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Neoliberalism, guilt, shame and stigma: A Lacanian Discourse Analysis of food insecurity

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Abstract

The researchers conducted a Lacanian discourse analysis of 21 interviews conducted in 2016 of food bank clients of a large city in a southern U.S. state. The study focused on accounts of food insecure individuals regarding their experiences of stigma, shame, and guilt towards receiving nonprofit food assistance and how those experiences—or lack thereof—might play a role in food bank utilization, given the problematic of why many food insecure households do not receive any type of food assistance. The researchers found that superegoic imperatives and stigma under neoliberalism served as major barriers to seeking adequate food assistance. Participants experienced guilt and shame at failing to meet the standard of self-sufficiency promoted by neoliberalism; neoliberal discourses dominate constructions of food insecurity as being due to personal failings. Participants attempted to mitigate stigma, guilt, and shame through passing as food secure by avoiding asking for needed food assistance; what is more, participants took great lengths to avoid being seen as illegitimately enjoying in accordance with neoliberal ideology (e.g., not wanting to meet the stereotype of "living off of the system", falling into the category of the underserving poor). In Lacanian terms, to be seen as illegitimately

enjoying is to be the object of xenophobia. Some participants were able to resist neoliberal discourses which would render them morally responsible for their plight by adopting egoic discourse identities of being independent, a helper, or a provider by seeking food assistance.

Key Terms

Food insecurity; neoliberalism; stigma; Lacanian discourse analysis; guilt; shame; superego

Introduction

Food insecurity, the state of having insufficient economic, social, and physical access to nutritious foods which meet dietary needs (FAO, 2008), is a major public health issue in the United States. It has been estimated that nearly 1 in 6 households in the U.S. are food-insecure (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2015), and over 20% of all households in the U.S. with children are food-insecure (Wight, Chau, & Aratani, 2011). Food insecurity has been linked to adverse health issues for children (Cook et al., 2004) as well as for adults (Gregory & Deb, 2015; Pruitt et al., 2016). In this vein, Pruitt et al. (2016), analyzing data from the 2005-2010 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), found that compared to respondents who were food-secure, food-insecure respondents "had poorer self-rated health, more frequent poor physical and mental health days, higher BMI, and higher prevalence of diabetes, smoking, depressive symptoms, and every type of functional limitation" (p. 3). What is more, they found that amongst the food insecure, 58% received no assistance while 20.3% received only Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, 9.7% received only food bank assistance, and 12.0% received both SNAP and food bank assistance.

One important question is why 58% of food insecure households received no assistance. On the one hand, logistical barriers such as confusion about eligibility, lack of childcare, and lack of transportation have been identified as factors that prevent participation (Bryant et al.,

2001; Kahler et al., 1992; Oemichen & Smith, 2016). On the other hand, some food insecure households might not seek food assistance because of psychosocial reasons, including negative social discourses about receiving food assistance. Along those lines, a handful of studies have revealed barriers such as stigma and shame (Bryant et al., 2001; Oemichen & Smith, 2016), or demonstrated, for example, that parents feel substantial shame on account of not being able to provide adequately for their families (van der Horst, Pascucci, & Bol, 2014). A few studies have focused more directly on shame experienced by food insecure households (de Graham et al., 2018; Purdam, Garratt, & Esmail, 2016), and have suggested a potential link between experiencing shame and reticence to receive food assistance (Purdam, Garratt, & Esmail, 2016). Correspondingly, there is a significant amount of stigma against the food insecure that is perpetuated by ideologies such as neoliberal discourses that blame the food insecure for their plight, focusing on causes like perceived individual deficiencies (e.g., inadequate budgeting skills) (de Graham et al., 2018).

Neoliberalism comprises a set of ideological practices which are applied both to the market and to social life. Neoliberalism functions "as the usual term for the current phase of capitalism, featuring market-emulating governance, financialisation, privatisation, the reduction of citizens to 'human capital,' a profound antipathy to progressive redistribution" (Dale, 2019). Bridging economics with the side of the human subject, neoliberalism proposes that "human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). In this vein, Foucault (2010) considers neoliberalism to be an ideology which promotes economic practices in the wider social sphere, so that society enacts a governance of the self based on the regulatory practices of the market; the merits of companies

competing with one another are translated into the imperative of individuals who compete, and this imperative is enforced by social groups. Under neoliberalism, then, individuals are defined as consumers who compete for resources and who are rewarded for hard work or ingenuity and punished for the lack thereof. Correspondingly, the market supposedly ensures that each individual receives what s/he deserves, positing that inequality is due to the presence or absence of individual merits.

Neoliberalism, then, as a set of ideological practices, also has effects on moral "laws". More specifically, neoliberalism's ideal of individual self-responsibility operates on this moral level. People tend to be aware of their status as stigmatized and apply that stigma to themselves, acting under neoliberalism as though they are to blame for their plight (Corrigan & Wassel, 2008; Corrigan & Watson, 2002). Positing that the food insecure are morally responsible for their disadvantaged situation de-legitimizes the accounts of those experiencing adversity while at the same time eliciting feelings of shame and potentially also of guilt—the latter relating to the transgression of a moral law. For example, a recent study found that food insecure households are affected by dehumanizing neoliberal narratives, and that many try to minimize accompanying negative judgments by attempting to "pass as normal (and thus moral) families by hiding their food insecurity and self-silencing their experiences of poverty" (de Graham et al., 2018, p. 397). The self-policing of neoliberalism in this way means that those who "pass" are able to reduce or avoid being on the receiving end of moralistic stigma. At the same time, however, passing reinforces neoliberal and protestant work ethic ideologies which perpetuate stigma and social inequalities (Harrison & Cooley, 2012). This kind of individualizing of food insecurity functions to repress or disavow awareness of the broader socio-economic determinants of food insecurity

including expensive housing, insufficient wages, and other practices preventing marginalized groups from improving their economic situation (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2017).

The manner in which food insecure individuals relate to neoliberal discourses regarding poverty and food insecurity is not well understood and will be explored in the present study which focuses on the accounts of food insecure individuals regarding their experiences of stigma, shame, and guilt towards receiving nonprofit food assistance and how those experiences—or lack thereof—might play a role in food bank utilization.

Method

Corresponding to the researchers' question about how food insecure individuals are affected by neoliberal discourses regarding food insecurity, discourse analysis is used. The analysis of discourse can be instrumental in depicting how powerful notions of the subject are promulgated in society as well as for providing avenues for those notions to be questioned and resisted. According to Ian Parker, "Patterns of discourse in capitalist society hold in place chains of demeaning images of human beings divided from each other on the basis of different categories (of class, race and sexuality, for example), and so the analysis of language is also necessarily an analysis of ideology, with 'discourse' to be conceptualized here as the organization of language into certain kinds of social bond" (2005, p. 164). Likewise, analysis of language is at the same time an analysis of neoliberal ideology as being constitutive of the subjectivity in today's society. More specifically, we utilize Lacanian (psychoanalytic) discourse analysis (e.g., Neill, 2013; Parker, 2005; Parker & Pavón-Cuéllar, 2014; Pavón-Cuéllar, 2010; Rogers, 2007) which both informed our interviews of food insecure individuals (Rogers, 2007) and our analysis of the resulting text. Parker, one of the foremost voices in Lacanian discourse analysis, emphasizes "in common with much discourse analysis, the notion

that there should be a fixed method or grid for reading text is anathema to Lacanian psychoanalysis" (2014, p. 38). Rather, Lacanian discourse analysis (or LDA) is an emerging tradition characterized by a plurality of methods. LDA is based on a definition of the human subject as a multiplicity that is constituted by language, split into conscious and unconscious processes, and correspondingly full of contradictions. As Stephen Frosh puts it, "the human subject is *never* a whole, is always riven with partial drives, social discourses that frame available modes of experience, ways of being that are contradictory and reflect the shifting allegiances of power as they play across the body and the mind" (2014, p. 20, italics in original). From this perspective, the individual is not reducible to her conscious intentionality, but sometimes does and says things—perhaps including neglecting to get needed food assistance—that do not make sense to the individual.

LDA is especially well-suited to critical psychological work on account of its conception of subjectivity which differs from the images that are typically circulated discursively in society and in psychology. According to Parker, it "is one of the most critical strands within 'critical psychology' precisely because it is not psychology at all" (2005, p. 164). Because an exhaustive account of the Lacanian subject could take up an entire book-length manuscript (see, for example, Fink, 1997), we focus only on a few of its main theoretical features which lend itself to discourse analysis. First, in various ways in Lacanian theory, the "I is an other"; via what Lacan calls extimacy, what seems to be most intimate in the subject is inextricably linked with the Other. Because of extimacy, there is no way to analyze a participant's speech without it also bearing relevance to the larger social world (the Other). As such, even though the present study analyzes the speech of individual participants, the analysis is not at the level of the "inner" psychology of the participants but instead takes their speech as indicative of the Other. The

Other has two faces: one, as the combinatory of language, and two, as representative of the symbolic order (consisting of culture, values, and so on). Ideologies, including neoliberalism, which circulate in a culture will manifest in the subject's speech. The subject is structured and divided by language, and "the unconscious is structured like a language" (Lacan, 1998, p. 149), the unconscious being the "discourse of the Other" (p. 131). LDA of the unconscious in a text, then, might attune itself to silences, negations, smokescreens, slips of the tongue, unfinished sentences, and revisions (Fink, 2007; Rogers, 2007).

Psychoanalysis allows us to see that there are multiple parts of the self. The ego, the intentional self that we imagine ourselves to be is constructed out of a series of identifications with others, and as such *at the very core of the self we find the Other*. The ideal ego is the beautiful self that we wish we could fully embody. When the ego or ideal ego are emphasized in a text—as being part of Lacan's imaginary order (or the part of human experience which is based on narcissism, rivalry, similarity, and the senses)—it is often to the exclusion of the subject of the unconscious, which is of the symbolic order. The ego ideal, on the other hand, has to do with the symbolic order and corresponds to the self we believe we should embody in order to be loved (by being a "good" person, for whatever that means in a culture and to the subject). The superego functions in linguistic terms as an imperative, one that forcefully commands the subject to obey the will of the Other, taken up as a moral imperative—typically causing suffering as a result. There is also a "subject in the real" (2006, p. 835)—which might also be called the subject of *jouissance* (an intense type of enjoyment which can be painful, pleasurable, or both) or the subject of the drives. The manner in which individuals enjoy themselves—or suffer—characterizes something essential about them. Finally, Lacan's concept of the object *a* further links the subject with the Other as it is what the subject imagines s/he has lost but is now a part

of the Other. The object *a* represents the thing that the subject imagines would render her whole, unified, and fully enjoying if only she could attain it. It is, as such, an impossible object, an object in the real (which, for Lacan, means something that cannot be said to exist). The object *a* is both what elicits the subject's desire and what causes *jouissance*. Individuals are characterized by the particular manner in which they chase after or avoid the object-cause of their desire and *jouissance*, which itself is particular to them. In fact, the split subject's particular way of relating to an object *a* is Lacan's formula for fantasy. As such, when an individual fantasizes about or imagines something, this for Lacan is not a derogatory term indicating someone's head is in the clouds but rather a fundamental human activity indicating how someone takes up a given situation, wishes to see herself, and navigates her *jouissance* and that of the Other.

In our analysis, we are attuned to the aforementioned ways in which the subject is a multiplicity and is in conflict with itself. For instance, what James Gee (2000-2001) calls a discourse identity—when individuals in interactions see themselves being recognized as a certain kind of person—is complexified in our mode of LDA by relating it to concepts of ego, ideal ego, and superego as well as in taking seriously how participants imagine they are or wish they could be viewed by others. When participants speak of themselves in terms such as "I should", their superegoic imperative connects with certain ideological values. Correspondingly, we ask what kinds of egoic identifications or dis-identifications and superegoic injunctions correspond to food insecure individuals under neoliberalism.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 clients of a non-profit food redistribution organization affiliated with a large regional food bank in a sizable southern U.S. city. Because we were interested in the experiences of both current and former food pantry clients (as the latter group might have either ceased to need food assistance or been prevented

from obtaining it for pragmatic or psychosocial reasons), our participants were comprised of both current clients (n = 16) and those who had not received food pantry assistance in over three months (n = 5). The first, third, and fourth authors conducted the interviews between June through August of 2016 in both English (n = 13) and in Spanish (n = 8), and were digitally recorded, transcribed, and when applicable, translated. All names were changed to pseudonyms.

IRB approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board affiliated with the first researcher's university. Written informed consent was obtained from all of the in-person interviewees, and verbal informed consent was obtained from those interviewed by phone. Upon completion of the interview, in-person participants were compensated with $20 in cash and by-phone participants were mailed $20 gift cards to a popular hypermarket.

Interviews were semi-structured, including some close-ended (e.g., "How many times have you gone to a food pantry in the last 12 months?"), but mostly open-ended questions (e.g., "Were there any emotional, social, or psychological obstacles you had to overcome to get to the food bank (this time or the most recent time)? If so, what were they and how did you work through them?"). Our goal was to capture participants' perceptions of visiting a food pantry and to focus on any reported experiences may affect their attendance or experience at the food pantry. In-depth answers were encouraged with follow-up questions, summarizing statements, pointing out contradictions, inquiring about gaps, and emphasizing repetitions in the speech of the participants.

In our analysis, we identified superegoic injunctions through participants use of "should" statements or variants thereof, such as "I've got to" or "You're supposed to". Egoic discourse identities were flagged by words used to describe the self or one's perspective, often using "I". Ideal egoic discourse identities were identified by the ways in which clients said they wished

they could be seen, and these are often contrasted with a superegoic injunction. For instance, a client might say he "should be a breadwinner", which implies both that he is failing to meet a superegoic injunction and that his ideal ego is that of a breadwinner. The difficulty in identifying someone's ideal egoic discourse identity really comes in differentiating it with the ego ideal. Although the distinction between the ideal ego and the ego ideal is often clear in clinical work on account of the sheer breadth of the clinician's knowledge about someone and ability to ask follow-up questions about this distinction, it is not always so clear in the text of our interviews. As such, we felt that the important thing was to point out text which could potentially represent either an ideal egoic or an ego ideal discourse identity rather than conjecturing which one it might be, since both of these capture the way in which the individual wishes to see her or himself. Next, *jouissance* is evident in words that describe suffering as well as pleasure. Finally, we selected negations on the basis of text that contradicted itself, often using words such as "but", "nevertheless", or "not" which are commonly recognized as negations in the English language.

Analysis

The analysis that follows is divided up into two main sections, each focusing on neoliberal discourse as constitutive of the subjectivity of food bank clients. The first section highlights clients' experiences of shame, guilt, stereotypes, and stigma under neoliberalism, showing how clients hold themselves responsible for their food insecurity and the negative effects this can have on their seeking adequate food assistance. The second section focuses on strategies other than passing as food secure that food bank clients demonstrated of mitigating shame that increased their ability to obtain food assistance.

Shame, Guilt, Stereotypes, and Stigma Under Neoliberalism

Participants who said they felt embarrassment regarding and reticence in asking for food assistance invoked stereotypes, stigma, and often guilt in their accounts. For instance, Eric, a divorced 51-year-old white man, said,

> I see the women and the children there [in line with him at the food pantry], and I'm thinking I'm, you know...[*these and subsequent ellipses denote a brief pause in the participant's speech rather than an indication that the material has been edited] I'm a healthy 51-year-old man. I still believe…I should be out there working. I see the women out there and I'm like "I'm the only man standing in the line." All these other women here…and their fathers are probably out there bustin' their butt at work and the women are, you know, just trying to make, make ends meet, you know, or whatever. And I'm thinking "You know…", but none of them are looking at me that way, but that's kind of like the thoughts going through my head. You know, it's kind of like that old-fashioned, you know, the man is the bread-winner.

Within the context of a neoliberal society, Eric takes up the egoic discourse identity of being a "healthy 51-year-old man" in the context of the gendered, and perhaps "old-fashioned" but still relevant discourse of "the man is the bread-winner" that seems to function for Eric as an ideal ego or how he desires to see himself as well as an ego ideal, or whom he feels he should be in order to be deserving of love. Eric uses this discourse to berate himself with the superegoic injuction "I should be out there working" and perhaps "bustin' [his] butt at work" like the fathers in his imagined scenario. To say it is an imagined scenario is to highlight the fundamental human capacity for imagination, instead of being derogatory, such that Eric's imagined scenario reveals the way he thinks the women and their fathers (the latter not physically being present, which alerts us to the potential importance of this role for Eric) are fulfilling their moral duty in

an area in which Eric falls short. And, as previously mentioned, to say that these thoughts are constitutive of Eric's fantasy is not an insult but rather a way of highlighting that he has constructed a certain kind of ideal ego and ego ideal (i.e., a bread-winner) and that he feels guilty about not meeting the command of his superego to be "out there working" instead of being a man standing in line with women at a food pantry. This interpretation of who is deserving of food assistance was relevant to Eric despite none of the women "looking at [him] that way" in such a manner as to show that they are judging him. Their mere presence activated his own judgmental look at himself. Eric's negation "but that's kind of like the thoughts going through my head" suggests that these thoughts persist and are dominant alongside other perspectives.

It is important to note that when Eric, like many participants, said he felt significant embarrassment or shame, his definition of shame often conflates, from a Lacanian perspective, shame with guilt. Shame is an affect elicited by the gaze of the Other (in this case, other people who represent the symbolic order for Eric), and it is a latent possibility which goes hand in hand with the social relation (Miller, 2006, p. 13). We can see shame in its essential relation to nudity—as it is foundationally theorized by Lacan and Derrida (2008), with its primary allusion to Adam and Eve—as being distinct from guilt, since the latter is about transgression (of a moral law, at the level of thought and/or of action) and about relating to an Other that judges (Miller, 2006, p. 13). Eric, when he sees himself being seen by the women in line, experiences shame—even as their gaze is devoid of any judgment. As is often the case, shame co-occurs with guilt for Eric as evidenced by his reported negative judgments about himself having failed to meet the moral law of "the man should be the breadwinner". As a subject constituted by neoliberal ideology, Eric unfortunately places the blame for his plight on himself and suffers psychological as well as physical (i.e., sometimes avoiding going to the food pantry) consequences.

Asking/Begging versus Passing as Food Secure

Some participants spoke of asking for food assistance in terms of an egoic discourse identity of "beggar" which was accompanied by feelings of shame. As Nina, a Hispanic woman in her early 40s put it, "Well, I always go [to the food pantry] embarrassed… begging for food…" Being reduced to begging, as the phrase goes, is a degrading experience (Wagman, Johansson, & Fristedt, 2019), and those who beg might justifiably worry about being seen as "aggressive" or "invasive" to those whom they direct their request for aid (Leone, 2012).

A desire and attempts to "pass" as food secure rather than "begging" or "asking" for assistance were commonly mentioned by interviewees as ways to combat experiencing their egoic identity as falling short. "Passing as normal (and thus moral)" (de Graham et al., 2018, p. 397) is a way to avoid feeling guilt. "Begging" and "asking" were two key signifiers that recurred throughout such accounts, such that they function as master signifiers (Lacan, 2007) or ways of anchoring knowledge, insisting on its truth value. "With the master signifier in the position of truth a certain body of knowledge, a perspective on the world, i.e., South African apartheid [corresponding to the master signifier "white superiority"], is held in place" (Neill, 2013, p. 344). When participants spoke about the superegoic imperative to avoid "asking" for food assistance it corresponded to a neoliberal worldview in which to be in need financially renders someone morally culpable for their plight, having enjoyed too much and worked too little.

Correspondingly, Susan, a white woman in her early 30s living with her male partner and infant son, said that she felt intense shame and embarrassment at having to ask for help, that she had not told her family that she was food insecure, and had avoided visiting the food bank until her household's food supply was almost depleted even though she could have used the help

sooner. (Numerous clients said they felt undeserving of food assistance until there was almost nothing edible left in their homes; this corresponded to waiting until SNAP, social security benefits, and/or a paycheck ran out such that they did not visit a food pantry until the end of the month.)

> I think a lot of it is is I don't want to say it's like beneath me, because like I don't like to... Go get assistance. Like I'd like, uh it sounds terrible, like my family, both my parents work two jobs and everything, just to... Pay for everything, you know what I mean? They didn't go and... So I think a lot of it is those people come intimidated and ashamed, embarrassed, you know what I mean? They don't wanna admit that they need the help when they really do, you know? Better to ask than struggle you know? Very better, you know? ... Oh man I don't know.

Susan is ambivalent and stuck between two contradictory discourses: first, the neoliberal mandate to work as much as necessary—even two jobs for each parent; and second, a discourse of kindness and understanding towards those in unfortunate circumstances. In the latter discourse, Susan positions herself both in the privileged class of people for whom getting assistance is "beneath" them—belied by her negation as well as an earlier concern that she is "snotty"—and in the underprivileged class of people who come to food pantries "intimidated and ashamed, embarrassed." Notably, when she speaks of underprivileged people, she shifts from having used the first-person "I" pronoun (when describing assistance being beneath her) to the third person "they" even though she is still trying to talk about herself and the two attitudes she holds. It is she who had come to the food pantry that day intimidated, ashamed, and embarrassed and who did not want to admit that she needed help when she really did. It is she who tried to convince herself that it is "better to ask than struggle" and then fell back into doubt (i.e., "Oh

man I don't know."). But Susan was only able to think of herself as needing food assistance with the help of the distancing effect of the third-person; the "they" functions to repress awareness of herself as doing something that she thinks should be beneath her. In addition, Susan's unfinished sentence in reference to her parents which begins "They didn't go and…" might have been concluded with "ask for assistance," which would have functioned as the repressed thought. This pause, this gap in Susan's discourse marks the pivot point between two contradictory systems of value: first, she speaks almost pridefully of her parents working two jobs each to provide for the household, rendering that a morally upright activity; second, after the pause in the unfinished sentence Susan shifts to finding a way to utter the repressed idea—that maybe her parents should have gotten over their embarrassment and asked for assistance.

Barbara, a single black woman in her late 40s with one child at home provides another example of how "asking" operates as a master signifier. Despite a monthly need for assistance, Barbara had visited food pantries on only two occasions in the past year, choosing to pass as food secure rather than suffer from guilt. Barbara said she even drove far away from her home to visit the food pantry in order to avoid being seen by anyone she knew. Furthermore, she intended to avoid repeating a visit to any one food pantry "because [she] want[s] to seem perfectly fine" because the alternative is to feel "like [she's] failing." When Barbara was led by her desperation to obtain food assistance, in visiting a place where she could feel anonymous (where neither staff nor clients would recognize her), as though she, Barbara, was not really there, she tried to avoid the gaze of both the Other who shames and the Other who judges and provokes guilt.

Following up with that, the interviewer asks, "Anything in particular you're afraid people are thinking about you?"

> Barbara: Am I homeless? Am I not managing my funds properly, you know? Because even my daughter said one time, she said "Mom, I need to come over there and manage your money", you know? And I sat her down and I showed her [my bills], you know, and she is like "Damn, you know, I don't know how you do it of off [$]".
>
> Interviewer: That you're saying that, you know, some people just assume that it's somehow your fault.
>
> Barbara: Yeah. I'm failing. That's how when I think on how my family would think. My grandmother and my mother. I, you know, my aunt…I…they don't have a clue about me going to the food banks.

Barbara's attempts to pass include not telling people that she needs help—including members of her family—as well as an avoidance of getting the food assistance that would help her situation. In depicting how she imagines she would be seen by others for receiving food assistance, Barbara gives an example of her adult daughter (from whom Barbara had accepted food on some occasions) assuming that the cause of her food insecurity was her own fault, her inability to manage her money. In this account, Barbara shows that she is aware that her food insecurity is not due to her inability to manage money, but that she is nevertheless interpellated by such neoliberal discourses of moral irresponsibility, going to great lengths to avoid experiencing negative judgments—from others and from herself. Under these neoliberal discursive regimes, to be food insecure means to be a guilty subject, to be someone who has failed where others have succeeded.

Barbara also spoke about the conditions for her taking up such neoliberal discourses of moral irresponsibility as the cause of food insecurity.

> Barbara: Let me say this. I come from a family that eats and starves [Inaudible], um, and everything in the family…what goes in the family stays in the family. What goes on behind closed doors stays behind closed doors. Society should not see you suffer, and you're not supposed…you're supposed to have your head up at all times.

With its attendant "should"s and "supposed to"s, Barbara references a superegoic injunction which she learned from her family and has had a powerful effect on her. Even if the family "starves", they do it together "behind closed doors" and keep their "head[s] up at all times". Barbara's family, then, was beholden to neoliberal discourses of blaming and shaming individuals who starve and suffer. Although keeping her head up high by passing as food secure is an attempt to be seen as approximating her ideal ego or ego ideal of a self-sufficient citizen and provider, the Other is not so easily escaped; Barbara's shame and guilt are extimate phenomena and do not require the presence of others to be activated, although in their absence her self-recriminations are perhaps less onerous. The discourses by virtue of which Barbara appears to herself as failing versus keeping her head up high are those invested with superegoic qualities.

Perhaps paradoxically, in Lacanian psychoanalysis the superego is not an agent of prohibition but rather an imperative to experience *jouissance* (Lacan, 1999, p. 3). Although we might say that Barbara enjoys keeping her head up high in public when she sometimes meets the standards of the superegoic discourse of "what goes on behind closed doors stays behind closed doors", the superego more typically leads the subject into transgressive *jouissance* which elicits suffering instead of pleasure. As such, the underlying superegoic injunction of providing without needing to ask for help is the one which causes suffering or painful *jouissance* insofar as she fails to meet those standards, but also when she goes without food so her daughter can eat

and she does not have to ask for assistance. The attempt to follow the commands of the superego is tantamount to betraying the subject's desire, and, according to Lacan, "the only thing one can be guilty of is having given ground relative to one's desire" (Lacan, 1997, p. 319). Accordingly, Barbara subsequently challenged the value of her family's superegoic discourse, saying "you do need to ask for help"—and it may be that asking for help is reflective of her desire.

Don't be seen as a thief of enjoyment!

In our analysis of Barbara's speech (as well as that of other participants), we also see evidence for an implicit superegoic imperative connecting to the master signifiers of "asking" and "begging": "Don't be seen as someone who is illegitimately or excessively enjoying!" A bit of theoretical explanation will help render this intelligible. First, a Lacanian take on xenophobia reveals that it is a response to the *jouissance* of the target of xenophobia, since alterity is grounded in the Other's *jouissance* (at the level of the real) rather than in the symbolic (see, for further explanation, George, 2016; Hook, 2018; Miller, 1994). In other words, alterity cannot be rooted in the signifier, in being nominated as this or that type of person, for example because the usage of politically correct terms cannot be said to eradicate xenophobia. Instead, as Slavoj Žižek puts it, "[i]n short, what gets on our nerves, what really bothers us about the 'other' is the peculiar way he organizes his enjoyment (the smell of his food, his 'noisy' songs and dances, his strange manners, his attitudes to work…)" (1992, p. 165). In xenophobia, we see the object of our xenophobia as having stolen the object *a*, that which we feel is rightfully our enjoyment. In our difficulty in accepting that we will never arrive at complete satisfaction, we engage in "imagining, *fixating upon*, the supposedly unimpaired and inevitably disturbing enjoyment possessed by cultural/racial/sexual others. In short: the fact that we cannot attain the *jouissance*

we feel we deserve results in perceptions of an unhindered, illegitimate, and undeserved enjoyment on the part of cultural others” (Hook, 2018, p. 247).

In the case of xenophobia against the food insecure, someone might imagine they have stolen the money he pays in taxes and are using it to enjoy excessively and “live off the system”; they are, in effect, illegitimately in possession of the object *a*, which is wasted on them. In her egoic discourse identity, Barbara goes to great lengths to avoid being seen as such a thief of enjoyment. She goes without food (or without nutritious food, which is more expensive) much of the time so she does not have to be seen asking for the object *a*, and when she does ask for food assistance she takes pains to do it anonymously. One stereotype Barbara defends herself against is one her own daughter initially harbored, thinking that Barbara was living too exorbitantly (that she could not manage her money) and therefore if she would stop enjoying herself to excess she would not need to ask for more.

The idea of those who are deserving versus undeserving of food assistance under neoliberal discourses rests largely on whether or not someone can be seen to be a thief of enjoyment, of the object *a*. This is evident at the level of the larger system in which our study participants lived. Unfortunately, presumably in an understandable attempt to appeal to the larger public in advertisements in order to elicit charitable donations, the billboards (and other ad modalities) of the North Texas Food bank only depict those who would be considered to be in the “deserving” category. For instance, these billboards feature a young black girl with the text “Full of potential. Short on food.”; an elderly white man with the text “Golden Years. Hungry Days”; an adult white woman with the text “Family of 4. Food for 2” (RSW Creative, 2019). The small text often reads “$1 feeds three hungry” kids, seniors, or people (ibid.). Children, families, and the elderly are thus depicted as the deserving poor, as hungry and in need, as

lacking the object. There are no single able-bodied adults figured in these ads, nor are there drug users or overweight individuals. In terms of the latter, most recipients of food assistance are overweight or obese (Pruitt et al., 2016) due to the relative affordability of calorically dense, nutritionally inadequate foods compared to fresh fruit and vegetables.

On account of his struggle with drug and alcohol abuse, having been in and out of recovery for decades, Eric had often placed himself in the category of those who had stolen object *a*, were illegitimately enjoying, and were therefore undeserving of food assistance. Eric had recently achieved one year of being clean and sober through seeing a psychologist at the Veteran's Association and attending 12-step groups. Speaking of his reticence to visit a food pantry on some occasions, Eric said "it's really usually the initial start...that I sh…you know, don't deserve it, you know, I should be in a better place, and…and like I said, that thinking then, I start to use." The feeling that he is undeserving of food assistance, if unchallenged by Eric, often leads to his drug use. Eric continued,

> see when I was using...that's that depression state of mind, addictive mind because it…it really, you know, because I'm already guilty because I know "Well, if I wouldn't have spent my money on…you know?
>
> Interviewer: Yeah.
>
> Eric: On all this dope and beer…then I wouldn't have to be here getting this food or I could've you know...done something different, you know?

When taking on the discourse identity of undeserving, guilty drug user—corresponding to his understanding of depression and addictive states of mind which he presumably has been encouraged to challenge by his therapy and his 12-step group—, having failed his superegoic imperative to be clean and sober and self-sufficient, Eric tended to decide against receiving food

assistance because he blamed himself for having spent money on dope and beer instead of food. Eric, as a neoliberal subject, felt guilty for enjoying excessively and illegitimately, and it is this "already guilty" mindset for which he punished himself by not asking for food assistance which, in turn, led to his using substances again. Similarly, Eric said he has the impulse to hide his cigarettes when he is at the food pantry; this way he hides from staff and clients the object *a* of which he feels he should not be in possession.

Eric's actions support the neoliberal idea that drug users deserve their plight even if that means going hungry or without nutritious food. This xenophobic discourse disavows the socioeconomic context of an individual's life situation and the complexities of recovering from an addiction. Likewise, after the interviewers announced the study to food bank clients in the waiting room, a client shouted that it was "disgusting" that we were offering to give money to "these people" who were "just going to use it to go get high"—those undeserving of food assistance who are thieves of enjoyment from whom this client was keen to separate herself. This, of course, was only the client's projection, and indeed, analysis of NHANES data shows that rates of alcohol consumption do not differ between food insecure vs. secure populations (Pruitt et al., 2016, p. 3).

Mike, a white man in his late 40s who said he would not have visited the food pantry if it had not been for the sake of his girlfriend, spoke of how he is affected by the stereotype that white people should not need to go to the food pantry. Mike said, "They-they [minorities] tell you, "I know you've got a brick house somewhere, I know you've got money in the bank because you're white!" Like white people got a checking account from the other white people that money just comes." In dismissing this stereotype, Mike is disavowing his white privilege (reducing it to the absurd idea of white people sharing bank account funds)—a privilege he

asserts further when he says, “It’s not cool because I’m a white guy and here with all the…like I said, I’m sorry to say, minorities, but, yeah it bothers me.” First, Mike positions himself as a victim of racism (via the brick house stereotype, etc.) and then his “sorry to say” functions apologetically to allow him to make a racist claim, setting himself apart from minorities. Correspondingly, in speaking of minorities Mike comments,

> It’s like it’s all owed to them. You know, you go here, you go here. That…them people know, they what the schedules [of each of the food pantries] are. They know where you can go. They know what you can do.

In stating that minorities think “it’s all owed to them”, Mike makes minorities out to be entitled advantage-takers of the system: thieves of enjoyment. In referring to minorities as “them people,” he creates a clear distinction between himself and them while accomplishing the generalization that is part and parcel of a stereotype. In Mike’s account, minorities have extensive knowledge of food pantries and this is evidence of their entitlement, their unfair possession of the object *a*. At the same time, Mike’s avoidance of asking for needed food assistance positions doing so as beneath him as he does not want to be seen or see himself as illegitimately enjoying like minorities. Mike’s superegoic commandment to not be seen as a thief of enjoyment is therefore intertwined with his racism.

Susan, when considering what prevented her from getting needed food assistance when she had been pregnant, said she worried staff and clients would think “oh God, here’s that pregnant girl again. She got pregnant, couldn’t afford the baby while she got pregnant.” Under neoliberalism, being at a food pantry while pregnant indicates that the woman was negligent in conceiving without the funds to feed herself and her baby, thus placing the blame squarely on the

woman for enjoying herself too much (e.g., for having unprotected sex and for enjoying having a child).

This stigma corresponds to the stereotype of the person who is "living off of the system" which Susan said affected her. The public frequently perceive that too many people are on welfare (Abramovitz, 2001). Susan said,

> Don't want to work. Want to just, be lazy, you want to live off the system. That's what I grew up hearing it is: Living off the system. And that's what I don't want, that's a big part of the embarrassment to it [visiting a food pantry] is living off the system. We're not going to live off the system; we're not those kind of people. "We try to struggle"—that's my dad—"we work two jobs, your mom and I did to take care of you, the struggle is hard, that's life." But not everybody lives off the system though, you know what I mean…Living off the system then, now which one is technically living off the system? What the single mom does or what the one with nine or ten kids does? You know, and doesn't work. So I think a lot of it is my family really did do that, they screwed me up [laughs].

Neoliberal discourses make use of the idea of food insecure individuals (and those in poverty) not only being at fault, owing to their purported laziness and unwillingness to work, but even desiring to "live off of the system." They are thus posited as thieves of enjoyment, of the object *a*. By way of exaggeration, Susan gives a characterization of such a woman as having nine or ten kids—as clearly enjoying too much. Susan speaks about women specifically because it is her own status that is at stake in her account (although she makes use of the distancing hypothetical third person), and through her generalizations she creates two classes of women who receive food assistance. In her attempt to see her receipt of food assistance as morally permissible,

Susan traces her intolerance to her parents, who embodied the ideal of "struggl[ing]" and working hard. At the same time, Susan strongly agreed with the notion that many people want to live off the system and do so because of laziness—out of enjoying excessively and immorally.

Strategies for Decreasing Shame and Positively Inclining Towards Food Bank Assistance

As we have shown, in a neoliberal socio-political context, food insecurity can be a source of guilt and shame which serves as a significant barrier to food assistance utilization. We also found that some clients were able to challenge neoliberal and xenophobic (related to being a "thief of enjoyment") discourses and adequately use food assistance programs. These strategies displaced the master signifier of "asking" or "begging" by adopting a discourse identity that approximated their ideal ego or ego ideal. More specifically, when clients adopted egoic discourse identities of "independent", "provider", or "helper" which allowed them to see themselves in a positive light, they were able to mitigate guilt and/or shame and obtain needed food assistance. As providers for their loved ones, in obtaining food assistance clients were able to see themselves as fulfilling a moral duty, a superegoic imperative, rather than being guilty.

For example, some interviewees attained an egoic discourse identity of "independent" through visiting a food pantry. Shirley, a widowed black mother of two in her late 20s, put it as follows:

And family's not always a shelter, you got to get out here and do things on your own, find that stuff [i.e., food] on your own, and then at the same time you don't want to sit out here and use all your resources with your family and stuff, and then when it really comes out that you need help and stuff, you don't run to them so many times if they do anything. They feel like you using them as a crutch. So yeah that's why I just try to do it on my own…

Shirley did not want to be seen as using her family as a "crutch", and promoted the superegoic statement "you got to get out here and do things on your own." She shifts from utilizing the second person "you" in describing the generalities of her ideology of independence to first person pronouns when she announces, in conclusion, that she has made this strategy her own.

Shirley continued,

Cuz you can't be dependent, I mean, and you can be independent even though you ask for help. You shouldn't have a problem with asking for help, you shouldn't feel some type of way for asking for help, because that's what these organizations are helpful with, to better your life, to not get you feeling down and depressed and out. Cuz when you start feeling depressed and stuff and you start thinking about other ways to get, and other ways to get end you up in jail or get you shot or anything.

Shirley thus establishes a discourse identity of an "independent" person which is not opposed to asking for help from food pantries and similar organizations. Instead, she speaks about using food pantries "to better your life" and avoid resorting to obtaining food by degrading or illicit means. Shirley again uses the second person pronoun as a way to generalize the truth of her claim. Likewise, Shirley says that the main things she tries to teach her kids are "Never be ashamed of anything; everybody got to ask for something" and "you gotta be independent." In her account, unlike those of many of the other participants, these two things are not mutually exclusive.

Other clients spoke about the importance of being a helper or a provider in "swallowing[ing] their pride" and asking for food assistance. Some helped by giving and receiving social support concerning food insecurity, such as finding a food insecure friend or

family member to encourage by travelling together to the food pantry. Others helped by giving an excess of a perishable food item to a neighbor in need. Still others helped by volunteering or by giving rides to food insecure friends. Others had anticipatory intentions, aspiring to be in a better place in the future so that they could donate or volunteer. Through helping others, clients rendered obtaining food assistance as morally permissible, combatting the master signifier of "begging" or "asking". Although these clients are still part of a world structured by neoliberal ideology, these strategies seem to provide ways out of the cycle of self-recrimination that, by way of passing as food secure, leads to further inequities in terms of food security.

On a related note, participants stated that the way they were treated by food pantry staff had the potential to affect their experience of themselves in seeking food assistance. The ability at some pantries to make some choices about what food is received adds an element of dignity to the process of receiving food assistance. Food pantries which "treat you like a number" were seen to perpetuate shame, whereas pantries at which staff are kind, respectful, and interested in clients as people mitigate shame. These differences led to client preferences for particular food pantries.

Conclusion

Supporting recent findings in the Netherlands (van der Horst, Pascucci, & Bol, 2014), New Zealand (de Graham et al., 2018), and the UK (Purdam, Garratt, & Esmail, 2016), our research suggests that many food insecure individuals experience shame and fear of being shamed as well as guilt resulting from stigma. These experiences directly relate to the operation of superegoic injunctions such as "Don't be seen asking for help!" that correspond to neoliberal discourses and render some people as deserving versus undeserving (those who are seen as enjoying illegitimately or excessively) of food assistance. When clients saw themselves as

culpable for their plight, many tended to combat their negative self-evaluations through attempts at "passing" as food secure which translates to insufficient food pantry utilization. As such, although passing might temporarily decrease feelings of shame and guilt, it perpetuates food insecurity. This is in keeping with Chase and Walker's (2013) observation that an individual's experiences of shame can lead to detachment from potential sources of aid. Nevertheless, some clients challenged their superegoic injunctions and neoliberal discourses through adopting discourse identities of "provider" or "helper" and were thus able to adequately use food assistance programs. These findings corroborate recent findings that food insecure households engage in stigma resistance (Xu, Zhu, & Bresnahan, 2016).

Our research adds to the methodological literature of Lacanian discourse analysis through its focus on superegoic injunctions, which were apparent in almost all of our key examples of discourse. Superegoic imperatives reveal someone's aspirational values as they connect with the Other and figure the individual as engaging in guilty pleasures or as striving to achieve an ideal self. The superegoic discourse of the clients in our study also allowed us to identify the operation of xenophobia insofar as participants strove to avoid being seen or seeing themselves as enjoying excessively or illegitimately.

By using Lacanian discourse analysis, we sought to show how food bank clients' perspectives on themselves and obtaining food assistance are inextricably intertwined with neoliberal ideology. Our approach analyzed the speech of clients in context toward the aim of identifying socially shared systematic patterns of discourse (i.e., the socio-cultural contexts which enable individual accounts). Under neoliberalism, many clients took up their food insecurity as an individual moral fault, and this is precisely demonstrative of how insidiously neoliberalism functions. If these clients were to attain food security, the larger problem of how

neoliberalism perpetuates food insecurity and its effects would not be solved. A difficulty of our study is that LDA, along with discourse analysis in general, cannot guarantee an avoidance of psychologizing, or of a psychoanalytic colonization of individuals. Although discourse analytic methods attempt to avoid focusing on the presumed “inner” psychological states of individuals by situating speech as describing and accomplishing things, in using transcripts of interviews of individuals, we naturally interpreted the speech of those individuals. Even though, via Lacan, we looked at the way in which the speech of food bank clients is indicative of the Other, showing how neoliberal ideology that circulates in our culture manifests in the clients’ speech—how, via extimacy, clients’ speech necessarily is linked to the larger social world—the text that we examined was still that of the speech of individuals.

Nevertheless, the speech of the clients we interviewed indicated the interconnectedness between self and society by way of the neoliberal ideology the clients endorsed. Neoliberal discourses serve to cover over the host of structural problems that neoliberalism itself exacerbates, including systemic racism (including, for example, historical land use policies such as home mortgage lending and redlining) (Pettygrove & Ghose, 2018), poverty (Bickel et al., 2013; Gibson, 2011), and reduced access to nutritious food and knowledge about healthy diet practices (Hilmers et al., 2012). What is more, since the food insecure are a stigmatized group, it is important to note that structural stigmatization adds to their network of disadvantages by way of institutional and community practices and social policies (Link & Phelan, 2014). Ultimately, then, attempts to increase food bank utilization must affect the structural components of food insecurity and related stigma.

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