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Gender, Social Networks, and Microenterprise: Differences in Network Effects on Business Performance

Seon Mi Kim
Ramapo College of New Jersey

This article aims to find if female micro-entrepreneurs have different social networks that affect their business performance compared to males. This article uses the longitudinal Panel Study of Entrepreneurial Dynamic (PSED) II data set (2005–2011) in the U.S. The key finding is that even in cases where female micro-entrepreneurs gained the same number of weak ties and resources from their networks as their male counterparts, their weak ties and gained resources did not help them to improve their business performance, unlike their male counterparts. Implications for Microenterprise Development Programs and future studies are informed.

Key words: Women, gender, microenterprise, social capital, social networks, business performance
Introduction

A gendered deficit in social networks is typically blamed for the lesser success rate of women-owned micro-enterprises, and correcting this network deficit has become the instrument of choice of many Micro-enterprise Development Programs (MDPs) when they seek to improve this success rate. MDPs have a special relevance for women in business. Many of these programs were first inspired by the special challenges in the business environment faced by women (and others), such as a lack of access to traditional business networks and capital; a lack of encouragement for entrepreneurship at home, school, and society; discriminatory attitudes toward women from business partners; and disproportionate responsibility for family and housework (Jennings & Brush, 2013). Many women are led to micro-enterprise to escape gender inequality in the larger labor market and for greater time-flexibility (Dumas, 1999), making the work of MDPs all the more important.

MDPs increasingly (and explicitly) reflect awareness of gender-specific obstacles in network creation and development. They often focus on helping women to improve networks, to create new ones, and to magnify networking benefits (Kim, 2012). For instance, in 2006, 55 Women’s Business Centers (WBCs) organized peer-support groups and provided women with referrals to specialized business professionals in a variety of fields, such as accounting, law, and sales consulting (Langowitz, Sharpe, & Godwyn, 2006). More recently, the Center for Women in Business and U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation (2014, pp. 5–7) argued that we need to “provide network opportunities specifically for women” based on “plenty of evidence” that women are often kept out of “formal and informal networks,” adding that gender-segregated network opportunities are a prime reason why women’s businesses are less likely to be in high-growth fields of businesses such as science, technology, and business services.

The arguments above rest on an assumption of large and pervasive gendered differences in networks and network effects. However, the evidence for this assumption is far shakier than one might think. To date, there have been only partial
and contradictory answers to many key questions. Elements of research design and implementation can be challenged. Generalizability from “normal” enterprise to micro-enterprise has often been just assumed. Some studies only sampled or only studied women, making comparisons impossible. Most work only looks at gendered differences in networks or effects of networks on performance, not both. No work to date on gendered differences in network effects distinguished micro-enterprises from other businesses. Some work lumps all network details together. Other works look only at one network factor in isolation. Factors such as network structure (on one hand) versus resources gained through networks (on the other hand) should be distinguished, yet tend to be blurred together. Furthermore, most research on these issues uses cross-sectional data, which makes it impossible to understand the dynamics of gendered impact of social networks on business performance as businesses grow.

This paper addresses these challenges. First, this study assesses whether female micro-entrepreneurs indeed have different social networks, documenting the details of such networks specifically focusing on micro-enterprises. Second, it studies whether the relationship between networks and business performance is gendered. Third, it distinguishes between network structure and network-gained resources and their distinct effects. Finally, this study uses longitudinal data from a sufficiently long-time period.

Data come from the longitudinal Panel Study of Entrepreneurial Dynamic (PSED) II dataset (2005–2011) in the U.S. The key finding is that even in cases where female micro-entrepreneurs gained the same number of weak ties and same number of resources from their networks (as did male counterparts), these gains did not help them to improve their business performance (unlike male counterparts). The findings imply the need for sharp departures from current practices and emphases for many MDPs. There are also implications for how we study gender-network-performance relationships.
The Special Role of Micro-enterprise Development Programs

Micro-enterprises are usually defined as small businesses that hire fewer than five employees, including the owner (Schreiner, 2003). MDPs help these businesses by providing loans, training, technical support, and access to social networks (Jha & Depoo, 2017). They were introduced in the late 1980s in the U.S. as an alternative strategy for increasing financial independence among the poor (Jurik, 2005). The reason that MDPs now receive much attention by policy makers and media (both in the U.S. and in other developing countries) lies in aspects of their unique approach. First, unlike other welfare programs focusing only on resource delivery (such as TANF and SNAP), MDPs focus on strengthening the poor’s business networks, entrepreneurial skills, access to loans, marketing strategies, etc. Not only do they, as the saying goes, teach the poor to fish rather than just giving them a fish, they also seek to improve diverse capabilities, rather than just (to mix metaphors) put all the fish in one basket. They even try to create jobs for disadvantaged populations outside of their existing job market (Jurik, 2005).

With many jobs for undereducated populations challenged by globalization, job training strategies need to be flexible in this way. MDPs usually target disadvantaged populations, who encounter special challenges in the job market, recognizing that just “any” job with low wages and benefits will not promise a real escape, in particular for those with added burdens of gender discrimination, criminal records, problematic immigration status, etc. Next, MDPs are seen as creating economic stability and sustainability in the community (Dumas, 2010), particularly in the provision of local micro-enterprises within the community (creating local jobs, improving relationships, supporting local culture, improving financial flow within the community, increasing tax revenue, and fueling entrepreneurial spirit) (Pere-do & Chrisman, 2006). This is why MDPs have been supported as a Community Economic Development strategy (CED) in the U.S. (Anglin, 2010).
Gender Difference in Business Performance

Empirical findings on the existence of gender differences in business performance are mixed, and differences in sampling, measurement, and methodology make it hard to draw firm conclusions. A large number of studies find that female entrepreneurs underperform relative to male entrepreneurs even after controlling for many factors and demographic differences, underperforming in terms of business scale (Alsos, Ljunggren, & Pettersen, 2003; Du Rietz & Henrekson, 2000; Fairlie & Robb, 2009), survival (Lowrey, 2010; Robb, 2002; Watson, 2003), growth (Alsos et al., 2003; Cooper, Gimeno-Gascon, & Woo, 1994), sales (Ali & Shabir, 2017; Fairlie & Robb, 2009; Gottschalk & Niefert, 2012; Loscocco, Monnat, Moore, & Lauber, 2009; Sabarwal & Terrell, 2008; Shaw, Marlow, Lam, & Carter, 2009), profit (Bosma, Van Praag, Thurik, & De Wit, 2004; Fairlie & Robb, 2009), or productivity (Aterido, Hallward-Driemeier, & Pagés, 2011; Sabarwal & Terrell, 2008). Some argue that some findings of gender differences only exist due to omitted controls for factors such as scale, industry type, initial investment, or organizational structures (Amoroso & Link, 2017; Artz, 2017; Diaz Garcia & Jimenez Moren, 2010; Robb & Watson, 2012; Rodríguez-Gulías, Fernández-López, & Rodeiro-Pazos, 2018; Watson, 2007a).

Another line of research investigates the structural reasons behind differences in business performance. For example, female entrepreneurs are more likely to start up their business in low profit and unskilled service and retail sectors due to gender segregated education, labor market segmentation, and domestic responsibilities (Gottschalk & Niefert, 2012; Lee & Marvel, 2013; Marlow & Dy, 2017). Women are discouraged from studying science and engineering, which can put manufacturing and technology-oriented sectors out of reach (Servon, & Visser, 2011).

Next, female entrepreneurs are more likely to locate their business within the home in order to carry out domestic work and child caring. Part-time entrepreneurship allows women to have flexibility to combine their home and work commitments with their lack of time for formal work (Klapper & Parker, 2011).
This part-time work has direct costs, but also indirect costs when women’s businesses are then perceived as simply an extension of domestic work. This negative connotation has real ramifications in the business sector, such as access to business loans (Ehlers & Main, 2013; Marlow, 2002). All of this discourages women from starting businesses in the first place, because they perceive more barriers to entrepreneurial activity than men (Santos, Roomi, & Liñán, 2016).

Another possible factor is the taint of the “pink-collar” job—a job associated with femaleness, which women were traditionally slotted into, rather than more “male” jobs. These jobs were not just distinct but “lower,” with little control or power over others. This traditional subordination in the segregated job market gives women disadvantages when they make the transition to business, limiting them directly and indirectly through damaged reputation, their access to networks, education, capital, and experience (Henry, Foss, & Ahl, 2016; Strohmeyer, Tonoyan, & Jennings, 2017). The stereotype of entrepreneurs is that of white, middle-class males, compared to which female entrepreneurs suffer (Berglund & Tillmar, 2015; Marlow & McAdam, 2013). Even when not true, women’s businesses are dismissed as smaller, weaker, slower growing, and amateurish, likely to be of the part-time lifestyle type (Marlow & Dy, 2017); in short, they are not taken seriously. All of the above can have real psychological costs in addition to direct costs, with Sweida and Reichard (2013) arguing these stereotypes negatively affect women’s intention and self-efficacy, thereby limiting their entrepreneurial achievement (Sperber & Linder, 2018; Sweida & Reichard, 2013). And, of course, these stereotypes can harm businesses directly. In short, biases and stereotypes of the “bad” businesses of women can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Female entrepreneurs could also have different values, with greater prioritization of, say, having a positive impact on society; or having greater autonomy; or preferring slow, safe and steady growth over a quick profit (De Bruin, Brush, & Welter, 2007; Cálas, Smircich, & Bourne, 2007; Fairlie & Robb, 2009). Some argue this calls for different achievement metrics for some businesses (Coleman, 2016; Henry et al., 2016), “gendering entrepreneurship” to reflect alternate valuations, purposes, or styles, rather than marginalizing female entrepreneurs by
using a stereotypically “male” standard (Ahl, 2006; Atkinson, Netana, & Pickernell, 2017).

Gender Differences in Social Networks

A social network is defined as the system of individuals’ organized relationships with others (Donckels & Lambrecht, 1995; Ibarra, 1993). When the entrepreneurs’ contacts provide some benefits that serve their entrepreneurial goals, these social contacts become their social capital and thus generate increased economic benefits (Lin, 2005). Are women and men different in terms of social networks? The most popular answer is that female entrepreneurs have less useful networks compared to male counterparts.

Findings align with two main theoretical approaches in social network theory (SNT): (a) the structure approach; and (b) the resource approach. The former explores the roles of network structures that convert individual interpersonal relationships into economic payoffs (Brüderl & Preisendörfer, 1998). In SNT, network structure means patterned and repeated interactions among individual actors (Burkhardt & Brass, 1990). In peculiar, structure entails nodes (individual actors) and the ties (relationships or interactions) that link them (Neergaard, Shaw, & Carter, 2013). Granovetter’s weak tie theory identifies the strength of a tie as a tool for the actor to access to embedded resources in the network. As Granovetter put it, the strength of a tie is determined by “the amount of time, emotional intensity, intimacy (mutual confiding) and reciprocal services which characterize the tie” (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361). Ties between people are typically labeled strong or weak (Santos et al., 2016). Strong ties are created by trust and a considerable amount of time and emotional investment. Strong ties often include family, relatives, and close friends.

Weak ties are superficial, involving less frequent and less emotional investments for both parties. These include many work-related acquaintances and business partners. At the same time, weak ties are not necessarily lesser; they are distinctly useful in their own right and have their own style of contribution. “Weak tie theory” argues that such ties provide members with unique information and resources, helping members to
reach outside of their own social cliques, creating bridges for otherwise disconnected groups (Granovetter, 2005). A related network metric, still part of network structure, is network size, defined as the number of direct links between a focal actor and other actors (Hoang & Antončič, 2003). This captures the amount and diversity of resources the entrepreneurs can access (Semrau & Werner, 2014).

Some research found that women’s social networks are less likely to have “weak ties” than men’s social networks. In particular, women’s job or business networks are smaller and include higher proportions of kin, families, and female neighbors. In contrast, men’s networks include more professional acquaintances and consultants affiliated with formal associations (Crowell, 2004; Fang & Huang, 2017; Greve & Salaff, 2003; Groysberg, 2010; Hampton, Cooper, & Mcgowan, 2009; Klyver & Terjesen, 2007; McDonald, 2011; Rankin, 2001; Renzulli, Aldrich, & Moody, 2000; Robinson & Stubberud, 2011). Women’s child care and housekeeping responsibilities imposed by gender segregated structures tend to limit women’s social network around family and kin (Loscocco et al., 2009; Munch & McPherson, 1997). Since women are less likely to or able to commit to network building due to such domestic commitments, women are in turn viewed as less available or less desirable as network partners. Networking is also limited by women’s lower level of previous work experience (Hewlett, 2014).

On the other hand, the resource approach to SNT highlights not weak ties or network size but instead resources embedded within the networks, resources that generate advantages for focal actors (Gedajlovic, Honig, Moore, Payne, & Wright, 2013; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001). Network resources include information, financial capital, making introductions, advice, training, emotional support, physical resources, and so on (Reynolds & Curtin, 2008). Resource metrics include the number of accessible resources, the “best” resource in the network, the variety of resources in the network, and the socio-economic status of network members (Bozovic, 2007; Lin, 1999). Since resources embedded in networks are determined by individual social position, not generated by individual choices, benefits from social networks are quite likely to be unequal (Bourdieu, 1986; Lin, 2005; Molyneux, 2002). This approach highlights the
possibility that weak ties of women do not deliver the same economic returns as those of men. Since women tend to be located in more peripheral organizations, such as those associated with domestic and community affairs rather than businesses or jobs, their weak ties generate fewer resources for their businesses (Beggs, 1997; Davidsson & Honig, 2003; McGowan, Cooper, Durkin, & O’Kane, 2015). Klyver and Grant (2013) and Hurlbert, Haines, and Beggs (2000) also found that women were less likely to report entrepreneurial resource providers or role models in their social networks compared to men.

Social Networks and Business Performance

Two main hypotheses of SNT related to performance are: (a) the network founding hypothesis; and (b) the network success hypothesis. The former contends that both strong and weak ties benefit business founding (Brüderl & Preisendörfer, 1998; Davidsson & Honig, 2003; Kiss, 2016). Since nascent entrepreneurs lack ideas, financing, and other resources, any network resources help. However, the network success hypothesis argues that, in the growth and survival stages of business, weak ties are most likely to provide inexperienced entrepreneurs with links to valuable information and resources (Brüderl & Preisendörfer, 1998; Burt, 1998; Butler & Hansen, 1991; Casson, 2007; Granovetter, 1973, 1983; Woolcock, 2001).

A number of studies have found social networks to have a strong and positive impact on performance, through access to a variety of scarce or intangible resources such as credibility, competence, information, advice, support for the idea, and reputational effects (Abou-Moghli & Al-kasasbeh, 2012; Baum, Calabrese, & Silverman, 2000; Bosma et al., 2004; Brown, Mawson, & Rowe, 2018; Davidsson & Honig, 2003; Kuépié, Tenikue, & Walther, 2016; Santarelli & Tran, 2013; Semrau & Werner, 2014; Stam, Arzlanian, & Elfring, 2014; Watson, 2007b). Limited research distinguished strong from weak ties, finding that weak ties significantly increase business performance (Hernández-Carrión, Camarero-Izquierdo, & Gutiérrez-Cillán, 2017; Jensen & Schott, 2015; Santarelli & Tran, 2013; Stam et al., 2014; Watson, 2007a).

In contrast to the network success hypothesis, Davidsson and Honig (2003) and Brüderl and Preisendörfer (1998) found
that strong ties also have positive influence on sale growth and survival. Arregle et al. (2015) also agree that strong ties are positive for new venture growth but argue that when strong ties are dominant within an entrepreneur’s network, the negative effects will actually override the benefits.

Some work contends that network size contributes to improving business performance in different ways. Larger network size increases: (a) the accessibility of resources (Semrau & Werner, 2014); (b) the possibility of obtaining further weak ties (Khayesi, George, & Antonakis, 2014); and (c) the opportunity to finding a key person who could be supportive, provide resources (Khayesi et al., 2014; Uzzi, 1999), or additional contacts (Semrau & Werner, 2014).

Interestingly, some empirical research (Aldrich & Reese, 1993; Johannisson, 1996; Littunen, 2000; Tata & Prasad, 2008) found no significant positive effect of network size, structure, activities, or resources on business performance. In fact, Bates (1994) finds that heavy use of social networks is more likely to result in less profitable and failure-prone businesses. Brüderl and Preisendörfer (1998) proposed two reasons for these inconsistent findings. The first reason is measurement. They argued that instead of measuring network structures or accessible resources, research should measure actual utilization or support from networks, because entrepreneurs can improve success only if they actually use their social networks for their businesses. The second reason is that entrepreneurs are likely to compensate for lack of financial and human capital by utilizing social networks, so that networks and their usage are endogenous to current business health. They suggested controlling for other critical variables, such as human capital and financial capital, to get around these problems.

**Role of Entrepreneurs’ Gender on Social Networks and Business Performance**

There is a dearth of research investigating the holistic relationship among entrepreneurs’ gender, social networks, and business performance. Tata and Prasad (2008) propose a theoretical framework for this. They hypothesized that women get benefits from network strength whereas men get benefits from
network diversity and size (the mechanism depends on collaborative exchanges). Even this framework risks overlooking resources embedded in social networks. If women’s social networks do not contain sufficient resources connected to business opportunities, women’s higher engagement in collaborative exchange will not increase business success. In addition, this framework does not go further to explain how men and women’s social network structure influences the different stages of business performance (start-up, growth, and survival). For example, entrepreneurs’ strong ties could be beneficial for business start-ups but still not for business growth or longer-term survival.

Renzulli et al. (2000) found that female entrepreneurs were disadvantaged in start-ups due to a high proportion of kin in their networks. There is some tension with the finding of Chowdhury & Amin (2011), which found that the more strong ties that female micro-entrepreneurs had, the more likely they were to intend to start up a business. However, this work did not measure weak ties. The value of strong ties for female entrepreneurs’ business start-up was also echoed in Yetim’s (2008) study, showing that migrant women with strong ethnic networks utilized the strength of strong ties for their businesses more than non-migrant women. This important work did not examine business performance, however, and also set aside weak ties.

Limitations and Implications of Existing Research

Summing up, note first that most research examines either the impacts of network structure or resources on business performance. However, both “the configuration” and “the content” of a network need to be examined in order to understand the impact of social networks on business performance (Seibert et al., 2001). Therefore, this study examines both social network structure and resources. Second, this study measures gained network resources in order to examine the actual utilization of social networks, because unutilized social networks could not affect business performance (Brüderl & Preisendorfer, 1998). Third, most research does not account for business scale, despite the likelihood of conditional effects, with micro-enterprise being more vulnerable to a lack of network support than larger businesses. This study only samples micro-entrepreneurs
because business scale could affect entrepreneurs’ social networks and their business performance. In addition, since 90% of women-owned businesses are micro-enterprises, this study attempts to find implications for female micro-entrepreneurs. Fourth, most research on this issue uses cross-sectional data and not time series data. Since the effect of social networks on performance would likely be different as businesses grow, longitudinal data analysis can reveal the dynamic impact of social networks on business performance. Therefore, this study uses longitudinal data in order to investigate the impact of entrepreneurs’ gender and social networks on different stages of business performance as businesses grow. Finally, this study controls for major human and financial capital as well as business location and industry, which have been verified as influential factors on business performance from previous studies.

Hypotheses

Given the above discussion, this present study predicts the following for business success.

Female micro-entrepreneurs will have...

Hypothesis 1a: ... lower growth of profitability than male entrepreneurs;

Hypothesis 1b: ... lower rates of business survival than male entrepreneurs;

Hypothesis 1c: ... lower start-up rates than male entrepreneurs.

(Note: As will be detailed later, the PSED data used here include only those still at least actively considering enterprise, so to the extent that women preemptively give up on the market, this hypothesis cannot be cleanly tested. The overall startup rate requires an estimate of those that succeed out of those who plausibly enter the market. “Latent” or potential micro-enterprises are not part of the PSED denominator. Indeed, the high startup rate within PSED shows that many potential failures have already been censored: 98% of the nascent entrepreneurs successfully started
up their businesses within the six-year period of the study. Only the start-up rate given currently active consideration can be evaluated. This is a problem in general with how start-up rates are sometimes measured in this type of work. I set this hypothesis aside here, and focus on the conditional effects given the minimal degree of activity required to be included in the PSED data.)

Next, the discussion of network structure and resources implies the following:

*Female micro-entrepreneurs will have…*
- Hypothesis 2a: … *fewer weak ties* in their networks than male entrepreneurs;
- Hypothesis 2b: … *smaller network size* than male entrepreneurs;
- Hypothesis 2c: … *fewer resources* in their networks than male entrepreneurs.

Given social network theory, and consistent with most existing empirical findings, *micro-enterprise performance* will be positively associated with…

- Hypothesis 3a: … *having weak ties*;
- Hypothesis 3b: … *larger networks*;
- Hypothesis 3c: … *greater network resources*.

And finally, bringing in moderated effects, *female micro-entrepreneurs will have a…*

- Hypothesis 4: … *weaker relationship between networks and performance* than male entrepreneurs.

**Research Design**

*Data and Sampling*

This study uses the Panel Study of Entrepreneurial Dynamic II data set (PSED), a longitudinal national database which
provides information on the characteristics and activities of individuals involved in the process of starting or managing a sample of businesses between 2005 and 2011 (Reynolds & Curtin, 2011). Random digit dialing was used to contact 31,845 individuals, within 48 states from September 2005 to February 2006. Individuals who met four criteria in a screener interview were invited to the study: (1) they consider themselves involved in the firm creation process; (2) they have engaged in some start-up activity in the past 12 months; (3) they expect to own all or part of the new firm; and (4) the initiative has not progressed to the point that may be considered an operating business (Curtin, 2012). This yielded 1,214 nascent entrepreneurs for the next step, a 60-minute phone interview (Wave A) (Reynolds & Curtin, 2011). Wave A interviews were conducted from September 2005 to March 2006 and the follow-up interviews (Waves B, C, D, E, F) were conducted once a year from October to March in every year between 2006 and 2011 (Curtin, 2012). The response rates of the follow-up interviews conditional on participation in the previous wave were 80% (Wave B, n = 972), 77% (Wave C, n = 746), 71% (Wave D, n = 527), 83% (Wave E, n = 435), and 86% (Wave F, n = 375). Here I focus on the sub-sample of micro-entrepreneurs, defined as entrepreneurs who want to hire or already had hired fewer than five employees for their businesses in Wave A (N = 979, 80% of the total sample). Network variables come from this wave. Performance variables come from the full set of waves.

At each wave/year, yearly business profitability is defined as monthly revenue exceeding monthly expenses for the new business for more than six of the past twelve months, and yearly survival is the firm not stopping its operation in that year. I next create summary dichotomized measures for the entire six-year history. Profitability is 1 if there was at least one year of profitability. Survival is 1 if there was at least one year of survival. Missing values of profitability (307 out of 979) were imputed with the multiple imputation procedure in SAS 9.1 program.

Social network variables are next, measured at Wave A. The PSED used egocentric network data, which provides information on the nature of the local social networks surrounding an actor. Social networks were measured by asking information on other owners (up to 10), key non-owners (up to six), and helpers (up to three). Owners include those expecting to own part of
the new business; key non-owners include active participants in start-ups who are responsible for a distinctive contribution to the founding of the new business but not expecting to own part of the new business; and helpers include those not expecting to own part of the business and not responsible for distinctive contribution, but who provided support, advice, or guidance on a regular basis to the respondents (Reynolds & Curtin, 2008).

Network size is the cumulative number of all active social networks that were instrumental for the business (the owners, key non-owners, and helpers). In the micro-enterprise subset, the actual range for this variable was from 1 to 101. Natural logarithms were applied to handle skewness.

These ties must be divided into strong and weak. A spouse, partner sharing a household, or relative was categorized as a strong tie. Others are trickier to categorize. The difference between “friend or acquaintance having not worked with” and “friend or acquaintance from work” was identified. It is reasonable to assume that the work related to relationship tends to be more superficial and involve much less emotional investment for both parties (Santos et al., 2016). Therefore, a relationship with a friend or acquaintance from work or a stranger before joining the (new) business team was categorized as a weak tie. On the other hand, a friend or acquaintance not worked with was categorized as a strong tie. Since weak ties are argued to be the most important, as discussed above, a better or “stronger” network (ironically) is one with at least one weak tie (this deals with the skewness of an alternate measure, using the exact number of weak ties).

Network resources gained from social networks are measured by the primary contribution of the person of respondents’ network to their business. The PSED broke the resources gained from respondents’ social network down as follows: financial (1); making introductions (2); providing advice (3); providing training (4); physical resources (5); business services (6); and personal services (7). A respondent could have more than one in a category and/or resources in different categories. I count the total number of gained network resources across all categories (actual range from 4 to 12, skewness: 0.78). Control variables were ethnicity, marital status, age, human capital factors, start-up capital, business location, and industry.
Descriptive Statistics

The sample (N = 979) contains more female (about 60%) and white (about 75%) respondents. Approximately 70% of the respondents had a high-school degree, and about half were married. The average age is 44 years old. About half reported that their parents had business experience (52%). Most had managerial (71%) and full-time work (78%) experience. Approximately 44% of the respondents already had business experience. Seventy-nine percent had their business in a service sector, and 70% lived in non-metropolitan areas. Mean start-up capital was $28,073.

Methods of Analysis

Logistic and OLS regression models are used, depending on the nature of the dependent variable in question, to examine the influence of micro-entrepreneur’s gender on business performance (profitability and survival). Another set of models examine the relationship between gender and the social network variables (network size and strength, and gained network resources). In the third set of analyses, the micro-enterprise performance variables were regressed on the social network variables. In the fourth set of analyses, the separated logistic (business profitability) and OLS (business survival) regression models for the whole sample and for each gender group were used in order to assess the moderation model of gender between social networks and micro-enterprise performance.

Results

The first hypothesis examined the relationship between micro-entrepreneur’s gender and business performance controlling for demographic variables (Table 1). Hypothesis 1b, regarding the relationship between micro-entrepreneur’s gender and business survival, is supported. Female micro-entrepreneurs are less likely to survive compared to male counterparts, a moderate effect size that is statistically significant. In contrast to hypothesis 1a, the coefficient on female is negative but not statistically significant (dependent variable being business profitability).
Hypothesis 2, with respect to the relationship between gender and social networks, is not supported (Table 2). The odds ratio suggests women are less likely to have weak ties in their social networks compared to men, but not at a level of statistical significance.
The third hypothesis addresses the relationship between social networks and micro-enterprise performance (see “full sample” in Tables 3A and 3B). Hypothesis 3c, with respect to the relationship between gained network resource and micro-enterprise performance, is supported. Specifically, gained network resource is positively and significantly associated with business profitability and survival. This means that the micro-entrepreneurs having more gained network resources are more likely to gain business profitability and survive. For hypotheses 3a and b, the network size and strength variables are not significantly associated with either business profitability or survival.

Table 2. Unstandardized Coefficients and Odds Ratio from Regression Models of Gender on Social Networks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Size (#)</th>
<th>Strength (0/1)</th>
<th>Gained Resources (#)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coeff.</td>
<td>Coeff.</td>
<td>O. R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>2.37***</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non White</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No High-school degree</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.01</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
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<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
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<td>0.64</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.82</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R2</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*P<.1, **P<.05, ***P<.01
Likelihood ratio for each logistic regression is <.0001
Table 3-A. Moderation Effects of Gender on the Relationship between Networks and Profitability (0/1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Full Sample</th>
<th></th>
<th>Male Group</th>
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<th>Female Group</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coeff</td>
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<td>Coeff</td>
<td>O.R.</td>
<td>Coeff</td>
<td>O.R.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>-3.59***</td>
<td></td>
<td>-2.10**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NW Size</td>
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<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NW Strength</td>
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<td>0.67**</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>-0.37</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gained NW</td>
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<td>0.09*</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>0.91</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>0.61**</td>
<td>1.75</td>
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<td>1.60</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.01</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>-0.08**</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
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<td>-0.01</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Parents’ bus Exp.</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Manager Exp.</td>
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<td>0.48**</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
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<td>No Work Exp.</td>
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<td>1.75</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>0.51**</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Business Exp.</td>
<td>0.32**</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>0.71**</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>0.45*</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Service</td>
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<td>0.12</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>-0.07**</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Metropolitan area</td>
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<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.23***</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start-up capital (Continuous)</td>
<td>0.13**</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>0.12**</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.1, **p<.05, ***p<.01
Likelihood ratio for each logistic regression is <.0001
Table 3-B. Moderation Effects of Gender on the Relationship between Networks and Survival (0/1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Full Sample</th>
<th>Male Group</th>
<th>Female Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Coeff</td>
<td>Coeff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.50***</td>
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<td>1.16**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NW Size</td>
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<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NW Strength</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gained NW</td>
<td>0.06**</td>
<td>0.08**</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource female</td>
<td>-0.18**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non White</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No High-school degree</td>
<td>0.28***</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.33**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.26**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (Continuous)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Parents’ bus Exp.</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Manager Exp.</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Work Exp.</td>
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<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Business Exp.</td>
<td>0.25**</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
<td>0.27*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Service</td>
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<td>0.13</td>
<td>-0.37**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Metropolitan area</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start-up capital</td>
<td>0.10***</td>
<td>0.08**</td>
<td>0.14**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R2</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*P<.1, **P<.05, ***P<.01
Likelihood ratio for each logistic regression is <.0001
Finally, hypothesis 4 is supported. Tables 3A and B present the results of the moderation effect of gender on the relation between social networks and business performance. In Table 3A, in model 1, for the full sample, the gained network resource is significantly and positively associated with business profitability. For the male micro-entrepreneur group, gained network resource is still significantly and positively related to business profitability. In addition, for male micro-entrepreneurs, network strength becomes newly significant and positively associated with business profitability. That is, for male micro-entrepreneurs, having more gained network resources and weak ties positively and significantly increases the probability of achieving better business profitability. On the contrary, for female micro-entrepreneurs, the significance between gained network resource and business profitability disappeared.

In Table 3B, gained network resource is significantly and positively related to business survival in model 1, the full sample. For the male micro-entrepreneur group (model 2), this relationship still exists. However, for the female group (model 3), the direction of the relationship of gained network resource and business survival is changed and the significance of relationship disappeared. These significant differences between micro-entrepreneur’s gender with respect to the relationships between social networks and business performances show that micro-entrepreneur’s gender works as a moderator on the relationships between social networks and business performance. It implies that the causal relationship between social networks and micro-enterprise performance changes as a function of the moderator variable, gender.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research finds women owned micro-enterprises are less likely to survive compared to their male counterparts. No gender difference in network structure or in gained network resources is found. The main finding is that micro-entrepreneurs’ gender works as a moderator between their social networks and business performance. To be specific, for male micro-entrepreneurs, having more gained network resources or weak ties significantly increases the probability of achieving better business profitability.
or survival. In contrast, for female micro-entrepreneurs, weak ties or gained network resources do not increase profitability or survival. Since this research controlled for business type (e.g., service industry or not), this gender difference is not induced by the higher likelihood that women’s businesses are service oriented. This finding implies that even in cases where female micro-entrepreneurs gained the same number of weak ties and resources from their networks as their male counterparts, their weak ties and gained resources did not help them to improve their business performance, unlike male counterparts.

Since there is little difference in terms of the quantity of social networks (i.e., the number of weak ties and gained network resource), this result implies that it could be that the problem is the differing quality of weak ties and gained network resources of female micro-entrepreneurs. Existing studies support the assumption of gender inequality in terms of quality. Studies show women tend to be located in smaller and more peripheral organizations, which are associated with domestic and community affairs, whereas men are more likely to be engaged in core associations having more information and resources for economic activities (McAdam, Harrison, & Leitch, 2018; Robinson & Stubberud, 2011). For example, both female and male micro-entrepreneurs could have the same “amount” of information for their businesses. However, males could acquire more unique and valuable business information compared to females due to their informant’s high social status.

Another possible reason for the new findings here would be that women are not able to fully utilize their weak ties or network resources for their businesses compared to males due to their life conditions. Women’s childcare and housekeeping responsibilities imposed by gender-segregated roles could prevent them from making efforts for activating them for their businesses (Loscocco et al., 2009). Un- or under-utilized weak ties or network resources may not be able to improve entrepreneurs’ business performance (Brüderl & Preisendörfer, 1998). Women’s networks could also have more redundant (less diverse) resources (see Burt, 1998; Klyver & Schenkel, 2013). Drawing on the finding that women’s networks tend to be related to domestic and community affairs, we could suspect that female entrepreneurs could have more homogeneous and redundant
resources. Therefore, although women have the same number of weak ties and gained resources, they do not generate similar positive impacts.

In addition, this research finds that female micro-entrepreneurs are significantly less likely to survive compared to male counterparts. However, this finding needs to be carefully interpreted in the U.S. context. Given that the period of the PSED II Data (2005-2011) overlapped with the Great Recession (2007-2009), we might suspect the economic crisis more harshly hit women’s network building opportunities and business performance than male counterparts. Perhaps under other conditions, the effects would have been less stark. In this vein, Cha (2014) found that women who returned to work from layoff experience greater earning losses than their male counterparts. Overall, the micro-enterprise market suffered an 18-percentage point crash in total investment in the recession (Shane, 2011). Thébaud and Sharkey (2016) found that women-owned businesses faced more difficulty in acquiring funding during these years compared to male counterparts. Women-owned businesses got a significantly larger penalty in the investment market during these years due to their lower credit scores than male counterparts. Since network building requires lots of time and resource investment and reflects an actor’s social position, women’s economic crisis in the job market and business might have deteriorated their network building opportunities and business survival during the recession. Therefore, further investigation on the relationship among microentrepreneurs’ gender, social network, and business performance needs to be done in a different period.

The findings provide empirical evidence to support the necessity of social networking intervention for female participants of MDPs. First of all, MDPs need to provide gender-sensitive social networking intervention for female participants. MDPs need to understand the risk of building women-only networks. If women’s networks have less return compared to men’s, we need to focus on providing opportunities for women to build better quality of networks by connecting them to resources more typically in the network of men but outside many women’s peer groups, like business experts, lawyers, bankers, financial institutes, and suppliers. MDPs could offer workshops that facilitate women’s interactions with formal business organizations and
business experts, to get advice, loans, information, and customer contact. Second, MDPs need to strengthen their own networks with a diversity of community groups, such as business associations, non-profit organizations, financial institutions, welfare agencies, and governments. Since MDPs are unable to provide female participants with all resources related to business, the joint production of services at the community level would be desirable for satisfying participants’ multiple needs (Provan & Milward, 2013).

This research also provides implications that U.S. MDPs and governments need to focus on long-term support in order to increase female micro-entrepreneurs’ business survival rate. A number of recent studies find that gender discrimination in finance is still common, such that female entrepreneurs receive less capital, provide more equity, or receive investments with lower valuations relative to their male counterparts (Artz, 2017; Brush, Greene, Balachandra, & Davis, 2017; Eddleston, Ladge, Mitteness, & Balachandra, 2017; Kanze, Huang, Conley, & Higgins, 2018; Poczter & Shapsis, 2017; Sauer & Wiesemeyer, 2018). Gender norms and beliefs that women are not appropriate for business leadership additionally amplify women’s barriers to access resources by infringing upon the decisions of the state and of the organizations which women ask for resources (Gordini & Rancati, 2017; Lindberg, 2014).

In addition, female micro-entrepreneurs face challenges in managing both family roles and work, which limit their commitment to their businesses (Monahan, Shah, & Mattare, 2011; Wang, 2018). Some research provides evidence that MDPs’ and government’s support for female entrepreneurs positively affects not only their business launching but also survival (Iakovleva, Solesvik, & Trifilova, 2013; Lockyer & George, 2012; Yoonyoung Cho, 2013). For example, MDPs and government agencies such as Small Business Development Centers and the Small Business Administration could offer business consulting services, skill training, workshops, and/or subsidies for childcare to existing women owned microenterprises. With access to capital a major concern, MDPs and federal or state governments could offer government grants, investor funding, and/or low interest loans to female micro-entrepreneurs. Federal and state governments could help women-owned microenterprises...
acquire relative competitive advantages in the market by giving additions in procurement for governments and helping create opportunities to be showcased.

Implications

This paper also has implications for future research. First, we should develop better measurement tools for the quality of weak ties and network resources. This study could not investigate the gender differences in terms of quality of weak ties and gained network resources because the PSED data set provides only the quantity of them. In addition, this study cannot identify which resource is more valuable than others in terms of its impact on micro-enterprise performance, because the analysis aggregated the number of gained resources. Future research needs to measure, in peculiar: (1) the relative values of resources for businesses (e.g., information, finance, advice, emotional support, etc.); (2) what resources each weak tie induces; (3) the level of homogeneity of weak ties (resource redundancy); and (4) whether the focal actor actually utilized the weak ties and gained resources for her/his business. Such a study would, of course, be more costly to undertake.

Second, this study implies that more qualitative research needs to be done in order to figure out female micro-entrepreneurs’ needs for social networks. What are the challenges for female micro-entrepreneurs in getting actual benefits from their networks for their businesses? What kinds of network resources do they want to access for their businesses?

Third, more research needs to investigate how the race and economic class of female micro-entrepreneurs influence their networks and businesses. Since a large portion of female participants of MDPs is minority or low-income women (Langowitz et al., 2006), figuring out how race and economic class intersect with gender, social networks, and business performance would be crucial.

Finally, we need to conduct comparisons between developed and developing countries in terms of the gendered effect of networks on micro-enterprise performance. Women-owned micro-enterprises have been fast growing and contribute significantly to the economy of developing countries. However, some
literature argues that female micro-entrepreneurs in developing countries have a lower probability for success compared to them in developed countries, because of more severe gender inequality and the underdeveloped business environment (Sequeira, Gibbs, & Juma, 2016). A recent global study found that while six developing countries are placed in the top ten countries in terms of the percentage of female business owners, only two developing countries (The Philippines and Thailand) were ranked as 8th and 10th in terms of women’s business success and relatively good access to business resources (Mastercard, 2017). Reflecting this gap between developed and developing countries, we could suspect that different gender dynamics between developed and developing countries could affect the relationship between networks and business performance.

References


Emily J. Warren
Johns Hopkins University

Melody K. Waring
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Daniel R. Meyer
University of Wisconsin—Madison

As social services become increasingly privatized amid a federal policy environment that provides a means-tested, temporary social safety net, there is potential for a larger contribution by congregations as a social service provider. Using data from a nationally representative sample of religious congregations collected in 1998, 2006, and 2012, we examine whether congregations have increased social service activity over time using three measures of service provision, and whether provision varies by the congregation’s community-level context. Controlling for organizational capacity, we find that after the Great Recession, congregations are more likely than before to engage in broad social services and to engage in “core” services that address basic economic needs. We find the trend differs by the poverty status of the congregation’s neighborhood, with congregations in high-poverty neighborhoods less likely to provide services in 1998 than congregations in low-poverty neighborhoods; after the recession, not only are significantly more congregations in high-poverty neighborhoods providing services than in 1998, they have closed the gap with congregations in low-poverty neighborhoods and are equally likely to be providing any services regardless of neighborhood poverty. Our findings highlight the importance of social
service measurement to determine the prevalence of congregation-level service provision and suggest that the role congregations play in providing services may be substantial, but it may still be an inadequate substitute for the public safety net.

Keywords: Congregations, social safety net, social services

At the turn of the 20th century, the predominant providers of the social safety net were private entities, primarily those with a religious focus (Katz, 1996). Over the course of the century, the locus of assistance changed to the government as the primary provider, with private agencies sometimes supplementing the government (Sosin, 1986). By the end of the century, however, the focus again shifted, with many arguing that governmental provision of social services had become inefficient and ineffective (Carlson-Thies, 1997). One emerging arrangement was for the government to provide funds to nonprofits to deliver services (Lynn, 2002). Recently, secular and religious nonprofits have both increased their role in delivering services (Allard, 2010; Boddie & Cnaan, 2006), and low-income families use a mix of public and private agencies for basic needs (Allard, Wathen, & Danziger, 2015; Wu & KeeganEamon, 2007). Social policy has attempted to encourage congregations to become social service providers. The 1996 welfare reform included a provision (Charitable Choice) that explicitly allowed the government to contract with formal religious organizations—though relatively few congregations have accessed federal funding (Chaves & Wineburg, 2010).

To what extent are congregations providing social services in response to community needs? And are some congregations more likely to provide services? On the one hand, it may be that congregations in areas of high economic need may be most likely to see individuals with difficulties and be motivated to provide material assistance. On the other hand, the economic resources of congregations come from the contributions of their members, so congregations in high-poverty areas may have the fewest resources with which to work. As a result, it is unclear whether congregations in high-poverty areas would be more
or less likely to provide services, and whether this changed in response to the recession. This is particularly salient in the context of the Great Recession of 2007–2009, as neighborhoods and individuals faced increased economic difficulties. However, relatively little is known about the types of material assistance congregations provide, and whether they were more likely to do so after the Great Recession after considering the capacity of members. This paper examines trends in the likelihood of congregations providing material assistance between 1998 and 2012, and the characteristics that predict service provision.

Background and Previous Literature

Previous Research on the Provision of Social Services by Congregations

Many congregations provide social services, and they serve an important role in the social safety net. In a case study examining the role of religion in social services, staff members (responding both at congregations and in secular non-profit organizations) identified both the flexibility of congregational funds and moral prerogative as drivers of the significant role of congregational social service provision (Garlington, 2017).

However, accurately estimating these activities in congregations is challenging. Chaves and Tsitsos (2001) made a pioneering attempt at a national estimate by interviewing congregations referred by individual respondents to the nationally representative General Social Survey in 1998. They estimated that 58 percent of congregations in the United States were involved in at least one social service program. Similarly, a regional study of congregations in Philadelphia led to an estimate of 45–49 percent of congregations providing social services (Botchwey, 2007).

In contrast, other studies find service provision to be nearly universal among congregations. Ammerman’s (2001) regional surveys and interviews found that 87 percent of congregations in seven regions (urban and rural) had at least one “community connection” or partner outside of the congregation to which they contribute space, volunteers, material goods, or money. Cnaan (2006), like Botchwey (2007), also examined congregations in Philadelphia,
but found a much higher estimate of 88 percent (versus 45–49 percent) involved in the direct provision of social services.

Some research has attempted to make sense of these diverging estimates. Perhaps congregations in urban areas are more likely to provide services than those in rural areas (Unruh & Sider, 2005). Different study methods also lead to different estimates. For example, Cnaan (2006) argues that his estimate, based on in-person interviews and prolonged engagement, is more accurate than surveys because surveys do not ask questions that elicit good data on a congregation’s provision of social services. Because congregations provide (directly or through a partner) a wide range of services, estimating how many congregations provide “services” depends on definition (Ammerman, 2001; Unruh & Sider, 2005). In addition, congregations’ roles vary from “short term and fleeting,” such as one-time fundraisers, to regular and intensive, such as year-round shelter programs (Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001, p. 669). Some congregations provide direct care themselves, and others indirectly support a partner social service agency (Ammermann, 2001). When measures of expenditures and staff coverage on social services are used as a proxy for “long-term and face-to-face” services, only about 10 percent of congregations provided them in 1998 (Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001, p. 669).

Predictors of Social Services

Survey estimates suggest that the most common services are the provision of food, clothing, and shelter (Ammerman, 2001; Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001; Garlington, 2017). Since these activities are related to meeting immediate needs, is community need an important predictor of service provision? The prior research provides mixed results. For example, Botchwey (2007) found that congregations in low-resource neighborhoods in Philadelphia were more likely to provide social service programs than those in neighborhoods with high resources. Similarly, Chaves and Tsitsos (2001) report a positive relationship between congregation social service provision and neighborhood poverty. Approaching the question from an economic exchange perspective, Hungerman (2005) used denominational records and county administrative data to estimate that a one-dollar
decrease in welfare spending related to the 1996 welfare reform legislation (which Hungerman interprets as an indicator of increasing unmet need) results in a 40-cent increase in charitable spending among Presbyterian churches.

However, other research shows little effect of neighborhood need. In an early study, Sosin (1986) finds no clear relationship between nonprofits (including religious nonprofits) providing services and low levels of public provision, which he interprets as increased need. Most recently, Gillooly and Allard (n.d.) find that the provision of social services by congregations is associated with measures of community need only when a congregation’s capacity for providing such services increases. Similarly, there is a strong positive relationship between a congregation’s annual budget and the number of community partners with which it provides social services, suggesting that the provision of social services may be driven more by congregation capacity than by community need (Ammerman, 2001).

In addition to congregation capacity, some research has considered the effect of congregation’s religious tradition and racial composition, particularly in light of racialized U.S. congregational demographics. National surveys suggest predominantly African American congregations are no more likely to provide any social services than majority white congregations (Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001). However, Brown (2008) finds that majority African American congregations are more likely to provide services he describes as having “long-term benefits,” such as job training and tutoring, rather than “short-term benefits,” such as food banks and thrift shops, compared to predominantly white, Asian, or Latino congregations (p. 102). Cavendish (2000) used a nationally representative survey of U.S. Catholic parishes to compare differences by race within the same denomination, and found that predominantly African American parishes are significantly more likely to provide social services than parishes that are predominantly white.

Denomination tradition has been a fairly consistent predictor of social service, where mainline Protestant denominations (e.g., Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian) are more likely to provide any services than Catholic congregations, or conservative or evangelical Protestant denominations (e.g., Baptist, Pentecostal) (Chaves & Tsitsos, 2001). However, the gap may
be closing: recent estimates find that evangelical congregations have had the largest increase in proportions of congregations providing social services, from 28 percent in 1998 to 52 percent in 2012 (Fulton, 2016). Less is known about service provision among Jewish, Islamic, or other non-Christian congregations.

*Trends over Time*

Given that both neighborhood and congregation characteristics affect the provision of social services, has service changed in response to secular trends in neighborhoods and congregations? Chaves and Anderson (2014) find several major trends in congregational change from 1998 to 2012: first, congregations are becoming more ethnically diverse, with an increase in the proportion of congregations made up predominantly of people of color, a decline in entirely non-Hispanic white congregations (from 20 percent of all congregations in 1998 to 11 percent in 2012), and an increase in congregations where no single ethnic group comprises at least 80 percent of congregants (from 15 percent in 1998 to 20 percent in 2012). Second, individual congregations are declining in size, but the average person is part of a larger congregation—indicating a concentration of members among large congregations. Third, more congregations are independent (not affiliated with a specific denomination) and denominational congregations have weaker denominational ties. This decrease in affiliation is also reflected in population-level surveys.

The Pew Research Center (2015) found that 16.1 percent of Americans were “unaffiliated” with a particular denomination in 2007 versus 22.8 percent in 2014; in the same period, the percentage of Americans identifying as Catholic declined from 23.9 to 20.8 percent, and as Mainline Protestant from 16.1 to 14.7 percent, while those identifying as a faith other than Christian (e.g., Jewish, Muslim, Hindu) increased from 4.7 to 5.9 percent. Taken together, these trends might suggest declines in service provision over time. First, the declining size of many congregations may mean that the proportion of congregations providing services is declining. Second, the denominational group most likely to provide services (mainline Protestant denominations) is generally shrinking.
In terms of neighborhood characteristics, the need for social services has also been changing. The welfare reform legislation of 1996 eliminated open-ended entitlement to cash assistance for low-income, single-parent families and established time limits and work requirements (Blank, 2002). Along with other changes (the increase in the Earned Income Tax Credit, for example), the current policy approach emphasizes work supports and in-kind benefits over cash assistance. The emphasis on work may lead to significant financial difficulties for those who face challenges finding regular employment at a living wage, and the emphasis on in-kind assistance may mean families have less cash for household bills not covered by in-kind supports (Brodkin, 2003; Cancian, Haveman, Meyer, & Wolfe, 2002). As a result of these changes, responsive congregations may shift the services they provide to replace basic needs that could have previously been filled via a public safety net (food, clothing, assistance with rent or utilities, or assistance with paying some required bills). Given that federal poverty policy increasingly prioritizes earnings, congregations may also be more interested in providing job training or educational assistance designed to help participants find stable employment.

The policy context regarding religious organizations has also been changing. Welfare reform created new funding opportunities for nongovernmental social service organizations, including religious congregations through the Charitable Choice program (Cnaan & Boddie, 2002). A place for congregations as sites of social services was further institutionalized when President George W. Bush opened the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (Chaves & Wineburg, 2010), a program that has been renewed by both the Obama and Trump administrations. Faith-based organizations, including congregations, that receive federal funding cannot discriminate in providing funded services by religion nor require religious participation—though some controversy remains about whether adequate accountability measures are in place to ensure compliance (Gilman, 2007). While grants to faith-based organizations for social services have been proclaimed as an important part of federal spending (Gilman, 2007), it has not become normative for congregations: among congregations providing any social service, only an estimated 5.8 percent reported applying
for a government grant in 2012 and only 1.9 percent received government funding for social services (Chaves & Eagle, 2016).

The Great Recession of 2007–2009 provided a wide-scale test for a safety net focused on supporting work, with soaring unemployment, lowered wages, and declines in housing values (Hardy, Smeeding, & Ziliak, 2015; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). The two groups of predictors of congregations’ provision of social services, neighborhood and congregation characteristics, might create countervailing forces. On the one hand, increased need during the recession could lead to increased social services. But contemporary changes in congregation size and makeup, plus income decreases for congregants during the recession, could lead to decreased capacity. Notably, while charitable donations decreased overall during the Great Recession, financial contributions to both congregations and food banks stayed constant or even increased over the recession (Reich, Wimer, Mohamed, & Jambulapati, 2011).

In summary, prior research shows that many congregations provide social services, though the estimates vary widely. The varied estimates may be due to a lack of clarity on what counts as a social service. Research also provides mixed findings on whether key drivers of provision are community need (for example, being in a high-poverty area), or congregation characteristics, or both. While there has been some research examining trends, this research generally stops before the Great Recession, which could have had significant effects both on the ability of congregations to provide services and the need for them to do so. In this paper, we focus on time trends in the provision of services and the characteristics of congregations providing services. We make two important contributions. First, we constrain the definition of social services to those most likely to respond to social need and we include a proxy for intensity of services to better understand changes over time. Second, we expand previous analyses by including data before and after the Great Recession, as a natural test for how congregations responded to increased need given other secular trends.
Method

We use data from the National Congregations Study (NCS), a survey of approximately 4,000 religious congregations in the United States. The NCS sample was drawn from the 1998, 2006, and 2012 waves of the General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative sample of noninstitutionalized English- and Spanish-speaking adults. GSS respondents were asked if they attend religious services at least once per year, and those responding affirmatively were asked for the name and location of their congregation. These identified congregations comprise the NCS sampling frame, which is nationally representative of religious congregations. NCS staff conducted 45- to 60-minute interviews, in-person or by phone, with key informants from each participating congregation, typically a lead clergy member or senior staff member. Response rates ranged from 80 percent in 1998 to 73 percent in 2012 (Chaves, Anderson, & Eagle, 2014). Interviews covered a wide variety of topics, including the demographics of congregants, the congregation’s physical space, worship services, finances, staffing, and congregation volunteering and social activities. We use congregation-level weights constructed by NCS investigators in our descriptive and regression analyses, which adjust for the GSS sampling frame, the possibility of multiple nominations of the same congregation by GSS respondents, a panel component added in the 2012 NCS interview, and an intentional oversampling of Hispanic congregations within the GSS (Chaves & Anderson, 2014). Our analytic sample includes 4,071 congregations, representing approximately 1.2 million congregations nationally.

Measures

Social service provision. NCS respondents were asked, “Has your congregation participated in or supported social service, community development, or neighborhood organizing projects of any sort within the past 12 months? Please don’t include projects that use or rent space in your building but have no other connection to your congregation.” Respondents were asked for open-ended program descriptions, categorized into 20 types of service activities by NCS investigators, as shown in Table 1.
Table 1. Description of Social Services and Core Services Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Social Services</th>
<th>Core Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Programs that feed the hungry</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs targeting the homeless or transients</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs to help people obtain jobs</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services for victims of rape or domestic violence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing or blankets, including rummage sales</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disaster relief</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonreligious education programs</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs for senior citizens</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs targeting physical health needs</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home-building, repair, or maintenance</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs directed at immigrants, migrants, or refugees</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs for children or youths</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs for prisoners or families of prisoners</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance abuse programs</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Vincent de Paul programs</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs for college students or young adults</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaning highways or parks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs targeting men or women in particular</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habitat for Humanity projects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programs targeting people outside the United States</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These are not mutually exclusive categories; for example, meals for people experiencing homelessness is categorized as both a meal program and a program for the homeless. Using these service categories, we create two types of social service provision measures: (1) *social services*; and (2) *core services*. We define social services as a general measure of service activity intended to capture longer-term, community-based engagement in service provision. For these reasons, we exclude short-term activities such as Habitat for Humanity projects and projects with an international focus. Core services is a narrower category, related to helping the homeless, providing food, and assisting with employment or jobs programs—as the need for such services is most likely to increase in response to the Great Recession. (In a robustness check, we include a broader set of services, including clothing, Habitat for Humanity, home repairs, and health; results were substantively similar.) Table 1 shows our
operationalization of services that count as social services and core services. Our third outcome variable, program staff, identifies congregations that report a staff member with more than 25 percent of time on social service provision as a proxy for the level and intensity of a congregation’s service involvement. However, because programs can be provided effectively by volunteer staff, this is an imperfect proxy.

Trends are incorporated with indicator variables measuring the year of the survey, 2006 and 2012 (compared to our base year, 1998). We have a dichotomous measure for high-poverty neighborhoods, indicating a census tract poverty rate of 30 percent or higher. We also measure whether the census tract is urban, rural, or suburban. We control for several characteristics of the congregation: congregation size (logged); income per congregant (in 2012 dollars); and congregation denomination split into 4 categories of historical tradition (Roman Catholic, Non-Christian, Liberal, and Conservative). We base denomination on a five-category indicator the NCS aggregates, though we model the effect of race separately from tradition so manually collapse the NCS “Black Protestant” category into either Liberal or Conservative based on denomination. Finally, we include characteristics of congregants, including: percentage of adults with a college degree; and predominant racial/ethnic composition. We create mutually exclusive categories for predominant composition using a threshold of 80 percent of regular adult participants for: White, Black, Latino, Other race, and No predominant race/ethnicity.

**Analytic Strategy**

Our research questions examine whether social service activity has changed over time and whether this varies by the economic needs of the congregation’s own surrounding community. We use straightforward logit regression models, one for each of our three binary outcomes of providing social services, core services, and having dedicated program staff. We use year fixed effects to assess time-related trends, omitting 1998 as the reference year. Finally, to examine whether high poverty is increasingly associated with social service activity over time, we interact year with neighborhood poverty status.
**Missing Data**

Eight of the congregation characteristics used in our analyses were missing from at least one observation, the most common of which was report of the congregation’s annual income (21 percent missing). Other characteristics, such as congregation size and racial composition, were missing for less than 5 percent of all congregations in the sample. Fewer than 5 percent of the sample respondents did not report information for our three outcomes of interest. To allow for use of the full sample, we used Stata’s MI program to impute data for all observations and all variables; we created and merged 50 data sets using a chained equations approach. (In a robustness check, we used only complete cases; with substantively similar results.)

**Results**

Table 2 displays weighted descriptive statistics of our sample at each cross-section. The prevalence of social services decreases between 1998 and 2006, from 50 to 40.9 percent; between 2006 and 2012 it increased to 56.7 percent. The proportion of congregations reporting engagement in core services also decreases between 1998 and 2006 before increasing by 2012, from 35–26–42 percent (an overall increase of 20.6 percent). While having staff dedicating at least 25 percent of their time to social service activity is a less prevalent form of service engagement than providing services, the proportion of congregations reporting program staff more than doubled between 1998 and 2012 from 6.7 to 13.9 percent.

The characteristics of congregations have also changed over time. The proportion of congregations in high-poverty neighborhoods increases during the survey period from 12.0 to 17.1 percent. Congregations are less likely to be in rural areas in 2012 than in 1998. Congregation-level demographic characteristics and trends show that the average congregation size is relatively stable, though the standard deviation indicates that there is increasing dispersion, with a few large congregations and many smaller ones. Average total income increased consistently over this period, but the median increased between 1998 ($85,000) and 2006 ($109,000) before declining by 2012 ($95,000).
Table 2. Characteristics of the Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1998 %/Mean (SD)</th>
<th>2006 %/Mean (SD)</th>
<th>2012 %/Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Service provision</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide social services</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>56.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide core services</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>42.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide program staff</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Congregation characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Located in high-poverty neighborhood</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Urbanicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>50.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Congregation size</strong></td>
<td>190 (11)</td>
<td>187 (10)</td>
<td>181 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total congregation income</td>
<td>$192,534 (96,514)</td>
<td>$228,182 (123,702)</td>
<td>$341,575 (126,559)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total congregation income/congregant</td>
<td>$1,019 (4,047)</td>
<td>$1,673 (5,147)</td>
<td>$2,972 (4,705)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Denomination</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Christian</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>71.3</td>
<td>67.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Congregant characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregants with college degree</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predominant congregant race &amp; ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td>62.9</td>
<td>57.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other race</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No predominant race/ethnicity</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[N = 1,230\text{,} 1,517\text{,} 1,324\]

Note.—All descriptive statistics use congregation-level weights.
### Table 3. Estimating the Effect of Time and Congregation Characteristics on Social Service Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1 Social Services</th>
<th>Model 2 Core Services</th>
<th>Model 3 Program Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trend (compared to 1998)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year-2006</td>
<td>0.67**</td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
<td>0.62**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year-2012</td>
<td>1.50*</td>
<td>(0.24)</td>
<td>1.54**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Congregation Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-poverty neighborhood</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>(0.15)</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urbanity (compared to suburban)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
<td>0.69†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregation size</td>
<td>1.71**</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>1.64**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregation income/congregant</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Denomination (compared to Conservative)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Christian</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>(0.54)</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>3.19**</td>
<td>(0.55)</td>
<td>2.74**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Congregant Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with college degree</td>
<td>1.79†</td>
<td>(0.57)</td>
<td>1.65†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predominant race &amp; ethnicity (compared to White)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1.42†</td>
<td>(0.29)</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>0.29**</td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
<td>0.25**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other race</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No predominant race/ethnicity</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>(0.31)</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 4,071

Note.—Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses. † p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01
Approximately two-thirds of congregations identify as conservative, and the proportion of Catholic and Liberal congregations decreases between 1998 and 2012. In the average congregation, about one-third of congregants had a college degree, a proportion that increased over time. The proportion of predominantly Black and Latino congregations increased, with predominantly white congregations declining, which is perhaps related to the decline in the proportion of rural congregations.

In Table 3, we present results estimating the association between congregation characteristics and the Great Recession on social services, core services, and program staff, with a special focus on the time trend, captured in the year indicator variables. We find evidence of time trends for all three indicators of service provision in Model 1. While congregations were substantially less likely to engage in social service provision in 2006 than 1998, by 2012 (after the Recession) they were not only more likely than 2006, they were also more likely than in 1998. We find a very similar time trend when examining core services, as shown in Model 2: congregations were less likely to offer core services in 2006 compared to 1998, but more likely in 2012 than both 1998 and 2006. In contrast, compared to 1998, the odds of having program staff were marginally higher in 2006 and statistically significantly higher in 2012. For all types of service provision, these results are similar to the simple descriptive statistics, suggesting that controlling for other factors that were changing over time does not change the basic time trend: congregations were more likely to provide social and core services and to have program staff in 2012 than 1998, controlling for other changes.

Location in a high-poverty neighborhood is not associated with the odds of either type of service provision or the presence of program staff. We find no strong evidence that a congregation’s urbanicity, income per congregant, or congregant educational level is predictive of social service or core service activity, though some coefficients are marginally significant. Congregation size is consistently positively associated with all three measures of service provision; this is not surprising given that size likely reflects organizational capacity.

Denomination and the congregation’s racial and ethnic composition are associated with multiple types of social service
activity. We find that liberal congregations have approximately three times the odds of engaging in social and core services relative to conservative congregations. Coefficients for other congregation categories are small and not significantly different from conservative congregations. Using predominantly white congregations as the reference group, Latino congregations have reduced odds of engaging in social or core services, while those whose members are predominantly Black are marginally more likely to offer social services and to have program staff. Congregations with no predominant race have 4 times the odds of reporting having program staff relative to predominantly-white congregations.

In addition to examining the time trend in whether congregations engage in social service activity, we are also interested in whether the likelihood of these types of engagement vary by the needs of the congregation’s own community. Using location in high-poverty neighborhood as a covariate in Table 3, our estimates suggest that location in a high-poverty neighborhood is not associated with the odds of engaging in social service or core service activity. But we are also interested in whether this association may vary by year in response to changing community needs, so we estimate the same models shown in Table 3 with interaction terms for survey year and congregation’s location in a high-poverty neighborhood. The results, displayed in Table 4, show a differential time trend for social service and core service provision among congregations in high-poverty neighborhoods; in contrast, there is no evidence for a differential time trend in program staff (the interactions are not statistically significant). The coefficients from Table 4 are used to generate Figure 1, which shows the predicted probability of providing social services and core services, with all characteristics set at their mean value except for neighborhood poverty and year. The first set of bars shows those congregations in high-poverty neighborhoods were predicted to be less likely to offer social services in 1998 (36% to 52%). While provision of social services was less likely for congregations in both types of neighborhoods in 2006 than 1998, the differential between low- and high-poverty neighborhoods did not change. By 2012, after the recession, neighborhood poverty shows a different relationship with the provision of social services. In low-poverty neighborhoods, the
Table 4. Estimating the Effect of Time and Congregation Characteristics on Social Service Contexts, by High-Poverty Neighborhoods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1 Social Services</th>
<th>Model 2 Core Services</th>
<th>Model 3 Program Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trend (compared to 1998)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year-2006</td>
<td>0.66*</td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td>0.61**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year-2012</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>(0.23)</td>
<td>1.36†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-poverty neighborhood</td>
<td>0.51*</td>
<td>(0.15)</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year-2006 * High-poverty neighborhood</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>(0.45)</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year-2012 * High-poverty neighborhood</td>
<td>2.34†</td>
<td>(1.08)</td>
<td>2.55*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other congregation characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urbanicity (compared to Suburban)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
<td>0.69†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregation size</td>
<td>1.70**</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>1.63**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregation income/congregant</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denomination (compared to Conservative)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>(0.27)</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Christian</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>(0.57)</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>3.19**</td>
<td>(0.55)</td>
<td>2.73**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregant characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with college degree</td>
<td>1.81†</td>
<td>(0.58)</td>
<td>1.67†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predominant race &amp; ethnicity (compared to White)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1.43†</td>
<td>(0.29)</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>0.27**</td>
<td>(0.09)</td>
<td>0.24**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other race</td>
<td>0.53†</td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
<td>0.53†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No predominant race/ethnicity</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>(0.52)</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 4,071

Note.—Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses. † p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01
Figure 1: Trend in Predictions of Offering Services, by Neighborhood Poverty
probability of offering social services was statistically the same in 2012 as it was in 1998 (59% to 52%). In contrast, in high-poverty neighborhoods, there is a greater likelihood of offering social services in 2012 than in 1998 (63% to 36%). For high-poverty neighborhoods, not only are social services more likely in 2012 than in 1998, but the lowered likelihood associated with being in a high poverty neighborhood has been overcome.

The next set of bars shows that the patterns in the probability of offering core services are generally similar to offering social services. Although not all coefficients are statistically significant, the general story is a decline in providing core services between 1998 and 2006 in both types of neighborhoods, with a rebound between 2006 and 2012, with those in high-poverty neighborhoods significantly more likely in 2012 than those in low-poverty neighborhoods. Thus, there is some suggestive evidence here that congregations responded to community-level need by increasing engagement in social service and core service provision after the Recession.

Limitations, Discussion, and Future Research

Our findings should be set in the context of the limitations of this research. First, the data source we use contains three cross-sections; this allows us to answer whether congregational provision of services differs at three points in time but does not enable an analysis of whether particular congregations began (or stopped) offering services. Second, the question on social service programs changed slightly between 1998 and 2012, such that the core services measure may be underestimated in 2012. We do not think this is particularly problematic, because the number of congregations affected is small (13 percent of respondents in 2012 could be undercounted, demographically similar to other congregations except more likely to be Conservative). Third, the data are best suited for an examination of whether a congregation provides services, not the duration or intensity of services. (Our measure of intensity is only based on dedicated staff, so excludes volunteers and staff responsibilities below the 25 percent threshold.) Fourth, our proxy for neighborhood need is crude and related to only the census tract of the congregation: individuals in need can cross neighborhood boundaries in search of
help. Finally, we only have the congregation’s report of whether it provides services, without information on availability or quality from the perspective of vulnerable families themselves.

Understanding how and if economically vulnerable individuals get help, and whether this help is effective, are critically important areas of inquiry. The providers of assistance have changed over the last 20 years. Public sector provision has declined some—in part on the rationale that other organizations would step in, and that faith-based organizations in particular would provide basic social services (Boddie & Cnaan, 2006; Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009). Is there evidence that congregations have begun to do so?

We find that the number of congregations providing at least one social service and at least one core service decreased from 1998 to 2006 but then by 2012 had increased to a higher level than 1998. There is no detectable decline from 1998 to 2006 for a crude measure of intensity of provision, having dedicated program staff; however, similar to the other measures, provision is higher in 2012 than in 1998. These findings have implications for disentangling some of the discrepancies in the prior research: whether congregations are stepping up or not may depend to some extent on the types of services we consider as “stepping up.” Our primary interest here is not in general services, but in the core services that are designed to meet basic human needs. Our results suggest that congregations are beginning to step into this gap: the proportion of congregations offering some type of core service increased from 35 to 42 percent during our study period, and the increase remains even controlling for potentially confounding factors. The increase in core service provision between 2006 and 2012 is especially important given that this was a period that covered the Great Recession, with heightened need for services that are part of the basic social safety net. However, future research needs to drill down to understand more about the types of services provided, and, especially, the extent to which these are available, generous, and of high quality.

Our results differ somewhat from those found in the previous literature, in part because we use different measures of service provision. Our results suggest that the way service provision is measured can change the conclusions: if we are concerned about the provision of social services or core services,
we see a significant decline followed by an increase in provision, but for intensive services as measured by staff, there is only an increase. The trend for social services and core services also differs between low-poverty and high-poverty neighborhoods, while for staff provision, the time trend is not different for low- and high-poverty neighborhoods.

Our second question focused on the characteristics that predict service provision, with special attention to whether those in high-poverty neighborhoods are increasingly more or less likely to provide services after the recession. Previous research has tended to emphasize the economic capacity of congregations as more critical than need (e.g., Gillooly & Allard, n.d.; Sosin, 1986). Similarly, we find a consistent positive relationship between congregation size and the provision of services.

However, our work suggests that service provision does not merely depend on resources. We did not find a relationship between service provision and the average income per congregant. After the recession, congregations in high-poverty neighborhoods are more likely than they had been previously to provide services and as likely to provide services as those in lower-poverty neighborhoods. A broad conclusion from our findings is that congregations may be responding to the needs around them—to the extent that they are able to do so.

The conclusions of prior research on the ability of private agencies (including, but not limited to congregations) to make up for pull-backs in the public sector has generally emphasized the limitations of the private sector and a spatial mismatch: areas of high need have few private providers (Allard, 2010). Our conclusions here, however, suggest congregations in areas of high need may be beginning to step into the gap. It is not yet clear whether their provision of service can begin to replace public provision, let alone meet the need. Depending on congregations to fill the gap created by what the public sector no longer provides seems to be hoping for something that has not yet been demonstrated: congregations are providing support, but there is no evidence yet that they can replace public provision.
References


Can the Lifeworld Save Us From Neoliberal Governmentality? Social Work, Critical Theory, and Habermas

Stephanie A. Bryson
Portland State University

Two years have passed since the 2016 election of Donald J. Trump, and U.S. social work is revisiting its radical stirrings and grappling with its conservative moorings. In this paper, I will argue that as U.S. social work appraises the adequacy of its intellectual leaders, the cultural relevance of its practice models, and its stance toward the Enlightenment ideals of reason, truth, and justice, it might usefully re-examine its relationship to the critical theory legacy of the Frankfurt School, especially the thinking of Jürgen Habermas. My goal in this essay is to suggest ways in which Habermasian thinking could provide social work more viable solutions than those offered by the idea of neoliberal governmentality.

Key words: Critical theory, Habermas, neoliberal governmentality, social work
Introduction: Social Work and Critical Theory

In light of twin impulses now sweeping the globe—the expansion of human rights in some places, the retrenchment of nationalism in others—U.S. social work is revisiting its radical stirrings and grappling with its conservative moorings. At a moment in which U.S. social work is both celebrated and viliﬁed for embracing positivism in its structural equation models and managerialism in its tightly constricted educational competencies, the profession faces great, if not grand, challenges (American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, 2019). Not least among these challenges is social work’s coherent and long-term response to the peculiarly American brand of nativism and corporate oligarchy potentiated by the 2016 election.

In this paper, I will argue that as U.S. social work appraises the adequacy of its intellectual leaders, the cultural relevance of its practice models, and its stance toward the Enlightenment ideals of reason, truth, and justice, it might usefully re-examine its relationship to the critical theory legacy of the Frankfurt School, especially the thinking of Jürgen Habermas. My goal in this essay is to suggest ways in which Habermasian thinking could provide social work a conceptual atoll in a rising sea of neoliberalism, professionalization, and criminalization (Mehrotra, Kimball, & Wahab, 2016).

The Critical Theory Legacy of the Frankfurt School

Before they were forced by Nazis in 1933 to close the Marxist Institute for Social Research (Institut für Sozialforschung) in Frankfurt, ﬁrst generation critical theorists Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, Friedrich Pollock, Leo Lowenthal, and Eric Fromm wrote widely against Nazism in Germany, fascism in Europe, and Stalinism in Russia. Under the leadership of Max Horkheimer, Frankfurt School theorists reinterpreted classical Marxist philosophy, giving greater weight than Marx to the role and function of ideology (the ”superstructure“) vis-a-vis materialist forces of production (the ”base“). Perhaps best known among the Frankfurt School in the U.S. were Horkheimer and Adorno, whose incendiary Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944) indicted “the culture industry”
they observed after fleeing Germany and taking up residence near Los Angeles, California.

On the whole, the Frankfurt School’s first generation denounced the unanticipated consequences of modernity—the violent deployment of technology, the calculating and bureaucratic contortion of Enlightenment reason, and the licentious exploitation of workers under increasingly veiled forms of capitalist production. Since the 1940s, several generations of critical theorists have built upon and modernized the ideas of the Frankfurt School. These include Jürgen Habermas, leader of the second generation, who carried on the school’s legacy in an era deeply preoccupied with the radical democratization of society through social movements.

Because Habermas is concerned with democratic engagement, his thinking has been taken up by social work scholars in the last 25 years. Notable examples include Henkel’s (1995) caution about the danger of an “aspiration to consensus” in the Habermasian ideal speech situation; Blaug’s (1995) concern about colonization in social work communication; Ashenden’s (2004) use of Habermas to understand “crises of legitimation” in child welfare practice in the UK; and Houston’s summative review of key Habermasian concepts (2013).

Like Freud, whose ideas traversed the Enlightenment and Romantic eras, Habermas is something of a transitional figure between modernity and postmodernity. With Marx, Weber, and Marcuse, Habermas shares a critique of technical or instrumental rationality, positivism, bureaucracy, capitalism, ideology, and domination. With Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida, Habermas recognizes the importance of language and meaning-making. What distinguishes Habermas from classical and contemporary social theorists alike is that he retains a belief in political consensus forged on the basis of collectively negotiated and legitimated values. In short, Habermas seeks to salvage the Enlightenment project—human emancipation through reason, law, and justice—by wrestling reason from the lair of the technical and bureaucratic and uniting it with language and the realm of sensual, interpretive, lived experience. In my view, Habermas’ reconciliation of Enlightenment reason and postfoundational critique could offer social work practical and conceptual strategies for resisting repression within and beyond the profession.
To sharpen the contours of Habermas’ thinking, I first compare and contrast his views with those of Foucault, Marx, Weber, Marcuse, and with contemporary theorist Wendy Brown. After a brief review of foundational theories culminating in the Foucauldian idea of governmentality, I take up three of Habermases’ ideas—system and lifeworld, legitimation crisis, and communicative action—and argue that these ideas could enliven social work’s response to the global phenomenon of neoliberal rationality.

Review: Structuralism vs. Poststructuralism

Although social work has incorporated “critical theory” into its lexicon (Fook, 2003; Healy, 2001; Pease & Fook, 1999), some scholars have lamented the imprecision with which this term is used. For example, Gray and Webb (2009) have characterized some critical social work as “largely impressionistic, with the [use] of the term ‘critical’ being casual and loose” (p. 78). It is fair to say that critical social work has struggled to reconcile, in the words of Wendy Brown (2016), an “indispensable but non-trivial incongruence in the formulations of power, of agency, of truth, and of historical change” between theories that derive from Marxist vs. Foucauldian thinking.

To her credit, Jan Fook acknowledged in early work that attempts to unite “structural” and “poststructural” perspectives under the banner “postmodern critical social work” (Pease & Fook, 1999) were fraught with epistemological and methodological challenges:

[C]urrently it is possible to identify two major perspectives in critical social work that can roughly be differentiated as the structural and poststructural. In broad terms the former is based on Marxist analysis...emphasizing the role of social structure in the determination of class and power differences. The latter approach tends to incorporate more Foucauldian analysis...which involves recognizing more personal, dynamic, and multiple ways in which power differences are created and maintained...[I]t is worthwhile noting that each perspective entails quite divergent implications regarding the nature of knowledge and knowledge creation. (2003, p. 125)
As Habermas occupies a territory between structuralism and poststructuralism, and as these terms continue to create more confusion than clarity, these divergent implications deserve further scrutiny. First, we must consider whether Marx and Foucault merit these characterizations at all.

**Structuralism**

To begin, Foucault’s analyses of the origins of modern medicine, psychiatry, and systems of classification in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963/1973), *The Order of Things* (1966/1970), and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969/1972), though widely debated, are often considered “high structuralist” (Elliot, 2009). Although they are unwilling to call Foucault a structuralist, Dreyfus and Rabinow allow that Foucault’s attempt in the *The Birth of the Clinic* “to find the silent structure which sustains practices, discourse, perceptual experience (the gaze), as well as the knowing subject and its objects” indeed “represents Foucault’s extreme swing towards structuralism” (1983, p. 15). Thus, Foucault’s early work can perhaps be considered “holistically” versus “atomistically” structuralist (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983).

Within social theory, structuralism *per se* is typically associated with de Saussure and later Barthes and Levi-Strauss, whose work sought to examine the linguistic rules governing language and speech (or food, or fashion). In Fook’s quote, above, Marxist analysis is considered structuralist, but mainly in opposition to poststructuralist. This is an ironic conceit a la Saussure, who maintained that meaning is always forged through the difference or opposition between signifiers.

In this case, the immense impact of cultural studies, which retooled essentialist and vanguardist Marxist assumptions about power, agency, truth, and historical change (cf. Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1993; Hall, Held, Hubert, & Thompson, 1996) and achieved a durable, nuanced, and historical materialist but postfoundingational version of Marxism, is ignored. Having said that, it is important to acknowledge that French post-Marxism made important contributions to structural Marxism, notably, the idea that the state rather than the bourgeoisie reproduces capitalism in its legal, economic, and political institutions or “ideological state apparatuses” (Althusser,
In sum, Marxism is not a monolithic category belonging exclusively to the domain of structuralism, nor is Foucault exclusively a poststructuralist.

Poststructuralism

Moving on with amplification of the structural/post-structural binary, poststructuralism is typically associated with the continental philosophy of Lacan, Derrida, Kristeva and others who pushed the limits of structuralism by questioning the immediacy of meaning inherent in sign-signifier pairings. As Anthony Elliot (2009) describes succinctly, Lacan argued that meaning is always suspended, whereas Derrida argued that the “absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification indefinitely,” (p. 92). In other words, meaning derives from a potentially eternal play of signs and signifiers and extends beyond the closed and purportedly stable system of sign-signifier proposed by structuralism to wider political and cultural social phenomena like gender and race.

In the past 30 years, variations of deconstruction have been taken up widely by feminist, queer, and postcolonial scholars to reveal the latent contradictions present in unstable signifiers like “woman,” for example. In the process, scholars too numerous to cite have followed on early attempts to de-center categories like identity and nationality (Bhabha, 1994); the colonial subject (Spivak, 1988); and gender (Butler, 1990, 1991, 1993, 2004; Cixous, 1981).

Returning for a moment to the characterization of Foucault’s concept of power as “personal” in the above quote about critical social work, one might argue that Marx rather than Foucault entertained something akin to notion of personal power in the 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte: “Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx, 1852, p. 6). In this sentiment, Marx both grants and checks individual agency against the historical materialist forces of production. To the contrary, and this is central to my argument against neoliberal governmentality, while Foucault’s idea of governmentality describes “the ways in which one might
be urged and educated to bridle one’s own passions, to control one’s own instincts, to govern oneself” (Rose, 1999, p. 3), his reliance on discourse diminishes human agency.

As Elliot maintains about Foucault’s theory of sexuality, perhaps Foucault’s most poststructural work,

[I]t is discourse which produces human experience rather than experience (individual dispositions, emotional desires, personal biographies) producing discourse. The strength of Foucault’s position is that he underlines the extent to which individuals, in defining themselves as sexual subjects, become fixed in relation to symbolic discourses and social prohibitions. The making of sexual identities, says Foucault, is always interwoven with a mode of social control. However, the weakness of this standpoint is that it bypasses the complexity of individual agency. Thus, Foucault’s work often implies a one-way movement of power over and above the individual. (2009, p. 86)

Although the notion of capillary power for which Foucault has become known may suggest a kind of personal power, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that Foucault’s rendering of power is more nuanced and less unidirectionally freighted than structural-functionalist versions of power. However, it is a version of power nonetheless constrained by discourse, which I will argue limits its utility for praxis.

Habermas’ Contributions to Critical Theory

Rational or Instrumental Action

To understand Habermas’ conceptual revision to classical social theory, we must first review the notion of rational or instrumental action—that is, action undertaken explicitly to reach a desired end. As Habermas (1987) argues in Theory of Communicative Action, Durkheim, Marx, and Weber, to varying degrees, ignore or misconstrue potential sources of liberation and mass resistance in late modernity, as against “traditional,” pre-industrial society.
The counter-Enlightenment that set in immediately after the French Revolution grounded a critique of modernity that has since branched off in different directions. Their common denominator is the conviction that loss of meaning [Weber], anomie [Durkheim], and alienation [Marx]—the pathologies of bourgeois society, indeed of posttraditional society generally—can be traced back to the rationalization of the lifeworld itself. (p. 148)

According to Habermas, orthodox Marxism subsumed reason within instrumental action, dismissing any emancipatory potential it offered. Moreover, historical materialism relegated all liberation to the realm of material production, thereby ignoring the role of the lifeworld, a concept to which I will return. Similarly, Durkheim lamented the loss of cohesion in anomic (post-traditional) society, but he underestimated the role that reason could play in negotiating shared meaning and values. And finally, according to Habermas, Weber conflates reason with technocratic rationality and loss of meaning. Chronicling the historical process by which the rationalized worldview of Puritans came to dominate modern society, Weber describes an “iron cage” of Fordist production and bureaucratic rationality.

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. (1930, p. 181)

Chiefly, Habermas takes issue with Weber’s gloomy conclusion: that rationalization means an iron cage from which there is no escape. He also admonishes Weber for failing to demonstrate how Western rationality can be seen as universal. In practice, Habermas introduces his own notions of rationalization, insisting that the imperatives of “functionalist systems maintenance” rather than “instrumental reason gone wild” are more to account for the particular ways rationalized values get superimposed onto peoples’ psyches and wills. Habermas’ notions of
social evolution through system and lifeworld will further explicate his critiques of Durkheim, Mead, Marx, and Weber.

**System and Lifeworld**

In *Volume II of the Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas describes the fundamental problem of social theory with which theorists have been grappling since Marx: “…how to connect in a satisfactory way the two conceptual strategies indicated by the notions of ‘system’ and ‘lifeworld’” (1987, p. 151). In this quote, Habermas is suggesting that a theory of society which fails to appreciate both material and symbolic reproduction, and indeed structure and agency, is fundamentally constrained in its explanatory power.

The lifeworld, in Habermas’ view, “preserves and transmits the interpretive work of preceding generations. It forms the symbolic space...within which cultural tradition, social integration, and personal identity are sustained and reproduced” (Thompson, 1983, p. 285). In contrast, the systems which maintain society and reproduce its “material substrata” are collectively known as “the system.” The internal logic of the system is calculated self-interest, power, and profit. By contrast, the lifeworld is the realm of day-to-day life apart from the narrow interests of organizations and institutions. It is the realm of language and meaning; identity and embodiment; love, sensuality, and altruism; and social and cultural values.

David Ingram (1987) explains that the lifeworld is divided into private and public sectors. The nuclear family, in Habermas’s thinking, serves an important function with regard to socialization and intimacy and makes up the core of the private sector. The public sector includes a “network of cultural institutions in which public opinion is shaped and social identity cultivated” (pp. 149–150). Importantly, the public sector of the lifeworld fosters “social dialogue necessary for generating the shared values and interests that undergird social integration” (1987, pp. 149–150).

Before going further, it is necessary to acknowledge criticism of this heuristic bifurcation in Habermas’ thinking. Feminist political theorists (e.g., Fraser, 1990) have questioned the masculinist idealization of bourgeois public sphere in
Habermas’ system/lifeworld dichotomy. Others (Ingram, 1987) have pointed out the deeply problematic reinscription of a widely discredited public/private split which effectively ignores the profoundly gendered and material functions of the family and at the same time underestimates the symbolic reproductive functions of employers in the paid segment of the labor force. Ingram provides a distinction that is helpful in considering the ideas of system and lifeworld: “It might be best, then, to think of lifeworld and system as relating to logically distinct functions that overlap within institutions” (1987, p. 116). This corrective allows us to theorize the conjoined aspects of carework and domestic labor, for example, as both intimate and economic, personal and political.

Perhaps the pivotal idea on which the system and lifeworld distinction turns is something Habermas refers to as “colonization of the lifeworld.” It is the recognition that the lifeworld cannot be conceptualized exclusively in instrumentally rational terms without grave, socially “pathological consequences.” When the system oversteps its “mediating roles and penetrate[s] those spheres of the lifeworld which are responsible for cultural transmission,” (Ingram, 1987, p. 385) inner colonization, or rationalization, of the lifeworld results. Writes Habermas, “Deformations of the lifeworld take the form of reification of communicative relations.” He goes on to describe the consequences: “Spheres of action of employees and of consumers, of citizens, and of clients of state bureaucracies” become thoroughly monetarized and bureaucratized (1987, p. 386). This is the pathological condition of technocratic domination in late modern society, a phenomenon which has been described elsewhere as neoliberalism.

Take, for example, the striking parallels between colonization of the lifeworld and Brown’s (2005) description of neoliberal rationality, which is worth quoting at length:

Neoliberal rationality, while foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; it involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player...The political sphere, along with every other dimension of contemporary existence, is submitted to an economic rationality; or, put the other way around, not only is the human being configured exhaustively as homo
\textit{a economicus}, but all dimensions of human life are cast in terms of a market rationality. (p. 40)

The crucial distinction between the account of monetarization and bureaucratization offered by Brown, which relies on Foucault’s idea of governmentality, versus the account offered by Habermas, which posits colonization of the lifeworld, is the submerged element of agency.

Brown goes on to describe the way in which neoliberal governmentality subjects “every action and policy to considerations of profitability...conducted according to a calculus of utility, benefit, or satisfaction against a microeconomic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, and moral value-neutrality” (p. 40). By contrast, Habermas is quick to point out that while class conflict has been institutionalized in late modernity and classes mollified, his notion of system and lifeworld actually predicts “new” antagonisms not organized along class lines:

The fact that in welfare state mass democracies class conflict has been institutionalized and thereby pacified does not mean that protest potential has been altogether put to rest. But the potentials for protest emerge now along different lines of conflict—just where we would expect them to emerge if the thesis of the colonization of the lifeworld were correct...The new problems have to do with quality of life, equal rights, individual self-realization, participation, and human rights. (1987, p. 392)

While not entirely autonomous, the lifeworld, as a concept, contains the nucleus of potential political action. It allows subjects a measure of sovereignty, a kind of counter-rationality against the relentless economization and bureaucratization of life. While Habermas’ notion of the lifeworld is admittedly too unified, idealized, and binarized, it nonetheless provides an epistemological archipelago, not unlike a collective “self-observing ego” or a political “wise mind.” Through communicative action, the next topic of this essay, publics can theoretically consolidate and promote shared values generated within the lifeworld—values like love, justice, and care—and mobilize these ethics to oppose the colonization of the lifeworld by the system.
Embedded in Habermas’ idea of the rationalization of the lifeworld is the concept of *communicative action*. Through *legitimation crisis*, in which publics lose confidence in leaders, institutions, or administrative functions, rational subjects become aware of, or “thematize” their location within problematic social relations and display their opposition by organizing and protesting politically or by otherwise expressing their discontent. According to Habermas, through reason and communication—that is, self-reflexivity and engagement in public discourse—late modern subjects can and do defy the full colonization of the lifeworld. In the U.S., recent examples include mass protest of the Trump administration’s travel ban on Muslim countries; local, state, and federal opposition and outright refusal to enact draconian immigration and healthcare policies; the largest one-day public demonstration in the history of the U.S. in the women’s march; and recent groundbreaking elections of women and people of color in the 2018 mid-term elections.

Returning for a moment to classical Marxist thought, we see that Habermas differs appreciably from Marx in his emphasis on both symbolic and material production. This allows Habermas to make sense of social movements organized along the lines of identity rather than class-based antagonism, as social movements which are not labor-based—and thus *system*-based—arise in resistance to the system domination of the lifeworld but along different vectors of oppression than those conceptualized by Marx.

Moreover, recently thematized arenas of concern make visible problematic social relations which were tacitly condoned by an orthodox Marxist embrace of positivism in promoting “scientific socialism.” These include indigenous communities’ environmental resistance to continuing expropriation of land by the oil industry; radical intellectual disability scholarship that embraces the notion of “animacy” for people labelled with intellectual disability (Chen, 2012); and queer and transgender erosion of a stubbornly persistent gender binary. In recognizing the liberatory potential of crises of legitimation organized around identity and group-based rights, Habermas is more closely aligned with Marcuse’s theory of one dimensionality, which I will now review briefly so as to delineate the contours
of Habermas’ arguments. In the final section of the paper, I will consider the potential of Habermas’ thinking for social work.

**Marcuse and One Dimensional Man**

Akin to Habermas’ inner colonization of the lifeworld is Marcuse’s theory of one-dimensionality. Marcuse, who fled Nazi Germany and engaged in anti-fascist work in the U.S. from 1942 until the early 1950s, held that in the advanced industrial societies of the mid-twentieth century, “a comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails...a token of technical progress” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 1). In such a society, and owing to the seemingly neutral operationalization of the scientific method, needs become homogenized to such an extent that people are unaware that they are unhappy with structures of wealth inequality and corporate dominance, for example. Moreover, technological rationality and mass production work to contain antagonisms by appropriating any revolutionary tendencies that might arise. Thus, little difference exists between the quantitative dimensions of life (the system in Habermas’ thinking) and sensual satisfaction (an element of the lifeworld).

According to Marcuse, modern forms of social organization, in creating and meeting the material needs of the populous, rob people of the capacity for critical theorizing and constrain the “negative dialectic.” “Independence of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition are being deprived of their basic critical function in a society which seems increasingly capable of satisfying the needs of individuals through the way in which it is organized” (1964, p. 1). Through the rationalization of all spheres of life, only the given, “objectively” determined reality exists. Thus, subjects are stripped of their subjectivity. Knowledge of oneself as part of a political and economic structure, and as an object of positivist science, is collapsed.

According to Marcuse, in late modernity, certain features of late industrial society—centralized economic planning, the automation of labor, the bureaucratization of all spheres of life, and the standardization and mass production of the culture industry—all combine to subdue citizen protest. “With the increasing concentration and effectiveness of economic, political, and cultural controls, the opposition in all these fields has been
pacified, co-ordinated, or liquidated” (1964, p. xxiv). People become one-dimensional, incapable of self-reflection and thus incapable of instigating meaningful social change.

Among critical theorists, Marcuse may be read as generally more resigned to the notion of pervasive false consciousness, which he refers to as “happy consciousness,” a thin veil of pseudo-contentment which conceals deeper class unrest and potential political rupture. Updating Marcuse’s work from the 1950s, advisedly, we might say late modern subjects under the reign of corporate oligarchy have become time-fixated, sound-bite saturated, socially media(ted) consumers who document life in a series of selfies and Tweets, between increasingly long and intrusive hours of work. Preoccupied by Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram, they pose only insignificant threats to the social order, so consumed are they with economic survival after decades of declining real wages and ever widening economic inequality (Reich, 2010). Self-celebration through social media is the new token economy in which the promise of “going viral” serves to quell outright political and economic unrest.

Despite pessimism about the persistence of false consciousness, Marcuse is somewhat more optimistic about liberation through what he calls “non-repressive desublimation,” the process by which modern subjects forge a critical dialectic that interrogates the one-dimensional conformity of consumption and repression. Just as Freud postulated that sublimation allowed civilization to exist by siphoning off libidinal and aggressive impulses through creative and philosophic expression, Marcuse holds that “autonomous art,” which was imbued with a critical sensibility toward conformity, could unfetter the political libido of 1950s America.

While Marcuse posits “the Great Refusal” of the status quo through avant garde or “autonomous” art, Habermas believes that a new consciousness can arise from a new form of action which is not fundamentally instrumental and rational. Through communicative action, publics can critically evaluate the deleterious effects of modernity while retaining certain beneficial elements of rationality, but a form of rationality that is based in the sensual embodied and daily experience of the lifeworld—not altogether different from Marcuse’s embrace of desire as the basis of art. Marcuse concludes One-Dimensional Man (1964) with a
call to discard false consciousness through the embrace of reason not unlike the reason embraced by Habermas in his theory of communicative action. Both essentially call on citizens to embrace “Reason...[which] promote[s] the Art of life.” In short, like Habermas and other critical theorists, Marcuse urges the development of a new kind of reason not conflated with the deleterious effects of technological rationality, but rather, with critical thinking and ultimate liberation. This is the sort of thinking I believe we need, pressingly, in social work.

Habermas’s Contribution to Social Work

Thus far in this essay, I have reviewed three central Habermasian ideas: system and lifeworld, legitimation crisis, and communicative action. I will now apply these concepts to social work and suggest, provisionally and advisedly, how social work as a project and social workers as citizen-workers can: (1) resist the technicization of social work practice, policy, and research; (2) democratize citizen/clients by leveraging legitimation crises; and (3) catalyze communicative action in communities.

Colonization of the Lifeworld by the System, Redux

To understand the technicization of social work, we must review Habermas’ idea of the colonization of the lifeworld by the system. Habermas conceives “of societies simultaneously as systems and lifeworlds” (Habermas, 1989a, p. 118). Let us first discuss the lifeworld.

The Lifeworld. Borrowing from Husserl, Habermas describes the lifeworld as the social “horizon within which communicative actions are ‘always already’ moving” (Habermas, 1987, p. 119). He says that “language and culture are constitutive for the lifeworld itself” (Habermas, 1987, p. 125) and goes on to describe the ways in which lifeworlds shape and are shaped by social actors in a dialectical feedback loop of structure and agency.

Like poststructuralists, Habermas recognizes that language/culture does not merely reflect reality but actively constitutes it. Perhaps he would even agree with the poststructuralist insight that language is a series of arbitrary signs and signifiers with no transcendental signified. That is to say that within sign/signifier
pairs, there can never be a stable or fixed meaning with which all human subjects would agree. Indeed, there remains the possibility that a given connotation will be appropriated and re-inflected to serve a political or economic interest. For example, social justice cleaves consistently to no intrinsic political essence. One has only to search YouTube to find video after video featuring the right wing insult du jour, social justice warrior, aimed at sanctimonious progressives.

The mechanics of meaning aside, in focusing not on the text that is produced but rather, on its production, Habermas underscores the importance of praxis. He posits that the activity of communicating, which requires modern subjects to referee reality literally hundreds of times each day, is the very basis of consensus in democracy. Within a functioning, robust lifeworld, publics can negotiate an acceptable working version of consensus. In short, they can govern themselves:

The structures of the lifeworld lay down the forms of the intersubjectivity of possible understanding. The lifeworld is, so to speak, the transcendental site where speaker and hearer meet, where they can reciprocally raise claims that their utterances fit the world (objective, social, and subjective), and where they can criticize and confirm those validity claims, settle their disagreements, and arrive at agreements. (Habermas, 1987, p. 126)

Habermas does not succumb to postmodern skepticism about modern subjects’ abilities to articulate shared human values. In a post-truth epoch, this belief seems almost radical. Indeed, according to Habermas, the challenge to lifeworlds is not that posed by the displacement of the grand narratives of truth, justice, and freedom under postmodernism. Rather, it is the challenge of regulating society through markets and bureaucracies, to which we now turn.

The System. As lifeworlds grow more complex, they enlist “steering media” to organize their day-to-day functions. These steering media, notably money and power in post-agrarian societies, are enlisted to coordinate political and economic activity and comprise the system in Habermas’ thinking. The system holds “a purposive-rational attitude toward calculable amounts of value...while bypassing processes of consensus-oriented
communication” (Habermas, 1987, p. 183). Unlike the lifeworld, the system is not governed by consensus. In fact, Habermas contends that the twin logics of marketization and bureaucratization actively undermine democratic consensus:

Between capitalism and democracy there is an indissoluble tension; in them two opposed principles of societal integration compete for primacy. If we look at the self-understanding expressed in the basic principles of democratic constitutions, modern societies assert the primacy of a lifeworld in relation to the subsystems separated out of its institutional orders...On the other hand...the propelling mechanism of the economic system has to be kept as free as possible from lifeworld restrictions...The internal systemic logic of capitalism [is that its needs will be met], if need be, even at the cost of technicizing the lifeworld. (Habermas, 1987, p. 345)

“Technicization” of the lifeworld is what Habermas means when he refers to its “colonization,” a state that occurs when “the imperatives of autonomous subsystems” (bureaucracies and markets) “make their way into the lifeworld from the outside—like colonial masters coming into a tribal society” and forcing “assimilation” (Habermas, 1987, p. 355). Under the reign of technicization, human interactions and activities are submitted to a thoroughgoing assessment of their efficiency and effectiveness. In social life, a means-ends rationality subsumes considerations based on kindness, love, fairness, or altruism.

Resisting Technicization: Implications for Social Work

Applied to organizations and sub-systems which comprise the social work field (e.g., welfare, child welfare, health, mental health, justice, disability, education), the consequences of technicization, or colonization, are grim. In this circumstance, “Efficiency overrides all other values, such as justice, honesty, fairness, and mutual consent” (Bausch, 1997, p. 323). The people who work within these systems “lack vitality in their lifeworlds...lose contact with their cultural traditions...lack a sense of personal and social meaning...[and] feel ineffective.” In short, they become Weber’s (1930) iron cage bureaucrats: “specialists without spirit” and “sensualists without heart” (Bausch, 1997, p. 323).
In Figure 1, I suggest heuristic applications of these ideas to social work practice, policy, and research. These are by no means exhaustive and are open to interpretation, reinvention, and improvement. However, to resist technicization of the life-world, social work might embrace the following four principles: critical praxis, values-based decisionmaking, global cooperation, and systems humanization. By critical praxis, I mean an orientation to social work guided by critical theory in which social work practitioners and researchers “seek to produce practical, pragmatic knowledge that is cultural and structural, judged by its degree of historical situatedness and its ability to produce praxis or action” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 160).

By values-based decisionmaking, I am suggesting that social work practitioners and scholars scrutinize the seductions of this particular moment, like faith in scientific or actuarial certainty. This includes a broad range of considerations: regarding neuroimaging as the most promising approach to mental health research; to the ubiquitous rankings and ratings of schools, programs, and scholars; to the pervasive seductions of criminalization, professionalization, and neoliberal marketization (Mehrotra et al., 2016).

As a hedge on policy and practice insularity, I maintain that U.S. social work should continue to nurture meaningful global collaborations and explicitly support historical and comparative research. Finally, I suggest that social work should promote an ethic of care in its systems and institutions. This would require high quality supervision and mass resistance to Fordist-derived production principles applied to human need. Following are more in-depth examples of these activities.

Reading across the first row, if social work adopted a critical praxis perspective, one practice implication is the use of decolonizing or anti-oppressive practice (AOP) frameworks. Anti-oppressive practice is “a social justice-based, anti-discriminatory approach to social work in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and other European countries” not yet widely adopted in the U.S. (Morgaine & Capous-Desyllas, 2015, p. 24). Informed by feminist, queer, anti-racist and other critical theoretical traditions that attend to the distribution of power in societies, AOP “addresses social divisions and structural inequalities in the work that is done with people whether they be users (‘clients’) or workers” (Dominelli, 1996, p. 170).
Although anti-oppressive and decolonizing frameworks invite scrutiny of micro-focused interventions rooted in individualizing biomedical formulations that are exclusively premised on positivist ideals, they do not entrain a reflexive rejection of evidence-based practice. Rather, clinical social workers practicing from an anti-oppressive practice stance, for example, could make an explicit commitment to select therapeutic interventions with demonstrated effectiveness among marginalized and historically underrepresented service users. For example, when serving Asian men, who contend with high rates of mental health stigma (Livingston et al., 2018) and treatment disparities (Abe Kim et al., 2007), social workers might adopt the fourth wave CBT Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which has shown promise of cultural relevance and treatment efficacy with this group (Nagayama Hall, Hong, Zane, & Meyer, 2011).

In the policy arena, social workers would center meaningful efforts to eradicate economic inequality. After a half century of social science research, we know that poverty and economic inequality, much of it due to ongoing colonial and carceral
processes like slavery and settler colonialism, are at the root of health disparities, child maltreatment rates, and educational disparities (Gil, 2013), to name just a few sequelae of an economic order buttressed by the gendered and racialized maldistribution of resources. A critical praxis approach to policy would resist the liberal welfare state status quo in which structural inequalities are displaced onto individuals through stigmatizing, pathologizing practices (Bryson, 2016).

Finally, if social work embraced critical praxis, it would seek interdisciplinary collaboration as a way to interrogate taken-for-granted conceptions of health, violence, and disability, for example. Engagement with other disciplines, especially newly emerging disciplines like critical disability, could trouble some of social work’s assumptions about psychiatric disability and neurodiversity, which are reinscribed in current social work scholarship/research, pedagogy, and accreditation standards around professional suitability, sensory capacities in the classroom, and social/interpersonal skills.

Reading down the first column of Figure 1, resisting technicization of social work practice would invite us to question the scientific certainty of this era’s scientific truths like biomedicalization, neuropsychiatry, psychopharmacology, actuarial risk assessment, and genetic engineering. As mentioned, we would “challenge the notion that the solutions reside solely in the state or the science” (Mehrotra et al., 2016, p. 159).

Continuing down the first column, in keeping with a desire to support user-directed initiatives and actions, we might forthrightly acknowledge that all social work relationships are embedded in a complex web of intersectional and structural realities that profoundly able-ize, racialize, normalize, and class and gender the intersubjective space between social worker and citizen. Using Habermasian insights about the lifeworld, we could identify and subvert those discursive and institutional practices that monetize and financialize every aspect of our and service users’ waking and sleeping hours. As a profession, we would refuse the colonial logic of the inquisition in our dealings with service users and work to dismantle institutional processes of surveillance in favor of co-constructing rather than extracting narratives deployed to gain access to services or resources.
Finally, as professionals, we might engage in *reflexive supervision* and forego our preoccupation with professional conventions, often borrowed from professions like psychiatry, psychology, and public health, which embody no particular commitment to social justice nor to fundamental social change. We would perhaps begin to imagine, with uninhibited creativity, ways of being professional that do not reinscribe a subject-object split between ourselves and service users.

*Democratizing Citizen/clients by Leveraging Legitimation Crises*

While I’ve hinted at the next implication of Habermasian thinking for social work, I wish to make explicit the need for social work to appreciate the submerged or invisibilized citizen in every patient or client. If we take an example from the current moment, the Trump presidency represents the legitimation crisis of global neoliberalism and its turn toward regressive nationalism. On the other hand, the Trump presidency has itself produced a legitimation crisis across the globe, an unprecedented in vivo test of liberal democracy’s mettle. Evidence of legitimation crises can be found in public protest, among other things.

If we look solely at protest, the election of Donald Trump spawned the largest single-day mass protest (The Women’s March) in U.S. history, drawing somewhere between 3,267,134 and 5,246,670 protesters, more than twice the entire combined U.S. military (Chenoweth & Pressman, 2017). Following Habermas’ logic, the self-reflexivity present in the lifeworld catalyzed this growing crisis of legitimation. In other words, given the link between the lifeworld and carework, paid and unpaid, it is not an accident that the largest march was a women’s march. The lifeworld sustains us, and at least on occasion, it resists ruthless and craven, rationalized and official misogyny. Whether we can nourish ongoing protest remains an unanswered question of our era.

As for social work’s role in nourishing and protecting the lifeworld, Habermas is fairly unequivocal that welfare states “grant a degree of need gratification to capitalism’s underprivileged” and in so doing, “make the capitalistic system secure amid the conditions of radical social inequality” (Bausch, 1997, p. 322). About the welfare state’s “clients,” Habermas writes,
“Clients are customers who enjoy the rewards of the welfare state; the client role is a companion piece that makes political participation that has been evaporated into an abstraction and robbed of its effectiveness acceptable” (1987, p. 350).

To counter the neutralization of the citizen role and the concurrent expansion of the client role in late modernity, social work could incorporate social and political action into all encounters and social work interventions—not just community organizing or other macro-focused activities. Each time social work frames a problem in terms of individual responsibility or pathology, promotes the language of client/consumer, or fails to attend to the larger structural forces shaping people’s lives and the very worker-citizen relationship, it contributes to the evaporation of political participation among the citizenry. If social work cannot resist biomedicalization, neoliberalization, and professionalization, how is it different from psychology, nursing, or other health professions?

In her book on cultural citizenship and immigrant community identity development, Hye-Kyung Kang (2010) identifies multi-level interventions which encourage immigrant subjects to generate counter-discourses of citizenship by taking part in political action (along with traditional counseling, for example). The particular political action may vary. However, to resuscitate liberal democracy, social work should examine the ways in which it unwittingly contributes, through naturalized professional practices, to the denaturalization of citizens.

**Catalyzing Communicative Action**

Finally, I wish to consider the implications of communicative action for social work. In the *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas (1987) explains,

> Communicative action relies on a cooperative process of interpretation in which participants relate simultaneously to something in the objective, the social, and the subjective worlds...Coming to an understanding [Verständigung] means that participants in communication reach an agreement [Einigung] concerning the validity of an utterance; agreement [Einverständnis] is the intersubjective recognition of the validity claim the speaker raises for it. (p. 120)
At few junctures in U.S. history has an electorate been so bitterly divided and so unwilling to grant the “validity of an utterance” to a person of the opposite political party. In my mind, this signals the need to attempt even potentially futile macrolevel efforts to bring together factions and publics to sustain reasoned dialogue. William Scheuerman offers an important apologetic for critics who have dismissed the Habermasian idea of communicative action as naïve with regard to power:

For Habermas, if we interpret democracy as a way of life where people make binding decisions based on arguments, we need to grasp how deliberation works, and how best to delineate reasonable and legitimate from unreasonable and illegitimate public exchange. Real-life democracy hardly looks like the idealized communication community Habermas describes. Yet absent some sense of that ideal community, we can neither distinguish manufactured from independent public opinion, nor deepen democracy. (2017, para. 13)

If we consider the cadre of trained social workers, a legion of more than 649,300 communication technologists (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2017), we immediately see the potential for social workers to become leaders in the promotion of communicative rationality, citizen subjects, and political consensus, not just microlevel therapy and ongoing welfare state bureaucracy. One promising strategy is intergroup dialogue, “a public process designed to involve individuals and groups in an exploration of societal issues such as politics, racism, religion, and culture that are often flashpoints for polarization and social conflict” (Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington (2006, p. 303). Dessel et al., conclude that while ongoing research is needed to establish the efficacy of intergroup dialogue in promoting behaviors and social change, existing “evidence appears sufficient to warrant social workers’ investment in exploring the approach” (2006, p. 306).

And here, I would push the implication of communicative action to its dialectic edge: Adopting an anti-oppressive practice stance is not enough. Arguing in agency or faculty meetings about how to decolonize social work or how best to center racial equity is certainly a beginning. However, for communicative action to repair fissures in the lifeworld, it must move beyond
rhetoric and beyond the academy. It must move away from a stance of “innocence” and toward engagement with family members, conservatives, and colleagues who are less “woke.” It must step into the void of democratic consensus and take up residence there, knitting communities together until they are familiar neighbors who remain in relationship despite perhaps fundamental and irreconcilable disagreement about the nature and function of the nation state, social entitlements, freedom, and power.

Conclusion: Critical Theory in These Times

In the conclusion to her essay on neoliberalism and the end of democracy, Wendy Brown (2005) calls for the Left to challenge neoliberal governmentality “with an alternative vision of the good, one that rejects homo oeconomicus as the norm of the human” (p. 59). Her goals are modest but profound: “In its barest form, this would be a vision in which justice would center not on maximizing individual wealth or rights but on developing and enhancing the capacity of citizens to share power and hence to collaboratively govern themselves” (p. 59).

In my mind, neoliberal governmentality provides the diagnosis but not the cure and cannot meaningfully provide a vision of shared power or collective governance. Its main epistemological foreclosure is that it relies on discourse, and, as we have seen, in Foucault’s formulation “it is discourse which produces human experience rather than experience ... producing discourse” (Elliot, 2009, p. 86). By contrast, and through my avowedly heuristic interpretation, the Habermasian notion of lifeworld reverses this prescription so that human experience becomes the ground of discourse. In this vision, political discourse is inaugurated by lived, embodied, human actors whose deliberative democracy is enlivened by passion and logic, reason and emotion.

In this essay, I have argued that revisiting critical theory in its original instance could move U.S. social work closer to an engagement with liberal democracy, whose prognosis and vital signs remain unstable at this time. The contributions of Jürgen Habermas and the Frankfurt School could inspire social work to embrace a version of reason in this historical moment which
challenges the means-ends calculus of late advanced capitalism and the unremitting monetarization and bureaucratization of work and life. In reclaiming the metaphoric potential of system and lifeworld, legitimation crisis, and communicative action, social work could seize opportunities for radical resistance at a moment in which the typically obfuscated state sanction of greed, avarice, and vice have been made legible to an entire globe. Finally, Habermas and the Frankfurt School could assist social work in its ongoing struggle to unite interpretation and empiricism and to emancipate the “critical soul of science” and the “scientific soul of criticism,” (Held, 1980, p. 250) which is perhaps the task of this modern century.

References


Can the Lifeworld Save Us From Neoliberal Governmentality?


Integrating Sociological and Psychological Perspectives on Collective Efficacy

Michael C. Gearhart
University of Missouri—St. Louis
School of Social Work

Collective efficacy is rooted in both psychology, and sociology. Discussions of the differences between the sociological and psychological conceptualization and operationalization of collective efficacy is limited. In psychology, collective efficacy reflects a group’s belief that collective action can be successful. In sociology, collective efficacy is a theory that describes the process by which social cohesion is activated as informal social control. Mutual efficacy was designed to incorporate the psychological concept of efficacy into collective efficacy theory. In this study, I conduct a multilevel confirmatory factor analysis to study the factor structure of social cohesion, mutual efficacy, and informal social control both between and within neighborhoods.

Keywords: Collective Efficacy, Mutual Efficacy, Social Cohesion, Collective Action, Theory

Introduction

Collective efficacy is rooted in both psychology (Bandura, 1997, 2006; Zaccaro, Blair, Peterson & Zazanis, 1995) and sociology (Sampson, Raudenbush & Earls, 1997). Although there are similarities in terms of how each discipline conceptualizes and operationalizes collective efficacy, there are also stark differences. In psychology, collective efficacy is a construct that
focuses on a “group’s shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 477). For sociologists, collective efficacy is a theory that describes the process by which social cohesion is activated as informal social control (Sampson, 2012).

Although the psychological conceptualization of efficacy is often cited in the context of collective efficacy theory, we have not adequately conceptualized or operationalized the psychological construct of efficacy within collective efficacy theory (Gearhart & Joseph, 2018). Mutual efficacy—defined as, “group members’ beliefs that collective action can be successful at achieving group goals,” was developed to make the psychological construct of efficacy an explicit component within collective efficacy theory (Gearhart & Joseph, 2018, p. 919). Mutual efficacy is framed as a mediator of the relationship between social cohesion and informal social control (Gearhart & Joseph, 2018).

Mutual efficacy reflects the perceived capability of a group. As such, it is important to study mutual efficacy both within and between groups. However, prior research on mutual efficacy (Gearhart & Joseph, 2018) was limited in its ability to conduct multilevel analyses. In this article, I describe the evolution of the conceptualization and operationalization of collective efficacy theory. Then I discuss the addition of mutual efficacy within collective efficacy theory—emphasizing the importance of understanding mutual efficacy as a multilevel construct. This study builds upon previous research by testing the factor structure of social cohesion, mutual efficacy, and informal social control both between and within neighborhoods using multilevel confirmatory factor analysis (MLCFA).

Collective Efficacy Theory

Collective efficacy was originally defined as “social cohesion among neighbors combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good” (Sampson et al., 1997, p. 918). Sampson and colleagues (1997) suggest that collective efficacy is comprised of two constructs: social cohesion and informal social control. Social cohesion is typically defined as the “extent of mutual trust, solidarity, and shared values among
community residents,” (Browning, Burrington, Leventhal, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008, p. 271). Sampson and colleagues (1997, p. 919) believe that social cohesion is a key component of collective efficacy theory because residents are “unlikely to intervene in a neighborhood context in which the rules are unclear and people mistrust or fear one another.” Informal social control focuses a community’s willingness to enforce social norms in the local area (Sampson et al., 1997).

In what would become the seminal study of collective efficacy theory, Sampson and colleagues (1997) used data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN) to study the relationship between social cohesion and informal social control. Social cohesion was measured based on respondents’ agreement with five Likert scale items: (1) people around here are willing to help their neighbors; (2) this is a close-knit neighborhood; (3) people in this neighborhood can be trusted; (4) people in this neighborhood generally don’t get along with each other; and (5) people in this neighborhood do not share the same values. Informal social control was measured using five items assessing how likely it is that neighbors would intervene if they observed the following situations: (1) children skipping school and hanging out on a street corner; (2) children spray-painting graffiti on a local building; (3) children showing disrespect to an adult; (4) a fight broke out in front of their house; and (5) the fire station closest to their home was threatened with budget cuts (Sampson et al., 1997).

Social cohesion and informal social control were combined into a summary measure of collective efficacy because they were highly correlated in the PHDCN sample ($r = 0.80$, $p < 0.001$; Sampson et al., 1997). Collective efficacy theory initially modeled how the combination of social cohesion and informal social control mediated the relationship between community characteristics (e.g., poverty, resident mobility, and racial composition), and community level outcomes, such as crime (Sampson, 2006, 2012; Sampson, et al., 1997). Research has shown that the summary measure of collective efficacy is a stable predictor of positive outcomes including lower levels of underage drinking (Maimon & Browning, 2012), juvenile delinquency (Sampson et al., 1997), community violence (Mazerolle, Wickes, & McBroom, 2010), and crime (Armstrong, Katz, & Schnebly, 2015).
Operationalizing Collective Efficacy Theory

The summary measure of collective efficacy has been supported as a predictor of positive community outcomes in the United States (Armstrong et al., 2015; Hart & Colavito, 2011; Hipp, 2016) and abroad (Bruinsma, Pauwels, Weerman, & Bernasco, 2013; Byrnes et al., 2011; Mazerolle et al., 2010). However, a growing body of research—summarized by Hipp & Wo (2015)—suggests that social cohesion and informal social control are modeled better as distinct constructs. Zhang and colleagues (2009), and Reisig and Cancino (2004) report that the correlation between social cohesion and informal social control is weak in their samples. Further, studies also suggest that social cohesion and informal social control have differential effects on outcomes. Reisig and Cancino (2004) show that social cohesion predicts neighborhood incivilities, whereas informal social control does not. Armstrong, Katz and Schnebly’s (2015) findings suggest that social cohesion predicts violent crime, whereas informal social control does not. Hart and Colavito (2011) found that informal social control predicts police notification behavior in a sample of college students, but social cohesion does not.

The most compelling evidence supporting the two-factor structure of collective efficacy theory exists in the findings of confirmatory factor analyses. Brisson and Altschul (2011) and Barnhart, Gearhart, and Maguire-Jack (2018) found that modeling social cohesion and informal social control as two factors creates a better data fit than the one factor solution. Similarly, Wickes, Hipp, Sargeant and Homel (2013) found that combining social cohesion and informal social control into one construct did not adequately fit the data. Separating the constructs demonstrated an improvement in model fit. Rhineberger-Dunn and Carlson (2009) utilized the PHDCN data to test the factor structure of collective efficacy using confirmatory factor analysis. Their findings support the two-factor model of collective efficacy over the one-factor model (Rhineberger-Dunn & Carlson, 2009).

Separating social cohesion and informal social control into unique constructs has created confusion in terms of how to operationalize collective efficacy. Some researchers continue to combine social cohesion and informal social control into a summary measure of collective efficacy (e.g., Sutherland, Brunton-Smith &
Jackson, 2013). Others label the informal social control items developed by Sampson and colleagues (1997) “collective efficacy” (e.g., Hipp, 2016). Armstrong, Katz and Schnebly (2015) used the umbrella term “measures of informal social control” for measures of social cohesion, informal social control, and the summary measure of collective efficacy. Wickes and colleagues (2013) considered their measures of child-focused informal social control, violence-focused informal social control, and civic engagement to reflect collective efficacy. Recent research highlights confusion in terms of what the measures developed by Sampson and colleagues (1997) actually represent.

The purpose of the measures developed by Sampson and colleagues (1997) is to model the process by which social cohesion is activated as collective actions, including informal social control. Thus, the measures developed by Sampson and colleagues (1997) assess two constructs: social cohesion and informal social control. Informal social control can be measured as the expectation of informal social control (e.g., the willingness of residents to intervene), or the presence of actual informal social control behaviors. Regardless, social cohesion, expectations for action, and action are conceptually and operationally distinct from efficacy, which focuses on perceived capability (Bandura, 1997, 2006; Gearhart & Joseph, 2018; Zaccaro et al., 1995).

Mutual Efficacy

Social cohesion does not automatically result in informal social control (Bellair, 1997; Bursik, 1999; Browning, Dietz, & Feinberg, 2004; Rhineberger-Dunn & Carlson, 2011; Sampson, 2004; Wickes et al., 2013), suggesting that factors may mediate the relationship between the two constructs (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010). Mutual efficacy was developed to make the psychological conceptualization and operationalization of collective efficacy an explicit component of collective efficacy theory (Gearhart & Joseph, 2018). The perceived capability of a group may contribute to why cohesive groups do not act. For example, individuals are less likely to institute informal social control if they do not feel that their actions will be successful at reducing crime (Dra-kulich, & Crutchfield, 2013; Kleinhans & Bolt, 2016; Randol & Gaffney, 2014; Rose & Clear, 2004).
Multiple meta-analyses (e.g., McEachan, Conner, Taylor, & Lawton, 2011; Sheeran et al., 2016) demonstrate that—on the individual level—shared values and norms and self-efficacy predict an individual’s willingness to perform a behavior, which in turn predicts whether or not the individual performs the behavior. This research served as a frame to shape mutual efficacy’s role in collective efficacy theory (Gearhart & Joseph, 2018). Gearhart and Joseph (2018) utilized data from the Seattle Neighborhoods and Crime Survey (SNCS) to explore mutual efficacy as a mediator of the relationship between social cohesion and informal social control. The results support the mediational role of mutual efficacy (Gearhart & Joseph, 2018).

Because mutual efficacy reflects the perceived capability of a group, perceived mutual efficacy can vary among group members (Bandura 1997, 2006; Brunton-Smith, Sturgis, and Leckie, 2018; Hipp, 2016; Zaccaro et al., 1995). According to Bandura (1997, p. 479), “a group belief, therefore, is best characterized by a representative value for the beliefs of its members and the degree of variability or consensus around that belief.” Therefore, mutual efficacy is expected to result in collective actions when there is a high degree of consistency of belief among group members that collective action can be successful. Although Gearhart & Joseph (2018) acknowledge that mutual efficacy is a group characteristic, their analyses were limited because the data did not allow researchers to conduct multilevel path analyses using structural equation modeling. Therefore, our understanding of the multilevel nature of mutual efficacy is limited. The present study contributes to the literature by assessing the multilevel factor structure of social cohesion, mutual efficacy, and informal social control.

Methods

Data

Data for this study are drawn from two samples collected as part of the SNCS: (1) a random sample of households; and (2) an ethnic oversample, which sampled households from Census Tracts with a high percentage of racial and ethnic minorities (Matsueda, 2010). The random sample included 2,220
households and the ethnic oversample included 1,145 households, resulting in a final sample of 3,365 residents in Seattle, Washington (Matsueda, 2010).

Measures

**Social cohesion.** Social cohesion is measured using four items based on the social cohesion measure developed by Sampson and colleagues (1997). Sample items include: “You can count on adults in this neighborhood to watch out that children are safe and don’t get into trouble,” and “People in this neighborhood can be trusted.” Response options range from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). The social cohesion measure met criteria for acceptable internal consistency (α = 0.828).

**Informal social control.** Informal social control is measured using four items based on the informal social control measure developed by Sampson & colleagues (1997). This measure assesses a resident’s perceptions of the likelihood that neighbors would intervene if they observed delinquent situations, such as: “Children were spray-painting graffiti on a local building,” and “If a child was disrespecting an adult.” Response options range from 1 (very likely) to 4 (very unlikely). The informal social control measure also met criteria for acceptable internal consistency (α = 0.762).

**Mutual efficacy.** Mutual efficacy is measured by combining two items assessing the effectiveness of “small groups of neighbors,” and “organized neighborhood associations or community clubs” in terms of addressing major problems around the neighborhood. Response options on each item range from 1 (highly effective) to 3 (not at all effective). Internal consistency was not calculated for mutual efficacy because it is a two-item measure (Pett, Lackey, & Sullivan, 2003).

Analysis Plan

**Multiple imputation.** The data were screened for missing values using SPSS’ v23 missing value analysis. The missing data analysis revealed that a listwise deletion would result in losing 28.6% (n = 928) of cases. Further, the data are not missing at random ($\chi^2 = 2,644.11, p < 0.05$); indicating that listwise deletion
is not appropriate. Following previously established guidelines (Graham, Olchowski, & Gilreath, 2007), data were imputed twenty times. Data were not imputed for respondents who answered “don’t know” or “refused” on survey items.

Multilevel Confirmatory Factor Analysis. A MLCFA assesses the nature of the relationships among social cohesion, mutual efficacy, and informal social control, and compares how well three different models of collective efficacy fit the SNCS data. These models are: (1) a one-factor model of collective efficacy theory that combines social cohesion and informal social control; (2) a two-factor model that separates social cohesion and informal social control; and (3) a three-factor model including social cohesion, mutual efficacy, and informal social control. The following fit indices are produced to evaluate the MLCFA: the model chi-square ($\chi^2_M$), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and the standardized root mean residual for both within and between groups (SRMR). All analyses are conducted using Mplus version 7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2015).

Results

Imputed SNCS Sample Description

In terms of race, the majority of the SNCS sample is White (n = 2,619.4; 78.70%) with the next largest racial or ethnic groups being Asian (n = 318, 9.56%) and Black (n = 242.4; 7.28%). Over half of the sample is female (n = 1,747; 51.91%), 53.96% (n = 1,801) of the sample are either married, or cohabiting, and the median age is 47 years old (Range = 17-102). Respondents are well-educated, with 38.39% (n = 1,287) graduating from college or a trade school, and 28.78% (n = 965) completing graduate or professional school. In terms of income, the majority of the sample earns between $25,000 to under $75,000 (n = 1,742; 51.79%), or over $75,000 (n = 1,038; 30.84%), and two-thirds of the sample is employed (n = 2,253; 67.00%).
## Table 1. Frequencies of Factor Analysis Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mutual Efficacy</th>
<th>Highly Effective</th>
<th>Somewhat Effective</th>
<th>Not at All Effective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Efficacy of small groups of neighbors (ME1)</td>
<td>1,597 (47.46%)</td>
<td>1,518 (45.11%)</td>
<td>250 (7.43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficacy of organized neighborhood associations or clubs (ME2)</td>
<td>1,030.2 (30.62%)</td>
<td>1,911 (56.81%)</td>
<td>423 (12.57%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Cohesion</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Count on adults to watch out that children are safe (SC1)</td>
<td>808 (24.03%)</td>
<td>1,819 (54.06%)</td>
<td>646 (19.22%)</td>
<td>90 (2.68%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People in this neighborhood can be trusted (SC2)</td>
<td>855 (25.42%)</td>
<td>2,125 (63.16%)</td>
<td>323 (9.61%)</td>
<td>60 (1.79%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults in the neighborhood know who the local children are (SC3)</td>
<td>635 (18.89%)</td>
<td>1,603.8 (47.66%)</td>
<td>971 (28.87%)</td>
<td>153 (4.57%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People are willing to help their neighbors (SC4)</td>
<td>849 (25.25%)</td>
<td>2,244 (66.68%)</td>
<td>248 (7.38%)</td>
<td>22 (0.68%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informal Social Control</th>
<th>Likely</th>
<th>Likely</th>
<th>Unlikely</th>
<th>Unlikely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If children were skipping school (ISC1)</td>
<td>617 (18.35%)</td>
<td>1,072 (31.86%)</td>
<td>1,298 (38.57%)</td>
<td>377 (11.22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If children were spray painting graffiti (ISC2)</td>
<td>1,679 (49.90%)</td>
<td>1,277 (37.95%)</td>
<td>326 (9.70%)</td>
<td>82 (2.45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If a child was disrespecting an adult (ISC3)</td>
<td>391 (11.62%)</td>
<td>1,253.8 (37.26%)</td>
<td>1,357.8 (40.35%)</td>
<td>362 (10.77%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If children were fighting on the street (ISC4)</td>
<td>1,148 (34.12%)</td>
<td>1,491 (44.31%)</td>
<td>587 (17.44%)</td>
<td>139 (4.13%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As seen in Table 1, few respondents endorsed the most negative response options for all of the key indicators. In terms of mutual efficacy, respondents felt more confident in the effectiveness of groups of neighbors compared to organized neighborhood groups. Levels of social cohesion were typically high in the sample. However, one-third (33.44%, n = 1,124) of participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed that adults in the neighborhood know who the local children are. Respondents typically report that it is likely or very likely that neighbors would intervene if they saw a child spray painting graffiti (87.85%, n = 2,956) or if children were fighting on the streets (78.43%, n = 2,693).

Model Fit

Table 2. Model Fit Indices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fit Index</th>
<th>One-Factor</th>
<th>Two-Factor</th>
<th>Three-Factor</th>
<th>Fit Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$\chi^2_M$</td>
<td>1,085.053*</td>
<td>256.933*</td>
<td>307.986*</td>
<td>non-significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMSEA</td>
<td>0.108</td>
<td>0.051</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>≤ 0.05 close fit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFI</td>
<td>0.823</td>
<td>0.963</td>
<td>0.966</td>
<td>0.05-0.08 reasonable fit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLI</td>
<td>0.752</td>
<td>0.945</td>
<td>0.952</td>
<td>≥ 0.10 poor fit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRMR_{within}</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>&gt; 0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRMR_{between}</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>0.046</td>
<td>≤ 0.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen in Table 2, the one-factor model only meets criteria on the SRMR_{between}. The two-factor model meets criteria for reasonable fit on the RMSEA, and meets fit criteria on the CFI, and both the SRMR_{within} and SRMR_{between}. The three-factor model meets criteria for close fit on the RMSEA, and meets criteria on all fit indices with the exception of the $\chi^2_M$. However, the SRMR_{between} is larger for the three-factor model relative to both the two-factor and one-factor models. Despite the relatively high SRMR_{between} for the three-factor model, the three-factor model of collective efficacy theory fits the data the best overall. Therefore, findings from the three-factor model will be presented in the following section.
MLCFA Results

Figure 1. Multilevel Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results
Intraclass correlation coefficients ranged from 0.042 for the mutual efficacy item focusing on the effectiveness of small groups of neighbors to 0.119 for the social cohesion item, “People in this neighborhood can be trusted,” suggesting that multilevel modeling is appropriate. As seen in Figure 1, factor loadings within neighborhoods range between 0.726 to 0.967 for the social cohesion items, 0.686 to 0.847 for the informal social control items, and the factor loading for the efficacy of organized neighborhood associations or clubs is 0.926. Mutual efficacy is significantly (\(p < 0.001\)) correlated with social cohesion (\(r = 0.076\)) and informal social control (\(r = 0.073\)). Social cohesion and informal social control are also significantly correlated (\(r = 0.194, p < 0.001\)).

On the between-neighborhood level, factor loadings range from 0.732 to 0.973 for the social cohesion items, 0.643 to 0.892 for informal social control items, and the factor loading for the efficacy of organized neighborhood associations or clubs is 0.729. Correlations among factors between neighborhoods are relatively weaker compared to the within-neighborhood level. Mutual efficacy is correlated with both social cohesion (\(r = 0.029, p < 0.001\)) and informal social control (\(r = 0.032, p < 0.001\)). Social cohesion and informal social control are significantly correlated on the neighborhood level as well (\(r = 0.066, p < 0.001\)).

Discussion

Results show that social cohesion, mutual efficacy, and informal social control are distinct constructs on both the individual and neighborhood level. Consistent with previous research (Gearhart & Joseph, 2018), mutual efficacy’s relationships with social cohesion and informal social control are relatively weaker than the relationship between social cohesion and informal social control. The factor structure of social cohesion, mutual efficacy, and informal social control is theoretically meaningful. Incorporating mutual efficacy in collective efficacy theory allows researchers to ask the most fundamental question of collective efficacy theory: does a shared belief in the effectiveness of collective action lead to collective action? The weak correlations among the constructs suggest that mutual efficacy may
not have a strong effect on informal social control. However, Wickes and colleagues (2013) demonstrate that social cohesion can result in a variety of collective actions (e.g., civic participation). The strength of mutual efficacy’s relationship with collective actions may vary depending on the collective action under study (Gearhart & Joseph, 2018).

The results also show that the correlations among social cohesion, mutual efficacy, and informal social control are stronger within neighborhoods compared to between neighborhoods. This finding is consistent with collective efficacy theory. Social cohesion is generated through connections among members of a group (Sampson et al., 1997). Mutual efficacy reflects the perceived capability of a group. In addition, social cohesion is a key precursor to mutual efficacy (Gearhart & Joseph, 2018). Thus, perceived social cohesion and mutual efficacy are expected to be stronger among more immediate neighbors due to more frequent interactions (Gearhart & Joseph, 2018; Sampson et al., 1997).

However, it is worth noting that measurement may have an effect on the correlations among social cohesion, mutual efficacy, and informal social control (Kline, 2005). Mutual efficacy was measured using two items with three response options, whereas social cohesion and informal social control were both measured using four items with four response options. The strengths of the correlations among factors may have been affected by conceptual overlap as well. One social cohesion item, “You can count on adults to watch out that children are safe,” (SC1) alludes to the informal social control of children. Multiple sensitivity analyses were conducted allowing SC1 to load on the informal social control factor, allowing SC1 to co-vary with the informal social control factor while remaining on the social cohesion factor, and removing the SC1 from the analyses. None of the alternative models were able to significantly improve model fit, so the SC1 indicator was allowed to load on the social cohesion factor.

Incorporating mutual efficacy into collective efficacy theory increases the theory’s utility in terms of informing practice. Currently, collective efficacy theory posits that social cohesion and informal social control are associated with lower crime rates (Sampson, 2006). Therefore, two key actionable components of
collective efficacy theory are social cohesion and informal social control. Social cohesion can be built by connecting residents to one another and by facilitating dialogue pertaining to norms and values (Fook, 2002; Hardcastle, Powers, & Wenocur, 2004; Mezirow, 2000; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Interventions targeting willingness to intervene typically build a group’s capacity to intervene by teaching skills such as conflict management, restorative justice and peace making (Ohmer, Warner, & Beck, 2010). Solutions based on social cohesion and informal social control do not typically account for the fact that social cohesion does not always become informal social control (Bellair, 1997; Browning et al., 2004; Bursik, 1999; Sampson, 2004; Wickes et al., 2013).

Community structural characteristics are a commonly studied rationale as to why social cohesion is more likely to produce informal social control in certain contexts (Collins, Neal, & Neal, 2017; Hipp, 2016; Warner, 2014). For example, individuals are more likely to institute informal social control in racially homogeneous neighborhoods (Collins et al., 2017). Residents are also more likely to institute informal social control if prior informal social control efforts have been successful (Hipp, 2016). Informal social control efforts are more likely to be successful in cohesive neighborhoods where residents trust the police, and resident mobility is low (Warner, 2014).

While it is useful to understand community factors that moderate the relationship between social cohesion and informal social control, community structural characteristics still do not account for the fact that there are cohesive groups that do not act because they do not believe that they can be successful (Drakulich & Crutchfield, 2012; Kleinhans & Bolt, 2016; Randol & Gaffney, 2014; Rose & Clear, 2004). Mutual efficacy appears to contribute to whether or not groups act collectively (Gearhart & Joseph, 2018). The SNCS is a useful data set because of the two items that assess the efficacy of formal and informal community groups. However, these items do not adequately reflect the entirety of mutual efficacy as a construct (Gearhart & Joseph, 2018). Therefore, it is important for future research to develop and test a measure of mutual efficacy using primary data. Such research will allow for more rigorous analyses of mutual efficacy’s role within collective efficacy theory.
Conclusion

The disciplines of sociology and psychology have been developing the theory of collective efficacy in parallel for over 20 years (Bandura 1997; Sampson et al 1997). Although scholars in both disciplines acknowledge the cross-disciplinary development of collective efficacy, discussions of the differences between the sociological and psychological conceptualization and operationalization of collective efficacy is limited. Mutual efficacy bridges the divide between sociological and psychological perspectives on collective efficacy. Conceptually, a strong sense of mutual efficacy should increase the likelihood that a cohesive group perform acts associated with informal social control. Operationally, mutual efficacy is a construct that is distinct from social cohesion and informal social control both within and between neighborhoods. Prior research suggests that mutual efficacy can lead to informal social control in communities (Gearhart & Joseph, 2018). However, primary research on mutual efficacy will allow researchers to more rigorously study mutual efficacy’s role in collective efficacy theory.

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References


In spite of India’s healthy economic growth during the last two decades, about 40 percent of all children in India today are stunted. Though the problem has received widespread attention in the public health literature on stunting in India, very few studies have attempted to explicitly account for the progressive stages of stunting among children. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects women’s education on various levels of stunting among Indian children. Data from the National Family Health Survey (2005–2006) was used to test three separate models of stunting with selected determinants of women’s capabilities and variables controlling for several environmental factors related to stunting. Generalized ordinal regression method was employed to analyze the data. Factors such as availability of diverse sources of water, increases in mother’s level of education, age at first birth, wealth status and urban residence significantly reduced the odds of being stunted.

Keywords: stunting, mother’s education, environmental factors, structural correlates
Introduction

The extent of malnutrition among children in India entering into the twenty-first century was referred to as a matter of national shame by political elites and human right workers as nearly 42 percent of children below five years of age were found stunted (Measham & Chatterjee, 1999). Stunting refers to inadequate growth and development that children suffer from due to dietary insufficiency, infections, and poor psychosocial stimulation. The percentage of Indian children below age 5 who suffer from stunting is almost 20 times the percentage of stunted children in a standard well-nourished population of children. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), nearly 165 million children under age 5 are stunted (de Onis, 2013). By age 5 or 6 when children enroll in primary schools in India, they have already been long exposed to the risk of stunting. Prior studies suggest that there is a direct link between childhood stunting and lower test scores, loss of economic productivity, reduction of schooling, and increased risk of degenerative disease, such as diabetes (Chambers & von Medeazza, 2014; Chang, Walker, Grantham-McGregor, & Powell, 2002).

The objective of this paper is to examine the role of selected determinants on various levels of stunting. Research on stunting has extensively focused on the presence or absence of stunting among children (Bartlett, 2003; Buzigi, 2018; Muhoozi, Atukunda, Mwadime, Iversen, & Westerberg, 2016). However, stunting levels may either worsen or improve depending on the impact of proximate determinants that precipitate the onset of stunting. These determinants may offer differing degrees of protection from the onset to severe through moderate levels of stunting. Though the immediate determinants are well known, prior studies on the impact of widely recognized factors on various levels of stunting (such as low, moderate and severe) are few and far between (Phuka et al., 2008; Stevens et al., 2012; Tiwari, Ausman, & Agho, 2014). Identifying determinants that offer protection against children suffering from stunting is of immediate importance to policy makers, particularly in regards to allocation of resources to stunting intervention programs and projects.
Literature Review

Literature on childhood stunting in India has focused on three dimensions—nutritional deficiencies, environmental factors, and socio-economic determinants. Bhutta et al. (2008) reviewed a number of studies on interventions targeted at yielding nutrition-related outcomes among children. They found that interventions designed to improve nutrition could significantly reduce child stunting and also child mortality between birth and 36 months. Furthermore, they argue that about a fifth of the existing burden of stunting could be prevented through improvements in nutrition and iodine uptake, brought about by expanding community engagement and delivery strategies necessary to reach populations at greatest risk of stunting (Bhutta et al., 2013). Behavioral changes leading to improved nutritional intake play a key role in improving the efficacy of nutritional interventions. Fabrizio, van Liere, and Pelto (2014) found that nutritional interventions that effectively identify cultural barriers and enablers to optimal feeding practices as well as assess intermediary behavior changes are essential to bring about changes with respect to adequate consumption of nutrition.

Large-scale nutrition-sensitive programs that enhance the coverage and effectiveness of nutrition-specific interventions will require investments to boost agricultural production, while at the same time keeping prices low and increasing incomes (Ruel, Alderman, & Maternal and Child Nutrition Study Group, 2013). Improving women’s education and maternal health also appears to play a significant role in stunting prevention. Espo et al. (2002) found that maternal short stature and small birth size significantly increased the likelihood of stunting. Other variables independently associated with severe stunting include inappropriate complementary feeding, high morbidity, male gender, and home delivery. SES variables also play a crucial role in infantile growth faltering, leading to stunting (Jones et al., 2008). A cross-national multi-factorial study (Smith & Hadad, 2015) which examined the role of income growth found that in addition to income growth, other factors such as women’s education, and gender equality significantly influenced the prevalence as well the severity of stunting in most developing countries. There is also some evidence that household connections of water supply and
higher levels of community coverage for sanitation significantly influence childhood stunting (Wolf et al., 2018).

A comprehensive study (Kim, Mejia-Guevara, Corsi, Aguayo, & Subramanian, 2017) of child stunting in South Asia identified 13 significant correlates, namely complementary feeding, breastfeeding, feeding frequency, dietary diversity, maternal height, body mass index (BMI), education, age at marriage, child vaccination, access to improved drinking source, sanitation facilities, household indoor air quality, and household wealth. Broadly, these correlates relate to socioeconomic conditions and nutritional deficiencies. One major drawback of existing studies is that they assume stable household environmental conditions in which child-feeding practices remain unaltered, regardless of children’s nutritional intake requirements for physical and mental growth. It is not known if the effects of the selected set of determinants of childhood stunting remain the same across low, medium, and high levels of stunting. Changes in the effects of factors call for appropriate changes in stunting intervention strategies.

Most studies attempt to isolate factors that differentiate the stunted from those not stunted (Pande, 2003). However, one weakness of this approach is that it subsumes various levels of stunting, such as extremely stunted under the broad category of the stunted (Crookston et al., 2010). Consequently, the effect of the selected variables in the models of stunting is expected to be similar for the stunted as well as the extremely stunted. Very few studies have evaluated the empirical validity of this expectation. The purpose of this study is to assess the effect of selected socioeconomic variables on several degrees of stunting and to test vulnerability theory.

Theoretical Framework

Vulnerability theory offers an adequate framework to seek explanations for the occurrence of stunting among children (Davis, 2013). Vulnerability is a latent and intrinsic condition that predisposes individuals and groups to varying levels of susceptibility to losses in physical, social, and economic realms (Cutter et al., 2008). In particular, individuals and groups who face several constraints in terms of availability of resources and choices (often because of discrimination and marginalization) are more likely to suffer from loss of health and adequate
opportunities for growth from very early stages of their lives. In the case of children, individual-level vulnerabilities that characterize their caregivers are likely to have both immediate and ongoing effects on the likelihood of stunting among children. Vulnerability theories of stunting focus on ecological, social, and cultural aspects of stunting. Of the three, the ecological aspect has recently emerged as a leading explanation of stunting among children in India. Spears, Ghosh, and Cumming (2013) find that the lack of toilets, combined with inadequate availability of clean water, facilitates fecal transmission of parasites in the child’s nutrients, resulting in stunting.

The social theories of stunting have focused on various aspects of maternal vulnerabilities (Som, Pal, & Bharati, 2007) with repercussions for children’s health. Becker (1981) presents three types of inputs necessary for child health: quality and quantity of child’s nutritional intake, level of accessibility and availability of health care systems, and the quality and quantity of mother’s time devoted to child care. The extent of the mother’s inputs is determined by her socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. More specifically, the mother’s characteristics are grouped into three socioeconomic variables: mother’s education, wealth status, and age at motherhood, which are found to be significantly associated with the level of stunting among children in India.

Among the three mother’s characteristics of substantive interest in the model, the one with the strongest empirical support for its association with stunting level is mother’s education. Since women are primarily responsible for children’s well-being in Indian households, women’s capacity to make intra-household resource allocation decisions plays a crucial role in preventing child malnutrition. Women’s capacity to make nutrition-related decisions is positively associated with their educational level (Imai, Annim, Kulkarni, & Gaiha, 2014; Ishwarji et al., 2018; Menon, Headey, Avula, & Nguyen, 2018; Panigrahi, Das, & Sahoo, 2018). Level of stunting is found to decrease with an increase in years of a mother’s education.

A second characteristic of interest is mother’s age at first birth, which affects young women’s opportunities to not only achieve physical maturity but also to learn parenting skills (Finlay, Özaltin, & Canning, 2011; Raj et al., 2010; Reynolds, Wong & Tucker, 2006; Tiwari et al., 2014; Villar & Belizán, 1982).
A third characteristic, wealth status of the household, is also associated with likelihood of stunting. One of the most common explanations of malnutrition in India is poverty and low per capita income. Studies show that stunting levels decrease considerably with increases in mother’s wealth (Kumar, Kumari, & Singh, 2014).

Cultural theories, on the other hand, have underscored the importance of religion on stunting levels in India (Sabharwal, 2011). Religious institutions exert significant influence on several aspects of growth from birth to death (Brainerd & Menon, 2015; Purohit, Sahu, & Godale, 2017; Yadav, Ladusingh, & Gayawan, 2015). In India, there exists considerable difference in stunting levels among children between Hindus and Muslims during early childhood (Brainerd & Menon, 2015). These differences have been associated with religious beliefs with regard to feeding practices during early childhood. However, very few studies have assessed the effectiveness of all three theories on various levels of stunting in India. This study focuses on the importance of a mother’s characteristics on stunting levels while considering both ecological and cultural variables.

*Control Variables*

Perhaps one of the most important cultural variables related to stunting levels in India is religion (Brainerd & Menon, 2015). Other variables related to the ecological and the cultural aspects of stunting—place of residence (urban or rural), source of water supply, type of toilet facility in use, and availability of electricity—are used as controls in this study. Mothers living in urban places are less likely to have stunted children than rural mothers, owing to availability of prenatal care and information on child nutrition (Chambers & von Medeazza, 2014). The availability of electricity facilitates efficient use of resources necessary for childcare and improved child growth (Das, 2015). The major sources of water supply are pipe water, tube, well, and others. Of the four sources of water supply, pipe water is more accessible and stable than other sources of water supply. The availability of pipe water reduces the likelihood of stunting by improving sanitary conditions in the household (Maitra, Rammohan, Ray & Robitaille, 2013). The type of toilet facility
is also strongly associated with the level of sanitary conditions (Das, 2015).

Methods

Measurement

Stunting scores are computed using the WHO age- and gender-specific standards for height by age (de Onis & Blössner, 1997). The height by age status is measured in standard deviation units from the median of the reference population as recommended by the World Health Organization. A test of normality of stunting scores found scant support. As a remedy for non-normality, the dependent variable, stunting scores, was divided into four categories. Children with stunting scores less than -3 SD were labeled “severely stunted;” those with scores between -3 SD and -2 SD were labeled “moderately stunted;” those between -2 SD and -1 SD were labeled “mildly stunted;” and the rest were labeled “not stunted.” These four categories were further coded 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively.

Mother’s education is measured as the number of years of schooling. The variable was dichotomized by coding less than 8 years of education as 0 and the rest as 1. Wealth status is a standardized measure of all household assets. The variable was divided into five different groups measured at the ordinal level. The five levels were poorest, poorer, middle, richer, and richest, coded 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, respectively. More specifically, the poorest category was coded 1, the poorer category coded 2, and those in middle, richer, and richest categories coded 3, 4 and 5 respectively. Mother’s age at first birth measured in years was recoded into five categories. Less than 16 years was coded as 1, 17 to 19 years was coded as 2, 20 years to 22 was coded as 3, 23 years to 25 was coded as 4, and later than 25 years was coded as 5.

The rest of the variables were coded as follows: Two categories of place of residence, urban and rural, were coded 0 and 1. All sources of water other than pipe and tube were coded as 1 and the rest 0. Two types of toilet facilities, pit and flush were dummy coded. Two dummy variables were created; pit toilet was coded 1 and the rest coded 0; flush toilets were coded 1 and the rest coded 0. The reference category is all other types of toilets, other than pit and flush toilets. Electricity availability was coded as a dummy variable with “household has no availability of electricity” coded
0 and the rest coded 1. Five religious groups; Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, and others, were measured nominally with those subscribing to Hinduism coded 1 and the rest 0.

Data

Data from the Third National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) of India were used in this study (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2007). The survey was commissioned by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, an agency of the government of India. This survey was conducted in all states of India during 2005–2006 and is the most recent survey available that is representative of households in India. The survey was administered verbally via questionnaires to male and female respondents separately. However, since our study is focused on examining the role of mother’s education, among other characteristics, we selected only the female sample for this study. The survey included responses of 131,596 women, aged 15–49 years, producing a response rate of 95%. This study uses a subsample of households (N = 17,239) with a live child between the ages of approximately 2 and 5. The survey reports information about nutritional levels of children in the household.

Analysis

The multivariate regression method provides an appropriate strategy to examine the effects of selected determinants on stunting scores. Given that stunting scores are measured at the ordinal level, ordinal regression method is most suitable. However, one of the assumptions underlying ordinal logistic regressions is that location parameters (slope coefficients) of each of the variables is the same across all four categories of stunting. A test of this assumption of parallelism was not supported, as shown in Table 1.

In the absence of the support for the parallelism assumption, multinomial regression models have been used as an analysis strategy. However, a more recent approach, generalized ordinal logistic regression (GOLR), yields a far more parsimonious model than the multinomial model while adjusting for the violation of parallelism hypothesis (Fu, 1999).
Results

The results from the GOLR approach are presented in Table 2 and in Figure 1. In assessing the effect of mother’s education, we examined the role it plays in determining the odds of being in a stunting level beyond a selected level of stunting. The level of stunting is measured at the ordinal level. Consequently, three comparisons—no stunting versus the rest of the stunting categories; no stunting and mild stunting versus the rest; and finally, no stunting, mild, and moderate versus severe stunting—were made in terms of the odds of a selected stunting category compared with the odds of being in categories at a higher level.

Women with more than 8 years of education had lower odds of their children being in any of the categories ranging from mild to severe. The odds for children of women with 8 or more years of education being in any of the stunting categories is about .77 times the odds for women with less than 8 years of education. In general, a higher level of mother’s education decreases the odds of their children’s being in any of the stunting categories, mild, moderate, or severe.

At higher levels of wealth status, the odds of being stunted are less than at lower wealth status levels. The odds of being stunted decreases by about 15% with every unit increase in wealth status. The odds of suffering from either moderate or severe stunting compared with mild or no stunting decreases by about 23% with unit increases in wealth status. A similar decrease characterizes the odds of being in the severe stunting category compared with lower levels of stunting in the presence of improvement in wealth status. Thus, wealth status is indeed negatively related to stunting status, as expected.

The odds for children of women at higher age at first birth being in any of the stunting categories is about .75 times the
Table 2. Generalized Ordinal Regression of Stunting Status on Selected Determinants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Y &gt; 1 Vs. Y &lt;=1</th>
<th>Y &gt; 2 Vs. Y &lt;=2</th>
<th>Y &gt; 3 Vs. Y &lt;=3</th>
<th>Values/Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Odds Ratio</td>
<td>Std.Error</td>
<td>Odds Ratio</td>
<td>Std.Error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s Education</td>
<td>0.778*</td>
<td>0.0513</td>
<td>0.649*</td>
<td>0.030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealth status</td>
<td>0.846*</td>
<td>0.030</td>
<td>0.777*</td>
<td>0.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s age</td>
<td>0.748*</td>
<td>0.042</td>
<td>0.773*</td>
<td>0.031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of residency</td>
<td>1.068</td>
<td>0.068</td>
<td>0.855*</td>
<td>0.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Sources of water</td>
<td>0.663*</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>0.763*</td>
<td>0.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pit toilet</td>
<td>1.005</td>
<td>0.107</td>
<td>0.738*</td>
<td>0.052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flush toilet</td>
<td>0.856</td>
<td>0.073</td>
<td>0.841*</td>
<td>0.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity</td>
<td>0.872</td>
<td>0.079</td>
<td>0.861*</td>
<td>0.047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu religion</td>
<td>1.183*</td>
<td>0.088</td>
<td>0.966</td>
<td>0.057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim religion</td>
<td>1.319*</td>
<td>0.134</td>
<td>1.213*</td>
<td>0.089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_cons</td>
<td>23.740*</td>
<td>4.583</td>
<td>7.903*</td>
<td>1.0175</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

odds of stunting among children born to women at lower age at first birth. At the next higher level of stunting, children’s odds of suffering from moderate to severe levels of stunting compared with mild or no stunting is about 23% lower among children born to mothers at older ages than lower. Increases in levels of parenting and nurturing skills that accompany delays in the transition to motherhood have significant effects on reducing the odds of suffering from stunting. Unlike both wealth status and mother’s education, the influence of mother’s age at first birth is confined primarily to the early degrees of stunting.

The fourth determinant, a control variable, in the proposed model of stunting in India was “place of residence.” It was expected that children in urban areas would experience lower levels of stunting than rural children. Our results suggest urban children had lower odds of suffering from either moderate or severe stunting than children from rural areas.

Though a high proportion of the households, nearly 40%, have access to pipe water, the odds of being “not stunted” is significantly higher among households with water supply sources other than pipe or tube water. We found that accessibility to flush toilets plays a limited role in decreasing the risk of being in either mildly or severe stunting group. Most households, nearly 78%, had electricity available. Electricity availability reduces the odds of being moderately or severely “stunted.” Religious differences did significantly affect the odds of being “not stunted.” Both Hindu and Muslim children were more likely to be stunted compared with non-Hindu and non-Muslim children. Muslim children were more likely to be in the “moderately” stunting category compared to Hindu children and to share similar odds of being in the “severely” stunted category with non-Hindu and non-Muslim mothers.

Four determinants—availability of sources of water supply other than pipe and tube, increases in mother’s level of education, age at first birth, wealth status—and urban residence significantly reduced the odds of being stunted. The effect of urban residence was significant for the moderate and severe stunting categories. Net of other factors, being either a Hindu or Muslim compared to the rest increased the stunting odds. In comparing the moderately and severely stunted with the rest, a large proportion of our selected determinants emerged playing a significant role in reducing stunting levels. Increases in mother’s education, age at first birth,
and wealth status significantly reduced the odds of moderate levels of stunting. Along with the three mother’s characteristics, public infrastructural variables—availability of water supply sources other than pipe and tube, pit and flush toilet facilities, electricity, and urban residence—reduced the odds of suffering from a moderate level of stunting. Muslims had higher odds of moderate stunting than the rest. The same set of variables (except age of the mother at first birth, sources of water supply other than pipe and tube, and availability of flush toilets) continued to carry over their significant role in reducing the odds of severe stunting. Surprisingly, Hindu children were less likely to be severely stunted than the children in the reference population.

Among all the determinants considered, mother’s education plays a significant and persistent role in reducing the odds at any of the three states of stunting. Among the three characteristics of the mother considered for their influence on all three states of stunting (mild, moderate, and severe), mother’s education had, in general, a stronger effect than the rest. A similar role, though much less strong, is played by mother’s wealth status. These two are the only determinants in our selected set to significantly reduce the odds of stunting across all three stunting states. Availability of pit toilets, water supply sources other than pipe and tube, older age at first birth, and availability of electricity reduced the odds of later states of stunting, moderate and severe. Other than the two mother’s characteristics, educational level and wealth status, the only other variable that reduced the odds at moderate and severe levels of stunting was urban residence. Our results clearly demonstrate the worthwhile role played by mother’s education in not only preventing the likelihood of ever being stunted, but also its effectiveness in preventing severe stunting. Educating women and investing in public infrastructure appear to be effective in preventing the odds of stunting among Indian children.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

A cursory view of stunting globally suggests that the problem of stunting in India is massive, accounting for more than half of all stunted children in the world. Our study found that mothers’ characteristics, such as education, wealth status, and age at first birth, have significant effects on reducing the
level of stunting. Mother’s capacity to make intra-household allocations for safeguarding children’s adequate nutritional intake is crucial for the success of prevention programs against stunting. Policies that directly help mothers to improve their social status through gradual increases in their wealth and educational levels are more likely to reduce stunting than programs that neglect the family context. Mothers with a high level of education are more likely to be aware of sanitary practices at the household level and also to improve children’s nutrition within the limits of available monetary resources.

In general, selected variables in our model of stunting, including the ecological variables related to vulnerability, were far more significantly associated with the mild and moderate states of stunting than with the severe state. The inconsistent effects of variables other than mother’s characteristics across the four levels of stunting suggest that it is appropriate to focus on each of the three states as an outcome instead of linking the three states together as a continuum of change from severely stunted to stunted. Both moderate and severe stages of stunting are likely to be characterized by disabilities and shortcomings which may only weakly manifest during the first stage of mild stunting (Kamal, 2011). The dissimilar effects of selected determinants on various stages of stunting as presented in this study underscore the importance of recognizing the various stages of stunting for both future research as well as policy formulation. Investing in women’s education programs should find priority in stunting prevention programs in India. These initiatives should be accompanied by public health programs in sanitation, water supply, and toilet facilities. From a policy point of view, it is necessary initially to design a variety of interventions that target various levels of stunting, rather than relying only on a limited set of interventions that prevent the odds of being in the first stage of stunting.

The strength-based approaches in public health are particularly useful for the purpose of educating mothers. All too often, mothers are blamed for their stunted children, and most intervention programs put forth to solve the stunting problem view mothers as deficient in the knowledge and skills necessary to prevent stunting. A public health approach to stunting, in contrast to this blaming perspective, would advocate for preserving the health of the mother and the child.
as an integrated system rather than independent identities (Seipel, 1999).

Given the important role the mother plays in reducing the incidence of stunting, social workers and public health workers should advocate for stunting-prevention policies that preserve and promote the health and well-being of mother and the child in unison. Seipel (1999) identifies specific strategies for the eradication of stunting among children and argues that provision of information is the first step in the making of policies for prevention and eradication of malnutrition. A second strategy involves the infusion of a human rights perspective in tackling issues of stunting. A human rights approach to improve women’s status, along with provision of information on child health, is central to policies for stunting prevention (Wollo, 2005).

Social workers have a crucial role to play in advocating for development of policies and legislation for the eradication of childhood stunting. Social workers as advocates may also help network various non-governmental agencies involved in child development and child welfare in India. In their role as facilitators, social workers in non-governmental and governmental organizations are crucial to helping parents with the utilization of available social and medical services for the eradication of childhood stunting.

Current Indian governmental policies and programs for eradicating stunting among children fall broadly into two categories. A set of programs in the first category provides both direct as well as ancillary support services. The most prominent among direct interventions to improve child nutrition is the Midday Meal Scheme. A second category of programs is anchored in a set of assumptions that indirectly link stunting with a number of environmental determinants associated with sanitary conditions (Chambers & von Medeazza, 2014; Ghosh, Gupta, & Spears, 2014). Both approaches fail to pay adequate attention to interventions that improve human capital among mothers, improving their capacity to significantly reduce child stunting (Drèze & Khera, 2017; Khera, 2006; Lokshin, Das Gupta, Gragnolati, & Ivaschenko, 2005).

Though we have emphasized the salient contributions of mother’s characteristics such as education on reducing levels of stunting among children, our study underscores the
importance of the indirect effects of environmental factors on stunting levels. Furthermore, overall our results support several selected aspects of the vulnerability theory of stunting. Public health workers as partners should be put on an equal footing with several nongovernmental, governmental, and local institutions while advocating and coordinating the community efforts aimed at prevention. The experiences acquired by public health workers in the forefront of stunting-prevention programs in India may be harnessed to improve the bio-social content of a public health–related curriculum (Shor, 2010).

One important limitation of this study is that we have no data on the role and influence of father/guardians’ characteristics on child stunting status. Even though the data used in this study are a decade old, the extent of child stunting in India appears to have not improved significantly during the last decade (Chanani et al., 2019; Coffey & Spears, 2017).

References


Stunting Reduction in India


Financial Literacy Research in China: The Progress and the Role of Social Work

Minchao Jin  
NYU Silver School of Social Work

Yiqing Yuan  
East China University of Science and Technology

Growing income disparity, expanding financial markets, and diversifying financial products have pushed economically vulnerable groups in China into greater disadvantage in recent decades, resulting in a call for financial literacy. Compared with the research in developed countries, the study of financial literacy is relatively new in China. Based on a literature review of studies on financial literacy in China, this paper presents the current progress and the gaps in both theory and methods. To address the gaps, social work can and should contribute to this area.

Keywords: financial literacy, literature review, China, social work
Introduction

In recent decades, China has undergone a social and economic transformation of historic proportions, but this transformation has been accompanied by dramatic growth in income disparity. From 1995 through 2012, the nation's Gini coefficient rose from 0.45 to 0.73 (Xie & Zhou, 2014) and reforms reduced social welfare provisions, which are now highly connected with Hukou (a household registration record) and employment status (Deng, Sherraden, Huang & Jin, 2013). These changes have increased institutionalized discrimination against socioeconomically vulnerable groups. Urban residents and employees in the large state-owned sector are often eligible for various welfare schemes while rural residents receive only a fraction of the benefits (Deng et al., 2013).

The recent expansion of Chinese financial markets has coincided with inter-temporal and inter-sectoral resource mobilization. A diverse complement of financial products and services has become increasingly accessible to small investors, adding complexity to financial decision making. These developments have exacerbated economic vulnerability by increasing the difficulty of acquiring, maintaining, and growing wealth. The China Household Income Disparity Report (Survey and Research Center for China Household Finance [SRCCHF], 2013) revealed that income from investment is a main contributor to income disparity, while income from wages and salaries actually narrow that disparity. The report also showed that households with incomes in the top 10% receive 67.21% of their incomes from investments.

Studies have found that financial knowledge is consistently associated with good financial behaviors in a few countries (e.g., Christelis, Jappelli, & Padula, 2010; Hastings & Tejeda-Ashton, 2008; Van Rooij, Lusardi & Alessie, 2011), which can lead to better wellbeing of individuals and families (Braunstein & Welch, 2002). However, financial illiteracy is reported as prevalent among vulnerable populations globally, for example, the elderly, people with low education attainment and the unemployed (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2011), and this exacerbates their difficulty in making ends meet. All of these have prompted a call to research financial literacy and involve social work. To answer this call, this paper aims to synthesize the current financial literacy
research in China and discuss the role of social work in future research and practice. Taking contexts into consideration, the paper first introduces the background on financial literacy research in other countries and the financial environment in China, and then reviews the financial literacy research in China and discusses the role of social work.

Financial Literacy Research in Other Countries

With the booming of financial markets in the U.S. in the 1990s and the increasing burden of welfare planning, such as retirement, on individuals, the negative effects of financial illiteracy emerged. For example, Bernheim and Garrett (1996, p. 3) found that “many individuals poorly understood their economic vulnerabilities, as well as the economic incentives that some tax provisions create.” They proposed the concept of financial literacy and measured it by assessing the respondents’ understanding of a series of related factual and conceptual items, e.g., “inflation, taxation...interest...the minimum wage, the federal deficit, federal debt per household, and Dow Jones average,” and “of real vs. nominal investment returns and risk-return tradeoffs” (Bernheim & Garrett, 1996, pp. 7, 9). This measure implies that financial literacy consists of knowledge of a set of financial concepts.

Since Bernheim and Garrett (1996), a number of studies have investigated this subject, mainly in the U.S. and other developed countries. Studies consistently reported that people do not have a desirable level of financial literacy (e.g., Fornero & Monticone, 2011; Lusardi & Mitchell, 2011; Sekita, 2011), while part of the research discussed interventions to promote financial literacy (e.g., Fernandes, Lynch Jr. & Netemeyer, 2014; Haynes-Bordas, Kiss, & Yilmazer, 2008). A significant body of research (e.g., Hung, Parker, & Yoong, 2009; Huston, 2010; Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014; Office of Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2015) focuses on conceptualization and measurement, which serve as the foundation of describing and intervening in financial literacy. Definitional consensus has not been reached yet, but measures of financial literacy are somewhat consistent. In one influential study, Lusardi and Mitchell (2014) defined financial literacy as “peoples’ ability to process economic information and make informed decisions about financial planning,
wealth accumulation, debt, and pensions” (p. 6), but their corresponding measure only looks at financial knowledge. They identified three fundamental dimensions of financial literacy: “(i) numeracy and capacity to do calculations related to interest rates, such as compound interest; (ii) understanding of inflation; and (iii) understanding of risk diversification” (p. 10), and developed a set of three questions measuring the three dimensions respectively. These questions have been widely adopted, and sometimes expanded upon (e.g., Hung et al., 2009), both in the U.S. and other countries (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014).

To analyze differences in the definition and measurement of financial literacy, Huston (2010) adopted a logical analysis approach and reviewed 71 studies published from 1996 to 2008. She came to define financial literacy as “a component of human capital that can be used in financial activities to increase expected lifetime utility from consumption (i.e., behaviors that enhance financial well-being)” (p. 307). In her conceptualization, financial literacy encompasses the four distinct content areas found in previous articles: money basics, borrowing, investing, and protecting resources.

The International Network on Financial Education (INFE) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) initiated a cross-country comparison on financial literacy. It defines financial literacy as “a combination of awareness, knowledge, skill, attitude, and behavior necessary to make sound financial decisions and ultimately achieve individual financial wellbeing” (OECD, 2015, p. 5). The measure, building on Lusardi and Mitchell (2014), covers all aspects of this comprehensive definition, examining day-to-day money management, financial planning, choosing appropriate products, and financial knowledge and understanding (OECD, 2015).

Beyond financial literacy, scholars proposed a framework of financial capability encompassing both financial literacy and financial access. Huang, Nam, and Lee (2015) contributed further to the framework by differentiating financial functioning from the matrix of financial literacy and financial access. In their work:

*Financial literacy* is the understanding of financial concepts on multiple financial domains, such as personal finance (e.g., interest, investment risk), borrowing, saving, and protection (Huston, 2010). *Financial access* is viewed as the availability
Financial Literacy Research in China

of...financial products and services (Sherraden, 2013; Huang et al., 2013). Financial functioning is defined by behaviors related to finances, such as budgeting, saving and investing. (Huang, Nam, & Lee, 2015, p. 240)

In accordance with this definition, their measure includes items on daily management; investment, lending, and credit; and policy and services.

In sum, with low financial literacy consistently reported in the literature, studying financial literacy has intensified in many countries, especially the U.S. Great effort has been expended on developing solid definitions and valid measures of financial literacy. Although a consensus has not been reached, conceptualizing and operationalizing financial literacy has progressed significantly.

The Financial Environment in China

The Formal Financial Sector

One feature of China’s financial environment is the considerable difference in access to banking services in rural and urban areas. According to the People’s Bank of China (PBC) (2017a), nationally, 6.125 billion bankcards had been issued at the time of their report, equivalent to 4.47 cards per capita, much higher than the average, 2.8 cards per capita, for rural residents. In 2016, there were 0.34 million ATMs and 6.77 million point of sale systems in rural China, counting for 37% and 28% of the national total, respectively (PBC, 2017b), in contrast to the rural population of about 910 million in 2016, about two thirds of the total Chinese population. Rural Chinese were less likely to be approved for loans from banks than their urban counterparts (Chen & Jin, 2017). Clearly, rural residents lack the access to banking services that their urban counterparts enjoy.

Another defining feature of the financial environment is the rapid growth of the stock market in China, which may be accompanied by high risk. The two domestic stock exchanges, the Shanghai Stock Exchange and the Shenzhen Stock Exchange, ranked top 10 worldwide by December 2016 (Stockstotrade, 2016). Participation in the stock market is also increasing, which is indicated by the proportion of people holding stocks which increased
from 8.82% in 2010 to 10.12% in 2014 and the proportion of those holding funds increased from 0.04% in 2010 to 3.52% in 2014 (Wei & Song, 2016). The stock market turnover ratio\(^1\) for China in 2015 was 557.04% (World Bank, 2017a), compared to the U.S. ratio of 160.16% (World Bank, 2017b). This is noteworthy, given that the government owns a portion of the shares of Chinese firms, and those shares remain non-tradable (Elliott & Yan, 2013). This implies that holding stocks for short-term return may be a primary method of investment, which could result in a highly volatile market and growing risk for investors.

Meanwhile, the Chinese commercial insurance industry remains relatively underdeveloped, and may not be able to effectively counterbalance the risk in the financial market. The insurance industry’s annual assets reached almost CNY 12.4 trillion, accounting for around 18% of China’s gross domestic product in 2015 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2016; percentage calculated by authors). In contrast, the annual assets of the insurance industry were valued at around $8.4 trillion (Federal Insurance Office, 2016), accounting for almost 46.9% of the nation’s 2015 gross domestic product (authors’ calculations based on Trading Economics, 2017) in the United States in 2015. Commercial insurance generally is not viewed as a financial source after retirement in China. According to a national representative sample, 52% of the respondents did not trust or hold a neutral opinion towards commercial insurance, and the proportions of the sample holding commercial pension insurance or commercial medical insurance were 2.6 and 6.9%, respectively (Wu, Yang, & Yin, 2017).

**The Informal Financial Sector**

China has a large and diverse informal financial sector, i.e., financial activities that are not regulated by any government entity (Elliot & Yan, 2013; Gao, Xin, & Zhu, 2014). This sector includes pawnshops, credit guarantee companies, microfinance companies, and firms that provide underground intermediation. Beck and De la Torre (2007) asserted that loans from informal lenders could cost more than those from formal institutions and expose the borrowers to greater financial risk. Research outside China also has shown that the cost and risk fall disproportionally upon those who are already financially
vulnerable: the poor, individuals with low levels of education, and female-headed households in rural areas (Campero & Kaiser, 2013; Deku, Kara, & Molyneux, 2016), which is also the same in China (e.g., Gao et al., 2014; Zuo & Ma, 2005).

**Internet Finance**

This sector is not exclusive to either formal or informal financial sectors, but needs to be separately discussed here, as its rapid growth features uniquely in the Chinese financial environment. Although the size is relatively small compared to bank loans and bank payments, the impact of internet finance cannot be overlooked, due to the large number of users and the associated risk. For example, the two biggest third-party payment platforms, Alipay and WeChat Pay, had 520 million accounts and 600 million accounts respectively in 2017 (Aveni & Roest, 2017). The total volume of third-party payment had doubled, from CNY 5.37 trillion to 11.90 trillion (Xu, 2017). From 2013 to 2015, the number of person-to-person (PtP) internet loan platforms tripled, from 814 to 2,595 and the total volume of PtP internet loan increased eight times, from CNY 97.6 billion to 830.2 billion (Xu, 2017). Guo (2016) stated that one third of the PtP platforms experienced problems that put their users at risk in 2015.

**Summary**

The complicated financial market, in the background of a revised social welfare system and prominent rural-urban disparity (see Choi, 2015; Deng et al., 2013; Selden & You, 1997) in China, requires people equipped with financial literacy, a need the Chinese government’s recent policy agenda has acknowledged. The State Council of China’s (2015) “Plan for Promoting the Development of Financial Inclusion (2016–2020)” includes a goal of improving financial literacy via building a long-term mechanism for financial education.
The Literature on Financial Literacy in China

Methods of Searching

Inclusive and exhaustive searches for both Chinese and English-language literature were performed in English bibliographic databases (ProQuest, SociINDEX with Full Text, and APA PsycNET), and one Chinese bibliographic database (China National Knowledge Infrastructure). The searches were updated on January 30, 2018. Through English database searches, peer-reviewed studies that were conducted in mainland China with a focus on the Chinese population, and that included any or all of three key terms: financial literacy, financial knowledge, and/or financial capability were identified. Through this process, we identified 296 non-duplicate English-language citations, to which we applied four major inclusion criteria: (1) “financial knowledge,” “financial literacy,” or “financial capability” as main observed variable; (2) empirical study; (3) conducted in mainland China in Chinese population; (4) included measures for “financial knowledge,” “financial literacy,” or “financial capability.” The process, illustrated in Figure 1 (See the Appendix), yielded two English-language articles for inclusion in the review. Another article was found and included through citation tracking. These three studies are marked with “*” in the references.

Through Chinese database search, articles were collected by two major search limits: (1) Article title, theme, key words, or abstract include one term from a key term series developed from semantic translations of “financial knowledge,” “financial literacy,” and “financial capability.” The domains of “financial” were captured by six Chinese synonyms: cai jing [finance and economics], jin rong [finance], cai wu [financial affairs], jing ji [economy], li cai [money management], and cai shang [financial quotient]; The domains of “literacy” were captured by five Chinese synonyms: su yang [literacy], su zhi [competency], zhi su [quality], neng li [capability], and zhi shi [knowledge]. Thus, six Chinese terms of “financial” and five terms of “literacy” or “knowledge” or “capability” were combined to create 30 pairs of key terms, such as cai jing su yang [finance and economics literacy], cai jing su zhi [finance and economics competency], cai jing zhi su [finance and economics quality], cai jing neng li [finance and economics capability], cai jing zhi shi [finance and economics capability].
knowledge], *jin rong su yang* [finance literacy], *jin rong su zhi* [finance competency], and so on. In addition, *cai shang* [financial quotient] was solely used as an additional search key term, since its Chinese meaning indicates a person’s financial quotient. (2) The article had to be published in journals that were included in the Chinese Social Science Citation Index (2017–2018) or Chinese Social Science Citation Index Extended (2017–2018) (Institute for Social Sciences Research and Assessment at Nanjing University, 2017), considered databases of high-quality journals in Chinese and frequently used in literature reviews (e.g., He & Liu, 2017; Wan & Zhang, 2016; Wang & Zhou, 2016). Two major inclusion criteria were applied to 1,044 non-duplicate articles: (1) Include any one of the 31 key terms as main observed concepts discussed; or (2) include a definition or measures of any one of the 31 key terms. One additional article was identified through citation tracking, resulting in a total of 47 articles. This process is illustrated in Figure 2 (see the Appendix). These studies are marked with “*” in the references.

*The Level of Financial Literacy*

The 38 empirical studies out of the 50 articles in our review provide a description of the financial literacy level in China. For example, the 2013 wave of China Household Financial Study (CHFS), a national representative dataset, adopted the three questions on calculation of interest, inflation, and investment risk diversification from Lusardi & Michell (2014). The participants answered on average 0.6 questions correctly. Only 1.65% of them answered all three questions correctly, and 73.6% did not know the answer to at least one of the three (Yin, Song, & Wu, 2014). Breaking down the overall score by the questions, 14.90% of the CHFS participants correctly calculated the interest, 15.64% understood inflation, and 29.57% knew that diversifying investment can reduce risk (Yin et al., 2014).

The 2014 wave of the Chinese Survey of Consumer Finance representatively sampled urban residents in China and included similar questions on the three aspects (Chu, Wang, Xiao, & Zhang, 2017). The study found over half were able to calculate compounding interest, nearly 60% understood inflation, and about 35% knew that investing in one stock was riskier than investing in equity stock (Chu et al., 2017). Based on a sample
of 358 urban residents in Shanghai, one of the most developed
cities, Chen, Wang, Yang, and Yuan (2014) reported that 45% of
the subjects calculated compounding interest correctly, 73%
understood inflation, and 59% got the relation of diversifying
investment to reduce risk. Zhu, Lin, and Zhang (2017) tested
1,130 urban residents on the same aspects. The accuracy rates
were 69.6%, 76.1% and 45.3% respectively, and 27% of the sam-
ple answered all the three questions correctly (Zhu et al., 2017).
Based on 1,126 stock investors randomly sampled in the capital
cities of four provinces in China, Du, Li and Yan (2016) found
that 50.18% of the sample understood compound interest and
65.08% understood inflation.

Adopting the three questions enables a comparison be-
tween China and other countries. According to the data pro-
vided in Table 1 in Zhu, et al. (2017), the accuracy rates of urban
China reported by Chu et al. (2017), Chen et al. (2014) and Zhu
et al. (2017) are close to the rates of the U.S., Japan, and Italy,
which rank middle in the table and lower than those of Ger-
many and Switzerland in the top rank. However, the national
statistics based on the 2013 wave of CHFS (Yin et al., 2014) are
similar to those of Romania and Russia, which are in the bottom
rank in Table 1 in Zhu et al. (2017). The comparison reflects the
relative level of Chinese financial literacy as well as the dispar-
ity between the financial literacy of urban and rural residents.

Other demographic characteristics have been studied in the
literature on financial literacy in China. One of these is regional
disparity, but the findings are not consistent (e.g., Sun, Li, & Li,
disparity is not significant. Wealth, age, education, profession,
and gender, conversely, have been found significantly associat-
ed with financial literacy, which is generally consistent with the
findings in other countries (e.g., Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014; Xu &
Zia, 2012). For example, Zhang and Xiong (2017) documented
that in rural areas, females, people with low education attain-
ment, those with agricultural employment, and those who had
not received financial education have lower financial literacy
than their counterparts. Chen et al. (2014) found the same gen-
der gap and education gap in urban China. The profession gap
is supported by Zhang, Wang, and Yu (2016) and Zhang, Lu,
and Zhang (2017) (who used the same data source), and Du et
al. (2017), all of whom sampled stock investors and found they
better answered the three questions. Based on a nationally representative sample, Liu (2018) found age is curvedly associated with financial literacy. In contrast with Zhang and Xiong (2017), females in this study are more financially literate than males, showing that some degree of inconsistency exists in gender comparisons.

The Impact of Financial Literacy

While documenting the level of financial literacy, most of the empirical studies used financial literacy to predict different financial behaviors. For example, Yin, Song, Wu, and Peng (2015) and Ma and Zhao (2015) found high financial knowledge is correlated with the decision and motivation to start an enterprise. People with high financial knowledge also are more likely to buy commercial insurance (Qin, Wang, & He, 2016; Wu, Yang, & Yin, 2017), have a long-term financial plan (Hu & Zang, 2017), and have a better retirement plan (Wu et al. 2017). Additionally, financial knowledge is positively associated with accessing loans at banks (Ma & Zhao, 2015; Su, He, & Kong, 2017; Sui & Ma, 2011; Wu, Wu, & Wang, 2018; Yin et al. 2014; Zhang & Yin, 2016), and paying back loans (Sun et al., 2017). Moreover, people with high financial knowledge are less likely to overextend themselves through loans (Wu, Wu, & Wang, 2018).

Financial knowledge is also positively correlated with family income and wealth (Liu, 2018; Luo & Wang, 2018; Wang, Deng, & Liao, 2016; Wu, Wu, & Zhang, 2018; Yin & Zhang, 2017; Zhang et al., 2016), though the strength of impact decreases with the increase of financial knowledge (Yin & Zhang, 2017). Luo and Wang (2018) further found that the difference between objective and perceived financial knowledge is curvedly associated with wealth. The association is positive when perceived financial knowledge is less than objective financial knowledge, i.e., financial under-confidence, and the association is negative when perceived financial knowledge is higher than objective financial knowledge, i.e., financial over-confidence (Luo & Wang, 2018).

The Gaps in the Research

Studying financial literacy has been booming in China recently. Eleven of the 50 articles were published from 2014 to
2015, and 34 have been published since 2016, the total of which counts for 90% of the identified articles. Four of the five printed before 2014 only basically introduced the concept of financial literacy or financial knowledge in the background of discussing financial education for students. Although the number and depth of articles on this topic have increased, the methodological quality of the articles leaves a few gaps to be addressed in future research.

First, the generalizability of the findings to the Chinese population, especially the vulnerable populations, is questionable. Although among the empirical articles, 22 used national representative data, the studies are based on only two datasets. One is the Chin FS, a national representative dataset. Twelve analyzed the 2013 wave of CHFS, one is based on the 2015 wave, and one used all three waves of CHFS, i.e., 2011, 2013, and 2015. The other is the Chinese Survey of Consumer Finance (CSCF), representatively sampling urban China. Only five empirical studies target rural residents, who are vulnerable in the financial market, but none used a probability sampling strategy to promote representativeness. Other vulnerable populations (for example, people with low income, people with disabilities, the older-aged, and women) have not been given much attention.

Second, theories and measures of financial literacy originated in developed contexts where the financial environment is different from the aforementioned Chinese environment. Thus, whether these theories and measures are applicable in Chinese contexts is questionable. For example, Lusardi & Mitchell’s (2014) three questions, which the CHFS dataset and a few other studies adopted, are based on the common practice in the U.S. of individual investment in the financial market, such as stocks and funds, for retirement planning. However, as the main part of the Chinese pension system is managed by the government, individuals do not decide on the investment of the pension. Therefore, it is uncertain that answering these questions correctly will lead to a better retirement in the Chinese context.

Moreover, not investing in high-risk financial products (for instance, stocks) is considered an investment mistake signaling financial illiteracy (Campbell, 2006). However, if high financial literacy leads to high financial wellbeing, not investing in stocks may actually suggest financial literacy, given the current situation of the Chinese stock market. Studies in China also found
that overconfidence in one's financial literacy, but not actual financial literacy, is associated with holding stocks in China (Hu & Zang, 2016; Xia, Wang, & Li, 2014; Yin et al., 2014).

Furthermore, compared with studies in many western countries, Chinese residents are more likely to respond “don’t know” to questions on financial literacy. For example, Yin et al. (2014) documented at least 42.37% of Chinese participants in the 2013 wave of CHFS selected “don’t know,” at about 30% more than the rates of “don’t know” in the U.S. and the Netherlands. The prevalence of “don’t know” adds the challenge of measuring financial literacy in China, as “don’t know” may not mean actual lack of knowledge, but lack of confidence.

Several new measures have been designed (e.g., Liang & Qiao, 2014; Liu, 2018; Meng, 2014; Su et al., 2017; Yu, Wu, & Hua, 2017; Zhang & Xiong, 2017), but few were specific for the vulnerable populations. As the financial environment within China is different for different populations, using a “universal” measure may lead to low validity. One exception is Zhang and Xiong (2017). Referring to the definition of financial literacy in the Program for International Student Assessment, their study developed a set of questions measuring financial literacy of rural Chinese. In addition to calculating interest, understanding inflation and diversifying investment, the measure also covers understanding credit, knowing the financial products of banks, comparing and selecting different types of loans, financial planning, selecting fixed loan rates or floating rates when interest increases are expected, and understanding who would be responsible for the possible loss of financial products at banks. Moreover, discussing the validity and reliability of these new measures is rare, with Liu (2018), and Zhang and Xiong (2017) as two exceptions. This issue can be partly attributed to a lack of discussing the fitness of theories to the Chinese context. Recently, Guo, Zhang, Feng, and Guo (2017), and Liu, Tian and Li (2017) summarized and commented on the development of financial literacy theories and measures in other countries, especially in the U.S., which can set the ground for addressing these two issues. More discussions are hopefully coming.

Third, few studies look into the causality among financial literacy, financial behaviors, and financial outcomes. None of the articles adopted a random control trial or quasi-experimental design to tackle causality, though a few used propensity score
(e.g., Du et al., 2017) or instrument variables (e.g., Wu, Guo, & Xie, 2017; Yin et al., 2015) to complement their studies. Research on preventing or intervening in financial illiteracy of vulnerable populations is deficient as well in the literature.

The Role of Social Work

Social work has been working on improving the financial wellbeing of vulnerable populations via promoting financial literacy since the beginning of the profession (Stuart, 2013, 2015). It has re-emerged recently and grown as an important area, particularly in the background of the recent economic recession in the U.S. (Sherraden, Frey, & Birkenmaier, 2016). For example, financial social work, as a specialty of clinical social work, was established by Reeta Wolfsohn in the U.S. in 2003 (Silverman, 2018). Financial social work practice can include financial education, financial coaching, financial counseling, and financial therapy at individual, family and even community/organization levels, as suggested by Sherraden et al., (2016). In 2008, the School of Social Work at the University of Maryland Baltimore in the U.S. created the Financial Social Work Initiative to promote the education, research and practice for the university (Frey, Sherraden, Birkenmaier, & Callahan, 2017). Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis in the U.S. had developed and tested a curriculum on financial capability for four years until 2012 (Frey et al., 2017). Social work scholars in the U.S. have also actively engaged in academic dialogue on financial literacy (e.g., Huang, Nam, Sherraden, & Clancy, 2015; Sherraden, 2013). “Building financial capability for all” is raised as one of the 12 grand challenges, which are suggested as the directions of social work profession in the 21st century by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (Padilla & Fong, 2016).

The aforementioned empirical studies report that financial literacy is positively correlated with sound financial decisions and economic wellbeing in China. The level of financial literacy of the Chinese is generally at the level of Americans, while low financial literacy is more prevalent among vulnerable populations (e.g., rural residents, people with low education attainment, etc.), than others. Aggravating the problem of financial illiteracy is the booming and relatively risky Chinese financial
market. In sum, the challenge in China is very similar to the one in the U.S. Social work in China, therefore, should take actions in both practice and research, as has been done by social workers in the U.S.

In the domain of practice, social workers have skills and ethics regarding their work with vulnerable populations. The profession of social work in China is rapidly developing. For instance, by the end of 2017, there were about 320,000 licensed social workers and 310,000 social work job positions in China, 10% more than the numbers in 2016 (Ministry of Civil Affairs, P.R. China, 2018). Meanwhile, we should note that social workers in China may not be well-equipped to help service recipients in financial areas. Two universities in China, Central University of Finance and Economics (CUFE) and Guangdong University of Finance and Economics, take advantage of their strength in finance education and are pioneering financial social work as the focus of their respective social work degree programs in 2018 (CUFE, 2018; Huang, 2018). Such a strategy should be supported by translating and localizing textbooks, courses or trainings on financial education, coaching, counseling and therapy developed in other countries, such as the U.S. A careful evaluation on the above strategy is needed. Meanwhile, Chinese social workers and scholars should also develop the curriculum and trainings on financial social work as applied to a Chinese context.

In the domain of research, social work has been absent in the academic conversation on financial literacy in China. For instance, none of the articles included in this review are authored by scholars in social work. However, social work scholars can take advantage of the social work discipline in financial literacy research. First, social work research focuses on disadvantaged populations who were given little attention in current literature. Social work scholars can address this gap uniquely by raising meaningful research questions relying on a large body of social work literature on the populations.

Second, the framework of financial capability proposed by social work scholars is clearly informed by the perspective of the person-in-the-environment. The framework suggests that financial literacy interacts with financial access, i.e. financial environment, and the interaction influences financial functioning and further financial wellbeing of a person (Huang et al., 2015; Huang, Nam, & Sherraden, 2013; Sherraden, 2013). One of the
advantages of the framework is that the relatively clear definitions of financial access and financial functioning can assist in setting the “territory” of financial literacy. For example, financial behaviors are categorized as financial functioning and are “scratched” from financial literacy. The definition of financial literacy, therefore, can be refined as mainly knowledge, which is clear for developing a measure. Moreover, the framework indicates financial literacy, financial access, and financial functioning are all means illustrating a path to financial wellbeing as the end. This sheds light on examining the validity of measures of financial literacy and stresses the importance of one of the ultimate questions of financial literacy research, i.e., what is financial wellbeing in Chinese contexts? The ultimate question has not been well answered in the literature, which is a significant obstacle for advancing research in financial literacy. Given a better understanding in the person-in-environment perspective, social work scholars in China are in an advantaged position to adopt the framework to contribute to the scholarship of financial literacy.

Third, social work research is practice-centered, which can promote the intervention/prevention research that is almost absent in the field of financial literacy research in China. The increase in intervention/prevention research would then accumulate evidence directly for practice and education, as well as compliment the research methods currently used in literature, as intervention/prevention research usually asks for rigorous methods, such as random control trial, quasi-experimental design and mixed methods.

In sum, the involvement of social work would lead to a deeper understanding of financial literacy in China via adding attention to practice and research on disadvantaged populations, enlightening theory development, and calling for intervention/prevention research. It is well positioned to contribute to the global discourse in the area.

Conclusion

Financial literacy research in China is much younger than in developed countries. Although the first publication (Wang & Xin) was released in 2003, most of the articles were published
in the last five years. The increasing research partly answers the call from micro practice and macro practitioners and reveals concerns about the level of financial literacy and the disparities associated with different demographics, particularly the rural-urban divide.

The research also presents several challenges. The fundamental one is the fitness of the definitions and measures of financial literacy developed in other countries. Financial literacy is a context-based concept, as no matter how financial literacy is conceptualized, either financial knowledge or behaviors need to adapt to the financial environment to achieve a desirable financial outcome. As described above, the Chinese financial environment differs from that of other countries. Further, cultural differences may cause systematic errors in measurement as well, such as the aforementioned study where Chinese were more likely to choose “don’t know” than other populations (Yin et al., 2014). Therefore, it is crucial to define financial literacy and its valid measurement within the Chinese context. A related challenge is the lack of studies on vulnerable populations, as most of the articles studied urban residents or the whole population.

Social work has not been active in the research of financial literacy in China, but it can and should play a role. As noted, one of social work’s primary frameworks, the “person-in-environment,” emphasizes fitness to the environment, and vulnerable populations are the target of social work research. Further, social work is practice-oriented, which can encourage more empirical research that is meaningful to implementation. Social work researchers are well positioned to meet many of the current challenges in financial literacy research in China.

Endnote

1. Share turnover is a measure of stock liquidity calculated by dividing the total number of shares traded over a period by the average number of shares outstanding for the period. The higher the share turnover, the more liquid company shares are (Investopedia, 2019, retrieved from https://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/shareturnover.asp).
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APPENDIX

Figure 1. PRISMA flow chart of English articles.
APPENDIX

Figure 2. PRISMA flow chart of Chinese articles.
It’s Like I Have an Advantage in All This: Experiences of Advocacy by Parents of Children with Disabilities from Professional Backgrounds

Sarah Taylor  
California State University—East Bay

Amy Conley Wright  
University of Sydney

Holly Pothier  
Chellsee Hill  
Meredith Rosenberg  
California State University—East Bay

Supports and services for children with disabilities are not distributed equitably. There are disparities in access to and quality of services for children with disabilities from low-income and ethnic minority groups. There are likely many contributors to these disparities, but one factor may be barriers to access that require parents to advocate to obtain services for their children. This qualitative study explores advocacy experiences of parents of children with disabilities (n = 40) who have a high level of education and/or professional achievement. Parents described relying heavily on their professional and educational backgrounds in advocacy, and some commented upon the “advantage” they had in accessing services. In the context of an international shift in developmental services policy towards self-determination and privatization, parents and guardians will play an even larger role in decision-making about services with their dependents with disabilities. The findings of this study suggest that support and training for parents and guardians
as they navigate this new policy environment is especially critical given the role of parental knowledge and skills in advocacy activities.

Keywords: caregiving, inequality, parenting, disability, advocacy, qualitative research

Over the past several decades, social welfare policy and practice in the area of disability has been increasingly focused on consumer and family member empowerment. One of the biggest changes is in the financing and delivery of support services for individuals with disabilities. In the past, services were typically reviewed, managed, and approved by a case manager. Over the past two decades, in several countries, including Australia, Canada, England, Sweden, Germany, and the United States, families and consumers are being offered the opportunity to manage disability services on their own (Piccenna, Chee, Lewis, Gruen, & Bragge, 2015). In the United States, 10% of individuals with disabilities in 15 states receive services under state policies that support self-directed plans (United Cerebral Palsy, 2019). Other U.S. States, including California, are initiating self-determination plans (California State Department of Developmental Services, 2015). In Australia, self-directed services are a key feature of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) policy (Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2017). Many of these new plans, such as Australia’s NDIS and California’s self-determination option, are specifically for adults and children with disabilities. When the consumer with a disability is a child, services are organized by a parent or legal guardian on the child’s behalf (Australian Department of Human Services, 2019; California State Department of Developmental Services, 2015).

The existing service systems often put parents and providers in adversarial relationships, whereby parents of children with disabilities feel they must “fight for services” and that “screaming loudly” is necessary to access timely, appropriate, and relevant therapies, services, and supports for their children (Ryan & Quinlan, 2018, p. 205). Societal and systemic barriers contribute to the difficulties in accessing services for children with disabilities. Institutionalized discrimination, stigma, and
outdated attitudes about people with disabilities affect consumers, family members, and providers and inhibit the well-being and meaningful participation of people with disabilities in our society (Ditchman, Kosyluk, Lee, & Jones, 2016; Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, & Link, 2013; World Health Organization, 2015). Other barriers include resource limitations, fragmentation in services, lack of cultural competency, and need for training in specific disabilities and the services that may be most relevant and helpful (Ditchman et al., 2016; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013; World Health Organization, 2015).

Within this complex service context, as disability policies shift towards self-determination, it may be even more important for parents and caregivers to be effective advocates for their loved ones. The lack of an assigned caseworker with experience in navigating disability services increases consumer and family responsibility for managing services, and thus presents’ opportunities and challenges for families. Families may be able to select services that they feel best meet their children’s needs, but they need to be aware of the services available, laws and regulations guiding these services, and means to address problems that may arise in accessing or using services (Purcal, Fisher, & Meltzer, 2016). There is a potential for this shift towards self-determination and privatization to exacerbate already existing disparities in access to services for children with disabilities, as families cannot request services that they do not know exist and cannot demand enforcement of legal requirements of which they may be unaware. There are likely many contributors to these disparities, but one factor may be barriers to access that require parents to advocate to obtain services for their children. The current study explores advocacy experiences in parents of children with disabilities (n = 40) who have a high level of education and/or professional achievement.

**Parental Advocacy and Service Disparities**

Over the past decade, an emerging research base, briefly summarized here, has begun to document the need for parents to advocate on behalf of their children, parents’ perceptions of their role as advocates, the activities parents engage in, the knowledge and skills needed for advocacy, and training programs to support parents in their advocacy work. Parents of
children with disabilities typically engage in advocacy throughout their child’s lifespan, from infancy through adulthood, with greater need for advocacy efforts during times of transition, for example, from early childhood to school-based services (Burke, Patton, & Lee, 2016b). Parents believe that advocacy is necessary and supports their active coping with the challenges of having a child with a disability, but parents also describe it as burdensome and exhausting (Green, 2007; Wang, Mannan, Poston, Turnbull, & Summers, 2004; Wright & Taylor, 2014).

Common settings for advocacy include educational institutions, medical centers, social services, and social media (Wright & Taylor, 2014). Parents may have more experience with, and feel more effective in, advocating at the micro level in schools, clinics, and social services agencies rather than at the macro level through community and political organizing (Wright & Taylor, 2014). Advocacy activities include raising awareness about their child’s disability, educating themselves on their child’s disability, learning their rights, educating others, and working to access educational, social, and medical services (Chadwick et al., 2012; Wright & Taylor, 2014).

There is limited research on the experiences of low-income and ethnic minority families who have children with disabilities (Grossman & Magaña, 2016; Vanegas & Abdelrahim, 2016). Given that access to educational and social services may depend on a parent or caregiver’s awareness of the services available and advocacy on behalf of their child, concerns have been raised about disparities in provision of services for families with linguistic, cultural, educational, and/or socioeconomic barriers to engaging in advocacy (Cohen, 2013). The existing research suggests that supports and services for children with disabilities are not distributed equitably. For example, there are disparities in access to services for children with autism from low-income, African American, and Latinx families (Liptak et al., 2008). (Latinx is a gender neutral alternative for Latino/a that is growing in usage [Steinmetz, 2018].) In California, racial and ethnic minority clients of Regional Centers that serve individuals with developmental disabilities are less likely to receive services than white clients (Harrington & Kang, 2008, 2016).

Several factors may contribute to these disparities. The well-documented disparities in access and quality of education, health care, and social services that exist for families of color
may be compounded by a child’s disability, such that racial and ethnic minority parents have an even greater need to advocate on behalf of their children. At the same time, an embedded advocacy expectation may present an additional barrier for some ethnic/minority families. Parents may avoid advocacy as they feel they should defer to professional opinion (Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000). Parents may also appreciate the services that are offered and be reluctant to be critical. Others may fear that teachers and other providers will retaliate if a parent complains (Chadwick et al., 2012). For very low-income families, frequent changes in contact information may inhibit follow-up (Khawaja, Hazzard, & Robins, 2015). These barriers to advocacy may present additional challenges for culturally and linguistically diverse families, because of gaps in the resources and training of providers to serve families effectively (Harry, 2008; Williams, Perrigo, Banda, Matic, & Goldfarb, 2013).

Parent training courses in the knowledge and skills required for advocacy have been developed and offered to various parent groups, including Latinx parents of children with autism (Burke, Magaña, Garcia, & Mello, 2016a). Training may also have a specific topical focus, such as advocacy in educational settings (Shepherd & Kervick, 2015) or macro-level advocacy (Gray, Duenas, & Daar Watson, 2015; Schuh, Hagner, Dillon, & Dixon, 2017). Emerging evidence suggests that these types of trainings help parents to feel more empowered and effective as advocates (Burke, 2013, 2016; Burke et al., 2016a; Gray et al., 2015). The trainings also appear to be beneficial to people across diverse socioeconomic, race, and gender backgrounds (Schuh, Hagner, Dillon, & Dixon, 2017).

In summary, the literature suggests that advocacy is a critical aspect of parenting a child with a disability. It also indicates that disparities in access to services exist for low-income and racial and ethnic minority children with disabilities, and that parent training courses may help to augment parents’ advocacy skills. However, there is a need for more research on the specific knowledge and skills parent advocates use in accessing services to help understand these disparities and to develop policies and programs that can address inequalities in care. This review of the literature led us to the following research questions:
1. What knowledge and skills do parents use in advocating for their children with disabilities?
2. What personal characteristics or advocacy styles do parents employ?
3. What is the impact of these advocacy efforts?

Method

This descriptive, exploratory study followed Miles and Huberman’s (1994) three-step process for qualitative research, which involves data reduction, data display, and development and verification of conclusions. We began with a conceptual framework (Lofland & Lofland, 1995) informed by the literature, practice experience, and discussions with key informants to narrow our focus. This conceptual framework encompassed the issues highlighted in our literature review, including themes related to the need for advocacy, goals of advocacy, and the settings in which advocacy occurs. The second author’s practice experience and research in global child advocacy (Wright & Jaffe, 2013), which has included training parents of children with disabilities to advocate for their children in Australia, also contributed to our conceptual framework. The intention was to use the conceptual framework as a starting place, with an openness to being surprised by our data and revising our preliminary understandings through the process of data collection, preliminary analysis, and deeper analysis.

The study was also informed by the first author’s experiences as a parent of a child with a disability. One of the graduate student researchers who served as an interviewer and assisted in the initial stages of analysis also identified as a parent of a child with a disability, thus the initial six-member research team included two parents of children with disabilities. The parent voice was part of all research decisions from design through analysis and writing, and these parent-researchers were able to gain access to other parents through groups with which they had connections. To avoid any conflicts of interest, if either parent-researcher had a prior connection to a potential participant for the study, she re-assigned her interview and preliminary analysis of that data to another member of the team. The strengths of the inclusion of parents of children with disabilities on the research team reflect those described in the
literature on reflexivity, including access to participant populations, participant willingness to share personal information, and the meanings parents bring to the research, from design through analysis (Berger, 2015).

Participants

Adult parents (n = 40) of one or more children with a disability were invited to participate in the study. The majority (n = 35) of participants were White/European American. Eighty percent of the participants reported that they were married (n = 32). The sample was highly educated, with most of the participants (n = 35) having completed either an Associate’s degree or some college. Furthermore, 75% (n = 30) of participants had completed at least a Bachelor’s degree, while more than a third (n = 15) had obtained their Master’s degree or higher.

Nearly one quarter (n = 9) of the sample was employed in either K–12 education or social services; two thirds of these parents stated that their experiences with their own children influenced their decisions to pursue their chosen careers, with six individuals working directly in social services related to disability (n = 3) or special education (n = 3). Several other participants (n = 4) reported careers in higher education or research (n = 3) and one in healthcare. Eleven of the participants stated that they were employed but did not specify their profession. Forty percent of the sample (n = 16) were either unemployed or full-time caregivers, but this includes a retired parent and a parent who volunteered full-time to run a small non-profit. Many of these full-time caregivers had been employed in professional occupations prior to having a child with a disability.

Most of the families (n = 35) had three or fewer children, and over 87% (n = 37) reported having one child with a disability. However, several of the families (n = 5) had multiple children with disabilities, while four participants reported larger family sizes (four or more children). The participants described their children as having a wide range of disabilities including intellectual, developmental, neurological, and physical disabilities, as well as mental health needs, and injury-related conditions. The most commonly cited diagnoses were autism and autism spectrum disorder (including Asperger’s syndrome), with nearly one third of participants (n = 13) reporting these in at least
one of their children. The age of the children ranged from infancy through adulthood, with 10% being ages 0–5, 19% ages 6–10, 17% ages 11–14, 20% ages 15–18, 13% ages 19–25, and 20% over age 25.

Recruitment

The study was reviewed and determined to be exempt by the Institutional Review Boards of two public universities in California employing each of the lead authors in October 2012. Participants were recruited from a large sample of parents of children with disabilities who completed an online survey (n = 304) for a previous study (citation removed for peer review) intended to gather information about parental advocacy experiences and perceived effectiveness of advocacy. The survey and interviews were completed in 2012–2013. The survey participants were initially recruited via social media and email listservs for parents of children with disabilities; the response rate is unknown, given that the initial survey announcements were forwarded to various individuals and groups by survey participants themselves and other interested individuals. Our sampling goal was 100 participants. The final sample included over 300 parents from 38 states, as well as six other countries.

The following question at the end of the survey was used to invite participants to share their experiences in an interview:

Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in this study. We would like to invite you to participate in a phone or in-person interview to discuss your experiences in more detail. The interview would take approximately one hour. If you are interested in this optional, additional portion of the study, please click here.

Parents were offered a $15 gift card as an incentive to complete the interviews. Departmental funds available to the lead author were used to pay for the participant stipends. The initial survey from which the interview sample was drawn was anonymous. When parents volunteered to participate in a follow-up interview, they were taken to a new online web form (not connected to their survey responses) that requested their contact details. This information was only used to schedule and complete the
interview; interview notes and transcripts were immediately de-identified once the interview was complete. Nearly 100 parents (n = 98) indicated interest in being interviewed, but many of these did not respond to follow-up attempts, thus the final interview sample included 40 parents, approximately 13% of those who participated in the initial survey. The sample size was driven in part by participant interest (i.e., more parents indicated interest than we anticipated, suggesting that many parents had experiences they wished to share), as well as a desire to have a sample that included parents of children of varying ages, disabilities, and regions.

**Data Collection**

Parents participated in semi-structured interviews regarding their family situations, advocacy activities, and reflections on advocacy-related successes and challenges. The 30-60-minute telephone interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed. Given that a national sample was used, telephone interviews were necessary as our study budget did not permit travel. A team of four graduate student research assistants in Social Work completed the interviews after participating in approximately six hours of training in ethics, confidentiality, and interviewing. We also trained the team in the importance of making participants feel comfortable and building rapport through using an opening script. This script provided information on the purpose of the study and assurance that participant identities would be kept confidential. As social work students, they were already skilled in engaging with a wide variety of people in discussion of sensitive topics. The training also included completion of audio-recorded mock interviews, which were reviewed by the first author.

The two lead researchers developed the interview guide based on a preliminary analysis of data from the survey noted above. The second author piloted the interview guide with one parent of a child with a disability. The interview was semi-structured and included nine broad questions with probes that were asked only if the participant did not address the sub-topics under the broad question. For example, the first question in the survey was, “Tell me about your family.” The probes were:
• How many adults are in the family?
• How are the children taken care of throughout the day?
• How many children do you have?
• What are the ages of your children?
• How many of your children have special needs?

Subsequent questions asked the parents to describe themselves, their children’s strengths and challenges, a successful experience of advocacy, an experience of advocacy that did not go as well as expected, and supporters and facilitators of advocacy efforts.

Analysis

A research team consisting of the two lead researchers and two graduate student research assistants developed a codebook based on the interview guide, and then revised the preliminary codebook based on emerging findings from review of the transcripts. Initial index codes included broad categories such as advocacy activities, advocacy goals, coping, perceived challenges, emotions and reflections, technical expertise, personal characteristics, and support or lack of support.

Two graduate research assistants who had completed a course in quantitative and qualitative analysis and a two-hour training in coding specifically for this study served as the primary coders. Using Dedoose qualitative online software, the codebook was applied, tested, and revised in an iterative process until a .70 kappa score of inter-rater agreement was achieved between these two coders. The lead researchers then identified the major themes and relationships among concepts through an axial and selective coding process. For this analysis, we focused on stories of successful advocacy efforts and what parents said in response to questions about what contributed to their ability to advocate effectively. As we worked through our analysis, we reached the point of saturation, at which time the themes and concepts appeared to be exhausted (Saunders et al., 2018).

Trustworthiness

Efforts to ensure the reliability and validity of the analysis included peer debriefing and negative case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Peer debriefing was completed through
frequent discussions among members of the research team about coding and preliminary findings. Negative case analysis involved looking for cases that did not adhere to patterns initially identified, and then revising these preliminary patterns to better reflect the data. Member checking was not feasible for this study, but as noted above, the research team included two parents of children with disabilities who provided ongoing feedback based on their lived experiences.

Findings

Parents attributed much of their advocacy successes to the knowledge and skills they employed as well as their advocacy style and personal characteristics. We also explored the impact of advocacy in terms of cumulative gains or losses and career trajectories.

Knowledge and Skills

The knowledge and skills parents utilized in advocating for their children were categorized as follows: (a) Knowledge of laws, policies, and norms; (b) Knowledge and skills acquired through professional and formal educational experiences; (c) Knowledge specific to their child’s disability.

Knowledge of laws, policies, and norms. In sharing their advocacy stories, parents described detailed and complex knowledge of special education laws and policies, curricular issues, district-specific policies, medical insurance guidelines, and social service programs. For example, one parent stated:

I felt I was in control of that IEP [Individualized Education Plan]. I knew exactly...this was the first time I can actually say to you, in all the years, I knew my daughter’s present levels, I knew what she needed, I knew where she’s going next year, I knew what her goals should be, I knew...and I actually understood everything single page of that IEP.

Many parents felt their knowledge of specific educational policies and the way to state their requests using policy-oriented language was critical to their successes in advocacy. For example, one parent commented:
So for my elder son they wanted to discontinue his services in seventh grade and I had the knowledge to know to ask for a “private evaluation at public expense,” but if you don’t ask for it that way, you’re probably not getting it. So, it was, okay, flip to the page that has that, copy the words exactly, tell them you want a new IEP and they can’t change anything because you’ve requested it until they respond to your request. At the time, the people in the room were, “Oh, no, we’re not giving him speech therapy anymore. We’re discontinuing this and we’ll look into this.” I said, ‘No, actually you’re not.” I said, “Legally you’re required to keep everything the same until you address my concern.” So, I got a call the next day saying, “Oh, yeah, I was right, his speech would stay in place.”

Knowledge and skills acquired through professional and formal educational experiences. Many of the parents in our sample had professional backgrounds in fields such as law, social work, education, medicine, science, writing, and nursing. Parents described drawing on this knowledge in their advocacy work. Nearly all of the parents who specified their fields cited them as contributing to their effectiveness as parents of children with disabilities, noting that their vocations helped enhance their advocacy skills as well their medical, technical, and legal knowledge. The specific knowledge and skills parents described included:

- Knowledge of child development
- Policies and funding
- Terminology
- Effective communication via email, letters, and phone calls
- Networking
- Knowledge of community resources
- Leadership
- Argumentation
- Public speaking
- Marketing

The following examples illustrate how parents felt their skills and knowledge informed their advocacy work. This parent described how her and her husband’s backgrounds in policy and law were valuable:
I would by lying to you if I didn’t say that the fact that my husband and I are well educated is a huge factor. He is an attorney. We both have Master’s degrees in public policy...We both work for the Federal government so we understand how bureaucracies work. We understand how to lobby and advocate, how to work the system, and call people and write letters and how to write good letters and all that stuff.

Another parent used her social work background to inform her advocacy work:

I’ve been fortunate that I have private insurance and I help people in the community so I can ask about different providers, but, I mean, again, it’s like I have an advantage in all this being a social worker with my skills and connections and then sometimes I think and go, “Oh, my God, what if I wasn’t a social worker?”

Parents also cited professional experience in fields that were not clearly related to disability. For example, one parent learned problem-solving skills through her astrophysics training: “I think my education background has helped a lot. I have a degree in astrophysics, so I’m used to learning complicated stuff and trying to apply it to different problems. I’m a good problem solver.” Another parent who is a professional writer describes how her skills support her advocacy:

It just struck me that my whole professional career up to this point in some ways was a preparation for me to be an advocate. My professional background is as an editor and writer and marketing communications person. So, whether it’s learning new material or getting the material out to people in a convincing way, it’s really all about advocacy.

Knowledge specific to their child’s disability. Parents described needing a deep knowledge of their child’s condition, including research on the condition, evidence-based interventions, and potential long-term outcomes. Parents often felt their knowledge exceeded that of many professionals with whom they interacted and felt frustrated by the need to educate these experts. Parents’ knowledge of their child’s disability was influential in obtaining a diagnosis, which is essential for access to some services:
Interviewer: How did you first learn of your son’s special needs?
Parent: How did I learn of them? I suspected them. I’m a physi-
cian myself so he was actually the first patient I actually
saw with autism and I took him in requesting a developmen-
tal screening for him about sixteen to seventeen months of
age when he stopped playing joint attention games with us
on the changing table. That was really the first red flag for me.

Parents’ knowledge also informed the types of interventions
they felt were appropriate for their child. This was particularly
true for parents whose children had rare conditions:

And then in terms of his medical treatment, it’s kind of the
same thing. You have to be, you have to learn how to advocate
for what’s best for him by doing the research on what are the
latest treatments, what’s going on in the world of treatment,
not just for epilepsy, but for his underlying disorder to [dis-
order name removed for confidentiality], because it’s a rare
disease. They aren’t going to be able to stay informed on all
aspects of it and be ready in the event that his disease takes
a turn in that particular direction. I know what the latest re-
search is, and I can say, “We’re doing this,” to a point where I
researched and eventually we decided for him to participate
in a clinical trial in a research experimental trial. And that
you can’t do, you can’t do that without doing your homework
and being the advocate, because the first doctors say, “Well,
that’s not the way to go,” and if you don’t do your research
and stand up and say, “No, we’ve looked at it and we’re will-
ing to go there, we’ve evaluated the risk.” I guess that’s my
byline for any kind of advocacy is you have to do your re-
search and evaluate the cost benefit of each decision and then
go with it and stick with it, if it’s the best thing for your child.

Advocacy Styles and Personal Characteristics

In addition to knowledge and skills, parents often remarked on
personal characteristics that they felt contributed to their advo-
cacy efforts. The most frequently noted self-identified personal
characteristics include determination, persistence, stubborn-
ness, and tenaciousness. These characteristics were discussed
by nearly all of the parents. For example, one parent stated:
I’m the squeaky wheel. I’m the person that just never goes away. I’m the person that calls back again and again and again. I’m the person that just won’t take no for an answer. “Okay, who else do I need to talk to? What other things can I try?”

Another shared, “I’m tenacious, I’m stubborn, I’m persistent, I’m very confident with research and once I set my mind to something, I’m hard to persuade different. So, I guess my tenacity and my persistence would be my character strength.”

The overwhelming majority of the parents also expressed deep dedication to their children. This dedication was occasionally described in cultural or spiritual terms, as with one parent who commented:

I would say that I guess what it comes down to is cultural and spiritual practices. Because in Lakota culture the word for children, it means “the holy ones.” That was always a guiding principle for me as well. Because we are taught that our children are sacred beings. They’re holy and that’s how you treat them. Even when they’re having a temper tantrum or even when you’re changing dirty diapers for the millionth time. This is a sacred being before you. So that was always at the top of my mind. That’s why I expect my child to be respected, to be valued for the person that he is. That’s why I think that has focused my efforts; the things that I’ve done.

Parents described using distinct individual personal characteristics in their advocacy work and felt those personal characteristics contributed to their success. The quotations below indicate how very different advocacy styles can be effective. This parent tries to be “cooperative” and “a team player:”

So, I’m not…it’s not my style to cause trouble for the school. I’m not comfortable doing that, I’d much rather be a good citizen. I’d much rather say, “Yes” almost all the time, so that once in a while I can say, “No” and we can stick. I’d rather be known in that way. I’m not a pushover. I do not want to be known as a pushover, but I want to be known as cooperative. I want to be known as constructive and a team player and that way when I need to say, “No”, they won’t just roll their eyes. So, that’s a style choice that advocates need to make.
How do I get her, how do I move through world, that’s just my style, it’s not everybody’s style.

In contrast, other parents described themselves as very assertive or even aggressive at times: “Okay. I would say personality-wise, I’m from New York. That has helped, to be aggressive when I need to.”

A few parents described utilizing a team approach, relying on complementary characteristics between themselves and their partners or spouses, where one parent is the more cooperative one, and the other takes on a more assertive role.

**Impact of Advocacy**

Many parents described advocacy as exhausting yet felt proud of the outcomes they were able to achieve. They felt their advocacy successes were cumulative, with impacts on their children’s lives as well as their own well-being. The next two quotations provide contrasting perspectives on successful advocacy versus missed advocacy opportunities. A parent who shared a successful advocacy experience commented on how it was “worth it” despite the personal toll it took on her:

The whole thing with getting her in the school and out of that bad environment—I was exhausted; it was emotionally very taxing which was a little bit of a surprise. I didn’t expect to be so strongly affected by that. I almost felt like I needed counseling after going through it...there is a definite emotional pull and tact that it takes, but it’s all worth it and you get yourself back together, you find your support. Everyone sees that what you did was the right thing and you’ve gained more credibility in everyone’s eyes, which really feels good... and having friends and family that support you helps restore you too.

A parent who missed an advocacy opportunity commented on feelings of rejection and continuing disconnection from her spiritual community:

But my real failure was that my feelings were so badly hurt and I did not go to somebody over his head and say, “Hey, are you going to back him up or is this really what the church
means to do? I just walked away and hid, because I just felt so rejected. I’m better at facing that on my own behalf than on my child’s behalf. I still haven’t done anything about it and that was three years ago, we just don’t go to church, which is terrible…

In the successful advocacy experience, the parent gains support and “credibility.” In the second, the family becomes more isolated. An additional sub-theme in this area is how the experience of advocating for their child shaped the career paths of some parents. Though most parents described using knowledge from education or work they began before having a child with a disability, a few parents commented on how the experience of having a child with a disability changed their career path or led to increased professional success. Two parents in this study started non-profit organizations to support and advocate for children with disabilities, one became a special education teacher, and another described being more effective in working with other parents at her current job in education as a result of her own parenting experiences.

Discussion and Conclusion

Parents’ knowledge reflected a sophisticated understanding of core elements of policy, including eligibility, program goals, benefits, the service delivery system, financing, and cost analysis (Chambers, 2000). The fact that parents relied heavily on their educational and professional backgrounds suggests that without strong social policies that guarantee equal access to supports and services for individuals with disabilities, gaps in services and eventual long-term outcomes may be exacerbated. This may be especially true given the potential for gains or losses to be cumulative, starting with access to early intervention services following a diagnosis at a young age. Many parents seemed to recognize this and sought to use their knowledge and skills to improve services not just for their own children, but for all children. The insights offered by this sample highlight the skills, time, and energy parents feel are required to gain access to supports and services that should be provided to all children with disabilities regardless of parental effort.
Policies emphasizing consumer and family member involvement have an embedded advocacy expectation, which assumes that families have access to information about services, rights and resources. Moreover, these policies are premised on values of equity, individual rights and freedom of choice that fit with the value orientations of middle-class professionals but may be antithetical to culturally diverse families (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). In the advocacy expectation, parents are “expected to know and understand what professionals know” (Kalyanpur et al., 2000, p. 129) and therefore parents who possess the knowledge, value orientations and confidence of professionals have a considerable advantage.

The inherent divide is cultural capital and social transmission of privilege. Cultural institutions such as schools reflect the dominant cultural and class groups. Children from these groups are socialized within the family to develop the social, cultural and linguistic competencies that enable successful navigation through the expectations of the culture. Those from non-dominant groups must acquire the knowledge and skills that come naturally to upper and middle classes (Lamont & Laureau, 1988). Laureau (2011) found in her ethnographic study, Unequal Childhoods, that middle class professional parents made frequent criticisms and interventions in institutions such as schools on behalf of their children. Observing these interactions, their children developed an emerging sense of empowerment and ability to see opportunities within institutional structures to get what they wanted. By contrast, working class parents expressed feelings of dependence with a sense of powerlessness regarding institutions and their children developed a sense of constraint and alienation when confronting social institutions (Laureau, 2011). The advocacy expectation contributes to a Matthew effect, defined by Merton (1968) as “the principle of cumulative advantage that operates in many systems of social stratification to produce the same result: the rich get richer at a rate that makes the poor become relatively poorer” (p. 7). In the case of disability services, parental advocacy is the key to accessing resources. The advantages already afforded to professional middle-class families enable them to use these advantages to gain more resources, thereby increasing the gap in access to resources between children in middle class and working class families.
Study Strengths and Limitations

Limitations of this study are the reliance on participant recall of past events and a focus solely on parents. It is likely that the other players (i.e., the child with a disability and professionals) involved in the events around which parents advocated would have a different perspective.

A strength and limitation of this study was the unintentional oversampling of parents from highly professional backgrounds who went to extraordinary lengths to advocate for their children. This happened both through selection bias (i.e., parents volunteering for a study about advocacy experiences are more likely to self-identify as parent advocates) and through the recruitment method via social media, attracting parents with access to the internet and connections to online communities for parents of children with disabilities. Though we had hoped for a more demographically diverse sample, the participants provided highly relevant and rich information for this research, and connecting with them outside of social service agencies was positive, in that for most of these parents, social media is a naturalistic setting in which they are comfortable, and through which they connect with other parents and engage in advocacy. Relevance, richness, and naturalistic settings are advantageous in qualitative sampling (Abrams, 2010).

Policy Implications

Having a professional background appeared related to parents’ capacity and confidence to act as advocates for their children. While this was a boon to their own families, it suggests that more privileged parents may be better positioned to identify and request appropriate services for their children, which can act to reinforce inequality. Our findings suggest that there is a tension between the policy goals of self-directed services, with the promise of equal access and choice, and implementation that is mediated by parental advocacy. Differences among parental ability to advocate for their children can create distributional inequality. Indeed, research on user experiences of the National Disability Insurance Scheme national policy in Australia have identified concerns that factors “...driving inequality—household income, education, residential location and household structure—
remain critical in filtering opportunities and capacities for service users and their carers to have choice and control in accessing services” (Warr et al., 2017, p. 9).

This finding underscores the importance of policy efforts to eliminate barriers to accessing supports and services for people with disabilities. This work could include simplifying forms and procedures, translating policies into multiple languages, providing access to resource and referral agencies with skills in working with culturally and linguistically diverse families, and making policies that are transparent and written in accessible language. One example of these types of policies is the Australian federal government’s an initiative to use “plain language” in legislation (Australian Government Office of Parliamentary Counsel, n.d.). Another example is in California’s recent passage of a bill (AB 959, 2017) that requires Regional Centers, the state organizations responsible for managing developmental disability services, to provide clear and consistent information on their websites. The bill also requires Regional Centers to make information culturally and linguistically accessible.

Our findings suggest a need to strengthen universal screening and case-finding efforts that require schools, medical clinics, and social service agencies to seek out children who will benefit from support. In the context of self-determination policies, there is a call for highly skilled support planners who can assist adults and children with complex needs and their parents in navigating this new service environment (Collings, Dew, & Dowse, 2016).

Practice and Research Implications

While engaging in this macro-level work, it is also necessary to provide micro- and mezzo-level counseling, support, and training so parents can access existing services for their children. Our research underscores the value of parent training programs such as those noted in the literature review. The programs must provide classes that are accessible to families who have work schedule, transportation, and other barriers to participation.

As children with disabilities grow into young adulthood and assume greater responsibility over their lives, their ability to self-advocate is strongly influenced by their parents, who can act as instructors, mentors and role models (Bianco,
Garrison-Wade, Tobin, & Lehmann, 2009). The ways in which young adults are supported in becoming effective self-advocates is an indirect pathway between privilege and parental advocacy that bears further investigation.

Future research is needed on the experiences of diverse families. Because of the relative affluence of this sample, we are unable to draw conclusions about the experiences of families from less advantaged communities. It is reasonable to guess that the advocacy experiences of families from other communities differ, but further study is needed to learn more about how and in what ways the experiences might diverge.

Future research is needed on the skills and knowledge low-income and under-resourced families already employ in their advocacy. This will allow parent training programs to build on existing skills. In addition to learning more about the experiences of diverse families, future research should explore inequality in access to services in more detail, comparing affluent families with those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. This could be done through a review of administrative data from large government and private non-profit social service agencies, schools, and medical clinics. This quantitative research should still include a qualitative component, because so much of the experience is subjective and involves reflection on advocacy goals, activities, and outcomes. Longitudinal research would be helpful in learning more about how advocacy experiences unfold over time.
References


Book Reviews


This book is a large compendium of papers on a range of topics of interest to those concerned with poverty, wealth, inequality and similar subjects. More a collection of papers than a book as such, readers might want to follow the author’s own advice and start with the summary material in the final chapter. Special interests are addressed, then, in particular chapters. The many topics include the development of personal wealth, changes in wealth inequality, and just who the rich and poor actually are. The overall focus is on wealth generation and accumulation. This is no small task, because wealth is actually a very difficult value to measure. For Wolff, the overall findings detail the rise and the fall of the American middle class.

A major point for Wolff is that average American household wealth in 2013 was about the same as it had been in 1969. Why would this be so? One possibility is that, with earnings stagnation, Americans mortgaged their wealth through accumulating housing debt. Correlatively, a long period of rising housing values may have reformulated, or at least dulled people’s resistance to debt. Additionally, predator investment consultants encouraged people to engage in financial transactions that mainly benefitted the investment bankers themselves with little regard for the actual financial status of their clients. When the asset market collapsed (which for the middle class consisted principally of home values) the financial life of the mortgage holders collapsed along with it.

In my view, Wolff’s detailed work represented in this volume raises three primary issues. The first issue (of which I confess I was also guilty) is simply our failure to notice what was happening. We did not notice this emerging problem until it was already upon us. It was truly a Black Swan event, a completely surprising and unexpected event with a cataclysmic impact, which afterward everyone agreed we should have seen coming.
Middle-class implosion was not on anyone’s policy agenda. Social workers and sociologists, among others, were largely silent. Subsequently, the country seemed more interested in assisting big financial institutions than in paying attention to the sufferings of the middle mass.

A second issue that might have been caused by this same pattern of ‘failure to notice’ is why we fail to take programmatic action, even in the absence of calamity. There were other pressures than the financial crisis for which action programs would be helpful. After all, Eisenhower sponsored the national highway system, and Kennedy suggested we go to the moon! These are both examples of programs of aspiration rather than remediation. But on the remediation side, we are still saddled with a deteriorating electrical grid, a collapsing road and bridge system, environmental challenges of all sorts, and a crumbling child welfare system, to name but a few of our most glaring problems. Yet with the possible exception of health care, even the need for remediation does not seem to move our system now. Such attention could come through a massive infrastructure improvement program, putting America’s infrastructure in tip-top shape, and thus utilizing the skills of those who suffered not only a collapse of their personal wealth but of their local and regional economies as well.

We seem unable to “think big” anymore, even as our systems collapse and shrink. Growing up in Pittsburgh, I saw the collapse of the America Steel industry and the demise of the entire Ohio River Valley. Working for the Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh, I saw the personal and human costs of this collapse. Our national accomplishments appear to have shrunk to the level in which only personal wealth accumulation dominates and is expanding.

Overall, Wolff shows that compared to other developed nations, the USA has moved from “first to worst” in terms of inequality, that is, from being more equal among developed nations by several measures to now being near the bottom of the pile. Again this begs the question of why did this happen? Why has our public discourse moved from collaboration to contention? How can it be that we have moved from a governing sense of the best policies being those that are for “the good of us all” to that of naked accumulative individualism? In describing the economics of the financial meltdown, I would have liked
Wolff to explain a bit more of how this happened. I have already mentioned the possibility of wage stagnation, but that would be a precipitating cause of middle class over-indebtedness. Why such stagnation, and why was it tolerated? Why was there such a failure of the culture of the Greatest Generation to be transmitted to subsequent generations of Americans?

John Tropman
University of Michigan

Philip N. Jefferson, 

Poverty is a global issue. Every country in the world makes some effort to reduce poverty, and especially in developing countries great strides have been achieved. The proportion of people in the developing world living in poverty fell from about 50 percent to around 14 percent between 1990 and 2015. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s adage expresses a common view, that the “test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.” This implies that poverty is an obstacle to progress. Why then do many people live in poverty? What kinds of public and private actions have societies taken and are currently taking in the struggle against poverty? Jefferson’s book explores these problems and seeks to find the answers. He focuses on four dimensions of poverty, including the meaning and characteristics of poverty, the methods of measuring poverty, the causes of formation and resolvable measures of poverty. Although explicitly intended to be a very short introduction, the book is a helpful beginning point for building a comprehensive understanding of poverty.

The first chapter analyzes the achievements of poverty reduction by using time-series data and cross-sectional data. Jefferson indicates the importance of taking contextual aspects into account when we define the poverty in countries on different economic development levels. This is followed by a chapter describing the historical development of anti-poverty philosophy and programs. Governments explicitly responded to poverty first in the 16th and
17th centuries. The famous English Poor Laws guided approaches to poor relief as an answer to poverty. As global trade developed, income inequality became ever greater, and with it the problems of increasing poverty. By the late 19th century and on into the 20th century, social security programs were established to fight poverty.

The third chapter takes on the task of defining just what poverty is. Defining poverty includes several key features. First of all, it is a measurement of well-being, that is, establishing a poverty line. The traditional resource-based measures of well-being including income, consumption and wealth, however, fail to capture qualitative aspects well-being, such as life expectancy, infant mortality, and educational opportunity. In contrast, the Human Development Index (HDI) of the United Nations utilizes a capabilities approach to summarize well-being, taking into account life expectancy, years of schooling, and per capita income. The assumption is that creating opportunities to pursue a good life is more effective than providing financial resources directly. Compared with an absolute poverty line, a relative poverty line requires additional resources as a society becomes wealthier. In practice, most countries adjust the poverty line upward to keep pace with inflation. An adjustment to the poverty threshold is dependent on the size of the household and various equivalence scales are used to make these adjustments. Tax and transfer systems also have been established to determine counting resource against the poverty threshold. Statistical approaches, such as a headcount index, are designed to assess the effectiveness of public policies. The depth and severity of poverty is more effective and convenient to measure poverty gaps.

The main section of the book is devoted to exploring the major causes of poverty. Poverty is an unavoidable social problem, attributable to family and social causes, as well as more strictly economic causes. Jefferson suggests that poverty is strongly associated with family structure. This is the case in both developed and developing countries. Health and education are crucial to the ability of people to compete actively in the social environment. Inferior education, like inferior health, transmits poverty across generations. Asset transfers can help people living in poverty pay for significant anticipated expenses. People living in poverty are also more vulnerable to climate
change, which increases the incidence of diseases and reduces current and future earning capacity.

Jefferson then focuses on the economic factors of poverty. Poverty is associated with weak or no attachment to the labor market and low earnings. Barriers to strong labor market attachment include low education attainment, social stratification, and discrimination. Minimum wage and the living wage policies, conditional tax credits, and job training can play a role in lifting individuals and families out of poverty, while factors including unemployment and underemployment, low educational attainment and low-skill job, racial, sexual, age or disability discrimination are associated with an increase in the poverty rate. Social mobility is critical for people living in poverty. The longer the household has been living in poverty, the lower the probability that it will escape poverty in the future. Higher income inequality is associated with less intergenerational income mobility. It is encouraging to note that immigration fosters economic mobility, an antidote to poverty.

The final chapters cover another core issue of anti-poverty programs. What measures have been effective in the struggle against poverty? The main factors involved in the decline of poverty globally are economic growth, mild (not extreme) inequality, inclusive institutions, international trade and commerce, a strong social protection system, investment in infrastructure and aid projects. Economic growth, good governance, and well-developed financial sectors are the basis for poverty reduction. Women especially face unique challenges based on gender, and key social norms imposed on them need to be changed in order to alleviate the poverty of women. Through evaluating the effectiveness of anti-poverty programs and policies by the means of randomized control testing, natural experiments, comparisons of pre-transfer and post-transfer statuses, and various historical approaches, we can promote the optimal allocation and efficient use of limited anti-poverty resources.

As Jefferson suggests, the “targets of poverty eradication in the future will be areas or peoples where it may be far harder to make progress with respect to better schooling and health, gender equality, democracy, rule of law, peace, environmental sustainability, and all of the other concomitants of shared prosperity” (p. 136). Though global resources are limited, we should utilize these finite resources to improve the health and skills of
the poor and promote the social and economic development of the fragile states. While poverty may never disappear entirely, it is imperative we remain focused overcoming poverty.

Yan Shen
Hubei Normal University


Food insecurity refers to the lack of consistent access to enough food for a healthy life. Food insecurity has been drawing attention among researchers and policy stakeholders due to its increasing prevalence and its impact on population health in the U.S. and globally, especially after the financial recession. While most books on health and nutrition only briefly mention food insecurity as an emerging social issue, this book is the most recent and one of the few that specifically focus on food insecurity as an independent topic.

Using findings from previous research and their own projects, the authors of this book provide an insightful discourse on food insecurity, including its social and historical context, risk factors, health consequences, current community strategies and policies, and future solutions. The book opens by contextualizing food insecurity from a multidisciplinary perspective and argues that food insecurity is not a production problem but rather a distribution problem. This is supported by empirical evidence on the risk factors of food insecurity in the U.S., including income, mobility, age, gender, race, household composition, marital status, geography, food assistance participation, and coping strategies, and comparing those with data from Canada and Australia.

The authors summarize empirical evidence on the impact of food insecurity on physical and mental health, including obesity, self-rated health, diabetes, mental well-being, cognitive function, and malnutrition, and discuss the concept of food deserts and availability-related issues. They acknowledge the influence of income and racial composition on neighborhood
access to healthy food, yet challenge the prevalent assumption that food availability is positively associated with dietary quality. Their view is that income inequality is at the root of the poor being undernourished and aggregate racial disparities of nutrition education and dietary quality.

The authors focus a following chapter on community-based alternative food movements, including home and community gardening, farmers’ markets, food banks, and food pantries. They argue that although gardening and farmers’ markets have provided fresh and healthy food and enhanced social cohesion, their impact on improving diet health and reducing food insecurity has been miniscule. One among many reasons for this is that those community-based alternative food movements tend to appeal more to middle-class non-Hispanic Whites, but not to ethnic minorities and low-income populations. Food banks and food pantries are intended to serve the poorest households who are food-insecure. Their roles, however, are merely supplemental due to several limitations, including low accessibility in rural and suburban areas, insufficient food supplies, scheduling conflicts with potential clients, and clients’ lack of awareness of their existence in communities.

The next chapter focuses on public policies relevant to food insecurity, including Meals on Wheels, free and reduced-price (FRP) school breakfast and lunch programs, and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The authors acknowledge the accomplishments of those public policies, yet they emphasize that none of them has eliminated food insecurity. Meals on Wheels, for example, has significantly improved diet quality, increased nutrient intake, and reduced food insecurity among older and frail participants, yet is hampered in its mission by long waitlists and limited outreach among the homeless elderly. FRP programs aim to provide balanced meals to schoolchildren from low-income families, yet must deal with ongoing issues including schedule conflict with schools, food waste, and unpalatable taste. SNAP seems to increase participants’ subjective health status but its benefits are outweighed by its stringent eligibility criteria, burdensome application and qualification processes, and social stigma among participants.

The book ends by summarizing scientific and technological advancements to ensure food is produced abundantly and concludes that food insecurity is essentially a problem of access
and distribution more than one of food supply. Distribution is closely tied to general problems of poverty and can be eliminated only as poverty itself is eliminated.

This book provides an up-to-date summary of literature around food insecurity, an overview of previous research on food insecurity, as well as individual strategies and public programs and policies to address food insecurity for new researchers and policy stakeholders who want to learn about food insecurity. It may well serve as a desk reference book for experienced food insecurity researchers and policy stakeholders to update their knowledge and to identify new literature to guide their work and research interest, and enhance their critical thinking for framing and addressing food insecurity.

Kaipeng Wang
Texas State University


In this overdue intersectional analysis of two decades of brutally subordinating welfare reform, the authors outline three primary concerns: the significance of gender in welfare reform; the narrowing of the welfare debate between Democrats and Republicans; and the activism of social justice feminists at the heights of welfare reform. The book provides a straightforward history of welfare reform policy while simultaneously highlighting the work of intersectional feminists who advocated for the voices of those most impacted by welfare reform, namely, low-income nonwhite single mothers. Additionally, in line with feminist perspectives, the book calls for researchers and policy makers to adopt an intersectional feminist agenda to address welfare reform today.

The authors make clear that the analytic tool for their arguments throughout the book is gender, because it “[calls] attention to the ways in which policy incorporates assumptions about maleness and femaleness, masculine and feminine behavior, and the two-option gender system itself” (p. 5). They
apply gender in an “expansive, intersectional way” highlighting how the gendered politics of welfare reform are differentially experienced by racially, economically and physically diverse individuals (p. 57). Kornbluh and Mink trace the path of welfare reform from the New Deal’s Aid to Families and Dependent Children (AFDC) to its replacement, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) under the 1996 Personal Responsibilities and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA).

The authors provide statistical evidence to support their claim that TANF, with its new rules centered on time limits, work requirements, marriage obligations and restrictions on reproduction, has done little to diminish or mitigate women’s and children’s poverty. Through their examination of arguments proposed by policy makers, activists, and researchers they highlight the intersectional gendered politics that underpin what was nothing more than legislating the personal responsibility of poor mothers. Specifically, the authors argue that both Democrats and Republicans have long supported welfare reforms that do not promote long-term economic self-sufficiency for women, but rather focus on two-parent households (particularly upholding conventional marriage patterns and gender role conformity) and labor force participation as the answers to alleviating poverty, which leaves little regard for single-parent families (often led by women) and caregiving. This support for programs centered on state-funded heterosexual marriage promotion, fatherhood initiatives, and child support enforcement as the cornerstones of policy “perpetuate the subjugation of low-income, nonwhite women and men” (p. 111).

In relation to their second concern, the authors extensively outline the changes in rhetoric among “New Democrats,” which they contend has led directly and indirectly to lack of attention given to underlying assumptions about parenting, poverty, and the role of government. The authors use the rise of Bill Clinton and his subsequent agenda, “to end welfare as we know it,” to reveal the shifts in rhetoric among Democrats. They argue that the failed campaigns allowed the Democratic Party to be “(un)beholden to familiar democratic allies such as labor unions, feminist organizations and civil rights lobbies” (p. 46) which shifted their image to that of mainstream white heterosexual masculinity. The authors simultaneously take to task the underpinnings of welfare-to-work logic, arguing that
the race and gender climate of the time explains bipartisan support of these initiatives. Support for welfare-to-work initiatives on both sides of the aisle paved the way for the end of welfare as conceived in the New Deal’s AFDC, and subsequent Democratic acceptance of welfare policies that “limit poor mothers’ self-sovereignty through various sexual, reproductive and familial interventions” (p. 132).

The third concern serves as a major contribution of this book, highlighting the activism of social justice feminists and collaborating welfare organizations around reform. Throughout, the authors demonstrate the contentious nature of welfare reform policy in 1990s, despite its reputation as a bipartisan success. They focus on the work of intersectional feminist dissenters, such as Patsy Mink, who consistently advocated for the centering of women’s economic self-sufficiency and the valuing of their caregiving in welfare policy. Additionally, they contend that welfare reform remains a critical aspect of politics and provide suggestions forward for Democrats and unaffiliated progressives. While the authors demonstrate and advocate for intersectional approaches to welfare reform, one area that they fall short in terms of intersectional feminist tenets is accessibility. The book is saddled with complicated academic language, which serves to alienate the very populations they intend to uplift and address in their work. Despite this shortcoming, Ensuring Poverty is timely in an era in which who is at the table seems more important than ever before.

Keiondra J. Grace
Western Michigan University


Melvin Delgado spotlights an evolving movement to address constantly changing attitudes on immigration and citizenship. Recent vilification of undocumented immigrants has created a humanitarian need that a broad range of civic, social and religious institutions is attempting to address through local
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action. This book is a call to action divided into three sections: (1) Grounding Sanctuary Cities; (2) Sanctuary Cities, Communities, Organizations and Homes; and (3) Where to Now?

Section I, Grounding Sanctuary Cities, provides context for the current national climate by examining historical, cultural, social and economic forces. Delgado defines sanctuary sites as “geographical entities or organizations...that at a minimum have openly expressed an unwillingness to cooperate with ICE when there is an effort to arrest someone who is undocumented” (p. 13). Delgado outlines five conditions that create social anxiety around immigration. Two of these forces are being used to fuel the current national climate: Linking immigration to security concerns, and government unwilling or unable to control the number of immigrants entering the country. A quick review of recent media stories will reveal how the current administration is using these perceptions to fuel anxiety and build support for the presidential border wall. The author notes the urgent need for social workers and others with influence to provide the counter-argument to the “fake news” that undermines these communities. The sanctuary movement is the civil and moral challenge to this created backlash. Delgado points out the parallels between the present and the nation’s fight to protect runaway slaves. “The influence is concrete and symbolic. Sanctuaries force us to examine the prevailing paradigms and the deficit language used to describe them” (p. 33).

Delgado provides a reflection of immigration history in the United States with multiple references providing a comprehensive review of the transition of national attention, from Irish and Italian immigrants to the current focus on Latinos and the southern border. The author explores the drivers for immigration and the American attitude toward them. These attitudes cycle from need to fear, depending on the need for workers (for example, during the Industrialization period) and competition for resources (as during the Great Depression and the recent recession).

Sanctuary cities offer safety and security for the undocumented. Sanctuaries have clear boundaries and attract immigrants due to their mix of social support and employment opportunities. These cities embrace the sanctuary movement to maintain trust and support of the citizens they are responsible to protect. These cities recognize that newcomers to their cities bring energy, willingness to work in low prestige jobs, and that they create
significant positive economic benefits for city centers. It is imperative to humanize these immigrants by pulling back labels and capturing their stories and understanding their sacrifices in pursuit of personal safety and opportunity for their families.

Delgado explores, furthermore, the criminalization of the undocumented, drawing attention to multiple statistics that support that immigrants are less likely to commit serious crimes than are citizens. He points out that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is now the leading arresting agency for the federal government, replacing even the Department of Justice (DOJ). The description of the “Arizona War Zone” (p. 90) and the number of deaths without dignity that occur in the desert requires us to understand the drivers for immigrants to risk the journey; put simply, for them it is safer than staying home.

The alignment of sanctuary cities with other social and religious organizations is explored at length also. The role of the Catholic Church historically and in the current immigration crisis is highlighted in Boston and San Francisco. The alignment between churches and civil leadership emphasizes human rights and social justice. The guiding principle of the sanctuary movement is access without fear. Other organization, including mass transit, schools, health centers and libraries support this principle through action.

Delgado concludes with several case studies of key cities and the role they play. The strength of the book lies in the timely examples it employs. Delgado’s ability to align sanctuary cities with global and historical movements for social justice remove the stigma portrayed by media. He provides a concise and comprehensive history of immigration and the drivers for the sanctuary movement. He concludes with the call to action for civic, religious and social leaders.

Esther A. Ayers
Michigan State University

This book offers accounts of the best practices concerning serious societal issues related to sex trafficking (ST) and commercial sexual exploitation (CSE). The numerous authors well communicate to readers using case examples and illustrative guides on ST and CSE. With increased ST and CSE, there is a need for improved social work responses in work with the affected population. These essays emphasize the challenges encountered, interventions, and preventive work involved in working with this population. Bottom line, this book is an important primer for social workers.

The book is to be lauded for focusing on an important social issue that demands urgent interventions on all fronts. ST and CSE present complicated issues that signify how rotten and lacking in direction a society has become. It reveals underlying issues that demand both short-term and long-term solutions. The chapters of this book provide a teaching tool for students and instructors, as well as a tool for communications with service agencies involved in victim assistance or advocacy.

The book makes compelling arguments rooted in evidence-based research studies across regions and disciplines. By giving survivors a voice, these writers make it real and drive the message with poignancy and logic. I especially appreciate the authors’ intergenerational perspective in trying to analyze the risk factors affecting African-American victims and survivors of ST. This prudent approach is useful for social workers, helping them to understand how sociopolitical and sociocultural factors influence the lives of victims and survivors of ST in this minority group. Valandra, of the University of Arkansas, in particular highlights the need to create culturally responsive policies to enhance the effectiveness of social work interventions. For this to be achieved, social workers must be conversant with these cultural dynamics, and Valandra’s essay here is a good place to start.

These authors reiterate that an intergenerational perspective supports resilience, recovery, and healing. Family assessment is crucial, revealing intergenerational risks that can guide social
workers in formulating preventive measures. There is concern about the underrepresentation of African Americans in study sampling pools, as it skews the data on the magnitude of ST and CSE. Based on the data cited here, African Americans constitute the most statistically significant group of victims. This in itself is a needed wakeup call for those doing research in this field.

The book is also highly recommended for its structural organization and presentation. Its chapters are organized topically, with condensed issues discussed by the various authors. That makes it an easy read and synthesis of information for the readers. The editors’ summary introduction provides the reader with a useful encapsulation of the book’s contents, giving a glimpse of what is to come in each section. There is a cohesiveness of the information that flows from the first to the last part of the book. The book will also be useful those conducting further research studies, replicating results across different populations and analyzing future trends. As the book points out, there are still many gaps in the collective knowledge about social work interventions with the affected populations, especially with survivors. We need advancement in this knowledge, as well as practical measures, to ameliorate and eradicate this social menace.

Fei Wang
Case Western Reserve University
Corresponding Authors

Seon Mi Kim
skim14@ramapo.edu

Emily Warren
emilyjwarren@gmail.com

Stephanie A. Bryson
sbyryson@pdx.edu

Michael C. Gearhart
gearhartm@umsl.edu

Vijayan K. Pillai
drpillai@yahoo.com

Minchao Jin
minchao.jin@nyu.edu

Sarah Taylor
sarah.taylor@csueastbay.edu
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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.