HOW OHIO WORKS FIRST PROGRAM MANAGERS TALK ABOUT WELFARE FRAUD

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By

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INTRODUCTION

“She has eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve Social Security cards and is collecting veterans’ benefits on four non-existent deceased husbands and she’s collecting Social security on her cards. She’s got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free income alone is worth $150,000.” (Zucchino 1997:65)

Ronald Reagan said the aforementioned about Linda Taylor, a welfare recipient. While Reagan greatly exaggerated Linda’s charges, she was convicted of defrauding the welfare system in Chicago, Illinois. But more importantly, mentioning welfare fraud proved to be an effective strategy in reforming welfare. Welfare fraud discourse blames those most marginalized by social and economic inequalities—welfare recipients—for social assistance programs’ inability to impede widespread poverty and its consequences (e.g., teen pregnancy; Collins 2000; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001). During the 1990s, welfare fraud discourse allowed politicians to reform the Aid to Families of Dependent Children (AFDC) program, creating the more punitive legislation: the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (hereafter referred to as PRWORA; Handler 2003).

PRWORA created a system of state- and county-level welfare cash assistance programs that report to the federal government. These programs, usually nicknamed welfare-to-work, were the first social assistance program that required recipients to work in order to receive assistance. The transition from AFDC to Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) was aided by a number of factors. First, the number of people covered by social insurance programs (programs such as Social Disability Insurance and Old Age Insurance) increased, leaving the most
marginalized individuals and families to rely on social assistance programs (e.g., Assistance for Families of Dependent Children and Food Stamps; Katz 2008). The second factor was welfare recipients’ lack of political support and representation. This lack of political support left politicians’ and the public’s stereotypes of welfare recipients unchallenged (Piven and Cloward 1993). Finally, the third factor was welfare fraud discourse (Handler 2003; Johnson 2000).

Welfare fraud still remains an issue for politicians, the public, and even the bureaucrats in local welfare offices (Handler 2003; Marston and Walsh 2008; Mosher and Hermer 2005). Yet in reality, welfare fraud rarely occurs. Annual reports published by the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services document the total welfare-to-work payments made and the amount of canceled payments. In 2010, the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services canceled over two million dollars’ worth of welfare-to-work payments, only 0.004% of the department’s total spending on welfare-to-work assistance (Ohio Department of Job and Family Services 2010b). A portion of these canceled payments include lost benefits due to the client being sanctioned and cases of clients receiving welfare fraudulently, deeming canceled payments as a very liberal estimate of confirmed fraudulent cases. Similarly, Marston and Walsh (2008) found that two magistrate courts in Australia only accused 80 defendants of welfare fraud during a seven-month period in 2007, with most of these cases involving social assistance programs which are not comparable to the U.S.’s welfare-to-work program.

While many scholars focus on welfare fraud discourse at the national level (Clawson and Trice 2000; Collins 2009; Foster 2008; Hancock 2004; Handler 2003; Misra et al. 2003; Riccucci et al. 2004; Zucchino 1997), there is a dearth of scholarship examining welfare fraud talk at the level of welfare-to-work implementation: the county-level. This research seeks to address the gap in the literature by examining how program managers in county-level welfare-to-work
offices talk about welfare fraud. Using 69 interviews with county welfare-to-work program managers in Ohio, this research finds that program managers talk both implicitly and explicitly about welfare fraud, mention welfare fraud in order to avoid questions about clients’ outcomes, and to justify either helping clients more or punishing clients more. I argue that program managers mention welfare fraud in order to blame fraudulent clients for managers’ inability to meet program rules and requirements. Below, I will first examine how historical and contemporary distinctions between deserving and undeserving clients and welfare fraud discourse has shaped these organizations. In the second and final section of the literature review, I discuss how goals and policies are implemented and performed within welfare-to-work organizations.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Welfare bureaucracies operate within a particular historical context. These historical contexts contain commonly held ideological beliefs about poverty, which then influence programs intended to benefit those in poverty (Blau 1963). To understand how local welfare-to-work program managers talk about welfare fraud, we must first answer the following questions: How has the structure of welfare cash assistance led to the current political concerns over welfare fraud? How do welfare-to-work program managers and workers within welfare bureaucracies foster a sense of efficacy in how they implement bureaucratic goals and policy?

Historical and Contemporary Ideologies of Welfare Organizations

The first social assistance programs were state-ran “mother’s pension” programs which primarily benefitted those perceived as worthy of assistance, primarily White women (Katz 2008; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Skocpol 1992; Trattner 1999). These assistance programs were heavily influenced by paternalistic ideology resulting in rules that govern the recipients’ behavior. Paternalism is an authoritative relationship between an authority figure and a subordinate, similar to the relationship between father and child. In a paternalistic relationship, the authority figure applies coercive tactics and rules that can, but do not always, improve the subordinate’s life (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). The authority figure can deploy coercive tactics and rules to improve the authority’s own social standing in relation to those they subordinate (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001). Paternalistic policies,
therefore, are those that attempt to change how those living in poverty behave by surveilling and sanctioning clients for ‘improper’ behavior, rather than “improving benefits or opportunities” (Mead 1997:4). When creating mothers’ pensions, policymakers explicitly stated that the state should serve as a father figure, by providing both financial support and rules of behavior, to widows and their children (Abramovitz 1988).

During the Great Depression, states created more paternalistic rules to remove those perceived as undeserving from state-run welfare programs. While the Social Security Act of 1936 created federal funding for state-implemented Aid to Dependent Children programs (Katz 2008; Trattner 1999) states were allowed to create vaguely defined rules, such as the “suitable home” rule, which required recipients to keep a “suitable home” in which to raise children. These rules were highly subjective and allowed racist beliefs of welfare bureaucrats to personally judge the recipient-mother’s behavior and moral standing (Chilton 1970; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Piven and Cloward 1993). In Florida, Chilton (1970) found that Black single mothers were more likely to be removed from welfare rolls for violating the “suitable home” rule than white single mothers. In fact, only 1.5% of the same Floridian recipients keeping ‘unsuitable’ homes (about 13 people) had their children removed from the house due to the unsuitability of their home (Chilton 1970). Caseworkers used these subjective rules to remove recipients they perceived as undeserving from the welfare rolls, usually economically marginalized Black women (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Piven and Cloward 1993).

During the Civil Rights Era, the U.S. Supreme Court charged states to remove any exclusionary measure, including paternalistic rules, that denied Black mothers welfare assistance (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001). The removal of these discriminatory rules, along with southern industrialization, caused an influx of Black mothers to receive Assistance to Families with
Dependent Children (AFDC). The rising welfare rolls and changing demographics of northern states led to increased media and political attention. News stories’ and politicians’ focus on Black welfare clients caused the public to characterize AFDC as a ‘black program’ (Gilens 1995; Katz 2008; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Omi and Winant 1986), eventually leading to accusations that welfare bureaucracies were mismanaged. Given the public concern over rising welfare rolls and charges of mismanagement, AFDC bureaucracies made it harder for clients to apply for cash assistance and began to remove “undeserving clients” (Piven and Cloward 1993:page number?).

Localities have always been concerned with fraudulent and undeserving welfare recipients (Katz 2008; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001), but this talk was localized to individual states until the 1960’s when two infamous events hit the national spotlight: Joseph McDowell Mitchell investigation of ‘migrants and newcomers’ in Newborough, New York and Peter Byrd’s congressional hearings on AFDC beneficiaries in Washington, D.C. (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001:82). In both cases, politicians argued that undeserving Black families were receiving welfare fraudulently. Yet, these two events provide contradictory evidence of how frequently welfare fraud occurs. In Newborough, local officials found no fraudulent welfare recipients. Yet, in Washington, D.C., they found many breaking welfare rules. In Newborough, local city officials forced welfare recipients to report to the local police station to confirm their eligibility and to receive their welfare checks. Yet in Washington, D.C., after the prompting of Congressman Peter Byrd, caseworkers found many individuals breaking AFDC rules (i.e., receiving money fraudulently). A majority of these “fraudulent clients” were breaking the “man in the house” rule, which required that no man lives with and/or stays overnight with a woman who receives welfare. This rule was widely unpopular with Washingtonians as well as the city’s
caseworkers and welfare recipients (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001). Yet, more importantly, the national rhetoric that disseminated from events like those in Newborough and Washington, D.C. created a controlling image of all welfare recipients as single Black mothers who are somehow undeserving of public assistance (Collins 2009; Hancock 2003; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001).

As stated earlier, this controlling image of welfare recipients provided an effective means to reform welfare. Between 1992 and 1996, local governors and state legislatures began ‘experimenting’ with AFDC policies by requesting waivers from federally imposed AFDC rules (Katz 2008; Rogers-Dillon 2004). These waivers aimed to lower AFDC clients’ rate of out-of-wedlock births, remove undeserving AFDC clients, and limit AFDC recipients’ dependence on welfare (Katz 2008; Mead 1999; Rogers-Dillon 2004). These welfare experiments favored requiring clients work for their aid (Piven and Cloward 1993). Thus, these experiments favored the business community by offering businesses low-wage employees (Piven and Cloward 1993). These experiments culminated in the federal legislation, PRWORA. The program guiding welfare-to-work programs is TANF, which is written into PRWORA (Rogers-Dillon 2004). Under TANF, welfare bureaucracies must lower the total number of clients receiving welfare. In addition, clients must work for their cash assistance benefits. TANF’s requirements occurred because loftier goals, such as ending poverty and dramatically reducing the number of out-of-wedlock births, were too politically decisive (Rogers-Dillon 2004).

Paternalism still dominates cash assistance programs under TANF (Katz 2008). In fact, welfare-to-work programs have the implicit goal of forcing clients to become “better” citizens (Katz 2008; Soss et al. 2011), or as Hays (2003) states, welfare-to-work programs “asserted and enforced a newly reformulated vision of the appropriate values of work and family life” (4). To receive aid, clients must sign contracts that specify their responsibilities while they are under the
auspices of welfare programs (Soss et al. 2011). Welfare-to-work caseworkers are taught that their job is to serve the business community as well as welfare recipients (Collins and Mayer 2010). Caseworkers are also taught “...the importance of taking efficient steps toward improving the bottom line” (Soss et al. 2011:49), possibly facing sanctions for not meeting certain program goals and requirements. In practice, these welfare-to-work goals and requirements are hard to achieve (Taylor 2013). Therefore, Ohio Works First (OWF) program managers might mention welfare fraud to demonstrate why they cannot meet program goals and requirements. Yet, program managers’ fraud talk would rely on the paternalistic ideology inherent within TANF, as well as the dichotomy of deserving and undeserving clients.

*The Image of the Welfare Queen*

The image of the fraudulent welfare queen is a stereotype of welfare recipients as Black single mothers who are undeserving of government assistance (Collins 2009; Fraser and Gordon 1994; Gilens 1999; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001). The welfare queen image is an image of a “highly materialistic, domineering, and manless working-class Black woman” (Collins 2009:88). Policy-makers have used this gendered, classed, and racist stereotype to gain the public’s support to cut to welfare spending, all the while reinforcing the belief that poverty is the fault of an individual’s moral and/or behavioral failings (Collins 2009; Gilens 1999; Katz 2008; Omi and Winant 1986). To truly understand how local program managers talk about welfare fraud, we must understand how Black women are stereotyped as welfare queens.

Despite the fact that those who are seen as worthy of government assistance has changed over time (Fraser and Gordon 1994; Misra et al. 2003), economically marginalized Black women have always been perceived as undeserving of welfare (Collins 2000; Katz 2008; Trattner 1999). Misra, Moller, and Karides (2003) found that media coverage of which government programs
create dependence for which groups has shifted programs over time. For example, during the 1930-1950’s, unemployment insurance was perceived as a cause of dependence among white male recipients. Yet, during the 1960s, media depictions of dependence began to focus on how women, especially women of marginalized racial/ethnic identities, were supposedly dependent on AFDC payments (Fraser and Gordon 1994; Gilens 1999). Due to this national focus on Black women’s dependence on welfare assistance, the white public predominantly believed that welfare was a program benefitting Black women who lacked a strong work ethic (Gilens 1999). While exclusionary policies are no longer in place, the public discourse and stigma associated with welfare-to-work programs can still vary according to recipients’ race, class, and gender (Fraser and Gordon 1994; Gilens 1999; Misra et al. 2003).

This stigma based on a recipients’ race, class, and gender continues at the local welfare organization level (Fording, Soss, and Schram 2007; Watkins-Hayes 2009). As stated earlier, some AFDC program rules allowed welfare bureaucrats to discriminate against and remove Black women from the welfare rolls (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001). In addition, welfare bureaucrats treated Black women’s verbal applications as ‘casual inquiries’ (Piven and Cloward 1993). While these exclusionary policies and practices are no longer in place, clients of marginalized racial, gender, and class statuses still face discrimination in the local welfare-to-work office. For example, Schram, Fording, and Soss (2008) found that Floridian sanction rates vary based on the clients’ class, race, and gender. In addition, Watkin-Hayes (2009) found that supervisors and caseworkers who are of marginalized racial identities themselves tend to hold clients of the same race to a higher standard as compared to clients of other races (Watkins-Hayes 2009). Therefore, white program managers may invoke welfare fraud in order to convey specific gendered, classed, and raced conceptions of their clients.
Welfare Organizations and Program Implementation

As stated earlier, the rising number of Black clients on welfare in the 1960s led politicians to believe that welfare bureaucracies were ineffective and mismanaged (Piven and Cloward 1993). These indictments led state governments and program administrators to introduce new rules (and later, waivers from federal rules) that attempted to remove undeserving clients from the welfare rolls, lower the number of clients having out-of-wedlock births, and limit recipients’ alleged dependence on welfare (Katz 2008; Mead 1999; Rogers-Dillon 2004). Under TANF, welfare administrators, program managers, and caseworkers had to reorganize the structure and goals of their organizations to meet TANF’s requirements (Piven and Cloward 1993). The workers charged with meeting the required goals are the street-level bureaucrats.

Street-level bureaucrats are government bureaucrats who primarily act as gatekeepers between private citizens and the bureaucratic organization (Lipsky 1980; Watkins-Hayes 2009). Due to the “catch-all” nature of these bureaucracies, street-level bureaucrats must be able to remain unhampered by strong bureaucratic rules governing their behavior (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). In theory, street-level bureaucrats’ use of discretion should be informed by the individual client’s need or the particular situation (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). Yet, Taylor (2014) found that Work-First street-level bureaucrats use their discretion in order to favor the welfare-to-work organization. In addition to Taylor (2014), most street-level bureaucrats are beholden to their managers and or coworkers (Jewell and Glaser 2006). Similar findings led Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000a; 2003) to characterize street-level bureaucrats as either state-agents or citizen-agents. State-agents are said to primarily use their discretion to benefit the state and/or bureaucracy, while citizen-agents primarily use their feelings and judgment to
rationalize helping citizens. Despite how street-level bureaucrats use their discretion, street-level bureaucrats can affect how bureaucratic policies, goals, and requirements are implemented.

Lipsky and colleagues (Lipsky 1980; Weatherley and Lipsky 1977) have argued that street-level bureaucrats play a key role in how bureaucracies implement policy. Sometimes, the goals and requirements of bureaucracies are hard to achieve and conflict with one another (Watkins-Hayes 2009; Weatherley and Lipsky 1977). In addition, goals and policies in TANF are, in essence, filtered and interpreted from the federal-level down to the local welfare-to-work organization (Hasenfeld 2000). These reinterpreted and conflicting goals allow street-level bureaucrats to choose which goals and policies to implement. Street-level bureaucrats use their bureaucratic identity, their attitude, the structure of the bureaucracy, their managers’ beliefs and goals, and the communication processes of the bureaucracy to inform their use of discretion (Jewell and Glaser 2006; Pandey and Rainey 2006). While TANF sought to limit bureaucrats’ discretion, it merely exacerbated their use of discretion.

TANF sought to limit welfare-to-work bureaucrats’ use of discretion by creating a more ‘efficient’ welfare-to-work bureaucracy limiting the use of street-level bureaucrats’ discretion. TANF also sought to limit caseworkers’ discretion by imposing large caseloads and strict rules governing program use, by delegating authority of welfare to counties, and sometimes, by privatizing welfare organizations. These changes were guided by the belief that local organizations could implement policy and deliver services more efficiently than larger federal- or state-level organizations (Hasenfeld 2000; Soss et al. 2011). Yet, PWRORA’s cuts to other social services and welfare-to-work’s continuously changing rules and policies force welfare bureaucrats to assuage more social problems than just merely helping those economically marginalized single mothers (Watkins-Hayes 2009). The larger scope of welfare-to-work
bureaucracies, the quick decision-making the job requires, and the continuously changing rules and requirements make it hard for welfare-to-work bureaucrats to maintain a sense of efficacy and have actually allowed bureaucrats more discretion to meet the performance measures of their welfare bureaucracies (Brodkin 2007; Watkins-Hayes 2009).

While managers are not technically street-level bureaucrats, their location within the structure of welfare-to-work organizations is closer to their subordinates (i.e., actual street-level bureaucrats) than it is to their bosses (i.e., welfare administrators). Program managers are the primary focus of this research because they can profoundly influence almost every aspect of welfare-to-work organizations. Program managers can redefine the goals of their welfare-to-work bureaucracy, how the bureaucracy prioritizes goals, how resources are used in order to meet those goals, and caseworkers’ perceptions of their work (Jewell and Glaser 2006; Reingold and Liu 2009; Taylor and Seale 2013; Watkins-Hayes 2009). In sum, managers are a valid and reliable way to study how talking about welfare fraud may affect welfare bureaucracies and welfare policy implementation.

Welfare Fraud Literature

There is little previous research examining welfare fraud (Shaw et al. 2008). Scholars mention how welfare fraud is a political tool in order to reform welfare (Katz 2008; Schram 1995). Yet, this political discourse has had real consequences in both the U.S. and other countries (Chunn and Gavigan 2004; Collins 2009; Foster 2008; Lubiano 1992; Marston and Walsh 2008; Shaw et al. 2008). For example, welfare fraud discourse is used in Canada to justify welfare policies similar to the U.S’s welfare-to-work programs (Chunn and Gavigan 2004). Yet, fraud is more a matter of a “politics of reframing” (Schram 1995:53). As Scram (1995) states, “What was called ‘welfare fraud’ was often not recognized as an honest attempt to make ends
meet in the face of horrendous bureaucratic obstacles” (53). Research supports this view of welfare fraud. When clients commit welfare fraud, it is out of economic necessity or their confusion (or their caseworkers’ confusion) with bureaucratic rules (Edin and Lein 1997; Shaw et al. 2008; Wright 1997)
METHODS

Location-The Ohio Works First Program

The program that grants cash assistance to clients in Ohio is called Ohio Works First (OWF), and this program is implemented at the county-level. To receive aid, potential clients must have at least one child and must meet income requirements. The client must also provide evidence verifying any information provided to the welfare-to-work office. To maintain cash assistance, and the client must participate in work and/or work-related activities. A recipient can be sanctioned if she or he fails to comply with the work requirement and/or fails to provide documentation. In Ohio, the first sanction only removes the sanctioned individual from the calculation of household size, effectively shrinking the payment. Subsequent sanctions will remove the entire family from OWF’s case rolls. Clients can only receive OWF benefits for a maximum of 36 consecutive months; however, families may request a hearing to receive an exemption from this time limit if that family is experiencing a “hardship.”

In 2010, 103,029 clients received OWF assistance (65,672 of which were adult recipients). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 53.6% of total clients were White, 41.2% were African-American, 4.1% were Hispanic, 0.1% were Native American, 0.4% were Asian, and 0.5% identified as Multi-Racial in 2012. Of the adult recipients, 6.3% of clients were under 20 years old, 55.8% were between 20-29 years old, 25.6% were 30 to 39 years old, 10.2% were 40-49 years old, and 2.1% of clients were 50 years old or
older. Approximately 81% of OWF adult clients were women (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2012).

Data

I examine how OWF program managers talk about welfare fraud by examining qualitative data collected by Dr. Tiffany Taylor and her research team at Kent State University. Dr. Taylor and her research team conducted 69 telephone interviews with Ohio Works First program managers in 2010 and 2011. One interview was collected per county for 69 out of the 88 counties of the state of Ohio. On average, interviews lasted one hour in length, with some interviews as short as thirty minutes and some long as three hours in length. These interviews asked OWF program managers a total 48 questions covering topics about the program, their beliefs about the program, their opinions about clients, and managers’ demographic information. Even though in-person interviews are preferred, telephone interviews have been shown to be comparable to data collected via in-person interviews (Sturges and Hanrahan 2004). In addition, program managers spend a majority of their day on the phone, deeming this method of qualitative data collection appropriate to this specific group of individuals.

Approximately 53 of the total 69 program managers (76%) interviewed were women; the remaining 16 interviews (23%) were with men. These welfare-to-work program managers are virtually homogeneous with respect to race, with 65 individuals self-reporting as white, one respondent identified as African American or Black, one Latino/a respondent, and two respondents who declined to answer. The highest level of education the program managers completed varied more than their race or gender. Approximately 17 (24%) program managers held a high school diploma or GED, 12 (17%) program managers completed some college
without obtaining a degree, 12 (17%) completed their associate degree, 26 (37%) managers have their bachelor’s degree, and 2 (2%) have completed a graduate degree.

Coding and Analysis

Dr. Tiffany Taylor has been collecting information on welfare-to-work organizations in North Carolina, and later, Ohio, since 2006. These interviews were conducted in order to explore how welfare services are administered by county-level organizations as well as to compare how two different states have implemented TANF. I joined Dr. Tiffany Taylor and her research group in 2014, several years after Tiffany Taylor and her research team collected and initially coded the OWF interviews. By the time I joined the research group, the interview transcripts contained over 1,000 codes. These pre-existing codes were determined via a modified grounded theory approach (Charmaz 1990). This process was similar to Lofland and colleagues’ (Lofland et al. 2006) concept of open-coding and focus-coding. These pre-existing codes include, but are not limited to: the race, gender, and education level of managers; when program managers mention of clients’ self-sufficiency; and a preliminary code for when program managers mention fraud and/or detecting fraud.

To conduct my analysis, I first read through each interview transcript to familiarize myself with the data. After reading through the transcripts, I did not go through a process of initial (open) coding (Lofland et al. 2006). Instead, I began to focus-code the transcripts for instances of fraud talk (Lofland et al. 2006). Generally, I placed managers’ fraud talk into two codes, categorizing managers’ fraud talk as either implicit fraud and or explicit fraud. During the coding of interview transcripts, I wrote analytic memos to analyze how fraud talk might be related to theoretical concepts (e.g., paternalistic and/or neoliberal ideology) and/or research
concepts (e.g., managers’ gender, region, and bureaucratic identity). These memos allowed me to critically examine the patterns presented in the findings section that follows.
FINDINGS

In general, OWF program managers do not mention welfare fraud. Less than half (27 of 69, 39%) of the OWF program managers mention welfare fraud, while the remaining forty-three program managers (61%, 43 of 69) did not mention welfare fraud. Fifteen of the program managers who mention fraud only mention it once during their interview forty-five question interview (55%, 15 of 27). Despite the fact that fraud talk is rare, there are three conspicuous patterns in how these twenty-seven managers talk about fraud: OWF program managers talk implicitly and/or explicitly about fraudulent clients, program managers mention certain topics during their welfare fraud talk, and program managers talk about welfare fraud frequently during questions about clients’ outcomes.

Fraud Talk Types

The first pattern involves how OWF program managers talk about fraud. OWF Program managers’ fraud talk can take two forms: explicit fraud talk or implicit fraud talk. The difference between these two ways of talking about fraud is semantic. Program managers’ explicit fraud talk occurs when they explicitly state that clients and/or other counties are engaged in illegal activities prohibited by OWF’s rules. Only four of the twenty-seven (14%) program managers used explicit language when mentioning welfare fraud. County 26, a white man, offers an example of explicit fraud talk in response to the question, “Why are some participants more likely to be sanctioned than others?” He replies:

County 26: Our participants are real blatant about the fact that they don’t want to work, they’re not going to participate [in the required Work Experience Program].
We’ve actually caught some clients lying. We make them do a job search and we find out they filled out the job search information themselves. Um, there is a small percentage [of clients] that… [The clients] didn’t want to better themselves or get a job that would pay them. It’s almost as if they want to um, take advantage of the system, so, luckily we only have a few of those clients.

County 26 gives the example of clients “lying” by falsifying job search information. This mention of fraud allows County 26 to justify why some clients are more likely to be sanctioned than others. While County 26 mentions that fraudulent clients only make up “a small percentage” of his caseload, his mention of fraudulent cases allows County 26 to blame clients for their sanctions. Thus County 26’s mention of fraudulent clients allows him and his county’s program to avoid blame for sanctioning participants.

Fourteen of the twenty-seven program managers (51%) solely used implicit language to mention welfare fraud, making implicit fraud talk more common than explicit fraud talk. Implicit fraud talk relies on subtle and covert language to mention how clients, and/or other counties, commit welfare fraud. County 23, a white woman, offers an example of implicit fraud talk in response to the question, “Why don’t more people who are eligible use Ohio Works First Services?” She replies:

County 23: I believe, in our county, that a lot of [clients] are using Ohio Works First program. What I have problems with, in my [county’s] program, is the participation rate. A lot of [clients] will not do their work activity. I find that a lot of [clients] are getting cash assistance or food assistance, [but] we have a high [number] of people on an alternative assignment. [Alternative assignment usually] means [that clients] have a doctor’s statement that says that they can’t do the [work-related activities] assignment for a medical reason. And those [doctor’s statements] are very easy to get in my county.

County 23 first offers a short answer to the interviewer’s question and then changes the subject to what she has a problem with: “the participation rate,” or getting her county’s OWF clients to meet the required work-related activity. In OWF, the “participation rate” is the number of hours a client is required to complete in a work-related activity. Federal rules governing the
welfare-to-work program require that every county must have 50% of its clients working every month (US 106th Congress 2006). In the above quote, County 23’s program manager justifies why her county is unable to make the required participation rate: clients offer doctors’ notes excusing the client from required work-related activities. County 23’s program manager ends her response by implying that clients receive these notes fraudulently: “And those [doctor’s statements] are very easy to get in my county.” County 23, along with seven other OWF program managers, implied that clients fake being medically unable to complete the work-related activity requirement.

Nine of the twenty-seven welfare-to-work program managers (33%) used a combination of both implicit and explicit fraud talk. For example, County 72’s program managers, a white woman, mentioned welfare fraud six times in six separate questions. County 72’s first instance of implicit welfare fraud talk occurs when the interviewer asked her, “What do you think is the most common reason that people seek Ohio Works First Services?” She replies:

County 72: I do believe it’s because they need to pay their rent and utilities. I think they think that’s going to help them—which it does. It will help those who are in a really tough [struggle], because the cash assistance is [a] real minimal amount. So, for a family of two, a mom and the child, [the amount of assistance] is 355 dollars a month. But [that amount is] not going to pay the rent, it’s not going to pay your utilities…unless you’re in a low-income apartment. […] Usually, [clients are] pretty desperate when they come in: they’re trying to make ends meet, they’re trying to …you know, if they’re getting Child Support, they’re Child Support has to be less than their OWF grant in order to get Cash Assistance. But that Child Support is [then] assigned over to the State of Ohio and all they get is the cash assistance. So […] I don’t know how some people make it. And then, that’s a whole other story. I think a lot of times people come in and they’ve only have to tell the truth. [and if they don’t tell the truth] we really have no way of really finding that out. I mean, we have a fraud unit but, the person can’t do those things.

County 72 mentions how clients sometimes come in and lie to her program’s employees. County 72 seems sympathetic to clients. Yet, County 72 mentions how clients “only have to tell the truth,” implying that some clients come in and lie to her and her workers. While County 72
does have a “fraud unit,” she still believes that the clients’ lies, and welfare fraud, are really hard to catch. Later, County 72 explicitly talks about welfare fraud during another question. When asked, “What do you think is the most common reason that participants reach their time limits?” County 72 mentions how clients are focused on their day-to-day experience with little concern for the future. County 72 then mentions welfare fraud explicitly:

County 72: “I say, anybody that’s working, give them assistance. Help them with their food, help them with some of their medical. But even medical, because they abuse it so bad. [clients abusing Medicare is] why us out in the private sector pay so much for our health insurance and stuff. The people that are on Medicaid don’t have any idea what it’s like to pay a co-payment. Or to think ‘if I’m really, really sick…’ and I mean, I have been [so sick] that I can’t put one foot in front of the other. But for me to go to the emergency room and know that it’s going to cost me, maybe a couple thousand dollars to go, I have to be just about on my deathbed before I go. […] If [clients] have a sniffle or a splinter, or something that’s [not] really an emergency, [But clients will go to the emergency room for those symptoms]. [The only place they receive medical treatment is at the emergency room]. They don’t even try to get a family doctor to go to. [The emergency room] is their family doctor. And that to me, isn’t right either. […] And that’s why I think the government [should] hire doctors, just to be doctors for [Medicare patients]. [These doctors] don’t have to be general practitioners, they can be specialists, [and] they can be in a network. Like our doctors are in networks and we can only go to certain doctors, with our insurance. So, you know, to hire these doctors and pay them to be doctors to the [Medicare clients] and let them make appointments, go get their doctor’s appointments like we have to. There I am again, rambling on.

County 72 mentions how clients “abuse” Medicare by misusing emergency rooms, hence the reason why private health insurance costs so much. County 72 uses this welfare fraud talk to justify creating a network of doctors who treat only Medicare patients. County 72 continually draws similarities between this proposed network of Medicare doctors and doctors in private health insurance networks.

Again, fourteen of the twenty-seven managers (52%) used only implicit fraud talk. Four of the twenty-seven managers (15%) only used explicit fraud talk. And the remaining nine program managers (9 of 27, 33%) used a combination of both implicit and explicit fraud.
Topics of OWF Program Managers’ Fraud Talk

The second pattern involves what OWF program managers mention in welfare fraud talk. Below, Table 1 summarizes the common topics of explicit and implicit welfare fraud talk and how frequently these topics were mentioned. The most common ways OWF program managers mentioned welfare fraud explicitly include: how OWF clients abuse Medicaid in order to obtain drugs (9 of 24 explicit fraud mentions, 37.5%), how clients “lie” or “fake the system” in order to obtain benefits (6 of 24, 25%), and how clients work under-the-table and do not report their income to the OWF program (2 of 24, 8.3%).

The most common ways program managers mentioned welfare fraud implicitly include: how clients “claim” medical and or mental health excuses justifying their inability to meet the work-related activity requirement (22.8%, 8 of 35), how clients work under-the-table and do not report their income (6 of 35, 17.1%), and how clients understand and exploit rules governing the Fair Hearing process (4 of 35, 11.4%). In addition, OWF program managers construct welfare clients as criminal by referring to clients as “repeat offenders” and/or caseload churning as “recidivism.” Hence, I code program managers’ reference to clients as “repeat offenders” as implicit fraud (3 of 35, 8.6%).
Table 2: Topics and Frequency of Explicit and Implicit Fraud

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explicit Fraud Talk</th>
<th>Frequency:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clients abuse social program (Medicare, EBT, OWF) to sustain drug use</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients “lie” and/or “Fake the system”</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients work under-the-table and/or do not report sources of income</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients &quot;abuse&quot; W2W cash assistance</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients “Sabotage employment” at WEP sites</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients “Fake Homelessness” in order to receive social assistance benefits</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other County-level OWF offices commit fraud</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients’ boyfriend uses OWF</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OWF county has Fraud Investigator on staff</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of explicit fraud mentions:</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implicit Fraud Talk</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clients offer doctor’s notes/ mental health professional’s notes in order to avoid participation in work-related activity</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients work under-the-table and/or do not report sources of income</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients understand and exploit Fair Hearing Process</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients understand and exploit program rules and/or procedures (not including Fair Hearings)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients do not report income, boyfriend, and/or other required information</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program managers use criminal justice language, such as referring to clients as “repeat offenders” and/or caseload churning as “recidivism”</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other county OWF organizations are fraudulent</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients break EBT rules</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients fake homelessness</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client was paid twice for work activity hours</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEP sites are Fraudulent</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program manager mentions how there are “illegal alternatives” to OWF Payments</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of implicit fraud mentions:</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The frequencies for the above topics correspond to the total number of counties mentioning that topic. While some program managers mentioned topics more than once, no program manager mentioned the same topic using the same type of language.
OWF Program managers’ talk of welfare fraud suggests that some program managers believe that clients are inauthentic and are “getting around the system.” When asked, “What parts of the county’s service provision are not working well? Are there any services you think are important but aren’t being offered by anyone in the county?” County 28 offers an example of a program manager who believes that clients “fake [that] they’re homeless” in order to receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (SNAP, often referred to as “food stamps”). County 28 begins her response to the question above by expressing concern that there are not enough drug and alcohol counseling services in her county. Later, in the response to the same question, County 28 mentions how clients defraud her county program:

County 28: I can’t tell you how many phone calls I get [about clients] selling their food stamp card for drugs. And actually, [another thing is] … I don’t know if this is on your survey, but we get a lot of young people that fake [that] they’re homeless. […] Yeah, it’s because…I think they’re living with their parents and they can’t get their own food stamps. So they…it’s just amazing how many people are homeless now. Now that the word’s out on [the fact that those living with their parents can get their own food stamps], they all just say they’re homeless and [the ODJFS will] give you your own [social assistance] benefits. But we get a lot, a lot of young people that are homeless, they live here and there, you know. [County 28 explains to the interviewer that the county provides homeless clients with a mailing address at the OWF office in order for clients to receive mail.] We’ll send [the homeless client] to Social Services, see if they can help them find a place. But I hope… huh… how can you come in with a designer bag and a cup of coffee from a store and you’re homeless? You know what I mean? It just seems kind of, you know…And again, the word’s out, just say [that] you’re homeless and you can live with your parents and get your own food stamps.

Here, County 28 states that homeless clients “fake [that] they’re homeless.” Similar to many counties, County 28 believes that clients know OWF’s rules so well that they can claim homelessness in order to defraud the welfare-to-work program. Above, County 28 constructs clients as conspiring with other OWF clients in order to defraud the OWF program. County 28’s discursive construction of clients as agentic and scheming with one another (“…the word’s out,
just say [that] you’re homeless and you can live with your parents and get your own food
stamps.”) allows County 28 to blame clients for the perceived sudden rise of homelessness in her
county. While only two program managers mentioned how clients fake homelessness, many
more program managers believed that clients lie to OWF officials about their lack of income.

County 13 and seven other counties mentioned how they believe that OWF clients had
unreported sources of income. When asked “Why don’t more people who are eligible use OWF
services?” County 13’s program managers, two white women, shift the blame onto fraudulent
clients:

County 13-1: Well, do you mean why do some people don’t come on [to the OWF
program]?
Interviewer: Yeah. If there’s people that are eligible that don’t apply.
County 13-1: Because, it’s kind of a pain for them. They don’t want to jump through our
hoops. They don’t want to do the things that they have to do in order to keep their cash.
That’s what I would think. You guys want to add anything to that?
County 13-2: Well it’s a matter of pride. We’re dealing with the really hard to serve and
these families are living in crises almost every day. [Clients are] trying to make you know
their life fit every day, [like] the children are sick, but yet, we demand that they do so
many hours [in a work-related activity] and if they don’t they’re sanctioned. And, instead
of going through all that they’ll just opt out of [the] OWF program.
County 13-1: Sometimes [clients and potential clients] can find money doing other things
under-the-table, or criminal, or whatever. But as long as [clients] have the food stamps or
you know… I think the medical [insurance in the form of Medicaid] is the most
important thing to them sometimes. Almost everybody is eligible for food stamps [and
Medicaid, but] the OWF [program] carries with it a great deal more responsibility in
order to maintain that cash [assistance].
County 13-2: And here’s another thing: A lot of these people have something else going
on. Now can we prove it? [No,] okay. [But,] This is [a scenario:] someone comes in,
they’ve applied for OWF cash, [and] they haven’t turned in all their verification. Their
case pends for over thirty days. If they really need that money, trust me… [If you were
the client] wouldn’t you have your verifications and stuff in right away? So [the client
has] other sources of income that we don’t necessarily know about.

Above, both managers for County 13 believe that eligible individuals would not
participate in the OWF program due to the eligible individuals’ “not wanting to jump through
[our] hoops.” Instead of merely explaining why some eligible individuals do not participate in
the OWF program, County 13 later offers an example of welfare fraud: potential clients who are working under-the-table and who fail to report their income. County 13 takes clients’ failure to turn in documents (“verification”) in a timely manner as proof that clients are lying about their income. Unlike counties quoted previously (e.g., Counties 26 and 23), County 13’s example of welfare fraud does not affect the county’s participation rate. Yet, County 13’s mention of welfare fraud, along with the mention eligible individuals’ laziness, allows County 13 to avoid being blamed for denying eligible individuals.

Program Manager’s Goals and Fraud Talk

The third pattern involves when OWF program managers mention welfare fraud. Managers most often used fraud talk in response to questions concerning client outcomes. The questions with the highest frequency of fraud talk, including six program managers (22%, 6 of 27) that mentioned welfare fraud during these questions, were: “Why don’t more people who are eligible use the OWF services?”; “How successful do you believe the current welfare system has been in eradicating generational poverty?”; “What is the most common reason that participants reach time limits?”; and “Why are some participants more likely to be sanctioned than others?” Another six program managers also mentioned fraud during the question, “If you could design a completely new program to serve the poor, what would it look like?”

In sum, OWF program managers strategically talk about welfare fraud. OWF program managers use talk of fraudulent clients or fraudulent counties as a scapegoat for the program’s ineffectiveness. As mentioned in the previous section, program managers use welfare fraud talk more frequently during questions about client outcomes. These managers construct clients as smart and inauthentic in order to blame the program’s ineffectiveness on fraudulent clients. Yet, as this section will examine, program managers’ welfare fraud talk can justify one of two
possible program changes: program changes aimed at helping clients or program changes aimed at policing clients.

Only four of the twenty-seven OWF program managers (14%) used welfare fraud exclusively to justify improving clients’ outcomes. Another four program managers (14%) used welfare fraud to justify both helping clients and police clients more. During the question, “How does the ODJFS measure the effectiveness of this program and the placements they make within the program?” County 76, a white woman, mentions how OWF is “a bunch of crappy federal rules that don’t work.” Later in her response to the same question, she states how fraudulent clients affect managers’ performance measures:

County 76: We need some [way of measuring “positive performance outcomes”]. [Current performance outcomes are] not like positive performance outcomes. [Current performance outcomes are] just making sure people do their [required] hours [in work-related activities]. And if [clients] are going to school, we got to make sure we get their school records and plug in their hours every two weeks and measure their attendance [to] make sure they’re going. You [have to] try to do that on 125 cases every month [, so] you don’t have time to do anything else. You know that’s why we had to cut other things back, like [our] job readiness workshop, [because] we don’t have time to do that. We can’t invest that time in those processes [of achieving “positive performance outcomes”] because we got to do work activities and make sure we get our stuff done and on the computer. […] So, it’s not… Like I said, I would just much rather be measured on positive performance outcomes, [clients receiving] jobs or improving [clients’] overall lifestyle by helping them get on social security, if [social security] is appropriate for them. You know, different things like that. But at the same time you’ve got to consider [that] there’s a significant number of people who are in and out of that [receiving] benefit[s] because they have drug related problems. More than you possibly [know or could imagine]. We never successfully do anything with [drug addicted clients]. They get on long enough to get a couple of checks and then they go off because they [have] their checks. Three or four months later, they’re back. You can never have positive performance outcomes with a lot of these people because they’re…Not very many people are willing to live on, you know, 400 dollars a month for a family of three. You can’t even pay your rent with that. So, there are always alternatives income resources: a lot of times it’s drugs, or prostitution or whatever that might be. And, they’re often on benefits. You know, they’re in and out of our system anyways.
County 76 is frustrated with the bureaucratic requirements of the program. County 76 states that getting clients into and monitoring the clients’ work-related activities hinders her county’s ability to offer “positive performance outcomes.” Positive performance outcomes, to County 76, include a “job readiness workshop,” getting clients employment, and “improving [clients’] lifestyle.” Yet, instead of solely placing the blame onto the design of the program, County 76 ends her response by complaining about drug-addicted clients. These clients seemingly will never have “positive performance outcomes.” Hence, instead of accepting responsibility for her inability to meet program goals and requirements, County 76 displaces some of the blame onto clients who receive their checks, leave the program, and later return to the program. Yet, despite fraudulent clients, County 76 still wishes that the program helped the good, non-fraudulent OWF clients, who remain implicit in the above quote. Other program managers, while still frustrated with the bureaucratic rules of the program, mention welfare fraud in order to justify helping clients more.

County 78, a white woman, uses potential fraud in order to justify why the program should not be based on surveilling clients. When asked, “What parts of the county’s service provisions are not working well?” County 78 mentions that “transportation is tight” and how the OWF program only counts drug and alcohol counseling as a work-related activity for a maximum of three weeks. This discussion leads County 78 to offer a long example of one OWF client who was recently released from prison for theft:

County 78: We had a mom come in that just got [released from prison]. [She] had been away for five years. She’s just now getting her [four] kids back. So for five years she had been responsible for nothing and now all of a sudden we’re going to give her four kids, and [she has to] make sure they’re all at school, [and make sure the kids are all] going to the doctor like they’re supposed to. [She has to] make sure that you’re looking [for work]. You got to be doing thirty hours [of work] a week for us. The parole officer is on top of you to make sure you’re doing what you need to be doing. You went through some
counseling in prison, we need to follow up with that as well. I mean this is a lot [to] to shove on one person just coming out the door [of prison]. You know? And okay, we’ve got a felony for theft. How hard is it going to be for this lady to get a job? Really hard. [...] So she’s going to have to do a lot more work to even find a job versus some folks that can go and grab a job quickly at McDonalds. Which, our McDonalds hires all the time. [McDonalds] keep[s] the [clients] that don’t work out, you know? It’s not a glamorous job, you know, but a job is a job. But they won’t take a felony for theft. Absolutely not. So you know, she’s got some hurdles to get over anyway, let alone slapping all this other stuff on her. I that’s more than a normal sane person can handle at a point. So let’s give, do that to somebody that might have a mental illness or a dependency problem. I think sometimes we’re not realistic. We want to be hard-nosed, and yes, everybody needs to work for their benefits. I agree with that but let’s make it realistic. We [do not] want to set them up for failure. You know if we’re really going to truly help folks, I would rather see this system set up to where it is a benefit to help them. To help the situation. Okay, let’s do this and this and this and not make it a judgment. Because yeah, if they can’t keep up, they get sanctioned, they lose their benefits. [...] Who is that helping? [...] Does that help the taxpayers? Okay. But now I’ve got somebody out there that has no money and they need to pay rent and what are they going to do? There’s all kinds of illegal alternatives out there. I just, you got me on my soapbox. Does everybody do this to you?

County 78 offers the story of an OWF client who was convicted of theft and has been released from prison. To County 78, this client is struggling to balance childcare, parole policing, and OWF’s punitive rules. County 78 mentions how “hard-nosed” OWF policies eventually end up hurting clients’ chances to reach self-sufficiency. County 78 foreshadows the possible consequences if OWF fails to help seemingly undeserving clients: “But now I’ve got somebody out there that has no money and they need to pay rent and what are they going to do? There’s all kinds of illegal alternatives out there.” In County 78’s mind, OWF clients’ inability to meet hard-to-reach program requirements, along with OWF’s constant policing of clients, can cause the client to turn to illegal alternatives.

County 63, a white woman, mentions how the ineffective program causes clients to commit fraud when asked, “What do you think is the most common reason that participants reach time limits?” She replies:
County 63: All the barriers [clients face when attempting to reach self-sufficiency]. I mean it’s a lot [of barriers]. It’s just, it’s awful: Jobs, [clients are] single moms, [clients are] not getting enough rest… (County 63 pauses) Before I forget, we [also] have a lot of OWF cases that are non-parental caretaker. Which is like a grandma raising [her] grandchild. And a lot of [kinship situations like that], I think a lot of [those kinship situations have] to do with drugs.

Interviewer: Oh, like the parents [are using drugs]?

County 63: [Drugs are] a big deal in our county. [I think] Some of our OWF clients [face problems associated with drugs]. [I think a lot of] our Medicaid [clients] are getting prescription pills. But they’re not taking those prescription pills, they’re selling them for money. Because they’re not getting much on the OWF program. It’s just like a vicious cycle.

Here County 63 explicitly mentions an instance of welfare fraud: clients sell prescription medication in order to supplement their low cash-assistance check. County 63 explicitly blames the program’s meager cash payments for clients’ fraudulent, and sometimes illegal, activity.

County 63, like other program managers, mentions clients’ fraudulent activity in order to demonstrate their frustration with OWF client outcomes. In sum, a minority of OWF program managers use welfare fraud talk to demonstrate how the program is inadequate at helping clients. Counties 63 and 78 believe that clients’ fraud is caused by low OWF payments. This view of welfare fraud avoids the dichotomy of clients as either deserving or undeserving of aid. Yet, County 76’s mention of fraud still relies on the notion that some clients are undeserving of aid. In her quote above, County 76 implicitly qualified those whom she wants to help—motivated clients and clients who are not using drugs. Again, only eight (8 of 27, 27%) program managers mentioned welfare fraud to justify why the program should help clients. The majority of OWF program managers (20 of 27, 74%) mention welfare fraud talk in ways more consistent with national welfare fraud discourse.

The majority of program managers believe that the program is inefficient because of welfare fraud. This view of welfare fraud allows program managers to justify being more punitive towards clients. For example, County 7’s program manager, a white man, describes how
clients “fake the system” after discussing the procedures for sanctioning OWF clients and how clients apply for County 7’s hardship extension:

County 7: They fake the system. I mean they understand it, they know that [once] they get on cash assistance we’ll give them their [cash] assistance [checks], [and then] assign them to their job. Well, you’re not going to know if they’re just not showing up [to their required work activity site] for a good four weeks. By the time you’ve learned that, you’ve found that they asked for a state policy hearing. So, that’s another 3 months [until that hearing]. So, I, theoretically, have people on cash assistance and we have no participation from them whatsoever. [This process can take as long as] six to seven months before we cycle them out of their hearing and properly close [the client’s] cash assistance [case]. [...] They’re smart when it comes to that. [...] And then they’ll do their sanction. They’ll lose their hearing if they can’t provide good cause, and then they’ll wait their minimum sanction period and when they need stuff again they’ll come back in. And it’ll be the whole cycle over again.

County 7 states that clients “fake the system” by asking for, and receiving, benefits without completing the required work activities. County 7 then discusses how clients abuse OWF by receiving their cash assistance and asking for a Fair Hearing when sanctioned. According to County 7, the Fair Hearing process allows clients to extend their benefits for “six to seven months”¹.

Some managers express frustration that clients receive benefits prior to participating in work activities required in the welfare-to-work program. Managers’ frustration with clients receiving benefits before working is associated with the county’s inability to meet their

¹ In Ohio, current OWF clients can request a Fair Hearing regarding any decision the OWF program has made (i.e., sanctions and/or the termination of benefits) to the client’s social assistance. Potential clients, if denied social assistance, can also request a Fair Hearing. In a Fair Hearing, a state-level ODJFS official, acting as an arbitrator between the client and the county-level OWF program, determines if the county’s decision followed both federal, state, and county-level rules and/or laws. While a current client is waiting for a Fair Hearing, ODJFS officials cannot terminate a clients’ social assistance benefits.
participation rate. For instance, County 73, a white woman, mentions implicit welfare fraud in order to excuse why her county is unable to meet work-activity participation rates:

Interviewer: If you could design a completely new program to serve the poor, what would it look like?
County 73: [Laughs] Oh, that’s a tough question.
Interviewer: Well [here is a question that] may be easier: what are some suggestions that you would have to change the current welfare system for the better?
County 73: Hmm… oh, I can’t even. It’s hard to think of all the things that keeps people still on some sort of assistance. I mean, Ohio Works First isn’t a bad program. I think it could be more effective. I think the issue that we have [is] getting people to participate, it’s difficult because of placements, or there’s just their own barriers. They’re just… no matter what you do they’re not going to participate. So some of those individuals [who do not participate] will receive their checks, they’ll get a fair hearing check, and then they’ll continue [to receive a check] because [the county is] backed up with the [Fair] Hearings. So, that could go on for six months. Um, so it’s kind of cyclical in that sense. Then even when [clients] come off [OWF assistance due to the Fair Hearing ruling in favor of the county], [clients can] still live off of food assistance, [their] medical and housing [assistance], get their housing paid.

County 73 uses the example of clients abusing Fair Hearing rules and procedures in order to justify why her county is unable to meet program requirements. Counties 7 and 73, along with six other program managers (8 of 27, 14.8%) believe that cash-assistance clients understand and abuse the program’s rules. These clients receive cash assistance without participating in work-related activities. Hence, some counties use fraud talk in order to blame clients for the county’s inability to meet state and federal requirements. This version of welfare fraud talk ignores clients’ structural barriers to work, focusing instead on blaming clients for the program’s inefficiency. To County 73, and other program managers, ‘smart’ fraudulent clients take advantage of loopholes in the program’s rules in order to extend their benefits. The logical conclusion to this version of fraud talk is to create more punitive rules and regulations for the clients.
County 49’s program manager, a white woman, mentions how clients should be punished for getting around the program’s rules and regulations. County 49, when asked, “What do you see as your program’s main barrier in reaching self-sufficiency goals?” blames the clients themselves for their lack of self-sufficiency:

County 49: [The two main barriers I see] kind of go hand in hand. The main barriers would be the lack of the willingness to cooperate [with the program’s rules and regulations] by the participants. The other would be the state [not] making people accountable for their actions. It’s coming to a point in time where [clients] know they’ve been on for quite some time. They know that even if they don’t do what they’re supposed to do, they can request a [Fair] Hearing from the state and that [Hearing] allows them to not participate or do what they are supposed to do. We are trying to help people reach self-sufficiency, we’re trying to teach them how to go to work when they’re scheduled. And when they don’t do that, the counties are [held accountable] in the decision to sanction. [By holding the county accountable it] in a sense, lets the participant think that it’s okay to [abuse Fair Hearings] because nothing is going to happen to them. So, it’s hard to help clients gain skills when there is no accountability for them to do it. I actually really feel that if OWF participants were paid for what they did [when they did it], there would be more participation. [Clients would be taking more] steps towards self-sufficiency than [when we give pay clients] and then have them participate. […] Like we work. We have to work, [and then] we’re paid two weeks later for what we’ve done. Because I know if I was needed [for] a forty-hour week, I would be there to get my full pay.

County 49 argues for more punitive changes in the welfare-to-work program. County 49 believes that clients who have received benefits for “quite some time” know the ways to get around the program’s rules. She supports her argument by describing how clients’ fraud punishes the county organization: “And when they don’t [go to work when they’re scheduled], the counties are [held accountable] in the decision to sanction.” This leads County 49 to recommend paying clients after they have worked. County 49 supports her program change with a notion of fairness: “Like we work. We have to work, [and then] we’re paid two weeks later for what we’ve done.”
DISCUSSION

These findings illustrate that while the larger discourse about welfare focuses on fraud (Hancock 2004; Misra et al. 2003), Ohio Work First managers do not share that focus. Only twenty-seven of the sixty-nine program managers interviewed (39.1%) mentioned welfare fraud, and these managers only mentioned fraud a total of fifty-nine times over 1500 pages of interview transcripts. Over half of these twenty-seven managers (14 of 27, 51%) use only implicit fraud talk. When mentioning fraud, managers: linked client’s social assistance abuse to clients’ drug use, discussed how clients get around WEP requirement by offering county workers a doctor’s note, and mentioned how clients fail to report under-the-table work. Managers mentioned fraud more frequently in response to questions about clients’ outcomes. Given these findings, this research argues that program managers’ fraud talk is a justification for why OWF should be more punitive. In addition, and surprisingly, a small number of OWF program managers use welfare fraud talk in order to justify helping clients. In what follows, I explore these three findings, discussing them in relation to relevant literature.

Finding One: Fraud Talk Types

This research finds that OWF program managers talk, both implicitly and explicitly, about welfare fraud. While Hancock (2004) mentions how congressional delegates mention welfare fraud implicitly, the vast majority of scholars examine, or theorize, about explicit welfare fraud discourse (Collins 2009; Foster 2008; Gilens 1999; Misra et al. 2003). Explicit fraud talk mentions how clients “abuse,” and “lie” to welfare officials in order to receive aid, the vast majority of welfare-to-work program managers (14 of 27, 51%) mentioned welfare fraud in an
implicit way. In implicit welfare fraud talk, program managers mention how clients get around the program’s rules and requirements, and how clients work under-the-table. Thus, managers’ implicit fraud talk merely suggests that clients commit welfare fraud. Yet, program managers’ fraud talk, both implicit and explicit, conveys specific racialized, gendered, and classed themes of clients which allow managers to avoid blame for denying potential clients and/or sanctioning current clients. This finding is consistent with welfare fraud discourse.

Both types of welfare fraud talk found within this research allow managers to discursively construct clients as fraudulent “welfare queens” (Collins 2009). Hancock (2004) offers a similar finding. Hancock (2004) found that politicians did not rely on explicitly raced, gendered, and classist language in order to pass welfare reforms. Instead, politicians evoked stereotypes associated with supposedly fraudulent Black single mothers—teenage pregnancy, drug use, and laziness—in order to make welfare programs more punitive toward clients. Program managers invoke similar stereotypes in order to implicitly link clients’ fraud to the controlling image of Black single mothers (Collins 2009). For example, some managers explicitly state that they have “caught some [clients] lying” (County 26) and that some clients “sell their food stamp cards for drugs” (County 21). Thus, OWF program managers’ fraud talk relies on the national discourse of welfare queens in order to convey how clients are undeserving of aid (Foster 2008; Gilens 1999).

Finding Two: Topics of OWF Program Managers’ Fraud Talk

OWF program managers’ mention of how clients get around program rules was much more common than their mention of how clients “abuse” their cash benefits. Some of the most common ways managers mention welfare fraud include how clients: fail to report their income or other required information (12 of the total 59, 20.3%), understand and get around program rules
and regulations (8 of 59, 13.5%), offer “easy to get” doctor’s notes excusing them from required work-related activities (County 23; 8 of 59, 13.5%), “sabotage employment” at their WEP site (County 59; 1 of 59, 1.7%), and “fake homelessness” in order to receive benefits (County 21; 1 of 59, 1.7%). Only a minority of program managers (18 of 59, 30.5%) mentioned how clients: break the rules of food stamps or cash assistance (2 of 59, 3.39%), abuse social assistance programs in order to sustain their drug use (9 of 59, 15.25%), and/or are “repeat offenders” (County 7; 3 of 59, 5.08%). Thus, a majority of program managers’ fraud talk (30 of 59, 50.8%) focuses on how clients get around program requirements and goals. These are the rules, requirements, and performance goals that program managers, and their respective counties, are evaluated upon (Bohte and Meier 2000; Lipsky 1980).

The overall goal of OWF is to help clients achieve economic self-sufficiency via job preparation (The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2015). This hard to quantify measure leaves welfare bureaucracies to implement alternative measures of effectiveness, such as the participation rate and the percentage of cases on alternative work-related activities (Lawton, McKevitt, and Millar 2000; Lipsky 1980). Yet similar to North Carolinian welfare-to-work caseworkers (Taylor 2013), OWF managers may believe that reaching alternative measures is arduous. For example, eight of the twenty-seven program managers (29.6%) talk about how clients offer doctor’s notes providing an excuse from the required work-related activity. Thus, OWF program managers’ fraud talk serves primarily as a way to avoid blame for not meeting their required performance measures.

This finding is similar to literature examining street-level bureaucrats’ goal congruence. Some bureaucratic workers tend to emphasize the means of achieving some goal, instead of the goal itself (Merton 1940). This misplaced emphasis allows bureaucrats to feel effective at their
jobs (Taylor 2013). OWF program managers mentioned how clients’ fraud hinders their ability to meet an alternative performance measure, participation rates. Thus program managers demonstrated that they are less concerned with the overall goal of the program and more concerned with meeting the means to achieve that goal. This finding is further supported when OWF managers mention welfare fraud.

**Finding Three: Program Managers’ Goals and Fraud Talk**

OWF program managers mention welfare fraud more frequently during questions about clients’ outcomes. These questions include: “Why don’t more people who are eligible use the OWF services?”; “What is the most common reason participants reach time limits?”; “How successful do you believe that the current welfare system has been in eradicating generational poverty?”; and “If you could design a completely new program to serve the poor, what would it look like?”

Program managers’ talk of welfare fraud is strategic. Program managers seemingly avoid discussing their culpability in clients’ outcomes, and instead, focused on clients’ ability to get around program rules and goals. This finding is similar to how North Carolinian welfare-to-work program managers mention clients’ motivation (Taylor, Samblanet, and Seale 2011). North Carolinian welfare-to-work program managers blamed clients’ lack of motivation and structural barriers in an attempt to cope with failing to meet program goals and requirements. In Ohio, program managers use fraud talk to avoid discussing why more potential clients do not use OWF services (Counties 23 and 13) and to justify why clients reach time limits and/or are sanctioned (Counties 72, 7, and 63).

This research demonstrates that OWF program managers discuss welfare fraud in order to justify why they, or their county, should help or police clients. Managers usually defined the
cause of clients’ welfare fraud within their fraud talk. For example, Counties 63, 76, and 78 blamed the low amount of cash assistance as the cause of clients’ fraud. Other program managers, like Counties 49, blamed the state’s leniency as the cause of clients’ fraud. Managers’ differing perceptions on the causes of fraud lead program managers to either justify helping clients or policing clients. Six of the twenty-seven program managers (6 of 27, 22%) explicitly blamed inadequacies in the program for causing clients to commit welfare fraud. However, the majority of managers (21 of the 27, 78%) mention fraudulent clients to argue the program should be more punitive.

The finding that some OWF program managers mention fraud to justify helping clients is a novel within literature examining welfare fraud. As mentioned before, studies examining welfare fraud (Collins 2009; Foster 2008; Gilens 1999; Hancock 2003, 2004; Misra et al. 2003) have largely examined how welfare fraud discourse allows politicians to make welfare more punitive. While this finding may be novel, the program managers who mention welfare fraud to justify helping clients merely reiterate paternalistic arguments. For example, County 76 mentions how clients are unwilling to live solely on welfare payments, and instead might supplement their income via “…drugs or prostitution or whatever that might be.” Here, County 76 implicitly argues that welfare bureaucracies should dissuade clients from illegal and or immoral work by raising the assistance amount. This is a paternalistic argument in which the county treats the clients “…as if they are incapable of understanding their own best interests or functioning autonomously without guidance by their social superiors” (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001:136). Thus, even fraud talk aimed at helping clients entrenches an ideology, paternalism, inherent within welfare programs (Katz 2008; Piven and Cloward 1993).
This finding also advances the literature examining street-level bureaucrats. Again, street-level bureaucrats can be either characterized as state-agents or citizen-agents (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). State-agents are street-level bureaucrats that use program rules and requirements to favor the state, while citizen-agents use their personal judgment of clients and program rules to help deserving clients (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000). Yet, some OWF program managers, like County 49, use their personal judgment and feelings to justify more punitive welfare-to-work policies, thus benefiting the state. In other words, some state-agents use their feelings and their notions of fairness in order to benefit the state.
CONCLUSION

While state and federal politicians may be concerned about welfare fraud, Ohio Works First program managers are largely not concerned about welfare fraud. OWF program managers rarely mentioned welfare fraud. Only twenty of the sixty-nine (39.13%) managers mention how clients or counties “abuse,” “lie,” or “fake,” to get around the program’s rules and requirements. Fraud talk is relatively uncommon for two possible reasons. First, the researchers never prompted program managers about welfare fraud. Secondly, welfare fraud rarely occurs. The Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services canceled only 0.004% of their total spending on welfare-to-work assistance in 2010 (Ohio Department of Job and Family Services 2010b). These cancellations include a recipient’s income rising above the program’s income threshold, sanctioned clients, and welfare fraud. Thus, canceled payments are a liberal measure of welfare fraud.

Previous research examining welfare fraud has focused on the discourse at the national level and the changing nature of this discourse (Misra et al. 2003), how this discourse is inherently intersectional (Collins 2009; Foster 2008), and how welfare fraud discourse functions to make welfare reform more punitive (Collins 2009; Gilens 1999). Yet, this research provides insight into how OWF program managers talk about welfare fraud. Managers mention fraud by using both implicit and explicit language. Yet, implicit fraud talk was more common than explicit fraud talk. Program managers mention how clients get around program rules and requirements more commonly than how clients “abuse” their cash benefits. In addition, program managers mention fraud more frequently during questions about clients’ outcomes. Thus, fraud
talk allows OWF program managers to blame supposedly fraudulent clients for managers’ failure to meet performance measures. This finding adds another dimension to research examining welfare fraud.

OWF Program managers’ use of fraud talk as a means to blame clients also provides insights into literature examining alternative performance measures and goal congruence for street-level bureaucrats. Some caseworkers focus on alternative tasks, such as paperwork, in order to feel effective at their jobs (Taylor 2013). Fraud talk may have a similar function. Program managers’ fraud talk may be a way for these managers, and possibly street-level bureaucrats, to justify why they are ineffective at their jobs. Yet, future research should examine if and how welfare-to-work program managers and street-level bureaucrats harness welfare discourse in order to prove that they are effective.

In addition to blaming clients for managers’ failure, OWF program managers used welfare fraud to justify program changes aimed at policing or helping clients more. A few program managers used paternalistic arguments aimed at improving clients’ outcomes. OWF program managers’ fraud talk provides a more nuanced understanding of welfare fraud discourse. This study finds support for Schram (1995) and Katz (2008) who both asserted that welfare fraud is a relatively empty signifier that can be used to justify whatever the speaker wishes to justify. In this study, a majority of program managers mention welfare fraud to blame clients for why they do not meet participations rates, while other managers relied on fraud talk to justify helping clients more. Yet, the kind of fraud talk that the managers rely on reinforces
raced, gendered, and classed images of welfare participants. Thus, fraud talk aimed at helping clients fails to challenge the distinction between deserving and undeserving clients.

These findings have several limitations. The biggest limitation, common to other studies that are qualitative in nature, is generalizability—in this case, to other states’ welfare programs. Welfare-to-work programs rules and goals vary by state and county, making program managers’ talk about welfare fraud specific to Ohio and their location within the program. In addition to this limitation, no interview question explicitly asked program managers about welfare fraud. Program managers’ may talk about welfare fraud differently if prompted about the subject. Another limitation of this research is not having data on a manager’s tenure, as tenure may affect their fraud talk. How? While two program managers volunteered information about how long they have been with the welfare-to-work bureaucracy, I do not have the same data for the remaining sixty-seven program managers. Future research should explore this relationship.
REFERENCES


