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Minding the Gap: Adolescent Mothers Navigate Child Welfare

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This article explores the gap between official policies and the realities of social programs. It examines relations among administrators, case managers, and adolescent mothers in a Supervised Independent Living program. It also adds to the traditional analysis of policies an exploration of the use of cultural tools in developing program practices. The work finds that, due to the distribution of the hierarchy of authority, there is social distance between leaders, on the one hand, and workers and clients, on the other. These conditions foster what are termed familiar zones, or program spaces that are not highly regulated. Participants use these zones to foster informal social networks, to hide rule-breaking behaviors, and to maintain the impression of compliance with official policies that are actually unrealistic and impractical. Familiar zones are inadequate substitutes, however, for the public support and organizational integrity needed to promote the well-being of adolescent mothers and their children.

Many scholars examine the effect of social policy on the experiences of the individual, as well as the individual's role in molding, shifting, and reconstituting policy on the ground (see, e.g., Lipsky 1980; Smith and Donovan 2003; Pillow 2004). Michael Lipsky (1980, xii) suggests that organizational conditions make it impossible for "street-level bureaucrats" to practice in ways that meet public agencies' official missions. Resource limitations, time pressures, and conflicting goals spur coping mechanisms among these bureaucrats. These coping mechanisms include giving preferential treatment to clients deemed deserving or likely to succeed, rationing resources, meeting personal goals that differ from official ones, and justifying service limitations (Lipsky 1980; Smith and Donovan 2003).

The current article is aligned with the approach developed by Lipsky (1980) in considering how official objectives diverge from providers' own practices and the ways providers negotiate with clients. Lipsky ex-

plains general strategies and patterns that tend to occur within a wide number of public bureaucracies, but the current work provides an in-depth ethnographic account that delves into the nature of street-level bureaucracy lived in a specific, local, residential program not officially run by the state. Moreover, this work draws insights from anthropology, sociology, and political science to expand on the description of the way the context shapes actual practices and the explanation of these practices. To a consideration of policies, resources, and the like, it adds an analysis of the role of cultural tools in practices.

Specifically, this investigation looks at how practice is shaped by broad governance as well as by local residential, educational, and child care conditions in a Supervised Independent Living (SIL) program for dependent and delinquent adolescent mothers. The SIL program analyzed here is located in a large U.S. city in the northeast. It is administered by Visions, a private nonprofit organization.[1] Visions is contracted by the local public child welfare agency, Children and Youth Services (CYS). The SIL program manual indicates that the program is designed to cultivate the educational, social, and general life skills that enable young mothers to move successfully out of the child welfare system and into autonomous adulthood. Yet, the success of the effort is in doubt here, as elsewhere. A wide body of research indicates that youth who enter adulthood from the child welfare system may have difficulties in managing the transition to adulthood. They have a high risk of poverty, homelessness, victimization, underemployment, and unemployment, as well as low educational attainment (Courtney et al. 2001; Reilly 2003; Courtney and Heuring 2005; Freundlich and Avery 2005). The argument here is that the failure of services may be explained not in terms of the choices of adolescent mothers and their case managers (as many argue) but rather by the nature of the organizational context that guides program development and shapes service provision.

This study applies concepts from anthropology and political science in an ethnographic investigation of how adolescent mothers and their case managers cope with multiple contextual barriers, including a complicated network of service providers, a dangerous residential setting, and lack of child care resources. It argues that service providers and clients face increasing pressure to conform to performance-based accountability measures while, at the same time, both groups must deal with the gap between the program's mission and resources to meet those objectives. Given these circumstances, social actors across hierarchical positions collude to manage an impression of program effectiveness and cohesion, while disruptions to these practices of impression management may and do occur.

Organizational Context

Young mothers are referred by CYS to the SIL program examined here if they are adjudicated dependent or delinquent. Adjudicated dependent youth are typically ordered by a court into the custody of CYS if they have been abused or neglected by a guardian. Adjudicated delinquent youth who are on probation with the juvenile justice system are taken under the custody of CYS. If a young mother is adjudicated as delinquent and is nonviolent but lacks a viable home for herself and her child, a court may order a SIL residency. Youth are adjudicated as delinquent for such nonviolent status offenses as incorrigibility (being beyond parental control), running away, drug possession, and petty theft.

The young mothers in the SIL program are between the ages of 16 and 20. The vast majority of them are African American. Many of the mothers (both dependent and delinquent) face ongoing challenges from histories shaped by poverty and homelessness as well as by the repercussions of their parents' drug addiction and incarceration. Each SIL resident lives with her child or children in an agency-leased apartment located in a privately managed apartment building.

At the time of this study, the SIL program leased 50 apartments clustered at three sites. The sites are located in low-income, urban, predominately African American neighborhoods. At any given time, delinquent mothers in the program head 15 to 20 households. Dependent mothers and their children occupy the remaining apartments.

Because CYS provides approximately 85 percent of the total funds used to run SIL, the program is designed in accord with public priorities and expectations.[2] Clients are expected to meet standards related to educational attainment, part-time employment, parenting goals, and adult-readiness skills (including, e.g., the ability to budget, manage a household, and seek and negotiate health care). The public maintains oversight through two primary mechanisms. First, the state and CYS conduct separate annual audits of the SIL program, visiting SIL sites to inspect the apartments in light of health and safety requirements, to review documentation of services, to examine case files, and to interview staff. Second, a CYS official supervises each dependent client, and a juvenile probation officer (PO) regulates each delinquent client. Officials from CYS and juvenile POs attend periodic court hearings to review client cases. They also make recommendations regarding SIL residential placements and services.

Case managers in SIL are required to provide consistent mentoring and support to help young mothers pursue sanctioned goals. The SIL program manual identifies the key areas in which case managers are responsible for assisting clients. These areas include heath care, edu-

cational planning, parenting, employment, life skills, interpersonal skills, household management, therapy, housing, and legal services. Furthermore, case managers are obligated to keep detailed documentation of all interactions and services. Such documentation includes (but is not limited to) case notes, incident reports, health reports, grade records, and psychological evaluations. In addition, case managers are required to uphold program rules that prohibit violent interactions, forbid visitors to apartments during hours other than those specified, ban guns, and bar drug use or sales. These features place case managers in a multifaceted role. As the SIL program manual states: "Case management involves coordinating all services necessary to allow the client and her children to achieve maximum personal growth and self sufficiency. . . . The SIL case manager wears many hats and plays many roles, including counselor, surrogate parent, teacher, hand holder, enabler, and mentor."

Low salaries, large caseloads, cumbersome organizational barriers, and insufficient training have led to very high turnover rates among child welfare workers (Center for Law and Social Policy 2004). Case managers in SIL are mandated by program guidelines to carry a caseload of 10 clients, but staff shortages force them to assume responsibility for additional clients, often for months at a time. Case managers report that comprehensive case management mandates, such as those related to education, advocacy, and oversight goals, cannot be met because of heavy caseloads, extensive documentation requirements, and insufficient program resources.

The case managers work from their offices, one of which is located in each of the three apartment buildings. The offices are apartments that are also rented from the building's owner and transformed into workspaces. Offices are supplied with secondhand desks and other equipment, including telephones, fax machines, cabinets for client files, and computers. Client supplies, such as diapers, cleaning solution, and toiletries, are also stored in these offices, as sometimes are secondhand furnishings for client apartments. In addition, the offices serve as headquarters for the agency's maintenance staff. Among other tasks, this staff provides all apartments with secondhand furniture, fixes doors that have been kicked in, changes locks, exterminates pests, and cleans apartments in between resident occupancy.[3] Apartment offices are generally busy, crowded, loud, and cluttered, as they serve multiple purposes and are centers of multiple activities. Case managers complain often that constant disturbances and interruptions prevent them from completing case notes and paperwork in their offices. Mothers and children tend to come in and out frequently, making requests of their case managers and reporting broken appliances and furniture. They also come to visit with case managers and each other.

Midlevel administrators supervise case managers and manage the pro-

gram. Oftentimes, these administrators engage in direct service with clients (serving as temporary case managers) because the program is almost always understaffed. Midlevel administrators tend to fill gaps by offering counseling, attending court hearings, accompanying clients to doctor appointments, and taking clients grocery shopping. Midlevel administrators work from a SIL administrative office, which is located in another part of the city and houses one of Visions' general equivalency diploma (GED) programs.

Upper level administrators include the financial officers, contract managers, grant writers, and directors who oversee the SIL program and all other programs offered by Visions. Upper level agency administrators occupy a business office, which is located in one of the city's suburbs, a 40-minute drive from the city's center.

In general, mothers, case managers, midlevel administrators, and upper level administrators occupy different spatial locations across the SIL-providing agency. This spatialization of status is also racialized. Administrators who work from the suburban business office are predominately white and female. Case managers and clients are predominately black; they occupy sites located within low-income sections of the city.[4] The distinct locations mediate access to resources and perception of self-efficacy. Furthermore, due to their distance from residential sites, upper level administrators do not have direct access to the daily experiences of clients.

Discrepancies in the quality and location of program environments contribute to a sense of social and status difference among upper level administrators, midlevel administrators, case managers, and clients. Differences among physical environments, distance between the urban program sites and the suburban business office, dissimilar access to needed tools and technology, and differential quality (or newness) of equipment and furnishings all map and communicate relative value within the organization. At the suburban business office, the furnishings seem to be in good condition and appear to have been purchased new. In case manager offices, the SIL administrative office, and client apartments, all furnishings are second hand. One case manager described the "broken junk" in her apartment office, noting the filing cabinets that were "busted" and did not lock. She wondered whether administrators consider how case managers feel when they visit the business office and it looks professional with all new furnishings. She continued to emphasize that if the conditions of her workspace were more professional, she would not feel like she were "playing case manager."

Midlevel and upper level administrators of SIL are responsible for supervising the program, setting program policies, and managing practices. Hence, they tend to be primarily responsible for the program cohesion and effectiveness (or at least the appearance of it) that is ascertained through audits and essential to maintain the program's

funding. In interviews, administrators talked about audits, during which they must show regulators that the program does what it is contracted to do. Case managers and administrators are accountable for different aspects of service provision. These distinct responsibilities shape the justifications and coping responses that each group uses to preserve its sense of competence and self-efficacy. This need to maintain personal legitimacy is related to the deliberate strategy of avoiding blame and punishment for program crises. Hence, the ways in which one justifies one's actions (or lack of action) are shaped by a broader social context and structure of governance.

Staff of SIL risk losing professional status and their jobs if they do not meet the expectations of policy makers, but mothers in the program face even higher stakes: they are at risk of homelessness and losing custody of their children. Program rules require an adolescent mother in the SIL program to participate in school, work part-time, and attend parenting classes. In addition, some mothers are required by their case managers, CYS workers, POs, or judges to attend therapy or behavior management classes. Each mother lives alone in an apartment with her child (or children). She must do all of this while managing her household and being a good parent. Mothers report that they often find it infeasible to meet all of the program's multiple expectations, as there is insufficient time in the day and insufficient support from the program. Furthermore, mothers are trapped in an organizational conundrum: the goals set for their performance often conflict with the program's administrative priority to cut costs. A public official at CYS notes: "We have all these kids coming in [to custody] with all sorts of multiple needs, and then we have to move those kids to some permanent outcomes quickly; so there's a lot of tension [and] a lot of mandates are not sufficiently funded." The administrator refers to federal mandates established by the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (113 Stat. 1822), which maintains that adolescents 16 years and older in child welfare should be enrolled in an independent living program "designed and conducted by State and local government to help prepare them for employment, postsecondary education, and successful management of adult responsibilities" (1823). Individual mothers bear a high level of stress and undue burden because the program's expectations for them extend well beyond the support and resources available to help them.

Methodology

This article draws upon data from a larger study based on 2 years of ethnographic fieldwork. I adopt a case study approach in order to understand the processes of service negotiation in a SIL program. I gained access to the SIL program as a result of a preexisting relationship. I

worked as a midlevel administrator for the SIL program from early July 2001 until the end of August 2002. Formal data collection took place from January 2003 through February 2005. I observed all three of the SIL residential sites, but the bulk of fieldwork took place at the largest SIL site, Evergreen, which houses 25 dependent and delinquent mothers as well their children. I also observed the SIL administrative office and Visions' main business office. The duration of these observations depended on the tasks, meetings, or events observed. I interviewed SIL staff from each of these locations and conducted interviews with mothers at each of the three SIL residential sites.

Mario Small (forthcoming) suggests that the strength of case study research comes from its ability to inductively sharpen concepts and explain the meanings that informants attribute within their cultural contexts to their experiences and perceptions. Furthermore, Small notes that within the case, selection of informants and events cannot be predetermined; rather, qualitative design must be flexible. It must respond to emerging themes and patterns of importance. Without representative samples, qualitative case studies cannot answer questions pertaining to how many. Rather, qualitative design provides insight into the processes of social life. Hence, I decided whom to speak to and what events to observe as my research unfolded. Such decisions were always made in response to what seemed important to my informants.

My methodology focuses on documentation of practice. This is done largely through participation in and observation of service negotiation in the contexts in which these processes naturally occur. Ethnographic research "involves both being with other people to see how they respond to events as they happen and experiencing for oneself these events and the circumstances that give rise to them" (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995, 2). Thus, I chose to be a player in many negotiations. My knowledge and actions serve as data that complement the interactions observed among mothers and other providers. I took field notes to recount in extensive detail the sequence of interactions, events, and dialogue. The notes were recorded as soon as possible after engaging in fieldwork for the day.[5]

I applied a dual, concurrent approach to fieldwork. For one approach, I interacted with 10 focal adolescent mothers in SIL and studied their experiences. These 10 central relationships were developed as a result of the young mothers' availability and willingness to participate in the study.[6]

In addition to spending time at the 10 mothers' SIL apartment sites, I accompanied them across several service contexts, including family court, schools, health clinics, public housing sites, and child care. The data for this article are drawn primarily from SIL program contexts. Engaging in ongoing relationships with mothers across contexts enabled me to study their service pathways by firsthand experience of their tra-

jectories and by taking an active role in negotiations. As Robert Emerson and colleagues (1995, 3) maintain, "Relationships between the field researcher and people in the setting do not so much disrupt or alter ongoing patterns of social interaction as reveal the terms and bases on which people form social ties in the first place."

Each of the 10 focal mothers also participated in an extensive, semi-structured qualitative interview, which I conducted and audio-recorded.[7] Interviews ranged in length from 1 to 3 hours and covered a variety of topics, including the young mother's background, her experiences in the SIL program, her ongoing experiences with school, her history with the child welfare system, and, if relevant, her interactions with the juvenile justice system. Interviews also addressed each mother's future goals for herself and her child (or children).

For the second approach, I collected data through observations of and participation in everyday SIL program activities and encounters. I spent many hours in the Evergreen site's staff office and visiting in mothers' apartments at this focal SIL site. Spending extensive time at the Evergreen site provided the opportunity to discover the patterns by which SIL staff and mothers interact in the office space. In visits to apartments, I chatted with mothers on a variety of topics, some serious and others mundane. I also assisted mothers with schoolwork and educational activities.

Interviews were also conducted with several other contacts, including SIL case managers, midlevel administrators, a PO, and CYS officials. Seven SIL case managers and three midlevel administrators were interviewed over the data collection period (four of these interviews were audio-recorded and the others were documented in field notes). No more than five case managers worked for SIL at any given time. Interviews tended to last 1 hour. The SIL staff shared their personal backgrounds, making connections or drawing distinctions between their experiences and the challenges faced by the clients. All of the interviewed staff members were women, and three case managers reported that they were mothers during their teenage years. All interviews occurred in private offices or in case manager apartment offices when the space was quiet and relatively private. Two female CYS workers were interviewed, as was one female PO and two top-level CYS administrators (both male). These interviews tended to last 1 hour.

The interviews were intended to explore how participants perceived their roles, involvement with clients, and job motivation. All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed. Because the total number of interviews is limited, the current analyses do not generalize about categories of administrators, case managers, and clients. Rather, interview data are used to explore individual perceptions of the types of practices I observed to be typical in program settings. Only through interpretation of participants' (i.e., staff members', mothers', and my own) practices

and perceptions was I able to gain a thorough understanding of the ways in which service navigation is shaped by what turns out to be central cultural features here.

My insider status and preexisting knowledge of the SIL program enabled me to study service negotiations that would not otherwise be accessible. Furthermore, established relationships with some staff and clients afforded me familiarity and social capital, enabling me to get to know unfamiliar SIL staff and mothers. However, insider status also presented some challenges. Clients often perceived me as a SIL representative, failing to ascertain my ambiguous role as an outside researcher who both studies and engages in practice. On several occasions, I clarified my role, correcting clients who associated me with responsibility for programmatic decisions.

I interpreted a variety of documents for this study. These include SIL program manuals, state legislation, and CYS policies. The documents reveal how the program is defined through official discourses, which I compared with data from observations and interviews. As noted below, I also developed a scheme to explain the significant gaps that separate official representations of the SIL program from the actual strategies used by mothers and SIL staff members in their everyday environments. A grounded theoretical approach was used, in which literatures helped define concepts and refine what was observed in the empirical case.[8] Furthermore, I reviewed a range of local and national popular press on issues of adolescent motherhood, child welfare, and juvenile justice. The analysis of media resources attempts to understand the social and cultural contexts in which the SIL program is situated.

Constructing Authority

James Scott (1998, 4) explores multiple large-scale examples of "social engineering" projects pursued throughout the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Michael Herzfeld (1993, 2005a) looks at nationalization processes with cases drawn mainly from Greece. Even as the scale and context of their empirical examples differ from the current, localized inquiry, I apply concepts from their works to explain service negotiation and the role of bureaucracy within a SIL program. In this study, I define bureaucracy to include the hierarchical and spatially distinct relations of authority among the participants.

Scott (1998, 2) suggests that the state uses a variety of scientific techniques and technical knowledge in order "to make a society legible." Government administration works through a "process of abstraction and simplification" (Scott 1998, 22). This process is facilitated by such techniques as procedural protocols, documentation, record keeping, application of statistical outcome measures, and audits. The techniques are used across various scales of government to regulate social reality, re-

ducing, assimilating, and transforming life into legible official formats (Scott 1998). Through administrative processes, officials are able to maintain authority by creating the impression of coherence, objectivity, and efficiency. These acts produce an official reality that necessarily ignores certain contradictory aspects of social life (Scott 1998).

Scaling Scott's argument down, the current work considers how informal processes in a SIL program are ignored and made invisible through such audit practices as standardized record keeping and through the pressure that public officials exert on SIL administrators to produce positive program evaluations. As various aspects of life in the SIL program are excluded from official documentation, the welfare of clients is compromised. Oppressive living conditions, insufficiency of services, and abusive treatment of mothers (in some instances, by case managers) tend to be left out of the record and, hence, are not officially addressed.

Herzfeld (2005b, 372) calls the hidden practices within the state "the dirty secrets that provide the basis of lived social experience." Yet, Herzfeld (1993, 2005a, 2005b) complicates Scott's construction of the binary relationship between official and local knowledge, considering the social interactions and common cultural tools used by bureaucrats and subjects alike. Herzfeld seeks to demystify the state as an abstract object by looking at how symbols of its abstraction are actually created and used as strategies by individual actors. Bureaucrats and their subjects work under the same assumptions and constraints (Herzfeld 1993, 2005a). Both groups use similar cultural symbols, the state or the system, as the objects of blame for their misfortunes (Herzfeld 2005a, 2005b). For example, bureaucrats blame the state to escape personal responsibility or because they feel trapped and unable to be effective in their positions (Herzfeld 2005a). He also argues that bureaucrats and ordinary folks draw upon common cultural symbols but do so to unequal effect, as strategies reflect different interests and access to resources (Herzfeld 2005a).

Herzfeld (2005b) points to the existence of a wide range of objectives, roles, and self-interests pursued by individual bureaucrats. This view represents "bureaucrats as agents exercising choice in varying degrees of self-awareness and for a wide range of ends" (Herzfeld 2005b, 373). In other words, just as clients make decisions and act on the basis of a variety of motives, so do bureaucrats. It is not useful, nor is it possible, to determine whether a "class" of individuals (bureaucrats or clients) acts on the basis of morally just intentions or deceitful, self-interested ones (Herzfeld 2005b, 373). A range of motives exists and is expressed within any particular individual and among individuals. Rather, "audit cultures" (quoted in Herzfeld 2005b, 373) structure particular types of social and material relations, regardless of personal intentions.

In SIL, because a wide schism separates official record keeping and performance requirements from the resources to meet these goals,

mothers, their case managers, and midlevel administrators are compelled to construct their own informal social networks. In order to meet personal needs and create the impression of compliance, participants use what Herzfeld calls a "zone of familiar ease" (2005*b*, 372) and what this article terms a familiar zone. Herzfeld (2005*b*, 372) characterizes a zone of familiar ease as a space where bureaucrats use their personal agency to "patch up, muddle through, and simply cope" with the rigidity of state demands. Yet, they do so for different reasons and personal motivations. Herzfeld (2005*b*) explores the roles of bureaucrats, but this article differentiates the concept of familiar zones further to examine the ways in which they are used by clients, ground-level case managers, and midlevel administrators. Familiar zones, constructed contexts of "bearable life" (Herzfeld 2005*b*, 372), arise in program spaces that are relatively unregulated. These spaces, therefore, tend to be hidden from or ignored by top-level bureaucrats and public regulators.

Familiar zones arise in the context of the SIL program as a result of social distance and problems in meeting goals. Social distance is caused by two primary conditions: (1) spatial divisions within the SIL program and (2) hierarchical relations of power that sustain differential access to resources. Many top-level administrators and officials rarely visit the residential sites where mothers live. Organizational hierarchy creates social distance through the separation of programming sites and administration. Because of this separation, categories of participants do not tend to interact. Thus, certain contexts, such as SIL apartments, could be considered familiar zones, as these spaces are less regulated than official meetings or court hearings. Coping strategies and informal social networks that are situated within familiar zones remain hidden from those staff and regulators in positions of authority.

Two primary conditions shape the necessity for participants to hide decision-making and rule-breaking behaviors in familiar zones: (1) high stakes attached to meeting official goals and (2) a gap that separates official goals from the social, economic, and organizational resources available to meet the goals. Participants, including clients, case managers, and midlevel administrators, use familiar zones to meet social, safety, and economic needs. In the process, zones are used to hide those aspects of program life that conflict with official policies. Participants break program rules, often doing so out of necessity and because social realities do not match official descriptions. Yet, even as participants cooperate to shape common impressions of program feasibility, they do so for different reasons, which will be explored at greater length below. Only through the use of familiar zones can participants engage in impression management, which is employed to hide discrepancies and to present an account of compliance to the authorities.

However, when an inspector visits an apartment to conduct an audit, this space momentarily loses its familiar-zone qualities. The social dy-

namics necessarily change as a result of the presence of an authority figure with the power to judge the SIL program's effectiveness. Hence, when program and client evaluations occur, the social and spatial characteristics of the setting cease to constitute a familiar zone. In other words, familiar zones exist along a spatial and social continuum that shifts over time.

Familiar Zones and Impression Management

It is a common practice for boyfriends (or girlfriends and family members) to reside in SIL apartments with mothers and children, even as this unquestionably violates SIL program rules. Furthermore, the structure of SIL residences, which include single-occupancy apartments located in privately managed community buildings, does not enable case managers to exercise extensive oversight. This residential structure and inadequate administrative support allow case managers to use residential familiar zones to hide the unofficial (predominately male) residents. Because of the social and spatial distance among levels of staff, many interactions between case managers and clients tend to remain in familiar zones. The interactions therefore remain largely invisible to top-level administrators and the public regulators. Although administrators are at least superficially aware of the presence of men in the program residences, spatial separation allows administrators to avoid the reality of this breach of program policy.

The schism between official descriptions of the program and lived realities leads to resourceful adaptation in familiar zones. For example, Rachelle, a case manager at one of the SIL apartment sites, was pressed to accommodate the official prohibition against cohabitation by individuals who were not program participants. Rachelle describes the ways in which she modified SIL program policy to account for the constant presence of men in the apartments.

> *Rachelle:*   And like I was telling [a midlevel administrator] the other day, you holler, holler, holler; you tell the girls, "He cannot be here, he cannot be here," and in actuality, he doesn't have a place to go. . . . You can go into an apartment five times in one day and tell him to leave, but who is to say he's going to leave. He might walk down the hall and go into another apartment. And when you don't have someone over the top of you coming out there to visit, coming out there to say, "Well you have to leave and there's no if, ands, or buts about it. If you are caught in this building again, we will call the cops and have you arrested for trespassing." That has never happened since I have been here. So instead of just keep saying, "Leave, leave, leave, leave," [she says to the guys] "You might as well stay and help clean up." It's not helping them much; the

"leave, leave, leave, leave" doesn't do any good because they're not leaving. So, you're like, let him stay, and just say, "Well these are the rules for you too," and you become case manager to the guys.

Author: So is that what you have found happen?

Rachelle: Oh yeah, I have to tell them, "You do this, this, and this, hopefully, you'll get a job. Can you come up here and sign for this and take the medical cards back upstairs and tell [the mother] Ms. Rachelle sent them? Tell her to call me later on if she has any questions. Why were you fighting last night? You know better with children in the hallway." I mean, you're a case manager to them too, so if you have 23 people and you add on their boyfriends, that's more.

Author: And their children, so you probably have about (*pause*) I don't know.

Rachelle: Whatever, there are so many. (*She laughs.*)

Rachelle offered the following justifications for breaking an official rule prohibiting male cohabitants: (1) the infeasibility of enforcing the rule, (2) the need to maintain order, (3) empathy for the young men, and (4) an understanding that the well-being of the children, mothers, and the mothers' male companions is interconnected. Because, as Rachelle suggests, administrators did not back her up in enforcing the official program policy, she used the existence of a familiar zone to decide to manage the informal social network of mothers and their boyfriends. Rachelle developed a practice of working with what may be termed shadow residents to foster their livelihoods so they could then assist the resident mothers. She perceived her obligation as case manager to her official female clients and children but also recognized a responsibility to the male shadow residents. Rachelle spoke about methods for developing rapport with these men so that she could establish her role as an authority figure. Such authority, she indicated, would enable her to maintain relative order and cohesion at the site. She maintained that the men were beginning to respect her and follow the guidelines she established. Her discourse contradicts the stereotype of the predatory, young, black male, conveying an understanding in which both young women and men struggle with the repercussions of poverty.

The widespread presence of shadow residents was in part indicative of the lack of comprehensive support from the SIL program and the larger child welfare system. Clients reported that they depend on their

shadow residents for several types of support, including child care, companionship, and economic support. Almost every interviewed young mother maintained that the $62 she received per week (for one mother and child) from the program is insufficient to meet her needs. Further, the SIL program's rented apartments are located in low-income, racially segregated areas where there is a significant drug trade. In a complicated way, the location increases the mothers' reliance on male shadow residents.

Thus, in an interview, a midlevel SIL administrator talked about the difficulties of leasing apartments for the SIL program:

> That's always an issue because, with the per diem rates that we get [from CYS], we can only afford to pay like X number of dollars for rent, and that really limits the quality of housing that we can do. . . . So we wind up being in places where there tend to be roach problems and drug problems, and I don't know, unless we eventually get our own building, you know that we'll be able to get away from that stuff. And you know the other issue, even if we could afford something better, the better places don't want teen moms. . . . Now that's the other issue. They really do look at the girls as failures and potential trouble, and they know that the girls are coming from troubled backgrounds. It's not always money; sometimes it's just basically, "No we don't want you here, not in our backyard. Yeah, we feel sorry for these young girls, and we hope somebody takes you, but we're not going to."

The administrator spoke to the limiting social, cultural, and economic factors that mediate the type of apartments available for the SIL program. In other words, lack of funds from the city's child welfare agency is one factor that limits the apartments available to Visions' SIL, as apartments must be rented in privately owned buildings. Racist and class-biased perceptions among the public also hinder the program. Many private leasing agencies are unwilling to rent to a program for teenage mothers and their children. These larger obstacles contribute to an environment in which many of the SIL participants felt unsafe. Several young women reported that they desire the companionship and relative protection they find with their shadow residents because they are afraid to be alone with their children and they feel particularly vulnerable in the apartment buildings where they resided.

Yet, the presence of shadow residents leaves safety constantly in flux, in part because staff retain differing degrees of authority over these informal social networks. Jasmine, a SIL mother, shared an experience that speaks to what happens when staff authority and control break down in a familiar zone.

Jasmine lived at Evergreen with her daughter, who was a toddler at the time. Jasmine reported that, after a quarrel with another SIL resident named Khadisha, Khadisha's live-in shadow resident pulled out a gun to threaten Jasmine. Jasmine grumbled about the fact that the boyfriend

lived in a SIL apartment and that he was not even supposed to be in the program but was threatening her life. Jasmine accounted the incident to the SIL live-in, who is reported to have exclaimed, "Well how I know if he got a gun or not?" and did nothing to address the issue.[9] Jasmine also indicated that she reported the threat to one of SIL's midlevel administrators and to her PO. The officials agreed to hold a meeting to discuss the incident. Jasmine indicated that she did not know whether this meeting would take place, as some time had passed and she received no notice about the details. She also indicated that the individual threatened her a second time:

Because the first time he did it, he was like, "Who the F said I put my hands on my girlfriend, who the F. . . . [Jasmine actually says "F," which I interpret to refer to a four-letter word.] He pulled the gun out on us and we ran. So the second time, my daughter was in here [the apartment], and I walked Shakiya [another mother in the SIL program] to the elevator and I left my door open. What if my daughter would have ran out here when he pulled the gun on us? And Shakiya was like, "Come on, let's go tell the live-in." All right, the first time I told the live-in she didn't do nothing, so why should we tell her again?

When young mothers like Jasmine communicate their concerns and SIL workers do not address the issues, the workers send the message that mothers' concerns are unimportant and invalid. The live-in may have felt powerless to address the situation. I did not ascertain whether this was indeed the case, as I was unable to interview the live-in. Yet, some case managers, who also worked in residences, bemoaned their lack of power and fear of mothers' male companions. They attributed this fear to the wide availability of guns, but my observations indicate that staff did not openly communicate these feelings to their clients. Staff tended to keep their feelings of vulnerability hidden from clients in an attempt to maintain the semblance of their authority over the program. Furthermore, the lack of expedient follow-through by the administrator and PO perpetuates the perception that the program staff will not protect Jasmine's safety. On multiple occasions, mothers spoke about workers who did not attempt to protect them in dangerous situations. Clients indicated that they tend to take this lack of action personally. They shared their perceptions about workers who, the mothers stated, did not care about their welfare. Residents learn over time that SIL case managers and administrators will not actively protect them; the mothers suffer on their own terms in program familiar zones.

Accordingly, familiar zones have two sets of consequences. On one hand, as in the scenario described by Rachelle, case managers and mothers are able to cope adaptively, creatively carving out spaces where the mothers can live somewhat self-determined lives, even within organizational boundaries that restrict the range of their choices. On the other hand, these program spaces are hidden from overt forms of reg-

ulation and, hence, the spaces also enable perpetuation of oppressive circumstances.

Although violence is sometimes perpetuated by staff inaction, I also observed and was told about instances in which case managers explicitly used their discretion to inflict hardship on particular mothers. For example, a midlevel administrator reported that one mother was denied new mattresses for her children's beds because the case manager in charge of ordering them did not like the mother. The denial of necessary bedding for the children was sustained even after this midlevel administrator directly requested new mattresses. Individual justifications for actions (or inaction) vary greatly. These justifications depend on an individual's sense of power and personal motivation. Herzfeld (2005b) suggests that the motivations and concerns of individual agents are highly variable. The organizational structure of SIL therefore allows the perpetuation of injustices against clients and their children.

Child care provision is another context in which available resources fall short of the demand for service. In order to receive SIL programming, mothers are required to participate in an educational program such as high school, preparation for the GED, postsecondary education, or college. The impetus and responsibility for attending school are placed squarely on the clients, and the young mothers often become caught in a significant bureaucratic inconsistency: mothers are expected to participate in an educational program (and sanctioned for failing to do so), but many are not provided with child care. Delinquent mothers can obtain child care only by following a rigid protocol and navigating several public bureaucracies. Program mothers and case managers reported that the task was nearly impossible. Dependent mothers, by contrast, receive funding for child care directly through CYS, and this funding is available upon admission to the SIL program.

If child care is not provided but school completion is enforced, mothers go to extraordinary lengths to attend school while making sure that their children are cared for. Many are pressed to use program familiar zones in their attempts. Some mothers arrange care with a shifting network of babysitters, who tend to include boyfriends, girlfriends, other SIL mothers, family members, and even case managers. These babysitters frequently use the SIL apartments to watch the children. Babysitters, like other shadow residents, are prohibited from occupancy by program policy, which dictates that visitors are allowed only during specified hours and only in the company of the mothers. Indeed, several SIL mothers were victimized by the same partners who watched their children during the day. Dependency on partners for child care can perpetuate domestic violence, as the mothers may feel compelled to stay in dangerous relationships, at least in part, to fulfill program requirements. Because of the high stakes attached to program compliance, daily violence tends to remain contained within program familiar zones,

where it is either invisible or ignored by upper level administrators and public regulators.

Mothers who are unable to access support from shadow residents may be prompted to use a different familiar zone: Visions' GED classroom. Summoned to court as part of a routine judicial oversight process, Tomeka, a young delinquent mother, negotiated the schooling requirement with her PO (before entering the courtroom). Tomeka and her PO would need to present a feasible educational plan so that the judge would continue her residential placement in SIL. Tomeka explained to her PO that lack of child care prevented her from attending the classes she needed to earn a high school diploma. Over the telephone, a mid-level administrator from the SIL program instructed Tomeka to satisfy the program's educational requirement by attending Visions' in-house GED classes with her infant until child care could be obtained. Tomeka conveyed her frustration, stating that she wanted a diploma, not a GED, and complained that she would not be able to concentrate on her studies with her baby in class. Tomeka's PO aligned with the agency, emphasizing the SIL program's educational requirement and pushing her "to meet the agency half-way" by attending the GED classes. The PO explained that since the agency was working on getting Tomeka day care, she should, in the meantime, attend the GED classes to demonstrate her willingness to comply. As Tomeka objected, the PO looked at her sternly and warned that if she wanted an advocate before the judge, then she must promise to attend the GED class. Tomeka quickly muttered her consent. The PO was in a position of relative power to bring Tomeka into agreement so that together they could engage in impression management before the judge.

Tomeka's experience demonstrates how participants construct schooling into an act of impression management. Only in the familiar zone of Visions' on-site GED class would Tomeka be allowed to bring her baby with her to class. In the context of deficient support, fulfilling the program's educational requirement took on dimensions of a negotiation strategy. Through compliance, Tomeka affirmed that she was a cooperative and deserving client, even as her learning was compromised by fulfillment of her primary responsibility: caring for her baby. Educational advancement, central to CYS and SIL program policy as a means of promoting clients' self-sufficiency, was replaced by an empty demonstration of compliance.

Without child care, the roles of student and mother merge as students simultaneously wrestle with GED curriculum and children in the same classroom. Yet, the impression of performance is preserved because such interactions remain largely unseen by public regulators and the judge, as the interactions are contained in the familiar zone of the agency's classroom. Tomeka attempted to advocate for herself by asserting her frustration with the proposal, but her concerns were dismissed. She

lacked authority to entertain choice, and the strategies available to her worker were limited by a system that does not adequately fund child care for delinquent mothers. It is important to note that the SIL midlevel administrator and PO would most likely have been amenable to To-meka's preferences if child care support were available, but the administrators and Tomeka were enmeshed in a bureaucracy that discriminates against delinquent mothers.

Familiar Zones and Regulatory Techniques

Continued provision of public funds to the SIL program depends on successful audits. Official expectations are at times irreconcilable with the contradictory and harsh program realities shaped by funding deficits, organizational obstacles, segregation, and violence. But familiar zones are temporarily transformed into regulated spaces during an audit, when government regulators inspect sites for brief periods of time. The common physical space thus temporarily takes on alternative social qualities as it is scrutinized.

The existence of familiar zones, even as these spaces tend to be invisible to the larger public, enables management to perpetuate an illusion of cohesion and efficiency (Herzfeld 2005b). The legitimacy of the SIL program can only be maintained if undocumented and contradictory acts that take place in familiar zones remain separate and hidden from public view. Participants, including mothers, case managers, and midlevel administrators, tend to cooperate in promoting a front of efficiency, not because they agree with the state of the conditions but because they are under high pressure to perform in accordance with the front. For example, mothers fear loss of their apartments, even if the apartments are less than adequate. They also fear losing custody of their children.

During public oversight, then, SIL program staff and young mothers use familiar zones to hide day-to-day realities so that together they can manage an impression of compliance. One case manager explains how she is able to disguise the presence of shadow residents from city and state auditors in order to create an impression of program integrity:

An inspector is coming. [The case manager tells the mothers:] "They are coming to inspect these apartments but make sure they are clean and well taken care of before [the male shadow residents] leave, because they can help you." So instead of just throwing [the men] out in the middle of the night, "Cause I know you don't have nowhere to go, so just leave at 9 o'clock [in the morning]. When I pull up, everybody must be out of here. If I have to knock on your door, give you a phone call, did he leave, is everything straight, is everything clean. . . ." And you have to do it like that.

The case manager's comments illustrate the ways in which she directs mothers to engage male shadow residents' help in cleaning apartments for inspection and then enforces the men's brief absence during the audit. The condition of apartments during the scheduled audit visits constructs the official face of the program.

Another case manager discusses her act of impression management before inspection and suggests that she sometimes has to create an impression that is untrue. She explains that the state of an apartment reflects how a young lady feels about herself. If a mother is depressed, she may have trouble keeping her apartment clean. The worker explains that she sometimes spends several hours cleaning such a client's apartment before an audit inspection.

During inspections, visits to apartment sites are planned and predictable. The state and CYS both audit the program once a year during the summer. Auditors are therefore unable to identify treacherous living conditions that persist over time in familiar zones. For example, during the winter, I observed clients often using their ovens to heat their apartments because landlords underheat apartments to save money. The use of ovens obviously poses serious safety hazards, but such risks are not detected by inspectors during the planned summer audits. Because auditors are not privy to residential life over time, the audit creates the illusion of program legitimacy. These evaluative mechanisms also are insufficient to capture the ways in which service provision is constantly being negotiated.

Furthermore, it is the relative "facade of cohesion," rather than an objective reality of program stability, that influences decisions among clients and even ground-level workers about "the risks of noncompliance" (Scott 1990, 56). Problematic individual behaviors, such as drug trafficking or acts of violence, can lead to discharge from SIL, but this generally occurs only when the acts are identified by public regulators or the landlords. If all clients were discharged for rule-breaking behaviors, it would be impossible to keep the program running. Thus, as long as noncompliant behaviors remain hidden in familiar zones, the SIL program's administrators tend to turn a blind eye. Yet, when public officials and private landlords identify these transgressions, the program becomes vulnerable, and administrators must enforce repercussions for individual clients. There is a pervasive perception among the young mothers that punishment is arbitrary and that only some clients are blamed for behaviors that are otherwise routine. Hence, the ways in which noncompliant behaviors are negotiated, identified, and punished depend on whether acts remain hidden within familiar zones or become exposed to a public audience.

The Breakdown of Familiar Zones

The legitimacy of the SIL program is threatened if the distinctions between official portrayals and familiar-zone realities become available to the public. On an early Saturday evening, a young man was murdered in the lobby of an apartment building where 25 young mothers and their children resided in SIL apartments. The young man who died was a known drug dealer and was reported by the mothers to have been killed over a drug-related dispute. Several of the mothers saw the young man's body before it was removed. The site live-in was aware of the murder and documented it in notes, but she did not contact the case managers or administrators, as was the official protocol. Because of the communication breakdown, no staff came to the site to assist or comfort program participants until the following Monday.

The occurrence of a murder at a program site threatened the site's familiar zones in two ways. First, the murder exposed the agency to additional scrutiny from its regulators (including the court and CYS) and the public, including the media. Fundamental to the existence of familiar zones is the invisibility of those spaces and practices to authority figures.

Second, the murder disrupted the power hierarchy, as mothers were empowered to challenge the existence of the familiar zones. Both before and after the murder, clients talked about feeling unsafe in SIL apartments. They repeatedly lamented this, describing scenarios in which strangers banged on their doors late at night. Because SIL staff had full access to their apartments, some mothers reported that surveillance and curfew checks made them feel panicked and jolted them from sleep. During these moments, mothers were uncertain whether an intruder was breaking in or a program official was entering the apartment. Many also reported that they fear walking the hallways or entering the building after dark. One young mother kept a knife above her doorframe, remarking that she needed it to protect her kids in case her apartment was invaded.

As "the facade of cohesion" (Scott 1990, 56) was fractured through a publicly exposed tragedy, norms of social engagement across hierarchical positions became less rigid. Mothers and case managers alike became more vocal about their perceptions that the environment was dangerous. Both groups shared these views previously, but before the murder, expression of dissent occurred mostly within familiar zones. As this tragedy became public, the SIL program administrators were held accountable directly by judges, CYS officials, and even clients for their claim to provide safe SIL residences. The on-site murder brought the official doctrine into direct and public conflict with program realities. Because of this acknowledgment of the residential conditions, some mothers used official discourses to leverage access to alternative services.

For example, two mothers were successful in directing their POs and CYS officials to pressure Visions to move them to different residences (although it was unclear to the mothers whether the new residences were better).

One of the apartment building's adult female residents, who was not affiliated with the SIL program, distributed a letter to the media, local government, and SIL program administrators. An administrator reported that she stated the many problems and dangers associated with the building, suggesting that a program for adolescent mothers and children should not be located in the apartment building. The case managers were advised by the SIL administrators to refrain from speaking to the media and to direct all inquiries to the executive director of the agency. The all-staff meeting, which took place at the apartment building on the Monday following the murder, was interrupted as the participants learned from a visiting juvenile PO that a detective was in the hallway talking to some of the mothers. One of the midlevel administrators quickly darted into the hallway to inform the detective that he was not allowed to speak to the program mothers because they were underage. Some of the mothers living in SIL are between the ages of 18 and 20 and are no longer minors; it is not clear whether the administrator deliberatively misguided the detective.

During the meeting and the remainder of that Monday afternoon, the administrators' panic and confusion were evident as they attempted to maintain order. The process of staff deliberation was constantly interrupted as various crises threatened the legitimacy of the program; disagreements on several fronts became publicly visible. The midlevel administrators attempted to silence voices of dissent, as they sought to preserve the internal order and public image of the program as well as their own public images. Several clients called their CYS workers and POs to complain about the situation, the letter publicly decried the dangerous program environment, and the media sought interviews with the mothers. In order for SIL program officials to continue receiving operational funds, they had to demonstrate (or at least uphold an impression of) effective governance and provision. As outside awareness spread and happenings in familiar zones were exposed, impression management became largely futile. Efforts to silence disagreement and to alleviate fear were unsuccessful. Harsh criticism followed in the several weeks after the murder. Officials from CYS and two judges admonished SIL case managers and administrators, threatening to discontinue Visions' SIL contract. The murder made it more difficult for all actors to justify the integrity of the program, as the dysfunction and danger associated with the residential environment became publicly, glaringly apparent.

Despite the warnings issued by judges and officials, the SIL program retained its contract. Soon after data collection for this study ended, I

learned that CYS prevented the program from accepting new partici-
pants until it met particular requirements. (I am unaware of what these
requirements entailed or whether they were enforced as a result of the
murder.) The SIL program has since begun to accept new participants
and continues to operate, although its structure shifted from three apart-
ment sites to scattered apartments at multiple sites throughout the city.
Although such a discussion is beyond the scope of this study, it is im-
portant to determine whether program improvements tend to follow
public scrutiny or whether scrutiny is fleeting and inconsequential.

Conclusion

Familiar zones exist in the SIL program for several reasons. The ex-
pectations embedded in child welfare missions diverge substantially
from the economic, organizational, and social support provided to pro-
mote these missions. Further, inspectors and top-level administrators
are socially distant from ground-level participants. This distance allows
much of SIL social life to remain hidden. The familiar zones that arise,
in turn, provide a context in which participants are able to manage the
impressions they communicate to auditors and regulators. Familiar
zones perpetuate service inconsistencies and oppressive conditions as
well as creative adaptations. Yet, they also perpetuate an untrue ap-
pearance of consistency in service delivery and unity among participants.
Familiar zones are insufficient substitutes for the types of comprehensive
public support and organizational integrity that are imperative if the
SIL program is to function effectively.

   As the gap between mandates and resources becomes irreconcilably
wide, individual participants are unable to shoulder the burden of im-
pression management. If impression management is compromised and
familiar zones break down, the violence and oppression within child
welfare becomes widely visible to officials and the general public. In-
dividuals across the social hierarchy are forced to acknowledge the un-
just conditions experienced by the same youth who are mandated to
receive protection from the child welfare system. Yet, blatant acknowl-
edgment of harsh realities does not necessarily lead to system restruc-
turing. The tendency to blame the individual (whether it is the mother,
the case manager, or the administrator) can limit change, as it fails to
promote a broad critique or restructuring of the current system. Such
a tendency also jeopardizes investment in child welfare support and
governance.

   When familiar zones are exposed, participants gain freedom to com-
municate dissenting viewpoints. Exposure may cause officials and the
public to openly acknowledge the reality of oppression within the system.
That acknowledgment may provide opportunities for deliberation, di-
alogue, and strategizing to promote improved conditions of care. It is

a social justice concern that programs be improved (not eliminated) so that adolescent mothers and their children may receive stable and supportive contexts of care.

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Notes

1. The names of all agencies (public and private) and individual participants are changed in order to protect confidentiality. Confidentiality concerns also prevent identification of the study sites' geographical location as well as interview dates.

2. This statistic was provided by a midlevel SIL administrator.

3. Apartment doors were often kicked in or broken as a result of domestic disputes. These may serve as indicators of the high incidence of domestic violence in many of the young mothers' lives.

4. The racialization of program spaces is explored at greater length in the author's unpublished dissertation (Silver 2007).

5. To avoid compromising my active involvement and the formation of social relationships, I did not typically record notes in the field.

6. Several commonalities are readily apparent among the 10 focal participants. All of the mothers identified as black. Nine identified themselves as African American, and one identified herself as Caribbean American. Seven out of 10 were adjudicated as delinquent youth. They were referred to the custody of CYS and to the SIL program because of this involvement with the juvenile justice system. The SIL program does not routinely provide the delinquent mothers with child care, so many of them are unable to attend school regularly. These mothers spent a large portion of their days in the SIL apartment buildings with their children. My interactions with mothers and SIL staff tended to occur during the daytime, and delinquent mothers therefore tended to be overrepresented in my focal cases. Although I was a researcher and no longer an official staff member, I continued to assist focal mothers in obtaining such services as education, child care, health services, and housing services. Analysis of these interactions allowed me to better understand pathways of service negotiation. The majority of the focal mothers, seven out of 10, were between the ages of 18 and 20 at the time of this study. Only three of the 10 mothers were under age 18. A CYS extension policy enables youth to remain in care after turning age 18 and up until their twenty-first birthday. Extensions were granted based on recommendations from case managers, CYS workers, POs, and, ultimately, judges. In order to be given an extension, a young mother was required to demonstrate ongoing participation in an educational program. For these mothers, acquiring child care was imperative so that they could participate in school. Because mothers over 18 were more engaged than their underage counterparts in obtaining the necessary resources for their transitions out of the child welfare system, they tended to welcome my assistance and advocacy in their preparation for such transitions. One of the greatest challenges facing youth who transition out of the child welfare system is finding affordable housing. Youth who age out of child welfare are particularly at risk for long-term homelessness (Courtney et al. 2001; Keller et al. 2007). I observed the struggle to acquire housing as a key impediment to the successful transition of mothers and children from the SIL program to self-sufficiency.

7. All but one of the interviews were conducted in the mothers' SIL apartments. The remaining interview was conducted in a semiprivate space at the SIL administrative office.

8. During an iterative coding process, data from field notes and transcripts were categorized into thematic areas. A relational rubric was then established among the various codes. This led to the creation of conceptual maps of possible patterns and analytical connections, which were identified in the themes emerging from the data and from various theoretical literatures.

9. The live-in is a part-time SIL staff member who lives in an apartment in the building that houses the SIL program. In exchange for housing, the live-in provides oversight after normal office hours and conducts curfew checks.