

Living in Algorithmic Governance: A Study in the Digital  
Governance of Social Assistance in Ontario

by

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this dissertation is to examine the impact of the digital governance of social assistance in Ontario via a new software program, Social Assistance Management System (SAMS). I wanted to know what it feels like to be governed by a software program. This study was designed to address that question. SAMS represents a hybrid of traditional methods of regimenting welfare assistance and a newer high-tech version. I reveal a critical shift in governance practice with SAMS, as the system governs welfare recipients into a particular mode of productive subjectivity in a manner that eliminates the flexibility that was available in previous systems to address specific needs and situations.

Despite the wealth and depth of research in surveillance studies about the potential impact of data mining, creation of data doubles, loss of privacy, and concerns about algorithms that replicate some of the worst biases about people in poverty, there is an absence of clear empirical research into or evidence of actual programs and how they work. We need a better understanding of the impact of delegated governance and algorithmic culture in the delivery of social services. Scholars posit that algorithms now govern and dictate the flow of information in many important ways, yet this is often not supported by empirical research and rarely involves interviews or focus groups with people from marginalized communities who are caught up in these algorithms, and without the option to opt out.

This dissertation reveals what it feels like to be governed at a distance through a welfare algorithm. To explore this, I interviewed welfare recipients and caseworkers dealing with a software program that has removed much of their professional autonomy and discretion.

Drawing from these in-depth interviews, including interviews with two software

programmers who offered insight into algorithmic control of software systems, I reveal how a software program works to construct the ‘ideal’ welfare recipient, a position from which the applicants I interviewed are structurally excluded. As this dissertation demonstrates, welfare recipients have developed techniques to resist this digitalized system through networks of support. Additionally, caseworkers have created ‘unofficial’ methods to bypass SAMS rigid regulations when they believe it is not flexible enough and often informally share these methods with each other.

At its foundation, SAMS removes the last of the discretion that was available to caseworkers to find appropriate solutions for specific welfare recipients. While welfare recipients appreciate reduced contact with their caseworkers and fewer home visits, the overall system operates according to a binary of yes/no and is a system designed primarily to reward the performance of employability even when employment is not a viable option for the individual. No longer is the welfare system designed to help those in need, because they are in need. And the dissertation tells the stories of some of the people trying to get by in this algorithm-driven system.

## Acknowledgements

Throughout the writing of this dissertation, I have received a great deal of support and assistance. First, I would like to thank my supervisor, Sheryl Hamilton, whose insightful feedback considerably shaped the direction and outcome of this project. Sheryl pushed me to sharpen my thinking and brought my work to a much higher level than would have been possible without her patient attention and support. Second, I'm extremely grateful to my readers, Josh Greenberg and Irena Knezevic, for their thoughtful reflections and suggestions. I still recall those meetings with you, Josh, very early in the project, when you shared ideas about making my work as impactful as possible. Finally, I cannot begin to express my deepest gratitude to Irena for her generous counsel throughout this long process. Additionally, Irena, your friendship has made the journey so much richer in every way.

Thanks to their endless support and guidance throughout the application process, I owe an additional debt of gratitude to Sheryl and Irena for their enormous contribution to the success of my application for a Vanier Scholarship. Thank you to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of Carleton University for a Carleton Graduate Scholarship. Also, thank you to Daniel Paré and Therese Jennissen, who were external and internal reviewers, for my defense. Your thoughtful questions and insightful feedback are much appreciated.

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Thank you for your trust.

Finally, there are two key people I need to thank for their role in my education and to acknowledge the enormous debt I owe to both of them, a debt I know I will never be able to repay.

Merlyna Lim was one of the first people I met when I arrived at Carleton. Although I had already been reading her work for years, it felt like meeting a celebrity the first time we talked. I still recall how shy and awkward I felt, hoping she wouldn't think I was dumb or weird. As I quickly learned, however, Merlyna is not only a brilliant academic, researcher, and writer; she's also incredibly generous and shockingly funny. My class with her during my first semester at Carleton remains my favourite class of all time. Who knew a professor could make you laugh out loud in every class in grad school? Thank you, Merlyna, for also allowing me the privilege to be involved with ALiGN, the digital media lab at Carleton. I've learned so much from the extraordinary opportunities the lab has afforded me, but the most important things I have learned have all come from you.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my mom, Eileen Dobson. My mother always stood up for anyone she believed had been pushed to the side, lacked a voice, or simply needed a friend to stand next to them. As children, my five sisters and I often resented how generous our mother would be with her time, and limited cash with anyone she believed needed it 'more' than we did. "You girls have each other!" my mother would say as if our sisterly love should be enough to diminish our hunger pangs or help us deal with an environment that frequently felt unsafe. We

often felt embarrassed by our mother's antics, wishing she would stop fighting with, what seemed at the time, *everybody*. The school board, the welfare office, the Mayor of Montréal and his staff, and the police. I'm not proud of this, but it would take decades for me to recognize all my mother had been trying to achieve. Today, I marvel that somehow, despite her own harsh and often violent childhood, my mother knew that unless you care about and are willing to fight for those even more vulnerable and desperate than you are, then the world isn't right yet for *anyone*. And she was right, of course, about the special gift shared between her daughters. The bond between my sisters and me gave us the courage and strength to make it through our own, often challenging childhoods and gave us the gift of hope for a better future. Thanks to my mother's loud and relentless voice, and her endless courage, I find myself in this shocking position of having completed a dissertation.

Special thanks to my sister Nora for always being on my side, willing to listen and cheer me on, no matter how dark or hopeless some days seemed to be. I love you.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In the late 1960s and early 70s, growing up in an industrial slum of Montréal, my five sisters and I learned to dread that sharp knock on our apartment door. It usually meant an unexpected visit from our city caseworker, coming to make sure that our dad wasn't secretly visiting our mom. We all knew what was at stake: if a man – *any man* – were ever caught in the apartment, our mother would immediately lose her welfare check and be charged with fraud. Maybe even dragged off to jail.

We lived in constant fear of that knock on the door.

Today's single parent on social assistance faces a different kind of threat. Instead of fearing that knock on the door, they might not even know the door is being knocked on. State governance is rendered almost invisible and undetected via high-tech software. In Ontario, this software, Social Assistance Management System (SAMS), was developed by Curam Case Management System, a private company (now owned by IBM) in partnership with the provincial government. It claims to increase efficiencies for those who receive social assistance and the caseworkers who manage it while providing tighter management and distribution of welfare benefits. It also means those who receive social assistance have less human contact with caseworkers. As this study demonstrates, this reduced contact has had positive and negative consequences for those who receive social assistance in Ontario and their caseworkers. The research shows a significant shift in governance practice with this software as the system is there to govern recipients of social assistance into a particular mode of productive subjectivity.

Automated digital surveillance is the new normal for those who receive social assistance. This raises a central question, and one that occupies the focus of this dissertation: how does it feel to be governed at a distance by a software program? Drawing on Sheryl Hamilton's (2009) study of identity doubles in Canada, the concern here is that "embodied offline, non-digital identities are becoming secondary to our recognition as social subjects" (pp. 117-118). In other words, surveillance technologies are changing our understanding and definition of what constitutes a 'person.'

As the child of a "welfare mom"<sup>1</sup> and as a former social worker, I am intimately familiar with what it feels like to work and live with the pre-digital social assistance apparatus. My lived experience with poverty, welfare, combined with my training as a social worker and my journalistic career drawing attention to the inequities in Canadian society, uniquely qualified me for this study. I believe participants, both welfare recipients and case workers, felt more comfortable with me because of this experience. As well, I was able to better empathize with my research subjects, and produce a text that validates rather than implicitly judges my participants. Finally, my experience allowed me to be aware of, and check, my class bias as someone who now lives within the middle class.

While critical scholars would argue that SAMS has an oppressive orientation in the abstract (Eubanks, 2018; van Zoonen, 2020), I wanted to know what it feels like to live under

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<sup>1</sup> **Terminology:** Throughout this dissertation, I use the words 'welfare' and 'welfare recipient' because it locates the terms historically and does not white-wash how it is understood. I also use the words 'participant' and 'social assistance' when it would possibly be otherwise confusing.

and work within the new governance structure of SAMS. This study was designed to address that question.

Regarding SAMS, I am making a three-part argument. First, that a software program is not only governing and disciplining those on social assistance at a distance, but it is also creating the 'ideal' welfare recipient; second, that both welfare recipients and caseworkers have found ways to resist this digitalized system through small and large networks of support; and, third, that even in this digital brave new world of "welfare," 'home' is contested ground, as it is not only a site of moral regulation, social class, and a place of benevolent surveillance but also a site of performance for those who receive social assistance. As my project demonstrates, welfare recipients usually know precisely what 'home' is supposed to 'look' like, and demonstrate a form of autonomy when they 'perform' that ideal during home visits from social workers.

### **Background on SAMS: How the War on Poverty Became a War on the Poor**

Ontario has seen the continuous deterioration of social assistance benefits over the past twenty-five years with a system now focused on governing the 'poor.' Governments have reduced welfare rates, increased surveillance, and now welfare recipients are forced to go to work or suffer the consequences if they do not. Governments in Canada now focus more on finding ways to reduce the number of people on social assistance than looking for solutions to the problem of poverty. Perhaps this focus on reducing welfare rolls should come as no surprise. After all, almost a million people in Ontario now rely on welfare benefits for basic survival (Ministry of Social Services, 2021). At the cost of nearly nine-and-a-half billion dollars in 2018-2019, social assistance represents close to six percent of the provincial budget. After health and education, it is the province's third-largest social investment (Public Accounts of Ontario, 2018-19). In

addition, the average length of time a recipient relies on Ontario Works has doubled from one and a half to three years over the past decade (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2018). Yet, social assistance in Ontario has become a less reliable safety net. As a result of policy changes, social assistance to Ontarians went from almost nine-and-a-half percent receiving welfare in 1997 to 6.7% in 2017.

An intense shift to a technology-oriented system started with the Service Delivery Model Technology (SDMT) software program, introduced in 2002, along with the Consolidated Verification Process (CVP). The Ontario Progressive Conservative Party touted the CVP technology as an approach that would make welfare bureaucracies more efficient, accountable, faster, and ultimately save taxpayers money by using "technology solutions to modernize delivery programs" (Daniels and Ewart, 2002, p. 26). The CVP, in partnership with the SDMT, would verify a welfare recipient's ongoing eligibility by automatically checking all data entered into the SDMT digital file of each applicant concerning income, assets, Canadian citizenship status, shelter costs, proof of all family members' identity, and date of birth. The CVP, which is still in use today, draws on other databases, including the Ministry of Transportation and Employment Insurance, to verify all information submitted by applicants for social assistance. This technology empowered the welfare office to widen the scope of monitoring recipients in a way that was not possible under older methods that relied only on caseworkers and their files.

The SDMT<sup>2</sup> was the information technology network that supported social assistance delivery for Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). Used for

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<sup>2</sup> Developed and custom-built by Accenture Canada, like SAMS, SDMT was also the result of a corporate partnership between the government and a private company.

case management by data-mining the information supplied from the CVP, SDMT was the electronic version of the recipient's case file with the welfare office. By 2009, however, the introduction of welfare surveillance technologies via SDMT faced some harsh criticism. For example, the Auditor's Report in 2009 reported that although the Ministry considered Ontario Works financial assistance a temporary measure, about one-third of the recipients they audited had been receiving social assistance for longer than two years, and thirteen percent had received this support for more than five years. The report also expressed concern about caseworkers relying on applicants to provide the information used to base decisions around eligibility for social assistance. Also, many recipients were not submitting the required monthly reports indicating whether their financial or living situation had changed in any way. Other examples of concern over a lack of accountability and verification in the report included:

We found little evidence in recipient files to indicate that the service manager caseworkers were involved in determining the most appropriate employment assistance activity, and there is no standard requirement to document this process. Rather, recipients usually selected the activity they felt was best suited to get them back into the workplace (p. 257).

The Auditor's report also expressed concern that most welfare offices were not consistently following the Ministry's directives regarding third-party information-sharing agreements. These agreements, with other agencies, included accessing information from the Canada Revenue Agency for tax return information, with Equifax for credit information, and with the Ontario Ministry of Transportation for any vehicle ownership information.

The Ministry's response to the Auditor's criticisms and recommendations included an agreement that all welfare recipients should undergo a review of their file at least every three months. Also, the Ministry said it would review its "policy guidelines related to job-search requirements to ensure that participation agreements are developed or updated appropriately" (p.

268). The Ministry also noted that the SDMT system allowed manual entry into individual files by caseworkers in order, for example, to make any necessary changes to avoid overpayments or underpayments. Many concerns in the report were raised around the "lack of evidence" that the Ministry was promising "a mix of employment activities to ensure" those on social assistance were seeking work (p. 271). The Ministry's response introduced an outcomes-based funding model for OW recipients, requiring individual welfare offices to "establish performance targets and measure client outcomes" (p. 272). The Auditor's report acknowledged that there could be multiple challenges to evaluating "effectiveness in achieving the primary objective of the program – to move Ontario Works recipients to paid employment and self-reliance – because many factors not related to the program can influence the number leaving it" (p. 272).

Some of these 'factors' listed in the report included that conditions in the economy can "greatly influence the creation or loss of the types of jobs Ontario Works recipients are most likely to qualify for," and also, "the commitment and personal initiative of Ontario Works recipients to find paid employment" (p. 272). In addition, the Ministry said it was reviewing its "current business processes for potential refinements and opportunities for improvement from the perspective of technology modernization" (p. 269). Five years later, those "refinements" and promises of "improvement" and "technology modernization" would lead to the creation and release of the Social Assistance Management System (SAMS).

A new provincial computer software system intended to replace its predecessor, SDMT, SAMS was launched in November 2014 and is the latest high-tech software program for welfare governance in Ontario. Gathering and storing enormous amounts of personal data about its users enables the software to use predictive analytics about who, for example, is most likely to be more - or - less inclined to seek employment. The overall effect of the consolidation of the shift to

employability being the ideal subjectivity is that the software program then places recipients into categories of 'productive' and 'non-productive,' as the system creates the 'ideal' welfare recipient around those willing and able to seek employment and those who do not. Unfortunately, the glitch-ridden software program has already cost millions of dollars over the initial budget, issued checks to the wrong people and in the wrong amounts, removed welfare recipients off the government's payment schedule, and continues to frustrate caseworkers.<sup>3</sup>

In 2009, the Ministry of Community and Social Services identified numerous concerns with the older system. These concerns included a lack of "adequate controls against fraud," that it was not adequately tracking whether OW recipients were seeking employment, and that caseworkers were not following directives around verifying income claims made by applicants for social assistance. As a result, Curam was awarded a \$202.3 million contract by the Government of Ontario to develop SAMS (Auditor-General, p. 473). The Ministry decided it would be more cost-effective to replace the previous system with one that could be purchased 'off-the-shelf,' then customized after purchase to meet the Ministry's specific needs. After the digital software program was purchased from Curam by the Ministry, another private high-technology company, IBM Corporation, bought Curam and was then awarded a contract by the Ministry to convert two years of client data from the older social services system and transfer it into SAMS. The Ministry also purchased servers to store data and central processing units to process the data, from IBM Corporation, for interfaces and connections with other computer systems across multiple platforms. As with its predecessor, SAMS supports social assistance delivery for both OW and ODSP. The launch date for SAMS was changed several times because

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<sup>3</sup> From the Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services website:  
<https://www.mcss.gov.on.ca/en/mcss/news/backgrounders/2015/20150501.aspx>

of concern over its readiness. As noted in the Ministry's report on SAMS (Auditor General, 2015), "This risk was especially worrisome in the case of SAMS because that havoc would affect the lives of over 900,000 of the most vulnerable members of society" (p. 475).

### **SAMS as Delegated Governance**

SAMS was supposed to make Ontario's social assistance program more efficient, more accountable and save the province millions of dollars through these increased efficiencies. ODSP is intended for people with serious financial needs and a mental or physical disability. OW, designed as a last resort measure for those living with extreme poverty who are forced to seek governmental help, is framed as a 'back to work' program. This is true whether actual jobs are available or not, and it is not intended to be a long-term solution to poverty in the province. Social assistance under OW comes with over 800 rules regarding eligibility and what recipients need to do to keep receiving payments (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.) Namely, successful applicants are forced to apply for jobs and/or training and continuously provide evidence of this regular search for work, however some research shows that work requirements do not eliminate poverty (Pavetti, 2016). This suggests that despite evidence that searching for work as a condition in exchange for government assistance does not address poverty (Hahn, 2018; Pavettit, 2016), OW participants are forced to undergo training for jobs that often do not exist. "Helping people find jobs and maintain self-sufficiency is more challenging than simply requiring them to do so" (Hanh, 2018, p. 1).

Private industry high-technology company partners post on their websites about governments being under pressure to reduce spending and boast about their software being able to "proactively prevent fraud, waste and abuse" by using algorithms that "uncover suspicious

behavior and stop fraudulent" behavior before it even happens (Heath & Smith, 2012, p. 1). In *The Surveillant Assemblage*, Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson (2000) explain how digital surveillance has led to the production of 'data doubles,' which are not simply online versions or representations of people, but rather digital stand-ins that give access to "resources, services, and power in ways which are often unknown to its referent" and are "also increasingly the objects toward which governmental and marketing practices are directed" (p. 613). These partnerships mean the private sector now has the approval of the government to create data doubles of anyone who uses social services to track and monitor them across multiple platforms. Data is gathered, coordinated, and analysed to gain insights into the lives of those receiving social assistance. Some critics of the government's use of the private sector to deliver social assistance have referred to this as 'delegated governance,' meaning, the government is downloading its responsibility for its citizens, including some of its most vulnerable, to private sector (Gollust & Jacobson, 2006; Stevenson, 2003). Although social assistance programs in Canada vary from province to province, almost half of all Canadians who receive social assistance live in Ontario, which means Ontario has the highest social assistance rate in Canada. However, as one of the provinces with the highest populations in the country, with nearly forty percent of Canadians living in Ontario, perhaps this number is not surprising. Yet, it does highlight the fact that SAMS, a privately-owned software program, now governs an enormous percentage of one of Canada's most vulnerable populations: the poor.

Ontario's November 2019 unemployment rate of 5.6 percent was one of the lowest in years. However, poverty rates remain high, with one in seven Ontarians living below the poverty line. According to the government's most recent annual poverty report (Ministry of Ontario, 2018), 15.4 percent (410,000) of Ontario children live in poverty, more than five percent

(74,000) households with children live in *deep* poverty and spend more than forty percent of their monthly income on housing. Almost eleven percent of youth (ages fifteen to twenty-nine), or over 300,000 young people, are not working, not in school, and not in any training program. Nearly 60,000 Ontarians between twenty-five and sixty-four face long-term unemployment, and the poverty rate for those with disabilities is almost twenty percent.

This means one of the primary goals of SAMS – to cut welfare rolls – does not address or acknowledge the reality of the changing nature of work in Ontario, especially for those who are unskilled, uneducated, and in most cases, will be forced into low paying and precarious jobs. If all 900,000 plus people currently on welfare in Ontario were to suddenly look for 'work,' willing to do *any* job, most of them still would not find employment since there are currently approximately 174,800 jobs available in the province (CFIB, 2019)<sup>4</sup>. In other words, simply reducing the number of people receiving social assistance does not reduce actual poverty, even if those falling numbers *appear* to be evidence of poverty reduction to the general public. Furthermore, those who receive social assistance may face multiple barriers beyond the efficacy of skills training, including access to affordable and stable housing, preventing them from obtaining employment. The Ontario government's latest experiment with welfare reform, both with SAMS and the recent pilot study to increase privatization of social services in the province (Ontario Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development, 2020), has been tried before in the United Kingdom and Australia, with disastrous results (Katz et al., 2018). In both countries, privatized welfare systems failed because those companies operating them, both for-profit and non-profit organizations, were offered incentives to move clients as quickly off of welfare as

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<sup>4</sup> I am deliberately using pre-Covid data because we still do not know what the long-term economic impact of the pandemic will be.

possible. Although the Ontario government has yet to release many details of this new endeavour, SAMS provides insight into some of the issues around the state, forming partnerships with private industry when it comes to governing and deciding who is eligible for social services in Ontario.

Research suggests that when the government outsources private companies to deliver public services, inequality worsens, weakening social infrastructure and poor quality of services (Chen, 2014; Greenwood, 2014). For example, when the Ministry of Community and Social Services first deployed SAMS, it caused such havoc in the system, some welfare recipients ended up evicted from their apartments after late welfare payments led to them being unable to pay their rents (Ontario Public Services, 2015).

In 1966, the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) was created by the liberal government of Lester B. Pearson. The program, a cost-sharing arrangement between the federal government, provinces, and territories, meant the federal government would partially fund certain social programs. In 1995 the federal budget combined the Canada Assistance Plan and the Established Programs Financing, creating the Canada Health and Social Transfer. Starting in the mid-1990s under the Progressive Conservative government of Premier Mike Harris in Ontario, welfare incomes began steadily eroding. As a result, social assistance rates were slashed by 21.6 percent, OW was introduced,<sup>5</sup> and eligibility for welfare assistance became significantly more inflexible, resulting in some of the most significant changes to Canadian social policy in decades (Brodie,

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<sup>5</sup> 'Ontario Works,' sometimes referred to as 'Workfare', is a program that requires able-bodied welfare recipients to participate in either training or job placements.

1996; Kennedy, 2020). These policy changes laid the groundwork for digital welfare surveillance that resulted in today's OW, CVP,<sup>6</sup> and SAMS.

Despite the reality that OW benefits barely meet basic human needs, historically, welfare recipients have been subject to all kinds of invasive scrutiny into their personal and financial affairs, both when applying for benefits and throughout their dependence on social assistance programs. For example, the maximum assistance from OW for a single person,<sup>7</sup> regardless of where one lives in the province, is seven hundred and sixty-four dollars per month (Ontario Social Assistance, 2021). In addition, a single parent with one child is allowed a maximum of one thousand, seven hundred and ten dollars a month from all social assistance sources (Ontario Social Assistance, 2021). Both of these scenarios fall well below the Market Basket Measure, which is a measure of low income based on the cost of a list of 'basket of goods' and services, including costs of food, clothing, housing, and transportation, representing a basic standard of living.<sup>8</sup>

However, what is different today is that as our lives become increasingly digitalized, the surveillance and governance of people on social assistance have become more high-tech. Although 'snitch' lines still exist in Ontario, where suspicious neighbours call in and anonymously report on what they consider to be a case of welfare' fraud,' welfare recipients are now also governed at a distance through software programs intended to sort and classify everyone as an ideal system subject, or not. An extra level of electronic scrutiny can be triggered

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<sup>6</sup> CVP is a computerized case file review program used to verify ongoing eligibility for social assistance in Ontario.

<sup>7</sup> This includes the GST rebate and Ontario Trillium benefit for those living on low-incomes.

<sup>8</sup> The MBM was designed by Federal, provincial and Territorial officials and are supposed to reflect the median costs.

by a change in relationship, going back to school, or even a change of residence (Lightman et al., 2008).

The state is spending enormous resources on these programs, which collect, share, and retain user information from other government agencies, including the Ministry of Transportation, Ministry of Health, and Employment Insurance (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2020). Yet despite these partnerships between government and private industry to develop programs designed to monitor, discipline, govern, and flag welfare 'cheats,' estimates place actual welfare fraud rates in Canada at less than three percent (Maki, 2011; Mosher and Hermer, 2005; Mirchandani and Chan, 2007). This suggests that welfare policy is being shaped and informed in part by the widespread belief that, those on social assistance often need to be forced into the workforce.

### **What does it feel like to be governed at a distance?**

In this project, I want to bring to light what it feels like to be governed through a welfare algorithm. To answer this question, I interviewed twenty people on social assistance. I also interviewed and included the experiences of five caseworkers, those who work in the social welfare system responsible for implementing SAMS with applicants for social assistance in Ontario. Frontline caseworkers are now dealing with a software program that has removed much of their professional autonomy and discretion. Finally, I also include the interviews with two computer software coders who offered insight and background into programming and algorithmic control of software systems. In addition to interviews, and an analysis of government and policy documents, as I will discuss more in the methodology chapter, I also conducted an

audit of the data analysis process through open-coding using traditional tools and methods, and the digital software NVivo for analysis.

## **Outline of Dissertation**

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This chapter provides a brief historical background on poverty and social assistance in Ontario. I also provide an overview of how SAMS, including how and why it was implemented in the province, some of the major issues around its governance of those who receive social assistance, and also discuss its software predecessor, SDMT. I also describe how, in this project, I explore the question of how does it feel to be governed through a welfare algorithm.

### **Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

In this chapter I consider changes in the Welfare State, transformed under neoliberal economic policies, which has meant a major shift towards those who live with poverty. This chapter also considers how information technologies, as part of neoliberal efficiencies, although often viewed as neutral and even benign, actually shape policy development and implementation in numerous ways. As I discuss, there is a consensus in the literature that “new networked technologies are likely to introduce, enhance and extend network forms of governing” (Henman, 2005, p. 80), and this is where surveillance intersects with welfare governance. The chapter outlines the four bodies of scholarly literature I position this dissertation in relation to, and explains how each chapter is individually theorized in connection to the themes in the questions.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter describes and analyses the approach I used for the recruitment and selection process for the participants I interviewed, a detailed explanation of the data collection, and a discussion of my analysis techniques. The interview process consisted of semi-structured interviews with three groups of participants, involving a series of open-ended questions. These three groups consisted of twenty welfare recipients, five caseworkers, and for background information, two software coders. Data sources include interviews, field notes and memos, research literature, and policy documents. I conducted an audit of the data analysis process through open-coding using traditional tools such as different coloured highlighter markers, sticky notes, and the digital software NVivo for analysis.

#### **Chapter 4: Small and Large Networks of Support: Acts of Everyday Resistance**

##### **Autonomy/Resistance/Automation**

During interviews with the participants on social assistance, it became clear that most, if not all of them, have developed ways to resist the system and work around some of the governance. For example, they have learned how to work around the system in numerous ways to make their lives a bit easier, including ways to provide 'proof' that they have been looking for a job. They share some of these creative workarounds with each other as well. My data analysis revealed examples of autonomy that I had not recognized before the interviews. As this chapter shares, people on social assistance have ways of resisting. Resistance and autonomy are also huge themes with the caseworkers who have also found workarounds to use discretionary powers, something SAMS has largely eliminated, forcing caseworkers to follow most of the steps and rules associated with the software and closing most loopholes. For example, caseworkers need to follow a prescribed series of actions when someone applies for welfare. They are not usually 'allowed' or permitted

to deviate from the software program's rigid steps. However, caseworkers have discovered ways around the system when they think it is not flexible enough.

### **Chapter 5: 'Home' as a Site of Moral Regulation, Performance, and Contested Ground**

In this chapter, after explaining the Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services regulations that allow for home visits, I discuss how home visits are an example of what Andrew Pithouse (1987) calls an "invisible trade." Pithouse explains home visits as something that happens behind closed doors, in the most private and intimate spaces of family life, between social workers and those on social assistance. I also explore the concept and importance of 'home,' constructed through my participants' narratives. For example, participants on social assistance often talk about home in a way that suggests home as a site of sanctuary and privacy; despite their awareness, it is a porous site of vulnerability. Therefore, I argue, the performance of home by those who receive social assistance when a social worker makes a home visit is a form of agency. They know what home is supposed to look like and know exactly what to do. This idea about performing the 'ideal' home conflicts with the social workers' view, who, as my interviews revealed, see the home as a site of 'truth,' a place which they believe, offers them the ability to see things that words or misrepresentations cannot hide. The chapter also presents a frame of conflicting visions of home and the resiliency of the material site of home, even in the digital administration of social assistance.

### **Chapter 6: Digital Ghost in the Machine: SAMS' 'Ideal' Welfare Recipient**

It used to be humans – for better or worse – who were making the decisions around social assistance and making exceptions when necessary about eligibility and in the actual physical

presence of the clients. Now it is a software system making decisions. Humans are increasingly on the periphery as we are headed towards a completely automated system, using algorithms to create digital doubles and make decisions (based on those digital doubles) at a distance. The same rules of the system force people to regularly prove that they are applying for jobs frequently or face having their welfare payments reduced or, quite possibly, even cut off completely. As explored more in a future chapter, prior to SAMS, welfare recipients could discuss their unique circumstances with their caseworkers to explain why they had not searched or applied for work that month. For example, if their child was sick, or they were unable to find a job within a reasonable distance of their home, or during hours that they were during school hours, caseworkers could add individualized comments to note exceptions. Today, however, the system assumes a welfare recipient is non-disabled (or they would be on ODS and not OW) and, therefore, need to get a job and off of social assistance as quickly as possible. The system also assumes there are jobs for the clients to apply for and obtain. So, how is the 'ideal' welfare recipient created by this new way of delivering social services? The assumptions built into the algorithms means the system has a set of strict parameters for each client that places them into categories. This chapter argues that the system is there to govern recipients into a particular mode of the productive subject, creating the ideal welfare recipient through a disciplinary mechanism, and discusses how this ideal system subject is created and what that actually looks like. I also argue in this chapter that an unexpected consequence for those on social assistance is them feeling empowered by SAMS. This results from fewer home visits and in-person meetings at the welfare office, as more and more of the application and monitoring process has become automated by SAMS and moved online.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

In this chapter I review my central arguments, including that SAMS is a hybrid system, one that is partly, but not fully, automated. For example, welfare recipients are still subjected, though less frequently, to home visits and they also still need to complete their applications for social assistance in person at the welfare office. In this chapter I also reveal how although there is continuity with some past modes of resistance, there are new ways both caseworkers and welfare recipients resist the governance of SAMS. Further, I argue that welfare policy is being shaped by the widespread belief that welfare recipients need to be forced into the workforce. I also argue that SAMS can be empowering to those on social assistance, and then end the chapter with a look ahead to possible future work.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

The neoliberal state, as defined by David Harvey (2005), involves expanding the reach and power of market transactions through "deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision," (p.3) while at the same time using the power of the state to advance these market-driven goals. This definition of the neoliberal state speaks directly to the heart of my project - how does it feel to be governed by a software program?

I position this dissertation in relation to four bodies of scholarly literature. First, scholarship exploring the rise and fall of the welfare state; second, the role of digital governance; third, surveillance; and fourth, work exploring the power dynamics of algorithmic culture and predictive profiling. Starting with a historical overview of the changes in the welfare state, then the role of digital governance in the digital welfare state, followed by an examination of the relationships between welfare surveillance on the one hand, and social division and power disparities on the other, I conclude with a consideration of the social sorting associated with algorithms and predictive profiling that leads to people being placed into categories under the assumption that people can be put into categories which can predict future actions.

### **Changes in the Welfare State**

Canada's transformation under neoliberal economic policy has meant significant changes in definitions and conceptions about poverty, attitudes towards those who live in poverty, and our 'welfare state.' The welfare state in Canada first appeared during the Second World War, after the government recognized that social services could play a crucial role in helping to address the recession and stimulate the economy by encouraging spending and consumption (Durst, 2007). Between the 1940s and 1960s, government policy shifted to provide social services and protect

citizens' social and economic well-being, which had previously been mostly left to religious charities and other private organizations. In 1946, Canada created the Family Allowance; a universal and federal old-age pension in 1951; the Canada Assistance Plan in 1966; the country's national health care program in 1968; and by the mid-70s, with unemployment insurance and benefits to persons with disabilities, maternity leave, and social assistance programs expanding to address child welfare, Canada had a solid safety net in place (Canadian Public Health, 2022; Hoynes & Stabile, 2019; Moscovitch, 2015; Moscovitch & Albert, 1987).

However, starting in the 1980s, while some programs expanded and new ones were introduced, many were phased out or rolled back, as policy changed to focus on priorities such as reducing deficits, cutting back rather than creating and continuing social safety nets designed to address poverty. Neoliberal state policies across the country transformed the welfare state dramatically during the regime of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney in Canada in the 1980s, continuing in Ontario under the leadership of Premier Mike Harris in the 1990s to 2002 (Milligan & Stabile, 2007; Tweddle et al. (2014).

Instead of addressing poverty issues through social programs, the shift from Keynesian to neoliberal governance in the 1980s emphasized policies "aimed at the labour market supply in direct response to labour need." However, full-time employment does not guarantee an escape from poverty (MacKinnon, 2013, p. 22). In fact, before the 2008 Financial Crisis, Canada's employment rates were at an all-time high and unemployment rates at near historic lows (LaRochelle-Coté and Gilmore, 2009). However, today more Canadians are now engaged in low-paying, often precarious employment, and many will experience some form of unemployment at some point in their working lives (Thomas and Tufts, 2016). This shift in logic with the social safety net entailed "austerity programs adopted by neoliberal governments to

reduce public services, impose public sector wage restraints, and reorganize public sector working conditions and labour relations" (Thomas and Tufts, 2015, p. 212). This included the scapegoating of unionized workers "and their unions in order to legitimize and popularize an austerity-influenced political agenda" (Thomas and Tufts, 2015, p. 213).<sup>9</sup>

When concentrated social welfare devolution started in Canada in the mid-1990s, it meant each province could re-establish its own rules about who could and should benefit from poverty reduction programs, including eligibility for social assistance programs. This was based on the claim that each province knows its community best and understands its needs better than a federal government. As a result, the federal government's role in Canada's social welfare programs became reduced to simple provincial transfers (Boismenu & Graefe, 2004). Previously, each province had significant jurisdiction to make its own rules, including critical decisions about national standards such as those prohibiting workfare and other important policies aimed at reducing stigmatization (Banting, 2005; Banting, 1997; Boismenu & Graefe, 2004; McBride & McNutt, 2007; McIntosh, 2004). As a result of the federal government's retreat from its traditional leadership role in social policy, the provincial governments exercised increasing policy discretion (Boismenu & Graefe, 2004). The federal devolution of responsibility for social policy impacted the Canadian welfare state so significantly, McBride and McNutt (2007) posit it created "opportunities for some provinces to adopt American social policy ideas" (p. 177). Although devolution led to more responsive social policy in some provinces, for example like

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<sup>9</sup> This was written prior to Covid-19. Undoubtedly, Covid-19 has had an impact on the support of those who are unemployed and in need of financial assistance. For example, the introduction of CERB, which has renewed calls for a basic minimum support system. It will be interesting to learn if those who receive financial assistance under CERB are subjected to the same stigma that those who receive social assistance are. Also, if those who receive CERB have a change of attitude or perception about those on social assistance.

Newfoundland, to address poverty based on regional knowledge, rather than Ottawa's idea of poverty, it resulted in negative consequences for others.

In Ontario, for example, this led to a focus on uncovering and eliminating welfare fraud and generally criminalizing those living on welfare (Chunn and Gavigan, 2004; Gustafson, 2009; Little and Marks, 2006; Maki, 2011; Mosher, 2005; Spencer-Wood and Matthews, 2011; Varma and Ward, 2014). For example, in 1995, if anyone deemed able-bodied quit their job in Ontario or were dismissed for 'just cause,' they were not allowed to apply for welfare for at least three months. In many other provinces, single parents with young children were permitted social assistance for only a limited amount of time before they would have to find employment or at least demonstrate they were attempting to find a job (Battle and Mendelson, 1997).

Raphael (2011) argues that Canada's common perception and discourse about those living in poverty is that they are responsible for their deprivation due to personal characteristics that make them unlikely to escape poverty because of some inherent laziness. This common perception arguably explains punitive public policies, workfare programs, the lack of broader outcry about them (Raphael, 2011), and the increasing digital governance of those on social assistance.

### **Digital Governance**

Information technologies have often appeared at the margins of accounts of welfare reform, such as SAMS, to increase the efficiency and consistency of services. As part of neoliberal efficiencies, information technologies have been treated as neutral and benign. However, Paul Henman (2010) has argued that information technologies are not just simply administrative tools: they also shape policy development and implementation in ways that go beyond the intentions of

their human creators. Henman argues that information systems not only make new ways of governing possible but can impact and change the landscape in which governing takes place in particular ways – human behaviour, for example, becomes 'informatisable,' and through this, new ways of governing become imaginable (Herman 2010; Zuboff 2015). According to Herman, information technologies are governing technologies, meaning that they translate political narratives and ideas into practices and techniques. As Liesbet van Zoonen (2020, p. 102) writes, the "transition to data-driven social policy, captured by the term 'digital welfare state,' almost completely takes place out of political and societal view," which means it escapes democratic decision making. Virginia Eubanks (2018) describes numerous examples of careless datafication in the social policy of U.S states and argues that data technologies and algorithms have created a "digital poorhouse," in which already disadvantaged groups are subject to more control and surveillance than ever before. Additionally, others have argued that the 'surveillance assemblages' that increasingly determine social policy and welfare decisions (Maki, 2011; Pleace, 2007), and poorly designed algorithms, privilege certain groups and discriminate against others (Wachter-Boettcher, 2017). Shoshana Zuboff (2015) argues that, although others often suggest the attribution of agency to technology, big data "aims to predict and modify human behaviour" (p. 75).

As McGann et al. (2019) have argued, welfare recipients are increasingly subject to numerous rules and regulations under digital governance. If they fail to comply, they can lose their social assistance. These conditions include, for example, compliance when it comes to seeking employment. Caseworkers need to regularly file reports that indicate whether a welfare recipient has complied. This is based on whether applicants have actively applied for employment, regardless of the job market. However, since the act of applying for employment is

an indicator of 'compliance,' those who fail to look for work, regardless of reason, are labeled and stigmatized by the inflexibility of the system as unwilling and de-motivated to work. In addition, the production, storage, and processing of increasing amounts of sensitive digitalized data raise questions and concerns about the uses of new digital technology; the security of these digitalized human subjects; and the shifting of traditional sources of accountability (McGann et al., 2019).

Dimitra Petrakaki (2017) writes that not only does the digitalization of public sector work change accountability, "little attention has been paid to the source of accountability in a digital government era or the possibility of accountability in e-government altogether" (p. 32). Petrakaki argues that restructuring public sector work engenders critical and significant organizational changes. "E-government does not merely transform manual bureaucratic procedures into electronic (this would mean merely automation) but rather, intervenes and alters" the organization (p. 35). As soon as information takes a digital form, it can be integrated into central locations, such as an electronic platform, and disseminated (Fountain, 2001; Giritli Nygren, 2010; Pina, Torres and Acerete, 2007; Tan and Pan, 2003).

Many scholars argue that there is a deliberate move, through policymaking and governance, from "welfare fraud to welfare as fraud" (Chunn & Gavigan, 2004. See also Evans & Swift, 2000; Gavigan et al., 2006). These increasingly pervasive forms of surveillance, such as welfare fraud detection programs, pose threats to political freedom, equality, and democratic accountability, and are presented as necessary or minimally invasive when weighed against the potential (though never clearly defined) 'threats' to the population. Thus, fear-mongering is used by the state to legitimize further surveillance as supposedly the most effective way to 'protect' "our" freedom, "because dangers to freedom are presented as a consequence of the threats to

which Canada is supposedly subjected, rather than as connected to the governance and security practices of the Canadian State" (Bell, 2006, p. 149).

For those who do apply for assistance, in addition to the numerous barriers they must first overcome, such as proving they are incapable of finding work and accepting limitations placed on purchases, there is ongoing "punishment for their plight." They will have to deal with the moral regulations surrounding those living in poverty and the welfare reform set up to discipline the poor and those 'at risk' (Gilliom, 2001, p. 40). Welfare assistance has been replaced by 'workfare' to control those living in poverty (Maki, 2009; Molander & Torsvik, 2015; Wacquant, 2009). Some academics suggest welfare has been replaced by incarceration and the penal system, with an overrepresentation of those receiving social assistance, representing a policy aimed "at the governance of social marginality" (Beckett & Western, 2001, p. 55). This suggests that these practices and ideologies constitute what could be called welfare governance and governing through welfare.

Specifically, using digital governance theory, I investigated how a software program, SAMS, an algorithmic system to increase efficiencies, governs people in poverty, using digital surveillance to manage their behaviours and categorize them. Using algorithmic culture and governance theory, I consider how SAMS gathers data and is a form of delegated governance, creating the 'ideal' welfare recipient. Yohko Orito (2011) describes delegated governance as the "silent control" of individuals and argues that most of us now lack autonomy or control over the type of information that can be acquired in today's dataveillance environments (p. 5). Although Orito is not referring specifically to SAMS regarding digital governance, the social impacts of dataveillance systems are intangible to most individuals, and "the power to control information may have already shifted to large organizations who operate dataveillance systems" (p. 17). As

Lyon (2001) explains, a human being is viewed as simply a data set. For the dataveillance system to work well, monitoring this 'data double' must be continually updated, drawing on a large amount of personal data stored in databases. These data doubles being created by SAMS are created using an algorithm. Those created have no way of knowing whether these 'doubles' are based on accurate information or where precisely these data points about them come from. This makes the ability to challenge the accuracy of a person's cyber twin's 'characteristics' impossible as these characteristics are defined within a closed system.

However, that does not protect them from being 'punished' for their cyber twin's alleged 'sins.' For example, suppose a welfare recipient fails to apply for jobs regularly or report on activities such as creating a résumé or attending training workshops. In that case, the customized information collected about those who receive social assistance has a powerful influence on an individual's perceived identity within the system, placing them into specific categories. This 'silent control' by the architecture of dataveillance systems impacts information processing and decision-making about individuals and, as Orito argues, because of this invisibility, "users are not aware of that control" (p. 11). Of course, the silent control over those who receive social assistance does not necessarily mean the 'system' was built with good or bad intentions.

However, as Halavais (2009) argues in relation to Internet dataveillance systems, the same could be argued about SAMS, that even good intentions may cause harm and bring about harmful outcomes. As with most dataveillance systems (Introna, 1997), SAMS contributes to the loss of freedom and autonomy of those who receive social assistance, and those risks have yet to be thoroughly examined.

## **Surveillance**

For the purposes of this project, I employ David Lyon's (2007) definition of surveillance as the "focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction" (p. 14). There is a consensus in the literature that "new networked technologies are likely to introduce, enhance and extend network forms of governing" (Henman, 2005, p. 80; also see: Lyon, 2008), and this is where surveillance intersects with welfare governance. This means increasing the state's ability to target, rule, and manage distinct groups and individuals. This collection and analysis of enormous amounts of data, which are shared across both provincial and federal government agencies, significantly increases the ability of government organizations and services to "make smart use of this information to develop public policy, administer services and enhance compliance" (Henman, 2005, p. 80). These new technologies for tracking, sorting, recording, and sharing digital representations of the populace "reflect new ways of thinking about conducting government more generally, as is now widely embraced under the neologism of 'governance'" (Henman, 2005, p. 80).

Although surveillance by the state is not new (Wood, 2009), the scope and scale of the practice have been increasing in Western nations, especially after 9/11. This transformation launched the surveillance industry into the limelight in the 'war' on terrorism (Dencik et al., 2016; Zureik & Hindle, 2004) and had massive implications and ripple effects on marginalized communities (Hier & Greenberg, 2009; Lyon, 2007). However, sweeping changes to privacy laws were often accepted without much consideration for how these modern surveillance systems "amplify existing social inequalities and reproduce regimes of control and/or exclusion of marginalized groups" (Monahan, 2008). This added to the stigmatization of marginalized groups and presented them as 'risky' and threats to national security, even though the effectiveness in the

'war on terror' from this enormous increase in surveillance has never been validated (Amoore & De Goede, 2005; Cavelti, 2014). Marginalized groups include those at risk of being subjected to multiple discrimination based on personal characteristics that include: gender, age, ethnicity, income, or sexual orientation. Importantly, these are also the social groups more likely to be living in poverty (Monahan, 2008).

However, although 9/11 encouraged and legitimized the acceleration of numerous surveillance programs, it also brought to light some trends that had previously been developing, including, for example, the development of biometric passports, biometric ID cards, and DNA databases (Aas, 2006). As Neil Gerlach (2004) posits, DNA testing and banking have resulted in an erosion of individual rights, privileging the importance of community security at the expense of individual rights. 'Biogovernance' is an example of individual privacy and autonomy being under threat as the government continues to increase surveillance to 'ensure' security and, in doing so, is changing the legal definitions of 'body' and 'humans' (Gerlach et al., 2011).

Historically, the surveillance literature primarily focused on how the act of surveillance connects to notions of privacy and confidentiality or attempted to explore how 'digital surveillance' may differ from past forms due to the ubiquity of ICTs and the breadth of data they are capable of capturing. However, suppose outcome variables are the measurement used to indicate the phenomenon for predicting, controlling, automated decision making, and digital tracking for those living in poverty. In that case, it becomes even more problematic as they "face the heaviest burdens of high-tech scrutiny" (Eubanks, 2017, p. 12). In other words, these algorithms create what we expect to 'find' in the data.

The "deeply encoded" inequalities in surveillance practices mean that those who live in poverty are singled out for more aggressive scrutiny, are often criminalized, and have less

political power to resist being subjects to surveillance. Some scholars argue that surveillance is used to reinforce existing stereotypes about those living in poverty and ethnic minority groups (Henman & Marston, 2008; Lyon, 2007). Further, this increase in surveillance of those who live in poverty has led to the creation of distinct groups based on data mining and then regulating these groups based on their determined ranking or status (Danna & Gandy, 2002; Gandy, 1993; Haggerty & Ericson, 2006; Stoddart, 2014). As Gilliom (2001) suggests, to govern or control people who live in poverty, first the state must 'know' them, and to do that, the state must place them into 'knowable' categories.

As Lyon and others have argued, this can then lead to troubling decisions by the state based on profiling and prediction policy (Lyon, 2008; Stoycheff, 2016). For example, for those assigned to a group that predicts the 'crime' of being a person living in poverty or not proving economic viability, the consequences can be enormous and potentially devastating as one is determined to be outside the group of citizens most valued and empowered by the state (Budd, 2011; Lyon, 2003; Lyon, 2011; Monahan, 2016; Stoycheff, 2016). In addition to the potential negative consequences of being assigned to a group outside those most valued by the state, increased surveillance can also lead to other troubling repercussions (Solove, 2008). For example, because of the large vast amounts of data collected and analysed through mass surveillance, the practice also enables the use of automated decision making: opaque algorithms, the so-called 'black boxes,' which make decisions that are not possible to explain given the complexity and secrecy involved in the implementation of such systems. This further weakens the ability to effectively oversee mass surveillance operations in order to determine how vulnerable or marginalized groups can be targeted. Other scholars are also concerned with how

being surveilled and monitored changes how we behave (Hall et al., 2016; Henman, 2004) as the act of being watched changes how we conduct ourselves (Foucault, 1995, p. 199).

Other scholars have noted that while some are focused on privacy rights (McGrath, 2004), there is not enough recognition of how surveillance can "force radicalized identities upon black and brown bodies such that people come to see themselves through the eyes of others, as threatening" (Hall et al., 2016, p. 153) and even change their behaviour and sense of who they are in response (Browne, 2015). There is increasing concern about how digital surveillance may operate outside of democratic processes. As the technology is developing and evolving so rapidly, it is outpacing ethical considerations, and 'targeting' often creates and reinforces social divisions and inequality (Henman, 2004; Stoycheff, 2016). Finally, Herman and Marston (2008) note that welfare surveillance reinforces social divisions, arguing, "while it is obvious that many social welfare programs are heavily biased towards poor people, there are other social services from which those with middle or high income disproportionately gain. Examples here include higher education, public subsidies for rail support, and public health care" (p. 190).

Many scholars argue the increasing stigmatization and criminalization of poverty and that welfare claimants are constructed as neoliberal deviants (Chann, 2012; Chunn et al., 2004; Gustafson, 2011; Maki, 2011; Mosher and Hermer, 2005; Spencer-Wood & Matthews, 2011). For example, Christian Fuchs (2012) posits that surveillance controls through "threats and fear," and is a form of "structural violence" which is applied unevenly at "the expense of other groups or individuals" and this "influence is brought about by coercive means" (p. 685). However, other scholars argue that public support for social welfare is heavily influenced by individual political values (Blekesaune and Quadagno, 2003; Feldman and Steenbergen, 2001). Further, public perceptions of welfare recipients' deservingness are difficult to conclude since "we know

virtually nothing about how values and perceptions might interact in shaping citizens' welfare opinions. Consequently, we have a sparse understanding of how contextual information might alter the considerations underlying welfare opinions" (Petersen et al., 2011, p. 25). Other scholars, including Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson (2000) and Lyon (2003), posit that surveillance technologies are more focused on sorting bodies through different surveillance environments, reinforcing the simulation of surveillance, than seeking discipline through surveillance technologies. Facebook and other social media platforms have also normalized surveillance to some extent, as people are desensitized to the practice of 'surveilling' (and being surveilled) online (Bennett et al., 2014; Hope, 2015). Further, Gerlach et al. (2011) suggest that the public becomes less critical as surveillance already seems familiar and already 'here,' making it "less amenable to critical analysis" (Gerlach et al., 2011, p. 4). All of these practices result in the normalization of "how personhood, sovereignty, and privacy are and can be manipulated by new regimes of surveillance and simulation" (Gerlach et al., 2011, p. 9).

In addition to concerns about the increase in online government surveillance, Gary Marx (2007) argues that even more troubling "is the scale, greater precision, continual invention and experimentation, and global connections," offering new digital and online ways to control and colonize contemporary society (p. 46). For example, the state uses surveillance (e.g., welfare cards limiting where and how recipients spend their money and CCTV cameras) to 'govern' people in poverty. In addition, surveillance is often used as a tool for intimidation and humiliation of the poor (Murray, 2000; Pollack et al., 2002), as demonstrated by mandatory urine tests and surprise home visits for those on welfare. Most critical surveillance studies research supports the argument that such tools allow the state to discipline and regulate the poor, with little to no public scrutiny, judgment, or accountability (Gilliom, 2001; Henman, 2005).

Most scholars argue that surveillance is never neutral, claiming that the very act of surveilling a person, whether for 'good' or 'bad,' impacts a person's autonomy. Further, state surveillance programs often threaten democratic governance through their lack of transparency and accountability. Some take this argument further, contending that surveillance is always connected to coercion, repression, power, and domination (Craven et al., 2015; Deleuze, 1992; Elmer, 2003; 2004; Fiske, 1998; Gandy, 1993). Scholars have noted that although overt discrimination based on race and gender has been increasingly outlawed, digital surveillance is offering new (and primarily unchecked) ways to discriminate against already marginalized groups through increasingly targeted forms of surveillance (Henman et al., 2008). As Marx (2005) writes, "large organizations have become ever more important in affecting the life chances of individuals" (p. 3).

Despite the claim by some commentators and scholars that surveillance is not inherently harmful (Monahan et al., 2010), it cannot be denied that if surveillance is applied unevenly and applied for different purposes, then "welfare surveillance is not benign and, in the service of the neoliberal state, acts as a direct assault on the poor" (Maki, 2011, p. 51). Further, some argue that to claim surveillance is not inherently positive or negative negates the concern and mounting evidence that surveillance is a "specific form of control that forms one dimension of domination, exploitation, class, capitalism...and similar negative phenomena" (Fuchs, 2015, p. 7). Indeed, there are claims that these technologies can be used in 'socially just' ways. For example, some argue that it is unrealistic to try and avoid the impact and reality of living in a 'super panoptic' society and one way to counter the private sector's constant surveillance is to encourage the state to become 'information-rich' to help facilitate the delivery of better public services to those in need (Dornan & Hudson, 2003; Kearns, 2002). Dornan and Hudson (2003) argue that by giving

up privacy - through increased state surveillance - citizens can expect more efficient and better-targeted government services and should, therefore, embrace an "increasing role for the state in collecting, storing and acting on information about its citizens" (p. 479).

However, when attempting to create social meaning from personal data to inform social policy, it quickly becomes evident that surveillance technology is not a simple 'good' or 'bad' network structure. It always depends on one's positionality since these new technologies are disproportionately directed at those groups defined as "risky" (McCahill, 2015). Yet despite this, surveillance scholars have done very few interview-based projects (Adams and Purtova, 2017; Saulnier, 2017), relying instead on theoretical discussions and, to a much lesser extent, some limited case studies (Saulnier, 2017). As Alana Saulnier (2017) writes:

Surveillance studies have been somewhat inattentive to the perspective of the surveilled subject. It is the functioning of the surveillance apparatus, not the relatively inconsequential subject, which has tended to frame the focus of surveillance inquiries, leaving understandings of surveilled subjects' experiences relatively limited (p. 1)

Further, while the literature on surveillance of people living in poverty continues to be developed in Canada and is aware of the class inequalities, no studies have considered surveillance from the ground up, from those living in, and forced to administer, a surveillance apparatus.

### **Algorithms and Predictive Profiling**

Some scholars have argued that data used for surveillance "contributes to the creation of suspect subjectivities" (Matzner, 2016, p. 197) and what Sara Degli Esposti (2014) describes as 'dataveillance,' which refers to the "systematic monitoring of people or groups, using personal data systems in order to regulate or govern their behavior" (p. 209). For example, predictive algorithms that draw on accumulated personal digital data are used to determine which

individuals should have access to certain goods and which individuals should be placed in a 'risky' category (Crawford and Schultz, 2014). For example, as mentioned earlier, if a welfare recipient fails to apply for jobs or attend job fairs or training, they are at risk of being removed from receiving social assistance. As Kitchin and Lauriault (2014) write, a concern is that "data infrastructures are never neutral, essential, objective: their data never raw but always cooked to some recipe by chefs embedded within institutions that have certain aspirations and goals and operate within wider frameworks" (p. 8). Kitchin and Lauriault assert that part of the job of predictive profiling is "anticipatory governance" and the concern here is those predictive analytics are used to assess and decide appropriate responses and actions even though "a person's data shadow does more than follow them; it precedes them, seeking to police behaviours that may never occur" (p. 12).

Harcourt (2006) posits that using predictive analytics as a form of anticipatory governance often punishes individuals based on assumptions drawn from dataveillance systems instead of actual behaviours. With SAMS, anticipatory governance has become increasingly a data-oriented practice which allows a software program to utilize data as contributions and evidence for decision making regarding a vulnerable population- those who receive social assistance. Anticipatory governance allows SAMS to use collected information to determine predictive practices and draw conclusions based on this data (Kitchin, 2014). Nicholas Diakopoulos (2016) argues that the potential for built-in bias of algorithms means replicating some of the worst stereotypes about marginalized groups.

The public needs to understand the bias and power of algorithms, including government agencies, used in the public sphere. When applied to algorithms, existing transparency techniques could enable people to monitor, audit, and criticize how those systems are functioning – or not, as the case may be. Unfortunately, government agencies seem unprepared for inquiries about

algorithms and their uses in decisions that significantly affect individuals and the public (pp.1-2).

Gerald Argenton (2017) argues that algorithms impact and govern what is visible and govern that which is not, that which is hidden. However, Ananny and Crawford (2016) caution that a focus on the lack of 'transparency' is not enough and write that "being able to see a system is sometimes equated with being able to know how it works and govern it – a pattern that recurs in recent work about transparency and computational systems" (p. 1).

Striphas (2015) writes that "humans have been delegating the work of culture – the sorting, classifying and hierarchizing of people, places, objects, and ideas – increasingly to computational processes" (p. 395). How does this dataveillance enable the state to recreate and govern the 'poor'? Governance practices, in other words, make subjects.

Contemporary dataveillance serves to produce neoliberal subjects who "approach the world through the eyes of consumers rather than those of citizens entitled to rights" (Monahan, 2010, p. 102). This reflects Wendy Larner's (2000) examination of a public discussion document sent out by the government to all households in New Zealand in 1998, *Towards a Code of Social and Family Responsibility*. Larner argues that the proposed code in the document should be approached as "a hybrid assemblage of neoliberal and neoconservative forms of rule" and that these regimes of power "have specific implications for post-welfare state social relations" (p. 244). In regard to surveillance and social sorting, Dee (2013) argues that these technologies illustrate an "increase in social control mechanisms" and how this "reads differently for those who do not neatly fit into the category of legitimate 'consumer-citizen' such as people on welfare payments" (p. 278). This suggests that in this contemporary neoliberal system, government projects and their supporting software programs make those living with poverty particular

objects of governance. The accumulation of vast amounts of data is not, therefore, necessarily going to result in the better delivery of governmental services but instead creates the risky category of "the poor" into which certain social subjects are pushed by service delivery systems and the algorithms they rely upon (Murray, 2000; Pollack et al., 2002).

## **Conclusion**

I identify several gaps in the current literature on delegated governance and welfare in the digital age. First, more transparency and scrutiny are necessary to examine these practices in terms of how they impact those being targeted and put into categories based on 'potentialities.' The literature does not address or answer the question of how it feels to be governed by algorithms. Furthermore, how are the collected data translated into ways that enable the state to control people further? Monahan (2010) argues that surveillance and data mining offers people up for examination and control "because these systems are closed" and "they resist opportunities for democratic participation in how they are designed, used, critiqued or regulated" (p. 93). However, the surveillance scholarship assumes, rather than demonstrates, the oppression of those who live with poverty and fails to acknowledge that people living with poverty have agency.

Further, people living in poverty are presented as passive subjects who have governance foisted upon them. Typically, the literature does not consider them more complex subjects who might react and behave differently. Instead, the literature presents governance as a force that just 'happens' to people. In this project, I examined how agency and power are articulated within algorithmic governance practices in relation to the "clients" of the system and the immediate "operators" of the system, both of whom are entangled in relations of governance that are increasing but never fully, digitized.

Each chapter is individually theorized in relation to the themes in question. For example, Chapter 4 draws on autonomy, resistance, and automation theories to argue that those on social assistance, and their caseworkers, find ways to resist and subvert the system's oppression and exercise their autonomy in unexpected and creative ways. Chapter 5 draws on theories of surveillance, home, privacy, and the self, to illustrate the role and impact of 'home' as a site of moral regulation, performance, and contested ground. Finally, Chapter 6 draws on theories of moral regulation, algorithmic and anticipatory governance, oppression, and digital governance to argue how, although SAMS empowers welfare recipients because of the fewer home visits, SAMS is creating the 'ideal' welfare recipient. The next chapter, Methodology, provides a detailed account of my research process and how I conducted the study.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter describes and reflects on my research process, offers a rationale for the research methodology, and discusses the selection criteria for those I interviewed. I discuss participant recruitment, offer a detailed explanation of the data collection, and detail my analysis techniques. I also consider ethical considerations and study limitations.

I conducted my research in Ontario since SAMS was the object of my analysis. I chose to seek interview participants in three Ontario cities with high concentrations of social assistance. These three communities include a mid-sized city in Southern Ontario, a large city in Eastern Ontario, and a smaller community in Northern Ontario. Ontario is a large geographical area, so I wanted to get input from several population centers. I hoped to learn about any significant differences in the experiences with SAMS between the cities for those who receive social assistance and their caseworkers.

#### **Recruitment**

Recruitment of people on social assistance was achieved through several approaches. In addition to posting flyers with details about my project in public spaces, including food banks and public libraries, I also used the snowball sampling technique to recruit more participants (Julien et al., 2010). In retrospect, the recruitment of people on social assistance was easier than expected as, after I did a few interviews in two of the cities, the word spread among others in both cities. The participants on social assistance in the study were five males and fifteen females, eighteen years of age and older, and currently living in Ontario. Fourteen of the participants were White, five were Black, and one was Indigenous. Meeting days and times were arranged either by email or phone and with two exceptions, the interviews were conducted face-to-face. On average,

interviews lasted approximately ninety minutes, and all interviews were digitally recorded with the participants' permission. Most of the participants were open to answering all of the questions, with one important exception, which I discuss below, and all were eager to offer their insights and opinions (see Appendix B, the Interview Guide, for a list of questions asked). After one participant talked about how much she wished she could have a few minutes to talk to the Prime Minister, just to let him know what it is "really like to live on welfare," I started asking every other participant what they would say if they could tell the Prime Minister anything. This question became quite popular with the participants, as most seemed to give it serious consideration and enjoyed sharing their thoughts. So, I decided to go back to the first four participants I had not asked this question and give them the opportunity to answer it. Each seemed delighted to be asked and eagerly shared their responses. I then went back to each of the caseworkers and asked if they had anything they would like to share about their jobs with the Prime Minister if given the opportunity, and each of them had something they wanted to share.

The recruitment of social workers was more challenging than I anticipated. For example, prior to starting the research, based on my previous professional experiences with social work and the multitude of former colleagues I believed I had to call on, I was confident I would have a large group of caseworkers to draw from for willing participants. Many had already expressed interest in the project. They assured me that even if they could not be interviewed, they would be happy to pass my contact information on to their colleagues. However, once I started to reach out with ethics clearance officially, suddenly, no one in social work seemed willing to be interviewed. There seemed to be serious hesitations around talking to me, even with assurances to anonymize their identities. I spent several months following up with two social workers in particular who kept assuring me they wished to be included as they had much, they wanted to say

about SAMS. However, I finally realized they would probably never talk to me 'on the record,' no matter how much I promised to keep their identities confidential. For those who did eventually consent to be interviewed, I met with two of them, on separate occasions, at the Alternative Global Network media lab on campus at Carleton University. We agreed to meet on a Sunday afternoon, knowing this would offer us a high level of privacy, with little to no chance of anyone seeing them at the lab. Another met with me in a coffee shop on an early weekday morning, and two did their interviews via Skype. They all agreed to be recorded, and interviews lasted from sixty to approximately ninety minutes. All five caseworkers were white, one was male, and the other four were female. The male and one of the female caseworkers appeared to be in their early 30s and seemed relatively new to social work. The remaining three caseworkers were in their mid to late 40s and were more senior, having worked for social services for fifteen to over twenty years each.

In order to gain greater insights into how the algorithms work from a tech point of view, I wanted to interview industry insiders who do programming for service software companies. Recruiting software coders was, as expected, very difficult. Many initially expressed interest in speaking to me and shared details of what they wanted to say if/when officially interviewed. However, after sending over a dozen emails to private software companies and speaking informally to several coders through snowballing (from people I knew who gave my contact information out), I ended up interviewing three. However, one asked to be removed from the study during the actual interview, just before it ended, saying they no longer felt comfortable sharing what they had and asked to watch me delete their interview from my audio recorder. The coder who asked to be removed seemed to suddenly worry that their stories and examples were "too specific" and the company they worked for would be possibly recognized. Despite my

reassurances that I would disguise who they were and the company they worked with, unfortunately, they declined to be included. The interviews with coders, whose input provided guidance and background about how software algorithms work, took place over Zoom. Interviews with all study participants were conducted between August 2019 and February 2020.

### **The Interview Process**

I conducted semi-structured interviews with all three groups of participants, as semi-structured interviews involve a series of open-ended questions based on the topic areas the researcher wants to cover (Horton et al., 2004; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The open-ended nature of the questions defined the topic under investigation but provided opportunities for both the interviewee and me to discuss some topics in more detail. If the interviewee had difficulty answering a question or provided only a brief response, I could use cues or prompts to encourage the interviewee further to consider the question. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer also can probe the interviewee to elaborate on the initial response or follow a line of inquiry introduced by the interviewee (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). For example, when one of the participants, a caseworker, referred to a secret notebook they had created in the office for system workarounds, I was able to probe for more details about what this notebook contained, the history of its creation, and more. Semi-structured interviews are also helpful when the research is exploratory, (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Horton et al., 2004; McIntosh & Morse, 2015), however, analysing the interview data from open questions can be more challenging than when closed questions are used as conducting the interview and analysing the interview data both require careful consideration and preparation.

Interviews were conducted with those on social assistance until saturation. I conceptualize saturation drawing upon Patricia Fusch and Lawrence Ness (2015), "reached when there is enough information to replicate the study when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained, and when further coding is no longer feasible" (p. 1408). Further, as Burmeister and Aitken (2012) explain, data saturation refers to the quality of the data instead of the actual numbers, whatever those may be. I stopped seeking further participants when I recognized there was a great deal of consistency in the respondents' responses (Bowen, 2009; Sav et al., 2013).

Based on my review of the literature, I realized there was a unique opportunity to build on narrative, surveillance, and governance literature by focusing on people who live with poverty who had rarely been consulted on their perspective on living with and working in SAMS and their ensuing struggles and success strategies. The literature revealed a gap regarding how those living with poverty feel about how SAMS may have impacted their relationship with their social worker, surveils them, contributes to creating a data double, and requires evidence they are continuously searching for employment a condition of receiving social assistance. Therefore, one of the open-ended questions I asked of people on social assistance, for example, included, "Can you tell me about what it was like when you first applied for social assistance?" This question led to many participants sharing their stories about their life when they applied and the circumstances around their decision to seek financial help. In other words, the question evolved from its original meaning of inquiry: what was the process of applying for social assistance for the first time like? As a result, the participant's understanding of the question was better, in my opinion, than what I had initially intended, offering a much richer context of their lives when they took that first step of seeking financial assistance from the government. Also, when asked,

"What were the steps? Did a social worker or anyone else help you with the application?" I found it interesting that five of the participants said they had no memory of what those steps were or if any social worker helped them with the application process. Instead, they only remembered the approximate date of when they first started receiving social assistance.

The central purpose of this project was to examine the technological governance practices administered by SAMS to learn how the system is working at the experiential level. What do people on social assistance think about SAMS? How does it feel to be at the lived end of this software system? How is it administered? In order to answer these questions, I knew I would have to meet with people who receive social assistance in person, on their terms, and in whatever environment they would feel most comfortable. Originally the plan was to meet them in public spaces only, including parks, local community centres, or coffee shops. However, it quickly became apparent that this was not going to work for most of the participants as they felt they risked recognition or running into someone they knew and were unsure how to explain who I was. The first two interviews were cut short because of this, and we had to meet again later, but this time (at their request) at their home. Eventually, I decided to meet wherever the participant said they would feel most comfortable, including their home, if that was where they preferred. The offer to meet wherever they preferred also made it easier for those with young children. Out of twenty interviews, fifteen were held in the participants' homes, two were by phone, and three were at local coffee shops. This arrangement seemed to work best for helping them to feel more comfortable and more willing to speak freely. Unfortunately, one of the participants later decided to remove their interview from the project, saying they no longer wanted any part of the study. I tried to find out their concern, suspecting that perhaps the participant suddenly felt embarrassed

or ashamed about some of the stories they had shared with me. Despite my reassurances, they insisted I not use any part of their interview, which was deleted.

All interviews were audio-recorded. Once I was away from the participant, I would jot down notes about things I knew the audiotaping alone would not have picked up on to keep the overall interview's 'feel' and atmosphere as part of my documented account. For example, I would note whether the interview occurred at the participant's home or in a public place. I would also write notes about if someone cried, seemed angry, if they paced or stayed at the table, and whether they offered me a drink or anything when I first arrived (anything that happened prior to the tape being turned on). I also noted how I behaved because some interviews seemed to flow more quickly than others. For example, some interview meetings included distractions like having extended family members in the room, commenting on the interview questions in a few cases, and active children in the room in others, asking *me* questions. However, what might have sometimes seemed like chaos to me was just the regular and everyday routine for that family's life. Before the interview would begin (prior to turning on the audio recorder), I would usually 'confess' that I also had been on welfare and grew up with a single mom. In most cases, this seemed to make the interviewee visibly relax. However, there were a few exceptions.

For example, one participant seemed offended by my confession, insisting that, unlike me, he did not grow up on welfare and knew he would be off it shortly. I cringed at how I sounded when I listened to that interview later. When I shared what I considered to be our 'common ground,' that of me also having been on social assistance, I intended for it to put him at ease, knowing I was not judging him in any way. However, in retrospect, I think I came off to him as sounding flippant, or like all experiences on welfare are the same, and perhaps even

condescending since I am no longer living in poverty or receiving social assistance. It also challenged his self-perception of being a short-term and only temporary 'welfare recipient.'

The two interviews done by telephone were the least successful as, I suspect, it was harder to establish trust over the phone. In addition, the participants seemed more reluctant to answer some of the questions or did not answer them as thoroughly as those interviews conducted in person. For example, one of the participants sometimes said, "next," in response to a question, making it clear they would not be answering.

I was also struck by how angry four of the caseworkers were throughout their interviews, insisting that SAMS is a complete "fuck up" and "still screwing everything up." They seem convinced that SAMS is intended to ultimately cut social service jobs as once the system is working better and most of the computer glitches worked out, more of their jobs will be automated. I had to adapt my view about social workers as it became apparent during the interviews that most of them cared very much about their work and, for better or for worse, wanted to help those they were working with as much as they could. Four caseworkers complained about how the system constraints their work and makes it more challenging. However, they also shared their stories of workarounds they had developed and were willing to use to assist those they were trying to help as much as possible.

Afterward, I listened to each interview at least twice before transcribing the recordings, which took numerous hours, of course. I took notes about anything I did not 'hear' the first time I listened or during the actual interview. For example, I stopped asking how much social assistance they were receiving after it became apparent (when I listened to the first few interviews on tape) that this question appeared to make participants uncomfortable. I realized I was asking a rude question, one way too personal for a stranger to ask someone. I recognized it

was also an unnecessary question. There is little to no variation among welfare payments to a single person or a parent(s) with the same number of children. Further, I could quickly look it up after the interview. I still regret asking those first few participants about "how much" they received. They were right: it was rude, intrusive, and unnecessary to ask.

Listening to the interviews also gave me insight into handling the subsequent interviews better. In addition to dropping a couple of the questions, I added a few new ones as the participants seemed to enjoy answering them. I believe they added richness to the interviews. For example, what, if anything, would they change immediately about how welfare is handled in Ontario. For some, they simply made a joke in response to the question, "I would double it!" but all seemed to enjoy answering it or appreciate having been asked. After all of the interview recordings were transcribed for all three different participant groups, I read through each of them several times before I started to note common themes and keywords, using different coloured highlighter markers to identify and group common, reoccurring themes.

### **Ethics and Informed Consent**

This study adhered to all applicable policies and guidelines of Carleton University's Research Ethics Boards (CUREB), including those of the Tri-Councils (CIHR, NSERC, SSHRC), specifically the Tri-Council Policy Statement on the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. Before beginning this study, I completed the Tri-Council Training Policy Certificate on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE) and received permission to conduct this research. Most participants signed an informed consent form that outlined the study (see appendices A, B, D, and F) for Study Information and Consent Forms), though some of the participants on social assistance gave their verbal consent on tape

before the interview started. I made three ethics applications for each participant group: those who receive social assistance, caseworkers, and software coders.

I admit, I initially dreaded the ethics process. I knew from what others had warned me, that conducting any research which includes human participants would be a more intense and drawn-out application process. However, in the end, I learned numerous essential and invaluable lessons about conducting research in the most ethical ways possible.

For example, a critical goal of the ethical review is to ensure that research participants are protected from any potential harm during the study and after its publication. After going through the process, I realized that thinking of myself as someone who would never intentionally harm anyone did not mean I was incapable of making serious errors in judgment that could put my participants in harm's way. As I learned while completing the ethics applications, there are necessary steps to take in order to help minimize any possible harm to human subjects, and 'good intentions' are not enough. As I quickly realized early in the process, I would have to unlearn some of my previous interviewing patterns and techniques as a seasoned journalist.

For instance, I had to ensure that participants privacy was maintained at all times and, unlike when interviewing people as a journalist, not to push or manipulate any of the participants into answering any questions they did not wish to answer for any reason. When two of the participants decided to drop out of the study, I had to remind myself not to try and guilt or coax them into staying and respect their decision to withdraw. Before ethics training, this is something I might have done previously as it is not uncommon for a journalist to use manipulation in some situations when trying to coerce cooperation from an interviewee in order to finish an important story.

Finally, completing the ethics application process also highlighted to me the importance of avoiding data analysis and interpretation bias. This includes, for example, how, instead of thinking about how my – ‘targeted audience’s’ - something a journalist is trained to focus on, might regard my report and analysis of the data, I learned to simply report it as fully and unbiased as possible, without any agenda about ‘my audiences’ potential reaction or response. I was confronted with the realization that when interviewing someone as a journalist, rarely is any attention or concern given to the potential impact once a story is published might have on the interviewee. Also, when asking personal, probing, or challenging’ questions, journalists do not necessarily pay attention to how the interview process itself can be triggering, stressful, and challenging for the person being interviewed. However, after going through ethics clearance; forced to consider all of the ways a participant can be put in harm’s way during an interview, I have grown to understand and appreciate the critical importance of ethics review. In fact, for better or worse, I suspect I am no longer the same as a journalist, either.

### **Data Analysis and Common Themes**

Consistent with Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's (2006) position that a 'theme' "represents a pattern and something important in the data about the research question" (p. 82), I read through all of the transcripts numerous times, taking notes about the characteristics and ideas that started to emerge as dominant and stand out. As Braun and Clarke write, "analysis is not a linear process of simply moving from one phase to the next. Instead, it is a more recursive process, where movement is back and forth as needed throughout phases. It is also a process that develops over time" (2006, p. 86). After each interview, qualitative data was transformed into reoccurring keywords and phrases through reviewing interview notes, listening to the recordings, and

reviewing the transcriptions. I then went through the highlighted points and organized comments that seemed significant, noting insights from the initial interviews to improve further interviews to elicit more extensive, revealing responses. For example, after it became apparent that none of the participants on social assistance was aware of the acronym 'SAMS,' nor the actual software program system's name (Social Assistance Management System), I wondered if they were ignoring the question simply because they were not familiar with the term. Instead, I started referring to it as 'the computer program in charge of welfare,' which led to much fuller answers and detailed responses with each participant afterward.

For those on social assistance, some of the themes that emerged from their interviews included: oppression and autonomy, sharing tips, moral regulation, loss of privacy, resistance, lack of skills and training, state control, laziness, surveillance, risk, welfare as governance, and the importance of performing the 'ideal' home as a welfare recipient during home visits with caseworkers. Finally, I narrowed the major themes and collapsed them into the following: autonomy and resistance, 'home,' privacy, governance, hybridity, and creating the 'ideal' welfare recipient.

The initial themes for caseworkers included: automation of jobs, job loss, autonomy, state control, private industry control, delegated governance, algorithms, lies, and workarounds. It became clear that the caseworkers were primarily focussed on potential job loss, the automation of their jobs, and how little autonomy SAMS means for them when it comes to making decisions 'outside the box.' They also expressed concern, as did many of those on social assistance, about the decline in face-to-face contact with clientele.

For coders, it was all about the algorithms and their insistence that, because of being based on algorithms, SAMS software is designed to be inherently unbiased, neutral, and efficient

in recognizing patterns and putting people into necessary risk categories. Common themes that arose from the interviews with the coders included neutrality, lack of bias, efficiency, and fairness.

At the end of each interview, I assigned numbers to the materials in the order interviews was completed. Data, notes, and digitally recorded interview transcriptions were carefully read and reviewed numerous times and then coded into themes. I then deposited that material, including all notes and transcribed interviews, in a file folder labeled with the same number in a locked cabinet. Using NVivo, a Qualitative Data Analysis computer-assisted software package (Alabri and Alyahmady, 2013), I conducted an audit of the data analysis process through open coding, focusing on using a particular language to interpret its meaning and frequency of common themes in each participant group.

Scholars in favour of using computer programs in qualitative data analysis argue that it enables a more accurate and transparent data analysis (Alabri and Alyahmady, 2013; Morison and Moir, 1998; Richards and Richards, 1994) and allows the researcher to interrogate the data set more thoroughly. Using the NVivo software to analyze and store the data from the interviews, in combination with traditional tools such as sticky notes and coloured highlighters, meant an additional interaction with the data and data analysis. In consultation with my large format display boards filled with sticky notes based on themes and concept maps, as an obvious visual form of coding, NVivo provided an additional tool for storage and easily accessible source for research analysis. However, as useful as NVivo was as a support for a richer data analysis, the physical act of writing on sticky notes, rearranging and rearranging the sticky notes and visual mapping encouraged a more meaningful interaction with the data. The ability to make a visual scan of all of the sticky notes at once (instead of having to recall themes) enabled me to

look for connections and relationships between themes more easily. Ultimately, the combination of manual and automated data analysis made for a much richer and more detailed recognition of certain repeated themes and patterns (see Table 1).

### **Narrative Research, Governance Theory and Algorithmic Culture**

Narrative research, which is the expressions of people's lived experiences through verbal accounts and the meaning and interpretation given to such lived lives (White, 2005), takes into consideration a person's story and how this population, in my case, those living with poverty, makes meaning from their experiences. Hearing and then sharing the narratives of this population is imperative to give a voice to those who are often rendered invisible. Using narrative research methods offered a rich way to examine and analyze the stories and recognize that those who share their stories and experiences with SAMS are active agents (Elliott, 2005). In this project, their narratives provide insight into how those on social assistance view themselves and make decisions to act. When shared with others, narratives can influence how others see the 'storyteller,' which means narratives as a research approach reveals how individuals make sense of events in their lives with themselves as the agents of their lives. I believe this form of inquiry contributes to learning directly from those voices and lived experiences that are rarely heard (Harding, 2016; Ravensbergen and VanderPlaat, 2009) and can offer insights about the world from their unique point of view (Hinchman and Hinchman, 1997). It means we hear directly from those living in poverty about their experiences with applying for, and living with, social assistance in Ontario. Narrative approaches offer insight into the power of word of mouth, stories, and what individuals choose to retain, forget, or share during their interviews about their lived experiences (McAlpine, 2016) with poverty and navigating through the social assistance

process. This insight applies to those caseworkers assigned to assist them and the software coders.

## **Reflexivity**

As someone who grew up on social assistance, I am mindful about the need for reflexive practice in my research. Andrea Doucet (2008) describes reflexivity as being "conceived as three *gossamer walls* through which researchers construct knowledge" (p. 1). These 'walls,' or 'relationships,' include our relationship with oneself "and the ghosts that haunt us: with research participants; and with one's readers" and audiences (p. 1). Doucet's metaphor of the "ghosts that haunt us" resonated with me as I am now painfully aware that I brought plenty of these ghosts, or rather – biases - into this project, manifested by my already 'knowing' what I would find in the research. Part of my motivation when I started this study was to expose how much emphasis, and focus, I believed there is around trying to label and expose welfare recipients as dishonest 'cheats,' constantly trying to take advantage of the system. I also wanted to expose how social workers and the software's attributions of purposeful, malicious behavior invoke unwarranted stereotypes about the undeserving poor, suggesting that many welfare recipients are not truly struggling and that fraud results more from greed than need.

However, similarly to Doucet's confession around becoming increasingly aware of the 'ghosts' between her "research self" and "other selves," I learned to pay attention to the apparent bias I had about social workers, the welfare distribution 'system,' and assumptions about those who receive social assistance feeling a certain way about that experience (p. 3). As Victoria Reyes (2018) argues, every researcher conducting qualitative research has their own "ethnographic toolkit from which they strategically draw," which includes both visible (such as

race and ethnicity) and invisible tools, such as social capital (p. 220). As Reyes explains, as researchers, we need to be aware of the multitude of ways this personal 'history' shapes and impacts our access in the field, and later our data analysis.

In other words, as someone who grew up with a single mom on welfare, I had to think about how my previous social position shaped my entrance, assumptions, and forms of social capital used during the interview phase with those on social assistance and the caseworkers. As Reyes argues, of central concern to those doing qualitative research, we need to pay attention and examine how our social position shapes access to study participants and how it shapes our interpretation of the data. I also had to consider my current position and how I would be perceived by the participants.

In regards to those who are 'insiders,' researching communities or populations who are similar to themselves, many academics have argued that insider status can potentially have a significant influence on their work in a variety of ways (Young Jr, 2008; Innes, 2009; Davis, 1997, Aguilar, 1981). So, how did my connection and personal history shape my research? Although I am no longer living with poverty or on social assistance, like Reyes, I believe my history with welfare and growing up with a single mom helped open doors to my participants. I believe it helped them trust me perhaps a little more and allowed them to feel comfortable enough to share stories and experiences they might not have otherwise. I suspect many of them viewed me as someone who was less likely perhaps to judge or view them in a negative light. In retrospect, I used my history with poverty to gain their trust and acceptance, encouraging them to believe I understood a lot of their frustrations and shame around applying for, and depending on, social assistance. Informed by my family background, my invisible tools were not only what Glenda Flores (2015) describes as 'hidden privileges,' they were also critical tools that I was able

to use to build rapport that started with those shared histories of growing up in poverty as an important shared trait (p. 21).

However, there were still many surprises for me during the interviews with the participants. For example, I expected most, if not all, of the welfare recipients to be upset with the new software system under SAMS. I admit, I initially resisted recognizing that many saw some important advantages to the hybridity of SAMS. As discussed in future chapters, most welfare recipients welcomed what they consider to be the less 'personal' approach under SAMS. The software imposes a strict structure on all applicants and recipients. I was also surprised by those caseworkers, which I introduce in later chapters, who are willing to put their jobs on the line when they believe they need to 'break' or bend the rigid rules of SAMS to offer assistance. During this study, I learned to stop thinking of social workers in simple terms of 'good' or 'bad,' as simply agents of the state whose focus is on 'catching' people living in poverty doing something wrong. Looking back, I was raised in my inner-city neighbourhood, which viewed most social workers as the enemy of the poor. In this study, I learned that it is much more complicated than that, of course.

In conclusion, however, as Doucet writes, we cannot 'know' our research participants, but we can and should attempt to "know something about their narratives or narrated subjectivities" (p. 13). Doucet argues that "rather than claiming access to knowing subjects, all we can know is their narratives or their narrated subjectivities" (p. 13). The stories I heard from the participants - both those on social assistance *and* the caseworkers - are the personal narratives and memories they chose to share.

### **Government Documents: How are they constructing the 'problem'**

How are those who receive social assistance constructed as a social problem to be governed by a software program? In addition to their narratives of living in and working in SAMS, I wanted to learn how the Ontario government and IBM framed the software. In order to answer that question, I collected data from provincial government documents and reports on social assistance and, using open coding, as discussed on page 47, examined the language and how these records talk about welfare recipients as a social problem.

These reports and documents include those from OW, the Privacy Commissioner of Ontario, backgrounders on poverty from both the Ontario and Federal Government which include 'poverty reduction strategy' position papers, Ministry of Community and Social Services, Ontario Social Assistance reports, numerous documents reporting on SAMS from Ontario Public Service Employees Union, Statistics Canada reports relating to poverty and the 'poor' in Canada and, specifically Ontario, during the period this project covered (see Table 2).

After obtaining the relevant government documents, legislation, and procedures related to SAMS and social assistance in Ontario, I performed a framing analysis to reveal how welfare recipients are constructed as a social problem to be governed. According to Stephen Reese, a 'frame' is a widely socially shared organizing concept that works symbolically to shape democratic discourse and influence public opinion by creating and promoting particular vocabularies (Reese, 2009).

After reviewing the relevant documents several times, I started to note themes and keywords and grouped common, reoccurring themes together. Then, as with my participant interviews, I conducted an audit of the data analysis process through open-coding using traditional tools, including sticky notes, creating another display board of themes for each of the

categories of government documents (see Table 3) consulted. Again, these themes were consistent across the documents, generated from the readings and not identified in advance.

Next, I used the NVivo software to analyze and store the keywords and emerging themes each time I went through the documents. The use of the NVivo software meant an additional interaction with the data and data analysis. However, as mentioned earlier, as applicable as NVivo was as extra support, the physical act of writing on sticky notes, rearranging the sticky notes and visual mapping meant a deeper and more meaningful interaction with the data. In addition, the ability to visually scan all of the sticky notes at once (instead of having to recall themes) enabled me to look for connections and relationships between themes more easily.

Some of the themes in these documents include welfare fraud, a need to set minimum targets for welfare recipients to find employment, and increasing the accountability of managers for the lack of reduction in welfare recipients because of their office failure to monitor, scrutinize, and screen applicants more carefully.

For example, according to the most recent report from the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario (2018), evidence shows that thirty-six percent of OW recipients face many barriers when it comes to seeking employment and staying employed. These barriers are related to mental health conditions, addictions and homelessness, affecting their ability to participate in employment activities or find work. In addition, this same report reveals concerns that, although OW "is intended to be a temporary assistance program, the length of time people depend on the program had nearly doubled since our last audit of the program, from an average of 19 months in 2008/09 to almost three years in 2017" (p. 160).

However, despite the acknowledgement that welfare recipients often face barriers to finding employment, the report recommends that service managers need to be audited. This audit

would ensure recipients excused from participating in "employment support activities" not only met the specific "eligible circumstances" to have that condition waived but that the supporting documentation was available for scrutiny to assess the service managers' compliance. In addition, the report recommends that caseworkers meet more frequently with OW recipients to "review their progress in activities designed to help them find employment" (p. 160). Yet the report also acknowledges that SAMS currently does not allow caseworkers to "record recipients skills, barriers to employment or referrals to training or community services in a way that would enable service managers to analyze such factors for their entire caseload" (p.161).

Some of the criticism of the implementation of SAMS in the Auditor's report (2018) includes a lack of targets set by welfare office managers for welfare recipients to obtain employment or any "mechanisms to hold them accountable for program delivery" (p. 160). This suggests an approach to welfare reduction includes holding managers of welfare offices accountable and scrutinized when the welfare roll numbers do not decline. However, the same report also criticized the managers of welfare offices for failing to "obtain and review critical applicant information, increasing the risk of errors in determining eligibility for Ontario Works" (p. 3). For example, in addition to concerns that there could be people receiving social assistance who are not eligible, the report raised concern that welfare offices across Ontario are a year behind in investigating the six-thousand 'fraud tips' they have received from the public. These reports claim welfare recipients are 'cheating' the system<sup>10</sup> somehow, and the Ministry has now formed a group to "support the work toward a transformed outcomes-based approach to social assistance accountability" (p. 4). This focus on "timely investigation of fraud referrals" and set

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<sup>10</sup> Another recommendation of the report included implementing a program to recover any overpayments to OW recipients, including from former recipients, through tax refunds. However, this program is currently on hold due to Covid-19.

targets "for the number of recipients expected to leave the program for employment" is even though one of the report's recommendations acknowledges that a significant number of welfare recipients face numerous barriers to obtaining employment:

To ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of the Ontario Works program, which is intended to provide temporary assistance, we recommend that the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (Ministry) assess the suitability of the program as it is currently designed and take steps to improve its effectiveness in meeting the needs of recipients who have significant employment barriers and require extensive assistance to become employed, or who receive assistance for lengthy periods of time without successfully obtaining employment (p. 163).

A further example of potential 'fraud' shared in the report was the food supplement allowance available for welfare recipients with special dietary needs. These special nutritional needs include HIV positive welfare recipients who suffer from renal failure, chronic Hepatitis C, Parkinson or celiac disease. According to the report, the Ministry intends to "begin repeating its review of special diet allowance forms completed by doctors for anomalies in their prescribing practices twice a year. Further, where necessary, it would refer doctors to the College" if the Ministry determines a doctor has completed a special diet application "that a recipient did not require" (p. 167). The report reminds caseworkers about the option to confirm the necessity of a special diet by requiring an additional application completed by a different healthcare provider. A recommendation from the Auditor to the Ministry includes circulating a list of any doctors the "Ministry suspects of approving questionable applications for a special diet allowance, including doctors the College is investigating or has previously sanctioned" (p. 169).

As noted in Tables 1 and 2, some of the themes that emerged from the government documents include recommendations to set targets for welfare recipients to find employment and increase the accountability of welfare office managers regarding a lack of reduction in the number of welfare recipients. Many of these themes in the government documents correlate to

many of the major themes noted in the interviews with caseworkers, including state control, potential loss of jobs because of automation, and loss of autonomy.

## **Conclusion**

Qualitative research permits the exploration of multiple dimensions of a problem, making it ideal for this research as it recognizes that the lived experiences of people can not only offer rich and detailed insight into specific issues but can also create opportunities for often suppressed or silenced voices to be heard (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). My interviews allowed me to learn more about the narrators and the social realities in their world directly from their stories. Squire et al. (2015) writes that this kind of research "values narratives as knowledge," and recognize it as "reconstructions of experience" (p. 19). Further, although narrative research often means dealing with a number of different "truths" (Andrews, 2007, 2014) it is through interviews that one can collect these different 'truths.'

Although I interviewed people on social assistance and caseworkers in three Ontario cities, hoping to obtain a broader perspective and perhaps discover any significant differences in dealing and living with SAMS between the cities, this highlighted one of the study's limitations. Of the twenty participants on social assistance interviewed, three were located in the smallest city in the study, and the remaining participants totaled seven in one and ten in the other cities. Those in the smallest of the three cities seemed to have more positive experiences with their local welfare office. For example, although the welfare assistance payments are the same from city to city in Ontario, I suspect that the level of administrative services might be more accessible and efficient in smaller communities. Of course, I cannot be sure with such a small sampling. However, unlike those participants living in the other much larger cities, all three participants

from the smaller community mentioned being able to sometimes show up at their local welfare office without an appointment and be seen right away.

In the next chapter, despite which city the participants live in, many of them share stories of their creative resistance against oppression and, as I argue, examples of their autonomy. The chapter also illustrates how caseworkers attempting to bypass SAMS's inflexible rules have discovered ways to subvert the system to help people who receive social assistance.

## Chapter 4: Small and Large Networks of Support: Acts of Everyday Resistance

*"I stood up for myself."* – Felicity

In this chapter, I begin with a definition and discussion of 'resistance' as it applies to caseworkers and those on social assistance. Second, I detail numerous examples where welfare recipients and applicants for social assistance have developed creative approaches to subvert the system when they feel it is necessary, demonstrating how those on social assistance have agency and are not passive in the face of the digital governance afforded by SAMS. Third, I discuss whether SAMS is "fair" and describe the steps necessary for applying to receive social assistance in Ontario, demonstrating how challenging it is to complete all of the steps required to be considered for social assistance. And in the last section, I share examples of how caseworkers have found workarounds to use their discretionary powers, something SAMS has largely eliminated, when the system makes it impossible for a caseworker to make a critical exception to the rules.

I argue that any activity through which a social worker or welfare recipient attempts to expose, repel, stop, abstain from, push against, impede or refuse to comply with, which includes any perceived type of 'disrespect' from the 'system,' may be understood as a form of resistance. I argue that welfare recipients and social assistance applicants find interesting, provocative, and wide-ranging ways to resist what is often experienced as a seamless system of oppression (McNaughton. et al., 2007; Bonnycastle, 2011; Olson, 2015).

By analyzing some of the stories from participants I interviewed for my study - their "narrated subjectivities" (Doucet, 2008) - including social workers and those who receive social assistance, this chapter illustrates the creative ways people will find ways to resist. I argue that some of the narratives I share from social workers in this chapter demonstrate ways they have

found to subvert the system when they perceive it as oppressive, non-responsive or limiting their autonomy in ways detrimental to their work with those who receive social assistance. As this chapter reveals, the actions of the caseworkers include numerous examples of them breaking the rules to assist welfare recipients and those who apply for social assistance. Additionally, with numerous examples of stories from those who receive social assistance, I argue that welfare recipients can exercise personal autonomy by sharing ways to subvert SAMS' regulations and governance with other welfare recipients. Finally, I also discuss how the lack of flexibility around SAMS software contributes to an environment that encourages - if not compels – many of the caseworkers to find workarounds that can subvert the system.

### **Small Victories: Subvert and Resist through Micro Networks of Resistance**

During the interviews with social workers and those on social assistance, it became clear that most, if not all, have developed both small and large ways to resist the system and work around some of the digital governance presented by SAMS. Despite what appears to be widespread assumptions and beliefs about people living in poverty possessing little personal autonomy, as I share in this chapter, many of those on social assistance have learned ways to resist and 'work' the system.

As Rose Weitz (200, p. 669) posits, "the term resistance remains loosely defined."

Jocelyn A. Hollander and Rachel L. Einwohner (2004) provide an examination of the literature on resistance and demonstrate how its characterizations diverge on two issues: recognition and intent. Two of Hollander and Einwohner's seven categories of resistance include overt and covert

resistance.<sup>11</sup> Overt resistance, for example, is not only intentional resistance but is also intended to be recognized as such (2004). The types of resistance that became apparent in this study also included 'oppositional culture' (Egan, 2006), a rejection of dominant views (Foucault, 1981; Scott, 1990). Examples include resisting by fighting the system by complaining to caseworkers.

Resistance strategies are methods that the participants – both social workers and those on social assistance – used to subvert some of the 'rules' of applying for, and living on, social assistance in Ontario. The study revealed two kinds of resistance strategies: overt and covert, though the majority of the examples in the study are covert forms of resistance. Hollander and Einwohner write that although both overt and covert forms of resistance are *intended* as resistance by the actor, only those acts of overt resistance are intended to be recognized as resistance by the target. In other words, covert acts are meant to be hidden and concealed, whereas overt are intended to be recognized as a form of resistance (p. 544). In the context of the power dynamics between a social worker or welfare office and someone on social assistance, it is not surprising that most acts of resistance are covert and intended to be hidden. The covert strategies discussed in this chapter included avoidance, withdrawal, passive-aggressiveness, sharing of knowledge, and 'tips' on subverting the system with fellow welfare recipients and caseworkers.

James Scott (1985) challenges the notion that 'resistance' is always revolutionary,' where a target is confronted directly and openly and easily recognized as resistance. As Scott argues, those in less powerful positions, including those who live in poverty, cannot resist openly

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<sup>11</sup> Hollander and Einwohner define and categorize resistance into seven distinct types. In addition to overt and covert types of resistance, the other five are: Unwitting resistance, Target-defined resistance, Externally-defined resistance, Missed resistance, and Attempted resistance (p. 544).

because of the potentially devastating consequences. Instead, to avoid the threat of retaliation, they perform what Scott describes as everyday forms of resistance because of their commonplace and ordinary nature. Scott notes, "Everyday acts of resistance make no headlines" (p. xvii). Though less confrontational, Scott argues that these low-key acts still qualify as resistance (p. 302). These low-key approaches can go unnoticed by the powerful, which helps protect those with less power from repression or negative consequences by masking the resistant nature of their activities. Examples of these small acts of resistance included, for instance, 'Dave' feigning ignorance and having a social worker explain something enough until they became visibly frustrated. This behaviour can be a way for those in lower status positions to covertly express resistance to the more powerful (Griffiths, 1998; Scott, 1985). Other examples of subverting the system includes resistance by tactical truth-telling, negotiated 'truths, or strategic truth-telling.

More significant acts of resistance shared by participants in the study include the sharing of knowledge with someone else in their circle of friends or family members on social assistance about how to best 'perform,' or answer questions from those in authority, including, for example, PTSD (post-traumatic-stress disorder) for a family doctor as a quick and less-invasive (of their privacy) method to become temporarily eligible for benefits under ODS. As discussed later in this chapter, a related example includes someone on social assistance advising another applicant to start the application online (instead of in person) to expedite obtaining an earlier appointment date with the welfare office without completing the process online.

As the following example illustrates, avoiding situations where one's identity may be disclosed is typical for people with devalued, negative, or stigmatized identities. Although forms of resistance vary, they provide marginalized groups, including those on social assistance, with a sense of empowerment. In addition to the important emotional benefits of resistance, it offers

practical ways to survive poverty. Avoidance strategies to keep one's welfare identity private are essential to some study participants. For example, Shanice, a young mother of three children, shared examples of how she obscures her 'welfare' identity.

I can tell when someone is judging me, looking at the stuff in my cart at Walmart, and deciding I must be on welfare. They look at my kids; then they look at me, then they get that look on their face that says they *know*. And that's when I fuck with them. I got a Walmart credit card, and trust me, they aren't that easy to get. I know they're always asking you at the check-out if you have one so they can get you to fill in the application on the spot if you don't. That way, the cashier gets a kickback. But I always stare them down, whoever is giving me the eye, while I whip it out and hand it over. *Shit*, I already got one of these!

Another way that Shanice attempts to hide or disguise her status as someone who receives social assistance is her refusal to accept any "special help" from her children's school.

They always, 'bout a billion times a year, they're hounding me for money for this and that. Can you please send a toonie for the Terry Fox marathon next week? Can you please send in your milk orders soon? Can you please send in your book orders, school pictures? And all that kind of stuff. They even have Pizza Fridays at the damn school. My kids get shy about it, but I tell them it's just stupid. And I send their teachers a note explaining we don't believe in none of that. My kids don't like it, but I don't have money for that stuff, and I also don't need to have their teachers being strange with me. The first time one of them tried to offer me "special assistance" or "special help," I put that to bed real fast. I keep telling the school, no thanks; my kids don't be needing pizza every Friday. We don't *believe* in that. There's a difference, you know?

As Michel de Certeau (1984) posits, even in the face of repressive structures and rules, regular people – including those outside of the power structures - will often find creative and even tactical ways to resist. When Shanice says, "We don't believe in that," she knows the school is likely to assume it is because of reasons of ethnicity or religion. By anchoring this in the kind of requirement of that institution to be respectful of the diversity of beliefs, the tactic worked, and the school backed down. Shanice brilliantly used the tools of that institution - of a liberal institution, which has to be respectful of the diversity of beliefs - to achieve her goal of not

having to participate in any of the numerous and costly school events while still maintaining her dignity. De Certeau notes that people use everyday situations to resist ruling structures and powers and will even repurpose those structures to their advantage. Similarly, those on social assistance, who are subject to the often, oppressive rules of SAMS, are not all passive actors in the face of software designed to govern them. Instead, like De Certeau's theory of bricolage, resisting by making do and using small warfare to fight back, they have found ways to work both outsides and inside of those repressive rules.

Since the mid-1980s, a body of literature has continued to develop the conception of resistance (Dean and Melrose 1996, 1997; Ewick and Silbey 1992, 1998, 2003; Jordan 1993; Gilliom 2001). Similar to earlier work on resistance, this later literature examines the power dynamics at play in the struggles of those who live with poverty. By highlighting their struggles and subversions, it sheds new light on those who live with poverty – and, more specifically, welfare recipients – and challenges, I argue, the image of the helpless, simple, passive, unsophisticated person who surrenders to hegemonic ideology. This form of individual resistance was lauded by scholars (Gilliom 2001; Sarat 1990; White 1990) for exposing "the inherent instability of seemingly hegemonic structures, that power is defused throughout society, and that there are multiple possibilities for resistance by oppressed people" (Handler 1992, pp. 697-698). Although this shift in focus raises questions about the transformative power of these individual acts to effect social and structural change, stories of resistance do not have to necessarily 'transform the system' to represent small, and perhaps even large, essential victories for the individuals involved.

In other words, the contention that struggles must take a collective form in order to generate change (Handler 1992; McCann and March 1996; Piven 2006; Tarrow 2011) fails to

recognize the incredible value and feelings of satisfaction and empowerment that can result from individual acts of resistance to those individuals. For example, one of the participants in the study, Felicity, is a single mother who became increasingly frustrated and angry over her caseworker constantly asking the same questions about whether the father of Felicity's baby had been in contact or dropped by for a visit. Finally, Felicity's boyfriend's behaviour during the labour and delivery was so concerning and troubling to the attending medical staff, someone from the hospital alerted the Children's Aid Society to report what they believed was an 'at risk infant.' The report triggered a series of follow-up home visits and interviews. that eventually resulted in Felicity doing something she said she had never done before.

I stood up for myself. For the first time! I never been someone to speak up when I know I'm being treated poorly, unfairly, but it all started off on a bad foot and got worse from there. I knew if I didn't start doing or saying something, I was gonna lose my son. Lose my Malcolm. That was never gonna happen. Nope. He's mine. [Felicity slaps the table as she repeats, very firmly] He's mine!

Three months after her son's birth, with the caseworker still showing up regularly, asking during each visit, when was the last time Felicity had had any contact with the baby's father, she decided not to hold back.

I told her, 'like I've told you already a million times, he ain't been around, he ain't gonna be around, and I haven't talked to him or nothing.' I was so sick of her always acting like he was coming around and maybe still talking to me like he did in the hospital and now in front of our son. I love my son. I would die for my son. What did she think I was gonna do? I asked her if she was ever gonna stop bugging me about that, and then she had the nerve to get mad at ME!

After her worker left that day, Felicity called the local welfare office and, with a trembling voice trying not to burst into tears, asked how to file a formal complaint against her caseworker and get a new one. "I couldn't believe how nice they were about it all on the phone," said Felicity. "You know, it was her word against mine, and I was sure they'd think I was just making shit up."

Eventually, Felicity was assigned a new caseworker. However, it was made clear that it was done to "facilitate her feeling more comfortable" and not an admission that Felicity's previous worker had done anything wrong or inappropriate. As Trudy Govier (1993) writes, "self-trust is a necessary condition of personal autonomy" (p. 99). On that day, Felicity trusted herself to be doing what she believed to be in her and her son's best interest. "I was worried at first, I might get into some kind of trouble or punished, you know, for speaking up? But I'm glad I did now. I was so sick of my stomach always hurting, worried I was going to lose my son."

Elaine M. Power (2005) states that everyone, including those on social assistance, "have a right to contest the evils that are done to us in the name of government" (p. 657) and now, "under our current neo-liberal form of government" which offers more and more "repressive disciplinary regimes to govern those who have been constructed as not having the means to govern themselves" (p. 658). This contention is perhaps more imperative than ever. However, how does someone on social assistance, painfully aware and worried that their eligibility for social assistance can be challenged at any time, 'resist' if they believe they are risking everything? The intersection of vulnerability and welfare benefits presents an enormous risk for those who attempt to resist or subvert the rules and governance of SAMS. For Felicity, it was not just the threat of losing the social assistance that made her believe it was too risky to resist what she perceived to be an invasive, offensive, and threatening approach by her caseworker. Instead, it was the risk of losing custody of her son to the state.

Fear and distrust within the welfare system among recipients is reinforced and fortified by welfare policies that appear to be fluid and under constant change (Garthwaite, 2014; Traustadottir & Rice, 2012; Gewurtz & Lahey et al., 2019). Further, as Dean Herd and Andrew Mitchell (2005) and others have written (Henman and Adler, 2001; Piven and Cloward, 1971),

administrative practices in welfare offices "have historically" (p. 65) created numerous barriers and obstacles for those who need the system. For example, people can be denied social assistance for reasons that are unrelated to their financial eligibility, simply because of bureaucratic issues around not supplying all of the information necessary to fill out an application (Pottie and Sossin, 2003; Sossin, 2003). In other words, Felicity's fears around the constant threat of being denied or cut off of social assistance are well-grounded. However, as this chapter illustrates, those on social assistance often find ways to push back against a system they feel routinely shows a lack of respect for their intelligence, dignity, and personhood. This includes, as Felicity demonstrated, exercising agency - even when it feels risky to do so - by utilizing an official complaint mechanism already in place when they perceive something to be unfair.

Michel Foucault examines how power is present in the smallest, apparently most inconsequential, human interactions. He views power as embedded in the everyday lives of all citizens and that "power is exercised rather than possessed," arguing that power always co-exists with the possibility of resistance (Foucault, 1977, p. 26). For example, sometimes that 'resistance' is expressed through a simple act of disrespect to the person in authority who is behaving in a way perceived as part of an ongoing pattern of disrespectful behaviour towards the welfare recipient. Resistance by people on social assistance and their awareness of it varies, of course. Some seek to resist SAMS governance through informal networks of support, teaching each other ways to subvert the rules by sharing their examples of success. Similar to what De Certeau (1984) writes:

Many everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.) are tactical in character. And so are, more generally, many "ways of operating": victories of the "weak" over the "strong" (whether the strength be that

of powerful people or the violence of things or of an imposed order, etc.), clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things (p. xix).

Some of these acts of subversion and resistance shared by those on social assistance are what De Certeau describes as "ways of operating" and constitute "the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate" and users "make (*bricolent*) innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt to their own interests and their own rules" (p. xiv). As mentioned earlier, Griffiths (1998) and Scott (1985) posit that the use of humour can be a way those in a lower status can demonstrate agency and present as a form of micro resistance. I believe this following example demonstrates both disrespect *and* humour as tactical resistance.

At 46 years of age, Dave has been on and off social assistance for most of his adult life due to an injury sustained during a loading mishap while working as a longshoreman. It means Dave lives with chronic pain. He has moved across Canada, from Newfoundland to Nova Scotia, Alberta to Manitoba, finally settling down in Ontario six years ago. Dave occasionally finds temporary work as a mover or house painter. However, the pain from his old injury will usually flare up again, forcing him to quit working for several months until, as he says, he can get the pain under control again. Dave describes his experience applying for social assistance in Ontario as "that old fucking dance."

After sitting down with a social worker at the local welfare office, Dave felt unable to raise any personal matters that might affect his ability to obtain full-time employment. Although the welfare application system is experienced one-to-one in welfare offices, the open-plan office space worked against Dave's disclosure of sensitive matters because it did not provide a private

environment for their conversation. In addition to his back injury, Dave was diagnosed eight years ago with having bipolar disorder.

I felt pretty exposed sitting there, like an idiot, knowing anybody and everybody could hear every damn word I was saying. Half the time, I couldn't listen to what she (the caseworker) was saying, and I know I was probably getting on her every last nerve when I had to keep saying, 'Sorry? What's that?' and make her keep repeating herself. I think she thought I was just messing with her. [Dave laughs] Okay, maybe I was messing with her a bit.

Like fifteen of the other participants interviewed for the study, Dave believes several of the questions asked during the application process are insulting and overly invasive. In addition, some questions seem to lack relevance.

Yeah, they're pretty nosy. Some of those questions made no sense. Like, they're asking just cuz they can and want to make you talk. Force you to give stuff up. I mean, who gives a shit where I went to high school? Why does that matter? How come they don't ask about shit that matters? Christ, I hate it when I have to apply again, having to tell all my business. But my mother can't help me anymore, she's broke now.

Dave believes some of the questions are designed to embarrass and punish him for applying for social assistance.

I hated having to say I didn't go to high school, and when I started to explain why, she [the caseworker] cut me off, saying it don't matter, and then asked her next stupid question about what I was doing instead. Like, how the fuck do I know? How the fuck can I remember that far back? I wanted to ask her what the hell was she doing eighteen or more years ago, right? And if the answer don't matter, why ask the question, right? Next time a caseworker asks me about high school, I'm gonna say I graduated from the school of hard knocks. [Dave laughs] That's what I have on Facebook.

When asked what questions he believes are missing from the intake interview, Dave pauses for several minutes, then says:

How 'bout asking me when's the best time to call me? Best time to reach me?  
How 'bout asking me how my back is doing? If I need help finding a family doctor to help me with that? [Dave starts to get louder, raising his voice in anger

as he continues] No, you want to ask me the questions that makes ME stupid, you stupid bitch!

Dave takes a huge breath, then apologises for "getting loud." As we continued to talk, Dave kept going back to his "getting loud," apologising again and again. While not going into detail about why he was so upset with himself for "getting loud," the implication was that losing control, and perhaps, coming across as threatening to me as a woman, was extremely upsetting to Dave.

The truth is, they always want you to kiss their ass while you're sitting there, feeling like an idiot, just wanting to punch shit. Near the end of the meeting, the meeting with the worker [Dave starts to laugh] I needed to fart so bad, I thought I was going to shit my pants. I finally couldn't help it, I had to let it rip. I don't feel that bad, though, [Dave is now laughing so hard, he's struggling to talk] I figured I might have had to kiss her ass, but she had to smell mine!

I spent quite a bit of time with Dave and his two roommates, forming a quick bond over endless cups of coffee. I feel comfortable around people like Dave, having grown up in similar circumstances and around other people just like him. After sharing that a single mom raised me on welfare with five sisters, Dave seemed to settle in and get more comfortable with me and the interview process. When I also disclosed where I had grown up (an inner-city neighbourhood of Montréal), Dave, who was familiar with the neighbourhood, joked with me for a few minutes about which of us had grown up in the 'tougher' neighbourhood. Once Dave reached a certain level of trust with me, he stopped making jokes and performing, I believe, for his roommates.

I've had mostly positive experiences with my government support. Like, I can't say enough about my disability [payments]. My disability has given me the stability I've never had my entire life. Well, I had stability growing up with my family. I had a great family growing up, but as an adult in my life, I had certain emotions I couldn't, control and one day, I was off my nut, and I went to the hospital. [Dave's voice is breaking as he quietly cries, then pauses until he regains control]. That's when I found out I'm bipolar. I've been stable in this apartment now for almost three years. My rent's never been late; my bills are all paid. I have food in the cupboard and fridge, and like for years, I was drifting from job to job, hurting myself, and collected welfare in between.

As the following example demonstrates, micro-networks of resistance include sharing information, tactics, and experience among those who have lived through the experience of applying for social assistance with those who are new to the 'game.'

Karen is a chain smoker, lighting a new cigarette with the one she has just finished before crushing it into the ashtray. She has struggled financially for all of her adult life, and although she was briefly on welfare at nineteen, she was eager to work and "get off the welfare rolls" as quickly as possible. When she finally landed what she referred to as her "dream job" at a nursing home, Karen felt she had finally found the job she would "keep for life. Good pay, doing good work, and the old folks love me." However, after working at the home for less than two months, when a male patient became sexually aggressive towards her, Karen started experiencing insomnia, weight loss, and bouts of depression. She also started missing some of her shifts at work when she just could "not pull herself out of bed," placing her "dream job" at serious risk. Karen never revealed to anyone at work what was going on or made any complaint about the patient, saying she was just too embarrassed to talk about it.

Even though I knew I was gonna lose my job, get fired, I couldn't shower or even brush my teeth sometimes for days. I just had no, no energy for nothing. I couldn't even watch TV no more. When that old guy would do his – thing - I just didn't know what to do. I'd be like paralyzed. And honestly, it was kind of funny. Seriously, it really was. He's just an old pig, wanting some stupid reaction out of me. I should have just slapped him, and it would have been done, the old fucker. But if I had slapped him, I would have lost my job. So yeah, I felt stupid. I just didn't know what to do.

When a close and trusted childhood friend, someone Karen described as knowing all of her "secrets," explained to Karen that she was experiencing PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) as the result of a childhood sexual assault from an elderly family friend, Karen said she suddenly "connected all the dots." When the friend said she should apply for short-term ODS, at first,

Karen would not hear of it. However, when she realized she would probably lose her job if she did not get at least a doctor's note explaining her "situation," Karen felt she had no choice. Her friend, who has been on ODS for several years due to a similar case of abuse during childhood, explained how it "all works" to Karen.

She told me exactly what to do and what to say. [Karen laughs] First, do not wash for a good week. Don't wash your hair or your muff for a week before you go see the doctor. Don't brush your teeth, don't wear any nice clothes, like nothing anything designer. Leave your good purse at home. And I didn't do nothing, just like she told me. [Karen snorts with laughter for a few seconds] Didn't wash, didn't come my hair, didn't do nothing. And boy, did I get a beautiful letter from my doctor, haha. 'That girl smells like skank. Never eating tuna again, haha.'

As I laughed with Karen over her comment about not washing her "muff" for a week, the feeling of the interview abruptly changed from warm to chilly, and I realized I had made a terrible mistake by laughing. Mortified, I realized Karen thought I was laughing at her. I managed only to make things worse when I tried to apologise and explain I was not laughing at her, but the situation, but that switched Karen's mood to anger, and she told me to "fuck off." I shut up and let Karen be upset with me. As she sat at the table and stewed in silence, I just waited. After I apologised again, saying, "Seriously, I'm an asshole. I'm so sorry," she stood up and dumped her ashtray into a small garbage can in the kitchen, then sat back down at the table with me.

Yeah, that was the biggest tip, to not be clean. Don't make no eye contact, look all messy and, she told me a few ideas about how to act, too. It was all good. I don't have to go back to work for almost a year now, thank God. And this time around [on social assistance], I only have to resubmit my stuff online. No meeting with snotty bitches, anyone judging me. I got to do it all on my computer from home.

Karen suddenly asked if "maybe we shouldn't include that part?" I knew she meant the part about not bathing. When I asked why she should regret sharing a story that sounded like a great way for her not to get into any of the personal backstories of why she was struggling as she was, that

seemed to resonate. "Yeah! Fuck it. I didn't want to have to cry for that doctor just to be able to take, you know, a damn breather at home until they get that old guy at work all sorted out."

Karen's support and 'coaching' from another welfare recipient is an example of the micro-networks of communication - about how to 'game the system' by using assumptions about your class position and cleanliness to get the outcomes you desire - and to do so in a very conscious way, and how that knowledge is transmitted among people.

When stigmatized groups reject negative social constructions, they express dissatisfaction with dominant ideals. Irving Goffman (1963) wrote about "the own," which he defined as "the first set of sympathetic others is of course those who share the stigma" (p. 20). Some of the participants in the study felt an affinity with other people on social assistance, often offering assistance and informal guidelines from personal experiences on how to maximize access to any benefits available. In doing this, they oppose the dominant culture by assisting each other in fighting the system when they feel they are being treated unjustly, which are examples of overt resistance through informal micro-networks. Some of those are kinship-based networks, some of them are friendship-based networks, and some – as discussed later in this chapter- in the case of social workers, are employment *and* friendship-based networks, or political-based networks. These micro-networks were often incredibly productive. Although these networks are not massive or formal, most were not just individuals acting alone; they had somebody else they were learning from, interacting with, talking to, and bouncing things off.

Although some of the people in the study sample accepted, ignored, or adapted to harmful or unfair treatment, many also resisted. Several participants shared examples of resistance that included, for instance, rehearsing answers to anticipated questions from caseworkers while applying for social assistance out of a conviction that the system was unfair or

prepared to mistreat them. These acts of resistance do not always come easy to those who feel compelled to 'game' the system. In the following example, a mother believes she may need to compromise a close and trusting relationship with her daughter to obtain the extra financial support she needs. However, her act of covert resistance means rehearsing and preparing her daughter for an encounter with social services that she worries will potentially hurt her daughter emotionally.

Nancy decided her adult daughter, who has intellectual disabilities, needed to apply for welfare. Nancy made this decision because of concern about what would happen when she would no longer help her daughter financially due to her increasing financial limitations. Nancy explained how she prepared her daughter for the initial meeting with a caseworker to determine her eligibility.

It was getting so expensive, trying to get her the extra food she needed. She's also a brittle diabetic, and I have to be careful what she eats. That's another reason why she can't live on her own. She can't cook. And she'll eat too much crap on her own, all the time, if I didn't watch what she's eating and hiding the junk from her. She doesn't know really how money works, either.

Nancy decided to claim to the welfare office that her daughter would be getting her own place soon, as apparently, this would mean an increase in her monthly welfare check. Nancy said she had no actual real intention of making her daughter move out, and it seemed very important to her that I believe that.

She looks like a grown woman, but trust me, inside, she's still just a kid. I sat her down and told her outright: I told her I was going to say whatever I needed to for her to get the help she needed. I didn't want to hurt her feelings, but she needed more money for food cause she's a diabetic and keeps ending up in the ER when she crashes cause she's not eating right. Fresh fruit and vegetables are more expensive than Humpty Dumpty. And she needs me to stand there and make sure she eats it, too. It hurt me to say she was retarded and not too smart about her food to the intake worker. But what was worse was when the intake worker says to me,

right in front of her, 'So you're choosing to abandon her? Your own child?' Later, my daughter asks me what 'abandon' mean.

Nancy says she patiently explained to her daughter what she needed to say and how she needed to act to get what she needed. To help her daughter understand the importance and value of her 'performance' in front of the social worker and what was at stake, Nancy felt it was critically important to be as clear and explicit as possible. It was clear that Nancy felt conflicted about risking hurting her daughter's feelings to get her what she believes she needs to survive, but not at all conflicted about 'working the system' she considers unfair and even cruel.

The lies we tell, even when it breaks out kid's heart. I told her what she needed to do, but I honestly don't think she realized how harsh I was gonna be. But I told her they needed to be the ones to take care of her, not me. I can't help. I barely make my own rent. So, I told her not to take anything she'd hear me saying to heart. That I don't mean it. That I wouldn't put her out on the street, even though that's what I told that bitch when she kept saying like I was a terrible mother who doesn't love her own kid, even though she's all grown now, how could I abandon my own child? I wanted to punch her in her fucking face.

Although fighting the system even by covert means still comes with substantial risk, most of the participants in the study, both caseworkers and those on social assistance, said they felt they had no choice. Most, if not all, of the strategies included tactics such as half-truths and refusing to comply with formal and informal rules. Nevertheless, all of the participants (welfare recipients and caseworkers) insisted that untruthfulness is sometimes necessary. As I discuss in the next section, the application process for social assistance, particularly the online interface, is time-consuming, often confusing, and challenging. However, as I also discuss in the next section, the software programmers I interviewed for the study believe that one of the advantages of SAMS is the fact that it *does* lack 'flexibility,' arguing that this adds to the system's 'fairness' and helps make it more objective.

## **Is SAMS 'Fair'? How to Apply for Social Assistance in Ontario**

On the Ministry of Community and Social Services website, SAMS is defined as a program intended "to help people in temporary financial need to find sustainable employment and achieve self-reliance through the provision of effective, integrated employment services and financial assistance" (Social Assistance in Ontario, p. 1). One of the rules of eligibility includes that you must be willing to "make efforts to find, prepare for an keep a job" and "other adult members of your household must also agree to participate in employment assistance activities" (p. 1). The application process for SAMS can be started online.

However, all applicants must eventually appear in person at the welfare office to have a caseworker verify their identity and documents required for receiving social assistance. Although SAMS is a hybrid system, embodied, and at a distance, after an applicant has started the process, whether by phone, in person, or online, an OW caseworker will eventually contact the applicant to schedule an in-person meeting. The caseworker will remind them to bring specific documents to the meeting, including information about all members of the applicants' household, regardless of the applicant's relationship to that person. As one single mom, Tiffany, who lives on and off with her boyfriend, said, "They seem to think he must be paying something or giving you money. So, they can fuck right off. It ain't nobody's business who's living at my place or sleeping in my bed."

Eighteen of the people in the study said they found the online application process hard to navigate, often getting kicked off the site before completing all the steps. In addition, fourteen said they were unable to complete the application online as once they were not able to fill in one of the drop boxes, the system would advise them to call the office for "assistance." An additional concern was the sheer volume of information that had to be entered into the application online.

As one frustrated applicant, Gail, who finally gave up and just called the welfare office, said, “It would have taken me forever to do that shit online, even if I knew how to. And who the hell even knows half the shit they're asking about? My neighbour told me to fill it in just a bit, and somebody would call me. It was so much faster that way!” Another applicant, Matt, who also gave up in frustration, described the online process as working a "fucking full-time job."

I decided to go online and complete as many steps applying for social assistance as possible to experience the online system. I understood immediately why some found it confusing, time-consuming, invasive, and frustrating. I approached the online application process as though I were a single parent of one teenaged child and quickly realized that as soon as you are unable to fill in a dropdown (perhaps because you do not have the information), there are no other available options to allow you to skip a step and move forward. For example, as this cut and paste from the SAMS website shows:

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## Chapter 1: Before you start the application

**You'll need the following information to complete the application:**

- current address
- housing costs

- list of expenses (e.g. child care and disability-related costs)

Also, for each family member in your household, you'll need:

- date of birth
- status in Canada
- total income
- list of assets and their values

You should also try to have the Social Insurance Numbers and Ontario Health Cards for each family member.

We suggest you [review this chart for additional details](#) on the information you'll need to provide, as well as the types of documents you'll need to present when you meet with a caseworker to discuss your application.

## **1.1 Select the application you wish to apply for**

Please click the link below to start the process to apply for social assistance

**Online application for social assistance**

How does one even begin to make a list of "assets" and assign "their values"? I suggest this is no easy task. Further, there is an assumption that every adult family member will be willing, and able, to cooperate with sharing all of the personal information required in regards to income, list of assets, expenses and more. As it states online, before starting the application for social assistance, "the results you get will be based on the information you provide." At first glance, the list seems reasonable enough; however, as I tried to assemble the lengthy list of the personal information I would need to provide before being able to proceed with the next steps in the

application process, I realized it would involve much time and for someone under duress or in a stressful life situation, finding and typing out the numerous pages of personal information this list required, could be daunting. However, as it states on the website, to find out if you are even eligible for any social assistance programs is a requirement of the system.

Below is a cut and paste from the list of required documents the website encourages one to have 'on hand' before filling in the online application for social assistance:

## Applying for Social Assistance

### Chapter 1: List of documents you will need

<b>What you need</b>	<b>For example:</b>
Name and date of birth from an official government document	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• birth certificate, or</li> <li>• baptismal certificate, or</li> <li>• immigration papers, or</li> <li>• landing document, or</li> <li>• passport</li> </ul>
Information on status in Canada, including the date you came to Canada (if you were not born in Canada)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Canadian Citizenship card, or</li> <li>• Permanent Resident card, or</li> <li>• Record of Landing, or</li> <li>• passport</li> </ul>

<p>Exact total amount of income (money that you and the members of your family receive), including start date and amount for each item</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• tax return, or income tax Notice of Assessment for the last year (for family members who are 18 years or older)</li> <li>• pay stubs (for family members who are 18 years or older)</li> <li>• statements from Canada Pension Plan (CPP) or other pension programs</li> <li>• Employment Insurance (EI)</li> <li>• Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB)</li> <li>• Old Age Security (OAS), Guaranteed Income Security (GIS) or Guaranteed Annual Income Security (GAINS)</li> <li>• student loans</li> <li>• child or spousal support agreements</li> <li>• sponsorship payments</li> <li>• any other type of income</li> </ul>
<p>Exact total amount of assets, including value and date purchased for each item</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cash</li> <li>• bank books or statements (including name of bank, transit number, account number and date account was opened)</li> <li>• life insurance policies</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• copies of savings bonds</li> <li>• statements for Registered Retirement Savings Plan (RRSP), Registered Disability Savings Plan (RDSP), Guaranteed Income Certificates (GIC), bonds or any other investments</li> <li>• etc.</li> </ul>
Information on other assets, including value and date purchased for each item	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• property you own, other than where you live</li> <li>• vehicle(s) you own</li> <li>• other valuables including jewellery</li> <li>• trusts</li> <li>• pre-paid funerals</li> <li>• etc.</li> </ul>
Exact total amount you pay for your housing (what you pay for where you live)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• rent</li> <li>• board and lodging</li> <li>• utility bills</li> <li>• heating bills</li> <li>• mortgage agreement</li> <li>• property tax statement</li> <li>• home insurance premium statement</li> </ul>
Employment information for family members with jobs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• start date of employment</li> <li>• employer name</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• monthly income from work</li> </ul>
Exact or estimated child care expenses (if applicable)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the amount you pay each month for unlicensed (e.g., babysitter) and/or licensed (day care centre) child care</li> <li>• extended day (school) program fees</li> </ul>
Exact or estimated disability related work expenses (if applicable)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the amount you pay each month for disability related items or services so you can work or participate in a training program. For example, attendant care, sign language interpreter services, specialized equipment, etc.</li> </ul>
Exact or estimated specialized expenses for a child with a disability (if applicable)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the amount you pay every year for items or services for a child with a disability. For example, transportation to medical appointments, special equipment or clothing, home repairs, etc.</li> </ul>

Now you are ready to fill out the online application."

Note the final sentence above: *Now you are ready to fill out the online application.*

Some of the questions offered only a "yes" or "no" response, including the question, "Are you in an abusive relationship?" And, "Do you feel safe?" As one participant, Tiffany, said, "Whose gonna give that stuff up on a computer?" Previously, under the former system, STDm, the

caseworker could have nuanced an applicant's answer to the question, for example, of whether the applicant feels safe or not. Instead, SAMS demands either a simple 'yes/no' answer, with no possibility for the caseworker to input an applicant's possible response of "sometimes, depending on certain circumstances," and then list and share those circumstances. Several steps in the online process include forcing you to agree, by clicking a small box, that you accept that all of the information collected about you will be kept by the Ministry of Community and Social Services and your local social services offices:

Under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act and the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. This information is subject to access and privacy provisions of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act and the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

Although I clicked the small box, "I am the applicant, and I agree to collection and use of my information as described above," I admit I was uncertain about what exactly I had agreed to. However, I would not have been able to proceed with my application had I not clicked the box, enabling me to select "NEXT" on the lower right side of the computer screen to go to the next step. This is an example of the difference between applying for social assistance via SAMS instead of going directly to the welfare office and consulting with a social worker immediately and then receiving their support throughout each step for applying. Although some participants reported appreciating the extra privacy they believe SAMS afforded them and the convenience and time savings from starting the application online, everyone complained about having to eventually still attend an in-person meeting at the welfare office. I finally stopped my application when I reached the stage where I had to start sharing some of my personal information, including my social insurance number.

Although eighteen of the twenty-welfare recipient participant in the study had complaints about the online application process, many also said it was still faster to attempt to apply online, even with an incomplete application, than to apply in person. "They just call you in about a week and help you do it on the phone, then they give you an appointment for the office meeting," Matt reported. Another participant, Tiffany, gained insight into which performance of self would be best for that meeting, saying how just looking at the online application gave her a good indication of the kinds of information she would have to share eventually with the welfare office. "And then I could, you know, before I go down there, give some thoughts to what I'd wanna say, you know?" For Tiffany, the online application process was like a 'trial run' and a way to 'perfect' her application after viewing and considering what she believed the welfare office valued. "It's a good head's up of what they want." Tiffany also consulted informally with other single moms in her apartment building complex, "asking around for you know, what not to maybe say." These informal networks of support offer further support and guidance about which performance of self needs to be played into when having to show up at the welfare office.

Caseworkers share similar frustrations with the application system, especially with SAMS' limited choices when completing an application. This includes the system's lack of flexibility for less common or unusual circumstances and not permitting exceptions even when a caseworker considers it necessary. In addition, caseworker Trudy says the rules of SAMS, and just welfare policies in general, necessitate untruthfulness. "Sometimes you just have to bend the rules if you want to do the right thing." Trudy has 'bent' those rules on numerous occasions when she has felt the rules simply did not make sense. "I've been at this a long time, and with all of the new structure and rigidity of SAMS now in place, sometimes you have no choice but to, well, bend those rules a bit."

Although algorithms are now a part of everything we do, SAMS' lack of transparency is of particular concern to marginalised and vulnerable communities, such as those who rely on social assistance. For example, the caseworkers interviewed for this study expressed frustration over what they believe are failures in the system to recognize some applicants as being eligible for assistance. This has led to caseworkers feeling compelled to create workarounds with SAMS and bypass some of the 'rules,' suggesting the system almost forces the need for workarounds and learning ways to 'game' the system. Nancy and her daughter with special needs is an example of the predicament of many of those on social assistance. In order to keep their benefits, they need to come up with creative ways to engage in deceitful behaviour. Some of them resist the standardization imposed on them by engaging in behaviour that allows them to maintain control over their own lives, to safeguard and maximize their benefits. These covert strategies of resistance, of fighting the system, demonstrate again that even people who are oppressed often have ways to express personal autonomy. Scott (1985) argues that everyday resistance by 'powerless' people who do not have the resources to resist will do so in less obvious ways, such as avoidance. This covert resistance is a way of avoiding detection and, therefore, punishment. Even if caseworkers eventually recognize some of these examples of covert resistance, they may not define them as 'resistance' if they lack a 'rule' in place that could be used against those on social assistance.

However, as discussed in the next section, these micro-networks of resistance include caseworkers directly involved with SAMS. Some shared numerous examples in their interviews about their unique (and technically illegal) specific workarounds to subvert the computer system. These workarounds are used when the system's inflexibility prevents a caseworker from awarding support to those applicants, they believe *should* receive support.

### **The *Cheat Sheet*: How SAMS 'Forces' Caseworkers to 'Game' the System**

Under the strict rules of SAMS software, homeless people are often limited or deemed ineligible for financial support since they usually lack the necessary documents required to provide proof of identity and place of residence. However, there are numerous ways to work around and 'game' the system if a caseworker decides it is more important to help someone needing assistance than strictly following the 'rules.' The actions of the caseworkers interviewed for the study include numerous examples of them breaking the rules to assist welfare recipients whenever possible, often putting their jobs and themselves at professional risk by doing so. The actions of these case-workers contradict some of the most popular negative stereotypes about social workers.

These common stereotypes - held not only by many of those on social assistance but also the general public - including social workers as being baby snatchers, self-serving bureaucrats, ineffective do-gooders offering only a 'band-aid' solution that will never lead to systemic change, and uncaring bullies who work for the state and lack compassion for welfare recipients (Aldridge, 1990; Bowen, 2016; Davenport & Davenport, 1997; Morgaine, 2014; Reisch, 2002; Specht and Courtney, 1994). The depiction of the social work profession found in the news and entertainment media tends to focus on stories when major failures occur in the system, particularly around child abuse and child welfare. These mainstream news stories often highlight and bring these 'failures' to the public's attention after a child in the welfare system dies from an extreme case of abuse (Freeman and Valentine, 2004; Neate, 2000; Franklin and Parton, 2001; Wroe, 1998).

For example, a study revealed that the depiction of social workers in movies is nearly always negative and, according to the study authors, social workers in movies are nearly always

portrayed as being "incompetent, have a tendency to engage in sexual relationships with clients, mostly work with people living in poverty, and mostly function to maintain the societal status quo" (Freeman and Valentine, 2004, p. 159). The profession is also often denigrated in the press, "it feeds into the well-established narrative that social work is a sinister arm of the state, focuses on the systemic removal of children above all else" (Mason, 2018, p.2). This stereotype of the social worker as incompetent, judgmental, and reluctant to intervene in the private life of a family, even when it would mean protecting a child from a suspected abusing adult, is one that persists in the public's mind (Franklin and Parton, 1991) in large part because of the media profession's representation in both print and movies. Some critiques of the welfare system unintentionally produce the stereotype of the social worker as a judgmental and simple agent in their rush to be critical of the system as a whole (Davenport & Davenport, 1997; Gibelman, 2000; Heraud, 1970; Joyner, 2005; Kaufman & Raymond, 1996; LeCroy & Stinson, 2004; McGowan & Walsh, 2000; Simpkin, 1979).

This negative image ignores the sheer complexity of social workers' daily decisions and undermines their work to help children and families in crisis. This image also fails to recognize that, despite the stereotype of social workers as incompetent and judgmental, and being portrayed in a negative light by the media (Ayre, 2001; Aldridge, 1990; Kitzen, 2000; Franklin and Parton, 1991; Jahan and Rahman, 2015) social workers have always looked for ways to bend the rules to assist those on social assistance, as did those in the study. My study challenges this representation of social workers as unfair and demonstrates the complex ways that social workers also feel vulnerable in the contemporary moment. Social workers are struggling to survive in terms of their practice. However, they are also trying to continue to find ways – as they always have – to best support welfare recipients in a context where the

automation of their labour restricts their autonomy and professional judgment. As stated earlier, the caseworkers interviewed for the study will often risk their jobs and even break the law when they decide it is necessary to help.

Megan had been a caseworker at a welfare office in a major Ontario city for over six years when SAMS was first rolled out. As with all of the caseworkers in her office, Megan underwent what she described as an "intense" two-week training session to learn how to use the new software system. Megan quickly learned that under SAMS, caseworkers have very little autonomy when it comes to trying to override a decision built into the programming, regardless of how much they might believe that decision is, in their view, wrong. For example, SAMS continuously monitors eligibility. Unlike the former system, caseworkers cannot cancel, refuse, override or negotiate with SAMS' decisions, regardless of a caseworker's opinion that an exception needs to be made. Megan says it drives her "crazy sometimes."

We now have very little discretionary powers. It frustrates the hell out a lot of us because sometimes you know SAMS is making the wrong call. I had a homeless guy come in one time who desperately needed some new shoes. His feet were pretty much ruined. But when he couldn't tell me the name of his former high school, for example, something SAMS demands, he wasn't eligible for financial support. Which is ridiculous, of course. Under the old system, I could have cut him a check to cover those shoes for sure.

However, Megan was able to help the person by consulting with an unofficial 'cheat sheet' of back doors to SAMS' software program. This 'cheat sheet' has been developed by caseworkers to draw on when SAMS does not permit a caseworker to offer assistance to someone they believe is eligible. However, the system refuses to recognize them as such. The 'cheat sheet' is a small handwritten notebook that many caseworkers in Megan's office have contributed to over the last few years, filled with handwritten notes of workarounds, and many in the office often consult. Though technically not allowed, Megan says this unofficial guidebook is "absolutely necessary"

and adds that she used to spend half her workdays on the phone when SAMS was first released, just waiting for one of the 'expert consultants' hired to solely assist with computer glitches, including those 'glitches' that might not allow benefits to some that should receive them.

SAMS is not going to allow you to receive benefits if the software program decides you aren't eligible. Sometimes a client is refused a certain type of assistance, and it's not always because of a 'glitch,' but, actually, just, well, *rules*. Stupid ones, yes, but still, they don't allow me to help some people who actually really need help. I can stand there all day yelling at my computer, "YOU'RE WRONG!" But it isn't going to change anything.

Megan says the unofficial guidebook was informally developed over two years by a group of frustrated caseworkers who grew tired of waiting hours for the consultant to get back to them and learning that SAMS disagreed with the case workers' assessment.

This is part of the problem of taking away the human element in this chain of decision-making. SAMS isn't looking at some homeless guy's feet and worrying he might lose some toes or maybe even one of his feet. SAMS wants those blanks filled in on the application process... all of those blank spaces. And SAMS doesn't trust us, on the front line, to decide it's wrong sometimes and allow us to override it.

When asked if all or most of the caseworkers in her office contribute and consult with this private 'guide' to how to override the software system, Megan said, "absolutely not. Some workers, okay, a lot of workers, seem to think it's better not having to make as many individual calls or decisions. And of course, some probably worry about losing their job if they were ever to get caught." It was important to Megan to make it clear that the guidebook is informal, unofficial, and not widely shared. She also seemed uncomfortable with my referring to it as 'guidebook,' saying that made it sound more "organized" than what it is, "that it's just a bunch of handwritten notes." However, when asked if she knew if other welfare offices had similar unofficial guides being shared among caseworkers, she reluctantly admitted that she is aware of "at least a few" other workers in other cities across the province that have also discovered

similar, if not the same ways, to foil the computer system when necessary and share these 'ways' with others.

I'm not saying everyone does this or even that most do it. I think it's a very individual choice. I don't know what the union would do if one of us got caught doing this. They hate SAMS, so I'm pretty sure they'd fight for us. I think so. But I know that for me, I couldn't sleep at night knowing someone truly did need something, and I had to tell them, 'Oh, so sorry. The computer says we can't help you.' That's just wrong.

When asked if she considers what she and other workers who have found ways to override the algorithms are committing a form of 'welfare fraud,' Megan became upset, and I immediately regretted having asked the question in the way I did.

No, of course not! These are people we would have always been able to help under the old system. This is a weakness, flaw of SAMS. I'm not doing anything I wouldn't have been able to do prior to this new software. Would I be in trouble if I got caught? Sure. Do I worry about being caught? Of course. I don't want to lose my job.

When I asked Megan if she had ever broken any of the 'rules' to help someone on social assistance under the old system, after thinking about it for a few minutes, Megan finally laughed and admitted she had.

Sure, of course. But I think it was easier to do before. We used to have a certain amount of discretionary funds in the office, for example, to give to anyone we thought needed help. Like a mom running out of diapers before her next check was due. Or someone needing a bit of cash for a school outing for one of her kids. But now? Under SAMS? You have to explain the Why, the How, the Who, and, God forbid if this is the second time, you're trying to give extra help. It simply won't allow you to!

SAMS' algorithms are based on the Ministry of Community and Social Service's mandate for who is eligible and under what conditions. For example, OW is all about making the applicant find a job as quickly as possible, any job, and the system is designed to push the recipient of social assistance in that direction, regardless of labour market conditions at the time. This means

that under SAMS' rules, the welfare system is set up to inhibit people from applying for benefits and pushing them to remove themselves from the state support as quickly as possible by reinforcing ideologies of individualism and self-reliance (Gilens, 1999). Welfare recipients are, in essence, punished for their dependence.

However, caseworkers like Megan realize that no matter how much the welfare system subscribes to the ideals of work and independence, welfare recipients are often unable to achieve financial self-sufficiency due to job market realities and institutional barriers. This understanding is also shared by Trudy, a caseworker in another large city in Ontario who has been a social worker for over twenty years. Like Megan, she has discovered ways to bypass some of what she refers to simply as "SAMS Blocks." For Trudy, this often consists of offering guidance in how to answer specific standard questions the 'right' way when it comes to any welfare recipient that she believes should be eligible for assistance for a more extended period than what they might perhaps usually be; under "SAMS Blocks." Trudy is helping to shape the recipient into performing the 'ideal' welfare recipient.

Sometimes I'll have someone flat outright say "nope" after I've asked them if they've been looking for work or not. I know why they haven't because there isn't any work right now for them. But they need to play the game. I can't type "nope" into the computer. If they want to continue to receive benefits, I need to type "Yes," and then provide some examples, and the 'right' examples, of where they've applied to and so on.

Trudy says this usually occurs at the three-month mark when a welfare recipient needs to meet with her and talk about what they have done to look for work since their last three-month check-in. "It's called Ontario *Works*," says Trudy. "Which means they need to demonstrate that they have been actively *looking for work*. OW isn't intended as a permanent situation... for them to continue to receive welfare." Trudy thinks it is unfair to treat everyone receiving OW benefits

the same way. However, saying that even if jobs were readily available, not everyone has the same level of skills, education, or even basic abilities when it comes to organizing themselves to even look for a job. When asked about the special training or workshops offered by OW, Trudy snorts in disgust. "Okay, sure, in fairness, some of these programs might be helpful. But first, there have to be jobs!" Trudy often also decides to 'guide' a welfare recipient in how to answer those accountability check-up questions if she decides the person is someone who would work if they could, but for various reasons, are legitimately unable to do so.

That's when I explain to them how to play the game. Tell me you went to a job fair. Tell me that you applied to McDonald's and Wal-Mart. ... That you are reading stuff online about how to write a résumé. It might be all bull crap, but they have to give me *something*. And yes, I'll often give them hints about what might be a better answer or reply. Sometimes I flat out tell them to Google 'job fair,' and then they've got dates and locations to provide details about. In the end, though, it comes down to this: if they want to continue to receive their check, they have to play the game.

The governance of the SAMS algorithms includes a time frame that is considered acceptable for someone to be receiving social assistance before they need to start providing evidence of having looked for employment. The 'evidence' is something Trudy needs to type into the system during her follow-up meeting with welfare recipients. Although Trudy said she does not do this for everyone, she feels it is unfair when someone is unfamiliar with how "the game" works or just lacks a decent vocabulary."

They often need a bit of guidance on how to frame their answers. I know that just because they haven't been looking for a job doesn't mean they wouldn't love to have one and wouldn't hesitate to take a *real* one in a minute. But they already know it's a waste of time. In a million years, they're never going to say that, of course. Not to me. None of these people are stupid.

When asked if other caseworkers in her office also offer the same kind of assistance, after seeming to think it over for a few minutes, as if deciding how she wants to answer the question,

Trudy reluctantly finally says no. She explains that the older caseworkers in her office – "the dinosaurs" - follow the rules as they are and do not suggest 'better' ways to answer the questions about looking for employment. It seems crucial to her to clarify that she is not judging them for doing things differently or taking a different approach. "I don't tell anyone else how to do their job," says Trudy. "I know they think I'm being manipulated half the time, and I know I think *they're* just burnt out and don't care anymore. Maybe they're right. Maybe not." Not all the social workers I interviewed shared the same view about 'assisting' welfare recipients that Trudy or Megan did. Two of the caseworkers I interviewed argued against offering "too much" assistance. They explained that it was important for those on social assistance to develop the skills necessary to fill out forms, navigate simple computer tasks online, and be held accountable for any failures to succeed at any of these important steps.

Elayne and Ryan have close to forty years of experience between them in social work. They have been colleagues at the same welfare office for nearly twelve years and seem to have a friendly working relationship and mutual respect. However, after initially agreeing to be interviewed, while trying to commit them to an interview date, they both seemed to develop some new reservations about being interviewed, asking new questions how much time it would take (even though they had already been well informed about this in previous emails) and what steps would be taken to protect their identities. I worried that if one dropped out, so would the other. Fortunately, this 'partnership' between them also worked in reverse, as once Elayne committed to the study, Ryan instantly followed along. Although I preferred to interview them alone, Elayne insisted - and Ryan quickly agreed - they wanted to "stick together." Initially, I found it frustrating that they seemed intent on wanting to confer, analyse, and negotiate with each other before 'officially' answering each question, especially since Ryan would ultimately

agree with Elayne on everything she decided was their "final answer." However, after the first several questions, they seemed to forget about their plan to reach a consensus before giving their 'official' reply and started answering the questions as individuals. Once they turned their focus away from what seemed like a performance for each other and decided to perform for me – the 'interviewer' - their answers seemed more genuine.

At forty-eight years of age, with just over twenty years of experience in social welfare, Elayne believes she has "seen it all" and would often sprinkle her answers with what came across to me as both condescending and harsh critiques of people on social assistance. "These people are smarter than you might think!" she said several times during the interview with a laugh, and "Not all of them are lazy." After expressing some of her frustration with SAMS, saying that at her age, the learning curve for a new software system makes her "work just so miserable!" I asked Elayne for examples of how it makes her work "so miserable." She explained the constant having to ask for tech support and how this would slow down her day, waiting for someone to show up and deal with the problem. "I feel like an idiot when I have a family sitting just a few feet away from me, watching me bang the keys uselessly, and what can I tell them?" It was clear from Elayne's frustration that her more significant issue was around concern for her professional demeanor, her wanting to *appear* a particular way to the applicants, than frustration with SAMS' system failures causing potential hardships for those who apply. Elayne resents how needing tech support makes her seem less competent, and her motivation has nothing to do with helping people. When asked if SAMS has changed her relationship with clients in any way, Elayne laughed and said, "You think? Of course, it has. I don't actually help anyone anymore. I just fill in forms and look at documents and make sure everyone is who they say they are."

When Ryan spoke up and said he occasionally tries to assist welfare recipients in giving "better answers," it reminded me of Trudy's similar approach. However, I felt uncomfortable pushing Ryan for details as I wondered if he should be sharing those examples in front of Elayne. I admit I was surprised when somehow, I missed the fact (until I listened to the interview again later during transcription) that Elayne answered the question herself, the very question I dared not ask in front of her.

You can't baby them. These are adults! But some of these forms are ridiculous, and if you don't fill them in just right, a client could end up not receiving what they are in fact entitled to receive. It's not cheating at all or wrong. English isn't the first language for everyone, and if anything, it's unfair if you're good with words or know how to give good answers that you can do better than someone who isn't.

However, there was a limitation to how much 'extra' help Elayne or Ryan would give to a welfare recipient. Unlike Megan and Trudy, the focus of genuine concern for both of them seemed to be more on the "unfairness" of having to learn a new software system, one they described as "complicated," "impossible to ever learn," "unfair," and "slow." Unlike Elayne, Ryan did not seem concerned about how he looked to the welfare recipients or applicants when he could not make the system 'work' under its rules. Instead, his primary motivation for resisting SAMS came from the belief that SAMS was trying to take his job away. When asked if SAMS has made any parts of their job easier, they both fell silent for a few seconds, looking at each other as if they could find an answer in the other's face. Finally, while looking at Elayne (and not me), Ryan went on a bit of a rant.

Here's the thing, okay? SAMS isn't about making our jobs easier or making it - making things more streamlined for our clients, or even about making the system more - fair. SAMS is really just all about canceling *us*. Once they get this running properly, they can have a trained seal do intake, they sure as hell won't need caseworkers. So, you're actually asking the wrong question. This isn't about whether SAMS makes my job harder or easier. It's about whether it plans to get

rid of my job once it IS all worked out and finally working. But thank God it will NEVER work. SAMS is just a piece of shit all around. [Ryan looks over at Elayne, and they both laugh].

Although I discuss Ryan's (and others) contention that SAMS is about eliminating caseworkers' jobs in the next chapter in more detail, as discussed in the next section, some workers, including Ryan, have found ways to subvert and resist SAMS, a system he believes exist mainly to eventually eliminate his job, through 'compliance.' For example, 'home' has become a site for some caseworkers to enact a form of resistance because it is the one thing the software cannot do. Therefore, I argue, many social workers suddenly need to do more home visits, instead of less, under SAMS.

### **Subversion and Resistance through Partial Truths and Compliance**

Elliot Turiel (2003) writes that, although resistance and subversion are most often regarded as anti-social behaviour, both resistance and subversion are both regular and even common occurrences in our daily lives. "As part of everyday life, resistance is not restricted to organized social and political movements... social conditions evoke opposition, resistance, and subversion" (p. 116). Turiel suggests that resistance and subversion are common because social practices often embody inequalities, and the acts of resistance and subversion can often involve deception by necessity. One of the examples shared by Turiel is when a doctor in the United States, for example, decides to engage in deception with insurance companies to subvert a system that they perceive has too much power over patients' health. Turiel concludes, "judgements about honesty and dishonesty, therefore, varied by the situation" (p. 125). Further, acts of subversion and defiance are committed by everyday people all of the time, sometimes in subtle ways, and these acts of resistance are often simply overlooked and not recognized as such. "So, it is not only in

the acts of famous figures like Socrates, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. that we see moral defiance, resistance, and subversion. We see it in many people, in people who are not well known as moral leaders with outstanding personal characteristics (pp. 128-129).”

In other words, moral resistance and acts of subversion are not reserved for those classified and recognized as 'special' and 'unique.' Sometimes, we see these acts of defiance and subversion by frustrated social workers and oppressed people living with poverty. As Turiel writes, "Resistance frequently entails deceptive actions aimed at transforming aspects of the social system judged unfair and detrimental to the welfare of groups of people" (p. 115).

Caseworker Ryan has found several ways to express his anger with what he perceives to be a plan to replace him at work. In addition to expressing his anger, Ryan says his 'approach' highlights some of the "weaknesses" of SAMS. For example, even though he knows that compliance with some of the procedures will nearly always result in a computer glitch that can lead to several hours of downtime, making it impossible to move forward with an application, Ryan sees this as his way to punish and push back against a system he believes is intent on making him redundant.

All I have to do is to keep on doing what I have. I follow all of the instructions to a tee. [Ryan and Elayne exchange a grin] I keep my head down most of the time, help out when I can, but try not to let it upset me anymore. I'll tell my people [the person or family he was assisting in applying for social assistance when the system freezes] to feel free to wander over to the job board or have a look or at some of the program posters we have hanging up in the lobby... tell them they can go off for a smoke and come back to see if it's working again.

Elayne interrupts Ryan to make it clear she does not use 'that' approach.

I wouldn't be able to stand sitting around and doing nothing. And, you know, sometimes they have their kids with them, and we don't need a bunch of children sitting around, either. It's not that I think he [she nods at Ryan] is wrong about this being, well maybe also, at least a bit about replacing about saving some money down the road. But for me? It's just so hard not to be able to do what I think needs

to be done without having to fight everything. I've been at this a long time. I can smell bullshit from a mile away. And SAMS is a whole can of bullshit.

Elayne and Ryan might not have defined or described their resistance to some of SAMS' rules as subversive. However, like caseworkers Megan and Trudy, each has found ways to resist a system they feel is sometimes unfair or oppressive, whether against them, the welfare recipients they serve, or both. While administrative disciplinary practices have long been a part of social assistance in Ontario and elsewhere (Little, 1998; Katz, 1986; Struthers, 1996), this current incarnation of work-enforcing reforms under SAMS, as the title of the program suggests – Ontario *Works* – could mean fundamental shifts in the nature of work and in the organization of labour markets, where rising inequality and precarious employment are increasingly the norms. Moreover, throughout the interviews, it became apparent that what may have been traditionally viewed as examples of individuals' cheating the system,' such as when Nancy, mother of a mentally challenged daughter, warns her daughter not to feel upset by any 'untruths' she might hear her mother saying in the welfare office. Or when Karen, a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, is offered coaching from a friend also on social assistance on how to make it through a doctor's appointment in the least invasive way possible. Both are, in fact, examples of those on social assistance being able to *enable* assistance from a program that even social workers often deem as unnavigable. In this way, these behaviours gained new meaning, subverting SAMS' understanding of serving those deemed 'worthy' or eligible. These acts of resistance and subversion, however small or large, demonstrate the resiliency and autonomy that users of SAMS – both the social workers *and* those on social assistance possess. However, in what ways does SAMS perhaps empower and disempower both those who work for the system, such as

caseworkers and those who are arguably at the mercy of SAMS, those who receive social assistance?

Empowerment and disempowerment were common themes among all five of the caseworkers I interviewed for the study and most of the people on social assistance. Additionally, the impact of automation from SAMS on social workers and, subsequently, their relationship with welfare recipients includes less time for intake interviews and less time with individual welfare recipients after their application process for social assistance is complete. Automation has also removed many of the discretionary powers of caseworkers had prior to SAMS. Whether intended or not, the automation afforded by SAMS has changed the organizational norms of caseworker behaviour. As a result, a rationale, if not mandate, for diminished attention towards welfare recipients was established. This reduction in "facetime" has become legitimized and, as Michael Robert Dennis (2006) writes, the automation of social service delivery systems has resulted in caseworkers resigning themselves "To a reduced, less empowered presence while many clients are upset that caseworkers distanced themselves" (p. 578).

Four of the five social workers I interviewed for this study not only said SAMS has been disempowering to them in numerous ways, but they also appeared convinced that SAMS is intended to eliminate their jobs. As caseworker Megan said, "The whole system is designed to get rid of workers. That's our sense - that SAMS was designed to take away certain controls from the workers and cut half of our jobs. SAMS is a jobs killer." All of the social workers interviewed for the study claimed that by eliminating most - if not all - of their autonomy when it comes to making exceptions to the general guidelines and rules of receiving social assistance in

Ontario, they have not only become disempowered by SAMS but are also not able to provide the same level of services to those on social assistance they believe is necessary.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter demonstrates how welfare recipients and caseworkers consistently find ways to challenge welfare governance's rigid control and structures under SAMS. The digital governance afforded by SAMS has meant finding new ways and approaches to resistance among both caseworkers and those on social assistance; these approaches include the development and enrichment of informal networks, strategic truth-telling, and significant changes in the relationship between caseworkers and welfare recipients. They have also found ways to maintain a level of autonomy and humanity, a level of professionalism, and a level of dignity through those acts of resistance in the face of the system.

Driven by a need for faster results, greater precision, and cost-cutting efficiencies, technological progress has brought about changes not only to worker's relationships to jobs but has also meant the loss of jobs in specific industries as workers are replaced by automation (Kranzberg & Hannan, 2017; Royakkers, 2015). For example, although Canada has embraced new technologies and their benefits across multiple industries, in the social services, where social workers have long used their discretion with significant autonomy, automation is increasingly removing much of their discretionary powers (Cheraghi & Calnan, 2013; Fabricant & Burghardt, 1992; Keymolen & Broeders, 2011; Nilsen et al., 2016; Peterson et al., 2020; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016; Zeleznikow, 2000). As some argue, this undermines the ability of caseworkers to modify the 'official' rules when they deem it necessary (Peterson, 2020; Christensen et al., 2020; Alkhatib & Bernstein, 2019; Dennis, 2006) or, as Michael Robert Dennis (2006) writes,

"disallows the ability [of social workers] to 'fudge' calculations that both caseworkers and supervisors occasionally practiced" in order to overrule or sidestep policies they believed were not in the welfare recipient's best interest (p. 564). As with other industries (Bessen & Kossuth, 2019), the impact of automation when it comes to those working with those on social assistance, has disrupted what – as evidenced by the comments from social workers I interviewed for the study - the vital relationship they feel vested in establishing, and maintaining, with those on social assistance. As one social worker, Megan, said, "How can I help them when the software system is in charge of – well - *everything* and doesn't allow me to make exceptions?" SAMS is working in the systems' best interest, not the welfare recipients.

Dennis (2015) writes that once automation is introduced, caseworkers often feel distanced from welfare recipients and even coworkers, and many feel their relationships with welfare recipients significantly deteriorated over time. "Some caseworkers admitted a cynicism towards clients that they related partly to the changed work environment," and some believe that welfare recipients were less willing to lie to them than they are to a computer system, meaning their relationship also contributed to welfare recipients being more honest as well (p. 569). Further, Dennis claims caseworkers are united in their shared frustration over having no input in the software design, believing that some paper forms should remain a part of the system, which aligns with most of the views expressed by social workers interviewed for this study. Their lack of input or neglect to consult with them adds to their overall sense of disempowerment.

Welfare recipients have always found ways to resist welfare governance's control, which remains true under SAMS. In addition to performing 'home' and the 'ideal' welfare recipient during home visits from caseworkers, other ways welfare recipients resist include sharing information and tips with each other about how to answer questions from those in authority. For

example, when trying to become eligible for benefits under ODS, how to answer the questions in the 'right' way. Another example includes avoidance strategies to keep one's welfare recipient status private, something Shanice, a mother of three, has developed to subvert the system.

In the next chapter, I argue that this growing sense of 'disempowerment' among social workers is also because SAMS has meant a significant decrease in one of social work's historically most 'meaningful' tools in determining welfare recipients' eligibility, and perhaps more importantly, 'deservedness': the home visit. At the same time, 'home' has become a site of resistance for caseworkers as it is something the computer is unable to attend to.

## Chapter 5: 'Home' as a Site of Moral Regulation, Performance, and Contested Ground

The home visit has always played a central role in the heart of social work practice. It is through the home visit, behind closed doors, and in the most intimate spaces of family life, assessments and judgments are made about risk, parenting styles, morals, and the protection of children (Cook, 2017; Ferguson, 2018; Saltiel & Lakey, 2019; Winter & Cree, 1015). Four of the five caseworkers I interviewed for my study seemed to assume SAMS would significantly reduce or possibly even eventually eliminate the home visit. However, that has not been the case. A contested practice between social workers and welfare recipients, home visits have long been a site of microaggressions.

However, what we see post-implementation of SAMS is the ongoing resiliency of the home visit. Under SAMS, the home visit is arguably a site of resistance to automation by caseworkers as they can still decide to perform a home visit for various reasons. These reasons include verifying whether someone is eligible for assistance, the amount they should get, determining if they are living with someone else, and whether, for example, the applicant has a car. Home visits are also performed to ensure ongoing compliance with the rules associated with continued financial assistance. Caseworkers know that these visual inspections around compliance can only be achieved in person. Yet, as Sandy Smith (1994) writes, "The home is a significant place for most people. Users expect near-total control of this environment in order to perform the important social and personal behaviours which define their residence as a home for them" (pp. 33-34).

Despite the recognized importance of having as much control of their home environment as possible, historically, social workers are responsible for "keeping tabs" on their caseloads by

regular home visits. Further, in the literature concerning the multiple meanings of home, privacy, in terms of the ability of families on social assistance to exert control over who can enter their home, is consistency acknowledged as a critical component of the home (Allan, 1989; Depres, 1991; Sommerville, 1997). In this chapter, I explore the resiliency of the home visit in the context of digital governance and the importance of 'home,' as constructed through the participants' narratives about home from the perspective of those who live on social assistance and the caseworkers who make home-visits. This exploration proceeds by considering the ways that 'home' operates as a site of moral regulation; second, the ways in which it operates as a site of performance, particularly for welfare recipients; and finally, the ways in which home emerges as contested ground for both welfare recipients and caseworkers.

### **Home as a Site of Moral Regulation**

Within social work practice scholarship, home visits have long been considered essential in serving families in their home, neighbourhood, and community context (Beder, 1998; Hancock & Pelton, 1989). Laura Cook and Danny Zschomler (2020) contend that research suggests that an in-person visit to the home's physical environment is necessary. It enhances the assessment of what an applicant needs in ways only a home visit can reveal (Cook, 2020; Saltiel and Lakey, 2020). Ferguson (2017) argues that a social worker's home visits are critical to understanding the experiences of those on social assistance, their needs, and, when it comes to children, to assess their safety correctly. Additionally, Baeza et al. (2019) posit that home visits are imperative to a social worker's work. They offer the social worker an important opportunity to listen, talk, and see those they seek to help. Social workers argue that home visits provide additional advantages to welfare recipients, including any service barrier such as limited transportation that can be

avoided (Collins, Jordan, and Coleman, 2012). They also claim the home visit enables them to read body language and subtle social cues in context, which they believe is invaluable to their work (Cook and Zschomler, 2020).

However, this research may also reinforce previous studies which reveal claims by many of those who receive social assistance that home visits are invasive and intended to collect data to make judgments about the welfare recipient's home and lifestyle, including even noting 'smells' or whether they have any pets (Cook, 2020; Ferguson, 2018; Muzicant and Peled, 2018). This suggests that in addition to gathering the necessary information to assess whether an applicant or someone already receiving social assistance is eligible to receive or continue receiving social assistance, the home visit is also an opportunity for social workers to make moral judgments. Critical social work scholarship troubles the standard assumptions and rationales of home visits. David Saltiel and Rebecca Lakey (2019) highlight that although the home visit is a long-established "core activity in social work and an important site for social work judgment and decision-making, the home visit has often been taken for granted, leaving it under-researched and under-theorized" (p. 37). This lack of reflexivity around a social worker's behaviour during the home visit makes them less likely to be held accountable for any unprofessional or harmful behaviours during the visit. This includes any comments that could be interpreted as negative or judgmental by the family they are visiting. Despite their professional training, social workers are naturally going to feel a certain way when encountering what might be a difficult or challenging situation in the homes they go into, particularly when they witness what they recognize as signs of neglect or abuse of children (Trevithick, 2011; Whittaker, 2011).

However, social workers admit to having an emotional response to those dramatic and concerning safety issues around potential child abuse or neglect. Social workers also

acknowledge having feelings of disgust, distrust, and sometimes even concerns about their safety during the home visit (Kim & Hopkins, 2017). Although a welfare recipient would understandably interpret any signs of disgust from a social worker as a personal judgment, perhaps more importantly, as Cook (2019) argues, although a social worker's emotional state during a home visit can operate as both a resource and a risk for professional judgment, it can also impede their capacity to think and make appropriate decisions. "In identifying the emotional challenges of the initial home visit, the present research sheds light on the impact of emotion on judgment. Defenses against sadness, anxiety, or fear could lead workers to defensively "shut down" (p. 5)".

Judy, a mother of three on social assistance, said her caseworker would often ask her, "What have you been cooking?" during a home visit as she walked around the apartment. "And with a real attitude, too. Like my place smelt like shit to her or something." Clearly, Judy felt judged by the caseworker's comment. She interpreted the question about "what have you been cooking?" as criticism of the way her apartment 'smells.' A recent study in England about the impact on home visits during the COVID-19 pandemic supports the argument that strong smells do act as an essential source of judgment by some caseworkers during home visits. The study noted that since smells are part of the "embodied, sensory experience of the home visit," when forced to switch to virtual home visits, some social workers in the study said they no longer had smells to use as a source "for part of their assessment" (Cook and Zschomler, 2020, p. 401).

In addition to how a home smells, Shanice, another participant on social assistance, complained about caseworkers making what felt like moral judgments during home visits about how welfare recipients spend their money. A single mother of three, Shanice prides herself on how clean and organized she keeps her apartment, saying she knows with three children, it could

quickly "turn into a disaster." Shanice also put a lot of thought and consideration into decorating her home, spending a considerable amount of time deciding where to place each item, and seemed incredibly proud of how comfortable her living room is. When her social worker made a casual comment about the size of Shanice's television during a home visit, Shanice was inwardly seething. She considered it a criticism of her choice to even own a television.

At first, I thought she was just jealous, you know? Making a point to say that it "must be nice to have such a large TV." Maybe she doesn't have a TV. Maybe she has one of those small ones. Or maybe she just don't believe in watching TV. But then, the more I thought on it, the more mad it made me feel. Like, what in the hell? Does she think my kids are sitting in front of it all day and night? Does she think I watch it all day and night? Maybe she thinks I shouldn't be allowed to have a TV. Didn't she *see* how clean everything is?

Shanice's belief that her social worker's choice to comment on her expensive-looking television's size was a deliberate attempt to shame her, whether accurate or not, seemed to have had that effect. However, narrative research offers the potential for a deeper understanding of and appreciation of people's lives. It perhaps allows us to "grasp some of the complexity, multiplicity and contradiction within lives as within stories" (Squire et al, 2014, p. 77). This suggests that whether that social worker intended to pass judgment about the cost of Shanice's television or not, it is clear that this was Shanice's perspective; allowing a social worker into her home makes her vulnerable to someone who holds significant power over her life.

As Clare Cooper (1976), Carole Després (1991), and Latimer & Munro (2009) have argued, the use of space, including how an occupant decorates that space, all reflect the person's sense of self. Suppose one conceives home as an inalienable source of identity. In that case, this suggests that any perceived criticism of one's home, whether the perception is, in fact, correct or not, could be taken as a personal attack on the self. This 'attack' is arguably more problematic when it comes from a caseworker against a welfare recipient because of the inherent power

imbalance, making this perceived attack even more threatening and offensive to the occupant since they might not feel able to defend themselves against such an attack openly. Although the stories shared by participants might not have the effect they hope for, narrative research is more about people giving their "voices to research" (Portelli, 2010). This creates the potential for narratives from people who receive social assistance and also caseworkers, offering insight into the social, political, and cultural contexts in which these stories occur, giving a personal glimpse of the social worlds and communities they are a part of, and a way of understanding that story's meaning for the narrator. Whether intended or not, a welfare recipient's belief that a social worker might 'punish' them for having what is considered an expensive television, or an apartment that smells a particular way, often leads to self-regulation under what is perceived to be a moral judgment. The welfare recipient will decide to put away certain items or avoid cooking specific foods before a scheduled home visit.

Alan Hunt (1999) defines moral regulation as "a practice of governing in order to focus attention on social action that attempts to influence the conduct of human agents." He argues that:

Moral discourses frequently link moralised subjects and objects with some moralised practices in such a way as to impute some wider social harm that will be occasioned unless subjects, objects, and practices are appropriately regulated. Moral regulation comprises 'moralisation' rather than 'morality,' and thus is relational, asserting some generalised sense of the wrongness of some conduct, habit, or disposition (p.8).

Terry Blum and Paul Kingston (1984) argue that home is also an important symbol of social class. "Owning a home is regarded widely as a central component of the American dream, a reward, even a right, accruing to those who successfully follow the economic rules" (p. 159).

Additionally, as Mallett (2004) writes, "Home as privacy means a space where one has the capacity to establish and control personal boundaries" (p. 82).

However, this is not always true for those subject to home 'visits' by appointment or surprise from a caseworker. What does this mean for those who can have their sense of home challenged, disrupted, and invaded by an agent of the state at any time because of receiving welfare? A single mother of five, Barbara recalls the initial sense of relief she felt when she did not have to "drag all five" of her children down to the welfare office when she first applied for financial assistance.

Can you imagine? The bus stop for the first bus isn't that close to my apartment building and the connecting one still only brings me three blocks away from the welfare (office). I worried about the baby needing a diaper change or something or one of them (the children) asking me for food or something. With little kids, everything is harder when you're away from home. When she told me on the phone that she'd come to me, I was thrilled.

However, in the end, Barbara's perception of that first home visit was that it was invasive, filled with "judgment," with her "whole life on display" to the caseworker. Barbara quickly changed her mind about the convenience of a home visit being worth the infringement and invasion of her privacy. Barbara said she spent hours before the caseworker's arrival tidying up her apartment, and by the time the caseworker arrived, she was "already exhausted." She said she was horrified and offended by how the visit unfolded, with everything it entailed.

I'm a fucking idiot. Here I was thinking she'd be like a guest, you know? Follow me to the kitchen, sit at the table, and help me fill in a bunch of forms or something. Nope. She right off the bat told me she wanted a tour of my place. A "tour"! Like my apartment is a fucking place for people to come and look around or something. I told her it was okay, she didn't need a tour, but she acted like she didn't even hear me and started walking around like she owned the place. I don't know what she was looking for, but she finally looked at me, like her hearing was back, and said, "Where can we have a seat and talk a bit?"

Barbara was not the only participant to share their feelings of frustration, embarrassment, violation of privacy, and anger over the way caseworkers behaved while in their homes. Many shared similar stories about the humiliation they felt when realizing there is no choice but to allow a caseworker into their home and most private of spaces, just so they "can make me feel stupid," said Barbara.

Home is not a haven for everyone, of course, nor is home always a place of privacy, safety, and security for everyone who receives social assistance. The reality is that for a large percentage of women and children, home is a site of fear, domestic violence, and sexual abuse (Goldsack, 1999; Jones, 2020; Lewis et al., 2015; McLay, 2020; Slakoff et al., 2020; Wardaugh, 1999; Wright, 1993) As Laura Goldsack (1999) argues, women are "more likely to be raped, assaulted and even killed at home than in any other place" (p. 123). In Canada, although rates of family violence are considered underestimated, with fewer than one in five being reported to the police, more than twenty-five percent of all cases of reported violence were from family violence (Government of Canada, 2018). The majority of those victims were women and girls and took place in the family home (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2014). Further, in Canada, a woman or girl is murdered every 2.5 days<sup>12</sup> on average. In ninety percent of cases where the killer was identified, they were male and nearly always a current or former partner of the victim (Dawson et al., 2018; Slakoff et al., 2020). As domestic violence researcher Myrna Dawson said in an interview with *The Canadian Press*, "Women are still most at risk of men that they are intimate with or who they should be able to trust" (Thompson, 2019). Feminist scholars question

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<sup>12</sup> The Canadian Femicide Observatory reports that the number of women in girls killed in Canada because of their gender has been rising for years and the 160 murdered in 2020 were not related to COVID-19, with women and girls being more restricted to home but rather, just part of the trend that is showing a rise in violence against women and girls. <https://femicideincanada.ca/callitfemicide2020.pdf>

the claim of home as a place of safety, privacy, and personal boundaries, arguing that it is a place of oppression and violence (Ahrentzen, 1997; Blunt, 2005; Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Dowling & Pratt, 1993). However, for the welfare recipients in the study, whether they are experiencing violence in their home or not, the home visit from their caseworker is still an important source of additional stress, loss of privacy, and infringement on their boundaries of self for many of them.

The participants indicated that the meaning of home comprises three dimensions: the physical, the personal, and the social. Those who apply for or receive social assistance recognize that home visits remain an essential site for social workers' decision-making and judgments about the people on social assistance. As Saltiel and Lakey (2019) posit, "To this day, the home visit is probably the most important activity in statutory social work with families" (p. 38).

From the perspective of caseworkers, home visits offer numerous and vital insights into the lives of those on social assistance, including how a welfare recipient's environment might affect their well-being and ability to cope (Pope and Hadden, 2020). Natalie Pope and Jennifer Hadden argue a home visit offers the caseworker an opportunity to "meet the clients where they are and to potentially reduce the power differential inherent in work with mandated clients" (p. 2). Yet as the interviews with those on social assistance demonstrate, a home visit can do the opposite of reducing the power differential as home visits are often perceived as invasive and humiliating by those on welfare. During her interview, Barbara mentioned a few times that she wishes she could "just mail in a card like you used to with poge (unemployment insurance). Why do they think coming to my house is going to prove anything, anyway? Especially when I know they're coming, right? Well, usually know they're coming."

Many on social assistance describe the home visit as intrusive and a violation of their privacy. However, caseworkers view their ability to observe welfare recipients at home as an

essential tool to gain relevant information as part of their assessment and case planning.

Caseworkers also see the home visit as a way to uncover the ‘truth’ about those who receive welfare. For example, caseworker Trudy said that although she does not like to make home visits and considers them time-consuming and often “very stressful,” she said they offer her a glimpse into the life and ‘truth’ of those welfare recipients she is trying to help as much as possible.

Seeing them in their personal environment, their own space, offers me a chance to really assess all kinds of important things, including the relationship they have with their kids. I also get a chance to see what the setup is for things like homework. It’s also good to see what kind of relationship the adults in the home have. For new clients, I can assess whether their claims about income and whether they own a car, have someone living with them, and so on and so forth. It’s hard to hide the truth when it’s right there out in the open for anyone to see.

Trudy was not the only caseworker in the project who seemed predisposed towards considering a home visit as a way to circumvent a welfare recipient from “hiding the truth.” For example, caseworker Elayne said she could often tell whether someone is making undeclared income on the side during a home visit.

If I go to your house and see that you now have new furniture or new toys scattered about your apartment, of course, I’m not stupid. I know you didn’t buy that stuff with your [welfare] check. So sure, I’ll sometimes ask where did it come from and who paid for it. Quite frankly, no one ever volunteers that they’ve earned some extra income on the side.

Elayne said she had never reported anyone having items in their apartment, even when she believed they could not have paid for with their welfare check, no matter her suspicions.

However, she admits she has found a way to ‘punish’ and discipline such recipients for what she describes as “cheating the system.” However, Elayne’s definition of cheating includes that if a welfare recipient asks for extra help, she believes they do not deserve it. Therefore, she will punish them by ensuring they do not have access to anything beyond the monthly welfare check.

“I can only pick a few to help out each month with extra support, anyway, and yes, they won’t be one of them!”

I argue that Elayne’s behaviour is an example of a caseworker who, after making a home visit, uses social sorting as part of their moral regulation, placing welfare recipients into categories of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving.’ The deserving poor are those who are deemed to be in legitimate need as they are unable to work because they are too old, disabled, or too sick, or children. The undeserving poor do not want to work or 'appear' unwilling to work, and often it is assumed that all non-disabled unemployed adults fall into this category. The deserving poor can be considered those who should not be blamed for their poverty. Their poverty is not a result of individual behaviour or character flaws but rather from structural or macro forces outside an individual's control. In other words, it is not their 'fault' that they are poor and, therefore, are 'deserving' of assistance. The undeserving poor are dismissed as deserving of any financial assistance as they are considered people with bad moral character and, therefore, do not deserve help (Hick, S. 2004; Mackenzie, C., & Louth, J. 2020; Raphael, 2011).

As Dennis Raphael (2011) claims, despite the strong evidence of "the structural roots of poverty in wealthy developed nations, societal values and attitudes frequently attribute poverty to personal failings such as lack of ambition, sloth, or failure to attain educational credentials" (p. 28). Elayne seems to subscribe to this type of reasoning regarding some of the welfare recipients she works with, placing them into categories of deserving versus undeserving. SAMS allows Elayne to do this by being built into the software system so that caseworkers ensure that only the 'most deserving' receive social assistance. Elayne can choose who to offer extra support and help to - or not help - by bypassing the software's algorithms that determine eligibility, depending on their responses to SAMS' questions. Elayne's position is problematic because researchers have

found that individualistic explanations favour reduced spending and more restrictive policies (Bullock, 1999; Bullock et al., 2003; Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

A caseworker favouring reduced spending or more restrictive policies would be of particular importance for those who make claims that the caseworker considers to be false and chooses to act on it or not act on it. For example, if the caseworker witnesses what they believe to be potential evidence of a welfare recipient receiving financial assistance from a partner or evidence of other adults living in the home, they are obligated to report this. The caseworker knows this would have an immediate impact on the welfare recipient's status with the welfare office. Caseworker Trudy admitted to sometimes turning a "blind eye" when she suspects one of the single moms is receiving some "extra cash" from a boyfriend, choosing to "ignore it" if she deemed the welfare recipient somehow more deserving of this additional financial assistance. Although this example of caseworker Trudy's 'moral regulation' of some of the people she works with is of benefit to the welfare recipient, it is still an example of how caseworkers can regulate who to assist or not assist, based on their personal beliefs around 'deserving' versus 'undeserving,' through workarounds of the software system. Eligibility for social assistance rests on meeting predetermined assets and income cut-offs, as well as an agreement to participate in activities that SAMS has determined will help lead to employment for those who receive assistance under OD.

While the system considers and recognizes that people with disabilities face greater challenges in the labor market, applicants for ODSP must prove substantial mental or physical impairment (Mahboubi & Ragab, 2020). Regarding disabilities around mental health, there is an opportunity for caseworkers to demonstrate moral regulation as they determine on case-by-case basis whether to advise an applicant on which steps are the most critical in meeting the criteria

for ODSP or not. As Elayne explained, "Of course, I'm not going to go out of my way to lay it all out for someone I think is laying it on a little thick."

Seventeen of the twenty people I interviewed for this project shared their stories of resentment, anger, and embarrassment over social workers showing up to their homes, whether scheduled for a home visit or not. Most seemed to view the home visit as an enforced inspection from their caseworker, even if only an informal or unofficial. The purpose of these inspections is always to the welfare recipient's disadvantage. As one participant on social assistance, Judy, said, "You know they are there just to look for trouble." Fourteen participants specifically mentioned feeling judged about the cleanliness or lack of organization in their home. Some spoke of embarrassment about not having certain key pieces of furniture they thought they should have, such as a sofa in the living room or a 'proper' table with chairs in the kitchen. Judy, a mother of two, said social workers often comment on what they consider to be her "lack" of furniture.

They make it sound like I did it on purpose, too, you know? Like I decided I want to have the fucking television sitting on the floor, or just don't want to get a couch or chairs. Like I'm saving that space for something else. One time a worker flat out asked me where my couch was. Like maybe I had it, what, hidden away in the bedroom? Maybe at my sister's place?

Home visits are an example of what Andrew Pithouse (1987) calls an "invisible trade," which happens behind closed doors, in the most private and intimate spaces of family life, between social workers and those on social assistance. The lack of transparency around the social worker's behaviour during a home visit is of concern as they work with members of a vulnerable population. As Ferguson (2009) writes, "Not nearly enough attention is given to the detail of what social workers actually do, where they do it, and their experience of doing it. In particular, the practice of home visiting, which is the methodology through which most protection of vulnerable adults and child protection goes on, is virtually ignored (p. 471)."

Recurring ideas about home represented in the literature are described as related to family, self, and a building that provides shelter to the people inside. For example, many victims of home robberies or break-ins speak of the overwhelming sense of invasion they feel knowing a stranger has 'invaded their space,' robbing them of not only their personal belongings but also their sense of safety, privacy, and self. In addition, many victims experience post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms in response to home break-ins (Angel, C.M et al.,2014; Hanson et al., 2010; Kilpatrick, D.J. et al., 1989). Undoubtedly, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, although home is not always a safe space for everyone, home is still where most people typically retreat, safely and privately, from the public eye (Cooper, 1976; Dupuis and Thorns, 1996; Madigan et al., 1990). This suggests, as one of the participants, Judy, shared in her story about her case worker's question about what had she been cooking, that a home visit from a social worker who, during their inspection of the premises makes negative comments about the smells or other conditions of the home, could be perceived by the inhabitants as invasive, and a form of moral regulation and judgment.

A recent study illustrates how important social workers consider the need to visually inspect the homes of those on social assistance when, even during the COVID-19 pandemic, caseworkers insisted on finding ways to personally "view" the homes, even if at a distance. They used various creative strategies to gather information. For example, they described asking children to give them a 'tour' of the house using their mobile phone and using a 'show and tell' approach, encouraging children to bring objects to show them. For example, one social worker described asking a child to 'imagine the room is your spaceship – can you show me around?' (Cook and Zschomler, p. 403).

That those at the receiving end of such an 'inspection' might experience this as a form of moral regulation should come as no surprise. Although the study claimed that the point of these particular "creative" strategies is to help "social workers to initiate a reciprocal interaction during which they could begin to understand children's experiences and their everyday lives" (p. 403), the report on the study addressed nothing about the ethics of using children as tools for their families homes' inspection. Even though in the same study, some social workers acknowledged that when home visits became temporarily rare because of the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing limits to their interactions to text or by virtual 'visits' online, they noticed an improvement in their relationships with the families.

Some workers reflected that the children and families they were most worried about at the start of lockdown actually fared better without frequent, intrusive in-person social work visits: It's quite ironic given the concerns about some families, but most of them have worked through it well. There may be something to that, in terms of not putting too much pressure on people or expectations, and they actually do better than you think (SW54) (Cook and Zschomler, 2020).

This inability to perform home inspections in person, resulting in improved relationships between caseworkers and their families, is not surprising. Every participant in my study complained about home visits is also of no surprise. Judy said she always enjoys the first few weeks after a home visit as she feels she can finally relax, secure in the knowledge that "the bossy bitch isn't going to be coming 'round making her snarky comments." Those families experiencing a reprieve from the home visit are undoubtedly also enjoying the break from having to 'perform' the ideal system subject, as I discuss in the next section.

### **Home as a Site of Performance**

Everyone on welfare in this project complained about feeling judged by their caseworker during the home visit. As a child growing up with a single mother on welfare, I also always dreaded those home visits from the social worker. Not only would it put my mother in a terrible mood for several hours before the visit, but she would frantically try to clean up and organize our apartment before the worker arrived. However, sometimes, even worse, the social worker would simply show up unannounced without any prior warning. Then I would have to witness my mother's humiliation at this invasion of our home from someone who, at the time, seemed intent on finding everything wrong with how we were living, as she went from room to room, making sure that my father was not hidden in our apartment. Unfortunately, today, home visits from caseworkers can still occur without any prior notice or warning.

However, unlike when I was growing up, one crucial difference in the regulations is that home visits can only happen during regular business hours<sup>13</sup>. Social workers can no longer look inside a welfare recipient's closets, drawers, or refrigerator. Instead, they are restricted to areas in plain view, including bedrooms and bathrooms. However, one thing that remains true today is that refusing a social worker's entrance to the home, including those social workers who arrive unannounced and without an appointment, can result in the loss of social assistance unless there is a 'valid' reason. Valid reasons include if someone in the home is sick or is on their way for a job interview, and a home visit could lead to them being late for, or even missing, the job interview (Ontario Works Policy Directives, 2013). Another thing that remains true today is that

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<sup>13</sup> As of 2019, due to COVID-19, social workers are avoiding home visits and those who receive social assistance are being told not to visit Ontario Works or ODSO offices. For those who are advised that they “must visit,” the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services are advising they must wear a mask, and follow other safety steps. See: <https://www.mcscs.gov.on.ca/en/mcscs/programs/social/>

those subjected to home visits usually know, whether intuitively or explicitly, how to 'perform' the ideal welfare recipient for their caseworker.

As this section discusses, these 'performances' include having a tidy home; children who look clean, well-fed, and know to act calm and polite with the caseworker; and any electronics on display need to appear 'dated' and less expensive looking. Many mothers also advised boyfriends to stay away on home visit days and attempted to act like the 'perfect' mother in the caseworker's presence. This meant keeping their voices subdued and never appearing angry, impatient, or emotional with their children in front of the caseworker. However, as one participant, Felicity, a single mother, shared, some have serious fears of losing custody of their child(ren) if their performance as an ideal mother is anything less than 'perfect.'

Felicity welcomed me into her crowded apartment with immediate offers of coffee, tea, or water, pretending not to notice the small bag and tray I was carrying from Tim Hortons holding two hot cups of coffee and a cold apple juice. I had called earlier that morning, asking what I could bring "from Timmy's" for our interview later that day. I was embarrassed when Felicity had to ask, since I had not thought to offer, if I would mind bringing her four-year, Malcolm, something to drink and eat as well, please. An apple juice and Sprinkle donut (and if they did not have Sprinkle donuts, a glazed Maple, please). Unlike his mother, Malcolm immediately reacted to the coffee tray and Tim Horton's bag, asking with a huge smile, "Is that mine?" Felicity brought me to her tiny kitchen, placing a paper coaster in front of me for my coffee cup. She seemed eager to begin our interview, telling me how she had been seventeen when she became pregnant with her son. She talked about how difficult it was for her to continue with her final year of high school with morning sickness and extreme fatigue through most of the pregnancy, and how although the pregnancy had not been planned, as the due date drew closer,

she had grown more and more excited to meet her baby finally. Felicity often felt lonely during her pregnancy, explaining that her baby's father had disappeared around the seventh-month mark.

That's why I was so thrilled when he showed back up at the end! I didn't want to do, you know, do labour all by myself. I needed someone who would be there, you know, for me. Just for me. I knew right off the nurses didn't like him, though. They don't know him like I do, right? So, when he'd say stuff, you know, like, shitty stupid stuff he didn't really mean, they'd be all, you know. He was shooting his mouth off.

When Felicity brought her son home from the hospital, she was surprised to see her social worker waiting in front of the building. However, she did not resist or complain at first when the worker explained she was there to make sure Felicity had the "proper set up for a newborn" and "everything she needed." Felicity felt self-conscious about her apartment, saying she "hadn't cleaned for a social worker visit." Felicity's statement that she had not "cleaned for a social worker visit" is an example of someone who receives social assistance 'performing' the ideal system subject, because Felicity knows her apartment needs to look a certain way for the caseworker's approval. Since the visit was unexpected, Felicity told herself to "just nod your head, be polite, and it'd be over faster."

The bitch didn't trust I had a crib or, you know, a proper setup for a newborn. I hated having to let her in. I knew what she'd think as soon as she saw how I left my apartment before going to the hospital. She was so close up my ass when I opened the apartment door; I swear I could feel her breathing on the back of my damn neck. And, of course, the place was a damn mess!

In subsequent visits with her caseworker, since they were usually by appointment, this allowed Felicity the time to prepare to 'perform' what she believed her caseworker wanted to see. It also allows her to feel somewhat emotionally protected from what she views as a hostile invasion. "You gotta be in the, you know, right headspace before she shows up. I'm not stupid. I know it means having to be all fake with someone who's trying to catch me being wrong or something.

[She then adds with a sarcastic laugh] At least my place looks great for a few days afterward, right?" When asked how she acts 'fake' with the caseworker during a home visit, Felicity expressed fears around being considered too immature or irresponsible by her caseworker because of how young she is and admitted she worries how that could result in her son being taken away from her.

I pretend that he sleeps in his crib and that I feed him on a timer. Like I have him on a schedule. She acts like I'm an idiot who's going to roll over in the night and smother him, or maybe forget to feed my own kid. But before she comes over, I always remember to put his bottles all out on the counter, lined up with the nipples and a stove timer right next to them. She's never asked me about it or said nothing, but I see her seeing it.

Although welfare policies from previous decades regarding "suitable home assessments" and "man in the house" raids (Frame, 1999) have changed and are no longer the norm today, social workers still collect information during home visits about household relationships. They also collect information about finances, the welfare of any children present, and the home's condition regarding cleanliness and orderliness. Any information about the families' domestic lives of interest to the caseworker that is hidden, or not apparent or visible for any reason on the day of the visit, surveillance at a distance through linked databases via SAMS software has supplanted many personal observations. SAMS enables caseworkers to automatically cross-check all aspects of an application for social assistance, verifying all claims instantly. SAMS also means maintaining state surveillance of welfare recipients across all government platforms, including income tax and bank records, unemployment records, Ministry of Transportation, criminal records, and more, once they receive social assistance. To become a welfare recipient means to give up any expectation of *any* privacy as the level of scrutiny is not only complete, it is instantly cross-checked via SAMS algorithms which are programmed to look for discrepancies, any

history of welfare fraud, 'hidden' relationships with other adults in the home, criminal behaviour, 'large' bank accounts or undisclosed assets of any kind. This all contributes to the 'performance' of poverty as well, after a welfare recipient decides it is necessary to hide out of view during the home visit anything they worry a caseworker might consider evidence of a hidden relationship, income, or other valuables and indicate access to items not considered 'normal' or appropriate for someone receiving social assistance. Shanice, says sometimes it is easier to hide anything her worker might think "too rich" for a single mother on social assistance to have than to risk the judgment or "ten million more questions" during the home visit.

I gotta remind my son every single time to stick his laptop under his bed when I know she's coming over [for a home visit]. My landlord gave it to him after he had borrowed it a few times for homework. Told him he didn't need it back and he could keep it. My son asked me why he has to hide it all the time, that he didn't steal it, that it's his. I told him we don't need no worker thinking we're rich or nothing and maybe taking back some of my check.

Although the foundation of social work is based on a structural understanding of social problems and favours structural explanations for poverty over individual causes, this does not mean caseworkers, like Elayne, do not still judge some individuals and families they are working with. This reinforces Shanice's conviction that she needs to act or perform her 'poverty' in a particular way. Although social workers and welfare recipients operate within the same institutional framework, those on social assistance know they occupy different social and power positions. Families and individuals are forced to open themselves up to the state for unlimited and ongoing scrutiny to receive public benefits, requiring them to proactively disclose all family relations and financial resources and activities to, first, obtain, and then second, continue to get welfare assistance. This is why eighteen of the twenty welfare recipients in the study considered it necessary to act a certain way during home visits. It is not enough to provide documentation

and access to everything online to demonstrate or 'prove' that one is in financial need via SAMS software after completing an application.; one also needs to perform what a deserving, or, 'ideal' welfare recipient looks and acts like during the home visit. As Ferguson (2008) argues, the concept of the home visit grew from the idea that "Seeing the poor was regarded as equivalent to 'knowing' them and surveillance as the means to inculcating civility and acceptable behaviour" (p. 566).

Welfare recipients believe their caseworkers want to 'see' their home to reaffirm their 'deservingness' for continued welfare support. However, they also know their caseworker is looking for specific signs and behaviours which demonstrate the welfare recipients' need and deservingness, or lack of need and deservingness, and 'home' is a stage for the performance. "I try to remember not to wear my bling when she's coming," said Felicity. "I'm not supposed to have, you know, the good stuff."

Despite social work being based on the understanding of structural explanations for poverty, and support for structural cases among social workers appears strong (Jones, 1994; Rehner et al.,1997; Rosenthal, 1993; Schwartz & Robinson, 1991), some research suggests that caseworkers sometimes favour individual attributions for unemployment and are favoured over external attributions (Eack and Newhill, 2008; Jones, 1994; Kallio et al., 2013). Although social workers may often be aware that welfare recipients are 'performing,' some caseworkers, for example, like Elayne, believe they can see through these 'performances' and still consider the home visit as an essential tool for getting to the 'truth.'

A study about what influences social workers' attitudes towards welfare recipients suggests that they can sometimes "hold less-than-positive attitudes towards this population and that these attitudes have an important outcome" (Eack & Newhill, 2008). Although the study was

about working with those who suffer from mental health issues, the social workers were clear about their "frustrations related to client behaviours... rather than frustrations with system-related issues" (p. 418). This study reinforces the argument that social workers do have expectations about how those who receive social assistance should behave as individuals, regardless of their knowledge and awareness of systemic causes of poverty that lead people to apply for and receive welfare assistance (Reeser & Epstein, 1987; Rehner et al., 1997; Schwartz & Robinson, 1991).

Felicity is convinced she needs to speak calmly and move slowly around her son in front of her caseworker. "I worry sometimes she thinks I'm a retard, you know?" said Felicity with a laugh. "I say everything slowly and carefully." When asked why she speaks "slowly and carefully" in her caseworker's presence, Felicity explained, "I think she expects me to act all hyper just because I'm young. You know how old people talk real slow? They pick everything they wanna say before they say it? I think it shows her that I do think before I say or do stuff. I'm not running around in here like a crazy person. I think shit through for sure."

Felicity's belief, and others in this study, that they need to perform in a particular way to reassure their caseworker that, as in Felicity's case, she is a 'good' mother is supported by the literature. Social workers give "special attention" to the home visit, believing they can gather critically important information about welfare recipients by their physical presence in the home. As Natalie Pope and Jennifer Hadden posit, social workers believe that much is revealed and "many benefits exist to seeing clients in their homes."

As social workers, we give special attention to our clients' environment and how this affects their functioning and well-being. Therefore, observing clients' living situations (conditions of the home, safety concerns, status of neighborhood and community, and so forth) can provide valuable and relevant information for assessment and case planning (p. 1).

Some of the advice to caseworkers on building rapport and gaining access includes, first, how to knock on the door. For example, they must knock "with authority, but not in a threatening way" and "Sometimes you need to knock a few times before the client will answer. Try to refrain from "peeking" in windows, unless you are concerned for the potential safety of children in the home after repeatedly unanswered knocks" (Pope & Hadden, 2011. p. 2). Caseworkers also 'perform' during home visits, often following a scripted approach and formula to follow throughout the visit. This 'script' includes asking for permission to be seated, paying attention to any 'rules' in the household about leaving shoes at the door, for example, and asking if televisions and radios can be turned off, so there are fewer 'distractions,' while ensuring the home visit remains professional and not misunderstood as a 'social visit' by the welfare recipient (Collins et al., 2010; Hepworth et al., 2010; Pope & Hadden, 2020; Reamer, 2003; Snyder & McCollum, 1999).

Some caseworkers believe it necessary to establish their authority as quickly as possible during the home visit, demonstrating their 'power' to the welfare recipient first by gaining entry into the home (Pope & Hadden, 2020). Caseworkers change some of their behaviours during home visits as well. For example, in an attempt, according to caseworker Megan, to help those on social assistance feel more comfortable and trust she has their best interests at heart during a home visit, even when she suspects something is "going on," she'll perform "friendliness and approachability" by avoiding getting straight to the issue at hand, devoting the first ten minutes to "chit-chat."

I always try to start the conversation by first volunteering information about myself and not asking a bunch of questions. Nothing too personal, of course, but something that helps to put them at ease and not feel like I'm there expecting or intending to ask a stack of personal questions. I'll maybe make a comment about the traffic during my drive over or mention that they're wearing something, if they are, in my favourite colour, blue. Anything I can think of that's superficial and

hopefully makes the visit feel less threatening. I'm on their side, but I need to show them that before they can relax and then we can address the issues we need to.

Despite examples, such as Megan's, where a caseworker makes a concerted effort to help those on social assistance feel less threatened or upset during a home visit, people on welfare often regard social workers as adversaries. As one welfare recipient, thirty-seven-year-old Phil, with a history of being incarcerated, shared, part of the 'performance' during a home visit includes hiding any sense of intimidation or fear of the caseworker. "You gotta pretend not to be afraid of that power they got as sometimes if they can tell you're scared, it can turn them into a bully. This is a stranger in your home. Someone with a lot of power who can make or break my existence." Phil described how he prepares for a home visit with his caseworker.

I have to make sure I get dressed up. Cleaned up. Fresh pair of sweats. And tidy up the house in all the areas she's going to see. So, as a minimum, that's the front doorway to the kitchen. Then I have to make sure I have some coffee and milk in the house, so I have something to offer her. She's never taken any, but the time I don't have it is the time she's gonna say yes.

Phil also puts away the items that will be in his worker's path during her home visit that he worries will suggest to the caseworker that he has access to more income than he 'should.'

I hide the litter box and cat food and put the cat outside. I hide any extra treats I usually have on the counter, like my May Wests and chocolate bars. If I don't, or I forget, it seems like why do I have money to pay for what they'd call 'luxuries'? When I talk, I remind myself not to swear and answer questions with minimum amount of information but make sure it doesn't look like I'm hiding anything or slip up and say something wrong.

When asked what would be an example of something 'wrong' to say, Phil thinks for a minute then adds, "That maybe I'm going away for a couple of days to see my brother in Oakville. It's less than an hour away, but she might look at it as a kind of vacation. And welfare bums don't get to go on vacation, no way, no how. It's like you're back in prison- where you can't just say or do

or even eat anything you want to.” Phil's social assistance comes from ODSP, almost a sixty percent increase over OW. ODSP provides financial assistance to those who meet the disability qualifications and pays more because it considers additional disability-related costs. For example, a single person on OW can receive up to \$733 per month, while the maximum monthly benefit is \$1,169 for a single, on-person household on ODSP. Phil admits he lives with a constant fear of being "bumped down to the regular welfare," which would mean he could no longer afford to live alone and would be forced to get at least one roommate. "After prison, I swore I'd never live with a damn stranger again. I need my own space. I can't fall asleep with someone else in the room. No way." This is why, Phil says, he has so much at stake during his caseworker's visits. "She can decide I'm not disabled and take me off the ODSP. That happened to a guy I know. Now he's homeless."

Phil tries to minimize his face-to-face interactions with his caseworker, but since he also struggles with literacy, he often relies on her assistance with completing any necessary forms. However, it's the unexpected home visits initiated by his caseworker that Phil always worries about the most.

From the time I get that phone call telling me she's coming to see me until the time that doorbell rings, I just feel awful and full of dread. You'd think she'd give me some kind of a heads up on the phone, right? I try asking her what the visit is about, and she never gives nothing away on the phone, and that makes it all harder to know how to act, right? Am I sad? Angry? Need her help with shit? I don't always know what to give her, what she wants to see. After she leaves, if I think everything went well and I didn't screw up anything, I feel so happy I could just shit. And I can bring the cat back in.

The vast majority of the participants in the study had firm ideas around how to 'act' and 'perform' during the home visit as necessary to impress their caseworkers as worthy of social assistance. Most of the research, and caseworkers I interviewed, demonstrate that social workers

also have firm ideas about what a 'home' of a 'good' welfare recipient should look or smell like and what kinds of behaviour is expected from any children in the family during the visit, as well. When comparing the list of expectations of what a home should look and smell like, they are very similar between caseworkers and the families they work with. The difference, of course, is that those on social assistance are 'performing' home for the caseworker and do not necessarily live that way in their homes when not subjected to what they consider an inspection from the welfare office.

Caseworkers seem to realize that there is a certain level of 'performance' for their benefit during a home visit. Still, as caseworker Elayne and many others make clear, caseworkers consider the home visit as a way to 'see the truth' of how those families on social assistance are living. Caseworkers talk about the home visit being a way to "meet the clients where they are" (Pope & Hadden, p. 1) in the sanctuary of their most personal space with claims of this somehow reducing "the power differential inherent in work with mandated clients" (p. 1). The idea is that home visits are also necessary to build a rapport and offer the best support and assistance possible to those on welfare.

However, like those on social assistance know, the home visit is also a way for caseworkers to judge, force transparency, accountability, and expose the 'truth' and any 'wrong doing' among those they work with. As the next section discusses, this tension between those subjected to the home visit - welfare recipients - and those who carry out the inspections – caseworkers – contributes to home as a site of contested ground.

### **Home as a Site of Contested Ground**

Many researchers have explored the word home's etymology (Douglas, 1991; Dovey, 1985; Hollander, 1991; Mallett, 2004; Rapport & Dawson, 1998). As the literature contends, beyond its literal meaning, as discussed in previous sections, home is widely considered a source of personal identity, a place to relax, and security (Despres, 1991; Dupuis & Thorns, 1996; Madigan *et al.*, 1990; Moore, 1984; Tucker, 1994). As Shelly Mallett (2004) contends, home is a place to retreat, "clearly differentiated from public space and removed from public scrutiny and surveillance" (p. 71).

However, as interviews with the participants suggest, there are two dominant and conflicting narratives around the concept of home. Despite the literature that posits home is a significant component in defining one's self-identity and an important place to retreat for privacy and feelings of safety, the boundaries and definitions of home differ between those who receive social assistance and the caseworker whose jobs include making home visits. For the former, home is usually viewed as a safe place to retreat, in privacy, and a boundary as 'self.' For the latter, home, when it comes to those on social assistance, is a place of benevolent surveillance by caseworkers. Similarly, Peter Saunders and Peter William's (1998) contention that three related concepts inform our understanding of home as a private space: privacy, privatism, and privatization.

My analysis of my participants' stories of home suggests that their home frame comprises these three interconnected elements. I argue this is why so many participants on social assistance narratives related feelings of resentment and anger over the home visit. It represents a violation of their privacy, safety, and boundary of self. First, regarding privacy, welfare recipients know their caseworker can, and often do, wander freely around their living spaces, sometimes making comments that feel critical and judgmental to the welfare recipient. Secondly, a home visit can

often feel like a threat to their 'safety' as the welfare recipient believes they run the risk of having their welfare payments reduced or even discontinued, depending on the caseworker's inspection of their home and even their feelings about the welfare recipient. Finally, although none of the participants I interviewed used words like "boundary of self," a central theme of many of their stories was around feeling their boundaries of self were being violated by the home visit. As one participant, Kayla said, the home visit left her feeling like she had been somehow assaulted.

The two bitches who came to my parents' place asked me so many personal questions, and like they were nothing like they were asking for a drink of water. Why do I have to tell them what I do with my free time? What do they care? I wasn't prepared for that. In the welfare office, I know to expect anything. Maybe I let my guard down because I was at home, but after they left, I couldn't get right for hours. I kept walking around the apartment, wanting to burn it down, just to get rid of their smell and questions.

Crystal Mullen-Johnson (2021) writes that boundaries are "personal limits one establishes as a safeguard to create peace, respect, and the maintenance of a healthy well-being" (p. 1). Clare Cooper (1974) describes the home as a symbol of self, arguing that this is why their home is sacred for most people. "For most people, the self is a fragile and vulnerable entity; we wish therefore to envelop ourselves in a symbol-for-self which is familiar, solid, inviolate, unchanging" (p. 144). Cooper posits that "a violation of the self (house) is perhaps" one of our "most deep-seated and universal fears" (p. 144). Now fifty-two years old, Kayla says she has never forgotten her first experience with the welfare office because, as was standard at the time, her intake meeting with a social worker happened at her family's home instead of the welfare office. Kayla says her mother had talked her into applying for temporary financial help when Kayla found out she needed dental work that her salary as a waitress was never going to cover. Her mother, who had previously been on social assistance years earlier, made the necessary

phone calls to the welfare office and set up the meeting date. On the day of the appointment, Kayla was surprised when she opened the apartment door, and there were two social workers.

Looking back, I figure they decided it wouldn't be smart, you know, to have a woman show up at a stranger's apartment all alone? So, I guess they were there as a team. You know, for backup. But it was still weird to open the door and see *two* of them. [Kayla laughs] Like one isn't bad enough, right? I only had a second to take it all in, to not show my surprise. Like it's normal to have two workers, standing in the hallway with their briefcases, coming in our apartment at the same time.

Kayla says the visit felt invasive and embarrassing after the workers made it clear they needed to have a look around the apartment and then went on to open every door in her home while taking notes as they walked around.

We lived in a shit hole, so it wasn't very clean, and my mom was a little on the hostile side, so she didn't make it any better, either. Then they were asking my mom and dad how much money they were making, and mom and dad then both became kind of rude to them because they were asking so many questions. The welfare was for me, but they seemed more worried about how much my parents were making. They just went around the whole place, and after they finished looking, the two workers just stared at each other and gave each other looks, without even having to have a conversation, if you know what I mean. Just looked at each other. I felt so judged. So, I got very quiet, and then they came into the dining room, and that's where we all had to sit—even my parents.

Kayla becomes choked up and stops talking for a few minutes.

I was ashamed. I regretted having them come to our house. I regretted the whole thing with my tooth. I mean, it was just about my tooth. And when they finally sat down, I even said to them, 'You don't have to give me any welfare. I just need some money to help with my tooth.' And they were very - what's that word - *condescending*! I just felt that, at best, they were condescending. They said to me, "Yes, but in order for you to get help with your tooth, even if it's just a temporary filling, you need to apply for and collect welfare." Can you imagine how much I owed my parents after that one? After that visit? They were mad for days, wouldn't even say boo to me.

All these years later and Kayla has never forgotten how she felt that day during her first home visit. Under the 'old' system of applying for welfare, previous to SAMS, new applicants usually

had to endure a home visit that included an inspection of the premises. For now, Kayla feels empowered by this new system, handling much of her social assistance needs online, with minimal contact with the welfare office and social workers in person. This is one of the unique aspects of SAMS – that those on social assistance who feel better about having less contact with social workers, office clerks, other welfare recipients, and applicants for SAMS at the welfare office can now reduce some of those encounters. For many of them, this gives them an increased sense of privacy, as the software feels impersonal and non-judgmental in the ways a face-to-face meeting with a social worker does. As Kayla and others expressed, an online system "feels more fair" and less able to play favourites.

Perhaps this helps explain why Kayla viewed this 'interview' in her home as a boundary issue, as the social workers' questions felt too personal for her to answer from another person, who is essentially a stranger and, perhaps more importantly, has power over her. As Mullen-Johnson and others have explained, personal boundaries feel "dishonored" or compromised when people, whether out of fear of suffering a loss or negative consequence such as Kayla did, believe she had no choice but to submit to the questions, despite how inappropriate and invasive they felt to her. Further, the unequal power in the caseworker and welfare recipient relationship makes it much more challenging for someone on welfare to mark and maintain those boundaries (Baillie, 2012).

Fifteen others shared similar stories of resentment over having to allow social workers free access to their homes. As mentioned previously in this chapter, some expressed concerns about being judged regarding the level of tidiness, choices regarding furniture placement, and even who might be in the home at the time of an unexpected visit from a social worker. Sixteen also expressed deep resentment over their lack of control regarding a worker's 'right' to just show

up, with or without an appointment. Perhaps, as Pithouse (1987) argues, due to the invisible nature of most of the activities performed outside of the welfare office by social workers, such as during home visits, evaluating their practice or interactions with welfare recipients is limited. This “invisibility” suggests a lack of accountability regarding how they conduct themselves when making a home visit. As Harry Ferguson (2016) points out, "Although a large body of research literature now exists on child and family social work, surprisingly little of this has been applied to producing knowledge of what actually goes on when social workers and children and families are face to face" (p. 154).

Twelve of those I interviewed told stories that spoke to this issue of caseworkers being held unaccountable for what some participants described as 'rude' or even 'bullying' behaviour during home visits. As part of what Pithouse called the "invisible trade," caseworkers can freely intrude into the private spaces of those on social assistance, making them often feel vulnerable, with their personal spaces violated. In the literature regarding the multiple meanings of home, privacy, in terms of the ability of families to control who can enter the home, is primarily recognized as a critical component of the home (Allan, 1989; Depres, 1991; Sommerville, 1997).

Participant Kayla talked about this loss of privacy, describing how social workers moved freely in her home, including spaces Kayla usually would not allow even her parents to "invade." "My mother stood in the doorway of my bedroom after they just opened the door and walked in. I knew I couldn't yell at them, like at my parents, to get the hell out of my room. It was probably the first time in two years my mother had seen my room."

Seventeen of the welfare recipients interviewed told stories that suggest SAMS works in ways that disrupt the power imbalance between them and their workers. It has meant significantly fewer home visits and face-to-face meetings in general because so much of the

process is now mediated by the software system. For example, Rebecca tells me she turns twenty-five in a couple of months and then describes herself as "old as shit." A single mother of two young boys, ages four and six, Rebecca says between working at McDonald's on the weekends, attending school part-time-time to earn her General Education Diploma Ontario High School Equivalency, and taking care of her children; she barely has a minute to herself. She asks if I mind if she smokes, and after I tell her to go ahead, she lights a cigarette off the top of her stove's burner, then sits across from me at her kitchen table. She barely glances at the release form I've asked her to have a look at before just scribbling her signature at the bottom. "I trust you," she says with a laugh. "But if you've just had me sign over everything I own to you, well, then you'll be in for a huge surprise!" she adds with another laugh.

Rebecca has been on and off social assistance for the past seven years. Still, since the birth of her last son four years ago, she has been trying to supplement her welfare checks with part-time work, saying she hopes to be able to work full-time once both of her boys are in school full days and then be able to support herself one hundred percent. "I can't wait until I can say fuck you very much, but I don't need that check anymore," says Rebecca. As someone who has received social assistance before and after SAMS was launched, I try to learn if Rebecca has noted any differences in the process or experience with receiving support under SAMS. It quickly becomes apparent she does not know what 'SAMS' is, nor has she ever heard the acronym before. I explain it is a new software system in charge of distributing and governing the social assistance program. That seems to somehow click with her.

Oh, right. That. Yeah, that's why I had to tell my worker I started working at Mc D's [McDonald's] as she would have found out, anyway. They keep track of everything now. No more paper, no more files, no more talking. It's all inside the computer now. You can't hide nothing! My worker knows if one of my kids misses school, how many hours I work a week, and how much I make down to the

last dollar. A friend of mine who was working, she didn't tell the welfare office, and holy shit, a really bad idea. When it caught up with her? Yeah, did she ever get it. Not worth it. So not worth it. Way too easy to get caught. They know everything about you now. Everything!

When I ask Rebecca if she preferred the previous system [as it sounds like she considered it less invasive], she quickly sets me straight.

Hell, no. As long as I don't try and bullshit anything, cause if I do, I'd get caught right away, anyway. They don't come to my house. They don't make me meet with them. They pretty much leave me the hell alone. The last time I saw my worker? In-person? Actually, [she laughs] I don't even remember. And if I do need to talk to her 'bout something, I can just call her now and don't even have to go to her office.

I ask her why she prefers not having to meet with her worker in person or at her home.

I tried talking to her about not having enough money one time, even with the bit I make on the weekends, and she was horrible. Just horrible. She expected me to be able to pay rent and buy stuff for me and the kids with what, only three hundred dollars? And support myself like that? It was bad. But Kelly here [the supervisor of the housing co-op where Rebecca lives] sorted all that out thankfully, and since then, it's not been too bad, thank God. I hate talking to the worker, period. She runs circles around me, and it's like she thinks I'm stupid. I know what she's doing, but what can I do about it, right? See? I hate talking to her or any of them. Hate having to ask her for anything. And now I don't have to meet with her anymore or let her in my place. I just go online now and fill in the forms about how much money I made and just type in the amount in that tiny little box on my paycheck. Then they put my welfare check right into my bank account.

Rebecca says she has had a "couple of good workers" over the years while on social assistance but always has a lot of anxiety about meeting with any of them. She said she struggles to read and feels embarrassed when they "stick a form in her face and seem to watch" her while she reads it. "They always hate me. I can tell. They think I'm stupid and am gonna mean extra work for them. But, I can read just fine, just as long as no one's watching me."

Rebecca is not the only welfare recipient I interviewed who made it clear they prefer the reduced face-to-face contact they now have with their social workers under SAMS. Although

twelve complained about the long wait times often necessary when reaching a social worker by telephone, nearly every welfare recipient I interviewed said they are pleased to endure no longer having a social worker come into their home. In addition, most seemed to prefer how much of the processes and applications around social assistance means a less personal approach, which feels less invasive to many participants. For fourteen of the participants, including Rebecca, it also seems more "fair," as the system is now impersonal and less biased since individual welfare recipients have less opportunity to "suck up to their workers when they come for a visit."

I know most of the other moms in the co-op, and it's fucking ridiculous how some of them used to get money for winter stuff for their kids and money for school shit, and I'd get nothing! I just can't stand to kiss ass. Not that it would've made any difference, anyway. My worker just didn't like me. I finally asked her one time if I could get some extra money for shoes for my kids, and the bitch told me to go to the church near Jackson Square and see if they could help me out. I mean, for real? You kidding me? Cassie next door got to take her kids to Walmart and let them pick out a pair that fit them perfectly, but I gotta get my kids to try on hand-me-downs? Tell me how that's fair? But that's what I mean. Mine doesn't like me. [Rebecca pauses for a minute and then laughs sarcastically]. Or maybe she's a nobody down at the welfare office, and Cassie's worker is a somebody. I don't know. But if my kids can't get new shoes, why should Cassie's kids just because their mom is so good at sucking up?

Seventeen of the twenty welfare recipients in the study said they had accepted 'official' decisions from the welfare office without question or argument, even when those decisions meant not receiving the extra assistance they had hoped for when, as long as they believed it was not personal or because of something they could or should have done. "You can't get blood from a stone," said another participant, single mother, Nancy. 'Playing favourites' was a common complaint of many of those on social assistance, who claimed some social workers' play God and others' punish' the welfare recipients they decide do not deserve extra help. Many spoke of their feelings of competitiveness and anger when another mom on social assistance would somehow obtain additional support, despite the similarities between their situation with the other mom.

Rebecca talked about how happy she was when she realized she would not have to meet with her social worker in her home or even in the welfare office as often anymore.

Every time I went to her office or she came to my house; it was the same stupid thing. She'd ask me like she was joking and just being friendly and ask if I ever wash my son's face. Can you believe that? *Do I ever wash my son's face?* What in holy fuck was I supposed to say to that? He was a toddler the first time she met him, and he had some peanut butter on his face from his toast. I felt like an asshole when she suddenly leaned in close and asked him if he was eating his breakfast or wearing it. Ha, ha, so funny. From then on, for the next three fucking years, she'd check his face every single time I saw her. 'Do you ever wash his face?' I still think about all the shit I wish I could have said back to her.

However, not every welfare recipient prefers the less personal approach of a social worker because of feelings of being treated unfairly, or believe they need to 'suck up' to the 'all-powerful social worker' who holds all the authority and control over decisions that can profoundly impact the quality of their lives. Like Rebecca, it is often simply how a social worker makes the welfare recipient feel about themselves, whether good or bad, intentional or not. Sometimes a welfare recipient's perception that a social worker is genuinely trying to help, understand, and get to know them better in context, can be even more offensive. As Dietz and Thompson write (2004), the power imbalance between the social worker-welfare recipient relationship is continuously operating - if even only in the background - and how these professional relationships work may be disempowering to some on social assistance. I suggest it is this imbalance of power that some welfare recipients are responding to, even when that 'imbalance' is used only with the best of intentions, and sometimes, even unintentionally, by a social worker. Whether welfare recipients can articulate it or not, and whether they overestimate its potential impact or not, they recognize that this *person* holds an incredible amount of decision-making power over their day-to-day lives and often, even how the welfare recipient feels about themselves.

Marilyn Peterson (1992) argues that the power differential in the professional-welfare recipient relationship is often established and reinforced because of repetitive social conditioning of the welfare recipient, beginning in childhood, where those on social assistance learn to confer social workers with tremendous power and superiority. However, Peterson also argues that welfare recipients not only confer this power on social workers, they defer to their social workers' expertise and comply with their directives based on the trusted ideal that social workers will faithfully use their power to benefit the welfare recipient. In this study, although many seemed to believe social workers have the necessary expertise and authority to assist them, many also seemed to learn to defer to their social workers' expertise because they had no other choice.

In his mid to late 40s, Steve has been on social assistance ever since he lost his job eight years ago after his plant shut down. Although it has been years since he first applied, he still recalls his intake interview with his caseworker extremely well and says he still remembers the sense of "dread" he felt that day when filling in the application form. Steve says his caseworker was young and friendly and seemed to want to help make him feel as comfortable as possible. Yet somehow, the very fact that she seemed intent on making an effort to help put him at ease only increased Steve's anxiety about the entire process. He 'read' her kindness as pity, illustrating how even the best intentions from a sensitive social worker can make a difficult situation even more difficult for the welfare recipient.

The information I had to give her was like telling my whole life story. Her face would look sad at what I think she thought were the sad parts, then happy at the good parts. It was embarrassing. She was too young to have to hear all about my, my stuff. Did I have a car? A house? Any money in the bank? Any loans? How much did I spend on groceries each week? My age. Did I have any children? Anyone else living with me? What jobs did I have before the one I lost? What jobs did I think I could apply for in the future? What about my education? It was just endless. Honestly, if I had known I was going to get someone like that, I

probably wouldn't have gone. I wanted to get up and leave a few times, but she was nice, and I didn't want to hurt her feelings or make her feel, you know, bad.

With SAMS, they can avoid having social workers come to their homes as frequently, which appeared to be an advantage to most welfare recipients.

However, how caseworkers perceive and report on their actions during the home visit, in comparison to those subjected to the home visit, is, as expected, quite different. Spencer Headworth (2020) posits that there is often a significant contrast between how welfare recipients and social workers view the same behaviour. For example, as Headworth (2020) argues, there is a "notable discrepancy between how welfare clients depict rule-breaking behaviour" versus how social workers define the same behaviour (p. 26). Additionally, previous studies examining the violation of welfare rules from those on social assistance, for example, posit that from the welfare recipients' perspective, unlike social workers, these violations are often the result of simply misunderstanding the rules or being unaware of a specific requirement (Edin & Lein, 1997; Gilliom, 2001; Gustafson, 2011). Social workers often rely on intuition, "niggles and gut feelings" during a home visit (Cook, 2017, p. 431). The goal during a home visit is to establish a relationship with the family or applicant, evaluate, make judgments, and then devise a plan for moving forward. As Cook (2017) contends, although 'gut feelings' and intuition can play an important role as a starting point, intuition should always be used only "as an aid, rather than substitute for, analysis' (p. 442).

When I first started interviews with the welfare recipients in my study, it was not difficult to imagine that many would consider SAMS an invasive, impersonal online system that they would view less appealing than speaking with actual people – social workers. How could an algorithm replace the in-person meetings, assessments, and discussions that previously created a

portfolio that led to important decisions about funding a welfare recipient's ability to receive financial assistance? Partway through the interviews with the study participants, I realized I had also assumed that social workers would have mainly positive things to report about the new system. After all, one of the main advantages touted about SAMS is that the software's efficiency and presumed neutrality helps to streamline both the application process and the distribution of social assistance in the province. I assumed this meant that social workers would now be able to spend less time on administrative work, as the software would do most of the operational work, freeing social workers to do what they do best: offering support and guidance to welfare recipients, educating them about the support and social services available to them. I was wrong on all accounts.

SAMS has proven to be perceived as empowering to many of those on social assistance in unanticipated ways. Examples include feelings of relief expressed by many participants that this now means less personal contact with social workers under the new SAMS system. In addition, since the 'system now makes most decisions,' many participants said they felt less 'judged' and believe this means social workers are also less able to practice favouritism or punishment towards welfare recipients, depending on how they 'feel' about them.

Fourteen welfare recipients also talked about applying for social assistance as feeling less 'shameful' and 'embarrassing' because of how depersonalized the system has become in many ways. "I didn't worry that maybe the worker wouldn't like me or believe me," said Karen, about her experience with applying for SAMS online. Instead, Karen preferred having to "just" provide the necessary documents in person later to finalize her application. Even the freedom to read through all of the forms on their own time, at their own pace, rather than on front of someone else can provide a sense of relief. This sense of relief was not true for all participants, however.

Some welfare recipients and applicants expressed frustration over how long the wait times are now (with SAMS) to see a social worker face-to-face, even once registered in the system. Additionally, many complained about how much more difficult it could often be to reach *anyone* by telephone at the welfare office, as wait times on the phone can often be up to forty-five minutes or longer. This is particularly frustrating when using the online system to apply for social assistance. For example, when someone has multiple questions and has to call numerous times to get an answer. There is also frustration that an applicant cannot work on the application in the interim because SAMS does not allow one to move forward with an application online without answering all previous sections on the application. "I hate when I have just a quick question for my worker, and I gotta either play phone tag or wait forever on the phone," said Felicity.

## **Conclusion**

As argued in this chapter, home is a site of moral regulation, performance, and contested ground. Home as a site of moral regulation includes, for example, when caseworkers will note and comment on any 'smells' they detect or whether any furniture in the welfare recipient's home seems inappropriate during a home visit. This means the home visit is considered a source of humiliation by most, if not all, the participants I interviewed. Welfare recipients understand the 'performance' they believe is necessary during the home visit to convey that they are 'worthy' and the 'ideal' recipient.

However, although many spoke of their resentment and feelings of humiliation during what some also described as an "invasion," some also seemed to recognize that their social class - or lower status as someone on social assistance - means they have no choice but to submit to

this performance. Although SAMS was supposed to eliminate or minimize the need for home visits, this has not happened. As caseworkers are fully aware, home visits remain outside of the control of SAMS as it still requires a human to show up in person. This means home visits remain one area that caseworkers can still exercise some professional autonomy.

Beyond the home visit, through its systems of social assistance, the state engages in surveillance through the systemic collection and retention of personal information, gathering substantial information (Bridges, 2017; Eubanks, 2018; Headworth, 2019; Hughes, 2017; Wacquant, 2009) about those who receive social assistance. Although research on surveillance in the form of policing has primarily focused on policing of public space (Fagen et al., 2016; Herbert, Beckett, and Stuart, 2017; Stuart, 2016), state surveillance extends into private family life. As Kelly Fong writes, "The predominant explanation holds that families open themselves up to the state as a condition of receiving public benefits" (p. 4). Further, although home visits are arguably becoming less common, welfare agencies still collect massive amounts of personal information, though today, it is "generally corporations, not the state, doing the tracking" (Couldry and Mejias, p. 155).

This collection starts during the application intake process – about family finances, vehicle ownership and driving histories, education level, previous employment, history of any access to unemployment insurance, health and health insurance, and personal relationships. Next, all of this amassed data is further collected, stored, linked, and shared through multiple databases, raising questions about how individual systems compile and share information in the first place (Brayne, 2014; Brayne, 2017; Haggerty and Ericson, 2000). The hybridity of SAMS includes third parties are increasingly involved in poverty governance (Garland, 2001; Herring, 2019), arguably making home visits increasingly redundant as SAMS contributes towards

rendering those receiving social assistance near-total visibility to the state. These third-party relationships include, for example, the contract with IBM, a large private corporation that created (and maintains) the software for SAMS.

In conclusion, from the perspective of those on welfare, SAMS seems to have had some unexpected positive impacts on the delivery of social services in Ontario. Namely, the less personal approach and the role that social workers have long played in the system appears to appeal to many of those who consider the home visit as intrusive and a source of stress, moral judgment, and humiliation. However, this does not mean SAMS has not also created potentially new problems for those on social assistance, whether those who receive welfare are fully aware of it yet or not.

As discussed in the next chapter, SAMS produces an ideal productive applicant eligible for social assistance. The assumption is that assistance would be temporary and that this ideal subject, part and parcel, is legible to those working in the system and participating in it. Most of the time, those who apply for social assistance *know* when they apply what they are supposed to do. They know how they are supposed to answer a social worker.

However, those stories of trauma or how things have gone wrong or are challenging in unique or individual ways are no longer relevant. There is a set of criteria and a set of attributes you are supposed to have, and you either have them, or you do not. In the next chapter, I argue that the lack of human factor in these decisions means little to no flexibility to take or make exceptions into account, as SAMS is now constructing the 'ideal' welfare recipient and this 'ideal' subject is legible to those using and working with the system.

## Chapter 6: Digital Ghost in the Machine: SAMS' 'Ideal' Welfare Recipient

As discussed in the previous chapter, the state's window into the home via the home visit has proven itself to be resilient - a sacred cow of the oppressive system - and a site of contestation between the new and the old way of governing welfare recipients. However, although SAMS was supposed to mostly eliminate the need for the home visit, enabling governance at a distance, social workers continue to resist, firm in their belief that the home is a site of 'truth.' Four of the five social workers interviewed insisted that SAMS is designed to perform many of their professional duties, and they argue it is intended to make most of them redundant eventually. However, caseworkers understand that algorithmic governance fundamentally changes decisions about who is good, bad, deserving, and undeserving. The caseworkers also know that the algorithms eliminate discretionary decision-making by the people who administer the systems, shared across algorithmic governance. With most, if not all, of the caseworkers' discretionary power removed, those on social assistance need to master a new performance, one for the machine. The critical difference is that SAMS is a binary system. Unlike social workers – humans - when it comes to decision making about those on social assistance, SAMS software is designed to say 'yes' or 'no.' Lacking the ability to contextualize an individual's unique circumstances, as social workers have always been able to do, SAMS algorithms now decide if a person is ineligible or, no longer eligible, based on a narrow definition.

Ultimately, this project is about living in algorithmic governance and being in *that* machine. In this chapter, I explore empowerment and algorithmic governance in the context of social sorting and anticipatory governance, as constructed through the participants' narratives about their experiences with SAMS. This chapter proceeds through a series of analytic claims;

first, due to the decrease in home visits and the diminished discretionary powers of caseworkers, SAMS can empower those on social assistance. Second, SAMS operates to reproduce the 'ideal' welfare recipient and punishes those who do not fit, or cannot fit, themselves within those norms. Additionally, more than just governance, SAMS is also a disciplinary mechanism. Third, there is a set of criteria and attributes all applicants and recipients are supposed to have, and they either have them or they do not. Finally, as I argue in the conclusion, all context is lost without social workers' discretion - the human factor in these decisions. SAMS is constructing an 'ideal' welfare recipient without considering each person's unique life circumstances.

### **How SAMS *Empowers* Welfare Recipients**

As described in the previous chapter, many participants in the study expressed satisfaction with the new reality of fewer home visits, and reduced contact with the welfare office in general, thanks to SAMS. Although all applicants new to SAMS must eventually appear in person with documentation to prove all of their claims to finalize their applications for social assistance, once registered in the system, much of the ongoing support and supervision by the welfare office and individual caseworkers can now be dealt with at a distance, online or by telephone. However, four of the social workers expressed concerns over the increasing lack of face time with the families they work with, claiming they can 'tell more' when they can 'see more.' This includes both office and home visits.

Further, the fact that they do care about those families and individuals on social assistance and genuinely want to help makes the changes around reduced contact face-to-face all the more frustrating and upsetting for them. However, although participants complained about the long wait times whenever attempting to reach their caseworker or the welfare office by

phone, all participants talked about how much they dislike the home visit and their feelings of resentment over being 'judged' by their caseworker. Being able to avoid and minimize contact with caseworkers is something new to the welfare system under SAMS.

Previously, all new applicants could expect a home visit, and those who remained on social assistance could experience an unscheduled or 'surprise' home visit at any time. However, SAMS makes the home visit, especially the 'surprise' home visit, less frequent. For those at the receiving end of these visits, being subjected to fewer encounters, which often left them feeling judged and demoralized, is not only welcomed but also perceived as empowering. SAMS lack of 'personal' or individual service makes welfare recipients feel less singled out, and less judged.

The moral 'judgments' by caseworkers can also happen during meetings outside of the home, of course. Pam is a social worker in a large city in Ontario whose caseload focuses mainly on assisting high school students whose families have recently immigrated to Canada to apply for social assistance. Pam presents as white, appears to be in her early to mid-40s, and is wearing a suit jacket with a white t-shirt, jeans, and a long string of bright pink pearls that she handles and plays with throughout our interview. Pam goes to three different high schools each week to meet with students to assist them with learning how to help their parents navigate Ontario's welfare application process. Pam likes that a student's family can apply for social assistance online but says she also likes that they have to eventually appear in person to provide original documents to support and complete their application. As Pam described it, her role is to help them learn how to fill in the forms and go through all the steps with her guidance. Pam considers SAMS an excellent learning tool for her students.

I think it's a terrific way to teach them how it works here in Canada. Sure, I could make the calls for them and fill in the forms, but I see this as such a teachable moment. I walk them through filling in the forms online first. It takes forever, as

often their English isn't very strong, but it's important for them to see what our government forms look like and how this process all works. Then once they've completed those forms, and sometimes kicking and screaming [Pam laughs], they have a much broader sense of it all. Then I still make them do a phone call to the welfare office, telling them just to pretend they need to clarify something on their application form. [Pam laughs] And trust me, that's the part they seem to *hate* the most. But I always insist as I know it helps get them used to it.

Pam did not seem concerned or express any concerns during her interview about SAMS trying to make her job redundant. However, she did say, "the new software has a lot of stuff it still needs to work out, as it shuts me out sometimes for no reason." However, besides the occasional computer software glitch, Pam did not complain about working with SAMS. Unlike the other caseworkers interviewed, who have come up with 'hacks' and workarounds to ensure applicants and those on social assistance receive what the caseworker believes they are entitled to - despite SAMS regulations - Pam considers an essential part of her role is to "ensure compliance from her clients" when it comes to making them apply for social assistance in ways she has decided are invaluable to them. Pam believes that all applicants for social assistance who are new to Canada should first apply online. "In order to learn the system, become more confident with computers, improve their English, and fill out forms in Canada since this is something they can look forward and expect to be doing for the next few years, anyway."

Pam insists that making the high school students call the welfare office also "builds their confidence in their ability to take care of things themselves." Pam appears to view herself as simply doing what social workers have historically aspired to do: empower those who receive social assistance to gain control of their lives. For Pam, this 'empowerment' and learning how to take control of their lives starts with insisting that those who apply for social assistance learn how to call the local welfare office, believing there is value in forcing an applicant whose first

language isn't English or French, to "speak to people from government agencies" and also learn how to navigate their way online.

The concept of empowerment has long played a central role in modern social work (Adams, 2008; Anderson, 1996; Boehm & Staples, 2002; Gutierrez et al., 1998; Lee, 1994; Simon, 1994; Solomon, 1976) and is strongly associated with increased levels of self-esteem, assertiveness, participatory competencies, and hope (Freire, 1994; Kieffer, 1984; Moreau, 1990; Powell, 1999; Rubenstein & Lawler, 1990; Zimmerman, 1995). As Dag Leonardsen (2006) writes, social workers, can "easily end up as moralizing agents rather than facilitators for their clients" (p. 3) if they work with only an individualistic understanding of empowerment and do not also take into account the fact that economic, political and cultural structures can limit an individual's freedom to choose. Leonardsen also argues that social workers "can never become neutral and disengaged benefactors in a society of inequalities and injustice," and this, in turn, creates high expectations of those in the profession (p. 10).

However, as the participants in this study argued, this very lack of neutrality among caseworkers can lead to inequalities and injustice as caseworkers make individual decisions and choices about who is deserving and undeserving among welfare recipients. Bob Pease (2002) argues that "Individualistic notions of empowerment are aimed at developing capacities of individual people, and they are not concerned with change in oppressive social structures" (p. 136). In other words, it is one thing to empower an individual to feel capable and able to take control of their circumstances, and quite another to tackle the oppressive social structures in society. Robert Adams (1996) defines empowerment as "the means by which individuals, groups and/or communities become able to take control of their circumstances and achieve their goals" (p. 5).

However, as Gutierrez et al. (1998) found after performing a content analysis of articles on empowerment in social work journals, most focussed on micro-levels of empowerment and failed to include any specific examples of suggestions of how this empowerment was to occur. As Mary Langan (1998) posits, empowerment "implies an individualistic conception of power which by reducing social relations to the impersonal level, obscures the real power relations in society" (p. 214). In this sense, empowerment focuses on individual responsibility, implying there is little difference between the concept of self-determination and empowerment.

However, as Pease (2002) argues, because of the tension inherent in the professional-welfare recipient relationship, which directly contributes to undermining the possibility of empowering those on social assistance, a focus needs to be placed on examining the ways in which local knowledge and expertise become "marginalized and disqualified" (p. 144). This means that if empowerment of those on social assistance is to be genuinely emancipatory, as Pease argues, social workers need to become more aware that by "conceptualizing power as a commodity, identities are forced into a powerful-powerless dualism which does not always do justice to diverse experiences" (p. 135). This suggests that Pease ascribes more power and influence to *individual* social workers than they may, I contend, actually have. After all, social workers involved in public practice for the welfare office are agents of the state, mandated to follow the policies and regulations regarding their roles and responsibilities as directed and defined by the state. Pease writes:

It is argued that social workers need to become more aware of the self-disciplining and self-regulatory processes involved in professional work to address the social relations of power embedded in professional practices. Foucault's analysis of how marginalized knowledges are affected by dominant cultural practices suggests a redefining of empowerment as the insurrection of subjugated knowledge (p. 135).

However, suppose social workers are increasingly becoming limited in their discretionary powers because of SAMS. In that case, this argument that they need to work somehow still to address the social relations of power embedded in professional practices seems to lack an awareness of how arguing their 'failures' also serves to individualize the conception of power. Although eighteen of those I interviewed did seem to view their social workers as powerful, able to make their lives more challenging or, if they chose to, more comfortable, do social workers have the power to challenge those rules and regulations under SAMS? Perhaps not. As I will discuss shortly, SAMS software limits social workers' ability to make individual exceptions in numerous ways. Restrictions are built into the software, making any deviation almost impossible.

Yet this conviction among the welfare recipients I interviewed that some social workers play favourites and "punish" those welfare recipients they disapprove of, or consider undeserving of social assistance, contributes to them wanting to minimize their interactions with social workers as much as possible. It also reinforces their conviction that some of the advantages of SAMS, from their perspective, is how it enables them to avoid those interactions with social workers that leave them feeling angry, defeated, cheated, disrespected, and worse off than before their face-to-face meetings. As Tiffany said, in response to her social worker's suggestion that McDonald's and Walmart are constantly hiring and urged her to apply:

She knows I worked at both places before, or maybe she just doesn't listen or just forgot. But like I keep telling her, they mess with your hours and mess with your check. I never ever got what I was supposed to, not ever. And by the time I paid for my bus fare and a sitter, I wasn't making a whole lot, anyway. So, to leave my babies at home to work maybe, what, 25 or 30 hours a week? Why? I mean, why? I'm so sick of hearing her saying I should apply like I'm just lazy and don't want to work. Bitch, show me a job that I can live on, and you will see the back of my head for the last time.

This belief that her caseworker was disrespecting her by making suggestions Tiffany considered, at best, to be useless and, at worst, insulting did nothing to help Tiffany feel trust or faith in her caseworker having her best interests at heart. Tiffany also said she was relieved when she no longer had to meet regularly with this caseworker and instead had to simply go online and confirm that her "situation" had not changed over the past three months. As she pointed out, what is the point in meeting with a social worker if, instead of helping them achieve any goals which *they* have identified as being desirable and, perhaps more importantly, obtainable within her life circumstances, only serves to make her feel "less."

Social worker Pam believes the multiple possible approaches to applying, with all of the numerous processes and steps involved with SAMS, actually offer her many opportunities to teach those who receive social assistance how to best access social assistance in Ontario and deal with governmental agencies in general. This is in contrast to social worker Megan, who insists that the current system under SAMS is of no legitimate value to those it was supposedly designed to help: those on social assistance. Further, Megan argues it is a system that benefits only private corporations, such as IBM, who developed the software system. "SAMS is a do-nothing technocratic solution created to evade responsibility and pour public money into private hands." However, with so many of the participants on social assistance making it clear during their interviews how much they prefer fewer, if any, home visits from in-person meetings with their caseworkers, does SAMS *empower* welfare recipients? Seventeen of the participants on social assistance argued that having less contact in general with *anyone* from the welfare office enables them to avoid the moralizing, favouritism, and scrutiny of caseworkers.

According to the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (2018), the relationship between social workers and those who receive social assistance requires that the

social worker has an ethical duty to act in the best interest of those they are assigned to work with (p. 2). However, how does a social worker act in the best interest of those who receive social assistance when their 'best interest' might directly conflict with a directive, policy, or requirement of their work on behalf of the governmental social service agency they work for? As Dietz and Thompson (2004) argue, there is a significant power differential between a social worker and those who receive social assistance. The discretion and authority of a social worker to do what they believe in their professional opinion is in the 'best interest' of those who receive social assistance, combined with an ethical obligation to do so, appears to be sometimes in conflict with what some of those who receive social assistance believe to be in their best interest.

In fact, according to eighteen of the welfare recipients interviewed for this study, a social worker's discretion and apparent freedom to act in ways they believe to be 'best' for welfare recipients, despite what the welfare recipient might consider being true, is where SAMS has become empowering. That is, by removing much of the social worker's one-on-one presence in the welfare recipient's life and, perhaps more importantly, discretionary powers. Instead, now under SAMS, most of those on social assistance have much less contact with their caseworkers, and caseworkers are less able to 'bend the rules.'

Fifteen of the twenty participants seemed to view their caseworker as a gatekeeper and often a hindrance to receiving the benefits they believed they might otherwise be able to receive. In other words, if they could only somehow be assigned the 'right' social worker, they would perhaps have more access to the financial support to which they believe they are entitled, but because of a social worker's individual 'power' to deny them based on what the welfare recipient believed to be personal judgments against them, are denied. The participants seemed convinced

that SAMS offers a way to equalize this power imbalance in their relationship with their caseworkers and force transparency and fairness in distributing financial support.

By removing most of a caseworkers' discretion and autonomy, SAMS now regulates the relationship between welfare recipient and social assistance and enforces the rules in ways that those in the study said often feels less personal, less judgmental, more impartial, and fair. As Tiffany, a participant who complained that her social worker "doesn't like" her and sometimes "makes up bad stories" about her, said, "The machine don't lie!" The impersonal approach of a software system seemed to appeal to many of the participants, even as they expressed frustrations around the long wait times when trying to reach a human at the welfare office to ask a question or seek assistance to correct an error in the system, including a delayed check, or one that was for less than the welfare recipient believed they were supposed to receive. As single mom, Felicity said, "I get so sick of playing phone tag. And that's if I'm lucky enough to even get through and be able to leave a message! I'm not kidding. I can be on the phone for forty-five minutes just waiting, like my time doesn't matter, right? and suddenly I get cut off and have to start the whole damn thing over again."

However, even Felicity would rather deal with the frustrations of long wait times and "playing phone tag" than be subjected to more frequent home visits.

Although much of the research emphasizes empowerment as a process that is central to social work theory and practice as a way to help those on social assistance gain control over their own lives (Adams, 1996; Cruikshank, 1993; Gutierrez et al., 1998; Langan, 1998), the level at which empowerment is directed and the political orientation of its advocates are arguably in conflict with the mandate of social assistance policies in Ontario. For example, as discussed in

the next section, SAMS is designed to move as many people off of welfare support and into the workforce as quickly as possible (Lankin and Sheikh, 2012).

### **More than Just Governance: SAMS is a Disciplinary Mechanism**

According to the coders I interviewed for this study, the fact that an algorithmic system makes all of the decisions now is one of the critical advantages of SAMS<sup>14</sup>. As coder Ben said, "unlike social workers, who are only human, the system will always be neutral and always be fair. The software doesn't 'like' or 'dislike' anyone. It just does whatever you tell it to and does it without any judgment." Coder Kevin agrees. "The lack of human decision-making on an individual level keeps everything fair."

However, both Kevin and Ben are wrong about the "system will always be neutral and always be fair." Ziad Obermeyer et al. (2021) argue that algorithmic bias is everywhere and offer numerous examples, including Joy Buolamwini's work, which exposed how facial recognition algorithms trained in non-diverse samples failed to generalize, affecting performance (p. 2).

Further, as Obermeyer et al. (2021) ask, how do we measure bias?

The first step is always to define the problem the algorithm is trying to solve. But before we ever touch the data, we need to articulate the ideal target for the algorithm. That ideal target embodies our value system: what do we want the algorithm to learn? Algorithms are extremely literal – they predict a specific variable, in a specific data set (p. 2).

However, because SAMS software is designed to limit any input data or add any exceptions to individual files by caseworkers, this allows SAMS to create and control the ideal system subject and punish those who do not fit the system's criteria of the ideal recipient. As

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<sup>14</sup> The two coders are Kevin and Ben. Kevin has worked in his field for over fifteen years and owns his own small software company. Ben, who is younger, works for a large private software corporation.

Jacques Donzelot (1976) writes, states search to bring "to light the moral fault that more or less directly determined" a family's misfortune, "involving continuous surveillance of the family, a full penetration into the details of family life" (p. 69). The ability for expanded and expansive surveillance of those receiving financial assistance by SAMS means designating people as simply eligible or not, based on need assessments or risk. However, with risk assessments drawing on prior system interactions (Brayne, 2017; Hirschman and Bosk, 2019), people in need accumulate more perceived risk, reinforcing social inequality.

Although home visits, including 'surprise' ones, still occur, with the constant evolution of technological advancements and anti-welfare sentiments, surveillance practices have become more high-tech and prevalent, particularly in government services (Lyon 2001, 2003, 2004). Digital surveillance at a distance increasingly enhances the systems' ability to know 'all.' There is a consensus in the literature that "new networked technologies are likely to introduce, enhance and extend network forms of governing" (Henman, 2005, 80; also see: Lyon, 2008). That is where surveillance intersects with welfare governance. It means increasing the state's ability to target, rule, and manage distinct groups and individuals. This collection and analysis of enormous amounts of data, which - as highlighted earlier - is shared across government agencies, explicitly increases government organizations and services' ability to "make smart use of this information to develop public policy, administer services and enhance compliance" (Henman, 2005, 80). These new technologies for tracking, sorting, recording, and sharing digital representations of the populace "reflect new ways of thinking about conducting government more generally, as is now widely embraced under the neologism of 'governance'" (Herman, 2005, 80).

However, as Gilliom (2001) suggests, to govern people who live in poverty, the state must 'know' them, and to do that, the state must place them in 'knowable' categories. For example, predictive algorithms that draw on accumulated personal digital data are used to determine which individuals should have access to certain goods and which individuals should be placed in a 'risky' category (Crawford and Schultz, 2016). As Harcourt (2006) posits, predictive analytics as a form of anticipatory governance often punish individuals based on assumptions drawn from dataveillance systems instead of actual behaviours. For example, the system assumes there are jobs for the welfare recipients to apply for and will 'punish' those who do not regularly report their efforts to seek employment. These reports about efforts made to find work must demonstrate how they are attempting to make themselves more employable by providing 'proof' of having attended job fairs or other similar events. The focus here is on the welfare recipient's performance with actively seeking employment. Based on the algorithms' profile, the digital double means the system has a set of strict parameters for each welfare recipient that places them into distinct categories of compliance, non-compliance, productive and non-productive.

However, with over eight hundred rules regarding welfare assistance, it is also easy to make a mistake and break one of these rules, often out of ignorance or confusion. It used to be humans making these decisions and making exceptions when necessary. For example, decisions about eligibility, and these decisions were always made in the person's presence. Today, with SAMS, the software makes decisions, and humans are now increasingly on the periphery, headed towards an entirely automated system. The introduction to the OW video includes information about SAMS' Interactive Voice Response,' which I discuss further in this chapter, is a 1-800 automated phone line that includes a message about accessing one's file online. I argue this

represents another opportunity to remove the human from social assistance. The welfare recipient can also update their file online, noting any changes or lack of changes, making face-to-face contact unnecessary.

Although the welfare office still collects information about household relationships and finances, beginning with the application process and then ongoing through home visits, surveillance through linked databases has become a meaningful way to enhance and increase personal observations of families' domestic lives (Gilliom 2002). Surveillance at a distance, a fundamental component of SAMS, now enables the state to gather substantial amounts of information about social assistance applicants and allows state systems to share and merge storage of personal data very efficiently. Surveillance and the datafication of every day are not only a violation of privacy but, as Lyon (2003) explains, a form of social sorting. The process of social sorting has the effect of creating and intensifying differences. As Lyon writes, "For surveillance today sorts people into categories, assigning worth or risk, in ways that have real effects on their life-chances. Deep discrimination occurs, thus making surveillance not merely a matter of personal privacy but of social justice" (p. 1.). As Monique Mann and Tobias Matzner (2019) explain, algorithmic profiling is a way of detecting patterns and making predictions based on these patterns. However, of particular concern is that "algorithmic profiling targets marginalised groups, such as racial minorities, individuals of low socio-economic status, and women" (p. 2), highlighting that not everyone is treated as equal.

As Lucas Introna (2016) writes, "Across state and private institutions, a vast array of algorithmic actors are becoming more or less interconnected (e.g., through big data) to operate as technologies of calculation and regulation deployed to enact and regulate their subjects" (p. 18). Social sorting has the effect of confining those on social assistance to pre-existing categories

while at the same time casting aside the uncharacterized as 'deviant' and 'other.' The monitoring and surveillance of 'deviants' through the systematic collection of 'objective' data built into the SAMS software program has been a powerful tool for exerting control. However, based on this amassing of big data, the system renders them hyper-visible to the state in ways that may reinforce inequality and marginality if they do not fit the ideal productive applicant, the 'ideal' system subject.

In a report on the "Ministry's Vision" for social assistance reform in the province for 2020-2021 (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2021), part of the ministry's 'plan' claimed in the report was to provide "greater opportunities to achieve better employment outcomes for social assistance recipients." The report further stated:

The ministry's plan to improve social assistance and employment programs is about transforming a broken, costly, and patchwork system into simpler, more effective supports so that everyone can contribute to the success of the province. By embracing technology to reform the social assistance system, the ministry is making service simpler for social assistance recipients and *allowing frontline staff to spend more time with their clients* [italics added]. The ministry is also reducing administration, eliminating unnecessary rules, and *providing greater opportunities to achieve better employment outcomes for social assistance recipients* (p. 2, italics mine).

However, it appears this goal of achieving "better employment outcomes for those on social assistance" is mainly achieved by either removing them from the system due to non-compliance with the 'rules,' or forcing them into low-paying and precarious jobs. This goal of the system is a priority, despite the evidence that employment requirements do not lower poverty (Moffitt, 2002; Pavetti, 2016). As mentioned earlier, a review of Ontario Works Directives (2021) from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services indicates that third-party verification includes mandatory cross-checking information with numerous agencies, including the Ministry of Transportation, to examine any history of vehicle ownership or address changes;

a credit check with Equifax Canada to verify assets; the Family Responsibility Office to check for any payment information from spousal support; Canada Revenue Agency to verify income, and Unemployment Insurance to examine and consider where there has been a history of employment, and to consider potential eligibility for Employment Insurance benefits (p. 9). From smartphones to fitness watches, and now a private company which for a fee, will create a data double to handle all of your social media accounts online for you, Andrejevic and Gates (2014) claim that "the point is that so-called 'function creep' is not ancillary to the data collection process, it is built into it – the function *is* the creep" (p. 189).

In addition to third-party checks, those who receive social assistance are also subjected to 'Participation Reviews.' These reviews "are conducted on a regular basis to ensure recipients are meeting their eligibility requirements and are making progress toward preparing for, finding, and maintaining employment" (Ontario Works Directives, 2021, pp. 9-10.) These reviews are performed every three months for OW recipients, and a minimum of once every six months for recipients who have a "temporary deferral of participation requirements" because of being either a single parent of a dependent child or are 65 years of age or older (p. 11). For those who do not have a deferral of participation, which is the vast majority of those who receive social assistance under OW, an immediate review will result if the recipient:

Is unable to prove they have been engaging in an independent job search; does not participate in agreed-upon structured job search activities; misses two referrals to any of the following without a reasonable cause: community placement agencies, job interviews, a job placement agency, a self-employment development agency, a program for the treatment of substance abuse, basic education, job-specific skills training, or literacy assessment and/or training; refuses an offer of paid employment; fails to attend literacy assessment and/or training (pp. 11-12).

A recipient also risks having their benefits cut off if they attend a community placement or employment agency but "do not participate in assigned activities" (p. 12). The Ontario Works

Directive (2021) lists the four categories under which a recipient can lose benefits for "non-compliance." These four categories are a failure to "make reasonable efforts to maintain employment;" refusing to participate in any activity which they are instructed to attend as part of finding employment; refusing to accept a job without "a reasonable excuse," and not making an effort to "meet participation requirements without reasonable excuse" (p. 12). For those who refuse a job offer or fail to engage in the "employment assistance activities," their benefits can be reduced or eliminated until the applicant "agrees to participate" (p. 12). For those who move to "another Ontario Works delivery agent, conditions of ineligibility remain applicable" (p. 13). In other words, the system already anticipates that some applicants who are denied or lose their welfare payments might attempt to reapply at a different welfare office in the province. There are some exceptions to denying someone social assistance for non-compliance. For example, exceptions for "non-compliance" could include temporary illness, a court appearance or detainment, or extreme weather (p. 14).

However, as these policy directives make clear, the ideal system subject prioritizes finding a job, any job, or attending workshops on applying for and keeping a job. The system wants to change all welfare recipients to fit that 'ideal' subject, and then it wants you off social assistance. In other words, the ideal system subject ceases to become a welfare recipient.

Big data presents significant privacy challenges. It assembles its content from a vast array of online sources based on user interactions, ranging from simple Google searches, smartphones, social media accounts, health records, and more, creating enormous data sets, and then can mine those databases (Stanley 2012). However, these data sets also include a massive amount of personal aspects of individual lives (boyd and Crawford 2012; Crawford and Schultz 2014; Schwartz and Solove 2011; Stanley 2012) and are intended to be used in predictive analytics

(Acquisti and Gross 2009; Tene and Polonesky 2013; boyd and Crawford 2012). Those databases are mined to search for subtle patterns, correlations, and relationships and often collect and gather data outside current privacy protections (Tene and Polonetsky, 2012). As Kate Crawford and Jason Schultz (2014) argue, big data not only operate outside the current privacy protections, in addition to privacy concerns, perhaps more importantly is the fact that the "poor execution of Big Data methodology may create additional harms by rendering inaccurate profiles that nonetheless impact an individual's life and livelihood" (p. 93). This includes, for example, when "personal harms result from the inappropriate inclusion and predictive analysis of an individual's data without their knowledge or express consent" (Crawford and Schultz 2014, p. 94). Furthermore, when data mining leads to combining someone's personal information, such as those receiving financial assistance from SAMS, the algorithms can infer new 'facts' about that person, which holds the potential to accentuate power differentials.

For example, data mining is used for risk analysis to treat people unfairly based on making statistical inferences about a person that the person is unaware of and unable to control. As boyd and Crawford (2012) argue, "Data sets that were once obscure and difficult to manage - and, thus, only of interest to social scientists - are now being aggregated and made easily accessible to anyone who is curious, regardless of their training" (p. 664). Big data enables those who draw on it to claim the "status of quantitative science and objective method" (p. 664). However, the truth is that working with big data is still subjective. When taken out of context, data lose meaning, despite claims to objectivity (boyd and Crawford 2012, p. 667). A primary concern arises when these predictive processes, for example, generate data doubles for those on social assistance that include inaccurate characterizations yet create a model that includes

personal information, and associate it with an individual. With their generated predictions and judgments, these data doubles operate outside of the person's awareness or control.

As Crawford and Schultz posit, big data is unpredictable, and "traditional notions of privacy that isolate certain categories of information – such as 'Personally Identified Information (PII) – to regulate collection, utilization, or disclosure are ill-suited to address these emerging risks" (p. 108). While there is no universal definition of PII, the challenge becomes how to define and then set limits on what SAMS should be allowed to collect, or not collect, about its users. Perhaps some would argue that when it comes to those who receive social assistance, there should not be *any* limits on what should be 'knowable,' and that collecting *more* data, not less, should be the norm. After all, we live in an age of big data, and advances in data mining and analytics have expanded the private industry and government's ability to accumulate and data-mine massive amounts of information on *all* of its citizens and not just those who receive social assistance.

Deborah Lupton (2015) writes that many have expressed a lack of concern about being monitored online or data being collected about them because "they have nothing to hide" (p. 147). However, as Lupton argues, we should still be concerned as the data collected is not always easy to correct, and since the data can be used to discriminate against people, this poses a particular hardship for those in poverty as they are "more likely to feel powerless about dealing with potential personal data breaches, identity theft or the use of their data to discriminate against them" (p. 148). Further, many on social assistance lack the necessary resources to fight back against their loss of privacy, discrimination or collected data being used against them.

Additionally, this 'data deluge' raises some crucial questions not only around the rights of privacy but arguably, more importantly, the accuracy of predictive analytics. Given the fact that

SAMS algorithms are kept private and not available for public scrutiny and, as Crawford and Schultz argue, "The nature of Big Data's dynamic analytical tools is such that the privacy problems of predictive algorithms are often themselves unpredictable. As computer scientists have shown, in many contexts, it is impossible to guarantee differential privacy when using a learning algorithm that draws data from a continuous distribution" (p. 99).

With the current lack of transparency and massive data silos accumulating and perhaps using the information in ways that are still unknown, big data may be assisting predictive analysis with distinct and worrisome implications for those on social assistance. The software programmers interviewed for the study insisted that one of the strengths of SAMS software is that the code *is* so specific, arguing that this is a crucial component of what makes the system more fair, balanced, and unbiased. Kevin, the coder who owns his own small software development company, said, "Software can't make mistakes. It can't think. It just does what it's told. That welfare software program [SAMS] can't decide anything on its own. Whatever it does or doesn't do was written in." According to Kevin, SAMS algorithms ensure that all applicants are treated as "equal" during intake. Further, the fact that any individual is unable to change or override the system, whether it be a social worker during intake or an applicant typing in responses to the automatic questions, is in fact, according to Kevin, a way to keep the system "honest and avoid being able to play favourites. One person shouldn't be able to overrule or override a system that was designed to approach an issue in a very specific way."

However, as Kevin points out, SAMS *has* been designed to "approach an issue in a very specific way." SAMS software is designed to approach the issue of social assistance from the perspective of the production of employable – not unemployed – subjects. That is, subjects who want to have a job, any job at all, will do the performance necessary for that. But, of course, then

the system has a working subject, which means fewer welfare recipients. Further, the system does not consider context in any way, as all applicants, and those on social assistance, are treated as 'equal.'

Despite algorithms becoming an increasingly important tool of policymakers, as Daan Kolkman (2020, p. 2) argues, "little is known about how they are used in practice and how they work, even among the experts tasked with using them." This lack of transparency is particularly problematic in policy-making contexts as contemporary algorithms' work actively imagines and estimates courses of action associated with not only things of states of the world (Callon and Muniesa, 2003) but also social welfare policies. How does a person of interest emerge from such a calculative process, one which acts to identify previously unknown patterns in a large volume of data so that the devices are said to "let the data speak" (Rickert, 2013)? As Joseph Rickert argues, the notion of allowing the data to speak for itself is naive, as "the data never really speaks for themselves. At best, they tell a plausible story for which they have been well-rehearsed" (p. 1).

Kolkman writes that algorithms "present an attractive alternative to biased, subjective, and otherwise flawed decision making by humans," which echoes the sentiments of both software programmers I interviewed. However, Kolkman also acknowledges that algorithmic models used in policy-making are "not necessarily very accurate" (p. 5). This notion that algorithms are not 'very accurate' has been argued by many others (Ananny, 2016; Bozdag, 2013; Diakopoulos, 2015; Kitchin, 2014; Ziewitz, 2015) and raises critical concerns about accountability, fairness, and bias. Malte Ziewitz writes that algorithms have developed into a modern myth which, "on the one hand, they have been depicted as powerful entities that rule, sort, govern, shape, or otherwise control our lives. On the other hand, their alleged obscurity and

inscrutability make it difficult to understand what exactly is at stake" (p. 3). As one of the software programmers in the study, Kevin, explained, SAMS algorithms have a specific set of instructions that the software will be asked to do. As a result, Kevin reluctantly acknowledged there is probably *some* bias built into the system.

Sure, there are assumptions built-in, but you'll never get into that vault to see what they are. They are like paint on a wall. The paint comes in a can, but once it's on the wall, it's part of the wall. Everything about that database is going to be confidential. The government is going to consider it their "secret sauce" in their effort to make the process fair. People often say someone has been "flagged." All that means is that the database has a special note that means while you don't necessarily have to do a deep search every time there's an application, you'll have to get done better illumination on this one because it is known to defraud the system.

Kevin wants it to be very clear that the software programmer is not the 'bad person' in this scenario. Any potential bias written into the code comes from the coder's instructions.

The coder is a monkey. He doesn't have an opinion. He does what he's told. Picture an excel sheet. It's got all kinds of information on it. Nobody cares what the info in the cells means, but you can tell the computer to look into certain cells under certain conditions, then make a judgment call to do something. That something would normally be to perform additional operations or to stop the application and refer it to a higher power. They aren't very secret.

Software programmer Ben agrees with Kevin's assertion that SAMS has been designed "by default" to be fair and less biased in its approach to each welfare recipient. He shares an analogy which he believes illustrates that SAMS does not carry any judgment, that it simply follows instructions - the code, and that, according to Ben - means the system is neutral.

Think about when the blueprint for a house is given to a carpenter. They contain a request for a secret room. They don't mention that this is where the drugs and guns will appear. Neither does the carpenter care. The painter is told not to paint this room. He doesn't care why or why not either. Code is very specific. So, you have objects. You tell the object what to do. How do you know what the object should do? The design document told you, much like the blueprint for a house.

Despite the software programmers' insistence that SAMS is, *by design*, built to be neutral and fair, algorithms are often deployed with multiple errors and biases and often unfairly marginalize communities. Three of the most common biases found in datasets are 'interaction,' 'latent,' and 'selection' bias. An example of interaction bias is facial recognition algorithms trained on datasets containing more Caucasian faces than African American faces. A study by Joy Buolamwini (2017) revealed that people with darker coloured skin were often misidentified or not even recognized as 'people' by those algorithms simply because of skin color. As a result, they are at increased risk of harassment or even detainment by law enforcement. In latent bias, an algorithm may incorrectly identify something based on historical data or because of a stereotype that already exists in society. Selection bias, for example, is when a dataset overrepresents one particular group and underrepresents another because a data set contains a vast amount more information on one subgroup over another. Shoshana Amielle Magnet (2011) argues that biometrics rely on biological ideas around race and gender that are outdated and are particularly prone to error when identifying 'othered bodies' and concludes that "biometric technologies bring to life assumptions about identity" (p.126).

Amazon had to stop using an automated recruiting tool favouring male candidates over female candidates because the algorithm focused on historical patterns in which men are primarily hired (Dastin, 2018). SAMS imposes complete transparency on welfare recipients, yet its algorithms remain hidden and secret, with little clarity about how the system works explicitly. Further, as mentioned previously, with its dropdown menu, this means limited choices for the caseworker when completing an application as they cannot record any information that deviates from the program's pre-set options. I disagree with the coders' claim that this is important for treating all applicants as 'equal' since all applicants are, of course, not equal. The system may not

create new inequalities that already exist; however, it renders them more public and visible and thus governable.

SAMS also illustrates what can happen when we hand over our decision-making processes to a computer software program that uses historical data. The way SAMS collects -and shares - data about those on social assistance needs to be more transparent so that it can be examined and re-examined regularly and frequently. The digital age has brought many benefits, and SAMS is an example of how it has streamlined many aspects of the welfare system. However, racism, ableism, and class politics have long been built into people's power assumptions. Although it was hoped that big data would eradicate this, SAMS algorithms are an example of how it has simply helped build on historical biases. Ethical considerations need to be built into processes around data collection and analysis. It is arguably even more critical to do this when considering the privacy of those who are part of a vulnerable population, including welfare recipients. Big data is not always better data and is frequently biased against those who receive social assistance. SAMS is just one example of how privacy standards around data collection are far lower for those who live in poverty. When it comes to discussions and concerns around protecting individuals' right to privacy, people who receive welfare are rarely, if ever, considered and are often viewed to be simply the 'price' of receiving welfare. As Charles Fried (1977) posits, privacy is more than just a simple right to be left alone.

As a first approximation, privacy seems to be related to secrecy, to limiting the knowledge of others about oneself. This notion must be refined. It is not true, for instance, that the less that is known about us, the more privacy we have. Privacy is not simply an absence of information about us in the minds of others; rather, it is the *control* we have over information about ourselves.

As I discuss in the next section, SAMS control' is focused on constructing the 'ideal' welfare recipient, who is someone who not only desires a job but any job.

## **How SAMS Constructs the Ideal Welfare Recipient**

The conviction among participants that their social workers have the leeway and power to 'play favourites,' enabling those they ruled to be more 'deserving' to receive extra supports beyond the basic amounts normally afforded is not unfounded. Previously, caseworkers *did* have much discretionary power before the implementation of SAMS. For example, the computer program used by social services in Ontario before SAMS (SDMT, as described in Chapter 1) was the first electronic version of a welfare recipient's file. This electronic file, which collected and stored information about each applicant and recipient, made the processing and sharing of information faster and more automated.

Unlike SAMS, however, this earlier software was a notes-based system, which meant caseworkers could use their judgment to enter and store notes about individual welfare recipients and the families they were working with. Caseworkers were also expected to use their professional judgment about what they believed they were entitled to within OW and ODSP parameters (Lewchuk, 2016). Therefore, it allowed caseworkers to make exceptions and override the software program if deemed necessary in their professional opinion. This discretion included the ability to issue extra financial support.

However, that 'power' has become increasingly constrained under SAMS. As Lewchuk (2016) argues, when it comes to SAMS governance of those on social assistance, "They are leaving the thinking to the machine." (p. 8). This change in the management and standardization of the data means significantly fewer opportunities for caseworkers to make exceptions as the system simply will not allow it. Instead, the system now forces everyone to accept and live with whatever SAMS decides. Unless a caseworker uses one of the workarounds discussed in Chapter 4 to force an exception, as Lewchuk explains, "By design, SAMS requires standardized data that

can be entered into fields for analysis so *it can make decisions*" [italics mine] (p. 6). Although welfare recipients might perceive SAMS restrictions that diminish their caseworker's decision-making power over them as empowering, caseworkers know that a computer system that demands data entered fit into tightly designed fields is not always in the best interest of those on social assistance. All data from SDMT, the computer system that SAMS replaced, needed to be converted and transferred to the new system. However, as mentioned previously, although SDMT included the ability for caseworkers to individualize each file with numerous notes and personalized entries, SAMS does not allow for anything outside of its very strict dropdown menu, with no possibility of any kind of input for which the system does not already have 'space'.

The Auditor General of Ontario's report (2020) on OW criticized the fact that SAMS does not permit caseworkers "to record recipient skills, barriers to employment or referrals to training or community services in a way that would enable service managers to analyze such factors for their entire caseload" (p. 160). This is a critical example of the difference between SDMT and SAMS. Under the previous system, caseworkers were able to contextualize social elements of each applicant. This individualization is especially important in light of the Auditor's report, which states that almost 40% of those who receive OW face significant barriers "affecting their employability, such as homelessness and mental health concerns" (p. 160). However, caseworkers are no longer able to note any of those specific limitations or barriers that those on social assistance face when it comes to obtaining employment, including homelessness or mental health issues, because SAMS is a yes/no, dropdown menu only, which means leaving the decision making to the software.

Historically, welfare recipients have been divided into categories of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' and, as Maki (2011) writes, "Since the Elizabethan Poor Laws of 1601, social

assistance and relief for the poor has always engaged in a project of moral regulation" (p. 54). Until recently, social workers have played a significant role in this determination around 'deserving' and 'undeserving' categories, though this always occurred on a spectrum.

However, as I argue in this section, under SAMS, welfare recipients are now evaluated about being a 'productive' subject, as opposed to deserving or undeserving, and sorted into categories of 'yes' or 'no.' This section discusses how SAMS is making this yes/no determination, and, as I argue, with the human (social worker) having been increasingly removed, the machine is now making the decisions that humans used to make.

Although the definition of what an algorithm is or does makes it sound objective and neutral, in reality, numerous actors are involved in the innumerable choices in the design and development of algorithms. An additional problem to bias in the algorithm is when information is inaccurate. As Robyn Caplan and danah boyd (2016) point out, algorithms "often depend on data that might be flawed in countless ways. Those underpinning major technologies are propriety, and companies are often vested in keeping away from public eyes, both for competitive reasons and to minimize external manipulation" (p. 4). Additionally, research has raised multiple concerns about the secrecy surrounding these technologies and the lack of accountability, which leads to apprehensiveness around algorithms' role in shaping public opinion, especially when based on flawed or inaccurate information.

In 2015, once work began to decommission SDMT, all historical data archived became available to "allow users to search and retrieve pertinent client information" (Government Backgrounder, 2015, p.3). Even if IBM was not hiding behind claims and arguments about 'propriety' rights regarding how the software works, according to one of the coders interviewed, Kevin, the government also wants to keep the specifics about how it works as private as possible

too. "Everything about that database is going to be confidential," said Kevin. "The government is going to consider it their 'secret sauce' in their effort to make the process fair." Kevin insists that SAMS algorithms are what keeps the system' fair.'

In order to speed up those lookups, the software has algorithms with a specific set of instructions that the software is probably going to be asked to do—for instance, baking a cake. There's always going to be eggs, flour, water, and a bowl and an oven. Making a cake? You'll need three eggs. Making ten cakes? You'll need thirty—a predictable calculation. This is what makes it fair. Everyone is submitted to the same process, rules, and scrutiny.

However, SAMS is not placing its subjects into recipes for making a cake. As Caplan and Boyd posit, algorithms, although automated, "are used to classify, filter, and prioritize content based on values internal to the system, functioning similarly to a newspaper editor, making decisions about which information is relevant to users in what context" (p. 5). This point, that algorithms contain values "internal to the system" speaks to what Jonathan Zittrain termed, "digital gerrymandering." Zittrain (2014) defines digital gerrymandering as the potential for those who own or control the platform to "unconsciously or intentionally manipulate algorithms to serve their interests" (p. 5). Natascha Just and Michael Latzer (2017) agree that algorithms often increase inequalities and lead to less transparency. Due to the lack of scrutiny around SAMS algorithms, it is difficult to determine how and when, for example, a bias enters into the algorithmic systems. Very little attention has been given to the ways that the algorithms exercise power through how they prioritize, filter, and categorize information.

Further, it also means a lack of scrutiny of SAMS regarding the role of algorithms as governance instruments, governing those who receive social assistance through codes baked into the software. Just and Latzer (2017) describe algorithms as "autonomous actors and policy-makers" (p. 252), making this lack of scrutiny perhaps even more troubling because if algorithms

are now autonomous policy-makers, what does this mean for those under the governance of SAMS? According to Just and Latzer (2017), although humans design algorithms, humans are also "simultaneously shaped by them" (p. 252). Further, algorithms automate the assignment of "relevance to selected pieces of information" (p. 254), which Just and Latzer define as an ideal example of the governing role of software, comparing the impact of algorithms on society as "similarly to laws, contracts, and values that are imprinted in algorithms" (p. 254). As one caseworker, Megan, complained about her work is now impacted under SAMS:

Some days I feel I've become just a data entry clerk and no longer make a difference in the lives of the people we serve. SAMS takes up so much of my time to make things work that I often lack the time or opportunity to help people to move forward in their lives. I used to love my job. Now I stress about going to work and surviving the day and often can't wait for the day to be over.

As discussed, in Chapter 4, when Megan spoke of having to 'coach' a welfare recipient about giving the 'right' answer regarding their employment search, she knew this was necessary with SAMS. Megan understood the recipient's unwillingness to look for a job that neither of them believed existed. However, Megan also knew that SAMS software would have determined the welfare recipient ineligible to receive social assistance had they not demonstrated 'evidence' of looking for employment.

SAMS is not morally evaluating welfare recipients, as that moral position has already been established. SAMS focus is on creating the productive subject, which means you are either productive subject because you have done these things; you are performing that ideal identity, or you are not. The caseworkers sort welfare recipients onto a spectrum of deserving and undeserving, but SAMS sorts them by 'yes,' they are the ideal system subject, or 'no,' they are not. Unlike SAMS, caseworkers consider things such as the current state of the job market and the specific situation of each applicant. However, as discussed later in this chapter, SAMS needs

to be 'fed' information that indicates an active search for jobs. SAMS lacks the nuance that a caseworker has to determine exceptions or exceptional circumstances to avoid labeling someone as "ineligible because of their "failure to" seek employment if a welfare recipient does not confirm they have been actively seeking work (Ontario Works Directives, 2021, pp. 8-9). Megan's belief that at least the *appearance* of looking for employment, regardless of how pointless that search may be, is critically important for those who receive social assistance appears to be well-founded.

In 2018, in the Ontario Legislature during question period, Lisa MacLeod, Minister of Children, Community and Social Services, said that as part of a "complete overhaul" of social assistance in the province, a more restrictive definition of "disability" would be implemented. This meant forcing more people back into the workforce as, according to MacLeod, social assistance "traps people into a cycle of dependency. And far too often, it robs them of the dignity and independence of a job." Further, the Minister said that "For the program to work, it needs to help more people get back to work." This meant that all recipients of OW benefits were now required to fill out individual action plans, and "the government and service providers would help match them to job opportunities" (p. 1). As caseworkers like Megan explain, this requirement to "fill out individual action plans" often requires significant support and guidance from caseworkers. However, as many on social assistance interviewed for this project claim, 'assistance' is often uneven. It relies heavily on the skills and willingness to work 'around the rules' of the caseworker involved. As many said during their interviews with me, if the caseworker 'likes you,' the help is much more significant. Further, as Ontario Green Party Leader Mike Schreiner said at the time, the government had "just axed a planned increase in the

minimum wage to \$15-an-hour which will make it more difficult for those on social assistance to lift themselves out of poverty with a job" (Artuso, 2018).

However, if an applicant fails to seek employment or take a job for any reason, they are identified in the system by SAMS as 'non-compliant.' This is an example of how SAMS fails or is unable to recognize that most jobs available to those on social assistance mean remaining in poverty, even if working full time. Or if a single parent, for example, refuses a job if they do not have access to affordable childcare and taking the job would mean leaving their young children alone at home overnight, or the job is so far away from their home, it would require spending numerous hours traveling to and from work. SAMS also does not distinguish between those who leave social assistance temporarily for seasonal work or short-term contract work and those who find long-term employment (Auditor General, 2020, p. 62).

Instead, the system merely registers them as having found a job, while those who fail to meet the requirements of continued eligibility for social assistance risk being removed from the system. This means SAMS is a disciplinary mechanism governing those who receive social assistance, making decisions about how to govern and even punishing those the system deems not in compliance. As Henman (2010) has argued, information technologies need to be analysed and considered not just administrative tools but as "non-human actors," shaping policy development and implementation in ways beyond the intentions of their human creators.

The most recent Auditor's report (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2020) describes OW as "temporary financial assistance and employment support to help recipients find work" and that applicants are "required to participate in activities that help them find work" (p. 159). These mandatory activities include updating or creating résumés, applying for jobs regularly, attending a training course that offers coaching for job interviews, and

reporting and recording these activities to their digital files regularly through their online account. In addition, every month, those who receive social assistance under OW must log in to their online account to answer a series of questions around whether any of their life circumstances have changed. This includes whether they have earned any income, started a new relationship, given birth, have acquired a new roommate, or moved. If nothing has changed, then the welfare recipient's monthly financial assistance will remain the same for the next thirty days.

However, even if nothing changes, under SAMS regulations, every two years, their file needs to be reassessed to confirm their eligibility for OW. With the few exceptions discussed in Chapter 1, those who receive social assistance under ODSP have to reapply every five years and be reassessed for eligibility. Part of this reassessment for those who receive support from ODSP includes providing documentation and evidence of having tried to overcome, if possible, whatever their 'disability' is.

Two of the participants I interviewed, Lewis and Debbie, who receive ODSP, struggle with mental health issues. Lewis, a twenty-two-year-old male house-ridden for the past four years, dealt with anxiety attacks frequently. He also has severe social anxiety and phobias around germs. It took several phone calls and then finally an agreement for me to allow the person (another participant who I had previously interviewed and had told Lewis about me and the study) to join our meeting before Lewis finally agreed for me to meet with him. I knew this was a massive step for Lewis as he is uncomfortable around new people, and his social circle is very small. He also has enormous fears around germs and tries to minimize contact with others as much as possible. After I arrived, as I had been previously warned would happen, I had to apply hand sanitizer several times carefully, then use a disinfectant wipe on my bookbag, and also wipe each item I pulled out of my bookbag. This included my pen, notepad, and digital recorder, all

under the careful eye of Lewis, who stood silent, just watching as I did the disinfecting ritual, he asked his friend and me to perform.

At first, Lewis said he didn't want me to use the video recorder as he didn't "trust" that the microphone wasn't harbouring germs from previous interviews. However, after his friend's encouragement, reminding him that *he* had already "survived my interview, buddy! I'm still breathing," Lewis asked me to be careful not to touch anything else in the room, and then we began the interview. With his friend sitting next to him at the kitchen table, Lewis started to talk. He shared that when his caseworker wanted to do a home visit after he applied online, he almost gave up applying for social assistance as just the thought of having a stranger come to his apartment sent him into a panic attack. After his mother spoke with the caseworker, the initial meeting took place at a nearby clinic Lewis had previously attended for several counselling sessions.

When I asked Lewis what kind of "proof" he would have to provide for his eventual official five-year reassessment, he said, "I think I'll just have to show my worker that I'd been going to these meetings, I guess," then added he will have to find a way to "force himself" to attend more counselling sessions when he gets closer to that five-year mark. The meetings are group counselling sessions that Lewis has attended three or four times over the past few years. However, he stopped attending the meetings after a panic attack in the middle of a session and felt too embarrassed to return. "Everybody was cool, you know? But, yeah. I can't go back, of course." Lewis forced a laugh, then added, "I don't know why I have to reapply every five years, though; it's so stupid. If I could leave the house, I'd be so happy." Lewis stops talking, looks down at the table, and cries quietly for a few minutes. His friend starts to reach a hand out as if to

try and comfort him and Lewis glares at him, reminding both of us not to touch him. "I guess I'll just wait and see what happens when I need to reapply."

The other participant receiving ODSP for mental health issues, Debbie, is a twenty-seven-year-old single woman who lives with her parents. She applied for ODSP three years ago after her bouts with agoraphobia became so frequent, she had to quit her job. Debbie admits she isn't "doing anything" to change her circumstances and doesn't have any plans to do so in the near future, either. "I can't leave the house. I'm a fucking prisoner. How am I supposed to see anyone? Do anything? It's crazy." Debbie said she is very worried, though, about what will happen when she has to reapply again, and her caseworker learns she hasn't attended any of the counselling sessions she told her about at their first intake meeting. "She gave me some numbers to call but...uh...no. Nope." When asked why she didn't call any of the numbers, Debbie thought for a minute, then said she simply didn't know what to say. "Like, what do I say to whoever answers the call from a Crazy?" I wanted to ask Debbie if she'd considered asking her caseworker to make the call for her but decided not to as I worried it might sound like I was judging her for not making the call. Debbie did seem to regret not being able to seek and receive some counselling, though, as she added:

Hey, maybe if they'd come to me, I'd talk to someone. But they just don't get it. I mean, seriously, I can't leave my house. I can't get my mail out of the mailbox, for Christ's sake, as it'll mean opening the door and sticking my hand out. They don't understand this is impossible for me. Do they think I like living like this? Cause I don't. Whatever happens in the future, I can't worry about that now. It just makes me, makes me even worse.

Just like those who receive welfare support under OW, each month, after her check is deposited into her bank account, Debbie checks the list online that confirms nothing has changed in her life. "So, I don't get why five years in, after no changes every single fucking month, I'm

supposed to somehow magically fix my shit? If I can't go out today, how in hell am I supposed to go out tomorrow? Or in a year? Or five?"

The information required from applicants during their application process is extensive and includes third-party verification of all documentation required. These documents include:

Applicant's social insurance number card

Ontario Health number

Birth certificate

All religious records (for example, Baptismal certificate)

Statement of Live Birth

Any military records

Driver's licence

Naturalization Certificate

Passport (Canadian or foreign)

Income tax returns and Income tax assessment records

Indian band records

Ontario photo ID Card

Employment status (Record of Employment, pay stubs with year-to-date amounts, letter of termination from employer)

Monthly bank statements from all accounts

Spousal and/or child support records, if applicable, including support court order, private agreement, divorce settlement.

Life insurance policies

Vehicle ownership registration form

Letter from Landlord

Rental receipt with landlord's name and telephone number

Copy of lease or rental agreement

Mortgage statement or agreement

Loan agreements for the purchase of a residence or necessary repairs to a residence

Property tax assessment or proof of property tax payment

Proof of insurance premium payments for fire, dwelling, or contents

Proof of common expense fees paid for condominiums or cooperative housing units

Statements or payment receipts for hydro, utilities or heating costs

If any of the applicant's information required for making an eligibility determination for welfare is not made available during the application process at the welfare office, they are "allowed up to ten working days to obtain and submit the outstanding information" (Ontario Works Directives, 2021. p. 11). The Ministry will *consider* allowing an exception of more than ten days for a victim of domestic violence, but as it states in the directive, "It is important that staff ensure the applicant understands his/her responsibility to provide the information within the allotted timeframe, and that failing to provide the required information may result in a decision of ineligibility" (p. 9).

During the intake appointment, applicants are advised of their rights and responsibilities under SAMS. For those who receive OW, this includes:

Participating in employment assistance activities and complying with the conditions of eligibility relating to employment assistance; making reasonable efforts to seek, accept and maintain employment for which they are physically

capable, and that would increase employment income; making reasonable efforts to pursue financial resources they or their spouse/dependents may be entitled to or eligible for; reporting the receipt or disposition of assets, and the receipt of income from any other financial support (p. 10).

Additionally, as part of the application process, an applicant, their spouse, or any adult dependent in their household may be required to attend an "Employment Information Session" as well.

Further, applicants and other adult members in the household who are not high school graduates may also be required to submit to a literacy test.

One of the first mandatory steps for applying for social assistance in many urban areas of Ontario is watching an eleven-minute video online. For example, the OW video for Ottawa states that every applicant must sign a declaration confirming they have watched the "Ontario Works Video as part of the application process." The video includes a narrator who, while explaining the application process, features a young white male who takes the viewer through the process as he applies for OW. The narrator explains that after completing the application forms online or by phone, you will then have an in-person interview at the welfare office to complete the application process and encourages applicants to bring "someone with you anytime you meet with your caseworker. This person can be a relative, friend, or someone from the community."

This video, I argue, is a blatant example of what the 'ideal' welfare recipient looks like, according to SAMS. The young male applicant in the video walks into the welfare office with what appears to be a friend, and they are both greeted by a caseworker who then has them follow her into an open cubicle office. The office has no doors and very little privacy and after the applicant and his friend sit across from the caseworker, the video narrator says:

To find out if you qualify for Ontario Works, your caseworker will collect information about your personal and housing situation, your immigration status, education, employment history, and your income and assets. You will also need to complete and sign some forms. You will need to show your financial records and

other important documents to your caseworker and again when you meet regularly to update your employment and financial information.

The narrator voice then switches over to the young male applicant who speaks directly to the camera:

I was only getting a couple of hours a week of work, and I couldn't make ends meet, so I applied for Ontario Works. They told me what to bring. Like ID, my lease, my bank statements, and a copy of my most recent resume. When I met with my caseworker, we filled out some forms and talked about my employment past and my education, and what I'd like to do. Then my caseworker told me that Ontario Works could provide me with money to pay for my basic living expenses. Like food, rent, and utilities. It only took a couple of days after we met, and a deposit was made into my bank account. I was so relieved.

As previously mentioned, watching this video is a mandatory part of the application process for social assistance in Ontario. For those who are not male, white or young, or able to speak English with the confidence and apparent ease as this young, white male in the video did, this visual representation of a 'successful' applicant for social assistance might be intimidating. After all, according to the video, this ideal productive applicant is a non-disabled young person who not only has a résumé - which suggests one already has a work history – but is both willing and able to find employment. After confessing to the camera that he is "so relieved" for the support he can obtain from OW, the screen then changes to a printed header, all in caps, "EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE." The narrator explains that:

You and your caseworker will work together to develop an action plan that identifies the steps you will take to prepare for and find a job. This action plan is called a 'Participation Agreement' and is part of your application for Ontario Works. It will take into account your skills, job experience and will be reflective of the employment opportunities that exist in Ottawa. Your spouse and other adult members of your family living with you will also need to sign a Participation Agreement. If you aren't able to participate in an employment activity, it's important that you talk to your caseworker. *Our staff are here to help you achieve your employment goals.* (Italics mine.)

If an applicant does not have a high school diploma, the OW program "requires that you take a Literacy Screening Test." The video does not mention why this step is required or what the results will mean for the applicant. The video narrator goes on to say that there "are a lot of activities to choose from that will help you prepare for work." Examples listed in the video of the kinds of 'activities' one can choose from include learning English as a second language, going back to school to improve reading, writing, or math skills, working towards completing a high school diploma, writing a résumé, or coaching for job interviews. Free childcare is also available for those attending job interviews. It does not mention if free childcare will be available if the applicant eventually finds employment. As the video continues the visual representation of the 'ideal' welfare recipient, with the non-disabled young male, he talks about having left home at a young age and having never graduated from high school, adding,

I'd had a string of mostly part-time work but never anything full-time. I told my caseworker I wanted to go back to school to get my grade twelve as I felt like it was holding me back. My caseworker told me that I can go back to school and that Ontario Works would help pay for my school registration fees and books. It was great to know one of my options included finally getting my high school diploma. Plus, I would continue to work part-time while I attended school.

The video explains that recipients will receive two letters in the mail within two or three weeks of receiving their first OW payment; one with their nine-digit Member ID and then a second letter with a Personal Identification Pin, which they can use to access their online files.

For your convenience, the Interactive Voice Response is a free automated phone line that gives you personal information about your Ontario Works file. You can call the toll-free number around the twenty-fifth of each month to get details about your next payment. If your Ontario Works file has been suspended, you need to talk to your caseworker as quickly as possible.

I called the 1-800-808-2268 number mentioned in the video, and it is fully automated. After a welfare recipient types in their PIN and nine-digit Member ID number, they are granted access to

their digital file. They can confirm whether their situation has changed, such as income, marital status, or employment status, without talking to a human. The ideal productive applicant in the video cheerfully explains how he called his caseworker for assistance when he was having difficulties with his roommate and running low on food. "My caseworker was so helpful, and she referred me to the Ottawa Foodbank and to a housing agency for advice. I know I would've dropped out of high school again had my caseworker not been there to encourage me."

However, when I went online to both of the resources mentioned in the video, the Ottawa Food Bank, and the housing agency, I learned that the Ottawa Food Bank is often unable to help everyone who needs extra food as they continuously have less food than they need to meet the demand. As the Chief Executive Officer Michael Maidment (2018) of the Ottawa Food Bank writes, "We cannot and should not rely on charity to do the government's work" (p. 1).

Further, as Maidment reports, more than 10,000 low-income families in Ottawa are waiting, sometimes up to five years, for affordable housing. One promise that the video makes about help the welfare office will provide, which it does keep, however, is the offer of "employment coaching if you're at risk of losing your job." In other words, if an applicant is behaving in ways that place their job at risk, the welfare office will set them up for a one-on-one coaching session to learn how to act more appropriately at work. The video constantly reinforces the importance and value of finding a job and then keeping that job by explaining that counselling is also available if you are at risk of losing your job because of alcohol or drug abuse. It is clear that the ideal productive applicant cannot want a 'good' job but instead want to have *a* job. As the ideal system subject, they need to be willing and able to show that they will look for a job, do job training, and ideally, have access to the internet and know how to use it.

The video's ending is a happy one for our welfare recipient, who shows up in his yellow hard hat and says, "I can't believe how much my life has been improved in such a short amount of time!" then shakes the hand of his caseworker. Next, the video narrator announces, "This is the end of the Information Session. You can come back to watch this video at any time." Then the credits roll, with "special thanks to the City of Ottawa staff who participated in and created this video." Then in much smaller print, "This video is for informational purposes only and should not be construed as legal advice. The story depicted in this video is fictional and does not portray any actual persons, companies, products or events."

In addition to the state-sponsored and created mandatory video for applicants to social assistance, algorithmic transparency of the code for data-driven technologies, such as SAMS, which affect and govern some of the most marginalized people, would offer additional insight into how the system creates categories that stigmatize and punish. This problem is compounded because, as Caplan and boyd (2016) write, "Algorithms, which often take into account variables like individual preferences, past actions, time location, and relationships, make little sense out of context: their results reflect the data they use, which almost certainly encodes biases of its own" (p. 12). Moreover, data-driven technologies interact and mediate numerous stakeholders, including private platform owners and governments. Thus, examining those codes and allowing public scrutiny of a private corporation's control of public service would mean transparency around those biases and assumptions that shape information flows and control how those subjected and vulnerable to the system are handled.

Neil Gerlach et al. (2011) write how after 9/11, "rights became contingent upon what one looks like, where one comes from, who one's friends and family are – all read as signs on, or more accurately, of, the body" (p. 9). Although Gerlach et al. are referring specifically to

immigrants, the point about the increased surveillance after 9/11 highlighted how "personhood, sovereignty, and privacy are and can be manipulated by new regimes of surveillance and simulation" also applies to those living under SAMS. (p. 9). I argue that Gerlach et al.'s claim that "biotechnology provides governments with a host of new strategies and techniques to monitor its citizens and maintain social order" (p. 10) is also applicable to algorithmic delegated governance. The software creates, then polices, the digital performances of those on social assistance.

Once a person submits to this application process, they become utterly transparent to SAMS. The system now knows, as part of its data collection on each welfare applicant, everything possible to learn about their physical and mental health, work history, educational history, literacy, finances, and even collects the names of their adult relationships as it takes note of anyone else living in their home, and so on. With such a massive collection of personal data during the application process and access to everything else, the system wants to 'know,' SAMS can now control these digital doubles. With the SAMS dropdown menu style of application, with no place for entering 'notes,' extra data, or deviation of any kind, the caseworker is forced to allow SAMS to make all the decisions and set the priorities for what is an 'ideal' applicant. The system locks out any human intentions or interventions, supporting SAMS goal, which is to determine the minimum amount of support and assistance it can provide, as the 'ideal' welfare recipient is the one who gets off of social assistance as quickly as possible.

As Andrejevic and Gates (2014) posit, some of these consequences of relying on automated data analytics, which makes its selection decisions based upon almost countless variables, is that the "database can generate patterns that have predictive power but not necessarily explanatory power. According to this logic, we need not and cannot know how the

correlations were derived or what causal explanations might explain them; we simply accept that the data science knows best" (p. 186). This includes the assumption with SAMS - that the system knows best. However, although SAMS relies on its algorithms to identify and classify patterns, it cannot explain the patterns it finds and notes in the system.

Like the system itself, the data doubles created by SAMS constitute additional selves, 'functional hybrids' (Hier 2002, p. 400). Their most important function is transparent to the system and trackable, which allows or denies access to a multitude of supports, and discriminates between people. The data double proceeds through a host of multiple 'centers of calculation,' all serving the purpose of enforced transparency first to create, then hold the data double accountable for all previous actions to determine which services or financial supports to allow or deny access.

However, with the increasing datafication of society, surveillance now combines the monitoring of physical spaces - such as the welfare recipient's home - to monitoring digital spaces, even though big data analysis produces only correlations. Moreover, data collected by a particular application can often be repurposed for various uses. The recently created company Digital Doubles,<sup>15</sup> for example, directs users to hand over access and administration of all their social media accounts to artificial intelligence. In turn, using algorithms that take into account interest and location, the software creates a digital double that independently adds people to the participant's friends list on Facebook and other media accounts. As the company states on its website, "The artificial intelligence manages the account of data miners so they turn into a single large network." The point of this company, which in addition to English, also offers its services

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<sup>15</sup> <https://digitaldoubles.com/>

in six additional languages (including Russian, Italian, Vietnamese, and French), is to have your digital double always 'on' in the background, working the 'room' (or net) to create more sales.

The company slogan, stated on its website, is: "The Future is Now. Soon, every human will have an AI platform account. The future when it would be inappropriate not to have an account on an AI platform is now."

As outrageous or unlikely as such a business concept might seem today, Minna Ruckenstein (2014) argues that smartphones and other monitoring devices have been contributing to the creation of data doubles for quite some time now. For example, self-trackers offer insights into personal analytics and even the ability to freely share tracking results and experiences with friends to "monitor their bodily habits and mental states in similar ways" (p. 70). However, when people decide to share and compare their data with others, they willingly do so and know what they choose to share. They can also alter the data double *they* create and set limits on what this digital-self comprises. Unlike those on social assistance, of course, who may not even be aware of the data double's existence. Until, perhaps, it gets them into trouble at the welfare office.

A report commissioned by the Ministry of Community and Social Services (2012) states that the Government of Ontario has recognized [that] employment is a key route to escaping poverty" (p. 3). However, the evidence suggests that those on social assistance are often pushed to find work too quickly, ending up in precarious and low paying jobs, meaning that even of those who manage to stay employed, many will continue to live in poverty, even after entering the workforce (Edin & Shaefer, 2015; Pavetti, 2016; Semuels, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

A common complaint from participants on welfare throughout my study is that social workers play favourites and that this impacts their access to extra benefits, categorizing those on social assistance in ways that have the potential to lead to unequal treatment. In the past, social workers have exercised moralizing judgments that place welfare recipients into categories of deserving and undeserving, worthy and unworthy (Handler, 1983; Morgen, 2001; Lipsky, 2010). The caseworkers in my study framed their acts of 'favouritism' around imposing balance and fairness within the system by offering extra assistance to those in need.

For example, caseworker Trudy helped some welfare recipients receive extra cash for diapers when their limited budget could not cover the unexpected additional expense when their toddler had diarrhea and needed more frequent diaper changes. Other caseworkers described the workarounds they have developed because, unlike SAMS software, they can contextualize the needs and often unique circumstances of those they are trying to help. I would argue that these are not acts of 'favouritism,' but rather an essential discretion necessary for social workers to use their experience and professional training to make crucial decisions around exceptions to the policies and rules around social assistance. This 'human' factor is important, even if imperfect, for social workers to 'play favourites' as welfare recipients argue. SAMS has taken away much, if not all, of caseworkers' discretionary powers. This removal of human discretion from the system means social workers violate their terms of service every time they adjust an application using a workaround to bypass SAMS' system. This means a software program, SAMS, is in charge of making all judgments and decisions around the distribution, accessibility, and eligibility for social assistance in Ontario. This includes complete control even at what might be a welfare recipient's most crucial moment of need, where human intervention is arguably the only thing that stands between them and having that critical need met.

The delivery of social assistance via SAMS leads to inequalities as the terms of access to benefits treat all applicants of each category (i.e., of a certain age, single or with a partner, number of underage children in the home) as if they are the same. This approach, based on algorithms, can lead to unequal treatment. In addition, the system lacks flexibility because of the way it is designed, forcing applicants, with the program's limited dropdown menu, into one of two categories: based on their limited responses, they are deemed eligible to receive social assistance, or two, they do not fit the specific criteria that SAMS demands and are not eligible to receive social assistance. However, it does not end there.

Once in the system, to continue receiving social assistance, welfare recipients are tracked online through their current and past activities, as the massive, all-encompassing data collection helps build a picture and information-rich profile of each individual for SAMS. The participants on social assistance in this study would celebrate and appreciate that SAMS has eliminated bureaucratic discretion and, therefore, variations in how policy can be interpreted and implemented by caseworkers. However, although this means that social workers no longer have as many discretionary powers, a software program is now not only in charge, it is not being held accountable for policy decisions and regulations. Further, as I have argued in this chapter, SAMS focus on the ideal system subject, which the video I discussed earlier perfectly highlights – a non-disabled young adult who is eager to find work, appreciates and engages with all training and workshops around finding employment, and is literate, means many on social assistance fall short of that 'ideal.'

SAMS governs not only those who apply for and receive social assistance but also those who work with welfare recipients and operates with intent and focus on taking away social assistance from as many recipients as possible. SAMS represents a hybrid of the old way of

regimenting welfare assistance and today's newer, high-tech version of reality. For example, welfare recipients still have to show up at the welfare office to complete an application for social assistance. With SAMS, although they do have the option of attempting to complete most of the application online, they still have to show up at the welfare office with all of their documentation, including birth certificates, driver's licence, pay stubs, bank statements, and so on, to finalize the application. The criteria for welfare eligibility under SAMS, and the amount one is entitled to, are also very similar to the previous system.

However, unlike the older system, what's new under SAMS includes that if an applicant does not fit the exact parameters of the question and answers for each dropdown menu, the application may not even be completed. All applicants are forced to follow every step of the application process precisely as SAMS directs them. Failure to do so means one will not be approved for social assistance. The binary answer to questions means applicants are defined and shaped in a particular way. Ultimately, the architects of the system have decided that an applicant for social assistance is in or they are out, and there is no capacity to personalize. One either performs that 'ideal' welfare recipient, or they do not.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

This dissertation contributes to the literature and scholarship on the rise and fall of the welfare state, the role of digital governance, surveillance, and the work exploring the power dynamics of algorithmic culture and predictive profiling in numerous ways. As this project highlights, more transparency and scrutiny are necessary in order to consider the impact on those being targeted and put into categories based on 'potentialities.' The literature does not address or answer the question of how it feels to be governed by algorithms, which was a key question I wanted this project to address. Furthermore, this project shows that the surveillance afforded by SAMS offers people up for examination and control.

Finally, this project demonstrated how the surveillance scholarship assumes, rather than shows, the oppression of those who live with poverty and fails to acknowledge that people living with poverty have agency. Despite the surveillance literature presenting people living in poverty as passive subjects and governance as a force that just 'happens' to people, as this project demonstrates, people living in poverty do have agency and, as shared in this dissertation, perform it in numerous ways.

Canada's transformation under neoliberal economic policy has meant significant changes in our welfare state. Instead of addressing poverty issues through social programs, the shift from Keynesian to neoliberal governance in the 1980s emphasized policies "aimed at the labour market supply in direct response to labour need" (MacKinnon, 2013, p. 22). However, full-time employment does not guarantee an escape from poverty. More Canadians are engaged in low-paying, often precarious employment, and many will experience some form of unemployment at some point in their working lives (Thomas and Tufts, 2016). This shift in logic with the social safety net entailed "austerity programs adopted by neoliberal governments to reduce public

services, impose public sector wage restraints, and reorganize public sector working conditions and labour relations" (Thomas and Tufts, 2015, p. 212). As Raphael (2011) argues, Canada's common perception and discourse about those living in poverty are that they are responsible for their deprivation due to personal characteristics that make them unlikely to escape poverty because of some inherent laziness. This common perception arguably explains punitive public policies, workfare programs, the lack of broader outcry about them (Raphael, 2011), and the increasing digital governance of those on social assistance.

Using digital governance theory, I investigated how an algorithmic system, SAMS, uses digital surveillance to govern people on social assistance, categorize them, and manage their behaviours. Using algorithmic culture and governance theory, I revealed how SAMS is a form of delegated governance, creating the 'ideal' welfare recipient. As Lyon (2001) explains, a human being is simply a data set. For the dataveillance system to work well, monitoring this 'data double' must be continually updated, drawing on a large amount of personal data stored in databases. These data doubles being created by SAMS are created using an algorithm. Those created have no way of knowing whether these 'doubles' are based on accurate information or where these data points come from, making the ability to challenge the accuracy of a person's cyber twin's 'characteristics' impossible as these characteristics are defined within a closed system.

However, as this project demonstrates, the lack of transparency and ability to challenge the accuracy of one's twin actions does not protect one from being 'punished' for their cyber twin's alleged 'sins.' For example, as previously discussed in this dissertation, if a welfare recipient fails to apply for jobs regularly or report on activities such as creating a résumé or attending training workshops, the customized information collected has a powerful influence on

an individual's perceived identity within the system, placing them into specific categories. This 'silent control' by the architecture of dataveillance systems impacts information processing and decision-making about individuals. We see reduced discretion on the part of the caseworker, reinforced by the affordances of the software system and its interface. Welfare systems have long categorized welfare recipients, but what used to be a range of options with which to categorize people has now become binary – yes/no. If the recipient falls afoul of the norms baked into the software, which almost all of my recipients did, then the task of securing assistance (both on their part and on the part of the caseworkers) becomes extremely challenging. As with most dataveillance systems (Introna, 1997), SAMS contributes to the loss of freedom and autonomy of those who receive social assistance, and those risks have yet to be thoroughly examined. Transparency is also a central challenge for researchers and policy makers given that these are proprietary softwares which are owned and controlled by the private sector companies which develop and license them.

These new technologies, such as SAMS, which track, sort, record, and share digital representations of these digital doubles, not only add to the stigmatization of welfare recipients but also present them as 'risky.' Historically, the surveillance literature primarily focused on how the act of surveillance connects to notions of privacy and confidentiality or attempted to explore how 'digital surveillance' may differ from past forms due to the breadth of data they are capable of capturing. The "deeply encoded" inequalities in surveillance practices mean that those who live in poverty are singled out for more aggressive scrutiny, are often criminalized, and have less political power to resist being subjects to surveillance. Further, this increase in surveillance of those who live in poverty has led to the creation of distinct groups based on data mining and then

regulating these groups based on their determined ranking or status (Danna & Gandy, 2002; Gandy, 1993; Haggerty & Ericson, 2006; Stoddart, 2014).

Surveillance scholars have done very few interview-based projects, relying instead on theoretical discussions and some limited case studies to a much lesser extent (Saulnier, 2017). Further, while the literature on surveillance of people living in poverty continues to be developed in Canada and is aware of the class inequalities, no studies, until mine, have considered surveillance from the ground up, from those living in, and forced to administer, a surveillance apparatus. Finally, none of these studies appear to be done by anyone with actual experience of living within the system.

I still remember when a social work student from McGill University sat with my mother at our kitchen table for almost two hours after my mother had agreed to be interviewed as part of a research project on community organizing. I listened as my mother provided all kinds of details about her recent run-in with the Montréal riot squad and answered questions about her community activism in the neighbourhood. As I watched my mother at the kitchen table, slowly sipping her cup of coffee and smoking endless Export A's, I was struck by how happy she seemed, contemplating each question like her answers possibly held the secret to life or death. After the social work student left, with agreements in place to come back again 'real soon,' my mother practically vibrated with joy as she quickly phoned several other mothers from the neighbourhood. She bragged into the phone about her Important Interview with "somebody from McGill!" as she paced around the kitchen as far as the phone cord would allow her. As a kid, I decided it was the happiest day of my mother's life until the next meeting when the social work student returned and brought two other students with her to the kitchen table meeting.

Over the next year, these meetings at my mother's kitchen table would grow to include numerous other moms from the neighbourhood. Several medical school students from McGill would also join the growing group of student social workers. That kitchen table became pretty crowded, surrounded by a well-organized and often militant group of community fighters, which would plot and plan their next moves to fight the local welfare office over the students' pile of snacks and drinks. My five sisters and I always enjoyed these meetings as not only would it put our mother into a great mood in the days leading up to the meeting, we would also get to share and fight over the left-over fancy store-bought cookies once everybody cleared out. It would only be decades later that I would finally understand and appreciate what those kitchen table meetings had meant to my mom, who finally had an appreciative and supportive audience, genuinely interested in what she had to say.

Last November, as I sat at a small kitchen table with two wobbly legs and a cat trying to get my attention as it rubbed up against my legs, I was mortified when I realized I was crying. The single mom seated across from me had just quietly explained what she wished she could tell the Prime Minister about her life on social assistance with tears streaming down her face. She didn't complain about not having a couch in her living room, or the fact that her youngest didn't have his own bed, or that it had been years since she had been able to buy new shoes. Instead, she wanted Justin Trudeau to know that she rarely smiles because of her shame about her teeth and how that makes it hard for her kids since she never wants to go out. Although the welfare office will pay for the dentures she so desperately wants, eventually, it won't pay to have the nine remaining rotting and discoloured teeth removed for her to be eligible for those dentures. And so, she waits, always afraid she might forget and accidentally smile on one of those rare

occasions she is forced to go out in public. She hugs me goodbye as I'm leaving, then reminds me that we haven't touched the donuts yet and says I should take them. But, of course, I don't.

Throughout my work on this dissertation, I often thought about my mother and her kitchen table talks and how her sit-ins and protests at the welfare office led to so many significant changes. For example, through their collective efforts, these moms forced the welfare office to finally agree to provide bus fare for trips to the pharmacy since none existed in our low-income neighbourhood. This meant moms could fill the prescription for the antibiotics necessary to treat their infant or toddler's ear infections. As I interviewed the welfare recipients for my study, I wondered whether my mother would have been able to still organize and fight against the system under SAMS. Has SAMS taken the 'fight' out of today's welfare recipients, satisfied by not having to endure the historically dreaded and invasive home visits or frequent visits to the welfare office?

In this dissertation, I demonstrate how SAMS represents a hybrid of traditional methods of governing welfare assistance and a newer high-tech version. I reveal a critical shift in governance practice with SAMS, as the system governs welfare recipients into a particular mode of productive subjectivity. Welfare recipients are now increasingly subject to multiple forms of work-related conditionality that, critics argue, presuppose a "pathological" theory of unemployment that stigmatizes welfare recipients as de-motivated to work (Wright, 2012). A key characteristic of SAMS is the more vigorous forms of conditionality that attach to many welfare payments. This manifests in threats of benefit withdrawal if recipients fail to comply with minimum administrative job searching and other behavioural requirements designed to encourage them to take *any* job rather than remain on social assistance.

Although a hybrid system, SAMS does mean fewer office and home visits from social workers for those on social assistance. For seventeen of the twenty participants in the study, these less frequent exposures to social workers and the welfare office is a welcome change. Historically, social workers have demonstrated a propensity for drawing opinions about welfare recipients that have placed them into categories of deserving and undeserving (Handler, 1983; Lipsky, 2010; Morgen, 2001). However, the caseworkers in this study framed their acts of ‘favouritism’ as necessary to create fairness within the system by offering extra assistance to those in need, compensating for the system’s lack of subjective judgment. I argue that these are not simple acts of personal judgments about deserving or undeserving. Instead, they are examples of caseworkers trusting their experience to make crucial exceptions to the policies and rules around social assistance. Unfortunately, the software program is binary- yes or no - with little room for a human, the caseworker, to nuance or override. As a result, the system forces both caseworkers and welfare recipients to fall into a narrow range of acceptable behaviours and assistance.

Although welfare recipients might argue that this forces caseworkers to be ‘fair,’ as no single social worker should have the ability to overrule welfare policies in place and award something ‘extra’ to a single welfare recipient, perhaps they are being short-sighted. This relatively new inability for caseworkers to officially overrule or sidestep policy regulations and make exceptions whenever they deem necessary, means a software program is now entirely in charge of making all judgments and decisions around the distribution of, accessibility for, and eligibility for social assistance in Ontario.

Further, although the rules and regulations around social assistance in Ontario may now be standardized and even rigid under SAMS, as Stephanie Baker Collins (2016) asserts, “clients’

needs and lives are not,” and the ability to assert exceptions, based on individual cases, will always be necessary (Brodkin, 1997; Carroll and Siegel, 1999; Handler, 1986; Howe, 1991). Choices and options are imperative as this crucially important flexibility allows for adapting policies and regulations when necessary, based on individual situations and changing conditions (Hermans and Declercq, 2003; Matland, 1995). Both welfare recipients, and the caseworkers to whom they are assigned, have discovered ways to bypass the elements in the system they believe prevent them from achieving their goals when it comes to social assistance. Social workers want the ability to override SAMS when they believe, based on their professional experience, that the system needs to adjust to specific individual cases and needs. For those on social assistance, the resistance is often directed at an individual caseworker as they represent the welfare office or system to those on social assistance. From the perspective of a welfare recipient, a social worker might always be considered an agent of the state, and for better or for worse, right or wrong, someone who is possibly a threat and therefore needs to be ‘managed.’

When considering the power dynamics between a caseworker and welfare recipient, it is not surprising that most of the acts of resistance by the study participants were covert because of their understanding that the system is hierarchical. As a result, many of the tactics used by welfare recipients were low-key and intended to go unnoticed in order to protect them from negative consequences. For example, subverting the system by tactical truth-telling, negotiated ‘truths,’ or strategic truth-telling. Other examples of resistance include sharing tips and previous personal experiences with the system with someone in their circle of friends or family members. For instance, when Karen started experiencing PTSD due to a childhood sexual assault, a friend on social assistance explained to Karen how to obtain a doctor’s note to be eligible for ODS. Karen felt too ashamed to tell the doctor about her childhood sexual abuse. Instead, thanks to her

friend's coaching and specific tips on presenting as severely depressed, Karen avoided what she would have considered a degrading experience. "Why should I have to tell anybody what happened to me as a kid? That's just private shit. Nobody needs to hear about that."

Several participants rehearsed 'best' answers to questions they were warned by family members they could be asked during intake at the welfare office. Home is also a site of resistance as some welfare recipients 'perform' and display what they believe their caseworkers want to see. Felicity, a young single mom who constantly worries about losing parental rights to her son because of her age, admits to "acting all fake" in front of her caseworker. For example, she pretends to have her son on a feeding schedule and has a decoy crib set up so her worker won't judge her for allowing her son to share her bed. Another mom instructs her son to tuck his laptop, a gift from their landlord, under his bed whenever a caseworker comes over to avoid judgment.

One of the critical questions I hoped to answer with this project was how does it feel to be governed at a distance by a software program? Based on the participant interviews, I was surprised to learn that most welfare recipients consider the governance by a software program preferable to the previous, more 'personal' approach that involved more frequent home visits from social workers. As a result of the decrease in-home visits and the significantly diminished discretionary powers of caseworkers, SAMS can empower those on social assistance. Seventeen of the twenty of the welfare recipients I interviewed spoke of the relief of not dealing with a social worker coming into their home and fewer visits to the welfare office. Instead, once registered into the system, most of their 'case' administrative details are handled by an automated system that only requires a monthly check-in by phone. Thus, welfare recipients can often avoid speaking to any humans at the welfare office or have them in their homes.

However, even if it might not of concern to those who receive social assistance, SAMS operates behind the scenes, out of sight, to reproduce the ‘ideal’ welfare recipient and punishes those who do not fit within those norms. Although many welfare recipients expressed concerns about feeling vulnerable to social workers who they believed often have too much discretionary power, it does not have to be all or nothing. While those on social assistance might celebrate that they can now easily minimize most of their previous contact with social workers, the concern here is that all context is lost without social workers’ discretion - the human factor in these decisions. The system minimizes any human interventions, streamlining SAMS’ objective, which is to create the ‘ideal’ welfare recipient, one who not only looks for a job but also *wants* a job and will get off of welfare as quickly as possible. As Andrejevic and Gates (2014) argue, one of the concerns with relying on automated data analytics is that we are assuming that the “data science knows best” (p. 186). When it comes to SAMS, however, does this system know best? Although SAMS relies on its algorithms to identify and classify patterns, it cannot explain the patterns it finds and notes in the system. SAMS creation of data doubles enables full transparency to a system that itself lacks transparency. However, one thing that is evident is that the enforced transparency of the data double serves the purpose of a welfare algorithm and not the welfare recipient.

Further, as four of the five caseworkers I interviewed claim, SAMS is working towards removing even more of the human element in welfare governance and eventually replacing social workers with data entry clerks. After all, that is what most caseworkers I interviewed insist their roles have been reduced to under SAMS. Ultimately, the system’s architects have decided what range of behaviours are even legible to the system. You either perform that ‘ideal’ welfare

recipient, or you do not. The system is there to govern recipients into a particular model of the productive subject, creating the ideal welfare recipient through a disciplinary mechanism.

Looking forward, what impact will SAMS have on the collective when it comes to welfare recipients organizing to push back against the system versus now plotting on an individual basis how best to resist or make it work better for them? Do welfare recipients still meet at kitchen tables and discuss making the system more equitable for all? Do they still plan sit-ins at the welfare office when they learn that a mom has been refused a pair of dentures until her few remaining, rotting teeth have fallen out? I think about my mother, whose approach was systemic and organized and collective, and how important her networks of support were for bringing about necessary changes. I have asked myself many times: What would she think of SAMS? What would *she* do about the governance and disciplining of welfare recipients by a welfare algorithm? The participants in my study have found all kinds of interesting and creative ways to resist. However, although they clearly still talk and often compare experiences with each other, instead of collective action, they seem more focused on sharing personal tips. Their approach is individual and tactical and only results in individual benefits rather than system-wide change. No one I spoke with had any previous experience with - or current plans to - storm their local welfare office or organize welfare recipients from their neighbourhood to collectively subvert the system.

Considerations for future research include a longitudinal study, for instance, one that could follow welfare recipients and caseworkers over time and study their interactions with SAMS in order to and place it in a greater context of local and provincial poverty/welfare rates. The study could potentially track these recipients' changes in financial status due to SAMS over time. There would also be value in examining other provincial welfare algorithms and

considering how they are used and perceived by welfare recipients and caseworkers. For example, how are algorithms used in social welfare programs and administration in the rest of Canada, in provinces like Quebec or the Maritimes? How do these compare to SAMS?

Other avenues to explore could also include examining how the feedback of welfare recipients and caseworkers/social workers could, or should, influence how welfare systems create and utilize algorithms in their distribution of social assistance. This could be expanded to other marginalized communities; how are algorithms in software programs used to govern and punish other members of vulnerable communities and populations?

Finally, the enforcement of work-related conditions for those on social assistance requires considerable administrative resources in determining “whether individuals’ suffering might be their own fault” (Eubanks, 2018, p. 176). This negative portrayal of welfare recipients as needing to be ‘forced’ into the workforce appears to be shared by much of the public in neoliberal welfare states (Schofield & Butterworth, 2015). A critical element in how those on social assistance experience this pressure towards finding employment is how caseworkers enforce or enact these welfare-to-work programs with welfare recipients. As Brodtkin (2011) argues, frontline workers “are manifestly responsible for making policy *work*” in that the choices they make in performing their roles determine how policy affects the lives of individual welfare recipients (p. 255). I know from my study that caseworkers, aware of the unique circumstances of the welfare recipients they are working with and the current job market, will sometimes ‘coach’ welfare recipients how to respond to questions around job searches to satisfy SAMS requirements for the active and ongoing search for employment. Also, future consideration of the extent to which negative opinions of welfare recipients possibly held by caseworkers responsible for guiding them through welfare-to-work and, more particularly, whether caseworkers who

internalize the “discourse of culpability” (Wright, 2012, p. 321) embrace more “regulatory welfare measure” (Deeming, 2016, p. 161). In other words, are they directing welfare recipients to take *any* job rather than remain on benefits and recommending sanctions for noncompliance for the behavioural obligations mandated by SAMS?

In conclusion, as de Certeau asserts, ordinary people are not merely passive and submissive but can manipulate the environments and power structures around them through everyday actions. The welfare recipients in my study demonstrated this to be true in a multitude of ways through their resourcefulness and willingness to push back against a system that often seems unfair and perhaps even ridiculous when it comes to trying to govern their ways of *being*. For example, when Shanice’s son asked her why he had to hide his laptop from the caseworker during a home visit, since, after all, “he didn’t steal it,” she explained to him, “We don’t need no worker thinking we’re rich or nothing and (then) maybe taking back some of my check.”

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Tables

**TABLE 1**  
**Participants: Common & Major Themes**

<b>Participant Group</b>	<b>Common Themes</b>	<b>Major Themes</b>
Welfare Recipients	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Oppression &amp; Autonomy</li> <li>-Sharing Tips</li> <li>-Moral Regulation</li> <li>-Loss of Privacy</li> <li>-Resistance</li> <li>-Lack of Skills &amp; Training</li> <li>- State Control</li> <li>- Laziness / Surveillance / Risk / Welfare as Governance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Autonomy &amp; Resistance &amp; Home</li> <li>- Privacy</li> <li>- Governance</li> <li>- Hybridity</li> <li>- 'Ideal' Welfare Recipient</li> <li>- Home</li> </ul>
Caseworkers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Automation (of Job); Job Loss</li> <li>- Autonomy</li> <li>- State Control</li> <li>- Private Industry Control</li> <li>- Delegated Governance</li> <li>- Algorithms</li> <li>- Lies</li> <li>- Work-around</li> <li>- Home</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Potential Job Loss</li> <li>- Automation of Work</li> <li>- Loss of Autonomy</li> <li>- Making Decisions 'Outside of the Box'</li> <li>- Decline of Face-to-Face Contact with Clientele</li> <li>- Home</li> </ul>
Coders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inherently Unbiased</li> <li>- Neutral /Efficient</li> <li>- Recognizing Patterns</li> <li>- Placing People into Real Risk Categories</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Neutrality</li> <li>- Lack of Bias</li> <li>- Efficiency</li> <li>- Fairness</li> </ul>

<b>TABLE 2</b> <b>Document Sources: Common Themes</b>	<b>37 Document Sources (See References)</b>									
<b>COMMON THEMES</b>	<b>Ontario Works (5 Documents)</b>	<b>Privacy Commission of Ontario (3 Documents)</b>	<b>Office of the Auditor General of Ontario (3 Documents)</b>	<b>Ministry of Community &amp; Social Services (6 Documents)</b>	<b>Stats Canada (Note 1) (5 Documents)</b>	<b>Ontario Public Service Employees Union Reports on SAMS (2 Documents)</b>	<b>Ontario Ministry of Labour, Training &amp; Skills Development (2 Documents)</b>	<b>Ontario College of Social Workers &amp; Social Service Workers (2 Documents)</b>	<b>Ontario Social Assistance Reports (3 Documents)</b>	<b>Backgrounder on Poverty (Note 2) (8 Documents)</b>
Set Min Target for Welfare Recipients to Find Employment	X		X	X			X			
Increase Accountability of Managers for Lack of Reduction of Welfare Recipients	X		X	X			X		X	
Failure of Office Managers to Monitor, Scrutinize, Screen Applicants More Carefully	X		X	X					X	
Barriers Related to Mental Health Conditions, Addictions & Homelessness	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Recommend Case Workers Meet More Frequently with Recipient to Help Find Employment	X	X	X	X		X		X	X	
Welfare Fraud	X	X	X	X	X				X	X
<b>Note 1: Reports relating to poverty in Canada and specifically in Ontario</b>										
<b>Note 2: From Both Ontario &amp; Federal Government Position Papers on Poverty Reduction</b>										

**TABLE 3**  
**Participants: Gender/Race/Age**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Male Gender</b>	<b>Female Gender</b>	<b>Trans Male</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Indigenous</b>	<b>Age: 18 - 30</b>	<b>Age: 31 - 40</b>	<b>Age: 41 - 50+</b>
<b>Welfare Recipients</b>	20	4	15	1	14	5	1	6	13	1
<b>Caseworkers</b>	5	1	4	0	5	0	0	0	2	3
<b>Software Coders</b>	2	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	1

## **Appendix A: Study Information & Invitation to Participate to those on social assistance**

Hello,

My name is Kathy Dobson and I am a PhD student working under the supervision of Dr. Sheryl Hamilton in the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University. I am emailing you because you have recently expressed interest in possibly being interviewed for my research project.

I'm doing a study that's interested in learning about the experiences of those who have or are currently receiving social assistance (welfare) under the new software program, Social Assistance Management System (SAMS) in Ontario. As someone who grew up in the system with a single mom on welfare, how people who have, or are currently living in poverty feel about their experiences is of great personal and academic interest to me. It's my hope that this project will offer insight into how, with all of the changes in the system, people feel about SAMS and possibly even impact future policies around welfare. I'd like to make sure your story is a part of that.

Participation in this study involves meeting with me in a mutually agreeable place (for example, a private space in the public library, local community center, a public park, or if we can find a private spot, a coffee shop) for approximately an hour and a half answering questions about your experiences with SAMS. I would like to record the interview with an audio recorder and to ask you questions to encourage you to share your impressions and feedback. The data from this study could possibly be shared in presentations, academic conferences, and peer-reviewed publications

but your identity and privacy will be protected at all times. In appreciation for your time, you will be compensated a \$15 Tim Horton's gift card.

The final decision about participation is of course yours.

If you are interested in being interviewed, please contact me, Kathy Dobson, at [KathyDobson@cunet.Carleton.ca](mailto:KathyDobson@cunet.Carleton.ca) and list your top three choices (days of week and time preferred) for when you would like to be interviewed. I will then provide you with further information concerning the location of the study. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please don't hesitate to email me. Or, if you prefer me to call you, just provide me with a phone number and possible times best to reach you.

You may also contact my supervisor Dr. Sheryl Hamilton at Carleton University. Her email is: [sheryl.hamilton@carleton.ca](mailto:sheryl.hamilton@carleton.ca).

The ethics protocol for this project, #110946, has been reviewed and cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board. If you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact Dr. Bernadette Campbell, Chair, Carleton University Research Ethics Board -A (by phone at 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or via email at [ethics@carleton.ca](mailto:ethics@carleton.ca)).

Thank you for your consideration of this study!

Kathy Dobson

## **Appendix B: Questions for those on Social Assistance and consent forms**

How long have you been on social assistance? (How many times? Have you been on social assistance in any other province in Canada? If yes, how was that experience?)

Please tell me about your experience with SAMS. What are the steps for applying? (Did anyone help you?)

Did you apply online from home? If not from home, where did you apply? (What was that experience like?) Or did you apply in person? (What was that experience like?)

Do you have an Internet connection at home? (If yes, do you use your Internet connection at home? Are you on social media?)

What do you know about how SAMS works?

What has been your experience with SAMS? (What does it do? How does it work? How do you feel about that?)

Can you tell me about what it was like when you first applied for social assistance? (What were the steps? Did a social worker or anyone else help you with the application?)

What kinds of information did you have to share in order to qualify for social assistance? (If this isn't your first time applying, has any of that changed over the years?)

What is contact with your worker like? How often do you meet? Has it changed?

Do you think applying for social assistance is different today? If yes, how?

Do you think being on social assistance is different today? If yes, how? (If they mention surveillance, I might then ask how do they cope with it or do they have any concerns about it.)

Have you received any advice or suggestions on how to handle the new system? (If yes, from whom- a friend, family member, your case worker?) If yes, what was the advice or suggestions?

Has SAMS changed your relationship with your caseworker in any way? (If yes, in which ways?)

Any specific concerns about being on social assistance today with SAMS? (If you could change anything, would you? What would you change?)

Do you see any differences between using SAMS compared to how it used to work for you before SAMS?

Do you think welfare has changed for you over the years? (If yes, in what ways? Is it harder to get? Easier? The same?)

If you could give any feedback or suggestions or say anything to the people in charge of designing SAMS, would you? If so, what would that be?

Is there anything you wish people who have never been on welfare could know about those who are on SAMS? If so, what would that be?

### **Consent Forms**

Introduction:

Hello, I'm Kathy Dobson. I'm doing interviews with anyone who has received social assistance with SAMS in Ontario. I want to learn about your experiences with the new software program, Social Assistance Management System in Ontario.

I'm inviting you to be interviewed, which will take about an hour and a half. I will ask you questions about how you feel about the new software program. I will take handwritten notes to record your answers as well as use an audio recorder to make sure I don't miss anything you say. The data from this study could also possibly be shared in presentations, academic conferences and peer-reviewed publications, but your identity and privacy will always be protected at all times. Your name will never be shared with anyone at any time during or after the study.

You don't need to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or that you do not want to answer. And you can stop taking part and being interviewed at any time. Once the

interview is completed, I will use the information you shared and analyze it with what other participants shared. You may ask to withdraw and have your interview data removed from the study for up to one month after the interview. At that point, you can no longer ask for your information to not be included in the analysis as it will be anonymous, and potentially included as part of a future research paper or conference.

I'll describe the steps I am taking to protect your privacy:

I will never use your real name or any information that could identify you. All the data from this research that will be shared or published will be anonymized.

Your participation in this study is voluntary.

You can decide to stop at any time, even partway through the interview for whatever reason. If you decide to stop participating, there will be no consequences to you. You will still be able to keep the \$15 gift card for Tim Horton's.

If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

You are free to contact me in the future should you have any questions.

If you have any questions about this study or would like more information you can email me, Kathy Dobson, at [SAMS.Interview@gmail.com](mailto:SAMS.Interview@gmail.com) or the supervisor of this project at Carleton University, Dr. Sheryl Hamilton, at [sheryl.hamilton@carleton.ca](mailto:sheryl.hamilton@carleton.ca)

The ethics protocol for this project has been reviewed and cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board. If you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact Dr. Bernadette Campbell, Chair, Carleton University Research Ethics Board -A (by phone at 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or via email at [ethics@carleton.ca](mailto:ethics@carleton.ca)).

Do you agree to be contacted after your interview for any follow up questions?

Yes

No

Do you agree to be audio recorded?

Yes

No

Do you have any questions or would like any additional details?

Do you agree to participate in this study knowing you can withdraw at any point during the interview with no consequences to you?

Yes

No

(If yes, begin the interview.      If no, thank the participant for their time.)

## **Appendix C: Study Information and Invitation to Participate to Social Workers**

Hi, I'm Kathy Dobson, and I'm conducting interviews with social workers who have experience with Ontario's Social Assistance Management System (SAMS) willing to share how they feel about it. I'm conducting this as part of research in my PhD studies in the School of Journalism and Communication. Thank you for getting in touch.

If you currently are or have worked with clients who received social assistance, I'm inviting you to do an in person or Skype interview with me, which will take about an hour and a half. I'm interested in learning more about how this new system actually works and how the social workers who help their clients navigate the system feel about it. I will ask you questions about your experiences in navigating the new software program, SAMS, that used to be the Service Delivery Model Technology (SDMT). I'll take handwritten notes to record your answers as well as use an audio recorder to make sure I don't miss anything you say. Data from this study could also possibly be shared in presentations, academic conferences and peer-reviewed publications. But your identity and the company or agency you work for will be anonymous at all times.

If you are interested in participating, would like to suggest or share this with any colleagues who you believe might be interested in participating, or have any questions about the study, please don't hesitate to contact me, Kathy Dobson, at [SAMS.Interviews@gmail.com](mailto:SAMS.Interviews@gmail.com) or the supervisor of this research project, Dr. Sheryl Hamilton, at [SherylHamilton@cunet.carleton.ca](mailto:SherylHamilton@cunet.carleton.ca)

The ethics protocol for this project has been reviewed and cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board. If you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact Dr. Bernadette Campbell, Chair, Carleton University Research Ethics Board – A (by phone at 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or via email at [ethics@carleton.ca](mailto:ethics@carleton.ca)).

## **Appendix D: Questions for Social Workers and consent forms**

Questions for Social Workers (Appendix B) #110673

How long have you been working as a social worker with people on social assistance?

What are the steps necessary for someone to apply for social assistance?

What's it like working with SAMS?

How has it made any parts of your job easier? More difficult?

Has it changed your relationship with clients in any way? (If yes, how?)

What do your clients think of SAMS?

What are some of the most significant differences between using SAMS and the previous software program for those who receive social assistance?

What, if anything, would you change about the current software, SAMS?

(If they identify any glitches or problems with the software, I'd ask them:

What do you do if there's a problem with the system? Do you call or contact someone for assistance? How long does it take?)

### **Consent Form**

Introduction:

Hello, I'm Kathy Dobson. I'm doing interviews with social workers whose clients include anyone who has received social assistance through SAMS in Ontario. I want to learn about your experiences with the new software program, Social Assistance Management System (SAMS) in Ontario.

I'm inviting you to be interviewed, which will take about an hour and a half. I will ask you questions about how you feel about the new software program. I will take handwritten notes to record your answers as well as use an audio recorder to make sure I don't miss anything you say. The data from this study could also possibly be shared in presentations, academic conferences and peer-reviewed publications, but your identity and privacy will always be protected at all times.

You don't need to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or that you do not want to answer. And you can stop taking part and being interviewed at any time. Once the interview is completed, I will use the information you shared and analyze it with what other participants shared. You may ask to withdraw and have your interview data removed from the study and destroyed for up to one month after the interview. At that point, you can no longer ask for your information to not be included in the analysis as it will be anonymous, and potentially included as part of a future research paper or conference.

I'll describe the steps I am taking to protect your privacy:

I will never use your real name or any information that could identify you or the company or agency you work for.

Your participation in this study is voluntary.

You can decide to stop at any time, even partway through the interview for whatever reason. If you decide to stop participating, there will be no consequences to you.

If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

An identity code will be assigned to each participant by the researcher so it can be used to link identity data elements back to the participants in the event that any decide to withdraw from the study for up to one month after their interview, after which time the code list linking individual participants to their data will be destroyed. The codes will be stored on a separate password protected USB stick and stored in a lock cabinet in the researcher's home. Transcripts will have all identifying details removed. The code list linking participants to their real names will be destroyed one month after interviews are conducted. All data will be destroyed five years after the study is completed. If using Skype for this interview, although I can not guarantee the security of the interview, if we do it via computer to computer (and not use cell phones on either end) it will be encrypted.

Follow up: You are free to contact me in the future should you have any questions or concerns. If you have any questions about this study or would like more information you can email me, the researcher, [KathyDobson@cmail.carleton.ca](mailto:KathyDobson@cmail.carleton.ca), or the supervisor of this project at Carleton University, Dr. Sheryl Hamilton, at [SherylHamilton@cunet.Carleton.ca](mailto:SherylHamilton@cunet.Carleton.ca)

The ethics protocol for this project has been reviewed and cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board. If you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact Dr. Bernadette Campbell, Chair, Carleton University Research Ethics Board – A (by phone at 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or via email at [ethics@carleton.ca](mailto:ethics@carleton.ca)).

Do you agree to be contacted after your interview for some follow up questions?

Yes

No

Do you agree to be audio recorded?

Yes

No

Do you have any questions or would like any additional details?

Do you agree to participate in this study knowing you can withdraw at any point during the interview with no consequences to you?

Yes

No

(If yes, begin the interview.)

(If no, thank the participant for their time.)

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Signature

## **Appendix E: Study Information and Invitation to Participate to Software Coders**

Hello,

My name is Kathy Dobson and I am a PhD student working under the supervision of Dr. Sheryl Hamilton in the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University. I am emailing you because you have recently expressed interest in possibly being interviewed for my research project.

I am seeking participants who have experience as coders with service delivery software as I'm interested in how coding actually works, and how you make the decisions you make when designing algorithmic systems. Participation in this study involves an interview via Skype, at your convenience, for approximately an hour and a half and answering questions about your experiences with coding with service delivery software. I would like to record with an audio recorder and to ask you some questions to encourage you to share your expertise with how these systems are designed. The data from this study could possibly be shared in presentations, academic conferences, and peer-reviewed publications but your identity (and your company's identity) will be protected at all times.

I would like to assure you that the study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance (number xxx) from the Office of Research Ethics at Carleton University.

The final decision about participation is of course yours.

If you are interested in being interviewed, please contact me at [SAMS.Interview@gmail.com](mailto:SAMS.Interview@gmail.com) and list your top three choices (days of week and time preferred) for when you would like to be interviewed. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please don't hesitate to email me. Or, if you prefer me to call you, just provide me with a phone number and possible times best to reach you.

You may also contact my supervisor Dr. Sheryl Hamilton at Carleton University. Her email is: [sherylhamilton@cunet.carleton.ca](mailto:sherylhamilton@cunet.carleton.ca).

The ethics protocol for this project has been reviewed and cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board. If you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact Dr. Bernadette Campbell, Chair, Carleton University Research Ethics Board – A (by phone at 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or via email at [ethics@carleton.ca](mailto:ethics@carleton.ca)).

Thank you for your consideration of this study!

Kathy Dobson

## **Appendix F: Questions for Coders and consent forms**

### Interview Questions:

My open-ended questions for coders, whether they have been directly involved with SAMS or some other service delivery software, includes:

- 1) How many service delivery projects have you worked on?
- 2) What did they involve?
- 3) When you get a new contract how does the process work? (The steps.)
- 4) How do you actually set up the system?
- 5) Can you walk me through how you write the program.
- 6) How do the algorithms work?
- 7) How are decisions made about tags?
- 8) What are some examples of the coding? Specific word choices?
- 9) How are specific words chosen?

### **Consent Forms**

#### Introduction:

Hello, I'm Kathy Dobson. I'm doing interviews about what's involved with writing the code and algorithms for government service delivery software. I'm conducting this as part of research for my PhD studies at Carleton University in the School of Journalism and Communication.

I'm inviting you to be interviewed, which will take about an hour and a half. I will ask you questions about how you write the code for service delivery software, and how you write algorithms in general. I will use an audio recorder and take handwritten notes to record your answers to make sure I don't miss anything you say. The data from this study could also possibly

be shared in presentations, academic conferences and peer-reviewed publications, but your identity will always be protected at all times.

You don't need to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or that you do not want to answer. And you can stop taking part and being interviewed at any time. Once the interview is completed, I will use the information you shared and analyze it with what other participants shared. You may ask to withdraw and have your interview data removed from the study for up to one month after the interview. At that point, you can no longer ask for your information to not be included in the analysis as it will be anonymous, and potentially included as part of a future research paper or conference.

I'll describe the steps I am taking to protect your privacy:

I will never use your real name or any information that could identify you or the company you work for. All the data from this research that will be shared or published will be the combined data of all participants.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you are not an independent contractor, you will need permission from your supervisor to be interviewed for this study. Please check off the box below indicating that you have received this permission.

You can decide to stop at any time, even partway through the interview for whatever reason. If you decide to stop participating, there will be no consequences to you.

If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

You are free to contact me in the future should you have any questions or concerns.

If you have any questions about this study or would like more information you can email me, the researcher, [KathyDobson@cmail.carleton.ca](mailto:KathyDobson@cmail.carleton.ca), or the supervisor of this project at Carleton University, Dr. Sheryl Hamilton, at [SherylHamilton@cunet.Carleton.ca](mailto:SherylHamilton@cunet.Carleton.ca)

The ethics protocol for this project has been reviewed and cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board. If you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact Dr. Bernadette Campbell, Chair, Carleton University Research Ethics Board – A (by phone at 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or via email at [ethics@carleton.ca](mailto:ethics@carleton.ca)).

If you have any questions about this study or would like more information you can email me, or the supervisor of this project at Carleton University, Dr. Sheryl Hamilton, at [sheryl.hamilton@cunet.Carleton.ca](mailto:sheryl.hamilton@cunet.Carleton.ca)

Do you agree to be contacted after your interview for any follow up questions?

Do you agree to be audio recorded?

Do you have any questions or would like any additional details?

Do you agree to participate in this study knowing you can withdraw at any point during the interview with no consequences to you?

Yes

No

You have received permission from your supervisor to be interviewed for this study.

Yes

No (it is unnecessary because you are an independent contractor.)

(If yes, begin the interview.)

(If no, thank the participant for their time.)

**Appendix G: Recruitment Poster for those who receive Social Assistance**

**ARE YOU ON WELFARE/SAMS?**

**DO YOU HAVE A STORY TO SHARE ABOUT BEING ON  
WELFARE/SAMS?**

**I WOULD LOVE TO HEAR YOUR STORY!**

Hello, my name is Kathy Dobson and I'm a PhD student in the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University in Ottawa. I'm looking to talk to anyone who receives or has received social assistance in Ontario with SAMS. I want to learn about your experiences with the new software program, Social Assistance Management System (SAMS) in Ontario. As someone who grew up in the system with a single mom on welfare, how people who have or are currently living in poverty feel about their experiences is of great personal and academic interest to me.

My hope for this project would be to possibly impact future policies on social assistance in Ontario and I'd really like to include your story in my project.

This would mean a face-to-face interview, which will take about an hour and a half, in a publicly convenient place to your location, but private so we can talk. I'll be audio recording the interview to help me with keeping good notes, but your identity and name will always be kept private and confidential. Data from this study could also be possibly share in presentations, academic conferences, and peer-reviewed publications but your identity and privacy will be protected at all times.

If you're interested in being involved or have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me, Kathy Dobson, at [SAMS.INTERVIEW@gmail.com](mailto:SAMS.INTERVIEW@gmail.com) or the supervisor of this research project, Dr. Sheryl Hamilton, at [Sheryl.hamilton@carleton.ca](mailto:Sheryl.hamilton@carleton.ca)