



“Hurry up and wait”: Stigma, Poverty, and Contractual Citizenship

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Abstract

The emergence of welfare contractualism in the United States in the 1970s marked a shift from viewing welfare as an entitlement to viewing welfare as a right to be earned through work. Combined with the continual degradation of labor markets since the 1970s, the rise of neoliberal ideology emphasizing individualism, and the passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, the devolved welfare system – most often managed by a myriad of social service nonprofits – has exacerbated the difficulties of the poor. Scholars have noted, for instance, the loss of civil rights and the proliferation of administrative burdens – including incessant waiting – with which poor people seeking aid are increasingly faced. But “contractual citizenship,” I argue, has not just remade relations between the poor and the state. Rather, as a diffuse cultural ethos, contractual citizenship has also remade relations between and amongst the poor themselves, exacerbating stigmatization, distancing, and denigration. Drawing upon an ethnography of a soup kitchen based in Syracuse, New York, I argue that as a consequence of contractual citizenship, prospective recipients of aid and the poor more broadly adapt their behavior to appear as deserving, worthy citizens and, simultaneously, externally defame their peers for their lesser behaviors. Those who take maximum advantage of free resources – such as attending multiple emergency food programs and taking more than one plate of food – are often deemed by other poor recipients of aid as greedy, ungrateful, and selfish. Thus, the repetitious and time-consuming nature of interacting with the state for basic resources – such as housing or welfare – is further complicated by this intraclass stigma. These findings not only shed light on the challenges of building solidarity amongst the poor but show how political and economic shifts influence how poor people interact with each other and the state.

Keywords Stigma · Poverty · Waiting · Neoliberalism · Welfare Reform · Contractual Citizenship

Introduction

In the eight months that I attended a soup kitchen in Syracuse's Near Westside neighborhood, I heard the same story again and again: someone would apply for a given entitlement or resource, wait for months on end, receive a letter of rejection or an unfavorable notification, reapply, wait some more, and then get rejected or pushed away again. Some poor people shared “hacks” that they had heard of to successfully receive state support. Denise, a Black woman in her late 50s experiencing foot problems, was told by her brother that her application for Social Security Disability Income (SSDI) would be successful as long as she resubmitted it as many times as necessary over a period of anywhere between five to ten years. Denise told me that she would do whatever it takes to get SSDI, even if it meant waiting for several years and remaining out of work. While numerous scholars have examined the formal administrative burdens or organizational practices that give rise to waiting (Auyero 2012; Moynihan and Herd 2018; Purser 2012), I show how waiting arises out of informal relations of intraclass stigma. Rather than observe poor people's interactions with the state, I observed the intraclass social dynamics that are consequences of a welfare regime marked by neoliberal paternalism.

Waiting, then, is not only an exertion of the state's power over the poor, but a result of the “rolling back” (Peck and Tickell 2002) of the welfare state, government devolution, and the degradation of labor markets. The economic crises in the 1960s and 1970s gave way to the rise of a new welfare regime that reshaped the state's relationship to the low-wage labor market and the behavioral expectations of welfare recipients/workers themselves (Collins and Mayer 2010; Soss et al. 2011). Soss et al. (2011) argue that neoliberalism has not only contracted the state through a decrease in federally and state-governed services, but it has also expanded services by extending the state (organizations receiving state and federal funds) through a *paternalistic* approach premised on behavioral and moral improvement. Neoliberal paternalism, as it plays out in poverty governance, creates “interventions that punish the poor” and “work hand in hand with efforts to support and incentivize the poor, collectively serving a broader disciplinary agenda that specifies the creation of compliant and competent worker-citizens as its ultimate end” (Soss et al. 2011, 9). The rise of neoliberalism restructured welfare in such a way that expands and enforces waiting.

I argue that the repetitious and time-consuming nature of interacting with the state for basic resources, such as housing and welfare, is further complicated by poor people's intraclass stigma. Mired in a set of informal social dynamics produced by contractual citizenship, poor people are often motivated to toe the line so as not to appear greedy or ungrateful, which, for many soup kitchen attendees, meant remaining patient while waiting for state and nonprofit support.

In this article, based upon ethnographic fieldwork in a soup kitchen, I expand on Collins and Mayer's (2010) contributions to show how contractual citizenship – defined as more than a citizenship marker, as also a cultural ethos – shapes not just poor people's relations with the state, but with each other. The poor people with whom I spoke had internalized neoliberal lessons to appear as grateful, hard-working citizens worthy of – rather than entitled to – support. These desires were often outwardly expressed through intraclass stigma and judgment of their peers. As a diffuse

cultural ethos, contractual citizenship shapes relations amongst and between the poor themselves, inducing the poor to wait so as to appear “deserving.”

To make this case, I first review literature on contractual citizenship and intraclass stigma. In the subsequent section, I describe my research methodology and provide an overview of the poverty landscape in Syracuse, New York. I then draw from fieldnotes to analyze the intraclass stigmatization and judgment of soup kitchen attendees. I show how this intraclass stigma is so rampant that soup kitchen attendees waiting on state services go to great lengths to avoid being viewed as ungrateful or entitled by their peers. I conclude with an analysis of the ramifications of these social dynamics, which hinder the possibility of class solidarity amongst the extremely poor.

The Emergence of Contractual Citizenship

Recipients of charity and welfare have long been stigmatized, as the predominant American conception of poverty is understood through the lens of individual and moral failure rather than resulting from structural or systemic causes (Bonnet 2019; Katz 1996; Piven and Cloward 1971; Steensland 2011). The ever-present binary classification of poor people as “deserving” or “undeserving” of federal, state, or charitable aid can be traced back to the early sixteenth century when Belgian lawmakers demanded that poor people must be working in order to receive relief (Bonnet 2019). Political perceptions of poor people and welfare in the sixteenth century are eerily similar to that of our contemporary welfare regime. However, the emphasis that a person must work in order to be deemed worthy of aid has not always been the case (Steensland 2011). Rather, the character of a welfare regime is shaped by the hegemonic understanding of poverty at a given time. For instance, the turn away from agricultural labor and toward urban manufacturing jobs during the Great Migration left poor Black people without employment and little government support (Piven and Cloward 1977). With economic conditions for many Americans turning ever more precarious – coupled with the racial injustices of the Jim Crow era – disruptive protests broke out across the country, highlighting Americans’ dire need for expanded entitlements (Piven and Cloward 1977). During this period, a person’s need for economic support became commonly understood as a result of systemic issues, whether they be political, social, or economic.

Many of the poor had apparently come to believe that a society which denied them jobs and adequate wages did at least owe them a survival income. It was a period that began to resemble the Great Depression, for in both periods masses of people concluded that “the system” was responsible for their economic plight, not they themselves... [Welfare applicants] in welfare waiting rooms had changed. They were no long as humble, as self-effacing, as pleading; they were more indignant, angrier, more demanding (Piven and Cloward 1977, 273–275).

The public denouncement of the “deserving” and “undeserving” dichotomy in the mid-1960s allowed for collective movements led by groups such as the National Wel-

fare Rights Organization and the Black Panthers to pave the way for federally funded welfare programs (Katz 1996; Piven and Cloward 1977; Potorti 2017; West 1981). Through collective organizing and mass protest, poor people were able to demand better living conditions.

As welfare rolls soared and people witnessed the positives of state intervention and regulation, proponents of neoliberalism were getting their feet wet and putting forth false, derogatory claims about welfare recipients (Crafton 2014; Piven and Cloward 1977). Neoliberal ideology seeks to recalibrate state intervention through deregulation and devolution, to cut spending, to privatize markets, and to end dependence on welfare (Crafton 2014; Katz 2002; Soss et al. 2011). The political support for each of these objectives coalesced to fuel the outsourcing of labor overseas, the breakdown of traditional full-time employment, and the rise of “flexible” labor – which often lacks workplace protections and/or benefits – such as part-time, consulting, temporary, and gig work (Doussard 2013). Through “second-order devolution,” or the transferring of power from the state to the municipal scale, nonprofit and charitable organizations have increasingly functioned as the frontline overseers of issues such as health, housing, and food access (Soss et al. 2011). The shifting political and economic landscape resulted in less social protections for the unemployed and working poor populations, further exacerbating economic instability (Hacker 2004). The application of the market to the welfare state, as Katz (2002, 30–31) explains, resulted in policy that was in direct contradiction to entitlements: “Benefits are rewards, not entitlements; there should be no guarantees. Ultimately, the responsibility for economic security should rest not with charity, employers, or the state, but with autonomous individuals taking charge of their lives.” President Nixon’s denigrating stereotypes of poor people and his creation of workfare programs (supported by Ronald Reagan, then-Governor of California) supplemented the national sentiment that poor people were lazy and undeserving of aid and, thus, should be put to work in order to receive support (Piven and Cloward 1977; Steensland 2011). In stark contrast to the successful welfare rights movement of the 1960s, “the ‘social pathologies’ of the poor were redefined as having their cause in overly permissive relief arrangements, not in defective socio-economic arrangements” (Piven and Cloward 1977, 339).

Today, welfare looks strikingly different than in the mid-1960s and early 1970s. Collins and Mayer (2010, 149) explain this shift from entitlements to welfare contracts in the 1970s as one where “citizenship was not the birthright for everyone but had to be earned through productive labor. This doctrine drew on our nation’s long-standing embrace of work as a key value, but it took the additional step of arguing that citizenship should be contingent on performance.” Workfare and job readiness programs are indicative of the restructured relationship between the state and individuals following welfare reform (Broughton 2003; Dickinson 2016; Hennigan and Purser 2018, 2020; Purser and Hennigan 2017, 2018). Lawmakers have even required recipients of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) – which provides food assistance to more than 42 million in the United States – to show their deservingness through work (Aussenberg and Billings 2021; Dickinson 2019).¹

¹ Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump administration proposed stricter eligibility requirements for SNAP. Under this proposal, counties experiencing unemployment rates below 6% would not be allowed

The rise of neoliberalism's focus on individual choice coupled with an increasingly precarious labor market, contractual welfare state, and denigrating stereotypes of the poor, birthed a new cultural ethos characterized by incessant individualism and the reproduction of poverty stigma. Lawrence Mead's (1986) *Beyond Entitlement*, for instance, championed discipline as the mechanism for achieving individual behavioral reform, as Mead believed the most successful way to move people off the welfare rolls was by "setting standards for their behavior and persuading them to 'blame themselves' for their failures" (Collins and Mayer 2010, 16).

Collins and Mayer's (2010) concept of "contractual citizenship" broadly refers to the creation of eligibility criteria to receive welfare benefits, be it attending workfare or job readiness programs *in exchange for* benefits or adapting a set of behaviors to appear as a moral and "deserving" citizen (Katz 1996). Many scholars write about this through the framework of "administrative burdens" (Moynihan and Herd 2018).

New theories of welfare contractualism are premised on the trading of civil rights for aid. By accepting assistance from the state, poor women are asked to relinquish a range of rights and liberties, from the freedom to decide whether to stay home with their children and to maintain ties to the fathers of their children, to the right to choose when and where to work and at what kind of job, to basic labor rights and protections while working at the job (Collins and Mayer 2010, 14).

The starting point for this paper is that the shift from welfare as an entitlement to welfare as contingent had broad ramifications. Indeed, contractual citizenship did not just reshape the relationship of the poor to the state. As a diffuse cultural ethos arising out of neoliberalism, welfare reform, and a degraded labor market, contractual citizenship also reshapes relations between and amongst the poor. Contractual citizenship extends beyond the doors of workfare programs and welfare offices to influence daily, informal conversations between and amongst poor people. The heightened individualism characteristic of contractual citizenship fuels intraclass stigma amongst the poor, leading poor people to adapt their behavior so as to appear as deserving, worthy citizens and, concomitantly, externally defame their peers for their lesser behaviors.

Several scholars have written about the dynamics of intraclass stigmatization (Pemberton et al. 2016; Purser 2009; Reutter et al. 2009; Snow and Anderson 1987; Wacquant 2008, 2010). Studies of intraclass stigma in welfare programs show how participants reproduce their own class stereotypes and engage in distancing behavior using the deserving/underserving bifurcation (Broughton 2003; Collins et al. 2020; Hughes 2019). In a study of Black mothers enrolled in welfare programs, Cayce Hughes (2019) examines how formal surveillance mechanisms, such as drug testing and marriage and parenting classes predicated on behavioral reform, encourage informal surveilling by the mothers themselves. Where Hughes (2019) focuses on the

to waive time-limit requirements. In April 2021, the Biden administration dropped this rule and paused requirements to increase food access during an unprecedented global crisis. However, the Biden administration has expressed their interest in returning to the "longstanding" employment and time-limit requirements following the pandemic (Aussenberg and Billings 2021; USDA Press 2021).

surveillance processes and interactions that occur while applying for and receiving benefits, I examine the restructuring of social relations that result from contractual citizenship.

My study took place in a soup kitchen, a site where scholars have repeatedly pointed out the shame and stigma associated with free, or “second hand,” food (Bruckner et al. 2021; De Souza 2019; Poppendieck 1998; Riches 2018). The concept of “neoliberal stigma,” developed by de Souza (2019), situates stigmatization by both food pantry volunteers and individuals within the contemporary political and economic context. The discourse and ideological premise of the evangelical food pantry reproduced neoliberal stigma, or stigmatizing others using the neoliberal language of “hard work, personal responsibility, and economic citizenship.” This environment encouraged clients to engage in “continuous self-surveillance, self-discipline, and self-censorship and, by the same token, cast suspicion on the motives, intentions, and behaviors of others” (de Souza 2019, 183).²

The atmosphere of the soup kitchen, where I observed and shared meals with people, was one fueled by intraclass stigmatization. Most commonly, the ramifications of intraclass stigmatization manifested in the form of waiting, of remaining patient, of maintaining a grateful, deserving appearance. Scholars writing about waiting are often analyzing the role of the state in exacerbating the difficulties of the poor (Auyero 2012; Ozoliņa-Fitzgerald 2016; Purser 2012). My ethnographic findings, however, suggest that waiting is not only exacerbated by state practices and administrative burdens. Taking into account the intraclass social dynamics developed from the cultural ethos of contractual citizenship, I argue that waiting is also exacerbated by intraclass stigmatization and judgement.

This article further examines the linkages between and consequences of work, welfare, intraclass stigma, and waiting. Daily interactions between poor people at a soup kitchen revealed not only the barriers they face when interacting with the state but also the internalized and reproduced class stigmatization enacted through judging people for not being grateful. The cultural ethos of contractual citizenship heightens the desire to become a grateful and deserving citizen, resulting not in collective action but rather in the superficial judgement of peers. These social dynamics limit poor people from speaking to each other about their injustices and exacerbate waiting on the state for support.

Research Methodology

Poverty in Syracuse

This study took place in one of the several neighborhoods with concentrated poverty in Syracuse, New York. A city struggling to economically recover from sharp declines in manufacturing jobs, Syracuse consistently ranks as having one of the highest urban poverty rates in the country. Like many other postindustrial Rustbelt

² See Bruckner et al. (2021) for further analyses of how clients of emergency food assistance programs reproduce neoliberal stigma and hinder social solidarity.

cities, it is historically known for redlining, “white flight” during the rise of suburbs and interstate highways, and the displacement of nearly 4,000 families and individuals through urban renewal (Ducre 2012).

During my first trip to the Near Westside on a blustery January afternoon, I passed under a bridge painted crimson red with the words “Mission District” in white, introducing and identifying the area as part of the Rescue Mission, a faith-based network of homeless shelters and soup kitchens in Syracuse and nearby cities. Conveying the Mission’s optimism, the opposite side of the bridge is painted with the slogan, “Lives Change Here.” I continued driving to see a line of about twenty people waiting outside of an emergency food program. A church nearby promoted itself with two straightforward banners that say, “SINNERS WELCOME” and “WHO AM I TO JUDGE?” I watched people file in and out of a health center with varying ailments, arriving by taxi, car, medical transport, and foot. Many people were not wearing warm clothing or close-toed shoes even though it was a sub-zero degree winter day. Across the parking lot is a store now boarded up with graffiti-covered plywood.

The physical character of the Near Westside is not only illustrative of the high levels of poverty in the neighborhood but also of the high levels of involvement by charitable and faith-based organizations. The Near Westside is a predominantly Black and Hispanic neighborhood where nearly half of residents live at or below the poverty line.³ As of 2017, 60.3% of residents had not worked in the past year. The Near Westside in particular has long been a focus of many non-profit and faith-based organizations, academic institutions, and healthcare groups working to “address poverty.” Collaborative groups, such as the Near Westside Initiative, have attempted to grapple with symptoms of poverty through economic development, artwork installations, paternalistic nutrition and health education, and painted plywood over abandoned house windows with inspirational quotes. The constant stigmatization of residents living in the Near Westside and lack of reflexivity by local politicians, school board officials, non-profit organizations, and charitable organizations continues to reproduce rather than resolve structural poverty.

Data Collection and Analysis

In October 2017, an independently owned, full-service grocery store permanently closed after 97 years in business. From January to August 2018, I conducted an ethnography of a soup kitchen in the Near Westside out of a desire to understand how residents were impacted by neighborhood change. The soup kitchen operates via a consistent set of predominantly white, middle-aged suburbanites who attend the nearby neighborhood Catholic Church. The soup kitchen is held in one of the church’s facilities that operates as both a gymnasium and auditorium. Each Wednesday, the street outside of the soup kitchen is lined with brand new cars on each side, with makes and models that are nowhere to be seen during the rest of the week. I ate with people living in the Near Westside neighborhood and attending from other parts of Syracuse. Unlike food pantries, which have strict geographic regulations on

³ All data were obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2013–2017.

participation, the soup kitchen is open to anyone, regardless of where they live. The soup kitchen is attended most heavily by Near Westside senior citizens and residents who are disabled or living in poverty, often reliant on benefits via Public Assistance (PA), Social Security Disability Income (SSDI), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and, of course, charity. Many of the people who rely regularly on the soup kitchen live in public housing located less than a block away.

My entry into the field site was undoubtedly messy. I arrived outside the soup kitchen and stood in the cold behind about thirty other people waiting to get inside. Two queues exist: one for those looking to get dry goods from the food pantry and one for the weekly soup kitchen. Once the double doors to the soup kitchen opened, I walked inside to see two white men sporting slacks and dress shirts setting up tables for health care and rehabilitation programs. An older white man played the piano in a cheery key. An older female volunteer wearing an apron, visor, and latex gloves greeted everyone as they walked through the door. Excitedly waving, she placed herself in a way that directed the herd of people toward the hot food line. As people filed through the heavy double doors, volunteers set free clothing on tables. “You can only take two,” another female volunteer says. The line of people slowly inch towards the volunteers serving food meanwhile a middle-aged female volunteer shouts into a megaphone, “No one can get seconds until everyone has been fed. We will make an announcement when you may come back for more.”

Although I was making roughly \$7,000 per year as a teaching assistant at the time, everything about my appearance expressed to soup kitchen attendees that I was anything but poor.⁴ When I explained that I was attending the soup kitchen to speak with people about the closure of a nearby grocery store, I was told by a few younger Hispanic women that I should “be careful of what I’m trying to do,” insinuating that I did not belong. Several people flat out ignored my presence when I tried to engage them in a conversation. I found my true entry into the field when I met a group of mostly Near Westside residents who lived in the senior apartment complex down the street. The group ebbed and flowed over the eight months – sometimes people did not show up because they were sick, sometimes they got their plate of food, wrapped it up in a paper towel, and went straight back to their homes – but as the weeks passed and I kept coming back, my relationships blossomed with people, talking about more than just the lack of sugar in the lemonade or the dreary Syracuse weather. My ethnography expanded from just attending the soup kitchen to hanging out with people in their apartments, sitting outside with them when the weather was nice, and taking people out for coffee to get to know them better. On one occasion, I sat through a medical procedure with Rita, a woman who had disclosed to me in secret that she had lung cancer.⁵

People quickly began telling me the real things they were going through. I started to see a pattern emerge as person after person told me about their struggles engaging

⁴ My positionality undoubtedly impacted the way study participants initially spoke of their peers and of themselves to me. However, over time, the study participants let down their guard, viewing me less as someone to impress and more as a peer who joined them for a weekly meal at the soup kitchen.

⁵ All references to people I interacted with at the soup kitchen, as well as the name of the soup kitchen, are pseudonyms.

with the social safety net and the never-ending list of nonprofits subbing in for the government as the neoliberal rolled-out social service providers (Peck and Tickell 2002). Similar to Maggie Dickinson's (2019, 7) ethnography of a soup kitchen in New York City, I too saw how "every crisis was met with a bag of groceries or a hot meal." Charles, a man who had been homeless for several years, told me that he had a "lotta food, [but] no money." It certainly appeared as though food was one of the few resources that people could consistently access. However, where Dickinson saw stigma and judgment of volunteers *by* volunteers, I saw stigma and judgment of soup kitchen attendees *by* soup kitchen attendees.

In total, I spent roughly 100 hours in the Near Westside or with residents of the Near Westside conducting participant observation through what I would argue was a form of a "go-along" or "hanging out" which Kusenbach (2003, 463) defines as accompanying participants in their routine activities, "asking questions, listening, and observing [to] actively explore [participants'] stream of experiences and practices as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment." I purposefully did not take notes or use any recording devices because I believed my ability to build rapport and deep relationships with the people who I encountered would be hindered by doing so. To record data, within 24 hours of each visit to the Near Westside or with Near Westside residents, I took detailed field notes, provided my own analysis of the visit, and read current scholarship on stigma and waiting to understand better how my observations were reflective of, or differed from, existing conversations and debates. This grounded approach is a response to Link and Phelan's (2001, 365) claim that people who study outside of their own identity and social class "do so from the vantage point of theories that are uninformed by the lived experience of the people they study... The result is a misunderstanding of the experience of the people who are stigmatized and the perpetuation of unsubstantiated assumptions." It was this immersed, iterative process that revealed the intersection between contractual citizenship and intraclass stigma. As Kristen Luker (2008, 61) reminds us, "The research question often reveals itself at the end, or close to the end, of the research (this is, after all, a voyage of *discovery*)." My fluid and iterative approach to participant observation entailed a mixture of inductive and deductive approaches that allowed me to deeply immerse myself in the neighborhood (Jerolmack and Khan 2018; Luker 2008). Inductively, I drew theoretical arguments *from* my field notes. Deductively, I built upon these theoretical contributions by visiting and revisiting relevant literature.

I engaged in reflexivity throughout my field note taking as often as possible, offering reflections on how my identity affected my conversations, perceptions of myself and others, and experiences that occurred during fieldwork. After I concluded participant observation of the soup kitchen, I compiled all field notes and used Atlas.ti to read through and code each set of field notes. I identified the common themes of judgement, stigmatization, waiting, and lack of access to basic resources.

“People are Given Free Things but Still Bitch about Something”

Rita, a Panamanian woman in her 70s, is a well-known and highly respected longtime resident living in extreme poverty in the Near Westside neighborhood. She moved from Panama to Texas in 1996, working various jobs as a food service worker for roughly \$25 per hour before moving to Syracuse. As we would take our usual walk back to her apartment following lunch at the soup kitchen, I found myself stopping every half-block or so for Rita to catch up with a friend passing by or to get a cigarette from one of her friends. Rita’s animated personality was illustrated by her demanding tone of voice and blunt attitude.

Shortly after meeting Rita, she told me how people were “greedy” for going to multiple soup kitchens and that people should not so heavily take advantage of emergency food programs. “If people took our free food away, then everyone would have to get a job or start stealing food,” Rita said. She then explained how losing emergency food programs would be awful because no one would want to sit through job readiness programs that do not pay their participants. Rita then told me how thankful she was for the free food, noting that she does not like to complain.

During another lunch at the soup kitchen, Rita derided an old Hispanic woman who always packed her personal shopping cart full to the brim with food from both the soup kitchen and the adjacent food pantry. Rita complained that the woman should have only taken one slice of pie instead of the whole pie. A few months later, we stood in line, waiting for the soup kitchen doors to open, when Rita commented on the same woman, who this time was lugging her Tupperware. She did, in fact, have four different Tupperware containers – two smaller, sandwich sized ones and two larger ones that could hold about 24 cupcakes. Once the soup kitchen volunteers allowed us inside, Rita sparked a conversation with one of the white female volunteers, Bonnie, about how the woman takes too much food. “I know! She steals everything,” Bonnie responded, without hesitation. As de Souza (2019, 123) similarly found, although Bonnie was well-meaning and generally kind to soup kitchen attendees, she “ended up surveilling and policing poor citizens and creating new languages to demarcate the so-called deserving and undeserving poor.”

On another occasion, a different woman approached the table where Rita and I were sitting, carrying a plate of food. The woman began wrapping up her food to bring back to her apartment to warm up in her microwave. The soup kitchen did not have a microwave and hot dishes were often served at lukewarm temperatures. After she left, Rita immediately looked me straight in the eye and said, “Do you see what I mean now? I almost told her that she should be thankful for what she receives, but then I kept my mouth shut. You see what I mean? People are given free things but still bitch about something.” Rita found the woman’s decision to reheat her food in her own home to be unacceptable, insinuating that the woman should have shown grace for the ability to access free food and not complain.

Contrary to the social solidarity of the poor in the 1960s and 1970s, people tend not to view their peers’ economic plight as a systemic or structural issue but, rather, as a personal or moral failing (Katz 1996; Piven and Cloward 1977; West 1981). Rita identified the correct and appropriate behavior for her peers while simultaneously removing herself from her own class through distancing and denigration. The lens

through which Rita sees her peers, and through which the volunteer views those she serves, is not much different from that of broader society (Bonnet 2019; Katz 1996; Piven and Cloward 1971; Soss et al. 2011). She immediately set the precedent for what is acceptable by constantly complaining about others' actions. No longer affiliating herself with low-income people who are accessing multiple soup kitchens or emergency food programs, Rita is able to reproduce intraclass stigma. She reaffirmed this stigma through her interaction with the white female volunteer, Bonnie, at once separating herself from what she believed to be the Hispanic woman's ungrateful behavior. Rita's judgmental behavior is analogous to Broughton's (2003) findings that poor women would distance themselves from their peers, engaging in "blaming discourse" that faulted the other women for their "personal deficiencies."

Rita was not an anomaly when it came to the poor reproducing intraclass stigma through judgment. A middle-aged Hispanic mother and her daughter were talking about a neighborhood grocery store closing when the mother, Mariah, told me how she works very hard "to get food on the table," working a job when she should be on disability for back problems. She emphasized to me that she follows all of the "rules." Mariah continued on to tell me how angry she was with all of the people who "abuse" the system and prevent it from being better for everyone, engaging in the "politics of resentment" (Crepaz 2008). She said that she could not understand why people do not just go out and get a job when she did it with a disability. She was very upset with people who "cheat" the system that is actually helping to keep her afloat. Just like Rita, Mariah does not see herself as part of a class struggle. She placed herself above others in her own class by identifying actions that are superior to her peers, an "associational distancing" used by those who "saw themselves as being more independent and resourceful" (Snow and Anderson 1987, 1349-50). In Mariah's mind, she no longer affiliated herself with other members of her class in this sense because of her deserving, "holier-than-thou attitude" (Snow and Anderson 1987, 1349).

Plenty of people were quick to call others out with drug addictions or mental health problems. Sandy, a middle-aged white woman, suggested that some people do not use their food stamps appropriately. She told me that people would buy "bad" things that were not eligible for SNAP coverage, such as alcohol and cigarettes, by going to a chain grocery store or Wal-Mart because the staff will give you hard cash in exchange for the funds allocated on a SNAP Electronic Bank Transfer (EBT) card. In a later conversation, Sandy warned me not to go to a different soup kitchen in Syracuse because it is "where all of the drug addicts go." Another day, I brought Rita to a doctor's appointment for her lung cancer. As we walked to my car, parked down the block, she said, "You parked all the way down there near the crackheads?" With some uncertainty, I responded, "Yes, is that a bad idea?" She quickly responded, "You gotta be careful where you're parking."

As quick as people were to judge others for their actions, they wasted no time contradicting themselves, ultimately revealing their internalization of denigrating stereotypes. On multiple occasions, Rita tried to recruit me to get additional desserts for her. The week before Easter, Rita ordered me to grab candy from the dessert station and bring it back to give to her. At the time, I was not eating lunch at the soup kitchen and had the appearance of a volunteer, so Rita used me as a proxy to get more food without looking ungrateful. The week after Easter, Rita similarly demanded I go get

her a pack of Peeps, even though she already had a grocery bag full of them. Rita felt comfortable using me as a tool to get more food because she herself was not projecting the ungrateful, selfish stereotype through which she stigmatized her peers. Just as de Souza (2019, 183) found when researching food pantries, soup kitchen attendees “engaged in continuous self-surveillance, self-discipline, and self-censorship and, by the same token, cast suspicion on the motives, intentions, and behaviors of others.”

In some instances, people revealed their internalized class stigma, judging themselves for the choices that purportedly landed them in poverty. During one lunch, Eddie, a soft-spoken Black man from Philadelphia, explained to me that he had been “staying out of trouble.” After asking Eddie what sort of “trouble” he was referring to, he dove into the backstory of how he arrived in Syracuse. Eddie was put in a rehabilitation program in Syracuse in 1995 after living in Philadelphia for his whole life. He told me that he was addicted to marijuana, cocaine, valium, and other prescription drugs. When telling me about graduating from his rehab program, he held his head high and smirked. “You know, one of those programs where they help you find Jesus Christ,” he explained. I immediately winced, showing Eddie my skepticism. I asked, “Have you been clean ever since?” He responded, “Yeah, well, I mean I smoke marijuana every once in a while... for medicinal purposes.” Later on, during the same lunch, Eddie sincerely asked me, “So, how do I get out of poverty? I didn’t go to college like you did, you know. I’ve been working since I was sixteen.” I asked him if he wished he had gone to college. Eddie said, “Yes. Maybe I wouldn’t be here,” suggesting that his own choices caused his plight. I asked, “Well, do you think it’s your fault?” “Yes. I didn’t have to get involved in drugs,” Eddie responded. Unlike other soup kitchen attendees, Eddie readily acknowledged his class status and stigmatization when he blamed himself for not making the “right” choices. Eddie’s internalization of such denigrating stereotypes led him to believe that, even though he’s “been out of trouble” for almost a quarter of a century, his own life choices created his impoverished predicament.

“Well, My Mother was Always Patient”

Denise, a Black woman in her late 50s, recounted to me how she ended up in Syracuse. In 2014, Denise took a three-day bus trip from Atlanta to Syracuse after her son, living in Syracuse, asked for support with his two children. Denise eagerly dropped what she was doing and headed north. Shortly upon arriving in Syracuse, Denise developed plantar keratosis, a foot condition that causes pain when walking. Denise had worked various jobs for at least 40 years, but when Denise approached job placement coordinators and explained her foot condition, they advised that she no longer work and instead file for SSDI. Denise expressed to me that she did not qualify for financial assistance through SNAP and vaguely attributed this to her previous living situation in Atlanta. When Denise missed lunch one day, Rita told me that Denise had been sanctioned in Atlanta for exchanging food stamps for cash. At the time of my interactions with Denise, she received \$122 per month after Public Assistance (PA) covered her rent. Denise relied entirely on emergency food programs to stock her cupboards and on donated items to clothe herself.

Soon after meeting Denise, she told me that she made a mistake moving to Syracuse, appearing dejected as she was unwilling to make eye contact with me. I asked her if she would want to grab coffee sometime so that I could get to know her better. Denise's eyes widened as a smile began to appear on her face. "Why yes, I would like that," she said. She told me that she was free any day the following week besides Monday, when she had to go to court to review her SSDI application. The coffee plans fell through with Denise, but the following week I followed up about her SSDI court date. Denise told me that she ended up not going to court and was not sure what had happened with her application, but that the SSDI office should be calling her in a few days to give her more information. Denise told me that the state owes her two years of SSDI. Rita explained to Denise that by the time her allotted SSDI benefits are processed through the welfare system, the money that Denise would receive would be a small fraction of what she was told she was getting. Denise seemed sad, yet persistent enough to see the situation through.

Two weeks later, I asked Denise for an update. Looking towards the ground, pursing her lips together at their corners and sighing, Denise told me that she had not heard anything. "But weren't you supposed to find out within the week? Isn't that what they told you?" I asked. "No, I've been talkin' to people and they said that it took them about a month." I was not sure if Denise forgot, but I specifically remembered her telling me that the judge said she should know the status of her SSDI within one week of her court date. She told me that she had not called her lawyer; instead, she would wait to hear.

When Denise and I finally met for coffee about a month later, I brought up how she keeps rewriting her story about SSDI. First, she told me she'd find out in a week... then it turned into two weeks... then a month... then two to three months. I asked her how and why she has become so patient with this process. "Well, my mother was always patient," she responded.

Almost two months after Denise was supposed to appear in court, she told me that she still had not heard anything. "I think this is a good thing, because people are sayin' it takes about two months and that'll be in May. I think it is good I haven't heard from anyone because they need to process my information so they can give me the money." Two weeks later, Denise finally heard back from the SSDI office that her application was deemed unfavorable, but that she still had the opportunity to appeal.⁶ When I asked how she was going to proceed, Denise told me, "I'll give 'em what they want 'cause I want my money. They gave out SSDI on the jobs I worked, and I want it." She told me how one of her brothers fought for ten years to get his SSDI and that he had to keep applying over and over again. Denise was under the impression that she would not qualify for SSDI if she tried to work again, so she continued to wait.

Denise's SSDI journey sheds light on her lived experience of navigating a devolved safety net and, more tellingly, how contractual citizenship pushes poor people to individualize and internalize their despair while appearing outwardly grate-

⁶ Prior to the 2020 election, Donald Trump threatened to cut budgets for Medicare and SSDI if he was reelected. Nearing the end of his term, Trump pushed to prohibit appeals for SSDI, allowing internal Social Security Administration judges to review appeals rather than independent administrative law judges (Knisley 2020; Meyers 2020).

ful. Even when forced to wait for the financial support she so desperately needed, Denise remained patient and optimistic, abiding by the behavioral expectations that diffuse from the myriad of social service programs and into the minds of past, current, and prospective clients.⁷ Her behavior is a response to the informal dynamics that result from contractual citizenship and that bolster intraclass stigma and denigration. Denise called attention to the judgmental behaviors of Near Westside residents, telling me on several occasions how people were gossiping and spreading rumors about each other. Denise, herself, was the target of rumors that she was using spike at one point.⁸ When telling me about the rumors, Denise combatted the attack on her character by talking about her former neighborhood in Atlanta. She felt that her old neighborhood had a stronger sense of community and less sense of everyone “going it alone” in comparison to the Near Westside. Denise provided an example of “mutual distancing,” or how poor people “commonly deny belonging to the micro society of the neighborhood and strive to distance themselves from a place and population that they know are universally sullied” (Wacquant 2008, 239). She added that people in the Near Westside should be grateful for what they are given at places such as the soup kitchen and not complain so much, simultaneously identifying her peers’ judgmental behavior while engaging in exactly that. In order to not fall into the same stigmatization and abide by the demands of contractual citizenship, Denise accepted that she may or may not receive state support and appeared outwardly grateful anyway. However, her internalized neoliberal desire to become a “deserving” citizen exuded from within her to judge others for their supposed “undeserving” character flaws. As Ange-Marie Hancock (2004, 17) said in *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen*, “The individual who is tied to a particular public identity is often challenged to change herself or risk further isolation and suppression in a context where the opportunity for change is limited by structural considerations.” Even as Denise suggested that she felt stigmatized herself, she reproduced this stigma, projecting it onto others by judging them. She heightened her sense of self by acknowledging her deservingness vis-à-vis her ability to be more grateful.

“You Just Hurry Up and Wait”

Charles, a middle-aged homeless Black man who frequented the soup kitchen, approached the table I was sitting at, carrying a grocery bag of cans and walking with a purpose. Charles almost always greeted me with a vibrant statement such as, “And how are we doing today, Miss Katie?” After he set his bag and coat down, grabbed food, and came back to the table, I asked him what he had been up to. He responded, “You know, tryna make a dollar and find me a wife.” I asked how that was working out for him and, Charles, with his head cocked to the left, responded with a lackluster

⁷ There are several studies of people who engage in individualized acts of resistance against the welfare state (Carswell et al. 2019; Koppelman 2018; Mujere 2020; Oldfield and Greyling 2015). One goal of this article is to shine a spotlight on collective acquiescence that manifests as waiting.

⁸ Syracuse and the Near Westside in particular have received national attention for the prevalence of users of “spike,” a kind of synthetic marijuana that is sold illegally and that has serious and often fatal side effects. Typically, the users of spike are extremely poor and/or homeless (Featherstone 2015).

answer of, “Well, we’re making progress.” He told me how he had been living at the Neighbors in Need homeless shelter recently but would find out in two days where the shelter had placed him for housing. He said that he really wanted to be able to live on his own. He had no idea where he was going to be placed and told me that he was praying. Once Charles finished his food, he stood up and said, “Well, Katie, keep me in your prayers that I get a good housing situation.” After I thanked him and told him I’d keep him in my thoughts, Charles put on his coat, threw away his plate, grabbed his cans, and quickly walked out of the soup kitchen, off to return his cans for cash.

The following week, Charles told me he’d been up to “a lot of the same.” He said that he did not figure out where he was moving to and that Neighbors in Need told him that he would need to wait a few weeks because of the recognized Easter holiday coming up. I apologized and acknowledged that my apology doesn’t change his situation. Looking downward at his lap and chuckling, with his head again cocked to the left, Charles said defeatedly, “Yeah. I know.” Charles fixated on the idea that his housing predicament was stalled by a holiday. “You can feel free to celebrate whatever you want, but it shouldn’t mean you get to stop. We gotta keep moving,” Charles said. He was clearly very frustrated with the way his housing situation was being handled and that people could take such an important matter so lightly that they are prolonging his homelessness until after a religious holiday. Charles oscillated between feelings of anger and defeat, for the most part slumping his shoulders and looking downward but picking his head up every so often to express his resentment. At this point, Charles was distraught over his housing situation. The week prior, he was so excited and optimistic, looking forward to not having to sleep in a bunk bed with several other people and to finally have a place of his own. This week he is understandably pissed off. I asked him if he knew any more details of his housing situation, such as if he would be living alone. He responded, “Probably so.”

A week passed as Charles’s patience wore thin. I asked Charles how the housing situation is going. “Friday. I’ve got a meeting on Friday,” he responded in an irritated tone. “So, you still haven’t found out yet?” I responded. “Nope, but hopefully I’m going to find out on Friday,” he said. I asked him if he was still staying at Neighbors in Need and he responded that he was. A man sitting next to Charles began talking about his own solo living situation, commenting on how great it felt to live alone. Charles unenthusiastically said, “Yeah, I would prefer to have a house of my own, upstairs and downstairs.”

When I saw Charles the following week, he greeted me with an upbeat, “How we doing today baby girl?!” I said, “I’m okay, how are you doing?” He responded, “You know, partyin’, drinkin’, smokin’.” Before I could begin asking about his housing placement, Charles began updating me. He said that he checked in with Neighbors in Need the day prior. Seeming indifferent at first, Charles said, “I guess they was trying to process my information to be put on a waiting list.” I said, “That’s interesting, they made it sound like you were supposed to have a housing placement a few weeks back, not be put on a waiting list.” “Yeah, I don’t know, man. You just hurry up and wait,” Charles said, chuckling, this time appearing dejected. He said that he either has to wait on his housing placement or he would have to find him a “rich old white woman.” “Honestly, whatever comes first,” Charles said.

In the weeks following, whenever I spoke with Charles, he responded with some version of, “Either I get a job or find me a rich white lady. Just being straight with ya.” I asked Charles for updates on his housing situation, and he said that he planned to keep waiting and not worry about it since there was nothing that he felt he could do to change it. The account of Charles’s precarious livelihood is exemplary of the day-to-day life of a low-income person who is toyed with by the state. The shift of the welfare state from entitlements to contractual citizenship not only shifts a person’s ability to easily navigate the system but also their perceived ability to access space and social settings that allow them to feel as they are not merely surviving. The absence of social solidarity in spaces such as emergency food programs leaves people with no one to blame but themselves. In doing so, poor people readapt to their environment, navigating through hardship the only way they know how. Charles, powerless, rescinds any authority and waits for the devolved welfare state to decide his fate.

Conclusions

The cultural ethos of contractual citizenship – produced by a weakened social safety net, deficient charitable institutions, heightened individualism, and a degraded labor market – push people to, first, individualize their and their peers’ choices and, second, make decisions based off their peers’ projected opinions. Poor people were often less apt to engage in any actions that had the potential to make them seem “less deserving” as they were always trying to isolate themselves from the broader stigmatized class. When another soup kitchen attendee, Walter, implied that poor decision making is a factor in someone’s deservingness, I decided to pry a bit more. Walter was a Black man in his 70s whose past employment included working on a cotton plantation and also as a steelworker. Walter’s employment history was a point of pride for him, and he often made remarks about his peers at the soup kitchen that he perceived as less hardworking. Many of these people, Walter believed, were engaging in informal or illegal activities to get by. “Why do you think people get wrapped up in drugs and prostitution?” I asked Walter. His reply was revealing of his own preconceived notions of poor people.

Because they’re weak. They ain’t have no love. They mad with the world. I’ll tell you exactly why. And they try to blame everybody else for their problems. When you try to tell them what’s right, they go lookin’ for a scapegoat. I tell ‘em, “Don’t bring that to me, because there ain’t no scapegoat. There’s right and wrong, truth or a lie. Plain and simple.” I see the jail runnin’ over from [ages] 16–30, they know everything, they been everywhere, but they don’t wanna work.

Walter acknowledges his peers’ undeservingness through his stigmatization of those around him. Walter’s peers may not directly impact his wellbeing, but he still resents those around him for not working as hard as he feels he has. “I would’ve given an arm and a leg to come along,” Walter says, continuing on that, “A lot of my working was for mostly nothing. You know what I mean? Now you’re getting paid for what

you're doing, and they don't have to work for 80 hours and they can't even do that," referring back to his strenuous, low-paid manual labor jobs. Contractual citizenship has influenced Walter so thoroughly that he is unable to situate people's choices as part of broader political, economic, and cultural shifts.

Several scholars have written about how intraclass stigmatization divides the extremely poor and hinders the possibility for collective action (Bottero 2004; Pemberton et al. 2016; Purser 2016; Reutter et al. 2009; Wacquant 2008, 2010, 2016). When eating with people at the soup kitchen, I actively tried to highlight similarities between people's experiences of navigating the devolved safety net. Echoing the findings of Bruckner et al. (2021), my attempts at conversation, more often than not, failed to spark interest or were immediately shut down, as if no one sitting at the table desired to understand the similarities of their class peers.⁹ Of course, each person did have a drastically different lived experience, which calls attention to the necessity of answering part of Loïc Wacquant's (2008, 245) interrogation in *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Urban Marginality*: "How are we to unify [people who], while they may occupy briefly or durably, close positions in the structure of social and urban space in synchronic cross-section, follow divergent trajectories or embody dissimilar dispositions and orientations towards the future?" The findings in this article underscore the importance of grappling with this question.

This article contributes to literature on the ramifications of contractual citizenship as well as intraclass stigmatization. I fuse the two bodies of literature to understand how intraclass dynamics are influenced by the political and economic restructuring of the welfare system. Through an ethnographic examination of the informal dynamics of people eating at a soup kitchen, I attend to the intraclass dynamics that derive from contractual citizenship, finding that people's deeply engrained perceptions of how to get out of poverty, namely through behavioral reform, inspires externalized, inter-necine judgement amongst and between the poor. The cultural ethos of contractual citizenship is so diffuse that, on a regular basis, poor people impart an individualistic logic of deservingness on one another. People with dire need for assistance tend not to see their peers as part of a collective struggle. Rather, they scrutinize and assess each other's worthiness for aid.

Informal intraclass dynamics, as exposed by Rita and many others in the Near Westside – who demonize their peers for their choices – push poor people seeking aid to choose paths of least resistance, as shown in the case of both Denise and Charles. This often means that poor people choose to wait rather than advocate for themselves for fear that such advocacy may lead to being seen by their peers as ungrateful. Yet, even when Denise and Charles adapt their behavior to appear grateful, they still are not protected from stigmatization. No matter the outcome – whether they do or do not receive state aid – their class stigma will continue to deem them undeserving and unworthy. However, if we fail to understand how the poor experience and respond to stigma from both authorities and their peers, then we also will fail to accurately

⁹ Although study participants at the soup kitchen found little interest in commiserating with each other, it is possible that they had stronger relations outside of the soup kitchen that would offer more promising opportunities for collective action. For more thorough discussions on social ties, see the work of Joan Maya Mazelis (2017).

understand how poor people could one day unite in opposition to the failures of the welfare system and their demonization.

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