

*Toward an Analysis of “Interpretive Representation:”
Inside the Black Box of Racially Representative Bureaucracies*

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ABSTRACT

The substantial incorporation of blacks and Latinos into government and quasi-government employment highlights important questions about the significance of race and class within politically contested institutions. Relying on interview data collected from black and Latino supervisors and caseworkers implementing welfare reform, I look at whether and how their presence has implications for the casework services offered to minority clients. Contrary to our assumptions about the level of impersonality entrenched in bureaucratic institutions, I find that many of these street-level bureaucrats 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 engage in what I term “interpretive representation,” a process by which bureaucratic actors communicate policies to clients in ways that are informed by their shared social group memberships in an effort to advance a set of perceived group interests. I present a typology to differentiate organizational actors who go about this process from those who do not and their various motivations for doing so. This article suggests that intragroup politics in minority communities are embedded and negotiated not only within neighborhoods and political movements, but also within policy organizations.

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INTRODUCTION

Public sector employment has been an important avenue for expanding the black and Latino middle classes (Greene and Rogers 1994; Hewitt 2004). Beginning in the Civil Rights era, increased political and social pressures challenged government organizations to diversify their workforces and ensure that their staffs better reflected the demographics of their clientele. As a result, public bureaucracies were the first institutions forced to open their doors to workers of color and to offer a salary, promotion, and job protection structure less open to discrimination (Dobbin et al 1993). Over time, federal, state, and local agencies around the country have incorporated people of color at all levels of the occupational ladder. Public sector work has consequently played a more significant role in intergenerational mobility for blacks than it has for whites (Eisinger 1982).

This transition to an integrated civil service also came about because many recognized that staff members of government agencies, especially the “street-level bureaucrats” who provide direct services (Lipsky 1983), are important social and political actors serving a variety of symbolic and substantive functions. 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 more advantaged members of racial minority groups serve multiple informal roles in addition to that of formally implementing public policy. These men and women also exist as economic beneficiaries of racial inclusion (Burbridge 1994; Collins 1983), resource brokers for deprived communities (Pattillo 2007), social regulators of

differently resourced race-mates (Lewis 2000), and counterexamples to the white bureaucrat-minority client service dyad that often dominates our assumptions.

While a literature exists that explores the dynamics of racial inclusion and exclusion in the political arenas of voting, political parties, and legislatures (Swain 1995; Tate 2003; Uggen and Manza 2002), we know little about how racial minority groups are incorporated into and represented within street-level bureaucracies. It is in these institutional settings that the presence of racial minorities among the power-wielding ranks arguably shapes most directly how social policy is experienced by citizens. Although we typically think of influence in terms of electoral politics, Eisinger reminds us that “Bureaucratic power provides opportunities to gather and interpret the information that underlies political decision making, to shape and establish choices on which elected officials act, to implement laws passed by elected bodies, and to shape the very character of the public workforce through internal procedures for recruitment, hiring, and promotion” (1982: 769; see also Lipsky 1983). Access to bureaucratic power thus theoretically provides individuals with opportunities to advance a variety of both institutional and group interests.

Although sociologists have not worked extensively in this area, public administration research has made critical strides in parsing out the impact of increased racial and ethnic diversity in government agency workforces on policies and institutional practices. Determining and measuring the effects of “representative bureaucracies” is an established area in this field. Based on the theory that an agency’s goals are encouraged by having a staff that reflects the social backgrounds of its constituents (Kingsley 1944), the ideal is to have “representative political institutions” that draw personnel from all sectors of society (Dolan and Rosenbloom 2003). The hypothesis is that the unique interests of minority clients are better represented in

agencies staffed with members of racial and ethnic minorities than by agencies staffed only with non-Hispanic whites; several empirical studies support this claim (Goldsmith 2004; Hinder 1993b; Meier 1993; Meier and Stewart 1992; Ogmundson 2005; Owens 2005; Riccucci and Meyers 2004; Selden 1997; Sowa and Selden 2003). Although results have been mixed (Ogmundson 2005), recent work finds support for representative bureaucracy theory with regard to gender as well (Keiser et al. 2002; Meier and Nicholson-Crotty 2006; Wilkens 2006; Wilkins and Keiser 2004). The idea is that 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 that will be better incorporated into public and institutional policies (active representation) should persons with those same characteristics be granted access to power within public agencies (passive representation).¹ In the case of race and ethnicity, active representation emerges only if minority bureaucrats wield discretionary power and recognize that a particular issue has implications for their racial group (Meier and Stewart 1992).

Welfare reform raises important questions about the role of minority street-level bureaucrats within local welfare offices and the extent to which these agencies operate as representative bureaucracies. Under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), its flagship program Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (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 low-income mothers, and higher levels of child support collection. However, welfare reform observers have noted a troubling trend – the

increasing concentration of racial minorities on the rolls. This raises important questions about the experiences of clients of color in welfare offices and how these institutions may or may not be adequately addressing their needs as they pursue economic resources.³

As this policy shift has unfolded, welfare caseworkers are no longer expected to simply confirm recipient eligibility, issue cash benefits, and monitor program compliance. 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 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 exploited as recipients navigate the now decade-old system.

This article analyzes the experiences of black and Latino street-level bureaucrats working in a local welfare office as it implements the TANF program or enacts welfare reform. It examines the following questions: First, how do these service providers see their professional roles within the organization, and how do their social backgrounds, occupational experiences, and political attitudes shape their understandings of how they should work with clients of color? Second, do these actors shape their interactions with these clients in ways that reflect simultaneous commitments as professionals and as members of racial and ethnic communities? Third, if there is evidence to suggest that race affects how minority employees assess particular

policy reforms and interact with clients, how might these social processes challenge or solidify existing inequalities within the institution? By addressing these questions, I will show how the multiple and intersecting social identities of black and Latino street-level bureaucrats shape the content and tone of their interactions with clients of color in ways that affect both welfare reform implementation and intragroup politics within minority communities.

More specifically, I argue that the peculiarities of bureaucratic “middle-ness” are heightened for the black and Latino social welfare workers in this analysis, as their simultaneous locations of power and subordination in institutional positions are similarly replicated in their (relatively) privileged class standing and disadvantaged racial status. I show that minority supervisors and caseworkers make strategic choices about whether and how to inject the issue of race 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 locations. Those that I call “apolitical bureaucrats” actively seek to divorce the issue of race from their interactions within the organization and their interpretations of the broader implications of the policy. For these bureaucrats, there is noticeably less integration between their professional identities and racial and ethnic group consciousness. Yet many minority bureaucrats use welfare reform and their interactions with minority clients to engage in a unique kind of street-level activism by igniting the points of solidarity, as well as the fault lines of difference, within their racial communities. These “street-level liberators” leverage race to communicate the social goals and political motives of welfare policy and attempt to use occupational authority and social status to pursue moral and political rescue missions grounded in racial group-centered ideologies. As these individuals interpret policy reform through the lens of their own social locations and discuss its implications with clients of color, the raced and classed ways in which

they both understand and articulate the welfare-to-work enterprise becomes incorporated into the organization in subtle, but critical, ways.

The next section of this paper uses current work on representative bureaucracies as well as research on dynamics within communities of color to demonstrate how interconnections among race, class, politics, and organizations can be illuminated by synthesizing these two schools of research. 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 these employees viewed 1996 welfare reform as well as their beliefs about their institutional status within the agency.

TOWARD AN ANALYSIS OF INTERPRETATIVE REPRESENTATION: INSIDE THE “BLACK BOX” OF RACIALLY REPRESENTATIVE BUREAUCRACIES

The present analysis fills a gap in the literature by focusing on the continuing significance of race in workplace interactions, especially within government institutions. On the one hand, as organizational actors, agency employees have distinct professional concerns; on the other hand, they occupy particular racial and other social locations, and may act as group members with investments that extend beyond their professional commitments and encompass interests external to the organization. As such, capturing their experiences allows us to address broader questions about how individuals integrate their racial and other social group memberships with their professional identities as policy implementers in street-level bureaucracies.

The approach to representative bureaucracy theory taken here addresses shortcomings that perhaps discourage its wider adoption among sociologists: a focus on *outcomes* rather than on how bureaucratic *processes* are shaped by race; inattention to the embedded surveillance that

fuels or constrains how employees of color implement what they see as the “best” course of action for minority clients within an organizational setting; and a lack of integration with existing social scientific paradigms that examine intragroup differences within racial minority groups.

Meier and Nicholson-Crotty (2006) write, “Representative bureaucracy concerns not just the composition of the bureaucracy but also the repercussions that representation has for policy making and policy implementation” (850). Hinderer (1993b) similarly focuses on 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” (419; also see Hinderer 1993a). Students of representative bureaucracies therefore largely focus on explicating evidence of differences in the concrete sets of resources that are distributed to clients of different backgrounds; uncovering agency rules that are bent, broken, or ignored for certain clients; and teasing out variation in the likelihood that clients will demonstrate a particular set of behaviors as a function of the makeup of an agency’s workforce and other institutional factors. Institutional processes and contexts are considered important (Keiser et al 2002), but only as functions of substantive representation.

The clear focus within this scholarship on documenting the presence of “passive” or “active” representation on the organizational level has led, however, to a limited conceptualization of how the demographic makeup of policy institutions shapes what occurs within them. If we understand racial representation within institutions as simply the percentages of minority bureaucrats or the differences in policy outcomes attributable to the demographic and other related characteristics of the bureaucratic institution and its workforce, how do we define the space in between? As Dolan and Rosenbloom rightly critique, “Instead of assessing whether individual administrators’ social origins first shape attitudes and then affect policy outputs in

predictable ways, the middle step has generally been omitted and administrators' social origins have been directly linked to policy outputs" (2003: 115). How are we therefore to understand the *hows* and *whys* of bureaucrats' behavior within these settings? How do we account for more clandestine moments when bureaucrats help clients who share their social group memberships to navigate the system in distinctive ways? How do we explain their use of organizational power for the sake of advancing certain "group interests" whether or not they are revealed in our measurements of policy outcomes?

The high level of surveillance operating within post-reform welfare offices may undermine the extent to which bureaucrats can actually alter existing policies in ways that clearly shape outcomes. With an established hierarchy ordering administrators, service providers, and clients, and a strong mandate that rolls be reduced and recipients engage in work, bureaucratic power in these institutions is limited (Hays 2003; Riccucci et al 2004). Michael Lipsky (1983) famously argued, before the computerization of welfare casework, that street-level bureaucrats exercise a high level of discretion and effectively re-create policy on the ground—whereas now, almost every action and decision made by a caseworker is subject to constant electronically managed supervision. As such, benefit time clocks, case closings, and noncompliance sanctions are often not solely under the direct control of caseworkers and instead are determined and executed in large part by the technological apparatus of the organization. The caseworker-client interaction, with relatively limited direct surveillance and its current focus on one-on-one advising, may therefore emerge as a critical space in which minority bureaucrats might attempt to pursue objectives for minority clients.

As such, I note at the outset that this paper does not examine whether black and Latino bureaucrats allocate a different set of monetary resources to minority clients or are more likely to

push for certain concessions related to time limits, work requirements, or other policies within welfare offices. Nor does this paper explore whether clients are more likely to leave welfare for work if their workers are of the same or different racial background. Such questions will prove beyond the scope of the data on which this paper is based. Rather, I seek to understand the *processes* by which minority bureaucrats seek to integrate multiple and interlocking identities in order to pursue what they define as racial group interests within bureaucratic settings. As this paper will show, the actions of these bureaucrats carry a significance that must be accounted for in order to fully assess the impact of the massive incorporation of blacks and Latinos into public sector and human service work and its implications for the political and social lives of traditionally marginalized groups.

The Conceptual Building Blocks of Interpretive Representation

Taking seriously the critiques of Brubaker and 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” (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 beauty of identity and identification concepts,” Albert, Ashforth, and Dutton (2000) advocate, “is that they provide a way of accounting for the agency of human action within an organizational framework” (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. 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.⁴

As potentially key drivers of interpretive representation, group consciousness, group solidarity, and linked fate likely inform many individuals' professional identities. They ostensibly motivate bureaucrats to affirm their racial identities through their work and to make choices about how to interact with co-ethnics. 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 – traditionally thought to be comprised of self-identification with the social group, a sense of closeness to one's group, or a belief that one's fate is linked to that of the group (Chong and Rogers 2005) – likely also informs whether and how bureaucrats bring race and other social identities into their jobs. 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; McClain et al 2006; Miller et al 1981; Sanchez 2006).⁵ 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. These perceptions have been shown to constrain the capacity of class divisions within the black community to create substantial differences in partisanship affiliations and voting patterns between middle- and upper-class African Americans and their poorer counterparts. "The historical experiences of African Americans," Dawson argues, "have resulted in a situation in which group interests have served as a useful proxy for self-interest" (1995: 77). Dawson does find modest class cleavages among African Americans around the issue of government economic redistribution, suggesting that support for efforts such

as welfare declines as affluence rises. Nevertheless, strong perceptions of linked fate reduce class divisions. 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.

Yet the linked fate and representative bureaucracy frameworks may suffer when we take into greater account the political, social, and economic diversity within racial communities. Sociologists such as W.E.B. DuBois (1899), Sinclair Drake and Horace Cayton (1945), E. Franklin Frazier (1957), Bart Landry (1988), and Mary Pattillo (1999, 2007) have highlighted the commonalities and differences that exist among and between the black middle class and their poorer counterparts. Others have argued that the public representation of black interests is currently (and has historically been) more reflective of the goals of its privileged members (e.g. middle class, heterosexual, male), challenging our understanding of "group interests" and how they are articulated (Boyd 2006; Cohen 1999; Gaines 1996; Ginwright 2002; McBride 2005; Reed 1999). "Dawson's formulation," Reed argues, "begs critical questions as to how individuals form their perceptions of group interest: How do individuals determine that certain initiatives or conditions generate racial common effects? And, more significant, how do they ascertain which interpretations, issues, and strategies actually represent the interest of the collectivity rather than some more narrowly partisan or idiosyncratic agenda?" (1999). Other work has challenged the extent, forms, and context of an all-encompassing pan-ethnic Latino linked fate (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.

Welfare offices are ideal locales in which to study these dynamics because they operate as politically contested spaces where caseworker-client interactions are thought to be highly symbolic (Brodkin 1992; Soss 2002). Underlying the seemingly mundane tasks of benefit distribution and the enforcement of work requirements and time limits lays a network of highly charged social and political processes. Researchers have demonstrated how caseworkers exercise power through their interactions with clients in ways that define the terms of political citizenship vis-à-vis access to public resources (Soss 2002), negotiate the meaning of social rights and obligations (Brodkin 1992), make moral assertions about the poor (Hasenfeld 2000), use administrative reforms to economically restrict individuals (Brodkin 1997), and perpetuate interracial inequalities (Gooden 1998; Lieberman 2001). It is therefore quite conceivable that in-group politics are negotiated within these organizations as well. As scholars of welfare offices have suggested, the distance between the rhetoric and goals of welfare policies and their implementation on the ground should not be thought of simply as operational anomalies, but as institutional battlegrounds for conflicting political and social goals.

METHODS AND BACKGROUND

Because the representation of a set of racial group interests is not an advertised function of rationalized bureaucracies (Keiser et al 2002), such events are difficult to observe. In-depth, one-on-one interviews where service providers have the opportunity to describe their actions as well as reflect upon them will likely capture some of the nuances of this social process in ways that other methods do not. By probing bureaucrats' attitudes and perceptions about not only the policies they are called to implement but also their implications for clients within particular social groups, we can discern how they then find ways to operationalize those views, even if they

fall outside of the formal precepts of service delivery. Further, fieldwork conducted over a long period provides the opportunity to build the rapport necessary to encourage staff members to discuss organizational interactions that often take place under the radar of organizational leadership. Conducting an in-depth organizational case study therefore allowed me to capture the experiences of minority caseworkers from multiple vantage points. Many have observed that this “black box” approach, with its emphasis on process, is problematically in short supply in current work on race and organizations (Reskin 2000; Vallas 2003).

Employee narratives are “highly textured depictions of practices and institutions” where individual actions and motives are prominently featured (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000). To be sure, narratives “do not assume that the stories are historically accurate accounts,” although they might be just that (336). Nevertheless, narratives do give us a sense of norms and beliefs that drive social interaction. Using this tool, we will see how street-level welfare bureaucrats deploy strategies to assert their professional, political, and personal philosophies and articulate the legitimacy of their approaches (Ravasi and van Rekom 2003).

The majority of the data used for this paper came from interviews conducted between 2000 and 2006 with fifteen black and Latino caseworkers and supervisors of the Staunton Office of a Northeastern state’s Bureau of Transitional Assistance (BTA).⁶ Initial interviews were conducted in 2000 and 2001 and included twelve of the office’s sixteen black and Latino front-line staff members (two supervisors and ten caseworkers).⁷ I supplemented those twelve interviews by interviewing three additional caseworkers in February 2006 who had transferred into the Staunton office from other BTA sites in recent years. The first round of interviews generated hypotheses and themes that I explored again in the second interviews. This approach allowed me to confirm previously reported dynamics and to interview institutional newcomers to

determine whether these dynamics persisted in cases of staff turnover and other organizational changes. 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 supervisor and one caseworker.

Respondents were interviewed for approximately one to one-and-a half 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. Interviewees were asked how they define their class, racial, and ethnic backgrounds; and subsequent discussions of the role that these social locations played in how they approached their jobs helped me to assess just how salient these identities seemed to be for interviewees in their everyday lives and work. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Each took place in an enclosed meeting room in the BTA office. Names of respondents and the welfare office have been changed to protect confidentiality.

The mission of these employees 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. 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 non-profit 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.

Staunton is the result of the merger of several welfare offices in one of the state's most populous cities. It funnels a geographically and racially diverse staff and client base into an urban location to administer the state's version of TANF. In March 2001, 44.4 percent of the Staunton office's caseload family heads were black, 35.0 percent Hispanic, 15.9 percent white, and 4.3 percent Asian.⁸ At that time, the office employed fifteen white TANF caseworkers, application screeners, and Employment Support Program (ESP) workers, eight Black, six Hispanic, and two Asian. There were six white and two African American supervisors of work units that administered the TANF program.

For this paper, I focus on the experiences and attitudes of black and Latino caseworkers and supervisors as they work with black and Latino clients. All nine of the black respondents identified themselves as African American in interviews. Place of family origin is noted in the case of the six Latino employees in this analysis, all of whom were 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.⁹ They too have multiple and competing identities and commitments that potentially inform their understandings and approaches to the service delivery process. Although racial representation within public bureaucracies has traditionally been associated with racial and ethnic minorities, in principle, some of these activities would seem generalizable to all racial and ethnic groups. However, space constraints confine me to exploring in-depth the experiences of bureaucrats who are racial minorities within the welfare agency's larger administrative structure and in the broader society in order to fully tease out this notion of interpretive representation.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

I. The Institutional Context for Interpretative Representation

Interpretative representation is best conceptualized as a negotiation between (1) the perceived institutional power of street-level bureaucrats vis-à-vis superiors, co-workers, subordinates, and clients; (2) the unique sets of politics surrounding the policies bureaucrats are called to implement and the social contexts in which these policies are embedded; and (3) the ways in which bureaucratic actors simultaneously operationalize a defined set of group interests and professional considerations – concerns that may compete or coalesce. I begin my presentation of empirical findings by exploring how Staunton’s black and Latino employees viewed their power within the agency and 1996 welfare reform in order to set the institutional and political contexts. Next, I look at whether and how these bureaucrats operationalized interpretive representation by looking at how they incorporated issues related to race into the service-delivery process. Finally, I consider what the widespread inclusion of racial and ethnic minorities into these agency roles means for street-level bureaucracies, communities, and the experiences of individuals as they access state services.

Both Flourishing and Foiled: The Paradox of the Minority Street-Level Bureaucrat

The social worlds of minority street-level bureaucrats are often created over decades of employment for the state.¹⁰ In the Staunton TANF office, black and Latino workers face many of the same dilemmas as their white counterparts (Morgen 2001; Riccucci et al 2004). The atmosphere of simultaneous power and subordination is often palpable. Front-line welfare workers are subject to the office’s supervisory and evaluation structure, the complex demands of an ever-changing welfare policy, and an institutional hierarchy that constantly sends down orders

from on high. The rumblings of an unhappy client or a phone call placed to one's supervisor from a legal services lawyer can expose caseworkers to piercing scrutiny. Yet these employees can also exercise considerable control over how some tangible and intangible resources are distributed and how they interact with their clients (Brodkin 1997; Hasenfeld 1983). Most relevant for the purposes of this paper, caseworkers determine how they will explain policy aims to clients and try to convince them to follow agency directives and fully invest in the welfare-to-work enterprise. As such, TANF caseworkers sit in the middle of low-income individuals' networks of human service providers, positioned between agency leadership and clients.

Although bureaucratic "middle-ness" is experienced by all Staunton office workers, it is in many ways heightened for employees of color. Their relative financial stability – via union-negotiated salaries, benefits, and pension packages – contrasts with the economic instability of their race-mate clients, whose poverty is disproportionately laid bare in the office and in the public eye (Gilens 1999). Ironically, the institutional power to which minority employees have access is in a government bureaucracy that has historically rendered many clients of color powerless (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Schram, Soss, and Fording 2003). Further, these staff members monitor, assist, and police not only poor minority clients, but also poor white clients who enjoy skin color privileges that they themselves do not possess (McIntosh 1988). This paradoxical position of power and subordination in an agency with such a distinct political character creates a unique undercurrent among minority staff members.

With two out of eight supervisors in the Staunton office being people of color and a collegial environment almost uniformly reported among the staff, minority workers seem to have successfully integrated into the welfare office as "middlemen" and "middlewomen" (Pattillo 2007). Yet despite the efforts of many of the interviewees 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 (Also see Barnett, Baron, and Stuart 2000; Behr 2000). All of the Staunton office's top-level administrators are white. Some black and Latino employees report frustration with their lack of professional mobility and limited access to positions in the central headquarters office where the higher-paid and more prestigious upper-level positions in the statewide system are located.¹¹

Carlos, who migrated to the state from Puerto Rico, represents this sentiment:

When you see a job posted [in the organization] and it pays over \$40,000,¹² 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, go to central office and you'll see all the Anglo-whites.¹³ 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 [minority] coworkers and supervisor 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.

The Staunton staff members of color, by and large, contend that they do not apply for higher-status positions with optimism. The 2005 promotions of Constance and Leena, two of Staunton's black female employees, to management positions in other offices within the welfare department functioned as a racial Rorschach test, disproving the contention that race mattered for some and serving as exceptions to a pernicious rule for others. Constance's own words in 2001 suggest a bitter irony – promotion was 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 resources jobs and I have my own battle scars.” Regardless of their occupational paths, these employees view race and ethnicity as important in their understandings of how the organization operates. Their “middle-ness” as employees of color is something that seems to both grant and limit their power, generating simultaneous allegiance to and leering of the organization in ways that potentially shape their strategies for interacting with other institutional actors.

II. The Political Context for Interpretative Representation

Staunton’s top-level administrators discourage anything but a neutral stance toward clients in the service-delivery process, yet front-line employees are hard-pressed to not let their perceptions of the welfare system make their way into their work. Tamara, an African American caseworker who has worked for the department for twenty-nine years, was critical of the tough regulations that she implemented:

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.

For many of Staunton’s black and Latino staff members, the welfare system carries a social meaning located in a broader context of racial inequality.¹⁴ I asked Timothy, an African American caseworker for over twenty years, what he thought when welfare reform passed: “I

knew who it was going to target more....Even though I know numbers-wise, more of them (whites) are on....But when I heard about it, I thought about how it was going to affect people of color.” As Timothy and I later discussed how he thought race affected his minority clients in the labor market, he had 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 about a black or a person of color is negative. 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 twenty-four hours has been negative. Clients experience some of that.

Although Timothy was asked to describe how race operates for his clients outside of the office, in answering he casts himself as the protagonist, the eager jobseeker. He then describes his clients’ experiences more broadly, suggesting that while Timothy occupies a different class position, he still feels as though he shares much of their economic vulnerability because of race.

Collective memory contributes to some minority bureaucrats’ racially informed readings of the welfare system, creating another symbolic link between themselves and their clients of color. Restricted access to the rolls prior to the late 1960s reminded Constance of the ways in which the system had for decades undermined the political rights and economic survival of other African Americans: “I’m originally from [the South], from a very small town. When I was a child, I was not aware of welfare. I grew up in a time when segregation was big. I have heard my parents and older people say, ‘Of course you weren’t aware of welfare because you had to know

somebody to be on welfare.’ I don’t mean you had to know somebody on welfare. I mean you had to know someone to get you on a state roll. Otherwise, they’d find a reason to turn you away. I knew poor people, but not people on welfare.”

Given this historical recollection of the welfare system and contemporary concerns about discrimination in the labor market, one might expect employees like Constance and Timothy to express hostility toward the idea of limiting access to the welfare rolls. By and large, however, they, along with the other black and Latino workers that I interviewed, expressed support for the judicious application of time limits, sanctions, and work requirements. Most felt that government bore a responsibility to help those who could not find work, but were largely uncomfortable with the idea of public cash support over an indefinite period of time. As Timothy explained, “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.”

Considering the increasingly conservative political attitudes of blacks toward the welfare system, as documented in Tate’s analysis (1999, 2003) of the National Black Election Study (NBES), such reactions are perhaps not surprising. The fervent welfare reform debate of the 1990s occurred at a time when African Americans and other racial minorities were enjoying significant political and economic clout under the Clinton administration. There was, until late in the debate, minimal protest from top political and civil rights leaders that represented large constituencies of racial minorities.¹⁵ Tate explained the level of support for welfare reform among blacks in the NBES as “political optimism and naïveté about the political process [that] blinded liberals and blacks to the hard consequences that this welfare reform law [would] have for children born in poverty,” a disproportionate number of whom were of color (1999: 351).

However, Staunton's street-level bureaucrats knew the economic and social realities confronting those leaving welfare and had lived with the policy long enough to witness some of its shortcomings. Particularly in light of their own frustrations with the bureaucracy and their status within it, what explains the alignment between their personal attitudes about the policy and agency policy priorities, with their complex ideological and social implications? Were they simply acting as obedient state employees, or were they operating as mindful political actors?

Ideology, Group Representation, and the Racialized Discourse of Welfare

Many of Staunton's black and Latino supervisors and caseworkers expressed general support for welfare reform *because* of its racialized implications. Undergirding their beliefs about welfare reform was their assumption that the welfare system had broad implications not only for their clients, but for minorities in general. It therefore bore a personalized meaning for these bureaucrats, even if they themselves had never been on assistance.

Carlos illustrates this linked-fate perspective. After taking classes to improve his English language skills, he attended a local community college for a year and then studied business 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 ethnic politics of the United States surprised Carlos, he quickly deduced that the government program for which he was now working had a politics all

its own. He realized that when people talked about welfare, they seemed to be talking about people who looked like him. His family had never been on welfare, but he felt implicated in its racialized vilification. Over time, the actual and perceived racial composition of the welfare rolls became highly political in Carlos's mind, an association that he considered crippling not only to clients in the welfare office, but also to him. Challenging that perception has become 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 takes on a social meaning that informs how he interacts with colleagues.

When welfare reform was announced, Carlos shared his co-workers' disbelief. After all these years, would they finally do something about a system that provided meager benefits and few supports for clients to return to work? When the new policy was announced and the office retrained them on the new rules, Carlos surmised that perhaps the state was on the right track. Workers throughout the Staunton office could pinpoint specific clients for whom welfare reform seemed particularly necessary and worried aloud about those clients who might not be able to make it under the new system. For Carlos, however, concerns about individual clients' fates were overshadowed by a 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 problematized, 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 different ethnicities.” This sense of pan-Hispanic and even pan-minority solidarity is a filter through which Carlos evaluates the current policy he is called to implement.

In this sense, how Carlos discusses the demographics of the caseload with co-workers 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. Implicit and explicit in his actions is the interpretation of welfare reform as a political vehicle, an instrument for improving the overall standing of all minorities. In the minds of minority employees with worldviews like Carlos’s, under welfare reform they can liberate people of color from the pernicious grasp of dependency, revising the public narrative about minorities and the welfare system, and helping people pursue an improved quality of life by encouraging particular behaviors and connecting them to needed services. As such, these street-level bureaucrats see welfare reform as a transformative opportunity for their group’s most disadvantaged -- and for minorities collectively. As we will see in the next section, some reason further that their racial communities are better served when the policy is administered by street-level bureaucrats with an eye towards this larger moral rescue mission, people who bring a sense of group solidarity and consciousness to the task of welfare administration.

III. Street-Level Liberators & Apolitical Bureaucrats in Representative Agencies

While minority front-line workers described valuing their abilities to assist all their clients, the fact that many clients are people of color advances the social significance of their work. Many of these minority caseworkers are excited by the prospect of developing productive,

supportive relationships with minority clients. To them, welfare casework has social resonance in part *because* of their racial backgrounds. They enjoy state-bestowed authority that they can then use to provide needed resources to individuals that look like them. For this reason, few minority workers wanted to completely disentangle their racial identities from their professional identities.

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.”

Carlos’s observations parallel the findings of Pattillo (1999, 2007) and Jackson (2001), who challenge the idea that black middle-class economic gains and subsequent residential mobility have removed these individuals from social interactions with and resource-brokering for poor blacks (Wilson 1987). These authors argue that meaningful cross-class interaction among blacks takes place in extended families, churches, community organizations, and other social spaces. As a middle-class¹⁶ Puerto Rican, Carlos’s world is not detached from that of lower-income Latinos. He and many co-workers live alongside minorities of various class backgrounds, and they seek to translate that sense of community to the welfare office, where they can distribute resources to those who haven’t been able to overcome some of the obstacles that they have.

Thus Staunton’s black and Latino staff members would have to decide whether to address their group-oriented concerns by leveraging their symbolic presence in the organization to carry

out policies and processes. While most workers asserted that they lacked the power needed to change agency rules or deliver a different set of services to minority clients, some nonetheless would find ways to weave together a style of interaction that, while articulating the expectations of the institution, conveyed another set of messages. This gave rise to two distinct approaches to actively negotiating professional and racial identities in service delivery.

One group of Staunton's minority welfare professionals dismissed the notion that their interactions with minority clients differed from those they had with white clients. This small but important segment of interviewees was committed to being apolitical in thinking about their work and welfare's racial implications. For example, Sharlene, an African American caseworker, doubted that racial consciousness could or should be invoked on the job. It was not that she considered race a non-issue, but she saw clear limits to the idea of unity in the name of racial sameness. Politics, she reasoned, were best left to the people who sent orders down to the welfare office. Moreover, Sharlene was preoccupied with the heavy demands of the job and highly valued impartiality, even detachment, in her work with clients. As she diligently typed information into her computer and guided the client interview, she often overlooked comments made by clients that she felt were irrelevant to determining whether they qualified for benefits and services or were meeting policy expectations. Besides, Sharlene reasoned, policy was policy, "regardless of whether you were black, white, green, whatever."

Timothy contrasts with Sharlene in representing another approach to his interactions with minority clients that is in some ways worlds apart. Although he does not directly influence the size of a client's check or whether she is mandated to go to work, he clearly infuses tailored, discretionary advice and guidance into his interactions with certain clients. All of his clients receive Timothy's attention and resources, but clients of color receive a message that goes

beyond the standard language of time limits, work requirements, and sanctions: “Because 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.” Timothy incorporates this presumed kinship into his repertoire of policy implementation tools, and then leverages it in service delivery to help punctuate his message about welfare reform. A smooth merger of his social and professional identities, this policy communication strategy functions as interpretive representation.

Front-line workers operating in this way can be described as *street-level liberators*, bureaucrats who attempt to use their occupational authority and social status to pursue moral and political rescue missions grounded in group-centered ideologies.¹⁷ For these employees, mere organizational presence is not enough; they are committed to bringing group-centered norms, collective histories, and belief systems to bear on communications with minority clients. While *apolitical bureaucrats* like Sharlene see no utility in bringing race into their interactions with clients, street-level liberators rely on their dual status as both community insiders and agents of the state to build relationships with clients and direct them toward particular goals. Legal scholar Kimberle 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 intracommunity problems.” (1256). The minority caseworker-minority client interaction acts as an alternative space where liberators can address perceived intragroup concerns with individual clients. 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. Thus, the goal of interpretative representation within this institution is to provide clients with advice on both navigating the bureaucracy and making certain life choices in an effort to jettison them from the welfare system. Only rarely did these liberators assist clients by extending their time on the welfare system. As such, the choices of these bureaucrats do not unilaterally contaminate policy implementation.

Loretta, a Venezuelan woman who came to the US in 1996, believes that her Latina clients are receptive to the tough-love messages that she reserves for them. Like many other street-level liberators, her own history of poverty and welfare use in some ways compounds her commitment to taking advantage of her occupational position to pursue a particular agenda. She describes welfare reform as a “necessary evil” and views it as her obligation to help clients get all of the services that they can in order to prepare for the time when they can no longer rely on the office:

I feel just as proud if they do well, regardless [of race]. But with the Spanish girls, particularly that are younger, I feel like I’m kind of more like a mother, you know? I got 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.

One might argue that, by promoting behaviors that are in line with the goals of welfare reform, minority bureaucrats are simply reflecting agency priorities rather than engaging in interpretative representation. Indeed, homophily does not necessarily imply interpretive

representation. However, these employees' messages reveal common themes in minority liberation struggles. Success is referenced as a shared experience among race-mates, not simply as the effective implementation of policy priorities. Street-level liberators emphasize actively resisting racial exclusion, triumphing over adversity, and proudly representing "the community." It is not uncommon for them to highlight their similarity to their clients, asserting social distance only to serve as an example of how far one can go. Louisa, a Puerto Rican caseworker, explains how she describes the department's training and education opportunities. Like Carlos, she asserts pan-minority solidarity in the 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."¹⁸ 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, 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 welfare policy to Latina and black clients in racialized terms. She also demonstrates how connections made on the basis of sameness give way to the politics of group consciousness. Louisa's message of racial social uplift is woven into her client service delivery in a way that she hopes will resonate with her clients. 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 have happened if their caseworkers were white or minority apolitical bureaucrats, Louisa believes that they matter:

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 it [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 Lipsky's *Street-Level Bureaucracy* (1983), that public policy is created in daily interactions between bureaucrats and clients, intracommunity political discourse becomes part of the policy implementation process within these institutions. By engaging in interpretive representation, bureaucratic actors' interactions with clients are informed by their shared social group memberships in advancing both public policies and a set of perceived group interests.

Street-level liberators are not unwilling to use their power to regulate and enforce. Interpretative representation therefore can be paternalistic or collaborative, condescending or supportive, even all at the same time, depending on the orientation of the bureaucrat. However, it almost always leverages in-group politics in powerful ways to articulate why a client should adopt a certain set of behaviors. Timothy's 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. 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 middle-class assumptions, highlighting the complexity of interpretive representation and its embedded power inequities. To Timothy, receiving welfare is a blemish. The idea that welfare recipients should distance

themselves from other welfare recipients is also somewhat unrealistic, considering the dense intraclass networks that low-income families leverage for child care, social support, and other critical resources (Dominguez and Watkins 2003; Stack 1997). Timothy references truck drivers and real estate agents, occupations that require costly training that most of his clients could not afford without assistance. These jobs also exist outside of the fast food, nursing aid, and low-level retail work into which most of these clients will likely be funneled. At the center of Timothy's prescriptions are directives aimed at modifying clients' behavior in order to exit the welfare system as quickly as possible.¹⁹

While Staunton's street-level liberators express a desire to protect clients of color from welfare system problems, they are not unaware of the difficulties that might await those who leave welfare. They recognize that they are sending many of them to a low-wage job market of limited flexibility and power, but their logic is that just about anything is better than welfare. Carlos tells his 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." In these moments, the caseworker-client interaction becomes a forum for intraracial evangelizing on the part of minority bureaucrats in order to address larger concerns about the conditions of poorer race-mates. Carlos and those like him use the tool most accessible to them: the power that they command in the welfare office.

PRWORA is now over a decade old with very few policymakers calling for its abolishment. In fact, policymakers point to the massively declined rolls and increased employment among low-income mothers to argue for even tougher requirements. Pushing clients

to accept these rules and move away from the system are arguably realistic responses to the hard actualities of the current regime. 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 and efforts to increase the minimum wage. The dire conditions of their poorer race-mates, these bureaucrats argue, require blunt intervention.

Despite the efforts of street-level liberators to engage in the kind of interpretative representation that may lead to altered outcomes for clients, they are not always successful. The multiple factors that influence whether a client follows the edicts of welfare reform are both institutional and individual (Hays 2003). No matter how much technical acumen or social uplift is involved in bureaucratic successes, though, when clients engage in contradictory behaviors – having another baby, quitting a job that seemed like a good opportunity – frustration mounts on the part of liberators. Research suggests that clients’ experiences under welfare reform are marked by ebbs and flows, peppered with success and failures, opportunities and closed doors, “good” and “bad” choices, and resource constraints and underutilized resources (DeParle 2004; Hays 2003; Watkins 2000). But while other workers might view client setbacks as professional disappointments, liberators see them as impediments to the political and even moral rescue mission. Timothy described his frustrations:

It kills me—a bunch of kids and different “baby daddies.” I sometimes ask them 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, they go from 1 to 10, just like that. And I hear them, “My man is doing 8-10, 3-5 [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 liberatory efforts prove ineffective, he may move interpretative representation in a direction that is even more 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 street-level liberation that transcends the boundaries of standard caseworker-client protocol.

In these interactions, clients are left unprotected from the harsher policing efforts of more privileged blacks and Latinos. Their stigmatization, their minimal political clout, and the power imbalance between street-level bureaucrats and their clients likely make them reluctant to openly contest this morality policing. Timothy reports that only a 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.”²⁰

Previous work suggests that many welfare recipients actually share these critical perceptions of the system, 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, James, and Walters 1998). In many ways, street-level liberators, 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. Liberators’ 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, go unquestioned.

DISCUSSION

The precepts of representative bureaucracy theory dictate that, unless we can point to differences in client outcomes or in the distribution of public resources, the presence of these employees has no meaning beyond their numerical (passive) representation. Internal group politics matter only insofar as they directly affect the allocation of state resources. Yet I have posited here that the ways in which a bureaucrat presses for the interests of a population that shares his or her background through caseworker-client interactions may reflect a form of representation. Decisions made about how to communicate policy and whether to strategically undermine or stoically enforce a particular policy can be done in ways (and for particular motives) that very much speak to group-based concerns. While interpretive representation may impact populations less starkly than active representation, this is as significant a phenomenon. Interpretive representation shapes the service provision process, becomes a part of clients' experiences within organizations, and may indirectly or directly affect particular outcomes; it is therefore a crucial part of the institutional story.

As an institutional process, interpretive representation allows us to map the ideologies that shape how bureaucrats perform their jobs within a raced (and classed) institutional landscape and more deeply understand how inequalities inside and outside of institutions are addressed, perpetuated, or ameliorated within agency walls. Minority street-level bureaucrats experience power and subordination simultaneously in their institutional positions and in their (relatively) privileged class standing and disadvantaged racial status. Interpretive representation requires,

however, more than mere ambivalence. Individuals must possess a racialized political consciousness about the government program that they are called to implement and surmise its implications for clients of color. When merged with an existing sense of group solidarity, group consciousness, and linked fate, these employees then school race-mate clients about the realities of the bureaucracy to which they all have ties. They deploy frames operating within marginalized communities to communicate the functions, goals, opportunities, and pitfalls of policies and procedures in ways they hope will resonate with clients. Interpretative representation therefore hinges on the acknowledgement of racial sameness and frames the work of bureaucrats, even if only marginally, in the context of that relationship.

As such, perceived group interests help to shape how individuals interpret and operationalize their roles as policy implementers. The focus on advice-giving as a key component of interpretive representation allows street-level liberators 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. Whether these activities evolve into what we know as active or substantive representation is a question for future work. This analysis has revealed a set of politics operating within welfare offices that has heretofore been largely ignored, opening up a whole new area for scientific inquiry and potential programmatic and policy interventions.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Minority Government Intermediaries in the Post Welfare Reform Era

In many ways the present analysis forges a new path in examining patterns of interaction and affiliation *within* racial groups in organizations. It takes into account the complexities that

arise when individuals who share a marginalized racial status nevertheless occupy different rungs on the organizational and socioeconomic hierarchy. As institutional processes reinforce or challenge embedded systems of inequality, individuals actively determine how to address and engage with these realities through their interactions with others and the meaning-making that they assign to their jobs. Consequently, many of the issues laid out in this paper are of both sociological concern and policy importance.

In an era of devolution, public-private partnerships, increased racial diversity among agency staffs, and various policy reforms, human service institutions are experiencing massive shifts in service delivery. Welfare offices, schools, child welfare agencies, housing organizations, prisons, and public health providers all wrestle with how to best advance institutional goals and create workforces that contribute actively to their missions. Deepening our understanding of the complexities of interpretative representation will help us to understand how these organizational processes shape service-delivery. The strong presence of interpretative representation during both waves of interviewing highlight the durability of these practices and investments.

For the minority 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).

Staunton's black and Latino employees are therefore arguably well positioned to assist in implementing welfare reform.²¹ They are watchful participants, often intimately aware of the

history of racial exclusion that the welfare system has perpetuated. They are able to offer a counter-narrative to assumptions of racial inferiority that may permeate welfare offices and their policies, using their insider's knowledge to question the tactics of organizational leaders and peers and advocating on behalf of clients of color. The power of middle-class members of racial minority groups to further group-based efforts has been observed in a variety of settings (Anderson 1999; Pattillo 2007). The present analysis suggests that many black and Latino welfare bureaucrats are similarly funneling resources "from the man to the littleman" (Pattillo 2007: 14). Sharing a racial identity with clients may communicate, if only superficially, that the institution is not a completely hostile racial environment, but one that can provide "a fair shake."

One must nevertheless wonder if instead these bureaucrats have yielded to a welfare system that has yet to become truly effective at helping its clients, particularly those of color who face discrimination and other barriers. Further, does seeing black and Latino faces on the other side of the desk in welfare offices somehow diminish minority clients' motivations for activism? Does it problematically legitimize both the policy and its implementation if bureaucrats of color deliver the messages of welfare reform, even invoking themes common to minority liberation struggles in the process (Reed 1999)? Does it make resistance that much more difficult? Do clients read the "off-the-record" conversations through which interpretive representation occurs as productive expressions of support and solidarity or as improper assertions of institutional power and social status? Lastly, because street-level liberation likely demands more time and emotional labor, what toll does it take on employees that adopt this stance? These are potential questions for further inquiry.

Like all employees, street-level liberators are informed by an array of goals and investments. Their assertions of what is best for their clients of color are just that, *their*

interpretations about how group interests would be best served by the behavioral choices of their clients. Social markers such as class that coexist with race generate multiple and possibly conflicting goals and commitments among these individuals. This study therefore echoes the caution of scholars who warn that what is often pursued as a group agenda actually represents the assumptions and interests of its more privileged members (Cohen 1999; Gaines 1996; Reed 1999). One must therefore ensure that non-dominant perspectives and needs within these communities are not further marginalized in the quest to help “liberate” by conforming to dominant norms and policy expectations (Boyd 2006; Pattillo 2007).

Ultimately, did these street-level liberators “help” minority clients? The answer hinges upon how one defines “help.” Depending on political persuasion, some might argue that these liberators offer differential treatment that regulates 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 have leveraged 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.

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NOTES

¹ Passive representation is also referred to as descriptive, numerical, or symbolic representation. Active representation is also referred to as substantive representation.

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

³ There is evidence to suggest that race plays a role in disparate sanctioning rates and access to employment-related services, which may shorten or lengthen welfare spells across racial groups (Gooden 1998; Keiser, Meuser, and Choi 2004). 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. In 1992, whites represented 39 percent of families receiving welfare, blacks 37 percent (down from 41.6 percent in 1985), and Hispanics 18 percent (up from 13.6 percent in 1985 according to Lower-Basch 2000). Between October 2004 and September 2005, the rolls were 32 percent white,

37 percent black, and 26 percent Hispanic (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/character/FY2005/tab08.htm> - DOR: 8/3/07).

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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 overall experiences of black and Latino staff members in street-level bureaucracies are likely to differ because each group has a distinct history, a unique saga for how the population was incorporated into government work, and variation in the degree to which its presence was contested within these institutions. Therefore, when appropriate and available, I incorporate literature that specifically addresses politics within Latino communities.

⁶ 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.

⁷ These individuals were part of a larger study that interviewed 32 Staunton office employees on a variety of topics related to their work in general and welfare reform in particular. For the project, I also observed client-caseworker meetings where services were delivered, staff meetings, and waiting room events, and shadowed office staff during their work days. I also conducted archival research, analyzing service delivery manuals and documents, client case documents, institutional literature on welfare reform, and worker performance evaluation documents. The data gleaned from these techniques are used to supplement the interview data in this paper.

⁸ In January 2006, 39.3 percent of the office’s caseload family heads were black, 37.3 percent Hispanic, 18.6 percent white, and 3.7 percent Asian. At that time, the office had eighteen white TANF caseworkers and supervisors, ten Black, nine Hispanic, and three Asian.

⁹ The larger research project on which this analysis is based includes the experiences of white caseworkers and supervisors and explores their ideas about the role of race in the institution. It also looks at dynamics between minority employees and white clients.

¹⁰ While previous work on TANF offices highlights the high degree of staff turnover (Hays 2003), Staunton's staff was relatively stable. On average, employees had been working for the department for over 20 years.

¹¹ Like their white co-workers, minority workers have diverse educational backgrounds. Some have bachelors and masters degrees, while others 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, get one in the running for supervisor positions, but an interview process and the recommendations of past supervisors typically get one the job. Positions higher than supervisor typically rely even more heavily on those qualitative measures.

¹² 2001 dollars.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Others were much slower to make such an interpretive leap. Sharlene, an African-American caseworker, described race in the welfare system as "a nonissue." She explained why minorities made up the majority of the office's clientele in this way: "Well, I only chalk that up to the area that I'm working in. If I was working in a white area, I would see mostly them. Where I trained, the city where it was, that's all you see is white people...It's the area. We're in the inner city; we're going to get who lives there – blacks. The whites come in here, too, but the majority is blacks." For Sharlene, the demographics of the office were solely a function of where people live, and she seemed reluctant to draw any inferences that something structural or discriminatory might explain the residential patterns that had consequences for who was in her client base.

¹⁵ 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" (287).

¹⁶ Anecdotal evidence about the education and income levels of welfare caseworkers in various states suggests that many should be characterized at “working class.” However, because of the education and income levels of many of the employees in this analysis, I define these individuals as “lower middle class” or “middle class” for brevity.

¹⁷ The designation of apolitical bureaucrats and street-level liberators is not meant to characterize the actual impacts of these individuals. Bureaucrats are fundamentally political in their roles as policy implementers (Brodkin 1992; Soss 2002), and it is debatable whether liberators are actually “saving” clients. Rather, these titles represent how these employees define themselves in the nexus between their professional and racial identities.

¹⁸ It is critical to note that, unlike other states, this one did allow 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.

¹⁹ 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, often focus on the social regulation of more economically and educationally disadvantaged race-mates by individuals who have the weight of private (and eventually public) institutions behind them (Boyd 2006; Cohen 1999; Gaines 1996; Higginbotham 1993).

²⁰ This also suggests an important generational component to interpretive representation more broadly and street-level liberation more specifically. 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 this policing.

²¹ Nevertheless, it should be noted that the bureaucrats in this analysis represent those employees who were willing to stay throughout welfare reform’s many challenges. Those who objected so strongly to welfare reform that they left the organization soon after its passage would not be included in this analysis. This may even help us to understand why apolitical bureaucrats and street-level liberators became the dominant models of welfare casework in the face of the policy contradictions and implementation problems that many researchers have observed (Hays 2003). Apolitical bureaucrats seemed unlikely to spend a great deal of time thinking about whether their personal and political goals lined up with institutional priorities. As “technicians,” they define their job goals as the efficient execution of policy and the assistance of clients within the strict parameters of the institution. Street-level liberators of the kind found in Staunton, whose personal and political goals somewhat aligned with agency priorities, were

probably also less likely to struggle with the contradictions inherent in welfare service provision with its combination of surveillance and support.