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Intersectionality and Social Welfare: Avoidance and Unequal Treatment among Transgender Women of Color

Abstract: This research adds to the emergent literature on intersectionality and public administration through examining how transgender women of color (trans WOC) are interacting with U.S. social welfare offices. It is our contention that trans WOC, facing a compounded set of negative stereotypes derived from racial and gender identities, will be more likely than other transgender identifying persons to: (1) avoid seeking out public welfare benefits and (2) be more likely to report experiencing discriminatory treatment in social welfare offices. Using data from the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey we uncover evidence that trans WOC are more likely to avoid social welfare offices and face discrimination in social welfare offices. Scholars and administrators of social welfare programs, including Social Security related benefits, should be aware of the potential for public benefit avoidance and administrative discrimination directed toward historically marginalized groups and prioritize social equity considerations among clients facing compounded intersectional barriers.

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Evidence for Practice

- This research offers evidence that persons with intersecting marginalized identities—identifying as both a transgender woman and a person of color—face compounded negative social constructions and prejudices around racial and gender identities, hereby influencing how these individuals will interact with U.S. social welfare offices, including social welfare avoidance and frontline administrative discrimination.
- Transgender women of color (trans WOC) are found to be significantly more likely, than other transgender identifying respondents, to both avoid seeking out social welfare benefits and more likely to report experiencing discriminatory treatment once engaged with social welfare offices. For instance, roughly 1 in 12 trans WOC report avoiding public assistance offices compared with 1 in 20 white transgender women.
- Due to disparities found in both social welfare avoidance and discriminatory treatment against trans WOC, administrators of social welfare programs should emphasize the application of an intersectional lens in social equity planning and action directed toward clients facing oppression due to the negative constructions associated with intersecting marginalized identities, such as transgender WOC.
- Practitioners could accomplish such actions through administrative efforts like inclusive outreach campaigns that include images or testimonials from trans WOC, the incorporation of implicit bias assessments to help identify organizational biases related to transgender identifying individuals, redesigned social welfare offices that emphasize inclusion, such as gender neutral restroom facilities, and increased usage of e-government benefit application tools that can reduce discriminatory face-to-face interactions.

The social construction of target populations shape policy design and administrative decisions in ways that determine who are and are not worthy of the benefits of policy outcomes (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Policy design and implementation processes send varying messages to different social groups. For those with negative social constructions, paternalistic policies are grounded in messages linked to value, virtue, and morality as social order and a desire to "better" individuals through public policy are embedded within its design (Soss 2005). This is perhaps no truer than for welfare policies (Gilens 1999; Hayat 2016; Monnat 2010; Soss 2005; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011; Watkins-Hayes 2009).

A voluminous literature examines the ways in which racial identity, especially Black identity, has been negatively constructed to be associated with stereotypes around sluggish work ethic and extravagant welfare usage, along with documented discriminatory challenges successfully navigating public administration systems and the U.S. social welfare system, specifically (Floyd-Thomas 2016; Gaynor 2018; Gilens 1999; Hardy, Samudra, and Davis 2019; Keiser, Mueser, and Choi 2004; Soss,

Fording, and Schram 2011; Watkins-Hayes 2009). However, much less is known in the literature about how converging dimensions of identity influence social welfare outcomes. For instance, when racial identity intersects with gender nonconformity or transgender (trans) identity, how are individuals with multiple intersecting identities experiencing and engaging with the U.S. social welfare system? While lesser known, such explorations are critically important to equitable and democratic policy development and public administration as those individuals with multiple intersecting marginalized identities likely experience the brunt of inequitable effects of marginalizing and degenerative policies, in compounding ways (Hankivsky et al. 2014; Seng et al. 2012).

With the continuing documented prominence of both transgender and racial discrimination, the explicit oppression of Black and other transgender women of color (WOC), low-wage and unstable employment opportunities, and widening income and wealth inequality in the United States, transgender people of color are more likely to report experiencing unemployment and poverty spells than the general population, including the general transgender population (James et al. 2016). Yet, little is known regarding transgender experiences with the U.S. social welfare system, including the engagement (or not) with public social welfare offices. In this investigation, situated within the social welfare context, we choose to focus on trans WOC. Female-headed households in the United States, particularly those headed by a woman of color, are more at-risk for experiencing poverty spells and more likely to participate in means-tested social welfare programs (Tucker and Lowell 2016). For instance, a January 2018 report from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found that, "among all one-parent families receiving assistance, nearly 94 percent had a female household head" (Foster and Rojas 2018, 2). Similarly, a 2014 Urban Institute report found that approximately 90 percent of families receiving multiple means-tested benefits were one-parent families headed by a woman (Edelstein, Pergamit, and Ratcliffe 2014). Women and WOC, in particular, experience unique barriers and concerns around experiencing material hardship and a likely magnified need to participate in ameliorative social welfare programs (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1981; Richard 2014; Savas 2010). In turn, trans WOC are the intersectional focus of our study.

This research builds upon a growing literature that examines issues of intersectionality and social construction in public administration. Consequently, this article argues that the negative social constructions associated with intersecting marginalized identities, in particular, those associated with identifying as trans WOC, induces negative interactions with U.S. public social welfare offices. Further, we seek to understand if trans WOC choose to engage with public social welfare offices at all. In this article, we argue and find evidence that trans WOC, relative to other trans identifying persons like white trans women, are more likely to both avoid seeking out public social welfare offices and are also more likely to face discriminatory treatment or be denied services when engaging with social welfare offices.

Our investigation seeks to first understand the role of intersectionality and negative social constructions on social welfare outcomes for trans WOC. Second, we draw connections between the discriminatory treatment experienced by trans WOC and their avoidance of social welfare offices. We then test these theories using data collected from the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey. We find that trans WOC are more likely to report experiencing discrimination and thus, more likely to avoid interactions with social welfare offices, than their white and male transgender counterparts. Finally, we offer administrative and management insights for a path forward.

Intersectionality of Social Identity
Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the theoretical concept of intersectionality and refers to the ways in which Black women experience race and gender in oppressive contexts. The application of an intersectional perspective, particularly in

offers a counterperspective to dominate white supremacist policy design and program implementation (Crenshaw 1989; Crenshaw et al. 1995). Furthermore, an intersectional perspective illuminates experiences occurring within the overlapping matrices of oppression and understands the complexity of identity and how this complexity shapes one's interactions with public agencies and administrators.

Social Constructions and Intersectionality

Social constructions serve as conceptual maps or mental images that shape one's understanding of the world and its social problems (Gaynor 2018). In the context of policy development and implementation, they operate to determine who is and is not deserving of policy protections and benefits (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Sociologists have long studied the social construction of social problems and scholars in other fields like media studies, gender studies, health, social work, and others have explored the social construction of crime, reality, race, and gender. Perhaps one of the most salient examples illustrating variance in social construction relates to the consumption and sale of marijuana. As of this writing, recreational marijuana is legal in several countries and 15 U.S. states plus Washington, DC. The distribution, sale, and consumption of marijuana are therefore constructed differently, depending upon one's location. Even within the states where recreational use is legal, the dominate constructions of those incarcerated for marijuana related offenses and those who own dispensaries or grow cannabis are vastly different. Where the former, largely people of color, are negatively constructed as undeserving criminals and deviants and the latter, largely white people or white-led organizations, are seen as deserving entrepreneurs with legitimate business endeavors. The differences in the ways in which each group is constructed— suggesting one is criminal and the other is not—leads to, among other things, disproportionate and negative interactions with the criminal legal system, economic sanctions, a criminal recor

and their street-level interactions with public administrators and

identifying survey respondents. Secondly, we compared trans WOC exclusively against only other trans women in the survey (i.e., trans WOC compared against white trans women). Thus, there are two model estimations for comparison presented for each dependent variable presented below: (1) all other trans respondents and (2) other trans women respondents.

welfare avoidance. In the comparative model with only trans women respondents, trans WOC are predicted to have an 8.67 percent chance of avoiding a public assistance/government benefit office, relative to a 4.79 percent chance for other trans women, representing a 44.75 percent increased likelihood of avoiding a public assistance/government benefits office. This suggests that roughly 1 in 12 trans WOC report avoiding public assistancespondent

The one theme that immediately stands out in the avoidance logistic regression estimations is the consistent statistical significance of the trans WOC variable, even after controlling for several rival predictors of welfare office avoidance, including poverty status, wh (see p -1e2 Td2),d modfindings-benef2ts officeother trans redo experiencing homelessness in the past year, age, education level, and disability status. The trans WOC coefficient is positive and statistically significant in each estimation related to the avoidance of public assistance/government benefits office (table 1) and the avoidance of Social Security offices (table 2). The dominant and most important finding throughout these initial logistic regression estimations is that trans WOC are more likely to report avoiding public assistance/government benefits offices and Social Security offices in the past year than other transgender identifying respondents, including when compared exclusively against white trans women. These findings support our core theoretical expectations around intersectionality and social welfare avoidance—that due to compounded, intersecting marginalized identities, trans WOC are more likely to avoid seeking public welfare benefits than other trans identifying persons, especially relative to white trans women. This represents a significant and groundbreaking finding in the literatures of intersectionality, social equity, U.S. social welfare, and public administration. This also represents a call to action for public affairs scholars and practitioners that any efforts at enhancing social equity will need to be explicit in addressing issues of intersectionality, with a focus on how compounded marginalized identities shape social welfare outcomes.

To better understand the exact magnitudes of social welfare avoidance between trans WOC and other trans identifying groups, odds ratios can allow for more precise estimates of effects. For instance, examining the odds ratios in table 1, identifying as trans WOC is predicted to increase the odds of avoiding a public assistance/benefits office by 70 percent when compared with all other trans respondents, and 78.2 percent when compared against white trans women. While not as dramatic, this same pattern holds for reporting the avoidance of Social Security offices. Identifying as trans WOC is associated with 31.2 percent and 48.0 percent increased odds of avoiding a Social Security office when compared with all trans respondents and white trans women, respectively. Odds ratios provide an insightful initial view of statistical relationships but are ultimately somewhat difficult to interpret substantively. Therefore, we also generated predicted probabilities for the trans WOC variable. The predicted probabilities suggest that meaningful differences in welfare avoidance exist between trans WOC and other trans identifying respondents.

For instance, in the initial avoidance model in table 1 that includes all trans respondents, trans WOC are predicted to have a modest 6.82 percent chance of avoiding a public assistance/ government benefits office; however, this figure represents a 42.2 percent increased likelihood over all other trans respondents, who are predicted to have a 3.94 percent chance of reporting

this is due to the multiple intersecting marginalized identities of trans WOC, which likely leads trans WOC to internalize that they will be treated poorly in social welfare offices due to their combination of marginalized gender and racial identities—being both a trans woman and a person of color. The fear/anxiety of magnified compounded discrimination likely keeps trans WOC from engaging with social welfare offices to begin with, relative to other trans identifying individuals. This initial analysis of social welfare office avoidance is clear and compelling. Trans WOC are significantly more likely to report avoiding public assistance/government benefits offices and Social Security offices than other trans identifying persons. Compounded marginalized identities—identifying as both a trans woman and a person of color—seemingly play an important role in the likelihood of deciding to pursue public benefits and social insurance programs that reduce material hardship.

Transgender WOC and Equal Treatment in Social Welfare Offices

Tables 3 and 4 report the logistic regression estimations for reporting being denied equal treatment or services in social welfare offices (or not). The patterns observed for trans WOC are similar to those observed for the avoidance models. In the equal treatment logistic regression estimations reported in tables 3 and 4, we observe statistically significant coefficients for the trans WOC variable in a theorized positive direction. However, the predicted probabilities suggest an overall modest chance of reporting unequal treatment, especially within Social Security offices.

In table 3 that examines the denial of equal treatment or services in a public assistance/government benefits office, the trans WOC variable is positive and achieves statistical significance when compared against all trans respondents ($p < .034$) and similarly when compared against white trans women respondents, albeit only at the margins of statistical significance in the trans women model ($p = .084$). Considering the relatively small sample size included in the equal treatment models (i.e., only a relatively small percentage of respondents in the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey report visiting and experiencing unequal treatment in social welfare offices), we are inclined to reject the null hypothesis at the $p < .10$ level in the trans women comparison model in table 3.

Examining the odds ratios in table 3, identifying as trans WOC is expected to increase the odds of experiencing unequal treatment in a public assistance/government benefits office by 67.1 percent and 56.6 percent when compared against all other trans respondents and white trans women respondents, respectively. Predicted probabilities suggest a similar pattern in overall magnitude and comparative differences than what was initially observed in the social welfare office avoidance models. For instance, trans WOC are predicted to have a 6.92 percent and 7.96 percent chance of reporting unequal treatment in a public assistance office, relative to 4.01 percent and 4.88 percent chance for other trans respondents and white trans women. This represents a 42.05 percent and 38.69 percent increased likelihood of trans WOC reporting unequal treatment respectively. This suggests that roughly 1 in 13 trans WOC will report experiencing discrimination after visiting a public assistance office, whereas, the figure is roughly 1 in 20 for white trans women.

These represent similar levels of magnitude and comparative difference as observed in the initial avoidance estimations.

Table 4 examines equal treatment outcomes reported in Social Security offices. The trans WOC variable is positive and statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level in both comparative models. Examining the odds ratios in table 4, identifying as trans WOC is predicted to increase the odds of reporting unequal treatment in a 4.2eTd [(S)12 (ocii3id (espect)6.1 (ely)85 a)]TJ 0 -1.2 T (. P)30 (r)10

Table 5 Logistic Regression Analysis of Equal Treatment Outcomes in all Social Welfare Offices Combined among Trans Women of Color (WOC)

Independent Variables	Comparison Groups		
	All Trans Respondents	Odds Ratio	All Trans Women

trans WOC are predicted to have a 9.31 percent chance of reporting unequal treatment in any social welfare office, while white trans women are predicted to have a 5.65 percent chance. This means that roughly 1 in 11 trans WOC will report experiencing discrimination in a public social welfare office, while that figure drops to roughly 1 in 18 white trans women.

Identifying as trans WOC seemingly matters for both welfare avoidance and equal treatment outcomes. Although the predicted probabilities suggest a modest overall or total magnitude of reporting avoidance or unequal treatment, this analysis suggests that trans WOC, relative to other trans identifying persons, are more likely to eschew public social welfare offices for fears of experiencing magnified discrimination, then in confirming those anxieties, more likely to experience magnified levels of street-level discrimination when engaging with social welfare offices. There are degenerative outcomes occurring on both ends of the social welfare equation for trans WOC relative to other trans identifying persons. Not only are trans WOC less likely to engage with social welfare offices in the first place, when they do choose to initiate claims on public benefits, they are more likely to report encountering discriminatory treatment and potentially be denied benefits and services. These findings have major implications for public service values and priorities of social equity, justice, and democracy in public service provision.

unequal treatment in Social Security offices relative to reporting unequal treatment claims in public assistance/government benefit offices. However, sizable comparative differences in the likelihood of reporting unequal treatment between trans WOC and other trans identifying respondents remain. For instance, in the general model, trans WOC are predicted to have a 3.28 percent chance of reporting unequal treatment in a Social Security office, while all other trans respondents are expected to have a 1.96 percent chance, representing a 40.24 percent increased likelihood of reporting discriminatory treatment for trans WOC. Similarly, in the exclusive trans women model in table 4, trans WOC are predicted to have a 6.05 percent chance of reporting unequal treatment, while white trans women are predicted to have a 3.55 percent chance of reporting unequal treatment, representing a 41.32 percent increased likelihood of trans WOC reporting being denied equal treatment or benefits. This translates to roughly 1 in 17 trans WOC reporting experiencing discrimination in a Social Security office, whereas roughly 1 in 28 white trans women will report the same.

These connections between intersecting marginalized identities and reporting unequal treatment in social welfare offices are further confirmed in table 5, which combines both public assistance/ government benefits and Social Security offices into one composite unequal treatment outcome variable—denied equal treatment in a public social welfare office. As observed in table 5, the trans WOC variable is, again, consistently in the theorized positive direction, achieves statistical significance, and reports an odds ratio of substantial magnitude, mirroring the findings reported in tables 3 and 4. In terms of predicted probabilities, in the general model, trans WOC are predicted to have a 6.2 percent chance of reporting unequal treatment in any social welfare office, while all other trans respondents are predicted to have a 3.78 percent chance representing a 39.03 percent increased likelihood of trans WOC reporting discrimination. When examining trans women exclusively,

Important intersectional lessons for policymakers and administrators emerge from this research in that trans WOC are found to both disproportionately avoid social welfare offices and report being denied equal treatment or denied service after choosing to engage with public benefit offices. Thus, a mixture of avoidance and administrative discrimination likely contributes to heightened material hardship (e.g., food insecurity, income insecurity, etc.) among trans WOC than other trans identifying groups, such as white trans women or trans men. Compounded, intersecting marginalized identities—identifying as both a trans woman and a person of color—is found to be associated with both the avoidance of public benefits and likelihood of reporting discriminatory treatment once engaged with social welfare offices.[8]

Discussion and Conclusion
This study begins to illuminate the intersectional social welfare experiences of trans WOC relative to other trans identifying persons and answers Crenshaw's (1989) call for an intersectional analysis. By connecting to broader critical theories including, critical race theory, Black feminist theory, and queer theory, we challenge normative approaches to research by offering an intersectional examination of transgender identifying WOC. Critical race theory and Black feminist theory call for the centering of voice and interpretation. Black feminist theory is rooted in the notion that Black women are uniquely positioned to resist intersectional oppression and discrimination while offering empowering self-definitions related to their own experiences (Taylor 1998). Queer theory, at its core, challenges binary conceptions of gender and the privileges associated with traditional binary gender definitions. In this way, queer theorists question how power and privilege are allocated to cisgender men and women in ways that are evasive to individuals identifying outside constrained gender definitions. Yet, how these privileges coincide with interactions with certain

social and political institutions (McDonald 2015). As such, this study seeks to center the lived experiences of transgender WOC, particularly as they engage with agencies providing social welfare benefits. Employing data from the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, we uncover evidence that trans WOC are more likely to report both avoiding public social welfare offices, and more likely to report experiencing unequal treatment in social welfare offices. Our findings support calls for the inclusion of intersectionality in public affairs research and practice and offer clear insights for the need to better understand the experiences of trans WOC when interacting with public agencies, in this case social welfare offices. Furthermore, we offer empirical evidence that illustrates the deleterious effects of navigating multiple systems of oppression—in this case racism and gender normativity—as an individual with multiple and intersecting marginalized identities.

The immediate implications of this research for policymakers and social welfare administrators suggest potential value in outreach and engagement efforts with trans WOC, who might be eligible to receive public benefits but are choosing not to engage with social welfare offices. Initially engaging with social welfare offices is likely just as important, if not more important, than management and leadership training approaches for reducing discriminatory actions taking place among frontline social service administrators. Thus, policymakers, agency heads, and program managers should be devising ways to improve the attractiveness or inclusiveness of public social welfare benefits for trans WOC, along with improving social equity training and priorities among frontline social service professionals working with clientele in social welfare offices. This could potentially take the form of inclusion-based social welfare campaigns or literature that includes images and testimonials from trans WOC when promoting social welfare offices. Additionally, targeted inclusive efforts could be pursued in local venues catering to transgender identifying WOC. Agencies may also consider conducting internal assessments related to the organization's climate, staff biases (via implicit association tests), accountability structures, and gaps in staff's knowledge on equity, inclusion, and belonging as strategies to reduce discriminatory behaviors and policies.

Lastly, this research suggests potential value in pursuing e-government approaches to benefit determination and enrollment in social welfare services. Allowing for more e-government opportunities for engagement with social welfare benefits could reduce the need for face-to-face meetings with case managers and other frontline personnel, potentially increasing the attractiveness of public benefits while reducing discriminatory street-level interactions. The probability of reporting discrimination in public assistance/benefit offices was found to be substantially higher than for Social Security offices, meaning that redistributive welfare benefits conditioned upon more intensive case manager monitoring and supervision like TANF and SNAP could be more susceptible to discriminatory interactions amidst rising unemployment and hardship. One potential benefit of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is that more social welfare services are moving online and less documentation (e.g., payroll stubs) and face-to-face contact with case managers is being required to access benefits and maintain eligibility.

Research findings also highlight the continued pervasiveness of trans WOC experiencing discrimination, even when seeking public

assistance from government actors tasked with helping citizens. This study uses data collected while President Obama was in office. This is particularly important because, at the federal level, the Obama administration had implemented many policies and programs that advanced equity for the LGBTQ+ community. However, even within a time and under a presidential administration that actively worked

Notes

1. The 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey was conducted in late 2008 and early 2009 using targeted outreach efforts with a confidential website that allowed for online survey completion on PCs or smartphones. All survey respondents had to be at least 18 years old, and affirmatively identify as transgender or genderqueer. Survey administrators then undertook extensive data cleaning efforts, such as removing respondents with multiple irrational or erroneous responses. Ultimately, 10,304 respondents were removed from the initial dataset, leaving 27,715 respondents in the final dataset (U.S. Transgender Survey 2015).

2. The equal treatment survey question was only asked selectively to those respondents who had reported visiting a public assistance or Social Security office in the past year.

3. NOT is presented in all caps in the survey instrument.

4. Other response options include items like "gym/health club," "court/courthouse," "public transportation," and "retail store, theater, restaurant, hotel, theater."

5. Other response options beyond equal treatment include "verbally harassed," "physically attacked," and "none of these things happened to me at these places."

6. Multi-racial survey respondents were asked a follow-up question asking about their primary racial identity. If the survey respondent chose a racial category (Black, Latine, Asian, etc.), they were added to that primary group in the disaggregated analysis of Black and Indigenous trans WOC.

7. Pseudo R^2 figures reported in both the avoidance and equal treatment models are relatively modest in the 0.12–0.21 range. While pseudo R^2 figures in maximum likelihood estimations of cross-sectional survey data are generally lower than R^2 figures in linear OLS models, we are somewhat uncertain of overall model fit and the exact precision of the predicted probabilities. Nonetheless, we are relatively confident that the model estimations produce accurate insights into statistically significant relationships between trans WOC and social welfare outcomes, along with comparative differences between trans WOC and other trans identifying respondents.

8. It should be noted that the analysis and findings related to being denied equal treatment might be encountering small-N analytical issues. Only 106 total survey respondents (out of 27,715 total respondents) report being denied equal treatment within a public assistance office. Once you
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