
Article

“They Are Underpaid and Understaffed”: How Clients Interpret Encounters with Street-Level Bureaucrats

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Abstract

Scholars have explored the nature and consequences of administrative burden but less is known about how citizens interpret costly encounters with the state. This qualitative study of 85 child care subsidy recipients applies attribution theory from psychology to illustrate how clients develop causal explanations for administrative burden. The findings show that clients either blamed negative experiences on bureaucrats—viewing workers as in control of their behavior, or the bureaucracy—blaming factors related to the subsidy system. In rare instances, clients viewed the bureaucracy as intentionally discouraging claims. We observed some variation by race/ethnicity and study sites. Examining clients’ causal explanations of administrative burden helps clarify how clients’ interpretation of costly bureaucratic encounters influences future claims, their perceptions of the state, and their political participation.

Public administration scholars have revisited the study of administrative burden, or citizens’ onerous experiences with policy implementation (Burden et al. 2012). Studies have demonstrated how administrative burden affects bureaucrats who implement policy (Burden et al. 2012) and clients who apply for and receive benefits (Heinrich 2015). Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey (2014) have conceptualized administrative burden as learning, psychological, and compliance costs that can undermine the effectiveness of policy, and negatively shape perceptions of the government.

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This literature focuses on the valence, nature, and broader effects of administrative burden, but less is known about how citizens interpret administrative burden. We argue that it is not just what citizens experience when interacting with public bureaucracies; it is also *how* they interpret those experiences that may influence whether or not they claim benefits and their perception of the state and political rights as citizens (Soss, 2005). While qualitative studies of bureaucratic encounters suggest that clients hold nuanced views of bureaucrats and bureaucracies (e.g., Adams, Snyder, and Sandfort 2002; Soss 1999a; Watkins-Hayes 2011), few studies explain how clients interpret costly encounters, how they ascribe responsibility for their quality, or the conditions under which distinct attributions emerge. We argue that a client’s decision to seek future public benefits depends in part on her interpretation of who (or what) controls the quality of a bureaucratic encounter.

We address these questions through a qualitative study of a means-tested, child care subsidy program. Serving more than 1.4 million children a month (U.S. DHHS 2015), the federal Child Care Development

Fund (CCDF) is the primary source of government-funded child care assistance for low-income working families in the United States (Lynch 2014). Like other public programs, child care subsidies aim to promote work and the economic “self-sufficiency” of families. Child care subsidies have received little attention in the public bureaucracy literature.

The interpretive approach we take reflects the lived experiences of study respondents (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013). To understand clients’ causal explanations for negative bureaucratic encounters, we draw from the administrative burden literature and attribution theory—a theory that explains how individuals use information to arrive at a causal explanation for some behavior or event (Fiske and Taylor 1991; Heider 1958; Jones and Davis 1965; Kelley 1967; Weiner 2000). We adapt a concept we call “attributions of control”—whether claimants view outcomes as under their control, under the control of bureaucrats, or due to external factors to explore how claimants develop perceptions of who is responsible for the bureaucratic encounters. Attribution theory acknowledges the valence and costs of bureaucratic encounters—a familiar topic of administrative burden research—and incorporates the capacity of clients, workers, and bureaucracies to control bureaucratic encounters, important concepts in prominent public administration frameworks.

We contribute to the study of administrative burden by conceptualizing key elements of clients’ interpretive process—illustrating what clients do when interpreting burdensome encounters (develop causal explanations) and whom claimants view as responsible for their costs (distinct objects of ascription). We argue that attribution theory from psychology provides a cognitive model for this dynamic that can supplement research on bureaucratic encounters and clarify the relationship between claiming behavior and political participation.

Extending attribution theory to the study of administrative burden also opens the black box of client interpretation in ways that may reconcile conflicting insights in existing theory and the gaps between theory and empirical realities. For example, the administrative burden perspective and related frameworks cast claiming behavior as a function of client resources relative to the costs of claiming benefits, but conflict on how costs deter claims. The street-level bureaucracy framework and power-dependence theory suggest that those with the least resources claim benefits despite burdensome experiences because they lack alternatives. In contrast, administrative burden studies frame costs as deterring the most disadvantaged because they cannot afford to pay the high costs of claims. Empirical studies are inconclusive on this point—and demonstrate how costs deter both the well resourced and those who

cannot bear the burden of costly encounters. Modeling how clients make sense of onerous experiences—how they arrive at causal explanations for costly encounters—may help explain why costs deter some clients and not others. These insights can clarify how administrative burden will affect client claiming behavior and can inform policy interventions that aim increase program access. Finally, integrating client causal attributions into theories of bureaucratic encounters may inform understanding of the influence of public policies on citizens’ political participation (Moynihan and Soss 2014). Whom clients view as responsible for onerous experiences may shape their views of government and political behavior.

We begin by reviewing research on administrative burden and bureaucratic encounters. We then summarize key concepts from attribution theory and turn to our empirical case: bureaucratic encounters with the child care subsidy programs in four regions: two in Illinois and two in New York. Using qualitative interviews with 85 clients, we examine administrative burden and attributions of control within clients’ evaluations of program experiences, asking whom or what clients view as responsible for negative and positive bureaucratic encounters. We leverage differences in subsidy administration across the four study sites and race/ethnic differences in attributions to explore the conditions under which distinct attributional patterns emerge. We discuss attributions of control as a conceptual link that can help public administration scholars understand how subjective interpretations of costly interactions with government can shape citizens’ willingness to claim benefits and participate politically.

Bureaucratic Encounters: Theoretical and Empirical Background

Qualitative studies of administrative burden suggest that clients hold nuanced interpretations of burdensome bureaucratic encounters. For example, Soss’s (1999a) study of welfare application encounters suggests that negative experiences do not always lead to dissatisfaction with welfare claims. He finds a “paradox of subordination” across client responses whereby clients express both satisfaction with claims and dissatisfaction with caseworker treatment. Soss surmises that the high stakes of application processes and clients’ low expectations of caseworkers lead clients to rationalize that experiences could be worse.

Soss (1999a) finds that clients of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program evaluate workers and agencies separately, rather than having a generally negative or positive view of their bureaucratic encounters. Similarly, Watkins-Hayes’s (2011) study of racial representation in welfare bureaucracies suggests

that clients sometimes recognize that the constraints workers face (e.g., time burdens, paper work, limited resources) can confine their interactions with workers to brief untailored service experiences. Although this finding is not central to Watkins-Hayes's analysis, it suggests that clients may recognize obstacles limiting bureaucrats' agency when evaluating encounters.

Adams, Snyder, and Sandfort's (2002) qualitative study of clients and staff in the child care subsidy program show that some but not all subsidy clients blame caseworkers for negative experiences such as losing paper work, failing to return phone calls, and providing incorrect information about the subsidy program. Similarly, Snyder, Bernstein, and Koralek (2006) find that child care subsidy clients distinguished responsive and helpful caseworkers from negligent workers who rarely answered phone calls or were considered "slow" in paper processing.

While pointing to varied interpretations of bureaucratic encounters, these child care subsidy studies do not provide a theoretical explanation for the observed variation. And the administrative burden literature has yet to offer a theory to explain how clients develop causal explanations for onerous claiming experiences, which we argue could help explain variation and further the explanatory power of the administrative burden concept. Rather, the administrative burden literature focuses on the punitive nature of worker discretion, describing bureaucratic encounters in means-tested programs as largely negative and costly (Kahn, Katz, and Gutek 1976). Caseworkers use their discretion in ways that subvert policy objectives and increase the costs of claims to clients (Brodkin 2007; Lipsky 1980; Soss 2000): "street-level bureaucrats" can increase the burden of bureaucratic encounters through "personal abuse, neglectful treatment, and inconvenience" (Lipsky 1980, 56). Mounting empirical evidence suggests that the 1990s welfare reform further shifted the cost of claims to clients (Brodkin and Majmudar 2010; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011) and incentivized punitive behavior toward clients, especially African American and Latino applicants (Brodkin and Madjumar 2010; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).

In one important contribution to the administrative burden literature, Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey (2014) developed a typology of costs that constitutes administrative burden and are expected to deter claims (Brodkin and Madjumar 2010). Learning costs reflect the burden of gaining knowledge about program availability, eligibility requirements, and access. Psychological costs refer to the stigma and stress of program experiences, including interactions that "violate basic psychological needs of autonomy and respectful treatment" (Soss 1999a; Moynihan, Herd,

and Harvey 2014, 5). Finally, compliance costs reflect the burden of completing applications, providing documentation, and responding to the demands of agency staff (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2014, 4).

Other related frameworks also construct bureaucratic encounters in terms of costs and claimants' resources, without explaining how clients differentiate workers from bureaucracies or ascribe responsibility for negative encounters. For example, Lipsky's (1980, 27–9) street-level bureaucracy framework describes bureaucratic encounters as negative and the realities of frontline work—poor training, high caseloads, and ambiguous performance standards—as compromising workers' discretion and service quality. On client resources, Lipsky (1980, 54–6) does argue that clients do not necessarily hold workers accountable for poor experiences because of the high demand for services and the limited alternatives for assistance. Nevertheless, his argument emphasizes costly bureaucratic encounters and clients' limited capacity to improve experiences. Lipsky's aim is not to elucidate how clients evaluate workers and agencies differently or to delineate the factors that contribute to the quality of agency encounters.

Hasenfeld's social policy application of power-dependence theory introduces variation in client evaluations (Hasenfeld 1985; Hasenfeld, Rafferty, and Zald 1987), but it is also not intended to explain nuanced views resulting from clients' subjective interpretation of bureaucratic encounters. This framework ties the valence of client evaluations to power and resources. Clients with more power and resources have access to less stigmatizing bureaucracies, such as entitlement programs (Hasenfeld 1985, 625; Hasenfeld, Rafferty, and Zald 1987; Schneider and Ingram 1993). These clients also expect favorable claiming outcomes, perceive themselves as having influence over officials, and have positive evaluations of their encounters (Hasenfeld, Rafferty, and Zald 1987, 631). In contrast, clients of means-tested programs receive vague information about benefit access, face administrative hurdles in securing services, and are subject to the high discretionary authority of caseworkers (Auyero 2012; Danziger 2010; Soss 2001, 2005; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Ybarra 2011). Scarce alternatives limit clients' influence over agency workers. Indeed, Auyero's (2012) ethnographic work of welfare offices in Buenos Aires illustrates the high levels of bureaucratic power over clients who must learn to patiently comply with arbitrary claiming processes to secure benefits. As a result, clients of means-tested programs "come to expect less, believe they have no influence over officials, and face greater risk of having their requests denied" and are less likely than beneficiaries of universal entitlements to claim benefits (Hasenfeld, Rafferty, and Zald 1987, 631).

An emphasis on resources and costs in the power-dependence framework obscures aspects of interpretive process that may shape how clients understand bureaucratic encounters. It assumes that clients in means-tested programs—because of their limited resources—uniformly view caseworkers as powerful agents. The question of whether and how clients distinguish bureaucrats from bureaucracies or distinctly ascribe responsibility for program experiences to one or the other remains unanswered.

We argue that attribution theory—when extended to administrative burden—can explain how clients make sense of costly bureaucratic encounters. Attribution theory seeks to explain how individuals arrive at a causal explanation for some behavior or event (Fiske and Taylor 1991). The theory originates in psychologist Heider's (1958) early attribution work, which suggests that we seek to explain someone's behavior by discerning her intentions. We either attribute an individual's behavior to personal attribution (personality, motivation, ability, and effort) or use external factors to make situational attributions for behavior.

A rich literature in psychology has elaborated on Heider's early model. Weiner (1985) suggests that attributions occur along the dimensions of locus of control, stability, and controllability. Locus of control refers to whether we attribute an outcome to internal or external causes. For example, we might perceive success as a result of our own effort (internal locus of control) or rather attributes it to luck or the difficulty of the task (external locus of control). Stability reflects whether we view the cause as fixed (an individual's ability) or unstable (motivation or effort). Finally, perceptions of controllability refer to whether we view ourselves as having control over the cause of outcomes.

Of central relevance to the current case, Weiner's (2000) later work applies these causal dimensions to marketing. He integrates the stability and controllability dimensions to explain consumer satisfaction, judgments of responsibility, and future purchasing behavior. For consumers, attributions “exert their influence after a product-related outcome and prior to the next choice” (Weiner 2000, 383). During this period, consumers evaluate whether a product-related outcome (e.g., service at the dry cleaners) aligns with their expectations. Consumers blame negative experiences on whomever they perceive as both responsible and in control of outcomes. Consumers generally attribute dissatisfaction to external causes but distinguish causes as either uncontrollable or controllable. Weiner illustrates this point by using the example of a poor flight experience in which a passenger may attribute a flight delay to a snowstorm (external and uncontrollable)

or a lengthy boarding time to poorly trained personnel (external and controllable) (Weiner 2000, 384). On purchasing behavior, how consumers ascribe responsibility and controllability can shape whether they complain, retaliate, or even boycott a product (Weiner 2000, 385–6).

We argue that these components of attribution theory can theoretically enrich the administrative burden literature by clarifying a client's interpretive process when evaluating program experiences. The theory describes what claimants do to interpret negative bureaucratic encounters by suggesting that they seek to identify the cause of their experiences (Heider 1958; Weiner 2000). Furthermore, the theory helps identify what clients consider when evaluating bureaucratic encounters by differentiating objects of ascription—distinguishing whether individuals blame themselves, others (e.g., bureaucrats), or external factors (e.g., bureaucracies). Finally, the concept of “controllability” sheds light on how clients assess their autonomy in claiming processes and the autonomy of bureaucrats and the larger bureaucracy, which aligns with the concept of “power differentials” emphasized by existing frameworks (i.e., Hasenfeld 1987; Lipsky 1980).

An attribution theory of how clients interpret bureaucratic encounters can explain variation in client views and how their interpretation impacts claiming behavior. Clients may assess the quality of encounters by their ability to contact caseworkers. One client may interpret busy phone lines and unreturned messages as the result of a resource-constrained agency—blaming the agency or the broader welfare bureaucracy—and viewing the worker as having limited control over outcomes. This client may choose to excuse the worker's inaccessibility and persist in claiming benefits despite the negative experience. In contrast, another client may interpret limited caseworker accessibility as the deliberate effort of a hostile or apathetic welfare bureaucrat to curtail successful claims. This client views the locus of control to be with the worker, who is perceived as having high controllability over the outcome. This client might choose to forgo benefits because he or she views the worker as intentionally deterring claims. Or the client might persist in his or her efforts but pursue a different claiming strategy that increases the chances of dealing with an alternate (and ideally more sympathetic) worker. This example illustrates how the concept of controllability can account for different views of the same negative program experience and why some negative encounters deter clients from future welfare claims, while other negative experiences do not—informing claiming strategies instead.

Given the potential implications of clients' causal explanations for administrative burden, we use the empirical case of the child care subsidy program to explore how clients integrate notions of responsibility and controllability of outcomes when interpreting bureaucratic encounters. We build on existing frameworks to incorporate attribution theory into the analysis. Our goal is to examine the attributional dimensions of client encounters with the subsidy program, rather than test the validity of attribution theory as an explanation of the claiming behavior of welfare recipients.

Empirical Case: The Child Care Subsidy Program

The CCDF promotes parental employment and children's wellbeing by reducing the child care expenses of low-income families. The CCDF program was born out of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, the welfare reform law that replaced the former AFDC entitlement program with time-limited Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and instituted work requirements as a condition of TANF receipt for most program beneficiaries (Lynch 2014). Although TANF time limits and work requirements received the most public attention, the child care changes in the 1996 law were significant. Three AFDC-related child care programs were consolidated into one block grant and the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) of 1990 was amended and reauthorized. The 1996 welfare law authorized that the funds for these various child care programs be combined at the state level and that states disperse all funds in accordance with CCDBG rules. States were also permitted to shift a portion of TANF funds to CCDF. The subsidy program reimburses a range of provider types: licensed and license-exempted providers in centers and homes, including relative caregivers in many states and territories.

As with TANF, states and territories were given considerable latitude over the design and administrative structure of their CCDF programs (Blau 2003). For example, the federal government allows eligibility to extend up to a maximum of 85% of the state median income (SMI), although states can and do adopt income eligibility limits lower than the federal maximum—between 40% and 65% of SMI (or between 125% and 200% of federal poverty line, FPL) (Matthews et al. 2015). At the time of the current study, income eligibility was 200% FPL in the two New York sites and 185% FPL in the two Illinois sites under investigation. In most states, including New York and Illinois, parents are required to make a financial contribution in

the form of a co-payment to the provider that is based on family income and household size. The remainder is paid to the provider by the state.

Compared to means-tested cash welfare programs, child care subsidies have received less attention in studies of administrative burden. As previously noted, the few existing child care subsidy studies suggest clients experience onerous claiming processes similar to those observed in AFDC and TANF studies. Still, we might expect more variation in client experience with child care subsidies because the program serves both TANF and non-TANF families and targets the working poor, a less stigmatized group than nonworking welfare recipients.

The Illinois and New York communities under study in this investigation include two suburban counties in New York (Nassau and Westchester), an urban county in northern Illinois (Cook County), and a seven-county mixed urban–rural region in southwestern Illinois. In addition to their geographic diversity, the four study sites differ in subsidy eligibility rules, administration, and staffing models. For example, eligibility standards, parent co-payments, and other subsidy policy features are set at the county level in New York. County social service departments administer the program (Professional Development Program 2013). In contrast, in Illinois the program eligibility requirements and policies regarding implementation are determined at the state level; the Illinois Department of Human Services contracts with nonprofit community-based Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agencies to administer the subsidy program for distinct geographic regions (Illinois Department of Human Services 2016). These differences between the structures of the New York and Illinois programs may influence the attributions of responsibility that clients form regarding their bureaucratic encounters. Compared to Illinois clients, New York clients may be more likely to view caseworkers as closely aligned with the bureaucratic system given that New York caseworkers are county government employees and services are administered out of local government welfare offices. We reason that this may increase the likelihood that clients view caseworkers as government agents, reducing the chance that New York clients will excuse caseworkers for negative experiences. In contrast, to the extent that Illinois subsidy clients are aware that the resource and referral agency administering the program is distinct from the government and does not dictate program rules, funding, and application procedures, they may be less likely to hold workers accountable for negative encounters. Moreover, because Illinois CCR&Rs do not confine their service to the administration of means-tested programs—they also assist families across income groups in finding child care—Illinois

clients may view the agency as less stigmatizing than do New York clients, who must claim benefits from county welfare offices. In this scenario, Illinois subsidy clients may be more likely to attribute negative encounters to the government bureaucracy rather than the resource and referral agency or the caseworker.

The two New York counties and the southwestern Illinois region use a caseworker model to administer the program. Caseworkers are assigned a caseload of families and are responsible for overseeing and processing application and recertification paper work and any changes to the family's case. In contrast, in Cook County, the large urban site in northern Illinois, a caseworker model is not used. Rather, subsidy eligibility workers in this region serve clients across the system, handling in a first-come, first-serve fashion clients' application and redetermination paper work and all other client contacts with the agency. Thus, we might expect that New York and southwestern Illinois clients have more opportunity to develop an individualized relationship with a caseworker, which could result in greater differentiation of bureaucrat from bureaucracy. The implications of this for the formation of causal attributions of caseworker responsibility are unclear. More data about caseworker behavior and the conditions shaping it could feed into a person-blaming scenario or, rather, help the client understand the constraints that limit caseworker agency. The implications for clients from northern Illinois who do not have a personal caseworker are also unclear. These clients may experience a greater number of workers overall. If their interactions across diverse caseworkers are overwhelmingly negative, the uniformity of experience may lead to the formation of system-level attributions for caseworker behavior. With more varied experiences, however, they may conclude that caseworkers have agency to shape encounter quality and attribute responsibility—whether encounters are positive or negative—to the caseworker.

Methods

Analyses are based on 85 qualitative interviews with child care subsidy recipients in four regions. The data are drawn from a project entitled "Determinants of Subsidy Stability and Continuity of Child Care," a multi-method study of new entrants into child care assistance in 2011–2012 who used the subsidy for at least one child younger than age 5 (Henly, Kim, Sandstrom, Pilarz, and Claessens 2017). The broader study includes three components: an analysis of child care payment records, a telephone survey of a random sample of recipients, and a qualitative interview component that included a subset of survey respondents. The 85 interviews (46 in Illinois and 39 in New York) that make up the qualitative component, which is the

focus of this study, took place an average of 22 months after families entered the child care assistance program.

Sample

Sample selection for the qualitative component was purposive. Our goal was not to achieve a representative sample of survey respondents but rather to identify a sample that was diverse on key demographic, employment, and program characteristics. Interview participants represented diversity in race/ethnicity and immigrant status, employment characteristics, family size, and child care setting (e.g., centers, licensed family child care homes, and legally exempt relatives and nonrelative providers.) Participants also displayed diverse subsidy trajectories: some stayed in the program continuously, some exited but returned within a few months, and some exited without returning during the study period. This sample diversity provides a range of bureaucratic encounters for us to examine. (See sample descriptives, [Appendix table A1.](#))

Procedures

After obtaining informed consent, a pair of interviewers conducted in-person interviews with respondents, lasting an average of 90 min (range: 60–120 min). A \$40 cash incentive was provided. Eighty-four of the 85 interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed (16 were conducted in Spanish and translated into English.) One participant declined to be audio-recorded; in this case, detailed notes replaced a verbatim transcription. Field notes and analysis memos were written on completion of each interview (Ryan and Bernard 2000; Weiss 1994).

Interview Schedule

The semi-structured interview protocol covered a range of topics including child care subsidy, employment, and child care use patterns and the challenges participants faced using the subsidy program. In addition, the interviews included information on participants' experiences with applying for and recertifying subsidy eligibility, interactions with the subsidy system and its staff, and suggestions for program improvement. The interview schedule included suggested questions and probes, but interviewers were trained to ask questions in a flexible and conversational fashion.

Analysis

We followed an interpretive approach to analysis in which we sought to understand the significance and meaning of subsidy interactions from the perspective of participants (Haverland and Yanow 2012; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013). The analytic approach was both deductive—informed by literature on administrative burden, street-level bureaucracy, and attribution theory—and inductive—allowing for emergent

concepts from interview text to inform the analytic story (Haverland and Yanow 2012). All transcripts, memos, and field notes were analyzed using a qualitative software package, NVIVO-10. We started the analysis process with a line-by-line reading of transcripts to which we applied a priori codes reflecting key study topics and drawing from existing research to initially organize the data. We then allowed additional categories to emerge through an in vivo coding process and refined them through an iterative comparison of client responses (Miles and Huberman 1994; Ryan and Bernard 2000). We double-coded every fifth interview; reliability was over 90%. We constructed unit-by-code matrices to help identify patterns across participants and across evaluation types (Ryan and Bernard 2000).

The analysis included an examination of respondents' evaluations of the subsidy program and their experiences with it, their descriptions of application and recertification processes, caseworker interactions, and recommendations for improving the subsidy program. We categorized respondents' assessments of subsidy staff and encounters by their negative and positive valences. For each interview, we assessed whether it was possible to determine if the negative, positive, or neutral evaluation was made in regard to the subsidy staff person (bureaucrat) or the subsidy program/system (bureaucracy) or both.

We then examined these evaluations further to assess whether the evaluation revealed a causal explanation for the experience. Attributions of "bureaucrat control" were coded when respondents made claims suggesting that subsidy staff had control over the quality of encounters with clients. Attributions of "system control" reflected statements suggesting that the office, agency, or policy affected the quality of subsidy encounters. For example, we coded instances when respondents described workers as hard to reach *because of heavy caseloads* as system control because the participant was expressing a view that the system was influencing how staff members were able to respond to client phone calls. In contrast, attributions were coded as bureaucrat control when negative experiences were understood to be the intent of subsidy staff members. For example, if in explaining that she had difficulties reaching agency workers, a respondent remarked that her worker (or workers generally) *intentionally avoided phone calls*, her response was coded as bureaucrat control. Categories on controllability were nearly mutually exclusive—only five interviews included a mix of bureaucrat and system attributions. However, these responses were still disproportionately one or the other, and coded according to the most dominant attribution.

We have reported all evaluations and attributions of control as the *perceptions* of the respondents because

they were gleaned from interviews with clients. It is of course impossible to know whether or not a particular client view is a valid interpretation of what transpired or if the source of a client's attribution is or is not accurate. Such is not the goal of the analysis as we aimed to understand the interpretive process of a client and not the actual motives or behaviors of a caseworker.

Results

We organized our study findings around three key research questions: What is the overall valence of clients' evaluations of their experiences (positive, negative, or neutral)? Do clients distinguish bureaucrats from bureaucracies in making these assessments? What causal explanations (attributions of control) do clients provide for the basis of their evaluations? Throughout, we highlight site differences and differences by participant racial/ethnic characteristics.

Valence of Bureaucrat Encounters

Onerous claiming processes are prevalent in our study—63 of the 85 subsidy clients interviewed (73%) reported negative encounters. Interviews indicated that most respondents from Westchester ($n = 22$) and all of the subsidy clients interviewed in Nassau ($n = 17$) reported negative experiences with the subsidy program. In contrast, respondents from our Illinois sites reported more varied valences of subsidy experiences. Of the Cook County respondents who reported contact with the subsidy office, 6 reported positive experiences (22%) and 20 (74.1%) reported negative experiences with the subsidy program.¹ In southwestern Illinois, half of the respondents who reported contact with the program ($n = 8$) reported positive experiences. Negative experiences were the norm among respondents regardless of racial/ethnic identity. However, African American respondents² were even more likely than Latino and White respondents to report negative experiences. Of the 41 African Americans interviewed, 33 (80%) reported negative subsidy experiences. Only two reported positive experiences; the remaining six African Americans reported limited or no contact with the subsidy office. Sixteen of the 24 Latino respondents (66%) reported negative experiences, 5 reported positive experiences, and 3 reported limited or no contact with subsidy workers. Most White clients ($n = 12$, 66.6%) also reported negative subsidy experiences,

1 Nine respondents reported limited or no contact with the subsidy office.

2 Two respondents who are counted as African American identified as mixed race.

only two reported positive experiences, and three reported limited or no contact.

When asked to assess their experiences, clients used three evaluative criteria that aligned with Moynihan et al.'s concept of compliance and psychological costs. On compliance costs, our findings support previous studies that find lengthy application processes and long waits in welfare offices (Auyero 2012; Hays 2003; Soss 1999a). Clients evaluated their experiences by the timeliness of the bureaucratic processes and the accessibility of caseworkers. They complained of late provider payments and delayed eligibility decisions, which respondents viewed as 30 days to several months following an application submission. Accessibility concerns referred to clients' challenges with contacting the benefits office—whether a personal caseworker or another staff person—which could slow the claiming process. Without the help of office personnel, paper work could be incomplete or completed incorrectly. On psychological costs, caseworker demeanor—whether workers were polite and helpful—emerged as a theme in client evaluations. Negative comments described workers as “rude” and unwilling to answer questions. We elaborate on these criteria further in our discussion of the main study results.

Do Clients Distinguish Bureaucrats from Bureaucracies?

A few studies of AFDC and TANF clients suggest that clients differentiate bureaucracies from bureaucrats in their evaluations (e.g., Soss 1999a; Watkins-Hayes 2011). We also found this to be the case for the majority of study respondents (Appendix, table A2). Twelve of the 85 respondents did not report a sufficient degree of interaction with the subsidy office to allow classification; but for 73 respondents, we were able to classify them into one of four groups. The table illustrates that almost half (46%, $n = 34$) of these 73 respondents reported negative views of both the system (e.g., bureaucracy) and its workers (e.g., bureaucrats) and 15% ($n = 11$) reported positive or neutral views of both. Twenty-nine percent ($n = 21$) of these 73 respondents evaluated the worker negatively but held benign or positive views of the system, whereas only 10% ($n = 7$) held negative views of the system but positive or neutral views of their worker.

Thus, our qualitative interviews suggest that even when respondents hold similar views of bureaucrats, they nevertheless can vary in their views of the bureaucracy. Likewise, when they share views of the bureaucracy, they may deviate in their views of bureaucrats. For example, 18 respondents reported positive or neutral views of their workers, but only 11 of these commented positively or were neutral about the subsidy system. The other seven reported having negative

views of the system, noting the complex claiming processes and glitches in the administration of the subsidy program. Of the 55 respondents who reported negative experiences with subsidy bureaucrats, 21 positively characterized the subsidy system, for example, as a “huge help,” and 34 negatively described the system, for example, as under resourced and cumbersome to navigate.

These results provide support for the claim of some past authors (e.g., Soss 1999a; Watkins-Hayes 2011) that clients hold differentiated views of subsidy encounters. But beyond that, the analyses that follow suggest that this two-dimensional system of evaluation does not by itself reflect clients' attributions of responsibility. As we show, holding a negative view of the subsidy bureaucracy or a subsidy caseworker does not necessarily indicate that a client holds the system or a particular worker accountable for the negative experience. In fact, we observed distinct variation in how study participants view bureaucrat control over encounters—whether experiences are the responsibility of the worker or the system—even when clients share similar affective evaluations of the encounter itself. Drawing on insights from attribution theory, we next explore this variation in how clients use perceptions of “controllability” to interpret their encounters with the subsidy program.

Who Is Responsible? The Bureaucrat or the Bureaucracy?

Responsibility for Positive Encounters

The subgroup of respondents who reported positive or neutral interactions with subsidy staff ($n = 11$) was exclusively in Illinois (and primarily in southwestern Illinois). This small group of respondents generally expressed satisfaction with workers and the subsidy system, describing the claiming processes as “straightforward” and workers as responsive, “fast,” “friendly,” and “helpful.” When attributional views emerged, respondents gave credit to the worker for the positive experience. For example, Sarah described the claiming process as “easy” and attributed her experience to a worker who was “just really good.” She explains,

Just, my personal caseworker—I know other people don't have it that good, they say—but my personal caseworker was awesome. Because I had never done it and she knew what situation I was in. And she gave me a list of people. I mean, she was just really, really good.

Unlike Sarah, it was difficult to discern respondents' causal attributions for positive encounters in the majority of cases.

Responsibility for Negative Encounters

Respondents' descriptions of their negative encounters almost always included an attribution of responsibility. We identified three types of attributions which we label "constrained bureaucrats," "autonomous bureaucrats," and "hostile bureaucracy." [Appendix table A3](#) provides a distribution of study participants across these attributional types by study site and race/ethnicity.

Some respondents viewed workers as the "constrained bureaucrats" described by the street-level bureaucracy framework (Lipsky 1980), in which the subsidy system's resource deficits hampered bureaucrats' abilities to offer high-quality service experiences. In these cases, the experience with the caseworker was negative but was not perceived as within her control, or as her fault.

Other respondents adopted an "autonomous bureaucrat" attribution and emphasized that workers do have discretionary authority to provide prompt and pleasant service experiences. Rather than constraining implementation, these clients viewed the subsidy system as establishing procedures that allowed bureaucrats to produce successful claims. They viewed the system as defining clear professional roles for workers and sufficient resources to fulfill these roles. Within this frame, clients reasoned that unsuccessful claims must be a product of workers' deliberate negligence. These study participants seemed to believe that bureaucrats control the claiming process in how they choose to fulfill their professional roles. When workers use their discretionary authority in ways that obstruct claims, negative encounters result.

Study participants who adopted a "hostile bureaucracy" attribution described the subsidy system as intentionally discouraging claims. Not only was the system responsible for their negative experience with the claiming process, but according to this view, it was also designed to be difficult as a means of deterring program use.

Constrained Bureaucrat

Of the 63 respondents who reported negative experiences with either the subsidy worker or the system, nearly half ($n = 32$) attributed these experiences to external system-level factors they considered beyond the worker's control. The worker was a "constrained bureaucrat" with minimal power to improve upon a faulty system. Twenty-six of the 32 participants reported negative experiences with both the subsidy program and subsidy staff. Most attributions that fit the constrained bureaucrat category were in the New York counties ($n = 18$, 56%), but this was the most common attribution for negative experiences in Cook county as well (12 out of 18 respondents).

Constrained bureaucrat attributions were somewhat more prominent among Whites than among African Americans and Latinos. Whereas 66% (8 of 12) of White respondents who reported a negative experience also reported viewing workers as constrained by the system, less than half of African American (46.8%, 15 of 32) and Latino (43.8%, 7 of 16) respondents with negative evaluations ascribed responsibility for their negative encounters to the system.

The participants with constrained bureaucrat attributions excused caseworkers for their negative encounters and blamed poor experiences on large caseloads, limited staff, and limited resources. For example, Danielle, from one of the New York counties, had difficulty reaching her caseworker and described the staff as "impossible to get in touch with," dismissive, and "harsh on help." However, Danielle did not blame the caseworker. Rather, workers were unavailable and "not nice" because they were "overworked and underpaid":

They're very impossible ... if paper work needs to go through, or if it's not on the computer, they're very—They are very ... harsh on help. They don't really get back to you. They're not nice. They're just very overworked and underpaid, and they have too many cases.

Danielle further attributed caseworker behavior to county-level budget cuts. Because of these cuts, the subsidy office was short staffed, which decreased worker accessibility and further delayed the application process:

Just like the county needs more workers. Because I think that's what a lot of the problem is Like I think that's why it took so long in the beginning. Because if I remember correctly, when we started, that's when like the county did all the lay-offs and like half the building was terminated. But, other than that, I mean, considering that there's not that many people working in that department, like, I understand that's why it takes so long to get stuff done, but I mean, yeah. That would be the only thing. Because I'm sure the caseworkers are stressed out about getting everything done on time too. And I think that's why they don't return phone calls because there's just not enough hours in the day to do everything. But, like I said, I'm still waiting for them to call me back. It's been like two weeks.

Stephanie, a southwestern Illinois subsidy client, also attributed poor caseworker interactions to system factors. She waited 30 days for an eligibility decision from her worker, but Stephanie did not view her worker as

intentionally delaying her application. Instead, she understood the delay to be due to a heavy caseload:

She, the lady who handles it—I believe her name is [*Caseworker's name*—and she's just so overloaded. She I mean, I think one time she said she had like 1200 cases on her desk or something like that And that's what took so long.

Stephanie also reported that large caseloads prevented her caseworker from answering and returning phone calls. After faxing her application to the subsidy office, Stephanie called her caseworker “nonstop” to make sure the office processed her application. But reaching her caseworker was like trying to find a “needle in a haystack”:

You had to fax it, or you could mail it, which would take forever So, good old library here has a fax machine. [Laughter] And then called nonstop ... was like a needle in a haystack trying to get a hold of her. It's either you get her voice-mail and you can leave a message, out of all the thousands of messages she's already got on there. Or her answering machine was full, and you just had to keep calling back. So it was like one of those things that it was very frustrating. There was people before me, so I have to just basically wait your turn. Which is understandable. It's just like, well, I kind of need it now.

Although frustrated, Stephanie explained her negative experiences by emphasizing the high demand for services and the limited control that the caseworker had over the process. She must “wait her turn” because of the pressing needs of other clients.

In 4 of these 32 cases, clients actually reported positive experiences with subsidy staff despite negative assessments of the subsidy system (e.g., positive worker/negative bureaucracy). These clients commented on the professionalism of workers despite their limited power to respond to system problems. Brittany's reflections on a visit to a Cook County subsidy office illustrate this perspective. She waited for 3 h to receive help with the application, attributing the delay to crowded office conditions. She expressed satisfaction with subsidy workers, noting their calm and helpful demeanor:

They helped. No attitudes. They was pretty, I would think, you know, since there were so many people there ... they didn't get ... into it with one another and the employees kept their composure. Nobody was acting upset or attitude-y Nobody was upset. They were pretty cool.

Brittany's recommendations to improve the program also reflect her view that the subsidy bureaucracy influences service quality. To shorten lengthy office waits, the system should increase the capacity of workers to see clients by adding more offices—what she calls “centers.” She explains, “I probably say more centers or bigger centers Yeah, so probably either more centers or ... maybe more people to help out.”

Autonomous Bureaucrat

A third ($n = 19$) of the 63 respondents who reported negative subsidy encounters attributed responsibility to the subsidy staff. We categorized these 19 participants as having an attribution of “autonomous bureaucrat” because rather than viewing workers as constrained agents, they reported that workers had the ability to exercise significant control over service delivery. When clients did not receive polite and prompt assistance, subsidy staff members were understood to be at fault. Indeed, many participants in this group said workers purposely complicated claiming processes by losing paper work and ignoring phone calls.

Fifteen of these 19 respondents were from the two New York counties, Westchester ($n = 8$) and Nassau ($n = 7$). In most cases (14 of 19), these participants positively evaluated the subsidy system but reported negative experiences with workers. Only four respondents in this group negatively evaluated both the subsidy program and the subsidy staff. Across the four sites, very few White respondents ($n = 2$) attributed negative program experiences to caseworkers, whereas Latino and African American respondents disproportionately held this perspective. Seventeen of the 19 respondents reporting autonomous attributions were Latino ($n = 7$) or African American ($n = 10$). Within the subgroups of African American and Latino respondents, the autonomous bureaucrat attribution was also common. Among the 32 African American respondents reporting negative experiences, 10 (31%) viewed workers as responsible. For Latino clients, 7 of the 16 (43.7%) clients who reported negative subsidy experiences made this attribution.

Gabriela's comments illustrate the autonomous bureaucrat perspective. When asked to describe her experiences with the CCR&R agency in Cook County, she remarked, “it's a wonderful program, but I'm going to tell you, they have terrible personnel there.” Gabriela visited the office after calling several times about a recent denial letter. She believed that the inaccessible and dismissive behavior of staff was to blame for her long and unproductive office visit:

They're terrible. You walk in. I had to go bring some papers because I wasn't ... I walk in there taking the papers and I'm waiting in line. Of course, she's on the phone and I'm waiting and standing there. Then suddenly she's on the phone because she's playing cards. She's playing 21 on the computer. And I'm waiting and waiting and she says, "What can I do for you? Do you have an appointment?" I said, "No. I'm supposed to come and bring these forms." "Do you have copies of them?" I said, "I did make copies just to keep." Yeah, "Because we don't do copies here." I said, "yes, I do." "Then why are you here? You drop that in the mailbox that's downstairs." I'm serious. I said, "Well, thank you for your help." And I walk away. But she was playing 21 on that computer. Okay, seriously.

According to Gabriela, crowded office conditions were not the reason for her extended wait. Rather, the caseworker's behavior contributed to the delay. She illustrated this point in her emphasis on the worker's choice to play a computer game instead of providing attentive service. From her perspective, the worker chose to be unhelpful although it was in her power to help.

Gina's comments about her southwestern Illinois caseworker also demonstrated her view of an autonomous bureaucrat with some control over the claiming process. She viewed the subsidy system as setting guidelines for timely processing of client paper work and blamed her caseworker for delaying her subsidy claim. According to Gina, her worker complicated the application process, was distrustful, and "tried to pick apart everything." Gina's worker required her to extensively verify household composition, income, and work schedules and often requested these documents at the last minute. She described how her worker's behavior delayed her eligibility by 3 months:

Like, the application wasn't complicated, but the woman, my caseworker was impossible to get a hold of. And she tried to pick apart everything I said. And when I said, because she asked if, who the father was and I said, "Oh, that's my fiancé," and she said, "Oh, well, you have to So you're living together?" I said, "Well, not right now, no." And then she made me actually verify, have like three forms of where I lived, prove where I lived, and then come up with three forms to prove where he lived. And then after that she like waited until the deadline. So this is three months later.

In addition to the worker's lengthening the application process, Gina also emphasized her unwillingness to meet deadlines set by the subsidy system. She

described the subsidy system as having rules and procedures that guide claiming processes and stated that her worker's negligence warranted additional accountability. She recommended that caseworkers should face performance reviews that evaluate the promptness of their responses and eligibility decisions. As it stands, she believed that workers face few consequences for poor service delivery and do not "make the effort" to help clients:

Like the caseworkers have to have ... they have a deadline of having something in by the end of a month. And then once that month is over, then it's having something else. Instead of that, I think it would work better if the whole process has to be completed in a month, or it's your butt on the line, as the caseworker. Because that's your job. And, you know, they would actually make the effort of picking up the phone instead of sending a piece of mail or waiting three weeks to do that. Or make an appointment for the person to come in.

Clients such as Gina viewed the subsidy system as part of a bureaucratic system that was designed to help. Yet, bureaucrats could jeopardize successful claims by failing to fulfill their professional responsibilities to clients.

Similarly, Marcus from Westchester County understands his negative experiences to be a result of difficult caseworkers who intentionally burden the client throughout the claiming process. As a client of the TANF program, Marcus interacts with both the Department of Social Services TANF unit and the child care subsidy unit. He describes his interactions with child care subsidy staff as a "headache." Workers in the subsidy office are "nasty" and "make it more difficult" for him. Marcus suspects that the taxing application process and troublesome child care subsidy staff reflect the deliberate efforts of subsidy staff to discourage successful claims. He draws this conclusion by contrasting what he experiences as the helpful behavior of a county supervisor in the child care subsidy program to the frontline caseworkers at the local office. To Marcus, the workers at the local office are unhampered by broader organization and policy constraints. The responsiveness of the county subsidy commissioner—despite his extensive duties—proves this point for Marcus. He reasons that caseworkers have fewer responsibilities than the county supervisor, yet they deliberately choose not to return his phone calls:

You can call ... the head dude, head guy He gets it done when you call him. Because they'll do little slick stuff, lie about certain stuff ... You got a fire under their butt, then you—Or, they

just give you a runaround and you know they lying Just making me do this, I guess, to deter people from staying on it or whatever, or being on it Now, this guy, the head dude, if you call him in the morning, by the afternoon, he calls you back, and he's running the whole thing, so if he has time to take out to call you back, why can't you? And, he's the big—So, I know there are plenty of complaints, paper work he got to do ... I don't understand how this guy ... how he has time to call you back, check his messages, call you back, and take care of the problem? And, you all can't do it? It can't be that busy.

Central to Marcus's critical rationale is the belief that caseworkers have the power to choose how to manage their professional responsibilities and subsequent service experience for client. He elaborates on this authority when he distinguishes the quality of caseworkers by their willingness to "do [their] job." Marcus believes that "nasty" or "crazy" caseworkers "don't want to do nothing." These workers opt to underperform and evade work tasks. In contrast, a "nice caseworker" wants to "do her job." Nice caseworkers choose to fulfill professional responsibilities, which for Marcus means responding to client concerns with polite and helpful assistance.

Not all autonomous bureaucrat attributions are negative. In rare instances, clients who reported positive experiences with workers emphasized a worker's capacity to control the quality of the experience—despite a cumbersome bureaucracy. While recognizing the flaws of the subsidy system, these clients also considered workers as having the power to intervene to make a poor system function better. For instance, Sabrina, a Cook County respondent, described the application process as a complicated "paper trail" and attributed the delay in an initial eligibility decision to the extensive paper work required for the application. Sabrina communicated with the subsidy office to confirm the receipt of her application materials. When she asked staff about the reason for the delay, she found they were helpful and prompt:

I just called over the phone and told them that we had sent the work in, you know; see if they had got it that second time. [*Interviewer 1: Okay. And how was your experience talking to them? Were they helpful?*] Yeah. They basically told me, yeah, they had got it that time and they were submitting everything; they would get back to us, you know? And they pretty much got back to us in a prompt time after that.

Hostile Bureaucracy

Four of the 63 clients who reported negative experiences with the subsidy program described a system

that was designed to intentionally discourage claims—a category of attributions that we distinguish from both the autonomous bureaucrat perspective and the constrained bureaucrat view. These clients described a system that was under-resourced, complicated, and/or inefficient (similar to the constrained bureaucrat category), but they went beyond this to argue that the system was deliberately set up to fail them. These four respondents evaluated both the subsidy program and its workers negatively; three of the four were from New York. Marina, a Westchester County respondent, viewed workers as constrained by large caseloads and excused inaccessible staff, although she reported her experience as negative—"they're overwhelmed, maybe they have too many people and can't do it with everyone But when I call they never pick up." Importantly, Marina went further in her explanation of responsibility than respondents in the constrained bureaucrat category. She claimed that the program used deliberate strategies to deter claims. As she put it, the subsidy program "wants you to lose the services."

Marina ultimately compared her subsidy experiences negatively against those for other means-tested programs. She reported that workers from the Food Stamps and Medicaid programs assisted clients throughout the application process. Workers from these programs also called to remind clients about recertification. In contrast, she commented that subsidy workers requested paper work at the last minute, behavior Marina viewed as the system's way of discouraging claims. She explained:

When you go to recertify the health insurance, it's really good, now, I have to, a lot, because since I get Food stamps, I get help from Child Care, the difference is huge, and health insurance. Health insurance and food stamps are hard too; it's difficult but health insurance is easy because if you get confused or you forget something, they call; they say look, can I put this here, and I say yes, of course or whatever question, come to certain place, we will personally help you with the paper work. They're always willing to help; they always want to help. They don't want you to lose the support. Child Care Subsidy doesn't want you to have help. That's how I feel. They want you to lose the services, because there is a lot of time to fill out the paper work and to wait until the last week to tell me something is missing. I'm talking about always, there is always a problem, so, to be more like the health care, they call, they remind you, whatever, come to the office, we will help you fill it out, to be more human with that.

Mandy, also a Westchester County respondent, viewed the subsidy system as one that discourages claims as well. While Marina excused workers for being

inaccessible, Mandy viewed frontline workers as deliberately complicating claiming processes. She commented on the difficulties of getting assistance from subsidy staff: “When you try to call and speak to somebody, you never get through to speak to anybody. You don’t know the status on anything. And when you do go up there, they just are not willing to work with you or answer any questions.” Ultimately, she relied on the help of a supervisor to process claims, suggesting that she did recognize some potential for staff agency to get around the hostile bureaucracy. Yet, we include Mandy in the hostile bureaucracy category because she later elaborated her view that the subsidy system—by design—deters claims. She suggested that its complex application forms and bureaucratic processes were intended to intimidate prospective claimants. These barriers reflected, in her mind, the deterrent tactics of “social services,” which have a “history of sending people back.” Consequently, clients must have “their ducks in a row” to claim benefits:

It was a very lengthy application process, but I prepared for it. [*Interviewer 1 agrees*] You really have to have your ducks in a row when you go down to social services, because they are able to review the application as long as you put their name on it, but that doesn’t mean that it’ll be approved ... I provided everything, so there wasn’t a real reason not to approve the application ... social services has a history of sending people back, sort of kind of like extending the process. It was a 13–14-page application in and of itself. So, I just included everything they needed, and then some.

Conclusion

This qualitative study of client experiences with the child care subsidy program begins to clarify how clients interpret administrative burden. We move beyond the distinction clients make between workers and bureaucracies to examine the causal explanations clients develop for burdensome claiming processes. By focusing on how clients interpret their bureaucratic encounters we mean to make no judgments as to whether the respondents are accurate or inaccurate in their assessments of who or what is truly responsible for their experiences. Rather, we suppose that as a predictor of future claiming behavior, perceptions—right or wrong—are likely what matter most and therefore worthy of study. To explain this aspect of clients’ interpretive processes, we apply the concept of “controllability” from attribution theory and argue that while clients assess their own power relative to that of agencies and workers (Hasenfeld 1987), they also develop perceptions about who controls the quality of their bureaucratic encounters—namely, the

caseworker or the system. Our pursuit of clients’ causal explanations of their child care subsidy experiences extends the study of administrative burden to inform understanding of how clients’ interpretation of bureaucratic encounters may influence claiming behavior and political participation.

Our findings replicate previous welfare studies that have described clients’ views of bureaucratic encounters with means-tested programs as overwhelmingly negative. Amid this generally negative backdrop, some study participants differentiated bureaucrats from bureaucracies, reporting positive experiences with the subsidy bureaucracy but negative assessments of subsidy workers and vice versa. Of particular relevance to our argument, we also found that clients’ interpretations of encounters reflected causal attributions of responsibility for a negative (or positive) experience—an aspect of clients’ interpretive processes not systematically explored by previous research on bureaucratic encounters. Specifically, our findings suggest that even when clients have similar evaluations of experiences, they vary in whom they view as responsible. In one view, clients hold workers responsible—emphasizing the bureaucrat’s capacity to control service quality. Bureaucrats are autonomous actors who deliberately increase the costs of claiming to deter applicants. In the other view, clients perceive workers as constrained bureaucrats, whose behavior toward them is influenced by the bureaucracy’s insufficient resources. Such diminished resources, from this perspective, limit bureaucrats’ capacity to provide high-quality service. Finally, a small group focuses on bureaucracies (not bureaucrats) as hostile institutions that are intentionally set up to deter successful claims through complicated and punitive administrative processes.

Negative experiences were common regardless of race/ethnicity, but African Americans disproportionately reported negative encounters with both the system and workers and tended to attribute responsibility to the caseworker. In contrast, White respondents were more likely to interpret their negative experiences to be the fault of the system—which they viewed as complicated and under resourced. In some ways, the prevalence of attributing poor experiences to caseworkers’ intentional behavior among minority respondents supports findings of previous studies that suggest Black and Latino welfare clients face more punitive actions (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011), aloof “arms-length” interactions with bureaucrats, and although less conclusive instances where workers raise the costs of claims (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). Our finding that African Americans and Latinos tend to view negative experiences as the fault of the worker extends these insights to include how clients of color interpret the valence of encounters and workers’ practices. While Black and

Latino respondents did not necessarily report feeling discriminated against, they did disproportionately view workers as responsible for negative experiences and intentionally increasing the costs of claiming. Given our small and non-representative sample, we note these differences by race/ethnicity with appropriate caution.³

We also discuss observed site differences with caution, not only because of sample size limitations but because the four study sites are heterogeneous in ways beyond their approach to program administration. Participants in the New York counties showed both more negative encounters with the subsidy office and were more likely to attribute responsibility to subsidy workers (i.e., autonomous bureaucrat attributions) than participants in the Illinois counties. It is unclear why this would be, but perhaps the CCR&R agencies that administered the subsidy program in Illinois were understood to be distinct from the government, whereas in New York, the county social service agencies and by association their workers were viewed as part of the system and with limited discretionary powers. It is also the case, however, that autonomous bureaucrat attributions were made more frequently by participants in southwestern Illinois than in Cook County. This suggests that perhaps a caseworker model (which was used in southwestern Illinois as well as the two New York counties to administer the subsidy program) resulted in greater familiarity—and by extension blaming—of a particular caseworker for negative treatment. Because clients interacted with multiple workers about their case in Cook County, they may have been more apt to develop a broad appraisal of the system as influencing worker behavior, especially if the majority of their worker encounters were negative ones.

Because the 85 clients interviewed were from four unique policy contexts—and within each context their selection was nonrandom—their experiences are not representative of subsidy clients generally or within these four communities. Thus, generalization of findings beyond this sample would be inappropriate. Furthermore, our relatively small sample does not allow us to explore how distinct attributions might relate to clients' subsequent claiming efforts, or the relative importance of these attributional processes vis-à-vis other factors such as employment experiences, child care availability, or children's needs in explaining claiming behavior. Instead, our theory-building aims are oriented toward generating plausible concepts

and hypotheses about clients' interpretive processes to explore in future research (Small 2009). Our sample is well suited for this purpose and allows for an analysis that theoretically deepens the literature and raises new questions about bureaucratic encounters.

First, understanding clients' attributions reveals important insight about how clients interpret the costs of claiming benefits beyond a descriptive valence of the burden. As the marketing application of attribution theory demonstrates, consumer satisfaction alone does not predict future behavior. Rather decisions to purchase a service again in part stem from consumers' nuanced views about who controls the quality of the service experience. In the same way, the valence of claimants' evaluations of bureaucratic encounters alone may not predict future claiming behavior. Future claims may reflect the claimants' understanding regarding who controls the quality of their encounters with bureaucracies. We do not argue that claiming means-tested benefits is analogous to consumer purchasing behavior. Indeed, both Lipsky's (1980) street-level bureaucracy framework and Hasenfeld's (1987) power-dependency application suggest otherwise—material needs and limited alternatives for assistance can drive claims despite onerous processes (Lipsky 1980). However, our findings suggest future research might examine whether and how client attributions influence approaches to claiming behavior.

Future quantitative studies with large, representative samples can also explore the relationship between attributions and claiming strategies. Some studies suggest that the burdens and the arbitrary nature of claiming outcomes teach clients to be subordinate and submissive to the wills of agency workers and bureaucracies (Auyero 2012). Still, our findings point to a more complex interpretation of administrative burden that may not lead to passivity. Whether and how clients exercise agency to claim benefits may depend on who clients blame for negative experiences. Clients may use one set of strategies to circumvent an autonomous bureaucrat and another set of strategies to navigate a complex under-resourced bureaucracy. In this sense, attributions may help explain who remains complicit and passive and who exercises agency to secure better quality service experiences and benefits.

Future research may also benefit from examining the features of policy administration that lead to distinct attributions. We find that clients are more likely to attribute negative encounters to caseworkers in counties that use caseworker models. Studies can formally test whether differences in intake processes and program administration are associated with constrained, autonomous, or hostile attributions. If attributions shape claiming efforts, these insights can direct the focus of policy interventions to improve participation outcomes.

3 We do not have information on the racial or ethnic characteristics of subsidy staff. Thus, it is impossible to determine whether differences in client experiences vary by the race/ethnicity of their worker or the match between the worker and the client. Evidence suggests, however, that Black and Latino clients experiences negative treatment regardless of the workers' racial/ethnic identity (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Watkins-Hayes 2009).

Of further importance to political science, studies can explore how clients' attributions of controllability affect their broader exercise of political rights. Some scholarship suggests that policies influence citizens' political participation (e.g., Campbell 2012; Mettler and Soss 2004; Pierson 1993). Citizens infer their political standing and the government's responsiveness from their experiences with public bureaucracies (Schneider and Ingram 1993; Soss 1999b). For low-income citizens, the design of welfare programs teaches recipients negative lessons about the government that dampen political participation (Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010; Soss 1999b). Client attributions regarding the quality of their experiences may offer interpretive causal mechanisms to explain the relationship between program experiences and clients' political behavior. Clients who view workers as responsible for negative experiences may draw different conclusions about the government from those who attribute burdensome experiences to bureaucracies. Future research can take up this hypothesis.

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Appendix

Table A1. Characteristics of Qualitative Sample ($n = 85$)

Race/ethnicity		
Black	39	45.9%
White	18	21.2%
Latino	26	30.6%
County		
Nassau	18	21.1%
Westchester	21	24.5%
Cook County	35	41.1%
Southwestern Illinois	11	12.9%
Works at nonstandard times	56	65.9%
Two or more jobs since program entry	51	60.0%
Immigrant	23	27.1%
Interviewed in Spanish	16	18.8%
Multiple subsidized children at program entry	34	40.0%
Type of subsidized provider at program entry ^a		
Center-based care	44	51.8%
Family child care	29	34.1%
Legally exempt relative care	13	15.3%
Legally exempt nonrelative care	6	7.1%

^aSix respondents reported using multiple subsidized providers at program entry. Total N of subsidized providers is 92.

Table A2. Subsidy Evaluations by Subsidy Bureaucracy and Bureaucrats ($N = 85$)

	Positive/Neutral Bureaucracy	Negative Bureaucracy	Total
Positive/neutral bureaucrat	11	7	18
Negative bureaucrat	21	34	55
Total	32	41	73

Note: Twelve clients reported limited interactions with the subsidy office or workers; responses not classified on table.

Table A3. Attributions by Site and Race

	Autonomous (<i>n</i> = 19)	Constrained (<i>n</i> = 32)	Hostile (<i>n</i> = 4)	None (<i>n</i> = 8)
Race				
Black	10	15	2	5
White	2	8	1	1
Latino	7	7	1	1
Other		1		
Westchester	8	10	2	2
Black	2	6	1	2
White	1	1		
Latino	5	3	1	
Other				
Nassau	7	8	1	1
Black	6	2	1	1
White	1	3		
Latino		2		
Other		1		
Cook county	3	12	1	4
Black	2	6		3
White	0	3	1	1
Latino	1	3		
Other				
Southwest IL	1	2	0	1
Black		1		
Latino				
White	1	1		1
Other				
Total	19	32	4	8