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Table of Contents



Volume 11

2026

Preface and Front Matter	i-v
Lili Lindahl and Dr. Eric Magnuson	
From Save Our State to Sanctuary: An Examination of California’s Trajectory from Proposition 187 to Provider of Undocumented Immigrant Healthcare	1
Preston Ho	
Why Is It Always the Mother? Gender, Autism, and the Politics of Blame	9
Morgan Keating-Gonzalez	
Masked Anonymity: Diffusion of Responsibility, Violence, and Contradictory Laws in ICE Raids and Immigration Enforcement	17
Yasmin Kim	
Adoption Across Borders: Cultural Socialization and Racial Identity Formation in International Adoption	30
Lili Lindahl	
The Impact of Assimilation on First-Generation College Students	45
Stephanie Pacheco	
American Islamophobia is an Imperial Logic	55
Samantha Qualls	
Systemic Wounds: Structural Racism and the Production of Black Trauma	61
Tryston Stone	
Racializing Labor: Analyzing LMU’s Labor Movement Through Joel Olsen’s Racial Framework	70
Brody Tomlinson	
Addiction, Punishment, and Social Stigma: A Sociological Examination of Recovery within the Criminal Justice System	87
Cheyenne Wahlheim	

Preface



Lili Lindahl and Dr. Eric Magnuson

2026

Each year, the Loyola Marymount University Department of Sociology is excited to publish some of the best original scholarship our students have been working on. The publications in this volume cover a wide range of important social issues that sociology explores, including the political system, the legal system, race, class, gender, immigration, the economic system, healthcare, and social psychology.

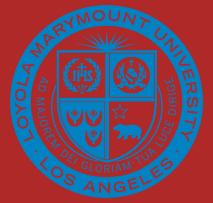
In this 11th volume of *The Sociological Eye*, the first paper entitled “From Save Our State to Sanctuary: An Examination of California’s Trajectory from Proposition 187 to Provider of Undocumented Immigrant Healthcare,” by Preston Ho presents a comprehensive content analysis that highlights key changes in California’s political rhetoric and policies regarding healthcare for undocumented immigrants over the past three decades.

Morgan Keating-Gonzalez’s “Why Is It Always the Mother? Gender, Autism, and the Politics of Blame” draws on social role theory and just-world belief to examine how gendered caregiving expectations in society perpetuate “mother blame” in autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and recommends promoting shared caregiving norms and promoting empathy.

Yasmin Kim’s “Masked Anonymity: Diffusion of Responsibility, Violence, and Contradictory Laws in ICE Raids and Immigration Enforcement” draws on social psychological theories of deindividuation and diffusion of responsibility to examine how selective masking regulations in ICE operations act as instruments of state control that enable violence while shielding agents from accountability.

Lili Lindahl’s “Adoption Across Borders: Cultural Socialization and Racial Identity Formation in International Adoption” examines the experiences of international transracial adoptees and posits that this population is not inherently predisposed to adverse outcomes but rather that such outcomes are the predictable result of inadequate racial and cultural socialization by White adoptive parents.

Preface



Lili Lindahl and Dr. Eric Magnuson

2026

Stephanie Pacheco's research proposal entitled "The Impacts of Assimilation on First-Generation College Students" proposes an interview-based qualitative study that examines how assimilation into American culture shapes the experiences of first-generation college students from ethnic backgrounds.

Samantha Qualls' "American Islamophobia is an Imperial Logic" highlights how American islamophobia is a deliberately constructed imperial framework that operates on pervasive narratives which normalize exclusion and perpetuate imperial domination.

Tryston Stone's "Systemic Wounds: Structural Racism and the Production of Black Trauma" draws on socio-historical frameworks and structural racism theory to examine how intergenerational Black trauma is an enduring systemic and structural phenomenon produced by centuries of racial hierarchy and institutional violence.

Brody Tomlinson's "Racializing Labor: Analyzing LMU's Labor Movement Through Joel Olson's Racial Framework" examines the labor fight between LMU's non-tenure-track Faculty Union and the university administration using a racialized framework to demonstrate how the power dynamics operating within them can be applied outside of a racial context.

Finally, Cheyenne Wahlheim's "Addiction, Punishment, and Social Stigma: A Sociological Examination of Recovery within the Criminal Justice System" presents an impressive semester-long qualitative research study based on four in-depth interviews with previously incarcerated individuals to understand how the criminal justice system and social stigma complicate long-term sobriety.

We hope you enjoy reading the impressive work and research our sociology students have published and we thank you for supporting *The Sociological Eye*!

Lili Lindahl and Dr. Eric Magnuson



Preston Ho '26

Preston is a senior Sociology major with a focus on health and social systems. He actively contributes to the LMU Music Department, performing solo and collaborative repertoire with the LMU Chamber Ensembles, and serves as a Teacher's Assistant. Beyond LMU, Preston is currently gaining clinical experience by shadowing at a neurology clinic, and plans to pursue a career in medicine.

Morgan Keating-Gonzalez '27

Morgan is a junior Psychology major, Sociology minor, and a Women's and Gender Studies research assistant who has collaborated on projects with Psychology faculty. Morgan is a first-author published researcher, who is currently writing two papers with faculty and has presented at six conferences. Morgan plans to pursue a PhD and has interest in feminist STS, ASD, and queer studies.



Yasmin Kim '26

Yasmin is a senior Sociology and Psychological Sciences major, minoring in Peace and Justice Studies and Women and Gender Studies. She is from Brazil and, as a member of Psi Chi and Alpha Kappa Delta, she is interested in community resilience and how the intersections of race, gender, and class shape structural inequalities. After graduation, Yasmin plans to pursue a PhD in Sociology.



Lili Lindahl '26 - Student Editor

Lili is a senior Sociology major and Spanish minor. This spring she was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, and she is also a member of Alpha Kappa Delta and Phi Alpha Delta. Lili is passionate about social justice, and after graduating she plans to pursue a career in law. In her free time, she enjoys scuba diving, traveling, trying new things, and spending time with family and friends.

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Stephanie is a junior Sociology and Psychology double major with an Applied Data Analysis minor, from Torrance, CA. On campus, she is president of the Latinx Student Union, an orientation leader, and a member of Alpha Kappa Delta. She is interested in using research and data analysis to support equitable outcomes among underrepresented communities.



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Sam is a senior from Chicago, Illinois who is working toward their Bachelor's degrees in Sociology and Women's & Gender Studies. They work as the lead undergraduate writing tutor at the ARC and as a peer-instructor for LMU's Nexus program. Sam's research interests include exploring identity formation, intra-community disciplinary practices, and how colonial logics endure in contemporary social settings.





Tryston Stone '27

Tryston is a Sociology major at LMU, originally from the Bay Area, specifically Red Wood City, CA. He is deeply interested in studying structural and institutional conditions and how they reproduce inequality. He plans to study law and become a public interest advocate, educating and promoting equitable systems. In his free time he enjoys playing sports, fishing, and listening to music.

Brody Tomlinson '26

Brody is a senior Sociology and Psychology double major with a minor in Peace and Justice Studies. They strive to support all those who have made their education possible, and hope to become an educator themselves. While they are unsure of their post-graduation plans, they plan to love others holistically in whatever field they decide.



Cheyenne Wahlheim '26

Cheyenne is honored to be graduating with a Sociology major and double minor in Psychology and Asian and Pacific Studies. She is thrilled to have been admitted to law school this fall, where she will be pursuing her J.D., with aspirations of becoming a public interest attorney in public defense and post-conviction relief.



From Save Our State to Sanctuary: An Examination of California's Trajectory from Proposition 187 to Provider of Undocumented Immigrant Healthcare

Preston Ho

Abstract

California's approach to providing healthcare for undocumented immigrants has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from exclusionary policies in the 1990s to expansive coverage by 2024. By conducting a content analysis of legislative documents and policy reports, this study highlights key changes in political rhetoric, policy priorities, and public attitudes over time. The findings reveal a shift away from criminalizing and cost-centered narratives toward more inclusive and humanizing frameworks. However, rising fiscal pressures and the re-emergence of restrictive political discourse suggest potential policy reversals. Ultimately, the trends identified in this study underscore how political climate shapes healthcare access for undocumented immigrants in the United States.

Keywords

Undocumented immigrants, healthcare, Medi-Cal, Proposition 187, Affordable Care Act, policy, politics

INTRODUCTION

Immigrant access to healthcare services has been a contentious issue across the United States since public healthcare became institutionalised. In California, this is no exception, as debates continue to arise, especially amidst the turbulent federal immigration policies of the second Trump administration. California presents a particularly unique case as a state that went from explicitly denying any undocumented immigrants access to healthcare to granting public healthcare services to all adults and children, regardless of immigration status. As of 2025, California is one of only four states in the U.S. that provides public healthcare

services to children and adults regardless of immigration status. However, less than 30 years ago, the state expressed a very different sentiment, passing Proposition 187 in November 1994—a bill that essentially barred non-citizens from using public healthcare resources or institutions.

This paper seeks to review and examine the evolution of California’s official and unofficial perspectives on healthcare access and immigration from the 1990s to the 2020s. It will review official legal documents from the relevant governmental perspective to examine and compare the language used to convey the two issues. The purpose of this analysis is to gain insight into how California radically shifted its stance on immigrant access to healthcare over the past 30 years. This paper also seeks to better understand public opinion on the issue by examining supplementary sources and relevant civilian-sector indicators of opinion. Finally, one other goal of this paper is to gain an understanding of the effects these policies have had on the broader community of immigrants’ health outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1994 – A CRACKDOWN ON CARE FOR UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS

November 1994 was a particularly important year for California’s healthcare and insurance systems. CA Proposition 187 included a wide range of legal measures aimed at excluding non-citizens from accessing healthcare resources. The proposition, which referred to non-citizens as “illegal aliens,” established its findings. It described the problematic nature of their residence and attributed economic hardships, personal injuries, and damages to the criminal activity of these individuals (California Proposition 187 1994). Next, the proposition stated its goal of granting the people greater power to prevent illegal entry into the state. It aimed to achieve this by increasing cooperation among local, state, and federal law enforcement efforts to curtail undocumented immigrants. Later, the proposition laid out provisional rules that restricted non-citizens’ access to public resources. These included medical care—except for urgent care—which, under federal law at the time, was required to be provided to anyone who needed it.

This specific clause directly reflected certain public sentiment at the time: that the continued use of public health resources by undocumented immigrants caused the backlog of an already overworked and understaffed system. At the time, many

California residents held the view that because of immigrants' socioeconomic status, the urgent care and public health systems were the primary means by which most received care. Despite this common understanding, as with many politicised claims, the reality was much more nuanced and obscured. As highlighted in an article from *The Los Angeles Times* in 1993, gauging the financial costs of treating illegal aliens was highly difficult to measure due to the challenging nature of tracking which patients were undocumented and which were not. However, broad estimates were still made using hospital codes, which determine billing and treatment. Oftentimes, these estimates showed a trend of large percentages of the overall public health budget being spent on reimbursing undocumented immigrants (Wielawski 1993).

2010s – A SHIFT IN THE HEALTH CARE LANDSCAPE

In contrast to the passage of CA Proposition 187, the federal passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), as well as the accompanying state-specific policy passed in California, ushered in a new era of access to healthcare plans. The Affordable Care Act introduced many sweeping changes to the workings of the U.S. healthcare system, including in California, which were further implemented through the passage of Assembly Bill 1602. Passed in September 2010, the new bill introduced the California Patient Protections and Affordable Care Act, which provided numerous new policies surrounding patient privacy in hospitals and insurance systems. Additionally, it established the California Health Benefit Exchange, which created the first marketplaces that integrated the new federally supported system for ensuring coverage through employers and government subsidies (AB 1602 2016).

These new systems would eventually become the basis for what is now recognised as Medi-Cal, which is California's implementation of Medicaid—a program which was greatly bolstered by the passage of the ACA. These programs received expansions over the course of the decade through bills SB 75 (2016) and SB 104 (2021–22), both of which expanded eligibility to all children under 19 regardless of income and to all undocumented immigrants ages 19 to 25 within the income threshold, respectively (Bustamante et al. 2023). All the aforementioned

bills took a noticeably less harsh stance on immigrants, with AB 1602 and SB 75 rarely mentioning the demographic group or immigration status altogether, whereas SB 104 utilised a more supportive tone and vernacular when describing undocumented immigrants. Notably, at the time of AB 1602, the marketplaces established were not open to undocumented immigrants, nor were the unemployment coverage subsidy provisions. Furthermore, the passage of SB 75 and SB 104 reflected a shift in California's political landscape as SB 75 was passed under Governor Jerry Brown and SB 104 under Governor Gavin Newsom, both of whom were staunch Democrats. This contrasted AB 1602, which passed under Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who, despite his centrist political views, ran and won two terms as a Republican.

2020s – FURTHER IMPROVEMENTS TO HEALTHCARE ACCESSIBILITY IN CALIFORNIA

The 2020s saw further increases in healthcare accessibility for immigrants in California. In 2021, the California legislature introduced an expansion to full-scope Medi-Cal coverage to all undocumented immigrants over 50 years of age, which was later implemented in May of 2022 through California AB 133. Notably, AB 133 uses softer language regarding undocumented immigrants, especially compared to the older bills examined—a change representative of the increasingly dominant position progressive politics held in California at the time (AB 133 2021). The bill also focuses heavily on socioeconomic status (SES) as a precursor to health outcomes, noting that lower SES is an indicator of poorer quality of care and reduced access to treatment.

This expansion marked the beginning of California's efforts to expand Medi-Cal eligibility to all undocumented immigrants. These efforts, which included grassroots community organizing and political lobbying by Democratic party representatives, resulted in the eventual passage of SB 184 in 2023. This granted all adults access to enrollment in Medi-Cal's programs, regardless of immigration status. SB 184 took effect on January 1, 2024, and remains in effect as of November 2025. Its proposal and passage also coincided with a federal push under the Biden administration to grant DACA recipients access to Medicaid coverage (Bustamante et al. 2023).

RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODOLOGY

In this study, I conducted a content analysis of the aforementioned legal documentation that enabled the policy change detailed in the previous section. I also found studies and reports from notable nonprofits and government agencies that examined the broader impact of these policies, most of which focused on the effects of policies enacted since 2014. These studies provided a greater understanding of the effects the previously mentioned bills had on immigrants' coverage rates and health outcomes. With a better understanding of these effects, I hoped to draw upon notable trends and identify correlations between inclusive or restrictive policies and certain outcomes in immigrant health. I also sought to analyse certain political documents, specifically from the 1994 period, to better understand the political climate in California at the time and, thereby, comprehend why such restrictive healthcare policies were passed. Furthermore, I aimed to identify any markers in the language used or opinions expressed that reflected the sentiment or vernacular currently used to discuss health care policy both publicly and politically as of 2025. Ultimately, I hoped to understand which indicators correlated with a shift toward inclusive policy and which indicated a shift toward restrictive policy, and to connect them to the current political administration, both federally and in California.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

From my examination of the legislative documents, I found clear trends across them. Understandably, each was a product of the political atmosphere that drafted them, and the language used to describe immigrants reflected this. Within the more restrictive documents, such as Proposition 187, emotionally charged vocabulary and divisive language were used to describe the current situation of healthcare and to justify the increase in restriction to access. Furthermore, appeals to high financial costs and money damages were also cited, attributing high costs—not only in healthcare but in all facets of society—to so-called “illegal aliens” as well as damages to property and society. These claims were all but absent in later texts where “illegal aliens” became “all adults regardless of immigration status.” Additionally, immigrants were divided into age groups, not only to more easily

pass legislation, but also to further humanise the demographic as a whole.

In terms of tangible effects, the expanded eligibility for California public healthcare services understandably led to higher coverage rates and more immigrants with better overall health. In 2016, after the third major enrollment period of Medi-Cal programs, a significant number of the immigrant population in California remained uninsured due to ineligibility. However, many also feared that their enrollment would draw unwanted attention or legal trouble due to their immigration status. This trend was especially prevalent among immigrants who did not speak much or any English, with 46% of respondents in a KFF longitudinal study reporting they would not enroll, even if eligible, due to these fears (Kirzinger et al. 2016). The concerns about immigration status as a barrier to enrollment were directly addressed in the bills passed in the 2020s, leading to a decrease in uninsured immigrant rates. A report from the California Health Care Foundation cited that at the beginning of 2022, roughly half of the uninsured immigrant population were ineligible. By 2024, this percentage had been reduced to a little over 20% of the population (Nanguneri and Momi 2024).

One notable downside to the expansion of healthcare eligibility has been a sharp rise in state spending on these programs. As these programs technically circumvent federal policy on immigrant eligibility, virtually all funding comes from the state budget. This has resulted in an increase in state spending on healthcare with costs rising from \$18 billion in 2017 to \$37 billion in 2024 (Nanguneri and Momi 2024). This increase in costs has led other, more progressive measures to be halted, such as a proposal for a universal coverage system as well as legislation such as H.R. 1 which reduces the benefits received by undocumented immigrants. This citation of infeasible costs reflects the 1994 documents, potentially foreshadowing further shifts toward reneging on coverage for undocumented immigrants and an overall change in political priorities and attitudes among both the political and public spheres.

CONCLUSION

With the Trump administration cracking down on immigrants via the Big Beautiful Bill, a proposed federal measure restricting immigrant access to public

services, and California's new H.R. 1 bill which addresses state healthcare eligibility, the trajectory of healthcare for immigrants appears bleak.

Unfortunately, much of the sentiment and language used in both political and public documents from 1994 can be seen in the rhetoric of political speech and legal syntax today. Concerningly, this likely means there will be a sharp decrease in immigrant enrollment in healthcare programs due to the revocation of protections regarding immigration status, as well as the rollback of eligibility for cost subsidisation.

However, these trends are indicative of a larger social issue in America: immigrants' evolving presence and perception in the United States, both in the public eye and in politics. As perceptions of immigrants continue to decline, it is unlikely that a reversal of this downward trajectory will occur in the near future, even if a progressive party were to take power in the next election cycle. This can be seen in California, where more restrictive policies are being passed and provisions are being rolled back, despite being one of the most progressive political spheres in the country.

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Why Is It Always the Mother? Gender, Autism, and the Politics of Blame

Morgan Keating-Gonzalez

Abstract

This paper examines the persistence of “mother blame” in autism spectrum disorder (ASD) discourse, despite scientific evidence rejecting maternal causation. Drawing on social role theory and just-world belief, it examines how gendered caregiving expectations and society’s need to assign blame leads mothers to be disproportionately held responsible for their child’s developmental outcomes. Mother blame not only reflects individual attitudes but also the structural inequalities that shape how responsibility and caregiving are socially constructed. The paper concludes that mitigating this issue requires challenging pervasive stereotypes by recognizing autism as a neurodevelopmental condition, promoting shared caregiving norms, and increasing public understanding and empathy.

Keywords

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), mother blame, gender roles, social role theory, just-world belief, caregiving, disability studies

INTRODUCTION

Despite advances in research on autism spectrum disorder (ASD), mothers of children with autism continue to face persistent social stigma and blame for their child’s disability. Historically, this pattern of “mother blame” can be traced to Bruno Bettelheim’s (1967) refrigerator mother theory. In Bettelheim’s *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self*, he claimed that autism was caused by a mother’s cold and withdrawn attitude toward her child, writing that “the precipitating factor in infantile autism is the parent’s wish that [their] child should not exist” (p. 125). Although research has disproven Bettelheim’s theory, mother blame continues to persist in discussions of autism, particularly

regarding prenatal factors or maternal decisions. For example, a recent case of mother blame discourse arose when President Donald Trump and U.S. federal health officials suggested a link between prenatal Tylenol use and ASD. This prompted the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to advise caution regarding the use of this medication, despite no causal relationship having been established (Office of the Commissioner 2025). Unproven statements like this maintain gendered expectations of caregiving, increase parental stress and guilt, and influence misconceptions about disability and people with disabilities. These narratives are embedded within broader institutional systems including medicine, media, and public policy, which have historically regulated motherhood and framed disability as a deficit or an issue that needs to be fixed. As a result, mother blame reflects not only individual attitudes but also structural inequalities that shape how responsibility and caregiving are socially assigned.

Understanding the persistence of mother blame requires examining the social processes that lead people to view mothers as responsible for their child's disability. This paper will analyze mother blame through two social theories: (1) social role theory and (2) just-world belief, which together will provide a framework for understanding how mother blame operates, why it persists despite scientific evidence refuting these claims, and how it may be mitigated.

SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS OF MOTHER BLAME GENDERED CAREGIVING EXPECTATIONS

Social role theory (Eagly 1987) explains how society's gender norms influence perceptions of behavior and responsibility. Universally, within most cultures, women are expected to be nurturing, selflessly devoted, and primarily responsible for childrearing following the "good mother ideology" (Williamson et al. 2022). These expectations are socially constructed and reinforced through cultural norms, educational systems, and work policies that position caregiving as the women's primary responsibility, while excluding fathers and shared caregiving models. This reflects a broader gendered division of labor that reproduces unequal distributions of responsibility and childcare. When a child is diagnosed with autism (ASD), this widely accepted expectation of a mother's role makes them easy targets

to blame as the “cause.”

For example, in one study, Nelson et al. (2023) found that mothers noticed and reported more externalizing behavior problems in their children than fathers did. This suggests that mothers may perceive themselves as having greater responsibility for managing their child’s behavior, which is consistent with social role theory’s claim that women are held to a higher standard for caregiving and are socially positioned as the primary caregiver or attachment figure.

It is commonly assumed that atypical patterns in a child’s behavior and development reflect the mother’s inability to raise her child, while biological and systemic factors are disregarded. This assumption is reinforced by parents’ lived experiences of stigma. In a sample studied by Oduyemi et al. (2021), about 30% of parents expressed that they had experienced stigma, specifically feeling discriminated against in relation to their child’s autism. Societal expectations of a mother’s responsibility not only influence external judgments but also heighten the mother’s internalized blame, feelings of guilt, and shame (Ludlow et al. 2011).

While social role theory provides valuable insight, it is not without its limitations. Namely, it does not fully explain why blame is targeted toward mothers more than fathers, even though both parents are typically involved in caretaking. Rather, this pattern can be further understood through Heider’s (1958) attribution theory, which posits that people tend to assign responsibility to the individual most closely associated with an outcome or behavior. In the context of autism, the “behavior” refers to the child’s development and condition. Because mothers are commonly viewed as the primary caregiver and attachment figure, they are perceived as the person most closely connected to the child’s development. Consequently, responsibility for a child’s autism is disproportionately attributed to mothers. As a result, gender norms shape how responsibility is assigned and reinforce patterns of mother blame within autism and disability discourse. This dynamic reflects moral regulation, in which women’s bodies and parenting practices become sites of social monitoring and judgment, while men’s are rarely subjected to the same level of scrutiny (Morgenroth et al. 2024).

MORAL JUDGEMENT AND DISABILITY STIGMA

The just-world belief hypothesis (Lerner 1980) describes individuals’ tendency

to believe that the world is fair and, thus, individuals get what they deserve. This is a bias that provides comfort by implying that the world is predictable and moral, and that our judgments toward others are influenced by subjective stances on what is ethical versus unethical (Blader and Tyler 2009). When individuals experience an event that goes against this belief (i.e., a child being born with a disability), they experience a feeling of discomfort, which is labeled as cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). To resolve this internal tension, blame may be placed on the mother due to the assumption that she must have done something wrong during her pregnancy or childrearing to “deserve” the outcome of having a child with autism. These assumptions often manifest as claims that blame the mother for causing her child’s autism through a physical accident during pregnancy, taking medication during pregnancy, being overly consumed by work and unable to dedicate time to childrearing, or vaccinating her child.

In addition, Lerner’s just-world belief hypothesis helps explain why misinformation is created, such as the claim that Tylenol causes autism. Believing that the world is just provides a sense of control over the seemingly dramatic rise in ASD diagnoses, which have increased by approximately 300% over the past two decades (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health 2025). If a cause can be identified, then the labeled “problem” of autism can be prevented, thereby eliminating the disability from society. This reflects ableist frameworks that position disability as a condition that must be eliminated or corrected, rather than recognized as a natural form of human variation. Such frameworks reinforce stigma by prioritizing narratives around finding cures rather than inclusion, acceptance, and access. In the context of seeking a cure, the public may find it less distressing to attribute ASD to a mother’s actions or behaviors rather than accepting that autism is a neurodevelopmental disability shaped by complex and largely uncontrollable biological factors. More plausibly, the increase in ASD diagnoses can be attributed to expanded research and improved diagnostic practices rather than maternal decisions. The just-world belief, therefore, fuels the stigmatization of mothers by shaping moral judgments (Toews et al. 2016).

However, the just-world belief hypothesis has limitations when used to explain mother blame. For instance, it does not take into account cultural differences

in parental blame. In collectivist cultures, societies may assign responsibility for childrearing across the extended family or community. In contrast, in individualist cultures, such as Western societies where independence and personal responsibility are emphasized, the bias toward mothers as primary caregivers strengthens gender norms that uphold mother blame. This highlights how Western individualism intensifies parental blame by placing responsibility on the nuclear family rather than recognizing caregiving as a shared social responsibility (Hays 1996).

WHY MOTHER BLAME PERSISTS

When social role expectations and just-world beliefs operate together, they reinforce stigma. Social role theory holds mothers to a moral obligation of caregiving and the just-world belief influences how blame is assigned when expectations—such as having a neurotypical child—are not met. Together, these dynamics reinforce the belief that if one were a “good” mother, free from mistakes, then their child would not be disabled. These dynamics are reinforced through institutional messaging, media representation, and medicalized language that frame autism as a deficit and place disproportionate responsibility on mothers.

In contemporary media environments, particularly on social media platforms, mothers are exposed to greater public criticism for their parenting choices, including their diets, vaccination decisions, parenting styles, and medication use. Yochim and Silva (2013) argue that contemporary media often frames a mother’s personal health and parenting decisions as highly determinative of her child’s future. This reinforces the pressure mothers face to ensure their child’s typical development and to be held accountable for atypical outcomes that are caused by factors out of their control. As a result, mothers are left to handle the guilt, anxiety, and social stigma that allow mother blame to persist, even after research has disproven these causes of ASD.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing mother blame in autism and disability discourse must be achieved through changing how society understands both caregiving and responsibility, and by promoting empathy. With regard to social role theory, there should be an emphasis

on shared caregiving roles through public representation. Fathers, grandparents, and teachers (especially in preschool and elementary school) should be understood as individuals who actively support and help to raise children. Caregiving roles beyond mothers should be normalized, which may challenge the stereotype that mothers are solely responsible for their child's development. As for the just-world belief hypothesis, there should be a focus on promoting empathy. This can be achieved by highlighting the lived experiences of individuals with autism and their families, which can promote a personal and emotional understanding of this disability. When individuals are able to take the perspective of families, especially mothers, of children with disabilities, it may decrease mother blame tendencies. Understanding the hardships and love involved in raising a child with autism through mothers' experiences can challenge the idea that autism is caused by maternal decisions.

CONCLUSION

Mother blame in autism discourse persists because of deeply rooted gender norms and social expectations surrounding motherhood. Social role theory demonstrates how cultural expectations frame mothers as primarily responsible for their children's development, while the just-world belief explains why individuals attribute blame when outcomes appear unfair or uncontrollable. These concepts suggest that mother blame is not only a social judgment, but a socially organized process shaped by gender norms, institutional authority, and societal perceptions of disability.

Mitigating mother blame, therefore, requires challenging these underlying assumptions. Promoting shared caregiving roles, increasing public understanding of autism, and emphasizing empathy toward families of children with disabilities can shift responsibility away from mothers. By recognizing autism as a complex neurodevelopmental condition rather than the result of maternal behavior, society can move away from mother blame and toward greater inclusion and support for individuals with autism and their families.

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Masked Anonymity: Diffusion of Responsibility, Violence, and Contradictory Laws in ICE Raids and Immigration Enforcement

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Abstract

This study examines how anonymity in mask-wearing by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents facilitates state violence while civilian masking remains criminalized. Drawing on social psychological theories of deindividuation and diffusion of responsibility, this paper argues that selective masking regulations function as instruments of state control rather than neutral public safety measures. ICE's masked operations institutionalize moral disengagement, enabling aggression while shielding agents from accountability. Such asymmetry undermines democratic legitimacy and perpetuates racialized surveillance. Policy reforms prioritizing law enforcement transparency and community trust are proposed as necessary interventions.

Keywords

Immigration enforcement, anti-masking, state violence, surveillance, democracy, deindividuation, diffusion of responsibility

INTRODUCTION

In the past months, debates over the legality of federal agents hiding their faces during ICE raids have intensified, exposing conflicting ideologies surrounding accountability, transparency, legitimacy, and federal and state power. Governments have historically justified anti-mask laws by claiming that transparency fosters trust and cooperation, arguing that individuals with just cause have no legitimate excuse to hide their faces and identities. Yet, these same laws simultaneously include exceptions that allow police and federal law enforcement officers to conceal their identities under the pretext of legitimate authority and protection from societal retaliation. This contradiction sheds light on an important

social issue, as it illustrates how law operationalizes the visibility of civilians while hiding the actions of the state. Understanding this dynamic is of utmost importance for analyzing how anonymity and power intersect in society.

This study examines how anonymity through mask-wearing leads to deindividuation and diffusion of responsibility—a phenomenon in which self-awareness and personal accountability are diminished—and creates conditions that may further violence among protesters and law enforcement. Yet, mask bans are disproportionately applied, as civilians are punished for hiding their identities, while federal agents are often permitted, or even encouraged, to do so under the justification of protection from communicable diseases such as COVID-19 or from potential public retaliation. This selective regulation suggests that mask laws are not genuinely intended to prevent violence or maintain public order, as coded in the law, but rather preserve governmental control and limit accountability.

To investigate these dynamics, this study focuses on U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) as a case study. At the core of this examination lies the question: How does ICE's use of anonymity both exemplify and perpetuate state control while the individual's anonymity is criminalized? This question also reflects the broader implications of democratic governance, suggesting that the current administration is walking a thin line between protecting the safety of its officers and abusing its powers to meet a political agenda of deportation. Ultimately, the purpose of this research is to analyze how anonymity facilitates state violence and delegitimizes society's resistance by only rendering the privilege of anonymity to certain bodies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

VISIBILITY, SURVEILLANCE, AND POWER

Visibility operates as a core apparatus of government control, rendering the actions and identities of civilians identifiable. Under the Trump administration, this asymmetry becomes especially evident, as transparency is demanded of civilians while federal law enforcement agents operate under anonymity (Bellafante 2025; Friedman 2025; Tavernise 2025; Jarvey 2025). This imbalance is evident in contemporary ICE raids, where masked agents in unmarked vehicles conduct operations that instill fear and confusion within communities, while undocumented

immigrants' identities are made public through official government websites and social media accounts (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2025; White House 2025). Such selective enforcement demonstrates not only a profound violation of privacy rights, but also how visibility is structured by spectacles of power, rather than by principles of transparency (Doherty 2020; Spiegel 2015). As Foucault (1977) argues, public spectacles have consistently been implemented to showcase authority through punishment and intimidation.

Historically, anti-mask laws were justified as measures to promote public safety, yet they disproportionately criminalized civilians for concealing their identities while allowing law enforcement to mask themselves under the pretext of protection from doxxing—a form of online harassment involving the publication of personal information, such as home addresses or phone numbers (Doherty 2020; Javie 2025). Spiegel (2015) argues that under the legislation, “good intentions” became synonymous with a civilian’s willingness to reveal their identity (p. 791). This ultimately fragments their identification into data points that can be monitored and controlled by the state. He further explains that this dynamic aligns with Max Weber’s (1919) theory of the state’s monopoly on legitimate violence in which the state defines and validates its own authority through the sanctioned use of force. As Doherty (2020) notes, the U.S. Supreme Court has yet to rule on an anti-masking case, leaving a patchwork of state and local decisions that privilege some individuals while constraining others. For instance, in 2024, Ohio’s Attorney General Dave Yost threatened to charge pro-Palestinian protesters with felony charges under a 1953 anti-masking statute, even though the state allowed ICE agents to cover their faces while conducting operations (Henry 2024; Meighan 2025). Together, these dynamics illustrate how the framework of visibility perpetuates state power, ultimately enabling surveillance, coercion, and legitimacy to operate in tandem.

Although reforms such as police-worn body cameras are often framed as tools that enhance transparency, they have minimal effect on the enforcement of masking laws or immigration enforcement more broadly. ICE has previously announced plans to introduce body-worn cameras to cultivate public trust, however the agency never implemented the initiative, citing insufficient resources as

justification (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2024). This statement has since been archived, as it originated under the previous administration and no longer reflects current practices. Thus, it remains unclear whether it will be implemented at all, highlighting how the state's surveillance capacities overshadow any movement toward transparency, ultimately consolidating state power at the expense of civilian safety.

DEINDIVIDUATION AND ANONYMITY

The social psychological effects of masking within law enforcement reveal how anonymity erodes accountability and furthers aggression. Silke (2003) defines deindividuation as a state in which personal restraint is weakened, as individuals are no longer recognized or held responsible as distinct persons. This was illustrated in anthropological findings, which revealed that across 24 separate cultures, warriors who hid their faces were significantly more likely to kill, mutilate, or torture captives than those who fought unmasked. This pattern that was also later observed in Northern Ireland in 1996, where disguised offenders were 8% more likely to inflict serious injuries (Silke 2003).

These social psychological patterns are reflected in contemporary law enforcement practices. As Arnold (2022) observes, the use of masks within police contexts serves both symbolic and functional purposes, dissolving personal identity into a collective and institutional one. The mask ultimately transforms the agent into a representative of the state, allowing individuals to act with a sense of moral detachment while appearing to embody a larger, legitimate authority (Arnold 2022). Silke (2003) argues that this blurring between the self and institution reflects Milgram's 1975 study on obedience, which found that individual conscience is overridden as the individual starts to view themselves as an instrument executing legitimized authority rather than autonomous moral agents.

Within U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), this psychological mechanism is intensified by the organization's culture. The ICE recruitment website emphasizes courage, heroism, and duty, calling for individuals "committed to protecting America from cross-border crime and illegal immigration that threaten national security and public safety" (ICE n.d.). This rhetoric evokes nationalist sentiment, cultivating a moral justification for intimidation. This is reinforced

KIM

materially, as ICE is offering \$50,000 signing bonuses and up to \$60,000 in student loan repayment to recruit new agents (ICE n.d.). The underlying ultimate goal is to expand the institution that legitimizes such an ideology. Foy (2025) documents how masked ICE officers have been accused of using excessive force during raids by pointing guns, pepper spraying, and physically assaulting bystanders. In fact, he cites a specifically heinous situation in which agents shoved an individual's face into wet concrete. However, such atrocious acts become nearly impossible to trace or prosecute given the anonymity of the agents due to mask-wearing. Ultimately, the combination of deindividuation, moral legitimization, and state authority leads to an environment where aggression is both enabled and hidden.

SYMBOLISM AND THE FUNCTION OF MASKS

Both Ruiz (2017) and Arnold (2022) argue that the human face itself functions as a symbol of trust and moral transparency as it gives an insight into a person's character. By hiding the countenance and other identifying items, such as badge numbers, law enforcement agents impede the visual cues that traditionally communicate integrity and accountability to the public (Arnold 2022; Spiegel 2015).

Masks operate as both symbols of instrument and power, changing their meaning depending on who wears them. Arnold (2022) describes masks as "protean": fluid objects that can symbolize belonging to a social movement while simultaneously signifying allegiance that seeks to suppress that same movement, with the officer ultimately being a faceless extension of the state (p. 56). Friedman (2025) draws on the use of masks in Hollywood and expands on their symbolic complexity, arguing that they transform individuals into archetypes. That is, by concealing the human face, masks position the wearer in a liminal state, beyond the norms of everyday morality or legality. Ultimately, this allows the individual to act in ways that would otherwise be reprimandable, as it undermines democratic accountability (Friedman, 2025).

ANTI-MASK STATUTES

Historically, anti-masking statutes were first codified to restrain organizations

such as the Ku Klux Klan, however, such statutes indicated more moral repudiation rather than actual strict enforcement (Doherty 2020).¹ In recent years, states have revived or introduced laws targeting the use of masks in public spaces, often citing protests and immigration raids (Marquez 2025). Anti-masking statutes typically fall into two categories: (1) general provisions, which prohibit masks in public regardless of criminal intent but allow exceptions for holidays, theatrical productions, or other sanctioned activities (in effect in 8 states); and (2) narrow provisions, which restrict masks in specific contexts, such as during crimes or organized demonstrations (in effect in 10 states and Washington, D.C.) (Doherty 2020; Marquez 2025).

However, several states have started to explicitly target ICE agents in their anti-mask legislation. For example, in 2025, California passed SB 627, which banned state, local, and federal officers from wearing masks during public duties. New York's Mandating End of Lawless Tactics (MELT) Act mirrors California's law, whereas Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee have focused specifically on ICE personnel (Rahman 2025). Tennessee even introduced the Stop American Gestapo Act (SAGA), a reference to Donald Trump's Make America Great Again (MAGA) slogan (Rahman 2025). These acts demonstrate the influence societal perception has on the law, with increased efforts to limit federal law enforcement's overt violence occurring due to widespread public dissatisfaction.

Nevertheless, the relationship between federal involvement in local law enforcement predates ICE. In 1996, the federal agency of Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) passed a law allowing local police to act as immigration officers, effectively deputizing them to enforce immigration laws. Many local law enforcement agencies resisted this expansion because it undermined community trust (Abdelfatah 2025). This is relevant, as effective policing relies on cooperative relationships with immigrant communities, whose members must feel safe reporting crimes and cooperating with investigations. This historical precedent

¹ Doherty (2020) traces the first U.S. anti-mask law to the Anti-Rent Wars in 1845, New York, in which armed and masked young men assaulted police officers and resisted eviction. Ironically, the same law exempted elite masquerade balls. Ultimately, this indicates how such laws have been historically applied in an asymmetrical manner.

illustrates the tension between federal and local enforcement; a dynamic that is perpetuated by ICE's contemporary masked operations. This tension is further demonstrated in the deployment of the National Guard in certain cities and states where federal authority similarly overrides local discretion under the pretense of maintaining order. As Schwartzapfel (2025) states, Trump's deployment of the National Guard in response to protests against ICE in Chicago and Los Angeles not only failed to reduce both crime rates and public dissatisfaction, but also intensified mistrust and strained the relationship between communities and the state.

CONTEMPORARY MEDIA AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON MASK USE BY LAW ENFORCEMENT

Contemporary debates over mask use by law enforcement, particularly ICE, expose the unequal relationship between state power and public accountability. Bellafante (2025) discusses the Mask Transparency Act in Nassau County, enacted as a response to anti-Israeli protests, which ultimately prohibits civilians from wearing masks but exempts police officers. County officials justified the exemption as a safety measure for officers conducting raids, but were met with the counterargument that this enabled law enforcement to conceal their identities during operations that already systematically targeted vulnerable populations and ultimately perpetuate histories of racialized policing practices (Bellafante 2025). This policy exemplifies what Spiegel (2019) labels as "asymmetrical logic," as citizens ought to be legible by the state, while the state conceals itself from those it governs (p. 792).

There has also been extensive media coverage related to the ethical issues raised by the United States government's decision to allow masked enforcement. Jarvie (2025) reports that ICE's use of masks during raids spreads fear within immigrant communities, creating confusion about who holds authority as it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish real agents from impersonators. These fears are validated by Gordon et al. (2025) findings, which identified at least two dozen incidents of individuals posing as ICE officers to intimidate, assault, or exploit immigrants. The normalization of masked enforcement ultimately blurs the boundary between lawful authority and vigilantism, furthering public anxiety and destroying trust in state institutions and their legitimacy. Additionally, Foy (2025)

documents cases where the anonymity of masked agents has enabled misconduct and hindered accountability for overtly violent actions, such as pepper spraying and physically assaulting individuals.

RESEARCH METHOD

This paper implements a qualitative research design that analyzes peer-reviewed studies from Canada, Northern Ireland, and the United States to examine the behavioral and symbolic implications of mask-wearing amongst protesters and law enforcement agents (Arnold 2022; Doherty 2020; Silke 2003; Spiegel 2015). Data was also collected from the official U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) website, which offered recruitment materials and insight into the agency's institutional culture. Moreover, media reports that document and contextualize ICE's practices in the field were also analyzed (Abdalfetah 2025; Bellafonte 2025; Foy 2025; Friedman 2025; Gordon 2025; Jarvey 2025; Marquez 2025; Rahman 2025; Tavernise 2025). Together, these sources allow for a critical understanding of how masking functions through social psychology and law as a political apparatus that reflects broader dynamics of power and accountability.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Anonymity through mask-wearing functions as a form of state-sanctioned power. When ICE agents hide their identities during raids, they embody the state's power as both a shield and a sword, ultimately granting protection from scrutiny while projecting authority and force. This transforms individual officers into anonymous instruments of the state without direct accountability. In contrast, civilians who hide their identities are criminalized, which illustrates how visibility itself is weaponized to perpetuate state surveillance and control over public demonstrations of disapproval. As Spiegel (2019) argues, transparency is selectively imposed since it is demanded of civilians but strategically withheld by governmental institutions. This juxtaposition sheds light on the state's monopolization of legitimate violence, where the right to anonymity becomes a privilege of power rather than a shared civic right.

From a social psychological perspective, theories of deindividuation state that

anonymity diminishes self-awareness and debilitates moral judgement. Silke's (2003) research demonstrates that individuals who concealed their identities were significantly more likely to engage in violent acts, particularly when they could transfer moral responsibility to a perceived authority. Among ICE, this process of moral disengagement is institutionalized, with agents being encouraged to perceive themselves not as moral actors but rather as patriotic heroes of the nation. This draws back to Friedman's (2025) argument that society's cultural understanding of masks is directly linked to Hollywood and media, with this apparatus turning individuals into archetypes of superheroes. Furthermore, ICE's official materials, which emphasize protecting the nation from "criminal illegal aliens" and "threats to national security," reinforce this heroic narrative that legitimizes aggression. However, it is important to note that such sensationalized rhetoric does not hold truth, as undocumented immigrants have exhibited significantly lower crime rates than U.S. citizens (Bryant 2024). Masking thus operates as a tool to ultimately permit acts of violence under the guise of professionalism and duty.

The spectacle of masked enforcement also produces a climate of fear and distrust that undermines public compliance. As Foy (2025) and Jarvie (2025) document, the sight of masked ICE agents during raids evokes panic within immigrant communities where residents often cannot distinguish between state authority and vigilantism. This confusion is furthered by reports of individuals posing as ICE officers to kidnap, sexually assault, or harm immigrants (Gordon et al. 2025).

Legally, the selective enforcement of anti-mask statutes showcases how laws function to serve the state rather than as unbiased arbiters of justice. Citizens are prohibited from concealing their identities under the suspicion of deviance or intent to disrupt order, while law enforcement officers may do so under the justification of subjective necessity (Marquez 2024). However, the important difference in these two instances is that, in protests, the tension lies between individuals' First Amendment rights to express discontent without fear of retaliation. ICE agents, however, justify their masking as a necessity precisely because they are performing actions under orders from the state. This contradiction illustrates how the legal code and surveillance are expected from regular civilians but resisted by those with power. Nonetheless, growing public criticism has led some states to propose

legislation restricting federal agents from wearing masks during enforcement actions (Marquez 2025; Rahman 2025). This ultimately indicates the reciprocal relationship between law and society as the law still is shaped and may be altered by imposed pressure.

The democratic implications are relevant because when the state reserves anonymity for itself while demanding transparency from its citizens, it redefines legitimacy as control rather than openness and trust. This erodes the foundations of democratic governance, which depend on the ability of the public to observe and hold authority accountable. The mask thus becomes a political technology that determines the limits of power itself, dictating who may be interpellated by the state and who may stray from accountability (Spiegel 2019). In other words, masking manipulates perception and allows violence to be perceived as legitimate, distancing agents from accountability, and perpetually maintaining the vulnerable communities at the state's gaze.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Mask bans expose a profound paradox of power: while states force individuals to be traceable and visible, they hide their own agents under the pretense of security and legitimacy. As discussions on surveillance and deindividuation have argued, anonymity can worsen aggression and diminish accountability, fostering conditions that enable violence to occur under institutional sanction. ICE's use of masked law enforcement agents exemplifies this, as the agents are transformed into a tool of fear rather than protection. To reinstate democratic legitimacy, policy and legal reforms must prioritize transparency and accountability within law enforcement. This includes rebuilding trust between governmental agencies and the communities they are in, ensuring that officers who act with excessive force are held accountable. Moreover, such policies must develop protections that address law enforcements' legitimate concerns—such as agents being doxed due to society' dissatisfaction with their actions—without resorting to masking.

However, it is worth noting that while these concerns are legitimate, they indicate an underlying issue. Public frustration with law enforcement often stems from the overt violence legitimized by the state and the broader governmental institutions that task officers with enforcing such measures. Consequently, this

KIM

anger is displaced as it is directed toward the enforcers rather than the governmental bodies that authorize and perpetuate these actions. Additionally, the dehumanizing language perpetuated by ICE's culture and used by state actors to describe undocumented immigrants must end, as this legitimizes violence and reinforces division. Without addressing these issues, the cycle of fear, mistrust, and extreme violence will continue, ultimately undermining democracy as a whole.

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Adoption Across Race and Borders: Cultural Socialization and Racial Identity Formation in International Adoption

Lili Lindahl

Abstract

International transracial adoption is a complex social process that lies at the intersection of race, power, ethics, and inequality. White adoptive parents often fail to grasp the gravity of the unique challenges faced by transracial adoptees, leaving their child ill-equipped to navigate the complex, intersecting identities they possess. Contrary to pervasive narratives, transracial adoptees are not inherently predisposed to adverse outcomes, but rather, such results are the predictable outcome of inadequate racial and cultural socialization by White adoptive parents. Drawing on the limited existing empirical research and emerging intervention frameworks, this paper highlights cultural socialization as a critical protective factor against adverse outcomes for transracial adoptees. Policy reform, pre-adoption screening, and culturally competent professional training are proposed to better support this underserved population.

Keywords

Transracial adoption, international adoption, cultural socialization, adverse outcomes, cultural competence, social processes

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1950s, international adoption has played a significant role in the demographic shift toward a multicultural American society (Jacobson 2009). While often framed as a humanitarian act of rescue, international adoption occupies a complex space at the intersection of race, culture, ethics, geopolitics, and social inequality. This complexity is highlighted by the fact that an estimated 80% of international adoptions in the U.S. are transracial (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services 2013). Many White parents fail to fully grasp the systemic

forces that shape international adoption and are often ill-equipped to raise a minority child in a predominately White society. As a result, adequate cultural socialization frequently falls to the wayside, leaving transracial adoptees to navigate identity formation, racism, and cultural belonging on their own.

Despite growing recognition of the unique challenges faced by this population, specialized treatment and prevention models remain limited. This paper argues that adverse outcomes among transracial adoptees are not inherent but are instead predictable outcomes of inadequate cultural socialization. This term refers to the transmission of racial issues, cultural values, and beliefs from parent to child, as well as the extent to which the child internalizes these messages and acquires the skills to function in a racially diverse society (Lee 2003). Cultural socialization serves as a critical tool in mitigating adverse outcomes among transracial adoptees, as it mediates the complex racial and social circumstances they are faced with. To understand why it plays such a central role in shaping outcomes, it is necessary to first situate international adoption within broader historical, political, and cultural contexts.

HISTORIC, POLITICAL, AND CULTURAL MOTIVATIONS OF ADOPTION

While adoption is often treated as a deeply personal and private decision, such a perspective obscures the fact that the practice is embedded in historical contexts, global power inequalities, and shifting moral frameworks (Harvard Political Review 2012, as cited in Commer 2023). Early adoption practices in the late nineteenth century prioritized the commodification of children through “baby farms,” in which unwanted or “illegitimate” children were exchanged for money and exploited for child labor. By the 1940s, the social acceptance of baby farming declined significantly, while sentimental adoption, that is, adoption based on the emotional value of a child, rose markedly. Given the United States’ foundations in whiteness, some scholars argue that white saviorism has historically shaped, and continues to shape, motivations behind international adoption. They posit that the practice can position whiteness as morally superior while framing minority children from less privileged nations as needing rescue (Tubbs 2021, as cited in Commer 2023).

LINDAHL

Two major waves of U.S. international adoption in particular illuminate how geopolitical instability, imperialism, and inequality influence the availability of international adoptees. The first wave took place after the Korean War, during which over 110,000 Korean children were adopted into the United States between 1955 and 2001 (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute 2002, as cited in Lee 2003). The second followed China's one child policy, which resulted in more than 82,000 Chinese children being adopted into the United States since 1992 (Qin and Wang 2024). Together, these patterns underscore that international adoption cannot be separated from broader systems of power, inequality, politics, and culture.

UNIQUE CHALLENGES AND CIRCUMSTANCES

Transracial adoption refers to the placement of a child of one race or ethnicity with adoptive parents of a different race or ethnicity (Smith 1994). Since the vast majority of transracial adoptees grow up with little to no connection to their heritage or birth culture, they must navigate complex, layered identities largely on their own, often feeling that they never fully belong neither within their birth culture nor among their White family and peers (White et al. 2022). This can give rise to deep feelings of shame, isolation, and low self-esteem, which are often compounded by narratives emphasizing that adoptees should feel "grateful" for being adopted into a family that could provide them with a "better life." Such expectations can invalidate the adoptees' racial experiences and discourage open dialogue about identity struggles, trauma, or curiosity about their birth culture. Together, these factors make this population vulnerable to mental health disorders, substance use disorders, and delinquent behavior.

A 2002 study conducted in Sweden, a country where less than six to seven percent of the population has non-European features, found that transracial adoptees were five times more likely to commit crimes or abuse alcohol than other children in Swedish society. Additionally, they found that transracial adoptees were three to six times more likely to commit suicide when compared to the rest of the general population (Hjern, Lindblad, and Vinnerljung 2002).

These findings, however, should not be interpreted as evidence that negative outcomes are inherent among transracial adoptees. It is important to note that even

nearly three decades after the publication of Hjern et al. (2002) study, research on transracial adoptee outcomes remains limited. In fact, some scholars argue that academic literature may inadvertently contribute to adoption stigma, as themes of adverse outcomes and deviance continue to dominate research discourse (Wegar 2000, as cited in White et al. 2022).

Adoption stigma and pervasive stereotypes further influence transracial adoptee outcomes by obscuring nuance and portraying the population as a monolith. Persistent beliefs that adoptees are inherently “problem children” who suffer from maladjustment continue to dominate (Garber and Grotevant 2015, as cited in White et al. 2022). Media portrayals and Hollywood often reinforce these harmful narratives, framing adoptees either as victims deserving of pity or as inherently “bad seeds” (Richardson and Goldberg 2010, as cited in White et al. 2022). Given the prevalence of international adoption and the well-documented stigma toward adoptees, a deeper understanding of how societal attitudes and stigma impact transracial adoptee outcomes is warranted (Lee 2003).

These findings suggest that while transracial adoptees do face a unique set of challenges that may increase their vulnerability to adverse outcomes, they are not inherently predisposed to deviance or psychological disorders. Rather, such outcomes are socially produced by a constellation of pre- and post-adoption factors, ranging from age at adoption to the diversity of the adoptive family’s community. Compounding these factors is the reality that international adoptees occupy at least three marginalized identities: (1) being a person of color, (2) being born outside of the U.S., and (3) being an adoptee. Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how these identities interact to create nuanced experiences distinct from those of U.S.-born, non-adopted minorities or White adoptees. Recognizing these complexities is critical to dismantling harmful, monolithic portrayals of transracial adoptees as uniformly maladjusted, and instead examining how specific contextual factors influence development and outcomes (Waggenpack 1998, as cited in White et al. 2022). Recent scholarship further emphasizes the importance of contextualizing transracial adoptee outcomes within broader historical and environmental contexts, systems of power and inequality, and shared experiences among marginalized populations. Having a nuanced

understanding of the complex forces that shape transracial adoptee outcomes allows for meaningful questions about how adverse outcomes can be prevented. Two essential tools for facilitating positive outcomes among this population include ethnic/racial socialization and cultural socialization, both of which are deeply intertwined processes.

ETHNIC AND RACIAL SOCIALIZATION

A unique challenge for White parents of transracial adoptees is determining when and how to appropriately address ethnic and racial differences with their child. A 2020 study surveying over 600 participants found that the majority of parents believed conversations about race should begin around age five (Sullivan, Apfelbaum, and Wiltonan 2020). In reality, racial awareness develops much earlier: three-month-olds show racial preferences, nine-month-olds use race to categorize faces, three year olds associate some racial groups with negative traits, and by elementary school, race-based discrimination is already widespread (Sullivan, Apfelbaum, and Wiltonan 2020).

Sullivan (2020) emphasizes that “even if adults don’t talk to kids about race, children will work to make sense of their world and will come up with their own ideas, which may be inaccurate or detrimental.” She urges White parents in particular to become comfortable discussing race early on with their child because once perceptions and beliefs about race have been formed, it is much harder to change them. Additionally, it has been found that delays in these conversations can lead transracial adoptees to develop ambivalence regarding race, culture, or ethnicity (Huang and Pinderhughes 2026).

While the importance of having race-related conversations may seem obvious, many White parents rely on well-intentioned yet ineffective color-blind strategies. Vittrup (2018: 676) found that “70% of White mothers [endorsed] ‘colorblind’ views to shield their children from racism or held beliefs that race did not matter,” with common responses including “skin color doesn’t matter,” “we’re all the same on the inside,” and “it’s not polite to talk about [race]” (Sullivan, Apfelbaum, and Wiltonan 2020). Similarly, Anderson (2015) found that “Only 21% of transracial adoptive families acknowledged the importance of racial and ethnic differences,

whereas 56% rejected differences and 23% had discrepant views.”

Such color-blind narratives are particularly harmful to transracial adoptees as feelings of detachment from their birth culture, uncertainty regarding racial or cultural identity, and a growing awareness of racism have been associated with greater psychological distress and lower self-esteem (Smith and Brodzinsky 2002, as cited in Lee et al. 2006). Conversely, racial socialization—the encouragement of ethnic/racial identity development and the teaching of critical skills necessary to navigate challenges related to racism—is linked to positive transracial adoptee outcomes. Feigelman and Silverman (1983) reported that transracial adoptees were more likely to exhibit racial pride when their adoptive parents emphasized the child’s racial background, actively engaged in cultural activities with their child, and lived in racially integrated communities (Lee 2003). It was found that adolescents who reported strong ethnic identities were less likely to abuse drugs or alcohol and more likely to exhibit overall positive psychological adjustment. (Deberry et al 1996; Lee 2003). In fact, the effects of racial/ethnic socialization were found to have a greater impact on transracial adoptee outcomes than more general measures, such as parental warmth and positive parent-child communication (Yoon 2001, as cited in Lee et al. 2006).

CULTURAL SOCIALIZATION

Closely intertwined with ethnic/racial socialization is cultural socialization, which Kathleen Bergquist (2018) defines as “exposure to cultural practices, history, traditions, and instilling in-group pride.” It involves the transmission of cultural values, beliefs, and customs that foster racial and ethnic identity development, coping strategies for handling racism, and the skills needed to be a competent member of a racially diverse society (Lee 2003). Friedlander (1999) posits that the objectives of cultural socialization are two fold: (1) creating a positive connection to the child’s country and culture of origin, and (2) reinforcing the child’s identity and fostering bicultural competence, allowing them to navigate both cultures without having to choose (Galvin 2003).

Prioritizing immersive cultural activities related to the transracial adoptee’s birth culture can greatly enhance the child’s sense of self, belonging, and increased

self-esteem during adolescence (Freundlich and Lieberthal 2000, as cited in Lee 2003). Proper cultural socialization among transracial adoptees has been linked to lower rates of delinquent behaviors, as demonstrated by the following research. A 2015 study conducted by the University of Minnesota's Departments of Family Social Sciences and Sociology examined the relationship between cultural socialization and delinquent behavior in international adoptees. This qualitative study of 111 U.S. transracial adoptive families with South Korean adoptees used observational assessments, enabling researchers to capture a broad range of cultural socialization practices while minimizing the bias associated with self-reporting, which often skews toward socially desirable responses. The research team hypothesized that adoptees raised in families that acknowledged racial and ethnic differences would display fewer delinquent behaviors than those raised in families that rejected such differences (Anderson et al. 2015).

During the study's observational assessments, each family received a set of index cards with prompts related to the role of ethnic and racial backgrounds within their family. Transcripts of these conversations were then coded using thematic analysis, which classified each family into one of three categories: (1) *acknowledgement of differences*, indicating that all family members acknowledged and accepted the importance of racial and ethnic differences in the family and integrated these themes in a symbolic or behavioral way; (2) *rejection of differences*, indicating that all family members rejected the importance of racial and ethnic differences or demonstrated a color-blind approach; and (3) *discrepant views of differences*, indicating that at least one family member acknowledged the importance of racial and ethnic differences while another rejected them (Anderson et al. 2015).

Using Thronberry and Krohn's (2001) definition of delinquent behavior as "a wide range of behaviors from truancy and running away from home to aggravated assault and homicide" (as cited in Anderson et al. 2015: 41), Anderson's study found that the transracial adoptees in families that acknowledged racial and cultural differences displayed fewer delinquent behaviors. In contrast, adoptees in families with discrepant views exhibited 2.1 times the mean level of delinquency compared to those in families that acknowledged differences, and nearly 1.5 times

the mean level compared to those in families that rejected differences (Anderson et al. 2015).

FACILITATING CULTURAL SOCIALIZATION

Given these results, it is clear that cultural socialization is a critical tool in preventing adverse outcomes among transracial adoptees. Practices that facilitate cultural socialization include maintaining open and ongoing dialogue about racial and ethnic heritage, active participation in cultural activities connected to the adoptee's culture of origin, and preparing children to navigate racism and discrimination. It is important to note that younger children are generally more receptive to cultural socialization practices, whereas adolescent transracial adoptees may resist such efforts, instead seeking acceptance and belonging among White family members and peers (Meier 1999, as cited in Lee et al. 2006). In light of evidence that racial awareness begins to develop as early as three months of age, it is essential for White adoptive parents to initiate cultural and racial socialization as early as possible.

A critical first step in facilitating cultural socialization is the development of parental cultural competence. This can be achieved through self-reflection on one's own racial, cultural, and social identity, as well as cultivating an awareness of how social experiences shape attitudes, values, and comfort levels regarding racial and cultural differences. Additionally, Huang and Pinderhughes (2021) urge parents to engage in deep self-examination to understand what it means to practice culturally competent parenting and actively nurture these competencies in their child.

Recent intervention-oriented scholarship on transracial adoption has emphasized the importance of family-level prevention efforts rather than individual remediation after harm has already occurred. Some propositions include: (1) pre-adoption training, (2) cultivating relationships with individuals of the same race/ethnicity as the adoptee to facilitate racial mirroring, and (3) ongoing training and support programs for adoptive parents (Commer 2023).

White et al. (2022) note that most adoption agencies currently lack standardized protocols for pre- and post-adoption services that focus on cultural

socialization. They argue that agencies must better screen families pursuing transracial adoption to ensure they possess the resources and competencies necessary to support the development of a healthy racial identity in their child (White et al. 2022). One proposed approach involves pre-placement home studies that assess prospective parents' attitudes toward racial and ethnic differences, implicit biases, cultural awareness, and their understanding of the challenges associated with raising a transracial adoptee. Additionally, these evaluations should consider parents' willingness and flexibility to engage in relationships across cultural and racial lines, as well as their capacity to implement complex ethnic, racial and cultural socialization processes (Huang and Pinderhughes 2021).

However, pre-adoption preparation and training alone are not sufficient. Adoptive parents to transracial adoptees require continued resources and support throughout the adoptee's various stages of development. Commer (2023) emphasizes the need for psychoeducation addressing the challenges related to race and ethnicity that transracial adoptees will face during their development. This may involve receiving guidance in ongoing self-reflection about their role as a parent, the effectiveness of the ethnic/racial and cultural socialization processes they are engaging their child in, and learning coping skills to deal with related challenges (Commer 2023). Another proposed post-adoption intervention is the implementation of annual check-ins for families of transracial adoptees that provide access to specialized care and support as new challenges arise during different stages of development (Huang and Pinderhughes 2021). Collectively, these proposed pre- and post-adoption efforts can foster the development of a positive racial, ethnic, and cultural identity, thereby resulting in more favorable outcomes among international transracial adoptees.

INTERVENTION MODELS AND PROGRAMS

Although there are currently no formal, large-scale prevention programs targeting adverse outcomes among transracial adoptees, recent developments have pointed toward promising intervention-focused solutions. One such initiative is the Strengthening Transracial Adoptive Families (STAF). STAF seeks to develop a culturally responsive, adoption-centered curriculum designed to support transracial adoptees and their families that promotes positive outcomes while

reducing the risk of adverse ones. Drawing upon the Biopsychosocial Model—commonly used in addiction and behavioral research—STAF’s program emphasizes the critical interactions between biological factors, social environments, family dynamics, and racial identity formation that shape transracial adoptee outcomes (Baden et al. 2022). The program explicitly incorporates racial socialization, adoption-related trauma, intersectional frameworks, and identity-based stressors into its model. As such, it is likely that STAF will inform future intervention and prevention efforts in international transracial adoption.

In addition, recent years have seen an increased emphasis on community-based interventions and professional training for those working with transracial adoptees. Some adoption agencies, nonprofit organizations, and mental health professionals have begun offering race-conscious training to staff and adoptive parents in order to foster cultural competence and positive racial identity development. However, Kohn et al. (2017, as cited in White et al. 2022) found that adoption-specific curricula and faculty with adoption-specific expertise remain largely absent from graduate mental health and counseling programs. Given that transracial adoptees are overrepresented in mental health settings, training in cultural, ethnic, and racial socialization, as well as transracial adoption more broadly, should be more fully integrated into graduate programs and used to inform both clinical practice and adoption agency services.

For transracial adoptees themselves, peer-based community programs that connect individuals with same-race peers and culturally affirming environments have expanded, serving as an informal yet significant protective barrier against social isolation and identity-related challenges (Scroggs and Heitfield 2001 as cited in Lee et al. 2006).

FUTURE RESEARCH

International transracial adoptees continue to be an understudied and misrepresented population within the social sciences, health care, and broader society. Although scholarship consistently suggests the importance of cultural socialization in facilitating positive outcomes for transracial adoptees, few rigorous, large-scale studies drawing from diverse and representative samples currently exist.

LINDAHL

This gap in the literature limits the ability to move beyond broad, often misinformed narratives and toward a deeper understanding of the complex intersections that shape transracial adoptee experiences. More robust, longitudinal research spanning from infancy through adolescence and into adulthood is essential for understanding how and why racial, ethnic, and cultural openness and preparedness influence developmental trajectories among this population.

Future studies should differentiate between specific forms of cultural socialization (i.e., exposure to cultural holidays and traditions, participation in language classes, engaging with culturally affirming media) in order to identify the mechanisms through which these practices act as buffers against adverse outcomes. Additionally, future research should incorporate multidimensional outcome measures, including social belonging, identity, and mental health, rather than relying narrowly on single-scale indicators such as self esteem. At a broader level, this work can help identify which cultural, ethnic, and racial socialization processes are most effective in promoting positive outcomes, which can then be used to inform clinical practice, prevention models, and future initiatives.

From an ethical standpoint, future scholarship on transracial adoption must be framed carefully to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes that portray all adoptees as inherently predisposed to adverse outcomes. Without a nuanced understanding of the historical, political, cultural, and social factors that shape international adoption and adoptee experiences, researchers risk reproducing the very narratives they should seek to challenge. Instead, scholarship should prioritize contextualized approaches that center the lived experiences of adoptees while critically examining the systems, structures, and conditions that contribute to their vulnerability. Scholars have both the capacity and the social responsibility to shift pervasive and misleading narratives toward more accurate accounts that are grounded in context, intersectionality, and resilience.

CONCLUSION

Raising a child of a different racial and cultural background within a predominately White society presents significant challenges that require more than love and good intentions to overcome. It requires racial awareness, cultural competence, an understanding of the nuanced complexities that shape international

competence, an understanding of the nuanced complexities that shape international adoption, and a willingness to confront systems of inequality while also engaging in self-reflection. Due to the fact that White adoptive parents lack direct experience with racism and often have limited knowledge about their child's birth culture, proper cultural and ethnic/racial socialization are often insufficiently addressed.

Existing research and statistics perpetuating harmful narratives about transracial adoptees being predisposed to adverse outcomes should not be interpreted as evidence of inherent flaws. Rather, these are predictable outcomes when transracial adoptees do not receive the adequate cultural and ethnic/racial socialization necessary to navigate their complex identities and lived realities. Ultimately, transracial adoptee outcomes are shaped by the environments that surround them, the conversations that are avoided, and the systems and narratives that remain unchallenged.

For decades, research has documented elevated risks of delinquency, substance use disorders, and mental health disorders among transracial adoptees. However, far less attention has been given to addressing the underlying circumstances and conditions that produce this vulnerability in the first place. Scholarship continues to document disparities after harm has occurred, rather than interrogating why such disparities persist and how the negative effects of social and structural forces, such as racism, can be mitigated.

The findings presented throughout this paper make clear that cultural and ethnic/racial socialization are central determinants of positive outcomes for transracial adoptees. Moving forward, more comprehensive, longitudinal research grounded in context and adoptee-centered approaches is needed to examine specific forms of cultural and racial socialization to determine which practices are most effective and why. Scholars must move beyond merely reaffirming the existence of disparities in transracial adoptee outcomes and instead address more complex questions, including how identity-related stressors evolve over the life course and which interventions most effectively mitigate them. These findings should then be used to inform future programs and initiatives, provide support for adoptive parents, and guide training for social workers and health care professionals.

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The Impact of Assimilation on First-Generation College Students

Stephanie Pacheco

Abstract

First-generation college students often experience sociocultural dissonance as they balance collectivist cultural values and the individualistic norms embedded in American society, putting them at a disadvantage relative to continuing-generation students. Drawing on existing literature related to assimilation, individualism, and academic elitism, this research proposal seeks to understand how assimilation into American culture shapes the experiences of first-generation college students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. It proposes an interview-based qualitative study across eight universities to explore these dynamics and their potential impact on academic performance, mental health, and social belonging. Findings from this study are intended to inform more inclusive university programs and support services for first-generation college students.

Keywords

First-generation, higher education, assimilation, American culture, academic elitism, sociocultural dissonance, collectivism, individualism

INTRODUCTION

First-generation college students are typically defined as university students whose parent(s) did not attain a bachelor's degree. They represent approximately one-third of all university enrollments in the United States (Bettencourt et al. 2022: 272). They are often disadvantaged in academia in several ways, ranging from cultural to financial barriers. Due to a lack of college exposure from relatives, research has found that first-generation college students struggle more when navigating campus life than continuing-generation students, whose parent(s) graduated from a 4-year university (Wang et al. 2022).

Despite the growing number of first-generation college enrollments, relatively

few studies have examined how assimilation into American culture shapes the experiences of those from ethnic backgrounds. There is a disconnect between imposed values and their effects on students' mental, social, and academic outcomes. This proposal intends to bridge that gap by exploring the following research question: How does assimilation into American culture through dominant worldviews impact first-generation college students from ethnic backgrounds?

This project's findings will allow university program coordinators to understand how feelings of sociocultural dissonance can hinder first-generation college students and, therefore, act accordingly to better accommodate their needs. Using a thematic approach, this literature review examines assimilation, individualism, and academic elitism to understand how prominent American ideals impact these students. Given the enduring influence of American history, such as colonialism and cultural imperialism, this proposal hypothesizes that assimilation will negatively impact first-generation college students in their acclimation to and socialization on a university campus.

ASSIMILATION

The perception of assimilation, as described by reporter Lalami, has several variations. For many, assimilation refers to the expectation that immigrants learn English, gain economic success, and attain relative familiarity with American cultural norms (Lalami 2017). In contrast, Abramitzky argues that assimilation is largely measured by “cultural practices—things like food, dress, and accent” (Abramitzky 2017: para. 5). In his view, assimilation is not merely knowing American values and gaining financial capital, but also outwardly presenting oneself as American. This distinction is significant because the further immigrants are urged to develop a distinct identity as Americans, the more distanced they become from their native country's practices, values, and beliefs. As highlighted in Berry's acculturation theory, “immigrants are expected to accommodate to the mainstream culture, not the other way around” (Zhao and Biernat 2022: 443).

The four acculturation strategies—assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization—that are imposed upon immigrants demonstrate how one's worthiness of respect and fair treatment is determined by how well they uphold

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these expected responsibilities. For this reason, many immigrants view assimilation as fundamental to the American dream. Historian James Truslow Adams first coined “the glorified American dream” in his 1931 book *Epic of America*. He identified it as the “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (Barone 2024). Since then, scholars have expanded upon and offered their own perspectives on the definition. For instance, in his discussion of Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography, Lemay states that the American Dream is “the rise from impotence to importance, from dependence to independence, from helplessness to power” (Unk 2018: 176). This definition implies that immigrants are inferior to American citizens until they achieve upward mobility and success, which are markers of a “successful” American Dream. However, Lemay does not consider that fulfilling this expectation is challenging in a country that is relatively unsupportive toward vulnerable communities, such as the undocumented or non-English speakers. For instance, restrictive immigration policies can make attaining citizenship more difficult. Regarding first-generation college students, it is important to gain insight into how the social construction of illegality can permeate their college experience, leading them to feel incompetent among their White peers. In turn, this may negatively affect their mental health, social life, and academic outcomes.

THE AMERICAN IDEAL OF INDIVIDUALISM

Bianchi (2016) illustrates the differences between individualism and collectivism, explaining that in cultures that emphasize the former, “the self is regarded as independent and autonomous,” while in cultures that emphasize the latter, “the self is defined in terms of one’s relationship with others and role within the larger group” (Bianchi 2016: 567-568). Bianchi also identifies America as a highly individualistic country, where “individualism is embedded in the historical, and cultural fabric of the United States,” and the majority “champion self-reliance and self-reflection” (Bianchi 2016: 567). Many scholars have also noted that individualism is an American and Western trend, while many countries outside of this region value collectivism. Adding on to this finding, the Individualism-Collectivism Continuum, which ranks countries by their emphasis on individualism,

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found the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands to be the most individualistic, and countries in Africa, Europe, Asia, and Latin America to be the most collectivist (Hofstede & Minkov 2010). This report is noteworthy because it gives insight into the cultural differences immigrants encounter in the United States. Since American culture inherently links individual accomplishment to wealth and prosperity, integration is particularly difficult for immigrants accustomed to collectivist cultures.

First-generation college students from diverse ethnic backgrounds are often raised in households that maintain interdependent values. As a result, they may seek the familiar cultural value of collectivism through family in order to navigate unfamiliar environments. A study conducted by Jimenez, Piña-Watson, and Manzo (2021) explored how the emphasis on “familismo” correlated with the success of first-generation college students of Mexican descent. Familismo is defined as “a Latinx cultural value that involves the importance of connection, commitment, honor, and interdependence within the family” and is “recognized as a potential protective resource...in the face of adversity” (Jimenez, Piña-Watson, and Manzo 2021: 354). The study found a significant positive relationship between family support and the academic and psychological outcomes of first-generation college students (Jimenez, Piña-Watson, and Manzo 2021: 352). These findings prove that preserving cultural links is vital to academic performance and mental health. Assimilation into American individualism is prevalent in academia and, thus, may harm the success of first-generation college students.

ACADEMIC ELITISM

Cornell University graduate, Mateo Castelli, reports his experience navigating academic elitism as a student from an ethnically marginalized group. He posits that academic elitism in universities is built on exclusivity and privilege and “is affirmed by students, professors [and] employers... every time someone is asked to change the way they speak, their intonation, their body language, etc.” (Castelli 2020, para 6). In recalling his experience, Castelli mentions feeling as though his identity and expression were subpar to his peers, which led him to feel pressured to assimilate into elitist norms (Castelli 2020). The construction of education itself

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is heavily reliant upon these norms and disproportionately affects first-generation college students from ethnic backgrounds, who are unlikely to have been raised with these standards. Similarly, Payne, Muenks, and Aguayo (2023) argue that “the norms that push for first-generation students to assimilate can cause cultural mismatch,” defined as the “misalignment between student cultural values and independent university norms” (Payne, Muenks, and Aguayo 2023:793). As a result, students feel more inclined to ask for help from peers and professors when “there is a cultural match” between them (Payne, Muenks, & Aguayo 2023: 793).

Academic institutions must value students’ cultural identities, values, and backgrounds in order to provide better support. Research has shown that cultural mismatch “is one important factor that leads to various negative outcomes for first-generation college students, including lower grade point average, greater perceived difficulty on academic tasks, lower tendency to seek out college resources, and greater...biological stress” (Chang et al. 2020: 281). Ultimately, multiple scholars have found that forced assimilation into unfamiliar academic elitist norms places first-generation college students at a disadvantage compared to their continuing-generation peers. For these reasons, it is important to study how assimilation into American culture through dominant ideals impacts these students.

METHODOLOGY

This project will use interviews to bring insight into the proposed research question. As mentioned, the goal of this study is to understand how assimilation into American culture affects the experiences of first-generation college students from ethnic backgrounds. Interviewing this group of students will be the most effective method to uncover the layers of assimilation in their college experience. Since I plan to recruit multiple interviewees, a standardized interview will be ideal for maintaining formality. Additionally, maintaining the same questions for each participant will aid in identifying trends when coding.

To recruit participants, I will first utilize cluster sampling to divide the large population into smaller clusters of universities across the United States. I will then randomly select eight institutions to ensure that each university has an equal chance of being selected for the study. Once the institutions have been randomly

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selected, I will obtain permission from the chosen universities to access the contact information of their first-generation students from ethnic backgrounds. An interest form will then be released to all eligible students, asking if they would be willing to participate in the study. From the students who respond affirmatively, I will conduct another simple random sample to elicit five participants from each institution. Therefore, there will be 40 participants in total.

In my interview questions, I will ask about the effectiveness of first-generation college programs, familial support, and American individualism. These concepts will contribute to my understanding of the participants' college experiences and perspectives. My questions will also encourage participants to explain why they feel this way. When formulating my questions for the standardized interview, I will maintain as much objectivity as possible as to not infiltrate the questions with bias or ask leading questions that would obscure the data. Maintaining the trust of my participants is of the utmost importance. For this reason, I will ensure to abide by ethical codes. As discussed, I will ask for consent from eligible students to participate in the study. In the form, I will thoroughly inform the participants of the methodology and guarantee confidentiality. To secure their privacy, I will alter the participants' names.

ANALYSIS

After conducting the interviews, I will analyze the data using a systematic indexing process. I will create various themes that correspond to my research question and hypothesis. As previously stated, I hypothesize that given the strength of America's historical practices, such as colonialism and cultural imperialism, assimilation will negatively impact first-generation college students in their acclimation to and socialization on university campuses due to cultural differences and an unfamiliarity with the college atmosphere in contrast to their continuing-generation counterparts. Although more themes may emerge after data collection, anticipated themes include the American ideal of individualism, academic elitism, familial support, cultural identity, stereotypes, and psychological distress. I will then search for these key topics within the interview transcripts and input them into an analysis program to make the coding process more efficient. This program

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will help me identify overlaps, trends, similarities, and contrasts in all of the transcripts.

DISCUSSION

This project will provide an important foundation for future research to address confounding variables, such as gender expression, age, or geographic location, which may also influence perspectives among the population. Subsequent research can measure these specific factors to examine how they overlap and thus construct different experiences. One suggestion is to conduct a focus group with a mixture of students from various backgrounds to examine their shared understandings and collective experiences. In doing so, we can better identify and account for other variables that may influence thoughts on the impact of assimilation into American ideals. Although the interviews will reliably draw detailed reflections from participants, the results are not intended to be generalizable to the broader population. Thus, focus groups can investigate the nuances of a larger sample.

CONCLUSION

This project seeks to gain insight into the research question: How does assimilation into American culture through dominant worldviews impact first-generation college students with ethnic backgrounds? As mentioned, assimilation is often regarded as the expectation that immigrants exhibit American values, thus implying the discarding of previous loyalties and cultural ideals. This assumption infiltrates their pursuit of the American dream, which is seen as the way toward upward mobility and prosperity in the United States. The social construction of illegality that projects inferiority onto immigrants may also affect the college experiences of their children.

As previously discussed, American culture places great emphasis on individualism, whereas many other countries emphasize collectivism. Nevertheless, immigrants are expected to shift their worldviews and adopt the same individualistic beliefs. Academic elitism demonstrates how higher education spaces are tailored toward continuing-generation students, who are more likely to understand and practice elitist norms. First-generation college students, who generally lack exposure

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to these norms, can develop cultural mismatch, which may lead to poorer mental, social, and academic performance. Therefore, first-generation college students tend to rely on their families as a protective measure during their transition to academia.

The methodology for this project will consist of standardized interviews. In the interviews, my focus will be to analyze why and how assimilation has impacted first-generation college students from ethnic backgrounds. Ultimately, this research study aims to understand how assimilation impacts these first-generation university students with the goal of reducing barriers and feelings of exclusion while promoting academic and social success in a college environment. The results of this project can improve first-generation programs at universities to provide a more inclusive place for this population to succeed.

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American Islamophobia is an Imperial Logic

Samantha Qualls

Abstract

Drawing on critical race theory and intersectionality, this paper examines how American Islamophobia is a deliberately constructed imperial framework used to preserve colonial systems of domination and oppression against Muslim and SWANA (South West Asian and African) peoples. Extending far beyond mere social prejudice that is rooted in fear or ignorance, American Islamophobia functions as a mechanism of empire, operating through pervasive narratives and rationalizations in order to normalize exclusion, perpetuate imperial domination, and police gender norms. Understanding these mechanisms highlights how the American empire not only maintains itself through war and policy, but through pervasive narratives that dictate belonging and exclusion.

Keywords

American Islamophobia, critical race theory, intersectionality, SWANA, Muslim, imperialism, colonialism

INTRODUCTION

The concept of empire is a tale as old as time, with the first recorded empire dating back to 2330 BCE in Mesopotamia and the first Western empire emerging in 753 BCE, which scholars would come to define as the Roman Empire (Campbell n.d.). Each empire throughout history has left behind distinct signifiers, markers of power, control, and dominance that historians and anthropologists have been able to identify in hindsight (Damen 2007). In the context of this piece, America will be referred to as an empire in the sense that it has wide-reaching cultural and economic influence, which informs global norms and values, including the construction and proliferation of Islamophobia. One of the defining signifiers of the American empire is its particular brand of Islamophobia. American Islamophobia is not just a social attitude, but rather a deliberate tool of Western imperialism and an intentional,

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functional framework created to preserve the power of dominant colonial groups while maintaining the subjugation of marginalized communities, especially Muslim and SWANA (South West Asian and North African) peoples. This uniquely American expression of Islamophobia was born and continues to operate at the bustling intersection of race, religion, class, and gender.

First, it is important to understand what role race plays within this intersection. Deepa Kumar states in her article “Race, Ideology, Empire” that “Anti-Muslim racism, as a systematic body of ideas embodied in Orientalist discourse, emerges out of the context of European colonialism” (Kumar 2015). One facet of European colonialism is the use of academia or pseudoscience in an attempt to rationalize why one group of people should be subjugated, while another should remain liberated. A particular instance of this is the application of modernization theory, which was built off of sociologist Max Weber’s competing characterizations of rural and urban life to Muslim and SWANA groups. Applying such a theory was a way to rationalize islamophobia and anti-Arab racism in the United States. This method differed from more classical renditions of imperialism as America used eugenic science as “indisputable” evidence to justify the domination and oppression of various groups. This was a new way to legitimize the creation and maintenance of otherwise arbitrary social ‘in’ and ‘out’ groups. This continuation and constant reconstruction of social ‘out’ groups, which bend with historical, social, and cultural trends, allows dominant colonial figures in power to remain in such positions of authority and for the foundation of the American empire to remain unwavering.

As for religion’s role in this intersection, Islam has long been viewed by Western empires as a dangerous, volatile, and hostile religion, unable to progress forward from its own antiquity. These empires, particularly the United States, have understood Islamic values and practices not only to be antithetical to imperial and colonial logic, but have also viewed Islam and general “Arab-ness” as a threat to American hegemony. Prominent American Christian writers, such as Chuck Missler, even go as far as to say the following about the Islamic practice of Jihad: “Since its inception Jihad has been waged by Islamic warriors to spread their religion of violence and hatred. Islam does not change: examine any of the countries in which Islam is in control” (2022). This excerpt from Missler’s recently

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published book, *Prophecy 20/20: Bringing the Future Into Focus Through the Lens of Scripture*, reinforces how Zionist Islamophobic Christian Americans (ZICAs), such as himself, construct essentialist and violent ideas of Islam and Muslim people (Fink 2014).

Referencing Kumar's assertion that anti-Muslim racism was born out of colonialism, Missler's specific attempt to barbarize this religion and its followers is particularly characteristic of the American empire. Even a highly educated writer and engineer, such as Missler, cannot resist falling into such reductive orientalist banalities, again using his positionality as an academic and author to "righteously" drag himself through a shallow and bigoted critique of Islam and the Islamic practice of Jihad. This rampant ideology—that Islam is a religious tradition full of violent extremists—keeps colonialism and empire alive and well in the United States. Hyper-aggressive assumptions about Islam do not allow for an exegetical or nuanced analysis of the Qur'an, which would explicate that Jihad is a practice far beyond mere explosive violence. What Missler might learn if he took that approach would be that Jihad is "also an ongoing condition of humanity, as we consistently struggle with ourselves and with structures of injustice," not a false excuse to commit acts of terrorism (Kashani 2024: 81-88).

In fact, Jihad is more frequently understood to be coterminous with a sustained and dedicated effort to work toward a more just and peaceful society. Similarly, personal Jihad can be interpreted, again, as a perpetual state of working toward a better version of oneself. In both examinations of this concept, Jihad is never tied to exertions of barbaric violence and hatred as Missler would lead readers to believe. However, Missler's misunderstanding of Jihad proves to be the most widely favored take on this concept in the American empire, which is used to maintain Muslim people's subjugation and oppression while legitimizing colonial and imperial frameworks such as Christianity. This false legitimization seems to strengthen America's perception of its own hegemony and power as an empire.

Within American society, Muslim and SWANA peoples are stereotyped to be of lower social and economic classes, which can be attributed to the imperial idea that most SWANA or Muslim people are assumed to be stuck in the dark ages, lazy, uneducated, and unmotivated. Despite the consistent efforts of these two groups to

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disprove such offensive blanket stereotypes, this harmful and persistent typecast remains dominant in American culture today.

“This strategy [selective assimilationist strategy] disassociates Arab Christians from Arab Muslims, associates Arab Christians with the ‘West’ and with ‘modernity’, and articulates a desire for middle-class U.S. nationalist notions of identity that affirm that to be ‘modern’ and ‘American’ is to be ‘Orientalist’” (Naber 2006: 87-111).

This quotation further proves how the U.S. empire urges the people who live within its border to pathologize and hierarchize SWANA and Arab people into finite orientalist classes, prioritizing those who adhere to imperial conceptions of normativity, like being Christian or “modern.” This process of categorization is precisely how social classes are formed and reified, and is both enforced upon marginalized groups as much as it is embodied and policed by marginalized individuals themselves toward people of their own or similar groups. This, in some cases self-inflicted, hierarchization keeps dominant colonial and imperial groups in power by creating rigid, inescapable structures based on social constructs like class, race, and gender. The only groups that can sit at the top of this hierarchy are those who best reflect the empire; these groups are usually comprised of White, Christian, heterosexual, cisgendered, able-bodied, upper-class men. The most insidious tactic of the empire is to get marginalized people to act as unofficial agents of the state via policing colonial and imperial values within their racial, religious, gendered, or otherwise marginalized enclaves. Again, this only further fortifies the legitimacy and reach of the American empire.

Beyond determining social class, American islamophobia is tethered closely to ideas surrounding gender and sexuality. The Muslim woman is viewed as infantilized and helpless; veiled, mysterious, uneducated, voiceless, and in need of saving. Conversely, the Muslim man is viewed as volatile, barbaric, angry, rash, unempathetic, violent, hyper-passionate, and vocal. As previously discussed, the American empire thrives on pathologization and hierarchical categorization—two things that can be aided by the adherence to strict and clear gendered binaries.

“The preoccupation in the United States with women in hijab, or presumably ‘oppressed’ Muslim and Arab women, coexists with a desire to rescue them

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from their tradition in order to bring them into the nation. At the same time, there is a deep anxiety about Muslim and Arab men as potential terrorists and religious fanatics who are antithetical to Western liberal democracy and ultimately unassimilable” (Maira 2009: 631-56).

This quotation affirms the American empire’s emphasis on strict and terminal categorization while also bringing forth an interesting point regarding an individual's ability or likelihood to be able to assimilate. It seems that one’s position on this spectrum of assimilation is directly tied to their class status and upward mobility, and that their positionality is tightly tethered to their gender. Again, because of the severe infantilization of Muslim women, Americans assume that, if only given the chance, any Muslim woman would want to be rescued and fully assimilated into American culture, leaving any “mystical” and “barbaric” relic of her Islamic or Arab identity behind. However, Muslim and Arab men are not even awarded this offensive opportunity as they are denied the possibility to assimilate or become a true member of the American empire. Instead these men are viewed as beyond saving, too far lost in the brutish and animalistic ways of Islam or the “Middle East.”

In sum, American Islamophobia is not simply a product of fear or misunderstanding, but rather a machine that has been calibrated to serve the American empire. It functions by utilizing race, religion, class, and gender to reinforce colonial systems of domination and oppression. By recognizing these intersecting forces, it becomes evident how the American empire sustains and glorifies itself not solely through war or policy, but through the everyday narratives it forms about who belongs and who does not. The implications that the American empire has on Muslim and SWANA Americans alone are lethal, which is why it is critical to understand its mechanisms in order to effectively abolish such an entity.

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Systemic Wounds: Structural Racism and the Production of Black Trauma

Tryston Stone

Abstract

Drawing on structural racism theory and socio-historical frameworks, this paper examines Black trauma as a systemic and structural phenomenon produced by centuries of racial hierarchy, institutional violence, and the commodification of Black suffering. It argues that Black trauma is neither incidental nor individual, but rather the predictable outcome of deliberately constructed systems of racial domination. The paper also examines the biological and epigenetic consequences of race-based trauma, offering critical insight into the disproportionately adverse health outcomes experienced by Black individuals. Interdisciplinary approaches are recommended to capture a more comprehensive understanding of Black trauma in order to dismantle the conditions that perpetuate it.

Keywords

Black trauma, structural racism, racial hierarchy, institutional violence, social justice, anti-Black violence, epigenetics

INTRODUCTION

Black trauma is the accumulated physiological, psychological, and intergenerational harm experienced by African Americans. This harm results from slavery, segregation, structural racism, and ongoing exposure to racial violence. Today, Black Americans are more likely to experience PTSD, chronic illnesses, and premature death. Their average life expectancy is nearly 5 years lower than that of White Americans (Arias et al. 2025). Although Black Americans make up 13% of the U.S. population, they represent nearly 40% of incarcerated people. They are also disproportionately represented in incidents of police violence, being killed at more than twice the rate of White Americans (Owens 2022: 478). These

statistics show that trauma is not just an isolated incident, but an institutional condition.

The term “race-based traumatic stress,” coined by Robert T. Carter (2007), helped define how racial discrimination can be a form of trauma. Other scholars expanded this framework, like William A. Smith (2008), who described “racial battle fatigue,” and Joy DeGruy (2004), who developed the theory of “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome.” These ideas emphasize the chronic and intergenerational nature of racialized trauma. Together, these theories contextualize Black trauma through sociocultural and biological conditions, which are embedded within the Black body and reproduced through institutions.

To further understand these distinctions, applying a socio-historical and structural framework can help reveal and examine how social, institutional, and biological pressures drive the persistent and disproportionate rate at which Black communities experience trauma. Structural racism theory contends that racism is interwoven into policy-making, institutional practices, and social norms in society, all of which work in a collective network to reproduce racial injustice. These institutions, in conjunction with structural networks, continue to privilege White people and disadvantage Black people. While many assume this injustice operates solely at the interpersonal level, structural racism theory highlights how it operates within the network of key institutional power. This is a result of historically designed policies that have unevenly distributed resources, opportunities, and protections. Segregated housing, unequal school funding, discriminatory policing, and healthcare injustice are not merely accidental; they reflect intentional structures built to secure advantages for White people while subordinating Black people.

Moreover, structural racism reinforces itself through supposedly “neutral” institutional practices, which are actually rooted in racial hierarchies. Policies like funding public education through local property taxes seem equitable, however, since Black communities were redlined into lower-value properties and neighborhoods, these policies guarantee generational underfunding. Similar conditions exist in the criminal justice system. Laws such as mandatory sentencing use race-neutral language but still disproportionately target and surveil Black communities. This results in wide racial disparities in arrests and incarcerations.

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Information, data, and policy may seem neutral today, but often continue racial hierarchy in contemporary forms.

In addition, structural racism theory operates alongside the concept of racialized control, which refers to historic systems that operated to regulate, punish, or oppose Black life, like slavery and Jim Crow. Structural racism theory examines how racialized control manifests in contemporary systems like mass incarceration, over-policing, and judicial bias. Even organizations and institutions that are seemingly designed to facilitate these manifestations, like social workers and schools, disproportionately criminalize Black students, who are suspended at four times the rate of White students (“Civil Rights Data” 2014). This demonstrates how structural systems can still funnel Black students into punitive pathways, reinforcing racial control (Stevenson and Balkey 994; “Civil Rights Data” 2014). Another concept within structural racism theory is structural violence, which arises from compounded intergenerational harms, such as inequitable access to housing, healthcare, and education, and leaves individuals’ basic needs unmet.

Through the structural racism framework, it is evident that Black trauma is not an ordinary byproduct of society, but a familiar outcome of the historical racial hierarchy within the United States. Structural racism and violence both create trauma and embed it into everyday life. Implementing this theoretical framework allows for a deeper analysis of the conditions that enable Black trauma and why it endures.

Black trauma persists because anti-Black violence has long been normalized and ritualized in Western culture, mainly in the United States. Throughout U.S. history, Black bodies have served as a public spectacle, being watched, consumed, and disciplined. This contributed to making violence seem socially acceptable and preserved the idea that these acts were “natural.” This exploitation began during the slave trade, when violence was both discipline and punishment, and was displayed. After slavery ended, violence changed forms in the Jim Crow era; lynchings became public gatherings where Black people were tortured as a communal ritual. Mark Simpson (2004) shows in his research on lynching postcards how lynchings existed both as events and as a commercial industry. Postcards of mutilated Black bodies were printed, sold, and collected, turning Black

suffering into a profitable business. The commodification of Black traumatic violence through images extended the spectacle of Black trauma. Those who produced, traded, or collected these postcards gained a false sense of access to the “definitional authority” that shaped prevailing ideas—an authority that presented itself as just while obscuring the true injustices (Simpson 2004: 25). This legacy persists today, with videos of police killings now circulating online and images of Black death spreading rapidly across social media. Khloe Green (2022) in “Dead Black Bodies and Social Media” explains how constant exposure to Black violence online generates collective retraumatization, especially for young Black viewers. Green shows how widely shared images of Black death and violence normalize this, transforming it into “trauma porn” for constant consumption (Green 2022: 2). This violence then spreads across all media, from news to social outlets, until it becomes pervasive.

David Owens (2022) extends Green and Simpson’s examinations into the present day, describing how viral footage of police killings on social media creates a modern “spectacle of Black suffering” (Owens 2022: 478). For instance, the viral nine-minute video of former police officer Derek Chauvin’s murder of George Floyd in May 2020 serves as another example of how state violence gets turned into a routine digital exhibition. Owens notes how the repeated circulation of these videos embodies the ritualistic tendencies of the Jim Crow era, much like how the organized ritual of lynchings had a scaffold, the lynch mob, and the lynching photograph (Owens 2022: 485). Although such videos may be an attempt to promote awareness, they create a society in which Black trauma is hypervisible but continuously unresolved. This allows anti-Black sentiment to seep even deeper into the collective conscience of individuals. These examples emphasize that Black trauma exists not only because of racialized violence but also due to the historical and cultural treatment of Black bodies in U.S history, with structural racism maintaining its presence in less explicit ways.

This recurrent dynamic is further evident in how Black trauma is preserved under conditions where Black suffering is commodified for profit through viewership. Today, digital media platforms operate on engagement; thus, the more shocking the material, the more attention and algorithmic amplification it receives.

Green's interviews reveal that many young Black adults feel media posts about Black violence create more harm than good. Nevertheless, the circulation of these images continues because they offer "social gain" and generate online visibility (Green 2022: 52-58).

It is crucial to understand that this dynamic in the media is racialized. Empirical studies and data reveal that violence against White victims is often personalized and shielded from circulation, while Black victims are treated as public spectacles. Content analysis from news media finds that Black victims are more frequently depicted as criminals, and their suffering is more widely publicized. In contrast, White victims are often portrayed in a more humanized way, enabling protection from graphic exposure through visual censorship (Dixon and Linz 2000: 133). Similarly, on social media, images and videos of Black violence and death are often shared without censorship, justified by claims of newsworthiness. In contrast, images of White victims are frequently blurred or censored (Noble 2018). Since Black suffering holds more cultural currency under racialized capitalism, it becomes frenzied, making it both more shocking and ultimately more profitable.

Clearly, this engagement is not neutral and becomes monetized for profit. This monetization enables the visual and lived persistence of Black trauma. With social media platforms operating through "racist marketplace logics," images of Black pain become advertising material that fuel data-driven revenue models (Sobande 2021: 1). Even institutions beyond the social media sphere reproduce the commodifications of Black pain, whether to draw money or credibility (Sobande 2021). Racialized capitalism enables this dynamic to fester within U.S. institutions, which derive economic and cultural value from non-white identities, ultimately treating Blackness as a commodity to be mined and extracted for structural benefit (Leong 2013). Even other media industries, like crime dramas or true crime narratives, function under the same economic exploitation, packing Black suffering into content that draws viewership and credibility (Bonilla and Rosa 2015). Black trauma carries on under the conditions of racial capitalism, where Black bodies, through historical treatments to modern-day economic systems, continue to be subjected to public suffering. This is ultimately reinforced

and eventually incentivized.

The outcomes of Black trauma are profound precisely because of the commodification and ritualization of Black suffering throughout history. The ever-compounding elements and outcomes of Black trauma have dire consequences that permeate into the biological, psychological, and structural customs of Black life. Biologically, Black communities and individuals experience disproportionate levels of chronic stress, inflammatory pathways, altered neural circuitry, and elevated stress hormones. As a result of racial trauma, these stress responses become embedded in the body intergenerationally (Carter et al. 2021). Similarly, studies have shown that Black individuals experience elevated levels of PTSD symptoms, like chronic stress and anxiety, which can lead to long-term mental health decline (Sibrava et al. 2019). Black individuals' epigenetic makeup, referring to how the structure of DNA is bound to proteins, has also been shaped by hundreds of years of trauma from slavery, Jim Crow, and modern-day structural racism (Carter et al. 2021). The epigenetic structure seen in Black individuals and communities has altered the everyday lives of Black people and changed their lifestyles. This offers critical insight into why many Black individuals experience lower life expectancy, higher rates of obesity, and higher levels of chronic stress. Taken together, this research demonstrates the harms that racialized trauma can have when left untreated and unprioritized historically, institutionally, and structurally.

Social distortion through media narratives can further reinforce legislative and institutional policies that criminalize Blackness. The normalization of Black trauma through media outlets often shapes public perception and state responses to Black people. David Owen (2022) analyzes how the “spectacle of Black suffering” demonstrates how state violence, such as the disproportionate rate of incarcerated Black people, becomes everlasting and politically unimportant, leading to normalization (Owen 2022: 478). This regularity of Black suffering then distorts not only the portrayal of Black individuals but their structural environments as well, like biased judicial and punitive systems, the rationalization of unequal schooling, and unequal access to housing and healthcare. This can lead to a public tolerance of unequal systems, further fostering a conscious and subconscious anti-Black sentiment among people within society, which then reinforces itself. Even

contemporary mechanisms, such as standardized testing, credit scores, and algorithmic risk assessment systems rely on data and information shaped by decades of segregation, biased policies, and economic distress (Garcia et al. 2024).

While structural racism theory offers profound insight into the macro-level drivers that shape Black trauma, it comes with limitations. For instance, it struggles to provide the complete picture of the factors and cultural dimensions that shape ritualized anti-Black violence. It requires more critical, cross-disciplinary research to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the non-economic drivers of the contemporary ritualization of Black suffering. Structural racism theory also does not independently explain how race-based trauma permeates into the biological structure of Black individuals and communities. Disciplines such as psychology, physiology, and epigenetic frameworks require further research and synthesis to elucidate their nuances. These limitations suggest that structural racism theory requires interdisciplinary approaches to capture the full extent and depth of Black trauma.

One thing is clear, however: Black trauma is not an accident, but rather a part of a predictable outcome of American society that has structured racial hierarchy directly into political, economic, cultural, and historical systems. The normalization and monetization of these conditions have enabled the persistence of Black trauma. Addressing the circumstances that maintain race-based trauma demands a strategic, structural, and purposeful dismantling of the institutional powers that produce it. This includes confronting systems that criminalize Blackness, challenging media practices, investing deeply in community-based healthcare, and implementing legislative policy that directly tackles historical and ongoing injustices. Only when these structural systems, institutional conditions, and public perceptions change can society finally move toward true justice and healing.

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Racializing Labor: Analyzing LMU's Labor Movement Through Joel Olson's Racial Framework

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Abstract

Extending the lens of Joel Olson's *White Democracy*, this paper analyzes the labor fight between Loyola Marymount University's non-tenure-track (NTT) Faculty Union and the university's administration, particularly focusing on the administration's response to the union's strike authorization. Conducting informal interviews with faculty members and drawing on the student newspaper's coverage of the labor fight, this paper describes the relationships between the Tenure-Track and the non-tenure-track faculty at LMU. It then applies Olson's racial framework to better understand the dynamics between each of the actors and the relationships they hold, while further showing how racial frameworks can operate in contexts outside of race itself. Importantly, while this is an analogy, it demonstrates the social construction of race and exemplifies how pre-existing power relations can map onto bodies as a recursive justification rather than "natural" categories. Finally, a short anecdote is included to demonstrate how oppressive systems affect all involved, not solely those who are directly oppressed.

Keywords

Labor union, faculty, higher education, tenure, race, racialization, Loyola Marymount University

INTRODUCTION

In Cathy Cohen's "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," she differentiates a Queer identity from a Queer politic, noting that while a person can be Queer, their political efforts may leave behind other marginalized communities, such as gay rights activists excluding people based on race. Queer identity is separate from a Queer politic, and neither of the two necessitate the other (Cohen 1997: 480).

Translating this to Critical Race Theory, it is possible to overlay a racial framework onto an empirical case without race itself as a necessary component. The themes and modes of analyses gained from the racial framework can be mapped onto other areas of political oppression—such as gender rights, labor movements, or immigration reform—that may not otherwise be racialized. Note, the term “racialized” in this context is not meant to describe how normative conjectures of race can exist in tandem with other social identities. Rather, the goal here is to understand how social categories arise via the same mechanisms used to construct race as a marginalized social category that systematically receives disproportionate access to resources and opportunities. Through this understanding of racialization comes new perspectives surrounding the complex dynamics of political movements. As a student directly affected by the labor movement at Loyola Marymount University (LMU), I aim to analyze this case through a racial framework with two goals in mind: (1) to better understand the power dynamics between the LMU administration and faculty, and (2) to analyze how marginalized categories are created to justify exploitation rather than existing naturally.

Particularly, I will focus on LMU Marketing and Communications’ video from October 3, 2025, which provides President Thomas Poon’s response to LMU’s non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty union’s strike authorization. My paper will analyze this response and its larger context via Joel Olson’s concept of White Democracy. During my research, I worked closely with many NTT faculty for various purposes, and I unofficially interviewed some on their experiences and involvements with the union. For their safety, they will remain anonymous and will not be directly referenced.

The first section of this paper includes two parts: (1) the former will describe the terminology for different faculty at LMU, and (2) the latter will follow the major events in the decade-long unionizing efforts, which has been covered by the LMU student newspaper, *The Los Angeles Loyolan*. The second section of this paper will offer legal scholar Joel Olson’s racial framework, which discusses the origins of whiteness and non-whiteness as well as the relationships between them relative to each other and the ruling class. The third section will use said framework to draw connections between and analyze the labor fight at LMU with the goal of

demonstrating how LMU administration's separation of Tenure-Track and NTT Faculty can be better understood as a racialized working-class division. The fourth and final section will provide a short, personal reflection on a conversation I had with LMU President Thomas Poon.

I. THE NON-TENURE TRACK FACULTY UNION FIGHT AT LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

The term “faculty” is used to describe a professor, instructor, lecturer, or anyone who is directly involved in educating the students (i.e., they are in the classroom assigning material and facilitating the coursework required for students to receive a degree). Following descriptions in the *LMU Faculty Handbook 2025-26* (pp. 1-4), various categories of faculty exist, which are distinctly separated into two categories: Tenure-track Faculty and non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty (the capitalization I use is consistent with that in the handbook). Tenure-track faculty include those who have been awarded tenure, those who are on the pathway to receive tenure, and those who are eligible for tenure positions. Within this category, five distinct positions exist, each necessitating increasing levels of achievement, collegiate teaching experience, and responsibilities. These positions include Assistant Professors, Associate Professors, Full Professors, President's Professors, and Endowed Chairs. Notably, these are full-time positions with renewable contracts. Likewise, the non-tenure-track faculty category further includes two distinctions for those who are ineligible for Tenure-track positions. Term Faculty are full-time members with renewable contracts, including both Clinical Faculty and Instructor positions. Meanwhile, Contingent Faculty can be hired part-time or full-time, but their contracts are limited in length and are often non-renewable or limited in their renewability. While faculty in these positions are ineligible for tenure-track positions, their titles are often listed congruently with the associated tenure-track positions. For example, a Visiting Associate Professor has the same qualifications and expectations of an Associate Professor, however, they are ineligible for tenure and have a short-term contract.

With the numerous qualifications and categories of professional status, it is expected that nuance and complications arise, given the inherent differences. Most

TOMLINSON

notably, by the nature of non-renewable, short-term contracts, contingent faculty do not have the same job security as their tenure-track colleagues. Because they are not guaranteed a new contract once their current one ends, their employment status is in the hands of the administration (note that the word contingent means “subject to chance”). Distinct from firing or prematurely terminating a contract with valid reason, the employer can, on a whim, simply refuse to provide a separate contract for the following term (Background Facts n.d.). To highlight this point, take the example of a contingent faculty member who has worked for LMU on numerous semester-long contracts. Throughout their time, they have established a presence in their department and created lasting impacts on students and the larger LMU community. At an unspecified moment between semesters, the administration then chooses to not provide an additional contract for this contingent faculty member. Since the most recent contract has expired, justification for this action is not necessary, nor is it necessary for the administration to provide prior messaging about the potential new contract’s status. Subsequently, this faculty member is unemployed, lest they are employed elsewhere. However, finding precautionary employment elsewhere cannot be at another college or university, as “teaching at another institution of higher education is not allowed” (LMU Faculty Handbook, p. 26).

The naturalized differences in job conditions between Tenure-track and NTT Faculty have been one factor leading to the organization of LMU’s NTT Faculty Union. In 2013, LMU faculty tried to unionize so they could more reliably fight for the pay, benefits, and conditions they deemed necessary to effectively and successfully teach. The unionizing efforts primarily involved Contingent Faculty members in the Bellarmine College of Liberal Arts (Silvester, 2025a). While this initial fight for faculty unionization persisted for several years, the COVID-19 pandemic halted its momentum. It was not until late in the Fall semester of the 2023 school year that the public idea of a faculty union arose again. Starting with only thirty dedicated faculty members, the first proposal for the non-tenure track faculty union would both logistically and optically center the faculty themselves as the primary drivers of the labor movement, rather than other corporations, such as Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 721, that help with legalities

TOMLINSON

(Carlyle 2023).

The following semester, tenured faculty member Anna Harrison emphasized the importance of recognizing and promoting this unionization effort as a means to better support students, noting how fair wages and working conditions would allow for a stronger integration between faculty and students alike, ultimately strengthening the university as a place for scholarship (Harrison 2024). Logically, when professors can direct their focus toward students and the learning environment rather than their own well-being, which is jeopardized by the limiting conditions under which they work, they can more easily foster an education of the whole person. In line with this call to action, many union supporters held various demonstrations, including marches, rallies, and other protests that involved non-tenure track faculty, students, SEIU organizers, outside LMU community members, and some Tenure-track faculty (Silvester, 2025a). It was not until after the 2024 commencement that the non-tenure track faculty won their union election with an overwhelming majority, which then allowed for official contract negotiations to begin.

Negotiations did not officially begin until December 20, 2024, and bargaining continued sporadically (Non-Tenure-Track News n.d.). Through this process, both the union and the administration threatened various lawsuits. Importantly, at this point, the union had been certified by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). While this battle between the university administration and non-tenure track faculty continued over the summer, it was immediately halted at the start of the Fall 2025 school year. On Friday, September 12, the LMU Administration and Board of Trustees issued a statement that they would no longer recognize the non-tenure track faculty union, despite its national certification. As a private Jesuit Catholic university, the ability to uphold this decision lies within certain constitutional rights that allow institutions to “invoke religious exemption from the jurisdiction of the National Labor Relations Board” (P. Viviano, personal communication, September 12, 2025). Unsurprisingly, this generated relentless back-and-forth between the LMU administration, the union, and those in support of the union. National media outlets joined the conversation with the National Catholic Reporter and The Catholic Labor Network (CLN) publicly condemning the Board of Trustees’ decision (Fraga 2025; Labor Month Highlights n.d.). Most

pertinently, an overwhelming majority of the unionized faculty members voted in favor to authorize a strike (Silvester, 2025b).

Shortly after the authorization, President Thomas Poon responded to the potential strike and its implications in a video titled “Safeguarding Learning and LMU’s Path Forward,” which framed SEIU as the decision makers for said strike rather than the faculty members who voted in favor of it (Loyola Marymount University 2025). While Poon provided claims against SEIU specifically, he made clear that the unionized faculty “chose to organize with SEIU Local 21,” which effectively presented his message toward the faculty members as well as SEIU. He contended that unionized efforts deter the desired progress that both faculty and administration seek, and the administration would “work directly with faculty [and address] their priorities with real actions” via bureaucratic processes such as the LMU Faculty Senate. However, it should be noted that multiple members of the Faculty Senate are grieved and frustrated with the administration’s engagement even with such direct processes in place. Additionally, Poon implicitly distinguished SEIU and the union members apart from LMU administration, particularly using “LMU” when referencing the administration and “the union” when referencing faculty members. While this is a developing case, it is important to analyze its nature as to gain insight into where it may lead.

II. JOEL OLSON’S RACIAL FRAMEWORK

Joel Olson’s (2004) *The Abolition of White Democracy* provides a historical account of the racialization of social standing in the United States, with an ongoing theme that demonstrates how the changing nature and boundaries of “whiteness” are used to uphold class disparities and power dynamics. Olson makes clear that while race is and has been socially constructed through formal and informal institutions, it is nonetheless necessary to recognize its presence given the power imbalance inherent in its construction (p. 8). One instance of such a dynamic is between those who are White and those who are non-White. Like many critical race theorists before him, Olson defines whiteness through an absence rather than a presence. It is predicated on the exclusion of other identities and cultures, which is what provides whiteness its power and privileges. There is no White culture or

TOMLINSON

White race in and of itself; rather, it has been “invented” through the oppression of others (pp. 32-33). As such, whiteness is a position in a social hierarchy. To elaborate on this, Olson provides specific historical accounts of whiteness and its relation to citizenship and social participation.

In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, poor European servants located in what would become the United States often labored under the same conditions as enslaved Africans, where both shared experiences of suffering. To limit the possibility of these two groups organizing against those above them, the ruling class deemed it necessary to divide the working class. Not only were laws passed that “distinguished Africans and Indians from the English,” but further legislation was enacted to provide certain rights and privileges to the English while denying such from their counterparts (p. 36). An important right in this distinction was “the right to own property (including human property),” which would determine one’s eligibility for enslavement (p. 38). If one could not own property, they would become the property, and if one could own property, they were ineligible to be property.

With this basis, a person could clearly prove their social standing—and now their race—via their status as either able to be enslaved or not. The “unenslaveable English workers associated themselves with the White owners, while the Africans who could be enslaved were diminished to non-white (p. 38). The poor English workers—who were now granted perceived access to the rights and privileges of the ruling class—separated themselves above enslaved African Americans, despite their lived experiences aligning more with those of Africans than the plantation owners. By associating with the White elites, working-class Whites could convince themselves of a higher social status while still living in a position similar to before. In doing so, they had earned what W.E.B. Du Bois calls the “psychological wage” and they could safely classify themselves as citizens solely on the fact they were not enslaved (p. 43). By offering working English people the “psychological wage of whiteness,” which placed them above the non-White African Americans, the elite plantation owners not only divided the working class across the “slave line” but also limited the combined interest of English and African American workers to organize against the ruling class. Through this account, it is clear that race was constructed through economic class structures.

TOMLINSON

Upon abolition, and in Northern states, however, no clear distinction existed between the whiteness of an “unenslaveable” worker and the non-whiteness of a worker who would otherwise be enslaved in the South. A working-class White individual could no longer use the “slave line” as a determinant for citizenship and social standing, and thus, the conditions of whiteness were reinterpreted. The pigmentation that had become known as “White” or “Black” was merely the visual characteristic most often associated with the whiteness gained from power and privileges or the non-whiteness from the lack of such, respectively. Nonetheless, this visual marker was used in the Supreme Court case *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, which ruled that a “Black person has no rights that a white person is bound to respect” (Olson 2004: 46). While this case is framed as using race first to justify jurisdiction over Black people, it is important to note that the decision also implicates the inverse: the rights a Black person were denied were the same rights a White person was granted, and the ability to possess such rights was the very condition that made one White. Whiteness in this context is definitionally exclusive. Determinants of rights became cemented in skin-color as well as enslavement status; the “slave line” was still a reality for some, yet the “color-line” had developed.

The rights White people held offered them access to power structures, opportunities, and privileges that were otherwise made inaccessible to non-Whites, including practices that allowed for civic engagement. The conditions of whiteness transformed from the possibility of enslavement, through the color line, and moved toward voting eligibility. Even after the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution granted voting rights for all men regardless of race, Jim Crow laws limited voting accessibility, most heavily affecting non-White, formerly enslaved citizens. While legal policy had changed, the separation between a White and non-White class still existed and was manufactured in a way that upheld the same effects of chattel slavery. If a person could vote, they were White; if they could not, they were non-White. The “color line” had become the “voting line” through which one could easily prove their White status by their ability to vote, regardless of their choice to do so.

In our present moment and following the Voting Rights Act of 1965, greater

voter accessibility has proved difficult for voting to prescribe whiteness. Granted, certain individuals, like those who have been convicted of a felony or who are currently incarcerated—of whom are disproportionately people of color—are still prohibited from voting (Ghandnoosh 2023). Nonetheless, because voting has become normalized and taken for granted across races, it can no longer serve as a basis for whiteness; it no longer has an exclusionary factor that in turn generates value for those who are included. With the dissolution of the “color line,” the new distinction between whiteness and non-whiteness exists through multiculturalism and inclusion.

When embracing a multicultural and inclusive lens, one must embrace all cultures, including White culture—which does not intrinsically exist. By doing so, whiteness is now legitimized as a “neutral racial category” despite its origins as a system for political domination (Olson 2004: 73). The benefits and privileges one receives from whiteness are still very real and hold lasting effects, noting briefly the disproportionately lower rates of income, life expectancy, and education for non-White individuals compared to the disproportionately higher rates for White individuals (p. 76). The difference between this current situation and those in the past, however, is the ability to ignore that such privileges are a product of one’s whiteness and instead claim them as deserved rewards based on merit or work ethic (p. 66). The racial hierarchy positions whiteness at the top but claims a position of equality while disenfranchising all those below it.

Importantly, in each articulation of whiteness that Olson (2004) offers, the division between White and non-White individuals was created to maintain the initial division between working-class English servants and enslaved Africans. In an effort to maintain political control and limit working class solidarity, legal policies ensured the division between the working class as White/non-White, enslaved/free, voter/non-voter, and citizen/non-citizen. Even in the present moment of multiculturalism, the working class remains divided as ignoring whiteness and emphasizing merit alone implies that those who fail are simply undeserving, rather than understanding their true underrepresentation and systemic disenfranchisement. All the while, the White elites—that is, those who are not a part of the working class—still hold power over all workers, including white workers. While both

White and non-White workers have access to the elite status, it is much more feasible for the White worker to achieve because of the privileges they hold above the non-White worker (Olson 2011). With the background of this framework, further movements with similar dynamics can be understood more holistically.

III. APPLYING JOEL OLSON'S FRAMEWORK TO THE NON-TENURE TRACK FACULTY UNION FIGHT

Drawing on the framework provided by Olson, the analogical actors at LMU are as follows: the non-tenure track faculty are the non-white workers; Tenure-track faculty are the White workers; and the LMU administration and Board of Trustees are the White elites or owners. To be clear, the argument is not that NTT experience the same oppression that people of color face under White supremacy, but rather that their social position exists via the same process of race construction. In the eyes of the administration, Tenure-track faculty are recognized as high-standing "citizens" of LMU. These positions offer greater benefits and securities that are often limited or absent in non-tenure-track positions. While neither of these groups are at the status of the administration, Tenure-track Faculty have security in their organizational standing, and thus they are less directly incentivized to organize against the administration. Tenure-track faculty at LMU have not generally developed a disdain for the NTT faculty as the White-worker did for the non-White worker in the antebellum era, yet the separation between the two still exists and holds tangible effects.

Following the religious exemption to remove any recognition of the union, it is necessary to understand the separation between the Tenure-track faculty and NTT faculty in terms of whiteness, access to power, and the limiting of potential collectivization. While tenure-track faculty receive additional benefits and increased pay compared to NTT faculty, they still labor under the same administration that is incentivized to minimize expenditures for the institution. The monetary compensation supplied to the faculty at large is not representative of the value they produce for the university and its students. As such, it is in the Tenure-track Faculty's best interest to organize with all other faculty members. However, the terms in their contracts offer job security and working conditions

ostensibly more valuable than those of the NTT faculty conditions, providing the “glass floor” upon which to stand (Olson 2004: 47). The Tenure-track Faculty are provided with the illusion of adequacy because they are superior to one group, regardless of their reality as inferior and disposable to the administration. They benefit from the “psychological wage” on which Du Bois speaks. This “psychological wage” further invites Tenure-track professors to disregard how the administration exploits them. They do not have to confront the degree to which their faculty standing is due to chance rather than qualifications because having a class below them gives a perceived sense of value. This is not to say that Tenure-track professors are unqualified, but it is meant to emphasize the degree to which their employment status can rest on variables beyond qualifications alone. Regardless of how faculty perceive this separation, its existence has tangible effects. Like the “color line” or “voting line,” the new “tenure-line” has been materialized as a tool for the LMU administration to further divide their workers. Tenure-track faculty can choose to disregard this attempted division, just as White workers can choose to reject their privileges, but the administration will continue to wedge the two parties apart.

In the video of President Poon’s response to the strike authorization, he asserts that teaching will continue by any means, regardless of whether NTT faculty carry out a strike. While this leaves room for interpretation, various routes could be taken. There is a possibility that the administration will hire new employees who are willing to work under such conditions, effectively firing any of those who strike. Notably, some Tenure-track professors have been expected to fill these roles. Not only is this outside of Tenure-track contracts, meaning there is no guarantee they would be financially compensated for their additional labor, but it would place extra responsibilities on full-time faculty who may not have the ability to fill such positions. It will be detrimental to all faculty for a strike to manifest. While this could give reason for the Tenure-track Faculty to organize in solidarity with NTT faculty—which many of them have—the administration pushes a different narrative of separation consistent with Olson’s racial framework.

Similar to the growing wealth inequality between both the White and non-White working class and the White elites, the LMU administration’s pay scale and

positions are growing at a faster rate than any other area of the university. However, both Tenure-Track and NTT faculty have not experienced such growth. The LMU administration—like the elites over the working class—created the conditions that led to the desire for a strike authorization, yet they avoid responsibility and refuse to acknowledge their own marginalizing activities. They characterize the strike authorization as an unnecessary choice that is only one of several alternative options for better working conditions. The options presented, however, would legitimize the injustice they create.

The LMU administration outlines their goals for faculty collaboration in their website titled “The Path Forward.” A key section of this page highlights “shared governance” as a means to negotiate with the faculty via direct conversations with the Faculty Senate. The request for this alternative to a strike is further elaborated in Interim Executive Vice President and Provost Kat Weaver’s October 3rd email to students: “The university realized that the best path forward is to work directly with faculty to address their priorities with concrete actions” (K. Weaver, personal communication, 2025). At face value, this is sound reasoning. However, it is important to recognize the dynamic between the faculty at large and the administration’s “whiteness.” If faculty choose to work directly with the administration, they must play by the rules of the “club”—that is, if they are accepted as a member (Olson 2004: 78). The club that is the LMU administration operates as an institution with finite resources. Therefore, it is against the administration’s interest to invest in areas beyond what it deems necessary, including increased faculty pay and benefits. For administrators, increasing their own pay and security is deemed necessary, while providing the same increases for both Tenure-track and NTT faculty is deemed optional and, therefore, unlikely due to the bottom-line profit incentive the administration adopts. Through this logic, it is inherently against the faculty’s interest to participate in this club because it actively works against them. Like Olson’s “inclusion,” the faculty are not “empowered” in their own right so much as they work to “attain standing” with the ruling class (p. 67). They are included, but it is into the very system that jeopardizes their status.

Through direct conversations, such as utilizing the Faculty Senate, the faculty

complicitly allow their working environment to exist as is, for the institutional hierarchy remains and they continue to be under the jurisdiction of the administration. The dialogues that prescribe the working environment exist in administrative fields, so contracts and policies are created from a top-down process rather than bottom-up. The administration's "whiteness" blinds them from the workers' interests.

The developing labor fight between the NTT Faculty Union and the LMU administration can be seen as creating two separate "races" within the faculty body. The Tenure-track "race" is granted access and afforded privileges similar yet still distant enough to those held by the administration, while the non-tenure-track "race" is neglected and disenfranchised by the very terms that describe their position. This analogy serves to understand how the nuanced relationships in the labor fight at LMU operate in ways like those of race. However, a deeper analysis about the process of racialization is necessary to fully conceptualize the existing power dynamics. While it may be the case that a disproportionate number of NTT faculty are of marginalized social identities (e.g., people of color, women, LGBTQ, disabled), this is not what is meant by racialized. Rather, the decision to not recognize the union is racialized in that it follows the same processes that construct what is normatively understood as race. The way that power is attached to the NTT position is the same way power is attached to race, specifically in that it is naturalized from construction. Olson demonstrates how race is mapped onto the bodies of pre-existing political power relations which have since become naturalized, but there is nothing natural about race itself.

Following this logic, there is nothing natural about the NTT faculty positions that allow the LMU administration to limit opportunities, benefits, and accessibility to certain professors. The administration has already undervalued certain professors and subsequently assigned a marginalized status—namely NTT—to then retroactively justify the reasoning for their exploitation. The administration created the NTT position so they could relegate certain faculty to a lower standing and, by doing so, they offered themselves a material basis on which the justification now lies. The now-determined NTT faculty are provided a lower wage or denied certain healthcare benefits, which is seen as expected given

the terms of their contract based on their faculty standing. A naturalized distinction is created from something that is entirely unnatural. This becomes significantly evident with the recognition that a union relationship is fundamentally a power negotiation, as it is the very terms of the NTT contract that create the conditions necessary for a union. When the administration explicitly does not recognize a union, they maintain the NTT faculty's relegated standing and disallow any potential attempts to balance power.

IV. MOVING FORWARD

I had the privilege to attend a Student Leader's Dinner, where I spent an evening in community and in conversation with President Thomas Poon. During the dinner, he made a comment about "appropriately rewarding faculty based on their work." Outside of the larger table discussion, I followed up on this comment and asked if he felt—at an individual level as opposed to an administrative level—that he was appropriately rewarding the faculty, especially after choosing to not recognize the union. His response was limited in depth, yet it hinted toward something larger, namely, the inherent limitations in imagining an alternate, more just structure while simultaneously overseeing and maintaining the structure itself.

While reflecting on this conversation, I recognized President Poon's inability to separate his personal views from his own position, and found that he, too, is affected by the "whiteness" he perpetuates. Olson (2004) claims that "whiteness inhibits attempts to expand democracy," because when whites maintain the structure, they maintain their privilege. Thus they are incentivized to uphold oppressive systems and simultaneously neglect how democracy could otherwise be used to benefit all people (p. 81). President Poon appears to be blinded by the religious exemption, which, in turn, limits his openness to the possibility that a faculty union could ultimately expand the university's position as a place for scholarship at all levels. While the idea to wholly deconstruct class relations at LMU is a radical perspective, that does not mean the unjust mechanisms which enforce class should be left unaddressed entirely. Ignoring this reality from Poon's position of power would be little more than a convenient and self-serving narrative. A good place to start is to address the growing wage gap and the faculty's key

TOMLINSON

concerns, one of which is the right to unionize. However, if dignified working conditions are the goal, it takes more than President Poon to simply recognize the union again, for the very structure of the university—which is predicated on the disparate class relations founded on the othering of faculty at large, but particularly the non-white NTT faculty—limits what can otherwise be imagined.

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Addiction, Punishment, and Social Stigma: A Sociological Examination of Recovery Within the Criminal Justice System

Cheyenne Wahlheim

Abstract

This qualitative study examines how formal criminal sanctions impact the addiction recovery process for individuals convicted of drug-related crimes. Drawing on in-depth interviews with four participants actively involved in Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, the study explores how the consequences of criminal charges—including barriers to housing and employment, systemic failures, and social stigma—complicate long-term sobriety. Findings reveal that incarceration alone is largely ineffective in achieving sobriety, whereas community-based programs like AA, grounded in fellowship and spirituality, are central to sustained recovery. That being said, criminal sanctions can serve as motivators for maintaining sobriety once it has been achieved. The findings call for policy shifts from punitive to rehabilitative approaches to addiction.

Keywords

Addiction recovery, incarceration, substance use disorder, Alcoholics Anonymous, criminal sanctions, criminalization

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, the United States has seen a drastic increase in incarceration nationally. More specifically, around two million Americans today are held behind bars within the formal prison system (The Sentencing Project 2024: 1). Drug convictions account for 46.0% of the federal prison population and 12.8% of the state prison population (The Sentencing Project 2024: 7). Given the extent and impact of the U.S. system of mass incarceration and drug offense convictions more specifically, it is crucial to study the lived experiences of those who have been convicted of drug crimes.

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According to the American Sociological Association (2024), the study of sociology relates specifically to “social causes and consequences of human behavior.” Through a sociological lens, addiction and incarceration can be understood as social phenomena that are accompanied by specific social stigmas and consequences. Neither addiction nor incarceration exist outside of social institutions. Rather, much of the harm experienced by individuals facing addiction or incarceration stems from the societal stigma attached to labels such as “convict” or “addict.” Using this sociological perspective, this research study aims to uncover how criminal sanctions impact individual’s addiction recovery process by focusing on the following research questions: (1) In what ways does a criminal charge for a drug related crime impact individuals, and (2) How do the consequences of a criminal drug conviction affect an individual’s addiction recovery process?

LITERATURE REVIEW

INCARCERATION IN THE UNITED STATES

More than 5 million individuals are currently incarcerated or under direct control of the U.S. incarceration system (The Sentencing Project 2024:1). Drug crime accounts for a staggering percentage of this population, making up 46% of the federal prison population and 12.8% of the state prison population as of 2022 (The Sentencing Project 2024: 7). In Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* (2010), Alexander explains in detail how the United States’ current system of mass incarceration can be viewed as a system of racial and social control. In the fourth chapter of her work, she elaborates on the hidden system of control that follows formerly incarcerated individuals long past their release time. In the U.S., drug conviction leaves a lasting stigma, “relegating you to a permanent second-class status” (Alexander, 2020: 142). Loss of access to housing, employment, voting rights, barriers to jury duty participation, and social stigma are all far too common post-incarceration consequences for those convicted (Alexander 2020). Therefore, this study sought to better understand the impacts of this hidden system of disadvantage and discrimination for those convicted of a criminal charge for a drug-related crime as well as the ways these post-conviction consequences inhibit or impact the addiction recovery process.

COLLATERAL CONSEQUENCES OF CRIMINAL CHARGES AND INCARCERATION

The specific loss of rights that accompanies a criminal charge is a well-documented topic of research, often referred to as “collateral consequences” associated with incarceration (Ewald 2023; Hoskins 2023). Previous research highlights the widespread categories of sanctions and informal punishment, including restrictions to firearms (Ewald 2023), lack of access to public benefits (Ewald 2023; Hoskins 2018), barriers to employment (Ewald 2023; Hoffman et al. 2023; Pager 2003), lack of secure and safe housing (Ewald 2023; Hoffman et al. 2023), loss of close relationships following incarceration (Hoskins 2018), and loss of voting rights (Hoskins 2018). Among these potential consequences, access to employment and housing are prominent concerns for formerly incarcerated individuals following release (Ewald 2023).

THE CRIMINALIZATION OF ADDICTION

These various collateral consequences of incarceration intersect uniquely with the addiction and recovery process for individuals who simultaneously struggle with substance use disorder (SUD) while facing criminal charges. While the label of “criminal” is already associated with societal and individual stigma, those facing both SUDs and criminal charges must bear the burden of a dual stigma (Streisel and Bachman 2019; Scher et. al. 2023). For example, individuals with SUDs and criminal charges express primary concern for access to housing and employment, with additional concerns over legal system supervision of addiction post-release (Streisel and Bachman 2019). Such legal system supervision, which is often a part of probation and parole, can further exacerbate financial costs by imposing charges and causing debt related to mandatory testing. Instead of having the intended outcome of lowering drug use, drug testing in the context of collateral consequences can have the unintended outcome of individuals avoiding testing rather than substance use (O’Neil 2024).

The criminalization of addiction, which is a punitive rather than restorative approach, is present in various sectors of legislation. For example, pregnant women with SUDs are at high risk for criminal consequences: as of 2022, two U.S. states

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have adopted laws that allow for criminal prosecution and five have allowed for civil commitment, despite evidence that this kind of harsh legislation is not effective in reducing prenatal drug use (Bruzelius et al. 2024). Additionally, the impacts of criminalizing addiction impact numerous populations. For instance, among college students, those who have been previously imprisoned are more likely to have higher addiction severity, although the direction of this association is not clear (Vest et al. 2024).

THE CRIMINALIZATION OF HOMELESSNESS

Similar to the sanctions that the criminal justice system imposes, which criminalize and further perpetuate addiction, the law additionally acts to criminalize and further perpetuate poverty and homelessness. This is demonstrated in interactions with law enforcement officials, such as forced removal from certain public spaces and ticketing fines. In their article, Herring et al. (2020) define and describe “pervasive penalty” as the system of interaction between unhoused individuals and legal authorities that comes before official arrests and has major implications. For unhoused individuals, it is a common and consistent experience to have law enforcement officials approach them and drive them out of their current location (Herring et. al. 2020). This is just one example of the various ways in which laws surrounding homelessness function to punish those experiencing it. The negative impacts of these homelessness laws are even further exacerbated when formal criminal sanctions are involved, as citations related to vagrancy or other actions that are simply part of the daily lives of unhoused individuals enforce financial burdens on those already struggling financially (Herring et. al., 2020).

RELEASE FROM INCARCERATION: A SYSTEM DESIGNED FOR RELAPSE

Even outside of the criminal justice system, the road to recovery from substance use and addiction is complex and non-linear. Following treatment from a SUD, there exist protective factors that can help against the risk of use, which include involvement in structured aftercare programs and reliable, safe housing. Further, individuals in recovery may be motivated to stay sober by a variety of

factors, including a fear of hurting their loved ones through continued substance use and a general fear of loss associated with substance use (employment-related, social-related, or financial-related) (Duffy and Baldwin 2013). Notably, although both stable employment and housing exist as protective factors, there is a concern that entry into the workforce too soon after post-treatment could result in relapse (Duffy and Baldwin 2013).

The time of release from the criminal justice system's direct supervision is a precarious period of drastic change. Individuals with SUDs have a high risk of relapse and overdoses, as release involves newfound substance access and opportunity to use. In fact, it was found that previously incarcerated individuals were 4.04 times more likely to have a death related to overdose than individuals with no record of incarceration (Gan et al. 2021). Additionally, the stressors involving lack of support and structure, as well as pressing financial concerns, worsen individual stress and may push them to relapse out of a desire to escape. While social support is key for individuals post-incarceration, former inmates fighting to maintain sobriety struggled to find social support, as much of their network pre-incarceration involved substance use and was seen as a triggering environment (Hoffman et. al. 2023; Binswanger et. al. 2012). The issue of social support is also prominent for individuals leaving incarceration environments and attempting to maintain sobriety. Feelings of isolation may emerge as individuals move away from pre-incarceration friendships and relationships to prevent themselves from being surrounded by individuals who regularly use substances.

For formerly incarcerated individuals with histories of substance use disorders, access to housing post-incarceration is both a general concern relating to exiting the prison environment but also a specific addiction-related concern, as many shelter housing options offer ample access to substances and can therefore trigger a relapse (Binswanger et. al. 2012). Additional perceived barriers may exist in the post-incarceration environment, such as financial and insurance barriers to treatment access as well as generally long wait periods to get into treatment programs (Rose et al. 2014). It is also important to note that the intersection of post-incarceration collateral consequences with relapse risk as financial, social, physical, and emotional stressors (increased in the time post-release) can increase

the risk of relapse (Binswanger et al. 2012).

METHODS FOR ADDICTION RECOVERY

Given the complexities surrounding the treatment of SUDs, especially when the experience of incarceration presents further challenges, it is important to understand what programs have been successful in facilitating this road to recovery. Based on the guiding principles of “recovery, service, and unity,” Alcoholics Anonymous exists as a self-help group run by members of the community that functions to support individuals with histories of addiction (Borkman 2008). Notably, the principles and focus of Alcoholics Anonymous go far beyond just physical sobriety from substances, since giving to others and serving others is viewed as crucial to community uplift as well as individual recovery (Borkman 2008). The idea of giving back to the community as a protective measure against relapse is supported by empirical evidence, with a 2004 longitudinal study showing both a correlation between involvement in AA programs and service of others as well as a correlation between helping others and lower risk for relapse (Borkman 2008). Further, the idea of fellowship and an accepting, supportive, and welcoming community is key to the AA program (Borkman 2008).

METHODS

Participants

The sample for this study included four participants, recruited through a snowball sampling method. Given the stigmas surrounding drug use and criminal records, as well as the anonymous nature of the AA/NA meeting structure, difficulty accessing participants made snowball sampling both the best sampling option and the only realistic one for data collection (Gerson and Damaske 2021). A purposive sample was deemed best suited to answer this study’s research questions, as they were not suited to be a representative sample due to time constraints, difficulty accessing participants, and the extent of restrictions on who this study aimed to represent. Further, as the goal of this study was not statistical representation of all criminally convicted drug users who have dealt with addiction, but instead was to highlighting the lived experiences of these individuals, a smaller sample was

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appropriate (Gerson and Damaske 2021).

This study relied on a purposive sample, only including participants who fulfilled specific criteria, including active participation in AA/NA (Alcoholics Anonymous/Narcotics Anonymous) meetings. Participants were recruited by word of mouth and flyers shared by a personal AA meeting attendee connection of the researcher. Inclusion criteria for the study included: (1) must self-identify as currently or in the past having dealt with addiction to one or more of the following substances (alcohol, cocaine, heroin, fentanyl, opioids, nitrous oxide, methamphetamine), (2) must be 18 years of age or older, (3) must sign informed consent form to be eligible for participation, (4) must have had one or more misdemeanor or felony charges directly related to drug possession, use, or sale, and (5) must be a participant in an NA/AA Meeting program. Individuals not eligible for inclusion in the study included individuals who: (1) did not self-identify as currently or in the past having dealt with addiction (regardless of whether they have attended rehab for addiction), (2) were under the age of 18, (3) failed to sign the informed consent form, (4) had no criminal charges or record (misdemeanor or felony charge) related to drug or substance use, possession, or sale, or (5) were not an active participant (attended a meeting within the last month at a minimum) in an NA/AA meeting program.

This means that individuals who self-identified as currently or previously having dealt with an addiction and encountered law enforcement on account of their addiction (usage, possession, or sale) but were not formally charged were not eligible for this study, as it aimed to understand the ways in which formal criminal sanctioning impacts the recovery process. Lastly, to maintain confidentiality, demographic information that could be used to identify participants, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and age were not collected or reported.

MEASUREMENTS

Finding Themes and Defining Concepts Within The Data

Appendix A shows a preliminary list of categories and subcategories that were used prior to conducting interviews to assist the researcher in the process of finding themes and defining the key concepts of the study. As this research aimed

to center on the experiences and perspectives of participants, Appendix A was only used as a preliminary list that was adapted and rewritten as interviews revealed more themes and key concepts. Chat GPT was used to develop this baseline of categories and subcategories (Open AI 2023).

PROCEDURES

All interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, and the Microsoft Teams built-in recording system and transcribing tool was used to collect and save data. Prior to conducting each interview, an informed consent form (see Appendix C) was sent to the participant's email, signed, and returned to the researcher electronically via the DocuSign electronic document signing tool. All signed informed consent forms were then downloaded by the researcher and saved to a comprehensive Google Drive titled "2025_SeniorResearchStudy" in an effort to maintain a record of all key documents.

Prior to the conclusion of all data collection, each interview transcript was added onto one comprehensive document. In order to code the data and find key themes, the researcher went in chronological order (Participant 1 transcript – Participant 4 transcript), simultaneously rewatching interview recordings while following along with the transcript and coding themes on the transcript using the Google Docs comments feature. After rewatching each individual recording and coding the interview themes, the researcher created a memo document for each participant that reflected on key moments and quotes from the interview as well as overarching takeaways from the participant's story. The comprehensive document, which included all coded interview transcripts along with each individual memo document, was saved to the "2025_SeniorResearchStudy" Google Drive."

RESULTS

Uncovering The Impacts of Criminal Charges on Substance Use

Through the analysis of all four interviews, key themes and similarities began to emerge that reflected the study's initial research questions and goals. As previously discussed, this study aimed to more closely examine the ways in which formal criminal sanctions relating to substance use impact the addiction recovery

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process for individuals. The study relied on two research questions: (1) In what ways does a criminal charge for a drug related crime impact individuals, and (2) How do the consequences of a criminal drug conviction affect an individual's recovery process? Through preliminarily inductive coding, the following key lived experiences and data emerged.

Table 1. Participant Sobriety and Substance Use History

Participant Number	Approximate Length of Sobriety	Primary Substance(s) of Addiction	Criminal Sanctions/Charges
P1	Over 1 year	Fentanyl and Methamphetamines (opiates)	9 times in county jail, 4 felony charges (2 possession of narcotics, 2 paraphernalia charges)
P2	Over 9 years	Alcohol and Methamphetamines	Possession charges, repeated probation violations, experience in county jail
P3	Almost 6 years	Crystal meth and heroin	5 th or 6 th degree felonies (primarily for possession)

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P4	Almost 11 years	Alcohol	Possession of marijuana, underage drinking, disorderly conduct, paraphernalia
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Table 2: Summary of Key Participant Experiences

Theme	Participants (P)	Quote
Early Age Exposure to Substances	Participant 2 Participant 3 Participant 4	“The first drink that I remember I was probably four years old. It was Mogen David wine and I remember even then wanting more. I didn’t start drinking alcoholically until I was 12.” (P2, Personal Interview, March 2025)
Experience of Homelessness	Participant 1 Participant 2 Participant 3	“I was out on the streets for three years, like living outside of Phoenix” (P1 Personal Interview, March 2025)

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<p>Current or Future Employment in Roles Supporting Others Within The Addiction Recovery Community</p>	<p>Participant 2 Participant 3 Participant 4</p>	<p>“I think it’s important for people who [can say] like, look this touched my life... I see what this does to people... That’s why I do what I do... I’ve got lived experience. I can talk to one of those people like nobody else can, because I know what it’s like to eat out of a garbage can. I know what it’s like to sleep outdoors.” (P2, Personal Interview, March 2025)</p>
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THE IMPACT OF CRIMINAL CHARGES

12 Step Programs as Mandated by the Legal System

For Participants 1-3, their moment of official and successful (long-term) involvement with rehabilitation programs, and AA specifically, was because of their criminal sanctions and involvement with the legal system. As explained by Participant 3:

“I mean, I wouldn’t be sober if I hadn’t gotten involved in AA like, if I hadn’t started gotten a sponsor and started working the steps I wouldn’t have gotten sober for sure. ‘Cause when I got sober, I still wanted to get high. It’s just kinda. I was just kinda like backed into a corner by probation and they’re just done with my, done with me. You know, they’re like, we’re just gonna arrest you. And if you don’t do something, and I was like, well, what do you want me to do? And they’re like a sponsor and do what the rehab tells you to do and so I just did that... And it ended up working” (P1, Personal Interview April 2025).

Impossibility of Compliance With the Legal System

Throughout the interviews, in describing their experiences with the legal system and experiencing charges related to addiction, participants described the ways in which systemic failures and the criminalization of homelessness made compliance with the legal system extremely difficult, if not impossible. Having experienced three years of homelessness, Participant 1 explained the vicious cycle of interactions with law enforcement propelled by the criminal justice system's criminalization of homelessness:

“I got caught for sleeping in a car lot, like a dealership parking lot, and because you can't get in any trouble during that seven years [on probation], I got a trespassing charge for that. So that re-released my first case and, you know, brought back the charges... Then I had a bunch of court appearances after that I wasn't going to, 'cause I was on the streets. You gotta go way downtown. It's like 40 minutes away, and so I was just blowing it off. So I had warrants out for me. So, at any point, I could be picked up. I went to jail nine times in the three years I was out there. All for the same warrants” (P1, Personal Interview March 2025).

Impact on Employment

Participants 2 and 4 also described failures within the legal system and difficulties with compliance, specifically issues with the legal system's lack of transparency. In explaining her struggle filling out forms that inquire about criminal history, Participant 4 explained:

“Have you ever been charged with a misdemeanor? I'm like, I'm not sure... What I have, like, but I don't know. I just know that I just did what they told me to do, and that made me, like, out of the out of trouble” (P4, Personal Interview April 2025).

While Participant 4 was never informed of her specific charges during interactions with law enforcement, Participant 2 explained how a clerical error within his records impacted his employment prospects for years:

“I wasn't supposed to have any felony charges on my record, but a clerical error messed things up, and I carried felony charges for 10 years, until I got my second set of charges I was going to get. I was going to get sentenced, but I knew it was

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wrong, because it's like they were charging me with, like, multiple felony repeat offender stuff... [I] found out that a \$30 payment that I had made didn't get logged... I couldn't figure out with my experience with, you know, my intelligence. Why couldn't I get a job?" (P2, Personal Interview March 2025).

THE IMPACT OF CONVICTION/CRIMINAL CHARGES ON ADDICTION RECOVERY

Long Term Barriers to Healing and Recovery and The Desire for Social Reintegration

Participants also expressed how stigma and systemic barriers surrounding criminal convictions became reminders of a past they were trying to move on from. While explaining the long-term impact that his charges have had post-sobriety, Participant 1 stated:

"At first, it didn't really sit in, but then, when it was like once I was getting my life back together... It's like, aw man, I messed- I messed up, and now it's like you can't change things that already happened, you know. So it ruins good opportunities for you when you really want to get your life back together. That's like part of the stuff I'm dealing with right now, like waiting on a work promotion." (P1, Personal Interview March 2025).

Further, participants expressed a desire to break beyond the dual stigmas of addiction and criminal charges and to no longer be defined by those constricting labels:

"It's important for me [to] remind myself that I'm a recovered alcoholic. I'm not just an alcoholic. I have people looking at... me sideways, like, 'Oh, you're recovered, huh?' Like, yes, as a matter of fact, I am. God has wrought a miracle in my life" (P2, Personal Interview March 2025).

Community and Spirituality as Keys to Sobriety

Throughout the interviews, community and connection continued to emerge as major protective factors and support for achieving and maintaining sobriety. In explaining his journey to achieve and maintain sobriety, Participant 1 explained

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why active participation in AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) has been so important for him:

“And you understand that other people are going through it. You can’t do this stuff by yourself. You gotta do it with other people. So, that’s why meetings have had a big impact, and I continue to go, you know. I try to go to two or three a week” (P1, Personal Interview March 2025).

This sentiment was echoed by all participants, who described AA as central to their sobriety success, citing both the grace of God and the community they developed. As participant 4 expressed similarly, “I definitely could not have gotten sober without AA. There's no way I could have done it alone” (P4, Personal Interview, April 2025). Across all 4 interviews, participants identified community as key to their success in the program. Beyond providing a safe and welcoming community for the participants to gain support and identify with others, AA often became a place of restoration and healing:

“My former drug dealer... we hated each other. We’d spent so much time ripping each other off and doing s***** things to each other, and it’s like, I ran into her at a meeting, and we both just hugged each other and started crying. It’s like, I can’t believe you survived it. You got off the mountain too” (P2, Personal Interview March 2025).

Jail and Incarceration as Ineffective for Accomplishing Sobriety

Diving further into the question of the impact that formal criminal sanctions have on this process of recovery, multiple participants discussed their powerlessness over their addictions. They expressed how incarceration was ineffective in accomplishing sobriety if they were not ready to attempt sobriety, and could even have the opposite impact of its intended effects. As Participant 1 elaborated:

“But it [incarceration] didn’t stop me... Like I wasn’t ready to get help. When you go into jail, it’s like... a university for criminals” (P4, Personal Interview April 2025).

Further, he explained how his path towards sobriety came from a personal

desire to end the cycle of addiction, not out of fear of further incarceration:

“Finally, when I was ready, I was like, you know, I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired, and I don’t want to do this anymore. It’s not because I went to jail one more time...” (P4, Personal Interview April 2025).

Participant 2 also echoed this sentiment, expressing that jail and incarceration are not helpful or effective in achieving sobriety and can cause more harm than good:

“But I think, as an overall rule, we found out that you cannot—you cannot punish an addiction out of somebody. It just creates more trauma. You know, it’s like, now I really need to go get high because I’ve just gone through this traumatic experience” (P2, Personal Interview March 2025).

Additionally, interviews revealed that individuals struggling with addiction were often more concerned about incarceration as it pertained to a lack of access to substances, rather than the lifelong or immediate consequences of their detention. For example, Participant 3 explained: “Fear of incarceration. Mostly just, you know, fear of not being able to get used drugs for a while” (P3, Personal Interview April 2026). Alternatively, charges can be ineffective in the sense that they do nothing to assist with the root issue of addiction and just become a nuisance to the individual charged, instead of a deterrent for future substance use. As participant 4 described, “[Experiencing criminal charges] really didn’t do anything at all, just because I just got in trouble, I paid the fees.” (P4, Personal Interview April 2026).

Criminal Sanctions as Motivation to Maintain Sobriety

In contrast to this idea of criminal sanctions and charges being ineffective in addressing addiction, an opposing theme emerged in the data that revealed that the fear of criminal sanctions and jail time acted as a motivator for sobriety, particularly when an individual was forced to choose between jail or rehab. Additionally, data highlighted this as a reminder of why maintaining sobriety is so important. When asked whether he believed experiencing criminal charges had hindered or helped his sobriety journey, Participant 1 expressed:

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“If anything, it’s, like, been motivation, now that I’m... staying sober and clean like it’s been motivation.” (P1, Personal Interview March 2025).

Participant 3 echoed this idea, explaining how his parole officer forced him to choose between prison or attending rehab:

“She’s like, ‘I’m just gonna lock your *** up’... At that time, I’m like, I hate her... And then now I’m like, that lady, you know, saved my life” (P3, Personal Interview April 2025)

DISCUSSION

Criminal Sanctions and Long-Term Sobriety

This study explored firsthand, lived experience accounts of four individuals who were actively involved in AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) programs and had all achieved and maintained at least one year of sobriety. This study revealed that experience with criminal sanctions perpetuates systemic injustice through restrictions on equal housing access and the impossibility of compliance with the legal system. Further, the results of this study highlighted the way in which systemic errors and failures can have long-term negative impacts on an individual’s understanding of their own charges and the ability to apply for employment. Lastly, the data demonstrated how criminal sanctions can also be understood by individuals as a reflection of how far they have come on their sobriety journey. In turn, this can be a motivating and positive factor that reinforces the importance of sobriety.

THE IMPACTS OF CRIMINAL CHARGES

Previous literature has explored how prior conviction records can inhibit individuals with criminal records from being able to secure a housing lease or stable employment (Alexander 2010). The data from this study elaborated further on this general idea, exploring how for some individuals struggling with addiction and criminal charges, living away from their family’s home or a shelter was understood as more preferable because they did not want their family or loved ones to see them in their state of addiction. Results were also consistent with previous research regarding employment restrictions because of criminal charges

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(Ewald 2023; Hoffman et al. 2023; Pager 2003). For example, participants highlighted employment barriers from complications regarding a lack of transparency about the specifics of their charges or, in the most extreme case, inaccuracy in the charges filed against them, restricting their ability to secure stable employment for years.

In understanding how criminal charges impact sobriety and addiction recovery, this research both supported and elaborated on previous findings. The repercussions of criminal sanctions, specifically in the ineffectiveness of parole or probation measures of drug testing, were not helpful in supporting sobriety and resulted in an avoidance of testing altogether (O’Neil 2024). Furthermore, some participants reported avoiding or cheating on mandatory drug testing or consuming additional substances to be able to pass mandated drug tests.

Previous research (Herring et al. 2020) has explored how legal policies criminalizing activities such as sleeping or staying in public spaces can perpetuate poverty and homelessness. This study elaborated on these findings by exposing how the experience of homelessness can increase the risk of facing criminal sanctions for addiction, and can make compliance with the legal system impossible. This was explained by Participant 1, whose trespassing charge (caused by his experience of homelessness) reopened his case related to substance use, perpetuating a cycle of criminalization and interaction with law enforcement without any support to be able to make his court appearances. This account reveals criminal justice system oversight and a failure to account for the situational experiences and factors of those facing charges. Lastly, this project also supported findings of previous research on the dual stigma of criminal charges and addiction history (Streisel and Bachman 2019). Specifically, individuals expressed a desire to live their lives beyond these restrictive labels, and had pride in their perception of themselves as recovered from addiction and as a new person.

WHY AA IS EFFECTIVE IN ADDICTION RECOVERY AND MAINTAINING LONG-TERM SOBRIETY

Throughout the interviews, participants expressed that AA was the primary and key factor for beginning their achievement and continued maintenance of

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sobriety. Although all four participants in the study were no longer court mandated or required to attend AA meetings, they continued to be actively involved in the program and were consistent meeting attendees. For participants, the structure of AA provided two key factors: spirituality and community support. Through AA, participants found support among other individuals who had similar struggles and became part of a network built on solidarity and shared experience. Additionally, this space allowed for reconciliation and healing, both individually and within a community.

CRIMINAL SANCTIONS: IMPACT ON RECOVERY

Throughout the interviews, participants discussed criminal sanctions in two very unique ways: (1) as a motivating factor to maintain sobriety and as a reminder of their recovery progress, or (2) as ineffective in achieving sobriety, as experiencing jail and criminal charges did not limit or stop their substance use. Both this study and previous literature have highlighted that community and connection are central to achieving sobriety. Participants' firsthand accounts were filled with experiences of stigma, isolation, and dehumanization, which are fundamental opposites of the factors that support recovery. That said, this study additionally highlighted how, despite being ineffective for initial sobriety, criminal sanctions—serving as reminders and motivators following achieved sobriety—are key effective motivators for sustained sobriety. This finding has much to do with the AA Model of Recovery itself (Borkman 2008), with its emphasis on individual development and self-accountability.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this study revealed key findings regarding the intersection of sociological concepts of addiction, recovery, the criminal justice and legal systems, and individuals' perceptions of their own role in the intersection of these concepts. This study focused on an individual, symbolic interactionist perspective to understand how individuals interpret their own involvement with the criminal justice system, and how this perception of criminal sanctions influences the addiction recovery process. While this study was limited by sample size and may

have gained a greater understanding from a larger sample size, relying on four participants allowed for very in-depth interviews. Since this study was conducted as an undergraduate research study for the purpose of an academic, semester-long course, additional limitations occurred, such as a lack of research funding and time constraints. Access to participants also presented a limitation as snowball sampling through a personal connection was employed, limiting the geographical scope of the participant group. Finally, this study was limited by its design as a cross-sectional study as are many examples of past research on impacts of incarceration and addiction.

Future research should aim to employ a longitudinal design to better understand the development of factors related to incarceration and how they change over time. Since much of the current research on this topic is qualitative in nature (this study included), future studies on addiction should employ quantitative methods. Additionally, given the findings of this study relating to key factors that support addiction recovery, future analysis should aim to analyze other programs for recovery beyond AA and identify the programs' factors that lead to success.

Overall, this study revealed the importance of AA and community-building support networks in addiction recovery while also highlighting the degrading and dehumanizing experience of incarceration and interactions with the legal system. Furthermore, it highlighted how access to employment, addiction experiences, and contact with criminal sanctions intersect. The findings supported the idea that, while criminal sanctions can be motivating factors for sustained sobriety, the times when the criminal justice system was actually effective for an individual getting sober were when incarceration was placed as an alternative to rehabilitation programs, and when programs such as 12-step AA groups were court mandated.

Jail and incarceration are not a solution to drug use, nor are they effective in helping individuals achieve long-term sobriety. This study revealed that the criminal justice system needs to understand how addiction works, as well as the factors that limit an individual's ability to cooperate with the system, such as access to housing or transportation. As explained by Participant 1, sobriety does not come from an incarceration experience:

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“When I was ready, I was like, you know, I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired, and I don't want to do this anymore. It's not because I went to jail one more time.”

In sum, one thing is clear: legislators, politicians, and officials within the criminal justice system need to completely rethink the way we approach addiction because community, not punishment, achieves sobriety.

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