Listening to Snitches: Race/Ethnicity, English Proficiency, and Access to Welfare Fraud Enforcement Systems

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Abstract

How does the state respond to members of the public seeking to mobilize its coercive power? Focusing on welfare fraud control units in the United States, we examine how race/ethnicity and written English proficiency affect access to systems for reporting welfare fraud suspicions. Using a correspondence audit, we assess fraud control authorities' likelihood of taking up reports from Latinas and Whites with higher and lower English proficiency. We find that fraud units are less likely to take up lower-proficiency Whites' reports, but that lower proficiency's uptake-dampening effect does not hold for Latinas. To explain the mechanisms underlying our experimental results, we draw on interviews with fraud investigators. The interview evidence reveals the determinations of investigative promise underlying these uptake disparities. For White reporters, English errors cue gatekeepers' preexisting skepticism about public reporters' reliability, decreasing enthusiasm for investing resources in these reports. Reports from lower-English proficiency Latinas offer special viability appeal, however, offsetting the negative influence on uptake probability that errors demonstrate for White reporters. Our results shed new light on contemporary racial/ethnic dynamics in the US welfare system, and advance social scientific understanding of why some people—and not others—become consequential contributors to the exercise of state power.

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Snitch. Squealer. Fink. Stool pigeon. Rat. A rich cultural lexicon surrounds people who incriminate others to legal authorities. A variety of government agencies use such informants (Natapoff 2009; Reeves 2017). This practice allows the state to enlist non-state actors as contributors to the exercise of state power (Garland 1996; Goddard 2012; Scoular and O'Neill 2007). In the prominent example of criminal law enforcement, authorities' rationale for recruiting informants is often straightforward: having identified someone possessing incriminating information, they offer the prospective informant an incentive (often a reduction in legal liability) in exchange for disclosure (Skolnick 1994[1966]:120-121). It is less clear, however, what factors shape authorities' responses under the "volunteer model" (Bergemann 2017), when members of the public approach them to report alleged wrongdoing.

Herein, we seek to understand why some people—and not others—become consequential volunteer contributors to the exercise of state power. Specifically, we focus on public reporting of suspected welfare fraud, when people contact dedicated fraud control units within social service agencies to incriminate others.[1] These units' investigators are tasked with detecting, investigating, and substantiating clients' rule violations, making their immediate function closer to police officers' than to nominally helping-oriented public assistance work. Intentional Program Violations (IPVs) are administrative charges that permit agencies to suspend and disqualify clients. Some cases are also referred to prosecutors for criminal charges. Fraud unit gatekeepers' decisions about what to do with incoming fraud reports shape who will be investigated for fraud, and potentially face a range of sanctions due to those investigations.

Fraud units spend much of their time on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps; state-level agencies completed nearly a million SNAP client investigations in fiscal year 2016 (Food and Nutrition Service 2017b:22). While they also

address other types of fraud—such as clients "trafficking" SNAP benefits by exchanging them for cash or goods—much of what fraud workers do reduces to boundary-work around formal eligibility categories. In investigating eligibility fraud cases, they seek to establish that eligibility-pertinent information clients supplied is inaccurate, incomplete, or outdated.

Like their counterparts in conventional law enforcement, administrative welfare fraud investigations run on information. With some jurisdictional variation, fraud investigators draw upon an array of evidentiary resources to substantiate charges: databases; inquiries to employers, landlords, schools, and daycares; home inspections; and interviews with neighbors and clients themselves. This article investigates influences on these investigations' origination, focusing specifically on case referrals that begin with volunteer reporters complaining of suspected fraud.[2] Fraud units and the agencies that house them encourage such reporting; agency websites provide instructions for reporting suspected fraud online or over the phone, and local offices and administration buildings display fraud-centered flyers and pamphlets recruiting clients as informants.

As street-level bureaucrats[3] (Brodkin 1997; Lipsky 1980; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011a:Ch. 10; Watkins-Hayes 2009b), fraud workers have significant discretion at multiple stages of the investigative process. Assessing incoming public reports and deciding whether to act on them—and if so, how—is a pivotal juncture of such discretionary decision-making. Fraud units do not have the labor necessary to fully investigate every referral they receive. Like police officers, they pursue "an ideal of 'economy of intervention'" (Bittner 1967:713), determining which cases merit substantial time investment through "triage" or "creaming" (Walsh, Dando, and Ormerod 2018; see generally Brodkin 2011;

Halushka 2017; Lara-Millán 2014). Unit gatekeepers have substantial leeway in making these determinations, working from both formal written rules and informal rules of thumb.

Ultimately, gatekeepers' decisions about fraud reports do not just involve providing or denying fraud reporters access to the state. Fraud reporters' incriminations are directly connected to reported clients' access to crucial social safety net programs. The program suspensions and disqualifications that result from substantiated fraud charges temporarily or permanently bar program participation. In the SNAP context, this means losing access to nutritional assistance program on which tens of millions of Americans rely every month (Food and Nutrition Service 2016). Welfare fraud investigations can also result in criminal charges (see Gustafson 2009). Gatekeepers' decisions about what to do with fraud reports, therefore, have far-reaching and serious implications, with different responses to different types of reporters shaping who is exposed to impactful sanctions (see also Lipsky 1980; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003).

We use two studies to assess how fraud reports' characteristics affect agency gatekeepers' actions. First, we employ a correspondence audit of fraud units' public fraud reporting systems to test gatekeepers' responses, assessing the impact of two timely independent variables: reporters' race/ethnicity[4] (Latina[5] vs. White) and their written English proficiency. As explained further below, we expect fraud workers to presume that Latina reporters are likely to report people similar to themselves, and for Latino ethnicity—particularly in combination with lower English proficiency—to cue questions about immigration status, encouraging gatekeepers to take up reports from these sources (see Flores and Schachter 2018). Our experimental results show that fraud units are less likely to take up reports from White reporters who make English errors, but that language errors' uptake-dampening effect does not hold for Latina reporters. Next, we use qualitative data from interviews with fraud workers in five diverse US states to illuminate their

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decision-making processes, and thus explain the mechanisms underlying the observed differences in report uptake. These data reveal how perceptions of investigative promise drive investigatory decision-making, and suggest that patterns of differential uptake result from gatekeepers' prioritization of reports they see as most likely to lead to substantiated charges. In total, our results evince the operation of a bounded and contextualized instrumental rationality: gatekeepers demonstrate attenuated interest in pursuing reports that appear to originate with less reliable reporters, unless another aspect of the report offers offsetting appeal.

BACKGROUND

We follow previous research demonstrating systematic differences in access to state services and resources, particularly between racial/ethnic groups. These studies show, for instance, that putative African Americans get fewer and less polite answers when requesting information about public services (Giulietti, Tonin, and Vlassopoulos 2017) and encounter less responsive state legislators when requesting help with voter registration (Butler and Broockman 2011), and that putative Latinos receive less information when trying to vote (White et al. 2015).[6]

Like these researchers, we are fundamentally concerned with access to the state. However, in investigating who is "taken seriously" as a complainant to state public assistance agencies, we assess influences on the disposition of individuals' appeals to state enforcement bodies, rather than requests for information or assistance. Like other street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980), fraud workers' assigned tasks exceed their labor resources, necessitating decisions about where to invest time and energy. In making these determinations, fraud workers exercise the discretion that characterizes street-level bureaucrats' working lives (Brodkin 1997; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Watkins-Hayes 2009b). A noteworthy instrumental rationality applies to these

discretionary determinations; fraud workers are outcome-driven, focused on successfully establishing as many cases as they can, especially intentional fraud cases (BLINDED XXXX). Thus, a different calculus applies here than in many contexts of individual-initiated access to the state: gatekeepers are motivated to maximize specific outcomes invoking the state's coercive power, not its supportive capacities. Both individual and group-level incentive systems underlie fraud workers' motivation to prioritize cases they believe they can successfully substantiate; fraud unit managers and individual investigators both stress maximizing IPV numbers, and the federal government incentivizes state governments' fraud control activity through allowing them to retain thirty-five percent of the federal SNAP benefit dollars that they recover via fraud enforcement action.[7]

In some ways, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) sanctions offer a case of welfare punishment that parallels these intentional fraud investigations. TANF sanctions are disciplinary and punitive interventions, levied as consequences for clients' noncompliance with program rules, including work requirements and reporting obligations (Soss et al. 2011a:153). Studies have generally found that race and ethnicity influence caseworkers' discretionary decisions about applying these sanctions, with Black and Latina clients more likely to be sanctioned than their White counterparts (Born, Caudill, and Cordero 1999; Koralek and Pindus 2000; Kalil, Seefeldt, and Wang 2002; Hasenfeld, Ghose, and Larson 2004; Monnat 2010; Schram et al. 2009; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011b).[8]

Experimentally assessing race and ethnicity's influence on caseworkers' sanction decisions, Soss et al. (2011a:255) find that TANF caseworkers express greater likelihood of penalizing Black and Latina clients than White clients when responding to hypothetical vignettes. Soss and colleagues' (2011a:257) corresponding review of administrative data, however, reveals

only bias against Black clients in real-world sanctioning behavior, not bias against Latinas. This result reflects their broader conclusions about TANF sanctioning: that "welfare officials do not inevitably sanction clients of color at higher rates… Client race can matter more or less depending on how contextual factors affect the salience and contents of racial categories as frames for decision making" (Soss et al. 2011a:154). Local characteristics such as rates of poverty and welfare participation increase overall sanction rates (Soss et al. 2011a:158), while political conservatism disproportionately increases sanction rates for Black and Latino clients compared to White clients (Soss et al. 2011a:163). These results suggest that local-level political and demographic factors influence caseworkers' discretionary decisions regarding when to apply sanctions (or not), as well as other discretionary action with regard to clients (Kogan 2017).

While dedicated fraud investigators also discretionarily implement client punishments, their circumstances differ notably. Fraud units present a particular form of the welfare system's "marketization" (Soss et al. 2011a:176). The broader contemporary business-style approach to welfare includes enforcing sanctions to mold welfare clients into usable workers for the low-wage labor market. Fraud units go further, as dedicated components of the welfare system incentivized to maximize client investigations and punishments; this makes them pronounced exemplifications of US welfare bureaucracies' punitive and adversarial stance toward their own clients (see BLINDED XXXX). With some inter-jurisdictional variation, investigators are expected to complete set numbers of investigations per month or per quarter, and performance reviews include completed case output. Federal financial incentives for substantiating client fraud and recovering overpayments solidify the overriding preference to invest time in cases deemed promising, and deprioritize others.

Monitoring clients' rule compliance and applying sanctions is part of welfare caseworkers' jobs as "catch-all bureaucrats" (Watkins-Hayes 2009), and their performance assessment systems can systematically engender increased sanction rates (Soss et al. 2011a:Ch. 9). TANF caseworkers, though, see high sanction rates as damaging to their performance assessments, and accordingly express hesitation about sanctioning clients (Soss et al. 2011a:223). Fraud workers offer a paralleling perspective from welfare systems' dedicated enforcement wings; discussing how cases come to them, frustrated fraud workers say that caseworkers do not refer enough clients for fraud investigation, a tendency that they ascribe to caseworkers' disinclination to deal with fraud referral paperwork (BLINDED XXXX).

For fraud workers, pursuing client punishments is not part of the job. It *is* the job. Their organizational priorities and performance assessments revolve around successfully detecting and officially substantiating clients' (intentional) rule violations; in contrast to caseworkers' reasons to hesitate about punishing, structural forces funnel fraud workers' discretion wholly toward maximizing successful charges. Straightforward bias or animus remain potential contributors to investigative appeal for at least some gatekeepers. Fraud units' policy mandate and structural position, though, suggest that gatekeepers' perceptions of reports' promise as investigative leads may be more influential on reports' dispositions (see also Epp, Maynard-Moody, and Haider-Markel 2014).

Thus, we posit that gatekeepers' decisions about which cases to prioritize will hinge on their assessments of investigative *promise*: reports' perceived likelihood of generating successfully substantiated charges. Following Goertz (2006), we develop an ontological concept of promise; that is, our concept is "about the fundamental constitutive elements of [the] phenomenon" (Goertz 2006:5). Per Goertz (2006), our concept of promise is also realist—empirically derived—and

causal—used to develop causal hypotheses and elucidate causal mechanisms. Promise has two fundamental constitutive elements. The first, *reliability*, pertains to reporters, denoting their perceived trustworthiness as case referral sources. The second, *viability*, refers to reports themselves, denoting assessments of the extent to which they contain provable allegations.

Race, Ethnicity, Immigration, and Welfare Workers' Decision-Making

Previous research provides grounds for suspecting that race and ethnicity might affect welfare fraud workers' assessments of reports and decisions about their disposition. Racial and ethnic inequalities have long characterized US public assistance. As the social safety net expanded during the Progressive Era and the New Deal, programs segregated and excluded racial/ethnic minorities, including Black Americans and people of Latin American descent (Fox 2012; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Quadagno 1988, 1994; Ward 2005). These inequitable origins produced a stratified public assistance system, with prominent differences between racial/ethnic groups' access to benefits and popular perceptions (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997; Brown 1999; Chunn and Gavigan 2004; Gans 1995; Gilens 1999; Katz 2013[1989]; Reyna et al. 2005).

The United States has a pronounced history of anti-Black racism. This form of racism figures centrally in the evolution of US welfare programs and anti-welfare backlash (Gilens 1999; Gustafson 2011; Hancock 2004; Kohler-Hausmann 2017; Ocen 2012; Roberts 2012: 1492), and much welfare research focuses on Black/White disparities. Some recent work, however, emphasizes the linked variables of Latino ethnicity and immigration status' emerging prominence in welfare discourse. Garand, Xu, and Davis' (2017) analysis of welfare opinions' "immigrationalization" highlights this phenomenon; these authors find that immigration attitudes are more consequential for contemporary welfare attitudes than a range of variables conventionally

associated with public assistance opinions, such as political ideology and attitudes toward African Americans.

Working with late-20th century survey data, Fox (2004) found that Whites' beliefs about Latinos' work ethic predicted their support for welfare programs, but that this relationship was context-dependent. In more heavily Latino states, Whites' belief that Latinos are hardworking predicted more favorable attitudes toward welfare, while in Whiter states, Whites' belief that Latinos are lazy predicted less favorable welfare attitudes. Fox (2004:615) concluded that "the contact hypothesis 'works' for Latinos": larger state-level Latino populations predicted more favorable White attitudes about Latinos' work ethic. Conversely, racial/ethnic isolation appeared to beget negative stereotypes about Latinos that aligned with those historically directed at African Americans (Fox 2004:616).

Things have changed substantially in the intervening two decades. During that time, the Latino population has grown significantly, from roughly equal to African Americans—around 12% of the population—to the country's largest racial/ethnic minority group—around 18% of the population (Fox 2004:596; Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2018b). More likely to experience poverty and food insecurity than their White counterparts, Latinos received more than 20% of all SNAP benefits in 2016 (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2018b).[9]

These demographic shifts have garnered attention. Politicians and others increasingly invoke Latinos as a stigmatized "target population" (Huber 2016; Johnson 2018; Ramos 2018; Schneider and Ingram 1993). Regarding welfare, this rhetoric focuses particularly on immigration, especially undocumented immigration (Amundson and Zajicek 2017:395-396; Brown 2016), evincing a broader contemporary pattern of depicting Latino immigrants as socially and economically dangerous interlopers who abuse government services (Chavez 2013[2008]; Massey

2007:146). This type of demonization of Latino immigrants is a prominent trend in recent US politics, particularly in the context of social safety net programs (Brown 2016; Flores and Schachter 2018).

The changing social discourse around Latinos in general and Latino immigrants in particular bears the hallmarks of a racial threat scenario, in which a racial/ethnic minority group's presence economically, politically, and symbolically threatens the White majority (Blalock 1967). Perceived threats to privileged status in the racial stratification system decrease Whites' supportiveness of public assistance programs (Wetts and Willer 2018). More concretely, larger racial/ethnic minority populations tend to beget strengthened police departments (Holmes et al. 2008; Huff and Stahura 1980; Kent and Jacobs 2005; McCarty, Ren, and Zhao 2012; Stucky 2005; Zhao, Ren, and Lovrich 2012), punitive discipline in public schools (Hughes et al. 2017; Payne and Welch 2010; Welch and Payne 2010), and welfare sanctioning (Monnat 2010; Soss et al. 2011a).

Evidence suggests that Latino ethnicity's potential effects on fraud unit gatekeepers' decisions may relate specifically to the close connections many contemporary US residents draw between this ethnicity, nativity, and immigration status (Jiménez 2008; Valentino, Brader, and Jardina 2013:155). Comparatively recent public opinion research indicates that anti-welfare sentiment is linked to negative feelings about immigrants, not negative feelings about Latinos per se (Hussey and Pearson-Merkowitz 2013). Yet, Whites associate Latinos with immigration concerns, and tend to view Latinos differently than other immigrants, especially White immigrants. For example, Whites see Latino immigrants as low-skilled and needy (Lee and Fiske 2006), but prefer highly educated immigrants (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015), and are more censorious of

inappropriate or illegal behavior among Latino immigrants than among White immigrants (Hartman, Newman, and Bell 2014).

Beyond Latino ethnicity and immigration status considerations' general salience in current welfare discourse, these factors also have specific fraud control salience. While race and ethnicity are formally irrelevant to SNAP rules, immigration status is not. Federal policy changes excluded undocumented immigrants from most social safety net programs in the 1970s (Fox 2016). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 went a step further, restricting legal immigrants' access to food stamps and other programs (Chavez 2013[2008]; Van Hook, Brown, and Bean 2006). Currently, undocumented immigrants remain ineligible for SNAP. Legally documented immigrant children and people with asylee or refugee immigration statuses are typically SNAP-eligible with no waiting period, while other immigrant adults must accrue five years of legal residence before becoming eligible (Food and Nutrition Service 2017a). Thus, fraud workers' immigration-related inferences bear on their assessments of reports' viability.

Because all of our experimental reports contain the same basic SNAP allegation—an unreported income-earner living in the home—we functionally control for basic viability assessments. This, however, is where ethnicity and immigration considerations prominently enter the calculus. Especially due to its current prominence in welfare discourse, Latino ethnicity may influence gatekeepers' assessments of incoming fraud reports. Apart from the possibility of straightforward bias against racial/ethnic minorities, we expect fraud workers to presume that Latinas are likely to report other Latinos, and for Latino ethnicity to cue questions about immigration status (Flores and Schachter 2018). Given immigration status' relevance to program eligibility, such presumptions would strengthen these reports' apparent viability as potential avenues of investigation. Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Fraud units will be more likely to take up reports from Latinas than from Whites.[10]

Written English Proficiency as Signal to Gatekeepers

Our experimental design (detailed below) entails varying two key dimensions of public fraud reports (reporters' apparent race/ethnicity and written English proficiency), while keeping other basic report characteristics constant. As such, we functionally control for reports' targets' socioeconomic status: we expect gatekeepers to typically presume that welfare fraud allegations' targets are relatively poor.

Within this context, English proficiency serves as a second independent variable signaling something to gatekeepers. We expect what English proficiency signals, however, to depend on reporters' apparent race/ethnicity. For White reporters, we expect lower English proficiency (LEP) to signal carelessness or incompetence, leading gatekeepers to see LEP reporters as less reliable than their higher English proficiency (HEP) counterparts; such perceptions would reduce LEP reporters' allegations' appeal to outcome-oriented street-level bureaucrats making discretionary decisions about their disposition (see Lipsky 1980; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). Language errors could also signal lower educational attainment, and perhaps lower social class. Given general stigma against less educated and poorer people—and fraud workers' common distrust of poor people who participate in welfare programs (BLINDED XXXX)—such signals could similarly make LEP reporters seem less reliable and their reports therefore less promising, discouraging bureaucratic gatekeepers from investing time and energy in them. Hence:

Hypothesis 2: Fraud units will be less likely to take up reports from LEP Whites than from HEP Whites.

We expect LEP to function differently when combined with Latino ethnicity. On the one hand, it is possible that gatekeepers may expect Latinas to have lower English proficiency than Whites, or be less surprised when Latinas make English errors, curtailing LEP's strength as an unreliability signal. Beyond this, we expect that Latinas' English errors will cue ideas about nativity and immigration status, making them pertinent to viability assessments. Like Latin American origin, LEP increases White suspicion about immigrants' legal status (Flores and Schachter 2018). We expect fraud unit gatekeepers to demonstrate similar tendencies, and correspondingly to see reports from LEP Latinas as more likely to implicate recent or undocumented immigrants than reports from HEP Latinas. Given immigrant status' relevance to SNAP eligibility, such inferences are directly relevant to viability assessments. Because fraud workers are incentivized to maximize successful investigations, we expect them to demonstrate elevated interest in reports perceived as likely to incriminate immigrants. Thus, we expect language errors to have an opposite effect for Latinas than for Whites, increasing rather than decreasing report uptake as viability considerations offset any reliability concerns raised by LEP.

Hypothesis 3: Fraud units will be more likely to take up reports from LEP Latinas than from HEP Latinas.

Our expectation that increased viability perceptions will offset any decreases in perceived reliability for LEP Latinas reflects substitutability in investigative promise's two fundamental constitutive elements (see Goertz 2006:12). While a certain viability threshold likely must be met for gatekeepers to take up reports, reliability and viability can also partially substitute for each other in constituting promise. That is, strong viability assessments may encourage gatekeepers to take up reports from reporters of questionable reliability, while high perceived reporter reliability may encourage them to give the benefit of the doubt to reports with questionable viability.

Overview of Studies

We employ a mixed-method design to comprehensively examine how reports' characteristics influence gatekeepers' decisions. Study 1 comprises a field experiment testing our hypotheses through assessing gatekeepers' real-world uptake tendencies. Study 2 uses qualitative interview data to illuminate fraud investigators' perceptions of public reports and their decision-making processes, and thus explain the mechanisms underlying the experimental results.

Our research design reflects our efforts to capitalize on each method's strengths and address its limitations through complementary data. Our fundamental interest in capturing what fraud unit gatekeepers actually do in their day-to-day work underlies our choice of a correspondence audit for Study 1. We are also interested, though, in *why* gatekeepers act the way they do, a question that our experiment is ill-equipped to address. Study 2's interviews fill this gap, revealing what fraud workers see as important, desirable, and worthwhile, and offering insights into the major influences on their decision-making. This allows us to draw conclusions about mechanisms based on empirics, not speculation or supposition.

STUDY 1: TESTING GATEKEEPERS' RESPONSES

Data and Methods

We submitted a series of pretextual reports to fraud units' internet-based public reporting systems (both email hotlines and fillable online forms) to assess gatekeepers' corresponding actions. Field experiments of this sort—often called "audit studies"—have proven an essential social science research design (Baldassarri and Abascal 2017). Through testing real-world responses to systematically varied experimental conditions, they measure actual social behavior. Research measuring hiring employers' responses to pretextual applicants and resumes is the approach's best-

known iteration, evincing how factors such as race (Bertrand, Chugh, and Mullainathan 2005; Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004), sexual orientation (Tilcsik 2011), criminal record (Pager 2003, 2007; Pager, Western, and Bonikowski 2009), social class and gender (Rivera and Tilcsik 2016), and educational credentials (Gaddis 2015) influence labor market outcomes. Similar research designs have shown that university faculty are less responsive to people of color regarding research opportunities (Milkman, Akinola, and Chugh 2015), and that minorities see fewer vacancies in real estate markets (Turner et al. 2013). In online markets, Black sellers tend to receive fewer emails and lower bids (Doleac and Stein 2013), and in healthcare, Black patients get different recommendations for similar cardiac problems (Schulman et al. 1999).

Dependent variable: agency uptake. Our use of pretextual fraud reports as means of interaction makes our study a "correspondence audit," in which mail- or internet-based communications replace experimental auditors who interact with employers or other institutions in person (see Gaddis 2018). We aim to determine how these reports' characteristics affect fraud units' likelihood of taking them seriously and meaningfully acting on them. Such responses are not typically apparent. Fraud units do not usually inform public reporters about resulting agency action (or lack thereof).[11] This necessitates a research design element to provide a signal of agency interest in the report.

To meet this requirement, each report excluded the information that fraud units need to launch even the earliest stages of investigations: no pretextual report included any name for the fabricated reported party, or any other potentially identifying information. Thus, if agency gatekeepers wished to pursue the report further, their only option was to send a follow-up email asking for additional information. We consider the sending of a follow-up email to constitute

uptake: an expression of agency interest in the report. The absence of a follow-up email, on the other hand, indicates non-uptake. With more specific information about accused parties, presumably all or nearly all reports would garner some degree of agency uptake, entailing at least a client lookup in the agency's computer system (typically, reporters who provide enough information to launch an investigation do not receive any response from agency gatekeepers, and have no access to information about their reports' disposition). The limited information we provided made "automatic" report uptake impossible; through our correspondence audit, we are able to measure our experimental variables' impact on gatekeepers' likelihood of taking the extra step necessary to give further consideration to information-deficient reports. Because all of our pretextual reports were missing the same pieces of basic information, we are confident that we have effectively controlled for any potential systematic disparities in how different types of missing information might affect gatekeepers' decisions.

We did not respond to any requests for additional information; when we received such a request, we logged and deleted it, concluding the course of that specific report. Thus, our outcome variable *answer* measures agency response as a simple 0/1 dummy variable: yes, the unit takes up the report, or no, it does not.[12]

Pilot study and final sample. Fraud control units in all fifty US states and the District of Columbia were potentially eligible for inclusion in our sample, setting the maximum sample size at fifty-one. After preliminary review, we found that thirty-six units were eligible for inclusion in our pilot study; the other fifteen units either had no online fraud reporting option, or (more commonly) used an online form with required fields that our research design could not accommodate.

The pilot study stage comprised sixteen pretextual reports sent via email or online form submission to each of the thirty-six units in our initial sample over a span of eight weeks. We used this stage to assess the sensitivity of our "uptake" outcome variable, and determine the extent of variation in fraud units' (non)response tendencies. Fifteen units of the initial sample demonstrated experimental variation; the other twenty-one units responded to either all (eleven units) or none (ten units) of the sixteen pilot-stage pretextual reports. Based on this result, we limited our final sample to the fifteen units demonstrating variation. We sent each final sample unit twenty-one total reports over approximately four months, yielding a total sample size of 315 reports.

Independent variables. We designed our two independent variables to correspond to key dimensions of investigative promise and to accommodate experimental manipulation in a correspondence audit. First, we vary written English proficiency through modifying the text of the reports themselves. We began with "non-error" versions of report text, without English errors. We then systematically introduced errors, yielding a "non-error" version and a matched "error" version of each report. Each error version contains the same sorts of errors and was sent to different agencies under both Latina and White names. Because of our interest in potential intersectional effects of Latina ethnicity and LEP, we chose written English errors characteristic of native Spanish speakers, originally derived from a guide to Spanish speakers' English acquisition (Coe

1987) and refined in consultation with an external expert on this topic. The errors primarily involve article use, plurals, and word order. While they are characteristic types of errors for native Spanish speakers, however, nothing about them is necessarily tied to native Spanish speaking.

Our second independent variable is reporter race/ethnicity. Methodological and practical considerations around sample size, statistical power, and data collection logistics limited this study to two racial/ethnic groups. Within these parameters, we chose to focus on Latino and White race/ethnicity. Several factors underlie our decision to compare Latinas with Whites: (1) current hostility toward Latinos and their (perceived) participation in public assistance; (2) tendencies for people to associate Latinos and immigration status questions (Valentino et al. 2013:155); and (3) immigration status' relevance to SNAP eligibility and attitudes about welfare (Garand et al. 2017). We also expected to find distinct effects of combining different apparent levels of written English proficiency with signals of these racial/ethnic categorizations.

We signal race/ethnicity via names. To date, many correspondence audits have assumed that study respondents reliably infer race/ethnicity from certain names, but made limited effort to confirm these operationalizations' validity through measuring different names' strength as race/ethnicity signals (Gaddis 2017a:470). Thanks to Gaddis' (2017a, 2017b) recent survey work, our study offers notable methodological strength in this area. Gaddis asked US respondents to indicate the race or ethnicity (if any) they associated with different names, thereby testing names' signaling strength. Gaddis (2017a) finds that numerous given names strongly signal Whiteness, with twenty out of forty-one White-typed female names read as "White" by more than 90% of respondents. Adding "White" surnames generally increases given names' signaling strength (Gaddis 2017a). Gaddis (2017b) finds Latina-typed female given names to be relatively weaker signals of race/ethnicity, with only two names out of eighteen read as "Latina" by more than 90%

of respondents. However, pairing "Latina" given names with "Latina" surnames increases the signal's strength dramatically: "correct" racial/ethnic identification exceeded 94% for *all* Latina given names when paired with Latina surnames (Gaddis 2017b).

Based on these results, we use strongly racially/ethnically typed given name/surname pairs for both our ostensibly Latina and our ostensibly White reporters. We randomly paired strong-signal White and Latina given names from Gaddis' (2017a, 2017b) surveys with strong-signal White and Latina surnames to create our set of experimental reporter names. We do not provide our specific experimental names here to prevent the possibility of agencies identifying archived copies of our reports.

We did not vary the characteristics of the people upon whom our pretextual reporters informed. In theory, we would have liked to use names to signal reported parties' apparent race/ethnicity. However, our research design precluded this possibility, for two reasons.

First, we carefully planned our study to present the absolute minimum demand on agencies' time and resources. By submitting only brief reports with few details, we ensured that the only possible agency response was to send a follow-up email requesting additional information. In their realized form, the pretextual fraud reports constituted only a very small portion of a much larger workflow. In correspondence with the authors, a fraud worker from a low-population state stated that that they receive multiple public fraud reports daily, around five or ten, and a mid-sized state's representative provided data showing receipt of around 6,000 annual public reports in recent years.[13] Totaling only twenty-one per state over four months and absent any information that could be used to generate even preliminary investigations or loop in actors beyond initial gatekeepers, our simulated reports were miniscule additions to agencies' public fraud report workflow. Supplying further information, such as names for pretextual reported parties, would have

potentially permitted agencies to give our reports greater attention. As realized, the design allowed agencies to invest only the most minimal time in the pretextual reports. Because fraud units regularly receive public reports missing key facts, our pretextual reports are an insignificant and unremarkable addition to a common trend.[14]

Commitment to avoiding potential harms to real people further precludes using fabricated names for our pretextual reported parties. Particularly given employment of common names, providing reported parties' names could inadvertently implicate actual agency clients, bringing unwarranted fraud scrutiny upon them. Nothing in the reports as realized provided grounds for scrutinizing any actual clients.

Combining the English proficiency variable with the race/ethnicity variable yields a 2 (Latina/White) X 2 (higher/lower English proficiency) factorial design (Table 1).

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Experimental control. Our research design requires diverse ways of communicating essentially the same thing to fraud unit gatekeepers. Because we sent each agency multiple reports, we needed multiple report versions. We randomly paired experimental names with reports, and ensured that the same unit did not receive both versions of the same report or multiple reports from the same experimental name. And, to isolate our experimental variables' effects, we held constant all other major characteristics potentially influencing reports' disposition.[15]

Because women predominate among adult SNAP clients (Gray and Eslami 2014), we presented both reporters and reported parties as women. We described all reported parties as having an unspecified number of children (but more than one).[16] All reports alleged an unreported income earner's presence in the home, a common version of SNAP eligibility fraud, and depicted

reporter/reported party relationships as acquaintanceships, using generic descriptors such as "coworker" and "neighbor." We also held constant the reports' other basic components, such as approximate length and language use sophistication (apart from systematically introduced errors). We do not provide experimental reports' specific text here, again to prevent the possibility of agencies identifying archived copies.

Analysis. To evaluate our experimental results, we calculated Average Treatment Effects (ATE), specifically:

$$\phi(L) = E[Y(L) - Y(W)]$$
$$\phi(P) = E[Y(NE) - Y(E)]$$
$$\phi(L*E) = E[Y(L*E) - Y(L*NE) - Y(W*E) - Y(W*NE)]$$

where L is Latina, W is White, NE is no errors, and E is errors.

To estimate ATEs, we used probit models for E and the interaction between E and L. These models used state fixed effects and robust standard errors.[17] We tested for variation in the treatment effects with several specifications for group comparisons using tests of the equality of marginal effects (Long and Mustillo 2018).

Results

We report predicted probabilities of response. Overall, fifty-four percent of reports received responses, a high total response rate compared to most labor market audit studies. Randomization produced excellent balance; there is no statistical difference between treatment groups.

Table 2 shows our regression main effects. These results demonstrate that Latina ethnicity alone does not significantly predict report uptake; because Latina ethnicity itself is statistically insignificant, our experiment does not support H1.[18]

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Table 3 displays the predicted probability of report uptake for reporters in each of the four experimental conditions. Using a probit model with state fixed effects, robust standard errors, and a control for the date the report was submitted (*DateS*),[19] we computed the probability of receiving an answer conditional on the four possible combinations of race/ethnicity and English proficiency, holding control variables at their observed means.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

While reporters in the other three categories all have better than 50/50 chances of receiving a response, LEP Whites have less than a 43% chance. This result supports H2, showing that LEP decreases Whites' chances of having their reports taken up.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

As Figure 1 illustrates, predicted probability of response is .549 for HEP Latinas and .579 for LEP Latinas, but this difference is not statistically significant. For White reporters, on the other hand, the probability of receiving a response was significantly higher when they did not make errors (Pr = .584) than when they demonstrated LEP through making errors (Pr = .425; difference of .159, p < 0.05). Among HEP reporters, Whites are more likely to receive responses than Latinas (.549 - .584 = -0.035), but this difference is also statistically insignificant. Significant racial/ethnic differences emerge among LEP reporters; here, Latinas' predicted probability of response is .154 higher than Whites' (.579 - .424 = .154, p < 0.05).

Based on the results shown in Table 4 and Figure 1, we also find partial support for H3. Although the predicted probability of response is somewhat higher for LEP Latinas than for HEP Latinas, the test of first difference by English proficiency shows that this difference is not statistically significant. Yet, the results of combining Latina ethnicity with LEP are noteworthy,

showing that LEP's response-dampening effect does not hold for Latinas. The effects of LEP for Whites and for Latinas differ significantly (-.159 - .03 = -.189, p < .05). Thus, English proficiency's effect is contingent on reporters' apparent race/ethnicity, suggesting that, for Latina reporters, errors' positive effect on viability assessments offsets any negative effect on reliability assessments in gatekeepers' determinations of overall investigative promise.

STUDY 2: EXPLAINING MECHANISMS

Our experiment reveals distinctive patterns in how race/ethnicity and English proficiency intersect in predicting reporters' probability of having their reports taken up. To better understand the perceptions and habits that underlie these tendencies in gatekeepers' responses, we turn to evidence from interviews with fraud workers.

Data and Methods

Study 2 derives from in-depth, semi-structured interviews that Author A conducted with fraud workers in five US states. We anonymize the five states with identifiers denoting their regional locations: "Eastcoast," "Midatlantic," "Northeast," "Southeast," and "Southwest."[20] State politics, welfare policies, criminal justice policies, and demographics vary across these states. Here, however, we focus on patterns that are consistent across jurisdictions; the selected quotes are representative of these patterns.

The forty-two interviewees include a range of those involved in fraud control efforts, including investigators, analysts, supervisors, and managers, as well as a handful of administrators with broader responsibilities; all names are pseudonyms. Some interviewees' current positions entail making the exact judgments our experiment assesses: deciding what to do with incoming

public fraud reports. All of the interviewees are familiar with this component of the fraud control information economy and experienced with similar discretionary decision-making.

Author A recruited voluntary participants via a recruitment message shared by organizational gatekeepers in each state. The interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to two and one-half hours, covering a range of topics related to the substance and significance of fraud control work. The responses recounted here arise especially from questions about how fraud workers assess and process public fraud reports, as well as their perceptions of patterns in fraud perpetration.

The qualitative data serve the purposes of logical inference, not statistical inference (see Small 2009; Yin 2014). While actors' motives are not generally empirically accessible (Reskin 2003), interview accounts offer unique insights into what people find important and meaningful (Pugh 2013). Our interviews illuminate the problem situations in which fraud workers exercise discretion as gatekeepers processing public fraud reports and suggest the habits they draw upon in making these judgments (see Gross 2009:375).

We provide qualitative evidence in three areas to explain Study 1's findings. First, we show how fraud workers talk about the necessity of "creaming" referrals: identifying those they perceive as promising, and concentrating their efforts on those cases. Second, we discuss their perceptions of reporter (un)reliability. This section covers fraud workers' belief that public reporters are often unreliable, and their specific sense that "messy" reports that "make no sense" do not merit significant time investments. These sentiments suggest that the lower uptake rates for LEP Whites predicted in H2 and observed in the experiment result from language errors cueing skepticism about reporter reliability. Third, we provide evidence about how ethnicity and Latinos' language skills influence fraud workers' perceptions of reports' viability. This section includes fraud

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workers' comments on homophily and fraud's concentration in ethnic enclaves, which support our expectation that gatekeepers will commonly presume that reports from Latinas are likely to implicate other Latinas. This section also includes fraud workers' statements about connections between ethnicity, language skills, and immigration status, supporting our contention that, for Latinas, LEP serves as a viability signal, offsetting the uptake-dampening effect it demonstrates for Whites.

Discretion and "Creaming" Referrals

Fraud units have to choose how to invest their resources. As Eastcoast manager Vincent explains, this includes deciding which incoming case referrals to pursue:

> *We get a lot of referrals… [thousands of] referrals a month that you have to vet through to see which ones [to pursue]. So yeah, we get a lot from the [local offices], we get a lot from the general public, from the fraud hotline, people can send us tips anonymously… Our job is to try to automate the best we can, to try the vet the best we can… but you never want them to slip through because the one slips through could be **that one**. […] We have a… dozen fraud referral and screener [staff], so we're constantly generating, constantly setting [up cases].*

Vincent illustrates how, facing a constant influx of fraud reports, fraud units continually seek balance, avoiding investing time and energy in unpromising reports, while also trying to ensure no promising reports go unaddressed. Similarly, Southeast manager Jack emphasizes that potential investigations outstrip their work capacity, and indicates some of the factors that contribute to prioritization decisions:

We're kinda like the police. The police can't work every case that they get. I've had officers tell me here that they work the best cases, they work the ones that they think they can get something out of. And we're basically the same thing. If we think we can do it, we'll give a shot. But you get some referrals that, not necessarily from the [local] offices, but some referrals may say, "We think so-and-so is selling their food stamps." Well, you know, that's hard to prove. First we basically have to get them to admit that they're doing it. But, we'll give it a shot, but we're not gonna waste a lot of time on something like that.

Per Jack's account, fraud units endeavor to avoid committing resources to unpromising referrals, and thus reserve capacity for those in which they see more promise. Distinguishing between more- and less-promising fraud referrals represents discretionary "triage" (Walsh et al. 2018) in fraud investigations. The marketization of welfare punishment in dedicated fraud units funnels this discretion in a particular direction. Jack explains how incentives drive his unit's activities:

We keep thirty-five percent for [Intentional Program Violations], twenty percent for [unintentional] cases. And if there's an agency error that caused a loss we don't keep anything [chuckles]. We don't get anything for that. [Stage whisper, looking over the top of his glasses:] *'Cause we'd be making money, you know.*

Jack's comments illustrate the push to maximize IPVs and other client overpayments. Organizational priorities and individual performance assessments motivate fraud workers to focus on promising leads in client fraud cases, rather than other types of waste or error, and to avoid sinking time into dead-end cases. Reporter reliability and report viability are the two key dimensions constituting fraud workers' perceptions of promise in these cases.

Reporter Reliability

Fraud workers are more inclined to invest their time in reports from people they see as reliable. Generally, they view public reports somewhat skeptically, in part because they perceive public fraud reporters as mostly personally motivated, and sometimes dishonest (see BLINDED XXXX). They also say that some public fraud reporters report things carelessly, are poorly informed about the situation they are reporting, or misunderstand program rules, making them unreliable sources. Southeast supervisor Rosemary says, "A lot of stuff we do get on the hotline we can't even do anything with." Eastcoast investigator Tiffany agrees:

> *Most of my good referrals do come from either caseworkers or [database matches]. Hotline calls can kind of be, unpredictable, because... you have usually angry people calling into the [fraud] unit. So, sometimes you get all kinds of strange information, and some it's good, some of it's bad. So I would say the hotline is probably the most unreliable information.*

As Tiffany suggests, one of the express reasons for fraud workers' dubiousness regarding public reports are their perceptions of informants' ulterior motives: they believe that voluntary fraud reporters are usually driven by interpersonal animus, and that such motivations beget less-reliable information (see BLINDED XXXX). Despite these reservations, public fraud reports remain resources in the fraud control information economy, and fraud workers are receptive to those they see as promising. Describing the value she sees even in interpersonally motivated reports, Southwest supervisor Carly says "That little old lady is mad because they're always partying at the house. That's typically how it comes to us. But, I'll take it, that's cool. However

we find it." Carly's comments illustrate fraud control's outcome-driven orientation, with reports that lead to successful investigations seen as valuable regardless of their motivation.

The language errors we introduced in some reports correspond to fraud workers' hesitations about what Midatlantic manager Brian calls "messy tips." Fraud workers say that carelessness or incompetence can characterize less-promising referrals, indicating that LEP's uptake-dampening effect results from cueing skepticism about reporters' reliability. Southeast supervisor Antoine explains the variation they see in fraud tips' quality, and communicates his lack of enthusiasm for spending his limited time on things that "make no sense":

> *Some [reports] have some information that really makes no sense […] It irritates*
> *me [when they turn into investigations]… I say, "Did anybody read this, or actually*
> *look at this?" It's not that I don't have enough to do… Jack and I talk about this a*
> *lot, 'cause sometimes he'll send 'em to me, and I'll say, "Did you read this?" and*
> *we'll start looking at it and say, "This don't make no sense. Okay, fine. We'll take*
> *care of it."*

Here, Antoine demonstrates his interest in maximizing his unit's efficiency by concentrating their efforts on promising cases that appear to originate with relatively reliable reporters. Advancing this objective means expeditiously concluding cases that appear to be headed nowhere, and ideally forgoing unpromising investigations altogether.

Report Viability

Fraud workers also discount reports they see as less viable, prioritizing allegations they predict they can successfully substantiate. Some public reports contain allegations that do not appear to constitute rule violations, such as complaints that clients have expensive pieces of personal

property that are irrelevant to eligibility calculations. Others contain allegations that are comparatively difficult to authoritatively document; under-the-table work, for instance, is harder for investigators to prove than formal labor market participation.

Fraud workers' statements also give reason to suspect that race and ethnicity may bear on viability assessments. Although fraud workers do not explicitly assert disproportionate interest in pursuing allegations against Latino clients, they do depict this group-level characteristic as enforcement-pertinent. First, while race and ethnicity are formally irrelevant to program eligibility, immigration status is not; thus, questions about immigration status may suggest comparatively greater report viability. While fraud workers—like others (Valentino et al. 2013:155)—connect immigration status and Latino ethnicity, the other enforcement-relevant aspect of group-level characteristics that fraud workers note is less racially/ethnically specific; fraud workers describe fraud behavior as often concentrated in racial/ethnic enclaves, and express interest in counteracting fraud in such "problem areas."

Homophily presumptions and addressing "problem areas." Fraud workers depict homophily in public fraud reporting as common; that is, they say that reporters tend to come from social locations similar to their reports' targets' (BLINDED XXXX; see also Bergemann 2017; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Fraud workers' strong consensus on this point suggests that gatekeepers draw inferences about reports' targets' characteristics based on reporters' characteristics.

Investigators also highlight fraud's concentration in particular "problem areas," and note the steps they take to attend specifically to such situations. Eastcoast administrator George exemplifies this perspective, describing both demographic and geographic patterns in fraud behavior:

Different areas have different populations. [One area] has a large section of Russians who were pretty darn good at what they used to do. Nigerians were very good… If you go around [certain] offices, there's a large Hispanic population, so it depends on where you are. And, it's, you know, everyone's got an angle. [...] You can go down the street probably ten minutes from here and buy a Social Security card, you know… [We are dealing with] illegals that we didn't know about their driver's licenses. Guess what? I hate to say it. They're probably gonna be on freaking aid too, so I gotta go out and find them before I get a call about them.

George foregrounds a connection between racial/ethnic immigrant enclaves and fraud behavior, and specifically flags fraud issues among undocumented immigrants. His comments suggest that, for him, while Latinos are one of the groups with whom he associates enforcement-relevant characteristics, they are not the only one. Other fraud workers, too, describe concentrations of fraud behavior among multiple groups, and not necessarily immigrants or racial/ethnic minorities; indeed, multiple fraud workers specifically mentioned issues among groups of White women.

These comments represent fraud workers' perceptions of homophily's role in welfare clients' lives generally, and fraud specifically. They typically depict fraud as a behavior modeled and learned in social settings. Furthermore, they say public reports of fraud suspicions usually come from people personally associated with reports' targets, such as neighbors, friends, or family. Southwest investigator Sue summarizes: "neighbors, and it's relatives, exes." Fraud workers believe that such socially proximate individuals often have personal motivations for reporting (BLINDED XXXX; see also Bergemann 2017). Particularly considered in conjunction with their beliefs about fraud behavior's social and geographic concentrations, fraud workers' consensus on

this topic begets the notion that fraud unit gatekeepers expect public reporters to report people similar to themselves.

Ethnicity, language skills, and immigration status presumptions. Latinos are decidedly the ethnic group that US Whites most closely associate with immigration, and Valentino and colleagues' (2013:155) survey evidence shows that "attitudes about Latinos in particular, not general ethnocentrism, are associated with policy opinions about immigration." Experiments demonstrate that White respondents cued with Latino associations express less favorable attitudes about immigration compared to those cued with European associations; this effect is particularly pronounced when combined with stereotype-confirming signals about Latino immigrants being low-skilled (Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008).

Our qualitative data support the notion that fraud workers associate language use, and specifically native Spanish speaking, with immigrants believed to be engaged in fraud. Eastcoast Manager Caroline, for instance, recounts her Spanish language skills aiding detection of immigrants' transgressions:

When it comes to [our unit], we do find there is a lot of immigrants that say that they don't understand. […] There are a lot of immigrants that come here get the benefits and say that they don't know what's goin' on, but I think they know what's goin' on. Because how would you know that you need benefits? Who told you that, you know, that you could get benefits? […] [That strategy works] a lot of the time.

I speak Spanish fluently. You can't tell, obviously [because I'm White]. I have been in situations where clients come here and we sat with them and they have spoken Spanish in front of me about a situation. And I'm like, "I can't believe they

are saying this!" And I am catching them on stuff that I'm like, "Well, she just told

me in English that she is not working, but she's telling him, 'We have to get out of

here in an hour,' because she has to start work." […]

> *I let them talk, and so we'll have a conversation, and then at the end, then I*

speak to them in Spanish: "Well, okay, let me just reiterate what you said and what

I heard you say to each other."[…] Their jaws drop, and they're like, "No, that's

not what I meant." [And I say] "No, I just heard what you meant because I'm

fluent."

Here, Caroline describes the relationship she perceives between speaking Spanish and certain patterns of rule violation, and indicates that her Spanish fluency helps her catch immigrants breaking rules. Southwest investigator Sue also speaks Spanish, and similarly notes that skill's role in her job. In doing so, she suggests a connection between Latino ethnicity and undocumented status, and links that status with lowered barriers to perpetrating fraud:

> *I do a lot of Spanish cases. So, with the Hispanic population, it's more of the*
>
> *unreported income. Because it's easier for them because they don't have a Social*
>
> *[Security number]. It's easier for them to work and get paid cash and not report*
>
> *it.[21]*

In interviews, welfare fraud workers assert that race and ethnicity themselves are irrelevant to both the phenomenon of welfare fraud and their jobs in fraud control (although they do commonly invoke racialized ideas about the "culture of poverty" and "generational dependence"). Non-discrimination rules and official bureaucratic colorblindness (see Einstein and Glick 2017) engender assertions of racial/ethnic neutrality, particularly in response to an inquiring outsider.

Immigration status, though, is rule-relevant, and fraud workers are sensitive to non-citizens receiving benefits as a form of fraud. Southwest investigator Ashley describes how she sees this manifesting: "Stolen Social Security numbers is a big thing, you know. Or them using their kids' Social Security numbers because their kids were born here but they weren't." Southeast investigator Leslie agrees, in a statement that suggests prejudice against Mexican Americans and evinces many fraud workers' disdain for components of the welfare system that they view as overly permissive and vulnerable to exploitation: "We have one interpreter, and she'll be interpreter for like twenty or thirty of the Mexicans that come in, and they don't speak any English, so she's there getting [assistance] for everybody."

Mechanisms of Disparate Uptake

Fraud workers' depictions of their working worlds indicate the operation of a contextualized and bounded form of instrumental rationality in their assessments of public fraud reports. Gross' (2009: 368) pragmatist theory of social mechanisms usefully applies. This model focuses on how social action derives from actor-problem-habit-response chains. Thus, instrumental rationality is not strictly rational choice: "actors are enmeshed in webs of meaning that indicate the significance of the ends they are trying to pursue, constrain the choices they make by setting limits on the thinkability of means, and sustain the social relationships in which instrumentality must be embedded" (Gross 2009: 367). Fraud workers' interview accounts reveal the context surrounding their instrumental action: the circumstances of problems' perception/interpretation; the significance ascribed to their ends (successful fraud cases); and the patterns of thought that constitute their habits. In total, they help us understand how the "habit of rationality… develops and is situationally deployed" (Gross 2009: 367) in this setting of social action.

Fraud workers draw on their experience and judgment in their day-to-day discretion, including determining which reports merit follow-up. Such circumstances provide space for stereotypes and biases to influence thinking and action; indeed, responsibility to assess and act quickly in response to complex situations with limited information engenders reliance on cognitive shortcuts (Epp et al. 2014; Lara-Millán 2014; Lara-Millán and Van Cleve 2017; Schram et al. 2009).

Fraud workers' interview accounts suggest mechanisms of disparate uptake derived from perceptions of investigative promise (although it would be surprising if their express interview accounts described acting out of racial/ethnic animus). For instance, Eastcoast manager Stephen says that, while he may be aware of people's race/ethnicity, he does not see those characteristics as a factor in his job. He does note, however, both immigration status and racial/ethnic enclaves as potentially enforcement-relevant issues.

> *This is a great country and a lot of people that are outside of this country want to come here. Does it affect my actual job? Not really, because, when I'm looking at data, and of course I'm looking at a retailer or a client or whatever, I'm not looking at a person's ethnicity as a result of that. But typically you can see patterns and trends based on geography, which people tend to gravitate toward a particular area. So from that perspective you can kind of make some inferences.*

Because race and ethnicity are themselves formally rule-irrelevant, there are no direct incentives for gatekeepers to make judgments on their basis. There is certainly room for straightforward animus in shaping fraud control activity, as findings from other welfare client punishment contexts suggest (Fording et al. 2011; Pipinis 2017; Soss et al. 2011a). However, differential uptake patterns do not require such motivation; they could result from instrumentally

oriented discretionary action within this institutional context, as gatekeepers make incentivized judgments based on their socialization regarding more and less promising types of referrals (see also Epp et al. 2014).

DISCUSSION

The Bounds of Instrumental Rationality in Welfare Investigation Decision-Making

Soss and colleagues (2011a:230) observe that "Organizational routines, tools, norms, incentives, information systems, and categories of understanding function as mechanisms of social control that shape the use of discretion in particular ways." Fraud workers' incentives all push toward prioritizing cases believed to be conducive to successful charge substantiation. Our results suggest how "the habit of rationality… develops and is situationally deployed" (Gross 2009:367) in this context. Fraud workers' accounts illuminate the context of welfare fraud's (formal) apprehension and interpretation as a problem, perceptions of successful fraud investigations' significance, and the patterns of thought that ground fraud workers' habits when processing informational inputs and choosing consequent courses of action. These accounts reveal the reasoning behind deprioritizing reports from (White) LEP reporters: language errors confirm preexisting wariness of reporters' reliability, reducing these reports' perceived promise as investigative leads. We do not find a significant effect of Latina ethnicity itself on report uptake.. LEP's failure to evince its otherwise uptake-dampening effect for Latina reporters, however, indicates an interaction between ethnicity and English proficiency. Fraud workers' interview responses reveal likely drivers: although race and ethnicity themselves are policy-irrelevant, the linked characteristics of citizenship and immigration status are policy-relevant.

Formally race/ethnicity-neutral policies can nevertheless functionally target particular groups (see e.g. Hartman et al. 2014), and gatekeepers' contextualized beliefs about group-level fraud likelihoods and different types of leads' investigatory promise can drive disparate uptake without specific discriminatory intent.[22] Because undocumented immigrants and many other recent immigrants are categorically ineligible for SNAP, elevated suspicion about Latinas' citizenship and immigration status may counteract any damage from LEP to perceived reporter reliability, erasing the uptake-dampening effect observed for Whites.

Our results are consistent with a contextualized and bounded instrumental rationality on gatekeepers' part. Overall, the experimental evidence reflects fraud workers' greater interest in cases perceived as promising. The evidence supporting H2 suggests that, for White reporters, LEP cues fraud workers' general skepticism regarding public reporters' carefulness and confidence. Their attenuated interest in these reports indicates their prioritization of reports they perceive to originate from more reliable sources.

Latino ethnicity itself does not appear to be a strong enough viability signal to statistically significantly affect gatekeepers' prioritization decisions, as H1 proposed. Adding English proficiency as a consideration, though, substantially changes things. Although the difference between LEP and HEP Latinas' predicted probability of response was not statistically significant, our experimental findings tilt toward the suggestion that fraud units are more likely to take up LEP Latinas' reports than HEP Latinas' reports. This result—which may have proved statistically significant with a larger sample—contrasts starkly with LEP's pronounced uptake-dampening effect for White reporters. Latino ethnicity's salience in this context appears dependent on its connection to other cues; namely, LEP, a primary determinant of "social illegality" (Flores and Schachter 2018). This result corresponds to recent research suggesting that anti-immigration

sentiment is more salient to welfare attitudes than are feelings about Latinos in general (Hussey and Pearson-Merkowitz 2013). When combined with Latina ethnicity, LEP loses the power to reduce uptake it demonstrates for White reporters, partially supporting H3 and evincing the interaction of apparent ethnicity and apparent English proficiency in claims-making upon enforcement systems.

Our experiment shows that the exact same sorts of written English errors have different effects depending on the perceived ethnicity of the person who makes them. In contrast to White reporters, LEP for Latina reporters might cue questions about nativity and immigration status. When combined with officials' statements about fraud's prevalence in certain communities and immigration status' relevance to program eligibility and rule violation patterns, the experimental results suggest how decision-makers interpret signals of ethnicity and language proficiency together when deciding whether to follow up on claims of fraud.

This interaction echoes Fording and colleagues' (2011:1638) finding that race/ethnicity and length of program participation interact significantly in predicting TANF clients' likelihood of being sanctioned. Both interactions suggest that race and ethnicity's meaning to street-level bureaucrats vary depending on accompanying factors. Differences in errors' effect for White and Latina reporters indicate that language errors cue different responses depending on the people from whom they appear to originate.

Listening to Snitches and the Individual-State Relationship

Fundamentally, our results contribute to theoretical understandings of the relationship between individuals and the state. Our dual-dimension conceptualization of investigative promise elucidates how different aspects of individual-initiated contact with state agencies interact to shape

government responses. Beyond demonstrating that people's access to state agencies is unequal, we find that the same variable that predicts access for Whites—English proficiency—loses its predictive value for Latinas. This finding deepens the social scientific understanding of how state gatekeepers view and respond to members of the public. Previous studies have documented diminished responsiveness when requests for information or assistance come from members of marginalized and demonized social groups; contrastingly, we find that membership in such groups does not diminish responsiveness when people volunteer information to agencies' enforcement systems.

Thus, our results illuminate a less-studied form of the individual-state relationship: members of the public attempting to mobilize the state's coercive power. Public reports of suspected fraud are compelling instantiations of Foucauldian "capillary" power, which manifests "*within* the social body, rather than *from above* it" (Foucault 1980:39, see also Foucault 1979[1977]:204-205). Our assessment of state agencies' evaluation of potential participants in responsibilization projects reveals why some people become consequential contributors to this exercise of capillary power and others do not. It shows that characteristics that constitute liabilities in accessing the state's supportive capacities function differently when approaching gatekeepers of formal social control.

Given the specific variables examined, our findings also add to the emerging understanding of race and ethnicity in the US welfare state beyond the conventional Black/White dichotomy.[23] Our racial/ethnic focus reflects developments in racial threat phenomena in the United States and related research highlighting Latino ethnicity and immigration status' current significance. While Black/White inequality remains central to individual-state relationships in general and social control and welfare contexts specifically, recent trends suggest that Latino ethnicity and

immigration considerations hold newly magnified importance. We respond accordingly, attending to pivotal contemporary dynamics in the "social construction of target populations" (Schneider and Ingram 1993).

CONCLUSION

Previous research reveals anti-Latino discrimination when people seek information or services from state agencies (Einstein and Glick 2017; Ernst et al. 2013; White et al. 2015). We find a related phenomenon among representatives of the welfare system's client investigation apparatus. The general public judges Latino immigrants more harshly than White immigrants for behaviors that violate laws or norms (Hartman et al. 2014); our results show that welfare fraud authorities also view Latino-connected rule breaking differently.

More broadly, this investigation illuminates how welfare rule enforcement authorities evaluate different categories of public reporters, and through them, different types of potential fraud suspects. Anti-Black racialization and racism are enduring features of US social safety net programs (Brown 1999; Gilens 1999; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001; Soss et al. 2011a). Recent trends point toward Latino immigrants' growing centrality in discourse about welfare abuse and dependence (Amundson and Zajicek 2017: 395-396; Brown 2016; Chavez 2013[2008]). Perceived racial status threats predict resistance to social safety net programs (Wetts and Willer 2018), as do anti-immigrant sentiments (Garand et al. 2017; Hussey and Pearson-Merkowitz 2013). Indeed, findings that immigration attitudes are more salient to opinions about welfare than the anti-Black attitudes long linked to anti-welfare sentiments suggest an "immigrationalization" of welfare attitudes (Garand et al. 2017). Within welfare bureaucracies, differences in how fraud unit gatekeepers process English proficiency for Latina and White reporters indicate that the patterns

of thought fraud workers reveal in interviews translate into measurable differences in real-world behavioral patterns. Our results suggest that fraud workers' perspectives on group-level characteristics and suspicions about Latinos' immigration status may influence their discretionary action as they seek to maximize fraud control outcomes.

Undocumented, documented, and documentation boundary-straddling immigrants alike experience stigmatization, criminalization, and legal vulnerability in US society (Abrego 2014; Dreby 2015; HoSang 2010:Ch. 6; Gonzales 2016; Menjívar and Abrego 2012). Restrictive legal rules—or absent legal protections—affect immigrants both materially and symbolically (Menjívar 2006; Golash-Boza 2016), and fear, mistrust, and feelings of marginalization may discourage Latino immigrants from making claims of legal institutions (Abrego 2011). The English proficiency-ethnicity interaction our study documents raises important questions about citizenship and perceptions of belongingness as factors bearing upon relationships between state agencies and the public (see also Ernst et al. 2013; White et al. 2015).

Regardless of gatekeepers' underlying motivations, the observed uptake differences have important substantive implications for program clients. Following TANF's replacement of AFDC, cash welfare's contribution to poor Americans' subsistence formulae has largely evaporated (Edin and Shaefer 2015). SNAP benefits' role has increased correspondingly, and SNAP's average monthly participation of around 46 million is over ten times TANF's (Food and Nutrition Service 2016; Office of Family Assistance 2015). Suspending and disqualifying clients via fraud investigations therefore threatens tens of millions of Americans' food security. Fraud allegations can also lead to monetary penalties, criminal charges, and potentially incarceration (see Gustafson 2009). Both administrative and criminal punishments entail serious consequences for poor families.

Our findings suggest that not all clients are equally exposed to such punishments. And public fraud report uptake as assessed here is one of numerous discretionary stages in the fraud enforcement process. Fraud workers have significant discretion regarding which cases to pursue, how much time and energy to invest in them, and what types of charges to pursue (if any): Unintentional Program Violations, Intentional Program Violations, or referrals for criminal prosecution. This study reveals only one link in the chain of discretionary action that leads to substantiated fraud charges; in the aggregate, between-group differences at various stages of this process have significant implications for systematic disparities in fraud control outcomes.

This study also builds on research identifying related phenomena in other countries. For example, literature from Mexico has documented strong ethnic biases in politicians' engagement with their constituencies (Trejo and Altamirano 2016), voters' responses to electoral appeals (Aguilar 2011; Campos-Vázquez and Rivas-Herrera 2019), and banks' reactions to potential clients (Martínez Gutiérrez 2019). Other researchers have observed ethnic biases with respect to local institutions in Brazil (Leivas and Aristides dos Santos 2018), social welfare programs in Colombia (Slough 2020), and the global allocation of internet access across racial groups (Weidmann et al. 2016). Evidence of bureaucratic discrimination has also been shown in developed countries like Germany (Hemker and Rink 2017), Sweden (Schütze and Johansson 2019), and the United Kingdom (Ford 2016). Our results add to the growing body of literature indicating ethnic and racial biases in the bureaucracies of diverse nations around the world.

TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Experimental Conditions

Latina & Higher English Proficiency (HEP)	White & Higher English Proficiency (HEP)
Latina & Lower English Proficiency (LEP)	White & Lower English Proficiency (LEP)

Table 2. Regression Main Effects

	Answer	Answer	Answer
Latina	0.180		-0.127
	(0.163)		(0.235)
LEP		-0.204	-0.580***
		(0.179)	(0.243)
Latina*LEP			0.690**
			(0.323)
Date Sent	-0.001	0.000	0.001
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Observations	315	315	315
Robust standard errors in parentheses			
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1			

Table 3. Predicted Probabilities of Uptake

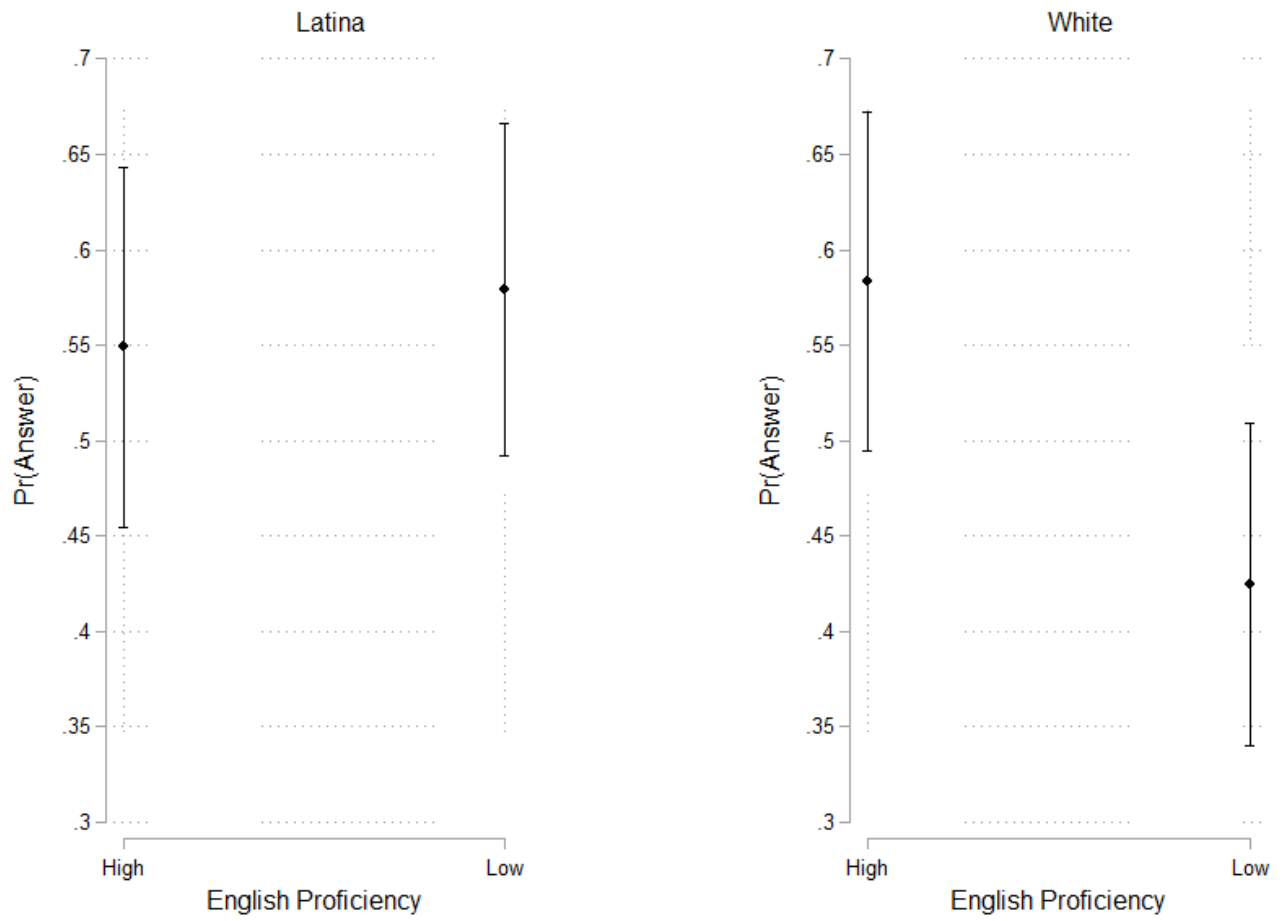|	Predicted probability of response	Test of first difference (English proficiency)	Test of second difference (English proficiency)	Test of first difference (Race/ethnicity)	Test of second difference (Race/ethnicity)
Latina				HEP	
HEP	.549	.579 - .549 =	-.159 - .03 =	.549 - .584 =	-.035 - .154 =
LEP	.579	.03	-.189**	-.035	-.189**
White				LEP	
HEP	.584	.425 - .584 =		.579 - .425 =	
LEP	.425	-.159**		.154**	

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Figure 1. Predicted probability of uptake by race/ethnicity and English proficiency

NOTES

[1] Some criminal justice agencies also have units dedicated to policing welfare fraud. See Gustafson (2009).

[2] Other typical sources of case referrals include public assistance agency workers and referrals from other state agencies, including police departments.

[3] Lipsky (1980:xi) defines street-level bureaucracies as "the agencies whose workers interact with and have wide discretion over the dispensation of benefits or the allocation of public sanctions." Lipsky notes welfare departments as leading examples of such bureaucracies. The fraud workers this study focuses upon are functionaries of these bureaucracies. Their assigned tasks and day-to-day activities satisfy all of the elements of Lipsky's formulation; they work on questions related to benefit dispensation and are responsible for enforcement actions that result in program-specific sanctions and other legal penalties, and exercise considerable discretion in the course of their duties.

[4] Throughout, we use the term "race/ethnicity" when referring to group-based categorizations including both racial groups and ethnic groups; this figures prominently into our analyses, which juxtaposes an ethnic group (Latinos) with a racial group (Whites). We use "race" and "racial" when referring specifically to race-based categorizations, and "ethnicity" and "ethnic" when referring specifically to ethnicity-based categorizations.

[5] Throughout, we use "Latina" when referring to our experiment's pretextual fraud reporters, whom we consistently depicted as women, and "Latino" when referring to people of Latin American descent generally.

[6] Some other work questions discrimination's ubiquity. While the literature documents widespread evidence of discrimination, the difficulties of publishing negative results may have contributed to contravening evidence's comparative rarity in peer-reviewed outlets (Arceneaux and Butler 2016). Both Black and White politicians' comparative responsiveness to same-race constituents appears to temper between-group disparities (McClendon 2016). Einstein and Glick (2017) also find that public housing officials respond at equal rates to email requests from Black and White people, a result they attribute to public housing's racial demographics, well-established bureaucratic profession, and anti-discrimination rules. Yet, they also find that Latinos are somewhat less likely to receive responses, and that the responses they do receive are less friendly.

[7] The federal government also allows state governments to retain twenty percent of recovered overpayments not substantiated as resulting from intentional client fraud.

[8] See also Keiser, Mueser, and Choi (2004), who find that people of color are sanctioned more than Whites within local areas, but that non-Whites' disproportionate residence in areas with lower sanction rates leads to overall lower sanction rates.

[9] African Americans, whose poverty and food insecurity rates are even higher, accounted for approximately 30% of SNAP benefits in 2016 (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2018a).

[10] For parsimony and clarity, we only report here our most theoretically central hypotheses. A more extensive list of hypotheses evaluated is available in the version of the study we registered at [BLINDED] prior to accessing our outcome data.

[11] Some fraud workers bemoan this fact, suggesting that providing reporters with information regarding report follow-up would encourage more reporting.

[12] We also recorded several characteristics of email responses received, including how quickly responses arrived, responses' length, and whether respondents provided personal contact information. Analyses of these supplementary outcomes did not reveal a consistent pattern of results.

[13] Unfortunately, no systematic data are available on the total numbers of public reports fraud units receive or those reports' characteristics.

[14] Please see Study 2 below for fraud workers' statements about reports commonly lacking the kind of information needed to launch an investigation.

[15] The gatekeepers' personal specifics are unknown; although it is likely that identity characteristics such as race/ethnicity affect their work (Watkins-Hayes 2009a, 2009b), we cannot assess these factors' potential influence on our results.

[16] The association of children with a case implies the potential for larger overpayments, and fraud units generally evince more interest in cases with greater implicated dollar amounts. See [BLINDED].

[17] The state fixed effects address any potential state-level confounders. In auxiliary analyses, we also explored state-level predictors, including Berry and colleagues' (2010) measure of government ideology; Democrat versus Republican gubernatorial control; Republicans' percentage of states' legislatures; states' percentage Latino in 2017 and change in that percentage between 2010 and 2017; states' percentage foreign-born in 2017 and change in that percentage between 2010 and 2017; states' estimated percentage undocumented in 2017 and change in that percentage between 2010 and 2017; and a state-level measure of Latino residential segregation. These auxiliary analyses generally did not yield significant results, perhaps owing to a lack of statistical power.

[18] Reporter reliability considerations may factor in to this result. That is, if gatekeepers see Latina reporters as inherently less reliable, this effect could offset increased viability assessments for Latinas' reports.

[19] This control is important because agencies have more time to answer reports submitted earlier.

[20] Study 1 and Study 2's samples partially overlap; interviews were conducted in some but not all of the states in the final quantitative sample.

[21] Working "under the table" is itself a cue for prejudice; popular opinion more strongly condemns this behavior among Latino immigrants than among White immigrants (Hartman et al. 2014).

[22] Immigrants' legal vulnerability could similarly influence gatekeepers, who might assume that LEP Latinas must have especially "good reasons" to come forward and initiate interaction with a state agency; such presumptions would also encourage closer attention to these reports.

[23] See also Fox (2012) for a penetrating historical analysis of the "three worlds of relief" for Black, Latino, and White Americans.

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