“Making Over” Poor Women

Gender, Race, Class & Body Size in a Welfare-to-Work Nonprofit Organization

Much research on gender inequality in the workplace rightfully interrogates the “glass ceiling.” Yet, scholars must also understand social barriers to the “front door,” by examining the experiences of disadvantaged women seeking entry into the low-wage labor market. Research on aesthetic labor suggests that poor women’s appearance and “style” may hinder their entry into the workforce because employers prefer workers whose bodies are “middle class, conventionally gendered [...] white” (Williams and Connell 2010: 350), and slender (Gruys 2012). Yet, little research has examined the institutional contexts nor interactional processes through which poor women might acquire these embodied capacities. This line of questioning has particular relevance in the post-welfare reform era and post-recession period, given the number of poor women who remain un- or under-employed yet are no longer eligible for welfare benefits or other state services.

To address these gaps in the literature on gender, race, class, embodiment and workplace inequality, I draw upon thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted at a nonprofit organization I refer to as “Successful Women’s Outfitters” (SWO). SWO aims to help unemployed poor women become economically self-sufficient by providing them with “style advice” and second-hand business attire to wear during job interviews. I examine SWO’s policies and procedures alongside interactions between SWO staff, volunteers, and clients to understand how gendered power hierarchies are negotiated, challenged, and reproduced within this site. Analyzing service interactions as potential forms of “inequality in action” (Hanser 2012), I employ Woodward’s (2013) framework for assessing welfare-to-work (WTW) programs

as either empowering or repressive by considering the extent to which – and *how* – programs transmit dominant economic, social and cultural capital to participants. I focus on cultural capital, paying particular attention to the relationship between “objectified cultural capital” (professional attire, in this case) and clients’ “bodily capital,” which is bounded by the intersecting corporealities of gender, race, class, and body size.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Aesthetic Labor, Embodiment, & Workplace Inequality

A robust sociological literature on *aesthetic labor* (Warhurst et al. 2000) suggests that poor women’s appearance and “style” may be an important barrier to their entry into the workforce (i.e., Cummins and Blum 2015; Gruys 2012; Williams and Connell 2010). The concept of aesthetic labor builds upon Hochschild’s (1983) theory of emotional labor, noting that workers are also expected to have particular embodiments as well as affective skills. Workplace expectations for aesthetic labor draw on gendered, raced, and classed norms for “deportment, style, accent, voice, and attractiveness” (Williams and Connell 2010), which are accomplished through a combination of mannerisms and physical appearance. These norms for what Goffman (1959) would describe as one’s “personal front” determine which workers will be hired to do what jobs and how they are expected to look and behave while on the job.

Stated another way, workplace expectations for aesthetic labor require the right combination of *habitus*, *bodily capital*, and *objectified cultural capital*. Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of habitus refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions through which people navigate the social world. Drawing on Bourdieu, Wacquant (1995; 2004) introduced the concept of bodily capital to illustrate the body itself as a form of capital. Bodily capital resides in and is bounded by one’s corporeal body, through which individuals cultivate “abilities and

tendencies liable to produce value” (Wacquant 1995:67) in a given social world. Ashley Mears’ (2011) research on fashion models emphasizes that, although a person can enhance his or her bodily capital, many elements of it – such as height, build, and skin color – are relatively fixed. The fixedness of bodily capital helps explain how it relates to workplace inequality; although U.S. law protects workers from discrimination on the bases of gender, race/ethnicity, age, disability and religion, workplace expectations for aesthetic labor often map onto these categories in ways that are discriminatory but not protected. As explained by Williams and Connell (2010) in their study of upscale retailers, “In virtually every case, the right aesthetic [for workers to embody] is middle class, conventionally gendered, and typically white” (p. 350). Demands for aesthetic labor reproduce inequality when a worker’s gender, ethnicity, age, body type, and/or class-imbued habitus limit her ability to meet a particular organization’s implicit or explicit aesthetic standards (Williams and Connell 2010).

Taking body size as a relevant example, workers often face weight-based discrimination, which is not protected by federal law (Rhode 2010)¹. Size discrimination is highly gendered, with women facing harsher social penalties for failing to meet the thin ideal compared to men (Fikkan and Rothblum 2012). Body size often maps onto race and class in ways that compound oppressions. Whites tend to be thinner than Blacks and Latinos and wealthy people tend to be thinner than poor people. Given that weight and income are negatively correlated in the United States, many imagine that poverty must cause fatness. However, fatness can also cause downward mobility due to discrimination (Ernsberger 2009; Mason 2012). As explained by Bartky (1988), fat embodiments compound women’s poverty because “[t]he burdens poor women bear in this regard are not merely psychological, since conformity to the prevailing

¹ Although the state of Michigan and a few U.S. cities have municipal codes with protections from discrimination based on physical characteristics such as height or weight (NAAFA 2017).

standards of bodily acceptability is a known factor in economic mobility,” (p. 100).

Despite the relative fixedness of many aspects of bodily capital, including body size, other aspects of appearance, such as dress and styling, are more malleable but require access to *objectified cultural capital*. Objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) exists in the form of cultural goods, such as books, instruments, or art. It is linked to aesthetic labor via workers’ possession and display of particular styles of clothing and/or other bodily accouterments, such as eyeglasses, jewelry, makeup, etc. To the extent that poor women lack access to interview attire social services providing this form of objectified cultural capital should help reduce inequality.

Yet, research examining WTW job readiness programs has been critical of those focused on appearance and mannerisms, noting that such programs can be demeaning, burdensome, and/or irrelevant in the absence of good jobs. For example, participants in Katz’s (2013) study of women in a WTW program viewed soft skills, such as interview etiquette, as a waste of time, preferring instead to complete their GEDs, earn higher education certificates or degrees, or develop job-specific skills. Similarly, clients in Kissane’s (2008) WTW study were “perplexed” when program staff instructed them to dress professionally in the absence of “the types of jobs that matched professional attire,” (356; see also Cummins & Blum 2015). In their study of WTW programs, Anderson and Van Hoy (2006) again argued that advice on how to dress for interviews “was irrelevant given the types of jobs for which [clients] were presently qualified,” (355). One interviewee, for example, described the advice as “obsolete,” saying, “[for] the job I got, I didn’t have to dress to impress” (p. 348). Other interviewees reported feeling embarrassed when overdressed at interviews for low-wage work, such as fast food work or housecleaning.

These studies suggest that access to professional attire is insufficient for meaningful change unless programs also acknowledge and address structural barriers to poor women’s

employment. Woodward's (2013) ethnographic study of two WTW programs in California reached similar conclusions, finding that "the context in which capital is transmitted is as crucial as the type or amount of capital provided" (46). Woodward's research provides a framework through which WTW programs such as SWO can be assessed as either empowering or repressive, based on the extent to which – and *how* – they successfully transmit economic, social, and cultural capital to welfare-reliant women. In the next section, I draw from the sociological literatures on "street level bureaucracies" and "interactive service work" to set the stage for assessing the "*how*" aspects of SWO's transmission of objectified cultural capital to clients.

(Social) Service Work as Inequality in Action

The reduction of state resources available to vulnerable women and their families, along with more stringent welfare time limits, has led to poor women's increased reliance on non-state organizations for social services. Yet, private benevolence is not uncomplicated, as gendered power relations between women, such as those rooted in race and class, may be reified through the micro-interactions of philanthropic service, even as well-intentioned volunteers strive to improve the lot of vulnerable women (Ware 1992). As argued by Ostrander (1980) in her classic study of elite women and the "masked class dimensions" of their volunteer work, "private upper class volunteerism [...] functions to maintain the elite control over matters of public concern" (p. 33). Indeed, several contemporary scholars who examined privileged women's philanthropy have found that, although cross-class volunteer-client relationships offer genuine help to low-income women, they may also reinforce class and race privilege (Cummins and Blum 2015; Hays 2003; Koven and Michel 1993). For example, in their examination of a "women-centered nonprofit organization" similar to SWO, Cummins and Blum found evidence for what they call "neoliberal maternalism," in which the program encouraged poor mothers' financial

independence through employment, while also “assuming that low-income women require intensive supervision by those more privileged” (2015: 3). WTW programs such as SWO may similarly implicitly reinforce inequality between privileged volunteers and disadvantaged clients.

Historically, racialized conceptions of women’s morality, temperament, appearance, and sexuality have depicted women of color as both opposite and inferior to white women (Collins 2004; hooks 1982; Morton 1991). These concerns are particularly relevant to philanthropic efforts closely tied to welfare reform, as feminist scholars argue that the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 was built upon and perpetuates a “welfare queen” stereotype, reinforcing distinctions between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor (Handler and Hasenfeld 2007; Neubeck 2013). Neubeck (2013) described PRWORA as built with a “mythical generic welfare recipient” in mind, which Ehrenreich (2002), describes as “lazy, overweight, endlessly fecund” (p. 66) African-American women, particularly unwed mothers (see also Brush 2003; Hays 2003). Such stereotypes craft “symbolic boundaries” (Lamont and Molnar 2002) around gender, class, race, sexuality and body size that prevent welfare recipients from being viewed as respectable, decent, deserving women.

In the context of social welfare organizations, notions of clients’ deservingness lead to material inequalities. Lipsky’s (1971) classic theory of “street level bureaucracy” suggests that welfare caseworkers facing limited time and resources will selectively ration and restrict services such that clients viewed as “undeserving” receive substandard service and resources. As street level bureaucrats, SWO staff and volunteers may similarly provide fewer resources to clients who conform to negative stereotypes. Thus, despite – or, perhaps, because of – PRWORA’s one-size-fits-all “work-first,” approach, the everyday enactment of social services may not only reify

power hierarchies between privileged volunteers and poor clients, but might also privilege some clients over others, along the lines of race, class, gender, and size.

Notably, some women are able to interactionally navigate the politics of deservingness. Korteweg (2003), for example, describes a welfare recipient who “knew it was in her self-interest to smile, to be docile and pleasant, because it gave her both material and moral rewards, enabling her to be recognized as a valuable subject by society,” (462). Fat Studies scholars have further tied deference to embodiment, noting that fat women can sometimes claim deservingness by “covering” (Goffman 1963) as “good fatties,” described by Pausé (2012) as “fat women who are openly shameful and apologetic for their size,” (47). Friedman (2012), following the work of LeBesco (2009), similarly finds that social workers draw from a problematic “virtuous fat subject” (58) trope to justify unequal services to unrepentant fat clients. Although behaving deferentially may help individual women navigate social services, this form of “impression management” (Goffman 1959) ultimately reifies the idea that only *some* women deserve help.

The sociological literature on interactive service work in for-profit contexts provides a useful framework for further understanding power relations between “street-level bureaucrats” and their clients (Fountain 2001; Korczynski 2009). In a review of current research linking service encounters to class hierarchies, Hanser (2012) described these interactions as “inequality-in-action,” noting that gendered, racialized, and class-based power relations between workers and clients are legitimized through interactional displays of entitlement and deference (see also Gruys 2012; Kang 2010; Misra and Walters 2016; Sherman 2005; Williams and Connell 2010). Notably, in cases of service interactions between social service providers and their clients, power relations are inverted compared to the typical worker-customer-manager “service work triangle,” in which the customer/client is typically in the most powerful position (Lopez 2010).

Given this inversion of power between for-profit versus non-profit organizations, previous research on for-profit workers who serve as “taste brokers” (Sherman 2011), provides a useful model for understanding cross-class hierarchies at SWO. Sherman’s study examined the work of personal concierges, whose jobs require “making consumption-related aesthetic choices for clients,” such as identifying chic new restaurants worth trying or choosing gifts for clients’ romantic partners, among other things. Although all clients were wealthy, some – particularly the nouveau rich – were viewed by concierges as having inferior, “cheap” taste. In these cases, despite their extensive *economic* capital, wealthy clients lacked *cultural* capital, while concierges lacked the former but possessed the latter. For concierges, this created a tension between a desire to maintain “good” taste and their need to display deference to clients’ preferences. Ultimately, deference to clients won out. Sherman argued that taste brokers’ work reproduces social difference not only by helping to solidify clients’ class positions, but also by legitimizing classed distinctions between “good” and “bad” taste.

Other research on taste brokers has shown that clients are not always in positions of power. Feminist analyses of the “makeover” genre of reality TV provide a particularly relevant perspective. For example, Angela McRobbie’s (2004) analysis of British “makeover” television shows described female makeover recipients as the “victim/participants” of symbolic violence enacted by “style experts.” Illustrating that these shows are rooted in the public humiliation, or, what Garfinkel (1956) might describe as a “degradation ceremony,” of disadvantaged women “for their failure to adhere to middle-class standards of speech or appearance,” McRobbie argued that style experts’ interactions with their “willing victims” generates and legitimates forms of “gendered class antagonism.” Weber (2007) made similar claims in her analysis of what she calls

“makeover as takeover” TV shows, finding that makeover recipients will be shamed until they “surrenders and thereby acknowledges the rightness of the makeover as takeover,” (p. 89).

Like Sherman’s personal concierges and McRobbie’s style experts, SWO staff and volunteers serve as taste brokers for their clients. However, it is difficult to predict whether service interactions at SWO will reproduce or challenge inequality. By enacting the typical service-triangle roles of “worker” and “customer,” it is possible that SWO staff and volunteers – like the concierges in Sherman’s research – will provide guidance but defer to their clients’ preferences, particularly in light of SWO’s stated mission to empower clients. Yet, given that SWO service interactions are oriented around a makeover “dramaturgy” (Goffman 1959), staff and volunteers may engage in “gendered class antagonism,” despite their benevolent intentions.

RESEARCH SETTING & METHODOLOGY

This study draws from thirteen months of participant observation at Successful Women’s Outfitters, a nonprofit organization located in a West Coast city in the United States. SWO was founded with the goal of helping disadvantaged women become economically self-sufficient by providing them with second-hand professional attire and style advice for job interviews. The organization operates under two core assumptions: (1) that poor women are unfairly disadvantaged in the labor market because they lack appropriate attire, and (2) that poor women lack not only *access* to professional attire but also the knowledge of how to wear it. Given that the majority of SWO clients were poor women of color while most staff and volunteers were middle- and upper-class white women, SWO was an ideal site for observing cross-class and cross-race interactions between women in which the transmission of objectified cultural capital was indelibly entwined with the corporeality of clients’ bodily capital.

The SWO office was comprised of three rooms, the “front room,” the “boutique,” and the “stockroom.” The front room combined an office and waiting area, where clients checked into and waited for their appointments. The “boutique,” was designed to evoke the aesthetic experience of a high-end boutique, with built-in closet cabinetry housing rows of hanging suits organized by color and size. Display cases were filled with jewelry, handbags, scarves, and belts, while decorative boxes housed high-heeled pumps and boots. Two mirrored dressing rooms lined one wall, and two mannequins were positioned on opposite corners of the space, each wearing chic business suits with coordinating purses and accessories. One mannequin was positioned with her right hand reaching out, as though initiating a collegial handshake. At the back of the boutique was the stockroom, which housed overflow clothing, accessories, and office supplies.

The paid staff at SWO included a full-time executive director, a full-time program coordinator, and a part-time program coordinator. The executive director, Rachel, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, was a slender white woman in her late 30s from a middle-class background. The full-time program coordinator, Brandi, was a plus-sized white woman in her late 20s from a working-class background and had earned a Bachelor’s degree at a regional university. The part-time program coordinator, Vanessa, was a slender Latina woman in her early 20s finishing her Bachelor’s degree at another state university. Volunteers at SWO included two groups: college interns and personal shoppers. College interns performed office work on a weekly basis with regular hours, earning course credits for their work. Personal shoppers attended to clients during their suiting appointments, volunteering anywhere from once per year to multiple times per week. The office records listed 550 total volunteers and that 359 were “active,” indicating that they had volunteered at least once in the preceding calendar year.

To participate in the SWO suiting program, clients were required to live below the poverty line, be “work-ready,” have a scheduled job interview, and be referred by a state agency or local nonprofit. SWO records indicate that 107 different referral agencies were approved to refer clients, and that 68 of these had referred at least one client in the previous year. In a typical first suiting appointment, the client received a brief orientation followed by a 30- to 45-minute “makeover” in which a personal shopper assisted her in finding one complete interview outfit, ideally consisting of a full suit, a matching blouse, shoes, and other accessories, such as jewelry or a purse, as needed. An appointment was successful if the client could, at least in theory, leave SWO and go directly to a job interview, dressed to impress. Once a client secured employment, she could return for a “second suiting” appointment to receive additional items that could be mixed and matched, creating the foundation of a professional wardrobe. Just over 1,000 clients were referred to SWO in 2013, resulting in 621 “first suiting” appointments (of which I observed 132), and 98 “second suiting” appointments (of which I observed 9). My analyses here are limited to my observations of first suiting appointments only. Demographic characteristics of the 621 “first suiting” appointments, obtained through clients’ intake forms, can be found in Table 1.

While volunteering in the office, I sorted clothing, filed paperwork, liaised with referring organizations, booked and confirmed clients’ suiting appointments, conducted client orientations, and assisted as a personal shopper. I wrote brief field notes into a notebook and could often record observations in greater detail by using one of the office computers. During non-participant observations of suiting appointments, I was able to use my laptop to type fairly extensive field notes on the spot. I was open with SWO staff, volunteers and clients about my intention to write a research paper based on the goings-on at the site. All names used here are pseudonyms.

Table 1. Sample Description of SWO Clients in 2013 (N = 621)

Characteristics	N	Percent
Race/Ethnicity		
African-American	279	45%
Latina	106	17%
White/Caucasian	106	17%
Asian	80	13%
Pacific Islander	25	4%
Unknown	25	4%
Age		
< 18	24	4%
18 to 24	174	28%
25 to 30	106	17%
31 to 40	137	22%
41 to 50	112	18%
> 50	68	11%
Clothing Size		
0-6	149	24%
8-12	193	31%
14-18	137	22%
20+	106	17%
Unknown	36	6%
Referring Organization		
State-Mandated WTW Programs	224	36%
Non-State Job Training Programs	155	25%
Youth Programs & Community Colleges	106	17%
Homeless Shelters	68	11%
State-Mandated Substance Abuse Programs	56	9%
Domestic Violence or Human Trafficking Shelters	12	2%

I analyzed my field notes inductively using analytic memos to identify prominent themes and narratives as they emerged. Following Woodward's (2013) framework for assessing WTW organizations by considering whether *and* how various forms of capital are transmitted, I developed codes accounting for the transmission of objectified cultural capital as well as the interactions through which it was transmitted. To assess material differences in objectified cultural capital, I coded for (1) whether the client left with a full suit (i.e., suit jacket, coordinating pants or skirt, and blouse), (2) whether she received accessories such as shoes, a

handbag, jewelry, etc., and (3) whether she received any “extras,” (i.e., duplicate items, such as an extra blouse or a second pair of shoes). To assess interactional inequities, I coded for (1) whether clients’ appointments were overbooked, (2) the amount of time a Personal Shopper spent with a client *after* finding her an “adequate-but-disliked” interview outfit (in other words, once a “good enough” suit had been found, how much *additional* effort did a Personal Shopper put toward finding one that the client actually liked), and (3) the rhetorical strategies used to convince a client to accept an outfit she did not like.

FINDINGS

Below, I first describe how SWO staff and volunteers act as taste brokers through their sorting of donated garments and accessories, arguing that this process functions as a form of classed gatekeeping. I then show that, although Personal Shoppers’ enactments of a boutique shopping-esque experience produce a façade of luxury and trust, service interactions at SWO ultimately serve to exert control over clients’ movements and behaviors; instead of “the customer is always right,” SWO operates under the logic that “the client is usually wrong.” Building from analysis of service interactions, I present my finding that racist, classist, sizeist, and sexualized assumptions about clients’ relative deservingness explain unequal access to both symbolic and material resources. Finally, I show that, compared to thinner clients, plus-sized women are the least likely to leave their appointments “interview ready.”

Sorting Donations as Classed Gatekeeping

SWO’s donation-sorting process involves careful consideration of which styles and qualities of garments should be offered to clients. By rejecting both articles of clothing that were not “good enough” *and* valuable garments that were “too good,” SWO staff and volunteers manage both the upper and lower boundaries of respectable taste through their pre-sorting of

material resources, i.e., objectified cultural capital.

All garments available to clients by SWO were donated, with donations sorted as follows. First, any “inappropriate” garments were immediately thrown away or donated to a local homeless shelter. Garments found to be dirty, stained, overly casual, or items judged by volunteers to be “cheap,” “unfashionable,” or “trashy” were considered inappropriate. “Cheap” seemed to imply poor quality; “unfashionable” seemed to imply either outdated or more masculine styles, while “trashy” seemed to imply sexually revealing. I noticed that unfashionable, stained, worn, masculine, or outdated (but not trashy) garments sized 16 or larger were often kept despite their aesthetic shortcomings, a finding I return to later.

Ironically, despite SWO’s intention to evoke a high-end boutique in décor and service, high-end garments never made it out of the stockroom. Of the remaining “good enough” garments, the next step was to remove those that were “too good.” All monetarily valuable garments (i.e., well-known expensive brands) were set aside to be sold through a local consignment shop. I asked Brandi why these items were not offered to clients. She explained,

We have to make tough decisions about how a donation will help most. If selling stuff helps us keep our doors open, it’s better than helping just the one client who might wear it. It’s not like these ladies are interviewing anywhere where a vintage Chanel jacket is going to open doors. Besides, if they knew it was worth something, they’d just sell it and who knows what they’d do with the money!

When I asked Brandi to explain a bit more, she described this policy as being for the clients’ own good: “Well, I’m not saying they’re are all on drugs or something, but they need to get a job, not more stuff, you know?” There was, of course, truth to Brandi’s assessment that SWO clients were unlikely to interview for jobs in which luxurious couture garments would “open doors,”

and, like most nonprofit organizations, funding for SWO was perilous. Still, her depiction of clients who would sell an expensive jacket for drugs instead of pursuing employment evoked the “welfare queen” stereotype of undeserving poor women fraudulently misusing their cash transfers. This was my first exposure to the paternalistic logic embedded within SWO’s culture.

Several weeks later, I was sorting clothes with Joyce, a white woman in her forties who was a longtime volunteer. One of the donated purses appeared to be made by the designer brand, Louis Vuitton. It had clearly been used, but was in fairly good shape. Joyce, whose own handbag was also made by Louis Vuitton, brought her purse to the stockroom so we could figure out whether the donated bag was genuine or a knock-off.

After a few minutes of looking at seams and labels, Joyce said, “You know, this might be a real Louis. We should send it to the [consignment] shop and see what they think.” I suggested, “But it’s pretty worn. Maybe one of the clients would really cherish it.” In response, Joyce replied, “Oh I have no doubt! Everybody wants a Louis! But, think about it. What would YOU think if you were interviewing someone for a job and she showed up with a \$3,000 bag like this but only half her teeth? That’s not what a responsible person looks like, you know?”

Joyce’s reasoning was certainly well intentioned, and her logic – if shared by a potential employer – may very well be legitimate. Yet, by describing the handbag as inappropriate “conspicuous consumption” (Veblen 1899) for a poor woman, Joyce framed herself as saving clients from their own poor taste. Furthermore, Joyce’s concern was not tied solely to the luxuriousness of the purse, but rather the potential juxtaposition of *an expensive bag on an impoverished body*, with poor women’s presumed bodily capital used to justify limited access to objectified cultural capital. By only offering garments that were good-enough-but-not-too-good,

SWO's donation sorting process narrowed the aesthetic possibilities available to clients, effectively insuring that no client – even those with more privileged bodily capital – would ever leave SWO looking authentically upper-class.

In this way, the SWO donation sorting process functions as a form of classed gatekeeping. Even if decisions such as those described above *do* prevent clients' aesthetic missteps on the job market, they come at the cost of fortifying symbolic boundaries between women, with class-privileged women legitimized as the arbiters of good taste. Additionally, these practices dismissively police clients' access to the pleasures of luxury consumption that wealthier women take for granted. Still, I do not suggest that Personal Shoppers did not care whether clients experienced pleasure through fashion. Indeed, they universally relished in delighting their clients during the makeover process. However, the acting presumption was that clients would be – or *ought* to be – just as delighted by gently used Banana Republic as the volunteers, themselves, would have been by vintage Chanel.

Service Encounters When “the Client is Usually Wrong”

SWO's mimicry of an upscale boutique was intended to give clients a luxurious boutique “shopping” experience, yet it simultaneously provided a script for service interactions that positioned Personal Shoppers as agentic decision-makers while clients passively awaited service. A central tension pervaded the site: SWO staff and volunteers were expected to make the clients *feel* like customers shopping at a fancy boutique while not actually allowing them the typical privileges afforded to customers. Instead of “the customer is always right,” Brandi often said, “the client is usually wrong!” Following this mindset, clients' choices and movements were carefully managed at every stage of their appointments. For example, when I was responsible for scheduling clients' appointments, Rachel said “Never ask a client when *she's* available. Offer her

our first available appointment. If she can't make it, offer the next available appointment and so on, until she commits. If you start by giving her the choice she'll think she's in charge." In this first direct contact with clients, SWO set the stage for managing compliance.

SWO wanted clients to like their interview outfits but efficiency often came before clients' satisfaction. When a client arrived for her appointment, she received an orientation designed to manage expectations. After being informed of the order of events, she would be told that we would try our best but could not guarantee being able to accommodate requests regarding style or color. Clients were required to sign a waiver indicating that they understood this policy. After orientation, the client would be introduced to her Personal Shopper, with whom she would spend the rest of the appointment.

In addition to hopefully finding a stellar interview outfit, Personal Shoppers were expected to manage clients' expectations and physical movements. The upscale boutique façade ironically facilitated a script for service interactions in which Personal Shoppers encouraged clients to passively await service. For example, we were taught to look at each client's referral form for what size she wore so we could select a few suits prior to the appointment. By doing this, Personal Shoppers could bring clients directly from the waiting area to a fitting room, leaving no opportunity for the client to "shop" along the way. Allowing a client to "go shopping" – i.e., allowing her to sift through the clothing racks – was frowned upon. Vanessa, the program coordinator, explained, "Make sure you don't let her go shopping, you know? No browsing. Never leave the client alone in the boutique area. If you aren't ready for her to start trying things on, she stays in the waiting area. If she starts wandering into the boutique, say, 'Oh, don't worry! I can do that for you!'" Of course, in this case, saying "I can do that for you!" actually meant, "Don't go anywhere or touch anything!" Perhaps the most troubling technique Personal

Shoppers used to control clients' movements was the strategy of waiting until a client had returned to her changing room and undressed before offering additional garments to try on. As Joyce explained, "She's not going to wander around naked, right?" This strategy exploited clients' vulnerability when undressed, while maintaining volunteers' control.

Other techniques helped monitor and manage clients' fashion choices. One afternoon, I overheard Brandi chastise Emily, a 23-year-old Chinese-American intern finishing her degree in fashion merchandising, for being too "nice" with a client, whose appointment had run fifteen minutes late: "Make sure she shows you *every single thing* she tries on, even if she doesn't like it or doesn't think it fits. Sometimes they don't think it fits, but it does – they just aren't used to wearing professional clothes." Personal Shoppers were instructed to draw on their own cultural capital, not only to help decide which clothing options were "most appropriate" for each client, but also as a rhetorical device to convince clients to accept outfits they did not like.

Thus, Personal Shoppers were encouraged to implore their clients' trust. The boutique echoed with exclamations of, "*Trust me*, you look great!" or "*Trust me*, this is what will make a good impression for your interview!" or "*Trust me*, you're just not used to dressing this way!" Volunteers were similarly required to wear "office-appropriate business attire" when working with clients to model proper fit and styling and so we could point to our own clothing choices if clients challenged our advice. These rhetorical techniques closely resemble the language used by the "style experts" in McRobbie's (2004) critique of "makeover" TV shows. It seems likely that Personal Shoppers' claims of trustworthiness ironically contribute to the pervasive culture of *distrust* that erodes poor women's agency (Levine 2013).

Building on these techniques for managing clients' expectations and behaviors, the next sections detail how Personal Shoppers' beliefs about their clients' "deservingness" further

shaped service interactions such that certain clients were privileged over others. These observations reveal that clients already possessing valued mannerisms and bodily capital were the most likely to receive favorable treatment and objectified cultural capital.

Deservingness

One of the posters hanging on a wall at the SWO office promises clients, “It’s not about where you’ve been, but where you’re going,” Yet, where clients had been – or, more specifically, the social service organization from which they were referred – predicted clients’ uneven access to symbolic and material resources. Service interactions between Personal Shoppers and clients were shaped by notions about which clients were most or least deserving. These notions relied on stereotypes about the types of clients sent by different referring organizations. As explained by Jessa, a long-time volunteer, “I can tell who will be picky based on who sent them.” Clients perceived as undeserving or difficult were treated with less patience and were less likely to receive complete interview outfits, accessories or extras.

Personal Shoppers were exposed to stereotypes before interacting with clients. Brandi prepped us at the beginning of our shifts by listing and describing the women who were scheduled for appointments that day. The referral forms given to Personal Shoppers before each appointment listed the referring agency. Below, I describe how stereotypes about referring organizations shaped clients’ experiences in terms of symbolic and material outcomes. These findings illustrate that service interactions during appointments produced inequities across three groups of clients: those referred by state-mandated welfare or addiction-recovery programs, those referred through voluntary youth organizations or community colleges, and the remaining women who were referred from a variety of other non-state programs.

Forty-five percent of SWO's suiting clients were referred through state programs, including WTW programs (36 percent of all clients) as well as those coming from state-mandated rehabilitation programs for drug and/or alcohol abuse (nine percent of all clients). These women were required to attend SWO appointments as a condition for continuing to receive benefits. This group of women, who Brandi referred to as "the TANF Ladies" because they participated in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, had a bad reputation. Clients referred through WTW and drug rehab programs were viewed as manipulative, difficult, and undeserving because they were, as one volunteer complained, "dependent on welfare and didn't even want to get jobs." One of the interns, for example, described the TANF Ladies by saying, "...they're the *gimme, gimme, gimme* types of people [who will] work the system if we let them." During volunteer orientation nights, Brandi warned soon-to-be Personal Shoppers about the TANF Ladies, saying, "They challenge us," they'll "always ask for extras," and "barely two-thirds even bother to show up to their appointments." Brandi's frequent use of the diminutive term "ladies" was jarring to me, emphasizing clients' relative status while alluding to the classed expectation that women ought to be proper and ladylike.

When I asked Brandi why SWO continued working with clients who she found to be so frustrating, she explained that the WTW office was under contract to pay SWO around \$100 for each client's visit. Thus, despite staff and volunteers' resistance to working with the TANF Ladies, SWO was financially motivated to maximize the number of these state referrals. The solution was an informal policy that all TANF Ladies' appointments would be booked for the same day. Because the welfare office hosted career workshops on Fridays (for which participants had to wear interview attire), Thursday became "TANF Day" and interns were instructed to

schedule TANF clients such that their appointments were often double- or triple-booked. “They’re no-shows so often that I book four at a time if I want to have two,” Brandi explained.

Although all TANF clients were mothers of young children, parenting responsibilities were not seen as a legitimate reason for cancelled appointments or lateness. “It’s not okay to bring your kid to a job interview, and clients need to treat their appointment here with the same respect,” explained Rachel, the executive director. Given that she could have just as easily argued that, “these exhausted single mothers need pampering without the distractions of childcare!” Rachel’s choice of language echoes Cummins and Blum’s (2015) notion of “neoliberal maternalism” in which poor women’s financial independence is encouraged while their personal decisions, such as those tied to parenting, are policed.

This practice of overbooking TANF clients meant that if all three or four clients *did* show up, the boutique would have more clients than dressing rooms. When this happened, clients sometimes waited in the front room for as long as an hour and a half, or were asked to come back at a later time that day, a pattern reminiscent of Reid’s (2013) concept of “temporal domination” in which being made to wait functions as a form of social control that marginalizes the poor (see also Auyero 2012). Other times, TANF clients were asked to share fitting rooms with each other, taking turns dressing and undressing while one Personal Shopper assisted both. These techniques for managing TANF Ladies led to less attentive service and signaled that the priority when serving TANF referrals was efficiency rather than client satisfaction.

I first served as a Personal Shopper on a TANF day. Having previously worked in retail as a salesperson, it felt natural to treat clients the way I’d learned to treat customers - in accordance with the logic that “the customer is always right.” My first client, Janae, was a 30-year-old African-American single mother attending a job fair the following day. She was of average

height, wore a size 8, and had an hourglass figure. I brought Janae several suits to try on. Once we'd found one she liked (of three that fit well), she found shoes, a purse, and jewelry. The appointment took longer than I'd expected, but Janae seemed pleased with her outfit, so I was pleased too. However, I was late for my next appointment. I mentioned this to Beth, the other Personal Shopper on duty (a white woman around my age.) "Uh oh!" said Beth, who advised:

Don't indulge them. You need to learn how to "close the deal" with these ladies. You can't spend so much time finding them the cutest suit out of seven. In fact, don't let them take more than two suits in at a time, and push for them to take the first suit that fits. Don't let them take more and don't get caught up in the accessories. They'll always ask for extra jewelry, and I'm pretty sure they sometimes take it without even asking, like everything is free, you know?

I nodded and thanked Beth for the advice. Later, Brandi asked me how my first day was going. I mentioned that I was not as fast as the other volunteers. She advised, "It's all about closing the deal. You have to use tough love when they push you to try on more stuff. If they're really picky about the clothes, say, 'So, what were you *planning* to wear to the interview?' You know, and *they* know, that they don't have any other options." These instances help explain why, even though TANF referrals almost always left with a complete interview outfit (unless they were plus-sized, which I discuss further below), they were less likely than other clients to be happy with their outfit. Unlike other groups, TANF clients only received jewelry when they specifically asked, and they rarely received "extras," even if they asked.

In addition to these material inequalities, interns and staff also displayed less patience and flexibility when working with TANF clients who arrived late to appointments or had to reschedule. "I'm so annoyed by this ghetto shit!" one intern exclaimed after failing to reach a

client who wanted to reschedule her appointment. “Either their phones are disconnected, or their voicemail is some random rap song that never actually goes to voicemail!” In another instance, a TANF client arrived late and seemed distracted and a bit sluggish. Brandi said she would call the woman’s caseworker, because “she was probably stoned.” As with the use of “ladies” to degrade clients who embodied lower-class femininities, the term “ghetto” reified racist stereotypes.

In stark contrast to the experiences of clients referred through required WTW programs, women referred through youth-focused non-profits or local community colleges – 17 percent of all clients – were seen as uniquely deserving and pleasant to work with. Compared to all other referral groups, these clients were the most likely to be doted on by Personal Shoppers, who often viewed these younger-than-average, thinner-than-average, and presumably childless clients as hard-working and upwardly mobile. As Beth remarked after ending an appointment with a 19-year-old Latina woman, “It’s so refreshing to dress someone who is working hard to have a better life than her parents!” These clients were often described as “fun” and, unlike the other groups, were occasionally allowed to “shop” for themselves and were sometimes encouraged by Personal Shoppers to try on multiple outfits, even after they’d already found one they liked.

I first observed this phenomenon was with a petite Asian-American client named Grace, who was 21 and finishing her Associate degree in accounting. Ritu, her Personal Shopper, had quickly found two full business suits that fit Grace, who was a size 2 and thus had many options from which to choose. “You look adorable!” Ritu exclaimed after the second suit fit just as well as the first. “Let’s try a few more, just for fun!” Grace ended up trying on six suits, five of which were deemed “adorable” or “cute” by Ritu. “I can’t decide!” Grace said, after trying two suits on a second time. Ritu said, “Well let’s try on shoes then. Once you find the shoes you like best, we can see which suit goes with them better.” Grace was again pleased to find that she liked several

pairs of shoes. Ultimately, she picked her favorite shoes – basic black pumps – and agreed that they looked best with one of the suits. Next came a purse, scarf, and jewelry. Ritu clapped her hands as she surveyed the final look, and then wrapped everything up while Grace changed back into her street clothes. “I put that second pair of shoes you liked in there too!” Ritu said, with a wink. After Grace left, Ritu said, “It was like dressing a doll!”

Another time, I helped a woman named Rachel, a 24-year-old Latina who wore size 10 and was raising her 9-month-old son while trying to finish a degree in biology at a nearby state school. She had just earned her Phlebotomy certification and was interviewing at a local medical clinic. Rachel had been referred by a non-profit helping single mothers continue their educations. I walked Rachel through the orientation process and chatted with her while she waited for her appointment to start. I learned that she had recently decided to “start over” after her son’s father had gone to prison. She vaguely mentioned that she’d also been involved in the “legal indiscretion” but was anxious to put it behind her. She hoped to be hired full-time (“who wouldn’t want full-time?”) but she would accept part-time work if it was her only option. Overhearing this story, Tania, her Personal Shopper, exclaimed, “What a survivor! You need a makeover to help jumpstart this new life. You’re going to be Cinderella, and I’ll be the fairy godmother!” Forty-five minutes later, Rachel left with a full business suit, shoes, bag, and jewelry, along with a second set of earrings and a brand new Clinique makeup kit.

The remaining 38 percent of SWO clients were referred from a variety of non-state social service programs, including job-training programs (25 percent), homeless shelters (11 percent), and domestic violence shelters (2 percent). These clients seemed meet the expectations for who volunteers and staff had envisioned helping at SWO. Unlike the least-liked clients (TANF Ladies) or the most-liked clients (youth), these clients arrived without any particular reputation

preceding them. They were generally treated as deserving until proven otherwise, because it was presumed that they sought help voluntarily. This translated into 20-to-40-minute suiting appointments in which clients were neither overindulged, nor abrasively over-managed (they were, instead, *politely* over-managed!). They still were not allowed to move around freely or “shop” for their interview outfits, but were usually allowed to select accessories and jewelry.

The only exceptions to the above pattern occurred when white clients exhibited “uppity” mannerisms when interacting with their Personal Shoppers, successfully refusing to settle for unfashionable, outdated or non-brand-name garments. I observed this three times. Each time, Personal Shoppers were resentful when clients expressed entitlement to decent clothes *and* possessed the cultural capital to see it through (i.e., they could not be “managed”). Personal Shoppers seemed to view white women with cultural capital as undeserving because they did not look or act poor. These clients left with their choice of suits, blouses, and accessories, but no extras, which Personal Shoppers withheld.

I first observed this logic with Rosemary, white client in her mid-30s who wore size 14 and had been referred by a domestic violence shelter. After her appointment, Beth, her Personal Shopper explained, “She was kind of hoity-toity, but I bit my tongue because I think she’s just getting out of a scary relationship.” In other words, this Rosemary’s status as a victim made her deserving, despite her reportedly entitled behavior. In contrast, volunteers were less sympathetic with the other two “uppity” clients, both young immigrants who were ethnically white but spoke with Slavic accents. The first, a white woman named Yana who wore a size 4, arrived wearing chic name-brand jeans fashionably tucked into boots, with a fitted black turtleneck. The first two suits she tried were a good fit, but she pointed out their stylistic flaws; one was “too boxy,” the other “an ugly color.” Grace, her personal shopper, insisted that the color of the second suit was

fine, but Sara firmly said, “No, it will not work.” As Yana left with a bag of newer and chic items, Grace asked, “Why was she even here? She could have just worn what she had on when she came in!” despite the fact that jeans, however chic, were not SWO-approved interview attire.

The other client, this one young and slender with long blonde hair, introduced herself as Nadia, speaking with a strong Slavic accent. “Oh great, another gold-digger!” whispered Ritu. I raised my eyebrows, and Ritu clarified, “You, know, a mail-order-bride. These girls come over from Russia looking for a rich man to marry so they don’t have to work.” I found this ironic, as Ritu, herself, did not work and was supported by her husband, a hedge-fund manager who was by all accounts a *very* “rich man.” To Ritu’s ire, Nadia firmly refused the matronly skirt suit (“for old ladies”) she was first offered. After several rounds of trying different outfits, Nadia left satisfied, having found a brand name she’d recognized. “If she’s too good for used clothes, then she can just go to Banana Republic next time!” Ritu harrumphed.

I was initially surprised when volunteers resented working with clients who were racially similar and displayed similar tastes. However, this pattern makes more sense when considered in light of the gendered and classed boundaries at stake. In addition to their honest desire to help poor women, middle- and upper-class Personal Shoppers enjoyed displaying their knowledge of dominant cultural capital; they *liked* playing fairy godmother to deserving Cinderellas. However, this fairy-tale script was disrupted by clients who, despite their lack of economic capital, displayed similar mastery of dominant cultural capital. Cinderella should be grateful, not uppity.

Body Size and Bodily Capital

During my time at SWO, I was sometimes struck by the anti-fat sentiments expressed by Brandi, who was, herself, plus-sized and frequently dieting. One notable example occurred the night before SWO’s annual fundraiser – a fancy gala in which former SWO clients walked down

a “runway” modeling fashion-forward professional attire for potential donors. During a break from the runway rehearsal, one of the client/models, who happened to wear a size 12, took a third serving of pizza. As she walked by carrying her plate, Brandi whispered, “We get a lot of heifers in here!” I was surprised by her statement, not only due to its offensiveness, but because only clients size 12 or smaller had been invited to model at the gala; the mainstream retailer donating the runway outfits did not offer plus-size clothing (and the possibility of finding a retailer with more inclusive sizing was never discussed). In other words, Brandi’s reference to “heifers” seemed odd, given that these client/models were on the smaller side of SWO clients.

My face must have registered my surprise, because Brandi softened a bit, explaining, “Well, I know being poor can make them [the clients] messed up about food. But they should ask in case there’s not enough for everyone.” It seems that this client’s third slice of pizza signaled something to Brandi. Indeed, many clients – *both* thin and fat – seemed to make the most of any opportunity for free food, from the candy jar we set out around Halloween to the pizza served that evening, even if it meant breaching a few social norms. Given the relationship between poverty, food insecurity, disordered eating, and higher body weight (Olson, Bove and Miller 2007), this is not terribly surprising. What did surprise me, however, was learning that a client’s chances of leaving her appointment “interview ready” decreased dramatically as her body size increased, a finding that brings new irony to critiques of WTW programs as “one size fits all.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015), the average American woman’s waist is 37.5 inches in circumference, which roughly equates to a size 16-18 at mainstream plus-size retailers at the time of this writing (Gruys 2012). This, combined with the fact that poorer women are heavier on average than more privileged women in the United

States (Hruschka 2012), made it unsurprising that the majority of clients served by SWO were plus-sized. Yet, SWO rarely had an adequate supply of plus-size attire.

I once asked Brandi which clients she found most difficult. I expected her to say “the TANF Ladies” but instead she said, “the bigger ladies,” explaining:

I guess that’s what happens when you can sit at home all day watching TV, right?

Not that I’m skinny or whatever, but working with the bigger ladies is always tough because we don’t have much to offer them that fits, and even if we find a perfect suit, they hate the way they look anyway. I don’t know why they get upset.

Everything looks the same on them, ‘lipstick on a pig’ and all that, you know? It’s just less fun for anybody, you know? We try to give them extras of other things if we can’t do a whole outfit. Sometimes it’s just impossible.

Brandi was right that SWO did not have much to offer clients who were plus-sized. Indeed, while clients size 6 or smaller received a full suit in every instance I recorded, in only *one* instance did I observe a woman above size 20 receive a full suit, which was also the only time I observed a client explicitly claim a more masculine gender presentation. In this case, Lynne (a white woman in her late 30s interviewing to be a short-order cook) adored a size 22 pinstripe suit that other clients had refused to wear. It was, as Lynne joked, “super butch, like me!” – as were the clunky wingtips she selected for shoes. I was curious to see if Lynne’s Personal Shopper, Marci (a self-proclaimed “Jewish *bubbe*” in her sixties) would nudge Lynne toward a more feminine look, but Marci seemed nonplussed, remarking later that it was “nice to finally find a home for that suit.” It was, indeed, nice to find a home for that suit, though it was even more fortuitous that Lynne was able to find an outfit matching her more masculine gender presentation; given that SWO-WC regularly discarded masculine garments (except those in

larger sizes), had Lynne been slender, she would have had more suits to try on but none would have been “super-but.” In this isolated but not random case, larger body size was an asset.

More typical for plus-sized clients, however, were cases like the following size 16 client:

A tall African-American woman in her late thirties, named Megan, came in after she was hired for a job at a “nice restaurant” that had a strict dress code. After meeting Joyce, her Personal Shopper, Megan explained that she was starting work the next day and was required to wear a black dress and suit jacket when working as hostess, but black pants with a black button-up shirt when working behind the bar. Joyce found two size 16 black dresses and both fit well. Megan said she felt “weird” in both dresses (to which Joyce said, “Oh, you’re just not used to wearing dresses like this!”), but agreed that one was comfortable and professional. Joyce found a pair of black pumps that Megan liked. But Joyce only found *one* size 16 pant-suit. The jacket fit beautifully, but the pants wouldn’t button. To make matters worse, there weren’t any black blouses above size medium. Megan seemed to panic, saying that she’d get fired for showing up out of uniform.

Joyce asked if I could help search for more options. We found two more black jackets (sizes 14 and 18) and one pair of size 16 black pants. I suggested that Megan try the jackets on with the dress she’d chosen. The size 14 jacket was too small but the size 18 jacket was too big.

Megan walked to one of the closets and started sifting through the black suits. We let her. After seeing that we did not have any above size 14, she repeated, “I’ll get fired if I don’t have a jacket, the size 18 kind of fits but I really liked that other [size 16] one more.” We weren’t supposed to “break up” matching suits, but Joyce said, “Oh, you can have it honey. And that second dress too. It wasn’t your

favorite, but it looked nice.” She turned to me and whispered, “Nobody needs to know. Just put the pants in the stockroom.” Megan thanked Joyce profusely for “trying so hard” but left looking anxious.

This example was a typical experience for plus-sized women in two ways. First, Megan left with some items, but not everything she needed to follow the dress code for work the next day. Second, her Personal Shopper spent 45+ minutes searching earnestly for a full outfit and then broke the rules to give Megan the suit jacket she liked best and an extra dress – even though breaking up a matching suit was against the rules. Yet, despite these efforts, Megan could not comply with the required dress code, and was therefore at risk of being sent home from work or perhaps even being fired. This case reveals the real economic consequences facing poor who cannot acquire the objectified cultural capital needed to accomplish aesthetic labor.

Jenny, a Latina woman in her late 20s who wore size 26, similarly had few options from which to choose. One of Jenny’s eyes was clouded over and her intake form was left blank where it should have listed the referring agency; I wondered if she had left an abusive partner. She requested dark colors and seemed relieved when we found a pair of black rayon slacks with an elastic waistband. “These are, like, for old ladies, but who cares? They fit!” she said, smiling. A suit jacket and blouse posed a greater challenge, but we found a bright pink sweater. It was tight, but stretchy. “See if you can find a tank top to wear underneath it,” encouraged Beth, her Personal Shopper. Jenny did not complain about not receiving a blouse or jacket, nor about the bright sweater, instead saying she was “relieved that *anything* fit.”

Women at the higher end of the sizing scale, particularly those size 20 or greater, like Jenny, were less likely than thinner women to express frustration during their appointments, even after trying on many items that did not fit. When they did leave with full outfits, plus-sized

women often took clothes that technically “fit” but were more outdated, matronly, obviously used, ill-fitting, or did not satisfy basic requirements or requests (i.e., “dark colors” or “no skirts”). Despite this, the fattest clients were almost universally deferential, and sometimes outright apologized to Personal Shoppers for being difficult to dress. In response, Personal Shoppers tended to be attentive and, if a complete outfit could not be found, they almost always offered additional accessories and extras, which fit regardless of body size.

These interactions echo Pausé’s (2012) concept of the “good fattie” who successfully positions herself as deserving by expressing shame deference, and gratitude. In doing so, fat clients may extract better treatment Personal Shoppers. Yet, as described by Friedman (2012), street level bureaucrats’ “romantic positioning of the virtuous oppressed subject does not provide a viable means of fighting structural oppression,” (58). Further, as Brandi suggests, SWO was aware of the mismatch between plus-sized clients’ bodies and the available clothing. Yet, the only action taken to remedy the situation was a single sentence on the website’s donation page noting a “need for larger sizes.” This lack of concerted effort, juxtaposed with Brandi’s anti-fat sentiments, SWO’s partnership with a standard-sizes-only retailer for the gala fashion show, and Personal Shoppers’ rewarding of “good fattie” performances, indicates a broad lack of concern for adequately serving plus-sized women, who comprise a significant proportion SWO’s clients.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

Successful Women’s Outfitters is dedicated to evening the odds for disadvantaged women entering the workforce by providing them with professional attire and style advice for job interviews. Yet, SWO ultimately reinforces many of the inequalities the organization hopes to remedy. My findings fit within a broader feminist literature that cautions against romanticized

understandings of privileged women's philanthropic efforts, as the very programs that seek to remedy social inequalities are not exempt from also reproducing them.

In addition to reifying class hierarchies between volunteers and clients, service encounters at SWO reveal that the most "deserving" clients – those perceived to have the "right attitude" and whose bodies already conform to middle-class standards for appearance – receive better treatment and more material resources than those deemed "undeserving." In their roles as "street-level bureaucrats," SWO staff and volunteers function as classed gatekeepers by controlling the distribution of symbolic and material resources, such that clients' access to objectified cultural capital (professional clothing) is predicated upon whether or not she is perceived as already possessing a sufficiently middle-class habitus and bodily capital. This unequal distribution of objectified cultural capital compounds already-existing gender, race and class inequalities.

Finally, my finding that plus-sized clients are much less likely than thinner clients to receive full interview outfits offers new irony to feminist critiques of workfare programs as inadequately "one size fits all." The fact that SWO largely ignores this issue, which impacts more than half of their clients, is troubling. Given that fatter women face employment discrimination regardless of race and class, a lack of access to plus-sized interview attire magnifies the job-search difficulties already faced by these women. Poverty and fatness are strongly correlated in the United States, with much research claiming that being poor leads to being fat. My findings help explain why the reverse causal relationship is also true: limited access to objectified cultural capital in the form well-fitting professional attire is likely one reason that fatness is impoverishing.

My finding that Personal Shoppers treat the fattest clients with overt kindness and patience contradicts most research showing that larger body size typically compounds already negative treatment of poor women of color. That said, it is possible that Personal Shoppers' actions are not due to their respect for plus-sized women, but are instead sympathies triggered by an inability to provide plus-sized clients with a full interview outfit, which is considered the bare minimum of SWO's responsibility to clients. In other words, Personal Shoppers' kindness may be motivated more by pity than respect, and had there been an adequate supply of plus-sized clothing, Personal Shoppers may have expressed more typical forms of anti-fat stigma. This puzzle points to the need for further research exploring the social contexts in which anti-fat stigma is likely to be expressed, and with what consequences for social inequality.

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