

Race, Respect, and Red Tape: Inside the Black Box of Racially Representative Bureaucracies

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ABSTRACT

Racially representative bureaucracy theory suggests that black and Latino clients of street-level bureaucracies will uniformly experience the benefits of a racially diverse staff within these institutions and perceive it as working to their advantage. Conversely, street-level bureaucracy theory suggests that racial minorities working within these organizations are under massive constraints that significantly hamstringing their efforts to exercise discretion in ways that might benefit minority clients. Using in-depth interviews of both recipients and providers of public cash benefits and food stamps, I find that the majority of black and Latina clients interviewed in a racially diverse welfare office do not view staff members who share their racial status as operating in ways that are distinctly informed by racial group commonality. A strong bureaucratic structure creates institutional boundaries that often restrict meaningful engagement between these groups despite social group commonality. In those instances in which black and Latina clients do have a racialized interpretation of their encounters with bureaucrats from their racial groups, they are not monolithically understood. Clients can read them as either pointed but welcomed interventions by racemates who offer wisdom on how to navigate the welfare system or heavy-handed maneuvers by more privileged members of their racial communities. Ultimately, this article argues that racial diversity among the workforces of street-level bureaucracies is important and can have positive effects on organizational dynamics as racially representative bureaucracy theory suggests, but organizational context and intragroup politics within minority communities *greatly* inform how race is mediated within these institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Racial and ethnic minorities are joining the employee ranks of human service agencies in growing numbers. For example, while blacks comprised just 10.9% of the total labor force in 2006, they constituted one-fourth of those determining eligibility for individuals

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applying for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), food stamps, unemployment benefits, social security, public housing, or other assistance (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2007). Increasingly seen as the “faces” of such institutions, black and Latino bureaucrats join their coworkers in articulating agency goals and expectations, brokering services, and enforcing policies (Lewis 2000; Pattillo 2007; Watkins-Hayes 2009). Their presence among the power-wielding ranks in public institutions is therefore an important part of the story of how social welfare policies and services are formulated and reworked on the ground.

Two distinct theoretical frameworks offer possibilities to help us understand how black and Latina clients interpret and negotiate this increasingly racially diverse human service institutional landscape.¹ On the one hand, racially representative bureaucracy theory predicts that the demographic composition of the bureaucratic workforce directly and indirectly shapes client outcomes whether due to the mere increased numerical presence of employees from socially disadvantaged groups or the belief that these bureaucrats are making consequential decisions informed by their social group memberships in ways that benefit clients from these groups. *Passive representation* indicates this demographic or symbolic presence of racial minorities within a bureaucratic staff, whereas *active* or *substantive representation* is concerned with the measurable “decision making behavior on the part of a specific group of civil servants which tends to affect systematically the resource allocation of a specific group of citizens” (Hindera 1993b: 419; also see Hindera 1993a; Meier 1993; Meier and O’Toole 2006; Meier and Stewart 1992; Naff 2001). Representative bureaucracy theory would therefore predict that racial affinity produces distinct patterns during interactions between clients and bureaucrats from the same racial and ethnic minority groups, perhaps in ways that clients recognize and value.

On the other hand, street-level bureaucracy theory reminds us that organizational actors face massive constraints. The institution “bears down” on frontline employees, creating a constant tension between the demands of the agency and the needs of clients. Frontline workers use bureaucratic discretion to negotiate these opposing pulls. When considering how the racial composition of the workforce might matter for organizational dynamics, street-level bureaucracy theory would require us to consider not only *what* is affected by intraracial interaction but also *how* this power is directed and controlled by organizational structures, policies, and cultures. Street-level bureaucracy theory would then predict that powerful institutional interests shape the use of discretion, ultimately trumping racial affinities among minority clients and bureaucrats.

I will posit that neither of these theories alone adequately explains the complexities of race within public bureaucracies. Taken together, however, elements of both theoretical frameworks prove to be quite useful. This analysis uses interview data collected from 20 women and men who have recently received cash and/or food stamp benefits from the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA). I also interview black and Latino caseworkers from the same office. To be sure, this article does not examine whether black and Latino bureaucrats apply rules or allocate monetary resources preferentially to black and Latina clients or if black and Latina clients experience outcomes that vary with the race of their caseworkers. Rather the purpose of this analysis is to explore

1 None of the Latino caseworkers and only two of the Latina clients in this study identified themselves as black Hispanics. Thus, I describe respondents as black *or* Latino/a. All client respondents of Hispanic heritage are female. Hence I use “Latina” rather than “Latino” to describe them.

client and caseworker *perceptions* of their interactions and how race is employed in these encounters. Such an exploratory study will eventually help to reveal the significance of race for programmatic outcomes in a racially diverse bureaucracy.

I find that black and Latina clients rarely identify race as a salient feature in their interactions with caseworkers. This is puzzling given the racialized history and politics of the welfare system (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001) and their strong agreement that having a racially diverse workforce in the welfare offices that they frequent is symbolically important to them. I further demonstrate that black and Latina clients who do sense racial overtones in their interactions with same-race staff members do not interpret these encounters monolithically. These clients can read them as either pointed but welcomed interventions by racemates who assist them in negotiating the welfare system or heavy-handed maneuvers by more privileged members of their racial communities.

I posit that bureaucratic environments with histories of racial inequality and orientations that apply “red tape” restrictively or punitively are likely to generate strong boundaries between racial minorities in bureaucrat-client relationships. This, I contend, restricts processes of representation despite social group commonality, accounting for differences between how clients and bureaucrats interpret and understand racial representation. In this sense, although racially representative bureaucracy theory provides us with useful tools to examine racial diversity within institutions, street-level bureaucracy theory, with its emphasis on organizational context, ultimately offers the best explanatory power to adequately capture caseworker-client relations among intraracial minorities.

Race in Street-Level Bureaucracies: Changing Models and New Questions

Both classical views of street-level bureaucracies and racially representative bureaucracy theory address the role of bureaucrat-client relationships and seek to understand how institutional power arrangements permit or restrict access to public resources. The standard view of street-level bureaucracies is perhaps best represented in classic texts such as Lipsky's (1980) *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, Blau's (1972) *The Dynamics of Bureaucracy*, and Hasenfeld's (1972) analyses of people-processing versus people-changing organizations. These scholars and their intellectual descendants focus on the ways in which public bureaucracies seek to change the behavior of individuals through institutional arrangements that impose strict rules, employ extensive reporting protocols to monitor clients, and clearly define bureaucratic roles. Discretion serves as a critical tool, allowing street-level bureaucrats to minimize or maximize the economic or social support that clients receive and the surveillance to which they are subject. Such discretionary capabilities are nevertheless subject to the parameters of public institutions and are therefore not without limits. As a result, the discretion of street-level bureaucrats must be understood within a context of constraints imposed by both internal and external influences (Watkins-Hayes 2009).

Racially representative bureaucracy theory, while acknowledging the power of institutional structures and policies, ultimately regards bureaucrats as largely capable of shaping organizational outcomes. Based on the theory that agency goals are supported by staffs reflecting the social backgrounds of constituents (Kingsley 1944), the ideal is “representative political institutions” that draw personnel from all sectors of society (Dolan and Rosenbloom 2003). Individuals of the same social background are thought to share a common history; similar life experiences, values, and political interests; and a collective social identity. It is believed therefore that the concerns of historically marginalized groups will

receive a fairer hearing should similarly marginalized persons staff public agencies. There is evidence to suggest that these efforts are valued by clients. For example, in their analysis of AIDS patients, Thielemann and Stewart (1996) found that a clear majority express very strong preferences toward receiving services from members of their ethnic group and gender.

On its own, each theory falls short of fully explaining the complexities of intraracial dynamics within public institutions. The representative bureaucracy framework may suffer when considering the political, social, and economic diversity within racial communities. Sociologists from DuBois (1899) to Drake and Cayton (1945) to Frazier (1957) to Landry (1988) and Pattillo (2007) have highlighted the commonalities and differences that exist among and between the black middle class and its poorer counterparts. They argue that the public representation of black interests is currently (and has historically been) more reflective of the goals of its most privileged members (e.g., middle and upper class, heterosexual, male), challenging our understanding of “group interests” and how they might be articulated within a public institution (Cohen 1999; Gaines 1996; Ginwright 2002; Reed 1999). Others have challenged the assumption that there is an all-encompassing pan-ethnic Latino political agenda (Jones-Correa and Leal 1996; Masuoka 2006; Segura and Rodrigues 2006; Stokes 2003), concluding that the notion of “representation” on the basis of race and ethnicity is fraught with qualifiers, contradictions, and contingencies.² In addition, as a great deal of the representative bureaucracy literature focuses on how aggregate percentages shape agency outcomes, discussions of one-on-one interactions between bureaucrats and clients rarely occur. This hampers our ability to peer into the “black box” of racially representative bureaucracies to discern the *processes* in play and the ways in which they are interpreted by both parties.

The absence of treatments of racial diversity in much of the work on street-level bureaucracies also becomes problematic in light of the demographic shifts that have taken place among the staffs in these institutions. Relevant research has always acknowledged the inequalities suffered by blacks and other minorities at the hands of white public servants as discretion can work against clients from marginalized groups (Lieberman 2001; Lipsky 1980; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Gooden 1998; Schram et al. 2009; Schram, Soss, and Fording 2003).³ Yet these dynamics beg for an updated understanding of the role of race in

2 Political scientist Michael Dawson contends that African Americans often share a sense that their fate is “linked” to that of other African Americans, and there is some evidence to suggest that Latinos also share a sense of linked fate with other Latinos (Dawson 1995). 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. Dawson’s “linked fate” framework complements the theory of representative bureaucracy as both foresee race as serving a critical function in the formation of attitudes among minority bureaucrats within welfare offices.

3 From the system’s inception, the ways in which clients were subject to policy enforcement, framed in the public imagination as part of the “undeserving” poor, and provided with or denied resources have been racialized, gendered, and classed (Lieberman 2001; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Schram et al 2009). These institutional and cultural scripts of welfare were informed by societal hierarchies, which framed certain groups as perpetual outsiders who should not have full access to this particular resource of citizenship. The “racialization” of welfare took place through policies and informal practices that systematically restricted the access of poor black women and other racial minorities to the rolls over the years, subjected them to much more scrutiny than their white counterparts, and contributed to public narratives that heightened the casting of welfare recipients as almost always black mothers with multiple children who live in unending economic deprivation. Latinos with more recent histories in the United States have also seen their ethnic heritage and immigrant status vilified in recent debates on access to public resources. These racial scripts are rehearsed over time, despite the removal of blatantly discriminatory policies and practices.

institutional interactions in light of the increased number of black and Latino bureaucrats now engaging with clients of all racial backgrounds. Watkins-Hayes (2009) points to a “racialized professionalism” among street-level bureaucrats in which many seek to integrate race and other social identities into their understanding and operationalization of their work and their goals for what it should accomplish. There are likely therefore *several* ways in which race shapes organizational processes, with power being deployed differently depending on the racial permutation of the clients and bureaucrats involved and the orientation of the institution.

Can these two theories be reconciled? First, street-level studies tend to focus on institutional *processes*, whereas representative bureaucracy work largely emphasizes *outcomes*. As I will suggest, racial representation can be a bureaucratic outcome, an ingredient shaping discretionary bureaucratic processes, *and* a racial project in and of itself as the form and content of representation is negotiated between groups. A process-focused interpretation of racial representation is likely to produce a more nuanced story about how bureaucratic actors straddle the line between organizational expectations and social group norms. Second, street-level bureaucracy theory requires us to situate the power frequently ascribed to bureaucrats in representative bureaucracy theory within a context of institutional constraint (Brodkin 2011; Meier and Hawes 2009). As such, what we might call “processes of representation” are heavily influenced by agency demands and reveal the *multiple* and *intersectional* ways in which social identities collide with organizational dynamics to shape interactions within public bureaucracies.

DATA AND METHODS

These issues will be explored using interview data from a study exploring the 1996 policy shift known as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) or welfare reform. Under PRWORA, its flagship program TANF provides time-limited cash assistance to low-income residential parents (mostly mothers) and in-kind resources that are directly tied to work. Aided greatly by a booming economy in the 1990s and a generous expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, welfare reform led to massively reduced TANF rolls, increased work among many low-income mothers, and higher levels of child support collection. In recent years, as unemployment rates have climbed, Massachusetts DTA launched an initiative to encourage more families to apply for food stamps by advertising and streamlining the application process. Because welfare offices are therefore still involved in the lives of many low-income families, interviews focused on how individuals were obtaining an array of state resources for economic survival. This research therefore targeted the dynamics of those bureaucratic encounters in light of both the reconfigured social safety net and also the demographic compositions of these institutions.

The data are derived from interviews conducted in 2008 with 20 women (17) and men (3) receiving services from the Massachusetts DTA. It uses a small number of respondents in a particular, local context to highlight social experiences and mechanisms that may operate in many other places and contexts. Small-n studies like this are therefore ideal for building theoretical models that can be tested in future work. As other scholars have noted (Meier and Hawes 2009), it is difficult to empirically observe the active representation of racial group interests within a bureaucratic context, especially when the institution explicitly affirms its commitment to equality of services. In-depth interview studies, while

unlikely to reveal differential client outcomes based on demographic staff composition, are likely to offer detailed observations about the attitudinal and behavioral building blocks that enable active racial representation.

Clients of the DTA were eligible to participate in the study if they (1) had received cash or food stamp benefits in the 12 months prior to recruitment, (2) had at least two face-to-face meetings with a DTA caseworker in the last 12 months, (3) were English speaking, (4) were living in the Boston area, and (5) were over the age of 18. Individuals were recruited from a variety of social service agencies, public and Section 8 housing complexes, and by word of mouth. Interviewees were asked how they define their class, racial, and ethnic backgrounds and were interviewed for approximately one to one-and-a-half hours on a variety of topics, including but not limited to their work histories, their histories of public assistance receipt; their attitudes about welfare and welfare reform; their perceptions of their caseworkers; and their beliefs about how their racial, gender, or class backgrounds influence their relationships with their caseworkers. Subsequent discussions of the role that their social locations played in their interactions with DTA office staff helped to assess the perceived saliency of these identities. Interviews were conducted in an enclosed meeting room in a social service agency and were tape-recorded and transcribed. All names of respondents, local welfare offices, and office staff have been changed to protect confidentiality. The data were coded to find emergent themes and analyzed using HyperResearch qualitative analysis software.

Fourteen respondents are Latina and six are black (this includes the three men in the study). Place of family origin is noted in the case of the Latina respondents, all of whom were first- or second-generation migrants from Puerto Rico or immigrants from Central or South America. Very few (four) of the respondents were receiving cash assistance at the time of study recruitment. The rest interacted with the office only to receive food stamps and childcare vouchers.⁴

In order to capture a sense of the context in which these clients are operating, I also present data collected from caseworkers in a previous study conducted by the author.⁵ These employees work in the same welfare office frequented by many of these clients (several respondents had used multiple welfare offices). The Staunton office has become one of two remaining offices in a highly populated area of the state. The companion project investigated the several factors shaping the delivery of public services in the wake of welfare reform (Watkins-Hayes 2009). Initial interviews were conducted in 2000 and 2001 with 13

4 Most of these respondents sampled the array of job training programs offered by DTA's contracting agencies, and they reported holding between one and three jobs over the last three years. To receive cash assistance, respondents completed General Equivalency Diploma (GED) programs, trained to become medical assistants or other entry-level employees, or found paid employment in community-based agencies that were once the sites of their community service assignments. Most had lost their jobs or quit, however, due to having to work while caring for sick children, manage challenging workplace interactions, or deal with personal illness or transportation woes. As a result, only 10 respondents were working at the time of study recruitment, typically in low-skilled jobs in medical offices, childcare centers, or non-profit agencies. All respondents reported personal incomes of less than \$20,000 per year and household incomes between \$15,000 and \$25,000. Respondents have between one and six children, with an average of 2.5. The average age of minor children was 9 years old. No respondents were married, but more than one-third were living with their mothers. Half of the women reported being in relationships in which their boyfriends contributed financially to their households whether they lived together or not.

5 The data on caseworkers are derived from a 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 (35 from Staunton and 30 from an office in another part of the state).

black and Latino frontline staff members in Staunton (two black supervisors and eleven caseworkers—six black and five 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 sites in recent years.⁶ To check the consistency of my findings over time, I also reinterviewed two of the original interviewees who had served as key informants in 2001: one black supervisor and one black caseworker. Limited staff turnover in these offices—featuring few new hires and considerable career longevity among existing employees—helped to facilitate this. Because many of the caseworkers that clients discuss in the 2008 interviews remain in the office, caseworker and client perspectives can be analyzed together.

“AN UNDERSTANDING OF WHERE I’M COMING FROM:” CLIENTS TALK ABOUT RACE IN POST-REFORM WELFARE OFFICES

Low-income individuals who were interviewed for this study routinely identify welfare offices as transitional or intermittent sites of assistance. They therefore struggle to understand whether welfare officials will facilitate or hinder their quests to secure short- and long-term family needs. Commonality and connection between caseworkers and clients may ease these interactions, with more now at stake as a result of welfare reform’s more stringent eligibility requirements. Racially representative bureaucracy theory would predict that black and Latino bureaucrats and clients leverage their shared histories and present-day experiences of racial subjugation to strengthen their social connections in ways that help clients effectively negotiate the human service dichotomy of material provision and interpersonal interaction.

In this section, I highlight the views of black and Latina clients who *do* believe that having a caseworker who shares their racial background has important implications.⁷ Notably, however, only one-third of client respondents recalled incidents in which they believed that race was important in a relationship that they had with *any* caseworker of any race, and only five talked about moments that seemed to be informed by intraracial solidarity or discord. The rather small number of clients who talked about the role of race in the bureaucracy suggests that these moments were perceived as *elements of* rather than *central issues in* their experiences within street-level bureaucracies.

For example, Jackie, a 28-year-old African American mother of three, reflects on a pivotal relationship with her caseworker Teresa, also an African American woman. Although she appreciated that this caseworker performed her job well—procuring Jackie’s benefits efficiently, explaining the rules carefully, and alerting Jackie when she needed to update her case file—it was their interpersonal connection that Jackie valued the most. Jackie’s caseworker had a unique ability to combine a warm personality with a clear willingness to explain Jackie’s choices with brutal honesty. Jackie’s first interactions with Teresa set the stage:

6 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.

7 This article does not go into depth about differences between black and Latino bureaucrats and clients because few were found. However, with a larger sample, one might be able to determine how racial representation differs across racial minority groups, likely informed by environmental conditions as well as each group’s distinct history, unique way of being incorporated into government work, and variation in the amount of resistance that marked its entrance.

When you're young, you have the sass: 'I don't care what they say,' and things like that. Teresa was always telling me, 'You know you're not gonna get far with that attitude. This is what we need to do, and this is where I can help you'. You know, it helps when you have support. Those moments . . . they've stuck with me.

Teresa made an even stronger intervention during the intake interview when Jackie admitted that she was unsure of the paternity of her oldest child and would therefore be unable to provide much information about him for the child support collection process:

I just was honest and told 'em, 'You know, I really didn't know. It was between two people. And [for one of them] I didn't even have a last name Teresa was kinda understanding. She just took as much information as she could and kinda gave me a lecture through it all. It was a lot of, 'Being a young woman ...'. Oh, it was a lot. She honestly thought she was more of a mom figure, you know, 'You grow from your mistakes ... you don't wanna go down that path again. You don't wanna be just out there running around and just hanging out. It's time to go back and get your education, and it's time to be a mom'. It was things like that, it was positive.

To Jackie, the combination of the messenger's social characteristics, the style in which the message was delivered, and Jackie's personal history made her open to Teresa's strong guiding hand. Her mother had passed away the previous year, and Jackie was finding it increasingly difficult to juggle raising her children and staying motivated in her GED classes. 'I was just coming to a lotta obstacles, hitting a lotta walls', she explained. 'It was like I was up to my limit with everything. ... I didn't seem to be accomplishing anything'. The fact that such stern words were coming from a woman who reminded Jackie of her mother likely made a difference in exactly what could be said:

I think a white woman could've said the same thing. But then again, I think it was more of the same race, too. I think that she felt that she *could* say it. She was talking from different aspects, different angles: for one being a DTA worker, for one being a mom, for one being a sista.⁸ Basically . . . she didn't want to see me keep going the route that I was going 'As a young African-American woman, you know, we tend to have it a little harder. This is what you need to be doing. This is where you need to go. We don't need to have this situation happen to where you don't know who [the father of your child is]'. You know, she just was more of a positive ... role model. ... I really liked her. She just kinda set her job aside and [gave] a lecture; and the lecture kind of helped. Because when you don't have a mom around anymore, sometimes when people just take that moment out, just to play that role or to try to guide you in the better direction, you appreciate that. I was really grateful She kinda got me started in the first place on a better path, going down a road to where I was able to obtain a career.

It was under Teresa's direction that Jackie finished her GED program and pursued medical office training, leading to a hospital job that lasted 5 years. This case history ran as predicted in racially representative bureaucracy theory: Shared social group memberships between clients and bureaucrats directly or indirectly enable the norms, expectations, and sense of collective identity among members of a traditionally marginalized group to filter into the institution. While questions of paternity are not exclusive to one

⁸ "Sista" or "sister" is a common term among African Americans to describe black women and is often meant to signal a sense of community among blacks on the basis of race.

race, Teresa's response and Jackie's interpretation of her intervention demonstrate the promise of racially representative institutions: the delivery of substantive (although not necessarily financial) resources in a transaction informed by affective affinity and grounded in the cultural knowledge of the actors involved.⁹

Notably, not all social interactions between black and Latina clients and caseworkers from their racial groups are understood by clients as moments of racial solidarity as representative bureaucracy theory posits. While Jackie viewed interactions with her caseworker as probing but welcomed mentoring, others believed that racial commonality with caseworkers worked against them. For example, Reena, a Puerto Rican mother of six, described several experiences in which Latina bureaucrats seemed to create more distance, and even some hostility, when working with her. She reasoned that they did so to protect their own professional standing. After all, minority bureaucrats also come from a disadvantaged social position and have to protect their mobility and stability as employees (Lewis 2000; Watkins-Hayes 2009). Reena recalled an incident that she believes was shaped by the fact that she, a client that Reena accompanied to the office one day, and the caseworker were all Puerto Rican:

I feel, in some cases, your own race discriminates against you too. I went to translate for somebody, and I noticed that [the caseworker] wasn't being gentle to the lady's problem She was very rough, 'cause I just feel that she was more worried about her position in the agency and not losing her job, than being kinder with her own race. I feel that she thought, if she gives in a little bit more, be nicer, you know, [her bosses] will be like, 'Oh, she was nice 'cause they're your race or whatever'. So she put on this hardcore [attitude]. It was just so funny, because the same situation my friend was in that I translated for, we know somebody else that's not our race that has that same situation, same worker, and got better results than my friend did. I just feel that, 'cause they're so worried about losing their job or [people] saying that they're choosing favoritism, that they're harder with their own race than with other races.

9 In this account, we also see how processes of representation are informed not only by racial connection but also by investments and beliefs that express Teresa's other social identities. Teresa indeed appears to have exerted a very positive influence on Jackie, but it is not an uncomplicated encounter, a case characterized solely by the interclass, intraracial role modeling advocated by some inequality scholars (Wilson 1987). Recent work suggests that many low-income women see motherhood as an opportunity to demonstrate one's worth, regardless of one's economic circumstances or the viability of the relationship with the father (Edin and Kefales 2005). Furthermore, poor women have often felt it was in their interests to be somewhat confrontational in public bureaucracies (Nadesen 2005; Orleck 2005). Teresa's advice to Jackie about her sexual history and her conduct in a bureaucracy evince a very different set of assumptions, likely informed by her class status and institutional position as a bureaucrat. These two additional social locations shape the form, tone, and content of the message given to Jackie. The advice coincides with, rather than contradicts, the normative principles of welfare reform—reinforcing rather than challenging the goals and expectations of the institution. We can therefore interpret Teresa's behavior as a deeply caring intervention between women who share racial commonality, a case of exploiting a shared racial background to ensure bureaucratic and social control, or a complex blend of the two. This demonstrates how a distinct and unspoken layer of politics, simultaneously supportive *and* regulatory, informs interactions between bureaucrats and clients during the process of racial representation.

Whatever explains this caseworker's aloofness, Reena's perception is that racial minorities must be *more* detached and strict with race-mate clients than with other clients. This suggests that, for some clients, diverse welfare offices *maintain* rather than *break down* existing social hierarchies.¹⁰ Despite the presence of Puerto Rican caseworkers, Reena sees whites as firmly in control of the system. Minorities receive some control over allocating resources but are ultimately limited in power and must be hypervigilant lest they appear biased, even if it means enforcing the strictest boundaries with clients from their racial groups. As we will see, caseworkers share this perception as "middlemen" (Pattillo 2007). Whatever the reason in individual cases, social boundaries are often formed between black and Latino bureaucrats and race-mate clients, challenging our assumptions about racially representative bureaucracies.¹¹

What informs clients' beliefs about "proper intra-racial conduct" within racially representative bureaucracies? A small but important group of clients hoped that a connection with caseworkers from their racial groups would translate into a sympathetic ear (and hand) when it came to service delivery and, in an often-used phrase, "an understanding of where I'm coming from." As Jackie previously explained, Teresa's social characteristics as a higher status member of Jackie's racial group helped convey her message more powerfully than a white woman could have. In Reena's case, her caseworker's lack of empathy felt like an even deeper betrayal given their shared ethnic background. As Ana, a 23-year-old Puerto Rican mother of one, explained, "I thought I was gonna relate easier to those black and Hispanic [caseworkers] because I'm black Hispanic, you know." Andre, a 25-year-old African American male, relied on a previous experience with a case manager at a job training program to inform his expectations about his food stamps caseworker:

It's just the way that we interacted with each other and him being a black male, and certain things he has had in his life as far as like challenges, struggles, and obstacles. So when you can sit down and communicate with somebody on the same level and page [about] what you've been through, you know, this is not like this person is reading this out of a book. They know by personal experience as far as being a black man.

Wanting a caseworker who shares one's racial background had less to do with a desire for special privileges and more to do with a desire for bureaucratic protection from harsh treatment or from a failure to understand how race, class, and gender converge to limit their opportunities in life. Shannon, an African American mother of two, revealed her misgivings about her white caseworker, with whom she had gotten off to a rocky start:

I wish she would have understood my situation, you know I felt she didn't care, that she's not in the situation, so it really didn't bother her. And I don't know how many white people are on food stamps, but I just felt that it was like she really didn't care. She didn't care that my kids were starving If she were put in my shoes, I don't think she would have felt the same way. I

¹⁰ It is hard to know whether the caseworker assigned to Reena's friend's case truly did dole out a different set of resources on the basis of race. Seemingly identical case histories may have slight variations that have implications for how bureaucratic decisions are made. However, what is important is that Reena *interpreted* the situation as one in which intragroup discord within an institutional setting emerged as a result of a need for protection from interracial subjugation in ways that shaped both the resources and the treatment that were given by this service provider.

¹¹ This point is reminiscent of a study conducted by Wilkins and Williams (2009) on Los Angeles police officers, which found that a larger percentage of traffic stops involved black drivers in police districts with more black officers, suggesting that black motorists are under *more* surveillance in districts with higher percentages of black police officers.

just felt like ... her being a woman and me being a woman and her having kids and me as well ... how could you not care for someone that's in a bad situation?

Shannon's belief that her caseworker lacked empathy because of her class and racial background clearly marked the boundaries between them. She hoped in vain for common ground on the basis of gender. In this sense, clients like Shannon clearly carried expectations into the office about how social group memberships should function within the bureaucracy and shape the caseworker-client dynamic. Asked if she expected a different result had her caseworker been black, Shannon asserted, "I believe so. Because we're minorities. I just feel that they'll understand [my situation] more than a white person would."

Although only about one-third of respondents explicitly talked about the significance of race in their interactions with caseworkers, we learned some valuable details. Some had expected that racial commonality might result in empathetic case management grounded in a common social experience. Yet caseworkers' class and bureaucratic interests intersected with racial group affinity to produce moments that were much more complex. Of those clients who perceived that their caseworkers were engaging with them through racial commonality, some read these encounters as welcome interventions by racemates to advise them on negotiating the welfare system, others as heavy-handed maneuvers by more privileged members of their racial communities. This suggests that processes of racial representation can both ease and reinforce inherent tensions between bureaucrats and clients in ways not previously addressed in representative bureaucracy theory. In the next section, we explore what black and Latino caseworkers say about the significance of race in their relationships with clients in order to understand another dimension shaping processes of racial representation.

ENGAGEMENT IN A WORLD OF CONSTRAINTS: HOW RACE IS MEDIATED IN CASEWORKER PRACTICE

There is a body of work suggesting that race shapes the outlooks and values that black and Latino welfare caseworkers bring to the welfare system (Lewis 2000; Riccucci and Meyers 2004; Watkins-Hayes 2009). Their beliefs about clients' opportunities and constraints are influenced in part by their own biographically informed understanding of racial stratification and its impact on economic opportunity. While little evidence suggests that these views shape bureaucratic *outcomes* in welfare service delivery, such beliefs affect organizational service-delivery *processes*. Watkins-Hayes (2009) found, for example, that black and Latino welfare caseworkers and supervisors actively deploy race (and class and gender) by shaping the content and tone of their interactions with black and Latina clients, reflecting both key priorities in welfare reform implementation and intragroup politics. They leverage racial commonality to communicate the social goals and political motives of welfare policy to clients from their racial groups and attempt to use occupational authority and social status to articulate why these clients should adopt a certain set of behaviors.

Almost all the bureaucrats in this study have experienced both economic and racial disadvantage at some point in their lives and draw upon the perception that they "have once walked in clients' shoes." These caseworkers and supervisors therefore believe they bring a unique sensibility to service delivery and interactions with clients from their racial minority groups. Sundra, a caseworker, was on welfare over 15 years ago when she was raising her son. She had this to say about how she approaches casework:

To me, my background gives me a better avenue of understanding where my clients are truly coming from. I know what it's like to sit in that chair It's not that much different sitting over here [as a worker], just more paperwork You truly understand because you have sat on that side of the table and asked somebody to give you a slice of bread too You know how that makes you feel if the person isn't responding to what you're asking for. Or that you're being demeaned even by asking them for it.

Sundra's empathy for her clients not only informs how she thinks about the job; she can also strategically deploy her history to forge a symbolic connection with clients and to legitimate her approach. Still, Sundra's messages to clients still very much align with the policy goals of the welfare system. In this sense, she implicitly uses race and explicitly uses class to underscore, rather than undermine, policy. Her racial, class, and institutional positions all work together to inform her approach to service delivery:

I don't share [that I was on welfare] with all my clients. But sometimes when I see a woman being stuck, and not knowing where she wants to go, or she sees all kinds of roadblocks, I say, 'I understand what you mean because I had to make a decision like this at one time too. Whatever is there, use it to the best of your ability'. Or I'll say, 'I understand your struggle because I'm of the same struggle But if you keep persevering, you can make a change. But you've got to want it and work for it and be able to seize the opportunity when it does happen for you. We can all sit and talk about not having this or that'.

Notably, black and Latino bureaucrats argue that, although they may bring to the job an experiential understanding of the combination of racial subjugation and economic instability that confronts their black and Latina clients, their interventions rarely go beyond offering words of encouragement. They assert that a racially representative bureaucracy should not deploy race to pursue particular outcomes. Not only do they worry about fairness, they also are cognizant of protecting their own professional standing. Loretta, a South American woman who shared that she occasionally advises Latina clients "as if I am their mother," asserted that she nevertheless places greater emphasis on her role as a bureaucrat. "Sometimes clients who are Spanish," she explained, "expect that I'm going to be on their side because we are Spanish. And I don't. You can be Chinese, Arabic, Russian—to me you're a client I have to think about my job before anything else." Reginald, a black administrator, was even more direct as he talked about the limits to what black caseworkers can actually do to help black clients. In revealing these views, he highlights the overall limitations of the agency in which these individuals are embedded:

Black folks can't talk about [race to their black clients], except under their breath, behind the backs of their supervisors. They might get [black clients] to more honestly state their concerns, but [black caseworkers] don't have the power, outside of their ability to motivate people, to do things that they think will improve their lives. Beyond that, they have no power to get people out of poverty. But they do have something very powerful ... and that is they're a face that represents a life that was advanced through education and job experience, and can serve as an example.

This suggests that these bureaucrats view their racial identities as symbolic assets that are contained and managed within a highly bureaucratic set of social and political processes over which they have little control. Ideals for what constitutes racial representation are complicated by the ways in which racial affinities and street-level organizational

limitations interact. Like their coworkers, black and Latino bureaucrats face significant institutional challenges as they implement policy. Based on a procedural paradigm of surveillance-based support, the eligibility rules and paperwork requirements to access public assistance remain extensive; caseworkers must juggle these as they funnel clients into job search and training programs, address the movements of clients on and off the rolls that often result from their receiving and curing sanctions, and ensure that clients who have special needs receive the proper services. Riccucci et al. (2004) and others have found that “front-line workers in welfare offices continue to believe that traditional eligibility determination concerns are the most important goals at their agencies” (438). As studies of street-level organizations, including those in this volume, suggest, such structural parameters on caseworker-client interactions make it difficult for caseworkers and clients to forge *any* kind of connection, much less one based on common experiences (Brodin 1997, 2011; Lipsky 1980; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). As Barbara, a caseworker with decades of experience, explained, “The quantity of time you had to spend with a client before welfare reform, you don’t have that anymore. You talk to them, you see what their needs are, you deal with what you can, and you send them along their way There’s a sense of urgency ... with clients that wasn’t there before.”

Black and Latino caseworkers therefore face pressures from a variety of sources: the agency that expects efficiency, accuracy, and the promotion of its policies; clients of all backgrounds who expect a certain level of service; clients from their own racial groups who prefer a caseworker with a distinct understanding of the issues that they confront; and caseworkers’ own expectations about how they should bring their social experiences to bear in the effective execution of policy. As a result, these bureaucrats, while perhaps carrying certain sensibilities about the symbiosis of race and poverty, are nevertheless careful about the interventions that they are willing to make to help members of their racial groups. They are not willing to jeopardize their standing in the organization or challenge management to do so. This suggests that, within processes of racial representation, race and other social group memberships can both *inform* caseworkers’ understandings of their work and be *actively deployed* in service delivery. But bureaucratic processes inform how robustly this takes shape. As we will see in the next section, a bureaucratically constrained, arms-length approach to racial representation is largely interpreted by clients as aloofness and disconnection. Most clients subsequently believe that the color that matters most is the disempowering red of the agency’s bureaucratic tape.

THE MOST POWERFUL COLOR IN THE BUREAUCRACY: RED (TAPE)

Respondents agree that racial diversity among welfare office staff symbolically conveys a message of inclusion and openness. However, the vast majority of clients interviewed for this study do not see race as a defining factor in their personal relationships and everyday interactions with caseworkers. From their perspective, their experiences in welfare offices are most clearly defined by the power of their caseworkers to address clients’ immediate and longer term economic concerns and by how they are treated in the process. After Rosario, a Puerto Rican mother of two, reeled off a litany of bad interactions with various caseworkers, she reflected, “Do I think things would be different if I had a Puerto Rican caseworker? No. Because it all depends on how the person thinks and sees things and how they try to contribute to you.” Similarly, Louise, an African American mother of one, was asked whether and how her relationship with her black female caseworker was shaped

because of their shared background. She shrugged and replied, “It’s not, not really. Can’t trust any of them down there at the welfare office.” Bureaucrats are bureaucrats, these clients reason, and they collectively exist on the opposite side of clients.¹²

Clients view the heavily formalized structure of their interactions with their caseworkers as leaving little room for tailored exchanges. Despite the overall declines in the rolls, individual caseloads average over 100 families, and caseworkers therefore have little time to address anything beyond the particulars of clients’ eligibility status and participation in job search or training activities. Cases in which clients collect only food stamps receive even less personalized attention, as caseworkers can carry caseloads of literally hundreds of “food-stamp only” families. Some caseworkers exercise discretion by shoe-horning in intensive conversations with clients, like the ones described by Jackie (Watkins-Hayes 2009). But according to most respondents, and consistent with previous research, caseworkers tend to focus solely on completing the necessary paperwork and moving on to the next task or engage in other modes of simplification (Blau 1972; Brodtkin 1997, 2011; Hays 2003; Lipsky 1980; Soss 2002).

Clients in turn follow suit, and some are downright distrustful of how any extraneous information that they provide might be used. As Tanya, an African American mother of two explained, the most important thing in the interaction is to “just try to get through it as quickly as possible and get the hell out of there, you know? Because the longer you stay, the longer they have time to probe you. Just tell me what I need to do and let me go.” Silence becomes an institutional survival strategy, precluding opportunities for common connection—race-based or otherwise—to emerge between clients and caseworkers. Leila, a black 19-year-old mother of one whose family is from Puerto Rico, has struggled to connect with her African American caseworker Alona. The ethnic differences may play a role in their relationship, but what seems most important to Leila is Alona’s status as a bureaucrat:

I don’t talk much at all [in our meetings]. Because I don’t feel comfortable. I feel like if I talk a lot she’s gonna cut me off [my benefits]. Like, if she asks me a question, I’m gonna tell her [the answer] and then go to details. And just by her facial reaction, she’ll hear something that will be bad. Or while I’m talking, she’s like grabbing things and doing all this paperwork. And I’m like, ‘okay, aren’t you supposed to listen?’ I know you don’t have to look at me to listen, but don’t ... that’s rude going through papers.

Clients therefore largely see their caseworkers not as black female or white male bureaucrats with racially based empathy but as agents of the state who can either provide the necessary resources to help them take care of their families or subject them to blistering scrutiny or policies and procedures that can block their access to benefits (Brodtkin 2011; Brodtkin and Majmundar 2010). These clients view black and Latina caseworkers as bureaucrats who, by and large, do not engage them on any aspect of their lives beyond mere eligibility. The time burden the bureaucracy places on caseworkers, the magnitude of the paperwork and surveillance involved, and the paucity and brevity of the benefits now going to families after welfare reform seem to trump any intraracial solidarity. Andre, who earlier

12 In an experimental study of sanctioning patterns, Schram et al. (2009) found no evidence that white case managers differ from nonwhite case managers in their sanction decisions, and the sanction decisions of both are susceptible to the influence of race, ethnicity, and other client traits in ways that disadvantage black clients.

described his expectation for a connection with his food-stamps caseworker, explained why such a relationship is now a near impossibility:

I think being in a role like that, [caseworkers] are under a lot of stress and pressure. They really are overworked. So I think as far as when they bring somebody in their office, ‘Okay, this is what you got to do’. In and out [because] there’s a lot of people waiting on you. So he didn’t rush me or anything, but he was on the speed.

Most clients therefore describe having civil but detached relationships with caseworkers. Many could not recall their caseworkers’ names. Clients generally viewed them as suspect and untrustworthy unless they presented strong evidence to the contrary.

As Jackie explained in reflecting on her caseworkers since Teresa, “When you’re just dealing with certain [caseworkers of any race], they just throw you stress. They just throw you off because you’re down on your luck and this is a way that you’re looking for help.” Clients talked at length about the indignities of poverty and how the embarrassment of relying on government help threatened to inflect every interaction that they had with welfare caseworkers. Stevie, an African American man who had recently been laid off from his job as a cook, talked about his uncomfortable first meetings with his Puerto Rican male food stamp worker:

So I go in—I wasn’t dressed to impress or anything, I’m just going for food stamps, not a date. I can just see at first glance that he’s like, ‘eh’. Probably his whole thing was like, ‘eh, this guy right here’. So then I’m trying to be polite and everything, but I’m telling you, he ain’t giving me his all. I’m here and I’m not feeling like he’s doing the best for me There was some resentment, but it wasn’t spoken, you know what I mean, but there was definitely some tension. He wouldn’t look me in the face and talk to me ... just focusing on the papers and the computer. So nothing he had said outright, it was just the feel. You know, being around people all the years that I’ve existed, I trust the way I feel about things. Wasn’t no particularly loving vibes coming from this guy.

It is hard to know whether the tension that Stevie sensed was due to interethnic tensions, the fact that they were both men, or some other unspoken dynamic.¹³ Overwhelmingly, however, respondents like Stevie believed that their status as impoverished men and women with very little social standing and institutional power created the greatest potential for abuse during their interactions with caseworkers. It figured most prominently in their narratives of bureaucratic interactions, and they most often explained negative treatment as a result of the lack of respect afforded to them because of their status as recipients. Jackie had this to say about a black caseworker to whom she was assigned after Teresa:

In how I’ve been treated, I wouldn’t say it was race or anything. My caseworker just seemed like she was just bitter. You know, just didn’t wanna do her job. I can see how anybody else would say it was a race thing. But it felt more like the education thing, like I’m just another statistic walking in. Like she just really didn’t wanna be bothered. When I would call, I just always got a little sass from her, that tension I felt between she and I.

As clients’ economic vulnerability and feelings about their impoverished status meet the words and deeds of bureaucrats who seem to control their fate, they seek the assurance

¹³ Previous research might predict interminority tensions between them (Wilson and Taub 2006; Bobo and Hutchings 1996).

that they can maintain their dignity while asking for help. Andre had this to say about his latest food-stamps worker, a white male:

When you have dealt with more than one person in social services, you see if the sincerity is there. And it makes a tremendous difference when you have someone and they care, because you're supposed to have compassion and it's not so much about the money. It's supposed to be about, 'Okay I'm in a position where I can help people, I have these resources and I can connect them with other people'. I would say, with my caseworker, even though he's busy, his professionalism [is good]. He seems like he really cares because I called him to let him know 'Okay, I have a job now,' and he's like, 'Oh, well, congratulations! I hope everything works out'.

Over two-thirds of respondents expressed views similar to Andre's. Rita, a Puerto Rican mother of six, expressed this predominant view in the following way: "I don't have no preference whether [the caseworker] is a man or a female, black or white. You know, as long as they treat me with respect, then I treat them with respect." How this respect was defined by clients varied little. Respondents highlighted the norms of courtesy (friendly tone of voice, open and accessible demeanor, listening when spoken to) but also wanted caseworkers to avoid treating them as undeserving others, perpetual outsiders who had no reasonable claim to public benefits. In the next section, I consider how this stated desire for "respect" fits into our discussion of racially representative and street-level bureaucracy theories.

CONCLUSION

Racially representative bureaucracy theory has made a strong case for the importance of hiring a workforce that reflects the demographics of agency clientele. However, this analysis suggests that it is incomplete in at least two respects.

First, the theory underestimates the importance of bureaucratic constraints as a mechanism that can limit intragroup connection and ultimately trump racial representation. Racial diversity within institutions can create the possibility for a level of responsiveness that is shaped by social group commonality. However, it is not an automatic relationship that emerges from the demographic composition of the staff and clientele. It must be cultivated and supported by organizational structure, unless minority bureaucrats opt to risk their institutional standing through covert or overt acts of racial representation. In the case of the Staunton welfare office, worker desires to use their social backgrounds as tools to work with clients were seemingly in tension with structural requirements that demanded efficiency, heavy surveillance of clients, and limited engagement with clients. Statements from workers that assert the importance of their jobs for them and their families, and the lack of institutional resources to address clients, reveal the reasons for bureaucrats' reluctance to challenge the agency or to venture outside the boundaries of the bureaucracy's intensive structure. From clients' perspectives, caseworkers evaded and at times suppressed client demands. What feels like "red tape" to clients is likely the heavy rules and impersonality that is thought to encourage efficiency in the agency. The stated preferences of the workers interviewed that wanted deeper engagement are thus suppressed by the structure of the organization. In this analysis, I found stronger evidence for street-level bureaucracy theory than for racially representative bureaucracy theory.

Second, racially representative bureaucracy theory can underestimate the *multiple* and *intersectional* ways in which race and other group memberships inform institutional interactions within public institutions. When racial commonality is explicitly invoked during

service delivery, these processes of representation are informed by the class and bureaucratic interests of caseworkers of color in ways that can both ease and reinforce inherent tensions between bureaucrats and clients. As such, the classic interpretation of racial representation, which assumes that institutional actions based on intra-racial dynamics always benefit minority clients, may be too simplistic a way to understand the dynamics of these organizations. Indeed, connections on the basis of race for marginalized groups can lead to positive interactions and outcomes through brokering, tailored advice, and an empathic understanding. However, these relationships can also produce adverse effects driven by the need to prove a street-level bureaucrat's professional legitimacy or perhaps to ease his or her job. This suggests that organizational actors should be aware of the ways in which race, class, and institutional politics collide to inform the behaviors of bureaucrats of color. Black and Latino street-level bureaucrats are expected to balance racial group solidarity with institutional and class interests that may not always coincide. As such, their choices about where to place their alliances may or may not reinforce the assumptions of racially representative bureaucracies.

These two dynamics suggest that race is in fact mediated through organizational dynamics, but not always in the ways we might expect. In turn, clients seem to advocate a bureaucratic ideal in which "respect" becomes the critical currency. Whether this respect is operationalized through minimal intrusion into clients' lives or maximum engagement in their affairs, clients seemed to be advocating for a level of neutrality in the service-delivery process that does not further problematize them. Moments of solidarity and discord on the basis of race, gender, or other social group memberships escape superficial explanations, in part because the histories, politics, and motives within and across these communities are as diverse and complex as the entrenched social dynamics of the bureaucracies in which they intermingle. To clients, respect therefore marks an institution as "representative" of their interests regardless of their caseworkers' racial identity.

I wish to emphasize that I do not dispute the importance or legitimacy of staffing racially diverse bureaucracies. Changed conditions for minority clients can come through passive representation, improving the racial tenor of the organization. Meier and Hawes (2009) stress that undergirding racial representation is "the normative position that representative bureaucracies are a positive good, that such bureaucracies either provide symbolic reassurance to citizens of the representativeness of government, or more important, that such bureaucracies will actually implement policies in a different way" (272). What this article suggests is that processes of racial representation are structured by both organizational conditions and intragroup politics in ways that encourage us to be mindful of, and attentive to, the complexities of diversity.

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