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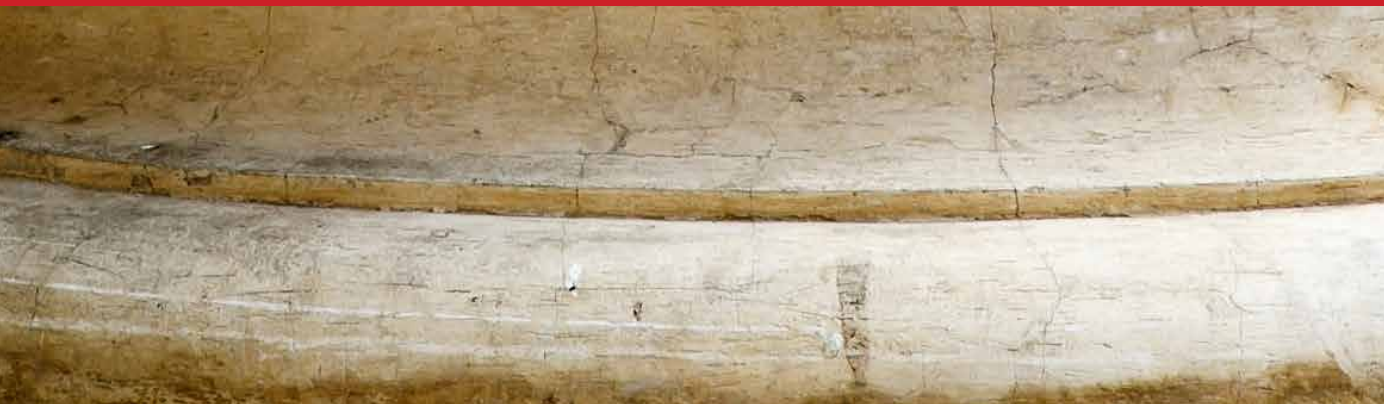
Social Work

Impacting Lives Around the World

Edited by Marian S. Harris



Social Work - Impacting Lives Around the World

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Contributors
Aakanksha Sinha, Ana Paula Caetano, Chereese Phillips, Cristiana Dias de Almeida, Dasim Budimansyah, Ida Merete Solvang, Jacqueline Marques, Jagad Aditya Dewantara, Kathy Karatasas, Margie Hunt, Marian S. Harris, Mpumelelo E. Ncube, Rdm Johan Johor Mulyadi, Sherri Y. Simmons-Horton, Stephen T. Wilson, Su Enyuan

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Social Sciences

Volume 6

Aims and Scope of the Series

The social sciences, as a form of scientific knowledge anchored on epistemological foundations, theories, and specific methodologies, both in their fundamental and applied dimensions, are paramount for understanding and, consequently, developing instruments that contribute to improving social and environmental living conditions. This Social Sciences book series, based on the concept of the social sciences as key elements in the promotion of scientific knowledge and its inherent consequences, has as its primary goal to be a space for the dissemination of relevant information on various objects of study, aimed at specialists, students, policymakers, and others interested in the challenges facing humanity. Thus, the aim is to promote scientific progress through the sound and rigorous dissemination of studies that, from the perspective of the social sciences, either through a specialised disciplinary approach or through interdisciplinary perspectives, foster a deeper understanding of the objects under analysis, clarifying the issues addressed and their implications.

Meet the Series Editor

Dr. Sandro Serpa is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of the Azores (UAc), Portugal. His career in social sciences and education began at UAc in 2000. He earned his Ph.D. in Education, specializing in Sociology of Education, from UAc in 2013. He is also an integrated researcher at the Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences of the Azores Centre (CICS. NOVA. UAçores). Dr. Serpa has demonstrated a strong commitment to higher education throughout his career. He has served in various positions at UAc, including Head of the Department of Sociology, Director of the Bachelor's in Social Work, Coordinator of the Scientific-Pedagogical Supervision Team for Social Work Internships, Member of the Pedagogical Council of the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, and Member of the Quality Commission. Additionally, he held the position of Deputy Director of CICS. UAc. Currently, he serves as Senior Editor (Sociology Section) for Social Sciences & Humanities Open (Elsevier), among several other journals. He previously held the position of Senior Editor - Sociology Section for Cogent Social Sciences (Taylor & Francis) from 2020 to 2022. Dr. Serpa maintains a distinguished research profile, evidenced by over 400 publications in international journals, books, and other scientific outlets across a wide range of countries: Brazil, Canada, China, United Arab Emirates, Germany, India, Kazakhstan, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States of America. His research interests encompass Teaching Sociology, Sociology of Education, Sociology of Organisations, Organisational Culture, Scientific Communication, Digital Society, Digital Literacy, Society 5. 0 and Sociology of Artificial Intelligence. Dr. Serpa emphasizes the importance of integrating academic knowledge with service to the university and society at large.

Meet the Volume Editor

Dr. Marian S. Harris, Ph.D., LICSW, ACSW, is Professor Emerita at the University of Washington Tacoma, School of Social Work & Criminal Justice. She is nationally and internationally recognized for her work as a child welfare researcher and scholar, a licensed independent clinical social worker, an expert witness in child welfare cases, and an advocate for children and social justice. She has received several teaching, research, and practice awards throughout her career, including the 2021 Social Justice Award from the Washington State Society for Clinical Social Work, the 2018 Distinguished Research Award from the University of Washington Tacoma, and the 2018 Social Worker of the Year from the National Association of Social Workers (WA State Chapter). Dr. Harris has written books, book chapters, journal articles, technical reports, training manuals, amicus briefs, op-eds, and newsletter articles, among other works.

Contents

Preface

Social work is a profession grounded in compassion, ethics, and a relentless commitment to human rights. Across every corner of the globe, social workers serve as practitioners, advocates, administrators, supervisors, educators, researchers, and policy influencers – working with individuals (including adults, children, and youth), families, and communities to help them overcome barriers and promote social justice. *Social Work – Impacting Lives around the World* aims to honor the global scope of the profession, explore current challenges, highlight its approaches, frameworks, and perspectives, and showcase the profound impact social work has on human lives.

In today's rapidly changing world, the profession of social work faces a myriad of new challenges and opportunities. From armed conflicts and forced migration to poverty, mass incarceration, child welfare challenges, inequality, and climate-related disasters, social workers are often on the front lines of the most urgent humanitarian issues of our time. Their roles are diverse and critical, encompassing providing mental health support in war-torn regions, advocating for children's protection and rights, promoting access to healthcare, food, and other essential services, advancing equity and inclusion, working on environmental justice, and shaping policy at both national and international levels [1, 2].

This book was inspired by the need to amplify the voices and experiences of social workers, as well as the challenges and issues they proactively address around the world. The frameworks, experiences, research, perspectives, and reflections presented in the varied chapters explore how social work is practiced in different contexts – shaped by unique cultural, political, economic, and historical factors. While the core values of social work are universal – such as dignity, respect for individual differences, human rights, and social inclusion – the application of these values varies widely across regions. For example, social work in the Global South often operates with fewer resources but navigates deeply entrenched issues of post-colonial injustice and poverty with great innovation and resilience [3, 4].

The social work profession has a responsibility to individual clients and to the larger society. *Social Work – Impacting Lives around the World* is a comprehensive compendium that takes an in-depth look at the issues, approaches, frameworks, policies, and research currently utilized to make a positive impact on individuals, families, and communities in various countries. Although some of the real-life experiences, approaches, and frameworks presented focus on populations in specific regions, they are certainly applicable to populations living in other geographic regions. Individuals, families, and communities around the globe are faced with challenges that are often distinct but are oftentimes interrelated, such as immigration, poverty, food insecurity, lack of health care, health disparities, climate change, homelessness, mass incarceration, substance misuse, child abuse and neglect, mental illness, injustice, and inequities. In many regions, especially among indigenous communities, social work is being reclaimed and redefined through culturally grounded practices that

emphasize community, spirituality, lived experiences, and ancestral knowledge. These approaches serve as powerful reminders that social work must be contextually relevant to be practical and ethical.

I recognize that social workers often work in complex systems that may be underfunded, bureaucratic, or even oppressive. Despite these constraints, many remain committed to advocacy and systemic change, leveraging their position to amplify the voices of marginalized individuals and push for equity at institutional and policy levels.

I hope that *Social Work – Impacting Lives around the World* will serve as both a celebration of the profession and a resource for critical reflection. Whether you are a student just beginning your journey in social work, a seasoned practitioner, researcher, or an academic exploring international social work practice frameworks, approaches, or models, this book invites you to consider the shared mission of social work worldwide: to build a more just, inclusive, and humane society.

I extend my gratitude to the many contributors whose passion, insight, professional and lived experiences have shaped this volume. Their commitment to justice, empathy, and ethical practices exemplifies the very best of what social work has to offer. To all social workers, past, present, and future, this book is dedicated to your tireless efforts to create lasting, meaningful change in the world.

Marian S. Harris
University of Washington Tacoma,
School of Social Work and Criminal Justice,
Tacoma, WA, USA

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Section 1

Social Work Challenges

Chapter 1

Poverty in Portugal: Multidimensional Challenges and Social Work Approaches

Jacqueline Marques, Cristiana Dias de Almeida and Ana Paula Caetano

Abstract

This chapter explores poverty in Portugal through a multidimensional lens, emphasising public perceptions across key domains such as housing, health, energy, transportation, and essential goods. It situates poverty within a broader socioeconomic framework, highlighting the interconnected nature of these dimensions. Data were collected *via* an online survey between December 2022 and May 2023, targeting 838 participants aged 18 or older residing in Portugal. The survey, disseminated through social networks and community organisations, gathered information on sociodemographic characteristics, employment status, household composition, income, and the perceived effects of rising costs on essential areas. Descriptive statistics summarised respondent profiles, while inferential analyses, including Chi-square tests and Spearman's correlation, explored associations between variables. The findings reveal significant impacts of rising costs across various domains. Although 62.5% of respondents reported a monthly income equal to or above the national average, 96.7% perceived a decline in purchasing power. Nearly half (48.2%) experienced difficulties in affording energy consumption, while 90% indicated that fuel costs significantly impacted their finances. Regarding food, 96.2% acknowledged price increases, 92.8% altered consumption habits, and 64.2% stopped purchasing certain items. Housing costs were problematic for 41.1% of respondents. In terms of healthcare, 49% of respondents had private health insurance, while 47.7% relied solely on the National Health System, with 21.4% unable to access specialist care. Furthermore, 55.1% of participants attributed psychological or mental health challenges to rising prices and reduced disposable income, highlighting the profound and multifaceted effects of economic pressures on Portuguese households.

Keywords: social work, multidimensional poverty, public perception, social policy, poverty in Portugal

1. Introduction

Poverty is a complex and multifaceted concept, often defined in relation to living standards and conditions. Whether conceptualised in absolute, relative, or subjective terms, it fundamentally relates to the conditions required or the resources needed to achieve an acceptable standard of living.

In Portugal, poverty remains a structural issue, evident in the persistently high number of people living in poverty over time. Although the trajectory in recent years has shown some improvement, Portugal continues to experience high levels of inequality and pronounced regional disparities in poverty rates [1].

In this study, poverty is approached as a multidimensional phenomenon. Key dimensions, such as inadequate access to basic goods, energy, housing, and healthcare – which hinder the fulfilment of basic human needs and place individuals in situations of poverty – were considered in the analysis. The study examines public perceptions in Portugal regarding poverty and its effects across these dimensions.

A survey was conducted with 838 participants to assess the extent to which rising inflation contributes to an increased risk of poverty by identifying the most affected areas, examining people's perceptions of its effects on their lives, and exploring the measures they consider most appropriate to mitigate or combat its impact.

Poverty remains a significant challenge in Portugal, particularly in the context of widening socioeconomic inequalities and the escalating cost of living. This issue is multidimensional, encompassing key areas such as housing, health, energy, transportation, and essential goods, which collectively shape the lived experiences of individuals and households. A comprehensive response to poverty requires both the analysis of statistical indicators and a nuanced understanding of its impacts on vulnerable populations, alongside the development of targeted social work interventions.

2. Poverty: From its conceptualisation to the Portuguese reality

In the twenty-first century, poverty continues to be one of the most significant social challenges despite the progress made in recent decades. According to the UN, "although the global poverty rate has fallen by more than half since 2000, one in ten people in developing regions still lives on less than $1.90 a day (...) and millions more live on little more than this daily amount" [2].

To begin with, it is essential to clarify what poverty is. Failure to establish a clear definition may lead to misunderstandings, as the literature offers a wide variety of definitions, and poverty is often conflated with deprivation, social exclusion, or inequality.

Absolute poverty is defined by the poverty line, which corresponds to the value of a basket of essential goods. This concept was first used in 1995, at the Copenhagen Summit on Social Development, as a "condition characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, health, housing, education and information" ([3], p. 73). However, although the concept was formally established at that time, Rowntree had already approached a similar definition in the 1970s, describing the poverty threshold as "the minimum expenditure necessary to maintain mere physical health" (Rowntree, 1971, cit. in Ref. [4], p. 32). This remains a normative concept, focusing on an individual's ability to meet their basic needs, such as food, clothing, housing, and healthcare.

In contrast, most studies conducted within the European Union (EU) adopt a broader perspective based on the concept of relative poverty. This approach does not reduce poverty to mere economic deprivation but considers that "people are in poverty if their income and resources are so inadequate that they are unable to live up to the standard of living considered acceptable in the society in which they live" ([5], p. 6). The EU determines the risk of poverty threshold based on net monetary income. Since 2000, poverty risk assessment has been conducted by comparing a household's net income with the national median income. Individuals or families with an income below 60% of the country's median equivalent income are classified as being at risk of poverty.

Based on this definition, poverty can be broadly understood as "a situation in which certain needs are unmet, or in which a minimally acceptable standard of living is not achieved due to a lack of resources" ([6], p. 23). Fundamentally, the absence of resources underpins the problem, hindering the fulfilment of basic needs while preventing individuals or families from integrating into a socially acceptable way of life. This perspective aligns closely with the concept of relative poverty, which argues that poverty arises when individuals lack the necessary resources to achieve the standard of living deemed acceptable within a specific society [4, 7] and is excluded from mechanisms of social participation [3]. Consequently, this concept is shaped by historical and cultural contexts, varying not only between cultures but also within the same society over time.

Poverty is often defined as deprivation caused by a lack of resources. However, it is essential to distinguish between deprivation and resource scarcity, as these are related yet distinct phenomena. As Perista and Baptista ([8], p. 2) note, "a situation of deprivation not caused by a lack of resources is not considered poverty, and the type of support required involves the proper use of existing resources". This distinction refers to cases where individuals fail to utilise available resources effectively.

This differentiation is crucial for shaping policies and interventions to address poverty. Efforts to tackle deprivation typically focus on providing essential goods and services necessary for a dignified existence. These measures often take the form of social assistance, such as food distribution or other necessary goods, which, while addressing immediate needs, may perpetuate dependency. In contrast, addressing resource scarcity involves transforming the individual's circumstances to enable them to obtain resources through "one of the sources society considers normal" ([8], p. 2). This approach emphasises empowerment and sustainable solutions, aiming to reduce dependency and promote self-sufficiency.

Amartya Sen's perspective on poverty emphasises the need to address both deprivation and resource scarcity, defining poverty as a deprivation of basic capabilities rather than merely an income below a predefined threshold [9]. According to Sen, poverty arises when individuals cannot enhance their capabilities to secure the resources necessary for a fulfilling and healthy life [10]. However, this capabilities-based approach to poverty introduces challenges in identifying cases of poverty, particularly beyond extreme or absolute poverty. As Sen ([11], p. 7) notes, "the identification of the poor and the diagnosis of poverty may be far from obvious when we move away from extreme and stark poverty".

Another frequently misconstrued concept is social exclusion, which originated in French social sciences following René Lenoir's 1974 publication, *Les exclus - Un Français sur dix*. The term gained prominence in Europe during the 1990s when the European Commission incorporated it into its policy discourse. As Costa ([12], p. 10) explains, "for both scientifically debatable and politically understandable reasons,

the European Commission introduced the term social exclusion to replace poverty", broadening its scope to describe not only the final stage of marginalisation but the entire process leading to it. Given the diversity of interpretations across academic, political, and journalistic spheres, the conceptualisation of social exclusion remains complex. Reflecting this complexity, Bruto da Costa ([12], p. 21) argues for the use of the term "social exclusions" in the plural, while Paugam [13] characterises it as a "horizon concept" encompassing a wide range of marginalisation processes.

Social exclusion is closely related to poverty, yet it extends beyond economic deprivation. Poverty can be viewed as one stage or form of social exclusion, but exclusion does not always entail poverty. Bruto da Costa et al. ([4], p. 63) emphasise that "poverty represents a form of social exclusion; there is no poverty without social exclusion. However, not all social exclusion involves poverty". For instance, socially isolated elderly individuals may experience exclusion without being impoverished.

Social exclusion is not merely a state but a dynamic and cumulative process of progressive ruptures across social spheres. Castel [14] highlights the heterogeneity of the term, which often serves as a vague label for deprivation without specifying its precise nature or origin. He argues that exclusion represents the final stage of broader processes, in which individuals transition through stages of integration, vulnerability, assistance, and ultimately disaffiliation [15]. Disaffiliation, the most severe form of exclusion, involves the severing of ties with family and close networks.

In Metamorphoses of the Social Question [16], Castel examines the impact of modern capitalist societies, characterised by labour instability, precarious work, and mass unemployment. These phenomena, described as the "fragmentation of the wage society", expand vulnerability zones and increase risks of disaffiliation globally. Castel ([16], p. 442) contends, "there are no individuals outside society, only varying degrees of detachment from its center". Thus, integration, vulnerability, assistance, and disaffiliation represent different levels of social connectedness, reflecting the progressive rupture of social ties.

It is essential to clarify that poverty is not synonymous with social inequality. While the two concepts are interconnected, "theoretically, high levels of inequality can exist without poverty, just as high poverty rates can occur with minimal inequality" ([4], p. 54). According to Silva ([17], p. 30), social inequality involves the private appropriation or usurpation of goods, resources, and privileges driven by mechanisms of competition and conflict. This encompasses assets, capital, opportunities, and access to essential services.

Biogenetic diversity, physical attributes, or other forms of horizontal inequality arising from role differentiation and the division of labour [10, 18, 19], while relevant, do not constitute the foundation of social inequality. Instead, its core lies in vertical inequalities, characterised by disparities in power, control over resources, and systematic barriers to upward mobility.

Thus, poverty is widely recognised as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, as demonstrated by recent studies that extend beyond material deprivation to include additional social indicators. The poverty rate, a key metric employed by the European Union's statistical framework under the Europe 2030 strategy, identifies individuals or households experiencing at least one of three conditions: monetary poverty, severe material, and social deprivation, or labour market exclusion/low work intensity (where adults aged 18–59 in a household work, on average, less than 20% of their potential working time) [1].

The assessment of material and social deprivation involves evaluating 13 dimensions: seven at the household level and six at the individual level (for those aged 16

or older)[1]. Individuals are classified as experiencing material and social deprivation when they lack access to at least five items, while severe deprivation is identified when this number reaches seven or more.

As previously noted, poverty is a multifaceted concept that varies depending on the chosen analytical framework. These approaches may focus on: (i) the observational dimension (resources versus needs or living standards), (ii) the reference framework (absolute versus relative), (iii) or social and individual perceptions [20]. In most cases, poverty is defined in relation to living conditions and standards. Whether conceptualised in absolute, relative, or subjective terms, poverty fundamentally reflects unmet needs or insufficiency of resources required to achieve an acceptable standard of living.

This study conceptualises poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon, acknowledging an economic and social threshold below which individuals are considered impoverished. The analysis incorporates factors such as inadequate access to essential goods, energy, housing, and healthcare, all of which limit individuals' ability to meet basic human needs and place them in conditions of poverty.

In Portugal, poverty reflects the country's socio-historical trajectory and its position within the global economic system. As a semi-peripheral country, Portugal shares characteristics with developed nations while retaining features common to peripheral economies. Consequently, there is a coexistence of "old poverty", characteristic of peripheral societies, and "new poverty", more prevalent in Central European nations. Regardless of its typology, poverty remains a defining feature of Portuguese society, as evidenced by the persistently high number of individuals living in poverty over time.

The first systematic study on poverty in Portugal was published in 1985, offering a sociodemographic profile of impoverished individuals and families and highlighting correlations with specific social and territorial factors [21]. Subsequent studies have sought to analyse the persistence and evolution of poverty in Portugal, including those by Silva et al. [22], Almeida et al. [23], Hespanha and Gomes [24], Capucha [3], Bruto da Costa et al. [4], Pereirinha et al. [7], Teixeira et al. [25], and more recent works such as Diogo [26], National Observatory for Combating Poverty [27], and Rodrigues [1].

The production of reliable poverty statistics became significant in the 1990s. It gained consistency from 2003 onwards with the implementation of the Survey on Living Conditions and Income (ICOR, Inquérito às Condições de Vida e Rendimento, in portuguese), which forms part of the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC).

The recent study "Portugal Unequal. A Portrait of Income Inequality and Poverty in the Country" by Carlos Farinha Rodrigues [1] examines various dimensions of poverty in Portugal, including poverty rates, severe material deprivation, and labour market exclusion. According to this study: (i) in 2023, 2.1 million people were living in poverty or social exclusion, with 1.78 million experiencing poverty and 500,000 facing severe material deprivation, and (ii) approximately 1.5 million individuals were affected by one dimension of poverty, while 453,000 were affected by two dimensions, and 105,000 by all three simultaneously.

In 2024, Portugal's material and social deprivation rate stood at 11%, while the severe deprivation rate was 4.3%. Among the key indicators of deprivation, the most

[1] See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Severe_material_and_social_deprivation_rate_(SMSD).

prevalent were inability to cover unexpected expenses (29.9%), inability to adequately heat one's home (15.7%), inability to afford a one-week annual holiday away from home (35.4%), and inability to replace worn-out furniture (36.2%) (Rodrigues, 2024) [1]. Although material and social deprivation declined compared to the previous year, barriers to adequate housing and nutrition remain pressing concerns.

These findings underscore the ongoing struggles individuals and families face in securing essential goods and services, such as housing and healthcare. Notably, certain groups are disproportionately affected, including (i) workers living in poverty despite employment, (ii) single-parent families, (iii) households with three or more children, and (iv) older people, children, and individuals with higher education facing rising poverty rates [1, 26–28].

The situation would be significantly more severe without social transfers, which, according to Rodrigues [1], reduce the poverty rate by 23.7 percentage points. Without these measures, the poverty rate in 2024 would have reached 40.3%.

While modest improvements have been recorded in recent years, Portugal remains a country marked by high levels of inequality and significant regional disparities in poverty and inequality.

3. Public opinion on poverty: Perspectives and perceptions

Poverty remains a persistent and multidimensional challenge, profoundly impacting individuals and communities worldwide (United Nations Development Programme, [29]). The rising cost of living in Portugal has exacerbated vulnerabilities, particularly in critical domains such as basic goods, energy, housing, and healthcare [30]. This study examines public perceptions of poverty in Portugal and its impact across these dimensions, aiming to inform social work interventions and policy strategies to mitigate these challenges.

An online survey was conducted between 15 December 2022 and 25 May 2023, using a snowball sampling method [31] to reach individuals aged 18 and above residing in Portugal. The survey was disseminated *via* social networks and community organisations to enhance participation and ensure a diverse respondent base. It collected data on sociodemographic characteristics, employment status, household composition, income levels, and the perceived impact of rising costs on key areas, including essential goods, energy, housing, and healthcare. The final sample consisted of 838 valid responses, reflecting a non-probabilistic approach.

Descriptive statistics summarised the sample's characteristics and responses. At the same time, inferential analyses, such as Chi-square tests and Spearman's correlation, were conducted using statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) to explore associations between the variables under study [32].

Participation was entirely voluntary, with participants fully informed of their right to withdraw at any time without providing a reason. The study adhered to strict confidentiality and anonymity protocols to protect all respondents' privacy throughout the data collection and analysis process.

4. Presentation and discussion of results

The final sample consisted of 838 participants, with 66% identifying as female, 32.7% as male, and 1.3% preferring not to disclose their gender. Participants ranged

	n	*%*
The rise in prices affected purchasing power		
Yes	810	96,7%
No	28	3,3%
The extent to which prices affect life		
Do not affect	13	1,6%
Affect less moderately	52	6,2%
Affect moderately	219	26,1%
Affect significantly	309	36,9%
Affect vary significantly	245	29,2%
Most affected areas		
Basic goods	486	58,0%
Health	73	8,7%
Housing	185	22.1%
Energy	403	48,1%
All the above	295	35,2%

Table 1.
*Descriptive overview of impact of rising prices (*N = *838).*

in age from 18 to 90 years (M = 38.76; SD = 13.42), with the majority residing in the northern region of Portugal (54.4%), followed by the central region (27.6%). Most households consisted of three members (32.7%). Regarding employment status, 62.2% were employed in salaried positions, 11.4% were self-employed, and 9.6% were students. The most frequently reported monthly household income was between €1000 and €1199 (14.1%), while 10.2% reported earning over €2600.

A significant 96.6% of respondents reported that rising prices had negatively impacted on their purchasing power. The most affected areas included essential goods (58.2%), energy (48.2%), housing (22.1%), and health (8.7%). Furthermore, 36.5% of participants stated that price increases had substantially influenced their overall quality of life (**Table 1**).

4.1 Impact on basic goods

Most participants reported a substantial increase in the prices of essential goods (96.2%). Monthly expenditures on food and hygiene products varied significantly, with 15.4% of respondents spending €450 or more and 13.6% spending between €200 and €249.

When asked about additional expenses attributed to rising prices, 19.2% of participants reported paying an extra €40 to €59 per month, while 17.1% spent an additional €60 to €79, and 12.5% paid €80 to €99. Notably, 92.8% of respondents reported modifying their consumption habits, and 64.2% indicated they had been forced to forgo purchasing certain products due to financial constraints. Bakery and pastry products were the most frequently or very frequently forgone items, reported by 43.7% of participants, indicating a shift toward prioritising more essential goods.

	n	%
Noticed price increase in essential goods		
Yes	795	96,2%
No	2	0,2%
Monthly expenditures (€)		
0€ a 49€	16	2,0%
50€ a 99€	49	6,0%
100€ a 149€	70	8,6%
150€ a 199€	94	11.5%
200€ a 249€	111	13,6%
250€ a 299€	91	11,2%
300€ a 349€	90	11,0%
350€ a 399€	68	8,3%
400€ a 449€	65	8,0%
450€ ou +	126	15,4%
Changed consumption habits		
Yes	610	92,8%
No	201	24,0%
Stopped purchasing certain products		
Yes	538	64,2%
No	274	32,7%
Receives food-related support		
Yes	25	3,0%
No	786	93,8%

Table 2.
*Descriptive overview of impact on basic goods (*N = *838).*

Despite these challenges, only a tiny minority (3.0%) reported receiving food-related support, highlighting the limited accessibility or utilisation of aid in this domain (**Table 2**).

It should be noted that the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for the "food and non-alcoholic beverages" category was 7.19% in August 2022, having doubled in 2023 to 15.07% [27]. This sharp increase explains the substantial impact that nearly all participants (96.2%) reported regarding the rise in food prices and its effect on their total household income. As a consequence, 92.8% of respondents adjusted their food purchases (e.g., a modifying the type of product consumed), while 64.2% were forced to eliminate certain products altogether, such as bakery and pastry items.

4.2 Impact on energy

Energy poverty, initially understood as the inability of families to heat their homes adequately, has evolved into a broader concept, encompassing the failure to access a socially and materially necessary level of domestic energy services [33, 34].

A standard definition of energy poverty within the EU was established only in 2023, with Directive 2023/1791 defining it as "the lack of access to essential energy services that ensure basic and dignified living and health standards, such as adequate heating, hot water, cooling, lighting, and energy for appliances… caused by a combination of factors including unaffordable prices, insufficient disposable income, high energy expenses, and low housing energy efficiency". In Portugal, it is estimated that 1.8–3 million people experience energy poverty, with 609,000–660,000 in severe energy poverty [35]. This multidimensional issue affects households above and below the poverty threshold, impacting social well-being, quality of life, health, and work productivity.

Energy poverty extends beyond economically deprived households. Many low-income families limit their energy consumption to avoid excessive costs, often foregoing adequate heating, cooling, or hot water usage. According to the findings of this study, 48.2% of respondents reported facing economic difficulties in accessing energy, and 85.8% reported that rising electricity prices adversely affected their finances, leading to restricted energy use.

Maintaining adequate indoor temperatures is a significant challenge in Portugal due to poor construction quality and the inability of many families to afford home renovations. In 2020, 25.2% of the population lived in homes with leaks, dampness, or decaying windows or floors [36]. Additionally, most homes lack fixed heating systems, resulting in reliance on inexpensive but energy-inefficient electric heaters. Consequently, as noted by Horta and Schmidt ([33], p. 6), families prioritise body temperature conservation overheating homes, using heating devices sparingly – only in necessary rooms, during short periods, and on the coldest days – leading to a "normalisation of cold" and eventual adaptation.

Similarly, coping strategies for heat focus on minimising energy use, such as natural ventilation (opening windows and doors), adjusting clothing, reducing shower water temperature, or leaving home for colder public spaces. These practices underscore the restrictive and resource-driven nature of energy usage in Portugal. High fuel prices in Portugal are another major concern, with 90% of the study's participants expressing distress over rising costs. Fluctuations in oil prices directly affect fuel costs and indirectly impact the prices of goods and services with significant energy content. This trend has been observed across Europe, where "a sharp reduction in oil use per unit of GDP has been noted in OECD countries. It is widely accepted that this reduction reflects the global economy's adjustment to a new era of higher and more volatile oil prices" ([37], p. 58).

A significant proportion of respondents, 85.8%, reported noticing an increase in electricity prices, 65.5% observed higher gas costs, and 90.0% identified a rise in fuel prices (**Table 3**). Nearly half of the respondents, 48.6%, reported monthly electricity bills between €50 and €99, with 17.5% spending between €100 and €149. When asked about the approximate monthly increase in electricity costs, 24.0% of participants reported an increase of €6 to €10, followed by 18.2% noting an increase of €11 to €15, and 14.5% experiencing an increase of €16 to €20.

For gas expenditures, 42.4% of respondents reported monthly expenses below €50, while 21.3% spent between €50 and €99. Approximately 23.7% noted a monthly increase of €6 to €10, and 14.9% reported a rise of €11 to €15.

Fuel price increases affected 90.0% of respondents. Of these, 29.6% reported monthly fuel expenditures between €50 and €99, and 23.7% reported spending €100 to €149. Regarding the approximate monthly increase in fuel costs, 29.9% reported an increase of €20 to €39, while 23.7% noted a rise of €40 to €59.

		n	%
Electricity	**Noticed price increase**		
	Yes	719	85,8%
	No	56	6,7%
	Monthly expenditure (€)		
	0€ a 49€	149	17,8%
	50€ a 99€	407	48,6%
	100€ a 149€	147	17,5%
	150€ a 199€	36	4,3%
	200€ a 249€	7	0,8%
	250€ ou +	7	0,8%
Gas	**Noticed price increase**		
	Yes	512	65,5%
	No	59	7,5%
	Monthly expenditure (€)		
	0€ a 49€	330	42,4%
	50€ a 99€	166	21,3%
	100€ a 149€	37	4,8%
	150€ a 199€	5	0,6%
	200€ a 249€	2	0,3%
	250€ ou +	3	0,4%
Fuel	**Noticed price increase**		
	Yes	710	90,0%
	No	8	1,0%
	Monthly expenditure (€)		
	0€ a 49€	85	11,0%
	50€ a 99€	230	29,6%
	100€ a 149€	184	23,7%
	150€ a 199€	83	10,7%
	200€ a 249€	42	5,4%
	250€ ou +	33	4,3%

Table 3.
*Descriptive overview of impact on energy (*N = *838).*

4.3 Impact on housing

Housing costs emerged as a significant concern for respondents, with 41.1% reporting they held a mortgage. Among those affected by rising mortgage payments, 10.0% reported an increase between €50 and €99 per month, while 9.1% noted an increase of €0 to €49. A smaller proportion of participants experienced more substantial gains, with 6.8% reporting an increase of €100 to €149 and 3.8%

experiencing increases of €150 to €199. Only 0.5% of respondents indicated their monthly payments had risen by more than €400.

For 66.6% of participants, this question was not applicable, reflecting a significant proportion of individuals either not holding a mortgage or otherwise unaffected by mortgage-related expenses (**Table 4**).

Housing conditions represent one of four key dimensions of poverty: health, education, and employment/unemployment [38]. Families experiencing housing poverty, even when their income surpasses poverty thresholds, are often classified as poor due to significant deprivation in essential aspects of housing and the surrounding environment. This poverty perpetuates across generations [21].

According to the OECD [39], adequate housing should provide a safe, private, and comfortable space for rest. Lopes [40] identifies three categories for assessing housing comfort: internal conditions (e.g., structural state, access to piped water, sewage systems, electricity, and gas), external conditions (e.g., accessibility, public services, transportation, green spaces, crime rates), and comfort-related goods (e.g., durable goods). Housing poverty is intricately linked to other dimensions of poverty, as inadequate housing can exacerbate other forms of deprivation. Additionally, maintaining dignified living conditions often accounts for a substantial portion of household budgets, including utilities, furniture, and maintenance costs, which can push families into poverty.

Since 2016, housing prices in Portugal have risen sharply, making housing one of the primary financial concerns for families [41]. Unlike other contexts, the sharp decline in gross domestic product (PIB, Produto Interno Bruto, in portuguese) during the pandemic did not reduce housing prices, which continued to climb. This issue worsened in 2022 with rising inflation and consequent increases in mortgage interest rates, further elevating housing costs. The study reflects these trends, where 41.1% of participants

	n	**%**
Mortgage status		
Yes	344	41,1%
No	337	40,2%
Not applicable	156	18,6%
Monthly increase (€)		
0€ a 49€	76	9,1%
50€ a 99€	84	10,0%
100€ a 149€	57	6,8%
150€ a 199€	32	3.8%
200€ a 249€	15	1,8%
250€ a 299€	5	0,6%
300€ a 349€	5	0,6%
350€ a 399€	2	0,2%
400€ ou +	4	0,5%
Not applicable	558	66,6%

Table 4.
*Descriptive overview of impact on housing (*N = *838).*

reported the impact of rising housing expenses on their monthly income. However, many respondents already owned fully paid homes, mitigating the financial burden.

4.4 Impact on health care

Approximately 18.4% of participants reported suffering from a chronic or prolonged illness, while 78.4% did not report any health-related conditions. Regarding healthcare expenses, 29.5% of respondents benefited from user fee exemptions, while 67.3% were not eligible for this exemption (**Table 5**).

Nearly half of the respondents (49.0%) reported having private health insurance, while 47.7% relied on public healthcare services. In terms of psychological impact, 55.1% stated that the rising costs had affected their mental health, underscoring the broader implications of financial strain on well-being. Specifically, 38.1% reported experiencing increased anxiety, 36.2% stress, 22.7% irritability, and 13.8% insomnia as a result of rising costs.

Barriers to healthcare access were evident, with 21.4% of respondents reporting an inability to attend specialist consultations (e.g., dental care, ophthalmology, psychiatry, and psychological services) due to financial constraints. Additionally, 8.0% of

	n	*%*
Chronic illness		
Yes	154	18,4%
No	657	78,4%
Exemption from user fees		
Yes	247	29,5%
No	564	67,3%
Private health insurance		
Yes	411	49,0%
No	400	47,7%
The psychological impact of inflation		
Yes	462	55,1%
No	349	41,6%
Unable to access specialist consultations		
Yes	179	21,4%
No	463	55,3%
Unable to afford medications		
Yes	67	8,0%
No	744	88,8%
Financial support for medications		
Yes	47	5,6%
No	764	91,2%

Table 5.
*Descriptive overview of impact on health (*N = *838).*

participants stated they could not afford essential medications. Despite these challenges, only 5.6% received financial support for medication expenses, while 91.2% did not benefit from assistance. However, 50.2% of respondents noted that they could rely on family or others for support in times of need, emphasising the critical role of informal networks in alleviating the effects of economic challenges.

Health and poverty are closely interconnected. Poverty negatively influences the quality of and access to healthcare, while poor health can hinder individuals' ability to work or study, perpetuating or exacerbating poverty.

According to the study Portugal, Social Balance, 2023, the health status of the poor population in 2022 remained worse than that of the non-poor. For instance, limitations in performing daily activities due to health issues affected 42.3% of the poor population, compared to 32.4% of the non-poor. Similarly, 12.5% of the poor reported being unable to access medical consultations (non-dental) at least once, compared to 3.9% of the non-poor. These figures for dental consultations or treatments rose to 39.3% and 13.7%, respectively. Increasing difficulties in accessing healthcare through the National Health Service (SNS, Serviço Nacional de Saúde, in portuguese) have driven more Portuguese citizens toward private health insurance—49% of the population in this study reported having private coverage. However, 47.7% of respondents lacked any form of health insurance.

The study also highlights mental health concerns, with 55.1% of participants admitting that high costs adversely affected their psychological well-being and daily lives. The link between poverty and mental health has gained increasing attention in recent years. In Portugal, the Association of Portuguese Psychologists [42] emphasised this connection, noting that socioeconomic difficulties negatively impact psychological and mental health, while mental health issues, in turn, exacerbate socioeconomic crises by "reducing productivity and increasing inequalities" (p. 9).

4.5 Overall impact on lives: Comprehensive insights

This section examines the social and economic disparities exacerbating vulnerabilities by exploring the associations between key factors and the perceived impact of rising costs.

A Spearman's rank-order correlation revealed a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between age and the perceived impact of rising prices on life ($r_s = 0.149$, $p < 0.001$). These findings suggest that older participants were slightly more likely to report a more significant impact of rising prices on their lives, although the strength of the association is limited.

A Chi-square test of independence demonstrated a significant relationship between the perceived impact of rising prices and gender ($\chi^2(8) = 110.903$, $p < .001$) and household income ($\chi^2(52) = 101.723$, $p < .001$) (**Table 6**). These results highlight that gender and income levels are critical in shaping respondents' perceptions of financial strain. For instance, male and female respondents reported varying levels of financial strain, and individuals from higher income brackets tended to report a lesser perceived impact of rising prices than those in lower-income households.

Moreover, the analysis identified a robust association between the psychological impact of rising prices and the perception of financial strain ($\chi^2(8) = 302.631$, $p < .001$) (**Table 6**). Respondents who reported experiencing psychological effects from rising costs exhibited significant differences in their perceptions of financial strain. These findings emphasise the complex interplay between economic stress and mental health, underscoring the need for comprehensive strategies addressing both dimensions.

	n	The extent to which prices affect life				
Sex		**Do not affect**	**Affect less moderately**	**Affect moderately**	**Affect significantly**	**Affect vary significantly**
Male	552	2	24	149	201	176
Female	275	7	26	67	107	68
Monthly income (€)						
[0€-199€]	17	0	0	5	4	8
[200€-399€]	8	0	0	1	5	2
[400€-599€]	29	0	1	7	6	15
[600€-799€]	59	0	1	17	26	15
[800€-999€]	81	2	7	20	22	30
[1000€-1199€]	120	1	6	24	44	45
[1200€-1399€]	80	3	7	20	29	21
[1400€-1599€]	81	2	2	20	32	25
[1600€-1799€]	52	1	0	11	30	10
[1800€-1999€]	62	0	6	16	22	18
[2000€-2199€]	76	1	1	26	29	19
[2200€-2399€]	51	0	4	12	21	14
[2400€-2599€]	37	0	0	9	19	9
+2600€	85	3	17	31	20	14
The psychological impact of inflation						
Yes	462	0	5	69	189	199
No	349	6	38	141	118	46

Table 6.
*Perceived impact of rising prices by sex, income, and psychological impact (*N = *838).*

Participants identified several policy measures as essential to alleviating the impact of rising prices. Specifically, 49.8% supported reducing Value-Added Tax (VAT) on essential goods, while 43.7% endorsed the regulation of maximum prices for basic items. Other proposed measures included exemptions from user fees for all individuals (31.3%), specific subsidies for healthcare expenses (30.5%), and reimbursement of healthcare costs based on household income brackets (45.6%). These priorities reflect public sentiment regarding tangible steps to reduce the financial burden on households.

These findings collectively highlight the significant financial strain imposed by rising costs on households, particularly those in lower-income brackets. Differences in perceptions based on gender, income, and psychological well-being emphasise the multifaceted nature of financial strain. Furthermore, the limited reliance on formal support mechanisms underscores the importance of re-evaluating social policies to ensure adequate protection for vulnerable populations. Poverty is recognised as a social justice issue central to social work practice [43, 44]. The research highlights the multidimensional challenges of poverty; therefore, social work approaches are needed to address them.

Social work is pivotal in addressing poverty through tailored interventions that promote social inclusion and empowerment. Strategies include facilitating access to social services, advocating for housing policies, and implementing community-based programmes that address energy and food insecurity. Additionally, social workers must prioritise mental health support for affected populations and collaborate with policymakers to advocate for systemic changes that reduce inequalities.

Poverty in Portugal is multidimensional, encompassing material deprivation and lack of resources [45]. Social work has been crucial in responding to these challenges, but practitioners face limitations due to organisational constraints and austerity measures [46]. The profession has had to adapt to changing social policies, including the shift from a national inclusion plan to a social emergency programme [47]. In this context, social work in Portugal is called to redefine itself as a sociopolitical profession, addressing the temporality of interventions, resource allocation, and professional training [47, 48].

The developmental approach in social work education and practice is crucial for addressing poverty and achieving socioeconomic transformation, particularly in Southern African countries [49]. The papers stress the importance of embedding anti-poverty approaches in social work practice frameworks and education [43, 50]. Social development, as conceptualised in South Africa, is based on five key principles. It adopts a rights-based approach and advocates for close social and economic development integration. There is also a strong commitment to democracy and participatory engagement and an emphasis on partnerships in welfare, referred to as "welfare pluralism", to address the fragmentation of previous welfare systems. Finally, it aims to bridge the divide between micro and macro-level interventions. Translating these principles into practical guidelines for social work has not been easy [51]. Midgley and Conley have developed a framework for a developmental approach to social work, known as "developmental social work", which, although similar to other approaches, is distinct in its focus on "social investment" and "economic development" (cit. in Ref. [51], p. 1). The capability approach is proposed as a valuable framework for critical social work practice with families living in poverty [44]. The studies also highlight the need for social workers to understand the psychological and social impacts of poverty on families and to advocate for those most in need [43, 44]. Overall, the papers emphasise the importance of poverty-aware social work education and practice. The capabilities approach has become the most influential framework for understanding development. Originating from Amartya Sen, it is a people-centred approach focusing on individuals and their quality of life. The author states, "There are many fundamentally different ways of seeing the quality of living, and quite a few have some immediate plausibility. You could be well off without being well. You could be well without being able to lead the life you wanted. You could have the life you wanted without being happy. You could be happy without having much freedom. You could have a good deal of freedom without achieving much. We can go on" (emphasis in the original [52], p. 1).

By addressing the pervasive challenges of rising costs through targeted interventions, policymakers and social workers can mitigate the disproportionate effects on low-income households, promote financial stability, and alleviate the associated psychological stress.

5. Conclusions

This study examines several factors that illustrate the economic difficulties faced by Portuguese families. Notably, among the 838 respondents, only 54 (6.4%) lived below the reference poverty threshold for 2024. Considering an average monthly income in the country ranging between €600 and €1199, 260 participants (31%) fell within this bracket, while 275 (32.8%) earned between €1200 and €1999, and 249 (29.7%) had a monthly income exceeding €2000. In other words, the majority (62.5%) of surveyed individuals reported a monthly income equal to or above the national average.

Despite this, 96.7% of respondents perceived that price increases had negatively impacted their purchasing power, with only a small minority (7.8%) stating that the impact was minimal or non-existent. The majority, 66.1%, believed the effects were significant or severe, leading to changes in some consumption habits. This demonstrates how rising prices for essential consumer goods affect both the economically disadvantage and the so-called middle class.

One of the defining characteristics of poverty in Portugal is that employment does not necessarily lift individuals out of poverty or prevent them from falling into it. As the National Observatory for Combating Poverty ([27], p. 11) points out, "Employees account for 36.7% of people living in poverty (aged 18 to 64), a higher proportion than the unemployed (24.9%), other inactive people (23.8%), pensioners (2.8%) or the self-employed (11.1%). In total, 52.1% are outside the labour market, and 47.9% are in the labour market".

The observatory identified energy, food, and housing as the three dimensions of rising living costs with the most significant impact on poverty, which aligns with the findings of this study. Regarding energy costs, respondents felt the effect of the increase in electricity prices in 85.5% of cases, gas prices in 65.5%, and fuel costs in 90%.

In terms of electricity and gas expenses, 48.6% of participants paid between €50 and €99, while 23.4% saw an increase of more than €100. Similarly, 21.3% of respondents reported paying between €50 and €99 per month for gas, while 6.1% saw an increase exceeding €100.

The social energy tariff, introduced in 2016 as a subsidy to provide discounts on low-voltage electricity and low-pressure natural gas tariffs, plays a crucial role in mitigating rising energy costs. Despite this, Portugal continues to experience persistent energy poverty, a pressing issue on the country's current political agenda.

According to data from the National Observatory for Combating Poverty [27], 17.5% of the population is unable to adequately heat their homes (compared to an EU-27 average of 9.3%), with this issue being particularly prevalent among single-person households with adults aged 65 or older and women. The study presented by Rodrigues [1] reported that 20.8% of Portuguese households were unable to maintain adequate heating in 2023, a figure that improved slightly to 15.7% in 2024. Notably, energy poverty affects not only those living below the poverty line but also middle-income households, many of whom are forced to reduce energy consumption, negatively impacting health and well-being.

The findings from this study indicate that 48.2% of respondents faced difficulties in energy consumption due to economic constraints. This reflects the high electricity and gas costs relative to Portugal's low wage levels. According to data from the Portuguese Government's Strategy and Studies Office [53], in the second half of 2023, Portugal had the 16th-highest electricity price in Europe when measured in euros and the 12th-highest when adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP). Regarding gas prices, Portugal ranked third in the EU in terms of cost when adjusted for PPP during the same period. Government estimates suggest that energy poverty affects between 1.9 and 3.0 million people in Portugal, with varying degrees of severity [54].

Fuel prices represent a critical concern for Portuguese households. The cost of fuel for vehicle transport is relatively high in Portugal, with transport expenses accounting for 14.1% of total household costs in 2022, equating to an average of €2863 per year ([55], p. 18). Notably, families in rural areas – where per capita income is lower – spend proportionally more on fuel due to a lack of public transport options. Meanwhile, urban areas have seen an increase in public transport usage, partly due to subsidised public transport passes in Lisbon and Porto. However, despite this shift, car dependency remains high. In the 2011 Census, 3,647,225 people in Portugal commuted to work by car, a figure that only slightly decreased to 3,594,770 in 2022. This continued reliance on personal vehicles for daily commuting, often due to a lack of viable alternatives, significantly impacts household budgets.

Food price inflation has had a profound effect on households. According to the study: (i) 96.2% of respondents reported that rising food costs had affected their lives, (ii) 52.5% of participants (440 individuals) experienced an increase in monthly food expenses exceeding €200, (iii) 32.8% (275 participants) saw their food costs rise by between €100 and €200 per month, (iv) 92.8% of respondents altered their consumption habits, and (v) 64.2% (538 participants) stopped purchasing certain food items. These findings underscore the impact of inflation on household budgets, particularly among lower-income populations. This aligns with broader economic trends, as Portugal ranks as the 11th country with the highest poverty rate in the European Union and the 4th most unequal country according to the Gini index [1].

Housing remains a major concern in Portugal, as the Housing Price Index (iPHab) has continued to rise between 2019 and 2023. According to the National Observatory for Combating Poverty [27], in 2022, the median rent for new family housing leases reached €6.52 per square metre, and the median sales price for family housing increased by 14.4% compared to 2021. This indicates that both renting and purchasing a home in Portugal are becoming increasingly expensive. Historically, Portugal had a culture of home ownership due to historically low property prices, with 77.8% of the population owning their home by 2022. However, the quality of the housing stock remains low.

A significant 55.1% of respondents in this study believed that the rise in living costs and declining disposable income had negatively impacted their psychological or mental health. Research by the World Health Organisation highlights the strong link between economic conditions and mental health outcomes, with multiple studies showing that financial hardship contributes to depression, anxiety, and increased suicide rates [56–58]. Economic crises exacerbate these risks, as seen in the global financial crisis of 2008, which led to a marked increase in suicides [59].

Social workers play a fundamental role in alleviating poverty through targeted interventions and policy advocacy. Addressing multidimensional poverty requires a comprehensive approach that includes access to essential services, mental health support, and employment facilitation. Our study highlights key areas where social workers can intervene effectively.

A primary area of intervention is ensuring access to basic services. With 48.2% of respondents struggling to afford energy, social workers should advocate for policy reforms expanding energy subsidies and promoting energy efficiency measures. Additionally, the widespread impact of rising housing costs, affecting 41.1% of respondents, underscores the need for social work engagement in securing affordable housing solutions and rental assistance programmes.

Mental health support is another crucial dimension. Given that 55.1% of participants reported psychological distress due to financial instability, social workers should integrate mental health counselling within poverty reduction strategies. Establishing community support networks and promoting financial literacy can enhance resilience among economically vulnerable populations.

From a policy perspective, findings indicate that improving health care accessibility is essential, as 21.4% of respondents reported difficulties obtaining specialist care. While Portugal's National Health Service (SNS) ensures universal healthcare access, inefficiencies in waiting list management remain a significant barrier. Social workers can contribute by advocating for improved coordination between primary and specialist care, supporting patients in navigating the healthcare system, and assisting in developing referral mechanisms that prioritise vulnerable populations. Additionally, they can work with policymakers to implement strategies that reduce administrative bottlenecks and enhance service delivery efficiency.

Furthermore, labour policies must address in-work poverty—which affects 36.7% of the employed—through wage increases and enhanced worker protections. Shifting social work models from income-based to multidimensional criteria, incorporating housing and food security, will improve policy effectiveness.

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to track the long-term effects of economic hardship, enabling more proactive policy responses. Comparative analyses with EU nations will provide insights into best practices for poverty mitigation. Additionally, research should explore the intersectionality of poverty with gender, age, and education to develop targeted interventions.

A coordinated effort between social work practice and policy reform is essential to reducing poverty's systemic impacts. Social workers can contribute to sustainable social and economic well-being by addressing structural inequities and advocating for evidence-based policies.

Tackling poverty in Portugal requires a multidimensional approach that integrates social work expertise with broader policy reforms. By addressing interconnected issues such as housing, health, and energy, social work can help mitigate the effects of poverty and foster resilience among vulnerable communities.

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Author details

Jacqueline Marques[1*], Cristiana Dias de Almeida[2] and Ana Paula Caetano[2,3]

1 LusoGlobe – Lusófona Centre on Global Challenges, Lusófona University, Lisbon, Portugal

2 Intrepid Lab, Lusófona University, Porto, Portugal

3 Lusíada Research Center on Social Work and Social Intervention (CLISSIS), Lisbon, Portugal

*Address all correspondence to: jacqueline.marques@ulusofona.pt

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Chapter 2

The Impact of Mass Incarceration on Children, Parents, and Families in the United States

Marian S. Harris

Abstract

The impact of mass incarceration on children, parents, and families is profound and multifaceted. The United States continues to have the highest rate of incarceration globally. As a result of mass incarceration, 2.7 million children have a parent incarcerated in prison or jail. Children with incarcerated parents face unique emotional, psychological, and socioeconomic challenges. Extended family members, such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, and other siblings, can play a crucial role in providing the necessary support for these children. This chapter examines the importance of extended family support for children of incarcerated parents, exploring its impact on their emotional well-being, social development, and academic achievement. It discusses the positive influence that extended family involvement can have on children's resilience and outlines potential strategies for increasing the effectiveness of extended family support.

Keywords: mass incarceration, children, families, parental incarceration, extended family support

1. Introduction

Mass incarceration in the United States has emerged as one of the most significant social and economic issues of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Mass incarceration refers to the unprecedented growth in the U.S. prison population, a trend that began in the 1970s and continued throughout the following decades. Mass incarceration has far-reaching economic consequences for individuals, families, and society at large. The U.S. spends approximately $80 billion annually on its prison system [1]. While this expenditure impacts taxpayers, the broader economic toll is felt in the lost productivity of incarcerated individuals and their families. With over five million people incarcerated in the U.S. jails and prisons [2], this country continues to have the highest incarceration rate in the world. By 2020, the U.S. continued to have the highest rate of incarceration when compared to other countries in the world, with approximately 1 in 5 of the world's incarcerated population residing in American prisons [3]. The War on Drugs, enacted in the 1980s, exacerbated this growth, disproportionately affecting communities of color, particularly Black and Latinx families [4]. The prison

population increased by 2% in 2022 because of higher rates of incarceration in 36 states and the federal government [5]. The research question explored in this chapter is as follows: How has mass incarceration impacted the lives of children, parents, and families in the United States? This chapter examines the multifaceted effects of mass incarceration on children and families, the importance of extended family support for children of incarcerated parents, and the positive influence that extended family involvement can have on children's lives during a parent's incarceration.

1.1 The impact on children

One tragic consequence of mass incarceration is that more mothers and fathers with minor children are in prison. Children of incarcerated parents face numerous psychological, educational, financial, emotional, and social challenges. Parental incarceration is now designated as an "*adverse childhood experience*" *(ACE)*; however, the combination of trauma, shame, and stigma distinguishes it from other childhood experiences [6]. ACEs are traumatic events that occur in childhood and can adversely impact physical, mental, emotional, and behavioral development. Parental incarceration can significantly impact a child's life in several ways that include psychological stress, depression, anxiety, antisocial behavior, academic suspension or expulsion, academic failure, substance abuse, economic hardship, and juvenile delinquency [7, 8]. These children often face stigmatization, isolation, and emotional distress. The absence of a parent can also result in weakened family structures, leading to disrupted living arrangements and strained relationships with caregivers. Furthermore, children of incarcerated parents are more likely to face involvement with the child welfare system [9, 10]. Approximately 3400 parents who resided with their minor children prior to incarceration reported that their children were in the child welfare system [11].

The best interest of the child is the primary focus in family court when a mother or father is incarcerated. There are several options for temporary custody and living arrangements for children. Family members are considered the first option, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. Another option is family friends or fictive kin; these are non-relatives who have a long-standing and positive relationship with the child or children. The last resort is foster care. Most children live with family members when a parent goes to prison. For example, when a mother is incarcerated, most children live with grandparents, and a large number live with their grandmothers; however, most children live with their mothers when their fathers are incarcerated [12, 13]. It is highly significant for children to maintain the parent-child attachment relationship when a mother or father is incarcerated.

1.2 The impact on families

The consequences of parental incarceration extend beyond the children and affect the broader family unit. The emotional and financial burdens of having an incarcerated family member are profound. Family members, particularly mothers, often face the responsibility of managing their households without the financial support and emotional presence of their incarcerated loved ones [14].

The absence of an incarcerated parent can place an enormous financial strain on families. Often, the remaining caregiver (usually the mother) is forced to take on additional work to make up for the lost income, which can lead to long-term financial instability. The high cost of maintaining contact with an incarcerated family member, such as telephone bills and visitation expenses, also adds to this financial strain [15].

Additionally, families are frequently forced to navigate the emotional toll of incarceration, including coping with the stress associated with having a loved one in prison [16]. For families, the direct economic consequences include the loss of wages, housing instability, and the high cost of maintaining contact with incarcerated family members. Although most parents and children of the incarcerated want to maintain the parent-child attachment relationship, the geographical distance families must travel to visit their loved ones is problematic (see **Table 1**). Most individuals in state prisons (63%) are incarcerated over 100 miles from their families and homes [16].

Millions of families are continuously faced with the difficulty encountered when trying to have in-person contact with their loved ones who are behind bars in prison. Other barriers they encounter include visitation policies and procedures that vary from state to state, telephone and internet regulations, background check fees, fees for children's birth certificates to prove official parental status, a fee to set up an email account through PayPal or some other entity, fees to write and send email, and fees for postage stamps when writing to their children and other family members. Yet, many incarcerated mothers and fathers are committed to maintaining contact with their children *via* in-person visits, video visits, letters, audio programs such as Mommy Read to Me and Daddy Read to Me, Girl Scouts Beyond Bars, and telephone calls. Families often spend significant portions of their income on maintaining contact with incarcerated loved ones, which can drain already limited resources [17].

The loss of a primary breadwinner, such as a mother or father, causes financial hardship for many custodial parents and other family caregivers; their economic struggles often result in their need for governmental assistance from programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). However, many elderly grandparents find it daunting to navigate the application process required to get assistance from these programs. Although there have been some reforms in several states to address the incarceration of parents with minor children, for many children of the incarcerated, barriers continue to exist that hamper their strong need to interact with their loved ones.

1.3 The impact on parents

Millions of children, parents, and families continue to endure the deleterious effects of mass incarceration. The separation of parents from their children because of mass incarceration is a tragic and traumatic life experience for both. Parents grieve the loss of their children, and children grieve the loss of their parents. Incarceration poses a significant barrier to a parent's ability to support their children and sometimes causes parents to lose their parental rights. Thirty-two thousand parents lost their

Distance from home	Percent visited last month (%)
Less than 50 miles	49.6
Between 50 and 100 miles	40.0
Between 101 and 500 miles	25.9
Between 501 and 1000 miles	14.5

Source: Ref. [16].

Table 1.
Visitation visits.

parental rights between 2006 and 2018 [18]. According to the Sentencing Project [4], the percentage of incarcerated parents increased, i.e., mothers (96%) and fathers (48%) [4]. However, incarcerated fathers continue to have more minor children than mothers, i.e., 626,800 versus 57,700, respectively [4]. It is imperative for all states to seriously consider the short- and long-term effects of mass incarceration on the entire family system, especially minor children who are being separated from their mothers. Incarcerated women tend to experience more challenges than men.

Women comprise the fastest-growing component of the prison population in the United States. In fact, the number of women in state and federal prisons has grown by 800 percent during the 1974–2014 period [19]. Most women who are incarcerated are mothers and are the only caregivers for their children. Women of color are disproportionately impacted by drug law enforcement in the United States and tend to be of lower socioeconomic status than incarcerated men. During the past 35 years, drug-related arrests for women have increased approximately 216 percent versus 48 percent for men, and drug dependence is more prevalent for incarcerated women [20]. It is important to note that there was a large decline in the number of incarcerated Black women between 2000 and 2021, i.e., 70% [21]. The incarceration rate for Black women in 2021 was 1.6 times higher than the rate for White women [22]. Regardless of race and ethnicity, the rates of drug sales and use are similar for women; however, Black and Latina women have higher rates of criminalization for drug offenses than White women [23]. Incarceration rates are also higher for Black and Latina women than for White women; in fact, Latina women are 20% more likely to be incarcerated than their White counterparts [24]. It is important to note that Black and American Indian or Alaska Native women are consistently disproportionately represented in state and federal prisons; data show the following: 48% – White, 17% – Black, 19% – Latina, 2.5% American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.7% – Asian, and 13% – other [25]. Racial and ethnic differences have also been demonstrated in a study that revealed the risk for being incarcerated for White women was 5 per 1000, 15 per 1000 for Latinas, and 26 per 1000 for Black women [26]. There are also differences in incarceration rates based on an individual's level of education. Research has shown that people who have a high school diploma or Graduate Equivalency Degree (GED) are more likely to be incarcerated than their peers with higher educational status [27]. Pregnancy is another issue for many women incarcerated in jails and prisons. Most women who enter prison are in the reproductive period of their lives when they enter prison. However, the prison and jail environments are designed for men and not designed to meet the needs of women. Approximately 4–5% of incarcerated women are pregnant [28]. From 2018 to 2023, there were grant programs available that could be utilized by state prisons and jails to support maternal health, i.e., five programs *via* the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and ten *via* the U.S. Department of Justice [28]. The harsh realities of pregnancy and mothering are complicated issues for incarcerated women. There are very few mother-child nurseries in prisons in the United States. In fact, one can say that prison nurseries are the exception and not the rule, with less than a dozen prison nurseries in the United States [29]. There are no easy solutions to these complicated issues that women experience during incarceration, especially if they are mothers of infants and minor children. Incarcerated fathers also face a myriad of issues.

It is important to remember that fathers are a significant portion of the incarcerated parents of the 2.7 million minor children impacted by mass incarceration in the United States. Because of mass incarceration, many fathers will experience the separation and loss of their children for many years, and many children will be

emotionally harmed by their fathers' incarceration. The number of fathers with minor children in state prisons is 1,133,800, as compared to the 208,200 minor children of fathers in federal prisons [30]. People of color are disproportionately represented in the U.S. prison population, including fathers of color [31]. This high rate of incarceration among fathers leads to a situation where children are often deprived of parental involvement, especially when fathers are removed from the home for extended periods.

Incarcerated fathers face numerous challenges that can impede their ability to maintain relationships with their children and prepare for life post-release. One major issue is the limited access to communication and visitation with children. In many cases, prison visitation policies are restrictive, and the physical distance between incarcerated parents and their families makes regular contact difficult. Additionally, correctional facilities are often ill-equipped to provide programs that address the emotional and developmental needs of fathers, particularly those with young children [32].

Another challenge is the stigma that incarcerated fathers face upon release. Many are subjected to societal biases that hinder their ability to find stable employment, housing, and access to social services. This marginalization complicates their efforts to reestablish meaningful relationships with their children and to reintegrate successfully into society. The lack of effective reentry programs that focus specifically on the needs of fathers also exacerbates these challenges.

The economic impact of paternal incarceration is substantial. Incarcerated fathers, especially those with limited education or skills, face significant barriers to employment upon release. The stigma of having been incarcerated often leads to discrimination in the job market, which makes it difficult for fathers to regain economic stability and contribute financially to their children's well-being. This economic insecurity compounds the negative effects on the family, including increased poverty rates and dependence on governmental assistance programs, which still impose full or modified bans on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (SNAP) for people convicted of a felony drug offense [33].

Furthermore, the financial burden of families left behind by incarcerated fathers often falls disproportionately on mothers or other relatives, leading to further strain on the family system. In many cases, the absence of a father figure can place an additional caregiving load on already overburdened family members, especially when the mother must juggle employment, childcare, and other responsibilities. The absence of fathers due to incarceration can have long-term consequences for children. Research indicates that children with incarcerated fathers are at risk for a variety of negative outcomes, including emotional distress, academic challenges, and possible involvement with the criminal justice system [6].

While the challenges faced by incarcerated fathers are substantial, there are initiatives and programs designed to provide support and rehabilitation for these individuals. Fatherhood programs within prisons have been implemented in various states, focusing on helping incarcerated fathers maintain relationships with their children and prepare for reintegration into society. These programs typically offer parenting classes, workshops on communication skills, and opportunities for fathers to participate in supervised visits with their children [32]. One program, Strength in Families, in Washington State, was started in 2015 *via* funding from the Responsible Fatherhood Opportunities for Reentry and Mobility federal grant. This program has been funded since 2020 by the Washington State Department of Corrections and focuses on building skills and knowledge in the following: Healthy relationships with parents and co-parents, responsible and positive parenting, and

effective communication. The program targets fathers and father figures who are being released from several corrections centers in Western Washington and reentering counties in this area [34]. An individual must be a father or stepfather to one or more children (birth to 18 years of age) and have had 36 months or less time to their transfer/release into the community [34].

The incarceration of fathers in the United States presents significant challenges for both the individuals incarcerated and their families. The absence of a father figure can have devastating emotional, financial, and developmental consequences for children. Incarcerated fathers face obstacles related to communication, stigma, and reentry, all of which complicate their efforts to maintain relationships with their children and reintegrate into society post-release. However, programs and policies that focus on supporting incarcerated fathers, improving father-child communication, and assisting with reentry can help mitigate some of the negative consequences of incarceration.

As previously stated, there are racial and ethnic disparities in the high incarceration rates for women and men of color; many of these individuals are incarcerated for some type of drug offense [2]. Research has demonstrated that racial disparities in the U.S. mass incarceration rates are possibly influenced by state and federal policies such as mandatory minimum sentencing and "three strikes," which can be traced back to the "War on Drugs" that began in the 1970s and the 1996 Anti-Drug Abuse Act [35]. During this era of mass incarceration, the number of Black individuals convicted and incarcerated for drug use has increased [36]. Approximately half a million people in federal (32%) and state (49%) prisons meet the criteria for substance use disorders [37]. Unfortunately, most federal and state prisons do not offer the type of clinical treatment needed for women and men with substance use disorders, and when treatment is offered, it is rather generic and does not meet the needs of varied populations [37]. For example, there are no substance use disorder programs designed specifically for women [37]. Although half of the incarcerated population in state prisons had a substance use disorder, only 1 in 10 received treatment; 16% participated in self-help groups, peer counseling, and/or some type of substance use education program [37]. Only 49% of incarcerated parents diagnosed with substance use disorders receive treatment [4]. Treatment, and not punishment *via* harsh prison sentences, is needed by the large number of incarcerated parents who have substance use disorders. After all, mass incarceration does not address drug use, which is a health problem that continues to impact parents, children, and families.

1.4 Extended family support

There is a family crisis when a mother or father is incarcerated, and children are removed from their home. While many children of incarcerated parents are placed in foster care or with non-parental guardians, the extended family network often becomes the primary source of support. Extended family members, such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, and older siblings, frequently step in to fill the caregiving void left by the incarcerated parent. This support system can offer emotional stability, financial aid, and a sense of belonging. The practice of relatives providing care for children who are their kin is not new in African American, American Indian, and Latinx families. In fact, shared caregiving is a tradition in African American families [38].

Children whose parents are incarcerated are at an increased risk of mental health issues. They are more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder [39]. The absence of a primary caregiver can also result in feelings of

abandonment, confusion, and loss [40]. However, extended family members can provide a crucial source of emotional support to mitigate these effects. For example, grandparents offer a sense of stability and continuity, which helps children cope with the upheaval caused by parental incarceration [41].

Research shows that children who maintain strong relationships with extended family members tend to have better emotional regulation and resilience in the face of adversity [42]. Extended family support helps to alleviate feelings of isolation and fosters a secure emotional environment, which is essential for the child's healthy development. The social development of children with incarcerated parents is often compromised due to disrupted home environments and the stigma associated with having an incarcerated parent. The absence of a parent can lead to difficulties in forming stable social connections and coping with peer interactions [43]. However, extended family members can provide a positive role model and a safe environment in which the child can build relationships and practice social skills. Grandparents have been found to offer consistent emotional and physical care, often reducing the likelihood of the child engaging in risky behaviors [44]. The presence of extended family can also help children feel more integrated into the community, enhancing their social networks and offering them access to broader support systems.

Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to experience academic difficulties, such as low grades and higher dropout rates [45]. Extended family members, particularly those with educational experience or resources, can significantly contribute to the child's academic success. Grandparents, for example, often provide a stable home environment that facilitates learning, while aunts and uncles may offer tutoring or academic encouragement [6]. Studies have shown that children who receive support from extended family members have higher levels of educational attainment, which can improve their long-term economic opportunities and break the cycle of intergenerational incarceration [46].

Resilience is the ability to adapt positively in the face of adversity, and it is a crucial factor in the development of children with incarcerated parents. Resilience is not an innate quality but a dynamic process that is influenced by a variety of factors, including the child's environment, relationships, and personal characteristics. The support of extended family plays a vital role in fostering resilience, as family members provide emotional and practical resources that help children cope with their situation. Prior work has indicated that children who had contact with extended family members during a parent's incarceration exhibited fewer behavioral problems and better coping mechanisms [43].

Moreover, an extended family can help children maintain continuity in cultural traditions, religious practices, and family rituals, which can provide a sense of stability in times of upheaval. The security and support provided by extended family members can bolster a child's sense of self-worth, giving them the confidence to navigate challenges and develop a positive sense of identity [47].

2. Methodology

This exploratory-descriptive study examined extended family support in a sample of 40 women incarcerated at a minimum-security corrections center, i.e., prison. Data were collected at a single point in time *via* individual interviews with the women.

Forty women who were in a family reunification group at a women's correctional facility provided informed consent in writing to voluntarily participate in this

research study. All the women were mothers of minor children and planned to reunify with their children after their release from prison. The women were incarcerated at a minimum-security prison in the Pacific Northwest area of the United States.

2.1 Data collection

2.1.1 Sample selection procedures

The sample was both purposive and one of convenience. It was purposeful because the research identified the study's focus to be incarcerated women who were mothers of minor children. Because the researcher had access to the women's prison, it was one of convenience. Women were contacted by their counselors at the prison after they expressed interest in participating in the study. They signed their names and room numbers on a recruitment flyer posted on the bulletin board in their respective buildings. The researcher met with each woman individually, explained the study's purpose and procedures, informed consent process, and answered all questions asked by prospective participants. After all questions were answered and the researcher was confident that each woman understood the study and informed consent process, each woman signed the consent for participation in a research study form and was given a copy of the signed consent form. Consent to conduct this research study was received from the University of Washington Institutional Review Board. Participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire developed by the researcher.

2.1.2 Scales and protocol for assessing extended family support

Extended family support was measured by administering eight questions and one scale to participants from McAdoo's (1980) Scales and Protocols for Assessing Extended Family Support [48]. McAdoo's original instrument is a 322-item questionnaire. The researcher explained the eight questions and the scale to participants. Questions were answered about the two data collection instruments. The participants provided written responses to the eight questions and the scale. The scale (Help Exchange Patterns: Help Received) is a chart that was used by participants to describe and delineate types and frequency of extended family support (see Appendices A and B for instruments). There is no published information available about the reliability and validity of Harriet McAdoo's Scales and Protocols for Assessing Extended Family Support. However, the researcher utilized the following protocol to ensure findings were reliable for the current study: (1) Data from the questions and scale were broken down into codes and then grouped into analytic categories and analyzed by the researcher; (2) Two secondary peer researchers coded and analyzed data using the following equation: (# of agreements/(# of agreements + # of disagreements) x 100. Inter-rater reliability was 90%.

2.2 Data analysis and findings

2.2.1 Demographic profile of participants

Demographic data is described for the 40 women who participated in the study and presented *via* **Table 2**. The study sample consisted of forty women incarcerated at a women's prison who were all mothers of minor children. There were 15 mothers who identified as Black or African American, 10 American Indian mothers, nine

Variable	N
Race/Ethnicity	15
African American	10
American Indian	9
Latina	6
White	
Age	11
20–30	19
30–40	7
40–50	3
50–60	
Education	3
College degree	27
High school diploma	6
Graduate Equivalence Diploma (GED)	2
Completed 10th grade	1
Completed 8th grade	1
Completed 5th grade	
Religious affiliation	16
Catholic	4
Protestant	5
Jewish	1
Muslim	1
Nondenominational	
Marital status	6
Married	2
Widowed	4
Divorced	3
Separated	25
Single	
Income	25
> $20,000	6
$20,000–$30,000	4
$30,000–$40,000	1
$40,000–$50,000	1
$50,000–$60,000	3
$60,000–$70,000	

Table 2.
Sociodemographic characteristics of participants.

Latina mothers, and six White mothers. The age range of the mothers was 20 to 52, with a mean age of 33.9. Educational levels varied. Three completed college, twenty-seven women graduated from high school, six had their Graduate Equivalency Degree (GED), two completed 10th grade, one completed 8th grade, and one completed 5th grade. The sample was varied regarding income. Their income ranged from 0 to $65,000, with a mean of $14,452.75. Several indicated receiving governmental assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for their children prior to their incarceration.

Religious affiliations included 16 – Catholic, 12 – Protestant, 4 – Jewish, 5 – Muslim, 1 – nondenominational, and 1 – none. Most of the women were single, i.e., 25. Six women were married, four were divorced, three were separated, and two were widowed. The number of children in their families ranged from 1 to 6, with a mean

of 4.1. All mothers in the sample provided the same answer to a question regarding why their children were removed from their home. They stated the reason for their children's removal was child neglect and risk of harm related to their substance misuse disorder, subsequent drug offense conviction, and incarceration. There were no reports of physical and/or sexual abuse of children by any of the women.

2.2.2 Extended family support

Eight questions and one scale from McAdoo's Scales and Protocols for Assessing Extended Family Support were administered to participants to measure the variable extended family support. A yes/no question was used to ascertain if participants had important relatives. All participants in the study responded "yes" to the questions about having important relatives. The responses to four of the questions from the revised Scales for Measuring Extended Family Support were analyzed using the statistical test appropriate to the level of data for each question. The level of data and corresponding statistical tests are listed for each question in **Table 3**. The remaining four questions produced narrative responses, which were analyzed using content analysis.

A yes/no question was used to ascertain if participants had important relatives. All participants responded "yes" to the questions regarding important relatives. To determine if there were differences in the existence of important relatives between participants based on racial/ethnic group, a chi-square test of difference was utilized. The existence of important relatives was not statistically different based on racial/ethnic groups. A t-test was used to determine if observed differences in the number of close relatives identified by women of color as compared to White women were statistically significant. Although the mean of 5.8 for women of color was higher than the mean of 2.7 for White women, this mean difference was not statistically significant. Participants were asked to narratively identify their family's most important sources of help. Childcare was the most important source of help for all women in the study. Emotional support was the second most important source of help for the women. Financial support and advice were identified as the third and fourth most important sources of support by all women. Participants were asked to rate the degree to which family members go out of their way to help them on a five-point scale (Not at all, Very little, Somewhat, A great deal, and A very great deal). A chi-square revealed no statistically significant differences in the women based on their racial/ethnic identification. Women of color and White women stated that the members of their

Question	Level of data	Statistical data
1	Nominal	Chi-square test for independent samples
2	Interval	T-test for independent samples
3	Narrative	Content analysis
4	Ordinal	Chi-square for independent samples
5	Narrative	Content analysis
6	Ordinal	Chi-square for independent samples
7	Narrative	Content analysis
8	Narrative	Content analysis

Table 3.
Analysis plan for extended family support data.

families went out of their way to help them. Most women of color and White women stated that members of their families went out of their way to help them "A great deal" and "A very great deal."

When participants were asked to discuss their feelings about their families coming to their aid in hard times, women of color and White participants expressed very positive feelings. Positive feelings are pleasant, desirable, and multifaceted responses to specific events, people, or internal dialogs that contribute to enhanced physical, physiological, and psychological well-being. In this study, participants are responding to their feelings about their family and extended family. The following responses are examples of positive feelings expressed by some women of color:

> *"I am feeling very good to know that my mother is providing care for my three children while I am locked up in this prison."*
>
> *"My feelings toward my family show that they are supportive; they help me, and I will help them with whatever they need. We love and care about each other; that what's family is all about."*
>
> *"I feel very good about having a family like that."*
>
> *"I feel good because some women in this prison do not have a family that would come to their aid and care for their children."*
>
> *"It makes me feel good because whenever I am down my family will be there for me."*

The following are responses from several White participants in the study:

> *"My mother will be right there to help me no matter what. She will give me her last dime."*
>
> *"My husband is always there for me. I am blessed that he and my mother are caring for our five children while I am locked up here."*
>
> *"I feel thankful and good."*
>
> *"Sometimes I feel good about it. Sometimes I don't because they don't have to do that for me. It's not their job to care for my children, but my mother would never turn her back on her grandchildren."*
>
> *"I feel great because I think family are supposed to aid you at hard times."*

Respondents were asked to narratively express their feelings about their relatives caring for their children. There were positive feelings expressed by all women in the study about relatives caring for their children. Some of the feelings expressed are as follows:

> *"I am glad that my mother was able to take time out to help me and my children. I did not want my children to go into foster care."*
>
> *"I feel good because my mother is caring for my children. I know that they are safe and are getting plenty of love."*

"I feel great. It is a blessing. Thanks be to God. I love it very much. My children are surrounded by family while I am in this prison."

"I know for a fact that my relatives care for my children a lot."

"I am very blessed to have such a wonderful family to take care of my children. They could have been with anyone. Someone who didn't care for them, but I know my family loves my kids."

"I love it. It makes me feel good inside that my two little girls are with family rather than with strangers."

"I love my family for being there and taking care of my kids."

"They can be loving. Very supportive, they can be dependable."

"They are supportive. They stick by me no matter what. They are very loving."

"They have a place to live. They have money in an emergency. They have food all the time. I know that my kids are being loved and well taken care of until I am released from this prison."

Participants had to indicate the exact relationship of relatives who provided help to them. The following are the relationships from the participants: Grandmother – 34, Husband – 5, Grandmother and Husband – 1. Participants also stated that other relatives also provided help when needed, including their siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Childcare and emotional support were the types of help identified as being received most often by participants, i.e., daily.

2.3 Discussion of findings

The purpose of this exploratory-descriptive study was to examine extended family support in a sample of 40 women who were incarcerated at a minimum-security prison in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Participants expressed positive feelings about members of their extended family. Positive feelings are pleasant or desirable responses to specific events, people, or internal dialog; examples from participants were presented in the "Extended Family" section of this paper. All participants had close relatives who provided help to them. Childcare, verbal communication, and emotional support were the most important types of family help identified by participants in this study. Thirty-four grandmothers provided more help than other relatives. In fact, maternal grandmothers, i.e., 34, were most of the caregivers for the children whose mothers participated in this research study. These findings are congruent with prior studies that have documented the significance of extended family as a resource for children [43, 46, 47].

The United States continues to incarcerate women at the world's highest rates. Women comprise 15% of the local jail population and 8–9% of the state prison population. Mass incarceration of women in the United States has resulted in large numbers of minor children being separated from their mothers and fathers, resulting in trauma for children as well as their parents. Many women become involved in the criminal justice system because of trauma and victimization and are subsequently retraumatized when

they are incarcerated. Parental incarceration not only impacts living arrangements but also economic stability, education, and emotional and physical health. Family continues to be the primary source of care and support for children of incarcerated parents. The weight of the evidence suggests that placement of children with relatives, i.e., kinship care, is primarily due to abuse, neglect, or drug dependence [48].

The concept of relatives/extended family caring for their kin is not new and provides continuity of the familial relationship for children who experience parental incarceration. However, several barriers are encountered by family members who provide care for children when a mother and/or father is incarcerated. One of the barriers is visits and maintaining the attachment relationship, despite the depth of research that has shown that visits and maintaining the attachment relationship are among the most significant ways to reduce recidivism [49, 50]. All the participants in this study were incarcerated in a prison that was a very long distance from their respective homes. In fact, most women reported not having regular visits with their children, although they repeatedly asked their child welfare caseworkers to schedule parent-child visits. Not only was the geographical distance a barrier, but the financial cost of travel to the prison was a major barrier for grandmothers and other family caregivers of their children. In Washington State, where this research study was conducted, prior to any parent-child visits, parents must provide prison officials with legal proof/evidence of their maternal or paternal relationship to the child, i.e., a certified birth certificate. For many parents, the cost of a birth certificate often delays the start of visits with their children. Any minor child of an incarcerated parent must be accompanied to the prison by an adult who is on the incarcerated parent's list of approved visitors. Adults on the approved visitor's list must pass a background check that is done by officials in some part of the criminal justice system. All participants in the study stated that they plan to reunify with their children after they are released from prison. Regular and positive parent-child visits are part of the court-ordered case plan for any parent whose permanency goal is family reunification. The fact that most prisons in the United States were built in isolated and hard-to-reach areas continues to cause a hardship on the families of the incarcerated. Although visits with incarcerated parents have been shown to help children in coping with the pain of separation and loss and are critical to their well-being, there continue to be barriers to in-person visits because of the location of prisons and the costs associated with visits [11, 51, 52].

Neglect was the primary reason for the removal of all children of the women in this study. Many of the women also reported having a diagnosis of a substance use disorder, which resulted in them focusing more on the misuse of substances than on providing the care and nurturing needed by their minor children. High rates of substance use disorders and mental illness are common in incarcerated women [53, 54]. Unfortunately, there is not a plethora of services to address trauma, substance use disorders, health issues, mental health issues, etc., when women are incarcerated. Although the women reported substance use disorders when they were incarcerated, only ten women in the study had received treatment during incarceration for their substance use disorders. The remaining thirty women in this study were on a waiting list for substance use disorder treatment. This finding is congruent with prior research that has demonstrated limited substance use disorder treatment programs for incarcerated individuals in the United States, although 32% of individuals incarcerated in federal prisons and 49% of individuals incarcerated in state prisons meet the criteria defined for substance use disorders [4, 37, 38]. Children, parents, and families continue to experience adverse effects because of the system of mass incarceration in the United States.

2.4 Limitations of the study

There are limitations to this research study. First, due to the small sample size of 40 participants, the results cannot be generalized to the larger population of incarcerated women with minor children. Second, there is no evidence available regarding the reliability and validity of McAdoo's Scales and Protocols for Assessing Extended Family Support; however, this measurement instrument has been utilized by many researchers to measure extended family support. Finally, there is usually some room for error when a self-report assessment tool, such as McAdoo's Scales and Protocols, is utilized for data collection.

3. Conclusions

One of the most significant social and economic issues of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the United States is mass incarceration. The United States continues to have the highest incarceration rate in the world, with millions of individuals currently incarcerated. A significant percentage of those incarcerated are parents with minor children who are disproportionately affected by the separation. According to the U.S. Bureau of Statistics, over 2.7 million children in the U.S. have at least one parent in prison [12]. This study examined extended family support in a sample of 40 women incarcerated at a minimum-security prison in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. The study demonstrated that extended family support was highly significant to all participants in the study and their minor children. The importance of extended family support for children of incarcerated parents cannot be overstated. When primary caregivers who are mothers are incarcerated, the involvement of extended family members provides crucial emotional, social, and financial resources that contribute to the child's resilience and well-being. By fostering these familial relationships and creating supportive environments, we can help mitigate the negative effects of parental incarceration and ensure that these children can thrive despite the challenges they face. Moreover, community-based programs that foster family engagement and strengthen intergenerational relationships can improve outcomes for children of incarcerated parents. Schools, mental health services, and community organizations can collaborate to create support systems that empower extended families to play a more active role in the care and development of these children.

It is imperative to have practices that continuously maintain and strengthen the attachment relationship between children and their incarcerated parents [29, 40]. In-person visits are crucial for maintaining a positive parent-child attachment relationship and helping children navigate the challenges associated with parental incarceration [55]. Families have always stated that no matter how much they desire to visit and children of the incarcerated see for themselves that their parents are safe, the money and time required make visiting incarcerated loved ones impossible. Administrators for correctional facilities in the United States, such as the one in this study, need to recognize that families are frequently the primary source of hope for individuals during their incarceration and the primary source of support when they are released; consequently, gathering input from families when making decisions about visitation and communication policies is important. It is important for correctional facilities to start developing and implementing programs that assist families of the incarcerated who want to visit, including transportation to prisons. Rather than increasing the number of prisons because of overcrowding, an exploration of

family-friendly prison sentencing and parole reforms will greatly benefit children, parents, and families who encounter the system of mass incarceration in this country. It is imperative for social workers to ensure that children, parents, and families have in-person visits to maintain the attachment relationship [29, 40]. In fact, providing transportation for children and families to the prison is a service that social workers can provide when working with incarcerated parents. Social workers can also assist incarcerated parents in other ways of maintaining contact with their children and families, such as video visitation and mail communication.

Due to the increase in the number of women with minor children who are incarcerated in the United States, it is important to assess women when they enter prison for sexual and physical trauma histories and make appropriate referrals for treatment. Women have unique health issues that require correctional facilities to provide a comprehensive array of services to address their issues. All women entering prisons should have access to trauma-informed, gender-appropriate counseling and treatment for mental health and substance use disorder issues. Social workers must advocate for policies and practices that optimize women's gender-specific health and mental health care needs in a trauma-informed way, which are crucial to the large number of incarcerated women in U.S. prisons today.

There have been some reforms in certain states within the U.S. to address the specific needs of incarcerated parents and their children, such as family-based alternatives to incarceration, expanding services, and ending SNAP and TANF benefit bans. In fact, several states have considered family relationships during the sentencing process. For example, Washington State passed the Parenting Sentencing in 2010 (SSB 6639) that allows special sentencing for parents with minor children. The Parenting Sentencing Alternative (PSA) has two components: The Family Sentencing Alternative (FOSA), which substitutes prison time with 12 months of community custody, and the Community Parenting Alternative (CPA), which allows for release to home under electronic monitoring for the last 12 months of the sentence. Eligibility required having a minor child, avoiding a history of certain offenses, and demonstrating a commitment to rehabilitation.

Resources and services to incarcerated parents and their families will be dramatically impacted by the recent passage of the so-called "One Big Beautiful Bill," P.L. 119–21 [56], signed into law on July 4, 2025. Food assistance will be eliminated for millions of children in this country. This bill will significantly harm children and youth in foster care, including the large number of children of the incarcerated in this country. The cuts to Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are large, will result in harm to children and families, and reduce resources available to those with limited income, including the 2.7 million children of the incarcerated. This draconian law eliminated essential supports for our most vulnerable populations and gives permanent tax breaks to the wealthiest in the United States. The consequences of this bill for incarcerated parents and families are economic, human, and traumatic and can possibly result in an increase in the number of parents being sent to jail or prison. When pressure and barriers are placed on families that prevent them from meeting their basic needs, the risk of costly involvement with the criminal justice and child welfare systems is significantly increased. Losing access to SNAP benefits will hurt children of the incarcerated in more ways than one because they will lose their automatic enrollment in free meals at school. Incarcerated parents and their families must be educated about this new law with the information they require to continue their eligibility for benefits. Social workers must advocate for the appropriate and transparent implementation of P.L. 119–21 and for state policies that are equitable and

treat individuals with dignity and respect, especially the disproportionate number of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color who are involved in the United States system of mass incarceration. We must rethink the way we provide resources, supports, and opportunities to children, parents, and families who are continuing to be adversely impacted by the system of mass incarceration in the United States.

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Appendix A

Selected questions from Harriet P. McAdoo's Scales and Protocols for Assessing Extended Family Support.

1. Now, thinking about the relatives that you have contact with (by phone, through mail, or in person), can you tell me if there are relatives who are important to you in one way or another? I mean, people you might turn to for advice, information, and help. People who might discuss important problems with you or just be there when it counts. Do you have relatives like that?

   (1)_____ Yes (0) _____ No

2. In general, how many relatives do you have that you feel close to?

   _____

3. What do you see as your family's most important source of help?

4. In general, how much do members of your family go out of their way to help you?

   (4) ____ A very great deal.

   (3) ____ A great deal.

   (2) ____ Somewhat.

   (1) ____ Very little.

   (0) ____ Not at all

5. How do you feel about your family coming to your aid in hard times, such as when you are low on cash, between jobs, or having a bad period?

6. Has the amount of assistance given to you by your relatives increased, decreased, or remained about the same since your child was placed with your relative by the child welfare system?

   (3) ____ Increased.

   (2) ____ Remained about the same.

   (1) ____ Decreased

7. How do you feel about your relatives caring for your child?

8. Could you list three of the most positive things about your family?

   a.

   b.

   c.

Appendix B

Harriet P. McAdoo's Help Exchange Pattern: Help Received.

We would like to get a picture of how mothers and their families exchange help with each other. On the left side are the types of help *mothers often receive* from others. For each type, please tell me if: (1) you receive this type of help; (2) if so, who gave it; (3) what was that person's relationship to you? (4) whether they are older or younger; (5) their sex; (6) what specific help was given; (7) how often this help was given; and (8) the last time you received this help (**Table A1**).

Type of help	Received help	Who gave the help?	Exact relationship to respondent	Older/ younger	Sex	Type of help given	How often*	Last time helped
1 Childcare								
2 Financial help								
3 Emotional support								
4 Repairs chores								
5 Clothes Furniture								
6 Activities Social parties								
7 Is there any other help that is important?								

D (daily) W (weekly) M (monthly) Y (yearly) O (occasionally)- (when).
** Mothers in America face many challenges such as lack of affordable childcare and poverty. Consequently, many mothers depend on their families for emotional and practical help. Affordable and accessible childcare continues to be one of the major family and policy issues in the United States. It was significant to highlight the specific type of help received from families by participants in this study.*

Table A1.
Help exchange pattern: help received.

Author details

Marian S. Harris
University of Washington Tacoma, School of Social Work and Criminal Justice, Tacoma, WA, United States

*Address all correspondence to: mh24@uw.edu

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Section 2

Social Work Frameworks, Approaches, and Real Life Experiences

Chapter 3

Hey, Why Are You in That House with Those White People? The Experiences of Multiracial Individuals Adopted Transracially

Stephen T. Wilson

Abstract

The goal of this study was to gain an understanding of mixed-race transracial adoptees voiced experiences in receiving support for their racial and ethnic identities. Interviews focused on self and other identification experiences, identifying challenging life situations, and where and whether identity crises may have occurred. The researcher also sought out information on how key informants garnered supports to reclaim a viable sense of him/her self as a person of color, while living in a White home or community as a transracially adopted youth.

Keywords: race, ethnicity, identity development, social supports, self-image, transracial adoption

1. Introduction

Throughout this researcher's practice history spanning some 40+ years, this researcher has observed, both as an individual psychotherapist and a mental health consultant, that transracially adopted children find themselves in situations where they wished their parents and families knew more about how to support them in developing their ethnic and cultural identities. As a researcher, I have also heard from consultees that sometimes parents do not always understand the importance of a child's ethnic and cultural identity. At times, these children express confusion or anger, or longing for connections to race and ethnicity that they were not able to attain. They often indicated that their concerns were not acknowledged, nor were they seen as their complete selves. One person put it this way:

> *I do remember the first time I talked about it. I was about six years old and I brought it up to my dad. That I felt I didn't belong in the family because. He said why and I said well, I'm Black and you are all white and this is really weird. He went and got a black napkin, and he said this is Black, and I said O.K.*

This person's feeling and experience were immediately denied and downplayed. The experience left her not having a safe space to speak about her concerns.

This chapter tells us about multiracial and ethnic transracial adoptee's experiences in their own words and provides a developmental pathway they outlined for their personal growth and development.

2. Defining transracial adoption and demographics

2.1 Definitions

In this study, the transracial adoption framework is biracial or multiracial child placed with a White family. The Multiracial Child Resource Book, Root and Kelly [1] refer to biracial as: A person whose parents are of two different socially designated racial groups, i.e., Black mother, white father…It can also refer to someone who has parents of the same socially designated race, when one or both parents are biracial, or there is a racial mixing in the family history that is important to the individual (glossary, p. vii). Additionally, Root and Kelly [1] identified multiracial individuals in this way:

> *People [who] are of two or more racial heritages. It does not necessarily mean the same as biracial. For instance, an individual can identify as one ethnicity, i.e., African-American, yet have parents of two distinct socially constructed racial categories ([1], p. vii).*

This study centered itself by examining the experiences of individuals who identify as biracial or multiracial and have been adopted by White parents.

2.2 Research questions

The research questions for this study were:

1. What are the lived experiences of biracial and multiracial transracial adoptees before they explore their racial/ethnic identities?

2. What experiences did biracial and multiracial transracial adoptees encounter as they explored their racial/ethnic identities?

3. What types of social support were helpful in developing racial/ethnic identities for these individuals?

4. How do transracial adoptees understand and make meaning of their racial and ethnic identities?

2.3 Demographics

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services maintains records on children in public child welfare. This database is called the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting Systems, [2]. **Table 1** shows the data between 2018 and 2022 the data showed decreases in adoptions of children with public child welfare agency involvement ranging from 53,547 at the end of fiscal year 2018, to 53,549 children at the end of fiscal year 20,122 (September). As of June 2023, the 243,060 young people in public foster care, some 53,665 children were placed in adoptive homes through public agencies.

Fiscal year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Number in foster care on September 30 of the fiscal year	437,010	425,974	47,332	391,641	368,530
Number of children exited foster care during FY	252,231	250,024	223,918	214,542	201,372
Number of children adopted with public child welfare agency involvement during FY	60,094	66,210	57,889	54,240	53,665

Note: Adapted from "Estimates of children in foster care as of June 2022," [2].

Table 1.
Estimates of children as of May 9, 2023.

Race/ethnicity	Percent	Number
American Indian/Alaska native	2%	927
Asian	0%	207
Black or African American	16%	8466
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific islander	0	124
Hispanic (of any race)	20%	10,889
White	51%	27,179
Unknown/Unable to determine	1%	797
Two or more races	9%	5032

Note: Adapted from "Children waiting to be adopted by race and ethnicity as of June, 2022" US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS) 2023.

Table 2.
Race and ethnicity of children placed out of foster care.

Table 2 shows the race and ethnicity of children placed out of foster care into adoptive homes. As of fiscal year end 2022, with some 49,121 children adopted through the public child welfare system. Nine percent of those adoptees were identified as two or more races: biracial or multiracial, (US Department of Health and Human Services, USDHHS, 2023). Finally, researchers have indicated that children with Black/White heritage historically have been and continue to be the group most likely to be, transracially adopted in both the United States and the United Kingdom [3, 4]. In her 2010 study, Samuels also indicated a number of children who were identified as Black, due to historical hypo- descent definitions who may also be biracial or multiracial. This number might be larger.

3. Racial and ethnic identities and cultural socialization

3.1 Racial and ethnic identity

Racial and ethnic identity has a complex system of components for these young people. Transracially adopted children engage with and learn about their identities through a multiplicity of influences: sometimes through their families, peer

interactions, and other culture-based experiences. Some of these influences are positive and informative, in terms of increasing pride, but often do not provide experiences geared toward learning cultural nuances [5]. These experiences also do not support transracially adopted individuals with strategies for engaging in the social world as persons of color [6, 7]. Given their experiences of being identified as ethnic minorities, whether they perceived themselves culturally as persons of color, these individuals also longed for experiences where they could learn strategies for engaging with racially charged experiences, and gain a sense of themselves as "authentic" persons of color [8]. As a person comes to realize they need additional information about themselves, it seems reasonable to seek out and explore these concerns.

Many transracially adopted children need to gain a sense of themselves as persons of color in ethnic minority communities. Some of this information as well as experience could be passed on through interactions with other persons of color [8]. On the one hand living in a home where one's experience is mirrored, and then extended so that one can pattern oneself after various role models in their world, provides self-knowledge. Not all these experiences are passed on to other ethnic minorities by other persons of color. In fact, a portion of these experiences are reflected in the majority community, and the other portion of these experiences is reflected through social interaction with other ethnic minorities [9]. Yet, seeking out people and identities to pattern oneself after, may only occur in the presence of persons one believes present similar characteristics, i.e. skin color, social constructions about racial identities, and experiences with challenging situations like racism [10]. Without these frames of reference, transracially adopted children find themselves at a loss, and may struggle to understand themselves, as well as work at creating a sense of authenticity.

3.2 Multiracial identity

Root [1] outlined an ecological framework for multiracial identity. These factors include geography, particularly the west coast where there are large numbers of persons who identify as multiracial. She went on to identify sexual orientation and gender where there is an increase in women and men crossing racial identifiers for mates. Class also influences multiracial identity, because one's orientation might not fit stereotypical notions around ethnicity, i.e., persons of color being poor, family functioning and socialization. Families that identify the different racial and ethnic identities within their family constellation, i.e. birth parent identities, or extended family members. Divorce and separation also impact on how multiracial individuals self-identify. Other factors that influence multiracial identity including whether there are persons with mental health issues, whether different languages are spoken at home, and exposure to different world views. Community socialization also influences multiracial identity as well; this is particularly true when the community can speak frankly about race and racism [1].

Root's framework also noted physical appearance often leads to many different people asking the question, "Who or what are you?" The biracial or multiracial individual's explanations sometimes lead to questions of authenticity i.e., whether a person looks like the ethnicities they indicate. Multiracial individuals' self-identification can sometimes be at odds with how outsiders view them racially and ethnically.

Negative aspects of multiracial identity can include colorism or coloration. Coloration as defined by Featherston [11], centers on skin color with darker complexion people living less privileged lives than lighter complexioned individuals (preface,

para. 1). When compared to their lighter complexioned counterparts darker skinned Blacks have lower levels of education, income and job status, are less likely to own homes or to marry [12, 13]. One can also view this social construction in popular media such as movies and television, where there is a penchant for straighter hair and lighter complexion, [12, 14–16]. Authenticity questions also come from self-defined monoracial individuals, who question ethnic identifiers. This notion centers on assertions about racial morphology, as well as questions of being authentically a person of color. Finally, phenotype or physical appearance interacts with all these dimensions. Thus, if one sibling is lighter than another, questions about ethnicity and family connection may occur.

3.3 Cultural socialization

Multiple authors have defined the importance of socialization for transracially adopted children, [10, 14, 17]. One facet of this socialization process is Cultural Socialization. Tran and Lee [18] defined cultural socialization as: the messages and practices parents and other individuals gave to their children living in an ethnically and racially diverse society, by fostering positive identities and instilling knowledge and skills to prepare them for functioning competently in society. (p. 456) Lee et al. [19] stated two determinants for cultural socialization: parent's attitudes about the salience of race and their beliefs; and, value regarding the importance of cultural socialization. Attitudes about race center on whether parents place importance on racial and ethnic identity. Cultural socialization centers on parents' willingness to provide information and support their children in understanding the racial and ethnic identities. They identified two other concepts, which supported children's cultural socialization: enculturation and racialization. They defined enculturation as the belief in and practice of promoting ethnic-specific experiences; and racialization as the belief in and practice of promoting race-specific experiences that help children develop coping skills to protect them from racism and discrimination [17].

For some children, connection to culture is an important component of their racial and ethnic identity. Without communities to identify with, in terms of similarities, many of these children find themselves struggling to self-identify as an ethnic minority person, and to engage with other persons of color. Even though their parents might align with a narrative which indicates happiness and joy that their child joined their family, children often find themselves struggling with whom to turn to or what to do when they receive conflictual information regarding how they are perceived in their communities. An example would be an outsider questioning how the child was a member of their adoptive family, given the differences in racial and ethnic identities between the child and their family members.

The data also show transracially adopted children are aware of racial and ethnic differences at a very early age [7, 20–26]. Peers and adults outside their family often ask transracial adoptees questions about who they are, where they come from, as well as questions about their cultural and language differences. While they may be aware of skin color differences, they are not always aware of cultural differences. This includes culture specific ways of addressing and engaging with elders, sometimes authorities, and linguistic/communication strategies. Even though transracially adopted children's parents might not be willing to discuss race, ethnicity and discrimination, the children are consistently working with, and sometimes struggling through their own identity development [7, 10, 21, 27–30].

4. Key informant's reporting

4.1 Participants

Eleven self-identified biracial or multiracial individuals, from 20 to 65 years of age, were recruited and after purposive sampling snowball sampling to participate in this study. The typical multiracial adoptee was transracially adopted as an infant. He or she also had one parent who was Caucasian, and the other African American, or mixed-race heritage. However, two individuals identified as multiracial with a different set of multiracial identifiers. One self-identified as Caucasian and Native American. The other informant self-identified as Filipino and Caucasian. All the informants were adopted into White homes.

4.2 Events and noticing

These informants identified events in their lives when they realized they were different than their family members. These events occurred during adult interactions with the key informants and their family members; with peers, as early in their lives as preschool; and, with peers in their communities as adolescents.

Initial noticing for key informants took place in their families, as they identified being aware they were racially and ethnically different than their parents, and in some cases their siblings. A large portion of these discussions were unsaid, when these key informants were young. Parental episodes of denying key informants their adopted children's definitions about their identities, provided a sense of confusion for the adoptees. Not speaking about ethnic identity shifted when these children were in social interactions in their communities.

Several individuals lived with White families in predominantly White communities. Because they were one of few multiracial children, entering school settings was a primary arena for their peers to point out racial and ethnic differences. These experiences were often exclusionary in nature, i.e., pointing out differences to demean, or to demarcate differences between the key informant and their peers. These individuals' peers inquired about difference and engaged in both verbal and physical boundary violations. These came in the form of inquiring "what are you" or inquiring whether the peer could touch their skin or hair. This was another level of experience and being objectified. In response to these experiences, some key informants described confusion, while others noted indifference to these experiences. Being othered was emotionally painful.

Key informants indicated adults in their communities attempted to categorize or make meaning of the relationship between the key informant and their adoptive parents. This led to individuals identifying what the relationship was between the adults they live with, and themselves. As a child, the adoptee was placed in a situation where they had to identify themselves as family members, when people did not necessarily believe this was a possibility. Multiracial adoptee's membership in White families, challenged other people's definitions of how families are constituted. Inside information about how key informants' families were constituted, was in direct contrast to outsider knowledge of family composition is. Having to explain these connections to people outside their family, left key informants feeling they did not fit into other people's definition of traditional family.

One key informant lived in a large city, and his parents were aware of racial and ethnic differences. His adoptive mother had conversations with him about insider

and outsider definitions of how family was constituted. His mother also provided him with strategies for understanding how people perceive biracial males racially and ethnically. In his house these discussions were a part of everyday life, and as result, he indicated being aware of these constructions.

There were also identifying episodes that were positive and affirming. In two cases, key informant's parents celebrated their children's racial and ethnic differences. In one woman's case, she felt so comfortable that the racial differences were not a part of her thinking, even though her mother focused and celebrated these differences. For another women her parents were willing to give as much information as they could to her about her racial and ethnic background. This information provided her with a sense of herself racially and ethnically.

Hair care, particularly for key informants who had one birth parent that was Black, was a marker for difference. Two women of African descent spoke about incidents where they had negative experiences around their parents' or other family members attempts at hair care. As children, these girls found themselves in a paradoxical situation: simultaneously being constructed as a part of the family, while knowing they were different because of their hair texture, and how their hair was kept. While their parents may not have experienced the difference, both these young girls did. They experienced embarrassment because they did not have hair that looked like their White peers, and maintenance was difficult. Hair became an issue for all the key informants of African descent that would continue throughout this study.

Three key informants indicated they experienced their families attempting to "celebrate" their identities. One person indicated little interest when she was young. In her case, even though she was exposed to Filipino culture, the community she lived in had few Filipinos in the community. Thus, she felt disconnected from other children of Asian descent.

Events where their differences were brought to the forefront had impact. Many of these individuals indicated outsider definitions of family constitution brought key informants' racial and ethnic identities to the forefront in some uncomfortable ways. In contrast, when their racial and ethnic differences were positively noticed in their adoptive families, they indicated increased positive feelings about themselves. On the other hand, when those differences were magnified in a negative manner, where neither the young person nor their adoptive parents had information on how to remedy or address the differences key informants experienced difficulties.

4.3 Not having information

Key informants revealed that as young people they often were in situations where they did not have information about cultural norms and expectations related to their perceived ethnic and cultural identities. This included issues around identity, personal self-care, and speech. They also contrasted the differences between what they knew in their homes, and what was expected of them as persons of color when engaging with other ethnic minority peers. They could see the difference between the world that they lived in at home, and what they learned about expectations of from their peers of color. Sometimes these contrasts left them feeling conflicted and anxious about how they would interact with their peers. Not having this information created a sense of not knowing what to do, or how to engage with other young people of color.

There were occasions where key informants perceived their parents' denying their adoptee's self-identifying with an ethnic identity. When adoptive parents responded by not acknowledging racial and ethnic identities, multiracial adoptees chose to stop

speaking with them about their identity struggles. Parent's denying or acting in ways that youth understood to be racially motivated left them feeling upset and unable to emotionally protect themselves.

Key informants identified episodes where adults in the community, (particularly school officials), made assumptions about ethnic identities these individuals did not resonate with, as in telling a student they would qualify for college support as an ethnic minority. If the individual did not see themselves as representing the identity the school official believed, this person had no strategies for engaging with the social position the school official had placed them in. They also were not able to emotionally protect themselves from this assault on how they self-identified, when they did not resonate with the adult assertion. School official assertions left these persons conflicted, and without emotional resources to disengage or set boundaries for themselves.

Hypo-descent and coloration played out in key informant's social interactions. The intersection between these two concepts created conflicts between peers. This came in the form of contextual identities, i.e. seen as Black in one social setting, and White in another. Additionally, there were times when notions of hypo-descent also led to difficulties between the young person, their peers, and their peers' caretakers.

There were also episodes where key informants did not anticipate they would have difficulties. This is particularly true of dating. Two people indicated their potential interest parents were upset about key informants' ethnic identity, and the possibility they might date. Being rejected by a potential partner's parent was difficult. Ultimately, not knowing, or having information about cultural expectations led to senses of loss.

4.4 Losses

Adams and Zuniga [31] describe three levels of inequality: individual, institutional, cultural and societal. Individual inequality centers on personal understandings in relationship to others it is often internalized. Institutional oppression occurs in schools, banking and finance, criminal justice; it can also occur in classroom settings. Culture and societal center on norms and values that govern communication style, gender roles, family structure, expectations of physical and mental capabilities, relationships, and other social interactions. They experienced losses in all three social arenas.

Key informants revealed struggles with their peer relationships when their racial and ethnic identities were foregrounded. They had to find ways to protect themselves from racially charged peer interactions. When they went to their parents, these multiracial individuals often found their adoptive parents had difficulties responding to their emotional responses. There were also occurrences where emotional losses were the direct result of their parents not being able to view them as persons of color. In combination, negative peer responses, and adoptive parents not seeing them as multiracial individuals, resulted in diminished trust that their parents could offer support in a meaningful way.

Key informants experienced losses in terms of peer and community expectations around their family membership. In addition, outsider challenges to their identity, or whether they were actual adoptive family members were emotionally taxing. Structural expectations regarding school performance, where stereotypic expectations downplaying ethnic minority performance led school officials diminishing their abilities. School officials downplaying expectations were sometimes confusing,

because the key informant did not view themselves through the lens of being an ethnic minority.

Key informants identified stressors regarding strategies for interacting with other persons of color in their communities. Sometimes these were the result of their well-meaning White peers deciding they should engage with other persons of color, while other events centered on attempting to figure out ways to engage in racial and ethnic social interactions they had little to no information about. As multiracial individuals with little to no information about social mores, speech, or expectations, they could not engage in the same ways their self-identified ethnic minority peers did. As a result, many of these individuals became angry.

Anger led to some key informants making decisions to withdraw from interaction with their families. This led to further isolation. Deciding to speak differently at home than with their ethnic minority peers is a sign of structural oppression according to Nobles [32]. These adoptees also disengaged from their adoptive parents, when their parents made oppressive race-based comments. As a result, they revealed anger experiences regarding their ethnic and racial identities in response to peers' negative comments about them, and difficulties in having to consistently defend their positions as persons of color.

There were times when key informants wished for support from their parents, only to find their parents had blinders on, due to their parents' social positions. Since their parents sometimes had difficulty viewing their adopted child's life in the same way the child did, as young people, these individuals experienced another form of loss: not being heard or accepted. Thus, they received no reflection of their realities. Subsequently, anger responses led to increased isolation, and ultimately experienced marginalization.

4.5 Seeking support

Key informants indicated there were sometimes ethnic minority adults who engaged with them as children. Informants also indicated powerful experiences of feeling claimed by other persons of color as they grew up. Ethnic minorities individuals, who were older than the transracial adoptees, invited them to engage in activities with the communities they felt affinity with. Informants indicated these activities were extremely important to them. These experiences ranged from having someone identify them as a person of color, amid living in a White home, or receiving information about tribal affiliation. Several people in the study indicated having experienced this affinity as they moved out of their homes, and into ethnic minority communities, or college settings where there were increased numbers of persons of color.

There were also occurrences where living in a community that included more persons of color, that these individuals experienced seeing life through a person of color's eyes. This was not limited to affinity experiences where they shared and ethnic identity; sometimes the experiences occurred in ethnic minority communities where the common denominator is that both key informant and their support person was a person of color.

Sometimes the support occurred from siblings. One person indicated a phrase, "an enlightened other." She indicated this person came into her life at a point when she really needed them to, and thus she revealed how strongly she felt the first time she was truly "seen," as a person of color, and experienced an affinity as well as a sense of being authentic. Seeking these supports, and finding affinity with other persons of color, particularly ones the that these individuals believed they aligned with ethnically and racially were profound.

Not all the support experience revealed positive outcomes. Sometimes being in the presence of other persons of color revealed multiple levels of oppression. This information gave them a sense of bias and prepared them for future experiences. There were other occurrences where some key informants' upbringing, and language patterns while in ethnic minority circles resulted in realizing they were foreigners This returned them to a sense of who am I where and when: sometimes inside the community, and other times outside.

4.6 Internal work

The more these adoptees learned about themselves, the deeper their internal work went. Sometimes the catalyst for their work occurred in the aftermath of a painful event. Other times, their desire to learn more about themselves was catalyzed by sheer curiosity. In other instances, key informants' interactions with other multiracial peers, allowed them to vicariously learn and practice ways of interaction that were supportive, and allow them to gain a greater sense of who they were as persons of color, and multiracial individuals.

There were other occasions, when key informants interacted with people who had little to no experience with multiracial individuals, who identified as persons of color. This resulted in decisions to either confront or advise these people on their identities. They also confronted offensive statements their peers, or loved ones might make. Increased self-awareness allowed them to state their points of view, as well as engage in self -protection from detrimental comments or actions toward the key informants. This is reflective of both positive and negative comments toward transracial adoptees, as well as attempts at misidentifying transracial adoptees identities. For the latter concern, misidentification led to painful experiences, an increased desire to claim their racial and ethnic histories.

Key informants also gained additional information about themselves as they engaged in personal, and sometimes intimate relations. They contrasted activities they had engaged in as transracial adoptees, with new ways of thinking while immersed in ethnic minority communities. These experiences not only lead them to reflect on how their life had been informed by being raised by their White parents, but the possibility that things could be different for them.

Key informants sought to gain additional information about their ethnic minority history to increase their sense of self. These learnings also instilled a newfound sense of pride in their ethnic minority identities. As they learned more about their histories, they also sought out additional activities in minority communities.

4.7 Sense of self

Throughout their lifetimes, these people have gained a sense of themselves as multiracial individuals. Many of them expressed a positive sense, but there have also been some prices; episodically this came in the form of realizing privileges associated with colorism. Sometimes they expressed concurrent feelings of both affinity and distance. Some key informants expressed this as not feeling particularly connected to Black women, or to Filipino community. Sometimes these experiences were also ones of continuous loss, and reminders of being in a marginal space. In addition, one person indicated feeling proud of their tribal membership, yet expressed desire to know more, and did not feel that information was forthcoming at this point. In addition, individuals indicated strong alignment with their multiracial/multiethnic identities.

These persons' identities are fluid, and situational. And as Root [33] reminds us, "I have a right to identify myself differently in different situations."

4.8 Offering support

Given their histories, these key informants had a better sense of themselves as multiracial individuals and had a keener understanding of what they had gone through as transracial adoptees in their developing years. They made decisions to give as much support as they could to other people in similar situations where race and ethnicity were at play. Their decisions to offer support to people were as simple as understanding the connection between being a person of color, and the need to offer support to other individuals of color. Other times the focus centered on offering support to White parents of transracially adopted children. This support sometimes fell on deaf ears. Yet, they felt strongly nonetheless about the importance of providing support. In addition, given their histories, many understood the importance of exposing transracially adopted children to ethnic minority communities. One in particular, expressed similar sentiments for children who are internationally adopted, as her feeling indicated these children might have lost all connection to their cultural identities.

Of particular note, one key informant spoke to her experiences in the adoptees' rights movement. She spoke eloquently to the connection between adoptees, their birth parent, and their adoptive parents. She noted the importance of acknowledging all three entities in this relationship, rather than attending to the needs of the adoptive and birth parents, and wanted to remind people that transracial adoptees do not always feel the connections adoptive parents would want them to. Adoptees must deal with their own senses of abandonment, and felt there might not be a place to express those concerns in this triangle relationship.

Finally, one key informant indicated the importance of seeking out an understanding where transracial adoptees are not expressing their concerns, and then supporting them to express them in a way that helps them to grow. He felt this information was key to supporting their development, and having a much deeper understanding of who they were as persons.

5. Summary

Key informants spoke about their experiences as multiracial individuals living in White adopted homes. All eleven indicated their experiences had the following events associated with them: they were aware that their ethnic and racial identities were different than their adoptive parents. In some cases, they were one child of several adoptees, who were from varying ethnic identities. This led to their parents and other family members to place their racial and ethnic identities at the forefront of their thinking. While adoptive parents were aware of their racial and ethnic difference, this did not always mean parents could provide their adoptive children with information they needed to engage in the world as persons of color. Sometimes parents brought people to their children: one informant's parents had adults and other ethnic minority students engage with him. A female key informant's relatives attempted to have her see other Black students. Still other parents brought information to them in the form or reading or providing information about ethnic identities. Additionally, one female spoke to the intersection between identifying as mixed race and living in a Jewish home, where she was about to speak about her identity at her Bar Mitzvah.

The informant of Native American and White descent indicated her parents consistently presented as much information as they could to her about her racial and ethnic identities.

Being mixed-race in social spaces led to key informants also identifying experiences where their parents were not prepared to help them deal with inter and episodically intra-racial difficulties. One of the men spoke to experiences where, who he was socially engaged with determined how he was constructed racially and ethnically; sometimes he was considered "yellow" or half Black in Black spaces, and Black in White spaces. Three women also had similar experiences, where their identities were considered ambiguous enough that their peers would claim them for various ethnic identities, depending on who they were with. For two women, these experiences occurred when they were in elementary school. In one woman's case, while she identified as Filipino, she knew she did not share similar identities with other Asian peers in her community.

Several people in the study identified feeling their peers engaged with them, but were not sure where to locate them racially and ethnically. Being one of few persons of color in a community allowed people to categorize them as exotic, as well as placed them in an ambiguous space while interacting with their peers. This experience was true for four women who self-identified as being of African American and White descent. Two women spoke about their language patterns, which identified them as being different from their Black peers. Two other women indicated this difference in viewing them as ethnic minority persons occurred when they engaged in athletic events, where the type of play they demonstrated was markedly different from their Black, female peers.

The two males in this study spoke about their identities being tied to both being Black and assumptions about their athletic prowess. While one man was also a debater, there were assumptions about his abilities, and simultaneously concern that he did not fit the mold. The other man found himself in the position of both being blamed for a team's failures and concurrently pointed to as not belonging in that setting.

Adoptive parental responses to their children were complex. On the one hand, adoptive parents were supportive, yet there were also events where the key informants identified parental frustration, racially charged statements, or a lack of knowledge about how to support their biracial children. While many indicated feeling their adoptive parents did the best they could to parent them, 10 expressed wishing their parents could have prepared them more for racially charged situations. These situations occurred in and out of their homes as young people. When there were overt instances, as in one informant's case, his father engaged effectively on his behalf. There were other times when these multiracial adoptees' parents were not successful in offering the support these individuals felt they needed. Three women and the two men indicated their parents sometimes were the ones engaging in race specific negative comments. In contrast, two women, and one man spoke to how family members offered support to them during racially charged situations. Finally, one informant's sister came up with an explanation that has fueled her from that point on: the analogy about Neapolitan ice cream was profound for her.

Key informants also identified experiences of feeling marginalized or at a loss for how to effectively negotiate racial and ethnic interactions with peers. This researcher should note these occurrences happened at different points in their lives. Some events transpired when they were children, but many of them occurred when these individuals left their homes and moved into larger communities, where they were exposed to other ethnic minority individuals and communities. On occasion these experiences

were ones where these individuals' experienced affinity with their peers. There were however other events when their experiences left them feeling they needed more information about what to do or how to engage with peers.

Some multiracial adoptees received information on their racial and ethnic identities from their parents, as was the case for two female key informants. The youngest person in the study was the only person whose adoption was open. As such, she knew her mother from the very beginning and had access to her. As she indicated, her birth mother was in and out of her life when she was a young child. She then found more information about her father when she was older.

When key informants sought out information on their racial and ethnic identities, they often gained information by interacting with other youth and adults of color. At times, they spent time in the presence of ethnic minority individuals, and interacting with them. Other times they gain access to ethnic minority experiences vicariously by observing others. Still yet, each sought out information on their ethnic identities by involving themselves in race specific activities like ethnic minority student unions, college classes, cultural emersion.

Four of the key informants strongly identified themselves as multiracial. They noted an awareness of their abilities to both be seen and not be seen in communities of color. The three women who identified as African American and Caucasian, indicated feeling strongly about their multiracial identities. They simultaneously indicated feeling affinity with other persons of color. The fourth woman, who identifies as Filipina, has consistently self-identified this way, and is also fluid in her identification. She noted being Filipina and multiracial simultaneously. These individuals also noted concern they did not have information about belonging to the ethnic minority communities both they and other people claim they belong to. They reported sometimes feeling left out of the conversations and social interactions with other persons, who identify mono-racially, i.e., Black, or Filipino, because they did not have access to those experiences during their developmental years, or when they became curious about their respective ethnic minority communities.

Key informants expressed positive sentiments about their identities. To that end, they were also willing to impart their positive sense of themselves to other individuals in similar multiethnic and racial spaces. They also indicated a desire to pass on support and pride in their identities for their children and other transracial adoptees.

6. Recommendations for practice

6.1 Adoptees

This study has provided an emotional road map for some transracially adopted, multiracial adoptees. They revealed multiple experiences where they did not have the information they wanted to have, to engage with their peers from a cross racial/ethnic standpoint. This in turn created marginalization, anger feelings and other losses for them. There were however people who acted as allies and offered support to them. This sometimes came from their White peers, and peers of color as well. There were also adults who episodically entered their lives to model racial and cultural interaction patterns for key informants to emulate. There were also episodic "enlightened others," who made themselves visible and offered support. This was particularly true for children with African heritage; access to hair and skin care is critical to multiracial children's self-esteem. Finally, as one person put it, "not all multiracial adoptees will

Adoptee concern	Strategy
Needs information on ethnic and racial identity	See other children that are like themselves. Social-media, PBS multicultural television, visual representations of multiracial families
Peer's questions about identity	As young children, social media and books on multiracial identity.

Note: Adapted from key informant experiences and suggestions.

Table 3.
Adoptee interaction recommendations.

feel grateful for their adoptive experience as persons of color." They appreciate their families and feel loved but sometimes the racial socialization was not present and left them at a loss for what to do (**Table 3**).

Key informants indicated school settings were catalysts for many of their social challenges. While school provides all young people with social challenges at different points in their school tenure, multiracial transracial adoptees also have a set of challenges that may warrant attention. Given key informant's stories, they may need a space to express concerns, learn strategies and, engage in practice to increase their sense of themselves. They will also need connection with other children who might share their concerns. Agencies can support this facilitation for parents (**Table 4**).

6.2 Parents

There will be events in their children's lives where listening to their experiences regarding race and ethnicity concerns, as opposed to downplaying their experiences' importance is critical to supporting their child to continue expressing concerns. Thus, understanding multiracial transracial adoptees have experiences with ethnicity and racially charged situations that may warrant additional support. In addition to education and reading, it would also continually be important to find people and experiences where multiracial transracial adoptees can learn and engage with other children and adults of color. The identity exploration pathway is a graphic reminder of some of the issues that might occur for your child in your family (**Table 5**).

6.3 Social workers and service providers

Key informants spoke to the importance of providing prospective adoptive parents with information about ethnic minority identity development. They also spoke to making sure, and this is particular to multiracial adoptees with Black birth parents,

Issue at school	Strategy
Children inquiring about difference	Anti-bias curricula. Story-telling that includes children with multiple identities.
Teasing about differences	Address and speak to all children having something different about themselves. Do not make handling oppressive comments the recipients responsibility.
Race specific bullying	Bullying curricula, address concerns matter of factly.

Note: Recommendations from key informants.

Table 4.
School support recommendations.

Adult concern	Strategy
Hair and skin care needs are met especially for children of African descent	Learn about hair from ethnic minority hair care professionals. African descent who you trust and learn from them about skin care.
Racially oppressive statements	Listen acknowledge and strategize responses. Engage with school officials
Child's identity	Acknowledge and praise ethnic differences, but do not over-emphasize ethnic identities. They are still your child. Attend multicultural events
Discomfort discussing oppression	Seek support from Social Worker, discuss with your partner. Be open to learn from trusted people of color

Note: Adapted from key informants' experiences and suggestions.

Table 5.
Adoptive parent support strategies.

Issue	Strategy
Adoptive parent colorblind attitudes	Increase social worker awareness of their own biases. Push adoptive parents to discuss race-based concerns when they arise. Go beyond culture camps. Cultural events are the beginning
Hair care for children of African descent	Create collaborations with ethnic minority hair care professionals
Children isolated in their communities	Big Brother/Big Sisters. Find cultural mentors that resemble the adoptee

Note: Recommendations based on adoptees' experience.

Table 6.
Adoptive service providers' recommendations.

that their hair and skin care needs be met. This could potentially mean providing access to hair care professionals, as well as giving information about how these children's hair requires different strategies than what White parents may be accustomed to. This researcher is aware of an African American hairdresser, who has held classes for White parents of multiracial children on hair care. Perhaps adoption agencies could create agreements with Black hairdressers to provide in services, and create data bases or referral services to community resources.

Social workers will need to have a sense of how racially charged situations play out for these children in their communities, and identify strategies for parents to use in support of episodic challenges. Perhaps locating resources for both parents and multiracial adoptees, so these youths have spaces where, if necessary, they can express their concerns and develop strategies for engaging in those social settings. They can also act as a sounding board for parents, when these issues occur, and help them as well to both learn and support their children. Using the Pathway as map of potentially expected challenges could aid discussions (**Table 6**).

Author details

Stephen T. Wilson
University of Washington School of Social Work, Seattle, Washington, USA

*Address all correspondence to: wilsonst@uw.edu

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Chapter 4

The S.E.L.F Cultural Framework: A New Approach for Social Workers to Explore and Nurture Cultural Experiences for Children and Young People from Multicultural Backgrounds in Out-of-Home Care

Kathy Karatasas

Abstract

Children[1] thrive when raised with their families in safe, stable, caring homes. However, when there are child protection concerns that cannot be resolved, children's ongoing care can be assumed by the state, through out of home care services, which essentially include foster or kin carers. In such circumstances as noted in the United Nations Conventions social workers have a responsibility to ensure that children's right to maintain safe connections to their family and culture are maintained. The S.E.L.F cultural framework provides a fresh lens to explore what culture may mean for children and families by considering the settlement journeys, ethnic traditions, language/s and faith practices. In turn, this information can guide how social workers consider and shape approaches to nurturing children's cultural experiences and influence positive wellbeing outcomes.

Keywords: cultural connections, multicultural children, multicultural, children, S.E.L.F framework, foster care, cultural connections, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), foster care, out-of-home care (OOHC)

1. Introduction

This chapter explores why culture is important reflecting on universal rights, and how it can be considered for children from CALD backgrounds in OOHC. It considers

[1] The term children is used for brevity. It includes children and young people, generally up to the age of 18 years.

Australia's multicultural population and the multicultural children in OOHC, which in Australia are referred to as culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD). It provides an overview of the S.E.L.F cultural framework including critical reflective questions in relation to exploring the child's and their family's settlement, ethnicity, language and faith. It uses a case study to consider the cultural care related issues and guide practice learnings.

The framework provides structure for social workers to use curiosity questioning and reflective thinking. It provides guidance for organisation's decisions in relation to collecting cultural data, facilitating training agendas and monitoring social worker's approaches to responding to children's cultural care needs. Collectively these practices can essentially contribute to stronger building blocks organisations can use to meet their responsibilities to CALD children in OOHC, to keep them safe, connected to family and culture.

2. Childrens rights to cultural connections

It is universally accepted that the best place for children is to be cared for safely by their families. When children cannot live with their parents and require statutory protection those representing the out-of-home care (OOHC) system, including social workers and foster carers, have significant roles in making decisions and taking actions that impact children's care. Collectively these services impact children's wellbeing trajectory, their sense of belonging, identity and self.

Investing in the wellbeing of children in care is of critical national and international importance. Children requiring care away from their parents are amongst the most marginalised and are at risk of poor life outcomes [1, 2]. With persistent concerns about ever increasing OOHC budgets there is much noted on how OOHC services are not meeting children's care needs. OOHC systems are influenced by multi-layers of interconnected systems, decision-makers and stakeholders, which may not always be constant. Effective care systems require keeping children's immediate and longer term care needs central, while concurrently coordinating these multidimensional levers through processes of constant disruptions and changes. Evidence of system's ineffectiveness is reflected through children's experiences of crisis placement decisions, significant relational and stability disruptions and discontinuity [3].

Cultural connection is a human right and crucial to supporting positive outcomes. As signatory to the United Nations Convention, Australia, like most international countries have committed to respecting children's universal rights, which includes their right to remain connected to family, community and culture [4]. While legislation and policies direct organisations to facilitate cultural connections, many children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) family backgrounds in Australia's statutory care system lose connections to community and cultural identity.

Social Workers representing the OOHC system across all levels, including executives, policy makers, managers and front-line practitioners, hold significant responsibilities in ensuring decisions and practices intentionally consider impacts on children's wholistic care needs, including their cultural wellbeing and sense of belonging [5, 6].

Ensuring the preservation of a child's right to grow within their own cultural tradition is a significant challenge for OOHC practice settings. The traumatic disruption to family relationships, combined with a shortage of available carers often creates a situation in which child safety trumps culture, and most would agree that this may

be necessary at least as part of an immediate crisis response. However, the initial crisis that surrounds the removal of children from their birth families is followed by days, months and years of child development years that will shape lifelong outcomes. The weight of the responsibility to address the trauma children in OOHC experience and to provide nurturing and supportive home environments is heavy for OOHC services [7].

Through the use of curiosity questions in relation to settlement, ethnicity, language and faith, the S.E.L.F cultural framework [6] designed by monitoring an Australian multicultural out-of-home-care program over a ten-year period, provides guidance to OOHC service system representatives and social workers on enhancing culturally responsive practices and positively influencing children's sense cultural connections and wellbeing.

3. Exploring culture: What is it and why is it important?

A positive sense of cultural identity is critical to wellbeing of children and young people [8]. Cultural connections is a right. Bronfenbrenner and Morris [9] pioneered the social-ecological theory calling out the wider context impacting individuals, which includes understanding cultural and social experiences, noting that most children learn from their primary social environment, their parents and families.

Culture is influenced by the relationships developed throughout life, the social heritage of an individual's connections to groups who influence subtly or directly how to make sense of life. It guides learning about what is considered acceptable or unacceptable, important, or unimportant, right or wrong, workable or unworkable. It encompasses learnings about behaviours, communication, assumptions, beliefs, knowledge, norms, and values as well as attitudes, dress and language.

Social relationships are essential aspects of social identity (Allen et al. [10], in Rughoonauth). How children see themselves shapes their unique identity. A positive sense of identity is critical to wellbeing and healthy lifestyle outcomes. Racial, cultural and ethnic identities form part of one's identity.

Disconnecting children from family and heritage, introducing new alternative carers or cultures, can influence the child's wellbeing trajectory including their sense of identity, belonging and self. When statutory services remove children from their parent's care and seek alternate homes for them, either in foster or kinship care, those representing the care system have responsibilities to consider how decisions impact on children's immediate and longer-term care.

The OOCH system is characterised by disruptions, discontinuity and disconnections [1]. Social Worker changes, placement or carer changes, changes in school environments for example contribute to disruptive relationships, social environments and learning which in turn impact children's sense of connections, identity and belonging. Constant disruptions to relationships inevitably impact negatively on children's sense of self.

Encouraging Social Workers to be mindful of the impact of disruptive relationships, may facilitate more intentional considerations to keeping a lens on all aspects of a child's care needs including their right to cultural connections, which may in turn positively influence the child's sense of identity and belonging despite the changes to their care relationships and environment.

Hammond's "cultural tree" uses the three elements of a tree, the leaves, the trunk and the roots as guides to looking at culture [11]. They are helpful prompts to encourage reflective thinking of what is informing views and ideas on what is culture. It

encourages a deeper look into more than what is observable. For social workers it encourages the practice of curiosity, information gathering and deeper assessments that may consider behaviours and deeper-rooted ways of thinking. Hammond's' three levels are:

1. *Surface level culture* (the leaves): This level is made up of cultural aspects you can see, like food, dress, language, music, hair styles, songs, etc.

2. *Shallow level culture* (the trunk): This level includes cultural aspects that are less explicit, the unspoken rules like concepts of time, personal space, and eye contact, ways of managing emotions or relationships, the non-verbal communications, child-rearing principles, theories of wellness.

3. *Deep level culture* (the roots): This level is the collective unconscious, the beliefs and norms that provide the foundation for culture. Examples include concepts of fairness, concepts of self, and spirituality, definitions of kinship and group identity.

4. Australia's multicultural communities

Australia's demographics are increasingly multicultural and rich in cultural heritage. The Indigenous communities, with over 60,000 of continuous cultures represent at least 250 languages.

The term "culturally and linguistically diverse" (CALD) is used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics [12] to indicate people born overseas or who have a parent born overseas and/or speak a language other than English. As of the last census, nearly half of the Australian population fit this category, with more than a quarter (27.6%) born overseas and an additional fifth who had one or both parents born overseas [12]. That is almost 50% have a parent or grandparent born overseas. One in five speak a language other than English at home. The demographics do not capture the cultural layers that may exist, generally referencing one cultural background and not capturing where there is mixed heritage, including with Indigenous cultures.

5. Australia's OOHC policies and cultural care

In Australia as at June 2021, there were over 46,600 children in care with annual increases in numbers at 8% [13]. And most children (67%) in care for a period of more than 2 years [14]. First Nations children continue to make up almost 45% of the total number of children in OOHC [15].

National Standards in OOHC promote the safety and stability of placements, acknowledging the importance of belonging and identity [16]. They include a requirement mirroring UNCRC. Australia's National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031, which all states and territories have adopted.

> *Children and young people in Australia have the right to grow up safe, connected and supported in their family, community and culture. They have the right to grow up in an environment that enables them to reach their full potential. (p. 2)*

However, cultural requirements are not consistent across state legislation. Some states such as Victoria only requires cultural care plans for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The last quarter of a century of Australia's history since colonisation has seen historical practices of removing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. This has had significant contributions to intergenerational traumas and over representation, at just under 50%, of Indigenous children in OOHC. More recently States like Victoria and NSW are attempting to address these traumatic circumstances. The *Families is Culture* report [17] provides comprehensive analysis and guidance to Australia's OOHC to improve Indigenous Children's care. The *Systems Review into OOHC* [3] includes a focus on implementing active efforts legislation which requires practical evidence to ensure children are safe and connected to their family, culture and community. In Victoria reform directions in recent years has seen the transfer of care of Indigenous children to the responsibility of Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCO) (DFFH) [18].

There is no question that there needs to be a deliberate, intentional and effective focus on rebuilding and improving cultural connections for Indigenous children in OOHC. What is in question is how to also keep a focus on the cultural care needs of all children including CALD children in OOHC.

NSW is one of the few states which requires cultural care plans for its Indigenous children and its CALD children in care. Reform initiatives over time such as the Royal Commission into Institutions Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017) recommended that Australian government should prioritise changes to the Child Protection National Minimum Data Set to include data identifying children from CALD backgrounds. To date the annual child protection report [14] has not yet reported on this data.

Data on CALD children in care is poorly kept and there are no accountabilities if data recording is incomplete [6]. The Australian Child Maltreatment Study affirmed the widespread nature of child maltreatment affecting Australia's children [19]. Reports have suggested that CALD children in care are increasing, representing upwards to 30% of the OOHC population [20, 21]. Given Australia's multicultural population it is reasonable to assume that children from CALD backgrounds in OOHC are a significant cohort.

6. Social work practices supporting cultural connections for CALD children in OOHC

It is essential that Social Work practices ensure that children who require OOHC are also supported to maintain connections to their diverse cultures [22]. The term, CALD, has also been criticised as it inferences that it is a homogenous term of diverse communities, potentially overlooking the distinct experiences, needs and challenges for each group and contribute to further marginalisation or stereotypes. The complexities of cultural elements may contribute to practice challenges in more accurately recording cultural backgrounds.

One approach to strengthening cultural practices is to take learnings from cultural work with Indigenous children. Krakouer et al. [23], for example, modified Bronfenbrenner's model of child development and wellbeing by placing culture as the most influential connection in a child's bio-familial-social-cultural relations, for Indigenous Australian children. The Indigenous Connectedness Framework, developed by Chase and Ullrich [24] highlights core relationships and mechanism

for building and maintaining healthy relationships to family, community, environment, ancestors and future generations, culture and spirit as well as self as a relational being. Cultural connectedness is a term that can guide practitioners to focus on seeking knowledge of family story and preserving family contribute to cultural connectedness [25].

Cultural matching between children and carers has been advocated as a strategy to facilitate children's cultural connections. This rationale assumes cultural matching can provide similarities and links between children's and carer's routines and social relationships. It reflects the potential risks that when carers do not understand children's cultures there are cultural losses for the child [26].

In practice, placement planning between children and carers who share culture could be improved by exploring the assumptions about the cultural alignment. Care is needed to consider the deeper level beliefs and views as deep as possible in the child's and carer's 'cultural trees'. Social Work practice needs to consider carer's attitudes and approaches to their holistic carer needs [27]. This is especially important at times of crisis or limited available foster carer resources when the concept of 'good enough care' may influence care decisions [24].

Tonheim et al. [28] advocates for culturally responsiveness and placing children with carers who have an aligned *philosophy of life*, as a contributing variable to considering cultural maintenance, including when there are cultural differences. In situations where it is impossible to find a religious, ethnic or linguistic match, as far as possible avoiding placing children with foster parents who have a philosophy of life that differs significantly from that of parents is an important consideration. Being able to meet a child's needs and a carer's willingness to do this is important, as is cultural alignment.

Some 10 years ago in NSW Australia practice shifted requiring cultural care plans for children from CALD backgrounds to be submitted to the Children's Court in the process of determining the child's permanency care. Cultural care plan requirements were already established for Indigenous children. A cultural care plan is an individualised plan that aims to develop or maintain children's cultural identity through connection to family, community and culture, while they are in care. Cultural care plans help to ensure planning and decision-making are culturally appropriate and in the best interests of the child [29].

In practice cultural care plans can outline how a child's cultural connections and experiences are being considered and nurtured, whether they are in culturally matched placements or placements with carer's whose cultural elements differ their own. While cultural care plans are a required policy commitment, as with cultural data, the practice and safeguarding elements such as regular reporting is inconsistent.

7. What do we know about the cultural experiences of CALD children in care?

In the last few years there has been a steady intentional lens on the care of CALD children in OOHC through three research projects in which the author has had an active lead role. These include:

1. The Pathway of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS) undertaken by the NSW Government is the first large-scale prospective longitudinal study of children

and young people in OOHC in Australia. It provides a strong evidence base to inform policy, practice and professional development to improve decision making and support provided to children and young people who cannot live safely at home. Research Report No. 20 *Culturally Diverse Children in OOHC, Safety, Wellbeing, Cultural and Family Connections* examines data to provide information on the cultural diversity and maintenance for CALD children and identify the factors that are associated with better outcomes for children [21, 30].

2. Upholding Cultural Connections for Children in OOHC Research, a multi-university, multi-partnership research lead by the Transforming early Education and Child Health Research Centre (TeEACH) University of Western Sydney [31].

3. Development of the S.E.L.F cultural framework from monitoring a multicultural specific foster care program [6].

1. The *Pathways of Care Longitudinal study* (POCLS) is focusing on safety, permanency and wellbeing. The child development areas of interest are physical health, socio-emotional wellbeing and cognitive/learning ability.

   Connections to culture information included, whether the child:

   - Maintained their birth name.
   - Practiced their birth language.
   - Discussed their cultural identity and heritage with the carers.
   - Socialised with the cultural community.
   - Maintain an understanding of their religion.
   - Observed religious practices.
   - Attended key cultural and religious festivals and celebrations.
   - Was provided good information that relates to their culture and religion.

   The POCL research found that CALD children in OOHC:

   - Have little exposure to their birth language and little access to cultural or religious activities or connections to their cultural communities.
   - Are, according to carers nurturing some level of cultural identity through culturally relevant food.
   - Of whom, about a quarter to a third did not identify with their cultural identity, according to carers.

Policy and practice considerations included:

- Focusing on culturally appropriate early intervention and prevention strategies to support families, with an emphasis on culturally sensitive campaigns and engagement initiatives to educate parents in migrant and refugee communities.
- Training and supervision initiatives to recognise the complexity of the work consider matching social workers with at-risk families with relevant language skills and cultural knowledge.
- Strengthening the practice of OOHC care and cultural plans development, implementation with family and cultural conduits, and monitoring children's experiences.
- Promoting placements and relationships with siblings.
- Engaging and recruiting carers from a diverse range of CALD backgrounds
- Provide carers with accurate information, culturally considered training and supports regarding the child's family, culture and community cultural mentors.
- Cultural training for social workers and practitioners.
- Improvements to administrative data collection and reporting

2. The *Upholding Children's Cultural Connections in OOHC* research has explored policy and practice landscape across Australia and sought to hear the voices of key stakeholders through individual interviews with children, parents and carers and focus groups with Social Workers and other practitioners. Publications include [6, 7, 22]. Preliminary emerging issues include:
   - The wide breadth of practice and diverse stakeholder understanding of cultural care planning, its purpose and how to do it well.
   - The lack of information and support received by carers to provide cultural experiences for the children they care.
   - The responsibility for cultural connections which many carers see as sitting with birth parents.
   - The ways that children's developmental stages impact how carers and children prioritise cultural activities.
   - The impact of caseworkers on the carer's views about promoting cultural connections.
3. The S.E.L.F cultural framework was developed by reviewing social work practices in child protection and OOHC services in NSW with migrant and refugee families. More specifically it considered:

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Concerns raised by CALD parents with community-based migrant resource services about their experiences with statutory services involvement in their children's care. Parents reported such issues as:

- Not knowing where the children were placed in OOHC.
- Not being able to communicate with their caseworkers.
- Children being exposed to different cultures and religious experiences with carers who did not share their culture.
- Children losing fluency of birth language and subsequent loss of communication with parents.

In response to Social Worker's advocacy and government reform agenda to transfer case management responsibility to non-government agency, a multicultural foster care program was established in an organisation which had at the time significant expertise in working with migrants and refugees.

The program committed to matching children from culturally diverse backgrounds with either foster carers or a bi-cultural Social Worker or other bi-cultural practitioner.

Over its initial 10 year period of operations the program, led by the author, held case management responsibility over 600 children, assessed and worked with over 200 carers and managed over 200 practitioners, mostly Social Work trained.

Monitoring reflective action learning approaches were used to:

- Explore assumptions and knowledge about culture.
- Monitor children's cultural data.
- Track "culturally matched" placements.
- Track children's cultural care plans
- Identify issues influencing children's cultural connections.

Communities of Practice Forums, Program and Team meetings were used to explore and monitor practices. They provided structured opportunities for cooperative inquiry, intentional dialogues about cultural values, views, expectations, practices, assumption and biases about working with children, young people and families from diverse cultural backgrounds. The group conversations explored questions and strengthened shared understanding on what was seen as culture.

Core questions explored included:

1. What cultural information is being collected to monitor a children's cultural profile? How is this information verified?
2. What cultural information is being collected in relation to carers and practitioners?

3. What approaches are being considered to facilitate children's cultural connections?

4. What strategies are cultural care plans capturing?

5. Where cultural considerations are being considered in matching a child to a carer?

6. How are caseworkers considering cultural experiences when a child's culture is not aligned to a carer's or a caseworkers?

7. What training is being offered and used by carers and practitioners to enhance culturally responsive activities with children?

8. What examples of culturally responsive strategies, and how do these consider a child's ages and development?

9. How are staff learning about different cultural approaches to parenting and child rearing?

10. How is practice evidence showcased?

In reviewing cultural data at one point in time, children represented 60 different ethnic groups, 40 different languages and 15 faith groups. One child had nine different cultural profiles when his parents and grandparents' cultures were considered. Initially their status as Australian born citizens, migrants or refugees was not considered but on review informed the development of the S.E.L.F cultural framework outlined below.

8. The S.E.L.F cultural framework

The four key cultural elements to the S.E.L.F cultural framework, as in **Figure 1** below are:

- *Settlement*: What was the child's and family's journey, migrant or refugee?
- *Ethnicity*: What is the child's and family's heritage?
- *Language*: What is/are the family's primary language/s?
- *Faith*: What religious practices are important for the family nd child?

Each cultural element prompts questions to guide learning and reflections on the child's culture. Karatasas et al. [6] provide an overview of 10 questions that can be used guide curiosity exploring each element Collectively the information across the four elements can inform social workers on what might be influencing a child's or a family's behaviours, what has influenced their thinking, their values and their approaches to the child's care.

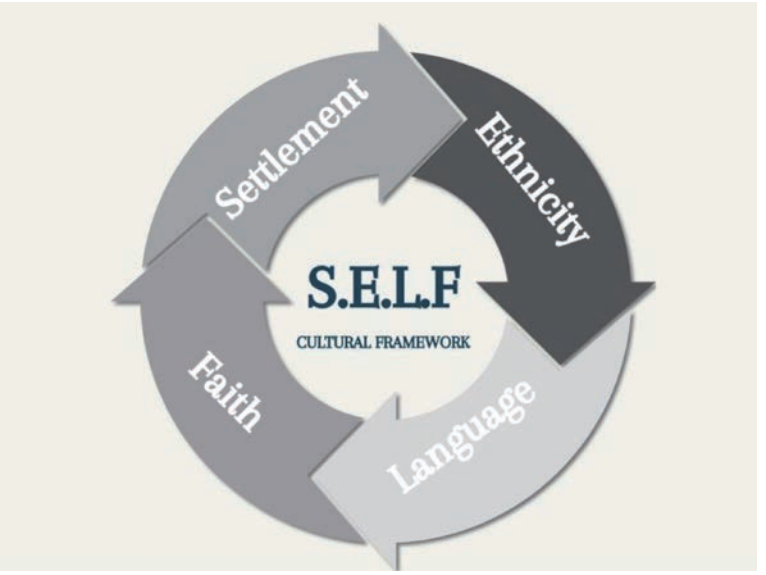

Figure 1.
The S.E.L.F cultural framework.

Being culturally curious can provide social workers better information to understand a child, their family and their history. The use of Hammond's cultural tree levels can also contribute to additional questions exploring what might not be as visible, or what may be unspoken. Such information can further enhance a better understanding of the child's and family's unique culture. In turn this can facilitate better relations with the birth family as well as the child and guide how carers consider approaching cultural activities with the child.

The SE.L.F cultural framework is a valuable tool to guide the development of cultural care plans and contribute to intentional, deliberate, considered approaches to considering children's unique circumstances, their developmental age and interests and facilitate meaningful cultural connections.

9. S.E.L.F cultural framework case study

The following case study outlines the information collected through using the S.E.L.F cultural framework to engage with children's family, carers and to create a plan for their permanent care.

9.1 The children

Eight-year-old Myriam and her younger 7 year old brother Issac come into care as a result of concerns related to their parents domestic and family violence, lack of supervision, hygiene and school nonattendance. The children were born in Syria, lived in refugee camps in Lebanon for 4 years before arriving in Australia as refugees just over 2 years ago. The children have been in care for just over 12 months.

9.2 The birth parents

Amal, the children's mother, and Youssef, their father were both born in Aleppo, Syria. Their extended family were also living in Syria. Myriam and Isaac's elder brother died some 6 years ago then aged four. Both Amal and Youssef have followed the Islam faith and speak Arabic. They arrived in Australia on a humanitarian visa 2 years prior having lived in refugee camps in Lebanon. Neither parent has yet to find ongoing employment. Their English language skills are in their infancy. They do not like talking to government representatives including interpreters.

Amal and Youssef have a handful of relations with local community and church members, but essentially keep to themselves. Both state that they do not understands what the child protection concerns relate to. They believe physical discipline is acceptable within marriages and as a form of parenting.

In the first 12 months of settlement Youssef come and left the family home for extended periods of times. His whereabouts were often not known to Amal or the children.

Family visits are arranged separately for Youssef and Amal. Amal attends regularly and responds to guidance by social workers on interacting with the children. Youssef's attendance has been intermittent, with his non-attendance to last three scheduled visits.

9.3 The carers

Sarah, and Simon, migrated to Australia 15 years ago and have been foster carers for 5 years. Born in Lebanon, they are both practicing Maronite Christians, and fluent speakers in Arabic and English. They have two children of their own, Maddie who is 11 and Billy who is 10. They have generally provided foster care for short periods of time supporting family reunification.

The family also included a foster child Adam, who is now nine, Adam come into their care 4 years ago and is permanently remaining in Simon and Sarah's care. Adam's parents were born in Turkey before they migrated to Australia and follow the Muslim faith. Adam is connected to a bilingual Turkish mentor who takes him to the local Turkish mosque and is teaching him the Turkish language.

9.4 Practice issues

The children's care is still before the Children's Court. Permanency care decision is still to be determined.

Myriam continues to indicate she wants to remain connected to the children but has been detracted from focusing on her capacity to meet their needs comprehensively. She has recently agreed to see a mental health Social worker experienced in grief and loss, with a community Arabic speaking friend, as she does not want to speak to an Arabic interpreter and the mental health worker only speaks English.

Myriam is not wanting to live with Youssef. They do not currently have a permanent visa. They do not want to return to Syria.

The child protection team is erring on the recommendations of long-term care for Myriam and Isaac.

The Social worker used the SELF framework's cultural elements and curiosity questions to explore issues and prepare a cultural care plan.

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9.5 Applying the S.E.L.F framework

Settlement questions considered.

1. How long has the child and their family been in Australia (the country?)
2. Is the child first generation migrant or refugee?
3. What were the circumstances behind the settlement decision into Australia?
4. What was the experience as the child or family were arriving in Australia?
5. What was the experience for the child in the early days of arrival?
6. What was different over the next period of time?
7. Where did the child or family live in the earlier days?
8. What was this experience like?
9. What connections does the child or family maintain from their country of origin?
10. What has been the carer's experiences with migration or refugee settlement journeys?

Myriam and Isaac have had significant changes and uncertainties to their care environments. Their settlement journey has included a minimum of four communities, all lacking permanency and choice. Initial home in Syria during periods of unsettlement, refugee camps, homes in Australia with their parents and with foster carers.

Both the children and their parents have had welcoming greetings from Refugee support teams and communities. However, remain distressed at their lack of choice but to leave their home, country. Their displacement contributes to uncertainties, fears and dysregulation.

Sarah and Simon arrived in Australia as migrants 15 years ago, seeking better economic opportunities. They have family in Lebanon who they maintain connections with including periodic financial assistance throughout the year. Their English language is fluent and with an accent. Their own settlement journey was influenced by supports from close friends who had also migrated and connections through the local Lebanese Catholic community. They have been foster carers for 4 years, providing ongoing care for one child, Adam and over the last 12 months two primary aged children, Myriam and Isaac.

Sarah and Simon appreciate the importance of parent's relationships with children and connections to history. They have expressed awareness and empathy for the children and their parents' settlement circumstances, recognising in particular that their settlement journey as migrants was one of choice not being forced.

Sarah and Simon have developed relations across a number of communities, connected through neighbourhoods as well as church, language and through community-based services. They have sought guidance from refugee advocacy services who have shared information about the impact of the civil war on many Syrians, and helping them understand the family's settlement journey to date.

Sarah and Simon have appreciated Myriam and Isaac's preference to sleep on the floor and/or to share a bed, as they had done at the refugee camps and when they arrived in Australia. Over time, the children have developed routines which include maintaining those practices, mostly on weekends now and sleeping in separate beds.

Ethnicity questions considered.

1. What traditions are important to the children's family?

2. What calendar events are important for children, and how are they celebrated?

3. Who is available to help the children participate in cultural celebrations?

4. What traditions may be important to acknowledge as children participate in primary school?

5. How can the children's parents or other family members help teach the children about cultural events or social communications?

6. How can carers be supported to learn more about Syrian traditions?

7. What Syrian festivals are important to know about?

8. What Syrian clothing would the children interested in?

9. What cultural food or meals could interest the children?

10. What information do the children have about their parent's heritage and upbringing?

Sarah and Simon have reached out to local community based cultural services who work with Syrian communities including refugees. There re links to the Australian Syrian Association which aims to unite Australian Syrians in NSW by organising events and providing opportunities for community meetings. There is an on- line social group where members share information about upcoming cultural events, festivals and gatherings.

Sarah and Simon took Myriam and Isaac to the "Arabian Night" a fest of Syrian food, which was also a community event raising funds for Syrian refugee families. The family also attended a festival in Paramatta NSW last October celebrated a range of markets stalls, music and food over 2 days during the school holidays.

Amal advised the Social Worker that she traditionally celebrated with her family growing up the 17 April, which is the Syrian Independence Day and the end of French colonial government in 1946. The children have attended celebrations with Sarah and Simon organised by the Syrian-Australian community. A number of performances included young people wearing national costumes and dancing the *Dabke,* a fold dance moving around in a circle incorporating stomping and rhythmic movements.

Sarah has discussed recipes and foods with Amal and the children. Amal often brings Syrian food to visits. The children particularly like the *Kibbeh* (a ball-shaped roll filled with bulgur, meat, spices, and pine nuts) and the *Fatteh* (crispy bread mixed with chickpeas, yoghurt, garlic, pine nuts and mincemeat). Both the children love hummus and baba ghanoush dips which they often have for lunch in bread rolls.

Sarah has invited Amal to the foster family's home for a visit so that the two women can share Syrian recipes. They have agreed to in the first visit to focus on the *Brazek*, a sesame and pistachio cookie which Myriam loves and the *Baklava* a pastry filled with nuts and soaked through honey syrup, which Isaac loves.

Adam's mother has also shared that the baklava dish is common in Turkish communities. Sarah and Simon are considering how to compare the Syrian, Lebanese and Turkish recipe in the future.

Language questions considered:

1. What language do the children's parents speak?
2. Are there dialects to consider?
3. What are the parent's wishes in relation to communicating through an interpreter?
4. How fluent are the children in their birth family language?
5. How fluent are the children in English language?
6. What can help the children develop/maintain their birth language?
7. What can help the carer's learn the children's birth language?
8. Who can help the children maintain connections and use of their birth language?
9. What music may be of interest to the children in language?
10. What online resources are available to keep the children interested in their language?

Myriam and Isaac's Arabic language is fluent as is their carer's Sarah and Simon's. The children have needed educational assistance to develop their English language and are progressively catching up with their peers academically.

The carers and Amal's Arabic is generally aligned, with some variations in certain use of words and sounds. Over time both have become more aware of each other's use of words and their willingness to share information has influenced reciprocity in certain terminology. For example Sarah greets the Amal with the traditional term "*Shlonka*" which means "How are you?" rather than a more traditional Lebanese Arabic term "*Marhaba*".

According to Amal, Youssef's Arabic language was influenced with more French terminology. It is hoped that when contact is reestablished with Youssef that his language may be further shared with the children.

Myriam and Isaac are attending Arabic language school on Saturday mornings. They have mixed feelings about their classes which gives them opportunities to maintain their birth language and see friends. Sarah and Simon's older children also attended the language school.

Amal speaks to the children in language during family visits.

The Social Worker often includes Sarah or an Arabic bi-lingual colleague in her meetings with Amal and Youssef, as they do not want others such as interpreters involved in these meetings.

Faith questions considered:

1. What faith is the family connected to?
2. How has the children's family practices faith to date?
3. What is the carer's faith?
4. How do the carer's practice their faith?
5. What similarities or differences are there between the children's family and the carer's faith?
6. What are key faith based milestones?
7. How have the milestones been experienced by the children?
8. What are key faith related rituals?
9. What are the children's views on their family's faith?
10. Who can help the children maintain faith-based experiences?

Simon and Sarah are aware of the religious differences between their faith, as Christians and the children's Islam connections. They have shared similar experiences with their older foster child, Adam, whose family are also of the Muslim faith.

Youssef has expressed his concerns that the children are not in a Muslim home. He has requested alternate carers. Amal has also expressed her preference for the children to be living in a Muslim home, however she values the approach and care Sarah has with her children and is aware how Adam, the other foster child is being supported with his Islam faith.

The Social Worker is consulting with the IMAM association, Islamic leaders, for guidance on who else in the community may support the children and their carers. There are a number of issues that have been raised, particularly in relation to Myriam wearing a hijab infront of 'unrelated" males who would include the foster carer's son, Billy and Adam.

Myriam has expressed the view she does not want to wear a hijab. The Social Worker is exploring this issue with Amal and Youssef, as well as community based workers such as the Lebanese Muslim Women's Association, the IMAM and other carers who have not shared the same faith as their Islam foster child. The community mentor who is linking Adam to the Turkish mosque is a potential conduit to also support Myriam and Isaac's faith practices.

As with Adam, Sarah and Simon celebrated Eid-al Fitr, the end of Ramadan by attending the local community festival and buying the children a gift.

Sarah and Simon attend church regularly on Sundays. The three children, Adam, Myriam and Isaac also attend with the family. The children do not participate in rituals such as communion, and report that they enjoy catching up with their friends after the church service.

10. Practice outcomes

10.1 The children, parents and carers

Collecting information using the S.E.L.F framework facilitated conversations with the children and helped develop a relationship between them and the Social Worker. It contributed to hearing the children's voice about their settlement journey, including listening to the sleeping behaviour patterns that had helped regulate them. Assumptions about the judgements and risks of siblings sleeping together linked to Western views of sleeping patterns were parked and biases unpacked.

The children's connections with their ethnicity and language was considered and nurtured through their foster carers and their participation in community events. The carers' capacity supports the children through cultural events and language development was confirmed and opportunities for additional supports where needed were explored.

While cultural and faith was not matched in the placement home, there was evidence of the carer's openness to respecting faith based differences and actively leaning inwards to ensure opportunities for more meaningful faith alignment was provided to the children, via other cultural mentors.

The carer's openness and respect of the children's and the family's history was reflected in their approach to engaging with the children's parents and facilitating the creation of a home for the children which could include their parents.

10.2 Social worker

The framework provided guidance on intentionally considering deeper level of questions that enhanced a better understanding of the issues influencing the children's care. It provided guidance for collecting information that deepened an understanding of their parent's capacity to navigate through personal challenges associated with their history and traumas and adjustments through displacement periods as refugees and parents in Australia. The four tiers of questions facilitated curiosity, respect and consideration of surface level culture, as well as more shallow and deeper level meaning to cultural connections.

10.3 Organisational

The framework provides guidance for organisations to collect data across the four tiers and explore opportunities for culturally respective approaches to supporting children, parents and carers whose cultures do not necessarily align. It provides guidance for information gathering on different cultural elements and to share such as an educational resource that can in turn be used to facilitate conversations with children, parents, carers and more broader community cultural representatives. In addition the framework can inform agenda discussions at Program, team or Communities of Practice Forums [32] that encourage reflective dialogue, debate and leaning [18, 33].

11. Discussions

All children have a right to be connected to their culture. Australia, like most international countries have agreed as signatories to the UN Children's Rights Convention

to honour this responsibility. And this right needs to be prioritised for all children cared for by OOHC services. Investing in the wellbeing of children in care is of critical importance, internationally, nationally and locally. Social Workers have critical roles to play in this work, whether it is as policy makers, organisational leaders, team managers, or direct practitioners.

The OOHC system is complex and confronted with multiple layers of competing priorities. Budget and workforce pressures, attention to compliance and crisis responses and limited foster carers, amongst other issues contribute to such complexities. In an environment of potential consistent disruptions, changes and relational disconnections the approaches social workers (and others representing OOHC services), use to monitor these challenges and remain focused on child's holistic wellbeing needs matters. In needs to be intentional, deliberate and consistent. Decisions made by Social Workers have a ripple effect impacting children's experiences at a point in time and into their future.

The S.E.L.F cultural framework provides guidance for being curious and for seeking out information from children and families to better understand what culture might mean to them. Through this process of respectful questioning social workers can better engage with family members particularly those who may have different cultural backgrounds. In turn better engagement can contribute to better understanding and support how social workers approach nurturing children's relationships with their parents, communities and cultures. A person's connectedness to family, community, and culture—is more predictive of their mental health than their history of adversity [34].

Contemporary Australian child welfare services attention to cultural care needs, often defaults to Indigenous children. Given the historical appalling practices of separating Indigenous children from their families, and the subsequent impacts on multi-generations, there is a need for such focused reforms and healing. However, this priority should not lead to the overlooking the cultural care needs of other children in OOHC including children from other culturally diverse backgrounds.

Australia is an increasingly culturally diverse country, rich with over 60,000 years of continuous Indigenous cultures speaking over 250 languages, as well as other culturally and linguistically diverse individuals and families. Almost half the population was born overseas or has parents born overseas. Data on CALD children in care is not maintained well. The percentage of the OOHC population or indeed the cultural elements of the CALD children in care is not known. How social workers value cultural data collection, how cultural elements are collectively understood and agreed to, varies, contributing to practice inconsistencies and an absence of meaningful data. One program measured 60 different ethnic groups, 40 different languages and 15 different faith groups in one cohort of 600 children. The likelihood of non-Indigenous children's cultural profiles in Australia's OOHC system being diverse is significant.

Research has consistently recommended more attention to collecting cultural data and focusing on children's cultural care needs, considering cultural reflective conversations and training for social workers and carers. However, the implementation remains to date underdeveloped.

When children come into care, their relationships and potential cultural experiences shifts. Whether children are cared for by kin or unrelated culturally different foster carers, children's subsequent care and experiences will be influenced by decisions and environments provided to them by the OOHC system. Being intentional about such experiences and taking proactive action to monitor and facilitate positive cultural connections with family and community matters. Social Workers approach to such work matters. It needs to be intentional, consistent and meaningful.

Children's culture and trajectory is influenced directly and indirectly by those who care and interact with them. Those involved in children's care have a responsibility to actively consider how they interact and impact on children's immediate and longer-term care. Self-awareness, and a willingness to question, reflect, and learn can contribute positively to how social workers and other practitioners interact and support children in care, especially those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Practice environments that facilitate opportunities for professional forums to explore practices, share knowledge, and learn can contribute to better approaches to facilitating children's positive cultural experiences.

The S.E.L.F framework provides guidance for social workers to have conversations, be curious and explore what is culturally important to children and families. Where cultural care planning is practiced with children in OOHC the four elements can guide cultural care information and considerations. For supervisors and teams it can shape professional development agenda, facilitate reflective dialogues, sharing ideas, exploring assumptions, biases, and views. For organisations it can provides guidance on approaches to data collections that record the child's settlement, ethnicity, language and faith. From a strategy lens it can guide intentional collaborations, partnerships and networks with cultural leaders community who can contribute to earlier intervention initiatives, raise awareness and educate families on such topics as child development, parenting in Australia and cultural community mentor roles.

12. Conclusion

Social workers can be *cultural practice warriers* advocating for children's rights to be connected to family and community. Through intentional conversations, checking out and clarifying information, social workers can plan for and nurture both relationships, and activities that can facilitate a child's connection to their cultural heritage. The S.E.L.F framework is a useful tool towards nurturing such culturally aware, responsive social workers. Most importantly this work can actively contribute to meeting caring responsibilities for children from culturally diverse backgrounds in OOHC and facilitate children's right to know their family, community and culture. Information that can be a critical anchor helping children develop a positive, sense of identity and belonging while in care and into their adult years.

Author details

Kathy Karatasas
Transforming Early Education and Child Health Research Centre (TeEACH),
University of Western Sydney, Australia

*Address all correspondence to: k.karatasas@westernsydney.edu.au

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Chapter 5

Autoethnography as Storytelling: Indonesian Migrant Workers' Children Born in Malaysia in Search of Justice and Child Welfare

Jagad Aditya Dewantara, Dasim Budimansyah and Rdm Johan Johor Mulyadi

Abstract

In the early 1990s, a wave of Indonesian worker migration to Malaysia created significant social, cultural, and economic dynamics in Southeast Asia. This autoethnography explores the lived experiences of Indonesian migrant workers' children born in Malaysia, focusing on their pursuit of justice and child welfare amidst the complex socio-economic and cultural dynamics shaped by migration. Set against the backdrop of the early 1990s wave of Indonesian labour migration to Malaysia, the narrative delves into the realities faced by undocumented workers and their families, with Tawau, Sabah, as the focal point. Tawau, a pivotal reception hub for Indonesian migrants, highlights the contributions of workers predominantly from Java, Sulawesi, and Nusa Tenggara to Malaysia's burgeoning palm oil industry. Despite their indispensable roles, these workers confront significant challenges, including legal invisibility, labour exploitation, and limited access to social protections. This study adopts a storytelling approach to autoethnography, with the author (Rdm Johan Johor Mulyadi) serving as both narrator and observer, offering first-hand insights into the struggles of migrant families and their children, who are often caught in a liminal space of belonging. By weaving personal observations with broader socio-political contexts, this narrative underscores the urgent need for collaborative reforms between Indonesia and Malaysia to ensure justice, social inclusion, and child welfare for this vulnerable population.

Keywords: autoethnography, justice, child welfare, Indonesian migrant workers, cultural dynamics

1. Introduction

1.1 An arrival full of hope and uncertainty

> "An imagined community is a community conceived in the mind, as its members, even the smallest among them, will never know, meet, or even hear of most of the other members. Yet, in the mind of each individual, the image of their shared unity lives on."

This quote is taken from Benedict Anderson's book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) [1].

Anderson's discussion of "imagined communities" offers profound insights into nationalism and collective identity. He explains that a nation or national community is not solely based on physical relationships or direct interactions among individuals but is instead rooted in shared ideas imagined by its members. Individuals within a nation may never meet or know each other directly, yet they feel connected through a collective consciousness of their existence as part of a larger community.

This concept is relevant to our study on the national identity of Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia and the Dayak community in Malaysia. For instance, migrant children born stateless face challenges in building a national identity because they lack both emotional and legal connections to either Indonesia or Malaysia. Similarly, the Dayak community in Malaysia, influenced by colonial legacies, often hesitates to identify as Dayak, thus losing their connection to their "imagined community" as part of the broader Dayak cultural identity. These conditions highlight the importance of a nation or community providing space for its members to imagine a sense of togetherness that enables them to feel belonging, connection, and appreciation.

This autoethnography recounts the story of one of the researchers, Rdm Johan Johor Mulyadi, who serves as a co-author of this narrative. Johan has an extensive track record in diplomacy, with experience in high-risk areas and strategic roles in strengthening Indonesia's international relations. In 2012, Johan served as Head of the Sub-Directorate for the Forum of East Asia and Latin America Cooperation under the Directorate for Intraregional Cooperation in the Americas and Europe at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Previously, between 2011 and 2012, Johan was deployed as an observer in a combat intelligence unit in Mindanao, Southern Philippines, as part of Indonesia's Peacekeeping Forces, Garuda Contingent XXXIV-A International Monitoring Team. During this assignment, the researcher collaborated with a team of 15 joint personnel comprising diplomats from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and military officers from the Army, Navy, and Air Force, all classified as Commando due to the high-risk nature of the conflict zone. Prior to deployment, the entire team underwent a month-long intensive training at the Peacekeeping Mission Center (PMPP) in Sentul, West Java [2]. Recognized by the United Nations as a center for educating and training peacekeeping forces worldwide, the PMPP's training covered various aspects of combat intelligence operations relevant to supporting peace missions in conflict areas.

After completing the assignment in Mindanao, diplomats based in Jakarta are typically reassigned to Indonesian missions abroad. However, the researcher's next assignment deviated from this norm, placing him at the Indonesian Consulate in Tawau, Sabah, East Malaysia. Previously functioning as an Immigration and Customs Office, the Indonesian Consulate in Tawau faced significant challenges in serving Indonesian citizens, particularly migrant workers. Key issues included involvement by certain technical staff and senior diplomats in criminal acts of corruption and extortion targeting migrant workers. Consequently, several diplomats faced criminal charges and were dishonorably discharged. Aware of the consulate's tarnished reputation, many diplomats were reluctant to accept postings there. However, driven by integrity and commitment to fulfilling his civil service oath since graduating from the Foreign Service School in 1996, the researcher accepted the assignment without hesitation. The posting to the Indonesian Consulate in Tawau marked the researcher's first experience in the Asian region after nearly two decades of service in Latin America and the Caribbean. During his career, the researcher developed expertise in the

region, including fluency in Spanish, which made him a valuable asset in diplomatic relations within Spanish-speaking territories. Although initially surprised by this reassignment, Johan viewed it as an opportunity to demonstrate his adaptability and contribute beyond his professional comfort zone.

The researcher's commitment to serving in difficult areas, such as Cuba, between 1999 and 2002 strengthened his reputation as a diplomat capable of dealing with complex situations. In Cuba, Johan faced challenges from the country's economic conditions due to the prolonged US embargo [3]. This experience shaped the researcher's ability to handle sensitive issues at the bilateral and multilateral levels and foster empathy for communities in difficult conditions. The researcher's assignment at the Indonesian Consulate in Tawau is proof of dedication to state duties and shows integrity in facing temptations and challenges that often arise in diplomacy. With a broad background in handling international issues, the researcher continues to demonstrate a commitment to providing the best service for the interests of the state and Indonesian citizens abroad. When I first set foot in Tawau as an attaché, I (Johan) immediately realized that these migrant workers were marginalized. They live in simple barracks in the middle of plantations, far from the city center. Among them were energetic young men, women carrying small children, and families looking tired but still in high spirits. They had come to Malaysia for various reasons: to pay off debts, to pay for their children's education, or to seek a better life than their hometowns could offer. I still remember my first conversation with a worker named Pak Surya, a middle-aged man from East Java. In his distinctive accent, he told me about his long and dangerous journey by sea to reach Tawau. "We had no choice," he said. "Back home, the rice fields had been sold to pay off the debts. Here, at least there was work, even though it was hard."

When I first arrived in Tawau, my first impression was that Tawau, although a small sub-district by Indonesian standards, seemed more developed. This comparison was a powerful reflection of how a country's policies and administration can influence the development of its regions, especially in border areas. As a home for the research family for 4 years, Tawau became a starting point for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of Malaysian administration, the history of its formation, and the transnational ideologies that shape the country's character. The ideology of transnationalism for the Indonesian diaspora in Malaysia reflects a life that crosses national borders, where individuals or groups are not only tied to one country of origin but also to the country they immigrated to [4, 5]. The Indonesian diaspora in Malaysia often builds dual identities, feeling an emotional closeness to their homeland of Indonesia while adapting to social and economic life in Malaysia [6]. The social and economic networks established between the two are a key feature of transnationalism [7], where they maintain relationships with family in Indonesia, send money, and build connections that connect the two countries, especially in the palm oil plantation sector and domestic work. In addition, many Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia access resources and opportunities in both countries, whether in work, education, or business.

Social solidarity among the Indonesian diaspora is also very strong, with kinship ties maintained between the first generation of migrants and the diaspora community that has long lived in Malaysia. This supports creating a community that helps each other in everyday life. On the other hand, the Indonesian diaspora is also involved in transnational politics, paying attention to political developments in Indonesia and playing a role in organizations that fight for the rights of Indonesian migrant workers [8]. In terms of culture, they maintain Indonesian traditions through media, art, and

social activities, creating a hybrid culture influenced by both countries [9, 10]. However, this ideology of transnationalism has changed over time, especially among the younger generation of the diaspora, who increasingly feel integrated into life in Malaysia. Nevertheless, solidarity and collective identity are maintained, strengthening the role of the Indonesian diaspora in keeping ties with their homeland while adapting to a new life in the destination country. This transnationalism forms a flexible and adaptive identity, allowing them to connect two different worlds, influence each other, and enrich their life experiences as part of a global community [11].

Upon arriving in Tawau, Johan immediately noticed stark differences in the characteristics of Indonesian and Malaysian societies. Although both stemmed from Malay cultural roots, Malaysian society appeared more "British-oriented" in daily behavior [12]. Amid his efforts to adapt, a local government propaganda banner caught his attention. The banner prominently prohibited the employment of "PATI Indon," an acronym referring to illegal immigrants from Indonesia. The term "Indon" sparked various interpretations among the region's Malaysians and the Indonesian diaspora. While some Malaysians claimed it was merely a practical abbreviation, similar to "KL" for Kuala Lumpur, many Indonesians believed the term carried a derogatory connotation. This ambiguity prompted the Indonesian Consulate in Tawau to display banners stating, "Do not call us Indon, call us Indonesia." This initiative aimed to assert national identity and eliminate the stigma undermining the dignity of Indonesian citizens. Unlike some diplomats who spent most of their time in the office, Johan and his team actively engaged with the local community, government officials, and the Indonesian diaspora.

The Indonesian diaspora in Tawau lived in groups based on their regional origins, such as Bugis, Makassar, Toraja, Javanese, Banjar, Timorese, and Lombok. Each group formed close-knit communities, reflecting their preserved cultural bonds despite migrating across national borders. Through visits and dialogs, Johan discovered that many members of the Indonesian diaspora in Tawau harbored a deep longing for their ancestral homeland. While some had migrated to Tawau centuries ago, others had arrived within the last few decades. Regular visits to Indonesia were a strong emotional bridge, reminding them of their cultural roots. One particularly notable relationship involved a family of Suluk descent in Tawau, whose ancestors had migrated from Mindanao, Southern Philippines, and had since become prominent political figures in Malaysia. Beyond mere friendship, Johan cultivated familial bonds with the researchers and families of these diaspora workers. This experience also revealed stark contrasts on the opposite side of the border, in Nunukan Regency, North Kalimantan. Despite being rich in natural resources, Nunukan appeared underdeveloped compared to Tawau. The disparity was especially apparent at night: Nunukan was enveloped in darkness, while Tawau was brightly illuminated. The lack of lighting in Nunukan was attributed to the limited electricity supply from East Kalimantan Province, which could only provide power 4 days a week. For the remaining 3 days, the region endured total blackouts.

Complex internal issues, such as corruption, illegal land acquisition, illegal logging, and fraudulent foreign investment schemes, further exacerbate these limitations. The dominance of structured power hierarchies is a significant barrier to the region's development. During Johan's visit to the local correctional facility, it was revealed that a former Regent of Nunukan was serving a prison sentence for corruption. As the Head of the Investment and One-Stop Integrated Services Office in North Kalimantan Province in 2017, the researcher gained valuable insights into the various development challenges in border regions. The underdevelopment of Nunukan reflects broader structural issues,

where the extraordinary potential of North Kalimantan remains unoptimized for the benefit of local communities. This experience provided a profound lesson on the importance of cross-border synergy in strengthening international relations. Border areas are not merely lines of separation but are spaces rich in social, cultural, and economic dynamics that demand special attention. Recognizing this, the researcher understood that fostering mutual respect and strengthening kinship is crucial to achieving harmony between these two closely related nations. With an inclusive approach and respect for local culture, the relationship between Tawau and Nunukan could serve as a model for better management of border regions in the future.

Life in the border regions between Tawau, Malaysia, and the cities in North Kalimantan, Indonesia, presents a paradox between geographic proximity and the vast disparities in living standards [13]. Having lived in Tawau for several years, I had the opportunity to witness and experience firsthand the unique socio-economic dynamics of this border area. In Tawau, packaged food industry products such as cooking oil, sugar, garlic, and Milo are readily available at significantly lower prices than similar items imported from Java or Sulawesi to North Kalimantan. The superior quality of these products makes them highly sought after by the Indonesian population at the border.

However, the harsh reality is that the high demand from Indonesian consumers is never matched by the supply of imported goods from Malaysia, creating chronic market tensions. These Malaysian goods do not only flood Nunukan or Tarakan—cities directly bordering Malaysia—but also penetrate farther regions, such as Berau in East Kalimantan [14]. The geographic proximity between Tawau and Nunukan, separated only by a narrow strait, allows goods to proceed seamlessly. Behind this legal flow lies a shadowy trade referred to as "smokol"—a term derived from the English word "smuggle." Smuggling has become an open secret at the border. Anecdotes circulate widely about how certain civilians and military officials often facilitate these illegal activities. By exploiting their positions, they enable the smooth operation of such practices, creating an entrenched shadow economy that is difficult to eradicate. The border communities on both sides seem to live in an unofficial symbiosis—urgent needs in Indonesia meet surplus availability in Malaysia. In between, legal loopholes become opportunities for those seeking to profit.

Tawau, despite being administratively classified as a sub-district-level city, offers significantly more comprehensive public facilities compared to the border cities of Indonesia. It boasts a grand central mosque, an international airport, a large-scale port for passengers and goods, modern cinemas, shopping centers, and even a branch of Universiti Malaysia Sabah. In stark contrast, Nunukan, located just a stone's throw away from Tawau, appears far more modest and deprived of basic facilities. The infrastructure in Nunukan reflects stark inequality, with frequent power outages and a lack of street lighting at night. From Tawau, the view of Nunukan at night resembles a dark shadow, barely visible. I still vividly remember my first time setting foot in Tawau, surrounded by the abundance of the city's facilities. Meanwhile, just across the strait, the people of Nunukan struggle to cope with significant limitations. Despite its wealth of natural resources, the region faces numerous challenges, including a low-quality human resource base, inadequate educational facilities, and insufficient healthcare services. These conditions create a heavy dependence on Malaysian products, which serve as pragmatic solutions amidst these constraints.

For me, living in Tawau became a reflective journey that opened my eyes. I learned that life at the border is not only about physical boundaries but also about the mental and structural divides shaped by differing policies, colonial histories, and unequal

economic dynamics. Tawau and Nunukan, though separated by a narrow strait, illustrate how borders can become spaces of complex interactions—where solidarity meets exclusion, and the necessities of life often blur the lines between legality and morality.

2. The life of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia

Days on the palm oil plantations begin before sunrise. Armed with simple tools, workers traverse red dirt paths toward towering palm trees. Their tasks vary, from harvesting oil palm fruit to transporting large bunches onto transport trucks. The work is exhausting and often hazardous, with risks of snake bites, insect stings, and other workplace accidents. Their wages are meager, barely sufficient to cover basic needs such as food and shelter. Yet, they persevere, driven by the hope of sending a portion of their earnings back to their families in their home villages.

In the evenings, life stirs in the workers' barracks. Laughter and conversation fill the air, often accompanied by the strains of dangdut music playing from old radios. Here, workers share stories of family back home, the challenges of their jobs, and their dreams for the future. However, moments of joy are often punctuated by tears when someone receives bad news from home. Most of the workers I encountered were undocumented, rendering them vulnerable to exploitation and deportation. Many paid exorbitant fees to unscrupulous agents, only to find that the promised jobs did not match reality. Their undocumented status also deters them from seeking help when faced with unfair treatment or abuse.

In Malaysia, the lives of the children of Indonesian palm oil workers, particularly in Sabah and Tawau, reflect immense hardships. Malaysian law prohibits migrant workers, including those from Indonesia, from bringing their families—wives and children—with them to work in Malaysia. Consequently, these workers must often endure prolonged separation from their families. However, over time, some succeed in reuniting with their families by bringing them to Malaysia or through marriages with fellow Indonesians or local Malaysians. This phenomenon has prompted the Indonesian Consulate in Tawau to organize annual *Itsbat Nikah* programs. These programs aim to assist Indonesian migrant workers who have yet to formalize their marriages, both religiously and legally. They allow workers to legitimize their marital relationships under Indonesian law, ensuring their unions are lawful and recognized. Moreover, these programs offer practical solutions for workers to obtain essential documents such as passports, family cards, marriage certificates, and birth certificates for their children.

Birth certificates are particularly crucial for children born in Malaysia, as they facilitate access to formal education and enable the acquisition of passports when they reach the appropriate age. Despite these legalization efforts, a significant issue remains: the children of Indonesian migrant workers are often denied access to formal education in Malaysian public and private schools due to restrictive regulations. Without formal education, these children are highly vulnerable to transnational ideological influences prevalent in Malaysia, such as liberalism and radicalization, which threaten their Indonesian identity. While these ideological currents may not be overtly visible in mainstream media, they permeate through social media and local environments, compounding the challenges faced by the young generation of Indonesia's diaspora in Malaysia.

A significant consequence of this situation is the increased vulnerability of Indonesian migrant workers' children to radicalization and terrorism. The history of

violence involving Malaysian terrorists such as Dr. Azhari and Nordin M. Top, who carried out various acts of terror in Indonesia, highlights the deeply entrenched nature of radical transnational ideologies [15]. Children of Indonesian migrant workers who do not receive formal education and are isolated can be potential targets for extremist groups seeking to recruit them. The Indonesian government's efforts to strictly supervise graduates of religious schools from the Middle East after these incidents are one step toward preventing their recruitment into terrorist groups that can damage social integrity and stability. The presence of children of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia is crucial because they are not only faced with issues of education and legality but also with the challenge of maintaining their cultural and religious identity amidst the influence of strong transnational ideologies. The success of programs such as Itsbat Nikah is key to providing them with the basic rights they should receive as part of the Indonesian family and nation. The acts of terrorism that have occurred, especially those related to Malaysian terrorist individuals such as Dr. Azhari and Nordin M. Top, have had a profound impact on the global perception of Islam. These acts of violence provide space for Western nations and non-Muslim groups to reinforce the stereotype that Muslims tend to engage in violence and that Islamic preaching is spread in a harsh and coercive manner rather than peacefully and lovingly. This is certainly very disturbing for the majority of Muslims, including in Indonesia, who uphold the values of peace and loyalty to the state and the law. In facing this challenge, the Indonesian government must be present, both domestically and abroad, to provide ideological guidance that emphasizes the values of Pancasila to Indonesian citizens (WNI), especially in the Sabah region. The presence of the Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia (KJRI) in Kota Kinabalu and the Indonesian Consulate in Tawau is very important in this regard because they have a strategic role in ensuring that the basic rights of Indonesian citizens, especially children of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia, are fulfilled. One is the right to education, a basic right of every child, like food. Although the KJRI has established the Indonesian School of Kota Kinabalu (SIKK) in Kota Kinabalu to provide education to children of Indonesian citizens whose parents work at the Consulate General, the Malaysian government's policy limits access to this education to children of Indonesian staff and diplomats. This shows that there are significant limitations for children of Indonesian migrant workers who cannot access education at SIKK. Once, when SIKK tried to accept migrant workers' children, Malaysian authorities conducted a raid on them. Only by using diplomatic vehicles with CC license plates, which have diplomatic immunity, can the children get safe transportation from home to school, thus avoiding inspections by Malaysian authorities.

On the other hand, the Indonesian Consulate in Tawau is aware of the urgent need to provide education for the children of migrant workers who are on oil palm plantations. Given the limitations of SIKK, the Indonesian Consulate in Tawau collaborates with the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture, as well as Indonesian Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) led by (the late) Najamuddin Ramli, a Director at the Ministry of Education and Culture. Through this collaboration, they strive to establish and manage Community Learning Activity Centers (PKBM) in oil palm plantation areas located in five working areas of the Indonesian Consulate in Tawau. These PKBMs provide an opportunity for the children of Indonesian migrant workers to get an education by bringing in teachers from Indonesia who are willing to teach in these areas. This effort, although limited and full of challenges, reflects the strong desire of the Indonesian Consulate to fulfill the basic rights of the children of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia and provide them with opportunities to have a

better future. The existence of education amid an isolated and challenging life on a palm oil plantation is an important symbol in the effort to preserve Indonesian identity and values. At the same time, it protects them from the negative influence of transnational ideologies that could damage the young generation of Indonesians abroad.

3. Autoethnography: Legal ambiguity and National identity of children of Indonesian migrant worker

It was a hot morning over an oil palm plantation in Peninsular Sabah, Malaysia. I walked toward a simple house on the edge of the plantation, where several families of Indonesian migrant workers lived. The houses were only wooden on dirt floors, with zinc roofs the only protection from the heavy rains that often drenched the area. Children were playing in one corner of the yard, laughing freely as they ran among the piles of oil palms. Their faces showed the joy of childhood, but I realized a more complex story behind them—their struggle for identity, education, and a better future. These children were the children of thousands of Indonesian migrant workers who came to Malaysia to seek a living. Born in a foreign land, they faced a double challenge: on the one hand, they were the generation that their families had hoped for, but on the other hand, they were in a situation the system did not want. Their citizenship status was often unclear—they were not recognized as Malaysian citizens, but it was also difficult to obtain Indonesian citizenship documents due to the complicated bureaucratic process. This situation places them in limbo, without official identity, access to proper education, and adequate legal protection.

I found several studies discussing statelessness in Indonesia, one of which is that the phenomenon of statelessness in Indonesia covers various ethnic groups and individuals who are marginalized by the administrative and political system [16]. One group trapped in this situation is the ethnic Chinese Indonesians who do not have official documents to prove their citizenship. Many lost their citizenship status due to errors in civil registration documents, so they are not recognized as Indonesian or Chinese citizens [17]. Similar conditions are experienced by ethnic Arabs and Indians in Indonesia, who are also unable to prove their citizenship because their status was recorded incorrectly or the relevant official documents were never issued [18]. In addition, Indonesian migrant workers who live abroad for a long period, especially under the provisions of the 1958 Law and the 2006 update, lose their citizenship and cannot meet the requirements to return to citizenship [19]. A few Indonesians exiled due to political conflict in 1965 also faced the same fate, becoming stateless abroad [20]. On the other hand, there are also undocumented migrants from China who have long lived in Indonesia but are not recognized as Indonesian citizens because they were not born in this country. Despite their different backgrounds, all of these groups share the same challenges: legal uncertainty, limited access to basic rights, and social marginalization that further worsens their lives.

Experts have provided various scientific views on the issue of migrant workers' children born abroad, especially in Malaysia, and statelessness. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), every child has the right to an identity, including citizenship [21]. Without citizenship, children lose access to basic rights, such as education, health, and legal protection [22]. Other studies have also shown that strict immigration and citizenship policies often make it difficult for migrant

children to obtain official documents [23, 24]. In Malaysia, migrant workers' children do not automatically obtain citizenship because their status depends on their parents' documents, which are often incomplete. This barrier has major implications for access to education, which is an important tool to break the cycle of poverty and social marginalization. Other studies have also highlighted the role of programs such as Community Learning Centers (CLCs) as a partial solution, but their scope is limited and cannot replace formal education [25].

In addition, the social and economic vulnerability of stateless children explains that they are vulnerable to exploitation, human trafficking, and limited social mobility due to the lack of official documents [26]. In this regard, the psychology field emphasizes that the uncertainty of their legal status creates emotional stress that hurts mental health and social development [27]. On the other hand, we emphasize the importance of cooperation between countries in resolving the problem of statelessness, including through bilateral agreements to facilitate birth registration and ensure that migrant children have access to citizenship. Therefore, the need for the responsibility of countries of origin of migrant workers, such as Indonesia, must be increased to protect their citizens abroad, including their children. Meanwhile, destination countries such as Malaysia also need to ensure that migrant children are not completely marginalized.

Suggested solutions include increasing access to birth registration through Indonesian consulates in Malaysia to prevent children from becoming stateless, revising Malaysia's citizenship policy to be more inclusive and expanding education programs such as the CLC with support from the governments of both countries. Establishing a cross-border cooperation forum could also help address this issue holistically. In addition, awareness campaigns and advocacy for children's rights and the importance of official documentation for migrant workers need to be encouraged. This view emphasizes that statelessness among migrant workers' children is not just a legal issue. It also encompasses social, economic, and human rights dimensions, requiring a multidisciplinary approach to ensure their justice and well-being. When I spoke to Lina, a young mother from East Java, she told me about her son, Rafi, who is now 7 years old. "He was born here, but until now he does not have a birth certificate. I've tried to take care of it at the Indonesian embassy, but the process is long and expensive," Lina said bitterly. As a result, Rafi has not been able to enroll in formal school in Malaysia. He only studies at a makeshift school run by a migrant worker community, which has minimal facilities and is not recognized by the Malaysian government. Education for children of Indonesian migrant workers abroad, especially in palm oil plantation areas in Malaysia, is called Community Learning Center (CLC) schools. CLC is good, but the education and ion provided are not in-depth deptinsuffisentient.

Rafi is not the only one who attends the Community Learning Center (CLC). Many children like him are trapped in a system that ignores their basic rights. In Malaysia, the formal education system requires proof of citizenship or other official documents, which are often not available to children of migrant workers. Without access to education, they lose the opportunity to change their fate and escape the cycle of poverty. These children are then forced to work on plantations from an early age, helping their parents in the hope of making ends meet. In a conversation with a teacher at the community school, I heard another story about the difficulties these children face. "They really want to learn, but we only have one book for three children, and the classroom is hot because there is no fan," said Ibu Yati, who has taught at the school for over 5 years. "We also lack teachers because this is an unofficial school. The teachers here are volunteers, most of whom are also migrant

workers." This situation shows how the systems in Indonesia and Malaysia have not provided adequate solutions. Malaysia, despite being a major destination country for migrant workers, still does not have an inclusive policy for the children of migrant workers. In contrast, Indonesia often views this problem as an external issue, relying only on consulates to handle individual cases without a broader strategy.

The psychological burden experienced by these children cannot be ignored. In my conversation with Farhan, a 14-year-old teenager, he expressed his feelings. "Sometimes I feel like I do not belong. Malaysians say I'm Indonesian, but I've never been to Indonesia. When my friends ask, I say I'm from here." His identity has become blurred, and this has affected his self-confidence. Farhan is an example of how this generation lives between two worlds without belonging to either one. From a legal perspective, this issue is a major challenge. Without official documents, these children are vulnerable to exploitation. They can easily become victims of human trafficking, labour exploitation, or even neglect. Unfortunately, the legal framework in both Indonesia and Malaysia does not provide sufficient protection for them. In Indonesia, many of these children return without documents and cannot continue their education because they do not have an NIK (National Population Registration Number).

Meanwhile, in Malaysia, their status as "illegal immigrants" marginalizes them from public services. As a researcher who has witnessed this condition firsthand, I cannot ignore the importance of more systematic interventions. The solution to this problem must come from both countries. At the bilateral level, Indonesia and Malaysia need to strengthen their cooperation in addressing the issue of migrant workers' children. A bilateral agreement that ensures children's rights to education, health, and legal protection is an important first step. In addition, there needs to be a special program that facilitates the processing of citizenship documents for these children, both in Malaysia and after they return to Indonesia. At the community level, a community-based approach can also be a solution. Community schools like those on plantations should be supported with adequate funds and resources. The Indonesian government can partner with local and international NGOs to provide non-formal education on par with national education standards. On the other hand, public awareness is also important. The issue of migrant workers' children must be a shared concern, not only among migrant workers but also in the wider community. The media can raise awareness of children's rights and encourage the government to act.

This autoethnography is an attempt to bring these stories out of the shadows. In their daily lives, these migrant workers' children demonstrate extraordinary courage in facing challenges. They are a reminder that there are young faces with big dreams behind the statistics and policies. We must ensure that they have the opportunity to realize those dreams, no matter where they were born or who their parents are. Successfully addressing this issue will be a major step toward social justice and cross-border prosperity for future generations. In Tawau, I also saw how discrimination against migrant workers is a real problem. They are often seen as "job stealers" or "disturbers" by some locals. This stereotype is reinforced by the media, which often only highlights criminal cases involving migrant workers, ignoring their contribution to the local economy.

One of the most touching sights for me was the children of migrant workers. Many were born in Malaysia but are not recognized as citizens by either country. They grow up on plantations without access to proper education or healthcare—their lives starkly reflect genera born between two worlds but not fully accepted in either. I once met a child named Rini, who was about 7 years old. With sparkling eyes, she told me about her dream of becoming a teacher. But the reality she faced was far from that dream.

Without proper documentation, Rini cannot attend public schools, while private schools are too expensive for her family. She spends days helping her mother cook or playing around the barracks with other children. Rini is one of thousands of children born to migrant workers in Malaysia who face uncertain identities and futures.

The lack of official documentation is a major barrier for these children to access their basic rights. Without birth certificates or clear citizenship, they are deprived not only of educational opportunities but also of proper health care. Many do not even have access to basic vaccinations, which increases their health risks. Several local NGOs have tried to offer assistance, but limited resources make this assistance uneven. As an attaché, I often felt helpless in this situation. My job is to bridge the needs of this community with the policies of the Indonesian and Malaysian governments. But, often, existing policies are not enough to address the complexity of their problems. At that time, I tried to advocate for informal education programs that were accessible to these children. Some migrant worker communities began establishing informal schools with simple curricula taught by volunteers. However, challenges remain, especially regarding funding and legal recognition of these schools. I also witnessed how these children face psychological stress due to their unrecognized status. They are often the target of intimidation in their neighborhoods, both from adult workers and the local community. Uncertainty about their identity creates a crisis of self-confidence, which can impact their mental development.

However, despite all these challenges, these children show incredible strength. They learn to survive amid uncertainty; many have big dreams despite their very limited circumstances. I still remember when Rini (a child of Indonesian workers) showed me her small notebook filled with pictures of teachers and students in a classroom. "I want to be like this someday," she said shyly. Her words reminded me that hope is one thing that cannot be destroyed, even in the most difficult circumstances. In my reflection, this situation reflects the complexity of migration and its impact on young people. In the middle of the physical and emotional borders between two countries, these children symbolize the challenges that governments, communities, and the international community must face together. More inclusive policies, access to education, and legal protection are important steps that must be taken to ensure that this generation does not become victims of a failed system. Despite many challenges, this migrant worker community shows incredible solidarity and resilience. They support each other through hardships, share food, and celebrate important days together.

When Ramadan comes, their barracks transform into a vibrant place, with simple meals shared and prayers offered for a better future. One of the most memorable moments in my memory was when I attended a wedding in one of the barracks. Although the wedding was very simple, with decorations made from used cloth and simple food, the atmosphere was full of joy. The event was a reminder that, despite all the limitations, they still have hope and the ability to celebrate life. As an attaché, my experience in Tawau opened my eyes to the realities of Indonesian migrant workers' lives in Malaysia. They are the unseen heroes who work hard to support their families and contribute to the economy of a foreign country. However, they are also human beings who face injustice and inhumane treatment. I learned about the power of courage, solidarity, and hope through my interactions with them. However, I also realized the need for systemic change to provide them with better protection, both from the Indonesian and Malaysian governments. More humane migration policies, access to education for their children, and recognition of their contributions are important steps toward creating a more equitable future for these communities.

4. Memories and experiences about Tawau "Half Alive, Half Dead"

Today, more than three decades after my experience in Tawau, I still remember the faces I met there. They are silent witnesses to the complex dynamics of migration but also symbols of human resilience amidst extraordinary challenges. Their stories are a reminder that behind the statistics and policies, there are real lives at stake. Children of Indonesian migrant workers born in Malaysia face a complex and challenging situation. They are amid legal uncertainty because they are not recognized as citizens by either Malaysia or Indonesia, making them a stateless group. In the legal context, Malaysia applies the principle of jus sanguinis, which grants citizenship based on bloodline. Because their parents are Indonesian migrant workers, these children are considered Indonesian citizens by the Malaysian government. However, Indonesia does not automatically recognize them as citizens without official documents, such as birth certificates or other supporting documents. This creates a legal gap that causes them to lose access to basic rights, such as education, health, and employment. This situation is exacerbated by the lack of systematic efforts to document their existence, reinforcing their vulnerable societal position.

Socially, these children grow up in an environment that does not recognize their existence. They master the Malaysian language and culture but are not fully accepted by the local community because they are considered "outsiders." On the other hand, they also feel disconnected from Indonesia, their parent country, which is just a concept without emotional or physical ties. This marginalization leaves these children trapped in identity confusion, which is exacerbated by discrimination and negative stereotypes against migrant communities. They are often avoided or looked down upon by local communities, who view migrant communities as a source of social problems or economic burdens. In their daily lives, social stigma often hinders their personal development and self-confidence. These children lose access to education and opportunities for healthy socialization, which can potentially build networks and skills that are important for their future lives. The economic challenges faced by these children are no less severe. Their parents work in the informal sector, such as oil palm plantations, with very low incomes and no social protection. Most families live in poverty, without access to necessities such as nutritious food, decent housing, and health services. Living below the poverty line, these children are often forced to work at a very young age to help support their families. They work in the fields or do other manual labour, which stunts their physical and mental development. This cycle of poverty continues as stateless children struggle to access quality formal education. Without adequate skills, they have no future job prospects and are trapped in low-wage manual labour, similar to previous generations. The Malaysian government's migrant workers working legally have only worsened the situation, further limiting their economic opportunities.

These conditions also have serious impacts on the physical and mental health of these children. Many do not have access to basic health care due to their legal status. Preventable diseases often become serious threats because they cannot access public health services. Unhygienic living conditions in workers' dormitories or informal settlements increase the risk of infectious diseases such as dengue fever, tuberculosis, and respiratory infections. Malnutrition is also a common problem, with many children experiencing stunting or being underweight due to a lack of nutritious food intake. Psychologically, the stress of living in constant uncertainty creates a heavy mental burden. Identity uncertainty, limited access, and insecurity are major sources

of stress and anxiety for them. Other studies have shown that stateless individuals have higher rates of depression and anxiety compared to the general population, and these children are no exception [28–30]. The absence of adequate mental support systems leaves these children to face their emotional challenges alone, which often impacts their ability to grow and develop normally. Efforts to address this issue have been made by several civil society organizations and migrant worker communities, such as establishing alternative schools to provide basic education. These schools are usually run by NGOs or local communities, with tailored curricula and more affordable fees. However, these initiatives are often constrained by a lack of funding, strict regulations, and limited resource access. The biggest challenge is the legality of these schools' operations, as the Malaysian government does not officially recognize them. As a result, graduates from these schools do not have recognized diplomas, limiting their opportunities to continue their education or find permanent employment. At the government level, Indonesia has tried to provide attention through special policies to assist migrant worker communities. However, inadequate political priorities and lack of coordination between agencies often hamper their effectiveness. In addition, the complicated administrative procedures for obtaining official documents, such as birth certificates, often discourage parents from caring for them.

Meanwhile, bilateral cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia faces challenges because migration is often a sensitive topic in relations between the two countries [31, 32]. Malaysia has a strict immigration policy emphasizing controlling the number of migrant workers. On the other hand, Indonesia has limitations in protecting its citizens abroad, especially those who work irregularly. A unilateral approach is often not enough to solve this problem. Closer cooperation is needed between the two countries to design inclusive and humane policies for these stateless children. To overcome this challenge, a holistic and sustainable approach is needed. Malaysia should consider ratifying the 1954 Convention on the Status of Stateless Persons to provide better legal protection. By ratifying this convention, Malaysia can provide a way out for children born in its territory to obtain a clearer legal status. The Indonesian and Malaysian governments can work together to provide access to education and health through community schools or special subsidy programs. These initiatives can include providing temporary identity documents for these children to access basic services without the risk of deportation. Public awareness campaigns are also important to reduce social stigma and discrimination against these children. Involving local communities in social integration can create a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Stronger bilateral cooperation is needed to address citizenship issues and provide long-term solutions systematically. Programs such as mass amnesty or naturalization for children of migrant workers can be the first step to breaking this cycle of injustice. In addition, empowering migrant worker communities through skills training and income generation can help them escape poverty so that their children have better opportunities in the future. With these steps, children of migrant workers born in Malaysia can be allowed to live a better life, break the cycle of injustice, and contribute positively to the communities in which they live. This is not just about improving the fate of individuals but also about creating a more just and inclusive future for all. We began to reflect on a bitter reality often encountered in the field, both in our journeys and in the stories we heard from Indonesian migrant children born and raised in Malaysia. They are the first to third generations trapped in legal ambiguity and uncertain national identities. We wanted to tell their stories, which are far from the

news but relevant to the humanitarian and human rights conditions. On a palm oil plantation far from the hustle and bustle of the city, the children of Indonesian migrants grow up without any clarity about their identity. They were born on Malaysian soil but were never recognized as citizens by the country where they were born. The Indonesian state also does not consider them part of the big Indonesian family. This legal ambiguity has become ingrained in their lives and affects almost every aspect. For them, citizenship status is a very vague thing. Most of them were born in Malaysia, but when it comes to identity documents, they only have birth certificates registered in Malaysia. However, Malaysia does not recognize them as citizens because their parents are Indonesian migrant workers. At the same time, Indonesia does not give them recognition as Indonesian citizens because they were not born in Indonesia and do not have valid documents from Indonesia. They are trapped in a legal loophole that gives them no way out.

We can feel how life as a migrant child feels like "living half-heartedly and dying half-heartedly." They do not have the basic rights that every child should have, such as proper education, access to health services, and legal protection, which should be their right. Many of them do not know what Indonesian national education is. No one teaches them about Indonesian culture, the nation's history, or even the Indonesian language, which should be their mother tongue. The education they receive is limited to basic education provided in a limited manner by the Malaysian government or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that try to provide little access. These migrant children grow up in a very limited way of life. In the middle of a remote oil palm plantation, they never get the chance to develop optimally. The lack of adequate educational facilities is one of the reasons why many of them grow up without enough knowledge to achieve a better future. As a result, they are often trapped in manual labour and do not have the same access as other children in their home countries. However, what is more heartbreaking is the fact that after their parents die or are no longer working, they lose their place to depend on. They no longer have a network of families to help or provide protection. On the Malaysian side, they cannot work because their passports are not worker passports, and they are not recognized as Malaysian citizens either. They also do not have access to decent jobs, even to work as manual labourers. They do not have the right to social security or access to legitimate employment. This condition further exacerbates their helplessness.On the Indonesian side, their situation is not much different. Indonesia does not recognize them as part of its citizens, even though they were born on Malaysian soil with Indonesian blood flowing in their bodies. They are isolated, without clear citizenship and adequate access to the resources they should have. They do not know where else to go. They have lost track of family who may still be in Indonesia. They do not know where they belong in the context of national identity. This loss is very pronounced for me as someone who knows how important an identity is. But for them, that identity feels far away and unreachable. They seem to have no place, as if they never existed, never recognized, and never seen by the countries where they are—Malaysia and Indonesia.

I often wonder, what makes them feel like they have no national identity? Why are they so far from the love for their homeland that they should have? Do they feel alienated even in the land that they should call home? This legal and citizenship ambiguity may be the root of their uncertainty. They do not feel like they are part of Indonesia because Indonesia has never paid attention to them. They are also not accepted by Malaysia because they are not Malaysian citizens and do not have the right to live or work with legal status.

Amid this uncertainty, I often feel the same feeling of being adrift as they do. They are at a crossroads with no clear direction. Without education, a family to rely on, and no recognition from the state, they are trapped in an uncertain life cycle. They have not only lost their basic rights but also lost their sense of identity and meaning of life that they should have received from the state. I must give them immediate attention as someone involved in various empowerment and cultural preservation projects. Not only to give them the right to education but also to restore their pride as part of the Indonesian nation. If they do not receive recognition and protection from the state, how can they grow and develop into individuals who can contribute to the progress of their country? They will only remain adrift, marginalized, and thrown away without a clear identity. The story of these migrant children is not just a story of legal uncertainty or lost national identity. It is a story of unfulfilled hopes, of children struggling to find their place in the wider world. As a nation, we cannot just sit back and let them continue to be marginalized. They are part of a country whose rights must be fulfilled like other human beings. They deserve a better future. We hope that 1 day when they look back, they will no longer feel alienated or neglected. We also hope they can feel proud to be part of Indonesia or Malaysia, have a clear identity, and have the opportunity to develop, just like other free children with a homeland and nationality. But for that, the state must be present and pay more attention to them. Because they are the future of a country, even though they were born abroad, they are still children with the right to achieve a better life.

5. Conclusion

Autoethnography as a self-narrative offers an in-depth perspective on the experiences of Indonesian migrant children born in Malaysia, who are often trapped in the ambiguity of citizenship and national identity. These children were born abroad, during an oil palm plantation environment, but are not recognized as citizens by both countries, Indonesia and Malaysia. They grow up without adequate access to education and health services, so their future is threatened to lag far behind their peers in Indonesia. This ambiguity of citizenship status creates uncertainty in their lives, which impacts their basic rights as children, including the right to education and social welfare. This condition not only prevents Indonesian migrant children from accessing basic rights but also creates an identity gap. On the one hand, they cannot work in Malaysia because they are not recognized as legal workers.

On the other hand, they face difficulties getting jobs in Indonesia due to their unclear citizenship status. This leaves them trapped in a condition of "living reluctantly, dying unwillingly," with no place to rely on either in Indonesia or Malaysia. This situation shows that they seem to have no legal citizenship and, worse, no clear national identity for them to identify.

The citizenship policies of both countries, Indonesia and Malaysia, need to be reformed immediately to address this ambiguity. Indonesia must take concrete steps in granting citizenship rights to children of Indonesian migrants born abroad, especially in Malaysia. The naturalization or granting of Indonesian citizenship to these children must be made easier to ensure they receive basic rights such as education, employment, and social services. In addition, Indonesia also needs to create programs that support the understanding of Indonesian-ness among this younger generation to strengthen their sense of identity and pride as Indonesian citizens. Meanwhile,

Malaysia must also introduce more inclusive policies for children of Indonesian migrants, who have often been neglected. This country needs to provide wider access to education for children of Indonesian migrant workers, especially in areas far from city centres. Establishing learning centres such as Community Learning Activity Centers (PKBM) in plantation areas or places where migrant workers live can be a solution to ensure that they receive a decent education. In addition, the country should consider providing other basic rights, such as health services, so that these children are not marginalized in society. Cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia in addressing this issue is very important. Both countries must work together to ensure the protection of the rights of Indonesian migrant children born in Malaysia. This can be done by opening wider access to education, facilitating the granting of Indonesian citizenship to these children, and formulating fairer and more humane policies for them. With these steps, it is hoped that the generation of Indonesian migrant children born in Malaysia can have a brighter future, with access to proper education and the opportunity to develop optimally. In addition, both countries need to see Indonesian migrant children not only as a burden or a problem but as part of a shared future that requires attention and support to develop. Through proper education and providing a clear citizenship identity, they can grow into productive citizens who will not only make Indonesia and Malaysia proud but also contribute to creating a more harmonious relationship between the two countries. The welfare of these migrant children is a shared responsibility that Indonesia and Malaysia must take as part of their commitment to human rights, social justice, and a better future for future generations.

Author details

Jagad Aditya Dewantara[1,2*], Dasim Budimansyah[1] and Rdm Johan Johor Mulyadi[3]

1 Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia

2 Universitas Tanjungpura, Pontianak, Indonesia

3 Badan Pembinaan Ideologi Pancasila, Jakarta, Indonesia

*Address all correspondence to: jagad02@fkip.untan.ac.id

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Chapter 6

Countering Social Exclusion among Disadvantaged Urban Youth: Fostering Aspirations and Skills through Temporary Leadership-Positions in Norway

Ida Merete Solvang

Abstract

Lowering high-school drop-out rates is regarded as a significant challenge in Western countries, as high levels of drop-out create problems both for the individuals affected and for society at large. Dynamics that may contribute to increased drop-out rates are heightened in communities with a prevalence of young people with low socio-economic status, yet the potential benefits of enhancement of strategic skills as a preventative measure directed at youth from disadvantaged communities have received scant attention. This chapter draws on a community-based policy scheme that provided leadership experience for youth from a disadvantaged community by hiring them to fill temporary job vacancies and employing them as leaders. Data are drawn from focus-group interviews with youth aged 13–19 who participated in the 2022 scheme. The data suggest that the acquisition of leadership skills through this temporary vacancy scheme holds the potential to counteract individual ramifications of social exclusion conducive to drop-out. Acquired skills included counteracting destructive group behavior and promoting inclusionary group dynamics. Participants also gained skills in decision-making, completion of tasks, and gaining and maintaining formalized authority. Such learning processes hold the potential to increase self-efficacy, to develop personal agency and support advantageous post-school transitions.

Keywords: youth work, drop-out prevention, community work, disadvantaged youth, skill enhancement

1. Introduction

Lowering high-school drop-out rates is regarded as a significant challenge in Western countries, as escalating rates of drop-out create problems both for the individuals affected and for society at large [1]. Students drop out of high school for different reasons. Studies suggest that they may do so for individual reasons, such as

grade retention, conduct and mental health problems, and that social dynamics such as peer deviancy and family conflicts may contribute [2]. Family background, such as migration experience and parental education levels, is also known to contribute to higher high-school drop-out rates [3]. Dynamics that may contribute to drop-out rates are heightened in communities with a prevalence of young people with low socio-economic status [1, 2, 4]. This chapter discusses drop-out prevention as exemplified through a community-based policy scheme in a Norwegian urban community with a prevalence of low-income families and a high drop-out rate [5].

In affluent countries such as Norway, a low-income household is usually defined as a household with an income below 50 or 60% of the median, entailing a lower standard of living for individuals in such households relative to the general population [6]. In neighborhoods and communities with larger proportions of low-income families, cumulative disadvantages may arise and reinforce dynamics of social exclusion [7], potentially increasing the likelihood of poor school performance and increasing the chances of drop-out [8]. The higher prevalence of drop-out in such contexts suggests risks that are particular to disadvantaged communities. Neoliberalism, deindustrialization, austerity and changes in the labour market have contributed to job insecurity and precarity both for parents and young people without higher education, while economic, social and geographical circumstances are increasingly seen as the responsibility of individual youth [8–10].

As a response to such developments, researchers have argued for broadening our conceptualization of child poverty. For instance, Bessell [11] argues for reconceptualizing child poverty in terms of material, relational and opportunity-making dimensions, all of which may affect social mobility [6, 12]. It has been suggested that a lack of aspirations and personal goals among young people in disadvantaged communities, reinforced by a lack of opportunity structures characterizing low-income communities, could contribute to the high proportion of school-leavers [4, 13, 14]. It is well recognized that young people's education pathways draw on their perceived access to available resources, socio-economic status, and resources both in the family and in the community [15, 16]. Consequently, in disadvantaged communities, the processes that set the stage for aspirations and the formulation of career pathways may be circumscribed by a lack of opportunity structures and a homogeneity of community influence [17]. Yet scant attention has been paid to the potential of opportunity structures beyond academic assistance for advancing beneficial post-school transitions.

This chapter investigates a social policy measure directed at youth in a community in Norway with cumulative disadvantages, including a high drop-out rate, and examines opportunity structures put in place through formalized leadership experience. Through its examination of this local measure, the chapter investigates influences of opportunity structures directed at skills enhancement for youth in disadvantaged communities. The aim of the chapter is to investigate how opportunity structures directed at skills enhancement can counteract dynamics of social exclusion and advance beneficial post-school transitions for youth in disadvantaged communities.

An in-depth empirical approach was employed for the study, drawing on focus-group interviews and individual interviews with 14 young people participating in the policy scheme. Focus-group interviews were chosen because this method is well suited to investigating views and experiences that can be shared and developed in a group to illuminate different facets of the phenomena under study [18]. In this chapter, the word 'children' refers to anyone under the age of 18, and the terms 'youth' or 'young people' refer to those between the ages of 13 and 18, in the initial stages of forming aspirations and personal goals related to post-school transitions. The main

contribution of the chapter is to nuance our understanding of the role of opportunity structures that enhance interpersonal skills and thus counteract dynamics of social exclusion conducive to dropping out of high-school. In addition, the chapter illuminates the potential for a more relational and social approach to beneficial post-school transitions for young people living in disadvantaged communities, thus allowing for the development of appropriate policies and the allocation of support.

2. Background

Several studies have examined what contributes to the decision to leave school. For instance, Moensted [14] found that bullying, lack of social and academic support, and feeling excluded and unrecognized could reduce self-confidence and influence a decision to leave school. Similarly, studies have asserted that a lack of necessary academic and familial support early in life could render students unable to meet academic requirements and exacerbate their struggle over the years, finally resulting in their decision to drop out [4, 19]. Most researchers agree both that falling behind in school is related to a lack of familial, academic and peer support, and that dropping out is a cumulative result of long-term, often complex difficulties [4, 13, 14, 20].

Although many European young people in disadvantaged communities consider school a social equalizer and seek to exploit the opportunities it presents [21], studies also assert that both individual stressors and social dynamics that may contribute to higher drop-out rates are exacerbated in communities with a prevalence of low-income households. Growing up in a low-income family is associated with a higher risk of behavioral problems, including being involved in bullying at school [22]. Youth from low-income families are more likely to have lower self-efficacy and lack access to social-enrichment opportunities, both of which are known to affect the likelihood of dropping out of school and have detrimental consequences for post-school transitions [6, 8, 11]. Both also limit chances of creating diverse and beneficial peer networks. Whether friends, romantic partners and siblings choose to leave school may also influence an individual's decision to do so [23]. The studies affirm that there are significant interrelationships between opportunity structures and post-school transitions in communities of cumulative disadvantages. Yet the processes by which opportunity structures can influence drop-out rates remain largely unexplored.

The findings of these studies are coherent with those of other studies affirming that low social mobility is associated with youth without higher education from disadvantaged communities. For instance, interviewing Australian young women, Ravn [24] described how many decided to remain in disadvantaged communities and adapt to conditions there rather than strive for social mobility through education or relocation. Youth entering the European labour market without higher education are faced with developments in demand skewed towards excluding them as competition increases for unskilled positions, such as service jobs or construction work, and as deregulation creates a rise in precarious positions [25].

Several features have been suggested as interacting in career decision-making processes for youth, including life experiences and personal experiences, as well as both informal and formal learning [13, 26–29]. Moreover, it is well recognized that young people's education pathways draw on their perceived access to available resources, socio-economic status, resources in the family and opportunity structures in the community [15, 16]. It has been argued that a lack of aspirations and personal goals among young people could contribute to the high proportion of school-leavers in

communities of cumulative disadvantage, reinforced by a lack of opportunity structures for youth in such communities [11, 13, 15, 24]. In this chapter, the interplay of aspirations and opportunity structures is understood as a factor that may contribute to counteracting processes where large proportions of students drop out, as aspirations and personal goals play a formative role in personal outcomes and are shaped in the interplay of material and social embeddedness and personal agency [30, 31].

Within temporary social policy discourse, young people from disadvantaged communities are positioned in terms of both deficit and potential [10]. Moreover, governmentality studies of policies directed at disadvantaged youth raise concerns about the increasing individualization of social challenges within such policies [10]. The roles of peer networks and opportunity structures, as well as local and national authorities, are obscured within such political approaches, which individualize responsibility for a range of social and economic issues [10, 13]. Scholars have repeatedly criticized such approaches. In particular, the negative framing of community culture and the tendency to attribute individual characteristics to socio-cultural upbringing have been critiqued [32].

In line with understandings of youth prevalent within such discourse, the literature on local policy initiatives targeting youth from disadvantaged communities primarily discusses initiatives that offer social-enrichment activities, such as field trips, and academic skills, such as tutoring [33, 34]. Although they generally report high levels of participant satisfaction (except in the case of tutoring), few studies emphasize long-term objectives, such as the formulation of future goals, increased self-efficacy or employability enhancement. Although the social policy measure discussed here addresses individual youth, its main objective is to provide opportunity structures for developing skills conducive to aspiring and to the formulation and exertion of career pathways by providing leadership training in an employment setting directed at young people in a community of cumulative disadvantages, subsequently advancing beneficial post-school transitions.

In general, leadership training of young people concentrates on offering skills appropriate for civic engagement, targeting high-achieving youth [35–37]. For instance, Puxley and Chapin [37] evaluated a programme targeting youth in general and involving courses and the initiation of an individual community project, asserting that participants displayed high levels of social skill and self-efficacy both before and after participation, and that civic engagement and community awareness improved as a result of the programme. Similarly, Khan [35] examined Australian leadership programmes directed at ethnic communities and asserted that such programmes often addressed high-achieving youth as role models and as representatives for their communities. Thus, leadership programmes generally target high-achieving youth, serving as arenas of political preparation [35]. Presenting leadership experience as a way of enhancing skills directed at youth from low-income communities at risk of dropping out of high school represents a novel approach to putting opportunity structures in place for advancing beneficial post-school transitions.

3. Presenting the policy scheme

This chapter emerges from a research collaboration between a Norwegian university and local authorities in a central district of a large Norwegian city. With a population of 45,000 and 2098 public housing units, the community has one of the highest proportions of public housing units in Norway [5], which are situated alongside

high-value residential areas. Housing prices have risen dramatically in recent years, creating a divided population where access to goods is unevenly distributed. Many residing in public housing receive social assistance benefits, and 21.3% of the children live in low-income families as compared to 11.7% at the national level [5]. The local policy scheme examined in this chapter is part of a wide array of policy initiatives to reduce the high-school drop-out rate of 31% in the area, one of the highest in the country [5].

Owing to the high proportion of public housing units and low-income families, local initiatives were launched to improve living conditions in public housing, particularly for children and youth. These initiatives placed considerable emphasis on the involvement of community residents to bring about desired outcomes, such as involving parents in local tutoring. More recently, the district administrator has mandated that local authorities find ways of cutting social expenditure and reducing the drop-out rate. Among the initiatives introduced as a result was a temporary job scheme where youth between the ages of 13 and 19 were temporarily employed by local authorities. Participants were given full-time paid work experience during the summer for a minimum two-week period by local authorities.

Employees were organized as teams consisting of eight to ten employees and led by a so-called captain. Some teams performed maintenance and beautification tasks in parks and public buildings; some teams handed out tests for COVID-19 to the citizens; others provided public summer activities for children; and a few teams provided food and planned social events for the other teams. Altogether, 422 youth participated during the summer of 2022. The captain of each team was one of the ordinary applicants who was assigned to lead the team in its everyday work. Captains were responsible for assigning tasks, ensuring their completion and handling any conflicts that arose. This chapter focuses on whether the type of leadership experience captains received can instigate processes of long-term development – including the forming of aspirations and personal goals – that may be beneficial in post-school transitions.

4. Methods

The author conducted four focus-group interviews and one individual interview with 14 young people who had taken part in the temporary employment scheme. Two of the focus groups were with ordinary employees, and two were with captains. The intention was to understand whether captains' experiences, challenges and potential learning outcomes differed from those of ordinary employees, as well as to gain insight into how employees had experienced being led by one of their peers. The author also conducted a small number of interviews with representatives from local authorities. The focus-group method was chosen because it allows for the sharing and discussing of experiences, as well as for developing views on similar phenomena [18]. The interviews provided a suitable setting for investigating both similar and divergent views and experiences of participation.

The informants were recruited via local-authority employees, and all had temporary jobs in 2022. Six ordinary employees and seven captains were interviewed in the focus groups. Each focus-group interview had duration of 2–2.5 hours, including a short break. One of the captains missed the time of the group interview and was interviewed individually for about 45 minutes. All participants signed written consent forms, and parental consent was obtained for those under 16 years old. All participants received a gift card with a value of around $30.

The focus groups were conducted in a neutral location, rooms where people had often met during their temporary employment. To create an informal atmosphere, we gathered around the kitchen counter and served pizza and snacks. Separate interview guides were created for employees and captains. Everyone was first asked why they had applied for a temporary job and then asked to describe the application process and the allocation of a workplace. They were then asked to describe the tasks and the social environment. Employees were asked more specifically about cooperating with captains and colleagues and about skills they had gained, if any. The focus-group interviews with captains evolved into a discussion about the experience of leading other young people, as captains appeared to want to discuss this among themselves. This development was encouraged by the author. As there were considerable age gaps within the groups and considerable variation in the school backgrounds of the informants, and since aspirations and personal goals in teenage years can be rather fleeting, the topic of future studies or employment was not explicitly addressed.

The informants were equally divided in terms of gender, and none described themselves as non-binary. Ten of the fourteen young people were between 14 and 18 years old. Two were 19 years old and had participated in extended upper secondary education targeted at recently arrived immigrants. The others were enrolled in compulsory secondary education or had just started high school. Five informants were in the process of learning Norwegian and resided in public housing, and another two participants were from immigrant backgrounds and had better language skills. Informants were not screened for parental income, as such screening might have affected their decision to consent to participate in the focus groups. In the chapter, all responses have been translated into correct English to ensure clarity.

The informants were recruited from different work teams: catering teams, maintenance teams and teams handing out tests for COVID-19. The maintenance teams did outdoor work, such as picking up garbage, maintaining vegetation, and painting and maintaining public buildings. The catering teams prepared lunch for the other teams. Some teams also conducted outdoor summer activities for children.

5. Findings

The author first asked the participants why they had applied to the programme and why they had chosen to become either captains or employees. The young people living in public housing had been encouraged to apply, but other young people in the area were invited to apply if there were enough vacancies. In all four focus groups, the informants unanimously stated that gaining work experience was their sole reason for applying for the temporary vacancies, and that pay was a secondary motive. Not everyone got their first choice. Nobody could apply to work as a captain, but those who had been asked to become captains before the job started stated that they did so to gain leadership experience. This motivation was echoed by employees who had wished to become captains, including informants still learning Norwegian and young teens.

The selection of captains among the applicants appeared arbitrary. One female 16-year-old explained the process of her selection:

> *I had never had a job before. It was very random that I was selected captain. I got to know about the temporary job because someone from the city administration visited*

> *[our school].... So I thought, ok, let's try. And they interviewed me [for the position of captain].... I don't know, on my student plan it said that I had mentored eighth graders, so they thought perhaps that I was used to being in charge of people around me.*

Mostly, though, captains were selected by the young people on the team. A 16-year-old captain of a janitor team described the selection process as follows:

> *Then [a younger boy] was chosen to be captain, which was not very popular in the group at first. So they thought it was really fun that we should play a game over who would be captain. And then we did, and then it wasn't me either. But then I worked quite well the first week, and then they asked if I wanted to be captain after that.*

She described the boy who lost his spot:

> *He sort of bossed everybody around.*

The experiences described by the captains differed from those described by ordinary employees, and the skill sets they developed also differed. The first skill captains needed to learn was how to organize the work and assign relevant tasks to each team member. These two duties were their primary formal responsibilities. A 16-year-old female captain described how she organized the work and assigned tasks to the team members working in the kitchen:

> *I handed out a few different tasks. So, for example, if we were going to fry something, there were some who cut vegetables, some who did the frying, and others who went out cycling to deliver the food. But if we were going to make a salad, everyone would have to help cut vegetables.*

A second skill captains developed was making sure the young people completed their assigned tasks. All focus groups agreed that this was the most challenging aspect of being a captain. In particular, captains found it challenging to supervise young people who did not adapt well to being under authority. For instance, having a leadership role involved managing young people who did not always perform according to general norms in working life. A 19-year-old male captain explained what it was like to lead his maintenance team, largely consisting of young teens:

> *I opened the door, and so on, and then I let the boss [administration] know who had arrived and who hadn't. And then some of the children hid [pause]. So they arrived late, so it was hard work and a lot of responsibility to look after that.... Yes, because, like, they arrived about 20 minutes late. Then they asked if they could go to the store because the food we got was not good, and then someone might ask if they could go to the bathroom, and then there they were, hiding.*

An 18-year-old captain of another maintenance team approached the motivation issue by establishing clearer ground-rules:

> *I made it pretty clear to the children that if they didn't follow the rules, they didn't get paid. So I had very clever soldiers in a way. They were always prepared to do the work and ready for action.*

A 14-year-old male captain of a janitor team explained how he had dealt with the challenges of managing employees who refused to cooperate constructively:

> *What was difficult was if the group didn't listen to me. Because then I kind of got all the pressure. Because it was sort of all up to me then, since I was, in a way, second-in-command. So, when the administration was not there, I was the manager. And then if they did something wrong, I got the blame. For example, when one of them started spraying green paint on the floor that didn't go away.... We just asked them to leave. And then we took some acetone and started washing like mad.*

He elaborated on how he had taken charge in relation to this employee:

> *Author: Were there any tendencies towards....*
>
> *Informant: Riots?*
>
> *Author: The student who sits at the back of the class and acts up – or riots, if you want to call it that?*
>
> *Informant No. Because I'm normally that student. And then I kind of know that I can't let them be in control and stuff like that, so I was super strict.... On the first day, I got a bit of a scolding because we had painted half the floor green. And then I thought, like, now it's serious, now I'm done with that guy. So then we got stricter. So I don't think he screwed up anymore after that. He was a bit lazy, too. He didn't use to do much .... I just sort of cared more. Or at first he was like, 'Don't make your assignments so strict, blah, blah, blah.' Then I said, 'If you want to take a break, then take a break and come back and work harder.' Because it's like – what's it called? – quality over quantity. So instead of him working like a slacker for two hours, I'd rather have him work for an hour as he was supposed to. So I kind of gave him more freedom in a way.... It worked quite well. Because I have, like, friends and such who struggle a bit with motivation for school and such. And then I sort of listened and learned a little bit from them .... Not everything suits everyone.:*

A third skill captains developed was facilitating constructive group dynamics within the team. The captains took responsibility for making sure the team members cooperated with each other in the work environment. An 18-year-old captain of a janitorial team described what they had found to be the most important elements of their responsibilities:

> *To get as many as possible to work and not just zoom out – that was most important in the beginning at least. That they didn't cooperate well because they didn't know each other, so it was important to have get-to-know-each-other games.... Like, did you ever play the one where you say your name and then an animal starting with the letter of your name. Making people get to know each other is 100% a job .... Because they go in groups of two or three all day, and then it's much better if they can chat and enjoy themselves.*

The 19-year-old captain of one of the teams handing out COVID-19 tests explained the difference in his team before and after a social gathering arranged for all employees:

> *It was actually very good because the children were a bit shy – or, not shy but they weren't that comfortable with each other until the first Friday. Because that's when you get to know each other better .... I think the day actually helped a lot. Cooperation was better, because at the start they were put in random groups with random people, but as they got to know each other, they started to form groups themselves. They became more coordinated and started to sort of talk more.*

A fourth skill captains developed involved gaining a holistic view of the work and suggesting potential improvements. The captain of the team distributing COVID-19 tests explained how he suggested simple changes that made the work more efficient and easier for the young people to carry out:

> *But there were many on the team who found things challenging, and so I took it up with them [the administration]. So I was a voice for the children, too, and then we fixed it. Not just me but everyone on the team was dissatisfied with .... At the start, it was like that we could carry a maximum of two bags with Covid-19 tests. It was very boring because we would deliver tests and then have to go back straightaway. So, to take fewer trips, we decided to ask them if we could change it so we could bring more tests to the site. So it was more efficient and we could be at the site longer. And it turned out well, too, because we were the last team to hand out tests and we managed to hand out more than the other teams.*

A 16-year-old captain in the kitchen had a similar experience:

> *With us, it was very chaotic the first week. There weren't enough aprons even. There weren't enough knives. There weren't enough chopping boards. But it went well, we made it. And I got an adult in the administration to buy aprons, knives and chopping boards for the teams that would take over the next temporary jobs. Two people had to stand and share a chopping board because there weren't enough chopping boards for all.*

Captains who gained a holistic view of the job were able to suggest improvements for the future. For instance, the 16-year-old captain in the kitchen suggested the following:

> *At least with catering we should plan a little better with food and such. And start a little earlier and have shorter days and possibly include food waste, for example. And that we possibly take the food that should have been thrown away and do something with it.*

On being asked about learning outcomes or what they had personally gained from the work, informants in the two types of groups responded in distinct ways. Employees responded by describing concrete tasks:

> *Well, if I need to paint a bench again, I'll know what to do.*

Captains tended to respond by describing how the work experience could be utilized. A 14-year-old male stated:

> *I have more job experience now, to apply for jobs in the future.*

Another 16-year-old male captain stated:

I applied for jobs last year [without getting any]. Now there's a lot with school and stuff. But I am going to study to become a kindergarten assistant, because I have experience being in charge of children.

6. Discussion

Growing up in a community with a large proportion of low-income families coincides with and reinforces known contributors to dropping out of high school, such as emotional stressors, low levels of parental education, involvement in social exclusion or bullying, and a higher proportion of friends, siblings and romantic partners who also drop out of high school [2–4, 23]. Moreover, social exclusion increases the likelihood of future unemployment as competition for unskilled work in Western countries increases [1, 25, 38]. Communities of cumulative disadvantage are characterized by a lack of opportunity structures, which coincides with a prevalence of young people with low aspirations and high drop-out rates [10, 13, 24, 30]. Consequently, counteracting dynamics of social exclusion conducive to dropping out of high school within such communities can be contingent on appropriate opportunity structures being put in place [11, 15, 16]. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate how opportunity structures directed at skills enhancement can counteract dynamics of social exclusion and advance beneficial post-school transitions for youth in disadvantaged communities.

Data demonstrated several challenges that arose throughout the course of being a captain. The greatest challenge informants described was getting the employees to accept their authority. Examples include the captains dealing with youngsters who ran and hid, trying to take a break during a physically demanding workday. The captains also learned how to assess employees' needs and to react appropriately towards employees who sabotaged the work. In one example, this required the captain to draw on his friends' experiences with low school motivation. The data also demonstrate that captains took responsibility for the social environment in the workplace and sought to facilitate cooperation within their teams, as well as to better team performance by improving working conditions.

All these developments were presented as challenges or as processes of improvement by the informants. The data suggest that these situations were hard to handle and that resolving them instigated learning processes related to establishing and upholding professional authority, pursuing aims despite obstacles that arose, and creating professional boundaries for team behavior. Each of these learning processes involved the development and exertion of personal agency in establishing and upholding authority and pursuing aims, as well as interpersonal skills for modifying group behavior in a formalized setting. Informants thus had to develop and exert skills conducive to personal agency and the pursuit of prescribed aims through new social repertoires related to their position as being in charge in an employment setting.

The position of captain also involved decision-making related to team behavior. This included decisions on how to improve performance and working conditions and how to address individuals who performed inadequately. Such decisions fostered the development of strategic skills and had to be taken on behalf of the entire team, rather than according to the preferences of the captain or any one employee. This involved the development of skills to address the needs of team members while facilitating prescribed aims. Captains were also prompted to consider the social environment to promote team performance and work efficiency. Thus, carrying the

responsibility of captain involved learning processes that fostered long-term strategic decision-making involving the different interests of team members, putting high demands on the exertion of personal agency.

Social exclusion and reduced access to material, social and educational resources in childhood and youth have been shown to potentially have long-lasting implications in shaping educational pathways and professional opportunities in adulthood [6, 12, 26]. Bessell [11] argues that child poverty should be conceptualized as having material, relational and opportunity-making dimensions, each with different consequences for children and families. Such a conceptualization allows for a nuanced understanding of the potential implications of poverty for social functioning and post-school transitions. The results of the present study demonstrate how the opportunity structure it examines created learning processes involving the fostering and recognition of personal agency as well as persistence in completing tasks despite both social and practical obstacles. The policy scheme thus illuminates how opportunity structures directed at skills enhancement may be conducive to the adaptation of interpersonal and strategic skills, making young people better equipped both to handle emotional stressors associated with living in communities with cumulative disadvantage and to form and pursue aspirations and personal goals.

Neoliberalism, deindustrialization, austerity and changes in the labour market have contributed to job insecurity and precarity, particularly for uneducated youth [1, 25, 27]. Such developments have made traditional, unskilled work less attainable. However, providing opportunity structures directed at enhancing skills and providing experience desirable in the labour market for youth from disadvantaged communities comprise a double-edged response to such circumstances. On the one hand, opportunity structures as exemplified in this chapter serve to prepare the ground both for forming personal aspirations and pursuing them and for increasing chances of future stable labour market attachment. Yet, in so doing, such opportunity structures also serve to make disadvantaged youth assume increased responsibility for their success in aspiring beyond dynamics of social exclusion conducive to drop-out, and beyond growing insecurities and precarities in the labour market. This falls into the pattern of policy schemes addressing challenges at the juncture of individuals' responsibility, rather than wider developments manifesting in the increased challenges faced by youth from disadvantaged communities at risk of dropping out of high school. Examples might include policy approaches towards precarious work, pathways to labour market entry or qualifications for uneducated youth. Consequently, the policy scheme highlights the gravity of the position of youth at risk of dropping out of high school and competing for unskilled or low skilled work. The present study aligns with previous studies employing a governmentality perspective on policies directed at youth from disadvantaged communities [10]. The learning processes identified here can broaden horizons for forming aspirations and personal agency, thus enabling individuals to project themselves into future education and potentially stable employment. By positioning the young people at risk of dropping out front and centre, and positioning them with both deficits and potential [10, 14], enhancement of interpersonal skills is regarded as a tangible solution to developments of society far beyond the scope of the policy scheme.

The study has some limitations. The main limitation relates to the choice of focus groups as a research method. The rationale for this choice is that it allows for participants to share and discuss their experiences, and to exchange, discuss and develop different points of view on similar experiences [18]. However, the limitation in this case is that probing deeper into the views and experiences of individual participants

was restricted to preserve the informants' privacy and personal integrity. The author considered conducting more supplementary individual interviews but concluded that the shared views and experiences in the focus groups would best illuminate the purpose of the study.

A second limitation concerns recruitment for participation. Captains who chose to participate in the focus-group interviews saw themselves as having been successful in how they addressed the challenges they faced in the role. They experienced the learning processes, although difficult and demanding, as having positive outcomes. This was not always the case, however, as exemplified in the data by the captain who was demoted. Bottom-up leadership approaches imply responsibilities that may also potentially exacerbate mental difficulties. Owing to the nature of the recruitment process, the data do not shed light on such challenges. Future research is needed to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the demands of the learning processes identified here, including incompletion and resistance. Only through such research we can understand the severity of the requirements we place on disadvantaged youth through the creation of such opportunity structures and the policy discourses underpinning them [10].

A third limitation concerns the short duration of data collection. This was primarily to reduce barriers to participation, especially for participants learning Norwegian and participants who were likely to relocate in post-school transitions in the near future. However, the data suggest that processes were initiated that may have long-standing impacts on the forming of aspirations and personal goals, as well as the pursuit of career pathways and post-school transitions. A longitudinal approach, potentially including randomized controlled trials, will be necessary to investigate whether and how such initiatives contribute to long-term social inclusion and post-school transitions.

7. Conclusion

Growing up in a low-income family is associated with lower school outcomes, exclusion from social-enrichment arenas, and increased risk of early school-leaving and unemployment. Communities of cumulative disadvantage are characterized by a lack of opportunity structures, which coincides with a prevalence of young people with low aspirations and high drop-out rates. This chapter drew on focus-group interviews to investigate learning outcomes in a local social policy scheme providing temporary employment and leadership experience for youth from disadvantaged communities. The purpose of the chapter was to investigate how opportunity structures directed at skills enhancement can counteract dynamics of social exclusion and advance beneficial post-school transitions for youth in disadvantaged communities.

Data for the chapter were drawn from focus-group interviews with 14 young people participating in a temporary employment scheme, 7 of whom had been formally in charge of other youth. The data indicate that the responsibilities experienced in such a role instigated several learning processes and placed considerable demands on individual youth. Learning processes identified related to the development of decision-making skills, the formation of strategies to ensure efficiency and how to negotiate obstacles to goal completion. The findings suggest that such skills can be beneficial for coping with emotional stressors and the development and recognition of personal agency. Because growing up in a community of cumulative socio-economic disadvantages may severely delimit the recognition and assertion of personal

agency, the findings demonstrate how opportunity structures that facilitate such processes can have considerable influence in counteracting dynamics of social exclusion faced by young people in disadvantaged communities and advancing beneficial post-school transitions.

Yet, as such policy approaches arise within a context of growing labour market insecurities for low-educated youth, the question remains whether, through enabling youth to assume greater responsibility for career development, this type of approach obscures the complexity of the challenges facing youth from communities of cumulative disadvantages. Although such policy schemes may be appropriate responses to such developments, we need to discuss more broadly how young people at risk of dropping out of high school are affected by broader developments in the labour market, education and social policies and how we can create viable strategies to ensure beneficial post-school transitions.

Author details

Ida Merete Solvang
Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

*Address all correspondence to: idasol@oslomet.no

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Chapter 7

Anti-Oppressive Research Approaches in Child Welfare: Opportunities for Partnering with Lived Experts

Chereese Phillips, Sherri Y. Simmons-Horton, Aakanksha Sinha and Margie Hunt

Abstract

This chapter articulates a framework and approach researchers in child welfare can use to pragmatically engage in anti-oppressive and liberating practices to better partner with lived experts (LEx). The field is currently grappling with ways to consistently and meaningfully integrate the knowledge and experiences of persons most impacted by the child welfare system and proximate to pressing issues, research questions, and concerns. The participation of LEx in the research process is often supplemental to the core work which can dilute the role they can play in creating research that is applicable to their realities. Traditional research approaches, have at times, been viewed as incomprehensive, extractive and oppressive rather than liberating for lived experts. Due to such intentional and unintentional past harms, there is a need to repair and pivot toward methodologies and approaches such as participatory action research (PAR), human centered-design (HCD), and co-design that equalize and prioritize the perspectives and experience of historically marginalized identities and bodies of knowledge in the research process. This chapter provides ways to conceptualize and execute research that uplifts and adheres to inclusionary principles and values.

Keywords: anti-oppressive, child welfare, co-design, research, lived experts

1. Introduction

There is tremendous value and an implicit necessity to engage and partner with individuals most immediately impacted by the child welfare system. However, actualizing this value system has remained elusive. By design, the fields of child welfare and research have deeply imbalanced power structures, in which the expertise, assessments, and insights of professionals are often prioritized over research participants or lived experts (LEx). Further, LEx experience societal, institutional, and social oppression [1, 2] which is often mirrored systemically and interpersonally as LEx interact with the child welfare system, workers, and researchers. Consequently,

where acknowledgement, repair and healing has not occurred, oppressive dynamics can color interactions between LEx, the child welfare system, and researchers which impact the ability to effectively partner. Overcoming historical past and present oppression via the application of anti-oppressive research practices is predicated upon sharing power, valuing, and collaborating with LEx to develop a deeper understanding of various social phenomena and, where necessary, propose more informed solutions. This chapter casts a vision and provides strategies and tools to further support pivoting the field to more inclusive and LEx centered research.

Lived experts (LEx): A term used to identify the expertise and experiences of an individual (e.g., current or former youth or adult, birth parent, and kinship care provider) who has been involved with or touched by the child welfare system [3, 4]. The usage of the term LEx, by the child welfare community, began in the 2010s, it was adopted as a unifying or umbrella term to represent a collective of discrete advocacy groups and their expertise. Prior to this shift, the terms constituent consultant, birth parent, alumni and grands were often used, today they are still used interchangeably with LEx. It is important to note, when partnering with LEx, ask them how they would like to be identified, knowing that this may change over time.

Anti-oppressive research: A theoretical framework that seeks to understand how systems of oppression operate, it strives to mitigate their impact on marginalized communities [5]. Anti-oppressive research considers the role social and structural inequities have on making and framing social problems [6, 7]. This research perspective urges researchers to re-evaluate power dynamics, specifically the researcher-researched dyad. This approach makes space for historically "researched" populations to play a larger role in the scientific inquiry process. Anti-oppressive research promotes plurality; it acknowledges that there are many ways to create and legitimate knowledge; and maintains that individuals and communities most impacted by a given phenomenon should be engaged in the research and meaning making process [8, 9].

1.1 Power dynamics in child welfare and research

Within the field of research, power and control have created a dynamic wherein researchers are viewed as experts and can conduct research on participants, as well as exclude or limit them from creating their own narratives about their lives and experiences [6, 10]. This control, if not managed equitably, has and continues to cause real and perceived harm to historically marginalized communities who have viewed some research as extractive, exploitative, tokenizing, and problem-saturated [11, 12]. According to Tajima et al. [13], there is a perception that knowledge derived by and for LEx and community has been devalued by some and labeled as biased, irrational, invalid, irrelevant, unserious, and/or political. One consequence of these imbalanced arrangements is a self-perpetuating cycle of exclusion and de-legitimation.

In response, there is a growing chorus of researchers, LEx and community leaders who have questioned the power dynamics that are at play which discount knowledge created by system-impacted individuals and communities [13–16]. Making room for plurality and epistemic diversity by incorporating devalued ideas is a key tenant of liberating knowledge. Researchers using anti-oppressive methodologies and frameworks such as community-based participatory research (CBPR), decolonized or indigenous research frameworks among others [17] have made significant strides in addressing power imbalances and the limited role of research in transformative social change. While these approaches and frameworks have gained popularity among some

academic researchers, there continues to be challenges in their application to child welfare research and evaluation practices due in large part to resources and ideology. Initially, the resource outlay for this approach can be substantial because it requires because additional funds, longer timelines, capacity to participate in rapport building and ongoing dialog, and specific methodological skills. And as discussed above, ideology can play an important inhibiting role in whether LEx engagement is prioritized or deprioritized.

1.2 LEx advocacy in child welfare

There are over 25 years of LEx advocacy in the child welfare space [3]. This advocacy has been rooted in self-determination, self-liberation, building community, and creating positive change for current and future people who will be touched by the child welfare system. These efforts spawned paradigms and frameworks such as "nothing about us without us," "better together," and "experts in their own experience" which sought to foster equity, inclusion, and mutual respect between LEx and child welfare agency staff. At the core of these perspectives was to call attention to the marginalization and oppression faced generally, and as a result of being involved in the child welfare system whereby LEx had minimal power or voice in child welfare proceedings. It also sought to articulate the precept that those most impacted by the child welfare system should have a say and be included as an integral child welfare partner because they know best what they need. Additionally, the goal was to establish a sense of normalcy, build community, and get rid of the stigma experienced as a function of being involved with the child welfare system.

Several advocacy groups were formed in the 1980s and early 2000s such as California Youth Connection (CYC) (1988), Foster Club (2000), National Alumni Network (2003), Foster Care Alumni of America (FCAA) (2004), and Rise (2005) among others [18–20]. These groups were formed in part to promote and champion LEx and constituents as leaders and strategy partners in support of child welfare reform; improve outcomes; and to educate policymakers and other stakeholders on how to prevent the need for child welfare while keeping children safe and supported. These groups have made indelible contributions to the establishment and maintenance of self-advocacy efforts and laid the foundation for the growth for both alumni advocacy as well as the parents, kinship provider and resource parent movements to support families and prevent them from coming into the child welfare system. A hallmark of this advocacy has been influencing systems change. An outgrowth of this advocacy has been the passage of prevention and reform-oriented policies such as the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) in 2018. With the passage of FFPSA there has been more of an imperative for child welfare agencies to partner closely with LEx on developing their prevention plans and on an ongoing, concerted basis.

1.3 LEx in child welfare research

One of the initial forays into partnering with LEx occurred with the Northwest Alumni Study in 1999, a seminal study, which interviewed over 1800 alumni of the foster care system in states across the U.S. and included LEx as study designers, instrument item reviewers, data analysts, presenters of findings, and manuscript authors. This study, at the time, was a departure from the mainstream approach and philosophy within the field of child welfare, and it helped set the stage for moving toward engaging LEx in the research process. More child welfare studies have

occurred since that time [21–27] however, a seismic shift occurred in 2020/2021 with the Covid-19 pandemic and a renewed and international awareness of structural racism and racialized violence. This catalyzed social service agencies, organizations, and academic institutions into developing antiracist and anti-oppressive initiatives to address system inequities that target Black and other families of color (BIPOC). This philosophical shift placed a renewed focus on a longstanding body of study solidifying the problem and underlying causes of racial disparities among Black and indigenous families [28]. It also spurred the rise and recognition of a group of intentional and unapologetic transformative child welfare scholars, committed to co-design, racial and social justice through engaging LEx in the research process.

Engaging individuals with LEx in research across various social service disciplines is a steadily growing trend and important priority in governmental agencies and community organizations. The growing emphasis on LEx engagement, particularly with current and former system-involved youth, is driven by a recognition of persistent poor outcomes for these youth, specifically youth of color. The prioritizing of lived experts, specifically in research may be explained by more recent changes in social service disciplines, such as social work, to engage in intentionally in anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and liberatory scholarship that resists and digresses from traditional methods of positivism, which can often de-center the experiences of those most affected by system involvement [29].

Because research is central to informing child welfare practices and policies, LEx in child welfare research must be viewed as integral and meaningful in transforming the system and dismantling racialized and gendered disparities. This, then, requires that LEx involvement in the research process move beyond tokenizing involvement of lived experts. This means, including LEx from the research conceptualization phase, to developing research questions, and through to analysis and interpretation of findings [30]. While LEx involvement in child welfare research has increased, much of this has reflected seemingly inauthentic involvement that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, "checks a box" for researchers, or positions LEx for reliving experiences of system trauma and oppression. The exploitation and tokenization of LEx in child welfare research reinforces power imbalances, social exclusion, and perpetuates oppressive practices [30]. A prime example of the ways in which LEx value and expertise is discounted is through no or nominal compensation in the research process which can be viewed as volunteer or indentured labor. A scan of LEx child welfare consultants found their compensation ranged from no compensation to $100 per hour [31].

There may be several potential pitfalls or lessons to be learned from shallowly engaging with LEx. Authentically partnering with LEx in child welfare research, however, can help dismantle oppressive practices when methods are designed to interrogate systems, center the voices of those experiencing system oppression, and demands an accountability to LEx individuals, their families and communities for action following research findings [32]. Liberatory child welfare research cannot occur without the active and meaningful collaboration with LEx individuals. Further, LEx research in child welfare should reflect research to policy and research to practice models where the individuals with lived experience can actively participate beyond the research process, to the fruition of policy and practice implementation [33].

As of late, child welfare scholars have been charged with engaging in innovative and liberatory research strategies that center the voices of children, youth, and families involved with the child welfare system. In 2022, several national organizations came together to develop the twenty-first Century Child Welfare Research Agenda. This broad coalition of research partners joined together to accomplish the following: (1) Identify

research gaps that support improvement in child welfare outcomes; (2) Convey clear and relevant unanswered research questions; (3) Identify and implement strategies to conduct research that will resolve key research gaps; (4) Help agencies use the findings to improve policy, programs and practice strategies; and (5) Advance equity [34]. Partnership with the LEx has been an integral part of the work and has significantly impacted the overall work by centering diversity, equity and inclusion; filling in blind spots and research gaps by sharing new ideas; and improving how partners engage with LEx. Despite the success of this initiative, much work is still needed to personify and apply anti-oppressive principles and practices more broadly in child welfare research.

2. Guiding principles for anti-oppressive research in child welfare

Research within child welfare can be a means to learn, liberate, and repair [8, 35]. There is an opportunity for research to be inclusive and a mechanism for social change [36]. For child welfare research and evaluation to be a catalyst for inclusion and transformation researchers must practice critical reflexivity and develop empathy and understanding for individuals and communities they may be researching or partnering with. According to the Anti-Oppressive Social Work Design (AOSWD) framework, cultivating deep empathy will require that researchers and practitioners use methodologies that shift the focus from individual blame to structural inequities [37]. To advance this ideal, we propose three principles that draw from the three critical frameworks of (a) Anti Oppressive Research, (b) Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation (CREE), and (c) Decolonizing methodologies. These methodologies focus on avenues to practice critical self-reflexivity, build empathy, engage ethically and authentically, and be transformation-focused [11].

2.1 Principle 1: Engaging in critical reflexivity

Critical reflexivity involves self-awareness, continuous self-examination, and acknowledgment of the way in which one's positionality can affect the research practices, processes, and outcomes [38]. Practicing reflexivity enables researchers to examine the ways in which their values, identities, and positionality affect research and relationships with participants [8]. More specifically, critical reflexivity centers the role of power and privilege in the research process and in the researchers' decision-making and interpretations. It suggests that the researchers' own participation in the conception of the research, choice of methodologies, analysis, and documentation should be scrutinized in relations of power rather than viewed as an objective process [39]. While critical reflexivity has been predominantly incorporated in qualitative research, Indigenous scholars have long advocated for reflexivity in quantitative techniques given it is the primary means for collecting data from historically marginalized communities to inform the development and assessment of programs and policies [12, 40].

2.2 Principle 2: Dismantling tokenism

Tokenism: A performative action that relies on the presence of a person with a certain background without entrusting meaningful duties or responsibilities to that individual [41].

It is important to explore the very harmful, exploitative, and potentially traumatizing practice of tokenism. In the case of tokenism, people with lived experience describe

it as being present but having no role, say, or decision-making authority [42]. On the surface it may appear they have a voice, however, it is largely superficial and symbolic [43]. Examples of this include: lack of autonomy or ability express true, thoughts, feelings and desires; expectation that role is limited to sharing personal stories and experiences, or being asked to participate in research project in which the study, methods and processes have already been predetermined. Meaningful participation of LEx and communities throughout the research process is essential. In recent decades, participatory methodologies have gained momentum, with the expressed intention of engaging historically marginalized individuals and communities in the research process. However, there is skepticism on how these techniques, if not implemented properly, can reproduce or even worsen existing inequalities and power imbalances [44]. Attention should be paid to how the social location of the researcher, LEx and community members can hinder or support authentic engagement, and what measures might need to be created for an environment that leads to collaboration and co-design in its true sense.

McKercher [45] has highlighted the need to focus on transformational co-design. Transformational co-design prioritizes the importance of relationship building and recognizing the expertise that LEx and communities have about their own experience. Transformational co-design can be achieved by: (1) Co-creating meaningful roles for people with LEx based on their professional skills as well as personal experiences; (2) Providing realistic timelines and sustainable funding mechanisms that generate possibilities for collaborative decision making; and (3) Curating genuine conditions for full participation by accounting for different social locations, identities, and learning styles [34, 45, 46].

2.3 Principle 3: Questioning the dominant research gaze

It is important to examine who sets the research agenda and reflect on why there is a predisposition to use marginalized individuals and communities as the optimal "objects" of research to understand social inequities. While the research community is influenced by curiosity, interest, and a well-meaning desire to better understand factors impacting the well-being of their research subjects, there is an inclination to study those that are viewed as less powerful rather than social structures that might be contributing to the inequities in the first place. This approach perpetuates the use of deficit-based lens that often pathologizes or negatively frames individuals and communities and understands them solely in relation to their deficits [8, 47]. Conversely, a strength-based research approach makes space for communities to self-define by creating their own research questions aims [48]. Further, strengths-based research explores the assets, resiliency, fortitude and innovation that resides within historically marginalized or oppressed populations [8, 49]. The goal is to disrupt the researcher-researched dyad and make space for plurality and more fluid roles as it relates to scientific inquiry. Shifting the gaze and power structure by normalizing environments wherein LEx are not subjugated as solely research objects but instead act as the conceptualizers, meaning-makers, leaders and authors of research—as exemplified by Spark Learning for Organizations, an LEx led research firm and consultancy.

3. Six step approach to partnering lived experts in the research process

There continues to be the desire for LEx to be included as partners in the research, evaluation and narrative framing process. Doing so adds dimension,

new perspectives, and credibility to the work. It also helps better align research with what LEx and communities want and need to know to improve outcomes. In the next section the core elements of anti-oppressive research principles (critical reflexivity, dismantling tokenism, and shifting the gaze) are distilled into an applied format. This 6-step process outlines an approach for centering anti-oppressive practices and the voices of individuals and communities with lived experts (LEx) in the research process. Moving through each step are opportunities to deepen partnership and collaboration with LEx in the research process (see **Figure 1**).

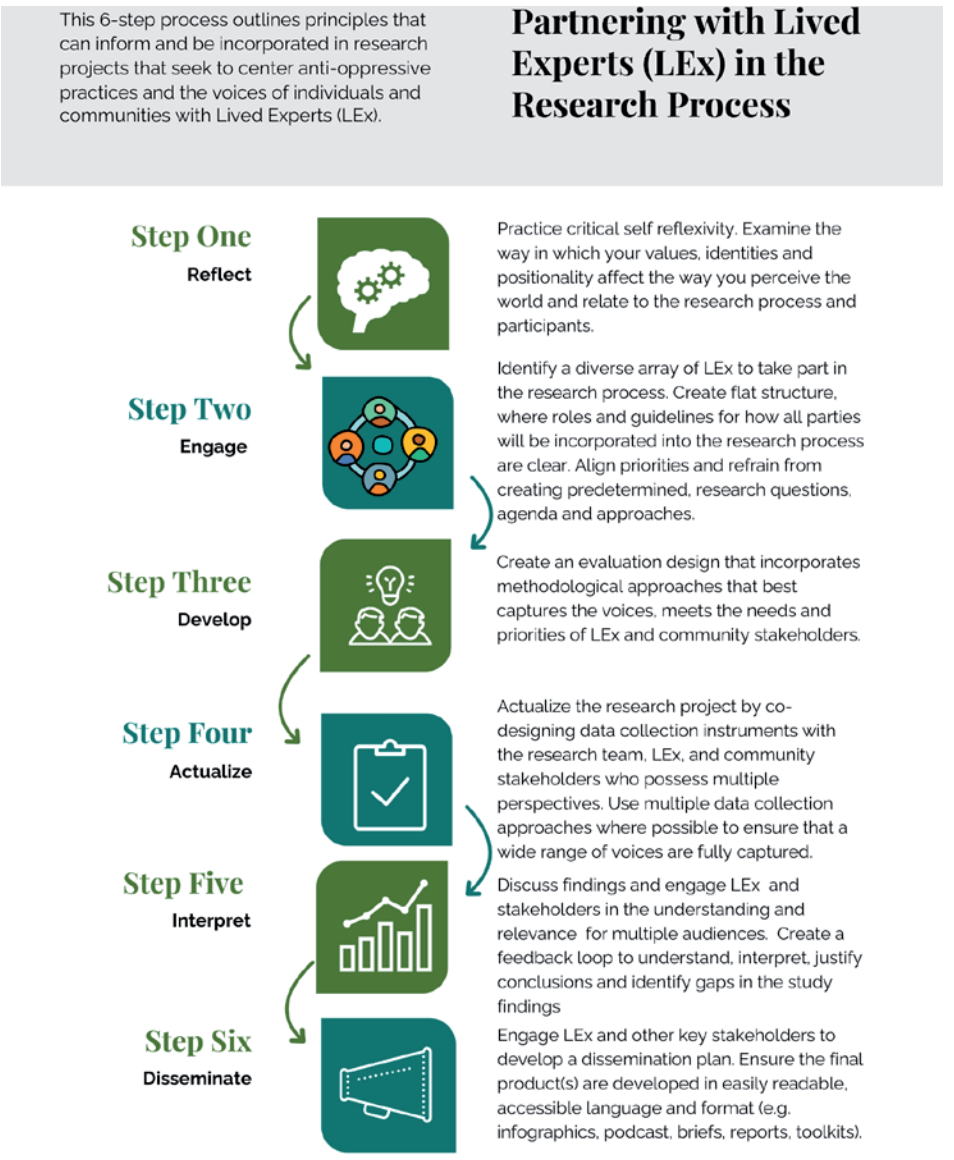

Figure 1.
Six steps for partnering with lived experts in the research process.

3.1 Step 1: Reflect

Practice critical self-reflexivity. Examine the way in which your values, identities and positionality affect the way you perceive the world and relate to the research process and participants. Consider the way in which your current position and research could or already does help in the liberation or oppression of individuals and communities impacted by the child welfare system. Reflect on whether you are truly ready to listen to LEx, take their views into consideration, and share power and decision-making authority. Ask yourself, who will benefit from this engagement? Bear in mind, the primary aim of the research should be to improve the lives of impacted families and communities, not enrich and amplify the lives of the researcher [50]. Further, our ethical responsibility and guidelines as researchers implores us to do no harm to LEx as team members and participants, this includes any further marginalization and oppression via our methods and approaches.

3.2 Step 2: Engage

Authentic engagement requires respect, transparency, accountability, clear and consistent communication, and sufficient time to build trust and rapport. From the outset, identify a diverse array of LEx with varied experiences and perspectives to be a part of the research team and process. Create a flat democratized structure, where roles and the way in which all parties will be incorporated into the research process are clear and consistent. Before the engagement begins, it is important to prepare LEx and partners for the engagement by discussing the project, their role and who they can talk with if they have questions or concerns about the work, other team members, or their anticipated contribution. Offer guidelines for collaborative decision making and the decision-making authority schema [46]. As part of proper level-setting, identify clear outcomes and tangible benchmarks to best situate the project for success, and check-in on a regular basis to help keep people engaged. People are on a continuum in their understanding and internalization of the importance of partnering with Lex and power sharing as a means for abiding by anti-oppressive research practices. It is crucial to work with all participants so they are on the same page about the value, expertise, and insights LEx can bring to the table. Finally, in working to establish ground rules, ensure there is a process to manage triggers, potential disagreements and to help navigate rupture, repair and healing [46].

3.2.1 Guiding questions for engagement

Below are Key things to think about and questions to answer before engagement of LEx to promote successful engagement. These questions are intended to gauge readiness to authentically work with LEx consultants and consider the intended impact of engagements. Not all questions will apply to all engagements. Determine:

1. What is the goal of the engagement?

2. What do expect the mutual benefit of engaging LEx will be?

3. Have you thought about who has what decision-making authority within the work group and ways to create an inclusive and collaborative decision-making structure?

4. How will the outcomes from this work be used in future research, policy, practice, and for influencing positive change?

5. How do you plan to assess engagement and success throughout the timeline of this work?

6. What opportunities are there for LEx to provide feedback?

7. If you anticipate the project will extend beyond the designated time? Please see the section below on best practices for long-term engagements.

3.2.2 Considerations for long-term engagement

For engagements that approach 12 months or more, ongoing monitoring and check-in with LEx and other partners is needed. Check-ins may be scheduled regularly (e.g., monthly, quarterly or as needed). Assess:

- How is the project going? Is it on track to meet goals or milestones?
- What is the lived experts experience? Are there pain points that need to be addressed?
- Is the engagement unfolding as expected? Are there changes that need to be discussed?
- Are there changes to the administrative logistics and coordination (e.g., changing a recurring meeting, or staff changes)?
- With a CQI lens, what worked well? What could be improved? Consider this beyond a specific engagement to encompass work with LEx broadly.
- Will the project continue beyond the pre-estimated timeframe. If so, consider budget needs when developing your team's budget for the next year.

3.3 Step 3: Develop

3.3.1 Process development considerations

Work together and create a study design that centrally features the perspectives and priorities of individuals and communities who are the focus of the research. Ensure there is relevance and reciprocal benefit and alignment for all parties before proceeding with the research. Incorporate methodological approaches that best capture the voices, needs and priorities of LEx and community stakeholders. Refrain from creating predetermined, research questions, agenda and approaches. Where possible, ground the research inquiry in such a way that it can help create social change that further honors the time, effort, and urgency of LEx individuals and communities to see real improvements and change.

3.3.2 Infrastructure development considerations

During the planning process, ensure there is a capacity for equitably compensating LEx for their labor and expertise. The compensation should be comparable to others at the table. The Equitable Compensation Taskforce Report, commissioned by a consortium of national child welfare organizations, suggests paying LEx at minimum a living wage for their partnership and expertise (see MIT Living Wage Calculator) [31]. Compensation should consider the level of engagement and experience, the deliverables and potential benefit cliffs, childcare and transportation needs where applicable. Above and beyond pay, make plans for a meaningful and rewarding experience in which noticeable progress and improvement in outcomes related to the area of study is desired. Build in enough time for a CQI process and an ongoing opportunity to assess the project process in terms of the partnership.

3.4 Step 4: Actualize

Actualize the research project by co-designing data collection instruments with the research team, LEx, and community stakeholders who possess multiple perspectives. Use a variety of data collection approaches, where possible, to ensure that a wide range of voices are fully captured. Where interest may lie, provide LEx opportunities for skill building, exposure and participation in carrying out the research study.

3.5 Step 5: Interpret

Review and analyze data together. Discuss findings and engage LEx and stakeholders in the meaning making process. Create a feedback loop to understand, interpret, justify conclusions and identify gaps in the study findings.

3.6 Step 6: Disseminate

Engage LEx and other key stakeholders to develop a dissemination plan. Ensure the final product(s) are developed in an easily readable, accessible language and format (e.g., infographics, podcasts, briefs, reports, toolkits). Include LEx in the writing, review, and presentation of study findings and materials where feasible.

3.7 General considerations

- What would integrating LEx voice in your research and policy look like for your research project/organization?
- What are some steps you can take, no matter where you are in the process, to meaningfully and respectfully engage LEx?
- How can you build on skills you already have to make a seamless transition to working alongside LEx.
- What level of impact will this research have, in what ways will it improve outcomes, how will LEx time and bandwidth be best used in service of creating real change?

Whether you are new to anti-oppressive research principles or a longstanding practitioner, reaffirming your commitment there is always room to continue to deepen partnership with LEx. Examining your current processes and practices at each phase of the research process can illuminate areas where you excel and areas in need of improvement. Meaningfully engaging LEx can enrich relationships and the quality, depth, and responsiveness of the research overall.

4. Conclusion

Partnering with LEx is a core component of engaging in anti-oppressive research. In service of this objective, we have provided strategies and tools to further support pivoting the field to more inclusive and LEx centered research. This re-alignment proposes moving away from research whereby the voices of LEx are usurped or not included in the research process. The anti-oppressive research approach has implications at the individual, interpersonal, and systems levels. Individually, practicing critical reflexivity shifts our understanding of ourselves and the role we can play in either using research to liberate or further oppress. It also broadens our thinking to be more inclusive epistemologically. Interpersonally, anti-oppressive research upends the historical power imbalance by engaging LEx as core partners in the research inquiry process. From a systems perspective, partnering with LEx provides a more well-rounded view and understanding of social phenomena which is crucial given research often drives systems level policy and practice decisions. Finally, partnering with LEx provides us with an additional imperative and urgency to use our research to creation positive social change.

Adopting anti-oppressive principles within child welfare broadly will require significant investment, conviction, and fortitude. While this chapter sets forth a vision and lays the foundation for what needs to happen to support and sustain anti-oppressive research in child welfare. The arc toward reifying this approach, we know, will be long. This framework is foundational and but one part of a compendium of efforts that are needed to build the practice and infrastructure to normalize meaningfully engaging LEx in child welfare research. A shift toward intentionally integrating anti-oppressive principles in each stage of the research and evaluation process will help the child welfare and research disciplines strengthen the social justice focus of both fields.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author details

Chereese Phillips[1*], Sherri Y. Simmons-Horton[2], Aakanksha Sinha[1] and Margie Hunt[1]

1 Casey Family Programs, Seattle, WA, United States

2 The University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH, United States

*Address all correspondence to: cphillips@casey.org

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Section 3

Proactive Perspectives

Chapter 8

Harnessing *Ubuntu* as an Organizing Force for Social Stability and Welfare

Mpumelelo E. Ncube

Abstract

The concept of *Ubuntu* has recently gained global attention, especially in understanding how preindustrial African societies maintained social cohesion. Studies highlight *Ubuntu* as a core social force, integral to fostering unity in Africa. This has spurred academic interest in exploring *Ubuntu* both as a philosophy and a model for development practice. More research is needed to further examine *Ubuntu*'s role in promoting social cohesion across sectors like politics, economics, security, and development. In social welfare, social workers are increasingly interested in approaches aligned with developmental social work, derived from social development theory, aimed at enhancing the welfare and aspirations of communities. This desktop literature review clarifies the relationship between social welfare, social development theory, and developmental social work, linking these to *Ubuntu*'s role as an organizing force for social cohesion, stability, and development.

Keywords: *Ubuntu*, social cohesion, social development, social stability, social welfare, social work

1. Introduction

While the term Ubuntu originates from the Nguni languages in Southern Africa, its essence can be found in various societies around the world in different forms. Various societies of the global South also have their own names for similar concepts. It is a philosophy whose central idea is that one's personhood is affirmed through relationships with others, as expressed in the Nguni languages, including IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, IsiSwati, and IsiNdebele, among others, albeit with varying dialects, commonly stated as umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu. Similar variations outside the Nguni-speaking people can be found in SeSotho/SeTswana (Botho), ChiShona (Hunhu), and TshiVenda (Vhuthu), as well as in Swahili (Utu), among others.

In this context, Motlhabi [1] argues that Ubuntu should be understood both as a philosophy and a way of life. This conceptualization emphasizes its significance in African societies and its potential application in modern contexts, offering insights into its ethical, communal, and humanistic values [1]. In the context of indigenous

Andean philosophy, Ubuntu is underpinned by social justice, sustainability, and collective well-being, emphasizing the importance of every life, irrespective of known or unknown differences [2]. Gudynas [2] presents Buen Vivir as an indigenous Latin American interpretation of Ubuntu, which translates to "living well" in harmony with the community and nature [2]. Similarly, Sanskrit in India emphasizes the world as one family, largely referenced in discussions on global solidarity and peacebuilding [3]. In the Middle East, Ramadan [4] explores Ummah as a conceptual parallel to Ubuntu, referring to collective responsibility, empathy, and the duty to support one another [4]. Comparable values are upheld by indigenous Australian communities, emphasizing shared responsibility, relationality, and reciprocity [5]. The Aloha Spirit in Hawaii and Fa'a Samoa in Samoa emphasize community-centered living, respect, and harmony. The Aloha Spirit reflects values of interconnectedness and collective well-being of the society [6]. In the same vein, Tui Atua [7] highlights how Fa'a Samoa maintains a communal approach to life that resonates with Ubuntu principles [7].

Furthermore, central in the Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese cultures is Confucianism, a philosophy that emphasizes filial piety, relational harmony, and collective responsibility in line with Ubuntu's pursuit of social cohesion and respect for others. Similar to the principles of Ubuntu, filial piety is a central virtue emphasizing respect, devotion, and care that children are expected to show toward their parents, elders, and ancestors [8].

This represents just a sample of various communities across the world whose indigenous life philosophies resonate with the principles of Ubuntu as presented in Southern Africa. These contrast sharply with the principles of individualism prevalent in the global North, which threaten to overshadow the collectivist philosophy of Ubuntu. This shift has, over time, been seen to undermine many indigenous communities, plunging them into economic instability, unemployment, poverty, crime, and underdevelopment, among other challenges [9]. For this reason, this chapter reexamines Ubuntu as a viable force for organizing social stability, welfare, and development. The following sections will focus on Ubuntu not just as a philosophy but also as a practice. They will explore social development theory and developmental social work, centering Ubuntu as an organizing force. Furthermore, the chapter will address the implications for social cohesion and development.

2. Methodology: Desktop literature review

This desktop literature review synthesized existing research on the topic of harnessing the philosophy of *Ubuntu* as an organizing force for social stability and welfare. A variety of purposefully selected academic sources were utilized, including journals, books, conference papers, and credible online resources. Specific themes resonating with the purpose of this work were targeted to create a well-rounded and synthesized argument.

3. *Ubuntu*: Philosophy and practice

This section focuses on understanding *Ubuntu* as both a philosophy and a practice for fostering social cohesion. The term philosophy is multifaceted, with various interpretations spanning academic, social, generic, and etymological contexts. Audi [9] describes philosophy as the study of fundamental questions concerning knowledge,

existence, reason, values, mind, and language. This study is facilitated through critical analysis, logical reasoning, and systematic argumentation. From an etymological perspective, philosophy reflects the "love of wisdom," representing the pursuit of understanding and truth about the world and human existence [10]. Seminal texts on philosophy often define it as "thinking about thinking," emphasizing the study of thought processes and the methods for acquiring knowledge. Similarly, Hadot [11] views philosophy as more than an abstraction; he argues it is a practical way of life aimed at cultivating wisdom, ethical living, and personal transformation. From a social perspective, Freire [12] sees philosophy as a framework for human understanding, critically analyzing political, social, and cultural assumptions. Moreover, Nagel [13] defines philosophy as an academic discipline that uses rational inquiry to explore the principles and presuppositions of any field of study or human activity.

Ubuntu, as a philosophy, resonates deeply with these elucidations, offering clarity on its roots and practical application. It can be regarded as one of the global South's most significant contributions to the world, emphasizing peaceful and community-centered living, harmony with nature, social cohesion, community interdependence, collective agency, collective responsibility, social justice, and holistic well-being. These tenets form the foundation of *Ubuntu*; however, they remain abstract unless contextualized in terms of their applicability, particularly in fostering social cohesion.

Social cohesion is conceptualized differently by various scholars, yet there are notable areas of convergence. Schiefer and van der Noll [14] highlight the importance of social relations, identification with a geographic unit, and orientation toward the common good. These ideas align with the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, providing a lens and framework for understanding and operationalizing it. Social cohesion, in turn, influences the quality of life people experience, shaping outcomes such as societal harmony or discord [14]. In this regard, communication between individuals, groups, and broader structures is foundational to social relations, with any discord in communication having ripple effects across all aspects of these relations. Conversely, effective communication strengthens social cohesion. Fiske [15] asserts that communication is central to establishing, maintaining, and transforming social relations, as it facilitates not only the exchange of information but also the transmission of emotions and shared meanings among individuals and groups. Effective communication within society fosters progress and development, while poor communication strains or dissolves relationships, leading to conflicts and other regressive social issues. Examples of the impact of communication, both positive and negative, are evident in the modern era of advanced technologies. Instantaneous communication has facilitated harmony in scenarios such as community engagement initiatives to fight crime or maintain familial ties across the globe. Furthermore, it was central in the Arab Spring, where rapid mobilization via social media sparked widespread conflict in the region [16, 17].

Beyond social relations, Schiefer and van der Noll [14] reflect on the centrality of identification with a geographic unit as a salient aspect of social cohesion. In his conceptualization of *Ubuntu*, Metz [18] states that it is a moral framework emphasizing communal relationships and the intrinsic value of belonging in human life. Furthermore, Battle [19] posits that, from a theological perspective, *Ubuntu* fosters community cohesion and a sense of belonging in diverse contexts. The importance of establishing a sense of belonging has long been studied in social psychology by many scholars, including Walton and Cohen [20], Baumeister and Leary [21], and Maslow [22]. In this sense, every individual has an innate need to belong. This need is not limited to individuals who may belong to families but stretches to groups that may belong to broader communities such as clans, tribes, and nations. Nations may also possess

the need to belong to regional or international organizations such as the Southern African Development Community, African Union (AU), Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, among others. Schiefer and van der Noll [14] state that the need to belong sets in motion a set of social processes that help instill in members a sense of security and self-worth that strengthens the willingness for participation and social networking held together by shared values. These are instrumental for social cohesion. Bailey et al. [23] talk of value-based essentialism, in which people think of certain social groups in terms of an underlying essence, but that essence is understood as a value. The main focus of their thesis is the essentialist beliefs about social groups with shared values. It narrows down to the importance of belonging and shared values in fostering social cohesion.

The third component of social cohesion, which overlaps with the first two, is the concept of the common good. Schiefer and van der Noll [14] highlight the importance of orienting all members of society toward a common good driven by shared values that unify the community [24]. The "common good" refers to the resources, including material, cultural, or institutional, that a community collectively provides for all its members. This shared provision represents a relational obligation to protect and promote the collective interests of everyone within the community [25]. Specifically, such resources may include public amenities, security, and shared histories, among others.

From a philosophical perspective, Hussain and Kohn [25] argue that citizens exist in a "political" or "civic" relationship that obliges them to create and maintain facilities serving common interests. Therefore, the common good is integral to practical reasoning within a political community. Moreover, orientation toward the common good entails taking responsibility and adhering to social norms and order. In doing so, society can define its collective vision, values, and development goals, creating a strategic plan that unites its members in shared commitment and fosters social cohesion. This is the essence of *Ubuntu*.

4. Social development theory and developmental social work

Social development, as a concept and practice, has evolved significantly through global efforts, particularly under the auspices of the United Nations (UN). The UN's first International Conference on Social Welfare in 1968 laid the groundwork for this approach, identifying remedial, preventive, and developmental functions of social welfare [26, 27]. This commitment by the UN was further underscored during the 1960s and 1970s, declared as successive decades of development [28]. Stokke [29] argues that social and economic development has been the central pillar of the United Nations system from the onset. In 1970, the International Development Strategy Conference emphasized that the ultimate goal of development was to improve the well-being of individuals and ensure benefits for all [30]. This goal includes multiple other aspects, such as economic, social, cultural, and environmental development, resulting in the creation of equitable opportunities and outcomes for all [31].

This shift toward a developmental approach highlighted the importance of enhancing the well-being of people, ensuring social justice, and fostering equitable resource distribution [32]. Unlike earlier remedial-focused approaches, developmental social welfare aims to strengthen individuals' capacities to achieve their potential as active contributors to society. However, this approach faced significant constraints, such as global economic slowdowns, rising national debts in developing countries, and structural adjustment programs that prioritized privatization over public welfare [30, 33].

4.1 Theoretical underpinnings of social development

Midgely [34] affirms that social welfare is central to social development, which he defines as a planned process of social change designed to promote the well-being of the whole population. Earlier, MacPherson [35] had asserted that social development comprises societal objectives and strategies to achieve them, emphasizing collective well-being as its ultimate goal. Social policies, as expressions of public goals, play a pivotal role in fostering human capabilities, substantive freedoms, and overall social development [26, 28].

Noyoo [28] identifies poverty, unemployment, and inequality as critical elements of the development agenda, arguing that economic growth alone cannot achieve meaningful development. Similarly, Midgley [36] views social development as a dynamic, multifaceted, and interventionist process. It involves addressing changing social, political, and economic contexts through targeted policies, programs, and projects. This universalist approach seeks to enhance economic growth while improving the well-being of individuals, families, and communities.

4.1.1 Key themes in social development

Patel [37] outlines five key themes central to social development, incorporating insights from Noyoo [28] and others:

5. Rights-based approach

Grounded in Marshall's [38] and Rawls' [39] ideas of social and distributive justice, this approach emphasizes a participatory and multicultural society as essential for social transformation. While conferring rights, it also assigns responsibilities to citizens, as seen in the constitutions of various countries, including South Africa, Vietnam, Angola, Kenya, Cuba, and China.

6. Social investment

This theme focuses on developing human capital to enable active participation in socioeconomic activities. It also highlights the importance of social capital, defined as shared norms and networks that foster sustainable livelihoods [28]. Capabilities, such as education and healthcare, are critical for enabling citizens to contribute meaningfully to society. Social networks and resources, such as education and entrepreneurship, further enhance human and social development [37].

7. Democracy and participation

Participation is integral to social development, as it empowers individuals to take part in their own progress meaningfully. This participatory democracy fosters collective action and mobilization to achieve shared goals, ultimately improving overall well-being [40].

8. Partnerships

Collaboration between the state, private sector, and civil society is crucial for providing social welfare services. This multi-sectoral approach leverages communities' existing resources to achieve social and economic development [37]. Assets such as education and entrepreneurship play a pivotal role in creating opportunities and promoting a forward-looking mindset [28].

9. Bridging the micro and macro divide

Globalization has emphasized the need for an integrated approach that connects local and global contexts. This theme seeks to address the influence of global factors on local communities, promoting an inclusive and holistic model of development [37]. Other scholars have looked at the micro-macro divide as a false dichotomy in social welfare, especially given the existence of advanced integrated practice models [41]. Patel [37] presents a multimodal approach that integrates various methods and strategies to address social issues holistically, including across the perceived divides.

10. *Ubuntu* as an organizing social force

10.1 Social cohesion across sectors

Various role players can harness *Ubuntu* as a philosophy and practice model to facilitate human interconnectedness, mutual care, collective responsibility, and the holistic development of all. These values, including social justice, mutual respect, and a shared sense of humanity, stand to be a guiding force if *Ubuntu* were to be centered in development and vice versa.

As previously elucidated, social cohesion is one of the cornerstones of the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, extending beyond individuals within a community. It encourages collaboration among government, civil society, and private entities for the common good. Gade [42] highlights the philosophy and practice of *Ubuntu*, particularly its emphasis on interconnectedness and its role in fostering collective action and collaboration. *Ubuntu* has the potential to promote cooperation across various social sectors. The State, leveraging its resources and primary mandate, should facilitate collaboration with various stakeholders in key areas of human development, including capacity building, education, employment, poverty alleviation programs, climate preservation initiatives, and more.

10.2 Influence in politics

Secondly, the philosophy of *Ubuntu* inspires governance models that prioritize collective well-being and participatory decision-making. In democratic governance, *Ubuntu* emphasizes the importance of consultation, dialogue, and inclusivity. Mboti [43] and Letseka [44] highlight the centrality of *Ubuntu* in governance and ethics, aligning it with democratic principles. *Ubuntu*'s unique contribution lies in its emphasis on respect, dignity, and the well-being of all. This helps counteract the growing tendency of politicians, technocrats, and bureaucrats to prioritize non-human-centered practices. Villadsen [45] reflects on Foucault's work regarding the three ways of

decentering the State. He argues that, while a democratic government should ideally derive its power from the people, corporations often extract wealth without seeking the consent of the public [45]. Additionally, just like in private corporations, history has shown that not all governments branded as democratic derive their mandate from the people. Historical instances abound where the will of the people has been subverted, particularly in cases of manipulated elections [46–49].

Ubuntu-centered governance would prioritize reconciliation and peacebuilding. In this context, the government would focus on fostering unity among people of different ethnic groups and races while also advocating for peace across regional and international borders. A notable example is the South African government's approach since the advent of democracy in 1994, addressing racial and ethnic tensions domestically and playing an active role in peacebuilding efforts regionally, continentally, and globally.

Tutu [50], reflecting on his role as chairperson of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), highlights how the commission was guided by the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, emphasizing restorative justice and the healing of a nation scarred by decades of colonialism and apartheid. Building on this foundation, South Africa has positioned itself as a key player in peacebuilding and reconciliation across Africa, with notable engagements in the Central African Republic, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, and, more recently, Mozambique [51]. Similarly, Van Nieuwkerk [52] discusses South Africa's advocacy for human rights, multilateralism, and reconciliation through platforms such as BRICS, the United Nations, and the Non-Aligned Movement. This demonstrates how the philosophy of *Ubuntu* can be infused into and influence political practices at various levels.

10.3 Impact on economics

The influence of *Ubuntu* on economics should ensure that national economic imperatives are people-centered. Any economic policies or initiatives that marginalize the population while prioritizing profits or the interests of a select few lack *Ubuntu* and should be revised and realigned accordingly. Social enterprises should be established with the common good in mind, emphasizing equitable resource distribution and collective development for all. Cooperatives and social enterprises promote social solidarity, where individuals prioritize each other's well-being through shared ownership [53, 54]. Moreover, *Ubuntu* encourages private business practices that go beyond profit-making to include redistribution of profits through corporate social responsibility initiatives. Therefore, the government should foster a policy environment that motivates private businesses to invest in human capacity and contribute to the communities they serve for the collective good.

10.4 Role in security

In relation to security, Ubuntu fosters mutual care and collective well-being for all, emphasizing the principle of being one's brother's keeper, where no harm is intended toward others. This approach seeks to eliminate unhealthy competition, which often leads to individualism, and create a drive to eliminate competition through any means [55]. The philosophy of *Ubuntu* seeks to preempt conflict by addressing its root causes, such as poverty, unemployment, individualism, and inequality. In instances of conflict, mechanisms are designed to promote reconciliation and reestablish unity among people [18, 42, 54]. Policing institutions, guided by *Ubuntu* principles,

encourage community participation to collectively take responsibility for maintaining peace and harmony. Furthermore, restorative justice, rather than punitive justice, is a foundational tenet of *Ubuntu*-inspired approaches to security.

11. Linking *Ubuntu* to social welfare and developmental social work

An elucidation of the theory of social development was presented earlier. This section focuses on the integration of *Ubuntu* into social welfare and developmental social work. It is essential to establish the relationship between social development, social welfare, and developmental social work. To begin, Midgely [34] broadly defines social welfare as a well-structured system of policies, programs, and services designed to meet basic needs and enhance the well-being of vulnerable, disadvantaged, or marginalized individuals, families, and communities. Patel [37] further asserts that this system encompasses a wide range of interventions, including income support, healthcare, housing, education, and social services, with the aim of promoting social justice, equity, and human dignity. It, traditionally, had two pillars, social security also known as social protection and social welfare services, before the adoption of development as its third leg [56]. The principles of social justice, human dignity, and equity are inherently aligned with the tenets of *Ubuntu*. Consequently, the integration of *Ubuntu* into social welfare creates a synergistic relationship, enhancing the ability of social welfare systems to address the holistic needs of individuals and communities while fostering solidarity, compassion, and collective responsibility.

On the other hand, when social development is adopted as a theoretical framework for social welfare, the resulting system becomes developmental welfare. Similarly, when the principles of social development theory are applied to guide social work services, the practice evolves into developmental social work [26]. Patel and Hochfeld [56] broadly explain developmental social work as the practical and appropriate application of social development knowledge, skills, and values to social work processes to enhance the well-being of individuals, families, households, groups, organizations, and communities within their social context. This approach addresses a broad spectrum of human needs, grounded in the values of mutual respect, compassion, and collective responsibility, which guide both engagement with service users and intervention strategies.

The promotion of developmental social welfare also extends to the realm of social work education, with the goal of equipping practitioners to adopt holistic and culturally relevant approaches to addressing societal challenges. Integrating *Ubuntu* principles into social work education entails embedding its values within the standards of teaching and learning. This ensures that the principles of social justice, human dignity, respect, collective responsibility, and participatory processes are prioritized in both the curriculum and pedagogical approaches. Moreover, it fosters a commitment to equity, inclusion, and fairness in the education of future social workers.

To further this integration, it is essential that social work curricula include modules dedicated to the philosophy of *Ubuntu*. This would provide students with a robust theoretical foundation, enabling them to engage effectively and sensitively with culturally diverse communities. Equally, educators must demonstrate cultural sensitivity in their teaching practices to reflect the diversity of their student cohorts. Indigenous knowledge systems should also be incorporated as core components of the curriculum, embraced by both educators and students as essential to understanding and addressing local contexts.

Additionally, students should be rigorously trained in advocacy, empowering them to champion marginalized populations and foster collective action for social justice. This can be reinforced through work-integrated learning opportunities, where students actively engage in communities to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world practices. Immersion in community dynamics allows students to develop a nuanced understanding of social issues while embodying *Ubuntu* principles in their interactions and interventions [57]. Additionally, assessments should evaluate not only technical proficiency but also students' ability to understand and operationalize *Ubuntu* values in practice. This approach ensures that *Ubuntu* becomes deeply ingrained in their professional ethos.

Furthermore, universities have long been criticized as "ivory towers," disconnected from the communities they are meant to serve [58, 59]. Infusing *Ubuntu* into academic institutions should lead to increased community engagement and a stronger emphasis on engaged scholarship by both faculty and students. This would allow communities to benefit from the expertise of universities, while universities gain valuable insights and validation through their reciprocal engagement with communities. Such a symbiotic relationship aligns with *Ubuntu*'s emphasis on interconnectedness and mutual support, creating a dynamic ecosystem where both academia and society thrive.

12. Conclusion

In summary, the paper posits that Ubuntu holds global relevance, drawing parallels across societies worldwide. Originating from the Nguni languages of Southern Africa, Ubuntu serves as a universally recognized term with shared interpretations and principles, despite variations in terminology. Across diverse societies, it emphasizes collective well-being, sustainability, and social justice, fostering relational harmony. As both a philosophy and a way of life, Ubuntu contrasts sharply with the individualistic ethos prevalent in the global North, offering a framework to address social development challenges such as inequality, poverty, crime, and unemployment, particularly in the global South.

Effective communication is essential in strengthening social relations and promoting social cohesion. Conversely, poor communication can lead to conflict and social disintegration. Ubuntu principles advocate for inclusive communication that encourages shared understanding and collective well-being. Moreover, social development integrates collective well-being into policies aimed at combating poverty, unemployment, and inequality and fostering development. Key themes include rights-based approaches, social investment, democratic participation, partnerships, and bridging micro and macro contexts for holistic development. Thus, the interconnectedness of Ubuntu and social development provides a framework that integrates local and global dimensions, promoting sustainable and equitable development.

Overall, Ubuntu is presented as a powerful organizing social force across various domains, including social cohesion, politics, economics, and security. Its core values of interconnectedness, collective responsibility, and mutual care enable collaboration, inclusivity, and holistic development. The paper further examines how Ubuntu can influence governance through participatory decision-making and restorative justice, challenge economic disparities through equitable resource distribution, and enhance security through community-centered peacebuilding. Additionally, the integration of Ubuntu into social welfare and developmental social work is explored, emphasizing

its alignment with social justice, human dignity, and equity. The methodology involved a comprehensive review of existing literature to synthesize insights on how Ubuntu serves as a social force, particularly within developmental social welfare and social work practice.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author details

Mpumelelo E. Ncube
Department of Social Work, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

*Address all correspondence to: ncubeme@ufs.ac.za

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Chapter 9

Unlocking Poverty-Free Futures: Synergizing Social Work with CSR's Vanguard Strategies

Su Enyuan

Abstract

Poverty remains one of the most pressing global challenges, deeply rooted in systemic inequalities and affecting millions worldwide. This chapter explores the synergistic effect of social work and corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a transformative approach to poverty alleviation. It introduces the *CSR Vanguard Strategies Conceptual Framework*, developed to align CSR with sustainable social impact through three interconnected pillars: embedding CSR into corporate identity, fostering collaborative ecosystems, and driving outcome-focused innovation. Grounded in theoretical rigor and case studies evidence, the chapter highlights how social work's grassroots expertise can synergize with CSR's resources and networks to address poverty's multidimensional complexities. Real-world case studies, including microfinance, sustainable agriculture, mental health initiatives, and technological advancements, illustrate the practical application of the framework in creating scalable and sustainable solutions. The chapter critically examines the potential and challenges of CSR-social work partnerships, offering actionable insights for practitioners and policymakers to foster genuine, impactful collaboration. By bridging theory and practice, it presents poverty alleviation as a shared responsibility, emphasizing innovative strategies that empower communities and promote equitable development, ultimately inspiring a reimagined future free from poverty.

Keywords: poverty alleviation, social work and CSR synergy, CSR vanguard strategies framework, collaborative impact, sustainable solutions, community-driven strategies, innovative poverty reduction

1. Introduction

Poverty remains a significant global issue that affects individuals and communities across all borders, cultures, and economies. As reported by the World Bank [1], around 692 million people are living on less than $2.15 a day, highlighting the pressing need for effective solutions. The impact of poverty extends beyond mere statistics; it is evident in the daily challenges faced by individuals, limiting their access to vital resources such as education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. It is challenging to envision a so-called "prosperous world" maintaining its prosperity when a significant number of individuals struggle to meet their basic needs, particularly in the face of complex global challenges such as climate change, health crises, and conflicts.

The consequences of poverty are profound and personal, stifling individual potential and hindering societal progress, which can create cycles of disadvantage that last for generations [2]. Addressing poverty in all its forms, particularly extreme poverty, is one of the greatest challenges we face and is crucial for achieving sustainable development. The *2030 Agenda* for Sustainable Development emphasizes this goal, alongside the *Addis Ababa Action Agenda* of the *Third International Conference on Financing for Development* and the *Paris Agreement* under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Together, these initiatives provide a comprehensive framework aimed at eradicating poverty and fostering sustainable development worldwide.

In general, poverty is commonly viewed as an economic challenge, primarily associated with inadequate income or a lack of job opportunities. However, extensive research reveals that the causes of poverty are deeply rooted in social, political, and cultural factors [3, 4]. Elements such as discrimination, social isolation, and a sense of powerlessness significantly contribute to the persistence of poverty.

Economically, those in poverty struggle to access education and healthcare, hindering their ability to escape the poverty cycle. This restricted access means that children from low-income families are more likely to remain impoverished as adults, perpetuating a generational cycle of poverty [5]. Moreover, poverty correlates with various social problems, including higher crime rates, social unrest, and political instability, which can destabilize entire communities and nations [6]. Additionally, poverty has severe psychological effects, with individuals often experiencing chronic stress, anxiety, and hopelessness, leading to mental health issues. Societal stigma surrounding poverty worsens these feelings, creating further barriers to assistance [5, 7].

Social workers are key advocates for marginalized groups, helping them break through obstacles to improve their lives [8]. However, as the complexities of poverty change with evolving conditions, there is a growing need to rethink and adjust our strategies. This is where corporate social responsibility (CSR) comes into play—a framework urging the corporate sector to actively engage in social issues, including poverty reduction. Merging CSR with social work practices offers a unique chance to enhance impact by utilizing resources, expertise, and networks from both fields.

Addressing poverty is not just a social issue; it requires shared responsibility and innovative collaboration [9]. By examining how social work and CSR initiatives can work together, this chapter explores ways to create resilient communities and equitable societies. Backed by solid evidence, successful models, and real-world CSR initiatives, it investigates innovative strategies in social work aimed at combating poverty and shows how business partnerships can strengthen these efforts. Through thorough analysis, actionable recommendations, and forward-thinking insights, this chapter inspires collaborative work toward a future where poverty is not an unavoidable reality but a challenge we can tackle together.

2. The role of CSR in social work

In apprehending the complexities of poverty alleviation, it is imperative to recognize that holistic strategies are requisite. Alleviating poverty mandates not solely economic remedies but also social policies that foster inclusivity, empowerment, and dignity for those affected. The genesis of the social work profession can be traced back to the pioneering efforts of the Hull House in Chicago during the early 1900s, where social workers galvanized immigrant communities through community organizing and advocacy

[10]. In recent years, a growing emphasis on CSR has emerged as a potential avenue for social workers to collaborate with the private sector in tackling systemic poverty [8, 11].

According to Carroll [12, 13], CSR encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities that society expects from organizations at a given time. Carroll further elaborated on this framework, highlighting the philanthropic dimension as voluntary efforts to give back to society beyond legal and ethical obligations. Over time, this aspect of CSR has evolved from being perceived as mere acts of charity to a strategic tool for driving social change, particularly in addressing poverty. Concurrently, the concept of CSR has broadened to include critical areas such as environmental performance, stakeholder engagement, and ethical business practices [14, 15]. This evolution reflects CSR's transition from traditional compliance-based initiatives to a more integrative approach, aligning corporate actions with societal and environmental priorities.

With the advent of strategic corporate social initiatives, companies are moving beyond ad hoc philanthropic efforts and instead seeking to integrate their community engagement with their core business operations [16]. ElAlfy et al. [17] emphasize this shift, underscoring CSR's strategic role in fostering long-term sustainable development by creating *"positive spillover effects"* that benefit society, the environment, and the economy. Together, these perspectives highlight CSR's capacity to drive systemic and lasting change through multidimensional and collaborative efforts.

Dahlsrud's [18] analysis of 37 CSR definitions identifies five core dimensions frequently referenced across governmental, corporate, and academic perspectives:

1. *Stakeholder responsibility*: This dimension emphasizes that businesses bear responsibilities not just to shareholders but to all entities impacted by their operations, including employees, customers, communities, and the environment. It often serves as the foundation for discussions on sustainability, recognizing the interconnectedness of diverse stakeholders.

2. *Social responsibility*: Rooted in ethical, moral, and humanitarian principles, this dimension underscores the expectation that businesses contribute positively to societal welfare, reflecting their role as agents of social betterment.

3. *Economic responsibility*: This aspect highlights the obligation of organizations to achieve and sustain profitability, benefiting shareholders while ensuring long-term financial stability for themselves and their stakeholders. Carroll's framework positions this as the foundational element of CSR.

4. *Voluntarism and discretion*: CSR is also characterized by activities that surpass regulatory requirements and industry norms. Voluntary initiatives reflect the organization's commitment to going beyond compliance to create meaningful, distinctive contributions that address stakeholder needs.

5. *Environmental stewardship*: This dimension underscores the importance of integrating environmental preservation into business practices. It reflects organizations' dual responsibility to safeguard the natural environment and operate sustainably.

Together, these dimensions form the backbone of CSR, collectively guiding organizations toward the "triple bottom line" of achieving beneficial outcomes for

people, the planet, and profit [19]. This holistic framework highlights CSR's transformative role in fostering sustainable development and ethical practices by uniting resources and expertise across sectors to address economic, social, and structural challenges [7].

3. CSR vanguard strategies conceptual framework

Kanter's [20] concept of "vanguard companies" proffers a compelling conceptual scaffolding for apprehending businesses that assimilate social responsibility as a core strategic component, surpassing conventional CSR. According to Kanter, these companies do not merely address social issues as a means of deflecting criticism but rather embed social responsibility into their corporate essence. The "vanguard companies," as she describes, strive to be "*big but human, efficient but innovative, global but attuned to local communities*." They harness their power and influence to tackle public concerns, infusing humanistic values into their operations as a "smart strategy" within the global, interconnected business panorama. "*They are ahead of the pack and potentially herald the wave of the future*" ([20], p. 12).

Kanter's studies on companies like IBM, Procter & Gamble, and Diageo reveal that in these organizations, leaders actively promote positive values and foster a culture where employees are encouraged to live out these principles in their work. This alignment between social purpose and strategic goals creates a sustainable competitive advantage, particularly when the social commitments align with economic objectives that attract investment and resources to the company. In essence, the "vanguard company" concept pushes toward a post-CSR model, where business success is driven by a fusion of moral purpose and economic achievement.

This book chapter will introduce the conceptual framework for *CSR Vanguard Strategies* builds upon Kanter's idea of "*vanguard companies*" and extend it into the domain of *CSR*. The framework was developed as part of this study to articulate progressive models for aligning CSR with transformative social impact and sustainable business practices. By integrating theoretical insights from existing literature and incorporating new dimensions tailored to contemporary challenges, this framework represents a novel approach to CSR as a strategic driver of societal change.

The *CSR Vanguard Strategies* framework introduces three interdependent pillars—*Strategic Integration of CSR as Identity*, *Collaborative Ecosystem for Social Impact*, and *Outcome-Driven Innovation*—to conceptualize how organizations can elevate their CSR efforts from peripheral initiatives to core operational strategies. This framework (**Figure 1**) was designed to provide a roadmap for organizations aspiring to lead in the post-CSR era, where addressing global challenges such as poverty and inequality is both a moral imperative and a strategic necessity.

3.1 Strategic integration of CSR as identity

At *CSR Vanguard Strategies* heart, embedding CSR into a company's identity is about moving beyond treating social impact as an afterthought. Instead, it is about making it part of the company's DNA—a defining element of who they are and what they stand for. As Kanter suggests with her concept of vanguard companies, truly leading organizations do not just talk about responsibility; they live it. This is the essence of *CSR Vanguard Strategies*, a proactive approach where humanistic values are not confined to glossy reports but are deeply woven into the fabric of daily operations.

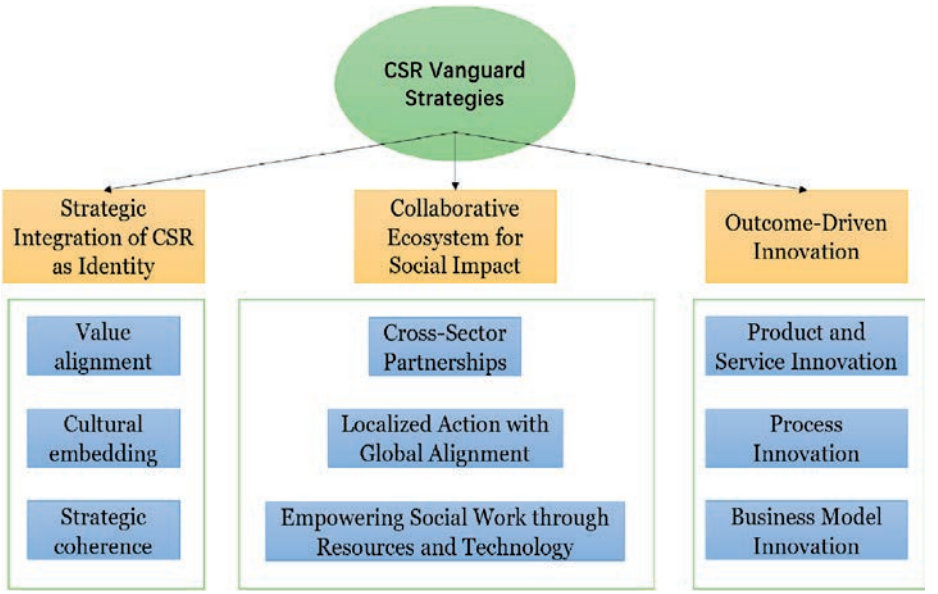

Figure 1.
CSR vanguard strategies conceptual framework.

These strategies focus on *value alignment*, ensuring a clear connection between corporate goals and societal needs; *cultural embedding*, where responsibility is championed at every level of the organization; and *strategic coherence*, aligning economic goals with social purpose so that both reinforce each other. This is not just good for society—it is good business. Companies that genuinely integrate these principles create trust, inspire loyalty, and build stronger, more resilient brands.

3.1.1 Value alignment

The concept of value alignment refers to the process of harmonizing societal values with corporate objectives, ensuring that business strategies reflect broader social priorities. It is about enlightened self-interest where social and economic responsibilities are aligned [21]. This principle is fundamental to CSR as a strategic identity, offering a pathway to build trust and credibility among stakeholders. However, this alignment is not without challenges. Critics argue that superficial value alignment can lead to "greenwashing," which undermines trust and authenticity [22]. Conversely, proponents emphasize that genuine alignment enhances credibility. Balmer and Greyser [23] highlight that ethical corporate identities foster stakeholder trust by ensuring consistency between internal practices and external communications. For alignment to be authentic, it must transcend public relations efforts and embed societal values into an organization's core operations and decision-making processes.

Stakeholder Theory, introduced by Freeman [14, 24, 25], highlights that a company's success depends on meeting the needs of all stakeholders, not just shareholders. This deeper integration involves setting ambitious sustainability goals and reflecting those goals in everyday business practices. Additionally, the concept of aligning societal and business objectives is further reinforced by Kramer and Michael's [26] *Creating Shared Value (CSV)* framework, which highlights the competitive advantages

of addressing societal challenges through innovative business practices. For example, Patagonia, their mission statement, "*We're in business to save our home planet*," exemplifies how authentic value alignment can transform corporate sustainable operations while addressing poverty-related challenges. A notable initiative is its collaboration with fair-trade certified factories, which ensures that workers in low-income regions receive fair wages and improved working conditions, which they can use to improve their living conditions, invest in education, or access healthcare. By 2021, Patagonia's Fair-Trade program supported workers in over 10 countries (India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam, etc.), providing more than $3.5 million in premiums since the program's inception. Furthermore, its partnership with organizations like the Fair Labor Association promotes ethical supply chain practices, addressing systemic inequities in global production networks [27]. These efforts highlight how aligning business strategies with societal needs can create meaningful economic opportunities for marginalized communities while maintaining profitability.

3.1.2 Cultural embedding

Schein's [28] framework on organizational culture emphasizes the importance of deeply ingrained values and shared assumptions in shaping organizational behavior. The embedding of CSR values within organizational culture ensures their endurance beyond external branding efforts. For example, SEWA's (Self-Employed Women's Association) engagement with self-employed women creates grassroots networks and trust, demonstrating how social capital can align societal goals with organizational resilience [29]. To further elaborate, embedding CSR values within organizational culture means that these values become an integral part of how the company operates on a daily basis. This goes beyond mere marketing or public relations efforts and ensures that CSR is not just a facade but a genuine commitment. Institutional theory, particularly the work of DiMaggio and Powell [30], explores how organizational practices are shaped by societal norms, logics, and pressures. George et al. [31] extend this perspective, emphasizing how cultural norms influence responses to Grand Challenges, illustrating that CSR initiatives must align with societal expectations to achieve legitimacy.

Critics warn that cultural embedding may falter if leadership fails to model these values, as inconsistent actions by executives can erode trust and undermine long-term commitments [32]. However, Aguilera et al. [33] extend the social capital theory [34] idea to CSR, suggesting that a CSR-oriented culture generates social capital, enhancing organizational stability and adaptability, underscoring the role of trust, networks, and shared values in fostering collaboration and resilience. Concurrently, leadership plays a critical role in embedding CSR values. For instance, Unilever's *Sustainable Living Plan* exemplifies how CSR-driven culture fosters innovation and engagement by making sustainability a fundamental aspect of its operational and strategic framework [35]. When CSR values are deeply ingrained in the organizational culture, they influence every aspect of the business, from decision-making processes to internal and external stakeholders' interactions and relations.

3.1.3 Strategic coherence

The Resource-Based View [36, 37] underscores the importance of leveraging internal capabilities to capitalize on external opportunities, thereby creating sustainable competitive advantages. In the context of CSR, achieving strategic coherence involves

integrating social initiatives with brand narratives, ensuring a synergy between profitability and purpose. This alignment, as Maignan and Ferrell [38] note, not only strengthens reputation but also fosters customer loyalty by tying CSR activities to an organization's strategic goals, stakeholder management practices, and brand identity. Strategic coherence, where all parts of the organization work harmoniously toward shared objectives, is key to achieving such outcomes.

Building on this, Maccarrone and Contri [39] argue that coherent CSR strategies play a critical role in enhancing stakeholder trust, which can, in turn, be transformed into a sustained competitive advantage. However, for CSR to function effectively as a strategic tool, it must transcend mere compliance and achieve a balance between formalization and flexibility. This aligns with Banerjee's [40] perspective, which cautions that overly aligning CSR with brand strategy risks prioritizing corporate image at the expense of generating substantive impact.

Nevertheless, Starbucks exemplifies this equilibrium with its "*spirit at work*" approach which can serve as a strength, positioning the corporation as a spiritually aligned entity. Through this approach, its ethical sourcing practices and community engagement programs not only bolster its brand image but also enhance operational efficiency [41]. Marques further suggests that fostering greater institutional oversight and incorporating smaller companies into multi-stakeholder initiatives can encourage both global corporations and smaller entities to adopt more spiritual and ethical perspectives in their stakeholder relationships.

Similarly, the Aravind eye care system provides a compelling example of aligning social impact with operational efficiency. By integrating affordable eye care into its mission, the organization simultaneously strengthens its brand identity and operational model, demonstrating the power of purpose-driven strategies [42]. These cases highlight the transformative potential of aligning CSR with organizational objectives.

3.2 Collaborative ecosystem for social impact

At its core, *CSR Vanguard Strategies* focus on *building collaborative ecosystems*, recognizing that the world's most pressing challenges—poverty, inequality and climate change—are far too complex for any one sector to tackle alone. Think of it as a dynamic partnership where businesses, governments, non-profits, and communities each bring their unique strengths to the table.

This approach moves beyond isolated or one-off efforts, aiming instead to create lasting, scalable change. Imagine a local project addressing water scarcity—where a corporation funds infrastructure, the government ensures regulatory support, non-profits drive community engagement, and local residents contribute their knowledge and needs. These collaborations weave together diverse perspectives and expertise, creating solutions that resonate on a human level.

3.2.1 Cross-sector partnerships

Freeman's [25] stakeholder theory provides a foundation for understanding cross-sector partnerships by emphasizing the importance of addressing the needs and expectations of diverse stakeholders. Partnerships between businesses, governments, and civil society exemplify the theory's core idea that value is co-created through collaboration. Cross-sector collaborations create a foundation for tackling complex issues such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation [43]. Kramer and Porter [44] emphasize that partnerships promoting shared value creation not only address

societal needs but also enhance competitiveness. While the initiative improved livelihoods, it also exemplifies how entrepreneurial framing can obscure systemic barriers to poverty alleviation and sustainable development [45]. Nevertheless, Coca-Cola's 5by20 initiative illustrates the principle by engaging NGOs, governments, and local communities to empower women entrepreneurs, thereby aligning stakeholder needs with organizational goals. By leveraging complementary strengths, organizations can overcome resource limitations and amplify their impact. Austin and Seitanidi's [46] *collaborative value creation framework* emphasizes that successful partnerships generate value at three levels: economic, social, and environmental. For example, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria exemplifies how private and public sector cooperation can strengthen health systems and combat global health crises. By creating value not only for the partners involved but also for the broader society. Through synergistic resource-sharing and complementary expertise, these initiatives maximize impact.

3.2.2 Localized action with global alignment

Institutional theory [30, 47] highlights the pressures organizations face to conform to societal norms and global standards. Adherence to frameworks like the UN Global Compact and GRI Standards exemplifies how companies align local initiatives with global sustainability objectives. These institutional guidelines provide a structure for scaling localized action while maintaining coherence with international expectations. Effective CSR strategies balance local responsiveness with global goals. Addressing local challenges requires context-sensitive solutions that are culturally and socially appropriate, while also aligning with broader sustainability objectives [48, 49]. Freeman and Liedtka [50] highlight the importance of understanding stakeholder contexts to enhance the relevance of CSR initiatives. This understanding should ensure that initiatives are relevant and impactful for the communities they aim to serve. Nestlé's Nescafé Plan, for instance, supports local farmers by providing training and resources for sustainable agricultural practices, efforts to mitigate the impact of climate change through carbon reduction initiatives, sustainable packaging, and energy-efficient operations aligning with global nutrition and sustainability goals [51]. While CSR initiatives must be context-sensitive, they should also be designed with scalability in mind. This means that successful local initiatives can be replicated and scaled up to have a broader impact. Unilever's *Sustainable Living Plan* integrates local environmental and social priorities into its global strategy, demonstrating how localized efforts can scale for broader impact [52], and the positive correlations emerged between higher levels of comprehensive ESG integration and enhanced profitability. This also demonstrates the growing importance of systematically embedding social and environmental considerations for realizing both bottom-line savings and top-line growth that are supportive of sustained shareholder value creation over the long term.

3.2.3 Empowering social work through resources and technology

Greenwood [53] critiques the assumption that stakeholder engagement inherently signifies corporate responsibility, arguing that while such engagement often involves moral considerations, it is fundamentally a morally neutral activity. This neutrality implies that stakeholder engagement may sometimes align with ethical treatment but can also diverge from it, driven by strategic objectives. This chapter recognizes that

balancing moral responsibility with business goals thus remains a key challenge in building equitable and sustainable partnerships.

However, this chapter asserts that businesses have a significant role in empowering social work by providing tools, resources, and frameworks that enable impactful interventions. For example, Microsoft's *artificial intelligence (AI) for Good* initiative provides NGOs with advanced technologies and data analytics, initially aiming to optimize resource allocation. Here, it could be just regarded as a morally neutral activity. Though, the initiative's real-world effects often extend far beyond its original scope.

While *AI for Good* empowers NGOs to deliver measurable results, the accessibility of these tools creates broader, sometimes unintended impacts. For instance, once equipped with advanced technologies, NGOs often adapt them for diverse applications, such as disaster response, poverty mapping, or healthcare delivery [54]. This demonstrates how resource provision catalyzes ripple effects, expanding the influence of corporate contributions across multiple domains of social work. Additionally, as social workers develop technical expertise, this knowledge is frequently shared within communities, fostering a broader culture of innovation and adaptability:

"*Now is the time for urgent action. Those of us that can do more, should do more. But the challenges we face are complex, and no one company, sector, or country can solve them alone.*" *---- Brad Smith, Vice Chair & President of Microsoft.*

Despite critiques that initiatives like AI for Good may reflect strategic positioning rather than altruism—enhancing corporate visibility and influence in sectors like AI—these efforts highlight the transformative potential of corporate resources. By enabling scalable and impactful solutions, businesses can align stakeholder interests with societal goals. Moreover, the ripple effects of these initiatives underscore their power to reshape social work paradigms, uncovering new methods to address persistent challenges.

3.2.4 Community-based partnerships

Participatory development theory [55] emphasizes the need for local communities to actively participate in decision-making and implementation processes. This theory argues that sustainable development is achievable only when initiatives are rooted in the priorities and knowledge of the communities they aim to serve. Community-based partnerships, such as SEWA and Grameen Bank, embody this principle by empowering marginalized groups to lead their own development efforts [29, 56, 57]. These partnerships emphasize grassroots initiatives, participatory planning, and capacity building to empower marginalized groups to address their own development challenges. Community-based partnerships focus on enabling underrepresented groups to lead their own development efforts.

From a systems thinking perspective [58], the practical implications of community-based partnerships can be understood as part of an interconnected ecosystem where local actions drive systemic change. *Participatory planning* ensures that solutions are co-created with communities, leveraging their unique insights to address local needs while contributing to broader societal goals. *Capacity building* fosters the skills, resources, and social capital necessary for marginalized groups to become active agents of change, creating feedback loops that strengthen community resilience and autonomy. *Long-term engagement* builds trust and cultivates relationships, which are critical for sustaining impact and fostering adaptive capacity within the system. By embedding these principles into community-based partnerships, organizations

can amplify their efforts, ensuring that localized initiatives not only address immediate challenges but also create cascading effects that contribute to solving complex systemic issues.

3.3 Outcome-driven innovation

When we think about tackling poverty, the term "innovation" might not immediately come to mind, but it is precisely this fresh thinking that can drive real, measurable change. Outcome-driven innovation, a cornerstone of *CSR Vanguard Strategies*, shifts the focus from simply doing good to achieving impactful results. It is not just about running programs or donating funds; it is about creating sustainable solutions that truly address the root causes of poverty.

This approach takes inspiration from Kanter's principles, where the intersection of sustainability and competitiveness becomes a fertile ground for progress. By adopting a results-oriented mindset, businesses can move beyond traditional charity-driven initiatives and focus on strategies that make a long-term difference.

3.3.1 Product and service innovation

Prahalad and Hart [59] argue that innovation targeting the Base of the Pyramid (BoP)—low-income populations—offers significant potential for addressing critical social needs while unlocking new markets. BoP innovation often emphasizes affordability and accessibility, ensuring that solutions align with the economic and social realities of underserved communities [60]. This involves designing affordable, accessible solutions in areas such as healthcare, education, and agriculture. Vodafone's M-Pesa offers a convincing example, revolutionizing financial inclusion in Africa by providing mobile-based banking services that bridged gaps in traditional financial systems [61]. These innovations illustrate the principle that businesses can create mutual value by addressing gaps in traditional systems. Similarly, the Aravind eye care system addressed preventable blindness by offering high-quality, low-cost eye care to millions in India, leveraging economies of scale and operational efficiency to sustain impact [42]. As Prahalad [62] argues, co-creating solutions with underserved communities ensures the scalability and relevance of these innovations, creating shared value for all stakeholders. Therefore, ensuring long-term sustainability requires integrating adaptive strategies that balance immediate goals with systemic alignment.

3.3.2 Process innovation

Williamson's [63] transaction cost economics (TCE) theory highlights how process innovations can reduce inefficiencies in supply chains and production systems, making goods and services more affordable and accessible. For example, Amul's innovative supply chain model aggregates milk from millions of smallholder farmers, reducing transaction costs while ensuring stable incomes for producers and consistent quality for consumers [64]. This model demonstrates how streamlined processes can generate shared value for stakeholders. In addition, the principles of sustainable operations management emphasize resource efficiency, waste reduction, and resilience in supply chains [65]. Correspondingly, sustainable agricultural practices, as explored by Hazell and Hess [66], not only improve crop yields but also mitigate environmental degradation. Besides, renewable energy innovations, such as solar

microgrids, provide affordable electricity to off-grid regions, exemplifying the potential of process improvements to enhance livelihoods while promoting environmental sustainability.

3.3.3 Business model innovation

Business Model Innovation (BMI) is a transformative approach that integrates social impact into the core operations of enterprises. By aligning profitability with societal objectives, BMI redefines traditional business frameworks to prioritize inclusive growth and sustainable development. Organizations could adopt this approach to prioritize inclusive growth by engaging low-income individuals as suppliers, employees, and customers. Prahalad [62] emphasizes that inclusive business models not only address social challenges but also create untapped market opportunities for businesses. As Bugg-Levine and Emerson [67] note as well, such initiatives often attract impact investors, enabling sustained funding and further amplifying their reach and efficacy.

A prime example of BMI in action is d.light, a company that provides affordable solar lighting and power solutions to low-income households in developing countries [68]. The d.light's business model is designed to address the dual challenges of energy poverty and environmental sustainability. By offering solar-powered products at affordable prices, d.light not only improves the quality of life for low-income individuals but also reduces their dependence on harmful and expensive kerosene lamps. This approach not only meets a critical social need but also opens up a significant market opportunity in regions where traditional energy solutions are inaccessible or unaffordable.

Since its founding in 2007, d.light has impacted over 175 million lives across 70 countries as of 2023. The company has sold more than 25 million solar light and power products, offsetting over 38 million tons of CO_2 [68]. This environmental impact is equivalent to taking more than 5 million cars off the road for a year. The d.light's inclusive business model has attracted impact investors, who see the potential for both social impact and financial return. This sustained funding has allowed d.light to expand its reach and impact, providing clean energy solutions to millions of people worldwide. For instance, in Kenya, d.light's solar home systems have reached over 5 million people, with a significant portion of these customers living in rural areas without access to the electrical grid. By integrating social impact into its core operations, d.light exemplifies how BMI can drive inclusive growth and sustainable development, creating a win-win scenario for both the business and society.

4. Transformative case studies in social work and social impact

Many of those who have risen above the poverty line in the past 15 years continue to live on the brink, vulnerable to economic downturns, climate shocks, or health crises that could easily pull them back into poverty [2]. This precarious reality is a reminder that poverty alleviation is not just about lifting people up; it is about keeping them there and creating resilience against future challenges.

This is where *CSR Vanguard Strategies* come into play. These innovative approaches, discussed in this chapter, position CSR as a catalyst for social change—particularly when integrated into the fabric of social work. By encouraging new models of service delivery, such as technology-enabled education programs or accessible

microfinance platforms, these strategies amplify the reach and effectiveness of social work. They also nurture cross-sector partnerships, bringing together businesses, governments, and communities to address systemic issues in ways that no single actor could achieve alone. The transformative potential of *CSR Vanguard Strategies* lies in their ability to not only address the immediate needs of vulnerable populations but also build structures that make poverty alleviation sustainable.

4.1 Scaling successful models

In recent years, scaling successful poverty alleviation models has emerged as a critical priority in addressing complex socioeconomic challenges. The research underscores the transformative potential of approaches that integrate social work, CSR, and government partnerships [69, 70]. Microfinance initiatives, community-driven development projects, and public-private partnerships (PPPs) exemplify how collaborative efforts can create impactful, adaptable interventions tailored to regional needs [71, 72]. However, scaling these models globally requires not just replication but nuanced adaptation to local contexts. Here, corporations and social workers play a pivotal role. Leveraging their insights into cultural dynamics and community-specific issues to ensure interventions remain both effective and sustainable. This synergy between global strategies and localized action provides a promising path to tackling poverty on a larger scale while respecting regional diversity.

4.1.1 Microfinance and entrepreneurship in CSR

Microfinance has emerged as a pivotal strategy for alleviating poverty and empowering marginalized communities, yet its precise impact on poverty incidence and its broader economic and social outcomes remains subjects of lively debate [73–76]. While microfinance initiatives are widely recognized for their potential to uplift marginalized groups, questions persist regarding the extent to which they effectively reduce poverty and deliver sustainable improvements in economic and social conditions. Evidence suggests that microfinance can positively influence the economic and social conditions of clients, their households, and their businesses [77]. Additionally, it can generate broader societal and economic impacts, such as transforming social relationships and influencing labor market dynamics. These effects, in turn, have the potential to impact overall poverty levels, whether poverty is measured narrowly by income or through a broader lens.

- Chirkos' [78] study in Ethiopia offers a compelling example. Through the Amhara Credit and Savings Institution (ACSI), microfinance initiatives have profoundly impacted socioeconomic conditions. Notably, 88% of respondents reported increased income, and 90% experienced enhanced empowerment, reflected in greater decision-making roles and financial contributions within families. Beyond these outcomes, ACSI improved access to education in the ratio of 85.3%, showcasing its holistic influence on community development. These findings align with broader research in Asia and Latin America, where microfinance also fosters gender equality and entrepreneurship [79]. However, Chirkos uniquely emphasizes resilience-building, as increased savings and income diversification shield participants from economic shocks. This underscores microfinance's dual role in immediate poverty alleviation and long-term economic stability, making it an indispensable tool for sustainable development.

- The Grameen Bank model in Bangladesh remains one of the most influential examples of microfinance, empowering millions to rise above poverty through innovative, collateral-free microloans [56, 80]. Its success in South Asia is evident in its ability to foster entrepreneurship and significantly reduce poverty rates. As Ali et al. [79] highlight, the impact of microfinance extends beyond economic gains, with innovations like group-based lending enhancing access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The study reveals that 96% of respondents previously lacked financial access, emphasizing the critical role of microfinance institutions, with 88% reporting income growth that translated into better living standards.

- Building on this, Unilever PLC's Shakti Project in India empowers rural women to become entrepreneurs and significantly contributes to local economies. Since 2001, over 200,000 women across 18 states have been trained as "Shakti Ammas" to distribute Unilever products. Reports suggest that this initiative increases household incomes by up to 15% annually while reaching over 4 million households monthly in underserved areas. Additionally, the program's ripple effect has created indirect employment for over 50,000 others in rural supply chains. These "Shakti Ammas" receive extensive training in distribution management, marketing, and financial literacy, enabling them to operate small retail businesses in their villages [81].

- ASA International Group plc, one of the world's largest international microfinance institutions, through scalable models, provides small, socially responsible financial services to low-income entrepreneurs, most of whom are women, across Asia and Africa. As of 2024, ASA operates in 13 countries, serving over 2.375 million clients with a Gross Outstanding Loan Portfolio (OLP) of USD 394.9 million, a 15% increase from 2023. Its streamlined operations ensure efficiency and high-quality loans, reflected in an improved PAR > 30 days ratio of 2.3%. These achievements underscore ASA's continued efficiency in scaling its operations to serve low-income communities worldwide.

By fostering *long-term economic resilience*, CSR initiatives transcend traditional aid models, focusing instead on empowering communities to achieve sustained growth and independence. This shift represents a fundamental rethinking of corporate engagement in poverty alleviation, where businesses leverage their resources, networks, and expertise to create shared value—benefiting both society and the organization itself. This approach aligns corporate goals with societal needs, promoting community empowerment and economic independence while addressing systemic poverty [82].

By scaling successful models, CSR initiatives go beyond isolated pilot projects to implement proven strategies on a broader scale, creating a systemic impact in poverty alleviation. This approach enables businesses to replicate effective solutions, such as scalable microfinance programs or community-driven development projects, in diverse contexts. By leveraging their resources and networks, companies can amplify the reach and effectiveness of these models, demonstrating that addressing poverty at scale is both achievable and sustainable. Scaling these efforts ensures that impactful solutions benefit more communities, aligning corporate capabilities with global development goals for long-term success.

4.1.2 Sustainable development and CSR in agriculture

Sustainable agriculture has emerged as a critical strategy to address the intertwined challenges of food security, environmental degradation, and climate change. These reforms aim to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, promote conservation, and improve resource efficiency in farming [83]. Diverse approaches such as agroecological practices, green subsidies, climate-smart agriculture (CSA), and organic farming have been implemented globally to promote resilient and sustainable farming systems. In regions vulnerable to climate change, CSA programs in Kenya and Ethiopia integrate adaptation and mitigation strategies, enhancing resilience and reducing greenhouse gas emissions [84, 85]. Meanwhile, organic farming movements, supported by certification systems in India and the EU, not only promote healthier ecosystems but also improve the market value of agricultural products [86, 87].

- A notable example is Brazil's Plano Safra, which incentivizes sustainable agricultural practices and combats deforestation through subsidized low-cost loans. In the 2021/22 agricultural cycle, 47% of Plano Safra's rural credit—amounting to BRL 118.66 million—was allocated to sustainable production systems, reflecting a significant commitment to green agriculture. Similarly, green subsidies, such as the EU Common Agricultural Policy and India's National Mission on Sustainable Agriculture, incentivize farmers to adopt environmentally friendly practices, reducing chemical usage and enhancing biodiversity [88, 89]. These initiatives not only address environmental concerns but also enhance the resilience of agricultural sectors, providing a model for balancing productivity with ecological stewardship.

- The Basic Cow Bank Model in Haiyuan County, Ningxia, serves as a remarkable example of innovative poverty alleviation and sustainable agricultural development. Once deemed "*one of the least suitable areas for human habitation in the world*" by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in 1972, this region has witnessed transformative progress since the program's launch in November 2017. Established through a partnership among China Resources Group (CRG), the Haiyuan County government, and Northwest A&F University, the initiative enables farmers to purchase livestock *via* a credit-based system, with costs shared among CRG, the government, and farmers. Beyond financial aid, it integrates subsidized infrastructure, technical training, breeding insurance, and scientific advancements like breed improvement and forage optimization. By 2019, the program had impacted over 200,000 cattle annually, significantly advancing high-quality beef cattle breeding technologies. The multi-sector collaboration has not only improved financial security and rural living standards but also generated substantial ecological and social benefits, demonstrating how CSR-driven strategies can catalyze sustainable development [89, 90].

4.1.3 CSR and mental health support

While microfinance initiatives and agricultural programs focus on empowering individuals through microloans and sustainable farming practices, they primarily address the economic and ecological aspects of poverty. However, true societal resilience also requires attention to the psychological impacts of poverty. Poverty

often exacerbates mental health challenges, creating barriers to individual and community development [91–93]. Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) has become a cornerstone of CSR mental health programs, offering a holistic approach to addressing the psychological toll of poverty and conflict. By focusing on understanding the pervasive impacts of trauma, TIC could ensure that interventions prioritize healing and avoid re-traumatization. This strategy is particularly effective in communities experiencing compounded challenges, such as gender-based violence and displacement.

- In Lebanon, Heartland Alliance International (HAI) has implemented TIC through its psychosocial services, targeting women and girls affected by gender-based violence, including Lebanese nationals and Syrian refugees. Since 2013, the organization's "Safe Spaces" initiative has provided a secure environment for over 7000 women and girls, where trained psychosocial workers deliver trauma-sensitive support. Similarly, in Uganda, TIC programs address the psychological consequences of conflict among South Sudanese refugees. The Tutapona Uganda initiative, in collaboration with TEAR, offers trauma counseling and therapy to those affected by violence, displacement, and loss. The "Empower" group support program, a key intervention, directly benefited more than 900 refugees by 2020 and reached hundreds more through broader community efforts [94]. Together, these examples highlight the transformative potential of TIC within CSR initiatives, demonstrating its capacity to foster resilience and recovery in vulnerable populations.

Moreover, Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) have proven to be effective in enhancing mental health, especially in populations dealing with chronic stress due to poverty or trauma. One notable example is the MindUp program, implemented in Northern Uganda, specifically in Gulu, a region affected by years of civil conflict. This program was adapted for children who had experienced trauma, including forced child soldiering and violence, aiming to improve their social and emotional well-being. Research by Matsuba et al. [95] has demonstrated significant improvements in emotional regulation, with reductions in depression and anger, alongside increases in empathy and resilience. Children who participated in the program reported better emotional outcomes compared to those in non-participating schools. These results were consistent across both controlled studies and observational assessments over a two-year period, indicating the long-term impact of mindfulness training.

- In Malaysia, Zaidi et al. [96] found that MBIs during pandemic times significantly improved mindfulness, well-being (subjective and psychological), and reduced perceived stress among Malaysia's bottom-40-percent (B40) and middle-forty-percent (M40) income earners, indicating that mindfulness can be an effective tool for enhancing emotional regulation and well-being in these populations. Platforms such as MindFi have made mindfulness practices more accessible, amplifying their impact in promoting resilience and mental health within these populations.

Furthermore, Kabat-Zinn [97] foundational book (original in 1994) reinforces the effectiveness of MBIs in promoting mental health and well-being. These above-mentioned cases and studies highlight the potential of TIC and MBIs as cost-effective

social responsibility initiatives to promote mental health in underserved, poverty-stricken, and trauma-affected communities.

4.1.4 CSR and skill development

The strengths-based approach (SBA) is particularly effective in CSR initiatives focused on skill development and vocational training [98]. IBM's P-TECH initiative, a CSR-supported educational model, is grounded in SBA principles, helping students in low-income communities build on their existing strengths to achieve career success. The program offers mentorship, practical skills training, and internships, emphasizing participants' potential rather than focusing on limitations. This model shifts the narrative away from a deficit-based view of poverty and instead emphasizes empowerment, allowing clients to become active participants in their journey out of poverty.

- In Ghana, the SBA has been effectively used to empower youth, particularly in rural communities struggling with poverty. Organizations like *World Vision Ghana* have implemented SBA programs that focus on leveraging the inherent strengths of young people, such as creativity, resilience, and community knowledge. These programs primarily target youth aged 15–24 and offer vocational training in areas like carpentry, tailoring, agriculture, and IT skills tailored to local needs. Since its inception, the initiative has positively impacted over 10,000 youth, with 75% of trained individuals securing employment or starting businesses within 6 months.

- The Johnson & Johnson Bridge to Employment (BTE) program, launched since 1992, utilizes SBA-Motivational Interviewing (MI) techniques to empower youth from underserved communities by encouraging them to set and pursue their educational and career goals. Detgen et al. [99] research, involving 23 alumni (57% from the United States, 48% graduated 2013–2016, 48% female), finds the program beneficial in four aspects: exposing to various careers (helping informed choices and clarifying interests), enhancing soft skills (essential for education and career), guiding preparation steps (valued by first-generation students), and strengthening relationships (with volunteers and peers). The impact of BTE is substantial: approximately 75% of graduates move on to higher education, and a significant portion (46%) express interest in pursuing careers in the healthcare field [100]. MI helps participants reflect on their aspirations and develop self-motivation, which is critical for achieving long-term success.

4.2 Technological integration

To ensure that no one is left behind, it is essential to know who the weakest are. This type of data is critical to expanding opportunities for people and providing pathways to sustainable development. The 2030 Agenda clearly identifies the need for high-quality, accessible and timely data on which to base informed decisions. History has also proved that science and technology are powerful levers that promote economic and social development [101]. At the global level, faced with population, environment and resource bottlenecks, scientific and technological innovation is a key path to changing the way of living and achieving sustainable development.

However, in sub-Saharan Africa, where poverty is most severe, about 60% of countries lack sufficient data to monitor poverty trends. Globally, it is estimated that

nearly 230 million children under the age of five have never had their birth registered, representing about a quarter of all children under the age of five. Children who are not registered at birth or who lack identity documents are often denied access to education, health care and other basic services [102].

Monitoring progress in poverty eradication and sustainable development will require a data revolution through investment in data and the strengthening of statistical capacities, particularly in the national statistical systems of developing countries [103]. Such a revolution is a shared responsibility of governments, international and regional organizations, the private sector and civil society. As CSR initiatives grow, companies are increasingly investing in technology and supporting social work such as poverty alleviation. By funding and supporting digital infrastructure and tools, CSR programs could help bring basic services to underserved populations, bridging gaps in access that many poverty-stricken regions face.

Here are a few ways in which technology, bolstered by corporate CSR initiatives, is revolutionizing social work in the context of poverty alleviation:

4.2.1 Establishing digital foundations and access to essential services

To make technology-driven solutions feasible in low-resource settings, CSR initiatives often prioritize establishing the necessary infrastructure. Examples include *Google's Project Loon*, which used high-altitude balloons to bring internet connectivity to remote areas in Africa and Latin America, making online resources accessible where traditional connectivity was challenging [102]. Similarly, Meta's Internet.org initiative, launched in countries like India and Kenya, provides free access to essential websites, including health and educational resources, allowing underserved communities to benefit from vital information at no cost.

Once connectivity is established, telehealth programs funded by CSR initiatives begin to deliver critical services. These digital healthcare solutions offer remote medical advice, counseling, and mental health support, reaching individuals who otherwise might not have access due to transportation or financial constraints [104]. By providing consistent, remote care, CSR-backed telehealth programs make healthcare more accessible and equitable for low-income communities [105].

- CSR initiatives in China have laid critical digital foundations that enhance economic and social mobility for underserved communities, largely through the integration of local markets and digital infrastructure. Over the last 40 years, China has achieved unprecedented poverty reduction, lifting nearly 800 million people out of poverty—a feat that accounts for 75% of global poverty reduction [106]. One notable example is the "Internet Plus" initiative, which aims to integrate the Internet with traditional industries to foster innovation and growth. As part of this initiative, the Chinese government has invested heavily in building digital infrastructure in rural areas. By the end of 2020, over 98% of administrative villages in China had access to broadband internet, benefiting millions of rural residents. This digital connectivity has enabled access to essential services such as online education, telemedicine, and e-commerce, significantly improving the quality of life in rural areas.

Imagine a remote village where a lack of connectivity once meant limited access to healthcare, education, or even basic market opportunities. Now, thanks to large corporations integrating modern technology into their CSR efforts, that same

community can connect to the world. A child might access online classes for the first time, a farmer could sell produce directly to urban markets, or a clinic might offer remote consultations, saving lives in areas without local medical professionals. These tangible changes do not just improve conditions temporarily—they empower people to shape their futures. The ripple effect is profound: one connection creates countless opportunities, enabling communities to thrive independently. This transformation underscores how CSR, coupled with technology, can turn barriers into bridges for a more equitable and connected world.

4.2.2 Integration of advanced technologies for effective poverty alleviation

Beyond basic digital infrastructure, CSR initiatives are increasingly integrating advanced technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), big data, and blockchain to optimize poverty alleviation efforts. CSR-backed AI-powered models help social workers and NGOs identify at-risk populations, predict crises such as food shortages or health emergencies, and deploy targeted interventions efficiently. For instance, predictive analytics allow organizations to allocate resources to areas with the greatest need, ensuring that interventions are both timely and impactful.

- One prominent example is M-Pesa, a mobile money platform that has revolutionized how people in Kenya, and beyond, manage their finances. Launched in 2007, M-Pesa enables individuals without traditional banking access to save, send, and receive money through their mobile phones. Over 80% of Kenyans use M-Pesa, and it has become a cornerstone of financial inclusion. A study by the World Bank found that M-Pesa lifted nearly 200,000 households out of poverty by allowing people to send remittances, access loans, and build savings without needing a bank accounter; CSR-backed initiatives have enhanced digital literacy to ensure that users can fully leverage mobile banking's potential. Suri and Jack [107] highlight that mobile money services have led to long-term poverty reduction by improving access to financial resources and enabling better economic decision-making. Additionally, Aker and Mbiti [108] show that mobile phones and digital financial services contribute to economic development in Africa, boosting market participation and lowering transaction costs. These innovations are not just about access but also empowerment, with greater financial autonomy contributing to improved quality of life for rural populations.

Technology has also played a crucial role in fostering entrepreneurship in impoverished areas. E-commerce platforms like Jumia in Africa and Shopify globally have made it possible for small business owners to reach wider markets, reducing geographical barriers to trade. According to Brynjolfsson and McAfee [109], the rise of digital business platforms enables entrepreneurs in remote locations to scale their operations, access global supply chains, and sustain their businesses in the long run. This has led to enhanced entrepreneurial opportunities, which are critical in areas where traditional job opportunities are scarce. Local businesses, particularly in regions like sub-Saharan Africa, benefit from the reduced entry barriers provided by digital platforms, leading to increased economic activity and job creation.

FinTech solutions, such as blockchain, artificial intelligence (AI), and crowdfunding, are increasingly used to support small businesses. KickStarter and Bitcoin are examples of platforms that offer financial services and capital access for micro-enterprises. Madan [110] examines how FinTech empowers small businesses in emerging

markets, especially in areas where traditional lending mechanisms are unavailable or inefficient. Blockchain, in particular, offers small enterprises secure, transparent transactions without the need for intermediaries, which is vital in reducing operational costs and fostering trust in low-income areas. Similarly, Zohar [111] explores how blockchain technology can alleviate poverty by improving market efficiency and expanding access to economic opportunities.

- In Kenya, the blockchain-based community currency initiative, Grassroots Economics, provides data-backed evidence of how blockchain technology supports poverty reduction and economic stability. Since its inception, Grassroots Economics has implemented community inclusion currencies (CICs) in several Kenyan communities, impacting over 30,000 people and facilitating thousands of local transactions each month. According to reports, the introduction of CICs has led to a significant increase in food security, with over 50% of the currency being spent on food-related purchases. Additionally, surveys among CIC users showed that more than 80% of participants experienced improved financial resilience, as these currencies allow communities to transact and trade even when conventional currency is scarce.

4.2.3 Multi-sector collaboration and policy backing

Picture a world where the fight against poverty is not confined to governments or charities but is a collective effort involving businesses, social enterprises, non-profits, and policymakers working hand in hand. Tackling poverty's deep-rooted inequalities demands this kind of bold, multi-sector collaboration. No single organization, no matter how powerful or well-intentioned, can solve these challenges alone.

By fostering partnerships that align diverse goals and leverage unique strengths, we can create solutions that are both innovative and inclusive. This type of teamwork turns competition into cooperation and aligns diverse stakeholders behind a shared purpose. It is not just about pooling resources—it is about blending perspectives and expertise to build sustainable solutions that address poverty from all angles. When all sectors come together, the possibilities for creating meaningful change become limitless, opening pathways to a future where equity and opportunity are accessible to all.

Multi-sector collaboration allows for a more holistic response to poverty, where stakeholders not only pool their resources but also engage in dialog to align their objectives. The *United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* have amplified the global call for such partnerships, particularly under Goal 17, which advocates for "partnerships for the goals" and emphasizes the need for multi-stakeholder collaboration in addressing global challenges, including poverty.

4.2.3.1 Enhancing multi-sector partnerships

Several notable initiatives illustrate the success of multi-sector collaboration in poverty reduction:

- *The global alliance for improved nutrition (GAIN)* is a partnership between government bodies, private sector companies, and NGOs aimed at improving nutrition in impoverished communities worldwide. By aligning the expertise of food companies, the logistical capabilities of government health ministries, and the advocacy power of NGOs, GAIN has made significant strides in reducing malnutrition in

vulnerable populations. This multi-sector approach ensures that food insecurity—a critical component of poverty—is tackled from multiple angles.

- *The homelessness partnership strategy in Canada* is another example. Here, local governments work with private developers, social workers, and non-profit organizations to create affordable housing solutions for individuals experiencing homelessness. This collaborative model addresses both the immediate need for shelter and long-term strategies for social integration, job placement, and mental health support. The program highlights the importance of integrating corporate social responsibility (CSR) with public policy and social work efforts.

The future of poverty reduction will increasingly depend on the ability to forge stronger and more integrated cross-sector partnerships. The collaboration between governments, corporations, and civil society—fueled by a shared commitment to achieving the SDGs—will be essential in mobilizing the financial and human resources needed to tackle poverty on a global scale. These partnerships should be built on *long-term commitments* rather than short-term solutions. By aligning their objectives and working together in an enhanced and coordinated manner, these sectors can create poverty reduction strategies that are not only impactful but also sustainable.

4.2.3.2 Facilitating collaboration through CSR and government policies

When businesses align their CSR initiatives with governmental poverty reduction policies, the synergy between public and private sectors drives sustainable change. This collaboration goes beyond financial contributions; it leverages the strategic capacity of businesses to implement scalable, impactful solutions. Governments often play a facilitating role by providing tax incentives, subsidies, or supportive regulatory frameworks that encourage corporate engagement in addressing societal challenges.

For example, *India's mandatory CSR policy* requires companies meeting specific criteria to allocate 2% of their profits to CSR activities. This regulation has catalyzed partnerships between the private sector, social workers, and NGOs, leading to impactful programs in areas such as education, healthcare, and rural development. By institutionalizing CSR through policy frameworks, governments can channel corporate resources into areas of public need, thus fostering collaboration between various sectors.

Recent trends in *Universal Basic Income* and conditional cash transfers have shown the potential to reduce poverty by providing individuals with the financial security they need to invest in their education, health, and livelihoods. Moreover, the future will see an increasing emphasis on *climate change and poverty*, as environmental degradation disproportionately affects impoverished communities. Policies that address the intersection of climate resilience and poverty alleviation—such as investments in sustainable agriculture, green jobs, and renewable energy—will be essential for long-term solutions.

5. Conclusions

This chapter has examined the intricate interplay between poverty alleviation, social work, and CSR, highlighting their potential convergence to drive meaningful and sustainable solutions. Poverty, deeply entrenched in structural inequalities, remains one of the most formidable global challenges. Yet, as demonstrated here,

social work—rooted in advocacy, empowerment, and community-driven strategies—has consistently proven its effectiveness in addressing both the immediate and systemic aspects of poverty. Concurrently, CSR has emerged as a powerful avenue for corporations to extend their influence beyond profit-making, contributing to societal transformation through intentional and strategic interventions.

Central to this discussion is the *CSR Vanguard Strategies Conceptual Framework*, introduced in this chapter as a blueprint for harmonizing corporate efforts with sustainable social impact. This framework underscores three pivotal pillars: *Strategic Integration of CSR as Identity*, *Collaborative Ecosystem for Social Impact*, and *Outcome-Driven Innovation*. By embedding CSR initiatives within organizational culture and aligning them with the principles of social work, the framework provides a comprehensive roadmap for maximizing their collective impact. It encourages corporations to move beyond traditional philanthropy, adopting proactive, systems-thinking approaches that address the root causes of poverty while delivering measurable outcomes for diverse stakeholders.

To reinforce the framework's applicability, this chapter incorporates transformative case studies that exemplify the potential of innovative partnerships between social work and CSR. These real-world examples validate the framework while offering actionable insights for practitioners and policymakers seeking to replicate or adapt successful models across diverse contexts.

When aligned strategically, the synergy between social work and CSR amplifies their collective impact. This alignment fosters innovative approaches to poverty alleviation by leveraging corporate resources, expertise, and networks alongside the empathetic, grassroots efforts of social workers. Together, these forces could address both the symptoms and root causes of poverty, providing a pathway toward long-term, sustainable development.

Despite its comprehensive exploration, this chapter acknowledges certain limitations. First, the analysis heavily relies on well-documented and successful examples, such as the Aravind eye care system and Starbucks, which, while illustrative, may not fully encapsulate the challenges faced by smaller organizations or those operating in resource-constrained environments. Second, the chapter offers limited discussion of practical tools or evaluative metrics for distinguishing genuine CSR efforts from superficial ones, leaving gaps for practitioners seeking tangible, actionable strategies.

Moreover, collaborations between social work and corporations must be approached cautiously. CSR initiatives, while capable of driving substantial positive change, risk becoming vehicles for "greenwashing," where corporations exaggerate or misrepresent their social impact [48, 112, 113]. Social workers, as advocates for social justice, play a pivotal role in ensuring that partnerships with organizations are transparent, genuine, and focused on sustainable development rather than short-term image enhancement.

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Author details

Su Enyuan
Putra Business School, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Seri Kembangan, Selangor, Malaysia

*Address all correspondence to: suenyuan68@163.com

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Social work is a profession committed to advancing human rights, promoting social justice, and supporting well-being at individual, community, and systemic levels. Across continents and cultures, social workers are on the front lines of humanity – standing with individuals, families, and communities in times of crisis, growth, and transformation. *Social Work - Impacting Lives Around the World* brings together powerful research, frameworks, approaches, lived experiences, and perspectives from professionals making a real difference in the lives of those affected by poverty, mass incarceration, child welfare issues, racial/ethnic differences, and systemic injustice. This inspiring collection highlights the diverse roles of social workers, spanning regions from North America to Northern Europe, and from Europe to Southeast Asia, as well as the Southern Hemisphere, and explores how social work adapts to local challenges while upholding universal values. Contributors examined a wide range of issues – including child welfare, poverty, mass incarceration, systemic injustice, and displacement through culturally responsive and ethnically grounded practice. Each chapter reveals the heart and resilience of a profession deeply rooted in empathy, equity, and social justice. This book offers valuable perspectives for students, educators, researchers, and practitioners seeking to understand the global dimensions of social work. The book is a vital resource for deepening global awareness and discovering how one profession is changing the world – one person, one family, and one community at a time.

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