

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA

TRAVIS JOHN HOFFMAN,

Plaintiff,

-vs-

NANCY A. BERRYHILL,¹
COMMISSIONER OF SOCIAL SECURITY,

Defendant.

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Civil Action No. 16-415

AMBROSE, Senior District Judge

OPINION

Pending before the court are Cross-Motions for Summary Judgment. (ECF Nos. 13 and 17). Both parties have filed Briefs in Support of their Motions. (ECF Nos. 14, 18). After careful consideration of the submissions of the parties, and based on my Opinion set forth below, I am denying Plaintiff's Motion for Summary Judgment (ECF No. 13) and granting Defendant's Motion for Summary Judgment. (ECF No. 17).

I. BACKGROUND

Plaintiff brought this action for review of the final decision of the Commissioner of Social Security ("Commissioner") denying his application for supplemental security income pursuant to the Social Security Act ("Act"). Plaintiff filed his application alleging he had been disabled since May 16, 2011.² (ECF No. 9-5, p. 2). Administrative Law Judge ("ALJ"), Douglas Cohen, held a hearing on October 30, 2014. (ECF No. 9-2, pp. 36-72). On November 26, 2014, the ALJ found that Plaintiff was not disabled under the Act. (ECF No. 9-2, pp. 18-29).

After exhausting all administrative remedies, Plaintiff filed the instant action with this

¹ Nancy A. Berryhill became acting Commissioner of Social Security on January 23, 2017, replacing Carolyn W. Colvin.

² As a child, Plaintiff received supplemental security income benefits. Once he attained the age of 18, his benefits were redetermined. On October 19, 2012, Plaintiff was determined not to be disabled as of October 1, 2012. (ECF No. 9-2, p. 18).

court. The parties have filed Cross-Motions for Summary Judgment. (ECF No. 13 and 17). The issues are now ripe for review.

II. LEGAL ANALYSIS

A. Standard of Review

The standard of review in social security cases is whether substantial evidence exists in the record to support the Commissioner's decision. *Allen v. Bowen*, 881 F.2d 37, 39 (3d Cir. 1989). Substantial evidence has been defined as "more than a mere scintilla. It means such relevant evidence as a reasonable mind might accept as adequate." *Ventura v. Shalala*, 55 F.3d 900, 901 (3d Cir. 1995), *quoting Richardson v. Perales*, 402 U.S. 389, 401 (1971). Additionally, the Commissioner's findings of fact, if supported by substantial evidence, are conclusive. 42 U.S.C. §405(g); *Dobrowolsky v. Califano*, 606 F.2d 403, 406 (3d Cir. 1979). A district court cannot conduct a *de novo* review of the Commissioner's decision or re-weigh the evidence of record. *Palmer v. Apfel*, 995 F.Supp. 549, 552 (E.D. Pa. 1998). Where the ALJ's findings of fact are supported by substantial evidence, a court is bound by those findings, even if the court would have decided the factual inquiry differently. *Hartranft v. Apfel*, 181 F.3d 358, 360 (3d Cir. 1999). To determine whether a finding is supported by substantial evidence, however, the district court must review the record as a whole. *See*, 5 U.S.C. §706.

To be eligible for social security benefits, the plaintiff must demonstrate that he cannot engage in substantial gainful activity because of a medically determinable physical or mental impairment which can be expected to result in death or which has lasted or can be expected to last for a continuous period of at least 12 months. 42 U.S.C. §423(d)(1)(A); *Brewster v. Heckler*, 786 F.2d 581, 583 (3d Cir. 1986).

The Commissioner has provided the ALJ with a five-step sequential analysis to use when evaluating the disabled status of each claimant. 20 C.F.R. §404.1520(a). The ALJ must determine: (1) whether the claimant is currently engaged in substantial gainful activity; (2) if not, whether the claimant has a severe impairment; (3) if the claimant has a severe impairment,

whether it meets or equals the criteria listed in 20 C.F.R., pt. 404, subpt. P., appx. 1; (4) if the impairment does not satisfy one of the impairment listings, whether the claimant's impairments prevent him from performing his past relevant work; and (5) if the claimant is incapable of performing his past relevant work, whether he can perform any other work which exists in the national economy, in light of his age, education, work experience and residual functional capacity. 20 C.F.R. §404.1520. The claimant carries the initial burden of demonstrating by medical evidence that he is unable to return to his previous employment (steps 1-4). *Dobrowolsky*, 606 F.2d at 406. Once the claimant meets this burden, the burden of proof shifts to the Commissioner to show that the claimant can engage in alternative substantial gainful activity (step 5). *Id.*

A district court, after reviewing the entire record may affirm, modify, or reverse the decision with or without remand to the Commissioner for rehearing. *Podedworny v. Harris*, 745 F.2d 210, 221 (3d Cir. 1984).

B. Opinion of Treating Physicians and Examining Physicians

Plaintiff first argues that the ALJ erred by improperly disregarding the medical opinion of his treating physicians and the examining physician. (ECF No. 14, pp. 9-12). The amount of weight accorded to medical opinions is well-established. Generally, the ALJ will give more weight to the opinion of a source who has examined the claimant than to a non-examining source. 20 C.F.R. § 416.927(c)(1). In addition, the ALJ generally will give more weight to opinions from a treating physician, "since these sources are likely to be the medical professionals most able to provide a detailed, longitudinal picture of [a claimant's] medical impairment(s) and may bring a unique perspective to the medical evidence that cannot be obtained from the objective medical findings alone or from reports of individual examinations, such as consultative examinations or brief hospitalizations." *Id.* § 416.927(c)(2). If the ALJ finds that "a treating source's opinion on the issue(s) of the nature and severity of [a claimant's] impairment(s) is well-supported by medically acceptable clinical and laboratory diagnostic

techniques and is not inconsistent with the other substantial evidence [of] record,” he must give that opinion controlling weight. *Id.* Also, “the more consistent an opinion is with the record as a whole, the more weight [the ALJ generally] will give to that opinion.” *Id.* § 416.927(c)(4).

In the event of conflicting medical evidence, the Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has explained:

“A cardinal principle guiding disability determinations is that the ALJ accord treating physicians’ reports great weight, especially ‘when their opinions reflect expert judgment based on continuing observation of the patient’s condition over a prolonged period of time.’” *Morales v. Apfel*, 225 F.3d 310, 317 (3d Cir. 2000) (quoting *Plummer v. Apfel*, 186 F.3d 422, 429 (3d Cir. 1999)). However, “where . . . the opinion of a treating physician conflicts with that of a non-treating, non-examining physician, the ALJ may choose whom to credit” and may reject the treating physician’s assessment if such rejection is based on contradictory medical evidence. *Id.* Similarly, under 20 C.F.R. § 416.927(d)(2), the opinion of a treating physician is to be given controlling weight only when it is well-supported by medical evidence and is consistent with other evidence in the record.

Becker v. Comm’r of Social Sec. Admin., No. 10-2517, 2010 WL 5078238, at *5 (3d Cir. Dec. 14, 2010). Although the ALJ may choose whom to credit when faced with a conflict, he “cannot reject evidence for no reason or for the wrong reason.” *Diaz v. Comm’r of Soc. Security*, 577 F.3d 500, 505 (3d Cir. 2009).

In this case, Plaintiff focuses on the Global Assessment of Functioning (“GAF”)³ scores by treating psychologists, Dr. Uber and Dr. Zerby, and examining psychologist, Dr. Houk, to argue that there is substantial evidence of record to support those GAF scores such that the ALJ should not have discounted them. (ECF No. 14, pp. 9-12). To be clear, the standard is not

³GAF is an acronym which refers to an individual's score on the Global Assessment of Functioning Scale. American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 32 (4th ed. Text Revision 2000). The scale is used to report the “clinician's judgment of the individual's overall level of functioning” in light of his psychological, social, and occupational limitations. *Id.* The GAF ratings range from 1 to 100. GAF scores are arrived at by a clinician based on his or her assessment of a patient's self-reporting. American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 32 (4th ed. Text Revision 2000). GAF scores do not have a direct correlation to the disability requirements and standards of the Act. See, 65 Fed. Reg. 50746, at 50764-65 (2000). In fact, as of May 18, 2013, the American Psychiatric Association no longer endorses the GAF scale as a measurement tool. See, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DMS-V) (5th ed. 2013). Nonetheless, GAF scores are still medical evidence that informs a Commissioner's judgment in assessing whether an individual is disabled and must be considered as such.

whether there is evidence to establish Plaintiff's position but, rather, is whether there is substantial evidence to support the ALJ's finding. *Allen v. Bowen*, 881 F.2d 37, 39 (3d Cir. 1989). Thus, this argument is entirely misplaced.

Nevertheless, I have reviewed the decision with regard to the weighing of the medical evidence, including GAF scores. Specifically, the ALJ appropriately considered the GAF scores and I find the reasons given by the ALJ in weighing the same to be appropriate, sufficiently explained (inconsistent with other evidence of record), and supported by substantial evidence of record. (ECF No. 9-2, pp. 23-28); 20 C.F.R. § 416.927 (discussing the evaluation of medical opinions). Therefore, I find no error in this regard on the part of the ALJ.

Consequently, remand is not warranted on this basis.

C. Residual Functional Capacity ("RFC")⁴

Plaintiff next argues that the ALJ improperly determined his RFC. (ECF No. 14, pp. 12-14). In support thereof, Plaintiff submits that there is substantial evidence to support that he is not able to mentally do the work set forth in the ALJ's RFC finding.⁵ *Id.* pp. 13-14. Again, to be clear, the standard is not whether there is evidence to establish Plaintiff's position but, rather, is whether there is substantial evidence to support the ALJ's finding. *Allen v. Bowen*, 881 F.2d 37, 39 (3d Cir. 1989). Thus, this support for Plaintiff's argument is misplaced.

At the end of this argument, in one sentence, Plaintiff states that "the medical records upon which the ALJ relied in determining the residual functional capacity that he made were mostly reports of therapists who are not acceptable medical sources." (ECF No. 14, p. 14). This assertion is confounding to me. In determining Plaintiff's RFC, the ALJ relied on, *inter alia*,

⁴ RFC refers to the most a claimant can still do despite his/her limitations. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1545(a), 416.945(a). The assessment must be based upon all of the relevant evidence, including the medical records, medical source opinions, and the individual's subjective allegations and description of his own limitations. 20 C.F.R. § 416.945(a).

⁵ The ALJ found Plaintiff has the RFC to perform light work with multiple exceptions. (ECF No. 9-2, p. 22).

the medical opinions of two state agency doctors, Dr. Cannon and Dr. Rattan. (ECF No. 9-2, pp. 27-28). State agency opinions are acceptable medical sources and merit significant consideration. See SSR 96-6p ("Because State agency medical and psychological consultants ... are experts in the Social Security disability programs, ... 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1527(f) and 416.927(f) require [ALJs] ... to consider their findings of fact about the nature and severity of an individual's impairment(s)...."). Therefore, I find Plaintiff's statement meritless.

D. Vocational Expert

Plaintiff next argues that the ALJ erred by improperly disregarding vocational expert testimony and by relying on an incomplete hypothetical question. (ECF No. 14, pp. 15-16). I disagree. An ALJ is required to accept only that testimony from the vocational expert which accurately reflects a plaintiff's impairments. See, *Podedworny v. Harris*, 745 F.2d 210 (3d Cir. 1984); *Chrupcala v. Heckler*, 829 F.2d 1269, 1276 (3d Cir. 1987). Based on my review of the record, there is substantial evidence that the ALJ's hypothetical questions accurately reflected Plaintiff's impairments. (ECF No. 9-2, pp. 18-29). Consequently, I find no error in this regard.

E. Plaintiff's Complaints of Non-Exertional Limitations

Lastly, Plaintiff argues that the ALJ erred by improperly evaluating his complaints of non-exertional limitations and discrediting those complaints. (ECF No. 14, pp. 16-17). In evaluating whether a plaintiff's statements are credible, the ALJ will consider evidence from treating, examining and consulting physicians, observations from agency employees, and other factors such as the claimant's daily activities, descriptions of the pain, precipitating and aggravating factors, type, dosage, effectiveness, and side effects of medications, treatment other than medication, and other measures used to relieve the pain. 20 C.F.R. §§416.929(c), 404.1529(c); SSR 96-7p. The ALJ will also look at inconsistencies between the claimant's statements and the evidence presented. *Id.* I must defer to the ALJ's credibility determinations, unless they are not supported by substantial evidence. *Smith v. Califano*, 637 F.2d 968, 972 (3d Cir. 1981); *Baerga v. Richardson*, 500 F.2d 309, 312 (3d Cir. 1974), *cert. denied*, 420 U.S. 931 (1975).

Plaintiff's entire argument in this regard is that there is "overwhelming medical evidence" to support his testimony. (ECF No. 14, p. 17). Again, to be clear, the standard is not whether there is evidence to establish Plaintiff's position but, rather, is whether there is substantial evidence to support the ALJ's finding. *Allen v. Bowen*, 881 F.2d 37, 39 (3d Cir. 1989). Thus, this support for Plaintiff's argument is misplaced.

Nevertheless, I have considered the same and find that the ALJ followed the proper method to determine the Plaintiff's credibility. As laid out in his decision, the ALJ considered the factors set forth above. (ECF No. 9-2, pp. 18-29). Thus, I find the ALJ properly evaluated Plaintiff's credibility as required by 20 C.F.R. §404.1529 and SSR 96-7p. Furthermore, based on the entire record as a whole, I find there is substantial evidence to support the ALJ's decision to find Plaintiff not entirely credible. (ECF No. 9-2, pp. 81-29). Therefore, I find no error in this regard. Consequently, remand is not warranted on this basis.

An appropriate order shall follow.

