

# Citizen Control: Race at the Welfare Office\*

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*Objectives.* Individual relationships to the state are shaped through encounters with a variety of institutions. Little scholarly attention has been devoted to how citizenship is shaped through everyday interactions with the social service arm of the state through local “welfare” offices. In Washington State, one-third of all residents are served by the state’s primary social service agency. Does this state agency send different messages about citizenship to individuals according to race? We examine this question through encounters of individuals with front-line welfare office staff. *Methods.* Using a systematic audit method, we collected data from 54 Community Service Offices in Washington State to explore messages sent to individuals. *Results.* We find consistent relationships between race and the quantity of information received and the quality of the interaction with the representatives of the state. *Conclusions.* Our findings provide evidence that the state reinforces notions of both belonging and marginalization through patterns of racialized encounters with the state.

As the popular media hails the advent of a postracial society in the United States, there is an urgent need to reexamine the ways in which the state shapes racial dimensions of citizenship. Indicators of wealth, education, and health demonstrate that we are clearly living in a society where racial disparities not only remain intact, but are also growing, despite movements to eliminate them. This article explores a different angle on questions of institutionalized racism. How does the state communicate the parameters of citizenship?<sup>1</sup> How might these perceptions shape our understandings of politics, community, claims making, and participation? While these questions are beyond the immediate

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<sup>1</sup>We embrace an expansive view of the term “citizenship”; it is not limited legal definitions of a citizen.

scope of this article, they provide a rationale for the central question of this study. Does the state send different messages about citizenship to individuals according to race? We examine this question through encounters of individuals with front-line welfare office staff.

This question provides an avenue to explore state-citizen interaction beyond conventional considerations of the formal electoral system. Less than half the entire U.S. population voted in the historic 2008 presidential election.<sup>2</sup> Voting is also a relatively rare occurrence in the daily lives of Americans. The presence of the state looms much larger in other ways in our everyday existence (Lipsky, 1980). For example, *one-third* of the entire population of Washington State was served by the state's Department of Social and Health Services (2009). While these interactions between the individual and the state at an everyday level are important in and of themselves, they also are important for those who study voting behavior and formal systems of participation in democracy: individuals may or may not feel they are full "citizens" depending on the quality and type of interactions they experience with the state. The long—and never-ending—history of the struggle for the right to vote makes the racial dimensions of this relationship even more pointed. While we may only speculate on the connection between everyday interactions with the state and voting behavior, it is possible to infer that it is one factor that may influence formal participation in a democratic system.

This article systematically examines the quality of state-citizen interaction at a site that is of great importance to the lives of many in the United States: the "welfare" office. Hasenfeld, Rafferty, and Zald argue these interactions are central to rights claims: "It is through encounters with human service workers that citizens attempt to claim their social rights, and the response of these workers determines in very concrete ways the form and substance of citizens' rights" (1987:398). The colloquial term "welfare office" belies the many social services available to individuals at these sites. In Washington State, Community Service Offices (CSOs) are the access point for the following services: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), General Assistance Unemployable (GAU), Working Connections Child Care, Medical Assistance Programs, Child Support Services, DSHS Emergency Programs, Washington Basic Food Program, Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA), Pregnancy Support Services, Family Planning Program, ADATSA Program (drug or alcohol treatment), and voter registration assistance (Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, 2009). Thus, it is the primary site of access for most social services provided by the state.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>According to the Office of the Federal Register, 131,032,799 people voted in the 2008 presidential election, less than half of the total U.S. population of approximately 305,000,000 (United States Census Bureau, 2009).

<sup>3</sup>Two exceptions are Social Security and unemployment, administered through different offices.

Our research focuses on all 54<sup>4</sup> CSOs in Washington State as an important point of encounter between the state and citizen. This encounter occurs first between the front-line staff at the office. They are, in simplified terms, the embodiment of the state at that point. The choices the state makes in terms of training and support for these staff communicates important messages about the state's relationship to people entering the office. These are not merely bureaucratic interactions. The resources and policy choices made by the state are communicated through these interactions: "One of the paradoxes of the welfare state is that in order to exercise their social rights citizens must disclose their private problems to officials . . . To the extent that public disclosure is stigmatizing and the bureaucratic response demeaning, citizens will be reluctant to exercise their rights (Prottas, 1981)" (Hasenfeld, Rafferty, and Zald, 1987:401). The results of the data collected on our visits to all of these offices, often in small, forgotten corners of the state, indicate patterns of different treatment by the state of "clients" by racial identity. As we discuss further below, while there are multiple possible interpretations of the results, the importance of race is clear. From the installation of bulletproof glass to the tone of voice of the receptionist providing information, these offices transmit powerful messages about belonging and deservingness to the clients walking through their doors.

### **Defining Citizenship**

The body of research about the political contours of citizenship about social welfare provision is too vast to attempt to cover in this article. This scholarship draws on work from public administration, sociology, political science, public policy, critical race theory, feminist theory, and social work. Instead, we focus on select work that underlies both the central questions of the article as well as the rationale for the design of the research study.

Michael Lipsky's (1980) work on bureaucracy, social services, and citizenship provides the theoretical underpinnings for the assumptions of our research question about state messages about citizenship: "The ways in which street-level bureaucrats deliver benefits and sanctions structure and delimit people's lives and opportunities. These ways orient and provide the social (and political) contexts in which people act. Thus every extension of service benefits is accompanied by an extension of state influence and control" (Lipsky, 1980:3). These bureaucratic encounters are not merely transactional interactions. They are communicative messages from the state. They may have particular significance for the individuals involved as they often determine accessibility of

<sup>4</sup>We visited all 56 offices in Washington State, but did not include two in this analysis. In the first case, one of us knew a receptionist at one of the offices, so we did not include this office. The second office was located on a reservation. Although we experienced outstanding service there, we did not include it as it was significantly different in terms of its structure, budget, and mission from the other offices.

food, healthcare, and housing, for example, in the case of welfare offices. They are more than that, however. The way in which individuals are treated when first entering the office (especially because the immediate outcome of the transactional portion of the encounter is not immediately clear) has important implications for the construction of citizenship, as Lipsky argues: "They oversee the treatment (the service) citizens receive in those programs. Thus, in a sense street-level bureaucrats implicitly mediate aspects of the constitutional relationship of citizens to the state. In short, they hold the keys to a dimension of citizenship" (1980:4). This is the premise of our research study, that is, why the state's choices about staffing, training, and support at this point of encounter in the office are so important.

The most well-known study of welfare provision and citizenship in political science, Joe Soss's *Unwanted Claims: The Politics of Participation in the U.S. Welfare System*, brings together two, seemingly contradictory, traditions of public administration and political science research (Hasenfeld, 1985; Soss, 2000). The first are those studies that rely on direct observation of client-state interactions, typically with a focus on bureaucratic discretionary power (Brodkin, 1997; Lipsky, 1980). These studies often view welfare provision as a mechanism of social control that clearly marks those who are symbolically part of the polity and those who are not (Piven and Cloward, 1993). The other tradition, perhaps best represented by Charles T. Goodsell's work on welfare offices, argues that claims that street-level bureaucrats treat the poor with uniform contempt are exaggerated. For example, in his study of welfare offices in seven states and Washington, DC, between 1977 and 1979, Goodsell finds that there is a great level of variation *between* different offices (1984). Although Goodsell's study used a direct observation method, many of these studies rely on survey analysis of clients, views of the system (Goodsell, 1980; Nelson, 1981).

Soss bridges this theoretical and methodological divide by designing a study that relies on interviews of clients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) programs. He finds that there are sharp contrasts in the ways in which citizens experience public benefit programs (AFDC) versus social insurance programs (SSDI). In our study, we build on Soss's theoretical and methodological insights about the central importance of welfare provision for citizenship. We address the weaknesses of the two literatures discussed above by combining both direct observation and participation in a new way. We collect data through direct observation of staff-client interactions in the offices as well as through our own participation as potential clients seeking information about programs provided at the offices. As Soss's study has addressed the differences clients experience between different programs, we seek to understand how clients potentially applying for the *same* services in offices may be treated differently, particularly in regards to race.

In the quest to measure levels and forms of racial discrimination in particular, such as those in the scenarios above, social psychologists and sociologists

have conducted studies based on reports of “perpetrators” and “targets,” quantitative data analyses, and quasi-experimental research (also known as “audit” studies) (Quillian, 2006). Two recent assessments of these techniques found that despite their limitations, on balance, audit methods are among the best available tools to measure levels of discrimination (Quillian, 2006; Page and Shepard, 2008). Audit studies usually are “conducted using pairs of racially dissimilar testers, who are confederates of the experimenter and have been matched to be similar on all characteristics that influence the outcome except race” (Quillian, 2006:303). Most of these studies have examined four areas in which racial discrimination is of particular importance: access to housing, employment, credit markets, and consumer needs (Page and Shepard, 2008). Language discrimination is a particularly difficult issue to disentangle from ethnic and/or racial discrimination. Moreover, distinct class accents within marginalized racial groups—such as African Americans—may further complicate this problem, as Massey and Lundy (2001) demonstrated in their audit study of housing discrimination. Economist John Yinger’s analysis of large-scale audits of housing discrimination “demonstrates conclusively that African Americans and Hispanic citizens continue to encounter extensive discrimination in housing and mortgage markets, with reverberations throughout the nation’s economic and social life” (1995:243).

We have yet to find any systematic audit analysis of these patterns in social services in the area of social welfare. We argue that while the areas of housing, employment, and consumer services are of critical importance in understanding phenomenon such as institutionalized racism, these studies generally focus on interactions between individual members of dominant and marginalized groups along the lines of race, class, and national origin. While some of these studies may include discrimination by government employers, for example, they are generally focused on intergroup dynamics, not on the power of the state to send messages about citizenship to marginalized groups. We seek to understand patterns of inclusion and exclusion by placing the state at the center of the analysis. The state has the power to encourage or mitigate these patterns of discrimination through public policy formation and implementation.

While scholars have not conducted systematic audits of welfare agencies in the United States, they have examined racial disparities and possible racial discrimination patterns in the implementation of welfare policy, particularly after the elimination of the federal entitlement to welfare in 1996, through other research methods. This research has included statistical analyses of racial demographics and program implementation (Keiser, Mueser, and Choi, 2004) as well as analysis of surveys of welfare participants themselves (Gooden, 2004).

In addition to this scholarship on welfare and race, community-based organizations have conducted their own studies with regard to different patterns of treatment at social service access points. The Applied Research Center in Oakland, California, conducted a large-scale survey (2001) through community-based organizations about the impact of welfare reform in 1996. The study

found that “people of color routinely encounter insults and disrespect as they seek to navigate the various programs that make up the welfare system . . . People whose first language is not English encounter a serious language barrier when they have contact with the welfare system, in spite of federal protections designed to lift that barrier” (Gordon, 2001:4). For the purposes of this study, the Children’s Alliance’s (2002) study of customer service at DSHS offices in Washington State is the most relevant. The study, titled *Room to Improve: Customer Service at Offices of the Washington Department of Social and Health Services*, was conducted in response to DSHS’s goals for improvement of customer service in its CSOs. While this study is invaluable to this proposal in its use of survey measurement questions, it is not systematic (observations of a limited number of CSOs, all concentrated in the Puget Sound area), and was conducted with the permission of DSHS. This is understandable given the working relationship this community-based organization has with this state agency; however, it does compromise, to a degree, the validity of the data collected. Moreover, the study does not address issues of possible different levels of treatment at the office based on race and language/national origin. This study addresses these shortcomings by conducting a systematic audit of these practices.<sup>5</sup>

## Research Design

The basic design of this audit study is straightforward: four co-investigators visited all 54 CSO offices across Washington State between July 2009 and December 2009.<sup>6</sup> The testing of racial variance was achieved by the fact that we each represent four racial identities (all women): African American, Asian American, Latina, and White American.<sup>7</sup> The measurement of messages sent by the state was assessed at three levels, one of which is the focus of this article:

<sup>5</sup>While our study conducts a systematic review of all offices, there are important limitations of the audit study that need to be explicitly addressed. Our study is not “double blind,” as no audit research design is double blind. That is, the auditors are aware of the general purpose of the study (Quillian, 2006:304). In addition, we have only one group of reviewers in each office (e.g., we did not send in two White Americans to each office), so it may be possible that there are differences between each investigator that account for different reactions on the part of staff. We did, however, try to minimize any physical differences between us by wearing jeans, t-shirts, and/or sweatshirts (not exactly alike because that would also be conspicuous) and minimal makeup. We also engaged in role plays before visiting the offices to simulate particular scenarios as a part of the training.

<sup>6</sup>Kamilah and Linda are graduates of the political science program at Seattle University. Rose is an assistant professor at Seattle University. The fourth researcher, Laura, also a graduate of Seattle University, was unable to complete all the office visits with us due to logistical challenges. She visited 19 of 54 offices, so it is important to understand the limitations of this data collection. The data she collected are interspersed throughout the analysis where appropriate and comparable with the data the three of us collected.

<sup>7</sup>We capitalize “White” throughout the article as a way of destabilizing the invisible normative character of Whiteness, as well as for reasons of consistency. We frequently use our first names throughout the analysis as a way to humanize the data presented. Kamilah is a U.S.-born African American, Laura is a U.S.-born Latina, Linda is a U.S.-born Asian American

face-to-face interactions with CSO staff.<sup>8</sup> Neither DSHS headquarters nor individual offices were notified of our visits, as is standard practice for an audit research design.

Each office visit included two types of data collection important for this analysis. First, we unobtrusively observed 427 other client-staff interactions in the office. The second, and most important, component of the study involved our interaction with the representatives of the state you first encounter when entering the welfare office (besides security guards): the receptionists.<sup>9</sup> We each asked for information about “welfare” and how to apply. We took notes on our interactions and then compared our interactions afterward with one another about information received, tone of interaction, and assumptions made about our status. It is important to note that we did *not* collect data on the race of the staff member involved in any of the interactions because it was not relevant for the question at hand in our study. This study is not concerned about the individual characteristics of staff members, but rather the staffing choices, training, and directives given to these office workers in their interactions with clients—in other words, institutionalized racism. For example, the state could choose not to have staff interactions at all. The welfare system could be completely automated with minimal staff involvement, or at least no face-to-face involvement (which is increasingly the case with online applications). This decision is just as important as whether the state decides to have a cultural competency and/or anti-racism training for its front-line staff. These are all policy decisions made by the state, not by individual workers.<sup>10</sup>

(we do not include “Pacific Islander” for census category reasons), and Rose is a U.S.-born White American. This information is important because of our later discussions about U.S. citizenship; none of us have “foreign” accents.

<sup>8</sup>We also gathered data regarding physical office attributes, as well as phone services and availability (in English, Spanish, and Russian). Each co-investigator took notes on the physical attributes of the office, which include some of the following: the attempt to create spaces for confidential conversations between staff and clients, accessibility, materials available (and in which languages), toys for children, availability of phones and computers, and the like.

<sup>9</sup>While we realize that the term “receptionist” is not an accurate description of DSHS employees’ official titles, we use this term for two reasons. First, it most accurately describes what this individual is supposed to do in our interaction: they are supposed to be professional and informative. Second, as most employees at the front desk do not wear name tags that clearly identify their name and position, we had no way of distinguishing between them and those who regularly work at the front desk. Therefore, we use this generic term to refer to everyone we interacted with at the front desk.

<sup>10</sup>While it is true the decision to hire and place receptionists at the front desk is a descriptive representation policy choice by the state, we are concerned primarily with the *treatment* people receive when walking into a welfare office. Therefore, the race of the receptionist is largely irrelevant to our study. It is also the case that every bureaucrat has his or her own set of prejudices, but the state has the ability to mitigate this to an extent through office procedures of incentives and penalties. Though we find Maynard-Moody and Musheno’s (2003) innovative framework of citizen-agent (as opposed to state-agent) perspectives on street-level bureaucrat policy making helpful, the very fact that the state still does or does not take active steps to mitigate or restructure these powerful street-level positions is a policy statement by the state itself. Furthermore, from a practical research design perspective, including the somewhat subjective identification of the race of each receptionist in addition to our already relatively

## **Findings: Interactions and Observations**

We examine data from the two central components of the study: individual interactions with staff and observations of other client-staff interactions. We weave together analyses of general and racially specific patterns in these following sections.

### *Interactions with Staff*

In order to provide a visual picture of the results, we offer an overview of a typical office visit. First, we randomized the order of entrance to the office. Depending on the size of the office, we entered either a minute or two after one another, or, sometimes even 10–15 minutes apart so that other clients would be interspersed between our entrances. Upon entering, we tried to sign in—sometimes unsuccessfully—so that we could be seen to ask our questions. The office sign-in systems varied from elaborate computer options, to taking a number, to simply walking up to the front desk. When we were called up to speak to the receptionist, we asked a variation of the question/statement: “I’d like find out about welfare (sometimes benefits)—what kinds of programs are there? Can you explain them to me?” Depending on the situation, the receptionist would sometimes probe further to obtain detailed information about us. We told receptionists that we “just wanted general information” and if they pushed further, we told them that we “might be applying for different people” or that “it’s a complicated situation.” Throughout the interaction, we did our best to remain emotionally neutral on the surface. In addition to asking them to explain the programs on the general intake application (cash, medical, and food), we asked them how to apply and what would happen after we applied. This was another point at which they could provide information. We then asked what we should do if we or the people we were applying for had questions or were confused. Finally, we randomized among ourselves one additional question to see if we could gather any further information about the programs.

We measured our interactions at two levels: instrumental and expressive. Both components are important in understanding whether individuals may decide to claim entitlements to a range of the programs administered through an office. Van Oorschot’s (1991) study of benefit claiming finds that at the individual (or client) level, the most important factor in determining whether an individual will pursue a means-tested claim is information: “usually the largest part of nontake-up is directly caused by simply not being aware of a scheme’s existence, followed, among those who are aware, by misperceptions of eligibility” (1991: 186). Therefore, the instrumental component included the

subjective measures of treatment would add a layer of uncertainty that seemed unnecessary, especially given our strong theoretical objections discussed above.



*quantity and type* of information provided upon our inquiries about welfare. For example, did they provide full information about the available programs? Did they skip over or refuse to explain certain aspects of the application? These were just a few of the instrumental questions we asked ourselves in measuring staff responses.

The expressive element included the *quality* of our interactions. This part of the interaction is important because means-tested programs are already stigmatized and therefore may have an effect on benefit claims (Van Oorschot, 1991). Furthermore, if a staff member is accusatory and rude or, conversely, inviting, this may have an effect on the potential client's willingness to engage in benefit claiming. Indeed, the majority of the programs administered through a CSO are already stigmatized, although some more than others. For example, claiming an in-home care assistance benefit for an elderly family member has a different level of stigmatization than claiming TANF assistance. This is a subjective measure, obviously, but it is equally important when compared with the instrumental measure. For example, if a receptionist provided two people the same information but raised her voice with one client so that everyone in the office could hear her confidential information, these two clients had different experiences. Fortunately, we were frequently able to observe each other's interactions so that we were able to compare our own perceptions with one another. We discuss first the instrumental results followed by the expressive results.

***Instrumental Interactions.*** Following each interaction, we noted whether the following programs were explained to us: cash, medical, and food. These three programs were located at the top of the application, so it was easy to point to them. In almost all of the offices, we had to prompt the receptionist to explain these programs to us. In most cases, the receptionists would explain the eligibility requirements for the programs, not what the programs actually provided. If we pressed them on this point, the most common response was "cash is cash, medical is medical and food is food." This response was neither helpful nor appropriate. Occasionally, a receptionist did take the time to explain the actual benefits one would receive, but this was rare. We did code the response as providing information as long as they took some time to explain something about the program (including eligibility).

We also took note of descriptions of subsets of the programs included on the application. For example, "cash" benefits include TANF and GAU. The first program is generally for adults with children while the second is for disabled adults. Medical includes different programs for children and adults. As these are important distinctions within the general program categories, we noted if receptionists explained these programs, however briefly, as they are at the heart of the application process for benefits.

In terms of general information about the programs, we were told most often about the cash and medical programs, and less about food stamp programs (Tables 1 and 2). This is somewhat unexpected, as the eligibility requirements

TABLE 1

Total Number of Program Explanations by Race of Investigator ( $N = 54$ )

	African American	Asian American	White Anglo
Cash	37	42	40
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)	20	19	28
General Assistance Unemployable (GAU)	12	18	21
Medical	31	41	34
Children	9	21	18
Adults	5	20	17
Food	17	35	38
Drug and alcohol	1	2	6
Rights and responsibilities	2	2	1

TABLE 2

Percentage of Program Explanations by Race of Investigator ( $N = 54$ ; Latina,  $N = 19$ )

	African American	Asian American	Latina	White Anglo
Cash	68.5 percent	77.8 percent	73.7 percent	74.1 percent
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)	37.0	35.2	31.6	51.9
General Assistance Unemployable (GAU)	22.2	33.3	26.3	38.9
Medical	57.4	75.9	63.2	63.0
Children	16.7	38.9	26.3	33.3
Adults	9.3	37.0	10.5	31.5
Food	31.5	64.8	47.4	70.4
Drug and alcohol	1.9	3.7	10.5	11.1
Rights and responsibilities	3.7	3.7	5.3	1.9

for food are the least stringent of all of the programs, so one would expect receptionists to mention this program more often. It may be, however, a simple case of an assumption on the part of the receptionist that "food" is much more self-explanatory than the other two programs.

If this were the case, however, we would expect this low frequency of explanation to be the same across racial categories. The strongest finding is about the food program. Kamilah (African American) and Laura (Latina) were told only 31.48 percent and 47.37 percent of the time, respectively, about the food program (Table 2). Rose's (White Anglo American) experiences in this

TABLE 3  
 Non-Anglo and White Comparison of Program Explanations

	Non-Anglo, Non-White	White Anglo American
Cash	73.3 percent	74.1 percent
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)	34.6	51.9
General Assistance Unemployable (GAU)	27.3	38.9
Medical	65.5	63.0
Children	27.3	33.3
Adults	18.9	31.5
Food	47.9	70.4
Drug and alcohol	5.4	11.1
Rights and responsibilities	4.2	1.9

area may provide a possible explanation: she was often told that TANF or cash programs were for “low, low income” people, which implied that she would not qualify. As the food program has the least stringent income requirements, receptionists may have simply assumed that she came to the office only for food benefits. Both Rose and Linda (Asian American) were often assumed to be college students (the receptionists mentioned roommates or work-study), which may also help us understand this disparity in explanations of programs.

In almost every category (with the exception of general explanations of medical benefits), Rose received the most information about all of the programs available through the CSO (Table 3). This is particularly apparent when we combine the data into a “Non-Anglo, Non-White” and “White Anglo American” categories (Table 3). Interestingly, she also received the most unprompted descriptions of drug and alcohol treatment available.

The other puzzling finding is that she received the fewest explanations of a client’s “rights and responsibilities,” a form that was sometimes included in the application packet that describes the legal contract applicants enter as a condition of the application. Even though there is a difference in the number of times we were told of our rights and responsibilities, the most important finding in this case is the general finding: on average, we were told of our rights and responsibilities only at total of six times out of 181 interactions (3 percent) with staff.

**Expressive Interactions.** At the beginning of this project, we knew that applying for benefits at 54 offices would be emotionally difficult and draining. We did have some degrading and generally horrifying experiences at the offices. We also had some relatively smooth interactions. It is important to reiterate at this point that the goal of our study is not to “call out” individual employees of this state agency. It is, rather, to gather a summative view of what people

experience when they encounter the state. We recognize that receptionists often have difficult and sometimes dangerous jobs. That does not mean, however, that treating individuals in a degrading manner is acceptable. The fact that we sometimes had sharply different experiences *with the same receptionist* attests to the fact that there is a great deal of bureaucratic discretion in this area. Furthermore, this interaction has many fewer constraints than those that are typically studied—the actual provision of services. We believe that both individuals and the state have responsibility for these interactions, although the burden is clearly on the state as it is the one that sets guidelines and enforces rules about appropriate client-staff interactions.

None of us had ever actually experienced applying for benefits, although we all know individuals who have experienced “the system.” What made this process bearable for us was (1) the ability to talk to each other about what we experienced, and (2) the fact that we did not actually *need* the benefits. Thus, in the discussion that follows, we are fully aware that we cannot actually experience what the average person does when he or she walks through the doors of a CSO, precisely because we are not actually applying for services. In other words, our description of our experiences is, in many ways, the best-case scenario, as we purposely try to remain as neutral throughout the process. The inability to “challenge” or “talk back” to them, while frequently disempowering, did give us a sense of what it might be like to be fearful of challenging the authority in front of us.

Our findings, as noted above, are necessarily subjective. We have partially mitigated this problem by (1) observing each other’s interactions while in the office and (2) discussing our interactions and comparing experiences (recorded on a voice recorder after each office visit).

We developed two measures of expressive interactions. The first are those that are noted immediately following the one-on-one interaction. We coded these individually before any general discussion with each other about our perceptions of one another’s interactions. The second measure involved collective coding of our experiences *after* we had completed the individual notations made in the first measure. This second measure focused on a collective comparison (and eventually ranking) of our experiences immediately following the visit to the office. As we discuss below, this was a relative measure: it was simply a comparison of our treatment relative to one another, even if we all received poor treatment in absolute terms, for example. Though we sometimes had different perspectives on our individual treatment, these differences were generally a result of not being able to watch our own interaction, for example, in comparison to another member of the research team. We never had any major disagreements on this ranking, however, once we discussed the interactions. Indeed, we discovered through this process differences that would not have been apparent if we had simply made individual notations without an accompanying ranking measure, mostly due to issues of omission. As we explain in the section about work and citizenship later in the article, it was only through our collective ranking that we discovered that Rose had

TABLE 4

Expressive Interactions with Staff by Race (1) (*N* = 54; Latina, *N* = 19)

	African American	Asian American	Latina	White Anglo
Professional demeanor	66.7 percent	63.0 percent	68.4 percent	75.9 percent
Impatient or frustrated	18.5	25.9	15.8	38.9
Hurried (fast talking)	25.9	31.5	10.5	37.0
Use complicated language	5.6	9.3	10.5	40.7
Dismissive or rude demeanor	38.9	31.5	26.3	25.9

never been asked about her citizenship status. It was simply assumed that she was a citizen. Linda, however, was asked this question quite often. We might not have uncovered this important difference without this collective ranking measure. Throughout this process, we were especially cognizant of a tendency to attribute “better” interactions to Rose (White Anglo American). In other words, we continually tried to question our possibly unconscious tendency to note that people of color received less than equal treatment. If we take these two measures together, we can get a full picture of our general interactions at the office.

The results of the first measure (Table 4) indicate that there were racial differences in our treatment at the offices. In all of the categories, Rose experienced better treatment than Laura, Kamilah, and Linda. In particular, Kamilah had the most number of dismissive or rude experiences—38.89 percent compared to Rose’s 25.93 percent. We coded the interaction as rude or dismissive behavior if there was a combination of raised voices, aggressive body language, combined with a refusal of staff to answer questions or purposely withhold information. For example, at one office, Kamilah asked for an application for benefits. The receptionist refused to give it to her. Instead, she began asking a series of questions, loudly, about Kamilah’s personal information. Kamilah asked politely for an application again so that she could find out about the programs. The receptionist eventually gave her an application (there were offices where they actually refused to give us paper applications even though they had them), but refused to answer any questions. This response was coded as dismissive behavior.

Rose also received significantly different treatment in terms of impatient and hurried interactions. This was often combined with the use of overly complicated language in the receptionists’ explanations of the programs. A cursory look at the application itself reveals the complexity of the language of benefit programs. Rose often had to stop the receptionists to explain “annuities” or

TABLE 5  
Expressive Interactions with Staff by Race (2)

	Non-Anglo, Non-White	White Anglo American
Professional demeanor	66.0 percent	75.9 percent
Impatient or frustrated	20.1	38.9
Hurried (fast talking)	22.6	37.0
Use complicated language (assume comprehension)	8.5	40.7
Dismissive or rude demeanor	32.2	25.9

“gross income” or “TANF.” We also asked them questions (not included in this article) about certain programs that listed “in-home care” or “401k,” “CD,” or “IRA.” The receptionists often gave us incomplete explanations or sometimes even incorrect explanations of the programs. In any case, they often assumed a very high level of both reading and verbal skill.

If we combine the experiences to see a non-Anglo and Anglo/White divide, the divergent experiences are even more pronounced (Table 5). The “professional demeanor” is a fairly easy requirement for receptionists to meet: (1) they do not make inappropriate jokes (i.e., “cash benefits, good times”), or (2) they do not yell or otherwise act overly aggressively toward us. Moreover, it was possible for a receptionist to be both professional and impatient, for example. They may have started with a professional demeanor but become progressively exasperated with the fact that we wanted to ask questions.

The second measure of our expressive interactions involved a ranking of our treatment at the office. Our rankings do not reflect whether we received respectful treatment or not. For example, we may have all had a bad experience at one office, but one of us may have received even worse treatment than another. In other words, it is a relative scale of treatment. If, for example, only one of us received noticeably better treatment than the three others, the three others received the same rank under the first.

This measure is particularly useful because it helps us understand comparative treatment at a particular office rather than across all offices.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it is for the same type of interaction: we all requested the same information. There were 14 offices where we all received essentially the same level of treatment (this says nothing about the quality of the treatment but, rather, the equality of treatment). If we examine just the offices where we did experience

<sup>11</sup>Though our unit of analysis is the interactions we experienced at these offices, we do shift here to an examination of offices in order to understand if there are patterns that are significant within particular offices. This ranking of treatment within the office clarifies if we were all treated equally poorly at an office, or if there was someone who was treated less poorly than another. This does not change the fact that all data reported in the tables are by interaction, not office.

**TABLE 6**  
**Relative Level of Treatment: Most Favorable**

	African American	Asian American	White Anglo
Most favorable treatment of four investigators	2.5 percent	5.0 percent	27.5 percent
Most favorable: others receive same treatment	17.5	30.0	60.0

NOTE: The second category includes instances where two or more investigators receive the same “most favorable” treatment. The total *N* for this table is 40; at the other 14 offices, we experienced similar treatment among the four of us.

**TABLE 7**  
**Relative Level of Treatment: Least Favorable**

	African American	Asian American	White Anglo
Least favorable treatment of four investigators	22.5 percent	17.5 percent	5.0 percent
Least favorable: others receive same treatment	52.5	35.0	10.0

NOTE: The second category includes instances where two or more investigators receive the same “most favorable” treatment. The total *N* for this table is 40; at the other 14 offices, we experienced similar treatment among the four of us.

different types of treatment (Table 6), there is, again, a notable racial difference in terms of treatment (see also Table 7).

In order to understand this measure more clearly, we provide some examples. As noted elsewhere, Kamilah (and to a lesser extent, Linda and Laura) sometimes had interactions with receptionists who raised their voices. This often took a form of shaming—that is, individual questions were “broadcast” to the office. In contrast, Rose sometimes experienced, for lack of a better term, a “conspiratorial” interaction with the receptionist. This took the form of allying themselves either implicitly or explicitly with Rose against the other clients in the office. For example, in one office, Rose asked what a “401K, IRA, or CD” was. The receptionist replied that it was “like a trust fund.” When Rose replied that she would not be in the office applying for benefits if she had a trust fund, the receptionist told her that she “would be surprised” about what clients tried to get away with, motioning to the other people in the office. In other words, Rose was drawn into a relationship where she was treated, more or less, as an “equal” with the receptionist, an experience that

Laura, Kamilah, and Linda had infrequently, and almost never if Rose had the same interaction.

The preceding analysis of instrumental and expressive interactions is troubling. There were a few puzzling results, but the overall message is clear: the Anglo/White American woman received more information about programs and, in general, received better treatment than her African American, Asian American, and Latina and counterparts. In the following section, "Citizenship and Work," we explore two patterns that were not necessarily anticipated in the design of the original project: assumptions about work and citizenship status.

***Citizenship and Work.*** Over the course of our visits, we began to notice a strong anecdotal pattern about citizenship and work questions that were asked consistently from some of us, but not others. Once we completed the analysis of our findings, we saw that there was indeed a sharp difference in who was being asked these questions. We examine the issues of citizenship and work together because there does appear to be a relationship between the two.

Citizenship, in the formal legal sense of the term, is a critical eligibility criterion for many social services. Thus, it is not surprising that DSHS requires documentation of this for enrollment in many of its programs. We do not dispute the necessity of this as a legal mandate the agency must follow. What we did find, however, is a completely uneven implementation of this in practice, at least at the initial stages of contact between the potential client and the state.

There were two ways in which receptionists inquired about citizenship status. The first was simply to ask us about our citizenship status. For example, Linda was asked, on different occasions the following questions: "Legal or illegal?" "Documented or undocumented?" "Are you a citizen?" "I assume everyone in the household is a citizen, right?" These inquiries were overwhelmingly directed at Linda, who is Asian American (Table 8). Rose, a White American, on the other hand, was never asked such a direct question about her citizenship status. It is difficult to discern if this pattern applies to Latinas, as Laura only visited 19 of 54 offices (35 percent of the visits). She was asked this question at some of the offices, however. Kamilah was almost never asked this question.

The second, more subtle question about citizenship had to do with providing documentation for the application. After we finished inquiring about general information about the programs, we would ask: "What happens after I turn it in?" They would tell us that we would most likely need to have an interview. Then we asked: "Do I need to bring anything with me?" At this point, the receptionists gave us wildly different answers, which often depended on their assumptions about who we were and thus our eligibility. The lists could include any of the following: identification, Social Security number, shelter costs, landlord statement, income statements, pay stubs, employment verification, and a birth certificate, among others. This list could also include



TABLE 8  
Questions About Citizenship and Work by Staff

	African American	Asian American	Latina	White/Anglo
Citizenship				
Asked a question directly by staff	1.9 percent	29.6 percent	10.5 percent	0.0 percent
Told to submit for interview	5.6	20.4	10.5	3.7
Any citizenship question/mention	7.4	40.7	21.1	3.7
Work				
Asked a question directly about work	11.1	29.6	10.5	1.9

“citizenship status” or “proof of citizenship.” Again, Linda was told to bring in this much more frequently than Rose or Kamilah. In fact, if we combine the two measures, receptionists implied the questionability of Linda’s citizenship at 40.7 percent of the offices, compared with 7.4 percent for Kamilah and 3.7 percent for Rose (Table 8).

We found a similar pattern in a seemingly unrelated area: work. Receptionists would routinely ask Linda about whether she or the people she was helping to apply were working (Table 8). Kamilah was asked this question more frequently than Rose, but still at a lower rate than Linda. This finding is somewhat puzzling. We surmise that there may be some connection to the issue of citizenship, but are unsure of what that connection might be. It is important to note that this pattern was not geographically concentrated in one particular area. In other words, it was not simply a function of a division between urban and rural areas, although it is true that receptionists in rural areas tended to be more inquisitive about our “situations” than those in busy urban offices.

We did include geographic comparisons in this analysis as well.<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, in less crowded rural offices, we received slightly better treatment on the whole (with some exceptions) than in urban offices (Table 9). In terms of racial differences, the same patterns we saw previously held regardless of rural/urban designation. One exception to this pattern is that the Asian American woman did experience rude or dismissive treatment at a higher rate in rural areas than the other two researchers.

In terms of information received, we did, in general, receive more information at rural offices than at urban offices (Table 10). Again, this is not

<sup>12</sup>We combined the Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) areas to arrive at the classification scheme. Offices located in zip codes designated as “Urban Core” and “Sub-Urban” were combined as the “Urban” classification. Offices located in zip codes designated as “Large Rural Town” or “Small Town/Isolated Rural” were combined as the “Rural” classification.

TABLE 9  
Expressive Interactions with Staff by Race by Urban/Rural Office

Urban	African American	Asian American	White/Anglo	Total	Rural	African American	Asian American	White/Anglo	Total
Professional demeanor	64.7 percent	55.9 percent	67.6 percent	62.7 percent		70.0 percent	75.0 percent	90.0 percent	78.3 percent
Impatient or frustrated	17.6	23.5	38.2	26.5		10.0	15.0	20.0	15.0
Hurried	32.4	38.2	44.1	38.2		15.0	20.0	25.0	20.0
Use complicated language	2.9	5.9	38.2	15.7		10.0	15.0	45.0	23.3
Dismissive or rude demeanor	29.4	29.4	26.5	28.4		5.0	15.0	5.0	8.3

NOTE: Thirty-four offices are located in urban areas and 20 are in rural areas.

TABLE 10  
 Percentage of Program Explanations by Race of Investigator by Urban/Rural Office

Urban	African American	Asian American	White/Anglo	Total	Rural	African American	Asian American	White/Anglo	Total
Cash	64.7	73.5	76.5	71.6		75.0	85.0	70.0	76.7
Medical	55.0	73.5	58.8	62.7		60.0	80.0	70.0	70.0
Food	29.4	64.7	67.6	53.9		35.0	65.0	75.0	58.3

NOTE: Thirty-four offices are located in urban areas and 20 are in rural areas.

surprising given the differences in volumes of people visiting the offices on any given day. The differences we saw in terms of race did not change markedly from the overall pattern explored earlier.

Using our qualitative data, however, the quantitative results are somewhat misleading because they imply that rural offices were somewhat “better” than urban offices. What these quantitative measurements do not capture is the fact that these offices often wanted to know much more about our personal information than was necessary at that point in the process. For example, this took the form of some memorable incidents where the receptionist said information about the African American woman quite loudly so that the whole office could hear why she was there. This is not technically rude, hurried, or impatient, but it does signal a different form of treatment.

As another example, the Asian American woman was asked repeatedly about her citizenship status, while the others were never asked this or asked it extremely infrequently. There is a geographical difference that is relevant to the discussion of different responses by urban or rural office. She was asked a question about her citizenship status at 38 percent of the urban offices, while she was asked the same type of question at 45 percent of the rural offices.

These not so subtle hints about the questionable citizenship of Asian Americans is, while disappointing, not surprising, given the long history of the racialization of Asian Americans by White Americans and the state as “immutably foreign” (Kim, 1999:107). Again, while we question the normative basis for providing services based on citizenship status, we do not dispute the need for DSHS to determine citizenship status. According to our research, however, this is not what DSHS is doing. They are targeting one group (and possibly two—Latinas) for inquiry about citizenship status. We now turn to examine our findings about expressive interactions between clients and staff we observed in the offices.

### ***Observations of Other Client-Staff Interactions***

In addition to gathering information about our own interactions with staff at welfare offices, we also collected data about other client-staff interactions. These observations, while necessarily subjective, did allow us to remove ourselves from the immediacy of our own interactions with staff. They also provided the addition of an important element to our analysis: gender. Finally, they give us a breadth of data not available through one-on-one interactions: we collected a total of 427 individual client-staff observations. Finally, they also provided us a way to “check” the reliability of our general perceptions of one another’s individual staff interactions discussed previously. We would frequently discuss our individual coding of the same interactions observed to ensure that we had the same expectations for positive, negative, and neutral interactions described below.

We were unable to record observations at every office: some offices simply had too few clients to observe. The data we did collect, however, noted a number of relevant demographic characteristics about both the receptionist and the client(s). We examine a few of these characteristics, race and gender, in relationship to type of treatment. We always tried to err on the side of caution in these observations; that is why there are a number of observations that are “neutral or undetermined.” We labeled the interaction based on the tone and level of voice, body language, laughter, tears, and shouting, as well as certain substantive comments by receptionists (e.g., shouting someone’s Social Security number so loudly that everyone in the office can hear it). We did make a note if a client approached the receptionist in a hostile way, though we tried to focus on the reaction of the receptionist to the situation. Here is an example of particularly egregious behavior on the part of a receptionist at an office in the central part of the state (the names have been changed):

“Sonia López!” A woman approached the desk. One of the few translators we had ever seen, a White man, approached the desk from behind and proceeded to interpret between the receptionist and the woman. “What’s your social security number?” The woman quietly told her the number. “Oh, you say it’s 564–34-0237?” the receptionist says so the whole office can hear. “Well, I can’t help you because you’re from another state. We don’t have the resources to do anything. We have a 35 million dollar state budget shortfall.” The woman left the desk and took her seat again. Tears were streaming down her face. Another man went over to comfort her.

“Josh Gordon!” A White man in his early twenties approached the desk. “How may I help you?” the young White woman behind the counter said. She proceeded to whisper, giggle, and joke with the man. He quickly received what he needed and left the office.

Meanwhile, the three of us were still waiting. And waiting. Another young White man approached the desk, out of order. His name had not been called. The receptionist eagerly helped him, flirting and chatting about issues unrelated to his case.

“José Ortez!” An older man approached the desk. He, like the woman helped before him, was treated rudely.

The greatest number of observations were neutral or undetermined (Table 11). This is an expected outcome as most interactions were relatively mundane: a client checks in for an appointment, drops off paperwork, or asks a simple question. If we disaggregate the data by gender and eliminate the neutral/undetermined category, however, there is a noticeable split between the interactions men and women had with the receptionists (Table 12).<sup>13</sup>

As we pay special attention to race in this study, we further disaggregated the data by race alone and then by race and gender. The non-Anglo/White

<sup>13</sup>The total does not come to 427 because observations where couples (men and women) interacted together with the receptionist were excluded.

TABLE 11  
Observations of Interactions by Expressive Quality ( $N = 427$ )

	Positive	Negative	Neutral/ Undetermined
Total	130	86	211
Percentage	30.4 percent	20.1 percent	49.4 percent

TABLE 12  
Observations of Interactions by Expressive Quality: Gender

	Positive	Negative	Neutral/ Undetermined
Percentage			
Women	32.6 percent	24.0 percent	43.4 percent
Men	27.8	13.0	59.3
Percentage (positive/negative only)			
Women	57.7 percent	42.3 percent	
Men	68.2	31.8	

NOTE: There were 108 observations of men in the first section, 288 observations of women in the first section. There were 44 observations of men in the second section, 163 observations of women in the second section.

TABLE 13  
Observations of Interactions by Expressive Quality: Non/Anglo White

	Positive	Negative
Non-Anglo, Non-White	56.1 percent	43.9 percent
Anglo White	63.5	36.5

and Anglo/White comparison reveals that there was an approximate 8 percent point difference in their positive interactions (Table 13). When we further disaggregate this by race and gender, the differences become more pronounced. A number of race and gender subcategories were not included because of a small  $N$  (e.g., American Indian/Native American/Indigenous men). Therefore, we included the four largest categories of data points collected (Table 14).

Of the four categories, Anglo/White men had the most positive interactions, while African American women had the least. These patterns point to the importance of intersectional analysis of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1991) in considerations of the relationships between citizens and the state.

TABLE 14

Observations of Interactions by Expressive Quality: Race and Gender

	Positive	Negative	Undetermined/Neutral
African American women	32.8 percent	31.1 percent	36.1 percent
Latinas	35.4	27.1	37.5
White Anglo American men	29.9	13.4	56.7
White Anglo American women	34.2	19.7	45.4
African American women	51.3 percent	48.7 percent	
Latinas	56.7	43.3	
White Anglo American men	69.0	31.0	
White Anglo American women	62.7	36.1	

NOTE: First section: African American women, *n* = 61, Latinas, *n* = 48, White Anglo American men, *n* = 67, White Anglo American women, *n* = 151. Second section: African American women, *n* = 39, Latinas, *n* = 30, White Anglo American men, *n* = 29, White Anglo American women, *n* = 82.

**Conclusion**

Studies of racial discrimination, whether through audit studies of home loans or legal analysis of selection bias in jury selection processes, are not new. The results of this research project are of particular importance for three reasons. First, the sheer number of people that encounter the state through DSHS is staggering: one-third of the residents of the State of Washington were served by this state agency in 2007. Second, individuals and families are often at their most vulnerable when they are forced to seek services. Therefore, we argue that these interactions are central to any individual’s conception of citizenship and belonging. Third, despite a few anomalies to be explored further, our general findings point to the importance of race (and gender, although this is only explored in some sections of our analysis) in shaping these interactions with the state. Our individual interactions demonstrate that the White investigator consistently received more information and had more positive interactions with staff than the African American, Asian American, or Latina investigator had. This is particularly evident when comparing the treatment of the White American investigator with the African American investigator. Furthermore, the Asian American investigator was consistently questioned, either implicitly or explicitly, about her citizenship status, thus revealing and reinforcing the racialization of Asian Americans as immutably foreign in this context. Finally, when we examine the results of client-staff observations, we find that race and gender intersectionality matters for the experience of potential clients. White men had the most positive interactions while African American women had the least positive interactions.

These findings provide evidence that the state plays a critically important role in reinforcing notions of both belonging and marginalization through these racial interactions. It is important to emphasize here that the interactions

we participated in and those we observed are just those that occur on the surface, in a public space. We have not even begun to examine the interactions that take place behind closed doors.

While we are unable to draw conclusions about how these encounters may directly affect willingness to participate in other state institutions, such as the electoral system, it is reasonable to surmise that it must have a general affect on a general sense of belonging within various political communities. Further research is needed to examine why and how social service systems “read” citizens in this racialized way, as well as the impact these interactions have on general views of citizenship and exclusion from the body politic.

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