001: one black supervisor and one black caseworker.¹¹ This yielded a total of 19 interviews with 17 of the 21 black and Latino TANF program staff members the office employed during my fieldwork. For data analysis, I used grounded theory to generate thick description and a theoretical framework to describe and explain institutional dynamics (Corbin and Strauss 1990).

All but one of the ten black respondents identify as African American in interviews (the tenth is Trinidadian). Place of family origin is noted in the case of the seven Latino employees in this analysis, all of whom are first- or second-generation migrants from Puerto Rico or immigrants from Central or South America. It is important to note at the outset that white employees and clients are racialized as well and must similarly find ways to navigate a racially and politically charged bureaucracy. They too have multiple and competing identities and commitments that potentially inform their understandings and approaches to service delivery. However, space constraints confine me to exploring in-depth the experiences of bureaucrats who are racial minorities within the larger administrative structure of the agency and society at large in order to begin to tease out how social and professional identities intermesh.

The mission of these bureaucrats is to aid clients, the majority of whom are racial and ethnic minorities, in acquiring resources for their families both in the short term and in anticipation of the time when they no longer rely on the welfare system.¹² Caseworkers in this study are responsible for determining client eligibility and program compliance as well as providing welfare-to-work case management—differing from practices in states that separate these functions or outsource one or both to nonprofit or for-profit agencies. The office is comprised of a director and three assistant directors who make up the management team. Eight work units administer TANF, each composed of three to five caseworkers and one supervisor.

As Table 1 illustrates, the Staunton office funnels a geographically and racially diverse staff and client base into an urban location to administer TANF.

In 2000 and 2001, as the city enjoyed record low unemployment, employers were eager to place many welfare recipients in burgeoning service sector jobs in the area. The office's location in a thriving metropolitan area in a politically liberal-leaning state offers its clients employment opportunities, social services, and other urban conveniences that, while by no means exhaustive, are in much shorter supply in other areas. Yet it also is shaped by the challenges faced by the surrounding city as rents and other cost-of-living indicators make it among the most expensive places to live in the state.

Findings and Analysis

The Professional as Personal: How Biography Informs Racialized Professionalism

In the Staunton welfare office, although bureaucratic "middle-ness" is experienced by all street-level welfare workers by virtue of their simultaneous positions of power and subordination vis-à-vis clients and administrators, this is in many ways heightened for employees

11. The perhaps unusual nature of staff turnover in these offices—particularly the low numbers of new hires and the longevity of existing employee careers—helped to facilitate this.

12. Although it has most of the same components as other state TANF programs such as work requirements and time limits, this state's TANF benefit levels are higher than the national average, there is no diversion program, a very high percentage of the caseload is exempt for work requirements and time limits, and full-family sanctions are applied only after adult-only sanctions remain uncured.

Table 1 • Demographic Characteristics of Staunton TANF Office

	2001	2006
Case family heads by race (percentages)		
Black	44.4	39.3
Hispanic	35	37.3
White	15.9	18.6
Asian	4.3	3.7
TANF caseworkers by race (percentages)		
Black	26 (<i>n</i> = 8)	25 (<i>n</i> = 10)
Hispanic	19 (<i>n</i> = 6)	23 (<i>n</i> = 9)
White	48 (<i>n</i> = 15)	45 (<i>n</i> = 18)
Asian	6 (<i>n</i> = 2)	8 (<i>n</i> = 3)
TANF supervisors by race		
Black	2	2
White	6	6

of color. Black and Latino bureaucrats must balance institutionally vested power and their (relatively) privileged class standing against the subordination inherent in their historically disadvantaged racial status. Their relative financial stability—via union-negotiated salaries, benefits, and pension packages—contrasts with the economic instability of their race-mate clients. Clients from their racial groups disproportionately make up the rolls, and their faces and images are most often invoked during political and public debates that lament the wastes of the social welfare system and the personal choices of those on the bottom of the economic ladder (Gilens 1999; Hancock 2004; Lubiano 1992). At the institutional level, it is ironic that the clout to which black and Latino employees have access is in a government bureaucracy that has historically rendered many clients of color powerless (Lieberman 2001; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Schram, Soss, and Fording 2003). Furthermore, these staff members monitor, assist, and police not only poor clients of color, but also poor white clients who, although less economically advantaged, may enjoy skin-color privileges that they themselves do not possess (McIntosh 1988). This paradoxical position of privilege and disadvantage in an agency with such a distinct political character contributes to an environment of racial and class complexity for these “middlemen” and “middlewomen” of color (Pattillo 2007).

Perceptions of their own standing within the institution represent a key piece of how black and Latino bureaucrats interpret the intersection of their professional and social locations. Foremost for these employees is maintaining the measure of economic security that the job provides. For all but a few, their own lower middle class status is the result of a fairly recent climb up the socioeconomic ladder. Most were low income or working class prior to landing a job at the welfare office. Sundra’s story is not unique among her cohort of coworkers who came to work for the office in the late 1980s. An African American caseworker and single mother, she occasionally tells clients: “I understand your struggle because I’m of the same struggle.” Her account of how she came to work for the department after a stint as a childcare worker reveals a personal history with the welfare system plus economic anxieties that tether her to the agency and its stability:

My marriage fell apart and I had to support myself and my son. At that time, I didn’t have a lot of skills. I had to make some goals for myself and I started off [receiving] welfare. I was able to go back to school. I used that to my advantage . . . Because ultimately I was afraid of being 50 [years old] and working at McDonalds. That has always been my fear.

Maintaining the economic foothold that these bureaucrats have achieved requires that they navigate the institution effectively, including its racial politics. Ida, an African American

supervisor, embodies this blend of formidable influence and calculated silence. Born in the segregated South of the 1950s, Ida's mother received welfare during part of Ida's childhood after they moved north. Ida earned a bachelor's degree in social work and has worked for the welfare department since 1978. Coupled with her second job working 20 hours per week at a residential facility for low-income, at-risk children, Ida and her husband have been able to carve out a stable middle class existence largely by working in state social service agencies. With an interaction style that dispenses motherly advice, girlfriend-like anecdotes, and what many agree is a commanding knowledge of the ins and outs of welfare policy, Ida enjoys a degree of inclusion that makes her an informal opinion leader in the agency. Such a privileged standing didn't come easily. She was promoted to supervisor in 1992, an accomplishment made possible by "working hard, staying out of mess, and making sure I don't let them [management] mess with me." I asked Ida what role, if any, she believes her racial background plays in her job. Ida attributes her professional success to a judicious workplace survival strategy in which racism's potential grasp never escapes her thoughts:

I am often encouraged by my coworkers to be a part of the group. I seem to be in the loop on things. I don't even have to leave my office; a lot of times, people just come to me and tell me something so that I always know what's going on in the office, policy or gossip. I pull my share and stay out of mess. I don't try to dump it on anybody. We [workers of color] get that stigma sometimes, "Well, they're not pulling their weight." They're not going to be able to say that about me because I'll do my share, and yours if I have to, to get the job done.

For Ida, racialized professionalism means guarding against racial stereotypes and devising strategies to reduce the chances that her race will negatively shape her work opportunities and institutional reputation (also see Lacy 2007). Success in the organization means both exceeding job expectations and making sure that she is ensconced in informal information-sharing networks, including those of the office's all-white top-level management team.

Since two out of eight supervisors in the office are people of color, and a collegial atmosphere is almost uniformly reported among the staff, strategies like Ida's for integrating into the welfare office's work environment seem successful. Yet despite the efforts of Ida and her colleagues of color to demonstrate that they can defy stereotypes and successfully perform as welfare professionals, the power that the organization grants them is tempered by what these employees describe as stymied opportunity and subtle indications that their symbolic footing within the agency is not as secure as they might desire. When the topic of seeking promotions within the organization came up, Ida described the limited number of minorities among the department's senior management as a source of frustration and discouragement: "Well, they will only let you get so far. That's why I don't even apply for management jobs anymore. You're telling me with all these people of color, there is not one qualified for one of those jobs? I know a lot of people that applied—nothing. So I just do my job and they don't bother me."

Blacks and Latinos expressed similar levels of dissatisfaction with their promotion prospects in the agency, and they talked more frequently about the centrality of race in their mobility than other social characteristic such as gender or immigrant status. The department's employees of color tend to be frontline workers in the local field offices that administer benefits and have direct contact with the public rather than office administrators or officials in central headquarters where the higher-paid and more prestigious positions in the statewide system are located. Carlos, a caseworker who migrated to the state from Puerto Rico, could barely temper his frustration:

When you see a job posted [in the organization] and it pays over \$40,000,¹³ no matter how good you sell yourself, they always find a skill for you not to get it. If you have what they're looking for,

13. In 2001 dollars.

go to central office and you'll see all the Anglo-whites.¹⁴ They have a big title but know nothing. I go on one, two, three interviews and they hire someone else. They say, "You're so good." Well then, give me the job. I've been sharing that information with my coworkers and supervisor [of color] and they tell me the same thing. "I applied for this job and this job, and I never got it," they tell me. Then they find out that someone else of a different color skin got it. They hire a few [people] of color just to cover it up.

By and large, the Staunton staff members of color contend that they do not apply for higher-status positions with optimism.¹⁵ The 2005 promotions of Constance and Leena, two of Staunton's black female employees, to management positions in other offices within the welfare department function as a racial Rorschach test, disproving the contention that race matters for some and serving as exceptions to a pernicious rule for others. Constance's own words in 2001 suggest a bitter irony—promotion is possible for those with the persistence to keep trying, but not without its hidden injuries: "Well, being a black person in any profession where you are going to be thrown predominantly with white people, the levels of what you can get are different. I worked in various social service and human resource jobs, and I have my own battle scars."

Regardless of occupational path, black and Latino employees' own experiences around race and institutional power distinctly influence their perceptions of how the agency operates and where they fit in as professionals. Their positions as street-level bureaucrats of color paradoxically grants and limits their power, generating simultaneous allegiance to and leanness of the organization. As the next two sections will show, this relationship shapes how they wield their institutional clout. As they protect their hard-won economic stability, the lessons gleaned from personal experiences contribute to how black and Latino bureaucrats assess the social and political context in which their race-mate clients operate and how they in turn should respond.

The Professional as Political: How Welfare Politics Inform Racialized Professionalism

"I knew who it was going to target more. Even though I know numbers-wise, more of them (whites) are on welfare. But when I heard about it, I thought about how it was going to affect people of color."

—Timothy, African American, 20-year veteran caseworker

This quote is Timothy's response to a question that I posed about what he thought when welfare reform came into law. As we will see, most black and Latino bureaucrats in Staunton hold clear beliefs about the juxtaposition of racial and economic inequality; and these attitudes inform their views of the welfare policies they implement in sometimes surprising ways. Many respondents identify on some level with the struggles their black and Latino clients face. As Timothy goes on to describe how he believes race affects the employment prospects of his clients of color, he has this to say:

Last hired, first fired of those who do want to go to work. There's what you call institutional racism in this state. There are some things that still haven't changed, they just have another label on them. Take a white boss. Everything he reads in the paper about a black or a person of color is negative.

14. Carlos's specifying of "Anglo-whites" is telling as well. He appears to want to differentiate this group from Hispanic whites, who he arguably sees as part of his social group despite any differences on the basis of class, skin color, or country of origin that might exist.

15. Like their white coworkers, black and Latino workers have diverse educational backgrounds. Some have bachelor's degrees, while others have worked their way up in the organization by starting as data entry clerks with high school diplomas. Seniority and civil service exam scores, rather than educational credentials, put one in the running for supervisor positions, but interviews and the recommendations of past supervisors typically get one the job. Positions higher than supervisor typically rely even more heavily on those qualitative measures.

Watches the news, everything he sees about a black or a person of color is negative. I come in and apply for a job. I don't care if I wear an *eight-piece suit*, I don't have a snowball's chance in hell of getting that job because everything that you've just seen about me in the last 24 hours has been negative. Clients experience some of that.

Timothy was asked to describe how race operates for his clients. Yet in his answer he casts himself as the protagonist, the eager jobseeker—suggesting that Timothy shares some sense of the economic vulnerability of clients of color despite his government job. At the same time, some black respondents worry that black clients do not do enough to disprove the negative reputations assigned to black employees by employers and that this has implications for other blacks (Kennelly 1999; Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991; Moss and Tilly 2001; Newman 1999; Smith 2005; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Lionel, an African American caseworker, joins Timothy in reflecting upon his status as a black man in the labor market to describe the opportunities and barriers facing black clients, intertwining the personal, the political, and the professional:

People have asked me how I feel being the only or first black to do whatever . . . I never thought I was any different than anybody else, and I think that's the attitude that you should have . . . I think unfortunately there's not enough people who think like that . . . A lot of blacks don't feel comfortable being the only minority in a work setting, and I don't understand. They want to quit . . . You should be a pioneer because if this works out for you, and you're a valuable employee, then that means if you recommend somebody, then that person comes highly recommended because of who you are. If you turn around and run out the door, that's gonna make it difficult for anybody else that comes through here that's a minority. Because they're gonna remember the experience with you . . . It's the stereotype that we face day in and day out as minorities that we're slackers. . . I know that there's racism out there. I know if you take the necessary steps to meet it head on, you can overcome that. I think our people are just beaten down and they don't want to compete . . . If you're an African American, forget about it. You're not going anywhere.

Given these concerns about how minorities fare in the labor market, caseworkers of color do not implement the current time-limited, Work First welfare policy without some trepidation. Topping the list of concerns is the quality of the jobs most clients are getting. Sundra finds herself funneling clients into the fast food jobs that she previously described fearing for her own fate. She criticizes the tough policies that she implements and worries about the practicalities of how clients are making ends meet:

There are times when the people in the power to make changes don't consider the little people . . . of how we can bring this family from welfare to work. But you figure overall with the economy and the minimum wages, it's hard. The cost of living is so high. You just feel helpless in trying to help [clients]. No matter where you try to direct them, you know there's a wall and eventually they're gonna hit it and fall down . . . The old saying is, "pull yourself up by the bootstraps." But suppose you don't have any shoes?

Nevertheless, despite worries about the low-wage labor market, the black and Latino workers that I interviewed generally offered up arguments *in support* of the recent changes to the welfare system. They unanimously agreed that prejudice and other racial inequalities faced by clients of color make it more difficult for them to succeed; but they largely view these as barriers that could and should be overcome. Camilla, whose parents emigrated from Costa Rica, commented that: "There is a way out; welfare is not the answer . . . I know it's harder and especially harder when you have children, but you can do it. It's not a matter of months, but you can do it." Black and Latino bureaucrats described specific aspects of the policy such as time limits, sanctions, and work requirements as important tools to encourage clients to follow agency directives and to emphasize the now-temporary nature of welfare services. Veronica emigrated from the Dominican Republic and has worked for the department for 11 years. She views as a weakness the department's forgiving policy towards sanctions that make them relatively easy to cure after just two weeks of compliance:

"Clients are not getting the message that you have to do [what we ask], and you are going to be sanctioned if you don't do it." Lionel described his frustration that clients balk at the low-wage jobs that they are often offered as a result of the work requirement: "Nobody wants to start at the bottom. Everybody wants to start at the top, and that's not how it works. You've got to prove yourself first." These bureaucrats believe that government bears a responsibility to help those who cannot find work, but almost all interviewed are largely uncomfortable with the idea of public cash support over an indefinite period of time. In this respect, they are very similar to both the majority of their white coworkers and previous literature that documents the views of welfare workers about reform (Danziger and Seefeldt 2000; Hays 2003).

Staunton's street-level bureaucrats know the economic and social realities confronting those leaving welfare and have lived with the policy long enough to witness some of its shortcomings. They've seen clients of all skill levels return to the rolls, unsuccessful in navigating the rigors of the low-wage labor market even after some periods of economic stability. But caseworkers' logic is that just about anything is better than long-term welfare receipt, and clients need to keep trying unless they are physically or mentally unable to work. Timothy commented, "Whether it be unemployment, SSI, social security, [welfare], thank God that there's a safety net. And there will always be a permanent underclass, trust me on that. But let it be a trampoline and not a hammock." These bureaucrats had already been implementing the current policy for five years when I entered the field, and very few policymakers were calling for its abolishment. In fact, many policymakers point to the massively declined rolls and increased employment among low-income mothers to argue for even tougher requirements. Black and Latino political leaders have not taken up the mantle of reforming welfare reform, and grass-roots activists are increasingly turning their attention to living-wage campaigns, immigration debates, and efforts to increase the minimum wage. Pushing clients to see the writing on the wall and move away from the system are arguably realistic responses to the hard actualities of the current regime. The dire conditions of their clients, these bureaucrats argue, require blunt intervention.

For a handful of the bureaucrats of color interviewed, support for welfare reform is not simply a professional opinion about what is best for the majority of their clients or a regurgitation of the organization's mission. It is a political calculation as well. These employees express general support for welfare reform *because* of its racialized implications. Undergirding their beliefs is the assumption that the welfare system has broad implications not only for their clients, but for minorities in general. It therefore bears a personalized meaning for these bureaucrats, even if they themselves have never been on assistance.

Political scientist Michael Dawson (1995) contends that African Americans often share a sense that their fate is linked to that of other African Americans, and there is some, although less robust, evidence to suggest that Latinos also share a sense of linked fate with other Latinos (McClain et al. 2006; Miller et al. 1981; Sanchez 2006).¹⁶ "The historical experiences of African Americans," Dawson (1995) argues, "have resulted in a situation in which group interests have served as a useful proxy for self-interest" (p. 77). Those who express high levels of linked-fate consciousness believe that the collective social standing of their racial group affects their personal possibilities for advancement.

Carlos's attitudes toward the welfare system illustrate this linked-fate perspective. After arriving from Puerto Rico with few resources, he took classes to improve his English language skills, attended a local community college for a year, and then studied business

16. In this study, I rely heavily on frameworks initially developed to explain black politics because many of them appear to be pertinent to the Latino interviewees as well. However, I recognize that the experiences of black and Latino staff members in street-level bureaucracies are likely to differ because each group has a distinct history, a unique way that it was incorporated into government work, and variation in the amount of resistance that marked its entrance. Therefore, when appropriate and available, I incorporate literature that specifically addresses politics within Latino communities.

administration at a local university. Within seven years, he had a bachelor's degree and a job screening welfare applications. Yet his transition was not easy:

When I moved to the U.S., my whole world fell because I grew up believing things about America and how we are a part of the U.S. When I finally came here, it was a complete lie. They don't want us . . . That affects us a lot because when we are there [in Puerto Rico], we feel we're a part of the U.S. When we come here, it's no, no, no, the people don't want us here . . . They say, "If you don't speak English, go back to your country!"

Although the racism that he experienced within the United States surprised Carlos, he quickly deduced that the government program for which he was now working had a racial politics all its own. He realized that when people talked about welfare, they seemed to be talking about people who look like him. His family has never been on welfare, but he feels implicated in its racialized vilification. Over time, the actual and perceived racial composition of the welfare rolls has become highly political in Carlos's mind, an association that he considers crippling not only to clients in the welfare office, but also to him. Challenging that perception is something of a personal mission. "Every worker here, whether white or black, is in the same boat when it comes to that. We all get people from our same ethnic group, and I like to remind people of that." As Carlos integrates his sense of racial group consciousness into the workplace, the demographic composition of the office's caseload has a social meaning that informs how he interacts with colleagues and understands his role as a professional.

When welfare reform was announced, Carlos's concerns about individual clients' fates were overshadowed by his focus on the group-level implications of the new law. Carlos reasoned that since the presence of Latinos and blacks on the rolls had already been demonized, restructuring their ties to the welfare system could be best in the long run:

Many years ago, you could be on welfare forever and that happened from generation to generation. Since the reform came, and I'm glad, you have to go in and out. In that way, it does good to our community and the people receiving the aid. When I talk about "community," I'm not talking about the Hispanic community only. Who are "my people"? Everybody of color. People coming from other countries, different races and ethnicities.

This sense of pan-Hispanic and even pan-minority solidarity is a filter through which Carlos evaluates the policy he now implements. In Carlos's mind, the transitional emphasis of the new welfare system has the potential to liberate people of color from the pernicious grasp of dependency and revise the public narrative about minorities and the welfare system. In this sense, how Carlos discusses the demographics of the caseload with coworkers and evaluates the latest welfare policy goes beyond his role as a departmental employee; his focus places him squarely in the role of a member of a racial community. As such, Carlos's racialized professionalism is manifested as a political project.

Upon closer inspection, we see that Carlos's views on reliance on the welfare system among people of color is both gendered and classed: The unique needs of poor mothers of color are collapsed into what Carlos believes is "good for the community," and his belief is that these women should define themselves as labor market participants rather than stay-at-home caretakers. His linked-fate framework reveals pitfalls identified by many observers of black and Latino politics. This investment often leads to further marginalization of the least powerful members within communities of color as the public representation of "group interests" is historically more reflective of the goals of its privileged members (e.g., middle class, heterosexual, male) (Boyd 2006; Cohen 1999; Gaines 1996; Ginwright 2002; McBride 2005; Pattillo 2007; Reed 1999). The extent, forms, and context of an all-encompassing pan-ethnic Latino linked fate has also been challenged by researchers who conclude that the notion of "interests" on the basis of race and ethnicity is fraught with qualifiers, contradictions, and contingencies (Jones-Correa and Leal 1996; Masuoka 2006; Segura and Rodrigues 2006; Stokes 2003).

Despite these complexities, many of the black and Latino street-level bureaucrats in this study hold ideologies about their racial group and its conditions and use these beliefs to interpret the social and political context in which their clients of color operate. To them, racialized professionalism includes injecting not only personal experiences but also political beliefs around race into their reading of their work. As we will see in the next section, they reason that their racial communities are better served when the policy is administered with an eye towards a larger moral and political rescue mission. These bureaucrats argue that they bring a sense of racial group solidarity and consciousness to their service delivery in order to support and encourage their more disadvantaged race-mates to engage in certain behaviors.

Role Models, Regulators, or Both? How Racialized Professionalism Informs Service Delivery

Staunton's top-level administrators explicitly discourage anything but a neutral stance toward clients in the service-delivery process, yet black and Latino frontline employees are hard-pressed to keep group consciousness from making its way into their work. These views and behaviors are not easily classified as biases in favor of clients of color at the expense of white clients. Nor do these workers express preferences to work with clients from their own racial group to the exclusion of others (nor does the agency match them in that way). Rather, black and Latino street-level bureaucrats are responding to the economic and racial environments in which they find themselves and making choices about whether and how to explicitly inject race into the service-delivery process. Welfare reform has assigned greater obligations to clients and street-level bureaucrats to put strategies in place to help clients succeed without long-term public assistance. This has come with new opportunities for caseworkers to shape organizational processes, including how they communicate policies using their own worldviews.

Veronica and Sharlene, both black, stand as two of the few respondents who dismiss the notion that their dealings with black and Latina clients differ from those they have with white clients. Their strategy is to try to be "apolitical" in thinking about their work and welfare's racial implications, and they frown upon the idea of invoking racial politics of any kind on the job. It is not that they consider race a non-issue, but they see clear limits to the idea of unity in the name of racial sameness. Politics, they reason, are best left to the politicians and administrators who send orders down to the local welfare office. Both describe being preoccupied with the heavy demands of the job and have decided that impartiality, even detachment, is the best way to efficiently manage the workload. Perhaps more importantly, Sharlene is particularly cautious because she had recently come under the scrutiny of office administrators after a white client accused her of treating her unfairly.¹⁷ "Policy is policy," Sharlene defended, "regardless of whether you are black, white, green, whatever." For Sharlene and Veronica, race is and should be understood as an implicit rather than explicit part of their professional identities.

The majority of black and Latino frontline workers, however, do not assert this level of professional detachment. As we saw in the previous section, a sense of group consciousness often translates into a racialized understanding of the welfare system and the unique issues

17. The client e-mailed the commissioner after coming into the office to find her assigned caseworker Sharlene, who works only part time, gone for the day. Later, Sharlene denied the woman's emergency food stamps application due to ineligibility. Sharlene explained that the client's letter expressed concern that "her case wouldn't be opened quickly because she had a black social worker." Although Sharlene was told by administrators to disregard the comments, Sharlene was both offended and worried about how the incident was being interpreted by management. She explains, "So when I read it; I got pissed off. Because when you come in, I don't see no color . . . My job is to help you . . . I didn't like that." As a result of the incident, Sharlene felt that the best way to survive in the organization was to try to ignore race, using it neither as a hindrance nor tool in service delivery.

facing clients of color. They find assisting all clients valuable, but the fact that many are people of color advances the social significance of their work. Lionel commented, "I think that every time [black clients] have a success story, people might say otherwise, but I think you really feel good about that." Carlos opined that his accent and brown skin were deterrents to his landing a professional job for many years before starting his current state job. Working for the welfare department affords him the opportunity to both serve others and be in a place where his ethnic background is seen as an asset by his clients:

I wanted to be a social worker and I like to help people. I always use the opportunity to educate my people . . . Yes; clients of color have certain expectations of you because you're a person of color. When Hispanic people come, even if they speak English, they want a Hispanic person. They think it's cultural [that] we'll communicate better, which is true.

Consistent with findings from previous research on black neighborhoods, Carlos, Lionel, and many of their coworkers use state-bestowed authority to funnel resources to those members of their community who haven't been able to overcome some of the obstacles that they have (Boyd 2006; Pattillo 2007). From their perspective, welfare casework has social resonance in part *because* of their racial backgrounds, and these bureaucrats do not want to completely disentangle their racial identities from their professional identities.

Black and Latino bureaucrats assert that they lack the power needed to change agency rules or deliver a different set of services to clients of color. To protect their own institutional and economic standing, they try to avoid appearing impartial to management because, as Sundra explained, "I have to keep a job too." But these employees nonetheless find ways to weave together a style of interaction that, while articulating the expectations of the institution, convey another set of messages. Although they do not directly influence the size of a client's check or whether she is mandated to go to work, these bureaucrats clearly infuse tailored, discretionary advice and guidance into their interactions with certain clients.¹⁸ All clients receive attention and resources, but clients of color receive a message that goes beyond the standard language of time limits, work requirements, and sanctions from these workers.

Anna Korteweg (2003) points out that welfare recipients are simultaneously designated as detached workers, marketable mothers, and dependent citizens who are expected to become independent worker-citizen subjects under the new welfare regime. Much of the discourse in welfare agencies now focuses on this drive. Black and Latino workers are explicitly and implicitly injecting race into this project in order to encourage race-mate clients to invest in the process. For instance, Louisa, a Puerto Rican caseworker, explains how she describes the department's training and education opportunities. While bureaucrats most often reserve these tailored messages for members of their own racial groups, Louisa joins Carlos in invoking pan-minority solidarity in the service-delivery process:

When I come across a Latina [client], I always say, "You can do it. It's possible. My parents were on welfare when I was growing up. I remember the poverty that I grew up in, and I didn't want that for myself or my kids. The only way out is education."¹⁹ Even if it's a GED, an entry position is better than being on welfare. I've been able to go to school and achieve things that I know are out there for me; it's not easy. But it's there to be grabbed and had." I've tried to stress to the clients. Blacks, I tell them the same as Hispanics. Somehow I try to convey to them that because of who we are,

18. This finding is reminiscent of Royster's (2003) study comparing the job acquisition strategies of black and white working class men. She describes white teachers who adopted a differentiated approach to counseling white versus black students in a high-school training program. Yet the crucial difference here is that black and Latino bureaucrats did not appear to offer a different set of tangible resources such as leads on lucrative jobs in the way this occurred in Royster's analysis, nor can the interventions made by black and Latino bureaucrats with minority clients be deemed universally preferential treatment because of the content of the intervention.

19. Unlike some other states, this state allows time-limited recipients to attend school for the first 12 months of their allocated 24 months of benefits under certain conditions and within certain limits.

we have to be a step ahead of everybody. We are black and Hispanic and always thought of as inferior. We have to be a step ahead.

Louisa explicitly frames the economic issues embedded in welfare policy for Latina and black clients in racialized terms and draws upon her own biography to link the professional, the personal, and the political. Connections made on the basis of sameness give way to a politics of group consciousness that Louisa then translates into the work setting. Louisa's message of racial social uplift is woven into her service delivery as she advocates challenging stereotypes of minority inferiority by staying a "step ahead" through work and education. Intertwined is a class discourse that is decidedly centered on encouraging clients of color to engage in "bootstrap" climbs similar to the one that she offers up as her personal narrative. While it is beyond the scope of this study to systematically determine whether these messages lead to outcomes for clients that differ from what would happen if their caseworkers were white or bureaucrats of color who did not engage in such strategies, Louisa believes that they resonate with clients:

I feel comfortable that I've had successes with my approach. I haven't had many, but even now there is a person who is in charge of the Entrée Program, Hispanic woman. She used to be my client. She was going to school struggling, but she went through. That's a success that makes me feel good. She actually used [welfare] the right way, as a stepping stone. I encouraged her and gave her the support and here she is. When I see her now she has a smile and can't take it away because she's on the same side as I am and even making more money than me. In that respect, I feel proud that a Latina is in a good position.

If we believe, in the tradition of Michael Lipsky's *Street-Level Bureaucracy* (1983), that public policy is created in daily interactions between bureaucrats and clients, intra-community political discourse becomes part of the policy implementation process within these institutions. One might argue that, by promoting behaviors that are in line with the goals of welfare reform, black and Latino bureaucrats are simply reflecting agency priorities rather than engaging in politically-informed racialized professionalism. However, these employees' messages reveal common themes in black and Latino political mobilization. Success is referenced as a shared experience among race-mates, not simply the effective implementation of policy priorities. These workers emphasize actively resisting racial exclusion, triumphing over adversity, and proudly representing "the community." As we saw with Louisa, it is not uncommon for them to highlight their similarity to clients in their interactions, asserting social distance to serve as an example of how far one can go.

Black and Latino bureaucrats engaging in this strategic integration of their professional and racial identities are not unwilling to use their power to regulate. Their interventions therefore can be paternalistic or collaborative, condescending or supportive, even all at the same time, depending on the orientation of the bureaucrat. However, they almost always leverage in-group or pan-minority racial politics in powerful ways to articulate why a client should adopt a certain set of behaviors while using class to at once distance and link themselves to clients. These bureaucrats of color take liberties to express views to black and Latino clients that they wouldn't necessarily express to white clients because, as Timothy explains, "Sometimes you have certain white people that will say, 'How dare you talk to me like that?' But with blacks and people of color, that's not the problem. I encourage all of the clients, but yes, there's a familiarity there, things you can say to people of color." One could interpret this as confidence that actions taken with minority clients won't be policed within the agency in quite the same way that interactions with white clients might be. But Timothy assumes a kinship based on his racial identity and working class background that he can then incorporate into his repertoire of policy implementation tools and leverage in service delivery to help punctuate his message about welfare reform. For him, this policy communications strategy represents a smooth merger of his racial, class, and professional identities. His comments elucidate this point:

[When welfare reform happened] I thought, how can I as a worker use this? What can I do to empower clients of color to help themselves? I tell them, "I used to watch cowboys and Indians when I was little. And the cowboys would be riding up the path and the Indians would be lying up in the rocks, getting ready to ambush them and kill them. And I used to run up to the TV as a child and pound on it and shout, 'Watch out, watch out, it's a trap!'" And then I look back at them [clients] and say, "And I say that same thing to you now," [whispering] "Watch out, watch out, this is a trap! And I'm frustrated if you're not hearing me . . . Don't get comfortable. Hang around people of like kind, it doesn't mean that you're better than [them]. If you're trying to be a truck driver, hang around other truck drivers. If you want to do real estate, hang around real estate agents. Hang around people who you want to be like. Don't hang around people who are on welfare. Water seeks its own level." Just trying to educate them, because there's a saying that goes, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge . . ."

Timothy's "cowboys and Indians" homily reveals some of the complex implications of these moments. On the one hand, his depiction of the welfare system to clients of color is grounded in a sincere passion for this population and genuine concern for their well-being. Putting aside his assignment of people of color to the role of (white) cowboys and the welfare system to that of the (exotic) Indians, Timothy views his tale's heroes as individuals in constant danger of unanticipated hazards. As an observer with a bird's-eye view of the potential outcome, his task is to warn. "I am my sister's keeper," he explains. "I tell them, 'Don't play into their hands.' You know what they say: Don't be a stereotype. You got to beat them at their own game."

On the other hand, Timothy's sermon is grounded in assumptions that reveal that racialized professionalism in practice is both classed and gendered. To Timothy, receiving welfare is a blemish.²⁰ The idea that welfare recipients should distance themselves from other welfare recipients is somewhat unrealistic, considering the dense intra-class networks that low-income mothers leverage for child care, social support, and other critical resources (Domínguez and Watkins 2003; Stack 1974). Timothy references truck drivers and real estate agents, occupations that require costly training that most of his clients cannot afford without assistance. These jobs also exist outside of the fast food, nursing aid, and low-level retail work that most of these women will likely be offered. At the center of Timothy's prescriptions are directives aimed at modifying individual behaviors of poor women of color to encourage them to exit the welfare system as quickly as possible.²¹

Comparisons between the styles of female and male bureaucrats of color should be made cautiously because of the small number of respondents (14 women compared with just 3 men), but some careful observations are in order. Notably, although both groups are trying to convince clients to find work and limit their time on welfare, black female and Latina bureaucrats appear to adopt a different tone and set of tools from their male counterparts.

20. Political scientist Tate (1999) writes: "Welfare mothers have long served as easy scapegoats, and this has been the case even in the black community . . . While blacks had emphatically rejected the anti-welfare language of Ronald Reagan during the 1980s that included the stereotypical black 'welfare queen' who owned furs and drove Cadillacs, many in the 1990s found persuasive the more subtle attack on black welfare *mothers* as irresponsible, who, instead of striving to provide for their children were actually damning them to a lifetime of crime and welfare dependency" (p. 355, emphasis added). Considering the increasingly conservative political attitudes of blacks toward the welfare system, as documented in Tate's (1999, 2003) analysis of the National Black Election Study (NBES), such reactions are perhaps not surprising. There was, until late in the debate, minimal protest from top political and civil rights leaders that represented large constituencies of racial minorities. Barker, Jones, and Tate (1999) point out that "Congressional Black Caucus members voted overwhelmingly against the bill, and some condemned the legislation as a betrayal of core Democratic principles. But on the whole, public criticism was muted" (p. 287).

21. Seeking to navigate oppressive white-dominated political, social, and economic structures and processes, the politics of racial respectability rely heavily on the modification and policing of individual behaviors and the promotion of mainstream norms and values within black communities in an effort to prove worthiness for social uplift and equality. These politics, scholars have pointed out, have historically focused on the social regulation of more economically and educationally disadvantaged race-mates by individuals who have the weight of private and public institutions behind them (Cohen 1999; Gaines 1996; Higginbotham 1993).

They are more likely to reference their own experiences as welfare recipients or single mothers of color and offer themselves up as examples to their clients that they too can escape the welfare system (see also Korteweg 2003). Having “been there,” they deliver messages stressing the importance of using human and economic capital as tools to nurture children, and they explicitly argue that the way to empower themselves as mothers is to work outside the home to climb a difficult but ultimately rewarding labor market ladder. Michelle, an African American caseworker for almost two decades, describes telling her personal story to clients over the years:

I’ve been there. I was on welfare . . . I’m not embarrassed to tell you where I started out at. I tell them, “look at me . . . I graduated from high school, and [went to] college . . . If I can do it, you can do it. And you have more tools to work with than I had to work with at that point. You can do it and do it better . . . I’m here to help you as much as I can . . . My son is in college now. He’s in his third year.” [With black female clients] I find myself trying to do more of that for them . . . I’m there for [all my clients]. But sometimes I have tendency to lean a little bit more [with black female clients] because I see how far we struggle to get there. Plus I’m black too and I can relate more to them than I can relate to the white[s] or the Hispanics.

Similarly, Loretta, a Venezuelan woman who came to the United States in 1996, believes that her Latina clients are receptive to the maternal messages that she reserves for them, distilled from her own history of poverty and welfare use. “I feel just as proud if they do well, regardless [of race],” she commented, “But with the Spanish girls, particularly that are younger, I feel like I’m kind of more like a mother.” She describes welfare reform as a “necessary evil” and views it as her obligation to help clients get all of the services and advice that they can in order to prepare for the time when they can no longer rely on the office. In contrast to the pan-minority assertions of some of her coworkers, Loretta tries to motivate her Latina clients by drawing contrasts between them and “other” welfare recipients of color who she believes are not as respectable:

I got [Latina] girls that were very rowdy. They were raised with girls of color in their urban population. And they have the same swing, the same talk. I feel like I can tell them, “Don’t you want to do better? Do you want to be on welfare all your life? And your kids on welfare all your life? Don’t you want better money than this?” And I tell them many times; they probably can quote me. “I’m telling it to you, like if you were my daughter.” They understand that I am telling them for their own good.

Conversely, male bureaucrats tend to target what they perceive as clients’ negative behaviors and engage in harsher scolding. Challenging clients to help protect the public image of the race and consider the consequences of their actions for the racial community at large appears to be a more popular tactic among male bureaucrats. For example, Carlos tells his [mostly female] clients of color: “[Welfare] is only to help you until you get on your feet. Don’t try to be a parasite or what the system wants you to be. Don’t be dependent on this . . . What will you tell your children that grow up in this country and they learn to survive just on a minimal income also? This is only to keep *us* under the foot, dependent.”

The multiple factors that influence whether clients follow the edicts of welfare reform are both institutional and individual. Their welfare-to-work transitions are marked by ebbs and flows and peppered with success and failures, opportunities and closed doors, “good” and “bad” choices, resource constraints and underutilized resources, and personal limitations and agency breakdowns (DeParle 2004; Edin and Lein 1997; Hays 2003; Korteweg 2003; Newman 1999, 2006; Seccombe 1998; Watkins 2000). Yet when clients engage in behaviors that these bureaucrats deem counterproductive—having another baby, quitting a job that seemed like a good opportunity—the tone of the rescue mission can become even more severe. Bureaucrats’ structural critiques of the labor market and the paltry resources offered to low-income women

yield to clear messages that recipients are ultimately responsible for improving their own situations and are expected to fully invest in the welfare-to-work enterprise. Timothy described his related frustrations with a frankness and tenor that seemed more prominent among the male caseworkers in this analysis:

It kills me—[when they have] a bunch of kids and different “baby daddies.” I sometimes ask [clients] to write the fathers’ names down, so they can see it on paper. So they’ll get it. How are you going to give “your best” away so easily? Instead of going 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 to 10 [in a relationship], they go from 1 to 10, just like that. And I hear them, “My man is doing 8 to 10, 3 to 5 [years in prison].” He ain’t your man! He’s somebody else’s man around here and probably somebody else’s woman up there. Unless he is snoring in your face, he ain’t your man! Don’t give away “your best” for nothing. I hear other clients—all of their baby daddies are in jail or on drugs. “What are you attracting?” I’ll ask them. “Are you picking them or are they picking you?”

When Timothy’s initial efforts prove ineffective, he may move his interventions in directions that are increasingly radical, disapproving, and invasive. Asking clients to write down the names of their children’s fathers is not standard protocol; caseworkers verbally solicit this information from clients and type it into the computer for the child support enforcement process. Timothy’s motives and methods—which also include asking clients about the wisdom of their choices around intimate relationships—are informed by a notion of racialized professionalism that transcends the boundaries of standard caseworker-client protocol. In fact, his lecture on family formation goes beyond the immediate policy concerns of welfare reform: child support enforcement and discouraging childbearing while receiving state support through family cap rules. Timothy is also targeting the women’s *choices* of partners and the multiple paternities of their children. Even the quality of these relationships—the wisdom of going from “1 to 10” so quickly and having a relationship with an incarcerated partner—receives Timothy’s attention.

In these interactions, clients, mostly women, are left unprotected from the harsher policing efforts of slightly more privileged race-mates.²² Their stigmatization, their minimal political clout, and the power imbalance between them and street-level bureaucrats likely make them reluctant to openly contest this morality policing. Timothy reports that few clients have responded to him with indignation: “You still get some of those old-school [blacks] saying, ‘Even though I’m here applying for cash assistance . . . you can’t talk to me that way.’ So you have to be careful.”²³ While other caseworkers might view certain client choices as outside the scope of their immediate concerns as policy implementers, Timothy clearly interprets many of his clients’ life decisions as impediments to a political and even moral imperative. As a result, Timothy demonstrates how racialized professionalism can be multi-layered, varied, and fraught. Investments and agendas designed to target intersecting disadvantages that arise from overlapping inequalities are embedded in the professional identities of many bureaucrats of color and subsequently deployed in institutional service delivery in ways that add an additional layer of support, regulation, or both to the experiences of clients of color.

22. Previous sociological work suggests that many of these women have their own justifications for their decisions around motherhood, relationships, and work. For example, Edin and Kefalas (2005) suggest that many poor women believe that childbearing and rearing under extreme conditions of poverty have the ability to “prove their worth” and help turn their lives around, whether their children’s fathers are available or not.

23. Other research suggests that many low-income mothers actually share these critical perceptions of welfare use, offering measured support for welfare reform, and focus their efforts on demonstrating, even if superficially, that their behavior falls within socially accepted norms (Hancock 2004; Hays 2003; Seccombe 1998; Seccombe, James, and Walters 1998). There also seems to be an important generational component to these interactions. In 2006, the average age of agency employees was 56 years old. The average client was 26.2 years old. Timothy is alluding to the ways in which older clients might contest these more supervisory interventions.

Conclusions and Implications

Black and Latino Government Intermediaries in the Post Welfare Reform Era

This article set out to explore how race is deployed by black and Latino street-level bureaucrats to interpret and operationalize their professional roles within a local welfare office. It shows that these employees strategically integrate their professional and racial identities by drawing upon occupational experiences, personal histories, and political attitudes to determine how race should inform the performance of their work. Racialized professionalism represents these employees' formulations of what workplace activities should accomplish in terms of both the immediate sphere of policy implementation and bureaucrats' broader ambitions for their racial groups. It involves the creation of discursive tools to pursue these goals and a unique lens through which to interpret organizational processes (Dhingra 2007).

Racialized professionalism is a concept that contributes to our understanding of the profound dilemmas facing professional people of color who are asked to both support and discipline race-mates within institutions. It is perhaps best understood as a three-step process that takes place at the level of the institution, the macro-structure, and the micro-interaction. First, individuals assess their perceived institutional power to pursue certain outcomes. For the black and Latino bureaucrats in the Staunton TANF office, the dominant forms of power operating in the economic, political, and social spheres provide a backdrop for their experiences as welfare office employees. Their presence and reportedly positive experiences at work evince the department's progress in hiring a workforce more reflective of the community it serves. With decent salaries and considerable job stability, they benefit from almost a century of struggle to integrate the public employment sector. Yet these individuals must remain vigilant against the possibility that their opportunities might be shaped or stymied by their race (King 1999). As middlemen and middlewomen in terms of both their institutional and societal positions, black and Latino bureaucrats endure perceived racial inequalities within the agency and demonstrate institutional loyalty in order to maintain their somewhat precarious economic stability (Pattillo 2007). This likely encourages them to restrict their efforts for minority clients to the range of acceptable behaviors within the institution.

Second, bureaucrats engage the political and social context of the policies they implement, offering support and critiques that shape their views on how they might use their discretion to administer policy. Black and Latino bureaucrats— informed by environmental conditions, political objectives, and personal strategies for navigating racial inequality—assess welfare reform as a policy that has disproportionate implications for members of their racial groups. While raising concerns about the new law of the land and how it affects poor blacks and Latinos, these supervisors and caseworkers ultimately champion the policy. This is not simply a case of bureaucrats obediently following the will of the institution; they have their own political and social motives for supporting the new system and hope that it will improve clients' quality of life as well as the collective standing of their racial groups. As such, perceived group interests are key drivers of racialized professionalism.

Third, bureaucratic actors choose whether and how to operationalize a perceived set of racial group interests in the course of service delivery. In other words, they strategize about how they want to use race as a tool to do their work. As professional identities intersect with distinct interpretations of the social meaning and implications of one's racial position, many black and Latino frontline workers attempt to use their occupational authority and social status to pursue certain political, personal, and professional goals that are grounded in group-centered ideologies. Legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1991) writes: "People of color often must weigh their interests in avoiding issues that might reinforce distorted public perceptions against the need to acknowledge and address intra-community problems" (p. 1256). In Staunton, black and Latino bureaucrats use the caseworker-client interaction as an alternative space to address perceived intra-group concerns related to work, family, and

state involvement with individual clients of color. For these bureaucrats, mere organizational presence is not enough; they rely on their dual status as both community insiders and agents of the state to build relationships with clients and direct them toward certain goals. The focus on advice giving as a key component of welfare casework allows black and Latino street-level bureaucrats to intervene in the lives of their clients of color in distinct ways, but guards against charges of bias and allows them to adhere to the expectations of the institution and protect their own standing. These actors see their interventions as liberatory in that they seek to alleviate the social and economic suffering of poorer race-mates and facilitate their independence from a relationship with the welfare system that, while perhaps necessary in the short run, they view as potentially damaging to both their clients and the racial community at large. As such, the choices of these bureaucrats do not unilaterally contaminate policy implementation, but in this case, complement them.

Of course, despite respondents' assertions of the primacy of race in informing their professional experiences and discursive tools, there are multiple identities at play here. An intersectional analysis, Evelyn Simien (2007) challenges, "rejects the separability of identity categories, as it recognizes the heterogeneity of various race-sex groups" (p. 265). We saw how racialized professionalism is heavily influenced by class and gender, which help us to understand variation among bureaucrats in terms of how and why they deployed racialized, gendered, and class discourse during service delivery. Bureaucrats' assimilationist leanings favor clients entering the low-wage labor market, adhering to normative practices around childbearing, and limiting their use of welfare benefits. While these interactions create opportunities for cross-class intra-racial connection and empowerment, they can also further marginalize clients with already limited power who rarely have the opportunity to challenge these directives during these exchanges. Women of color therefore disproportionately find themselves as both the recipients of support in the name of racial solidarity and the targets of gender- and class-based social scrutiny and regulation in ways that likely differ from what white clients or the men in their lives experience. These bureaucrats' simultaneous disciplinary positions of encouragement and reprimand therefore complicate any assumption that matching black and Latino caseworkers to clients from their racial groups will offer a uniformly more beneficial approach to service delivery.²⁴

This article also reveals some of the longer-term implications of welfare reform as it becomes institutionalized within offices. Is the embrace of welfare policy at least in part a reflection of workers' relative inability to dismantle major obstacles to change for their clients? Without the resources to heavily intervene in their clients' lives, discourse becomes a central tool for workers in their quest to facilitate upward mobility. While bureaucrats expressed support for the new welfare policies, their relative impotence may have fed the adoption of an ideology that fit the demands of the job—a job that they themselves need to maintain their own economic stability. In many ways, black and Latino bureaucrats, presumably like many of their clients, have adapted and yielded to a welfare system that places much of the burden of change on the behaviors and fortunes of clients. As clients confront work opportunities shaped by their skin color, gender, and/or economic disadvantages, these caseworkers and supervisors are ultimately unable to protect them. Their politically pragmatic messages offer a brand of policy implementation tailored to help clients of color navigate these realities; yet, the aims and tactics of these social uplift missions, as well as any problems in the welfare system itself or the low-wage labor market, go unchallenged.

24. Immigrant status may be another social location that complicates racialized professionalism. There is some evidence to suggest that recently arrived Latino immigrants do not hold the same views about the prevalence of racial discrimination as blacks and Latinos who have lived in the United States for longer periods of time (Domínguez 2008). I found few differences between the black and Latino bureaucrats in this study; yet, this may be because most of the Latino respondents in this study are Puerto Ricans or immigrants who have been in the United States for over 15 years. They are therefore more likely to have experienced race-based discrimination and include it as a key factor in describing their opportunities and experiences in the labor market.

Ultimately, did these bureaucrats “help” clients of color? The answer hinges upon how one defines “help.” Depending on political persuasion, some might argue that these workers offer tailored case management that regulates and supports behaviors toward appropriate ends. Others will accuse them of making scapegoats of their race-mates in neglect of the larger structural problems and behaviors that are represented across the entire caseload, not just among blacks and Latinos. It seems that the bureaucrats surveyed in this study may well have done both. They assessed the political current and savvily steered their clients towards possibly better lives, but they have also failed to criticize a set of reforms that still leave a disproportionate number of people of color mired in poverty.

Future research can explore how clients interpret the messages coming from bureaucrats from their racial group, whether they adopt certain behaviors as a result, and whether this ultimately shapes outcomes. Further work could also draw comparisons among bureaucrats of color on the basis of their seniority within the organization, age, or immigrant status, and could delve into differences based on the fine gradations of socioeconomic status among those bureaucrats who have disparate education levels, household incomes, and job positions. Because of the number of respondents that formed the basis of this article, these kinds of robust comparisons are difficult to make. Lastly, future studies could explore how white bureaucrats engage in racialized professionalism as they determine the role that whiteness should and does play in how they understand their institutional power, the political and social context of the policies they implement, and whether and how to actively deploy their racial, gender, and class statuses in service delivery.

Arguably, these events reflect bureaucrats’ own class stories and are very much in line with the strategies they have adopted for navigating the welfare system as professionals (and in some cases, former clients). They offer clients lessons learned, not simply for leaving welfare, but for navigating state and economic systems from a position of disadvantage. They are not abstract recommendations, but tactical and perhaps world-weary instructions of calculated silence, resilience in the face of socioeconomic striving, assimilation into the demands of the state and the mainstream labor market, and acceptance of both these entities’ limitations. As such, this analysis tells us a parallel story about the mobility narratives offered by black and Latino street-level bureaucrats as well as their prescriptions for bootstrap climbs among their clients of color.

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