




## Intersectional motherhood: investigating public support for child care subsidies\*

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### ABSTRACT

Past research shows that beneficiary characteristics shape public support for social welfare programs. Intergroup attitudes and stereotypes can determine whether a group is seen as deserving of aid or exploiting the system for personal gain. One's own social group membership can also influence program support. Women, for example, tend to favor social welfare programs more than men, all else equal. In this paper, we investigate how race, gender, and class intersect to shape support for child care subsidies for working mothers among White Americans. Using a survey experiment that varies the characteristics of program beneficiaries, we consider (1) whether support for child care subsidies varies depending on the race and class of mothers receiving subsidies, and (2) whether women are generally more supportive of child care subsidies, in line with research on the gender gap in public opinion. The results indicate that racial cues affect White men and White women similarly, but that gender differences emerge in response to cues regarding recipient class.

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## Introduction

Public opinion toward social welfare policy engages questions of both race- and gender-based inequality. Attitudes toward social welfare policy are highly racialized, with Americans who hold negative racial attitudes and endorse negative stereotypes of Blacks demonstrating less support for welfare spending and programs (DeSante 2013; Kinder and Sanders 1996). The feminization of poverty lends social welfare programs a gendered dimension as well, given that women are overrepresented among the nation's poor and stand to benefit disproportionately from social welfare programs. Gender and race often intersect in public debate over welfare policy; notably, the social construction of the “welfare queen” has been a consistent feature of calls for welfare reform over the past 50 years (Collins 2000; Hancock 2004). The welfare queen rhetorical frame highlights a specific subgroup of welfare beneficiaries defined by their gender, race, and class who are cast as particularly unsympathetic and unworthy of public support.

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This constellation of stereotypes bolsters opposition to welfare programs – particularly among White Americans – by characterizing program recipients as making illegitimate, self-interested claims for government assistance.

Much of the public opinion literature has tended to evaluate support for welfare without carefully considering the intersection of race, gender, and class, even though scholars have documented the high prevalence of these group cues in public discourse about social welfare and health care (Abramovitz 2006; Zhu and Wright 2016). In this manuscript, we consider how the characteristics of program beneficiaries shape public support for child care subsidies by activating group-based attitudes. We use a nationally-representative survey experiment from the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) that manipulates the race and class of women who stand to benefit from a government-subsidized child care program. This approach allows us to determine whether certain groups of mothers and, by extension certain types of families, are judged to be more or less worthy of public support. We also consider whether women are less sensitive to cues regarding beneficiary groups' race and class characteristics. Given that social welfare is commonly characterized as a "women's issue" and support for social welfare programs is generally higher among women relative to men (Huddy, Casseese, and Lizotte 2008), we evaluate whether women express more support for child care subsidies regardless of salient subgroup characteristics. Our results reveal that White Americans express different levels of willingness to extend government assistance to groups of women based on their race and class. These findings point to the persistence of racial prejudice and the continued challenges facing efforts to address race and gender-based economic stratification with effective public policy. In contrast to much of the gender gap literature, we uncover few differences in attitudes among White men and White women. We discuss these findings in light of the intersectionality literature on Whiteness and middle classness as political identities.

### **Perceptions of social program recipients shape program support**

Public discourse on social welfare policies often focuses on the characteristics of the social groups who would stand to benefit from government assistance programs (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Stereotypes about groups are integrated into causal narratives about inequality in ways that shape attributions of deservingness, responsibility, and blame. For instance, race is highly salient in debates about welfare in the United States. Gilens (1996, 1999) notes that support for welfare is low among many White Americans because they endorse negative stereotypes about Black Americans, who are often cast as the primary beneficiary group of most welfare policies. In his work, Gilens (1996) finds the belief that "Blacks are lazy" has a more profound effect on welfare preferences than a number of competing explanations including individualism, economic self-interest, and beliefs about the poor. Stereotypes (like laziness) are codified in policy narratives through phrases such as "culture of poverty," "welfare as a way of life," and "cross-generational dependency," which are employed to portray Black reliance on welfare programs as an inevitable consequence of Black degeneracy – as a problem with Blacks *themselves* (Hancock 2004).

Gilens' (1999) work has been criticized for ignoring the role of gender in opposition toward welfare policy. Foster (2008) points out that opinions of Black mothers, rather

than Black Americans more broadly, drive opposition to welfare programs. In a reanalysis of Gilens' (1999) data, Foster demonstrated that beliefs that a welfare recipient will have more children to increase the size of her check reduced support for government spending on welfare. This belief, however, only had this effect if survey respondents were primed to think about a Black recipient and not a White recipient. This shows that the public is generally unsympathetic to Black women who are welfare beneficiaries. It further suggests that beliefs about Black women "gaming the system" may undercut support for policies designed to assist these women. While Foster's (2008) article covers some of the same ground as Gilens' earlier work on this topic (i.e., Gilens 1996), she goes one step further to offer a gendered analysis.

Foster (2008) explains that the divergent findings for Black and White mothers are a manifestation of "gendered racism" (Essed 1991), arguing that

women in racial minority groups often experience the interaction of racism and sexism as more than just racism plus sexism. The Welfare Queen stereotype, for example, applies not to African American people in general, nor to all women, but specifically to African American single mothers. (165)

Hancock makes a similar point about the power and pervasiveness of beliefs about Black mothers in shaping public support for welfare programs: "the welfare queen is more than just a stereotype, the welfare queen has become the public identity of all welfare recipients ... [it's] a shorthand for obviously failed persons with a race, gender, and class specific location" (163). This work points to the need to better understand how subgroups of women – defined by their race and class – are viewed as mothers and how these views shape their deservingness as targets for social programs.

### Understanding intersectional constructions of program recipients

Group categories like race, gender, class, sexual orientation, or disability can overlap in ways that create meaningful subgroups of program beneficiaries who vary in their traits and perceived deservingness (Cassese, Barnes, and Branton 2015; Foster 2008). Race, gender, and class intersect to create the maligned social group "welfare queens," which features centrally in narratives of opposition to welfare programs. Hancock (2004) argues that this intersection is critical for understanding public attitudes toward welfare. She maintains that the "conflation of all welfare recipients with single, poor Black mothers largely reflects the supercession of inegalitarian traditions of race, gender, and class over the facts concerning the demographic characteristics of welfare recipients" (24).

Stereotypes and beliefs about Black motherhood and, in particular, *poor Black mothers*, lie at the root of White opposition to welfare. Poor Black mothers are commonly characterized as lazy, hyper-fertile, drug-using, and rejecting of middle-class intensive parenting ideologies (Roberts 1999; Simien 2007). Because poor Black mothers are cast in this light, Black motherhood is often viewed as a social problem in and of itself, and consequently, poor Black mothers are seen as less deserving than poor White mothers (Foster 2008). The implications of this common representation of poor Black mothers shows through in welfare policies that attempt to regulate Black women's reproductive and family life – for example, prenatal drug testing, family caps, and incentives for long-term contraception (Franke 2001; Hancock 2004).

Much of the public opinion literature has tended to investigate public support for welfare without carefully considering the race-gender-class nexus. Nor has extant research done much to unpack the concept of “needy families,” including whether the characteristics of mothers shape the extent to which families are judged as worthy of public support (see Foster 2008, for a notable exception). Research on intersectionality points to the need to explore attitudes toward these subgroups. Intersectionality is an analytic approach defined by an emphasis on the “simultaneous and interacting effects” of multiple social categories (Simien and Hancock 2011, 185). Researchers working from this perspective warn that investigating race independently of gender (and other factors like class) often overlooks the ways that racism, sexism, and classism mutually reinforce one another to form an interlocking system of disadvantage (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1989; Hancock 2007). Because there is evidence that intersections between gender, race, and class are politically relevant (Foster 2008), but no consensus on public opinion toward race-gender-class subgroups, further research is needed to better understand public opinion toward social welfare programs.

To address these deficiencies, we conducted an experiment that varied the race and class of working mothers who would benefit from government-provided child care subsidies. Experimentation is increasingly used to study racial attitudes (e.g., Huddy and Feldman 2009), but much of this work has failed to directly engage the intersectionality literature (but see Cassese, Barnes, and Branton 2015; Foster 2008). The experimental design allows us to make “situated comparisons” across subgroups of women based on race and class in a public policy context (Dhamoon 2011, 236).

Our study builds on Gilens’ (1996, 1999) work showing that attitudes toward Blacks play a central role in White opposition to social welfare programs, as well as Hancock (2004) and Foster’s (2008) subsequent arguments about the role of Black mothers specifically in mobilizing opposition to welfare. We employ a similar approach, but we look at a child care subsidy program rather than welfare, as this policy is more expressly linked to motherhood. Our work also differs from both Gilens (1996, 1999) and Foster (2008) in that it explicitly varies class cues, providing a broader sense of how race, gender, and class intersect, rather than focusing exclusively on welfare recipients, which characterizes the program beneficiaries as poor, essentially holding their class characteristics constant. We expect that program support will vary systematically based on the characteristics of mothers who receive the subsidies, with support being the lowest for Black mothers:

*Hypothesis 1:* Support for child care subsidies will vary depending on the race of the mothers who benefit from the policy, such that support will be higher for White mothers and lower for Black mothers.

Moreover, because the racialized public discourse on welfare casts *poor* Blacks as violating core American values and thus as less deserving of public assistance (Hancock 2004), we argue that race cues will be more influential in explaining support for child care subsidies for poor mothers than for middle-class mothers. The combination of race and class cues reflects several different “ethclasses,” each of which represents different stratum in the socioeconomic hierarchy. According to Gilliam and Whitby (1989), the ethclass approach argues that the intersection of race and class results in different subcultures, which are demarcated with different sets of beliefs and values. This may shape how individuals who belong to different ethclasses perceive one another. Thus, the interaction of race

and class may result in individuals viewing the subgroup or ethclass of poor Blacks with less sympathy than middle-class Blacks.

The middle-class label invokes middle-class values – a term that typically references the Protestant work ethic and economic individualism – which are often invoked to justify opposition to race-conscious programs (Federico 2006; Sears and Henry 2003). The middle-class label may also be less likely to evoke class conflict and less likely to depress policy support. Class differences in public opinion often result from the perceptions of class conflict in capitalist economies (Wright 1985), and the middle class is often cast as resentful of having to support programs that only benefit the poor (Skocpol 1992). However, the overwhelming majority of Americans consider themselves to be part of the middle class (Morin and Motel 2012), so the description of the program beneficiaries as explicitly middle-class mitigates opposition to this kind of child care subsidy program. This leads to our second hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2:* Differences in policy support across racial beneficiary groups will be larger among poor mothers compared to middle class mothers.

White Americans' negative attitudes toward Blacks are typically characterized as symbolic racism (Henry and Sears 2002) or racial resentment (Kinder and Sanders 1996), and reflect a tendency to attribute race-based inequality to the characteristics of Blacks as a group rather than attributing it to experiences of systemic discrimination in the nation's social and political institutions. For instance, the idea that Black Americans are stereotypically lazy and need to try harder to work their way out of poverty, places the blame for inequality on the group itself and militates against the characterization of Blacks as "deserving poor." Instead, poverty reflects a moral failing among Blacks and a rejection of core American values, like economic individualism and the Protestant work ethic (Mendelberg 2001; Sears and Henry 2003). These beliefs create a heightened perception of social distance between White and Black Americans, allowing White Americans to detach from feeling in any way implicated in racial inequality (e.g., Hurtado and Stewart 2004).

Work on racial resentment suggests individualism is race-conscious and its relationship to policy preferences is contingent on cues about the racial group targeted by a social program. Perceived violations of individualist values among Blacks is more strongly associated with opposition to welfare programs than perceived violations among Whites, and this difference occurs whether researchers use an individualism measure that is explicitly racialized, as in racial resentment, or race-neutral (Federico 2006). Individualist values are so closely aligned with racial attitudes because news coverage of poverty and welfare programs overuses images of Blacks relative to their representation among the poor and welfare program beneficiaries (Gilens 1999; van Doorn 2015). This association is bolstered by elite discourse about social issues like poverty and crime, which often evokes negative stereotypes of Blacks in contrast to positive individualist values (Mendelberg 2001). These messages are often coded for both race and class, with individualism referred to as a middle-class value, whereas poverty is considered a consequence of rejecting this value. Unsurprisingly, racial resentment is associated with opposition to a range of race-conscious programs including welfare, affirmative action, child care, and student financial aid (Federico 2006; Feldman and Huddy 2005; Kinder and Mendelberg 2000; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Rabinowitz et al. 2009; Sears and Henry 2005).

Based on the racial resentment literature, we expect that the variation we observe in support for subsidies will depend on the underlying racial attitudes held by survey respondents. White Americans who are high in racial resentment and attribute racial inequalities to the characteristics of Blacks as a group, rather than systemic discrimination, will respond more strongly to race and class cues in the question about support for child care subsidies:

*Hypothesis 3:* Racial resentment will decrease support for child care subsidies in the presence of cues about program beneficiaries' race and class.

### Unpacking the gender gap in public opinion

Attitudes about the groups who receive social welfare benefits shape public opinion, but citizens' own social characteristics and group memberships influence their policy attitudes as well. Research on the gender gap in public opinion shows that women generally take more liberal positions on social issues than men (Barnes and Cassese 2017; Huddy, Cassese, and Lizotte 2008). There are small differences between men and women on racial policy issues. Women are about 3–4 percentage points more favorable toward government spending to improve the position of Blacks, school integration, and affirmative action in college admissions, though no differences are found on other racial attitudes, like an endorsement of stereotypes about Blacks (Howell and Day 2000; Hughes and Tuch 2003). There is more variation in gender differences in support for child care, health care, poverty, and homelessness – ranging from 3 to 10 percentage points across specific issue areas – but the presence of a gap is robust over time (e.g., Clark and Clark 1996). This difference raises questions about the intersectional effects of gender and race on public support for programs like child care subsidies.

Common theories about the origins of these gender gaps attribute them to socialization and social roles, which contend that women's shared experiences likely have political consequences that cut across other group memberships and demographic characteristics (Eagly, Wood, and Diekmann 2000; Eagly et al. 2004). For instance, women's "care-giving" orientation is commonly linked to their greater endorsement of social welfare programs aimed at disadvantaged groups (Page and Shapiro 1992), as well as liberal positions on health care, child care, education, and homelessness (Schlesinger and Heldman 2001). These associations between women's traditional social roles and gender gaps on social welfare and other compassion policies account for why such policies are commonly considered "women's issues" (Reingold 2000).

A limitation of the gender gap literature is that it takes an average-difference approach – focusing on how the average American man differs from the average American woman. This approach aggregates across many other known sources of diversity among men and women, contributing to a focus on women's greater liberalism and theories emphasize liberalizing experiences among women (Barnes and Cassese 2017). However, we know that factors like race, class, and religiosity exert significant cross-pressures on women, creating wedges between subgroups of women (e.g., Cassese and Holman 2016). For example, returns from the 2016 presidential contest show the expected gender gap, with women more inclined to vote for Hillary Clinton. Looking just at White women, however, tells a different story – more White women voted for Donald Trump than Hillary Clinton (Junn 2017). This example further illustrates the importance of exploring the intersectional effects of race and gender.

Whereas the gender gap literature might lead us to expect a small but significant gender difference in response to our experimental conditions, with women reporting more favorable attitudes toward child care subsidies compared to men, the intersectionality literature on whiteness suggests a different outcome. Whiteness has been undertheorized as a racial category, due in part to Whites' tendency to view themselves as racially neutral or as "not raced" rather than as explicitly White. Frankenberg (1993) argues this is a functional practice; by identifying as not raced, Whites can evade their role in contemporary racial politics in the United States and avoid a sense of complicity with or responsibility for race-based inequality. Whiteness does play an important role in political thinking, however, as whiteness generates norms and perspectives on social problems that lead to relational thinking about politics – i.e., an "us vs. them" mentality. For instance, Hurtado and Stewart (2004) argue that whiteness "naturalizes" social distance, affording Whites a feeling of material and psychic distance from racial inequality and the difficult circumstances surrounding socio-political disadvantage. This manifests in attitudes and behaviors that reinforce privilege through exclusion and social distancing, including "ideological constructions that defend one's social location" (Wellman 1993, 25).

Whiteness confers an advantage to White women, especially when they are also middle class. This particular gender-race-class intersection can obscure feelings of disadvantage associated with womanhood and mitigate feelings of connection with other women, particularly minority women (Levine-Rasky 2011). Research shows this intersection is relevant in educational contexts. For instance, Levine-Rasky (2009) finds that middle-class mothers engage in exclusionary practices that maintain a social distance from working-class and immigrant parents at their schools. These behaviors are more pronounced when concerns about status loss are salient, as when schools experience demographic changes. This work suggests that middle-class mothers reproduce class-based advantage through strategic investment in schools and relationships with school officials, and that this logic may apply to child care arrangements more generally. The important takeaway from this work is that White, middle-class women "are not passive recipients of their class privilege but actively participate in maintaining it" (Hurtado and Stewart 2004, 320). White women are simultaneously members of dominant and subordinate groups, and this complexity calls into question how social positioning influences their attitudes toward child care subsidies and other social welfare policies. As a result, social distancing practices associated with whiteness and middle classness might show through in White women's policy positions, such that we do not observe more liberal positions among White women relative to White men.

These literatures lead to competing expectations about gender differences in response to the race and class cues provided in the experiment. Based on the gender gap literature, we would expect White women to be more supportive of child care subsidies across conditions due to women's greater average liberalism and tendency to be slightly more supportive of men on policies involving government spending to improve the position of Blacks (e.g., Hughes and Tuch 2003). Alternatively, the literature on whiteness and its intersections with gender and class suggests that White women distance themselves from racial politics (e.g., Frankenberg 1993; Levine-Rasky 2011) and thus may not differ appreciably from White men in their support for child care subsidies across these race-class conditions. As a result, we evaluate the following competing hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 4a:* White women will be generally more supportive of child care subsidies than White men across framing conditions.

*Hypothesis 4b:* White women will report comparable levels of support for child care subsidies to White men across framing conditions.

## Method

We examined support for child care subsidies using an experiment administered in the 2012 CCES to a representative sample of adult Americans (see the Online Appendix for details).<sup>1</sup> The experiment was included in the post-election wave, and 844 respondents from the initial wave were re-interviewed. Our sample was disproportionately White and did not contain a sufficient representation of African Americans ( $n = 74$ ), Hispanics ( $n = 44$ ), or other racial groups ( $n = 63$ ) to afford the statistical power needed to evaluate the effects of the experimental manipulations on these groups across our eight experimental conditions.<sup>2</sup> As a result, we retained only White respondents, for a final sample size of 663.<sup>3</sup> Respondent gender was balanced; 51.36% of respondents were women.

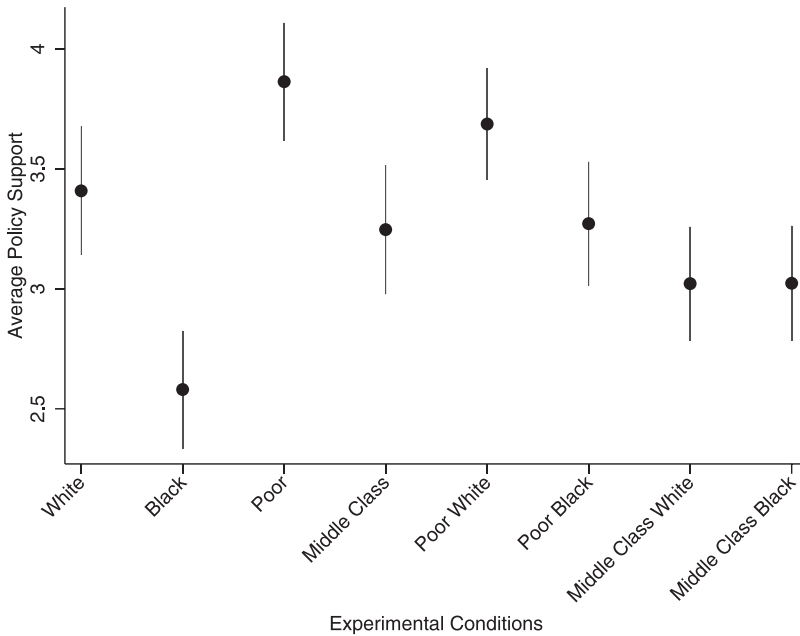
The experiment manipulated the racial and class characteristics of the women who would benefit from a subsidized child care program. Respondents were asked: “To what extent do you favor providing government subsidies for child care to assist \_\_\_\_\_ working mothers?”<sup>4</sup> and randomly assigned to one of the following beneficiary groups: White, Black, poor, middle class, poor White, poor Black, middle-class White, or middle-class Black.<sup>5</sup> Support or opposition to child care subsidies was measured on a 6-point Likert Scale, ranging from strongly support to strongly oppose. Our experimental design replicates Feldman and Huddy’s (2005) college scholarship experiment, which includes the same eight beneficiary groups. We vary program recipient class because class differences between Blacks and Whites may influence whether people perceive them as needy or deserving of assistance.

## Results

### *Average treatment effects*

To evaluate Hypotheses 1 and 2, we compare mean levels of support for child care subsidies across the eight experimental conditions for White respondents. The results are plotted in [Figure 1](#), and difference of means tests are reported in the text below. Conditions are listed across the  $x$ -axis, and the  $y$ -axis represents policy support, with high scores corresponding to higher levels of support for child care policies. Recall that the dependent variable ranges from one to six, signifying that mean responses of three or less indicate that the average respondent opposes child care subsidies while responses above three indicate support. The confidence intervals surrounding the mean values allow us to evaluate whether differences between conditions are significant at the 95% confidence level (Julious 2004). A full list of pairwise comparisons across conditions is available in the Online Appendix, Table A6. Hypothesis 1 states that policy support will vary depending on the race of the mothers who stand to benefit from child care subsidies. Comparing the White and Black mothers conditions, the first and second means plotted in [Figure 1](#), we find support for this hypothesis. On the six-point Likert scale measuring policy





**Figure 1.** Average treatment effects, White respondents.

support, the mean is 3.41 in the White mothers condition and 2.58 in the Black mothers condition [ $F(1, 662) = 10.35, p < .001$ ]. In other words, when the beneficiary is White, respondents, on average, favor subsidies, but oppose them when the beneficiary is Black. This preference for White recipients over Black recipients holds for each pairwise comparison (i.e., White vs. Black; poor White vs. poor Black) except for the middle-class categories (see discussion below).

It is also worth noting that support varies by class when racial cues are absent from the policy question. Support is higher for poor beneficiaries (mean = 3.86) relative to middle-class beneficiaries (mean = 3.24) [comparison of the third and fourth means plotted in Figure 1 [ $F(1, 662) = 5.69, p < .05$ ], ostensibly because perceptions of need are greater. As a matter of fact, being described as poor (compared to the conditions without class cues) increases support for child care subsidies for both Whites and Blacks. Nonetheless, we observe substantial differences in support across class conditions when racial cues are present.

Indeed, consistent with Hypothesis 2 – i.e., differences in policy support across racial beneficiary groups will be larger among poor mothers compared to middle-class mothers – support varies by race when beneficiaries are described as poor but not when beneficiaries are described as middle class. Specifically, support for child care subsidies for poor White mothers (mean = 3.69) is higher than for poor Black mothers (mean = 3.27), though the difference is only marginally significant [comparison of the fifth and sixth means plotted in Figure 1 [ $F(1, 662) = 2.83, p = .09$ ]. The mean is above three in both cases indicating that on average respondents support subsidies for both groups. The contrast between mean policy support in these conditions and the poor mothers condition (absent any racial identification, mean = 3.86) is also instructive. Support for poor mothers is indistinguishable from support for poor White mothers [comparison of the

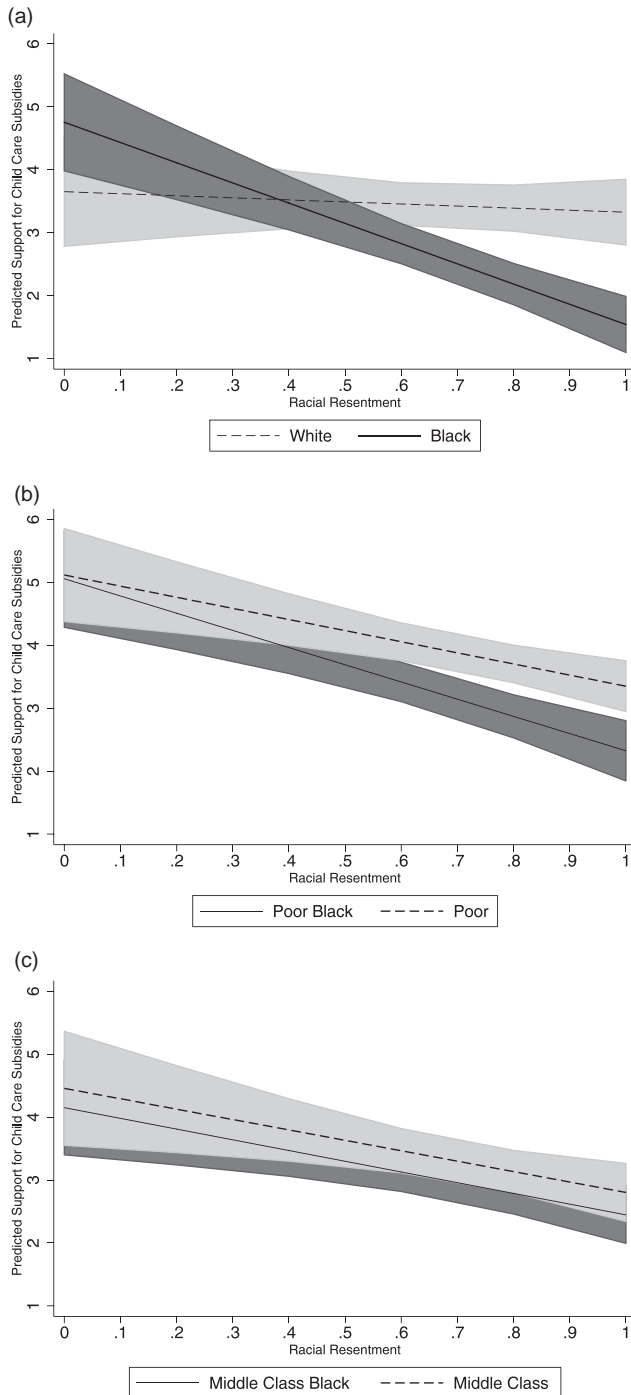
third and fifth mean in [Figure 1](#) [ $F(1, 622) = 0.54$ ], but is significantly higher than support for poor Black mothers [comparison of the third and sixth mean in [Figure 1](#) [ $F(1, 622) = 5.47, p < .05$ ]. Despite this variation in support for poor mothers, attitudes toward subsidized child care for the *middle class do not vary as a function of race*. That is, respondents are no more likely to support child care subsidies when the recipient is described as middle class (with no mention of race, mean = 3.25), White middle class (mean = 3.02), or Black middle class (mean = 3.02) [comparison of the fourth, seventh, and eighth means in [Figure 1](#)].

The overall pattern of results reflected in [Figure 1](#) shows that citizens do use cues about recipient race and class jointly when evaluating social welfare policy. Specifically, poor Black mothers fare worse than poor White mothers and poor mothers who are not racially identified. Nonetheless, respondents are no more or less likely to favor support for subsidies for middle-class Black mothers than subsidies for White middle-class mothers or middle-class mothers who are not racially identified, consistent with the idea that the intersection of race and class, rather than race or class alone, drives policy support.<sup>6</sup> Combined, the evidence presented in [Figure 1](#) lends support for Hypothesis 2.

### Racial resentment and treatment effects

To test Hypothesis 3, we considered whether treatment effects are heterogeneous with respect to racial resentment. We estimated an OLS regression model in which the experimental conditions were indicated by a series of dummy variables and interacted with racial resentment.<sup>7</sup> Consistent with previous research using the CCES data (e.g., Bradberry and Jacobson 2015; Cassese, Barnes, and Branton 2015; Citrin, Levy, and Van Houweling 2014; Tesler 2016), racial resentment was measured with two items from the CCES common content: “Irish, Italians, Jews and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors,” and “Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that made it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class (reversed).” The items were combined and rescaled to range from zero to one (alpha = .76; absolute factor loadings both .70).<sup>8</sup> The model controlled for ideology, measured on a five-point Likert scale, given the complex association between racial resentment and conservatism (Feldman and Huddy 2005; Rabinowitz et al. 2009; Zigerell 2015).<sup>9</sup> The full model for this analysis is presented in Table A3 of the Online Appendix.<sup>10</sup> Again, the analysis is confined to White survey respondents.

Consistent with Hypothesis 3, we find that as racial resentment increases, policy support among White survey respondents declines significantly for Black mothers, poor mothers, and poor Black mothers, but not for White mothers. To illustrate these relationships, we plotted predicted values of policy support for different conditions across the range of racial resentment in [Figure 2](#), along with 95% confidence intervals. [Figure 2\(a\)](#) shows that the relationship between racial resentment and policy support for White mothers is essentially zero – the line is flat. Yet, when race is cued, policy support declines precipitously as racial resentment increases. Specifically, the expected value of supporting government subsidies for child care is 4.75 for individuals on the lowest end of the racial resentment scale, but decreases by 3.21 points to 1.54 for individuals who score the highest on the racial resentment scale. In other words, whereas the average respondent with low



**Figure 2.** Racial resentment moderates treatment effects. (a) White mothers vs. Black mothers, (b) poor Black mothers vs. poor mothers, and (c) middle class Black mothers vs. middle class mothers. Figure 2 plots the expected values (and 95% confidence intervals) of level of support for government subsidies for child care across the range of racial resentment for different treatment conditions in our experiment.

levels of racial resentment favors child care subsidies, respondents with high levels of racial resentment oppose subsidies.

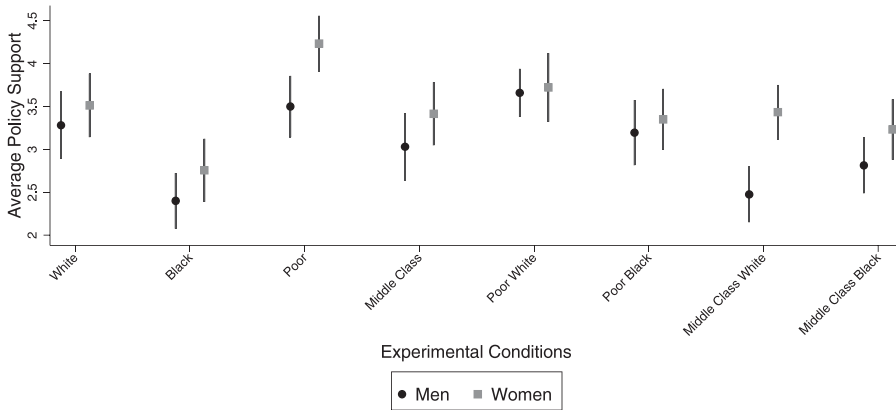
Similarly, [Figure 2\(b\)](#) indicates that an increase in racial resentment is associated with decreasing policy support for both poor mothers and poor Black mothers. While support declines for both conditions across the range of racial resentment, the effect is significantly stronger for the poor Black mothers condition (a 1.77 point decrease for the poor condition compared to a 2.73 point decrease for the poor Black condition) – indicating that the intersection of these two identities drives down policy support more than the class cue alone. This interactive effect was not evident for the middle-class conditions ([Figure 2\(c\)](#)). The relationship between racial resentment and policy support does not differ for middle-class mothers and middle-class Black mothers; significance tests indicate that predicted policy support is indistinguishable for the two conditions at all levels of racial resentment. This is consistent with the idea that racial resentment captures perceptions that Blacks violate middle-class values rather than simply an ideological orientation; when the middle class is specified, there is no difference in policy support based on the race label.

Together, the three figures show that racial resentment decreases support for child care subsidies among White Americans when race and class are cued, but only when poor mothers are the salient beneficiaries. The race cue moderates the relationship between the poor cue and racial resentment, such that policies that benefit poor Black mothers receive significantly less support than policies that benefit poor mothers who are not described in terms of their race. Yet, class cues do not moderate racial cues; instead, support for Black mothers is slightly lower than support for poor Black mothers and support for middle-class mothers does not vary depending on race. In sum, the results thus far illustrate how the race and class of program beneficiaries intersect to shape support for welfare programs designed to benefit women.

### **Respondent gender moderates treatment effects**

In Hypothesis 4a, we posit that women are generally more supportive of child care subsidies regardless of beneficiary characteristics. To evaluate this claim, we compared mean levels of support for child care subsidies across the eight experimental conditions for White men and women. The results are provided in [Figure 3](#). Contrary to expectations based on the gender gap literature, White women do not diverge much from White men in their levels of policy support across the experimental conditions. Notably, the effects of the racial cues are similar to those observed in [Figure 1](#) and cut across men and women. Support in the Black mothers, poor Black mothers, and middle-class Black mothers conditions is comparable, and there is no evidence of a gender gap. These results are consistent with expectations stemming from the whiteness literature in Hypothesis 4b – whiteness, rather than gender seems to drive policy support in response to the experimental conditions.

We do, however, observe significant gender differences in support when experimental conditions cue class. White women are significantly more supportive of child care subsidies for poor mothers than White men are – but only when racial cues are absent [ $F(1, 662) = 4.61, p < .05$ ]. Women's levels of support for poor mothers and poor White mothers are comparable, though the contrast between women's support for poor



**Figure 3.** Treatment effects by respondent gender, White respondents.

mothers and poor Black mothers is significant, with White women expressing less support for policies aimed at Black mothers [ $F(1, 662) = 6.71, p < .01$ ]. There is also a large gender gap in support for subsidies when they aim to benefit middle-class White mothers, with White women reporting significantly higher support than White men [ $F(1, 662) = 8.93, p < .01$ ].

These findings suggest the gender gap in social welfare support may stem from a more self-interested perspective than previously thought. Rather than reflecting a more global concern for women, policy support is greatest among White women primarily when policies stand to benefit other White, middle-class women.<sup>11</sup> Thus, while we do observe gender differences in response to the experimental treatments, they do not conform to the expectation that women are generally more favorable toward child care subsidies simply by virtue of their gender – whiteness and middle classness exert significant cross-pressures that shape policy support in this context.

## Conclusions

This research brings together insights from the public opinion literature on racial attitudes as well as the intersectionality literature, by demonstrating that subgroups of women defined by their race, class, and gender elicit different degrees of public sympathy among White Americans. Consistent with our expectations, we found that support for child care subsidies depends upon the characteristics of the mothers who stand to benefit. Black mothers, in particular, heighten opposition to child care subsidies among White Americans. Our results have important implications for policy outcomes, as they illustrate Hancock (2004) and Foster's (2008) contentions that the social construction of mothers in political rhetoric surrounding welfare policy has consequences for public support. Consistent with their work, our findings imply that negative stereotypes about program recipients have the potential to undermine policy support, particularly among White Americans, thereby altering the trajectory of policy reform.

Our results also have important implications for how racial resentment shapes public opinion. We find that both cues about program recipient race and class activate racial

resentment in White Americans, leading to a decline in policy support. The class cues alone are sufficient to activate racial resentment; policy support declines even in the absence of information about program recipients' race. To the extent that racial resentment shapes support for programs aimed at the poor and middle class more generally, it conveys the effects of conservative values on program support. This result points to a persistent question about the measurement of racial resentment. Racial resentment is closely linked to conservative principles, particularly economic individualism, and researchers have struggled with cleanly parsing race-neutral conservatism from racial animus (Sniderman and Tetlock 1986). Some scholars argue that controlling for conservatism is necessary to accurately estimate the effects of racial resentment on policy attitudes, but are divided on whether the typical self-identification measure is sufficient to purge racial resentment of its ideological content (Federico 2006; Huddy and Feldman 2009; Rabinowitz et al. 2009; Zigerell 2015). Our results further underscore the need to distinguish between race-neutral conservative principals and racial bias. Beyond this, our supplementary analysis also uncovers a moderating effect of ideology on responses to the policy frames, with liberals demonstrating greater responsiveness to the beneficiary characteristics depending on their level of racial resentment (Table A3, Online Appendix). This result is consistent with other research on the relationship between ideology and racial attitudes (e.g., Cassese, Barnes, and Branton 2015; Huddy and Feldman 2009), and also speaks to the need for future research in this area.

Our findings regarding gender differences in response to race and class cues challenge existing research on the gender gap in public opinion. This literature argues that women generally take more liberal positions than men on social welfare issues (Barnes and Cassese 2017; Huddy, Cassese, and Lizotte 2008), and on policies designed to improve the status of women (Barnes and Córdova 2016; Cassese, Barnes, and Branton 2015; Strolovitch 1998) and Black Americans (Hughes and Tuch 2003). Our results qualify these generalizations about women's policy preferences, in that we find considerable variability in support for child care subsidies depending on the type of mother who stands to benefit. White women are significantly more supportive than men of child care subsidies to benefit poor and middle-class mothers; but, their level of support is markedly lower (and essentially indistinguishable from men) when asked about programs to benefit Black mothers generally.

These results are consistent with the intersectionality literature on whiteness and middle classness, which suggests that membership in these categories works against the relative disadvantage associated with womanhood (Hurtado and Stewart 2004). Whiteness and middle classness create a sense of distance from women with other racial and class-based characteristics, mitigating a more inclusive sense of gender identity (Levine-Rasky 2011). These findings suggest that White women define their interests narrowly. This runs contrary to arguments that women are generally socialized into holding compassionate views on social welfare programs. Instead, support seems more targeted and, in some cases, self-interested. For example, we observed a gender gap among Whites in support for child care subsidies aimed at White middle-class women. Such a result is consistent with intersectional arguments about the invisibility of Black women's interests in the public sphere and also historical conflict between White and Black women's political agendas (Hancock 2004).

Future research should unpack how gender and racial identity intersect to shape support for policies designed to benefit women and families, as well as the ways that Black and White women translate their views to political action (e.g., Farris and Holman 2014). Ideally, subsequent research would include representative samples of both White and Black Americans in order to understand how these identities shape opinion across gender and racial groups. Additional scholarship should also consider how these race, gender, and class intersections function across policy areas and across time periods. Our analysis is confined to child care attitudes and it draws heavily on literature about public opinion toward welfare, yet little is known about how these intersections operate in other policy domains, particularly where dominant social constructions of program beneficiaries differ. New research suggests that factors like religiosity (Cassese and Holman 2017) and party (Barnes and Cassese 2017) create important divisions among women across multiple policy areas – a more careful exploration of the relationship between these various identities, the changing salience of policy issues in the political discourse over time, and public opinion should afford a more nuanced understanding of women’s policy preferences and the conditions under which they diverge from men.

Finally, the results of this experiment have important substantive implications for the policy process. Public opinion toward child care and other family policies has rarely been studied, yet child care is one of the biggest expenditures facing American families. In some locations, child care costs outstrip all other family expenditures, including housing. In 33 states and Washington, DC, the cost of care for an infant exceeds the average cost of in-state college tuition at four-year public institutions (EPI 2015). In his 2015 State of the Union Address, President Obama identified affordable child care as a top priority for propping up the nation’s stalling middle class. Yet, we find support for subsidizing child care expenses for middle-class mothers is rather low – hovering around three on a six-point Likert scale – regardless of race. In fact, support is lowest among men evaluating programs for White, middle-class mothers. Perhaps this opposition stems from a commitment to economic individualism and a sense that families should work toward self-reliance. Further research is needed in order to better understand Americans’ perceptions of their own economic self-interest in subsidized child care programs, economic individualism, and views on family-friendly policies in order to understand what, if anything, the public really wants in terms of government assistance. For now, it is clear that how these policies are framed – in terms of which populations of mothers they will serve – has a significant impact on public opinion.

## Notes

1. For information on the CCES, see Vavreck and Rivers (2008).
2. See Table A1 in the Online Appendix for the regional and racial distribution of respondents across treatment conditions. While we restrict our analysis to White respondents, research has explored opinion among other racial groups. For instance, Latinos exhibiting levels of racial prejudice against Blacks equal to that of Whites are more supportive of social welfare programs designed to help Blacks, given their higher levels of support for government intervention generally (Krupnikov and Piston 2016).
3. There are theoretical reasons to expect the treatments effects would be heterogeneous with respect to respondent race. For instance, in-group dynamics, rather than out-group dynamics, would likely govern Black responses to the Black mothers conditions, meaning

that support would be higher in these conditions among Black respondents, but lower among White respondents, to the extent that they hold negative attitudes toward Blacks (Gilliam and Whitby 1989; Sigelman and Welch 1994). Unfortunately, we cannot evaluate these possibilities given the data constraints.

4. We formulated the question to ask about mothers, rather than parents, given the centrality of women as dependents in narratives about social welfare policies (e.g., Abramovitz 1996). In addition, we formulated the question to ask about *working* mothers to establish a clear need for child care. It isn't clear whether people would support child care subsidies for women who don't work, and support for unemployed women has featured prominently in narratives of opposition to welfare (e.g., Hancock 2004). By specifying working mothers we hoped to disambiguate whether the subsidies have any practical value – they are clearly to support women who work.
5. Respondent demographics were reasonably balanced across treatment groups (Online Appendix, Table A1). Further, multinomial logit results, presented in Table A2 show that participant age, gender, ideology, income level, and party identification do not predict group assignment.
6. Respondents are slightly more likely to prefer subsidies for Blacks when we do not specify the class of the Black recipient (the second category in Figure 1) than for middle class when we do not specify the race of the recipient (the fourth category in Figure 1). This is likely because respondents assume the Black recipient is poor.
7. The results are robust to alternative estimation methods. See the Table A5 in the Online Appendix for models estimated via ordered logit and the associated plots (Figure A3 and A4) of predicted values across conditions.
8. Whereas the original racial resentment scale developed by Kinder and Sanders (1996) is constructed using four questions, only two of the original items are included in the CCES common content. The mean level of racial resentment among White respondents is 0.687 with a standard deviation of 0.29. The modal level of racial resentment is a 1. See Figure A2 in the online appendix for a distribution of the racial resentment variable and a discussion of the two-item scale.
9. Additional analyses indicate that our results are robust when controlling for the respondents' employment status, whether the respondent lives in the South, and attitudes about modern sexism. These results are reported in Table A4 of the Online Appendix.
10. We also estimated models separately for liberals and conservatives based on past research indicating the effects of racial resentment vary for liberals and conservatives (Feldman and Huddy 2005; Cassese, Barnes, and Branton 2015). The results are suggestive of this general pattern, with stronger results evident among liberals, but we have limited statistical power given our sample size and cannot draw definitive conclusions (see Tables A4 and A5, Online Appendix).
11. To further explore the self-interest perspective, we compare responses from women who do and do not work full-time. We find that White women employed full time are more likely than women who are not employed full time to support child care subsidies for poor White women. We do not find, however, that working and non-working women respond differently to other treatments. See Figure A5 in the Online Appendix. Results reported in the multivariate regression analysis, moreover, are robust to the inclusion of a variable controlling for the employment status of the respondent. See Table A4 in the Online Appendix.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.



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