

TITLE: Bias Forged Through Suspicion: The Gatekeeper in Public Housing Reconsidered¹

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines housing eligibility officers' practices of suspicion, which contribute to the systematic and historic appearance of bias in their rationing of housing subsidies.

Through developing expectations based on racial/ethnic categorization, and perceiving anomalies in applicants' documents, appearance, demeanor, and family obligations, housing officers justify reasons for some applicants to receive a housing subsidy, and others to be excluded. Housing officers judge each others' competence based on the use of such practices, and train novices in them, even as they reflexively note that such practices may be discriminatory and not to be found in regulatory guidelines.

Deutscher's (1968) classic study shows how a housing gatekeeper uses the demeanor of applicants, family constellation, and the race of applicants for determining their desirability for public housing. The use of such criteria would seem to simply indicate the gatekeeper's personal bias, based in the dominant middle-class values of the time. As Lipsky (1980: 109) notes, "one of the most well-grounded generalizations that can be made concerning client processing," is that "street-level bureaucrats respond to general orientations towards clients' worthiness or unworthiness that permeate society and to whose proliferation they regularly contribute." This study also finds that housing gatekeepers use such criteria in rationing housing to applicants, yet the reasoning behind such orientations differs dramatically in this study, as it is not merely the result of personal bias. Rather, such discriminatory actions are the result of carefully cultivated practices of suspicion, by which gatekeepers judge their colleagues' competence and train novices.

Workers' noticings which elicit suspicion have been an enduring topic in sociological research. Sacks (1972), for example, wrote of how police officers suspect persons who appear to deviate from the policeman's conception of the "normal ecology" of an area. Whalen and Zimmerman (1990) explore how emergency calls to the police may elicit suspicion from the call-taker if the caller's stance (their account of their ability to see and hear) towards an event appears to the call-taker to insufficiently warrant the caller's depictions of the trouble. Furthermore, Emerson (1997) shows how interviewers who are usually not suspicious of women applying for temporary restraining orders may become suspicious of a client's motivations if a third party supporter becomes overzealous in their advocacy for the client. Each of these studies probes the grounds for how workers respond to clients suspiciously "with good reason." In the Ferndale (pseudonym) Section 8 Housing Program, these grounds rest in perceiving deviations from: routine paperwork, applicants'

appearance and demeanor, assumptions regarding family obligations, and applicants' perceived racial/ethnic categorization.

According to federal regulations, Section 8 tenants must meet certain eligibility guidelines, verified with proper documentation, as discussed below. A Section 8 worker who makes decisions based merely on such criteria, however, would be considered dubious, or at least a dupe of savvy applicants. Knowing when to become suspicious, and how to act based on suspicion, are central skills by which many social control and human service workers judge the competence of their fellow workers. To not be suspicious when an experienced worker would find suspicion warranted is to be either inexperienced or incompetent. Such a worker wastes precious resources and is an embarrassment to colleagues, as they allow criminal activity to escape attention, or allow wealthy applicants to receive government subsidies. Regulations, however, are hopelessly inadequate for specifying the details of such work. For example, when police officers suspect those who deviate from the "normal ecology" of an area (Bittner 1967; Rubinstein 1973; Sacks 1972), they must know what is "normal" (see Sudnow 1965) in their ecology, and what might deviate from it, which are processes requiring years of watching an area and developing relationships with members. Similarly, many housing eligibility officers take pride in their ability to question applicants in order to reveal ways they may try to make themselves eligible, or even commit fraud.

While such skills may be appreciated among the police, housing eligibility officers are not particularly noted for their practices of suspicion. Instead, studies commonly focus on how workers deny services to the needy, rather than how they prevent the well-off from seeking funds intended for the destitute. For instance, Lidstone (1994) examines how housing workers formally ration housing by determining eligibility, and informally ration housing by withholding information, deterrence, and discretion, but she does not examine how such practices may potentially prevent fraud. Sahlin (1995), like Deutscher, also looks

at practices of exclusion from public housing, using Foucault's (1979) concepts of border control and discipline, to show how the former is accomplished through the sorts of strategies Lidstone describes, while the later is accomplished through individual contracts, supervision, and expulsion, all rationalized as "for the client's own good" (p.397). As in Deutscher's and Lidstone's papers, such housing officers exclude or discipline because they morally disapprove of behaviors such as drug use and alcoholism, not, as in the current study, of those with a middle-class demeanor and income who are trying to unfairly qualify for a subsidy. Others look at how applicants are discriminated against on the basis of race and class (Henderson and Karn 1987), and age (Clapham and Munro 1990). Such research is undoubtedly vital in the attempt to insure a fair and equitable provision of a vital human service, and provides a resounding chorus of fault-finding.

Lempert and Monsma (1994) broaden the dialogue concerning discriminatory housing allocation, providing quantitative data that Hawaiian housing eviction boards discriminate against Samoans, and qualitative data that reveals the processes behind such outcomes. Namely, eviction board members are aware of Samoan cultural practices of providing money to their clan (aida) or church, often before paying their rent, yet they do not excuse such practices. Rather, they expect Samoans to accommodate to the social system from which they are receiving welfare support. In one especially revealing interview which prefigures some of the practices of suspicion analyzed in this paper, a Samoan public housing manager asked the Samoan tenant who cannot pay his rent due to the death of an uncle, for the name of that uncle. Only after the tenant provides the name of the same uncle and uses his death as a second excuse for missing his rent, does the manager begin to evict. Such an analysis provides a richer portrait of discriminatory behavior, whose ultimate definition and resolution will be determined, the authors note, through political struggle.

This paper builds from Lempert and Monsma's approach, in an attempt to understand the skills of housing allocation specialists from their perspective. Such an approach follows from a long tradition of studies of work in symbolic interactionism (Hughes 1984; Becker et al. 1984; Harper 1992, 2001) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1984, 1986, Zimmerman 1969, Sudnow 1978), which aim to capture the meanings and artfulness of workers' practices. It is hoped that as we probe housing officer's practices of suspicion, we will gain a deeper understanding of the historic and notorious recalcitrance of such officers to change their biased practices.

The Setting²

The Section 8 Program is the largest housing program in the United States, subsidizing approximately 5% of the rental units in most metropolitan areas, for a total of over 2.5 million units nationwide at an annual cost of over \$10.5 billion, at the time of the fieldwork (U.S. Department of Commerce 1993). When Nixon claimed that the Section 235 Home Ownership program and the Section 236 Rental Program, which provided interest subsidies on loans, were, "inequitable, wasteful, and ineffective," in their service to the poor (Lazin and Aroni 1983: 2), the Section 8 Program was pioneered through HUD, the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Providing direct subsidies to landlords who rent to Section 8 tenants within a locally determined ceiling on rents, called the fair market rent (or FMR), tenants on Section 8 typically pay 30% of their income towards rent, and the federal government pays the balance. Such tenants may take their voucher to any municipality with Section 8 landlords, who ultimately determine their suitability for a unit. The program has endured throughout the past thirty years as an alternative to "warehousing" the poor in large projects, and shows no sign of being discontinued, despite limitations. As Logan and Molotch 1987: 170) state, "Use value goals like racial integration, energy

conservation, or environmental amenity cannot be shaped by a national housing policy in which government passively writes checks to be spent in the marketplace.”

Ferndale is a well-established coastal community of about 50,000, adjacent to a large metropolitan area. The city is ethnically and racially diverse, with both a substantial affluent population and a large number of homeless. The office manages approximately 900 tenants on the program, providing each of three caseworkers with a load of about 300 cases to review, or recertify over the course of a year. The caseworkers are (all names used, beside the author’s, are pseudonyms, with gender and ethnic background retained): Maria, a Latina; Ed, an African-American male; and Sidney, a European-American male. Four other officers staff the office full-time besides the specialists: the manager, Joe, a European-American male; the supervisor, Sara, an African-American woman; the waiting list coordinator, Carol, an African-American woman; and an administrative assistant, Tom, a European-American male.

In order to qualify for Section 8, a person must first be a resident in the municipality to which they are applying, meaning they either live there, work there full time (35 or more hours a week), or are homeless. Second, they must fall within the limits of the annual income criteria.³ Third, they must be either a family,⁴ elderly (over 62), or disabled (as defined by Social Security). These are the standard criteria for eligibility, but due to the high demand for the program, an additional condition has been established called “federal preferences,” or, more colloquially by Section 8 workers, “desperate need.” In order to qualify for a federal preference, a tenant must either: a) pay more than 50% of their income towards rent, b) live in substandard housing, or c) have been involuntarily displaced or homeless for reasons other than eviction with cause. Approximately 9000 persons are on the waiting list for Section 8 at this setting alone, and if they meet all the above criteria, they will be moved to the top of the waiting list by a computerized point system in roughly one to two years. Applicants on the

wait list could call on Thursday afternoon between one and four to find their position. Many who appeared from their application to not live in substandard or overcrowded housing, or reside outside of Ferndale, called weekly only to find that their position had not improved, or had dropped as others with preferences moved ahead of them.

Most importantly, an applicant's eligibility for each of the above criteria must be "verified." For example, the identity of each person in the house must be documented with an ID and a social security card; one's work must be verified with an employee verification form; one's income must be verified with at least five paycheck stubs; one's residence must be verified with a lease and utility bills; one's rent must be verified with check stubs; one's assets must be verified with a divestiture of assets form; government support, bank statements, and school attendance must be verified with the proper forms, and if one is unable to provide such verification one must sign a legally certified statement to that effect.

Despite the fact that all applicants were convinced of their need for a housing subsidy, few managed to convince Section 8 workers. In fact, in a batch of fifty scheduled interviews, typically only one or two would be eligible. Some had moved and not notified the office, some did not attend their appointment for unknown reasons, and many could not prove that they qualified for a federal preference. Workers' typical stance towards applicants is one of skepticism and suspicion, especially if an applicant appears not to be destitute. For such applicants, eligibility workers are adept at finding warranted grounds for doubting verification, asking "dubious" applicants to return repeatedly with further verification, until the applicant tires of the process or the worker accepts their claims.

The Field Work

As a case study of a single office, this paper offers an in-depth investigation of the workers' practices, afforded by the rapport that develops with members when an extended amount of time is spent at one setting (Ragin and Becker 1992; Feagin et al. 1991; Harper

1992). While each Section 8 office differs in terms of such factors as the geography of the area, the ethnic mix of applicants and tenants, and the “working culture” of the office, each office is faced with similar federally mandated tasks to which they are held accountable by inspectors from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Thus, the details of workers’ practices at one office may be highly similar to, or provide a useful contrast to descriptions of such practices in other offices, a point future research may well address.

Prior to this study, I had initially worked in the office as a temporary administrative assistant for two weeks, before Tom was hired. In the initial stages of the fieldwork, I worked as a “floater,” reacquainting myself with the work and personalities of each officer and assisting in any way possible. After about two months, I proposed that I become part of what I called the “Intake Interview Team.” Thereafter, I worked closely with Sara and Carol to assist with the pre-interview and post-interview paperwork, in exchange for being allowed to take field notes during the intake interviews, and to tape record in-depth interviews following their intake interviews. I was not allowed to tape record or videotape intake interviews due to federal privacy provisions. After completing over 100 hours of observations over the course of six months, I coded and analyzed my data according to the traditions of grounded theory (see Charmaz 1988) and analytic induction (see Katz 1988 and Emerson et al. 1995).

Making Decisions

When a Section 8 worker conducts an intake interview, it is likely to be the first time an applicant and a worker have met in a face-to-face interaction. The applicant’s prior contact with the program typically does not consist of more than completing an application one or two years prior to the interview, and perhaps calling the office to determine their location on the wait list. As described above, the program has strict criteria for which applicants may or may not be qualified. The clear guidelines in Section 8 for determining eligibility may be seen as

analogous to those of a Social Security Survivors program, a “highly routinized administrative program” which Handler (1986: 3) contrasts to a special education program in which “decisions should be discretionary.” In the former, according to Handler, “there is little room for interpretation or choice. It is a rule-bound system rather than a discretionary system.” In this report, however, even such a “rule-bound” system will be shown to have important discretionary elements. Nevertheless, even in such a highly regulated environment, workers may vary in terms of the time they take to determine if an applicant is qualified, or how readily they would perceive an applicant’s claims with suspicion.

Scheff (1966: 105-127), borrowing from statistics, speaks of such proclivities in terms of Type I and Type II errors. In statistics, a Type I error is to reject a hypothesis that is true, while a Type II error involves accepting a hypothesis that is false. In the justice system, a Type I error would be to find an innocent person guilty, while a Type II error would be to find a guilty person innocent. In medicine, a Type I error would be to not treat a patient who is ill, while a Type II error would be to treat a patient who is not ill. While in each of the above cases, a Type II error will be risked so that a Type I error will be avoided, the preference for a Type I or a Type II error varies from setting to setting.

In the Section 8 Program, such “errors” involve locally recognized “bad decisions” based on the qualities of an applicant as perceived by the interviewer. Such “bad decisions” would be: to find a “qualified” person to be unqualified (a Type I error) or to find an “unqualified” person qualified (a Type II error). The quotation marks connote members’ practices for perceiving and responding to applicants (to be discussed below), which use and elaborate upon the regulatory specifications of whether an applicant is qualified or not. As Pollner (1974: 39) states, “while creating meanings by his actions, he [the member] encounters the meanings as the pre-existing cause of his actions.”

A recurrent theme in the ensuing text will be how officers' versions of "qualified" or "unqualified" rest on typified notions of applicants' traits. Such traits as "desperate need" or "homelessness," discussed below, occur "within a horizon of familiarity and pre-acquaintanceship which is, as such just taken for granted," and comprise "the way of life considered to be the natural, the good, the right one by the members of the 'in-group'" (Schutz 1962: 7,13). When such expectancies are breached, a strong correlation may be found between a members' "subscription to the 'natural facts' as a normative ordering of knowledge" and their level of anxiety (Garfinkel 1984: 57-67). Similar practices were found among public defenders (Sudnow 1965: 275), who routinely utilize "practically tested criminological wisdom" of "normal crimes" in order to decide how to prosecute in a particular case.

While workers share many typified notions of applicants' traits, they do not share a sense of which type of error is more important to avoid. Unlike fields such as statistics, law and medicine, which clearly prioritize Type I and Type II errors, some Section 8 workers are more concerned to ensure that all qualified applicants receive a subsidy (accepting occasional Type I errors), while others are oriented towards ensuring that no applicants commit fraud (to avoid Type II errors). Such priorities in a Section 8 office may vary according to the "politics" or practices in a particular office, or among different workers. The manager at the Ferndale Office makes his preference for avoiding Type I errors clear to me on my first day of fieldwork, stating, "What I say is, if we get ten people on the program and one of them's lying, at least we got nine people on the program." A local Legal Aid lawyer reflects the opinion of many of the city's human service professionals towards this office, stating, "here they're very good, they're very client oriented."

From a strictly cost/benefit point of view, such a policy is also lucrative for an office, as each is financially rewarded for every spot filled. As a manager from an office in a

northern county informed me, “Our administrative fees are 7.65% of the fair market rent. That’s the bottom line. Until they create an incentive for catching people doing fraud, most offices aren’t going to find it worth their while to pursue it.”

Nevertheless, some offices did have a reputation among workers as being more “fraud-oriented” (that is, to avoid Type II errors), especially those located in areas known for their conservatism. As the manager of the Ferndale office said in contrast to the purported liberalism of his office, “In South County they have fraud investigators who go to people’s houses in the middle of the night and follow people around. They spend all their time doing this so they can’t do anything else. We don’t do that here.”

Workers also recognize individual differences concerning which sort of error was most important for them to prevent. According to Sara, “Ed’s hard, but I’m easy. Unless I have some reason to suspect they’re not telling the truth, I believe them.” This difference is evident in Ed’s comment about a man who owns multiple drugstores, while he and Sara are collating papers at a conference table.

“He was charging his mother thousands of dollars for drugs each year, which is a write-off for both the IRS and Section 8. We get doctors and lawyers in all the time who want to get their mothers on the program.” [He leaves, shaking his head.]

Sara then informs the researcher, “there are little flaws like that in the program, but if you fixed it, you’d just create new flaws. If children couldn’t rent to their parents, it would be unfair to someone.”

The following sections will address the locally recognized ways by which workers guard against making “bad decisions.” Throughout the analysis, two aspects of workers’ determinations of eligibility will be probed: the fact that they are both decisions and practices. Such *decisions* often include moral assumptions about clients, as in the following

account from Joe, the manager of the office, who says that he asks two questions when interviewing applicants to determine eligibility:

“Here, sure it’s hard saying ‘no,’ but there’s some people you like saying ‘no’ to...You won’t see this in the regs anywhere, [but I ask] “First, are you willing to share? It’s not what we do, matching people up, but if they really need a place, they’ll say ‘yes.’ Second, will they take a single? If they say, ‘Oh, I have too much furniture,’ or, ‘I need a place for my dog,’ that slows down their application another two days. It makes me that much less willing to help them out. If they answer ‘yes’ to those two questions, hey, whatever I can do. They can move in today. But the more it seems like they’re looking to trade up, the less I figure they need it, and the slower it’s gonna be for them.”

This way of determining eligibility reveals many of the officers’ assumptions about their work. If an applicant seems morally worthy for the program, revealed here by their desire to make sacrifices, the worker would take special pains to assist them. On the other hand, if the applicant was not willing to make such sacrifices, they were less likely to fit the manager’s notions of who is destitute enough to “need” the program, and he would be less willing to assist them, as exemplified in his use of “trade up”. Such an account shows how eligibility officers may come to devise personalized criteria for decision making.

At the same time, these decisions by workers are also *practices*. Since tacit practices (Polanyi, 1966) are more difficult for workers to articulate than explicit decisions, we will examine instances in which a novice interviewer is instructed by a more experienced worker as especially revealing of such skills. Transcending what regulations could specify, such skills are necessary for being locally recognized as a competent worker. In the excerpt below, Sara, the office supervisor, knew the regulations when she began doing intake

interviews, for she had already worked in another capacity in the office for a number of years, but she did not have the “rhythm and style” for adequately determining eligibility.

“My first year of interviewing I was horrible. I was just like, how did Joe put me in this situation to do these things? I can look back now and I realize there are people that I put on the program that I shouldn’t have, that there were people that I could’ve put on the program had I known that there was something else I could’ve done. It’s just that over the course of time you develop a rhythm and a style and you begin to know what to ask when they say things.”

Sara’s tale here is reminiscent of Sudnow’s (1978) elaborate description of how his hands came to play jazz piano. With each page, Sudnow describes the evolving development of “jazz-knowing hands,” as an intertwining of hands, music, body, and knowledge. As he states, “when you make music, you are obliged to keep on doing work with your hands. You can’t stop for long and think through a next place to go” (Sudnow 1978: xii). Eventually, he comes to find, with reflexive amazement, “the fingers are making music all by themselves” (Sudnow 1978: xiii). As the field worker watched Sara flow from paperwork, to questioning the applicant, to the calculator, I was reminded of Sudnow’s description.

Below, we will examine how such discretionary decisions and tacit practices comprise local competence, and are inevitably conflated in the ways workers judge various features of applicants to deviate from their routine expectations. These features include the appearance of documents, the appearance and demeanor of applicants, assumptions about familial obligations, and racial/ethnic characterizations. Finally, we will explore a case in which a novice worker discovers grounds for her suspicions through the instructions of a more experienced colleague.

Suspecting Documents

As in most street-level bureaucracies, paperwork in the Section 8 office is an enormous part of the workers' jobs (see Miller 1991: 4-5; Zimmerman 1969; Garfinkel 1984: 195). Below is one instance of many unsolicited comments of a worker complaining about the paperwork. In this case, the manager highlights the drain of doing the paperwork by means of a metaphorical contrast with what he sees as the more rewarding aspects of the job.

“You know what gets me? It’s all this paperwork. About 75% of what we do is recertifications. This is what I hate [he shows me a file he’s just proofed which he then files away]. You know, when we first put people on the program, it’s like building bridges, you get a lot of gratitude from that. But recerts are like sweeping the streets. It’s not that exciting, it bugs the hell out of everyone, but we’ve got to do it.”

Yet, knowing the paperwork well is integral to doing many aspects of the job, including interviews. While the necessity of doing and knowing the paperwork is provided by the regulations, workers understand the *uses* of paperwork in a way that cannot be stipulated in advance. Below, Sara tells how manipulating stacks of paperwork helped her learn the tacit practices of her job.

“You start getting more in tune with the people that you’re interviewing rather than all this stuff...[That technique] develops after you’ve done the papers so much.”

Experienced workers speak of times when they are able to recognize when a client’s documentation deviates from what they expect in a case. As Sara states, “Papers can lie...after a while things don’t jive, and you can spot it.” Below, Sara tells of two instances of recognizing grounds for suspicion in two separate cases. In the first case, the applicant attempts to use a utility bill for a commercial property to appear to meet the local residency requirement. In the second case, the applicant is claiming a federal preference for paying 50% of her income for a room in a house owned by her brother:

“Normally, when families come in and you request a copy of the utility bills, they don’t bring in a copy of the utility bill, they bring in the utility bill. She brought in an actual copy. Instantly I went on the alert, like this isn’t normal, this isn’t the routine thing that happens with a case. So I began to question--I didn’t tell her that this is weird that you brought in a copy of your utility bill, but I began to ask her questions about where she was actually living, how many bedrooms, and that sort of thing. Then, while she was here I called the utility company to see if she actually lived there, and they said it was a commercial address.”

...

“She had a lease and no utility bills. [I asked] ‘OK, why don’t you have utility bills?’ [The applicant said] ‘Well, my mom’s name is on the utility bill.’ [I asked] ‘OK, why is your mom’s name on the utility bill?’ [The applicant said] ‘Well actually, I’m living in a room in a house. Automatically [I asked], ‘Who owns the house?’ [The applicant said] ‘My brother.’ You know it’s just like, after a while [...] from one set of evidence, you know what questions to ask, and it just comes out.”

Sara speaks of a number of her learned practices in this account. First, as Sudnow (1965) showed in the context of criminal proceedings, officers have an idea of what to expect in a “normal” case, and when that is not forthcoming, they “go on the alert.” Secondly, she becomes suspicious “instantly,” or “automatically,” as if she simply knows, in her working practices, what to do next. Third, she pursues the grounds for suspicion without informing the client. Finally, she knows how to verify the applicant’s claims, and does so while the applicant is present. Such practices show how (in)eligibility is not preexisting, but is actively determined through questioning practices.

Below, Carol notices how a feature of the paperwork a woman used to verify her status of homelessness is witnessably questionable.

“So, she hasn’t really been thrown out into the streets, because she hasn’t been in a shelter yet, with no place to go. And then her SSI papers were going to a bank in Norwood. Why is it all the way in Norwood [30 miles away]? That means she has to travel like from here all the way to Norwood to do her banking?”

From the distant location of the applicant’s bank as shown in the paperwork, Carol expresses doubt about the applicant’s claim of homelessness.

The importance of paperwork is highlighted when a novice worker does not perceive what an experienced worker sees as obvious grounds for suspicion. In the following case, Carol, a novice, consults Maria, an experienced officer, in the midst of a follow-up interview. The first time Carol saw this applicant, she cried when Carol told her she was unqualified for a federal preference, since her husband made enough money for her rent to be less than 50% of her income. In her second interview, the applicant explains that her husband left her two weeks before. In the excerpt below, Carol has explained this to Maria, and asks how she should proceed.

Maria: Why was her husband on there? [referring to the application]

Carol: She said he left her two weeks before the interview.

Maria: She’s schemin’. Where’d she say the husband was?

Carol: Off somewhere. She said they’re getting a divorce.

Mari [incredulously]: Where’s she living? [louder] You have a right to ask!

Carol: Should I ask to see the lease?

Maria: Something. Or a statement from the owner.

Carol: His owner?

Maria: Get a letter from the owner that he’s not there.

Carol: Oh, OK.

Throughout this exchange, the importance of recognizing grounds for suspicion in paperwork, and knowing what sort of paperwork to request to pursue those suspicions are integral to locally recognized competence. Maria's first question is a leading question, striking at the fact that the applicant's account contradicts her paperwork, and thus is liable to be false. In Carol's response, Maria shows that she hears deceitfulness from the applicant, and, in asking for the husband's whereabouts, provides Carol with another question she should have asked to elicit evidence that the husband had indeed moved away. Maria's incredulity demonstrates that she hears Carol's response as evasive, and she thereby both chastises Carol for not probing such questions herself, and typifies the sort of stance an officer may well exhibit when confronted by such a case. Carol, in her response, tries to affirm her competence to Maria by pursuing verification of where the husband lives by asking to see the lease. However, with her following question to Maria, "his owner?" Carol reveals the tenuous nature of this competence when she shows that she does not know from which owner the applicant should solicit a statement. Such a case shows how: 1) workers' suspicion is triggered by documents, 2) workers may demand significant paperwork from applicants in an ad-hoc fashion, 3) workers pass on such ways of seeing and demanding documentation not through regulatory stipulations, but through collegial interactions, and 4) workers judge each other's competence based on such practices.

Usually, if the documents which a Section 8 applicant brings to an interview are not aberrant in some way, they are not treated with suspicion. Nevertheless, one paper record is typically doubted by workers regardless of its contents: letters applicants bring from shelters to verify that they are homeless. Homelessness is an asset for receiving Section 8 assistance, since it not only sidesteps the thorny issue of residency, but it also qualifies as a federal preference under substandard housing. In order to verify homelessness, workers usually request a letter written by a worker at a homeless agency. Letters from some agencies are

seen as more dubious than letters from other agencies, however. According to workers, they trust letters from government welfare programs because those programs are more like Section 8, while letters from emergency shelters are seen as less credible, since they have a different sort of agenda. According to Carol, “The homeless agencies don’t exactly follow guidelines like social security or Aid to Families with Dependent Children if a person’s homeless. They’re there to help people immediately, people that need help immediately, so they can’t go through all that these other agencies have to go through.” Or, as workers discuss in staff meeting:

Sidney: A lot of them see us as obstacles.

Ed: They’re advocates.

Sidney: They just wanna circumvent the rules.

Emerson (1991) discusses how such interorganizational knowledge provides resources for workers to infer “what is really going on” when they receive a referral. Section 8 workers view emergency shelters as sending “unfiltered” (Emerson 1991: 201-2) sets of applicants, comparable to the variety of calls that come into a police station. Welfare officers, on the other hand, are perceived to send “filtered” sets of applicants, such as the calls dispatchers screen before notifying the police (Rubinstein 1973). While the “official” reason for the referral may be the same in both cases, the “real” reason for the referral, as understood by Section 8 workers, is subject to these background understandings.

These impressions about the sources of homeless letters are based in neither experience nor fact, however, but were purely untested, subjective workers’ assumptions. Few, if any had spent time in either welfare offices or emergency shelters. When the fieldworker informs a local legal aid attorney that Section 8 workers seem to provide more credence to documents from governmental social service bureaucracies than frontline homeless service centers, he responds, “That’s strange, because SSPD [Services to Persons

with Disabilities] has fired all their caseworkers. All they have are eligibility workers now, so they don't actually go out to investigate people's claims for services like AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children] anyway."

Nevertheless, since workers perceive letters from homeless agencies as insufficient evidence of homelessness, they verify the verification by asking such applicants numerous questions about their lifestyles. Just how one verifies homelessness is not, and perhaps could not be stipulated by regulations, so workers are free to vary in their degree of suspicion or leniency towards an applicant's claims, depending on their political attitudes toward the homeless, or practical contingencies such as time. In the following account, a worker speaks of eliciting the applicant to "paint a picture for you," so that by their answers the very fact of their homelessness would be self-evident.

"You want them to paint a picture for you, to show you why they need this program. Like, where is their mail being sent, is their name on a lease, where do they stay? If they're homeless, their mail *should* be going to a shelter, and they *should* be receiving services from that agency."

Such a "picture" of homelessness is not arrived at separately for each applicant, but is programmatically assumed. The gestalt of the applicant's lifestyle gleaned from the interview is matched to such a typified definition. Other workers, however, express doubts about this typification, in the assumption that the very behaviors that had led to homelessness would preclude their ability to document it. For many, the only trusted way of verifying homelessness is to have direct contact with the person on the street. Understandably, such instances are welcomed with relief, although documentation of homelessness is still required for the file.

Joe: Here's this guy, he's definitely homeless. I pass him on my way to work in the morning. I see him there in the park and I talk with him.

Interviewer: Did he give you a letter to show he was homeless?

Joe: Yeah, but I already knew about that.

...

Sara says she had asked this one guy where he lives, and he said up on 20th on the corner by the bank. “He’s there every day. Why should I question that? I saw him there.”

In sum, the only reliable criteria for workers to verify homelessness diametrically opposes the very ideals of regulatory stipulations for action and bureaucratic impersonality, yet the appearance of operating according to such stipulations is still maintained. Whether workers’ biases for or against the homeless are a cause or a product of their practices of suspicion is an excellent question for further research.

Suspecting Applicants’ Appearance and Demeanor

As opposed to suspecting documents, which have a witnessably obdurate quality, and can be filed to officially justify decisions, judging the appearance and demeanor of applicants can be neither officially sanctioned nor documented. Nonetheless, housing gatekeepers, like other street level bureaucrats, are well-known to use client characteristics as a basis for their suspicions. Deutscher’s (1968: 46) shows how housing gatekeepers *favor* those tenants with an appearance and demeanor which, “are, of course, those of the dominant middle class: cleanliness, clarity of speech, appropriate clothing, self-assurance, integrity, and the like” (also see Sahlin 1995). However, in the present study it was precisely such qualities of applicants which raise the suspicions of housing eligibility officers.

When Section 8 workers suspect that an applicant is hiding wealth or income that would make them ineligible for a housing subsidy, they often contrast the behavior of the applicant to their own behavior, using a “contrast structure” (Smith 1978: 38-47). According to Smith, such structures are comprised of a description of behavior preceded by a statement

for how to hear that behavior as anomalous. Consider, for instance, the manager's following statement about a problematic tenant on the Section 8 program.

“We've done everything we can yet she still complains. She says, well she's going to Oregon for a few weeks and hopes we won't have any problem with that. I say, 'You know what that tells me? That sends up a big red flag for me, that you can afford to leave for a few weeks for Oregon. I can't afford to go to Oregon. I gotta pay my rent, I got a family.' It's just amazing.”

This case stirs the manager's indignation, highlighted by juxtaposing the client's ability to take a vacation on a government subsidy as opposed to his inability to take a trip on his paycheck (see Miller, 1991).

Other workers did not specifically use a contrast structure, but they speak of judging an applicants' appearances as an indicator of their appropriateness as a Section 8 tenant. In the following, Ed speaks in general terms of some of the indicators that an applicant has hidden assets.

“But if the person's sitting in front of you, the longer you do the job, you have a sense of whether or not a person is living off \$500 a month or whether they are living off of much more than that. And none of this is in the regulations but, grooming, skin tone, the clearness of the eyes, the intelligence. A lot of that will tell you the standard of living of the individual in front of you. You can bring me two women in here, both on AFDC, both with two children, and I can tell you the one that's living strictly off of their AFDC grant, and the one that at least has a boyfriend that's taking her out to dinner once a week, or giving her some money to get her hair done or get her nails fixed.”

Below, Ed tells of how such practices were articulated in an intake interview.

Although the applicant had fulfilled all the legal requirements for qualification, she had not met his working notions of the appearance of a qualified applicant.

“I’m sitting here with a woman sitting in front of me with a freshly cut hairstyle, manicured nails, long nails, where we’re talking about the overlays, porcelain nails. And she’s saying that she’s homeless and she has a letter. Now based on regulations, I should basically say, ‘OK you have a letter verifying you’re homeless, you’re on the program.’ Well, this particular case sort of hit an emotion, and I said, ‘I don’t see how you’re living in a shelter and you haven’t broken your nails.’”

Section 8 workers’ suspicions may also arise in response to the way an applicant talks. In the excerpt from an intake interview below, Carol suspects Mitch, a man applying for a subsidy for his mother, whose lack of “need” is reflected in the way he speaks on his cellular phone.

Carol: And you are employed?

Mitch: Yes. Can I call work? [She nods and he dials] Sorry about the delay.

Carol: That’s OK.

[We wait]

Mitch [On phone]: What took you so long to get to the phone? Get to it quicker next time. I’ll be hung up for a little while more. OK? OK. [hangs up and sits back down]

Carol asks three more routine questions, and then goes to the copy machine and I follow her. As she’s copying the papers she tells me, “I bet he owns his own business. You don’t talk to your co-worker that way on the phone.” She talks about the nice quality of the suit he’s wearing and we laugh about it.

After the interview, Sara jokes with Carol about these applicants, saying, “So you sent them out to doctor some papers?” Then, when Carol tells her how he spoke on the telephone, Sara ardently affirms Carol’s suspicions, stating, “He owns it. Oh yeah. He owns it. You don’t talk to people at work that way unless you do.” Such inferences are then grounds for suspecting that the applicant may not fit workers’ typical notions of a Section 8 tenant as “destitute,” since Mitch may be able to provide his mother with adequate funds.

Suspecting Families

In addition to an applicant’s documents, appearance and demeanor, eligibility officers also suspect an applicant’s family relations in determining if they are eligible for a housing subsidy. As in the case of demeanor, the use of this criteria by the housing gatekeeper in the current study is in stark contrast to the ways Deutscher found housing gatekeepers discriminated based on family constellation. In Deutscher’s (1968: 45) study, “the gatekeeper does not approve of families without fathers present,” whereas in the current study, if an applicant’s job and the stability of their family lend them the appearance of being self-sufficient, they may not appear truly destitute, and this may arouse workers’ suspicions. Below, Carol speaks of her hesitations to grant a subsidy to a family that was fully qualified, but seemed not to “need” the program.

“There was a family that came in composed of a mother and her two daughters and a son. One of the daughters had a child and was getting AFDC. The other daughter was working and the mother was working. They were living in a unit where the rent was not high, and they all pitched in to make the rent. I kind of looked at that family, and maybe I’m wrong for doing it, but I thought to myself, no you really don’t need this program, not like the need that I see other people that come in here and need it. Because, even after you guys pay your rent, you have enough money left over to

where, you know, if one of you wanted to save and get their own apartment, or you know. Maybe I look at that wrong, but that's kind of the way I looked at it."

Officers are also suspicious of applicants who appear to be able to bring additional money into their family, but are not doing so. In the following, Carol interviews a veteran, Earl, who has a daughter, and she repeatedly calls the applicant to account for the fact that he is not receiving money from AFDC for his daughter.

Carol: So you get \$990 from the VA. Do you get any money for your daughter?

Earl: Nothing.

Carol: Have you ever applied for anything?

Earl: No.

[Then, after receiving information on where she goes to school, and verifying his income, rent, and identification, she comes back to this topic just prior to concluding the interview.]

Carol: I have one more question. Have you ever applied for income for your daughter? Have you ever?

Earl: No.

Carol: Have people told you you could get support?

Earl: I may be eligible. I could look into it, but I don't have the time. I knew I needed this.

Carol: You may be eligible to get something for your daughter. I'd ask. It's not to make you not eligible. Let me know how it goes.

After this interview, she speaks with Ed about her reservations, and he tells her that the applicant should verify the fact that he is not receiving money from AFDC. This would override the applicant's excuse that he "has no time," since procuring a letter that he is not

eligible for aid would probably be as time consuming as finding that he is eligible for aid. As Ed states, “if he doesn’t receive aid, he should show why.”

Below, Carol has been told by Mike, the man she is interviewing, that he has three sons, aged 15, 19 and 20. She then asks how each one is earning a living, as a means of determining how much income is coming into his house, but she doesn’t stop with questions simply about his sons’ unemployment.

Carol: What about the 19 year old?

Mike: He was working for the city too.

Carol: How long has he been unemployed?

Mike: 6, 7 months.

Carol [Staring without blinking at the applicant]: How has he been living?

Mike: It’s very hard. The money. He has nothing.

This sort of intense, direct questioning provides a strong moral undercurrent to the interview, and often prompts moralistic accounts from officers in time outs away from the applicant. Below, the interviewer talks with the researcher as she goes to retrieve a form needed by the applicant.

“You know I’m tired of people with kids who aren’t working. When I was 19, I wanted to work. I wanted to drive, and to have nice things and go out. I couldn’t just live on \$5 to \$10 a week! Uh uh. Something’s funny here. A nineteen year-old and a twenty year-old don’t just live on the money their parents give them... Sometimes you feel that they’re hiding something.”

As above, in this case Carol speaks of her own actions as normative, providing a contrast structure for hearing the subsequent information as anomalous, thereby highlighting the questionable nature of the applicants’ claims. While the regulations would not condone the fact that a worker uses personal criteria as a basis for judging applicants, such practices

may cast applicants' actions in sharper relief, and reassure the worker that, in the manager's words, she was doing all she could to "find the most eligible people to receive a very limited amount of funds."

Suspecting Racial/Ethnic Groups

While Section 8 workers develop their suspicions of applicants' documents, appearance, demeanor, and familial relations through the course of the intake interview, this section will show how workers become suspicious of applicants themselves prior to any contact, based on the applicants' presumed racial/ethnic status. In Deutscher's (1968) study, the gatekeeper discriminated against African-Americans by placing them in segregated housing projects. In the current study, workers notice how certain perceived racial/ethnic groups present routine problems in intake interviews. Despite workers' reflexive knowledge of regulations that explicitly prohibit the use of such criteria in determining eligibility, workers reify the patterns they notice in their workgroup discussions, and locally define competent work as warranting suspicion based on such "patterns." Specifically, workers often use generalizations based on perceived ethnic/racial categories in suspecting applicants' claims and determining eligibility. Such uses are of interest in this study not for how they incriminate the workers, but for how they reveal the workers' practical responses to the contingencies of their work (see Lipsky, 1980: 108-116). Such categorical understandings are learned through work experience, and, as Emerson (1992: 39) states, "are organizationally-sanctioned devices for assessing 'what is going on,' and not simply or primarily sources of bias," even though workers may speak of them in such terms.

On the one hand, workers are mindful and wary of their own personal biases which could predispose them to favor certain groups of people over others. On the other hand, they notice patterns of trouble among applicants of various racial or ethnic groups, and remark among themselves and to the fieldworker about the predictability of these patterns which

could influence their responses to applicants. In pointing out their own biases, Carol and Sara show how they share many of their working notions about ethnic groups.

Carol: “People have their MO’s, which you start to recognize after a while. I hate to be prejudiced, but Ed has said this too, and it’s just something you start to see. Hispanics almost never have a lease. They live with other people who help them out. For some reason, they just hardly ever have one. Blacks [said hesitantly, and she laughs], try to pull the game on you. Russians, Middle Easterners are very persistent. They’ll come back everyday to make themselves qualify. After you do this for a while you just start to see it.”

...

Sara: I mean I’m not prejudiced. Carol’s not prejudiced. But you see, it’s the Mexican families or Hispanic families that come in, normally, do not have a lease or rental agreement. It’s true. Middle Eastern families always have a scam, always in the best apartment, usually have money in the bank, it’s usually like with them, it’s always questionable. And you’re on the alert. You don’t want to but you just do. It’s like OK, what are you guys gonna try to do today? Um. Usually black families, normally they have a history of generational assistance, you know. It’s usually the same situation you see day in, day out.”

In both of these accounts, workers orient to the fact that their words could appear prejudiced. Yet the workers were not describing themselves, they were describing their work. As Lipsky (1980: 115) states, “they are particularly inclined to believe that experience provides the basis for knowledge in assessing the client world.”

Such locally recognized “knowledge” serves as a starting place for the review of a case, but is subject to revision in light of what emerges from the intake interview. Below, Carol articulates such knowledge (and the awareness that it could be perceived negatively)

while she previews the files of apparently African-American, Latino, and Persian applicants before their interviews. Carol pulls the file for her next interview. She tells me the applicant is on the 2 bedroom waiting list, and she's a 65 year-old African-American. She's on the applications with her 47 year old son.

“Get a life. I shouldn't say that. He's probably helping her.”

Carol tells me about her next interview with an elderly Latina who is on the application with her 16 year-old daughter. They claim a preference for paying over 50% of their income for rent, and local residency.

“She's on social security. “Now watch, she won't have a lease.”

Carol looks at her schedule. “Let's see,” she says. She points her finger down the list. “I've got 4 in the morning.”

“Op, that one'll be trouble,” she says, pointing at a Persian name. “No, I don't wanna do that,” she says, laughing, “but it's hard to help it.”

It is notable that while Carol's statements could be seen as discriminating against the applicants, she checks herself, reflexively orienting to that possibility. In the second case, Carol's local knowledge that the family is unlikely to have a lease may aid the family, for it may prepare her to pursue other means of verifying the family's residence and rent paid.

Workers also reveal such predispositions in the course of intake interviews. In the case below, Carol discusses her attitudes towards her current interviewee with the researcher during a “time out” from the interview in which she copies papers from the applicant's file. Although this Persian applicant has met all the criteria for eligibility, Carol still has reservations about allowing him onto the program.

“It's pretty obvious that he's qualified, but there's always that, you know how it is, that gut feeling of mmm I don't know. It's like, I don't know if I should say this on tape but, everybody has their M.O. Their M.O. is that they've got hidden assets. I

don't exactly believe that he has, no money, that he doesn't have any money at all, you know?"

As these excerpts may appear as a blatant example of racism, Carol states, "I don't know if I should say this on tape." In order to understand how she could make such a statement, it is important to recognize that the interview occurs in a context in which she had recently interviewed two Persian applicants whom she initially believed were qualified, but were later determined to be unqualified.⁵ While her suspicion of this applicant will not prevent him from receiving a Section 8 subsidy if he meets all the legal criteria for eligibility, she will review his case closer than that of a non-Persian applicant, and this review will be based on locally recognized warrantable grounds. As Lipsky (1980: 116) states, "Clients and concerned citizens see biased behavior. Street-level bureaucrats see attitudes forged from experience reinforced in their validity. Clients see unfairness; street-level bureaucrats see rational responses to bureaucratic necessities."

An Illuminating Case

Knowing how to note appearances which are locally recognized as suspicious, and knowing how to respond in interaction are difficult practices to teach. For example, Rubinstein (1973: 219) shows that a policeman's training at best consists of anecdotal advice from instructors such as, "watch out for people walking late at night," or "watch out for people carrying large packages" which had led to arrests in the "dimming past." As Rubinstein (1973: 219) states, "Each policeman must teach himself to see what he is looking at, just as he must teach himself to patrol. Older men help him out occasionally with hints and tips, but the skills he acquires are discovered by accident, by example, and by making mistakes. It is not a painless process, either for the policeman or for the people he encounters."

Next, we will see how Carol comes to recognize and act upon grounds for her suspicions through a dialogue with her more experienced colleagues, Joe and Ed. In this excerpt Carol *feels* that applicants who appear qualified actually are not qualified, and in her search for grounds of her suspicions, and in the instructions she receives from other workers, the practices of warranting suspicions in documents, families presumed obligations, and typifications of ethnic groups are underscored. In this case, a father's oldest son accompanies his father to ask for assistance for his father, who lives with his wife and his second son in the house of his third son. On paper, the family qualifies for assistance since they are paying more than 50% of their income towards their rent.⁶ Yet Carol defers making a decision on the case during the interview until she could talk with other staff members, because the applicants somehow do not "seem" like they should be receiving assistance. As she said to the fieldworker directly following the interview, "That man did not need this program. I felt like saying, 'you don't need this program.' I knew, but there was no way for me to say that, you know?"

In this case, Carol has many locally accountable reasons to be skeptical of the applicants' claims. First, this case violates the workers' assumptions about familial obligations, for the federal subsidy would allow the father to pay rent to his son. While such a practice was not contrary to the regulations, this seemed to be one of the main reasons Carol felt suspicious of these applicants. As she stated to me, "the thing is, if he wasn't with his son, he would appear qualified." Secondly, the applicants' name and appearance are visibly "Persian," and workers had certain expectations regarding Persian applicants, as discussed above. During the interview, Carol takes a "time out" from the clients to speak with the manager, Joe, about this case.

Carol: Can I ask you something?

Joe: Sure.

[Carol tells Joe that the father receives disability insurance and General Relief, and that they qualified under the rent they had to pay to their son.]

Joe: [shaking his head] These people don't belong on the program, do they? Is this where you want your tax money to go, to creeps like this? This guy's basically looking for us to subsidize his mortgage.

[Joe tells Carol to get a copy of the deed for the house, and make sure their parent's name isn't on it.]

Joe: Ask for deeds for their other properties, so their parent's name isn't on that either.

Carol: OK.

Like Carol, Joe suspects the applicants although he lacks grounds to dismiss their claims according to the regulations. He offers locally justified "good reasons," using the morally damning term, "creeps." Still, his advice to Carol is on legal grounds, requesting verification that the properties are not in the parents' name--verification which could be easily doctored.

Carol then resumes the interview, concluding it by leaving the applicants with a list of items to bring to their next appointment. She failed to articulate her suspicions to the applicants in the context of the interview, so these men could conceivably keep returning for follow-up appointments until they are granted a subsidy. Below, Carol expresses her reservations about seeing these applicants again, and refers to the skills of other workers as more apt to handle such issues.

"I know I don't wanna interview them. I'm gonna ask Joe if he'll do it, or Sara if she'll do it. 'Cause I'm too inexperienced to handle something like this. They're detectives. They'll ask him a question and get him to talk and then go ah ha! What did you say? Like when they first started talking, Mossein [the second son] was

working, and then all of a sudden I come back and he's not working. Well what is it?

You know? Did you catch that?"

Although Carol proposes an incident in the interview which elicited her suspicion, since it could reveal an additional source of income, she was not able to act on it in the course of the interview.

As I continue to interview Carol, Ed enters the office, and I elicit his opinion of the case. In the excerpts that follow, he begins to show Carol, in the course of his instructions, both what she may have noticed with suspicion and how she may have acted on that awareness.

Ed: OK. So he had himself, his wife, and his 23 year old son.

Carol: Mm hmm.

Interviewer: This brother said the 23 year old brother [Mossein] was in chiropractic school all the time, so she gave him a school verification form.

Ed: Who's paying tuition? [he looks squarely at Carol] You know, part of this job is we get caught up in the regulations, and we forget common-sense. Sometimes if you approach people with common-sense, they may not like it, but they get the understanding. And the bottom line is, this program is designed for low income families. When we say low income, we're talking about income available to you.

Now it appears as though you have one son that has multiple properties that you could live in. You have another son where you say he's a dependent with no income, but he's going to chiropractic school. So, in order for us to determine your eligibility, we have to be sure that there's no unreported income. And you have assets available to you. So until we can get a clear picture of that, we can't say that you're qualified for this program.

Ed begins his monologue with Carol with an implied criticism, that she is too caught up in legal stipulations to act in locally recognized competent ways, referred to here as, “common-sense.” Although he speaks of common-sense as something “we forget,” as if it is intrinsic to human nature, he then enacts for Carol what using common-sense consists of in an interview. Ed then lists the clues for inferring that the applicants do not “fit” the typified notion of applicants as “low income families.” Finally, Ed provides her a way to “cool the mark out” (Goffman, 1952), by explaining this situation to these interviewees without telling them “no” outright, which would not be appropriate without definitive evidence of their ineligibility.

Thus far, each of the ways the workers probed to find these applicants unqualified were unsuccessful. If the parents’ names were on the deeds to the property they were renting from their children, they could simply omit those in a subsequent interview. The two suspicions concerning the second son, who was living with the father and attending chiropractic school, that he may be bringing in unreported income by working, or that there may be unreported income based on the fact that someone had to be paying for his tuition, were also moot since the parents mentioned they were willing to remove the dependent son from the application, as Carol informed Ed. Later, however, as Ed and Carol review her day’s interviews, they collaboratively arrive at a way to prove this ineligibility.

Ed: You’re dealing with relatives here. And our program’s a government program and it has to be able to withstand scrutiny by an objective party, so it would appear that--well common-sense. Why are you charging your parents rent anyway?

Carol: Huhu. Mm hmm.

Ed: You know. How much are they supposed to be paying in rent?

Carol: \$500.

Ed: OK, now here you go.

Carol: \$400 and \$200, and you're taking \$500 of your parents' money?

Ed: Parents' money? No.

Carol: And you're leaving them to live off of \$100?

Ed: Make a note of that, because that's where you get them.

As Ed begins this excerpt, he collaboratively searches with Carol for a foundation for their suspicions in the applicant's family status, and in the fact that their program is subject to government oversight. Then, signaling he has found a means of questioning these applicants, he provides for his talk as connected to prior instructions by repeating what he had said earlier ("Use common-sense"). This statement also signals to Carol to hear him using common-sense, through an enacted statement that is not simply a question to the applicants, but a confrontation. This morally challenges the applicant's family relations in terms of workers' typified notions of familial obligations, and may even shame them (the father is receiving \$400 from Supplemental Security Insurance, the mother \$200 from General Relief, and their son is charging them \$500 in rent). Ed's final statement in this excerpt emphasizes officers' satisfaction when, in a job that mostly consists of the routine paperwork of recertifications and modifications, they can prevent an unworthy applicant from getting onto the program (compare Sacks 1972: 293 and Rubinstein 1973: 219, 225). As their conversation continues, Ed tells Carol she can cancel her subsequent interview with these applicants, and instead send them a letter on file which states, "There appears to be unreported income that is not verifiable. Based on the lack of information, you're not qualified."

As they continue to discuss the case, they enact through a sort of role play what they could say to the applicants. First, Ed utters another hypothetical challenge, continuing to strike at the moral transgression of their claims of eligibility. Then Carol, perhaps in her eagerness to show herself as a quick study, offers a challenge of her own.

Ed: Why don't you let them stay there free? If you don't charge them so much money in rent, they don't need this program.

Carol: If I had two houses I wouldn't charge my mother [Carol laughs heartily but Ed does not].

Ed: See that's the thing. But would the regulations say it?

Carol: Mm hmm.

Ed does not join with Carol in her laughter, but is careful to point out that her personalized contrast structure is not to be dismissed, but is in fact integral to doing the job. Just such a way of "personalizing" a case may make the doing of suspicion tangible for the novice, for at this worksite competence is found not when one's personal "biases" are omitted, but when they are integrally incorporated into doing the job. As the workers find a personal sense of moral outrage at the applicants' claims, rather than a particular regulatory guideline, they come to see most clearly how those claims might be effectively questioned. As Ed states in a career interview,

"Initially you are interested in doing your job correctly. That means following the regulations and knowing the regulations and applying them to the people sitting in front you. I think the next step that happens is your own self judgment. What beliefs, politics, and feelings that you have, they come to play in you performing your job.... So, you use all of the skills and the knowledge that you have in life in doing your job."

Conclusion

In revisiting the biases of housing gatekeepers, this analysis has shown how they may be founded in working practices of suspicion which are integral to officer's notions of local competence. In contrast to prior studies by Deutscher (1968), and Sahlin (1995), this study finds that such practices are not rooted in middle-class bias, but arise from workers' earnest

efforts to find the most destitute applicants for limited funds. The appearance and demeanor, the families of applicants, and their supposed ethnicity continue to be important in such workers' eligibility decisions, but in a very different sense in the current study. Applicants are not discredited for appearing destitute, but for appearing middle-class, and families are not excluded for having a single parent, but they are suspected if they seem to underreport potential sources of income, or seek subsidies for rentals within the family. Race is seen not in a way that warrants segregation, but in a way that cues gatekeepers into potential problems in applications. Far from being secretive and apologetic for such practices, experienced workers help novices find a personalized means to potentially threaten the face of ineligible applicants, through contrast structures. Such contrast structures are integral tools for novices, for it is through articulating what they could not morally condone for themselves, such as charging a mother rent, that they find the means to question applicants. Two primary questions arise from this analysis. First, why might workers' use of the appearance and demeanor, family constellation, and the presumed ethnicity of applicants in the current study differ so substantially from prior studies? Secondly, are workers justified in judging applicants based on their appearance, demeanor, family obligations, and presumed ethnicity?

First, it is notable that Deutscher observed housing gatekeepers for only two weeks, and Sahlin conducted surveys and interviews, but not did not directly observe eligibility practices. While both studies were conducted some time ago, and regard gatekeepers for public housing, rather than portable vouchers, all housing gatekeepers face similar constraints in finding the best applicants for limited funds. Hence, one would expect to find practices of suspicion in each setting, and one might presume that with a more in-depth, ethnographic methodology, one might find how bias is rooted in such locally-justified practices in any street level bureaucracy where workers must determine eligibility for limited resources.

In addressing the second question, certainly housing gatekeepers have no legal basis for such practices, and it is doubtful a legislator could write them into law even if they wanted to. Nonetheless, the practices discussed above are tacit, “going without saying,” and are the basis for determining, among workers, which are most competent. Section 8 officers are judged by administrators on the basis of their files, and indeed, the office which serves as the basis of this study was commended for their exhaustive paperwork. Yet Section 8 workers judge each other on the basis of their practices of suspicion, and the respect or embarrassment that results from such collegiality is a most powerful motivator. Only through observing such processes, rather than generic outcomes, might we better understand the sources of bias in the provision of social services.

While such discriminatory actions are troubling, more troubling are the broader social processes which leave so many women and people of color in poverty and homeless in the first place (see Oliver and Shapiro, 1995; Edin and Lein, 1997). As Deutscher (1968:50) noted, housing gatekeepers are scapegoats for the disappointed and disgruntled housing applicants, as well as housing administrators and policy makers. The allocation of such social services can never be perfect, but the more the poor are empowered to address discriminatory practices and appeal apparently unjust decisions, the more street level bureaucrats will be held accountable, and the less likely they will engage in unfair practices. On the other hand, for those instances in which bureaucrats’ practices of suspicion are able to weed out those who would unfairly take advantage of social services, thereby depriving others who may be more needy but less savvy, we would do well to provide them a long overdue acknowledgement.

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Notes

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² This description applies to the Section 8 Program at the time of the fieldwork; the program has undergone substantial legislative changes since that time.

³ At the time of the fieldwork, the limits on household income (based on 50% of the annually adjusted median family income for the regional area, as determined by the Department of Housing and Urban Development) were as follows: for 1 person, \$16,900.00; 2 persons, \$19,300.00; 3 persons, \$21,750.00; 4 persons, \$24,150.00; 5 persons \$26,100.00; 6 persons, \$28,000.00.

⁴ The Quadel Coursebook notes: “Family is not completely defined by HUD. Public Housing Authoritys must define in their Administrative Plan.” The coursebook then provides a “commonly used definition” as: “Two or more persons sharing residency whose income and resources are available to meet the family’s needs and who are related by blood, marriage, or operation of law (or who give evidence of a stable relationship which has existed over a period of time).” Thus, when this definition is applied, two friends who are not kin may be considered as “family.” See Gubrium and Holstein (1993) for how the meaning of “family” is determined within an organizational context.

⁵ One applicant owned two businesses and had over \$10,000 invested in bonds, and another applicant rented a room in one of his son’s two large houses in exclusive housing areas. At the same time, Carol was also aware that many needy Persian applicants had deservedly received Section 8 subsidies at this office.

⁶ Parents who pay over 50% of their income towards rent on property their children own can be eligible for Section 8 provided their name is not on the deed.