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Corresponding Authors
Do Social Workers Support NASW’s Political Activism? Evidence From Texas

Richard Hoefer
University of Texas at Arlington

Brandi Jean Felderhoff
Department of Sociology and Social Work
Joint Master of Social Work Program
Texas Woman’s University

Larry Watson
Hoefer & Watson Nonprofit Consulting and Private Practice

According to the NASW Code of Ethics, social workers are called to engage in political activity at the micro, mezzo and macro levels for the advancement of social justice and human rights. NASW has mechanisms in place to aggregate the voices of individual social workers through political activity. Drawing on a model of civic voluntarism, the aim of this study was to examine the impact of political activity on decisions by Texas social workers to join or re-join NASW, as well as their opinions on the political engagement of NASW/Texas. This study employs a non-experimental, exploratory, cross-sectional survey design to assess political participation of social workers and their view of how politically active NASW as an organization should be. The survey was sent to all attendees of the 2013 NASW/Texas Conference, held in Austin, Texas. The conference attendees (n = 789) included NASW members (n = 643), and non-members (n = 146). A total of 148 responded to the survey, yielding a 19% response rate. The findings of the study suggest that political activity at the organizational level positively impacts social workers’ decisions to join or maintain their NASW membership.

Keywords: National Association of Social Workers, political activism, social work political action
Do Social Workers Support NASW’s Political Activism? Evidence from Texas

Social work, as a profession, has ethical standards promoting action at the individual client level, such as self-determination, respect, and confidentiality. Other ethical standards are focused at the wider societal level (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). The actions called for at this level inherently include (but are not limited to) advocacy, not only for our clients, but also for social justice and human rights. Section 6.04a of the NASW (2017) Code of Ethics identifies the purpose underlying advocacy for social workers: “Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully” (para. 174).

The Code of Ethics urges social workers to be aware of the impact of politics and policy-making on practice and to advocate for policy changes to improve social conditions. It charges social workers to act for expanded choices and opportunities for all people, especially vulnerable, disadvantaged, oppressed, and exploited individuals and groups. In addition, social workers are to promote policy and practice that is respectful of differences, supports the expansion of cultural knowledge, advocates for cultural competence across organizations and systems, and promotes policies designed to safeguard the rights of all people (NASW, 2017).

While the NASW Code of Ethics takes strong stands on the duties and obligations of individual members of NASW, the Code is silent on the role NASW itself is to play in assisting members to achieve these purposes. NASW, as a professional organization, is presumably supported by members to achieve goals that benefit the vulnerable populations cited in the Code. Social workers, both members and non-members, may also expect or desire efforts to support issues that also benefit them, and these efforts may make a difference in whether social workers become members of the organization.

Questions about the congruence between ethical standards in the Code of Ethics and beliefs of individual social workers have not been answered and remain open. For example, does
NASW have the support of its members to conduct political activity on behalf of vulnerable populations? Does the membership want to use dues funding for political activity? Do non-member social workers have different views regarding political activism than do members? In this study, we examine the impact of NASW organizational political activity on decisions to become/stay a member of NASW, as well as both NASW member and non-member Texas social workers’ opinions on NASW/Texas’s political involvement. We begin with a discussion of a general overview of the reasons why individuals, including social workers, might be involved in politics in the United States.

Why and How to be Involved in Policy Advocacy

Democracy can be defined as a form of government where the ultimate decision-making power rests with the people and is exercised by them through a system of representation, generally involving free elections. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) assert that “Voice and equality are central to democratic participation” (p. 1). Political participation simply means that a person is (voluntarily) involved in an activity that is intended to influence government action. Many individuals will argue that it is a civic duty to be involved in politics. This usually refers to the act of voting in an election at the local, state or national level; however, political activity is much greater than voting alone. Regardless of whether or not political participation is a civic duty, it is a right bestowed to citizens of a democratic nation. Involvement of individual citizens is key to the development of the nation. Citizens vote representatives into office to support their ideas, interests, and needs. Without the vote, which is one type of input from individual citizens, government officials would not know where the public stands on issues, how policies impact individuals, changes that need to be made, etc.

Verba et al. (1995) found many reasons, in addition to civic duty, that people report as their reasons for political participation. These include the chance to advance their career, to obtain assistance from an elected official on a personal matter, a desire to someday run for office or get a government job, recreational activities offered by the organization with which they become
involved for the political activity, excitement, enjoyment of the company of the other involved individuals, opportunity to meet important or influential people, opportunity to earn recognition from respected individuals, maintenance of personal relationships, and because they see it as an opportunity to influence government policy. In other words, there are a variety of reasons that individuals become involved in political activities.

These activities can be classified into two main categories: direct and indirect political participation. Both direct and indirect political participation can be organized at the local, state and national levels. Direct participation includes such actions as communicating with public officials through personal meetings, working on electoral campaigns, attending protests, marches or demonstrations, writing emails, placing phone calls, or writing letters to representatives (Verba et al., 1995). Indirect political participation can be described as attempting to influence electoral results through the giving of time, effort or funds. Indirect participation can be accomplished as an individual or in collaboration with others.

Verba et al. (1995) focus on the ability and efforts of individuals in politics. People also work to affect policy by joining and thus supporting organizations that work to advocate particular political views. Individuals who are not active in other ways can, in effect, delegate this activity to an organization to be active on their behalf. Organizations can use their advocacy efforts to attract support (financial and volunteer) to increase their numbers of members if they can find a particular niche within the policy space. An example of a highly focused group within a crowded space is Greenpeace, an environmental activist group. Greenpeace defines itself as “the world’s largest direct action environmental organization” (Greenpeace, n.d.). By finding the niche of “direct action,” Greenpeace differentiates itself from other organizations active in the environmental field. Thus, carefully targeted membership (and other) organizations can serve to aggregate opinions of individuals and seek to magnify their political impact. People join only because the organization expresses views that are supported by potential members. If people stop believing in those views, they do not renew their memberships.

The situation of other membership organizations that seek to represent a profession and its members, as well as a particular Code of Ethics, is different and more difficult. Professionals
do not always join an organization simply to express their political views but also to gain the “selective benefits” (Olson, 1971) that are offered only to members. These benefits can include discounts on education or training, specialized insurance products, invitations to social and networking events, and so on. At times, potential members who desire to express a professional identity or to access selective benefits may be hesitant to join a professional organization if the political views that it supports are counter to their personal views.

NASW finds itself in this position. It is mandated by its Code of Ethics to be politically active to support the positions its members vote for, but these very positions may be perceived as reasons to avoid joining NASW by non-members. People who support banning or limiting abortions, for example, may not desire to join NASW because of its support for reproductive rights. NASW leadership may walk a fine line of encouraging membership with selective benefits that apply only to members, while promoting advocacy of positions that are not universally shared by the population of the profession.

Social Workers’ and NASW’s Involvement in Political Activities

Very little research has been conducted in recent years on whether social workers are meeting the charges in the NASW Code of Ethics related to political activity and how effective they are in doing so. There are studies that examine factors from the Chapter or Political Action for Candidate Election (PACE) Committee’s standpoint, as well as those that examine participation from a student perspective, asking what might predict political participation (Colby & Buffum, 1998; Dickson, 2004; McNutt, 2010; Ritter, 2008).

Colby and Buffum (1998) examined the 1992 general election cycle in terms of PACE Committee’s political participation nation-wide. They surmise that NASW PACE Committees raise and contribute significantly less than other, similar, professional PACs. Colby and Buffum also conclude that NASW State Chapter PACE Committees vary in the activities and level of participation with which they politically engage. Dickson (2004) studied a group of MSW students, in an attempt to replicate a study completed in
1972, investigating MSW students’ attitudes toward social action. Dickson found that only about 80% of those surveyed “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with statements in the NASW (2017) Code of Ethics regarding political participation of social workers. She also found that respondents who were more politically active before, during and after completion of their MSW, were more likely to agree with these statements. Dickson’s findings support the need for greater emphasis on policy advocacy in MSW programs but do not speak to social workers’ attitudes toward NASW and their own political participation.

In an economic analysis of social work policy practice, McNutt (2010) asserts that the social work profession’s commitment to evidence-based practice is not evident in the political arena. McNutt (2010) goes on to assert that social work as a profession does a poor job utilizing its limited resources for policy advocacy to the fullest of their capacity. He argues that economics is the foremost social science discipline in the policy arena, and that if social work is to move forward in participating in evidence-based advocacy, we must draw on the work of economists and others to maximize our resources and efforts. McNutt’s analysis speaks to the lack of knowledge in the area of social workers’ perceptions and activities toward policy advocacy as individuals and for professional organizations, such as NASW.

Ritter (2008) applies a model from Verba et al. (1995) termed the “civic voluntarism model,” to determine whether or not civic voluntarism explains why some licensed social workers are more politically active than others. Ritter’s (2008) findings support previous suggestions that social work students are not as adequately prepared for policy practice as they are for clinical and direct practice services, and thus social workers are less active than other similar professionals. She suggests that psychological engagement with politics is a crucial factor in explaining licensed social workers’ political engagement. This is really the first study of its kind to test a model of political participation with a sample of social workers (both members and non-members) selected from each region of the United States.

What is missing from the literature is research aimed at understanding the impact of an organization’s political activity on decisions by eligible professionals to join or not. The aim of this study is to partially fill this gap by examining the impact of
Support for NASW’s Political Activism?

political activity on decisions by Texas social workers to join or re-join NASW, as well as their opinions on the political engagement of NASW/Texas.

Methods

This study reports on six items from a larger survey of social workers’ opinions on and actions toward political engagement. This study employs a non-experimental, exploratory, cross-sectional design for an eighteen-item survey created by the authors to assess political participation of social workers, their view of how politically active NASW as an organization should be, how social workers maintain currency with political news, and in what ways social workers engage in political activity. Upon approval by the TPACE Board of Trustees and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Texas at Arlington, the survey was designed in the online survey platform, SurveyMonkey, for distribution.

The survey was sent to all attendees of the 2013 NASW/Texas Conference, held in Austin, Texas. The conference attendees (n = 789) included NASW members (n = 643), and non-members (n = 146). These potential respondents were selected as they would provide a robust sampling of both member and non-member social workers/social work students in the state of Texas.

Three recruitment emails were sent to registrants of the 2013 NASW Texas Annual Conference by the NASW Texas office, from February through March 2014, which included a link to the online survey. These emails were accompanied with the incentive of entering a drawing for one of three $25 Amazon gift cards, as well as one $100 Amazon gift card. In the end, a total of 148 surveys were completed (19% overall response rate). This turned out to be 106 members (16% member response rate) and 23 nonmembers (16% non-member response rate). (An additional 19 respondents did not answer the item about their membership at the time of the conference so we have excluded them from these results.) Members and non-members are thus proportionally represented among the respondents relative to their attendance at the NASW Annual conference. While these rates are not ideal, they do fall in line with average response rates for online surveys in recent years (Couper, 2000; Fricker & Schonlau, 2002; Kaplowitz, Hadlock, & Levine, 2004).
In order to gain a broader understanding, six survey items were used to approach this topic (see Table 1). A principal component factor analysis was completed to determine whether a pattern of intercorrelations among variables existed. The principal component analysis yielded two subscales made up of the six survey items that explain 68% of the variance in this model. These two subscales were labeled: (1) general support for advocacy; and (2) narrow support for advocacy. The general support for advocacy subscale includes four items measured on a 5-point Likert scale: “I am much less likely,” “I am less likely,” “it has no impact,” “I am more likely,” and “I am much more likely.” These items are: (1) “In what way does NASW/Texas’ policy advocacy/political action affect your decision to be a member of NASW?”; (2) “To what extent does maintaining current NASW/Texas political activity affect your decision to join/re-join NASW?”; (3) “To what extent does advocating for current NASW/Texas political stands affect your decision to join/re-join NASW?”; and (4) “To what extent would ending all NASW/Texas political activities affect your decision to join/re-join NASW?” The general support for advocacy subscale was found to be reliable (4 items; $\alpha = .76$).

The narrow support for advocacy subscale included two items ranked on the same 5-point Likert scale. The items are: (1) “To what extent does advocating only for better social worker pay, benefits and working conditions affect your decision to join/re-join NASW?”; and (2) “To what extent does advocating only for greater social justice affect your decision to join/re-join NASW?” The narrow support for advocacy subscale was also found to be reliable (2 items; $\alpha = .74$).

Results

The major purpose of this study is to determine the desire among social workers to see NASW act in the political arena and to determine if there are differences between the two groups in their views

Information from all Respondents

The first item asked about advocating for current NASW/TX’s political stands. The distribution of responses positively skewed,
with 40% of respondents indicating that this made them “much more likely” to join or re-join, with another 41% saying they were “more likely” to join. Only 3% were “much less likely” or “less likely” to join because of these efforts by NASW.

A second item asked how maintaining NASW/TX’s current political activity affected membership decisions. The distribution of responses is similar to the first question but is slightly less positively skewed with more respondents saying it had no impact (26%). Still, 26% of respondents indicated that this made them “much more likely” to join or re-join, and another 44% said they were “more likely” to join. This contrasts with just 5% saying maintaining current activities made them less or much less likely to join.

We then asked, “In what way does NASW/Texas’ policy advocacy/political action affect your decision to be a member of NASW, whether or not you are currently a member?” Respondents reacted strongly positively and in nearly the same way as the previous question. Nearly two-thirds of all respondents indicated that it made them “much more likely to join or rejoin” (26%) or “more likely to join or rejoin” (38%). While political advocacy did not affect membership decisions for one-third of respondents, there were only a handful of respondents who reacted negatively (3% were “less likely” to join or rejoin while just 1% were “much less likely” to join). These four questions comprise the “general advocacy support” subscale. All items on this subscale are ranked 1–5 (1 being “much less likely” and 5 being “much more likely”). The overall mean score of this subscale was 4.

The next two questions (the “narrow advocacy support” subscale) ask how changing what is advocated for might affect the likelihood of joining NASW. The first item relates to “advocacy only for better social worker pay, benefits and job conditions” while the second asks about “advocacy only for greater social justice.” Responses for both items are very similar, with a majority of respondents seeing either of these options as making them “more likely” and “much more likely” to join. Still, respondents are much more positively inclined to join when NASW/TX maintains current political stands than limiting policy stands to only social worker benefits or social justice issues. This subscale also utilizes a 1-5 Likert scale ranking system (1
being “much less likely” and 5 being “much more likely”). An overall mean of 3.6 was found for this subscale.

The final item in Table 1 asks about the impact on joining if NASW/TX ended all political advocacy. This question had the most skewed distribution of the six items. Over half (54%) said that this would make them “much less likely” to join or re-join, while another 28% stated it would make them “less likely” to join. Thus, over four-fifths of respondents felt that ending all political advocacy would make them less likely to join or rejoin, compared to only 3% for whom this action would increase their likelihood of joining or rejoining.

Comparing Responses from Members and Non-members

Because we have the possibility to compare responses from NASW members and non-members, we can address the question of whether it is likely that non-members do not join NASW due to its political activities. We look at the same six items to determine if there are differences and if there is a pattern within the distribution of responses (See Table 2). While we saw in Table 1 a very steady level of support for NASW political activities, the pattern here is not as uniform.

We analyzed responses from the first question regarding how NASW policy advocacy/political action affects membership decisions, breaking apart the answers by whether the respondent was a member of NASW at the time of the conference or not. We find a significant difference between the two groups, with non-members stating they were much less likely or less likely to join NASW because of its advocacy efforts. Even here, though, many social workers who were not NASW members saw NASW’s political advocacy as something that inclined them to join. Similarly, in the second question, we see there is a significant difference in the effect on joining or re-joining NASW between members and non-members related to maintaining NASW/TX’s current political activity. Non-members are significantly more likely to respond negatively to the survey items regarding keeping NASW’s political activities going. Interestingly, none of the other four items show significant differences
between members and non-members. Additionally, there were no differences between members and non-members on the general and narrow advocacy support subscales.

**Discussion**

Social work, as a profession, has ethical standards focused on macro-level practice, specifically political advocacy (NASW, 2017). This paper used a non-experimental, exploratory, cross-sectional design for an 18-item survey created by the authors to assess political participation of social workers. Six of these items,
specifically, were examined for purposes of answering the research question: What is the impact of political activity on social workers’ decisions to become/stay a member of NASW, the professional organization of social work? The findings of the study suggest that political activity at the organizational level impacts social workers’ decisions to join or maintain their NASW membership. However, as there were significantly more NASW members than non-members that completed the survey, and many of the non-members responded with less interest in the political activities of the organization, it is difficult to say for sure if this is a widely held view of social workers, or simply a view of current NASW members. Additional limitations of this study include a relatively small sample size (n = 141) with a small number (n = 23) of non-member respondents, which makes generalizing from these results difficult. Further investigation is needed to determine the intensity of the views represented in this study of social workers in Texas and elsewhere.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes new and important information to the existing literature on policy advocacy for social workers. These results highlight the importance of political participation for NASW/Texas, based on the views of social workers. Again, these findings are in contrast to reports from volunteer and paid leadership within the NASW/Texas and TPACE organizations, who had heard from social workers in this “red” state, that the candidates the organization endorsed and the policy positions endorsed were not those that social workers within the state felt as though should be supported by the organization. These findings, standing in contrast to the beliefs held by NASW/Texas and TPACE leadership, have the potential to impact future directions of NASW/Texas, TPACE and other state chapter/PACE program initiatives. It is important to note, however, the slight variation in two of the items, between NASW members and non-members, may suggest that those that are not currently NASW members are less likely to join because of the political activism of NASW/Texas. While these numbers were small due to the limited number of social workers surveyed, relative to the total number of social workers in Texas, it is not clear whether or not this is a widely held view.
Support for NASW’s Political Activism?

Further investigation is needed to assess whether or not the views of Texas social workers are similar to those of social workers in other states. However, this study provides a base for understanding how social workers view the duties of political activity of their professional organization.

Table 2: Percent Respondents’ support for NASW Political Action (NASW member and non-member)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How does NASW/TX policy advocacy/political action affect your decision to be a member of NASW?</th>
<th>Much less likely</th>
<th>Less likely</th>
<th>No impact</th>
<th>More likely</th>
<th>Much more likely</th>
<th>( p = )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Member (n=105)</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>( \chi^2 = 21.944,\ df=4 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-member (n=23)</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>( \chi^2 = 16.135,\ df=4 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does maintaining NASW/TX current political activity affect your decision to be a member of NASW?</td>
<td>Member (n=104)</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-member (n=21)</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>( \chi^2 = 5.332,\ df=4 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does advocating for current NASW/TX political stands affect your decision to be a member of NASW?</td>
<td>Member (n=105)</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-member (n=20)</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>( \chi^2 = 3.186,\ df=4 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does advocating only for better social worker pay, benefits and job conditions affect your decision to be a member of NASW?</td>
<td>Member (n=105)</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-member (n=22)</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>( \chi^2 = 3.051,\ df=4 )</td>
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<tr>
<td>How does advocating only for greater social justice affect your decision to be a member of NASW?</td>
<td>Member (n=103)</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-member (n=20)</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>( \chi^2 = 2.186,\ df=4 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does ending all political advocacy by NASW/TX affect your decision to be a member of NASW?</td>
<td>Member (n=104)</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-member (n=20)</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>( \chi^2 = 2.146,\ df=4 )</td>
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References


Sexual Healing: How Racialized Black Males Use Sex to Cope with Stress, Loss and Separation

Allen E. Lipscomb
Wendy Ashley
Jovon Riggins
California State University Northridge

While the behaviors of Black males are widely studied and often pathologized, their internal, subjective experiences are frequently absent from contemporary research. Utilizing a qualitative research methodology, this study explores the lived experiences of Black males, focusing on sexuality as a coping strategy within the context of loss, separation, and stress. A non-clinical sample of 33 Black male participants was identified using snowball and purposeful sampling via social media and word-of-mouth. The findings provide considerable insight regarding the needs of Black men navigating the vicissitudes of loss and stress. In addition, the data endorses deconstruction of the Black male masculine sexual identity which is often stereotyped and reinforced by American racial and social constructs. Implications suggest that cultural relevance and humility are essential elements in the provision of effective mental health services with Black males who have experienced loss and stress.

Keywords: Black male, sex, coping, loss, stress, black masculinity, qualitative

This paper explores the utilization of sex among racialized Black males as an adaptive coping strategy for stress, loss, and separation. The authors explore the crisis of Black mental health, examine masculinity through both external (research-based) and internal (lived experiences of Black men) lenses and critique
what is known about the sexuality and sexual behaviors of Black males, exemplifying the disparities between current research and the lived experiences of racialized Black males in the United States. Methods and findings for the current study are described, followed by discussion and implications for mental health practitioners working with Black males around sexual coping.

Male sexuality is often researched as it relates to cultural variance, sexual orientation, masculinity, relationship discourse, and disease prevention. Because of the inherent binaries associated with these categories, male sexual behavior is polarized between contained and uncontrolled. Unbridled male sexuality is frequently perceived as a lack of emotional intelligence or stability. In his book, *Men Don’t Heal, They Ho: A Book about the Emotional Instability in Men*, Dixon (2009) explores how emotional instability in cisgender men impacts heterosexual relationships, arguing that it is the key element in successful monogamy. With the utilization of a case study, Dixon (2009) argues that when men discover their "truth" about their emotional instability, it will enhance and improve their intimate relationships. What Dixon does not consider in his generalization of male sexuality is the multifaceted complexity of intersectional identities. One particularly nuanced population is that of racialized Black males.

To appreciate the perspective and experiences of racialized Black men, it is critical to comprehend their socio-political context. Racialization involves the identification, perception, viewing, categorization, or imposition of a racial context. For Black men, this translates into the simultaneous experience of their ethnicity and gender as substantially larger than their other identity factors; being a Black male both colors and defines every circumstance. In this context, we use the terms Black and African American interchangeably as related to the lived experience of racialization. Black males undisputedly have greater stressors and challenges than the rest of the population due to historical trauma, systemic oppression, prejudice and economic disparities rooted in racism (Bowleg et al., 2017; Harris, 1995; Lipscomb, 2016). Black males are disproportionately over-represented in the United States jails and prisons, and the unemployment rate for Black men is over twice the rate of White men of the same age (Bowleg et al., 2017). They are disproportionately exposed to poverty, unstable housing, increased HIV
risk, homicide, unintentional injuries, suicide, heart disease, and cancer (Bowleg et al., 2017; Bowleg & Raj, 2012; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2015; Dunlap, Benoit, & Graves, 2013). It is easy to pathologize Black men in relation to their responses to trauma; indeed, incarceration, anger, and resistance are barriers to effective intervention. However, what if their behavioral responses were viewed through a strengths- and resiliency-based lens? In this context, sexuality may be viewed as an adaptive coping skill. Lipscomb (2016) contended that sexual coping may be a component of the Black Male Grief Reaction to loss and stress, proposing a paradigm shift in how Black male sexuality is viewed in clinical settings.

Black Mental Health

The mental health of Black America is a social problem of epidemic proportions. While 13.2% of the U.S. population identifies as Black or African-American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014), 16% of them, or over 6.8 million people, had a diagnosable mental illness in the past year (Mental Health America, 2018). Adult African Americans are 20% more likely to report serious psychological distress, are more likely to have feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and worthlessness than White adults and are twice as likely to be diagnosed with schizophrenia (American Psychological Association, 2016; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, 2016). When compared with white (non-Hispanic) counterparts, Black males are more frequently victims of severe violent crimes, meeting the clinical diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health disorders (American Psychological Association, 2016; Woodward, Taylor, & Chatters, 2011). Historical trauma, which includes slavery, ongoing discrimination, racial injustice, police brutality and race-based exclusion, results in socioeconomic disparities for Black people, which is a substantial reason for these challenges. The consequences of inequity include poverty, homelessness, incarceration, and substance misuse or addiction, which increase the risk of poor mental health.

Despite these sobering inequities, Black men often do not seek mental health treatment. In fact, Black males are least likely to seek psychotherapy and counseling services to treat
mental-health-related challenges (including but not limited to anxiety, clinical depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, marital conflicts and challenging familial dynamics) (Woodward et al., 2011). Black men are also often absent from research trials. The legacy of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, one among many historical human rights violations by treatment providers, has contributed to barriers to Black participation in health, mental health, and research (Corbie-Smith, Thomas, Williams, & Moody-Ayers, 1999). Ward (2013) found that Black males were markedly concerned about stigma, which may reinforce their lack of representation in treatment and research. However, as a result of these factors, there is a dearth of research on how Black males cope with oppression, marginalization, and mental health symptoms.

The primary reasons cited for Black males’ avoidance of mental health treatment are stigma, provider mistrust, and the lack of culturally-informed care (Turner et al., 2016; Watkins, Allen, Goodwill, & Noel, 2016). Alvidrez, Snowden, and Kaiser (2008) utilized a qualitative study to examine the experiences of African Americans currently receiving mental health services. Approximately a third of the participants disclosed concern regarding stigma. They indicated that reporting levels of anxiety or mild depression would deem them as crazy among their social networks and communities. In addition, they believed even discussing one’s issues and challenges with an outsider (i.e., mental health therapist) was problematic, saying “don’t go telling people all your business” (Alvidrez et al., 2008, p. 887).

An additional challenge to effective treatment with Black men is cultural incongruence with mental health practitioners. This often manifests in preferences regarding the racial background of the therapist. Thompson, Bazile, and Akbar (2004) revealed that Black men prefer treatment providers who look like them. Thompson et al. (2004) found that Black Americans view mental health therapists as older white males who do not have an understanding and sensitivity to the experiences of being marginalized or of the Black community, thus, making mental health professionals ill-equipped to handle Black related issues in therapeutic spaces. Further, mistreatment and misdiagnosis are pervasive in the Black community; people of color are misdiagnosed with more serious psychological conditions, even when they have similar symptoms to Whites. Black
Americans were more than two times as likely to experience a psychiatric hospitalization as their White counterparts after controlling for severity of mental illness and other variables (Alvidrez et al., 2008). The language of treatment can also create cultural barriers. Research has suggested that Black Americans are comfortable using terms such as counseling as opposed to psychotherapy (Thompson et al., 2004). While this appears minor, flexibility regarding the therapeutic lexicon employed by treatment providers can make a significant difference when working with Black Americans in clinical settings.

**Black Masculinity**

Masculinity among Black men has been socially racialized through the institution of slavery to demonize or racially castrate them of their full sexual expression and identity. Thus, how Black men define masculinity is different from traditional European, Western masculinity (Cleaver, 1968/1992; Mincey, Alfonso, Hackney, & Luque, 2015). While traditional masculinity describes manhood as controlled, successful, competitive, heterosexual, and White (McClure, 2006), Black men define manhood through accountability, responsibility, maturity, sacrifice, family, community, spirituality, and humanism (Dancy, 2011; Hammond & Cochran, 2005; Mincey et al., 2015). Roberts-Douglass, Curtis-Boles, Levant, Rochlen, Ronald, and Wade (2013) explored the ways in which African American males form masculine identities, and ascertained that having a positive male role model is vital to developing a positive and healthy masculine identity. Black men also identified their own acceptable image identity archetypes which elucidate strength or success and include the labels: tough, thug, player, flamboyant, athlete, or role model (Roberts-Douglass et al., 2013).

Hypermasculinity appears to be both a reflection of the patriarchal, sexist, heteronormative dominant culture and an effort to navigate the discrepancies between stereotypes and real lived experiences. Ongoing oppression and emasculation have created a thirst and hypersensitivity among Black males to reformulate what it means to be a Black man in America. Unable to conform to traditional masculine roles, Black males are defining and re-defining masculinity to be based on hyper-sexuality,
violence, and toughness (Roberts-Douglass et al., 2013). This stance can be viewed adaptively as a strategy Black men utilize to cope with the stress of racism and blocked opportunities, as well as a method of demonstrating power and authority while concurrently expressing bitterness, rage and contempt towards the dominant society (Fields, Bogart, Smith, Malebranche, Ellen, & Schuster, 2015; Majors & Billson, 1992). In addition to the expression of one's emotions, (i.e., other than anger) strong disapproval for all feminine qualities was expressed. In general, American manhood situated in that masculinity is White, heterosexual, recognizable, and socially fixed. Because the rigid constructions of masculinity are interwoven with poverty, unemployment, drug trafficking, substance abuse, incarceration, depression, intimate partner violence, child abuse, and other social problems, a de-mythologizing of Black male sexuality is critical to effective discourse regarding the experiences and needs of this vulnerable population (Mincey et al., 2015).

**Black Men and Sexuality**

For Black men, race and racism are inextricably linked to sexuality (Bowleg et al., 2017). Viewed within a historical context, sexuality is a fundamental element in the ongoing oppression and marginalization of Black men. Bowleg et al. (2017) outlined several historic periods, including: slavery (the racist stereotypes of Black men as virile with a rabid lust for White women); post slavery (the lynching of Black men for raping White women, despite a lack of evidence to support these accusations); the 1930’s (the Tuskegee Syphilis Study in which Black men were denied treatment for syphilis); and the 1950’s (14-year-old Emmitt Till was brutally murdered by two White men for flirting with a White woman, which she later admitted was false) as an amalgamation of consistent examples of how Black men continue to be perceived as animalistic, predatory, hypersexual beasts.

Although sexual socialization is ubiquitous to the human experience, it is considerably influenced by gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, socio-political, and environmental forces (Bowleg & Raj, 2012; Dunlap et al., 2013). Social inequity impacts how Black men experience and express their sexuality, and
researchers’ awareness or ignorance of this impacts empirical evidence regarding the sexual interests, behaviors, and attitudes of Black males (Bowleg et al., 2017). As a result, our understanding of sexuality of Black and White men varies significantly. Research informs us that Black men are sexually socialized earlier than White men, resulting in earlier dating and romantic involvements, decreased use of prophylactics, more liberal sexual attitudes, and more inclination to participate in non-monogamous, non-committed sexual exchanges (Dunlap et al., 2013; Samuels, 1997; Staples, 1982).

Although the research generally paints a licentious picture of Black male sexuality, how men perceive themselves is perhaps a more accurate predictor of their sexual behavior. Oparanozie, Sales, DiClemente, and Braxton (2012) explored the relationship between racial identity and risky sexual behavior among Black men, finding that the more positive they feel towards themselves and other African Americans, the fewer sexual partners they were likely to have and the more likely they were to use a condom with a primary partner. Bowleg, Teti, Massie, Patel, Malebranche, and Tschann (2011) explored the link between traditional ideologies of masculinity and sexual risk among Black middle or lower class heterosexual men. Their research revealed several fundamental principles regarding masculinity, including: Black men should not be gay or bisexual; Black men should have sex with multiple women; Black heterosexual men cannot decline sex, even if it presents risks; and, women are solely responsible for condom use. Thus, stereotypes regarding masculinity, sexuality and sexual norms may be internalized by Black men, decreasing understanding of their experiences, needs, and healthy coping skills.

In order to understand the lived experiences of Black men, it is critical to include their voices in our research. Historically, the overwhelming majority of researchers who have designed, conducted, and disseminated research on Black male sexuality have been White (Bowleg et al., 2017). With a dominant White, heterosexual, cisgender, middle- or upper-class, Western narrative, research frequently fails to account for privilege and oppression and often reduces intersectional identities to single axis factors (Bowleg et al., 2017). Thus, research may focus on issues regarding Black people, men or LGBTQ identified groups, missing the intersectional multi-axis identity interweave. Further, with
racialized Black men, the individual and collective intersections of gender, race, and sexuality are vital to understanding the coping, resilience and survival skills of the population. In managing the stressors associated with racism, stereotyping, and oppression, Black men employ a plethora of creative coping strategies. Although some research identifies maladaptive coping strategies, such as avoidance and denial (Constantine, Wilton, & Caldwell, 2003; Wang, Nyutu, & Tran, 2012), Mincey et al. (2015) contend that Black men frequently choose reframing, acceptance, self-distraction, religion, and planning as coping techniques. This study explored Black males’ use of sex as an adaptive coping strategy to manage stress, separation, and loss.

Methods

Research Approach and Rationale

A phenomenological research methodology (Creswell, 2012) was utilized to explore the shared lived experiences of 33 Black-identified men in relation to sexual activity. In addition, a Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) approach was honored during the recruiting and collection of the data. The essential elements of CQR are the use of open-ended questions in semi-structured data collection procedures (i.e., typically in interviews), which allow for the collection of consistent data across individuals as well as a more in-depth examination of individual experiences. The rationale for the utilization of this approach was to allow Black men to choose to participate without coercion, deceit, or manipulation. Specifically, the research questions posed were the following:

1. How do Black males who have experienced loss and separation respond to sex and sexual activity?

2. How do Black males who are stressed approach and experience sex during this time?

3. How do Black males narrate their experiences of sex when dealing with a loss or stressor(s)?
Sampling and Participants

Participants in this study were selected via snowball sampling and purposeful sampling in order to provide for what is often known as “information-rich” cases in qualitative research (Patton, 1990). The participants consisted of 33 Black-identified men with a mean age of 35 with ages ranging from 25–60. All the participants completed high school and a quarter of them received their Bachelor's degree. Half of them had children. Two participants were divorced, 20 participants were in a committed relationship (i.e., half cohabiting with their significant other) and eleven participants were single and had never been married. Their identified professions were: human service worker; coach; lawyer; security officer; warden; corrections officer; management; military personnel; student; and unemployed. All participants identified themselves as Black.

Interviews and Instruments

The interview guide was developed by the lead researcher using information obtained from the current literature, clinical direct practice work, and research with Black men around grief, loss, and coping. From a qualitative perspective, electronic interviews provided the best means for obtaining a more authentic and detailed account of participants' experiences related to sex and coping. The interview guide was provided to spark insight into the role of sex when it comes to loss, separation, and stress.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews were administered using an online semistructured interview guide. Participants were given a short demographic questionnaire to complete before starting the interview. Data analyzed were responses to the interview questions as well as information obtained from the demographic portion of the questionnaire.
In the second phase, the authors met monthly for several months in an iterative process to review transcripts and modify the coding to include "emerging codes"—codes that were consistently found in the interview analysis process were then discussed among authors. Data were analyzed by taking significant units of textual evidence and categorizing the coded information. Categorized transcribed data was then used to develop overarching themes and various categories and subcategories that emerged from the analysis. Furthermore, open-ended interviews were analyzed to better understand antecedents to sexual coping behavior. A critical thematic analysis was utilized to expound upon the themes and categories in an attempt to gain and enhance insight into the participants’ lived experiences with sex and coping from a phenomenological perspective (Morrow, 2005).

Results

The findings in this study are not intended to be generalizable, since it would not be realistic to assume that all Black-identified men across the Black diaspora who experience stress and loss will have the same experiences as the 33 men reflected in the study. Rather, the findings are intended to bring about awareness of how one views and assesses Black male sexual coping. The research questions that guided this exploratory study resulted in the emergence of themes. The themes were then clustered into four main categories based on an iterative and interpretive analysis. In addition, pseudonyms have been assigned to each participant in order to humanize their experiences and voices.

Sex and Loss

Within sex and loss, the following two themes emerged: a desire for sexual intimacy and an increased libido; and sex provides an escape/distraction and fills a void related to the significant loss.

Theme 1: Desire for sexual intimacy and increased libido. Participants shared the physical, emotional, and psychological yearning of sexual connection to someone during a time of significant loss. Ninety
percent of the participants reported an increase in sexual activity during a time of loss. Although participants indicated being physically present with their partner(s), they also shared that they were psychologically absent from the day-to-day relationship exchange. The following are a selection of quotes that speak to this theme:

Marcus  “I find myself wanting to engage in sexual behavior more frequently.”

Deon  “I once had sex with my wife within hours after learning of the death of a cousin whom I dearly loved. I felt comforted by my wife but guilty that I was at all interested in sex at that time.”

Trey  “I invest more energy into sex.”

Derrick  “During loss, I tend to want more intimate sex, not that rough sex. I seek the closeness and connection part of sex.”

Kenneth  “My experience with sex during a loss of separation comes typically after being in a committed relationship. So, I find myself being more promiscuous after being in a relationship.”

Jerome  “I tend to look for more outside sex.”

Theme 2: Sex provides an escape/distraction and fills a void related to the significant loss. Many participants expressed needing to escape the feelings that accompanied the loss. An unconscious numbing of the pain of losing someone close was experienced by many of the participants in the study. The following are some quotes selected to capture this theme:

Leon  “I don’t mind sex during time of loss. It takes my mind off of the situation.”

Carter  “It helps by temporarily numbing the emotional pain.”

Dre  “(I) really never examined my sex life during any of these periods. However, loss of intimate relationship makes me want to be involved with someone ASAP if I am not being intimate on a regular basis.”

Desmond  “All experiences were mechanisms to escape for a little while and just feel good.”

Alonzo  “Sexual experience can be categorized as ‘wanting to fill a void.’ I look at sex during moments of loss or separation as an outlet, regardless of the loss or separation.”

Sex and Stress

Within the categories of sex and stress the following two themes emerged: a decreased desire for sexual intimacy and exercise as an alternative means of coping with stress.
Theme 3: Decreased desire for sexual intimacy (i.e., decreased libido). Several participants described not having a sexual drive during times of stress. They shared feelings of not finding anyone sexually attractive during this time. In addition, participants were clear about not engaging in sex when feeling stressed. There was a clear distinction between loss and more sex versus stress and no sex, as shown in the following quotations.

Jason  “When I get stressed, I can't have sex. I really don't find anybody sexually attractive.”
Q.  “(My) sex drive decreases under stress, making an erection unattainable.”
Dorian  “Stress makes it harder to get an erection at times, causing sex to be less intimate than desired.”
Michael  “Really not into it!!!”
Tyson  “No sex until stress is gone.”
Rayvon  “During stressful times I usually have a decreased sex drive.”
Clyde  “(I) almost always have a decreased sex drive during stress.”
Jordan  “During stress sex is ok, but at times I can't get in the mood because I'm too focused on my problems.”
Kevin  “(I have) decreased sexual drive during stress. I don't like people to see stress on my person when I am going through it, so I keep it to myself until I figure it out. My sex drive is only good when my mind is free.”

Theme 4: Exercising as an alternative means of coping with stress. Participants often described other forms of coping when stressed, like exercising. Whether it was stress that came from sleep deprivation, work, financial concerns, parenting challenges and many more, stress was reported to have impacted their sex drives and sense of achieving sexual satisfaction. The following are some quotes selected to capture this theme:

Donte  “(I have an) increased drive but learned to channel energy to something different by working or working out.”
Quincy  “I just need to get my head clear and playing basketball helps when I'm feeling stressed out!”
Anthony  “With so much shit going on in my life that causes stress, the last thing I am is horny. Real talk...I'll just go hit the gym.”
Discussion and Implications

This study explored various dimensions of Black male sexual coping. The findings suggest that Black men utilize sex as an adaptive coping strategy, but they use it differently with loss and stress. This study is in part an attempt at an organized way of thinking and understanding the complexities around sexual healing among Black men. Over 90% of the participants experienced increased levels of sexual desire and activity when they experienced a significant loss of some kind; conversely, levels of desire and sexual activity decreased when they experienced varying levels of stress. The participants who experienced loss seemed to desire a more intimate experience and a sexual release, while those who experienced stress seemed to focus more on the release of energy.

The authors are not arguing that a decrease in libido due to stress is unique to Black men. However, the authors do believe that how stress is experienced due to racialization, marginalization, and oppression is not always assessed and recognized by mental health professionals when looking at low libido. Effective unpacking of these results requires thoughtful consideration of historical oppression. Utilizing a Eurocentric clinical lens when exploring Black male sexuality engenders vestiges of dehumanization, stereotyping, and pathologizing. To understand the sexuality of Black men, we must include resilience, strength and adaptive responses to oppression as determinants.

It is important to note that both coping methods are about space. Loss creates space which is experienced as an absence of a presence or the presence of an absence. Managing absences through connection and sexual contact appeared to be necessary for coping, as voiced by the men in the study. Stress, however, takes up space, and participants reported wanting distance and disconnection. They reported a desire for withdrawal and release, indicating they expressed emotions in other ways (e.g., working out).

Many questions emerge from these findings, including: What does this mean for Black males under stress daily because of marginalization, oppression, and racialization? Do Black men experience stereotyping, racism, and discrimination as loss or stress? How are they differentiated intrapsychically and interpersonally? Does stress disconnect Black men from healing
relationships and access to resources? What does it feel like to not have space or room enough to cope externally in society? And finally, what are Black men having to do to create space in their lives both unconsciously and consciously to cope—what are they doing with those feelings if their stress levels are high and/or their libido is low? These questions, and many more, speak to the experiences of victimization inherent in being a racialized Black male.

Victimization in society because of racialization as a Black male is a key component that mental health practitioners who are not Black or men must understand. Marginalization and victimization lead individuals to physically avoid people or places where they might experience this re-victimization or be reminded of previous victimization, and this may function to prevent the physical and emotional consequences of further victimization (White, Pachankis, Willie, & Reisner, 2017). Mental health professionals must understand how this can develop into avoidant coping strategies that may also be adaptive; “however, the more a person who has been victimized tries to avoid exposure to victimization, or suppress distressing thoughts associated with the threat of victimization, the more powerful and persistent those thoughts may become” (White et al., 2017, p. 42). As a result, avoidant coping can make the individual feel hopeless and can cause low self-efficacy for preventing additional experiences of victimization through less avoidant methods. These avoidant coping strategies often result in poor mental health (White et al., 2017) and sexual intimacy.

All mental health professionals must avoid pathologizing and embrace homogenizing the way in which they explore and assess Black male coping. This requires managing countertransference and projections. Countertransference reactions may be manifested in therapist reactions that reflect judgment, fear, discomfort, or disapproval. Clients see countertransference through cues such as “facial changes, postural shifts, voice tone, or muscle tension” (Kahn, 1991, p. 123).

Mental health professionals should also focus on the qualities and strengths that assist Black men with coping (i.e., sex and exercise) and not de-value and discredit them as maladaptive forms of coping. Highlighting strengths and self-affirmations can aid Black racialized men who have been victimized
"manage the fear of future mistreatment by realizing they have the skills and strengths to prevent or manage these experiences through less avoidant means" (White et al., 2017, p. 47).

One strategy for mental health practitioners is to increase inclusiveness when considering coping skills. The findings of this study reflect the need for mental health practitioners to recognize all the compounding variables that make it difficult for Black-identified males to adaptively cope with loss and stress. In addition, the positionality that the mental health practitioner takes must be couched with cultural humility. Cultural humility has been defined as “the ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented [or open to the other] in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the [person]” (Hook, Davis, Owens, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013, p. 354). The utilization of inclusiveness, highlighting strengths, and cultural humility must be explicitly adopted and practiced in order to develop a trusting, authentic therapeutic relationship. When a genuine therapeutic rapport is present, practitioners are more able to fully understand the intersectional nuances of the Black male client.

Limitations

The purposeful and selective nature of the recruitment process resulted in an inability to compare other races, ethnicities and gender variances in the findings, since the sample did not include other males outside of Black-identified males. It is unclear whether or how findings in the current study would have been different had the sample included an equal number of white non-Hispanic men. Future research should include the experiences of mental health professionals treating Black men who are grieving or experiencing stress as well as consider relevant information that contributes to stress and coping among Black identified men. Another recommendation would be to utilize a mixed-methods exploratory sequential design to examine and explore findings that are generalizable to the larger population.

There was limited research found in the literature regarding heterosexual Black-identified men and sexual activity and expressions. In addition, research shows that while mental
health practitioners have recognized a need for providing appropriate psychotherapy with Black males, very few provide the services due to lack of trust, appropriate outreach, and sensitivity for this marginalized population (Alvidrez et al., 2008). Introducing the awareness and assessing of Black male sexual coping to the mental health field as a way of understanding "sexually acting-out-behavior" among Black males, as well as a form of stress reduction, is a meaningful addition to the field of Black mental health. Upon implementation of these approaches, future studies should include case study evaluations of the services to explore Black men's experiences and coping methods while receiving mental health services.

Conclusion

This research study was initiated and designed to honor Black male voices and gain an understanding of the unique experiences with sex as a coping strategy related to stress and loss. The present study provided a new way of understanding adaptive Black male sexual coping experiences from a phenomenological perspective; courageous Black-identified males shared similar experiences and reasons for utilizing sex to cope with distress, disclosing key factors that influenced their sexual behavior. Unique to this study is that all of the participants are Black, the researchers are Black, and the data analysis focused on identifying strengths and adaptive coping skills. Black researchers exploring Black male sexuality adds nuanced, contemporary data to male sexuality literature. This type of progressive, clinical acumen is critical for success with marginalized populations. While this study provided some insight and an alternate lens to view the experiences and behaviors of Black men, it is evident that further research is needed among this population. Their voices and lived experiences are meant to be heard and represented in the research literature.

"If you possess enough courage to speak out what you are, you will find you are not alone."

Richard Wright, *Black Boy*


Multiplicative Advantages of Hispanic Men Living in Hispanic Enclaves: Intersectionality in Colon Cancer Care: A Research Note

Keren M. Escobar
University of Windsor

Mollie Sivaram
McMaster University

Kevin M. Gorey
University of Windsor

We examined Hispanic enclave paradoxical effects on cancer care among socioeconomically vulnerable people in pre-Obamacare California. We conducted a secondary analysis of a historical cohort of 511 Hispanic and 1,753 non-Hispanic white people with colon cancer. Hispanic enclaves were neighborhoods where 40% or more of the residents were Hispanic, mostly first-generation Mexican American immigrants. An interaction of ethnicity, gender, and Hispanic enclave status was observed such that the protective effects of living in a Hispanic enclave were larger for Hispanic men, particularly married Hispanic men, than women. Risks were also exposed among other study groups: the poor, the inadequately insured, Hispanic men not residing in Hispanic enclaves, Hispanic women, and unmarried people. Implications for the contemporary health care policy debate are discussed.

Keywords: Barrio advantage, gender, health care reform, health insurance, Hispanic enclave, Hispanic paradox, intersectionality, marriage, poverty
The term “Hispanic paradox” was coined by Kyriakos Markides and Jeannine Coreil (1986). They and others described diverse health advantages among Hispanic people despite a more significantly disadvantaged socioeconomic profile in comparison to other ethnic groups, including Non-Hispanic white (NHW) people. Moreover, many of these Hispanics live in what the barrio advantage theory describes as Hispanic enclaves (Eschbach, Ostir, Patel, Markides, & Goodwin, 2004). Such enclaves or barrios—prevalently populated with first-generation Mexican American immigrants—have been similarly associated with health advantages despite the prevalence of lower socioeconomic statuses (Aranda, Ray, Snih, Ottenbacher, & Markides, 2011; Vega, Ang, Rodriguez, & Finch, 2011; Eschbach et al. 2004). Imbedded in kin-based networks, they seem to have more social capital than otherwise similar neighborhoods, their residents assisting each other more instrumentally with direct and indirect health care costs (Cornwell, Schumm, Laumann, & Graber, 2009; Ruiz, Steffen, & Smith, 2013).

Pointing toward cultural strengths and resiliencies, Hispanic paradox and barrio advantage theories are quite consistent with social work’s strengths and empowerment perspectives (Lee & Hudson, 2017). At about the same time, African American feminist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” (1989). Black feminists helped us realize that their experiences were not merely categorically or additively different from those of white feminists, but existentially, even multiplicatively, different. Moreover, they pointed toward the necessity of studying such intersections if we were to have the most relevant knowledge for professional practices and policy (Bowleg, 2012; Hulko, 2009). This study does so by examining the intersection of gender, Hispanic ethnicity, and health.

Little is known about how Hispanic health advantages may differ for men and women. A systematic review of 58 mortality studies found much evidence in support of a Hispanic paradoxical effect, but it was not significantly moderated by gender (Ruiz et al., 2013). Another review, however, suggested that such Hispanic mortality advantages “may be more evident among men” (Markides & Eschbach, 2005, p. 253). Patel, Schupp, Gomez, Chang and Wakelee (2013) explored, but did not test, a lung cancer survival cohort and found a slightly more pronounced
Hispanic advantage among men who lived in Hispanic enclaves. Similarly, another exploratory study suggested a colon cancer survival advantage of eight Mexican American men who lived in barrio neighborhoods compared to otherwise similar Mexican American women (Gorey et al., 2018).

A historical database of colon cancer care among those living in poverty in 1990s and 2000s pre-Obamacare California provided a secondary analytic opportunity to examine the intersection of gender, Hispanic ethnicity, and colon cancer care to more confidently test specific Hispanic advantages among men, while providing evidence relevant to America’s present health care debate (Escobar et al., 2019; Gorey et al., 2013; Richter, Gorey, Haji-Jama, & Luginaah, 2015). Gorey and colleagues demonstrated that focusing on socioeconomically vulnerable people tends to magnify practical policy significance.

We think this data platform instructive for the following reasons. First, in oversampling people living in poverty, it also oversampled Hispanic people. Moreover, previous studies have suggested that Hispanic paradoxical effects are strongest among the most socioeconomically vulnerable (Turra & Goldman, 2007). Second, colon cancer is prevalent among Hispanic and NHW women and men and is treatable when diagnosed early (American Cancer Society, 2015; Hines et al., 2015). Third, better understandings of treatment access may help us better understand observed survival differences. Evidence-based, post-surgical chemotherapies proliferated for the care and comfort of people with colon cancer during this era. However, with much managerial and clinical discretion, the majority of Americans did not receive them. Finally, this historical platform will facilitate our envisioning what to expect if the Affordable Care Act were to be replaced with any of the conservative reforms under present consideration.

This study, therefore, examined the intersection of gender, Hispanic ethnicity, and chemotherapy access. We hypothesized an interaction of Hispanic ethnicity, gender, and Hispanic enclave status such that the advantaging effect of living in a Hispanic enclave was greater among Hispanic men.
Methods

The sampling frame was the Greater California Cancer Registry, which is among North America’s most comprehensive and valid. The original historical cohort of 6,300 people with colon cancer was established between 1995 and 2000, joined to the U.S. decennial census in 2000 and followed to 2010. It oversampled the poor, and consequently Hispanic people, by randomly selecting a third of its participants from high poverty neighborhoods where 30% or more of the households were poor (Wilson, 2012). The remainder were selected from strata of 5% to 29% or less than 5% poor. The most affluent third was excluded from this analysis. It was restricted to 511 Hispanic and 1,753 NHW people with stages II to IV colon cancer. Stage I was excluded because chemotherapy is not indicated. Hispanic enclaves were defined as neighborhoods where 40% or more of the residents were Hispanic, as this was the most predictive criterion.

Age confounds any cancer analysis, and chemotherapy is indicated therapeutically for stages II and III and palliatively for stage IV colon cancer. A logistic regression tested the main effects of Hispanic ethnicity, gender, and Hispanic enclave residence and their hypothesized 3-way interaction, controlling for potential confounding influences of age and stage of disease. Exploratory survival analyses used Cox regressions. Hazard ratios (HR) and confidence intervals (CI) were estimated (Vittinghoff, Glidden, Shiboski, & McCulloch, 2012). After the three age and stage-adjusted main effects and their interaction entered no other demographic, socioeconomic or clinical characteristic entered any regression model. As for practical analyses, all rates were age and stage-adjusted and reported as percentages. Standardized rate ratios (RR) were reported with CIs. Details of methods, limitations and ethics were reported (Escobar et al., 2019; Gorey et al., 2013; 2015, 2018).

Results

Sample descriptive profiles are displayed in Table 1. The Hispanic sample was much younger than the NHW sample. In fact, they were eight years younger on average with mean ages of 64 and 72; \( t (2,262) = 11.13, p < .05 \). Consequently, the Hispanic participants were more likely to be married and less
likely to be widowed. Hispanics were more socioeconomically vulnerable, nearly three-times as likely to be uninsured or Medicaid insured, and nearly twice as likely to live in high poverty neighborhoods. The typical household income in Hispanic
neighborhoods ($30,285) was substantially less than in NHW neighborhoods ($37,440); $t (2,262) = 9.31, p < .05$. The two group’s tumors, however, were biologically similar. They did not differ on colon tumor stage or grade, proxies for disease advancement and virulence.

All of the main effects were null, but the hypothesized 3-way interaction was statistically significant in a logistic regression model. The interaction is practically depicted in Table 2. It demonstrates that the protective effect of living in a Hispanic enclave was quite large and statistically significant among Hispanic men (RR = 2.02), while it was insignificant among Hispanic women. Interestingly, the highest chemotherapy receipt rate was among Hispanic men who resided in Hispanic enclaves (39.9%), whereas the lowest such rate was among Hispanic men who resided outside of Hispanic enclaves (19.8%). These Hispanic men were largely disadvantaged compared to their NHW counterparts (RR = 0.56). A nonsignificant trend toward their relative advantage, though, was observed among Hispanic men in enclaves (RR = 1.20).

Descriptive adjuncts may aid our interpretations. First, Hispanic men in enclaves were more likely to be married compared to their NHW counterparts: 70.6% vs. 55.9%; $\chi^2 (1, N = 485) = 10.65, p < .05$. A tendency toward more prevalent marriage among Hispanic men who lived in enclaves than among Hispanic men who lived outside of enclaves was also observed: 70.6% vs. 59.3%; $\chi^2 (1, N = 251) = 2.49, p = .11$. No such tendency was observed among Hispanic women. Within Hispanic enclaves, a protective effect of marriage that approached statistical significance was observed for men (HR = 0.70; 90% CI 0.49, 0.97, $p = .08$). Such married Hispanic men who lived in Hispanic enclaves were estimated to have been 30% less likely to die within five years than were their unmarried counterparts. No other marriage-survival associations were observed among the three other Hispanic study groups or among NHW women. Married NHW men were similarly protected (HR = 0.76; 95% CI 0.65). Marriage was also significantly associated with health insurance adequacy among Hispanic men and women.
Table 2. Depiction of Ethnicity by Gender by Neighborhood Hispanic Enclave Interaction on the Rate of Receiving Chemotherapy: People with Colon Cancer Living in Poverty in California, 1995–2015 (N = 2,264)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Non-Hispanic White</th>
<th>Hispanic / NHW</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Rate</td>
<td>RR</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Men</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Hispanic Prevalence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>&lt; 40%</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 40%</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>2.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Hispanic Prevalence</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>&lt; 40%</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>&gt; 40%</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CI = confidence interval, NHW = non-Hispanic white, RR = standardized rate ratio. All rates were directly adjusted for age and stage using this study's combined Hispanic-non-Hispanic white population as the standard. Bolded rate ratios are statistically significant (p < .05).

* Number of incident colon cancer diagnoses.

** A rate ratio of 1.00 is the within-ethnic group baseline.
Discussion

Main effects in pre-Obamacare California were all non-significant: Hispanic ethnicity, gender, and Hispanic enclave residence, but these null findings were supportive of Hispanic paradox theory. Recall that Hispanics lived in deeper poverty and were less adequately insured than NHW participants, yet overall they accessed chemotherapy, critical to their colon cancer care, at similar rates. We also found that Hispanic enclave advantages were greater among men.

As hypothesized, the interaction of Hispanic ethnicity, gender, and Hispanic enclave was statistically and practically significant such that the advantageous effects on treatment access and survival of living in a Hispanic enclave were larger for Hispanic men, particularly married Hispanic men, than women.

Social work researchers have long called for the study of interactions (de Smidt & Gorey, 1997; Lundahl, Yaffe, & Hobson, 2009) as intersectionality theorists have called for richer study of “interlocking systems of privilege and oppression” (Bowleg, 2012; Hulko, 2009). In addition to theory development and policy implications, this study demonstrated the importance of these interrelated principles. If this had been a study of mere main effects, one might have concluded, for example, that gender does not matter. But study of a gender by ethnicity by neighborhood context interaction demonstrated that gender profoundly matters. Men were relatively advantaged (and women disadvantaged) on colon cancer care and survival, but not in isolation. In transaction with gender, personal and neighborhood ethnicity, neighborhood poverty, marital and health insurance statuses, all also matter.

These findings of greater Hispanic enclave protections in colon cancer care among men are consistent with a synthetic study of familism (Yanez, McGinty, Buitrago, Ramirez, & Penedo, 2016). The concept suggests strengths and resiliencies (allegiances, attachments, and supports) associated with nuclear and extended family networks that are uniquely strong among Hispanic, particularly first-generation, Hispanic American families. One of our descriptions is relevant: Hispanic men who lived in Hispanic enclaves were more prevalently married than any other study group. In addition to spousal support, such men may effectively double their kin-network and thereby double its protective
effects. Such spousal support may also be financial, allowing one a better chance of obtaining health insurance through employment and better enabling one to absorb the often large uncovered costs of cancer care through pooled family incomes and assets. Future narrative studies are needed to advance our understandings of these processes in Hispanic enclaves.

In addition to protective effects, this study also identified vulnerabilities or risks. After all, the vast majority of its participants did not receive chemotherapy. One may ask: What of the poor, the inadequately insured, Hispanic men not residing in Hispanic enclaves, Hispanic women or unmarried people? All were at relatively greater risk than another group of not gaining access to evidence-based care. It seems highly unlikely that any version of Trumpcare, with its seemingly planned gaps—inadequately supported commercial insurance exchanges and acceptance of a “red” versus “blue” state divide on Medicaid—would respond effectively to their needs. America is bound to continue such entrenched health care inequities if Obamacare is repealed. Instead, it ought to be retained and strengthened with well-supported exchanges and Medicaid expansion across all 50 states.

This study focused on America, but cited studies also made comparisons to Canada. They consistently observed better care and outcomes. Single payer Canadian coverage explained the between-county divide. Well-supported Obamacare would reduce such inequities much more effectively than Trumpcare, but a single payer reform would further reduce and potentially eliminate them. Longitudinal studies across the pre-post Obamacare era are needed to better inform such significant policy decisions.

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References


Unwed Motherhood, Adoption Reunion and Stigmatized Social Identities

Karen R. March
Carleton University

Data gathered from semi-structured interviews with 33 reunited birth mothers show they had been stigmatized for their unwed motherhood and hid this identity to protect self from social censure. The public exposure created by reunion contact with their adult placed children required new ways to manage this stigma trait. The women engaged in a process of identity talk supported by their understanding of altered perceptions of female sexuality and a “no choice” discourse that drew upon historical changes in the social position of unwed mothers. This identity talk increased their self-efficacy by providing stronger control over their presentation of self.

Keywords: stigma, identity, self-efficacy, unwed motherhood, adoption

The majority of legislative districts in North America instituted non-disclosure adoption laws during the mid-twentieth century that sealed adoption records and kept the identity of adoption triad members, that is, adoptive parents, adopted persons and birthparents, confidential. Part of the original rationale for non-disclosure was its ability to protect women from the shame attached to becoming pregnant before marriage (Garber, 1985). Non-disclosure is terminated when adopted adults reconnect with their birth mothers (Farr, Grant-Marsney, & Grotevant, 2014). Limited knowledge exists on birth mother identities, however, or on the way birth mothers manage the exposure created by reunion contact (March, 2014, 2015; Neil, 2013).
The 33 reunited birth mothers in this study discussed the impact of reunion contact after many decades of keeping their pregnancy and adoption placement secret. The data emerging from those discussions indicate their acceptance of non-disclosure was influenced by their perception of being stigmatized socially for their unwed motherhood. Although a useful protection for self, the women found the secrecy of non-disclosure to be restrictive because it rendered their motherhood invisible. Reunion contact helped them manage those concerns and integrate this identity more satisfactorily as a part of their self-concept. This process involved two forms of identity talk. The first invoked new images of women’s sexuality. The second involved usage of a “no choice” discourse which presented placement as the result of social circumstance rather than an immoral act.

Self-concept, Social Location, Global-Self Attitudes and Social Stigma

Rosenberg (1981, p. 595) viewed the self-concept as biographical in that it “encompasses the totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings with reference to oneself as an object.” He also believed a “global self-attitude” emerges as individuals mature, gain knowledge of the larger socio-historical context in which they are socially located, and expand their understanding of the reference groups by which they are socially defined. Global self-attitude is not necessarily anchored in any specific component based on intimate interaction with others. Rather, it develops through the process of being able to perceive one’s social position within the larger society of which one is a part. For example, Rosenberg (1989) claimed that it is not until black children are old enough to understand the socio-historical context of racism in the United States and the structural constraints of unemployment, lower educational opportunities, and economically devalued occupational positions available to them in comparison to “whites” that they develop a lower sense of global self-esteem as a “black person.” In this way, Rosenberg (1989, p. 363) distinguished personal self-esteem, that is, “esteem for one’s individuality…or …how one feels about self in a comprehensive sense” from global self-esteem or the feeling toward self that reflects one’s social location. In doing so, he
highlighted the importance of questioning how the advantages and/or limitations created by one’s position in the social structure (determined by such characteristics as gender, race, age, social class, religion) are reflected in the self-concept, especially in one’s sense of “self-efficacy, that is, the perception or experience of oneself as a causal agent in one’s environment” (Gecas & Burke 1995, p. 47).

Rosenberg’s (1981) approach to self-concept draws attention to the role played by the larger social context in shaping social identity, that is, the identity attributed to individuals based upon the groups, statuses or social categories to which they belong. In a similar fashion, Goffman (1963, p. 28) remarked upon the role played by social classification systems for constructing social stigma in his analysis of how “society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for these categories.” Essentially, by conceptualizing social stigma as “a designation or a tag that others affix to the person” rather than as a moral failing existing “in the person” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 366), Goffman called for consideration of the structural components by which categories of individuals become identified for stigmatization and the social processes by which particular discriminatory practices and stigma management tactics come to be used (Frost, 2011; Link & Phelan, 2001).

Stigma, Identity Work, and Identity Talk

In their desire for social acceptance, those who are socially stigmatized employ stigma management strategies designed to minimize the negative reactions of others and to alleviate any personal and social discomfort their stigma trait creates (Goffman, 1963). That choice is influenced by how they perceive their social position within the larger society (Kilty & Dej, 2012; Leisenring, 2006; Link & Phelan, 2001). For example, Thompson and Harred (1992) observed that female topless dancers separated their social world into two categories, with one category consisting of the larger majority of others who were unaware of their occupation, and the second category consisting of a small group who knew about their work and helped them maintain secrecy. In a replication study conducted ten years later, the same researchers found structural changes in job performance
created by the industry had stimulated the development of an additional stigma management strategy whereby topless dancers “relied heavily on cognitive and emotive dissonance to... separate their dancer personas from their personal selves” (Thompson, Harred, & Burks, 2003, p. 569). Comparably, Anderson and Snow (2001) noted that men who were homeless and living on city streets resorted to stigma management strategies such as hiding material items or modifying their behavior to avoid being identified as homeless (“passing”), diverting attention away from their status by engaging in activities like street performance (“covering”), or intentionally breaking or challenging social conventions in an attempt to avoid personal humiliation or ridicule (“defiant behavior”).

These research examples demonstrate how social location and social context affect the creation and use of stigma management strategies. Each group of study participants possessed distinctive characteristics of social location (e.g., female vs. male, employed vs. unemployed, ability vs. lack of ability to remove self from the stigma setting) upon which they drew to maintain personal self-esteem within a social environment where their global self-esteem was compromised. Snow and Anderson (1987, p. 1348) have referred to this generic process as “identity work” and describe it as the “range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept.”

Given the lack of resources available to those struggling with homelessness and the social identity of being a homeless man who exists within a larger society where poverty is devalued and the rules of social support institutions often demean him, the majority of Snow and Anderson’s (1987, p. 1348) research participants used “identity talk” composed of such verbal tactics as “distancing, (2) embracement, and (3) fictive storytelling” in their “attempt to construct, assert, and maintain desired personal identities.” In a similar vein, Leisenring (2006) observed clients of battered women shelters drew upon various attributes presented within the two dominant institutional discourses of “victim” and “survivor” to create a form of identity talk that matched their own abusive experience and supported their self-concept as self-sufficient women. In contrast, although topless dancers employed identity talk involving “denial of injury to others, condemning those who condemned them and
appealing to higher loyalties,” the tactic of creating separate social worlds stood as their most effective strategy for maintaining social respectability (Thompson et al., 2003, p. 569).

The 33 birth mothers in this study went from keeping their unwed motherhood hidden for decades to revealing it publicly to strangers. Maintaining their personal self-esteem within this new social context required a new process of identity work to manage their social stigma. That process is outlined in the data analysis sections below through a description of: (1) the women’s perception of unwed motherhood as a stigmatized identity; (2) how the stigma management strategy of passing impacted their sense of self-efficacy; (3) a revised understanding of their social location as women who had babies before marriage; and (4) reunion contact, disclosure, self-efficacy and presentation of self as a birth mother.

Methods

The data analysis presented in this article is based on in-depth interviews with 33 birth mothers residing in Ontario, Canada. The interviews were conducted with the use of a semi-structured interview questionnaire designed to address major themes found in the adoption literature, media material, and three years of participant observation with search and reunion groups. The semi-structured interview format offered a combination of open and closed questions and a focus for how discussion of the research topic would unfold. It also provided the flexibility needed to probe and explore issues of consequence for birth mothers from their own perspectives and the ability for the women to supplement the interview material with their own concerns. The interviews were taped and transcribed with the use of pseudonyms and removal of any potentially identifiable material. All tapes were destroyed after transcription. All of these methodological techniques were approved by the university ethics review board.

Interviews occurred at a place of the woman’s choice (usually her home) and averaged two hours in length. The women were relaxed and open during the interview session, but some did cry. At such times I would stop the interview, wait for the woman to regain composure, and ask if she wished the interview stopped. None expressed this desire. Instead, they tended
to say, “No, it’s good to get it out” or, “I’m fine. It helps me to talk about it.” At the end of each interview I left the name of a counsellor who could be contacted without cost if any of the women experienced a delayed emotional reaction to the interview. I learned later from the counsellor that none of the interviewed women had made contact.

The sample is a purposive volunteer sample because the secrecy surrounding adoption makes it difficult to obtain randomness. In an attempt to overcome the potential bias of using membership/client lists of self-help organizations or counseling agencies, I advertised through local news media and gained 15 interviewees (45% of the sample). The remainder (18 or 65%) was accessed by word-of-mouth. Although 22 (67% of the sample) had registered with agencies in expectation that their placed child might contact them and 3 (9%) had actively searched, all of the women were reunited because the adopted adult made initial contact.

Demographically, the sample corresponds with the samples reported by reunion studies conducted in Australia, Great Britain, New Zealand, and the United States (Evans B. Donaldson Institute, 2007). The women are all Caucasian. Forty percent (13) are Protestant and 60% (20) are Roman Catholic. At the time of placement, 21 (64%) were between the ages of 15 and 19, three (9%) were aged 14, and nine (27%) were over the age of 20. None of the pregnancies were planned. Three-quarters of the sample had lived at home and were attending high school when they became pregnant. Seventeen (52%) resided in maternity homes, eight (24%) were sent away to live with family members and eight (24%) were self-supporting and lived alone until placement occurred. More than a third (12, 36%) did not return to school after placement, but close to a third (9, 27%) went on to complete a college/university degree. At the time of the interviews, 55% (18) were married, 15% (5) were single and 24% (8) were divorced. The majority (24 or 73%) had subsequent children, and three (9%) had placed a second child for adoption. Almost half of the sample (16 or 48%) reported contact relationships of more than 6 years. Seventy-five percent (25) were contacted by placed daughters and 25% (8) by placed sons.

The data were analyzed using the constant comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). First, each interview was read separately and categorized into consistent
thematic patterns based on repeated words, phrases or simple sentences (Charmaz, 2014). Next, each “open-ended” and “fixed” question was separated and examined to see if particular questions elicited particular patterns or themes. Finally, the interviews were reread and notes were made about significant remarks or observations, and reappearing words or phrases were documented both within and across the interview transcripts. In this way, a thematic pattern emerged on the most significant pregnancy, placement, and contact issues expressed by the women.

Unwed Motherhood, Sexual Promiscuity and Social Stigma

The birth mothers I interviewed used three identities when describing their pregnancy and placement experiences: (1) sexually innocent girl; (2) girl who had made a mistake; and (3) sexually promiscuous girl. These three identities were intertwined as part of a single narrative with the birth mother drawing upon the identity of sexually innocent girl to reinforce her identity as a girl who had made a mistake and to contrast self with the more undesirable identity of sexually promiscuous girl. The following quote by Jan illustrates this pattern:

I was young. I didn’t really know anything about sex. Later I learned he had gotten some other girls pregnant too. I thought I was in love but I realized too late. Then, my parents sent me away. It’s not like today. It was a black mark on the family. They really didn’t consider us much. We were baby machines. That’s how I feel. It’s like we didn’t have any rights, any feelings. We were nothing at all. Sluts who deserved nothing.

Comparably, Alice said, “I was only 18. A virgin. First time away from home. I didn’t know anything. I thought I was in love and he wanted it. When I became pregnant I couldn’t tell my parents. I was ashamed they would see me as loose, like the girls I had been warned about and warned not to become.”

The majority of females in North American recognize the stereotypical image of unwed mothers as sexually promiscuous (Rains, 1971; Solinger, 2007). Interview data such as the quotes above reveal a need for the women in this study to separate
themselves from that stereotype. By distinguishing their personal identity as a sexually innocent girl who “realized too late” from the social identity they carried as “sluts who deserve nothing,” the women maintained distance from the social attribution of sexual promiscuity and preserved a sense of personal self-esteem in a social world where their global self-esteem had been compromised.

This need to maintain distance from the social attribution of sexual promiscuity had been exacerbated by intimate interaction during the early stages of pregnancy. Each woman in the study spontaneously described in her interview at least one incident where a significant other, such as a parent, a sibling, or a friend, had either stated or implied she was sexually promiscuous. For example, Ann observed:

People can be mean. My sister refused to eat at the table with me. She made such a fuss. Called me a slut. So my father found a place for me to board and sent me away. And, the nurses in the hospital spoke sharply. If you were in pain they ignored you. As if you deserved it. They were different when I had my sons because I was married then.

Comparably, Evelyn said:

I was only 15. I told my mother and the first thing she said was, “Do you know whose it is?” I was stunned. I wondered, what kind of a person does she think I am? Then, when I went to the hospital, the doctors and nurses acted as if I didn't care about the baby and was happy to be rid of her.

Grace also remarked:

I told the father. He said it was likely from someone else and walked out the door. I never saw him again. I didn’t expect marriage. But I did expect some kind of support, even if it was only emotional. When my parents sent me away and I got to the maternity home I realized he wasn’t the only one.

Interestingly, the women did not challenge such attributions because they viewed them as a by-product of their own failure to maintain the normative standards of sexual purity expected by their generation. As Kathy reported,
I couldn’t say much. It was an incredible sinful thing to do what I did. Looking back I think that shame made me feel unworthy of a lot of things. And, grateful for the wrong things. Grateful to my parents for accepting me back after I had done this. Grateful to my husband for marrying me when he knew I had done this. As if I didn’t deserve all of the good things that happened to me.

The quotes above also reveal how closely the women linked their experience of being labelled as sexually promiscuous by significant others to the treatment they received from strangers. This type of connection suggests that the process of being shamed by significant others reinforced the women’s own understanding of their unwed motherhood as a shameful and, hence, discreditable identity. Specifically, if people close to them sanctioned them and treated them badly for being an unwed mother, then strangers were likely to view and treat them either in similar or worse ways. Given this understanding, pregnancy concealment became a form of self-protection, as well as a social expectation. Pam exemplified this perspective when she said:

I was 25. But, it was a bad relationship. And, a bad reason for a marriage. I had left home. My family was out west. I didn’t tell them. The shame…I was embarrassed to tell them. When I began to show, I had to quit my job. I basically went into hiding. It was hard. I stayed in my place. I didn’t go out of my apartment except if I had to. Back then it was a shameful thing. I was too ashamed and afraid of people seeing me pregnant. Afraid they would know I wasn’t married. Afraid of what they would think of me.

Pam’s behavior demonstrates the women’s recognition of their social location in a society where being an unwed mother was connected to the shameful act of sexual promiscuity. In fact, Pam had internalized this shame to such an extent that, despite her maturity, her access to financial resources, and the likelihood she might pass as a married woman, she went into self-imposed exile out of fear strangers on the street would recognize her identity as an unwed mother, judge her negatively, and treat her accordingly. In an effort to maintain personal self-esteem in an environment where her global self-esteem had been compromised, Pam embraced the stigma management
strategy used by most unwed mothers of her time. She kept her pregnancy secret and hid herself from public view.

Non-disclosure, Secrecy and the Dilemma of Passing

Hiding may have been effective during pregnancy, but, it was not a viable approach to everyday life. In contrast, non-disclosure was designed so unwed mothers could pretend their pregnancy had not happened and their child had never been born (Garber, 1985). Similar to most unwed mothers of their generation, the women in this study accepted non-disclosure and employed the stigma management strategy of “passing.” They engaged “in cultural performances in which individuals perceived to have a somewhat threatening identity present themselves or are presented by others as persons they are not” (Renfrow, 2004, p. 485).

The decision to pass occurred as soon as the women returned home from the maternity home or hospital, and significant others acted as if they had never been away. The women interpreted these interactions as further evidence of the enormity of their transgression and as an indication of how they should behave. Apart from telling a future husband “so he would know what he was getting,” few discussed their unwed motherhood again. For example, Stephanie noted:

I mentioned the baby to my mother and she said “Don’t talk about that.” Then, my aunt came to visit and acted like I had never been away. I learned not to say anything. Just to go off by myself and cry if I needed. And to act like it had never happened with everyone else. I told my husband because I thought he should know because we were getting married. But, I never told anyone again…Ever.

Passing left the women unable to access a group of “the wise...who in spite of their failing would understand and accept them” (Goffman, 1963, p. 28). They became isolated in coping with their loss and in coming to grips with their pregnancy, birth, and placement experiences. Their shame over being unwed mothers was not addressed, and their fear of exposing that identity deepened. As Julia observed,
Looking back I realize I always tried to maintain a pretty large distance between myself and other people. I think it’s that wall that I put up so I don’t get hurt. And, so they don’t get too close...close enough that it might slip out...that they would know...that I was who I was...that I had done what I had done.

Passing also left the women vulnerable to accepting others’ assessment of them in ways that made them feel inauthentic and diminished. North America embraces a pro-natalist culture where motherhood occupies a major part of the ideal woman’s life, conversations concerning one’s status as a mother are prevalent and intrusive, and reliable accounts of motherhood are demanded and expected (Solinger, 2007). The women never knew when, where, or how consideration of their unwed motherhood and adoptive placement might arise. Ordinary daily events such as doctors’ appointments, shopping trips, or completing application forms raised anxiety over possible exposure and/or how to act. For example, Denise noted,

I had the hardest time when I had to fill in forms for my job. How do you explain a 6 month absence? Or, when I had to go to the doctor. Should I say I have had a child? Will he know if I don’t? And, you are sad on certain days or times and people wonder why but you can’t explain.

Comparably, Beth said,

Even on the street. When people ask you how many children you have. You can’t tell the truth. Do I say three children? Because I had three but I didn’t. And, there I would be again...denying who I was.

Situations involving pregnancy were especially difficult. Susan, who was unable to have additional children, emphasized this dilemma in her statement that,

It was hard. In a work situation when people start talking about when they were pregnant. Or, you’d go to baby showers. They would say, “Oh you don’t understand giving birth. You don’t know the scenario.” Or, you can’t know what it is to be a mother. I’d want to say, “Yes I do. I’ve been there too.” To
a certain extent you are living incognito. I couldn’t be me. But, it was a secret. I had to keep it hidden so I couldn’t.

Comparably, Kathy observed,

You always pretend. Like when I had my son, I had to pretend he was my first. I couldn’t enjoy my pregnancy. I felt phoney. It was much better when I had my daughter because I could act normal. Like I had had another child so I didn’t have to pretend. But it never stops because he is always treated like my first and she my second.

Socio-Historical Change, Reunion Contact and the “No-Choice” Discourse

Similar to the findings of other studies on adoption reunion (March, 2014; Neil, 2013), the women agreed to contact because they carried an overwhelming sense of grief from their loss and an overpowering sense of anxiety over their placed child’s life situation. The decision to expose their identity as a birth mother, that is, as a mother who had placed a child for adoption, was mediated, however, by socio-historical change. Over the last quarter of the twentieth century transformations in women’s employment status, access to effective contraception, divorce, remarriage, and the growth of alternate family forms have initiated more tolerant attitudes toward women’s sexuality and more social, economic, and institutional support for unwed mothers (Solinger, 2007). The women were mindful of such changes and referred to them frequently in their descriptions of their placement decision and in their accounts of how others responded to their reunion contact. For example, Laura said,

It’s a different time now. When I tell people about my daughter, they tend to say the same thing. It was a time when it wasn’t accepted. Your baby wasn’t accepted. You weren’t accepted. Look at the young girls now. There are grants that help them go to school. Their parents are supporting. Helping them out. It isn’t such a shame to get pregnant and have a baby. It certainly was a different time back then. I was just in a different time.
In a similar fashion Donna remarked,

It’s a lot easier now. Now you are a single mom. But, it was so different back then. It was shameful and a disgrace on your family. And, there was no support. You couldn’t get a job if you had a child. There was no mother’s allowance. What were we supposed to do, sit in a room alone and starve? No man would marry you because you were damaged goods. I didn’t want to do it but adoption was the only way. It was hard but it gave her a better life. Most people understand that.

In this way, by contextualizing and comparing past unwed mother situations with the current circumstances of single mothers, the women drew upon a discourse of “no choice” (Melosh, 2002) to ease any social discomfort that might emerge when they presented the fact they were reunited with a child they had placed for adoption. Others’ usage of a similar discourse in response to those presentations reinforced the women’s claims and weakened their fear of future exposure.

The women used a different form of identity talk when they discussed their unwed motherhood. That identity talk focused on perceptions of female sexuality and altered sexual standards. This talk presented sexual attraction and sexual curiosity as normal biological processes. As sexual beings, it is understandable if women have sex before marriage. Without proper sexual knowledge and contraceptive advice, it is also understandable if they become pregnant. They had been punished for their unwed motherhood because the normative standards of their generation had not acknowledged these fundamental realities. To quote Alice:

I was one of the bad girls (laughs). Back then, we were called unwed mothers and I went to a home for unwed mothers. Hidden and closeted behind doors. But, we were before birth control. So, it was a naïve time. You didn’t know much about sex. It was an adult thing. You weren’t taught about it in school and our parents didn’t talk about it. I got pregnant, but I didn’t even realize what was going on. It was the very first time I had sex. It is different now. Everyone talks about sex. You see it on TV and in the movies.
The identity talk of altered sexual standards and its focus on female sexuality normalized the women’s pre-marital sexual behavior in ways that corresponded with their image of being a “sexually innocent girl” who had “made a mistake.” More important, its emphasis on how sexual attitudes and sexual behavior had changed over time neutralized their stigma trait by transforming the shame of their unwed motherhood from a “moral failing” into “a designation or tag affixed by others” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 363). It was this process of neutralizing her stigma trait (Goffman, 1963) that enabled Alice to laugh at herself for being “one of the bad girls” who had remained “hidden and closeted behind closed doors.” It was this process of neutralizing her stigma trait that helps to explain why, when asked if reunion contact had changed her, Pam, who had hidden in her apartment for fear strangers might realize she was an unwed mother replied,

Well, the only thing that I can say for sure is that I’m free. It is a great freedom to be able to tell people I have another daughter. And, if they don’t like it who cares? They can say good-bye.

Disclosure, Presentation of Self and Self-Efficacy

The majority of women said most significant others, such as family members and friends, expressed “surprise,” “excitement,” and “curiosity” when told about their adoption placement and reunion contact. Some described “shock” or “amazement,” especially subsequent children who “could not imagine I could do such a thing.” A few reported “anger” or “resentment.” Mary encapsulated these types of reactions when she replied,

My husband always knew. I told him before we got married. But, I had to tell my children. They were surprised and a bit curious about what had happened. My one daughter seemed a bit threatened at first, but we talked about it, and when she found that I hadn’t really changed toward her now the other has come back, she is better. My friends just accepted it. Most people you tell are positive. Most people say, “Gee if it happened to me, I would do the same thing.” So, it’s really fairly positive. And, some will admit they did it too...Like, everyone has a skeleton in their closet...Somewhere...
As the women extended their news to a wider range of people, they were more likely to experience social disapproval and learned to be more circumspect. For example, Liz said:

What surprised me the most was that it was always this bad dark secret. Suddenly, overnight, it wasn’t a secret anymore. It was the same awful story but it wasn’t so awful now. I told everybody. Most were happy for me. Excited. But, I came to learn that my wonderful story wasn’t so wonderful to everyone. Like, there is a woman at work who thinks I am interfering with the adoptive parents and his family. And, a friend disapproves of me letting him go. I am more careful now about who I tell. But, mostly people are okay.

The women tended to consider such types of negative responses to be the by-product of social prejudice and narrow-mindedness rather than the result of their own behavior. The “no choice” discourse had given them a more socially acceptable account of their placement decisions, and the identity talk of altered sexual standards had diminished their sense of shame over being unwed mothers. These views were reinforced by others, especially significant others who used similar language with reference to adoption placement and reunion contact. Additionally, the more frequently the women disclosed their identity as a birth mother, that is, as a mother who had placed a child for adoption, the stronger they became in assessing when, where, and with whom it was safe to reveal that identity and how to govern its revelation. This knowledge gave them a more satisfactory presentation of self and a stronger sense of self-efficacy than they had experienced through the uncertainty created by non-disclosure and the stigma management strategy of continual passing. To quote Susan:

It’s easier now. I decide who I tell and why I tell. Most people are positive. But, generally you get to know people before and you can judge their reaction. So, you don’t just tell anybody, just like with anything else. But, that’s how it is. I only feel guilty about things that I think are really bad. And, I don’t think it was bad. I did what I had to do and I suffered for it. But, I will talk to anybody now because I am not ashamed. I regret it but I am not ashamed.
Discussion

The accounts presented in this article support the need to consider the interconnections between the structural and interpersonal components of social stigma, social stereotyping, and social discrimination. The research literature on social stigma tends to isolate specific stigma traits and individualize stigma impact with minimal consideration of the structural components by which categories of individuals become identified for stigmatization (Link & Phelan, 2001). Such focus can lead to an understanding of stigma outcome as a mere collection of idiosyncratic management techniques rather than also being influenced by social, economic, and political forces (Anderson & Snow, 2001; Thompson et al., 2003). As the interview data indicate, the processes by which persons become identified as being stigmatized and the experiences of those who are stigmatized are not entirely separable.

Frost (2011, p. 825) notes that “the meanings inherent to social stigmas are nested within historical contexts and their meanings can change over time.” Renfrow (2004, p. 485) argues that a more complete understanding of passing as a stigma management strategy emerges when we place “the social meaning of the “transgressed identity” within its “unique socio-historical political milieu.” The data presented here support these claims.

Sexual morality and the sexual purity of women emerged as central concepts in the interview data, but the meaning of those concepts reflected the larger economic, political, and socio-cultural environment of particular generations. In the case of the women in this study, the social value placed on the sexual purity of unmarried women influenced their own perception of their identities as unwed mothers, the process of stigmatization they encountered, and the stigma strategies they applied. Socio-historical changes affecting conceptualizations of female sexuality, women’s rights, and single motherhood transformed those perceptions. When they balanced this new understanding against the sense of inauthenticity and the lack of self-efficacy produced by continual passing, the exposure of reunion contact became less threatening to them.

Armed with the new identity talk of altered sexual standards the women were able to neutralize the shame of unwed motherhood and reveal their identities of reunited birth mothers. The
social, economic, and political changes that have occurred in the last quarter of the 20th century have made adoption placement rare in North America, however, and women who make adoption plans can be perceived as “selfish, uncaring and irresponsible,” or “degenerate” (March & Miall, 2006, p. 380). The women had to find stigma management strategies to soften the impact of such social responses. Sometimes they passed. In the majority of situations, they used the identity talk of “no choice” to highlight their former social location as young, uneducated, unemployed women who had lacked the social, political, and economic power to keep their babies. This use of a “no choice” discourse helped the women create a more satisfactory presentation of self than they had experienced through the secrecy of non-disclosure. Specifically, they learned how to judge when, where, and with whom to reveal their social stigma through the responses of others to those presentations, thereby gaining a stronger sense of control and a stronger sense of self-efficacy when the identities of unwed mother and birth mother were engaged.

Melosh (2002) suggests that the images of sexual shaming presented by reunited birth mothers are obsolete in a contemporary environment where premarital sex and cohabitation have become socially acceptable. The data in this article question the simplicity of Melosh’s analysis. Such images may be outdated for some, but they still resonate. The women in this study had been discredited as sexually promiscuous by significant others during early pregnancy and perceived unwed motherhood as a shameful identity. Contact acceptance meant exposing their shame and the meaning it held for their self-concepts. They were able to do so because the identity talk of altered sexual standards helped them consider their pregnancies as the product of normal sexual behavior rather than personal immorality. This new understanding helped them reconcile their global self-esteem more effectively with their personal self-esteem because it affirmed their perception of self as a “sexually innocent girl who had made a mistake” and their adoption placement as a social punishment rather than a selfish act.

Implications for Research and Practice

The identities of unwed mother and birth mother need to be considered as separate but closely linked identities. The
interview data indicate that shaming by significant others during pregnancy influenced the women’s perception of how others would treat them if their unwed motherhood was exposed. It also indicates the women were vulnerable to social disapproval when they revealed they were reunited birth mothers. These themes emerged serendipitously in the data through grounded theory analytical techniques.

Further research on the pregnancy and placement experiences of unwed mothers is needed to provide us with a stronger understanding of the stigmatization process these women encountered, the sense of shame they may have internalized, and how those past experiences may affect a reunited birth mother’s self-concept. As counsellors, practitioners, adoption professionals and policymakers, we need that understanding so we can address these images appropriately when the topics of unwed motherhood, birth mother identities, reunion, and adoption triad membership arise.

The identity talk of altered sexual standards neutralized the women’s shame over being sexually active before marriage by transforming this behavior into a natural biological response. This perception was supported by significant others in the women’s lives, such as husbands, subsequent children, parents, and friends who were told about the adoption placement and reunion contact. Some described the sense of regret expressed to them by parents who had realized their error in forcing the adoption. A few mentioned friends or relatives who exposed their own identities as unwed mothers. In this way, the women’s decision to accept contact gave them a group of others who validated their identity as unwed mothers and accepted them as “ordinary” (Goffman 1963, p. 28). This finding affirms the therapeutic value of making group counselling opportunities available to all adoption triad members, especially in light of the increasing numbers of reunions taking place. Mixed groups are advised when the desire is to promote understanding of other triad perspectives. The shaming incidents experienced by unwed mothers during pregnancy and their long term silence before reunion emphasize a need for “birth mother only” groups where women may discuss these types of experiences openly with minimal fear of social judgement from others.

The birth mother identity is founded upon the socially stigmatized identity of unwed mother and, as such, also represents
a spoiled identity needing management. The data analysis indicates reunited birth mothers combine the “no choice” discourse with the identity talk of altered sexual standards to create a socially acceptable account of their unwed pregnancy, adoptive placement, and reunion. It offers minimal insight into how each type of identity talk unfolds, under what social conditions each is employed, or if one form of identity talk is preferred over the other. Neither does it offer a strong understanding of what others think of these types of presentation, especially the reunited adopted adult.

For example, Latchford (2012) believes the “no choice” discourse is ineffective for building healthy birth mother-adopted adult relationships because it portrays the unwed mother as a victim, negates her power in the decision-making process involved in adoption placement, and catches her in an interactional trap of continued guilt, obligation, remorse and regret. In a similar vein, Leisenring (2006) notes battered women are caught between notions of victimization, agency and responsibility when they use the identity talk offered by the shelter system to explain their experience to others. The “no choice” discourse and the identity talk of altered sexual standards may disempower and demean birth mothers at the same time as it offers them a viable account of their unwed motherhood and adoption placement. If so, how do they manage these social processes and/or the new forms of stigma messages they receive? Do they create alternate stigma management strategies designed to assert more socially appropriate identities, or do they merely withdraw from revealing their birth mother identity as they did their identity as an unwed mother? Such questions remain for further exploration in more detailed and more focused studies of adoption, social stigma, unwed/birth motherhood, adoptive identity, and reunion contact.

The women in this study kept their identities as unwed mothers hidden as much as possible during pregnancy. They also maintained the non-disclosure expectations of the original adoption contract and did not reveal their birth identity until they were contacted by their adult placed child. Quinn and Earnshaw (2013, p. 46) refer to these types of identities as “concealable stigmatized identities” and note that people may experience increased psychological and physical distress over how others may respond when a concealable identity is exposed.
The original purpose of this study was to examine contact outcome from the perspective of reunited birth mothers. As previously noted, the data analysis on shame, social stigma, and unwed motherhood emerged in response to grounded theory methodology, and conceptualizations of psychological and physical distress were not targeted. Some signs of psychological distress appear in the women’s descriptions of how they hid during pregnancy and in their discussion of passing continuously. It seems, however, that this population would offer a focus for research on the relationships between identity centrality, social context, psychological and physical distress described by Quinn and Earnshaw (2013), especially in their call for future exploration of the changing nature of concealable stigmatized identities over time. In the interim, practitioners engaged in counselling women who are either involved in or considering reunion contact should be alert to the signs and symptoms of the psychological and physical stress evoked by the presence of the stigmatized concealable identities of unwed mothers and birth mothers.

Conclusion

Anderson and Snow (2001) believe symbolic interactionism offers a more complex approach for understanding the impact of social stigma than perspectives that focus exclusively on microscopic management strategies or macroscopic structural factors. The symbolic interactionist concepts of identity, self-concept, and significant others provided a framework of analysis for appreciating how unwed mothers reacted to their pregnancies and their ultimate acceptance of non-disclosure. Rosenberg’s (1981, 1989) conceptualizations of global self-esteem and personal self-esteem added to that understanding by highlighting the interface existing between knowledge of one’s social location, how that knowledge impacts individual behavior, and self-efficacy. The data also support Rosenberg’s (1981, 1989) proposition that a person’s immediate reference groups are more important for self-concept than social location through its demonstration of how significant others affirmed and solidified the women’s perception of the shame they carried for becoming pregnant while unmarried.
The data indicate a stronger focus on the interconnections between micro- and macro-influences is needed if we are to grasp the full implications of social stigma, stigmatized identity, and stigma management. Notably, the women in this study occupied a different social location than the one they had occupied at the time of adoption placement. They were older, most had been married, had raised subsequent children, and were well-educated with occupations or careers. Despite such life transitions, they maintained the secrecy of non-disclosure until contacted by the adopted adult. It was their knowledge of socio-historical changes in the treatment of single mothers and changed attitudes toward female sexuality that enabled their acceptance of a reunion contact in which their birth mother identities were exposed. Future research should consider other aspects of how the process of stigmatization affects all of the family members involved in the adoption, search, and reunion process.

References


Housing Cost Burden and Maternal Stress among Very Low Income Mothers

Kaycee L. Bills
Stacia Michelle West
Jami Hargrove
University of Tennessee

As the affordable housing shortage proliferates, more American households struggle with high housing cost burdens. Grounded in Belsky’s (1984) parenting stress framework, we use a weighted low-income sample from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study of mothers who rent their homes (N = 388) to investigate a relationship between housing cost burden, or paying a substantial portion of income toward housing, and higher rates of reported maternal stress. Findings of the linear regression indicate that younger mothers and those paying 30% or more of their income each month toward rent have higher reported maternal stress scores. These findings are discussed with attention to practice and policy implications.

Keywords: maternal stress, housing cost burden, poverty

This article employs Belsky’s (1984) process model of determinants of parenting to consider the potential inclusion of housing cost burden as a correlate of maternal stress. The process model has been commonly used in the exploration of maternal stress (Cardoso, Padilla, & Sampson, 2010), and includes three domains: parental factors, the child’s contribution, and contextual factors. In the following section, we briefly contextualize the lives of mothers and discuss the current literature examining maternal and child-related contributors to maternal stress. Our
study is then situated as an exploration of housing cost burden as a potential contextual contributor to maternal stress.

Maternal Factors

As outlined by Belsky (1984), personal psychological resources of the mother are important to examine when analyzing parenting stress and aggravation. Belsky (1984) maintains that a mother’s psychological and emotional well-being is dependent on her outlook and perception of her own life. Negative perceptions of aspects of a mother’s life, such as relationships, parenting, work, and support, can lead to poor mental health outcomes among mothers. Mothers have more diagnoses of psychiatric conditions, such as anxiety and depression, in comparison to fathers (Crosier, Butterworth, & Rogers, 2007). Poor mental health often causes additional stress in a mother’s life, which can ultimately lead to increased levels of parenting stress and aggravation (Wijnhberg & Reding, 1999). Mothers with mental health problems have been found to experience higher levels of parenting stress than mothers who do not have mental health problems (Cardoso et al., 2010). Along with poor mental health, poor physical health may also be related to parenting stress and aggravation. Many mothers who experience physical illnesses or disabilities may feel isolated or perceive low levels of social support, thus resulting in increased levels of parenting stress and aggravation (Cardoso et al., 2010).

Race, ethnicity, age, and other demographic factors may also contribute to differing levels of maternal stress (Cardoso et al., 2010; Wang, Wu, Anderson, & Florence, 2011). Younger mothers are more likely to experience parenting stress and suffer from depression when compared to older age groups (Liu, Chen, Yeh, & Hsieh, 2012; Wang et al., 2011). This may be due to the stresses associated with being a new mother, which may include a lack of maternal confidence (Ruchala & James, 1997). Additionally, mothers of color experience parenting stress differently from Caucasian mothers, due to differing cultural approaches to coping with stress (Cardoso et al., 2010). Furthermore, since parenting stress is often attributed to one’s life perceptions, socioeconomic status, and social relationships, stress will vary between ethnicities as a result of differences in life experiences (Cardoso et al., 2010).
Child Factors

Child reactions to stress. As discussed by Belsky (1984), child-mother relationships are an essential component of parenting stress and aggravation outcomes. Parent-child interactions are often reciprocal; children being raised by parents with higher stress levels are more likely to experience developmental delays, psychological problems, and worsened temperament levels. Consequently, developmental delays, psychological problems, and temperament problems among children often add additional stress to the parent (Evans & Kim, 2013; Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012). Children who grow up in a household affected by a lack of family structure due to elevated stress levels may display antisocial behaviors, such as aggression, lack of respect for authority, and rule-breaking (Mitchell et al., 2015). Additionally, children living in high-stress households are at an increased risk for developing learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, or cognitive disabilities than those who live in low-stress environments (Mason, 2014; Neece et al., 2012). As a result of difficult behaviors that demand increased attention, parenting a child who has temperament problems, antisocial behaviors, psychological conditions, and/or disabilities exacerbates tension for already-stressed parents (Evans & Kim, 2013).

Parent reaction to stress. When parents become stressed because of anxiety related to poverty or their child’s behavior, they tend to also become more tense, often resulting in more punitive discipline methods and hostile living conditions for the children, which can ultimately exacerbate preexisting emotional and psychological problems the child was already experiencing as a result of living in the stressful environment (McLoyd, 1990; Sheidow, Henry, Tolan, & Strachan, 2014). Additionally, parents who experience higher stress levels are less likely to promote a structured home environment for their children, thus resulting in more behavioral issues that often lead parents to employ harsher parenting tactics (Mitchell et al., 2015).

Contextual Factors

Social support. As Belsky (1984) points out, social support is a pivotal contextual factor that plays an important role in ameliorating stressors associated with motherhood. Mothers, in
contrast to fathers, often lack support when it comes to parenting because mothers are more likely to raise a child alone than are fathers (Cardoso et al., 2010; Osborne, 2004). Social support from family and friends may have positive mental health impacts on mothers and may be related to reduced stress levels (Leahy-Warren, McCarthy, & Corcoran, 2012). Mothers who are employed may experience higher rates of family conflict associated with increased time spent away from the home. Specifically, mothers who had jobs that were inflexible in circumstances, such as school cancellations or a child’s illness, experienced more family conflict (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010). Extending beyond Belsky’s framework, there is mounting evidence to suggest that both the lack of material resources and neighborhood context may play an equally important role in parenting stress.

Poverty. Single parenting is more prevalent among mothers, as women are more likely to have children living with them or have full custody of children than fathers (Christopher, England, Smeeding, & Phillips, 2002). Several factors seen frequently among single mothers often result in higher poverty rates than other household types. In comparison to other household types, single mothers often have lower educational attainment (Kalil & Ryan, 2010; Wijnhberg & Reding, 1999), higher costs of childcare (Christopher et al., 2002; Kalil & Ryan, 2010), fewer supports from the father and/or other family members (Kalil & Ryan, 2010; Radey, 2008), and are more likely to be working part-time versus full-time (Lichtenwalter, 2005; Shafer & Jensen, 2013; Wijnhberg & Reding, 1999). These factors often correlate with lower wages and higher expenses, resulting in single mother households having higher poverty levels than other families (Lichtenwalter, 2005; Shafer & Jensen, 2013). Welfare supports, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), that are meant to help women provide for their families are chronically underfunded and have failed to keep pace with inflation and growing need (Stanley, Floyd, & Hill, 2016).

Lower-income families face stressors associated with financial instability and insecurity, such as the unaffordability of healthcare, childcare, housing, and other basic needs (Santiago, Wadsworth, & Stump, 2011; Seccombe, 2002). Many families living in poverty are often forced to work inconvenient hours and/or multiple jobs to gain financial stability, which ultimately
exacerbates preexisting parenting stress (Sheely, 2010). Consequently, children are more likely to develop weaker parent-child relationships due to the lack of time they spend with their parental figure (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010). As such, it is evident that poverty has a significant impact on parenting stress.

**Housing and neighborhood factors.** Past literature indicates that the interplay between a person and their environment may directly impact stress levels (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber, 1997). Poverty-related stress can also occur as a result of living in disadvantaged neighborhoods, as neighborhoods with low-income housing or less expensive housing are often louder, exhibit less cohesiveness, and experience high crime rates (Booth, Ayers, & Marsiglia, 2012; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1997; Santiago et al., 2011). Booth et al. (2012) found a positive correlation between living in an unsafe neighborhood and psychological distress. Sheidow, Henry, Tolan, and Strachan (2014) found approximately 70% of families living in disadvantaged neighborhoods have witnessed some type of violent trauma. The often tumultuous experiences and risk of exposure to trauma associated with living in low-income residential settings may contribute to higher levels of stress for families.

Families often pay too much of their income for rent or are forced to move frequently due to a lack of affordable housing. Recent data indicate that nearly 33% of American families pay more than 30% of their monthly income in rent, meaning that they are housing-cost burdened (Joint Center for Housing Studies, 2017). With so little income remaining after housing expenses, families often move to find higher paying jobs, cheaper rent, or locations with better resources (Coulton, Theodos, & Turner, 2012; Gruman, Harachi, Abbot, Catalano, & Fleming, 2008). However, there are often too few affordable housing options within communities, forcing some families to remain in situations where they must pay a considerable portion of their income for housing costs. For families in either situation, the difficult process of managing scant resources may contribute to higher parenting stress.

When considered comprehensively, the literature indicates that maternal factors, child factors, and contextual factors in the mother’s environment may all contribute to increased levels of maternal stress. Building upon this existing literature, and also the associated literature connecting poverty and maternal
stress, we seek to determine if housing cost burden is uniquely related to higher levels of maternal stress.

Methods

Data

This paper uses publicly available data from Wave 9 of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study [FFCWS] and closely follows the methods to investigate correlates of maternal stress used by Cardoso, Padilla, and Sampson (2010). The FFCWS is a birth cohort study that has collected information on birth mothers from 16 cities in the United States with populations above 200,000 stratified by labor market conditions and policy environment instead of geographic location. The study intentionally oversampled non-marital births, yet used a random sampling method to meet quotas of both marital and non-marital births (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001) (for technical documentation for the FFCWS, see www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu).

Sample

The analytic sample included mothers with children in their care at least 50% of the time, who rented their primary residence, and indicated receipt of TANF benefits within the 12 months prior to their interview. The sample was weighted to be representative of all births in cities with populations greater than 200,000 in 1994. This resulted in a sample of N = 388 and weighted population of N = 40,921 very low-income mothers who rented their primary residence.

Measures

To test the relationship between maternal stress and housing cost burden, we used the following variables taken from Wave 9 of the FFCWS.
Dependent Variable

Maternal stress. The FFCWS contains 4 of the 9 variables used to measure aggravation in parenting in the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), originally developed by Abidin (1995). Respondents chose answers from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” on a four-point Likert scale. These values were recoded to range from “4 = strongly agree” to “1 = strongly disagree,” summed, and then divided by the top value to result in a maternal stress score.

Independent Variable of Interest

Housing cost burden. Housing cost burden was calculated by dividing total amount paid in rent by monthly income. This percentage was then transformed into a binary variable to indicate whether the household was paying more than 30% of income in rent—the threshold of cost burden used by the U.S. Census Bureau and other agencies (Schwartz & Wilson, 2007). The binary variable was then coded as “0 = no housing cost burden” or “1 = housing cost burden.”

Control Variables

Race/Ethnicity. Race and ethnicity was coded as 0 = White, non-Hispanic; 1 = Black, non-Hispanic; 2 = Hispanic; and, 3 = Other.

Highest education. Respondents were asked to indicate the highest level of education completed. These were coded as “0 = less than high school;” “1 = high school or equivalent;” “2 = some college or technical school;” and, “3 = college degree or higher.”

Age. Age was a continuous variable collected at the time of the Wave 9 interview.

Poverty level. The categorical variable measured percent of the federal poverty level and was coded as 0 = 0-49%; 1 = 50-99%; 2 = 100-199%; 3 = 200-299%; and, 4 = 300% or greater.

Number of dependent children. This variable was the number of dependent children under 18 years of age in the household.

Cohabiting. This variable indicated if the mother was married or living with a partner at the Wave 9 interview. It was coded as 0 = no; and, 1 = yes.
Hours of work. This continuous variable was the total number of hours worked each week.

Depression. As an indicator of the respondent’s mental health, this binary variable measured whether the mother met the liberal criteria for a major depressive episode according to the Composite International Diagnostic Interview-Short Form, Section A. It was coded as 0 = no; and, 1 = yes. More information related to creation of this variable and scoring is available in the FFCWS technical documentation.

Social support. Mothers were asked whether they had a person in their life that they felt close to or could depend on. Responses were coded as 0 = no; and, 1 = yes.

Child behavior. To assess the extent of a child’s aggressive, externalizing behaviors, the aggression subscale of the Child Behavior Checklist was included (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). Scores from the three items within the subscale were averaged for a total score.

Residential mobility. This continuous variable was the total number of times the mother reportedly moved her household in the prior two years.

Neighborhood safety. This binary variable measured whether the mother reportedly did not let her child play outside due to violence. Responses were coded as 0 = no; and, 1 = yes.

Data Analysis

Data were extracted, cleaned, and analyzed using Stata SE v14.1. National level weights were applied to account for the complex sample design. Specifically, we used the national level weight (cm5natwt) and correspondent replicate weights to generate results that are nationally representative of births within U.S. cities with populations greater than 200,000 in 1994 (FFCWS, 2009). Descriptive statistics were conducted for each variable included in the regression model. To determine whether rent burden was related to maternal stress for mothers in the sample, OLS regression was conducted. Multicollinearity in the model was assessed with variance inflation factor (VIF) scores, and no multicollinearity was detected.
Results

The mean respondent’s age was 32.57 years. The average total number of children the respondents had was 3. The mean of the total hours a week the respondents worked was 33.38. The average total stress score of the respondents using the aggravation in parenting scale was 2.18, and the average parenting aggravation score was .21. The average number of moves the respondents had made was 2. Racial and ethnic identities of the respondents were black (69.33%), Hispanic (19.07%), white (8.765%), and other (2.84%). Regarding level of education, 34.96% of respondents had less than a high school education, 39% had a high school diploma, 38.56% had attended some college, and 3.08% had a college degree. The majority of the sample were not living with a partner (72.31%). More than half of the sample was experiencing rent burden (63.67%). Only 25.77% of the sample met the criteria for depression. Half of the sample were below 50% of the federal poverty level (FPL), 28% were between 50% and 99% of the FPL, and the remainder (22%) were 100% or above the FPL. When asked if they were afraid to let their children play outside because of risk of exposure to violence, 33.25% of mothers answered “yes.” Only 10.54% of respondents denied having someone they felt they were close to upon whom they could depend.

A linear regression was conducted and demonstrated that the controlled independent variables made up for 64% of the parenting stress and aggravation among mothers experiencing rent burden ($R^2 = 0.64$). Displayed in Table 1, results approached significance ($p = 0.069$) for rent burden. Rent burden accounted for a 0.50 increase for maternal stress scale ($b = 0.495$, $t = 1.90$, $p < 0.10$). Mother’s age demonstrated statistically significant results ($b = 0.07$, $t = -2.85$, $p = .009$) that showed that one year of older age was related to a .07 score decrease on the maternal stress scale. Other variables in the model, including race and ethnicity, educational attainment, number of dependent children, cohabitation, hours worked per week, presence of depression, child behavior, number of moves, and neighborhood violence were not significantly associated with maternal stress.
This study explored parenting stress and aggravation among mothers experiencing housing cost burden. We examined variables to determine which factors contributed to higher stress and aggravation scores among respondents. Results showed that both rent burden and age of the mother were associated with higher stress and aggravation scores. This research builds upon the existing knowledge base regarding maternal stress and contributes to the literature by demonstrating that the experience of paying too much of one’s monthly income toward rent plays an important role in maternal stress.

Poverty, mental health issues, lack of social supports, stressful environmental factors, frequent moves, and childrearing struggles are all correlates of maternal stress (Belsky, 1984;
Crosier et al., 2007; Osborne, 2004). Our findings related to younger maternal age and higher reported maternal stress are consistent with and build upon the prior theoretical and empirical literature. Past studies have found that mothers who are younger experience increased stress levels due to having fewer supports, being less financially stable, and possessing lower maternal confidence (Liu et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2011). However, prior studies have not demonstrated that age has a substantial impact on parental stress and aggravation level when controlling for other variables related to the mother, child, and her environment. Younger maternal age likely correlates to a lack of parenting experience and childrearing skills, which may also be associated with a lack of skills and resources needed to manage problematic child behavior. Additionally, younger mothers are more likely to be first-time mothers, and are thus more likely to be dealing with the often severe anxieties that accompany the transition to motherhood (Ruchala & James, 1997).

In addition to younger mothers’ reported higher rates of maternal stress, we also find that mothers who report paying greater than 30% of their monthly income in rent also report higher stress levels related to their financial instability. This finding is compelling given that the models controlled for poverty level and that there is no extant empirical literature that explores the parental stress response to housing cost burden. Theoretical literature related to the stress of being unable to make ends meet may provide some insight for this finding. Shah, Mullainathan, and Shafir (2012) note that resource deprivation or scarcity often demands the attention of households to the detriment of current and future well-being. For example, consider a mother who is paying 50% of her monthly income toward rent, and imagine that her most recent water bill was higher than expected. This mother must now focus her attention on reallocating resources within a budget that is already insufficient. Other responsibilities and activities that directly impact her well-being will be neglected as she makes a series of quick financial decisions, some of which may be temporary fixes with risky consequences. As this mother allocates her time and attention to her household finances, she must necessarily neglect other areas of her life that could impact maternal stress, including her relationships with family and friends, job performance, and relationship with her child.
Because parental stress can have deleterious consequences for children’s development and overall well-being across the lifespan, both social work policy and practice should be attuned to the correlates and potential prevention of parental stress. Particularly, our findings indicate that housing cost burden is related to higher levels of maternal stress in very low-income households. This finding represents an important opportunity for federal and local policymakers to alleviate housing cost burden.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

Beginning in 2016, states received appropriations from the National Housing Trust Fund (NHTF) enacted under the 2008 Housing and Economic Recovery Act (HERA). As a block grant, states set priorities to address worst case housing needs that impact extremely low-income households, or those reporting less than 30% AMI (HERA, 2008). While this was a promising and welcome infusion of funds, chronic underfunding and the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 (TCJA) represent real threats to the federal commitment to creating and maintaining affordable housing (TCJA, 2017). The NHTF has no permanent funding stream and is currently funded through allocations from government-sponsored enterprises, namely Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, as well as through any other appropriations of the federal budget (HERA, 2008). This funding formulary, or lack thereof, positions the NHTF to be easily halted, as was done during 8 years of recovery from the recession. Trump’s 2018 tax proposal included the direct elimination of all funding for the NHTF, which was not realized; yet, the lowering of corporate tax rates under the TCJA has struck the deferred tax assets owned by Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, which nearly guarantees the suspension of contributions to the NHTF (Capps, 2017; TCJA, 2017).

Given the draconian federal policy landscape, some progressive state and local governments have taken innovative steps to improve affordable housing stock and access. One such example in Nashville, Tennessee is the Housing Incentives Pilot Program, which is intended to preserve and create affordable and workforce housing by covering the difference between unrestricted market rates and maximum allowable rents to not exceed 30% of lessee’s monthly income (Affordable & Workforce Housing
Incentive Grants, 2016). Denver, Colorado, which faces high rates of vacancy coupled with high housing costs, has implemented the City and County of Denver Lower Income Voucher Equity (LIVE) Pilot program, which uses public and private funds to subsidize the cost of 400 rental units (City and County of Denver, 2017). In addition, there is renewed interest in community land trust models that help lower-income householders purchase homes (Cho, Li, Migliorato, Rauch-Kacenski, & Salzman, 2016; Housing Works, 2018; Torpy & Houghton, 2004).

These mezzo level approaches may well alleviate housing cost burden and its negative consequences for some, but without radical reform to housing finance concomitant with policies to address income insufficiency, community-based organizations will continue to see parents struggling to pay rent and make ends meet. This issue is particularly salient in communities with constrained rental markets where the availability of Housing Choice Vouchers and public housing far outpace need. In 2015, approximately 11% of households that received a Housing Choice Voucher were unable to find rental housing within the 60-day window allotted by HUD (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2017). With only 10 states currently having legal protections preventing discrimination based on source of income, social workers must become knowledgeable about and directly address sources of income and race-based discrimination in housing (Tighe, Hatch, & Mead, 2017). Such an approach requires practitioners to move beyond simply providing resources and guidance to clients, and instead focusing some effort on building partnerships with and educating property owners on their role in alleviating the affordable housing crisis.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. The variables in the analysis explained 62% of the contributions to parenting stress levels. This indicates that there is still much to be learned about unobserved characteristics associated with parenting stress. Additionally, this study was limited by its use of cross-sectional, rather than longitudinal, data. Inspiring future research, this indicates that there is much to be explored regarding parenting stress and its relationship to rent burden.
References


Affordable and Workforce Housing Incentive Grants, BL2016-342, (2016).


From the Empire State to the North Star State: Voter Engagement in the 2016 Election

Katharine M. Hill  
*St. Catherine University*  
*University of St. Thomas*

Shannon R. Lane  
*Adelphi University*

Jenna Powers  
*University of Connecticut,*  
*Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work*

Tanya Rhodes Smith  
*University of Connecticut,*  
*Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work*

Voter engagement has the potential to be a fundamental part of social work practice and a key to the professional socialization of social work students. This article describes a classroom-based voter engagement project conducted in two undergraduate social work programs in different U.S. states with significantly different voting laws. We describe the rationale of the project, the implementation process of the project, the evaluation of the project, and review the results in the context of the 2016 election. We suggest future research that can help develop best practices and methods for implementation of voter engagement in social work practice and education in the future.

*Keywords:* Voter engagement, civic engagement, BSW education, undergraduate education, social work education, social work ethics, political context
Introduction

The social work profession is rooted in social justice and social change, emphasizing empowerment of clients in all areas of practice. However, despite the profession’s Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) which calls for the empowerment of clients, the political power of social workers, and the communities we serve, is often overlooked. Voting and voter engagement can be a powerful tool for engaging students, clients, and agencies in exercising their political power. Classroom-based interventions that encourage social work students to include voter engagement in their conceptualization of social work practice are key in the professional socialization of students who will prioritize social and political action to achieve social, economic, and political justice.

This project is rooted in research about the benefits of voting to individuals and communities, including stronger intra-community connections, increases in other types of civic participation, and positive relationships with health and mental health. This research suggests that voting influences political decision-making (Avery, 2015; Griffin & Newman, 2005), overall community health (Blakely, Kennedy, & Ichiro, 2001; Martin, 2003), and overall individual health and well-being (Klar & Kasser, 2009; Sanders, 2001).

There are many reasons that individuals and communities may not participate in voting within the United States. In many states, there are both official and unofficial restrictions that lead to voter disengagement and voter suppression (McElwee, 2015). Barriers to voter engagement disproportionately impact low-income communities, people of color, and young voters (McElwee, 2015). Such barriers include the disenfranchisement of people who have been convicted of felonies in many states (Sentencing Project, 2016), restrictions such as registration deadlines, photo identification requirements, and the closure or relocation of polling places in certain districts (McElwee, 2015). As social workers, the impact of these high levels of disengagement on our clients and on our practice requires our attention.

From September to November 2016, the authors implemented a classroom-based voter engagement project in two undergraduate institutions in two states. In both settings, the intent was to engage students in nonpartisan voter engagement
through a series of structured, classroom-based activities. This article includes a review of the model for this integration in classes and the evaluation results. Discussion will also include possible implications of adapting this methodology in states with differences in the restrictiveness of their voting laws. We believe that the evaluation of this project will add to the evidence base on classroom-based voter engagement projects and will begin to identify best practices and methods for implementation of these types of projects in the future.

### Literature Review

Although studies have shown that social workers are more politically active than the general public (e.g., Wolk, 1981; Ezell, 1993; Ritter, 2007; Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010), a minority of social workers engage in active political activities other than voting (Lane, 2011; Ritter, 2007; Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010) and social work students may be more likely to participate in other types of community engagement than political engagement (Hylton, 2015). Further, while social work educators and field instructors are politically active, one study suggests as many as one-third do not believe that social workers ought to be active within political contexts (Mary, 2001). Pritzker and Burwell (2016) found that voter registration efforts are included in fewer than half of all accredited social work programs. Thus, most social work students are not being provided opportunities to increase their knowledge or experience of voting or other political activities—and, consequently, the connections between these political activities and the social work profession are not learned.

Social workers’ political behaviors may increase as a result of gaining more political knowledge. For example, many social workers have a misconception that they are not allowed to engage in voter engagement within their agencies and organizations (Rocha, Poe, & Thomas, 2010). Contrary to these common perceptions, though, most agencies and organizations that employ social workers are allowed, or even legally required, to engage clients in the voting process. The National Voter Registration Act (passed in 1993) mandates all state agencies that administer driver’s licenses, welfare assistance, food stamps, Medicaid, and
disability benefits to offer assistance in registering to vote (Piven & Cloward, 2000). Additionally, nonpartisan voter engagement, education and outreach which stays away from support of individual candidates or political parties is permitted in nonprofit organizations (Nonprofit VOTE, 2017).

Educating social work students about the best practices of voter engagement is important because populations served by social workers often fit the demographic characteristics of those who are less likely to vote. Voting barriers which contribute to low rates of voting among people of color and people who are low-income are less likely to be experienced by people of higher social status (Rolfe, 2012). Low voter participation, particularly of oppressed individuals, is a problem because it reduces the likelihood of responsive governmental solutions to problems of those who typically do not vote (Bartels, 2008; Campbell, 2007; Frasure & Williams, 2009; Piven, 2011; Shipler, 2005; Verba, Schlozman, Brady, & Nie, 1993).

According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), youth voting matters for several reasons. First, “voting is habit-forming,” (CIRCLE, n.d., para. 2) so people are more likely to vote again if they do it once. Second, CIRCLE explains that people between the ages of 18 and 29 make up 21% of the voting eligible population in the U.S. Forty six million young people are eligible to vote, which is larger than the 39 million seniors eligible to vote. Third, “involving young people in election-related learning, activities and discussion can have an impact on the young person’s household, increasing the likelihood that others in the household will vote” (CIRCLE, n.d., para. 2). CIRCLE concludes that the failure to engage young voters from underrepresented voting groups now will reinforce current gaps in participation, which could persist over the course of the young people’s lifetimes. Educating students, therefore, particularly those in the 18-29 year old age group, around voting is an efficient and sustainable method of increasing voting rates among young people.

Classroom-based Voter Engagement Project

The project described here was implemented in Fall 2016 with undergraduate students at a university in Minnesota and a university in New York. The two program sites coordinated
their implementation of the program, using similar project guidelines and activities, and conferred over the course of the semester on the logistics of the project. Some differences were necessary due to differences in schedules and state-imposed registration deadlines.

The basic framework of the project was consistent across both sites. The project extended over several weeks, beginning in September at the start of the semester, and ending on Election Day in November. Students received several trainings throughout the semester on voter engagement, including rules and best practices in their state. Working in small groups, students determined a population or community to target for voter engagement throughout the semester. Examples of target populations for the project included students, people who are homeless, residents of particular neighborhoods, and people who identify as transgender. Each group tailored their activities to best meet the needs of their target group—focusing sequentially (although with some overlap) on voter registration, voter engagement, and voter turnout.

Methods

Building from this body of knowledge, and our previous work in this area, our research was organized around the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of a classroom-based voter engagement project on perceptions of the importance of voting in social work practice?

2. How does participating in this voter engagement project impact students’ self-reported sense of political efficacy?

In Minnesota, the voter engagement project was conducted as part of a required BSW policy class. This was the second year of the voter engagement project at this school. It had been piloted during municipal elections in Fall 2015. The majority of students in Minnesota (n = 16) were juniors and social work majors; one was a social welfare minor. The course meets once per week, for three hours.
There were some differences in the implementation in New York. This was the first year of implementation and it was part of a new elective course open to social work and non-social work students. The participants (n = 13) were primarily social work students, but also included English, business, and psychology majors. They ranged in student status from first year to senior students.

The schedule and primary activities for the project are presented in Table 1. While there are a few differences—for example, the sites used different trainers on voter outreach and engagement—the project overall was very similar. Instructors shared materials for classroom instruction and activities before and during the semester, and also had regular check-in conversations via phone as the semester progressed.

**Instruments**

Evaluation data were collected at three points using a pre-test, process survey, and post-test designed for voter engagement within schools of social work. Pre-tests were completed by students on the first day of the semester—prior to their receiving any training on voter engagement within the classroom. Process surveys were completed directly following the introductory, class-long presentation on voter engagement best practices. Post-tests were administered at the end of the semester, shortly after Election Day. Additional evaluation data were collected from de-identified student papers at one of the sites after the semester concluded. The evaluation was part of a larger study approved by both universities’ Institutional Review Boards.

The evaluation materials have been used since 2015 in several schools of social work across the country to examine the impact of voter engagement activities in classroom and field settings. Grounded in a theory of planned behavior (TPB), the surveys ask respondents about their attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control as they relate to their political participation (Eckstein, Noack, & Gniewosz, 2013). Through this TPB lens, the surveys measure the attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control surrounding the political behavior of students in order to measure their level of intention to engage in political behavior and, therefore, their true political behavior. Other characteristics that may influence one’s political behavior
include demographics such as their age, race, and gender, as the literature suggests that these are determinants of political participation (Ostrander, 2017).

Political participation (behavior) is conceptualized as the participants’ activities that are intended to affect change within local, state, and/or federal governments, which were adapted from Rome and Hoechstetter’s 2010 survey of the political participation of professional social workers. The surveys measure the level of students’ intentions of engaging in political behavior (e.g., registering to vote, voting, and involvement in voter engagement or registration activities with others), which are key determinants of their actual political behaviors (Glanz, Rimer, & Viswanath, 2008). Behavioral intentions are determined by “their attitude [emphasis in original] toward performing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Minnesota</th>
<th>New York</th>
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</table>
| **Phase 1** (September/October) | • Introduction to the project; pre-test  
• Introduction to voting and voter registration in Minnesota by a Voter Outreach Specialist from the Minnesota Secretary of State’s Office; speaker from League of Women Voters  
• Process survey  
• First group meeting  
• End of voter pre-registration per state deadline | • Introduction to the project; pre-test  
• Introduction to voting in social work by Humphreys Institute director; speakers from campus voting agency and League of Women Voters  
• Process survey  
• First group meeting  
• End of voter pre-registration per state deadline |
| **Phase 2** (October/November) | • Voter registration group report due  
• Election Day; class does not meet but students are required to participate in voter turnout activities | • Voter registration group report due  
• Election Day outreach; class meets on Tuesday, so outreach is outside of class |
| **Phase 3** (November/December) | • Election debrief  
• Voter engagement group report due  
• Election Day group report  
• Individual reflection on voter engagement activity  
• Post-test survey | • Election debrief  
• Voter education/voter outreach (combined) report due  
• Individual reflection on voter engagement activity  
• Post-test survey |
the behavior and their subjective norm associated with the behavior... [in addition to their] perceived control over the behavior” (Glanz, Rimer, & Viswanath, 2008, p. 70). Perceived control, in this study, is being operationalized as political efficacy. We measured students’ sense of political efficacy (perceived control) with the American National Election Studies (ANES, 2012) scales; that is, their beliefs that they are capable to intervene in the political system (internal efficacy), that the system is capable of responding to their intervention (external efficacy), and the combination of the two (overall political efficacy). These ANES scales of internal and external efficacy have each been tested for validity and reliability (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991).

Data Analysis

The survey results for each institution were analyzed separately. Quantitative analysis, including descriptive statistics (means, frequencies) and comparison of means (t-tests) were run using SPSS. For the qualitative analysis, data were collected from two sources: open-ended survey questions and student papers. For the open-ended responses, we began by coding the responses in each domain of the survey, for example “feelings about voting” or “voter engagement activities.” Next, we analyzed each collection of qualitative data for themes and constructs. Student papers were collected at the end of the semester, de-identified, and reviewed. Once the data were de-identified, we used a thematic analysis approach in order to identify, categorize, and aggregate the data (Padgett, 2017). We began by coding the responses for themes, using key words and concepts from the surveys. Next, we identified similar concepts that were identified in the qualitative responses that were either aggregated under a single label or, if particularly salient, identified as a theme. Each of these labels and themes were reviewed and refined by the researchers. The final themes were manually organized using word processing software.

Findings

Between the two classroom sites, students reported registering 458 voters (61 in New York and 397 in Minnesota) and educating and facilitating voting of many more, in settings
including on-campus locations, local nonprofit agencies, homeless shelters, online identity groups, areas around the Universities, and with their friends, families, and co-workers. After participating in the project, students in both sites reported that they were likely to integrate voting and voter engagement into their professional practice through encouraging others to register to vote, helping others engage with the voting process, and encouraging others to vote. Table 2 describes the demographics of the participants in the study, Table 3 describes their engagement prior to the project, and Table 4 describes their statements of intended behavior after completion of the project.

Table 2. Demographic Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Minnesota</th>
<th>New York</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17 (100%)</td>
<td>6 (67%)</td>
<td>23 (88%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (22%)</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-binary</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (11%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>10 (56%)</td>
<td>5 (56%)</td>
<td>15 (56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>2 (11%)</td>
<td>1 (11%)</td>
<td>3 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bi- or multi-racial</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>1 (11%)</td>
<td>2 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>1 (11%)</td>
<td>2 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>3 (17%)</td>
<td>1 (11%)</td>
<td>4 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Mean=22</td>
<td>Mean=20.9</td>
<td>Mean=21.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Engagement with Voting Before the Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Minnesota</th>
<th>New York</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Mean*</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How frequently do you vote in federal elections?</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.76 (SD=1.56)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How frequently do you vote in state elections?</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.18 (SD=1.55)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How frequently do you vote in local or municipal elections?</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.35 (SD=1.42)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior to this training, how important was voter engagement to you and your social work practice?</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1.53 (SD=1.38)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale; 5=Very and 1=Not at all

Table 4. Engagement with Voting After the Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Minnesota</th>
<th>New York</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Mean*</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How frequently do you plan on voting in federal elections?</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.92 (SD=0.29)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How frequently do you plan on voting in state elections?</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.83 (SD=0.39)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How frequently do you plan on voting in local or municipal elections?</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.33 (SD=0.65)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After this training, how important is voter engagement to you and your social work practice?</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.24 (SD=1.03)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale; 5=Very and 1=Not at all

*Unlike other post-test questions, this item was included in the process survey.
Participants

Twenty-seven students participated in the project. The youngest participant was 18, the oldest was 42. The majority of participants were between the ages of 20 and 25. The majority of students identified as female (24), two as male, and one identified as gender non-binary. Four students identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino, three as African-American, fifteen as white, one as Asian, two as bi-racial, and two as “other.” All but two of the students were BSW students.

Voter Participation

Students registered voters at a number of sites, focusing on a variety of populations and communities, including students, veterans, and people experiencing homelessness. Students reported that they recognized multiple connections between their voter engagement activities and their social work skills. For example, one respondent said,

This project provided a great way for me to actively use many of the social work skills we’ve spent the semester learning. Focusing on a particular population showed me how important it is to get to know who it is that you are serving. The issues and barriers present in the homeless community will not be the same problems and obstacles present in, say, a particular immigrant community. By taking the time to reflect on the lives of homeless adults, we were able to tailor our information and research to best reach and serve them. I also learned the importance on connecting to other resources in the community.

Students reported an increased likelihood of their own participation in federal, state, and local elections. At the beginning of the semester, five students (four of the 17 in Minnesota and one of the twelve in New York) reported that they were not registered to vote. By the end of the project, all survey respondents indicated that they were registered. In both pre- and post-test surveys, the students were also asked a number of questions about their past and future plans for voting, measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Results for these questions are provided in Table 3 (pre-test) and Table 4
(post-test). These shifts in attitude are reflected in the following comment:

I had, regretfully, never voted before coming into class. I also was convinced that I had “registered wrong” and thus was afraid to even try and vote. Basically, I had a lot of unanswered questions and preconceived notions about what registration and voting entailed. I am so thankful to have gotten more information about the voting process in Minnesota because of this class and this project, more specifically. I know that I will take this information with me and use it in the years to come. Moving forward, I’m excited to find creative ways to engage my future clients in voting. This has turned into something bigger than a class project... It’s a project that will span my entire life.

**Political Efficacy**

As described above, students’ sense of political efficacy was measured using a scale from the ANES. As described in Table 5, findings from our evaluation of the two program sites indicate that students in Minnesota reported an increase in their sense of overall efficacy and in their sense of external efficacy, while results in New York were less clear. Other differences between the two program sites’ results included how students in the two program sites viewed the importance of voting and voter engagement to social work practice.

Qualitative comments from students offer some further insights into students’ experience with their sense of political efficacy. Students from both sites reported an increase in their own sense of efficacy. For example, one student wrote:

This project has made me realize how important voting can be. I was one of those people who had the belief that my vote doesn’t really matter. This election year was the first year I was old enough to vote in the presidential election, so I think the project came at the right time. I was registered to vote, but I had no intentions of actually voting. From everything I have been taught so far in the semester, I learned that my vote could actually make a difference.
Other students offered similar statements, such as, “Voting has become more important to me & I am now more knowledgeable about the process. I feel more passionate about voting! I want to help other people who are confused or scared about voting.”

Several respondents remarked that they now felt that voter engagement could be an important part of increased self-efficacy for clients. For example, one wrote, “One benefit is knowing that [clients] have a say in our political system,” while another wrote that clients might now realize that “…their vote does count.” Another respondent shared an anecdote from her group’s experience of conducting voter registration at a homeless shelter. She wrote:

On election day [sic] there was a young woman who we helped register to vote for the first time. She came out after and greeted us with high fives. She told us about how important voting was to her because her grandmother has always voted and it was a dream of hers to vote just like her grandmother had. It’s people like her that remind us what voting can do for our clients.

Another student discussed the connection between social work practice and voter engagement:

As social workers, we often engage with people who are experiencing difficulties or barriers when trying to access resources in their communities. This lack of resources creates a situation where they are powerless in the political realm. Our work as advocates and brokers places us in situations where we can recognize firsthand the issues our clients face as a result of some of the policies implemented by our elected officials. Our education and expertise put us in positions where we can mobilize others and encourage them to use their votes to elect representatives who will address the issues they are facing. It is this combination of recognition and credibility that makes it necessary for social workers to not only cast their votes but to empower our clients to cast theirs as well.
Anecdotally, community-based sites also reported that the voter engagement activates made an impact for their clients. For example, a supervisor at a local homeless shelter in Minnesota sent the following email (shared with permission) to the student organizers:

My social service office and I would like to thank the volunteers that came to assist with voter information. You made a difference in the lives of those who you talked to, and encouraged them to get their voices heard. Many that come in are so disenfranchised that even hearing that we want them to vote gives a boost to their self-esteem, even if they told you that they won’t vote because it ‘doesn’t matter.’

The qualitative comments suggest that respondents in both states reported an increased sense of efficacy; however, there were some differences between the two sites in terms of reports of external efficacy and overall efficacy. While all the qualitative comments from the Minnesota site were positive, several students in the New York site reported a more mixed sense of political efficacy at the end of the project. When asked if their feelings or beliefs about voting changed over the course of the project, for example, one respondent said, “Not much. It’s necessary, and it’s important that voters are educated on it thoroughly, but the system is intensely corrupt in areas,” while another wrote, “Nope, not at all. I don’t really like it [voting].” A third student, while more positive about their own efficacy, identified a sense of dissatisfaction with the system as a whole; writing about change from start to finish, this student stated, “Not very much because I have been an advocate throughout. I think it is important for people to voice their opinion even if the voting system is flawed.”

Limitations

The quantitative findings of this study are limited in their generalizability due to the small sample size, and there are reliability challenges that may be attributable to the particular political environment of the 2016 presidential election. Further, the qualitative data was utilized for gaining more depth and understanding—supplementary to the quantitative surveys—in this context (Padgett, 2017). Nevertheless, the findings (qualitative
and quantitative) underscore the need to engage social workers and social work students in voting work. With the importance of voting and voter engagement for social workers in all areas of practice (micro, macro, and across settings), it is critical that social work faculty integrate content on voting into their curriculum.

**Discussion**

Students in both universities actively engaged in the project and registered voters. As shown above, however, there were significant differences between the two groups in their outcomes as well as unexpected findings. Possible reasons for these differences across sites include variances in student populations; dissimilarity in the presentation of the project by the two professors; levels of restrictiveness of voting laws in each state; and the particular context of the 2016 presidential election. The two student groups were similar in many ways: both were undergraduate students at predominantly white institutions; and most were social work students, female, and of similar ages. However, there may have been differences between the two groups that were not captured in these demographics that affected the way they experienced voter engagement.

While the projects in the two locations were done as similarly as possible, they were presented and organized by two different instructors. At the university in Minnesota, it was the second time it had been conducted, and the presentation emphasized the group work aspects of the project. Grading was also slightly different, as the instructor used a specification grading model (Nilson, 2014), rather than a more traditional grading approach. At the university in New York, it was the first time the project had been done, and group activities were not completely equivalent to the Minnesota version, which may have made the process less effective. The presenters who came in to train students in each of the sites were also different and may have presented the information differently.

The possible impact of the restrictiveness of voting laws in each state is an area we consider especially important to explore. Neither state requires an ID to vote. However, in many other ways Minnesota has significantly more accessible voting laws than New York. Minnesota led the nation in voter turnout in
2016 with 74.5% of eligible voters casting a ballot (United States Election Project, 2017). Additionally, Minnesota has a relatively open voter registration and voting process, including Election Day voter registration (EDR) and online voter registration, as well as 46 days of early voting prior to Election Day.

The New York site, on the other hand, is located in a state where 56.9% of eligible voters cast ballots (United States Election Project, 2017). New York has a relatively restrictive voter registration process with no EDR nor early voting options. In addition, New York has dealt with a perception of corruption at the state level since our country’s founding. As the character of Alexander Hamilton says in the musical Hamilton, “Corruption’s such an old song that we can sing along in harmony/ And nowhere is it stronger than in Albany” (WMHT, 2016). This reputation has been enhanced in recent years, as New York has seen a string of public attention paid to corruption and poor behavior by policymakers, including accusations, charges, and convictions ranging from sexual harassment to corruption involving some of the state government’s highest-ranking members of both parties (Craig, Rashbaum, & Kaplan, 2016). This environment was mentioned by several students in their descriptions of the challenges of creating change in the electoral and policy systems.

Previous literature has indicated that EDR is linked with higher turnout (Brians & Grofman, 2001) but does not change the partisan balance in a state. In our evaluation, we found that students who participated in a voter engagement project in a state that allows EDR registered substantially more voters. Although both groups were more likely at post-test than pre-test to report plans to vote in federal, state, and local elections, the group in Minnesota scored higher on plans to vote in all three types of elections. In addition, they scored much higher on post-test scores of efficacy, although their scores on these measures prior to the project were similar to the students in New York.

Finally, the 2016 election was a challenging time to do voter engagement for a variety of reasons. One significant difference between the two states was that Minnesota was a battleground (or swing) state and New York was not. This could have affected the ways in which the students experienced this project in a number of ways, including exposure to campaign advertising
and media, visits from candidates and their surrogates, and campaign organizing efforts. Additionally, the potential impact of the negative tone of much of the presidential election discourse may have impacted students’ willingness to engage in any part of political work—including voter engagement. The negativity of the 2016 discourse was a frequent topic of conversation throughout the course of the project, particularly in New York. Although there were a number of races on the ballot in addition to federal and state legislative seats, some students may have been deterred from engaging with the electoral system altogether due to the presidential election, the hotly contested primaries, and the ongoing negativity of this election cycle.

**Implications for Practice, Social Work Education, and Research**

The findings from this study have a number of implications for social workers. First, they suggest engaging students in voter registration are an effective way to engage them around the political process and their communities. From a practice perspective, this suggests that social workers should seek out opportunities to incorporate voter engagement into their work. While in need of further exploration, the findings of this evaluation also suggest that working in structured, collaborative groups may have an impact on the outcome of perceived political efficacy of students. The Minnesota site’s group work model draws heavily from a Freirean popular education model, where participants engage collaboratively to raise both their own critical consciousness and that of others through “total participation” (Carroll & Minkler, 2000, p. 25) of the students. Students are empowered to design, shape, and drive their groups’ goals and practice with support and encouragement from the instructor. The popular education model suggests that fostering empowerment at the group level will, in turn, grow empowerment at more macro levels (Carroll & Minkler, 2000; Hardina, 2013). The practice implications of this model fit with the larger empowerment tradition in social work practice, as well as the model of voter engagement for empowerment (Davis, 2010; Lane, Humphreys, Graham, Matthews, & Moriarty, 2007). Social workers who wish to incorporate voter engagement into their practice would be well served, we believe, to model an empowerment approach throughout their
implementation of this goal—from group work, to goal setting, to registration, engagement, and turnout.

Incorporating voter registration activities into policy classes serves multiple pedagogical purposes; it engages students in their own process of voter participation and it allows them to practice some key political social work skills, including working in small groups, planning activities and events, setting strategic plans and goals, and collaborating with outside agencies. Further information about voter engagement as a tool for social work can be found in Lane & Pritzker (2018). Additionally, it allows them to practice engaging with others about politics and political engagement through a comparatively “safe” nonpartisan topic. There is broad concern about the need to learn to communicate across our political differences as a country, and this project creates an opportunity for students to practice political engagement around a more politically neutral topic. This, we hope, will help them build their skills. Communication about political diversity is a social work skill that is highly valued in all practice settings; political social work is not an exception and is a practice setting that social work has been called to deal with more effectively (e.g., Rosenwald, 2006). This project allows students to practice these political social work skills in the classroom setting and in the real world.

There are a number of areas for future research that emerged from this work. The two participating social work programs in this evaluation are located in states with different approaches to voter registration, and we believe that these differences in openness of registration made a difference in the perceived efficacy of our participants. Future research should further explore the impact of voting laws and voter regulation on the political efficacy of residents of those states. There has been a movement nationally, carried out at the state level, to limit voter access—for example, through voter identification laws, or limitations on absentee balloting or access to registration (McElwee, 2015). These laws directly impact social work clients, as they disproportionately affect voting access for some of our most vulnerable citizens (Lane et al., 2007; McElwee, 2015). Less is known on their impact on the political efficacy of social workers, and further research needs to be conducted to investigate these questions.

The findings from this study are limited to data gathered in only two sites during an extraordinary election year. Repeating
the study in other sites would help to deepen our understanding of the impact of these types of projects, as well as the impact of the 2016 presidential election on the results. How does implementing a voter engagement project impact political efficacy in a year without a national election? How did the rhetoric and tone of the 2016 election specifically impact respondents’ efficacy? We plan to continue this project in the future, and hope to gain more insights into these questions.

Conclusion

Voter engagement can be used in the classroom setting to contribute to the professional socialization of social work students, engage students in the beginning of a lifelong commitment to political engagement, and help students connect with and serve their communities. This project also suggests that classroom-based voter engagement can be used to help students understand how social work practice skills such as engaging with diverse individuals and communities, taking an empowerment-based approach, and group work techniques are each applicable to political engagement. As one of the project’s participants noted above, engaging others in the political arena is a lifelong process. The current social, economic, and political contexts provide many challenges to social work students, practitioners, and educators who wish to engage in political and social change; and we look forward to continuing to meet these challenges side-by-side with our students.

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Myth or Reality? Exploring Intergenerational Social Assistance Participation in Ontario, Canada

Tracy A. Smith-Carrier  
King’s University College  
at Western University

Amber Gazso  
York University

Stephanie Baker Collins  
McMaster University

Carrie Smith  
King’s University College  
at Western University

Is there an intergenerational causal link in social assistance (SA) participation? There is a dearth of research addressing this question, yet the belief in ‘welfare dependency’ is unreservedly embraced. The limited research that does attempt to tease out a causal link in intergenerational SA participation remains equivocal. Qualitative research is largely absent in welfare scholarship—research that might provide a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics underlying SA receipt. We employ an exploratory qualitative analysis to understand SA participants’ experiences and perspectives on intergenerational SA usage. We find that the two causal mechanisms underlying intergenerational SA usage, the learning effect and conformity effect, require further investigation. The theoretical foundations fundamental in explaining a causal intergenerational link are shaken by our grounded theory approach.

Keywords: Conformity; intergenerational social assistance use; learning; social assistance; welfare
Introduction

Is there an intergenerational causal link in social assistance participation? Do parents on social assistance cause their children to eventually go on welfare? There is a dearth of research addressing this question in Canada. And yet, the belief in “welfare dependency” (Misra, Moller, & Karides, 2003), which positions people in low income brackets outside the social relations of waged labor and as “dependent on the state” (Scott, London, & Meyers, 2002), is hegemonic (Smith-Carrier, 2011). Not only is the nature of welfare dependency socially constructed to be long-lasting within the individual’s life course, it is thought to be generational in nature; the lone mother on welfare is believed to set the course for her “feebleminded” children (Piven & Cloward, 1971), fueling an endless cycle of dependency (Fraser & Gordon, 1994). Widely embraced in society, the notion of welfare dependency sanctions the vilification of social assistance (SA) participants (Smith-Carrier, 2017) and contributes to a policy climate in which it overshadows the more socially-inclusive goal of poverty reduction. The limited quantitative research that does attempt to tease out a causal link in intergenerational SA participation—that SA receipt is transmitted from parents to their children—remains equivocal. What is largely absent in welfare scholarship is qualitative research—research that might provide a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics underlying intergenerational SA receipt because of its attention to individual meaning, perceptions, and behaviors (Padgett, 1998).

The purpose of this study was to test the theories identified in the intergenerational SA literature. Qualitative research is particularly useful in exploring, confirming, and refining theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and yet there has been a dearth of qualitative studies in the extant literature; qualitative research on intergenerational SA receipt is thus long overdue. We employ an exploratory qualitative analysis to understand SA participants’ experiences and perspectives on intergenerational SA usage and to explore the dynamics that may contribute to shared parent-child SA access, allowing us to consider whether theories cited in the wider literature prove as useful as promised.
The Intergenerational SA Literature

While the hypothesis of welfare dependency dates as far back as the British Poor Laws (Fraser & Gordon, 1994), it became highly politicized and accepted in the academic milieu and by the general public around the same time governments began their retrenchment of welfare state provision (Orloff, 2002). The attention drawn to the “spider’s web of dependency” of the “welfare culture” (Pear, 1986) in the late 1980s in the U.S. triggered the introduction of tighter eligibility criteria, welfare-to-work requirements, and time limits on access. At the same time in Canada, and especially in Ontario, politicians became concerned about the swelling of the caseload and the expense of maintaining what they perceived to be a profligate system that served only to maintain “dependents’” addiction to welfare (Smith-Carrier, 2011). Ontario thus adopted a “tough love” approach aimed at breaking the “cycle of dependency” through the introduction of Ontario Works (OW), which was framed as giving people “a hand up, not a hand out.” Under the policy, benefits were cut by 21.6%, and the “passive” system of SA entitlement based on need was jettisoned, replaced with an “active” one (Fuller, Kershaw, & Pulkingham, 2008) in which participants were mandated to work for their benefits or be sanctioned for non-compliance (Gazso, 2012). While these reform measures were largely instigated due to the ostensible pervasiveness of intergenerational welfare use, there remains a dearth of literature that conclusively affirms “dependency” or that illuminates the nature of intergenerational patterns of SA receipt.

Quantitative research that does exist tests “welfare dependency” as the result of a causal link or an intergenerational correlation between parent-child SA participation. If the link is causal, it is primarily thought to be derived from two key factors: (a) a learning effect: children of SA participants may learn how the system works from their parent(s) on SA; and/or (b) a conformity effect: children may find receipt to be less stigmatizing as a result of having a parent(s) on SA (Beaulieu, Duclos, Fortin, & Rouleau, 2005). If the link is instead correlational, intergenerational SA participation is thought to derive from common environment-specific characteristics affecting both parent and
child. Knowing if parent–child SA participation is causal or cor-
relational is crucial, because either finding will yield disparate
policy implications focused on reforming individuals or struc-
tures. For example, policy aimed at breaking the learning and
conformity effects arising from a causal link might involve ad-
justing SA eligibility criteria and benefit levels versus policy fo-
cused on ameliorating correlated environmental factors (i.e., the
lack of job or educational prospects shared by parent and child)
(see Beaulieu, Duclos, Fortin, & Rouleau, 2001; Penman, 2006;
Stenberg, 2000).

Numerous American quantitative studies have tested the in-
tergenerational transmission of SA hypothesis, although many
studies are now dated and employ less than ideal sample sizes,
observation windows, or age ranges of participants, which have
likely biased estimates (Page, 2004); results are, overall, inconclu-
sive. Some more recent work has emerged in Europe. In Sweden,
Edmark and Hanspers (2012), using a sibling difference method
(to isolate causal effects from correlated factors), found a high
positive intergenerational correlation, but not a causal effect,
whereas Stenberg (2000) found an intergenerational correlation
only in households where particular social problems were pre-
sent (e.g., a father with a criminal record). In the UK, Schoon et al.’s
(2012) study on parental ”worklessness” found that it alone did
not cause poorer outcomes in children and adolescents (e.g., re-
lated to cognitive ability, education, behaviors, and attitudes), but
these were adversely impacted by the complex and multilayered
socio-economic factors facing ”workless” families.

Currently only one study exists that tests intergenera-
tional SA transmission in Canada (Beaulieu et al., 2005). Using ad-
ministrative data in Quebec, Beaulieu et al. found a significant
parent-child correlation that derived from conforming and
learning effects, both of which suggest a causal link—but the
answer was not definitive. Study data revealed that, on average,
a one-percentage unit increase in parental participation during
a child’s pre-adult years (age 7–17) generated a 0.29 percentage
unit increase in the child’s participation rate during early adult-
hood (age 18–21). The authors conclude, however, by stating
that this link may, in fact, be due in part to the occurrence of
events correlated with parental participation, not distinct from
it (Beaulieu et al., 2005).
Some studies point to a ”welfare culture,” akin to a ”culture of poverty,” as a possible vehicle for intergenerational SA receipt (see Antel, 1992; Baron, Cobb-Clark, & Erkal, 2008). However, few studies identify which cultural values specifically are transmitted from parent to child, and rarely are these included as variables in intergenerational welfare analyses. While many affirm the importance of cultural values, there are equally others who argue that the lack of opportunities and resources shared by parent and child is more likely to influence SA use (e.g., Bartholomae, Fox, & McKenry, 2004; Martin, 2003). The dynamics or mechanisms underlying the intergenerational SA link continue to remain unclear (see also Moffitt, 1992). Indeed, Rank and Cheng (1995) suggested just over two decades ago that “previous research has been marked by its absence of a theoretical understanding of the intergenerational use of welfare, which has been a critical oversight” (p. 674). Frequently, in the absence of a clearly delineated theoretical framework, a classical economic theoretical lens is applied, albeit implicitly.

As statistical models alone cannot provide the appropriate explanations for intergenerational SA use, the importance of robust theoretical understandings on the mechanisms underlying SA receipt are imperative. To date, there have been few to no (to our knowledge) qualitative research studies that endeavor to tease out the dynamics affecting intergenerational SA usage in light of established hypotheses about cause and effect in quantitative research. This study pursues this objective.

Methods

Sampling & Recruitment

After securing ethics approval from three institutional review boards, we worked with the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) to identify and recruit our participant sample. In the spring of 2016, the MCSS sent a letter introducing the study to parents within a subset of the OW population, according to the following inclusion criteria: parents, ages 32–70, with children, ages 18–64, both in receipt (or formerly in receipt) of SA from one of the three research sites: London, Toronto, and Hamilton, Ontario. The letter specifically targeted parents for recruitment, and requested, employing a referral/
snowball sampling approach (Patton, 2002), if they were interested in referring their adult children (ages 18–64) to the study. Parents and/or their adult children interested in hearing more about the study were asked to contact one of the researchers via phone using the contact information provided. To ensure the complete confidentiality of both parties was respected, parents did not know whether their adult children participated in the study, and vice versa. Over the phone, the researcher reviewed the informed letter of consent. If the candidate verbally agreed to participate, the researcher scheduled an interview at a mutually convenient date and time. Interviews were held at coffee shops, the local library, or in participants’ homes. At the time of the interview, the researcher secured informed consent in writing. Participants were informed that they would receive $30 in recognition of their time and contributions to the study, they could choose not to answer any questions, or could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty (and still receive the $30; none withdrew).

We completed a total of 31 (1-1.5 hour) interviews with parents and adult children (conducted separately) (London, n = 12; Hamilton, n = 9; Toronto, n = 10). Most interviews were conducted separately with parents on SA and their adult children, but in two cases, the adult child of the parent was present at the interview. There were four dyads in the data (parents linked to their adult children; neither party was aware of the other’s participation). The sample of participants was quite diverse, including single parents, immigrant and native-born families, lone working-age adults, and young people. Experiences of abuse and trauma in participants’ backgrounds were common, presenting in various forms (i.e., domestic violence, child abuse, and/or family neglect); as a result, there were 17 participants (more than half the sample) who had personal experience with child welfare. The health and mental health of participants was also compromised in many cases, with a number of participants reporting chronic conditions (e.g., diabetes, bipolar depression) or relatively new ailments (e.g., back injury).

In-Depth Interviews

Our in-depth interviews with participants aimed to identify the social, economic, health, and environmental factors
affecting parents and children who are participating (e.g., on OW), or have participated in SA in the past. An interview guide was employed, outlining sample questions and probes, as necessary. The questions posed address the environmental factors shaping participants’ SA use (e.g., how would you describe your neighborhood?), potentially indicative of shared determinants or an intergenerational SA correlation, and individual factors influencing participants’ SA receipt (e.g., how did you learn about SA?), possibly reflective of a causal link. Interviews were digitally recorded, unless the participant preferred that hand notes be written instead (two participants asked that the digital recorder be stopped at one point and that written notes be taken, although later requested that the recorder be re-started).

Analysis Strategy

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and entered, with written notes and memos, into QDA Miner Lite for analysis. We employed concurrent data collection and analysis, memo-taking, and the constant comparative method; data from one set of interviews were compared to subsequent interview data, an iterative process that informed successive data collection and analysis. This inductive procedure was used to generate categories and themes that captured participants’ thoughts and experiences of intergenerational SA receipt. In addition to ascertaining emergent categories, we analysed the corpus of the data using a priori codes, specifically in relation to SA learning, conformity, and categories reflective of shared determinants of parent and child. We employed a process of open coding (the process whereby categories were identified and their properties and dimensions uncovered), followed by a subsequent round of coding to refine the categories identified and link them across various dimensions for both the predetermined codes and the emergent categories.

To ensure trustworthiness in our analysis, we used thick and detailed descriptions in our analysis, met frequently for peer debriefing (Creswell, 1998), and employed theory and interdisciplinary triangulation (Padgett, 1998). Several key themes emerged in the data analysis; the first two sections of our findings document the themes related to the key effects (learning
and conformity [or imitation]; see Beaulieu et al., 2001) identified in the literature as being salient in establishing a causal link in intergenerational SA receipt, and the third section relates the themes that emerged with respect to the shared determinants of parents and their children.

Findings

The Learning Effect

Recall that the premise of the learning effect is that children learn how to use SA while living with parents accessing benefits, again, increasing the likelihood of their receipt (Beaulieu et al., 2005; Moffit, 1992). Two main themes emerged in relation to the learning effect: being unaware of parental SA receipt and learning about SA.

Unaware of parental SA receipt. During their childhood, not all adult children were aware of their parents’ past experiences with SA; for some, they became aware of this shared history much later in life, if at all. A few (adult) children spoke of the shame and embarrassment their parents must have felt in hiding such information from them. For instance, Kobena noted,

They didn’t really say anything about it. I wasn’t sure how their feelings were back then. It would have been more informative to me if I knew growing up exactly what was going on in that part. Now I understand that they probably felt embarrassed, like how I feel embarrassed now. I feel like they felt like I would not understand them. They’re one of the parents that if you don’t ask, you won’t know.

Similarly, for Selina, SA usage, along with many other important topics, was not a conversation she was free to explore with her parents.

No, there was never talk of that. There was never anything discussed in front of the children. We went to our bedrooms and then whatever discussed was discussed. Ever. I can never remember being included in the conversation.
In Daanis’s case, the realization of the very existence of SA did not come until she was in adulthood. When asked, “So, you don’t think your parents were ever on Ontario Works?” she responded, “No. When I first came to the city I didn’t even know there was such thing as welfare.” Kali was also unaware that her parents or son ever accessed SA (this was either a sampling error or she simply was not informed). Discussing how her parents felt about SA when she was a child, she shared,

I don’t think they looked at it (SA) in a negative way. I think they looked at it as a last resort and something that you would want to avoid. I don’t remember talking about it or even if I hung out with anybody as a kid that was on assistance.

*Learning About SA*

Although some participants admitted to learning about SA from their parents, others felt they had learned about it from other significant people in their lives. Friends were the apparent source of SA information for Kobena.

I learned about income assistance through, while I was in high school...a couple of my friends were on it and I learned it through them. They told me about how Ontario Works can help you get your own place. All these things. I think the reason they told me is cause they knew I was on it, well my parents were on it, but I wasn't speaking about it ‘cause I didn't know until later on, right? I learned about it when I went through the divorce with my ex, because then I needed to be on it...I didn’t want to be on it.

On the other hand, Wenona claimed she learned about SA from her grandmother (Kobena, above), who she had lived with since age “8 or 9” (given that her father was an alcoholic and “wasn’t stable enough” to care for her).

Well, my grandma told me that I had to eventually pay my rent somehow when I lived with her. She wanted me to grow up like that and pay rent and get a job like that. I didn’t want to do that so she told me to get on assistance, so that’s when I got on it. But I heard about it from my parents back then when I was little. I didn’t really care for it or try to go on it.
Very few parents (two expressly) admitted to advising their children to turn to SA when under-employed or unemployed. One was Lisa, whose parents had never been on SA (that she was aware of), but who had a son with post-traumatic stress disorder (from being in the Navy) who she had advised to access assistance.

I had to tell my son (what) to do. He was determined he didn’t want to be on it but I told him your job is not giving you enough hours to survive to pay the rent. You need to be responsible for your bills, so you need to go to OW for help. Even some of the programs like (agency name) won’t touch you unless you’re on income assistance.

The other participant who stated they gave their child advice about SA was Abla. Abla was an immigrant from Africa, who had experienced deep poverty during his childhood in Ghana. He had two sons and two daughters; one of his sons had recently broken up with his wife, and had difficulty getting enough work hours. Abla realized his son was on OW, then gave him advice:

I realized just last week that he’s on Ontario Works. So I call him and I advise him...I said, “You should tell them if you want to go back to (college) or (university); they are there to help you. They will direct you. Don’t put your mind on the money they are giving you.” He took my advice. So yeah, it’s good as a last resort to help you move on.

The presence of a learning effect appears questionable in these data. While some participants had claimed they learned about the existence of SA from parents and/or friends, few admitted to giving or being given specific advice about how to access or navigate the program. Indeed, many parents stated that they would not recommend the program (to their children or anyone else), and would only do so if the person had absolutely no “other support system” to turn to.

The Conformity Effect

Structural versus individual explanations and welfare stigma. Explanations, either individual or structural, for "welfare
dependency” are inherent in the existing quantitative models; the former pointing to deficiencies within the individual, the latter reflecting environmental constraints leading to SA use. Explanations of SA receipt directly or indirectly tie into participants’ views of and experiences with stigma (see Baumberg, 2016) and thus fit within the findings related to the conformity effect. That is, the conformity effect is said to reflect the decrease in stigma that children purportedly experience as a result of living with parents who have received SA. In relation to stigma, participants were all acutely aware of the inferior status ascribed to SA recipients. Adil, whose parents immigrated to Canada, expressed,

There definitely is (stigma). You can’t deny that. It’d probably be that people think those receiving income assistance are too lazy to find a job or just should not be in a situation where they should have to be receiving income assistance...Maybe they might think the money is going to waste or it’s constantly going to people who aren’t looking to get a job anyways. I think that’s the stigma floating in the air.

The experience of going to the SA office resulted in a visceral reaction for Selina, “Once I went into the (welfare) office I felt dirty. I had to come home here and scrub my skin. It was like, I hate this, I hate this, I hate this! It was the most horrible experience.”

On the whole, participants typically attached structural explanations to justify their own need for assistance, while ascribing individual explanations to explicate others’ SA receipt. For example, Cian (whose parents had been on SA when he was a child, and has two adult daughters presently on SA) shared, “Well, I blame the economy. For sure. Like I said, my oldest daughter has worked in retirement homes but now there’s no jobs out there and if there is, it’s like McDonalds, Mr. Sub, and all that...” He went on to say, “Like me, I’d love to have a job but nobody will take on an old man who’s four years from retirement...” A lack of employment opportunities was clearly on Kali’s mind as well:

I have never struggled as much in the past year finding a job in my profession. I don’t know if it’s the economy. I’ve applied at (fast food restaurant) and was told that I’m over qualified...
So it has been a nightmare over the past year trying to find suitable employment. I’m registered with all the temp companies, I’ve knocked on doors...

Indeed, individual explanations proliferated in the interviews, albeit commonly when referring to other people (often denoted in the use of the third person, not first), not participants themselves. Niimi expressed, “I figure possibly they got fired from their jobs or they’re young and they’re just starting out. Homeless...(they) got in an accident or (have) a disability.” “I think...a lot of mental issues” (Paul) created a need for SA, or because of “losing a job, marriage or separation, moving, or unexpected illness or needing to look after an aging parent” (Gwen). Gwen also felt SA receipt had more to do with an individual’s “personality, some kids are more motivated to succeed or they feel it’s more important to make it on their own.”

A few participants were suspect of others’ need for assistance. Paul (who had experienced significant abuse from his parents as a child, who were not to his knowledge ever on SA, and had two children, one from whom he was presently estranged) shared, replete with expletives,

If you’re young enough, go out and get yourself a goddamn job! Get off! What the hell are you doing? If you’re 20 years old, or even 17...go out and get a job...I think it’s time for parents to get off their friggin’ ass and give them a kick in the ass, and say, “Hey, get the hell out and get a damn job. We’re not supporting you anymore.”

Structural and individual explanations could also be combined. Possibly beneath Daanis’s explanation below is the repeated history of social and economic marginalization within Indigenous communities.

I think it’s cultural in some instances, or your environment, like if you were brought up that way. Like, I don’t mean to be mean to say it, but welfare breeds welfare, right? Like if that’s how you were taught you survive month to month, like, I don’t only just see it in the city. I see it on the reserve too. That’s how you know how to survive.
Participants thus resisted the hegemonic stereotypes of SA recipients to depict themselves, but simultaneously endorsed them to characterize others. Abla explained,

The idea that you’re maybe inept or stupid or lazy or don’t want to work...But...I know myself. I know how hard I work to get an education, and it’s just unfortunate that I haven’t been able to get a job. So why would I carry this load of people thinking that you’re a bum.

While some “just look(s) at it (as a way) to get by” (Wenona); other groups “scam the government just so that they have extra money” (Odina). Individual participants in our study, however, use it as “a temporary solution...to help (me) move forward” (Linda).

Parental expectations. Should the conformity effect be interpreted more broadly, as children’s desire to conform to their parents’ expectations of them, we found that none of the adult children we interviewed, whose parents were on SA, directly indicated a desire to conform to their example (role modeling). Becoming a “welfare recipient” was simply not an aspirational goal. Although some expressed being subjected to specific parental expectations as a child, others did not. In response to the question asking if their parents had particular expectations of them as a child, almost all of the participants who answered in the affirmative stressed that “education” (Gwen) and “hard work” (Ronica) were of utmost importance. Kobena, an older Indigenous woman, commented that her parents “always encouraged me to further my education...they encouraged me to go to (college)...They always encouraged me to do my best.”

Several participants discussed how they had worked hard to instill a work ethic into their children, regardless of their personal employment situations and how these changed over time. Isi explained,

(E)ven being a mother on welfare, I really worked hard to show them that I’m not just a lazy person. I’ve applied for many jobs, I went and done house cleaning throughout four years of my life. I mean, I’ve done lots of different jobs to show them that you have to work to make a living...People just don’t hand you things, you know. You have to work for what you want.
Marianne, in her late 30s, was resolute that her children would not access SA.

They are not going on OW; I’m going to make sure they work. That is why I am working my butt off to make sure that’s not happening. No, never. Their dad wouldn’t allow it either. Their dad works two jobs and has a savings account for both my kids to make sure that never has to happen.

In this way, parents on SA were constructed to be the negative case example of what their children should not become as adults. Rather than taking the perceived easy route of assistance, as constructed in the welfare dependency argument, here, an avoidance narrative dominates. Adil shared,

I do think that people do learn from each other. I know I’m definitely learning from my parents. To do that differently from what they’ve done in the past.

Many participants discussed how they had strived to conform to their parents’ expectations for them, irrespective of the economic class of their parents. Gwen acknowledged, “I don’t think I really liked school all that much but I really wanted to do well to please my mom.” She also noted,

I met my husband-to-be when I was 15. I was far too young to be leaving school and even thinking about getting married, so my mom said, “No, you’re going to finish high school and go on to university.” And I did.

Other participants stated that their parents did not verbally communicate their expectations for them as children, although this was typically the case when there was violence in the home. Marianne, who lived with an abusive father, shared,

I’m sorry, but I don’t think so. I think our expectation was, no nothing...Like if we were to get into trouble all we would do is get sent to our room and then we would just cry to get out...

The findings suggest a need for the conformity effect to be problematized. Overall, parents endeavoured to model a strong work ethic (even while on SA), aiming to send the message to
their children of the value of “work, not welfare.” The stigma of welfare does not appear to be in any way reduced for participants’ children; rather, the stigmatization of SA use by others became shared knowledge by parent and child, further perpetuating the stigma of being on SA, making it seem scary and undesirable to children in particular. As such, children’s conformity is more aligned to the view that welfare dependency is a problem per se, not conformity to the individual practice of dependency.

**Shared Determinants—or Intergenerational Link?**

In the extant quantitative literature, and explored here in qualitative research, intergenerational experiences of SA use are said to arise from shared or correlated environmental factors (e.g., growing up in similar impoverished neighborhoods, having comparable educational/employment opportunities, etc.). Various themes emerged in these data that point to shared determinants, expressed here as “linked lives” (see McDaniel & Bernard, 2011).

**Living in Impoverished Neighborhoods**

Many, but not all, participants came from similar backgrounds as their parents. Kobena shared, “The neighborhood that we lived in was, like ah, low income area where low income families live, so some were on it (SA)....some were not. A lot of my friends understood.” Isi described how

(her children) got teased a lot in that time. I didn’t have the money to keep their clothes clean all the time...I had to go to food banks all the time. I had no help from their father...it was really hard, they were teased...so we were stereotyped, just being in that neighborhood, you know? And I didn’t have a drug problem, or nothing.

Jenn described her neighborhood: “It was kind of embarrassing and rough. Everybody coming into school with new clothes, and we’re sitting there wondering where our next pair of shoes are.”
Intergenerational Transmission

To tease out the underpinnings of causality, expressed through the presence of conformity and learning effects, we asked pointedly if participants believed there to be an intergenerational link in SA receipt. Responses were mixed, albeit again typically reinforcing the notion that learning and/or conformity effects may be at play for others, but not for participants themselves. Proposing a link, Kobena claimed, “I think there is. The kids kinda see what their parents are doing and...if they see that it’s okay then they themselves are going to get on it too. If it’s not harming their parents and if their parents openly talk about it, then they have an understanding about it.” Some, as in the case of Adil, believed in the existence of a link, but again, not in his particular case.

I think that people who were raised in a household that is receiving income assistance will continue to carry out that norm. I think it’s become a routine for them and people are afraid of change and that routine carries on. Personally, in my position, I think that I’m unique from other people. I’ll do my best to get my life more on track.

Ronica, who talked earlier about the value of hard work, reasoned that an intergenerational link might be forged if individuals are raised not to value themselves.

Maybe it is how they value themselves...how the parents value themselves and how the children see the parents valuing themselves. Because if you have a positive attitude about lifting up yourself, then your children are going to see that. But if you don’t care, they must see it as something good, (as) I don’t care either. Easy money, why do I have to go out and work?

The idea of being “raised properly,” implying being raised with a strong work ethic (as discussed in the conformity section), is similarly echoed by Jade:

I think the way they (people on SA) were raised, to be honest. If you were raised properly, I would think, that you would try to go to college or go get a job, and do things the right way. Which is not to say that we weren’t raised properly, but we
could have been raised a little better… I mean my mom did her best. I do think that living with my dad with the drinking and stuff I think played a part in the way we were raised.

She also claimed, “I mean, for some kids they must have had a really loving and supporting household for them to just go out and get a job right away and never to go on OW.” In contrast, some participants, like Joseph, were not convinced that an intergenerational link exists. Joseph shared, “No, my son would rather be working; he’d like to get out to work.” Or, if a link does exist, it was thought to do so because parents make SA appear attractive (re: the learning effect). Isa explained,

No, it’s not hereditary, no. It’s what you choose, it’s your children and if you’re a mom who is on assistance, and… you’re making it seem like it’s the best life, like a party life, then of course your children are going to think the same thing. But I was not very proud of being on assistance… it helped us out and I was not proud standing in food bank lines, but I did it, you know, because we needed to eat.

Data presented here confirm that many (but certainly not all) parents and their adult children face similar challenges (impoverished neighborhoods, limited choices, insecure attachment relationships) affecting their life trajectories in ways that led both to access SA. The correlation of disadvantage surfaced time and again, as participants recognized they had little choice but to access assistance.

Discussion

Intergenerational Relations

Certain fields of study in intergenerational relations have traditionally postulated a relationship between the behaviors, values, and attitudes of parents and their children concerning divorce (Diekmann & Schmidheiny, 2013), criminal behavior (Besemer, Ahmad, Hinshaw, & Farrington, 2017), education (Addio, 2007), and economic mobility (although the latter shows remarkable variability by country) (Corak, 2013). In other areas, however, a link shared across generations is far less certain—for
instance, child maltreatment (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Even if an intergenerational link is established, what remains murky is the nature of the relationship, that is, whether the association is causal or correlational, and the possible factors underlying each. Our study suggests that the proposed causal mechanisms of intergenerational SA receipt may be unclear, because theoretical understandings on their origins and pathways—the learning effect, the conformity effect, shared determinants—may not be entirely robust—that is, they may not fully capture why parents cause their children to go on to receive SA, if a causal relationship does exist.

The Learning Effect

The learning effect is premised on social learning theory (SLT), which suggests that children observe others and encode their behavior through the “reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral and environmental determinants” (Bandura, 1977, p. vii). SLT assumes three key principles: (a) people, including children, learn through observation and imitation; (b) mental state (cognition) is central to learning, mediated by both external and internal reinforcements (e.g., satisfaction); and (c) learning does not necessarily lead to changes in behavior. Taylor (2004) suggests that SLT aligns with what many developmental psychologists posit: children from the ages of 0-7 are most likely to learn from significant relations (i.e., parents), whereas children from the ages of 7 to early teen years typically model and demonstrate what they have learned from others, including their peers.

Not all adult children in our sample were aware that their parents had received SA when they were younger. If they had, they learned of this receipt during their adolescence or young adulthood, not during the formative years when learning from significant relations (i.e., one’s parents) is purportedly most pronounced. Some parents described withholding their past SA involvement from their children in an effort to hide the shame and indignity of its use. Yet, if adult children had little to no knowledge of their parents’ SA access during childhood, when did this learning take place? Even if adult children had knowledge of their parents’ prior SA access, few (only two, in fact, in the entire sample) shared
they had received specific advice from them on how to navigate the system in order to personally claim benefits. The vast majority of parents claimed they did not want their children to access SA and would recommend it as an absolute last resort (i.e., in times of “desperation” [Lisa]), and even then, only temporarily.

Returning to SLT, children must observe their parents’ behaviors in order to imitate them, and they must be motivated to do so. In what ways, then, would adult children be motivated to access SA? Not one participant in our study sample appeared motivated to pursue a life “on the dole.” Rather than instilling in their children the motivation to be “dependent” on the system, many of the parents in our sample, while on SA or off, endeavoured to drill into their children the value of education and hard work. The supposed values and attitudes associated with SA use (i.e., the lack of motivation to work, dependency) were certainly not verbally reinforced with participants’ children. Many parents had similar expectations of their children as would be expected in the general population, and if they did not, there appeared to be other factors at play (e.g., a few adult children claimed that their parents did not have expectations of them as they grew up, yet their parents were also those dealing with a history of trauma, abuse or illness, or who had resorted to substance use to cope with their adverse experiences).

Consistent with Dunn’s (2013) research that failed to find a reduced work ethic among less-educated people relative to those with more education (with the former group more likely to say a bad job is preferable to unemployment), a strong work ethos—imparting the values of education, hard work, and personal responsibility—so engrained in mainstream society was not lost on our study participants. Several claimed they had worked hard, but still could not get ahead; others had significant health issues or past experiences of trauma and abuse to contend with that made acquiring and maintaining gainful employment exceedingly difficult. Many of the immigrants in the sample had struggled when they came to Canada and had no other recourse but to resort to SA; their children followed suit, but typically only as a stepping stone before commencing post-secondary education. Many adult children faced similar challenges as their parents. In the case of Indigenous participants, both parent and child experienced the (intergenerational) impact of colonial oppression, racism, trauma,
and the shared determinants of place (comparable impoverished neighborhoods) and status (living in poverty).

Several adult children discussed wanting to live up to their parents’ expectations for them with regards to education and employment; they did not aspire (or desire) to conform to a lifestyle living on SA. These findings are at odds with Barón, Cobb-Clark, and Erkal’s (2008) study in Australia, which found support for the cultural transmission of work-welfare attitudes, but are consistent with Lee, Singlemann, and Yom-Tov’s (2008) study that found no statistically significant difference between attitudes toward work of adult children on the American Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program and the general population.

Ambivalence About Welfare Stigma and The Conformity Effect

The stigma associated with SA receipt (an indicator of the conformity effect, insofar as parents’ SA participation is said to reduce the stigma of participation for their children), found to be a deterrent to people (presumably rationally) contemplating accessing benefit uptake, is so profound that parents appeared far more likely to dissuade their children from receiving benefits, rather than encouraging them to do so. Welfare scholarship suggests that children, given their parents’ prior SA receipt, are less likely to be affected by welfare stigma than children from non-SA accessing families (Beaulieu et al., 2005), yet there is nothing in our data that would suggest that the stigma of SA use was any less intense for our participants than it may be for the non-SA participating population (as was also reflected in Baumberg’s [2016] research in the UK).

According to Goffman (1963), social stigma is defined as the individual characteristics that negatively differentiate deviants from non-deviants. Hand-in-hand with social stigma is stigmatization, the devaluation of deviant individuals/groups resulting from a negative evaluation of their personal character. Baumberg (2016) further conceptualizes stigma as fitting within three constructs: (a) self-stigma: an individual’s own feeling that claiming benefits conveys a devalued identity; (b) stigmatization: the perception that other people will devalue your identity; and (c) claims stigma: stigma experienced in the process of claiming benefits (as in Selina’s comment that she felt “dirty” in the welfare office).
Never-married “welfare moms” have been publicly pilloried and stigmatized as deviants who eschew traditional work and family values. Yet, despite the stigmatization they recurrently encounter, mothers on SA in Jarrett’s (1996) study believed “that their ability to manage the challenges of motherhood under conditions of poverty elevated their status, despite stigmatizing images to the contrary” (p. 372). In our study data, the role of stigma similarly does not appear to play out in a direction consistent with the conformity effect. Congruent with Baumberg’s (2016) study, our data show that both parents and children are continually subjected to stigmatization for their participation on SA (see Kobena’s comment about SA participants being seen as the “scum of the earth”), although at the same time, participants did not overwhelmingly experience self-stigma. Participants commonly believed they were exempt from individual explanations associated with SA use; they personally were not part of the groups that “abuse welfare” (e.g., Isi’s statement). Our study participants did not make a rational calculation, based on the stigma attached to benefits uptake, whether to access SA; they did so because they had no other choice. The conformity effect does not appear to hold in these data.

**Shared Determinants**

Consistent with Calvó-Armengol and Jackson’s (2009) model of “overlapping generations” (p. 125), underscoring the importance of shared neighborhood characteristics in predicting parent–child behavior, and much of the income mobility literature, which commonly reveals neighborhood stratification patterns marked by race (in the U.S., see Sharkey, 2008) and class (in Sweden, see Ham, Hedman, Manley, Coulter, & Östh, 2014), environmental factors appear to be particularly salient in predicting child SA use among our participants. The cumulative exposure to disadvantage and intergenerational transmission of neighborhood effects have been documented in Canada (Finnie & Bernard, 2005), although are said to be substantially less than in the U.S. (Oreopolous, 2008). Solon (2017) argues that American intergenerational income elasticity is significantly higher (0.4 or 0.5, as opposed to 0.2) than previously assumed (from estimations derived from short-term data). Challenging the notion that the growing gap is of little concern, Solon (2017)
suggests that the playing field is far from level, and children from families living in low income are at a “substantial disadvantage” (p. 5) relative to those from well-off families. Accordingly, proponents of the structural explanation of intergenerational SA receipt find that exposure to disadvantage is more likely to affect a child’s SA participation than is their parents’ prior welfare use.

Limitations of the Study

To ensure absolute confidentiality, parents and their adult children were recruited to the study separately, which meant that we could not assure that all research participants derived from the same family (guaranteeing participation from two or more generations). Consequently, we had only four dyads in the study—a limitation that restricted the full exploration of dynamics across generations. Moreover, as this study involves qualitative research, the findings cannot be used for the purposes of generalization. These data do, however, suggest that the underlying theoretical underpinnings of intergenerational SA use warrant re-examination in future research.

Conclusion

This qualitative study aimed to explore the dynamics of intergenerational SA receipt, including considering the causal effects and correlational associations that may underlie SA use across generations. Our data suggest that the theoretical foundations of causal pathways of intergenerational SA receipt be further problematized; the learning and conformity effects are less than decidedly identified, and not borne out in our research, especially to the same extent as shared determinants. The complexity of factors (including child maltreatment, trauma and violence, interrupted education [for some], the strong sense of welfare stigma, variable awareness of parental SA receipt, housing instability, and neighborhood poverty) intertwine in participants’ lives such that it appears difficult to establish predictable patterns in SA receipt. Are there too many spurious relationships and unobservable effects to allow for robust generalizable statistical models that govern SA receipt? To make policy decisions based on research presenting such conflicting results is not helpful, and
yet policy-making to date has favored (more punitive) theoretical orientations (i.e., the cultural-behavioral model) over others (e.g., the structural model)—harming SA participants in the process. There now appears to be some evidence to question the validity of econometric models that definitively estimate causal relationships in intergenerational SA participation.

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The views expressed are those of the authors alone.

References


Book Reviews


Many histories of government welfare in the United States have been published over the years. In addition to providing chronological narratives, most also offer analytical insights into the complex factors that fostered its expansion. As is well known, industrialization, class conflict, and interest group politics have all been identified as contributing to the emergence of the welfare system. Normative commentaries that assess the social, economic and political effects of government welfare have also been popular, and many writers have claimed that its expansion represents the country’s social conscience and the desire of its citizens to care for each other. On the other hand, some have argued that social welfare in the United States has evolved haphazardly and that compared to other Western countries, a fragmented and reluctant welfare state has emerged. Still others contend that despite its expansion, government welfare has been characterized by racism and gender discrimination and has served to legitimate the capitalist system.

Cogan offers a very different interpretation, which contends that the expansion of government welfare since the time of the Republic’s founding has been disastrous and, that unless curtailed, will have calamitous economic and social effects. As a result of the proliferation of social programs, more than half of Americans are the recipients of welfare so that the United States has now become a so-called entitlement state. He also believes that many of those receiving benefits, such as middle-class retirees, do not need assistance, and in order to reduce spending to manageable proportions, resources should be concentrated on those who are truly disadvantaged. This contention is consistent with the book’s theme that the federal government may initially have been motivated by good intentions, but because of the political pressures exerted by undeserving interest groups, supported
by complicit politicians, the welfare system has swollen exponen-
tially and social spending has become unsustainable.

This argument is forcefully expressed in the book's intro-
duction and final chapter, but it is also reiterated in the interven-
ing chapters, which trace the expansion of government welfare
since the War of Independence, when the federal government
first granted pensions to sailors and soldiers who were wound-
ed, and to the widows and dependents of combatants. Cogan
shows how political pressures resulted in these provisions then
being extended to soldiers in the state militias and, after the
Civil War, to an even larger numbers of beneficiaries. These
events whetted popular appetites for the further expansion of
social programs and resulted in the advent of the entitlement
state during the New Deal. The Great Society initiatives of the
Johnson era consolidated and fostered the further proliferation
of social programs. This trend has persisted up to the present
day and pressures from multiple interest groups for welfare
benefits continue unabated.

The book is well written and informative, and some chap-
ters deal with interesting topics that are not always covered in
other historical texts. For example, Cogan gives a fascinating
account of the creation of the Naval Pension Trust Fund in 1799
that financed benefits for disabled sailors from booty confiscat-
ed from enemy and pirate ships. However, because of poor in-
vestment decisions, the fund was bankrupted in the 1830s and
required a sizable taxpayer bailout. Cogan observes that the
fund is the precursor to the Social Security Trust Fund, which
he believes will also need to be rescued by taxpayers in the
near future. Another interesting chapter deals with President
Roosevelt’s attempt to curtail veteran’s pensions at the time of
the Great Depression. Faced with economic collapse and a huge
federal deficit, he sought to abolish these pensions but, encoun-
tering stiff opposition from Congress, he only succeeded in re-
ducing benefit levels. Cogan explains that Roosevelt did not fa-
vor veteran’s pensions, believing instead that all citizens should
be covered by social insurance and other social programs. Also
of interest is the chapter on the GI Bill of 1944, which the author
acknowledges had a positive impact on the lives of the millions
of veterans after the Second World War. However, he claims
that these achievements were sullied by widespread fraud and
numerous scandals.
Although Cogan can be commended for clearly stating his own position, the book lacks balance and no mention is made of countervailing arguments that are supportive of government welfare. Despite claiming that social spending will ruin the economy, he fails to recognize that many other Western countries provide comprehensive social services (including health insurance) which have not impeded their own economic development. Since the United States spends significantly less on social welfare, it is unclear why its economy is being harmed by social spending, while other countries that spend more have respectable levels of economic growth. They also enjoy widespread prosperity. In view of today’s booming economy, it is hard to accept that economic growth in the United States has been severely damaged by what Cogan denounces as profligate social spending.

Cogan acknowledges in the book’s introduction that many interest groups in the United States benefit from tax expenditures, subsidies and outsourcing, but he glosses over this issue by claiming that a discussion of these policies is beyond the scope of his book. However, the issue cannot be dismissed so easily since tax expenditures in the United States, which overwhelmingly favor higher-income earners, currently amount to approximately $1.5 trillion annually. Although the tax “reforms” introduced by the Trump administration in 2017 reduced mortgage tax relief and other deductions, tax breaks still feature prominently in the tax code. The Treasury estimates that just one of these breaks—the exclusion of contributions to employer sponsored health programs—will cost taxpayers about three trillion dollars over the next ten years. In addition, he does not mention that the administration’s new tax policies will increase the federal deficit by an estimated $1.5 to $1.8 trillion over the same period. Instead, like other critics from the political right, he claims that the budget deficit is almost entirely attributable to social spending.

Despite recognizing the positive impact of some programs such as the GI Bill and nutritional programs for poor children, the author also ignores the investment effects of social spending. There is a substantial body of research to show that many social programs, including early childhood interventions, access to health care, nutritional supplements, the Earned Income Tax Credit, job training and educational programs among
others, facilitate the participation of many disadvantaged people in the economy and help them to lead productive lives. In fact, far from being an "entitlement" state, the United States prioritizes social spending on those engaged in regular employment, and thus arguably should be described more accurately as a "workfare" state. Various programs, including the Earned Income Tax Credit, Social Security, TANF and the exclusion of health insurance and retirement contributions all are designed to support employment and promote economic growth. Had he considered their contribution to development, Cogan may perhaps have approved of these programs.

In the book's final chapter, Cogan mentions the role of intellectuals in laying the groundwork for policy change by articulating their own vision of the Good Society. The political right has assiduously campaigned for its vision of the Good Society for many years—a society in which there is little room for government social welfare. The author makes clear that his book seeks to promote this vision by legitimating the retrenchment, if not abolition, of government social programs. Although he is not the first to mount a systematic attack on these programs, Cogan's book provides renewed academic support to those who oppose government welfare. Despite the mixed results of the 2018 mid-term elections—which resulted in a significant Democratic majority in the House but also an increased Republican majority in the Senate—the political right's campaign against "entitlements" will undoubtedly intensify. Those who believe that all citizens should have guaranteed access to government welfare in times of need should be fully acquainted with the arguments and prepared for the struggle ahead. It is in this context that Cogan's readable and informative book should be widely consulted.

James Midgley
University of California, Berkeley

In this book, the authors address how Quebec has achieved a lower level of poverty when compared to the other three largest provinces in Canada, Ontario, British Columbia, and Alberta. Using a quantitative approach, these authors explain the differences in social and labor market policies across these four provinces, and introduce how these differences result in dissimilar levels of poverty in the three provinces.

Policy approaches in Quebec emphasize a social investment perspective, labor force participation (particularly amongst females with young children) and support for families with children. This exceptionalism in social and employment policies has become more pronounced since the mid-2000s in comparison with other provinces. Based on social investment, this approach results in benefits for both two-parent families and single-parent families in Quebec, leading to lower levels of poverty. These authors attribute Quebec’s success in reducing poverty rates to active labor market policy, which is derived from the “Swedish model” of maintaining work for everyone. This is especially accurate considering the province’s focus on encouraging women with children to participate in the labor force. In addition to successful labor market policies, there is indication that providing more generous welfare benefits to families contributes to the low levels of poverty in Quebec.

This book contains new information explaining Canada’s current status of poverty as well as recommendations regarding how to reduce poverty levels. Given that the authors used quantitative data and compared findings from Quebec to those in other provinces, their arguments are acceptable and reliable insofar as their analysis of the data is appropriate. However, readers should be aware of Quebec’s specific demographic, cultural, and geographic characteristics when interpreting the findings in this book. Such factors are often disregarded here, factors that may influence poverty rates across the four provinces. Because such factors are ignored in explaining the lower levels of poverty in Quebec compared to other provinces, their argument may not be as strong as it otherwise could be. Additional analysis and data
are needed to supplement their argument. In other words, when generalizing the effectiveness of Quebec’s policies to reduce poverty compared with other provinces, readers may cast doubt on the feasibility of their recommendations because each place has its own set of characteristics, some of which are fixed and have developed over a long period of time. Although the authors do explain how Quebec’s policy approach achieves lower levels of poverty, it would improve the analysis to include the mission and values of the Quebec government. After all, policies do not operate independently from a government sense of mission and values. This approach might be more helpful to understand how Quebec has been able to develop and cultivate policies that lead to lower levels of poverty.

Quebec’s following of the Swedish model has its own disadvantages in terms of sustainability in a province with a smaller population of younger taxpayers and larger population of older adults receiving services, as well as an increasing influx of immigrants who seek benefits. Thus, readers need to consider the sustainability of Quebec’s current policy approach.

Overall, this book is worth reading to understand different poverty levels in Canada, and how Quebec has achieved the lowest level of poverty. It remains open for educators, students, researchers, and policymakers to decide the extent to which Quebec’s policies may be applied to other regions.

Jaewon Lee
Michigan State University


Logically organized, with an integrative and holistic approach to child welfare, Lewandowski introduces the historical evolution and present practices of child welfare in the United States, providing constructive suggestions for future directions of this field. The historical review on development and evolution of child welfare policy and practice in the United States starts from the alternative care policies in the colonial era, such as the Elizabethan Poor Law, and continues to the modern-day
Personal Work and Responsibility Act, renewed in 2013. Detailed cases and historical documentation mark the progress made by organizations and individual scholars dedicated to the field of child welfare. Case studies, such as that of a young girl named Mary Ellen, vividly illustrate the picture of a girl’s life before and after the removal from her guardians, marking early attempts to protect children from abuse and neglect.

With clear definitions and discovery of child abuse and neglect, the second part of this book focuses on practices protecting children from potential abuse and neglect, describing decision-making processes in real practices, and introducing types of out-of-home care for children who were removed from abusive family contexts. These include understanding their behavioral, emotional, developmental, and medical needs. It should be noted that underrepresented groups and those with special needs, such as immigrants, LGBTQ groups, and children with disabilities, are specifically noted in this section. Although we have seen an increasing interest in discussions on diversity and minority groups in various disciplines of social sciences, many of the assumptions and conclusions are based mainly on the white middle-class population. Yet norms, values, beliefs on rearing children, parental roles, family structure, and many other factors are rooted in the context of child and family encounter. We should be cautious about arbitrarily applying our own beliefs and values with children from diverse family dynamics and cultural backgrounds.

The last part of the book sheds light on the future direction of child welfare by examining multiple aspects of children’s well-being, preventing abuse, reunifying children with their families, child adoption, and health care for children. All the aspects of children’s need were comprehensively examined from the physical, emotional, social, and psychological perspectives. Emphasizing an integrative perspective, the author presents a complex child welfare system involving public child welfare agencies and the many levels of government, schools, health care providers, religious organizations, courts and legal systems. Future efforts to promote child welfare should seek to integrate the coordinated efforts of all parties. There is a long road ahead in terms of protecting children and promoting child well-being. The section on looking to the future provides powerful guidance that points us toward the next stage of development.
It is inspiring to observe the progress that we have achieved so far. Yet we still need an examination of child welfare improvements set against the historical background of human civilization and its close linkages with social movements, especially one that discusses the issues in a more comparative and global perspective, not one confined to the context of the United States, as Lewandowski provides here.

Yemo Duan

Michigan State University


Grief is a universal and personal human response to the loss of loved ones. We are in an era in which research and clinical practices of grief counseling are acknowledged and highly valued. However, specific attention is needed for grieving men. This book bridges a salient gap in the clinical literature by depicting the journey of seven widowed fathers and their support for each other through group work. Using a story-telling voice throughout the book, the authors and the seven group members show us their shared yet distinct pathways to a more settled future as they recover from the deaths of their wives.

The seven chapters in Part 1: Unimaginable Loss, offer detailed portraits of the struggles faced by widowed fathers. The book starts with a disagreement between Neill and his daughter. Neill has forbidden his daughter, Julie, to go to the hockey game on the first anniversary night of the death of his wife and Julie’s mother. The conflict between the two motivates Neill to attend a support group for men who were widowed and are raising children on their own. Chapter 2 provides a vivid reflection on the fact that the original five group members and two facilitators did not have much knowledge as to the best way to support grieving men. They proceed to explore this effort together. Chapter 3 introduces some theory, reviewing Kubler-Ross’s stage theory of facing death and dying, and introduces Stroebe and Schuts’ Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement
Chapter 4 focuses on grieving men’s needs, especially in the context of raising their children alone. Such challenges are further explored in Chapter 5, along with the guilt and low confidence grieving fathers have of their ability to take good care of their children. Chapter 6 uses the life experiences of group members to inform ongoing professional controversies regarding diagnosing depression among grieving populations. A final chapter in this section narrates the fast forming group dynamic among this “band of brothers.”

Part 2: Adaptation, focuses on the role of members as fathers and how fathers adapt while supporting the grief of their children. While most members were initially shocked by the concept of the “Good Enough” father, all of them later on adapted to the idea and made efforts to become a good enough father. Chapter 9 elaborates on important topics of a child’s grief in the context of grieving men and contributes to discussions about how these men can better support their grieving children. Chapter 10 confronts the struggle of whether to continue wearing their wedding rings, and what follows from that decision. A wedding ring symbolizes so many memories and characteristics of the wives of these men, and there is marked ambivalence about finally taking it off. Following chapters explore the ways most fathers put themselves and their own needs last and on the consideration of dating again. Bonanno’s resilience research among prolonged bereaved people is highlighted, and inspires the support group to ask themselves why the distress and functional disruption experienced by most group members seems to linger far longer than previous theories assumed it would. Once again the Dual Process Model is employed to understand dating-related anxiety among bereaved men. This section ends with one member deciding to become engaged and depart from the group.

The final section of the book switches to a more future-oriented outlook. It begins with a discussion of whether or not remarriage signifies closure and, in terms of the bigger picture, what might be in store for these men at that point in their lives. One group facilitator shares his experiences of a different kind of loss, drawing on the similarities he sees with the experiences of these men. The support group continued to evolve and started to talk about wider topics such as the meaning of life, post-traumatic growth, and how strength, resilience and growth are
consistent themes pertaining the experiences of bereaved men. Ending chapters examine the dynamics that emerged during the group process and the hard-earned “wisdom” each member carried with him as a result of participating in the group.

In summary, the book is an interwoven tapestry of theories, clinical debates, client experiences and group development, and offers an integrative presentation of effective ways for supporting grieving men. It will be of great value to mental health professionals and all those who want to learn more about supporting grieving men.

Anao Zhang
University of Michigan


Welcome into the world of big money philanthropy! This is a world in which representatives of foundations heavily funded by corporations and the top 400 families debark from private jets and limousines to gather at luxurious conference facilities for the purpose of coordinating their ideas for how to make the world a better place. Anand Giridharadas, as a Henry Crown Fellow of the Aspen Institute, knows that world from the inside and has enjoyed all of the benefits—income, invitations, travel, grants, connections, class privileges—that this world has to offer. It is the kind of life about which we academics, pecking away in our little offices or grading one more pile of term papers, can only dream. Were one of us to call out, in effect, that these emperors have no clothes, it would be easily dismissed as the echo of *ressentiment* arising from the toiling classes. But this book is a cry from a privileged insider—thus all the more unexpected, and likewise all the more credible.

The thesis of Giridharadas’s book can probably be deduced from the subtitle. Many of the wealthy denizens of what Giridharadas calls “MarketWorld” may be genuinely motivated on some level to do well by the world, and have created and sponsored networks of charities, foundations, programs, think tanks and relief efforts with all good intentions, but in doing
so they adhere to an all but explicit axiom never to seriously challenge or question the economic status quo. The underlying assumption of this world is that of the neoliberal utopia of free markets and free trade, backed by strong legal enforcement of property law. There is no moral evil in scoring big, making lots and lots and lots of money, so long as it is done within this framework. After that wealth has been ensured, those with conscience who want to do so can engage in philanthropic work to “give back” to others and help to ameliorate world troubles. What you may not do, what is considered out of bounds, impolite and bad form, is to raise questions about how the money is made, nor make direct connections between the way that money is made, or the resulting extremes of inequality in the world, and the very problems the charitable and philanthropic wing of MarketWorld is aiming to ameliorate.

Making this connection is what Giridharadas did, in a presentation made in 2015 at the Aspen Institute. Looking out over the audience, Giridharadas was overcome by the inescapable recognition that so much of the good work these wealthy philanthropists were engaged in was made necessary by the very products and financial shenanigans that built their wealth in the first place, and even then would be better ameliorated were these people and the interests they represented simply to pay their workers well and pay their actual share of taxes, rather than find all sorts of ways (such as setting up philanthropic foundations) to shield themselves and their wealth from these taxes. This book is a longer-form argument based on that original Aspen Institute presentation of 2015.

Another recurring theme in this book is the extent to which the MarketWorld philosophy has become endemic in society as a whole (and, we might add, in the world of social work and social welfare in particular). It is essentially this concept that underlies the current approach of solving social problems through “public/private partnerships.” This is not to say that such public/private partnership ventures are always wrong, though it is not hard to guess which side of such ventures is generally supplying the capital and which side is generally reaping the profits. But it is to say that we need to view such proposals with a much more critical eye. While the stated ideology speaks of Win/Win, the actual facts on the ground are closer to Winners Take All. Perhaps now that the world has seen New York City
and Washington D.C., both with starving public sectors, hand over a reputed $1.5 billion in tax expenditures to Amazon, one of the richest corporations in the world, the inherent logic of such public/private ventures will be more transparent. In the meantime, the inherent logic of MarketWorld continues to be both seductive and corrupting.

The heart of Giridharadas’ book is a series of life stories and snapshots of a selected group of people who exist within the MarketWorld milieu—from entrepreneurs and financiers to the TED-talkers and PopTechers who butter them up and sing their praises. A good example from our own neighborhood of academia is Amy Cuddy, who as a Harvard social psychologist studies issues of workplace discrimination, and the effects of prejudice and social power. But when invited to present on the MarketWorld conference circle, she eschewed those unsettling problems and spoke instead on how women’s body language might be part of why they find climbing the corporate ladder to be more difficult than it need be—that by striking regular “power” poses when they interact, women gain more sense of self-confidence and might well find this works to eliminate executive prejudices against them. This is not to say that what Prof. Cuddy said here is wrong—no doubt women striking regular power poses might have all kinds of positive outcomes. But it is to say that of all the work Prof. Cuddy has done that seriously addresses problems in the workplace, that she chose (or was specifically invited) to speak on power poses does illustrate how strong the temptation is to pull one’s punches and neglect to address directly the concepts and ideas that challenge the validity of the neoliberal corporate milieu. Each chapter of the book presents the dilemmas of another person from the inside.

While I do highly recommend this book, and see it as part of a growing body of works beginning to question the commonplaces of neoliberal and Silicon Valley corporate charity and philanthropy, I have reservations about Giridharadas’ proposed solutions. He comes down heavily on the side of government policies and regulations as the solution to social problems in general, and as the only force capable of reigning in the forces of neoliberal corporate capitalism, which feed the elite charade of changing the world. In the first place, while I am no cheerleader for corporate capitalism, the fact remains that on the things we mostly measure as outcomes to describe advancement toward a
“better world” (rising incomes and education levels, increases in public health and decreases in starvation and infant mortality) neoliberal corporate capitalism has proven to be as effective as any system we have seen. It is easy to see why people get behind this ideology and push it, even those who have not been among the super fabulous “winners” of the current system. The real problems arise mainly as societies rise up the social hierarchy of needs, as Maslow predicted. For meeting those basic survival and lower-end needs, the current system is arguably the best we have seen yet. It is at the higher end of the hierarchy that the current system of rising inequality threatens the internal sense of well-being and we come to realize that a strictly materialist notion of a “better world” does not adequately address human needs (and probably could not if it tried). To what extent, then, is it realistic to expect government policies and programs to do so (though I do support more egalitarian efforts)? In the second place, governments themselves respond mainly to the desires of the super fabulous winners of our system, and a book outlining stories of the ambiguities and cooptation of young idealists who get into government to change the world could easily serve as a companion volume to this book.

This is not to say we can give in to cynicism, or even some sort of Muggeridgian world-weariness. It is to say, however, that a lot more thought and consideration is needed than provided in this book to arrive at proposals for solutions. Perhaps we should have a conference aimed at producing such ideas. Perhaps establish a ThinkTank with a newsletter and a journal. Yeah, that’s the ticket. Now, where might we turn for start up funding for those endeavors?

Daniel Liechty
Illinois State University
Corresponding Authors

Richard Hoefer, rhoefer@uta.edu

Allen E. Lipscomb allen.lipscomb@csun.edu

Kevin M. Gorey gorey@u windsor.ca

Karen R. March karen.march@carleton.ca

Kaycee L. Bills kbills1@vols.utk.edu

Katharine M. Hill Katharine.Hill@stthomas.edu

Tracy A. Smith-Carrier tsmithca@uwo.ca
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Contact Person: Melinda McCormick Ph.D., Managing Editor. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, School of Social Work, Western Michigan University, 1903 W. Michigan Ave., Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5354 USA. e-mail: swrk-jssw@wmich.edu. Tel: 269-387-3205 Fax: 269-387-3183.