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Language at Stake in International Research Collaboration—Methodical Reflections on a Multi-Sited, Rapid Ethnographic Study

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Abstract: Based on experiences from multi-sited, rapid ethnographic fieldwork about age-friendly communities, the article aims at shedding light and reflecting on the encountered challenges and potentials regarding language and communication. Moreover, the aim is to contribute to enhancing researchers' awareness of and preparedness to meet and address such challenges in future research endeavors. As English often serves as a lingua franca for Western-dominated international research collaborations, the implications thereof for researchers/participants, the use of interpreters, and linguistic pitfalls are discussed. Such attention is significant for international collaboration, methodical choices, and research quality. International rapid ethnographic fieldwork requires thorough preparation and reflection to properly handle linguistic and cultural competencies, nuances, and understandings incorporated in the researchers, with subsequent consequences for research processes/outcomes.

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Based on experiences from an international collaborative study conducted in several countries, this article focuses on methodical challenges and potentials related to language. The United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organization (WHO) jointly launched the initiative "Decade of Healthy Ageing" (2021-2030) with the overarching aim to foster healthy aging and improve the lives of older adults, their families, and the communities in which they live, including changing negative narratives of aging in societies (United Nations 2020; World Health Organization 2021). That also invites (inter)national and (inter)professional research about the lives of older adults, their families, and the communities. International, interprofessional research collaborations are a current trend in continuing development (Pinho and Reeves 2021). In fact, this article has its starting point in such an international, interprofessional research collaboration about older adults where rapid, team-based ethnography was applied. Rapid ethnography can, in short, be defined as a collection of field methods to provide researchers with a reasonable understanding of the studied areas given a limited amount of time spent in the field gathering data (Paay 2008). In some projects, such as the one presented in this article, albeit a short timeframe limits, a potential strength is in the multidisciplinary and multinational team contributing to illuminating differences in what is observed and how when different team members are observing the same institutions and social phenomena.

Some of the challenges in conducting international research are related to linguistic barriers, as well as wider cultural differences in the research team and between researchers and study participants. Language constitutes a significant barrier in conducting multinational research, a barrier that can be amplified when both researchers and study participants speak different languages. Studies highlight that language is an often underestimated barrier in international research (Lor 2019; Matusiak, Bright, and Schachter 2022). How people talk can both unite and divide them and can reveal social positions and roles (Kinzler 2020). Language is also intrinsically connected to power—and as such to discourses and to social reproduction (Fairclough 2013; Odrowąż-Coates 2019)—both in the sense of the power *of* (language can change) and power *over* (the powerful can speak). While people's speech largely reflects the voices heard as children (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Kinzler 2020), to some extent, people can change how they speak. For instance, by learning new languages, whether foreign or task-specific or by switching between dialects. Language, thereby, can become a vessel for social- or self-positioning of communicating where one is positioned in a given context (Odrowąż-Coates 2019). Most people are influenced by their native tongue, which also has significance when it comes to communicating with and understanding other people. That further implies that people's language filters how they perceive and process situations and relations, including how they understand, evaluate, and construct experiences (Werner and Campbell 1970; Bourdieu 1996; Bourdieu et al. 1999; Ingvarsdotter, Johnsdotter, and Östman 2012). Language, following Bourdieu, is significant not only for communication but also for how people 'make sense' of social life, also as a basis for (the complex) processes of social categorization and stratification within a given 'culture.' Language is also significant when traversing between cultures and countries. Being exposed to multiple languages can contribute to an enhanced understanding of the diversity and nuances of languages and embedded

cultural understandings, whereby the world opens up, and complexities are seen and perhaps even better understood (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Kinzler 2020).

In an academic context, researchers may comprehend, speak, and possibly master several languages. Academic education can also be a marker in terms of social position in society, with academics from different regions of the world sharing some kind of common language platform. For example, researchers have language competencies related to their respective mother tongue and oftentimes can speak and understand foreign languages, but also to their academic discipline (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Language differences present challenges, but they can also be an asset for facilitating relationships, mutual understanding, and international collaboration. Moreover, being a newcomer to a society or community (or the academic field) and not mastering the language can potentially be an opportunity for social contact and collaboration. As many anthropologists and other researchers have experienced, local participants may act friendly and helpful toward visitors who are not familiar with their language and rather inept as to local culture and traditions (Manderson and Aaby 1992). Hence, it may be accepted by native informants that researchers lacking competence in their native language and culture ask questions that would be considered unnecessary or even impolite if asked by a researcher familiar with the culture and in full command of the native language. By way of trial and error, by investing the necessary time and effort in understanding local concepts, ideas, and traditions, and by well-planned use of interpreters, researchers lacking native competence may arrive at valuable information not easily accessed by any researcher (Jacobsen 1998).

In international, collaborative research, cultural dimensions, including language challenges, are often at stake (Matusiak, Bright, and Schachter 2022). They are important to consider and reflect on to achieve successful collaboration (Serrano LaVertu and Linares 1990). Ethnographic fieldwork is commonly characterized by relatively long periods of data collection, in which ethnographers spend talking to people and observing actions (Reeves, Kuper, and Hodges 2008). Rapid ethnographic fieldwork, in contrast, often has a short and well-defined timeline for fieldwork activities (Baines and Cunningham 2013; Reeves et al. 2013), frequently between a few days to three months (Reeves et al. 2013; Sangaramoorthy and Kroeger 2020). Reeves and colleagues (2013) point to the fact that rapid ethnography is often conducted in settings with limited time and resources to conduct the research, for example, in healthcare settings (Vindrola-Padros and Vindrola-Padros 2018; Cox et al. 2022). As ways to compensate for the time-limited fieldwork, both multiple, parallel data collection methods, as well as conducting fieldwork as a team, including local and external researchers, can be used as time-deepening strategies (Ranabahu 2017). Still, when conducting more time-intensive forms of ethnography, challenges connected to language can be particularly significant. As this paper discusses, these challenges relate both to internal (within the research team) and external (between the research team and participants) communication. In a review of 168 articles focusing on international research collaborations, Wöhlert (2020) shows that the studies largely focus on the structural dimension of communication, while the focus on the actual communication processes among researchers, including language, is sparse. According to Gibb and Iglesias (2017), field researchers must break the silence about language-related issues in their work. In continuation thereof, based on an internation-

al collaboration study using rapid ethnographic fieldwork as a method, the current article aims to highlight and discuss methical challenges and potentials related to language by shedding light and reflecting on these encountered challenges and potentials. Moreover, the aim is to contribute to enhancing researchers' awareness of and preparedness to meet and address these in future research endeavors. The article assumes the perspectives of Scandinavian researchers. It is structured so that, first, a brief description of the project in question is given. Next, the article focuses on the theme of *Challenges of Using English as Lingua Franca in Research*, discussing 'Native and Non-native English-Speaking Researchers and Participants,' 'Language at Stake in the Encounters with Participants,' and 'Challenges Related to the Use of Interpreters.' Subsequently, the theme *Required Attention to Linguistic Competence* is discussed, focusing on 'False Friends,' 'Missing Words,' and 'Challenging and Challenged Definitions of Concepts.' Finally, the article ends up with a conclusion.

The Project, In Short

The current multi-site, rapid ethnographic fieldwork is part of a larger project investigating age-friendly communities and environments from different perspectives in several countries on four different continents. For ethical reasons, the project is anonymized concerning the title, specific locations, universities, and researchers and participants involved. The project was built on the WHO's global "Age-Friendly Communities" initiative (World Health Organization 2007; 2015). Aiming at addressing complexities, the research team included scholars and partners from many jurisdictions representing several disciplinary and sectoral perspectives. Addressing critical knowledge gaps identified by the WHO,

the overall aim was to investigate how culture and gender matter in creating age-friendly cities and to pay particular attention to how age-friendly cities can contribute to older adults not only maintaining healthy active lives but also to participating and creating meaning in later life. Cities were selected to allow for diversity in jurisdictional and local contexts. Rapid ethnography, involving international and multidisciplinary teams, was chosen both because of the practical challenge of funding long-term ethnographic fieldwork and because of the potential benefit of intensity stemming from collective teamwork, both in terms of data collection and analysis, to some extent making up for lack of time in the field. The field research is currently in process and is planned to be undertaken in multiple cities in several countries on four continents. This paper primarily draws on fieldwork conducted in Denmark (in 2022), Canada (in 2021), and Norway (in 2019). In this project, each fieldwork session lasts about seven days and involves 12-20 researchers, including a small group of researchers from the explored city, who also act as hosts. The remaining researchers stem from a variety of countries. When fieldwork is conducted in a country with a native tongue other than English, the number of 'native' researchers, students, and participants acting as translators tends to be somewhat higher to accommodate the native-English-speaking majority. Professional interpreters were not used for financial reasons. The researchers represent different disciplines, such as health sciences, comparative politics, history, economics, social sciences, and gender sciences, and different career stages, such as professors, postdocs, doctoral students, and master students. Before a field visit, an extensive background report about each city is made by researchers and research assistants in the city in question, supported by the project management and appointed doctoral students.

The report includes the city and country's history, policies, legislation, organizations, and services related to older adults' needs. Furthermore, a report consisting of detailed descriptions of all the research sites to be visited is made. All involved researchers get the reports a few days before the field study to be read before it begins. Once in the city, different pre-identified research sites are explored, often in small groups and sometimes by the whole research team. The team conducts interviews supported by an interview guide, observes, and takes field notes supported by an observation guide, participates in community activities, chats, takes photographs, and records videos. The guides are consistent for all field visits in a specific city, although they vary across cities. Non-professional interpreters are sometimes involved, and the host researchers also assist with translations during interviews and conversations. The study involves meetings with stakeholders, organizations, researchers, older adults, and volunteers, and exploring social activities, libraries, transportation, living places, and more. During the week of the site visits, the assembled team members meet three times to reflect, discuss, and share their insights. The idea is to provide shared opportunities for reflection and critique (see also Rubin and Rubin 2005). Field notes, interviews, meeting recordings, and transcriptions are uploaded continuously during the fieldwork to a secure server and are later made available for the team to use in their analyses. The study is ethically approved in Canada (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al. 2014) and Norway (Helse- og omsorgsdepartementet 2008). Based on Danish legislation, such studies do not need ethical approval when performed in Denmark (National Committee on Health Research Ethics 2019). In the field study in Denmark, personal data were handled under the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016/679 (European Union 2016) and the Data Protection Acts in Denmark (Ministry of Justice, Denmark 2018).

Challenges of Using English as Lingua Franca in Research

Native and Non-Native English-Speaking Researchers and Participants

Since English serves as the lingua franca for many Western-dominated international research collaborations, English-speaking researchers are privileged in international research collaboration as the spoken and written language often is their mother tongue (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2014; Kamadjeu 2019) following general societal trends, perhaps particularly in Europe (Odrowąż-Coates 2019). In the current study, about three-quarters of the team members were native English speakers. English was most often a second or third language for the rest of the team members. That leads to challenges that, in principle, are the same when another language, such as French (Wright 2016) or Spanish (Godenzzi 2006), functions as a lingua franca in international research.

One concrete challenge experienced in this project, from the perspective of the Scandinavian researchers, was the speed of conversations, attributed to the fact that the majority of the researchers and participants talked in their shared common tongue. That influenced the internal communication within the team and was a consistent theme needing reminders during the field visits and related team meetings. Collaboration processes occur on multiple levels, such as at the team level, task level (e.g., to define goals, procedures, and manage collaboration), and structural context level, which can encompass different institutional contexts (Wöhlert 2020). All lev-

els can be affected by language comprehension and implied power relations. Taking the right to determine the speaking speed can be seen as an inclusion and exclusion mechanism in the team's conversations (Berger and Luckmann 1966), simultaneously making visible power relations and implicitly designating the right to speak (Bourdieu 1995).

The speed of the spoken language was enhanced by another language-related challenge that arose during the field visit in Canada, which took place at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. The facemask requirement in public transport was, for example, lifted in the middle of the field study period. The project had a COVID-19 protocol, which determined that the team had to wear high-quality masks in indoor spaces during the study. During team-based outdoor and team-only events (e.g., team meetings, tours, and meals), masks were optional. However, the researchers had different COVID-19-related experiences and personal histories, which meant that some wanted to wear their masks in all social situations, while others preferred to drop them whenever possible. Nonetheless, wearing facemasks reinforced the language barriers both in the internal communication with researchers and external communication with participants, as it was impossible to 'see' what people said and to read their facial expressions. Words faded into a murmur, which made the audio decoding difficult. In line with previous research, we experienced that the wearing of facemasks impairs speech understanding (Francis et al. 2023), verbal and nonverbal communication, and it blocks emotional signaling (Yosef, Mokhtar, and Hussein 2022), thereby obstructing communication and learning opportunities for, especially, the non-English native-speaking researchers. Relatedly, also in the Canadian context, part of the rapid ethnography had to be altered from physical to

digital presence because of a COVID-19 outbreak. While the technical aspects of that worked out well, thanks to research organizers and adaptive service organizations, that presented a similar challenge for non-English native-speaking researchers. Here, as for listening to people wearing protective masks, facial expressions, and mannerisms became less visible, less 'live,' and, likewise, made it more difficult to 'hear' or to 'sense.' Also here, in other words, the Scandinavian researchers were made aware of the importance of facial and bodily mannerisms, this time contorted through a digital medium, to understand what was being communicated. It is easier to decode words and meanings in one's mother tongue than in a second (or third) foreign language. That means the use of facemasks and/or digital meetings potentially reinforced the language-related challenges in the research team, but also among researchers and participants in the study. Such challenges were not specifically related to the used method, that, rapid ethnographic fieldwork, but calls for awareness and attention in all kinds of research projects where communication is at stake, regardless of the lingua franca in research, as it could be other than English, for example, Spanish (Godenzzi 2006).

Language at Stake in the Encounters with Participants

The external communication with participants during the field visits demanded increased attention toward language-related challenges. While most participants in the Canadian part of the fieldwork were proficient in English, language barriers were more visible during the Norwegian and Danish field visits, particularly regarding the researchers' encounters with study participants. Often, English-speaking researchers expect people to be able

to understand and speak their language, while accepting imperfect versions of their mother tongue related to faulty pronunciation and grammar, a mix of words from other languages, et cetera. During the field studies in Denmark and Norway, some study participants with Danish/Norwegian as their mother tongue agreed to do the interviews in English, while others declined. Some participants were relatively proficient in English, while others expressed that they could only speak 'tourist' English. During a visit to senior co-housing premises, parts of the visit took place in English, while other parts took place in Danish. During that stay, it became visible to the Scandinavian researchers how many details in the older adults' narratives unfolded when Danish was spoken and how speaking Danish influenced the English-produced narratives, which were less nuanced, although body language was used in both languages. Additionally, not speaking in one's mother tongue may be a potential risk resulting in simplifications, miscommunication, and misunderstandings (Matusiak, Bright, and Schachter 2022; Pinho and Reeves 2021). The participants occasionally searched for words and concepts that they never found. Resch and Enzenhofer (2018) call for attention to participants struggling with expressing their thoughts when they have to talk in a foreign language. Such problems often become more obvious when speaking a foreign language, although people can have similar difficulties expressing themselves and finding words or expressions in their mother tongue, related to language skills, education, illnesses, et cetera (Lee, Sulaiman-Hill, and Thompson 2014; Toki et al. 2018). The ability to express oneself verbally can be important, in part, for the participant's sense of well-being and participation in research and, in part, for the quality and trustworthiness of the empirical material that is constructed during the field visit. Language and related

challenges thus imply a significant ethical dimension, which must always be reflected before, on the spot, and after the conduct of the study as part of good research ethics. It is also important in terms of minimizing and problematizing language-dependent methodical and analytical challenges. Tanu and Dales (2016) show that language use and fluency, moderated by contexts, impact ethnographic research. Working in a non-native language may call for the need for awareness of the difference between one's fluency and that of the participants, as a certain level of (non-native speaker) fluency may be understood as full fluency by participants who are pleased to engage in their language, and vice versa. Perceived fluency, and similarities between researchers and participants, can create a perception of sameness and proximity in the research process, where the researchers or participants fail to realize that the perceived fluency may still encompass risks of misinterpretations. Furthermore, it is important to reflect on the fact that language barriers can result in biases when recruiting informants and study participants, which also can have implications for the study's results. In the Scandinavian field sites, informants proficient in English tended to be prioritized, although there were exceptions, as we will return to. At a 'stakeholder meeting' in Norway, for instance, a leader of the Council for the Elderly declined participation, stating language barriers as the reason. Also, when doing fieldwork in organizations, informants proficient in English were easier to recruit. That tendency can, as mentioned, imply a selection bias, primarily in the sense that, in a Scandinavian context, language competency is connected to social and cultural resources more broadly, thus, potentially excluding important voices. As such, language barriers can contribute to further silencing the voiceless in society. Fryer (2019) recommends researchers remove the 'English

speaking participants' criteria from research studies and pay attention to how it can, in unintended ways, function as hidden criteria, as seen in the current case, to conduct inclusive research with culturally diverse communities. That argument can be equally valid for any dominating language in other countries, where people from 'minority' languages risk being underrepresented in research. We further argue for the importance of being sensitive to untold stories, which may be unimportant at first glance, but may reveal an otherwise hidden phenomenon or viewpoint (Bourdieu et al. 1999; Glasdam and Øye 2014). The issues related to the use of the English language in non-English populations must also be taken into consideration in other non-rapid qualitative research methods.

The mix of languages in meetings between researchers and participants with varied mother tongues can be regarded as a language-learning process. In addition, the local researchers are often more familiar with their 'home-based' study site and national context as compared to the international researchers, who have less knowledge of the city and the studied context. Additionally, language learning takes time, which is challenged by the concept of rapid field visits because of the limited time spent together at the field site. Bourdieu (1995) points out that people never learn a language without simultaneously learning the language's conditions of acceptability, which also means learning the potential of this language in different situations, such as choosing well-suited phrases or expressions. In that light, native-speaking field researchers have a better opportunity to understand what the language refers to. It also opens up the possibility for second-language-speaking researchers to, to a certain extent, understand what is at stake on the second-language-speaking field visits.

With Bourdieu in mind, researchers who do not, to some extent, know the language spoken in the culture they are studying have a harder time decoding what is at stake. The differences between cultures are reflected in and made evident through the use of language. At the same time, languages are dynamic, they keep growing and changing, including language 'subcultures' and dialectical variations. Mastering the nuances of a language can nonetheless help understand people and their culture. Also here, we see that rapid ethnography is challenged by its time-limited period. It calls for intensive preparation of the research team to cope with cultural peculiarities, including language-related challenges, before and during site visits as ways to minimize misunderstandings and misinterpretations. However, there is also a great research value in being a tourist or foreigner in a new country, as newcomers can challenge all common-sense understandings in the studied culture and among the national researchers (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Bourdieu 1990). As such, language barriers, in the sense of researchers using their second language in meetings with first-language-speaking informants, can also be advantageous at times, opening doors otherwise shut or perhaps not even noticed by native researchers. A post-study reflection is that such research team discussions and reflections on cultural differences, linguistic codes, and common-sense understandings can be advantageously developed with the ambition to promote mutual learning and understanding. That is valid both internally in the research team and externally toward participants to strengthen the research, the empirical material that is generated, and the related ethical considerations. It could also be a way to balance power asymmetries within the team and to recognize that different competencies are equally important to facilitate a well-conducted study.

Challenges Related to the Use of Interpreters

During some field visits in Norway and Denmark, students or Scandinavian researchers were used as simultaneous interpreters from Norwegian/Danish to English and vice versa. The presence of researchers who master different languages and the use of interpreters in research comes with multiple challenges as languages are dynamic, and language affects people's experiences of their 'realities' (Werner and Campbell 1970; Bourdieu 1996; Bourdieu et al. 1999; Ingvarsdotter, Johnsdotter, and Östman 2012). Language can be said to be associated with worldviews and the comprehension thereof. Challenges connected to alternating between languages, between researchers, and between researchers and participants were, for instance, noticeable during the Norwegian field visits. In one community organization frequented by many local older adults, both individual interviews and focus-group interviews were conducted in pronto in the public space of the host. Based on the participants' preferences, most interviews were conducted in Norwegian, while a Norwegian researcher or student acted as a simultaneous interpreter between the participants and researchers. That was, however, a cumbersome process as the conversations had to be translated both ways, from English (from the international researchers) to Norwegian (to the participants) and vice versa. The ebb and flow of the interviews suffered accordingly. That had at least two unintended consequences. First, the answers from the participants became relatively short and to the point and, one would assume, not as in-depth as if the interviews were conducted without interpretation. Second, and in part as a reaction to that, the interpretations gradually became shorter and more efficient, more summaries than verbatim interpretations. It was particularly noticeable during focus-group interviews as the interpretation part made conversations virtually impossible. The participants, in one case three female older adults sitting around a table with two native English speakers and one Norwegian-speaking researcher, became increasingly passive, giving short answers before waiting for the translation. Instances where the participants elaborated on a thought sequence or added to another's comment were largely missing. A study on the use of interpreters in research shows that 'technical fixes' are not enough as there are many layers that can complicate the communication and translations between the involved parties, including cultural differences, sociodemographic factors, language, and disciplinary proficiency, with more (Ingvarsdotter, Johnsdotter, and Östman 2012), which must be reflected in all kinds of research using interpreters. These factors can represent barriers that lead to biases, miscommunication, and different 'levels of freedom' in how interpreters handle their tasks (Ingvarsdotter, Johnsdotter, and Östman 2012). Ingvarsdotter and colleagues (2012), for instance, showed that interpreters at times chose to translate or not translate an interview question and/or response from the participant based on what the authors interpreted as potential cultural discrepancies/prejudice, insufficient language skills, with more. Such scenarios ought to be taken into consideration in international research projects, such as the currently discussed project, in which interpreters were non-professionals, with varied language, cross-cultural, and disciplinary skills and knowledge. A particular challenge in the current rapid ethnographic study was the time factor. The organization of the ethnographic field visit in Denmark, for instance, meant that within five research days, many different visits had to be carried out to generate as much empirical material as possible.

That meant that each visit was limited in terms of time, usually to 1½-3 hours, with a few exceptions. It takes time to conduct a good research interview (Bourdieu et al. 1999), and it takes even longer to integrate a 'natural,' or rather 'cultural,' interpreter function along the way in such interviews. Doing rapid ethnographic field studies thus calls for reflection on such language challenges, not least considering the limited timeframe.

Mastering the language nuances proved a strength in the meetings with some participants. That was seen in an example where the research team's language skills could support that immigrants with the same native mother tongue as the visiting researchers chose to speak up. That was illuminated on a visit to an activity and drop-in center in Denmark. The interpreter was delayed, which was why the research team started the visit without an interpreter.

> **Researcher 1:** Our interpreter was about 15 minutes late. We had to start without him, which was actually kind of fun and amusing because everybody was trying to understand each other and there was lots of goodwill, even though the staff did tell us that some people were a bit skeptical about us coming. [team meeting, notes]

This participant was a native English-speaking immigrant. According to the center staff, s/he used to visit the drop-in center daily and usually kept very quiet. Now, s/he spontaneously stepped in and acted as a simultaneous interpreter from Danish to English and vice versa. S/he connected participants and researchers and actively contributed to the research. Here again, it was notable how common native languages can contribute to uniting people and inviting them to tell, nuance, and share their stories and knowledge. That leads to the thought

that the current study includes participants with different cultural and language backgrounds within the respectively studied countries, which makes the distinction between, for example, Scandinavian/English even more complicated and in need of thorough attention.

Required Attention to Linguistic Competence

False Friends

Language comprehension can be hampered by so-called 'false friends.' In linguistics, a 'false friend' means a word in a different language that seemingly directly translates into a concept in the other language or looks or sounds similar to a word in a given language, but differs significantly in meaning (Carrol, Littlemore, and Dowens 2018). One example is from a visit to a Danish nursing home, where an employer explained how older adults were allocated to nursing homes. In Denmark, there is a municipal job position called a *visitator*. A Dane can easily associate this word with an English origin, and the interviewee also translated this job title to 'visitator,' easily associated with the English word 'visitor' or 'visitation.' A Danish 'visitator' is an administrative homecare allocator responsible for assigning municipality assistance according to existing laws and local standards (Glasdam et al. 2013). That could be, for example, allocating personal and practical help, meal arrangements, dental care, and emergency help to people who need it. It can also consist of allocating housing, nursing homes, and short-term/respite stays for the elderly (Skanderborg Kommune 2020). A retrospective reflection is that researchers ought to consider beforehand the potential consequences for participants and themselves of not conducting interviews in the participants' language. Partly,

participants may feel linguistically amputated and somewhat powerless in their expression, partly, the empirical material may not properly reflect the participants' world and knowledge. van Remoortel (2022) calls for reflections on how researchers, in all kinds of research, make sure that they truly understand each other, from the basic comprehension that is needed to operate as a team to a more in-depth level of understanding of cultural contexts that are not their own.

Missing Words

Researchers from non-English-speaking countries often become accustomed to 'thinking' in a language that is foreign to their own (Andersen and Hellman 2021). It means that those researchers are prepared and attuned to possible misunderstandings. However, it can be difficult to spot such situations and realize that there may be a misinterpretation. Such a situation, for instance, happened in Canada when the research team was on a guided tour of a social housing building under construction. The guide talked about the premises and the intentions behind the social housing project while they guided the research team through the whole building and showed the team a bachelor room (see: Picture 1). One of the Scandinavian researchers was acquainted with two meanings of the word bachelor—a university degree and a single (unmarried) man—and could not get those two meanings to fit into the context of the social housing idea. Loudly, the researcher asked, "I wonder if it is so in Canada that single men are not able to live on their own and must live in social housing?' (field notes). That gave rise to amusement, but also thoughtfulness in the research team. It also helped to decode the word's meaning in the current context, namely, that a bachelor room was the same as a studio, a one-room-apartment, avoiding potential misinterpretations in the further analytical processes.

Picture 1. Bachelor room in a social housing building under construction

Photographer: Stinne Glasdam, 2021.

Another issue that arose was related to the different languages' alphabets, which differed and were the source of misinterpretations that affected the research process. When non-Scandinavian researchers do research in Scandinavia, they may operate in a foreign context with a foreign language. In Denmark and Norway, the alphabet encompasses three additional characters that do not exist in the English alphabet: æ [ae], ø [oe], and å [aa]. That demands special attention to, for instance, avoid mistaking geographical names, as shown in the quotation below.

We arrived an hour and a half late because we confused A-løse [district of a city] with Æ-løse [town]. XX and YY [co-researchers] checked on their phones [map app], which showed 18 kilometers. And we said, "How can this be?" Because we knew it was only 5 kilometers away [from the hotel]. [Researcher 2, team meeting, recorded/transcribed]

Researchers being late for appointments was regarded as impolite by some participants. In Denmark, for instance, some participants gave the organizer a phone call wondering if they had wasted their time and waited in vain. Other participants experienced that as unproblematic, for instance, participants from a social place for homeless people who were used to 'a deal not being a deal' with their visitors. During some of the visits, it became a jokingly amusing narrative about 'errant researchers' among the participants and the researchers. The researchers were often invited to the participants' locations, including their homes, workplaces, and social meeting points. The way researchers enter their hosts' premises can impact the establishment of trust between researchers-participants, affecting their relationship and thus also the empirical material quality (Rosteius et al. 2022). The language thus proved to be a factor at play in terms of delays, sometimes reinforced by the inability to assess distance in unfamiliar environments. That points to the need to be attentive, thoughtful, and careful when doing research in other cultures with a language that differs from the researchers' mother tongue, whichever research method is used, and also in rapid ethnography.

In another example from the Norwegian field study, an interview was conducted with a female older adult who was both a patron and a volunteer at one of the studied organizations. Two native English-speaking researchers were supported by a Norwegian researcher. As the interviewee was proficient in English, which prevented interruptions for translations, the ebb and flow of the interview worked well overall. Nonetheless, the Norwegian interpreter had to contribute even here, mostly by translating terms and concepts connected to the peculiar political and bureaucratic aspects, which were largely untranslatable in the sense of not having a direct equivalent in the other country. However, the Norwegian interpreter could function as a perhaps necessary bridge between the two cultures as they had considerable knowledge about both Norway and Canada. However, as with the previous case, that took considerable time, and being only peripherally relevant to the topic of the interview, also led to missed opportunities. Considerable time was spent on clarifying these linguistic technicalities, perhaps necessary for the foreign researchers to understand the contextual features, but also somewhat disturbing the main issues intended to be discussed. That calls for the importance of careful cultural preparation related to the concrete rapid field visits by all involved researchers, including language and country-related concepts. That is not a new method-related issue (Ranabahu 2017), but challenging considering active field days, which require 'handling on the spot,' as well as proper preparation, for example, by taking part in the context-related preparatory work and reports as in other kinds of interview studies and ethnographic fieldworks.

Challenging and Challenged Definitions of Concepts

Another arising issue relates to the complexity involved in the definition and understanding of words/concepts and divergences within and across borders relating to what can be understood as the word's/concept's correct meaning. Some specific concepts, like the English word 'healthcare assistant,' frequently employed in the United States and Canada, seemingly meaning the same as 'hjelpepleier' in Norwegian or 'social- og sundhedsassistent' in Danish, but designates a staff category not existing in Denmark or Norway. As used in North America, the concept may encompass both workers with no or less than one year of formal health education. In the Danish or Norwegian contexts, it desig-

nates healthcare workers with at least two years of health education. In that, and several other similar examples, translating between jurisdictions is not too hard. However, such translation work needs a preparedness not to take any concept in other contexts for granted. Some other concepts are more challenging as they tend to inform, at a higher level of abstraction, ways of approaching another national or local context. The word/concept 'culture' is central to the current project and has significance both internally in the research team and externally in the meetings with the participants. A classical and influential anthropological understanding of culture is that it provides a map of and for reality (Geertz 1973). Hence, culture is a multifaceted resource that both guides people's actions and helps them make sense of their world and their everyday life. However, in the current project's plan, the concept of culture is employed in a more limited sense, stressing diversities due to, for example, global migrations, indigenous people, gender roles, community characteristics among people with disabilities, and characteristics of LGBT+ groups. In Denmark, we visited a local culture house, which in Danish is understood as a public institution that offers a variety of cultural activities, such as exhibitions, lectures, communal dining, courses, and related socializing. However, the pre-defined culture concept challenges the understanding of what a culture house could be in the research team.

> **Researcher 3:** We had a debate about what culture was, and I think it took a while for me, but I could make sense of it by thinking of it as a community house. What I would call a community house. So the word culture for me means more kind of high culture or ethnic culture.

> **Researcher 4:** I asked her [the manager of the culture house]: "How do you define culture? Who said

this is a culture center? Then how do you define the culture?"...[the manager answered]: "I don't have my own agenda, those who come here define what the culture is."…I asked her how the government defines culture; then she said, "It varies all the time." I asked her what the most recent definition was and then she said, "Now, the culture is to make money out of tourism".

> **Researcher 5:** [Expressing that it is not a real culture house] In Canada, we might think of this as a community center, right, so it kind of falls in that guise where it's got municipal funding, but unlike a lot of community centers she keeps the programming kind of under the wire, so she said everything is mouth to ear. [team meeting, recorded/transcribed]

According to Andersen and Hellmann (2021), Scandinavian researchers often use English concepts that quickly spread across the world, leaving the grassroots level with the predicament of figuring out what the concepts mean in new contexts. Ravn and Bengtsson (2015) show that concepts' meaning changes when they cross borders, and researchers must therefore be careful to reflect on how they adapt concepts (Andersen and Hellmann 2021). However, in the current case, the different English definitions of the concept 'culture' are similar to the Danish definitions, whereas the project's definition of the concept seems rather limited, instead of acknowledging and encompassing a wider diversity of definitions associated with such a concept. Predefined propositions of a concept can make researchers blind to the complexities of the culture at stake and thus, also to the embedded possibilities. It seems necessary to continually discuss and reflect on pre-defined concepts as they can be challenged and developed throughout the research process, not least in meetings and intersections across nationalities and research disci-

plines. Maraña (2010) points out that culture is not a static set of values and practices. Over time, the concept recreates itself as people question, adapt, and redefine values and practices when facing changes and interchanges of ideas. The English language's dominance is also seen here, where the English-speaking researcher(s), probably unconsciously, come(s) to translate the Danish culture house concept to a Canadian community center.

The complex composition of the research team, with members representing several countries and a broad range of disciplines, led to important questions being asked that would otherwise not have been asked. As an example, a historian will ask other questions as to the context of a built structure or a cultural institution than a social scientist. Still, even in such an advantageous situation, it seems important to work hard on pre-defined definitions when exploring and trying to understand the culture at stake as a way to frame (international) relational perspectives when a 'case' is investigated. That calls for challenging pre-defined concepts and embedded myopia in a project and to aim toward openness and curiosity to explore the content of the culture concept in, for instance, the Danish context and reflect how that can enrich the project's international context. Furthermore, it calls for ethical reflections, where the right to define a concept's contents is inscribed in power relationships (Bourdieu 1990)—internally in the research team and externally among researchers and participants, as seen in the current study.

Conclusion

Based on an international, multi-sited, rapid ethnographic field study about age-friendly communities and environments involving researchers from several countries and a broad range of dis-

ciplines, the current article shows that language was at stake both internally within the research team and externally between researchers and participants. Language-related challenges can occur on multiple levels and affect the interaction and dynamics within the research team and between researchers and participants in several ways, including research participation, language comprehension, the interpretation of what is being communicated, with more. That may ultimately affect the research process and, thereby, the outcomes of research projects, including their quality and trustworthiness.

Language-related challenges can occur in all types of research projects and methods, whether carried out over a prolonged time or a limited period. As seen in the current case, the time-limited nature of rapid ethnographic fieldwork can represent an additional challenge as the time slot for researchers to collaborate and collect data in the field is narrow. That has consequences for the researchers' time for immersion in the studied sites and their opportunities to 'get to know' the culture, including local language idiosyncrasies, before collecting and analyzing data. Although researchers' 'naïveté' may be an advantage at times, unawareness of such challenges can nonetheless affect the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data, which ought to be problematized as a potential limitation in such types of studies. The currently described challenges can serve as 'food for thought' and be capitalized into experiential knowledge and an enhanced preparedness in similar, future research endeavors, and may be relevant for future rapid ethnographic studies and other kinds of international studies. The article calls for attention to both visible and invisible language-related challenges, which are embedded in the culture. Such attention is significant for

international research collaboration, methodical choices, research ethics, and research quality and trustworthiness. International, multi-sited, rapid ethnographic fieldwork requires thorough preparation and reflection to embrace and think through linguistic and cultural competencies, nuances, and understandings incorporated in the researchers and their potential consequences for research processes and outcomes. Such research requires an open climate and reflexive processes among researchers, taking into consideration blind spots, pronounced and unspoken knowledge and assumptions, and the ability to question and challenge preconceived ideas in both previously known and unknown contexts and territories. Some experiences from the included project, like the above-mentioned story of the bachelor room,

illustrated that an inquisitive, patient, and open-minded attitude could result in valuable learning, benefitting the overall research. Other examples indicated that a rapid ethnographic approach, when working across jurisdictions involving pronounced linguistic and cultural differences, might sometimes lead to important cultural and social differences not being fully understood.

Acknowledgments

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Citation

Coping with Stigma: Experiences and Responses of Former Youth in Care

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Abstract: This paper examines social stigma in relation to child welfare involvement. Drawing on interviews with twenty former youth in care, the paper highlights the participants' experiences with stigma and their adaptive responses. Notably, participants described pervasive stigma that accompanied their status as youth in care. To contend with the stigma they experienced, participants developed a range of responses, including concealment, challenging the stereotypes, physical retaliation, and seeking solidarity. The study aligns with previous research identifying concealment as a relevant strategy for mitigating the effects of stigma among foster care recipients. However, the results also extend the literature in this area by identifying additional adaptive responses. Moreover, the participants revealed that the stigma they experienced was pervasive, yielding long-term effects.

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In Canada, each year, an unspecified number of children and youth are placed in the care of child welfare agencies. Since child welfare falls under provincial and territorial jurisdiction (except for some services for Indigenous children), the exact number is not tracked nationally. However, in 2019, there were an estimated 54,139 Canadian children

in care (Saint-Girons et al. 2020). Individuals come into the care of child welfare agencies for a variety of reasons, most commonly when a child protection worker determines that they have been abused or neglected, or are at risk of abuse or neglect (Trocmé et al. 2019). Children may also end up in care if a parent is unable to care for them. For instance, death, illness, or an inability to cope among parents can sometimes lead their children to come into the care of a child welfare agency (Wegner-Lohin, Kyte, and Trocmé 2014). These children and youth, referred to as "youth in care," may be placed in group homes, foster homes, treatment centers, or kinship foster homes (Anglin 2002:2). In some cases, they may be held in youth detention facilities if they conflict with the law.

Youth who enter care may be returned to their parents after some time or may remain in state care until they age out of the child welfare system. Whether a child returns home or not, being in care can present many challenges for those who experience it, and in some cases, can yield long-term impacts (Kessler et al. 2008). One such challenge stems from social stigma. Several studies have documented the stigma that youth in care experience in connection to their child welfare involvement (e.g., Festinger 1983; Snow 2013; Michell 2015; Rogers 2017; Dansey, Shebero, and John 2019). There are, however, relatively few qualitative studies examining this relationship in an in-depth fashion from the perspectives of those who have experienced it first-hand. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to examine the degree and character of stigma experienced by former youth in care as they passed through the child welfare system. This paper is based on 20 semi-structured interviews with former youth in care and is part of a larger project examining the long-term impacts of care. There are advantages to examining their perspec-

tives from the vantage point of adulthood. The participants were able to look back on their experiences with the distance that time gave them. They were able to reflect more deeply on the experiences that made them feel stigmatized, discredited, devalued, and 'othered.' They also had insight into some of the ways that, as a youth, they developed approaches and strategies for dealing with stigmatizing experiences. The paper attends to the following research questions. First, how do former youth in care look back on how they were stigmatized as a result of their youth-in-care status? And second, how do former youth in care respond to these stigmatizing experiences? Following an overview of child welfare in Canada, the paper begins with a discussion of the theoretical framework used to analyze youth in care, with an emphasis on stigma and labeling processes. Next, I outline my methodology, describing how I conducted the study and analyzed my results. The methodology section of the paper also provides details about the participant interviews. The paper then turns to its two main themes: the experiences of stigma and the responses to stigmatization. The paper concludes with a discussion of the study's findings and directions for future research.

Child Welfare in Canada

In Canada, child welfare is provincially mandated with no unified federal legislation to guide the provision of child welfare services (Trocmé et al. 2019). Consequently, child welfare practices vary considerably across Canada. For example, in some provinces, the age of majority for child welfare purposes—the age at which a child is no longer eligible for child welfare support—is 16 years (e.g., Saskatchewan, Newfoundland, and Labrador). In other provinces, individuals can receive child protective services until the age of 18 years (e.g., Quebec and

Alberta) or 19 years (British Columbia) (Trocmé et al. 2019). In Ontario, children can now receive protective services until the age of 18 years, which is an increase from 16 years in 2018 (Trocmé et al. 2019). Although child welfare legislation varies across the provinces and territories, some guiding principles are generally consistent regarding child apprehension and care provision.

Children who are considered to have experienced or be at risk of maltreatment may be apprehended by child welfare agencies and placed in out-of-home care. Child maltreatment generally refers to the abuse or neglect of children or youth by a caregiver, guardian, or person in a position of trust (Fallon et al. 2021). There are several types of maltreatment for which children may be apprehended, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and exposure to intimate partner violence (Fallon et al. 2021). There are several circumstances in which children and youth may become involved with a child welfare agency. The most common is when child protection workers determine that a child has been and/or is likely to be (further) harmed by abuse or neglect (Wegner-Lohin et al. 2014). However, children may also enter care if a parent is deemed unable to care for them (Wegner-Lohin et al. 2014). For example, death, illness, or the inability to cope for some parents may result in their children entering the care of a child welfare agency. In some cases, parents may voluntarily terminate their parental rights if they feel they are unable to care for their children. When an allegation is made that a child is suspected of suffering harm, child welfare authorities investigate the allegation. In Ontario, child welfare is governed by the *Child, Youth, and Family Services Act* (Fallon et al. 2021). Once an allegation is made, families are investigated by one of the 50 independent children's aid societies (CAS) across the province. In cases where the report is substantiated, families may receive services while the child remains at home, or the child may be placed in residential care (Wegner-Lohin et al. 2014).

Although anyone can end up in care, certain groups are more likely than others to come into contact with child welfare agencies. In Canada, children from low-income families, children with disabilities, visible minority children, and Indigenous children are all significantly over-represented in child welfare involvement (Lefebvre et al. 2017; Trocmé et al. 2019). Some of the participants in this study fell into these categories. For instance, three of the twenty participants were Indigenous, two were visible minorities, and one participant volunteered that they had a learning disability. For individuals who belong to these specific groups, the experience of care will undoubtedly include unique elements that can only be understood with an appreciation of the larger picture regarding these groups.

The over-representation of Indigenous children in the Canadian child welfare system is particularly stark and cannot be understood apart from Canada's colonial history. As noted by critical scholarship in child welfare, Canada has a long history of separating Indigenous children from their families (Blackstock 2007; Sinha and Kozlowski 2013; Caldwell and Sinha 2020). The residential school system, which operated throughout the twentieth century in Canada, systematically removed children from their families and placed them in institutions (Milloy 2017). Survivors of these institutions report abysmal conditions that include overcrowding, malnutrition, general neglect, and severe abuse (Knockwood 1992; Sinha and Kozlowski 2013). Residential schools not only traumatized their pupils but also

served as a massive assault on Indigenous cultures, constituting a form of genocide (MacDonald and Hudson 2012).

Although the majority of residential schools were closed in the 1960s, the systematic removal of Indigenous children from their families continued with apprehension by child welfare authorities with a large influx of Indigenous children placed in care in the years that followed (Gough, Shlonsky, and Dudding 2009; Caldwell and Sinha 2020). Many of these children were placed for adoption in what has been termed the "Sixties Scoop" (Gough et al. 2009:359). Over 11,000 Indigenous children were adopted in Canada by non-Indigenous families between 1960 and 1990 (Sinha and Kozlowski 2013). Current child welfare practices continue to remove Indigenous children from their families at disproportionally high rates (Trocmé et al. 2019; Caldwell and Sinha 2020).

There is a substantial body of literature examining the challenges associated with child welfare involvement. The existing literature firmly establishes just how deep and far-ranging the impact of being in care can be in terms of education, health, criminal justice, housing, employment, and general well-being during the time children are in care and during post-care years. For example, there is extensive research indicating that youth in care achieve lower levels of education and lower high school completion rates relative to their non-care counterparts (Snow 2009; Ferguson and Wolkow 2012; Barnow et al. 2015; Rutman and Hubberstey 2018). Youth in care also face disproportionally high rates of health concerns (Turney and Wildeman 2016) and are often medically fragile compared to their non-care counterparts (British Columbia Ministry of Health 2001; American Academy of Pediatrics 2015). Many

children from the care system have suffered from abuse or neglect, which can have long-term health consequences that last into adulthood (Kessler et al. 2008). In addition to physical health, child welfare recipients also experience disproportionate mental health challenges (Deutsch et al. 2015; Turney and Wildeman 2016). Depression rates are higher among individuals with a history of foster care placements (Palmer, Prindle, and Putnam-Hornstein 2021), and several studies have linked child welfare placements with elevated suicide rates (Evans et al. 2017; Brown 2020; Palmer et al.).

Youth in care also experience elevated rates of criminal justice involvement (Owen 2000; Barn and Tan 2012; Esposito et al. 2015; McFarlane 2018). Some studies have linked associations between foster care and criminality with trauma, strain associated with care experiences, shortcomings within the care system, and challenges associated with port-care transitions (Barn and Tan 2012; Yang McCuish, and Corrado 2017; McFarlane 2018). Michell (2015) links the criminalization of foster youth to the stigma associated with child welfare involvement. McFarlane (2018) argues that children in care experience disadvantages within their placements and that the care environments meant to protect them are instead criminogenic.

Finally, youth in care experience challenges associated with leaving the care system. Many youths experience their exit from the system as sudden and feel unsupported as they go through the process (Rutman and Hubberstey 2018). During post-care transitions, mental health challenges are often exacerbated, and many youths experience unmet healthcare needs (Zlotnick, Tam, and Soman 2012). Youth exiting the care system experience severe economic challenges and are at heightened risk of becoming

homeless compared to their non-care peers (Nichols et al. 2017).

There is also research indicating that youth in care are subjected to stigma associated with their child welfare involvement (Kools 1997; Michell 2015; Rogers 2017). The following section addresses that theme, along with a theoretical discussion of stigma and labeling.

Stigma and Labeling

The importance of stigma as a focal point of this study makes it salient to highlight the work of Erving Goffman and the dramaturgical approach he developed. While the dramaturgical approach is usually considered a variant of the symbolic interactionist perspective (Meltzer, Petras, and Reynolds 1975), it is sufficiently distinct to qualify as a theoretical perspective in its own right. Like other interactionists, Goffman (1959; 1963) was concerned with face-to-face interactions and how social actors collaborate to construct definitions of reality. For Goffman, identities are produced, negotiated, and performed through situated encounters. Goffman (1959) used the metaphor of the theater to think about social life. Social actors are like actors in a theatrical production, performing their roles and presenting different aspects of themselves to the audience. As social actors, we engage in *self-presentations* and attempt to *manage impressions* through a variety of strategies and tactics.

According to Goffman, making concerted efforts to manage outward appearances can preserve one's sense of self and facilitate social interaction. Given that one's sense of self is closely tied to the perceptions of others, individuals tend to manage their behavior and deportment to convey a desirable image (Goffman 1959; 1963). Goffman (1959) identifies impression management as a habitual practice that individuals engage in to present a favorable self-image. Using props (material objects, clothing, facial expressions, etc.), performances are enacted in the *frontstage* realm, where social actors tend to carefully script the role identities they present, while in the *backstage* realm of one's life, one can relax and reflect on one's performances. Performances can be solo acts or collaborative, with several actors working together, much like theater troupes, to uphold a collective group impression or definition of the situation (Goffman 1959).

It was Goffman's interest in presentations of the self and identity management strategies that led him to consider circumstances where identities are devalued by others and tarnished in the sense that individuals are negatively judged or labeled. In his classic work, *Stigma* (1963), Goffman focuses on the social processes involved in coming to terms with a stigmatized identity. Goffman defines stigma as a trait that is "deeply discrediting" (1963:3). Individuals who are stigmatized are "disqualified from full social acceptance" (1963:13). They move from "normal" to "tainted" and "discounted" (Goffman 1963:13). Their dilemma is not the attribute that elicits the reaction, but the social disgrace that accompanies the negative attributions of others. Goffman (1963) makes a critical distinction between discredited and discreditable identities. Discredited identities are outwardly visible, while discreditable identities can be hidden. The youth in care status falls into the latter category since it is an identity that can be hidden.

The distinction between the two categories becomes important as Goffman (1963) identifies some of the common responses to living with a stigmatized

identity and draws attention to the adaptive mechanisms used by individuals to cope with social stigma. Stigma management involves managing one's self-presentation specifically to avoid or minimize the negative effects of stigma and allow one's sense of self to remain intact.

Goffman contends that individuals can be severely impacted by stigmatization in terms of self-perception and identity. He uses the concept of a "moral career" to describe the sequence of steps that individuals may go through as a result of stigmatization—how they might internalize deviant labels. The concept is based on research that Goffman presented in his book *Asylums* (1961). The book tracks the experiences of patients in a psychiatric hospital. Goffman found that the individuals he observed underwent major changes in self-perception as they navigated the institutionalization process. The shift began with their entry into the hospital and a "mortification" stage where they were stripped of identity markers such as clothing, personal belongings, and their everyday routines and activities, to name a few. Through this stage, they passed from being a person to being a patient. They experienced a sense of loss at this stage, but as they moved into the in-patient stage, many began to perceive themselves in new ways, through the lenses that staff viewed them. By the time they reached the discharge stage, they were defining themselves as mentally ill. Through the ex-patient phase, they ceased to be patients, but given cultural understandings of mental illness as a chronic condition, many continued to use the mentally ill label to define themselves.

Goffman developed the concept of a moral career in the context of an analysis of institutional labeling. More specifically, he was interested in the identity implications of life in a total institution—a strictly regimented institution that governs almost every aspect of one's life and restricts individual autonomy. The child welfare system is hardly a total institution (though some youth are placed in living arrangements that might come close). Yet there are distinct parallels between the circumstances that Goffman describes and participants' passage through the child welfare system, particularly concerning the initial mortification process, the sense of disorientation it generates, and how it makes those subjected to it vulnerable to re-evaluations of their character, moral worth, self-perception, and identity. Moreover, some residential placements resemble total institutions through features such as "a forced residence, schedule of daily activities carried out in a group, restricted contacts with the outside world, [and] a clear staff-inmate split" (Golczyńska-Grondas 2015:109).

A final contribution informing this paper is Goffman's (1963) emphasis on the capacity of stigmatized individuals to demonstrate agency and push back against the labels they received. Even among the institutionalized patients he studied, Goffman observed that they found ways to assert their autonomy and personalities. More generally, Goffman insisted that individuals deploy specific strategies for preserving their sense of self when contending with stigma. They may conceal the attribute that has led others to label them. They may attempt to compensate for perceived inadequacies by overachieving in other areas. Conversely, some may engage in strategies of diffusion, for example, through the use of humor. Doing so allows individuals to avoid at least some of the consequences of labeling and to mitigate at least some of the damage that negative labels can inflict on an individual's sense of self.

Similarly to Goffman, the labeling approach in sociology shifts attention away from objective understandings of deviance toward processes of labeling and their consequences (e.g., Lemert 1951; Becker 1970). Beginning in the 1960s, and influenced by the tenets of symbolic interactionism, sociologists began questioning the objectivist view of deviance that had dominated the field up to that point. The objectivist or normative view rested on the assumption that certain behaviors are inherently deviant and that deviants are inherently different from non-deviants. From an objectivist perspective, the goal was to explain the existence of deviance to find effective remedial or ameliorative strategies for reducing deviance. In contrast, the labeling approach—as it came to be known—conceptualized "deviance" not as an inherent quality of certain behaviors but as a meaning or label *applied* to certain behaviors (Gibbs 1966). As Becker (1970:9, emphasis added) explains:

> social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an "offender." *The deviant is one to whom the label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label*.

Prus and Grills (2003:10) reiterate this point by saying, "it is in the definition of things that deviance is brought into play as a meaningful human essence." That alternative conceptualization redirected the course of study in the sociology of deviance to how processes of labeling work and their consequences. According to Prus and Grills (2003:10), attention is drawn to "the human enterprise entailed in artic-ulating, identifying, engaging, promoting, stabilizing, experiencing, and resisting definitions of deviance within the human community." Among those consequences are the stigma connected with being labeled as "deviant," the impact on one's interactions with others, the internalization of others' judgments and negative views, and how these internalizations affected individuals' lived experiences and life trajectories (Lemert 1951; Becker 1970). Societal reactions are thus vital to the creation of deviance and sustained deviant trajectories. This view is consistent with Goffman's work on the effects of stigma, except that Goffman highlights a broader range of labeling reactions and suggests that internalization may be only one step in the process of adapting to labeling.

Despite a decline in the use of societal reaction perspectives since the 1970s, their core ideas remain prevalent in various strands of contemporary sociology (Grattet 2011). Link and Phelan (2001:363-365) comment on the profusion of research on the nature, sources, and consequences of stigma that Goffman's work has generated over the last several decades. Along the way, they point out that there has been some confusion about what is meant by "stigma." They attribute the confusion partly to the enormous array of circumstances to which the concept has been applied—everything from urinary incontinence (Sheldon and Caldwell 1994) to exotic dancing (Lewis 1998). To Link and Phelan's list one can add pornography (Jensen and Sandström 2015), HIV (Jugeo and Moalusi 2014), mental health (Bharadwaj, Pai, and Suziedelyte 2017), homelessness (Roschelle and Kaufman 2004) and scores of other stigmatizing conditions and situations. The confusion also results from the fact that much of the research on stigma is multidisciplinary, taking in social psychology, anthropology, political science, and

social geography. As Link and Phelan (2001) point out, different frames of reference have led to differences in conceptualization. That is not a problem, they conclude, so long as analysts specify how they are using the term.

Link and Phelan's (2001) conceptualization focuses on the relational dimensions of the term that Goffman himself stressed. For Goffman, one cannot talk about stigma without focusing on the interactional dynamics between those who do the labeling and those who are labeled. Stigma is enacted. Link and Phelan (2001:367) break that down into five interrelated components:

In the first component, people distinguish and label human differences. In the second, dominant cultural beliefs link labeled persons to undesirable characteristics—to negative stereotypes. In the third, labeled persons are placed in distinct categories so as to accomplish some degree of separation of "us" from "them." In the fourth, labeled persons experience status loss and discrimination that lead to unequal outcomes. Finally, stigmatization is entirely contingent on access to social, economic, and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labeled persons into distinct categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination.

Among the groups whose experiences with stigma have been investigated are children and youth in the care system. Dansey and colleagues (2019) argue that the stigmatizing aspects of being in care have long been acknowledged in the literature (Kools 1997; Hedin, Höjer, and Brunnberg 2011; Ferguson and Wolkow 2012). However, it has only been recently that researchers have examined how chil-

dren experience this stigma and what they do to manage it. In the study that Dansey and colleagues (2019) conducted, children talked about being treated differently from others and about being bullied. To avoid these reactions, they hid their care status from others.

Rogers (2017) found that children in care did not feel "normal." They felt "less than." In response, they tried to pass. They worked hard, as Rogers (2017:1088) observes, "to fit in with the in-group in their everyday interactions" and were careful in deciding "whom they disclosed their 'in-care' status to and the way they wanted to do this." Another strategy Rogers identified was their efforts to form their "in-groups" with fostered peers.

Michell (2015) reviewed first-person accounts of the experiences of children in both private and public care in Australia between the 1920s and 1990s. She found that "stigma is a theme which threads its way throughout the twentieth century" and provides numerous examples of just how these "State kids" (as they are referred to in Australia) felt the "harsh sting of social disapproval" (Michell 2015:673).

Neagu and Sebba (2019) studied Romanian-born children who were taken into care in the UK and experienced different kinds of placements (residential care, foster care, domestic and intercountry adoption). While the researchers' interests included how these children felt with respect to their biological families, their study could not consider their experiences without noting that wherever they were placed, they were stigmatized. They were bullied in school, they were accused of misdeeds (stealing and begging) that they did not commit, had few friends among their classmates, and suffered from self-esteem issues as a result.

Drawing on impunity as a theoretical concept, Golczyńska-Grondas (2015) examined the social factors that contribute to institutional violence, focusing on the children's residential care system in the People's Polish Republic. Notably, Golczyńska-Grondas (2015) emphasized how the social exclusion and devaluation of care recipients contributed to their mistreatment in the system.

All of these studies go beyond merely noting how stigmatizing it is to be a "kid in care." They all begin to fill out the picture of how stigma is enacted and how stigma looks and feels from the perspective of those who are in the care system. As this paper shows, however, it is possible to go deeper still. One of the components in Link and Phelan's conceptualization of stigma (the second component) is the linkage of the differences that individuals exhibit to undesirable characteristics and negative stereotypes. The particulars here are important because of the extent that individuals internalize the negative labels applied to them; these are the characteristics they begin to attribute to themselves. Moreover, while some of this recent literature recognizes the agency of children in care and their efforts to resist and/or negotiate the negative attributions others make, there is room to explore in more depth the range of management strategies they adopt.

Methods

This paper is part of a larger study examining how individuals are broadly impacted by child welfare experiences as they progress into adulthood. Since my objective was to capture the individualized ways that youth in care are impacted by their child welfare experiences, I was interested in first-hand perspectives and opted for a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews. I devised an interview guide with a set of open-ended questions to allow participants an opportunity to speak freely about their experiences.

The interviews were held in multiple locations throughout Southern Ontario. Following ethics board approval, participants were recruited through posters and brochures, as well as through social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. Posters and brochures were distributed in recreation facilities, universities, public libraries, laundromats, apartment buildings, and shelters. Participants who saw the recruitment materials and were interested in participating in the study contacted me to arrange an interview. Snowball sampling was also employed to further facilitate recruitment. To snowball, I asked each participant at the end of the interview if they knew any other former youth in care who might be interested in my study and if they would be willing to share recruitment documents with them. Several participants did that, resulting in four additional interviews.

Once participants contacted me for an interview, we decided on a mutually convenient time and location. The interview location was left to the participants to decide, although I suggested several options. The interviews were held in participants' homes, parks, libraries, university campuses, and coffee shops. One interview was conducted by telephone. I approached the interviews in a conversational manner, asking participants to begin by telling me a bit about themselves. That approach can enable participants to tell their stories more freely and allows them to steer the interview toward areas they consider important, potentially revealing unanticipated information (Marvasti 2004; van den Hoonaard 2018). In that case, it enabled participants to identify aspects of their care experiences that they identi-

fied as relevant. With some interviews, participants spoke freely and their narratives answered many of the interview questions without being asked directly. For these interviews, the participants' narratives guided the interviews, which were interspersed with my occasional questions from the interview guide and selective probing. While the study aimed to identify how the participants were impacted by their child welfare experiences and progression into adulthood, stigma emerged as a prominent theme early in the interview process. Although the interview guide included a question about whether participants had ever experienced stereotyping associated with their youth-in-care status, fourteen participants raised the issue of stigma or stereotyping in their narratives without being asked directly. Several participants were more reserved and responded more actively to specific questions. For these interviews, the interview guide was followed more closely. All the interviews, however, followed a general pattern in which participants began by discussing their earliest contact with CAS and their entry into the system before discussing their experiences in care and how they have been impacted by these experiences.

With the permission of participants, most of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Four of the 20 participants declined to be audio-recorded, despite the information I had provided about the steps I would take to protect their privacy and maintain the confidentiality of any data I collected. [That included keeping all recordings and written documents in a secure place under lock and key, and all digital material encrypted on a password-protected computer.] Their reluctance is understandable, given the sensitive nature of the experiences they would be recalling. Participants discussed emotionally charged encounters with CAS,

and for some, involvement in illegal activities. For these interviews, participants did allow me to take detailed notes, which I filled in as much as possible once the interview was over.

The interviews ranged from twenty minutes to two hours in length, with most being an hour and a half long. To protect the confidentiality of participants, pseudonyms were selected for the participants and any identifying information, such as names and places, was removed from the transcripts. Following transcription, the interviews were analyzed thematically. I adopted a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Glaser 2001), coding the data through an iterative process that involved grouping similar concepts and identifying common patterns and themes. There was some overlap between the data analysis and interview process, and I adjusted my interview questions to pursue emergent themes. While I was attentive to the themes that were emerging in the interviews as I was conducting them, I started a systematic analysis of my data once all the interviews had been fully transcribed.[1]

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[1] I began analyzing the data using an open coding process to identify relevant concepts and their properties. That involved writing notes in the margins of transcripts or field notes and creating documents compiling relevant observations to identify broad themes. I engaged in both strategies, analyzing the interview transcripts and notes, line by line to identify larger themes and subthemes. While this paper is part of a larger study examining care experiences, stigma emerged early on as a prominent theme. As such, I created a document compiling all the relevant information from each participant pertaining to stigma, which I referred to during the subsequent coding and writing stages of the project. Once this document was created, I then coded smaller subthemes detailing the processes by which the participants experienced stigma. I then divided the data into two categories: direct experiences with stigma and responses to stigma. Consistent with Strauss and Corbin's (1998) approach, I used axial coding to link categories and subthemes and selective coding to refine and integrate the emergent themes by scanning the transcripts repeatedly for data that relate to the core themes. The notes from the coding documents provided a base for this paper.

The participants experienced a variety of placements across Ontario (primarily Southern Ontario), which included group homes, foster homes, kinship placements, and treatment centers. Some participants also spent time in youth shelters, and two were placed in youth detention facilities following other CAS placements. The length of time spent in the system ranged from several months to twelve years or more. Some participants had difficulty determining exactly how long they spent in care due to having been placed in care and returned home multiple times. The age of participants ranged from 21 to 65, with most participants in their twenties or thirties. Participants were asked to self-identify in terms of their gender and race. Among the participants, there were 8 females and 12 males. Caucasians were the largest racial group, with 15 participants identifying as White or Caucasian. The group also included three Indigenous participants—one who self-identified as Métis, one as First Nations, and the other as "Native." The other two non-White participants identified as Filipino and South American. The question of race was particularly significant for identifying some key differences between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants' experiences of stigma, which is discussed in the following section.

Experiences with Stereotyping

Individuals experience stigma and devaluation in the context of specific types of interactions with specific others. Generally, the participants in this study did not talk about being "stigmatized" or "discredited." They talked about messages they received in a variety of ways from others that told them the kinds of assumptions people were making about them and the stereotypes they felt were being applied to them. Stigma manifested itself in their lives through these messages and their interactions with a broad range of individuals, including their caregivers and agency workers, but also teachers, neighbors, peers, and the families of their peers. In this section, I focus on some of those messages.

Bad

The most common label applied to youth in care was "bad." Several participants commented on the stereotypical view of youth in care as bad kids who are in care because of problem behaviors or because they "have issues." They conveyed a sense that youth in care are viewed as "troubled," "delinquent," and "untrustworthy," and that they are somehow at fault for their entry into the system. Some people, participants claimed, tend to link care status with criminality. They described numerous instances where, once they divulged that they were in care, they were asked: "What did you do?" Dave, for example, was brought into care due to his mother's mental illness, which at times prevented her from being able to care for her children. Yet, as early as the fifth grade, Dave recalls his classmates bombarding him with questions that implied that his entry into care was due to some transgression on his part.

> "Oh, you're in foster care? Why, what did you do? Did you burn down a house or something?" You know? That's what they automatically think. Or, you know, "Did you come out of jail and you can't go back with your parents?" Or, "Did you kill your parents?"

Dan had a similar experience:

> One of the worst [reactions] is when you finally summon the guts to tell one of your closest friends that you're a foster kid. One of the worst responses that

I got was, "What did you do?" You know? Like I did something.

Karl made reference to the suspicion with which kids in care are regarded once their status becomes known:

I think right off the bat, if you were to tell someone that they were in a situation where they were taken in by a foster home, maybe they would think, "Maybe I shouldn't trust this person." Maybe he's automatically been a criminal or something, which is not always the case.

The negative reactions came through not only in their interactions with peers but also in the responses of their peers' families. Janice recalled how after hearing that she was in foster care, a teammate's mother jumped to the conclusion that Janice had done something to warrant her removal from her family. She admonished her to start behaving if she wanted to be returned to her parents.

I remember when I was in baseball, this one lady was driving us to our destination or whatever, and she asked what my parents did or something, and I told her I was in foster care, and she was like, "Oh, you know, you just have to listen to your mom and dad, and you can go home."

In some cases, families tried to discourage friendships because of their suspicions and fears about the influence that the participants might exert on their children. Amber described how her friend's mother banned visits to her friend's home because she feared Amber would steal something.

I had a friend, and his mom refused to let me in the house. She refused to let me in the house because

I was a Children's Aid kid, and she thought that I was going to steal something from her. I went to a Catholic school, I had good grades, I was friends with her son, but she refused to trust me—those were the only things she knew about me other than I was a Children's Aid kid—but she refused to trust me to be allowed in her house because she thought I would steal from her because I was a Children's Aid kid.

Many of the negative assumptions about the participants persisted even after they were returned to their families. In his now classic study on the effects of negative labeling, Rosenhan (1973:184) observed that "labels can be sticky." The phrase captures the experiences of participants in this study. Having been defined as "bad," participants continued to bear that label even after their circumstances changed.

Sometimes, even when we went back to our parents, we would go to our friend's place, and their parents wouldn't want us there. They thought we were bad kids, you know? [Tyler]

Assumptions about the degree to which the behavior of the children accounts for their entry into care are often reinforced by the circumstances under which they are taken into care. It is not uncommon for police officers to be present during CAS apprehensions. Though the apprehension of a child may have nothing to do with the child's behavior, the mere presence of a police officer feeds into others' inclination to wonder what the child might have done. Amanda was in a situation where her mother was having difficulties dealing with the challenges of being a single parent. Her mother's troubles meant that Amanda often had to help care for her younger brother. She was forced to assume adult responsibilities that few of her peers had ever experi-

enced. Yet, she was taken into care while at school, with two police officers present during her apprehension. The memory of the incident was vivid in her mind. She recalled, "I mean *everyone* looked at me [emphasis original]." She also reflected on the impact that the incident had on how others saw her from that point on, even years afterward.

> And what's sad is when I go back [to my hometown,] these people still exist. My friends that were my friends back then, they're people that have grown up, and the stigma of that is something that I'll always have with me. Because they remember me as that troubled teen where *those two police officers apprehended her* [emphasis original]. So it's very embarrassing. It's just so embarrassing.

Harold Garfinkel (1956:420), another sociologist who contributed to the development of labeling theory, has coined the term "degradation ceremony" to describe the symbolic point at which individuals are stripped of their status as a "normal" member of their social group and relegated to a devalued status. These perceptions of children in care as "bad" and "not to be trusted" are not limited to outsiders who might have little knowledge of the circumstances under which children are taken into care. Even caregivers can engage in this kind of stereotyping. That fact became clear for many of the participants right from the moment they were taken into care. In scenes that echo Goffman's description of mortification processes, they recalled being stripped of their possessions and subjected to strict rules and procedures designed to regulate them. Amanda described it as akin to being in jail. She described the intake process in the following way.

> It was like we went to jail...What they do is they pretty much strip you of everything, like all your human

rights. Even though I didn't deserve that. Like I didn't do anything at that point, right?

In her first group home, Amanda was not able to attend regular school and was homeschooled in the basement instead. Moreover, she was not permitted outside without staff supervision. Community time had to be earned by demonstrating compliance and was limited to a maximum of 15 minutes.

Participants provided numerous specific examples of situations where they were regarded with suspicion and where their workers and caregivers assumed they were lying and were not willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. Stephanie recounted how it was often assumed that she was "faking it" when she complained of not feeling well, even when it was subsequently determined that she was suffering from chicken pox. Lily recalled a routine visit to the dentist that became an attack on her motives and credibility.

> They filled a cavity for me, and I came out of the dentist's office, and they had put me under because I was really afraid to go to the dentist, so they gave me gas or whatever, and I came out of the dentist, and my lip was frozen, and I was making faces, like being funny 'cause I couldn't smile—it was just completely drooped, and I remember the receptionist from the dentist being like, "She's not still under the influence; she's just faking it." And I was like, "But, that's not even what I was doing!" I was just playing with my lip and, like, being funny about my lip. And that's an obvious stereotype—like even at the dentist we're just group home kids. We're just acting out for attention or whatever.

Contrary to the ethos of 'innocent until proven guilty,' these youth felt they already had a mark

against them simply by being in care. Lily linked the assumptions that staff often made about them to the abuse that occurs in care settings. She reasoned that if staff tended to see youth in their charge as "bad," they would be more inclined to treat them harshly.

> I think even within care there is the perception that we're all liars, we're all bad people, we all shouldn't be trusted, we're all messed up so don't listen to them 'cause they're wrong, and that leads to, like, abuse.

Sick

In some cases, the "badness" of participants was medicalized and treated as illness; a trend previously identified in the treatment of youth (Conrad 2007; Bosk 2013). Participants were seen as having "mental health issues." Rather than punishment, participants received treatment, though as Conrad (2007) points out, both are simply mechanisms of social control. In these cases, too, the message sent to participants was that *they* were troubled in some way and that it was *their* issues that required attention. Stephanie explained:

> What was just inculcated into you was that there was something wrong with you. Just something wrong with you...It was that you removed [kids] from the home for intensive treatment when there wasn't actually a need for treatment of the kid. It was the environment that needed to change.

Lily's time in care was interspersed with regular stints in hospitals, where she would be placed for a few days at a time until her social worker could find her a placement. That practice, especially in combination with the heavy medication she was required to take, made Lily feel in hindsight like the

mental health problems she might have experienced were largely induced by the professionals she encountered while in care and the medications they prescribed.

> I wasn't really given a choice. I just went with it. It [the medication] started when I was 14, and I was really depressed. Like, I've had kind of a rough upbringing and stuff, and it was obviously circumstantial. I think my doctor was just like, "Here's some Paxil. Just take this!"

Stupid

Another common assumption that participants believed others made about them had to do with their intellectual abilities. There were numerous stories about the various ways they were made to feel "dumb," as some participants put it, or simply not capable. Rarely did their caregivers or teachers expect them to do well in school and most assumed that they would never attain a college or university education. One participant succinctly stated, "I've had people treat me like I'm stupid." For Janice, the sense she had as a child that she was viewed as slow or deficient in some way was affirmed for her years later when a friend considering fostering said the following about foster children.

> My friend said that she wanted to be a foster parent, but she didn't know if the kids would be able to mentally and physically keep up with her three-year-old. I don't think she knew that I was ever in foster care...I know some people have some really weird-formed opinions of certain groups in society, but I never thought that if I was in foster care I'm supposed to be in remedial classes or something!

Even gestures on the part of well-intentioned teachers, probably meant to be generous and accommodating, reinforced the impression that participants could not succeed academically on their own. Amanda described a situation where one of her teachers gave her credit for work she had not completed. Amanda appreciated the gesture, but took away from it the message that the teacher did not have confidence in Amanda's ability to succeed without assistance or accommodations.

> When I was in my senior year, I was given like three free credits. I mean, I'm grateful that she did it, but it made me think that by giving allowances and breaks, are we increasing that person's autonomy?...Because I feel like if I didn't get that stigma, I wasn't going to get that outcome.

This incident reveals the subtle forms stereotyping can take. Even well-intended adults can inadvertently relay the message of intellectual inferiority through their attempts to be helpful.

Inferior/Pitiful

The third component of stigma that Link and Phelan (2001) identify is status loss.

Participants were keenly aware through their years in the care of their devalued social status. Many of them recalled feeling "inferior," "lower than" or "less than" others. Karl asserted, based on his experience, that youth in care are viewed as "worthless." Amber used the term "defunct" frequently throughout the interview to describe how youth in care are viewed by society in general. Colin referred to how being in care was "very pride taking-away-ing." Janice's reflections powerfully captured what it felt like using the symbolism of the "trash" bag she was forced to use for her belongings every time she was moved from one home to another.

> How people look at you—the poor kid coming to our house with the bag full of her clothes. You feel like trash when you're walking up with a trash bag full of your clothes!

Jess put it this way:

> I think a lot of the times they think that we're low, that we don't—I can't even describe it... we're less educated, we're not bums, but lower than average people, and I think it's not fair at all.

The sense of being "less than" for several of the participants placed with foster families was reinforced through the differential treatment from the biological children in the family they received at the hands of their caregivers. For instance, Savannah described being excluded from family vacations and holidays throughout the ten years she spent with her foster family. At Christmas, she would return to her biological family, and she would be sent to a respite home when the family went on vacation.

> Christmas is what stands out for me the most. They would often encourage me to go with my family whether or not—there were actually a couple of years where I was like, "You know what, it'd be really neat to stay with you folks." I think out of the ten years I spent maybe two Christmas mornings with them. So not a lot. They would always celebrate birthdays with me. But, I felt like there was always a difference between their biological kids' birthdays and the foster kids' birthdays… whether or not they didn't actually want me or they couldn't get permission to take me out of the province or the country, but the foster

family would go on vacation, and I'd go to another foster home until they got back.

For Savannah, being treated differently in all of these ways contributed to a keen sense of being devalued.

Janice had similar experiences. She recalled how one particularly abusive foster mother would treat her and her sister as servants, expecting them to cater to her biological children.

> She would, like, take us to the fair and we [Janice and her sister] would have to carry her kids' bags and stuffed animals while they did stuff. We were basically the wagon.

The sense of exclusion and devaluation was even stronger among those who experienced instances of abuse in their care placements. Being mistreated made them feel further diminished.

In some cases, the sense of being devalued had an obvious class dimension to it. Colin recalled how "the rich, snobby kids looked down on [him]." Stephanie described herself as a charity case.

> I've always felt like you were just a charity case. You know, people from the community would give you presents at Christmas and stuff like that. And they would come in, and we became the project for nursing students.

Unwanted

When asked about the kinds of stereotypes he believed are applied to youth in care, Karl said "unwanted." For Karl, being "bounced around," as he put it, "can only make you feel unwanted."

Never having stability or secure parental relationships, Karl felt "thrown away—like a piece of garbage—just tossed away." Several other participants echoed this sentiment. Savannah remembered being chided by classmates when they discovered her care status.

> People would say things like, "Oh, you're not really loved, or your parents don't want you, that's why you're in there." Or they'd call me "orphan." I mean, this is when I got a little bit older, but once people find out, they go for it.

For some participants, the sense of not being wanted extended beyond their families of origin and was also applicable to their caregivers and to the community more generally. Lily explained that while she was in care, there was a campaign on the part of residents in the neighborhood where the group home was located to have the home moved.

> You perceive that nobody wants you there for sure, but then it doesn't help when staff are like, "Yeah, they don't want us here, and they're trying to get us kicked out of the town."

Summing up, I have described some of the more common labels and stereotypes that participants felt were applied to them by virtue of their care status. There were others, closely related to these—that youth in care came from conflict-ridden and dysfunctional families and that given their family circumstances, foster children must be fundamentally unhappy and "damaged." When Kevin told a classmate that he was in foster care, the reaction was, "You look too happy to be in care." Savannah perhaps encapsulated all of the stereotypes best when she said:

That we are poor. That we are troubled. That we come from very dysfunctional broken homes. Often questions like. "Are you a crack baby?" The whole perception is that it was an unwanted pregnancy, or your parents are addicts, or you must have been abused or very much neglected. The one that affects youth the most is that people assume that you're trouble...there's the perception that kids in care are trouble and have issues.

One of the central concepts in labeling theory is the notion of a master status (Hughes 1945:357)—a social status that overrides all others concerning one's social identity and that constitutes the lens through which individuals are viewed by others. And if internalized, the lens through which one views oneself. It is clear that in this case, being in care comes to act as a master status for youth in that situation, significantly coloring how others view them and the assumptions that others make about their character, capabilities, and potential.

Before turning to how participants attempted to manage the stigma they encountered, I want to discuss the case of two participants for whom questions about the stigmatizing aspects of being in care did not resonate. Both participants were Indigenous. Cody explained that being visibly Indigenous meant that he experienced stigma from a young age, so entering the child welfare system did not make a big difference. He was used to feeling different and left out. It was difficult for him to identify how much being in care exacerbated his situation. Kayla said that she did not find being in care that stigmatizing, in part because she had been placed with a family member and many people did not know that she was in care. However, even where others knew, she observed, it all blended in with the stigma of being a First

Nations person. Going back to Hughes' (1945) concept of a master status, for these two participants, being Indigenous overrode being in care as a status marker. That makes a telling statement about racism in Canada. It also makes a telling statement about the relative strength of different status markers. According to Link and Phelan (2001:377), stigma can be a matter of degree. The labeling of human differences can be more or less prominent. The connection between labels and undesirable attributes can be relatively strong or relatively weak. Some groups are more stigmatized than others. The experiences of these two participants illustrate these points. They also point to the importance of aiming for an intersectional approach to studying stigma, one that considers how different sources of stigma (based on race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, disability, etc.) may interact to shape an individual's care experiences (Choo and Ferree 2010).

Responding to Stigma

In line with symbolic interactionist understandings of agency, Goffman's work pays as much attention to how individuals manage stigmatized identities and cope with repressive conditions as it does to labeling and mortification processes. As noted earlier, even those in total institutions designed to stamp out their individuality, residents will fight to assert themselves in responding to stigma and control. While the ability to do so and related consequences can vary by circumstance, Goffman (1961; 1963) draws attention to the ways that stigma and labeling are resisted. Goffman's work, and subsequent literature in the area of deviance, have revealed that individuals can be endlessly creative in responding to stigma. Along with the stigma management strategies identified by Goffman, the literature in

this area has identified a long list of ways that individuals respond to, manage, and try to reduce and resist their stigmatization. Many of them are similar to strategies that participants in this study adopted; others are different.

Concealment and Selective Disclosure

Goffman (1963) asserts that concealment is often the preferred strategy in managing deviant identities because it is the most efficient way of avoiding stigma entirely. If one conceals potentially damaging information about oneself, others cannot react negatively. Concealment, however, is a strategy only available to those with discreditable attributes, not those whose difference is obvious. As Cody, one of the Indigenous participants remarked, his care status was not outwardly apparent in the same way as his race. The visibility of his race may be another factor explaining why Cody felt the stigma attached to his race so much more keenly than that associated with his care status. Since the youth-in-care status is a discreditable stigma that can potentially be hidden, it is not surprising that some participants dealt with the possibility of others reacting negatively by at least trying to hide their status from others whenever they could. "I didn't tell anybody at school. That I remember," said Lily. Amber explained: "At the time, nobody knew I was a foster kid. I purposely left that as quiet as I could."

For Dan, concealment proved more challenging after he was placed in a group home since the move now meant having to ride a school bus. Anxious to avoid questions from his peers, he found a way.

> They had one of those handicapped buses come to my place every morning to drive me and drop me off. And it was embarrassing because, you know, rid-

ing with the handicapped kids and then, you know, I had to, like, run off the bus. I was, like, hiding from other students, my peers, 'cause I thought, like, if they saw me, they would make fun of me, and this would be the worst. So, I'd find myself hiding that this was going on. And it was a real, real source of embarrassment and shame for me... Like I'm not living with my parents, how do you explain that? I'm living in this random house far away, how do you explain that, right? And, like, you know, so I was living this double life almost, in the shadows, too.

However, concealment as a strategy for youth in care often meant counting on the complicity of others. In some cases, they were able to secure others' cooperation. Savannah, concerned that the social workers who visited her at school would give her secret away, asked them to hide their badges when they visited.

> The social workers would often come to see us during school times, which I never fully understood. So getting called out of class to go chat with your social worker. I remember telling my social worker, like, put your badge away! 'Cause I didn't want anyone to identify him or know—like, it was obvious that he was a social worker.

Stephanie, on the other hand, had less success with her teachers.

> The teachers at school would make sure other people knew because I was saying something about being a fee-paying student and the teacher said [name of treatment center] girls are not fee-paying students.

Amber's efforts at passing failed when she was 'outed' by her ex-boyfriend.

At the time [grade nine] nobody knew I was a foster kid. I purposely left that as quiet as I could. But, he [ex-boyfriend] knew because we were dating, and he met my confusing-as-fuck family. Yeah, so he said in the middle of the cafeteria that he would never be caught dating some sort of fucking retard CAS kid. In front of hundreds of kids! So, at that point, everyone knew.

Little wonder, then, that those who attempt concealment live in a constant state of anxiety, particularly in their school situations. They never know when they will be outed. The repercussions can be dire when this point is reached. Other studies (Michell 2015; Dansey et al. 2019) on the stigma experienced by children in care have found that they are often bullied by their peers. Both Savannah and Amber experienced physical confrontations and bullying once their peers discovered they were in care.

The power of concealment as a strategy is underlined by the deep sense of shame participants felt when others were aware of their care status. Lily describes it as being branded.

Everyone knows you're a group home kid. So, if you're in school, it's in your file. The teachers know. Everybody just kind of knows that's who you are and where you're from. You feel like you're wearing it across your forehead, too. Like, when you go out and it's two staff and this group of girls, you feel like everybody knows. And maybe they don't. Like, maybe they wouldn't look at a group and be like, "That's a group home group!" But, at that age, you feel like it's written across your forehead. Like everybody knows, and everybody judges you for it.

Stephanie expressed it in similar terms. She said she felt "marked."

The thing is, everyone knew you were from [name of treatment center,] so you were marked... You couldn't hide it. That's where you lived.

Challenging the Stereotypes

Another stigma management strategy involved attempts to counter the stereotypes of the typical youth in care. Some of the participants talked about making concerted efforts to do well in school, just to prove that they could, and in doing so, to challenge the stereotype of youth in care as academically weak. In fact, it became Savannah's goal to eventually acquire a post-secondary education. Toward this end, she also became active in school clubs and extracurricular activities while in care. She was motivated by her future goals, but she set those goals against the backdrop of messages she received that advanced education was beyond the limits of what most youth in care were likely to achieve. Similarly, Amber excelled at her studies. Both participants were proud to have been touted as "the golden girls"—in Savannah's words—of their respective children's aid societies.

Connor explained that he, too, worked hard at his studies to defy assumptions about his capabilities. The fact that he qualified for a math competition in Grade 10 stands out for him still as an accomplishment in which he takes great pride. He also boasted about his success in sports. He had to stop his participation in sports when a foster care placement took him away from his teams and new arrangements could not be made. The point in all of these examples is that these participants strived to stand out for their excellence and success in certain endeavors in a situation where not much was expected of them.

Some of the examples of this strategy are revealing in their subtlety. Stephanie, for instance, described

a dress that she made for a sewing competition. As she finished the design, she decided to add a belt. She was concerned that without it, the looseness of the dress might suggest teen pregnancy. Sensitive to the stereotypical image of youth in care as troubled and sexually promiscuous, she took steps to forestall any such speculation. That example highlights how efforts to combat stigma can find their way into even the most mundane activities, such as choice of clothing styles.

Physical Retaliation

In cases where participants' care status was generally known, and a source of taunting or bullying, other strategies were adopted. Several participants reported being mistreated at school by peers and, in some cases, teachers when their care status became known to others. Some participants reported getting in fights at school when teased by their classmates. Colin explained: "[I needed to] stand up for myself, you know? Not back down." For Colin, teasing about his care status would sometimes lead to physical confrontations. His comments about 'not backing down' reflect a desire to preserve and assert a sense of pride. Amber, the lone female participant who volunteered stories of fighting, described how she resorted to physical retaliation on two occasions when bullied at school due to her care status. One was the cafeteria incident described earlier, where she punched her ex-boyfriend in the face. The second incident involved "almost punching" a fellow student for some derogatory remarks about foster kids.

> When I was in high school, I almost got suspended for punching a girl in the face. I didn't actually punch her in the face. My music teacher stopped me from punching her in the face, but it nearly happened.

Like Colin, Amber also felt compelled to challenge the bullies she encountered and occasionally resorted to physical retaliation as a means to do so. Standing up to bullying about their youth in care status can be understood as a way for these participants to preserve their sense of self when confronted by stereotyping. If nothing else, these physical displays left participants feeling tough, strong, and powerful. Aaron, Karl, and Connor also described similar encounters as a youth in care, although, for these participants, fighting was primarily a survival tactic in environments where violence was commonplace.

Seeking Solidarity

A final strategy aimed to foster interactions with others who, in addition to sharing the experience of stigmatization, did not judge or stigmatize. Instead, they provided positive affirmations. Some participants talked about finding companionship and forging friendships with others who were similarly marginalized and/or stigmatized. Lily, for example, described how she mostly hung out with other group home kids throughout her time in care.

> I don't really remember having any friends that were outside of group home kids, not when I was in there. I think that I had one friend that I started hanging out with. She knew, but she had like a really messed up life anyways, so it really didn't matter.

As Lily described, the one friend she had that was not from a group home also had difficult circumstances in her life, which facilitated their bond. Particularly, if they were of an age and in circumstances where they had more freedom, the participants spent a lot of their time on the streets where they sought out other street-involved youth. Janice explained: "I always hung out with the rejects and

rebels and everything, so I wasn't weird." Amanda explained that she often gravitated toward other marginalized individuals, a habit that continued even after leaving care: "I always find the misfits in every group that I'm in." Both Janice and Lily use language—"rejects," "rebels," and "misfits"—that acknowledges and ironically reinforces or reifies the stereotypes linked to youth in care. But, their larger point about finding companionship among these individuals speaks to their desire to find a group where they feel they fit in.

Discussion

The stories shared by participants reveal the extent and severity of the stigma they experienced. The findings are consistent with other studies that have looked at youth in care (e.g., Golczyńska-Grondas 2015; Michell 2015; Rogers 2017; Dansey et al. 2019; Neagu and Sebba 2019), but go further in specifying precisely what stereotypes they face and how the assumptions that others make about them are communicated to them in ways that underscore their diminished social status. To a greater or lesser extent, they have all been underestimated, devalued, and often written off as not likely to amount to much. To many, they were nothing more than a "CAS kid," with all of the negative connotations described in this paper. The devaluation they experienced occurred both at the interpersonal and structural levels. At the interpersonal level, some were taunted, bullied, and abused—by peers, teachers, caregivers, and social workers alike. However, participants also felt devalued by institutional features, such as the policies and procedures in child welfare settings that made them feel criminalized or otherwise diminished. Examples include the practice of involving police presence during apprehensions, strict, punitive rules in care placements, and medicalization.

As Goffman (1961) argues in *Asylums*, individuals subjected to stigma, especially in rigidly controlled environments like those many of the participants experienced, are primed to undergo significant shifts in self-perception and identity as they begin to internalize others' views of them. Consistently receiving messages about their diminished status from others sets them up to question their character, capabilities, and moral worth. Given that our self-perceptions are intrinsically linked with how we think others see us, we are often inclined to see ourselves through the lens of the labels we receive (e.g., Lemert 1951; Goffman 1961; Becker 1963). For individuals who are subjected to persistent and pervasive stigma, the impact can be profound. This was certainly the case for the participants in this study. They expressed powerfully the effect that the negative attributions they experienced had on how they felt and how they saw themselves. They felt branded.

At the same time, their accounts reveal the extent to which they attempted to protect themselves, salvage a more positive sense of self, and respond to their circumstances. In this regard, too, the paper confirms findings in the literature, but also extends them. Dansey and colleagues (2019) found elements of defiance in the youth they studied, who tried to protect themselves from the negative judgments of others. Rogers (2017:1088) has written that youth in care are "active social agents who are problem-solvers" as they try to manage their spoiled identities. Rogers' (2017) study also observed how foster youth carefully manage disclosure and added that they often form their in-groups to lessen the impact of social exclusion.

The findings presented in this paper identify a broader range of strategies. Concealment and selective disclosure certainly did work for the participants in

this study to minimize damaging encounters with others by managing information about their care status. Countering the stereotypes, however, provided an additional means to mitigate stigma, as they challenged others' negative assumptions about them head-on. Within the tightly constrained and highly controlled circumstances they often found themselves, some of the participants made decisions and behaved in ways that defied expectations and forced others to see them in a more favorable light. Physical retaliation, as a strategy, allowed some participants to show that they were not willing to acquiesce or passively accept others' judgments and actions. Finally, seeking solidarity represents a strategy whereby participants proactively sought out associations and relationships with others who were similarly socially devalued and therefore provided a source of understanding and non-judgemental encounters. Link and Phelan (2001:378) concede that stigmatized individuals sometimes attempt to resist playing the "helpless victim" to the labeling forces around them. They nonetheless point out that there are relatively few stories of resistance in the literature. Participants in this study offered stories of resistance.

Of course, from the point of view of securing validation and inclusion, some of these strategies worked better than others. Physical retaliation, and, in some cases, seeking the company of marginalized others (like street-involved youth), often set participants on a course that only created more problems for them and led to encounters with the law and the criminal justice system in ways that entrenched their status as "deviants." In terms of consequences, these strategies bear some resemblance to what other authors have found. In his study of marginalized, inner-city male youth, Anderson (1999) showed that when confronted with limited opportunities for self-affirmation, male youth marginalized by race and class some-

times adopt a brand of masculinity that emphasizes toughness and physicality. Anderson (1999:175) calls the strategy "going for bad." Adopting this demeanor can help one feel powerful, gain respect, and facilitate self-protection. An outcome of "going for bad," however, is that it can contribute to escalating violence, involvement with the justice system, or, in some cases, heightened stigma.

Roschelle and Kaufman (2004) document the same strategy among homeless children. The homeless youth that they observed would often adopt threatening demeanors and body language. They swaggered in exaggerated ways, spoke louder than usual, and engaged in "ghetto talk." In both the Anderson (1999) and Roschelle and Kaufman (2004) studies, the authors argue that besides offering individuals some measure of physical protection in environments that are often dangerous for them, the threat of physicality is one of the few means available for poor, socially marginalized youth to assert themselves and make them feel powerful. Therefore, they adopt manners of speech, demeanor, and style associated with gang culture, sometimes "code-switching" to fit into specific environments (Anderson 1999:36). However, both studies also point out that while physical posturing might provide protection and some satisfaction in terms of how the youth view themselves, the satisfaction is often fleeting and short-lived. Physical posturing, in many cases, has the longer-term effect of only further stigmatizing, marginalizing, and alienating them for the very groups from whom they are seeking inclusion. Such is certainly the case for many of the participants in this study, who continued to pay the social price for their actions well into adulthood. For many participants, stereotyping affected them well beyond their time in care, highlighting the degree and intensity of the stigma they faced. A future paper will address these long-term impacts.

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Caught in a Matrix of Factors: A Pilot Study of Female Retirees Receiving Below-Minimum Pension Payments

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Abstract: Pension systems based on an insurance model were originally designed for male breadwinners who worked under permanent contracts without career breaks. Since their inception, women's participation in the workforce has increased significantly, but on average, their employment career paths are still shorter and less linear compared to those that men enjoy. Demographic changes have prompted many countries to reform their pension systems to ensure long-term financial sustainability. And to varying degrees, such reforms also have looked to address the issue of short careers. In Poland, reforms introduced in 1999 brought about significant changes to the rules governing pension entitlement. That led to the emergence of a new category of retirees—those who had contributed to the pension system for a short period and consequently received very low pensions. This article provides an overview of an exploratory qualitative pilot study conducted in 2018 with nine women who were in receipt of benefits from the Polish universal pension system, which amounted to less than the so-called 'lowest retirement pension' being granted at that time. The analysis makes recourse to the concept of employment career and its connection to retirement to identify various life-course determinants that contributed to their situation. These factors include childhood and adolescent adversities that affected educational attainment; domestic and caregiving responsibilities coupled with cultural expectations and insufficient institutional support; the labor market situation, and the inability to document certain employment periods. The research material indicates that a significant portion of the work performed by the interviewees throughout their lives did not translate into a pension benefit, as it either involved unpaid domestic and caregiving duties; or work performed without formal contracts.

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In this article, we present the findings of an exploratory qualitative pilot study conducted with women who, in 2018, were receiving benefits from the Polish universal pension system, which were lower than the so-called 'lowest retirement pension' being granted at that time. Our objective is to analyze the life course determinants that have contributed to their pension status, using the concept of employment career and its connection to retirement.

Although the actuality of pensions turning out to be lower than the 'lowest retirement pension' has been directly caused by policy regulations specific to Poland, it is part of a broader set of changes that have been observed in Europe. These changes have encompassed demographic trends such as increasing longevity and decreasing fertility, resulting in a growing percentage of older people in European societies (Eurostat 2020a). The 60+ group includes many cohorts that differ, among other things, with regard to their needs, ranging from support in the labor market to the provision of long-term care. These demographic shifts present a challenge to social policies, particularly concerning the financial sustainability of pension systems. Consequently, there has been a rise in 'active aging' programs and an emphasis on extending the period of 'productivity' into older age. Moreover, attempts to reform pension systems have been made in many countries through, among others, partial privatization, the introduction of defined contribution models, and a raising of the statutory retirement age (Hinrichs 2021). These changes have aligned with the neoliberal tendency to approach social policies through an economic lens, addressing them through austerity and market mechanisms (Orenstein 2013) and reducing the responsibility of states in solving these issues, resulting in the individualization of risk and creation of social relationships, anticipated by Beck (1992) as 'the risk society.' Poland abandoned its socialist welfare system and joined this trend in the wake of the systemic changes that took place in 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe. The precarization and flexibilization of the labor market in Europe (OECD 2023) would impact occupational careers and also negatively affect the situation of retirees. That situation also obtains in Poland today, where the pension system is insurance-based. All of these factors, coupled with growing economic and social inequalities in many parts of the world, have prompted some social gerontologists (Grenier, Phillipson, and Settersten 2021) to associate the term 'precarity' and 'precariousness,' previously used mostly to analyze employment, with aging. They treat these concepts as a lens through which the insecurities and risks that later life brings may be highlighted and which are not always due to financial adversity.

The largest number of Polish pensioners (approx. 85%) receive their retirement pension from the so-called *universal system* (based on the Social Insurance Fund administered by the Social Insurance Institution [ZUS]). The system is based on the Bismarckian social insurance model (Anderson 2015), whereby the amount of the retirement pension is strongly linked to the total amount of contributions paid by the individual to ZUS (which is why it is known as a 'defined contribution system'). This system was implemented based on reforms introduced in 1999 (Wiktorow 2007) and the first Polish women retired under this system in 2009, while men, due to their higher retirement age (65 years for men vs. 60 for women), only started to retire under the new regulations in 2014. One of the changes that was introduced as part of the reform, and one which is relevant in the context of this study, was the abolition of the requirement to prove that a certain number of working years (insurance seniority) had been worked to receive a retirement pension. As things stand currently, even people who have paid their ZUS contributions for a very short period, for example, for only one month or one year, can receive a pension, albeit an extremely low one. Indeed, the state guarantees a minimum retirement pension (at present: PLN 1,588, i.e., approx. EUR 337 gross), but to receive it, women must prove 20 years of social insurance seniority (the so-called 'contribution periods' and 'non-contribution' periods[1]), while men must prove 25 years of such seniority.[2] Over time, re-

tirement policy experts began to point out that the number of people receiving pensions below the minimum threshold was growing rapidly. In December 2022, such pensions were paid out to 365,300 people, of which 80.2% were women. The predominance of women is partly related to the fact that they started collecting pensions under the new system five years earlier than men did. However, among those who received a 'below-minimum' pension for the first time in 2022, women also constituted a majority, as they accounted for 68.2% of the total number (Zalewska and Tomczyk 2023).

In preparation for a larger research project, we conducted nine qualitative interviews in 2022 with women living in different parts of Poland, who previously in the Polish Panel Survey (POLPAN) in 2018, declared that they had been receiving a pension below the minimum threshold. The form of the interview was inspired by the biographical approach: we aimed to explore the subjectively narrated stories of the whole of the participants' lives. The article is structured as follows. First, we introduce the theoretical framework linking the life course approach with the concept of employment career and retirement. We then review previous research on this subject and introduce relevant details on the Polish pension system. Subsequently, we present the data underpinning our study and the methodology used. In the next section, we present an analysis of the interviews, specifically focusing on the factors that contributed to pensions below the minimum for the study participants. We conclude the article with a reflection on the need to seek ways to protect retirees from poverty and to coordinate different branches of public policies. Finally,

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[1] Contribution period—"counted period; the period of insurance for which compulsory are national insurance contribution payments—retirement and social security insurance—or for which no such contribution payment obligation existed, yet legislation saw them as contribution periods." Non-contribution period—"the period for which there was no obligation to pay social security contributions (retirement pension and social security insurance), which, however, as a result of the specific character is taken into consideration in establishing the right to retirement-social security benefits and their rates" (ZUS 2016:58).

[2] From 2019 onwards, also mothers (and sometimes fathers) who have raised four or more children (the Mama 4+ program)

are entitled to the so-called parental supplementary benefit, equal to the minimum pension, regardless of whether or not they were in paid employment and for how long.

we point to possible directions for further research on the issue of below-minimum pensions.

Theoretical Framework: The Life Course Approach

Our research on the factors connected to low pensions is nestled in the theoretical assumptions of the life course approach (Shanahan, Mortimer, and Johnson 2016) combined with the concept of career (Hughes 1997). We assume that the situations of pensioners are influenced by the course of their lives, and so we apply a long-term perspective for our analysis of the situation in which individuals in older age find themselves. Accordingly, the different life stages of individuals need to be linked together (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe 2003), and attention must be paid to the mechanisms of formation, weakening, and strengthening of advantages and disadvantages over the course of a person's life.

Hughes (1997) defines the concept of career as the general course of the life of an individual, but in a more narrow sense as that portion of life in which a person works. Specifically, in the context of work, a career is understood as a particular pattern of jobs (e.g., Fauser 2020). Building on this approach, and for the purposes of this research, we introduce the concept of an employment career as a sequence of paid and registered employment that is directly related to the amount of pension, as well as to breaks in registered employment, such as non-registered work, unpaid reproductive work, or unemployment. The first part of our definition follows from the construction of the Polish insurance-based pension system and from the research that points to the relation between the linearity of employment history and pension (e.g., Möhring 2015). The second part is driven by empirical data on the life courses of our study's participants, which reveal numerous activities that can be considered as work, but are not officially registered or remunerated. Those two dimensions allow us to analyze the determinants of low pensions both from inside and outside of the sphere of registered employment, as well as to follow participants' perspectives on their life course.

To describe the reasons behind the employment careers of the participants, we chose to build on the following aspects of the life course approach: the interconnectedness of life stages, the entanglement of individuals in the structure, the intergenerational aspect, and the linked lives principle. We agree with those authors who have pointed to the significant impact of events occurring in the early, formative stages of life on the course of adult life (especially: the impact of childhood and education on employment careers, as highlighted by Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe [2003]), as well as the impact on social roles and transitions between them. Those issues concern the socialization of the individual, especially as this strand of research has drawn heavily on developmental psychology and lifespan psychology (Elder 1998; Diewald and Mayer 2009). In this approach, lives are conceptualized "within the contexts of families, society, and historical time" (Kok 2007:par. 4). Therefore, although we do not diminish the value of the agency of individuals when it comes to shaping their lives, we pinpoint that all actions are taken within the context of available opportunities. The life course approach draws attention to the intergenerational transfer of values, attitudes, and socioeconomic and intellectual resources (Carr 2018). In the context of retirement situation analysis, research on social mobility and the inheritance of poverty are relevant because they point to the link between life outcomes and social backgrounds (Moore 2001; 2005; Potoczna and Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2009). Lastly,

one's career never happens in a vacuum, the lives of individuals are always embedded in a complex web of social relations that condition employment trajectory: with family members, friends, colleagues, and many others who influence the individual's life course (e.g., Drobnič and Blossfeld 2004; Möhring and Weiland 2022 [coupled careers]). The belief that 'lives are lived interdependently,' is referred to as 'the linked lives principle' that summarizes the issue of socially and structurally embedded lives (Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe 2003; Carr 2018).

The life course approach has many interfaces with social stratification research and studies on social inequalities. O'Rand (2006) states that stratification is at the heart of life course studies—it plays a crucial role in understanding various aspects of individuals' lives, including the processes of economic attainment and health disparities. By investigating how social and economic inequalities intersect with individual life trajectories, researchers can shed light on the underlying causes and consequences of these disparities. O'Rand (2006:146) proposes the concepts of 'life course capital' (defined as "interdependent stocks of resources across life domains that are accumulated and/or dissipated over the life course") and 'life course risks' ("differential likelihoods of exposure to adverse conditions [disadvantages] or structural opportunities [advantages] for the accumulation, protection, or depletion of forms of life course capital"). Although in our analysis we do not operationalize these concepts, but rather treat them like Blumer's 'sensitizing concepts' (1954), O'Rand's approach is close to our thinking. Kendig and Nazroo (2016) describe three mechanisms through which outcomes in later life may be influenced by social (dis)advantages over the life course. The first of them, the 'critical period model,' we have already mentioned above. The second mechanism, the 'accumulation model,' does

not pay much attention to the timing of significant events, but highlights that (dis)advantages during the life course cumulate, leading to widening inequalities in later life (the Matthew effect [Dannefer 1987; 2003]). The last, the 'pathways model,' focuses on the factors that mediate between circumstances earlier in life and later life outcomes. In our opinion, these models are not contradictory; each of them emphasizes a different but important aspect of biographical and social processes.

Previous Research

Employment Career and Pension Outcomes

With Bismarckian pension systems, the pension amount is directly related to the amount of contributions paid to the pension system, which, in turn, depends on the mode and timing of one's labor market participation. In the social sciences literature, authors (De Freitas et al. 2011; Corna and Sacker 2013; Chłoń-Domińczak, Magda, and Strzelecki 2019; Möhring 2021; Bravo and Herce 2022) have looked to investigate the relationship between individual employment careers and individuals' income in later life.[3] As for the work-related determinants of income level in older age, some researchers have focused on 'breaks' or 'interruptions' in employment careers, which include various situations (unemployment, part-time employment, inactivity periods, early retirement) (De Freitas et al. 2011; Bravo and Herce 2022). Scholars have also investigated how the type, length, number, and timing of employment interruptions impact the income levels of older people. Möhring (2021) also takes into account periods of low-status jobs (occupa-

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[3] There is also a group of articles devoted to the impact of employment histories on the timing and pattern of retirement transitions and continued work in retirement, but this issue is less relevant to our topic.

tional status is related to the level of earnings, which, in turn, influences a pension amount). Researchers have also looked to highlight the impact of family histories (e.g., the number of children, the number of years a respondent was married) on the income level of older people (Corna and Sacker 2013; Möhring 2021). In our analysis, we treat this last factor as a determinant of labor market participation. Summing up: the literature indicates that (a) employment career types that deviate from the concept of full-time long-life career pattern pose the risk of economic hardship in older age, (b) these types of 'atypical' careers are more likely to be held by females than males, (c) the negative effects of 'atypical' careers can be mitigated by state policies.

We must note that 'atypical' careers are defined in opposition to a 'normal' career, which is a normative ideal type that is hardly present in actual biographies (Potter 2020), but it remains the reference point for the organization of welfare and pension policies. Hence, it is widely present in the research. 'Atypical' careers are analyzed using numerous concepts, such as 'non-linear,' 'patchwork' careers, or 'non-standard' trajectories, all of which focus on slightly different characteristics. Analyses of 'non-linear' careers point both to opportunities, such as independence for workers and to the risk of biographical uncertainty (Schilling 2012). The positive image of nonlinearity has been brought up in the studies that focused on flexibility, and the possibility of combining care and employment, however assessments of flexibility are usually ambiguous (e.g., Giesecke and Groß 2003; Wheatley 2017). Risks or disadvantages connected to nonlinearity are developed in concepts of 'patchwork' careers characterized by changes of employment, forced termination, and a lack of control over the biography (Domecka and Mrozowicki 2008); or as the 'pattern

of trajectory' that is "characterized by the reduction of career goals, orientation towards the current working situation, the family and/or relationships" (Schilling 2012:728). From the institutional perspective, 'atypical' careers are linked to non-standard employment (e.g., Booth, Francesconi, and Frank 2002; Standing 2011) and analyzed with the concept of precarity, which is defined as a type of employment deprived of social security benefits (Rodgers 1989), and which can result in an insecure situation during retirement.

In the research on pensions, 'atypical' careers should be understood from the perspective of possible risks and disadvantages in the later stages of life. That type of working trajectory is commonly attributed to the careers that women pursue (Möhring 2015). In our research, all participants were women, and in the next part, we shall focus on the determinants of 'atypical' careers among them.

The Drivers of 'Atypical' Employment Careers

The first group of determinants underlined in the research are traditional gender roles and gender stereotypes, especially in the context of work and the division of household chores (Ciccia and Bleijenbergh 2014; Karwacki and Suwada 2020). In Polish culture, the care for children and other dependent family members, as well as household chores, have traditionally been attributed to women rather than men, while paid work tends to be seen as the role of men (Hryciuk and Korolczuk 2012; Sarnowska, Pustułka, and Wermińska-Wiśnicka 2020). This division into the domestic (women's) sphere and external (men's) sphere is deeply rooted in the distant past and is related, among other things, to the division of labor in traditional peasant culture (Zadrożyńska 1983). Despite cultural transformations, which

took Polish society toward greater equality in this regard, contemporary research indicates that Polish women are still burdened with domestic and caring responsibilities to a greater degree than men are (Titkow, Duch-Krzysztoszek, and Budrowska 2004; GUS 2016; CBOS 2018; Suwada 2021).

Women experience labor market obstacles. Companies in Poland, especially smaller ones and those from the private sector, are relatively less likely to introduce solutions to help employees to combine work and childcare (Kotowska et al. 2007). Flexible working hours or part-time work, although 'atypical,' might facilitate a return to the labor market, but are not availed of very often (Eurostat 2022b); and those caring for dependent family members are 'punished,' mainly by lower pay (Witkowska and Kompa 2020). Another problem is the gender pay gap, which is currently much smaller in Poland than the European average (Eurostat 2022c), but is, nevertheless, present. Lower earnings translate into lower contributions to ZUS, which, in turn, translate into lower pensions. The gender pay gap also prompts some couples to opt for the male breadwinner model. In addition, women are more likely than men to experience problems with career advancement, especially in top positions (referred to as the promotion gap, glass ceiling, glass wall, or sticky floor). The phenomenon of qualified women leaving the labor market at higher career levels is sometimes referred to as the 'leaking pipeline.' As a result of the aforementioned processes, the labor market is segmented vertically: men prevail in higher positions, and this division coexists with a horizontal segmentation where some occupations, often with lower pay, are performed mainly by women, while men dominate in others (Janicka 1995; 2020; Titkow 2003; Kalinowska-Sufinowicz and Domagała 2016).

The abovementioned factors and obstacles impact women from different social strata in unequal ways. The class of origin, the socio-economic status of parents, and the formal education of women (which is often related to social background) inform the patterns of their workforce participation and contribute to the variation of their employment careers (Jacobs 2002; Huang and Sverke 2007). Bravo and Herce (2022), drawing on human capital theory, state that greater investment in human capital during early ages leads to higher lifetime earnings and reduces both the risk and duration of unemployment periods. The socio-economic status of the family of origin also impacts health outcomes during adult life (Pavalko and Caputo 2013), which may translate into a non-linear employment career.

The Design of the Pension System in Poland

We have discussed above the determinants of women's non-linear employment careers related to gender roles and gender stereotypes, labor market obstacles, and class inequalities. What is known, however, is that the impact of such careers on retirement (and, more broadly, on the risk of old-age poverty) can be mitigated by several factors (Kwan and Walsh 2018). One of these is the design of the pension system itself.

From a historical perspective, pension systems based on the insurance model were designed for male breadwinners working under a permanent contract, without career breaks (Lewis 2002; Petelczyc and Roicka 2016), which, in turn, creates problems when it comes to the inclusion of childcare periods in such systems. A comparative analysis of 13 European countries (including Poland) found that the relationship between employment history and pension income varies among countries for women and is notably influenced by factors associated with the pension

system (Möhring 2015). In Poland, the laws regulating entitlement to various types of parental leave have changed multiple times over the past few decades. The rules regarding the payment of pension contributions for childcare periods have also been subject to change. In addition, different calculation bases for pension contributions have applied for parental leave at different times. In the past, Polish legal solutions attributed childcare mainly to the mother (and to date, full equality between parents has not been reached in this respect). On the other hand, pension contributions for childcare periods were not always paid; or if they were, they were often lower than if the caregiver had been working during that time.

The Polish universal pension system is the only one in Europe, and perhaps in the world, that entitles people to receive a pension (proportional to their contributions, and therefore often dramatically low) based on the completion of one day's work. As a result, it has 'brought to light' women who, under the previous system, would not have received pensions at all and would have had to rely on social assistance in the absence of income from other sources. The non-linear careers of women are only partially recognized by the Polish pension system. Moreover, this system 'rewards' periods of farm work in a very minor way. Although a separate system for farmers exists, to receive a pension from farming, one must document 25 years of contributory periods. If a person has worked in agriculture for a shorter period, their pension from ZUS can be increased, but only by a small amount.

Data and Methods

Sample Description

This research study is based on nine qualitative interviews that we conducted between March and May 2022 as a complementary part of the Polish Panel Survey (POLPAN) research project (Tomescu-Dubrow et al., 2021). With the approval of the study leader, we selected people who declared in the 2018 wave of POLPAN that they were receiving a pension below the minimum pension threshold. At the time it was PLN 1029.80 gross (which usually meant PLN 878.12 net, that is, around 206 Euro, and we took this figure as a threshold for sampling). In addition, when selecting interviewees, we applied the year of birth criterion, and later, when selecting interviews for analysis, we also used the criterion of retirement year and age. We wanted to make sure that we were analyzing the narratives of people covered by the new pension system in Poland.[4]

The group of people who met all the aforementioned criteria comprised 18 people (17 women and 1 man). However, we were not able to contact six of those people at all, we found out that one person had died, and two people refused to participate in the study, so we interviewed nine participants (women only). The women we interviewed were between 65 and 73 years old. They lived in five provinces of Poland: four lived in rural areas, three in small or medium-sized towns (under 70,000 inhabitants), and two in large cities (over 250,000 inhabitants). Additional socio-demographic data about the participants in our study are provided in Table 1.

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[4] We excluded some participants from the sample on which this analysis is based, namely, people born up to and including 1948, as well as women who retired before 2009 and men who retired before 2014. We also did not include people who retired before the universal retirement age. While some people in Poland do have the right to retire early, to do so, one needs to have insurance seniority of 20/25 years (women/men), in which case the pension is raised to the lowest pension threshold. In addition, we excluded two people based on their employment history as recorded in the POLPAN study—one person most probably received a pension from the agricultural system, and we found no record of past work in the data concerning the other person.

Table 1. Selected socio-demographic characteristics of interviewees (all females)

Interview number	Interviewee's education	Family of the interviewee	Still below the minimum in 2022?
1	secondary vocational	married, 3 children	yes
2	secondary vocational	widowed, 2 children	no
3	primary or lower	married, 4 children	unclear
4	basic vocational	widowed, 2 children	no
5	secondary vocational	married, 3 children	yes
6	primary or lower	married, 8 children	no
7	basic vocational	married, 3 children	yes
8	basic vocational	widowed, 2 children	no
9	primary or lower	married, 3 children	yes

Source: Self-elaboration.

As it is shown in Table 1, the situation of some women was different at the time of our study versus 2018. Three of them were widowed and were receiving 85% of their husband's pensions instead of their pension, and one was benefiting from the Mama 4+ program. The situation of one interviewee was unclear.[5]

Method of Data Collection

We conducted the interviews at the interviewees' place of residence. The interviewing method was loosely inspired by Fritz Schütze's (1983) method of autobiographical narrative interviews. We began by asking the participants to tell the story of their lives. Most of the interviewees found it difficult to develop an extended free-flowing narrative about their lives,

which is why the interview turned into an unstructured in-depth interview. We came to the meeting with a prepared list of questions concerning both the biography and the issues of particular interest in the context of our study—the assessment of the participants' lives, their current life situation and its perceived sources, their strategies for coping with their current economic situation, and their attitudes toward helping people in financial dire straits. We asked these questions when the free narrative ended.[6] We recorded the interviews on a voice recorder (except for interview 7 where the interviewee did not agree to be recorded; we made a detailed note of that interview). The interviews lasted between 45 and 140 minutes (approx. 70 minutes on average). The recordings were transcribed and we relied on the transcriptions for our analysis.

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[5] During the interview, she reported a pension amount lower than the minimum, while stating that her pension had been increased due to the birth and raising of four children.

[6] In addition, after the interview we asked the interviewees to complete two short questionnaires, but this article will not draw on the data obtained from them.

Method of Analysis

We used the biographical interview method to gather information about the interviewees' life course and to understand their perspectives and later conducted a thematic analysis arranging interviewees' statements in themes (Braun and Clarke 2012). The biography in itself was not a subject of in-depth analysis, but rather a tool for understanding the circumstances that had influenced the interviewees' current pension status; and, more broadly, the material situation. When analyzing the interviews, we looked at the course of the different stages of the interviewees' lives (childhood, adolescence, early and middle adulthood, current stage of life), looking in particular for factors that, either according to the interviewees or in our view, might have influenced their working life, material situation, and pension. To aid our analysis, we used MAXQDA software, consulting the shape of the coding tree with each other on an ongoing basis. We also occasionally supported the analysis of the qualitative material by using questionnaire data on the interviewees (in this paper, we do so in the section *Adversities During Childhood and Adolescence*).

Results: Determinants of Low Pensions Through the Lens of Employment Career

In this section, we focus on factors that contributed to the participants' non-linear employment careers and eventually resulted in their low pensions. We follow their stories chronologically, according to their life trajectories, and aim to describe all the important life events that might have influenced their current situation following the definition of employment career as a sequence of paid and registered work and other activities.

Adversities During Childhood and Adolescence

Many interviewees recalled the difficulties they had experienced during childhood and adolescence, such as an illness or absence of one parent, poverty, and sometimes domestic violence. Concerning connections with work in the first stages of life, some interviewees took up 'odd' jobs at an early age to support the household budget or to cover their needs, whereas some had to help their parents with the farm work. They were also brought up in an environment that inured them to the performance of unpaid housework.

The first significant issue that sheds light on this situation is the family background of the participants of our study. The POLPAN survey provides data on the education of the interviewees' fathers. In six cases, it was a primary education or lower; in two cases, lower vocational education, and one father had secondary vocational education. As for mothers, we have data only in five cases (in all of them, the mothers had primary education). According to the narrative interviews, the fathers of most of the interviewees worked in farming or performed low-skilled, physical jobs in the industrial sector. One interviewee mentioned that she and her siblings had been raised only by their mother. Another participant stated that her father had died when she was 10 years old. Most families followed a traditional family model, close to the male breadwinner model. Fathers were working for pay, while mothers were raising children, doing housework, and working on a farm, and they took up paid work only periodically. Although we did not ask directly about the economic status of the respondents' family homes, a considerable proportion of interviewees spontaneously stated that it had been difficult and that they also had to take up work to secure their needs or support the family budget.

My childhood was... well, not... not too great. No, no. We were poor. My mom raised us alone, three kids. So it wasn't too great. Well, it feels painful when I think about it. [Interview 4]

[M]y mom was more of a housewife, and later on, she also got into the cottage industry. And I would go to school, come back, and help her out, right? [Interview 3]

I was in sixth grade, and I already went to work with the saplings, in the forest. There was a nice gamekeeper, and he took me and my sister, I earned some money to buy… well, I won't tell you maybe... panties. And I would always earn some money to buy [things] for school. [Interview 6]

In some cases, the participants rated their situation as not so bad, but expanded on this by referring to the resourcefulness and flexibility of their parents rather than to easy and secure life circumstances.

I mean, let me tell you, my mom was a very resourceful woman, and she coped well with everything. [Interview 8]

Following the assumption of the interconnectedness of life stages, we considered the moment of educational decision-making in the early period of biography as being critical for the further employment histories of the interviewees. The decisions about choosing a school and continuing or discontinuing education were rarely made independently. The 'linked lives principle' points to the social entanglement of the unfolding of biography and this is perfectly illustrated by the fact that the parents of the interviewees had a significant say in their educational choices. Namely, the situation of the entire household was taken into account. It was important whether the family could afford the cost of schooling (the distance between the school and home was considered, as commuting potentially generated additional costs). Moreover, in some cases, the interviewees were under pressure to become economically independent quickly, which meant that they had to take low-paid jobs that did not require high qualifications. Only two interviewees said they had tried to pursue their educational ambitions—with little or no support from their family members, and with no positive outcome.

Three interviewees have either primary or lower education; three have basic vocational education, whereas three others completed secondary vocational schools. The interviewees, as well as their parents had ambiguous attitudes toward education. In some cases, participants had their education goals, as well as some of their parents valued education. However, in other cases, families forced the interviewees to either choose 'practical' education or leave school and get a job.

Researcher: And what kind of school was it? And how come you went there?
Interviewee: Well, to get an occupation. Yes, yeah. My mom took care of that. [Interview 4]

My parents wanted me to become independent as soon as possible because my dad was ill, he had a heart condition and health problems, he also started to go to sanatoriums a lot, and he was afraid that his heart would simply stop beating one day, and I wouldn't be independent yet, right? [He was afraid that] Mom wouldn't be able to support us all, and so on. [Interview 1]

Many participants reported they had been forced out of education by external factors. The first one

was the economic situation. In some cases, the participants and their families did not have the resources necessary to continue their education. One lacked funds to buy the necessities, another one could not move to another town that had an adequate school. They also did not have sufficient time to spend on education. Instead, they were expected to work and contribute to the family.

> We had a hard life, too, because it was one father at home, and four kids, right? And we had to cut down on everything, so when I went on holidays, my friend and I used to hitch-hike...in May, June, July, August, I went to holiday resorts [to work] as a waitress. And there we earned money for books, copybooks, to relieve our parents, right? [Interview 2]

> No, I was forced to, it wasn't my choice. Well, I wanted to be a nurse. That was my dream. But, unfortunately… I would have had to live in a rented room because there was no boarding school, and my mom couldn't afford it. So that is why. It was forced upon me. [Interview 4]

Therefore, some participants could not obtain the kind of education that would facilitate their entry into the labor market, and, in the end, this affected their work and pension size.

Adult Life: Between Paid Employment and Other Activities

As for employment careers in adulthood, they were relatively discontinuous, and in most cases, they included different 'odd' jobs and short-term work episodes, as well as periods of unpaid work, which resembles the concepts proposed above of 'non-linear' or 'patchwork' careers. The interviewees predominantly explained this situation

by referring to factors beyond their control, such as caregiving responsibilities, the onset of health problems, and the labor market situation, that is, the unavailability of suitable jobs in their area of residence. Following their accounts, concerning the relationship between employment and retirement pensions, we observed a paradox. Despite the absence of continuous paid employment, it is very clear that the lives of the interviewees were filled with hard work that simply did not translate into retirement benefits later. This work comprises three categories: caregiving and household duties, farm work, as well as 'odd' jobs performed without any formal contract. All the interviewees maintained a pragmatic balance between these three types of work and 'official' occupational careers. That balance was often complicated and unstable, with the interviewees having had to adapt to the needs of the moment. The interviewees often decided to take up paid jobs when there was a shortage of money in the household. The decisions regarding the 'structure of work' ('official' paid job, paid work without a formal contract, domestic work, and farm work) at a given moment were determined primarily by the well-being of the family and not the individual.

> Then my mom fell ill again, and I had to give up my job again. Well, who else was supposed to look after her? So there I was with my mom, and then my granddaughter was born. So my daughter says she'd like to go to work. And I say, "You'll earn more, because by that time she had a university degree, so you'll always have a better job than me." [Interview 9]

While an 'official' paid job was not central to most biographies, it may have been a means to achieve those goals that were important for the interviewees, who thought about themselves in collective

rather than individual terms. Throughout their biographies, the participants organized their lives around being part of a family, especially given the shortage of caregiving institutions that could take over family care responsibilities. Such responsibilities, in effect, excluded participants from the labor market. Faced with important life turning points such as the birth of their children, or the illness of their parents or other family members, the interviewees quit their jobs to provide the necessary care.

[I was working] on site, nice and pleasant, it was great, but then I got pregnant, and had a kid, right? One year later, I gave birth to another one and I had to say goodbye to my job. Who would've [taken care of my child]? There was no childcare place. If there had been a childcare place, I would've signed them up for childcare, right? [Interview 2]

I didn't have any leave, either maternity leave or parental leave, because I didn't, I just… well, I didn't work for a long time… it was something like five, or five and a half years, or something, and then, as I said, my father was ill, so I quit my job, right? [Interview 3]

It is interesting, however, that although six out of nine interviewees reported quitting their jobs because of caregiving responsibilities, only two explicitly stated that they were forced to do so by the absence of caregiving institutions, while others just reported that they 'had to' do it, which might be deeply nested in the traditional gendered view of household responsibilities. According to the interviewees, they took up the caregiver role voluntarily. They perceived caring responsibilities as a woman's domain and presented it as the natural order of things. When they gave birth to children,

they postponed paid work or quit their current job to undertake childcare. They also had to quit their jobs to look after their parents or other relatives. This issue was reported by six of the nine participants. In some narratives, they provide some arguments, but in others, they say that they just 'had to.'

My husband worked a lot, did different shifts… and, well, there were situations where I just felt I was needed here, and not elsewhere. [Interview 1]

Well, and then, later on, once my father was bedridden, there was no other choice, I had to quit my job, right? [Interview 3]

The kids were little, three children, I couldn't just leave them with my mother, so I had to. As I said, only when my younger daughter went to school did I go to work. [Interview 9]

Their activities were also the outcomes of decisions taken by their husbands, who directed them to take up housework.

My husband preferred for me to stay at home. He always did. He didn't want me to work anywhere. But, not later on. Later on, when the boys... He preferred me to be at home, to make sure everything was ready on time, and so on, so that I could take care of the children. But, later, as I told you, when one [son] got married and the other one was about to finish secondary school... Well, then my husband didn't mind anymore. [Interview 4]

It is, however, not easy to distinguish the fulfillment of gender roles voluntarily from coerced because a husband's directions are a part of the patriarchy that assigned those roles to women in the first place.

Concerning the labor market situation, the participants reported direct obstacles that prevented them from getting a job. Two of them complained about the lack of suitable jobs, whereas some mentioned changes in enterprises after the 1989 transition that resulted in employment cuts. The interviewees mostly lived in small towns and villages where the supply of jobs was limited, especially for workers with low education and qualifications.

> And so, of course, I didn't go to work anymore because later on... the kids were older, but it was already hard to find a job. In fact, because, you know, if you have no occupation, it's hard, isn't it? [Interview 3]

> I couldn't find a job. I still remember when my son, the older one, went to school, and I was looking for a job, but I couldn't find any. Nobody wanted to hire me, right? It was... I think it was a time of high unemployment then, I think. [Interview 4]

> There was a State Machinery Center nearby. That's what used to exist: communal cooperatives, farmers' guilds [*kółka rolnicze*]. They were all liquidated later. Our Center was very well developed because we had a tire retreading point, but it was all sold, they sold it for peanuts. They bought it for a lot of money and sold it for peanuts. They destroyed it all. [Interview 5]

One interviewee mentioned that in the 1990s, she had worked for about six months with an employer who asked her to sign a short-term contract for each month, but only did so for fear of being inspected. At the end of each month, he tore up the contract. The interviewee thus worked *de facto* without a contract, and no pension contributions were paid. Later on, this turned out to be fraught with consequences because if the employer had paid contributions for that period, the interviewee's total insurance seniority would have exceeded 20 years, and her pension would have been increased to the minimum pension.

It must be noted that the lack of suitable jobs mentioned by some interviewees could have been related to the general situation in Poland at the time (e.g., high unemployment during the period concerned) or the local specificities of the labor market in peripheral areas. Moreover, the mismatch between the interviewees' education and qualifications and the labor market requirements contributed to their difficult situation. This observation adds an important dimension that was not visible directly, namely, that the place of residence, that is, small towns and villages, with their structural deficiencies (in transport, infrastructure, labor market), played a significant role in the participants' situation later in life.

The last issue in the interviewees' employment histories is the terminations of work, which came about not because of care or reproductive work, but health issues. Four interviewees experienced serious health problems—either physical or mental, or both. Consequently, three of them transitioned to a disability pension as a result, and once they achieved the retirement age, they moved from a disability pension to a retirement pension. A fourth interviewee applied for a disability pension, but without success.

The first of the aforementioned interviewees developed an illness at work and, in the interview, she explicitly linked her resignation from further gainful work to her health problems.

> But, I didn't work for too long, fifteen years, because I was struck down by a very serious illness. I didn't walk at all for six months. I was ill, I had [name of illness]. After an untreated flu. This is what they said…

The bakery was not heated [after being closed for a few days], it was very cold, like in winter...I came down with the flu, and during the communist times, people were not allowed to get sick leave. I was on sick leave for three days only, I went to see a doctor on the fourth day, and I got one more day and went back to work. And I neglected the flu terribly, and I got that bad disease after that flu. [Interview 5]

The second woman said that her retirement was related to her inability to continue to perform the heavy physical work at her job (cleaning stairwells in blocks of flats).

Then I took a disability pension because I couldn't work anymore because of my health, because I had to carry water up to the fourth floor to wash the staircases, and my heart was already very weak. [Interview 6]

This statement signals a broader problem, namely, a limited choice of earning opportunities for individuals living in a small town or village, and with a relatively low level of education. Presumably, the lack of available job options, probably caused by macroeconomic changes, may also have influenced the third interviewee's decision to retire due to disability. She worked as a procurement clerk at the school attended by her children, and then she began to experience mental health problems.

So we walked together and it was fun, nice. I would buy these [things], for major purchases we'd travel to [name of town], and they gave us a car, we'd drive there. Or we might have cycled to the local shop as well, right? And things weren't bad...Later, they liquidated these canteens, right? So those canteens existed, but they were liquidated later. [a longer pause] And that's how it was, later on, I got ill, I remained ill, and later on, I qualified for a disability pension. [Interview 2]

The fourth interviewee experienced a turning point in her biography, resulting in serious health problems. This woman lost her husband and a young child within a short period. In addition to the psychological distress that resulted from these events, she suffered from several physical conditions. In the interview, she said that she had never returned to her previous job as a shop assistant due to health problems (however, it is worth noting that she eventually gave up on the idea of returning to work when she had three children, so the need to provide for them was probably an additional factor). This particular interviewee unsuccessfully applied for a disability pension.

In the Polish pension system, not only the course of employment is important but also its reflection in the Social Security Institution records. When applying for an old age pension, two participants could not prove their full employment history, which resulted in gaps in their records. The first one sought an increase in her pension unsuccessfully, due to the unavailability of some of her employment records (lost by her employer), the other one also could not provide the required records as they had been destroyed by her employer.

I went to ZUS, and they told me that if I had all the records, then maybe I'd get a bit more, maybe not too much, but something. But, I went to that Chamber [of Crafts], and the woman said, "We simply don't have those records anymore," so to speak. Well, when I finished working, I was twenty-four, so it's a long time to be sixty years of age. So that stuff might just not have been there anymore. Well, maybe in some archive, not sure. But, she said there

weren't any records, well, they just didn't have them anymore. [Interview 8]

But, I didn't have my earnings recorded. Well, and when I was about to retire, I went there to say that I wanted these [earnings confirmations]. "But, we don't have this documentation. It was destroyed because we were moving our headquarters, and all the documents older than 1979 or 1980, the older ones, were destroyed." So that's it. So my retirement pension is calculated at the lowest rates from that period. [Interview 1]

The situation of these two interviewees is due to the fact that before 1999, pension contributions were not recorded in the individual accounts of insured persons. Therefore, after the reform, people who worked before 1999 had to document their insurance history and the amount of earnings during that period on their own so that their contributions could be included in the calculation of their pensions. Many years after finishing work, completion of the documentation often turned out to be very difficult. Moreover, at the beginning of the economic transition (after 1989), many companies were restructured, privatized, or went out of business. The regulations for preserving employee records were not tight enough, and much documentation was lost (Louchin 2018).

Discussion and Conclusions

Our team's analysis of the participants' biographies allowed us to identify and describe those factors that underpin the low retirement pensions analyzed in the framework that links employment career and retirement. In all of the biographies, the unfavorable current situation is a product of a combination of numerous disadvantages and obstacles that occurred at different stages of life. Those disadvantag-

es did not only accumulate in specific spheres of life but they also reinforced one another over the course of the same. When following the biographies of the participants, we noted that the concept of a linear career was incompatible with their perspectives and experiences. Their careers, peppered with short episodes of paid work, are in fact full of unpaid reproductive work and other unpaid activities. That image is convergent with analyses of reproductive unpaid work as being highly gendered (e.g., Del Re 2010) and the notion of precarity as being a general condition for women in the labor market (Federici 2006). While this type of labor is not perceived as 'work' in the institutional meaning and is not sufficiently acknowledged by the country's pension system, in the interviewees' account they spent life occupied, doing hard but necessary and fulfilling work.

Before 1999, the participants in our study would not have been entitled to any pensions. After the reform, they received retirement benefits, which, however, were lower than the minimum pension, and lower than the social minimum.[7] The number of 'below-the-minimum' pensions would continue to increase in the coming years. Moreover, the replacement rate (the ratio of post-retirement income to pre-retirement income) in Poland is declining, even among those who have earned pensions higher than the minimum. This situation raises questions about how to protect people in receipt of pensions from poverty. Some countries have introduced systems of basic pensions granted based on residence or citizenship. In Poland, a person whose pension is not enough to live on can only look to the social assistance system. However, very few people meet

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[7] Social minimum "defines a model category allowing the minimum level of decent life, necessary for social integration" (Kurowski 2020:33).

the exorbitant income threshold criteria for obtaining assistance. Secondly, the so-called 'permanent allowance' granted to people unable to work due to age (The Social Assistance Act [Ustawa z dnia 12 marca 2004 r. o pomocy społecznej]) is currently close to what is regarded as a subsistence level.[8] It is also reduced by the amount of income the person receives from other sources (such as, for example, a pension). Thirdly, the use of social assistance in Poland is fraught with negative stereotypes and the risk of stigmatization.

The topic of an old-age pension being below the minimum retirement pension is a new phenomenon, which has not yet been analyzed in depth in Poland. This issue is becoming more and more relevant because of the huge number of people working with non-standard contracts who are not entitled to full social security (Kiersztyn 2016; Mrozowicki and Czarzasty 2020), which, in the near future, will result in an increase in the number of people receiving low pensions. We believe that preventing pensioner poverty requires coordination among various branches of public policy. Possible changes to the pension system alone are not enough when there are significant inequalities in society regarding access to education, the labor market, or institutions providing care for dependent family members.

While in this article we have focused on the external determinants of the interviewees' situations, a closer analysis, which exceeds the scope of this article, could cast light on the agency of the interviewees: how resourceful they were in their daily lives, what kinds of coping strategies they

employed, and how they pursued not only family objectives but also their individual goals, if only on a micro-scale. Further analysis could be conducted using the intersectional framework, or with the concept of employment precarity applied to the employment careers of participants. In future research, granting researchers access to Social Security Institution's data would be highly valuable (currently, it is nearly impossible). Comparing the circumstances of older women with limited and irregular work histories across countries and various pension/welfare systems would also be insightful. The experiences from this pilot project are being used in a separate study on older people receiving pensions below the minimum, titled *Paltry Pensions' in the Context of the Sense of Social Justice and the Goals of Pension Policy. A Multidimensional Sociological Analysis* and funded by the National Science Center, Poland. In the qualitative component of this project, researchers seek to reach a more diversified sample composition that would include retired women and men belonging to various social strata.

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[8] Subsistence minimum "defines the lowest possible level of consumption allowing the households to survive" (Kurowski 2020:33).

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Citation

Awareness Context and Social Recognition: Reconsidering a Case Study of "Dialogue" between Different Ethnic Persons in Japan

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Abstract: This study incorporates Honneth's social recognition into awareness context theory by reconsidering a case study of the dialogue between *Zainichi* Korean and Japanese people in Japan. It revitalizes the theoretical significance of Strauss' symbolic interactionism in terms of its focus on power dynamics and conflicts between the majority and minorities that differ in the cultural or ethnic background in modern global society. Incorporating critical theory into symbolic interactionism is a method of enhancing its contemporary significance. However, the discrepancy between them remains unresolved. There are some previous studies on *Zainichi* Koreans' dialogue and the public sphere. Still, this case uniquely fits the aim of this study.

As a result, it proposes both a substantive theory as a social justice inquiry in Japanese society and a modified formal theory of awareness context by adopting the theoretical perspective coined in this study and using abductive reasoning in the reconsideration. The substantive theory proposes a joint action characterized by unending mutual recognition and pragmatist dissent as a pragmatist public sphere between different ethnic persons in Japan. It is a method of grassroots communication that realizes liberal democracy as the form of modern society in Japan, liberating people from the Japanese communitarian mindset of *Wa*. The formal theory proposes new awareness contexts focusing on information and social recognition, which applies to the majority-minority relationship that differs in cultural or ethnic backgrounds from a theoretical perspective by focusing on conflicts between traditional cultural communities and modern society. Additionally, as an implication of this study, a pluralistic character of symbolic interactionism united by common frameworks of formal theories is proposed.

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Recently, the sufficiency of symbolic interactionism (SI) to analyze the complexity of interactions in contemporary modern society has been brought into question. In this study, I consider complexity as the struggles or conflicts between majorities and minorities who differ in terms of cultural or ethnic backgrounds in global macro societies. Particularly, after the Second World War, this theme has been examined from a critical perspective in anthropological, post-colonial, Asian, and African studies that aimed for human equality and liberation. These studies mainly analyzed and criticized the concrete macro structures of dominant-subordinate relationships. Thus, they did not focus on the theoretical elaboration of complex interactions in the structures, which is one of the most notable research interests in SI. However, comparing SI with critical theories, some interactionists have focused on the micro-orientation of conventional SI, highlighting its failure to deal with macro-structures (see: Shalin 1992a). Further, it has sought objective and neutral knowledge without any value judgments and has been insufficient in analyzing power relationships (see: Shalin 1992a). These criticisms largely remain unresolved. Indeed, a project that attempts to answer these criticisms, revitalizing the potential of SI by incorporating critical theories, has been developed (see: Jacobsen 2019a). The possibility of a grounded theory with a critical perspective has also been considered (see: Charmaz 2005; Denzin 2007; Gibson 2007). These attempts are in their initial phase. Thus, they neither form a common view nor sufficient accumulation of their knowledge. Moreover, the discrepancy between critical theory and SI has been rarely elaborated (see: Gibson 2007; Jacobsen 2019b), and the fundamental difficulty of theoretical unity lies between them (see: Langman 2019).

This study incorporates social recognition in Honneth's critical theory into the awareness context theory in Strauss' SI through a reconsideration of a case study of "dialogue" between *Zainichi* Korean and Japanese people in Japan. It attempts to revitalize awareness context theory and Strauss' SI and their contemporary significance by resolving some of the existing criticisms and coining a theoretical perspective that can be used to analyze complex interactions in contemporary modern society. Specifically, it proposes both a substantive theory using a particular case as a social justice inquiry in face-to-face communication between the ethnic minority and majority in Japanese society and a modified formal theory of awareness context with social recognition, which is applicable to majority-minority relationships that differ in cultural or ethnic backgrounds from the perspective of modern society. Additionally, I propose that this attempt widens the scope and plurality of SI.

This study focuses on Honneth's social recognition[1] for two reasons: (1) his recognition theory is compatible with SI because he reconstructed Hegel's theory of social recognition with Mead's social psychology (Fraser and Honneth 2003; Honneth 2005) and (2) he focuses on the conflicts between the majority and minority who differ in the cultural or ethnic background as "the struggle for recognition" (Honneth 2002; 2005; 2012), proposing the affective or emotional mutual recognition of existential persons as a condition for the social integration of modern society (see: Fraser and Honneth 2003). Till now, SI has rarely focused on Honneth's theory. Furthermore, I found only one book review by Athens (2017) and one empirical study by Eramian and Mallory (2022)

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[1] Habermas' (1985; 1986) communicative critical theory is also compatible with SI (see: Shalin 1992a). However, it does not suit the purpose of this study because it focuses on the rearrangement between macro systems and lifeworld. Further, no studies have been conducted on the comparative analysis between awareness or consensus in SI and recognition or consensus in critical theory.

that applies social recognition. However, the latter does not refer to the difference between critical theory and SI, although its research project is similar to this study.

This study focuses on the awareness context theory in Strauss' SI for three reasons. First, Strauss' theoretical perspective is in a meso domain, which connects micro and macro domains (Maines 1982; Hall 1997), and some interactionists have elaborated and expanded on his perspective for the analysis of power relationships (see: Hall 1997; Wolfe 2002). Thus, it is suitable as a counterpart of SI to Honneth's theory, which analyzes micro-human power relationships in the macro conditions of modern society. Second, the compatibility between the grounded theory proposed by Glaser and Strauss and critical theory has been considered. For instance, Denzin (2007) has incorporated grounded theory into critical theory, and Charmaz (2005) and Gibson (2007) have incorporated critical theory or perspective into grounded theory. Thus, their theories have critical character. In contrast, this study incorporates critical character into a substantive theory of the case of "dialogue" in Japan and also incorporates critical theory, exempting critical character, into a formal theory of awareness context, as mentioned below. Third, awareness context theory can analyze conflicts and their transformations in interactions between the majority and minority because it focuses on the interactions of identity management and the shifts in their contexts. However, the theory's potential in the substantive area has not been considered because it has been mainly used in the areas of medicine, nursing, and care, including Glaser and Strauss (1965). Furthermore, former studies have claimed that the theory proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1964) mainly focuses on information management by rational interactants. Therefore, it un-

derestimates the aspects of both affection or emotion and interpersonal acknowledgment and does not consider the relationship between awareness and acknowledgment because of the ambiguity of the interpretation process by interactants in understanding or acknowledgment (Timmermans 1994; Mamo 1999; Hellström, Nolan, and Lundh 2005). Nevertheless, I insist that the awareness context theory can overcome its limits when we incorporate Strauss' (1993; 1997) theoretical perspective, Scheff's (1967; 1970; 2005a; 2005b) perspective on awareness context, and Honneth's social recognition with it.

This study incorporates only the explanatory parts of Honneth's critical theory into Strauss' SI because one must carefully exempt critical or progressive logical structures that reflect the normative or ideological standpoints of the author to maintain the generic character of theoretical perspectives in SI. The fundamental theoretical difference lies between critical theory and SI. Critical theories largely have the quality of diagnosis or critical assessment to reform society. Thus, the theories have idealistic and normative characters (see: Bohman 1999; Fraser and Honneth 2003). Honneth's critical theory is a grand theory constructed from theories of various academic fields and is intertwined with a critical and progressive perspective and the explanatory theory of humans and society (see: Fraser and Honneth 2003; Honneth 2005). Conversely, SI largely has the quality of perspective and method for empirical studies (see: Blumer 1986), and it has accumulated findings from such studies. Strauss' SI consists of formal analytical theories for empirical studies, grounded theory methodology for empirical studies, and substantive theories for practical solutions to people using them that are interrelated (see: Strauss 1993; Corbin and Strauss 2008).

Additionally, we should verify the incorporated concepts in empirical studies to see whether they fit the practices of people (see also Shalin 1992b) because Honneth's theory is grand. Thus, this study reconsiders the case study of "dialogue" between *Zainichi* Koreans as an ethnic minority and Japanese as a majority in Japan (Yamaguchi 2008; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2018) to both test their concepts and coin a theoretical perspective that can be used to analyze complex interactions in contemporary modern society. Here, the term *Zainichi* Koreans mainly refers to Korean migrants and their descendants who came to the Japanese islands from the Korean peninsula during Japan's Great Empire era and includes people who are of different nationalities, such as the Republic of Korea (South Korea), *Chosen* (the Japanese name for undivided Korea used by *Zainichi* Koreans), or Japan. This definition signifies historical differences from Koreans who came to Japan after the Second World War and those who came to Japan in the premodern era (Tonomura 2004). Historically, the percentage of *Zainichi* Koreans in Japan's population is approximately 1%, although this does not appear in official statistics reported by the Japanese government (Tonomura 2004). There is a vast number of studies on *Zainichi* Koreans and their society. I found several books in English (Fukuoka 2000; Ryang 2005; Chapman 2008; Morris-Suzuki 2007; Lie 2008; Ryang and Lie 2009; Kim-Wachutka 2020; Ropers 2020; Kim 2021), as well as many books and articles in Japanese. However, there are few studies on their dialogues and the public sphere.[2] Seo (2012) studies a counter-public sphere of *Zainichi* Korean women within the context of *Zainichi* Korean society, Lee (2016) studies dialogues between *Zain-*

ichi Koreans with Japanese nationality and people with double ethnicities of *Zainichi* Korean and Japanese in the context of *Zainichi* Korean society, and Lee (2018) studies a transnational public sphere between Japan and South Korea in the context of social movements run by highly motivated activists. Unlike these previous studies, this case of dialogue fits the purpose of this study. It is not part of a collective social movement, but a case of face-to-face interaction as a public sphere, revealing ethnic differences. It is not in the context of only *Zainichi* Korean society, but in the intersectional context of both *Zainichi* Korean and Japanese societies.

It is not sufficient when the theory only fits one case. However, upon reconsideration in this study, Honneth's social recognition is found to fit the case, and the analytical perspective coined in this study is distinctive and useful. In the following sections, the character of social recognition in Honneth's limited critical theory,[3] the character of awareness context, consensus, and its recursive structure in SI, and the connectivity between them will be examined. These comprise the first step to incorporating the concepts of critical theory into SI.

Social Recognition in the Limited Critical Theory

Limitation and Alteration of Honneth's Theory

Honneth's theory has critical and progressive logical structures. For example, his thought that modern society progresses through "the struggle for recognition" in the future, the moderate value realism that trans-historical and universally validated values

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[2] This study exempts Chapman's (2008) notions regarding *Zainichi* Korean women's participation in the public sphere in the 1990s from consideration. The book contains neither empirical details based on rich data nor theoretical elaboration on its public sphere.

[3] I also referred to the Japanese translation versions of Honneth (2002; 2005; 2012) and Fraser and Honneth (2003).

exist, the conceptual priority of love to every other form of reciprocal recognition, the acceptance of the independence of others that the recognition form of love releases, normative and idealistic solidarity in modern society, the conceptual priority of recognition over cognition, the primordiality of recognition in intersubjective relationships, and reification as the forgetfulness of primordial recognition (Honneth 2002; 2005; 2012). These themes are empirically impossible in a strict sense because of their highly abstract and idealistic character, and the variety and complexity of interactions in the empirical world[4] are not considered because of their strong normative and ideological orientations. As these are not theoretical but empirical matters in SI, this study appropriates his social recognition concept to enhance theoretical sensitivities on these themes, exempting his critical and progressive logical structures.

Further, the shift in the main analytical focus in Honneth's theory is required for the aim of this study. Honneth's (2002; 2005; 2012) theory analytically focuses on a person's esteem, which consists of social recognitions anchored by primordial recognition. The moment of "the struggle for recognition" can be judged in the affective or emotional attitude of the self against the lack of social or primordial recognition in intersubjective relationships. In other words, its judgment can be measured in the degree of lack of recognition in one's self-esteem. The awareness context theory analytically focuses on interactions in which persons represent identities rather than self-esteem (see: Strauss 1993). Therefore, this study shifts self-esteem to interaction in the main analytical focus of Honneth's theory and

alters his terminology to suit interactions in various situations—social esteem and self-esteem in one's attitude are replaced with collective evaluation and self-evaluation in interactions, which are compatible with Strauss' (1997) perspective. Thus, the degree of lack of social recognition in the judgment of self-esteem can be replaced by the gradation of these lacks revealed in interactions.

Social Recognition in the Limited Honneth's Theory

Honneth's social recognition is more than mere cognition of an object. It includes more or less a positive, affective or emotional, and existential attitude of the other or the self. A person can socially obtain activeness and autonomy through identification with the groups they belong to and being recognized by others in the groups. It is a mutual recognition when people positively empathize with each other by taking the other's standpoint. A person socially recognizes others, without denying or forgetting each other's existence, even if the person dislikes or hates them. That indicates that the degree of social recognition has gradations from severe to slight (Honneth 2002; 2012).

His social recognition has three forms—love, law, and collective evaluation.[5] These are the conditions for positive relationships. This suggests people can be identified with their personalities, be mutually autonomous under the law, and identify themselves with collective evaluations if they fulfill the conditions. Additionally, these forms are conditions for creating a life as a subject. They give people opportunities for self-confidence, self-respect, and self-evaluation (Honneth 2005).

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[4] The variety and complexity here include something other than the intersubjective dimension in focused interactions. People do not always behave carefully, and interaction is not always focused. See: Strauss (1993; 1997) and Goffman (1963).

[5] This study adopts love and law in Honneth's terminology to explain interactions.

Love is the recognition of a personality of the self or another, expressed by affective or emotional care. A love relationship is a foundation wherein a person forms self-confidence, which can be retained over interpersonal or physical distance. Examples include friendships, parent-child relationships, and erotic relationships between lovers (Honneth 2005).

Law is the recognition of obeying socially formed norms by controlling one's actions. People share a standpoint of the "generalized other" that law indicates. They recognize each other as legal persons who know their obligations and rights and understand they are responsible agents. A person in a legal relationship forms an attitude of self-respect, which means that they legally respect themselves and are legally respected by others. Modern laws, which have universalistic principles, are for all people to whom the laws apply, thus implying that exceptions and privileges are not admissible to them, and modern laws assume people to be rational and free beings. For instance, hierarchical ranking is prohibited when people recognize each other as legal persons in modern law. Conversely, tradition-bound laws formed by a community are for people belonging to that community. Their legal recognitions are restricted in their membership because the "generalized others" in the laws are applied only to their community members. Therefore, conflicts of legal recognition arise between a modern society with universalistic principles and traditional communities[6] (Honneth 2005).

Collective evaluation is the recognition of a person by themselves or others who belong to the same group, evaluating their abilities or outcomes that are significant for the group. The criteria of the evalua-

tions are formed and shared by the group members and include stages of evaluations or a scale of more-less or better-worse. A person can achieve the self-realization that their personality is different from the personalities of other members through collective evaluations (Honneth 2005).

A person holds negative affection or emotion, such as humiliation, insult, or shame, when they are disrespected in social recognition. This experience includes moral conflicts and deprivation or withholding of recognition forms. The person's experience causes an identity crisis in one or more forms of social recognition. The experience can be a moment that begins a social movement as a "struggle for recognition" if it is shared as a social problem. The disrespect in social recognition relates to reification. Reification refers to treating people as depersonalized objects as a result of losing the capacity to empathize with others, and it includes the denial or forgetting of social recognition. Reification is generally engendered as anonymous because it relies on the conventions of specific rigid thoughts or behaviors. That may be caused by the generalization of commodity exchange in capitalism or a social structural condition containing a lack of social recognition engendered by ideology or prejudice. Reification has the following gradations—from the dehumanization characteristic of racism or human trafficking to a slight degree, such that it barely constitutes a violation of the practical condition of human life (Honneth 2005; 2012).

Awareness Context Theory and Its Connectivity to Social Recognition

Awareness Context in Strauss' SI

The perception or awareness of an object is related to interaction in SI, whereas it is related to the indi-

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[6] According to Honneth (2005), Mead's concept of the "generalized other" can apply to both traditional communities and post-traditional modern society.

vidual in psychology. According to Strauss (1997), awareness is a symbolic matter and is defined as a sensitizing concept required to analyze interaction. Glaser and Strauss (1964) define awareness context as the total combination of what specific persons or groups know about a specific issue. Although the combinations are enormous and complex, the total combination of what each interactant in a situation knows about the identity of the other and their identity in the eyes of the other is valid as long as we focus on simplified interactions. Context is a structural unit used to analyze interactions and encompasses orders greater than interactions.

Glaser and Strauss (1964) propose four types of awareness contexts that are empirically useful. However, unawareness context signifies the limitation of awareness contexts. Unawareness context is a combination in which interactants know neither the identity of the other nor their identity in the eyes of the other. That is illustrated by strangers meeting or passing each other on a dark street. Closed awareness context occurs when an interactant does not know either the other's identity or the other's view of their identity. Suspicion awareness context occurs when an interactant suspects the other's identity or the other's view of their identity or both. Mutual pretense awareness context occurs when both interactants know the other's authentic identity and the other's view of their authentic identity, but they pretend not to know.[7] Open awareness context occurs when both interactants

know the other's authentic identity and the other's view of their authentic identity. None of these definitions are inherently less stable than the others. They shift from one to another through changing situational conditions or interactions and interactants' modifying awareness. It is beneficial to supplement the definitions by adding an assessment of one's "own identity" (Glaser and Strauss 1964:678) to the two assessments of identity. An example can be illustrated through interactions in which an ethnic minority individual passes as a majority member by hiding their ethnic identity from that majority. This awareness context is closed when their passing succeeds. However, it shifts to suspicion when a majority of individuals suspect their ethnic identity. Awareness context is mutually pretentious when the majority person and the ethnic minority person know about the attempt to pass, but do not express it. If one of them expresses it, the awareness context becomes open, as illustrated below.

Consensus and the Recursive Structure in Scheff's SI

Scheff's concept of consensus is closely related to the idea of awareness context. According to Scheff, the agreement is an endorsement of an object or statement, and the consensus is equivalent to the open awareness context. Therefore, consensus occurs when each interactant agrees (assessment of self-identity), each knows that the other agrees (assessment of each other's identity), and each knows that the other knows that they agree (assessment of their identity in the eyes of the other). These are levels of consensus, and dissent arises if one or more of them are inaccurate. As he defines it operationally, the consensus seems to be the infinite reciprocal process of the assessment of interactants

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[7] Glaser and Strauss (1964) use the term "true identity" in their definition. Scheff (1970) claims ambiguity in the use of "true." This study uses the term "authentic/inauthentic" to indicate empirical definition by people, not as true/false concepts accompanied by the philosophical "problem of other minds" (Scheff 2005a:158). See also Muedeking (1992) and Strauss (1982; 1993).

with each other. Although this shows that consensus becomes the infinite regress in assessment, it is empirically up to the third level. Scheff places consensus into the recursive structure of mutual awareness in co-oriented (or intersubjective) interaction. This structure has two aspects—the co-ordination of interaction in a situation and affective or emotional attunement in an interpersonal relationship of interactants. The former is when interactants coordinate their acts in macro-social structural conditions, and they are aware of its aspect. Therefore, it implies social integration based on consensus. In contrast, the latter occurs when interactants empathize with each other in an interactional order and includes pride, face, shame, or embarrassment. This is invisible in Western culture. Thus, the interactants are rarely aware of its aspect (Scheff 1967; 1970; 2005a; 2005b).

Connectivity of Awareness Context Theory to Social Recognition

Based on the above, we can find connections between awareness and consensus in SI and social recognition in Honneth's critical theory, limited to the explanatory parts of humans and society—social recognition as an aspect of awareness. However, three points should be carefully confirmed and altered for the aim of this study. The first is the quality of interaction. The limited Honneth's theory is affinitive to SI because it focuses on linguistically mediated interaction (see: Fraser and Honneth 2003). Using Scheff's perspective, mutually empathized interpersonal relationships, of which people are typically unaware in interaction, and the negative experience, of which people are aware and react emotionally, can be placed into his social recognition and the experience of the lack of social recognition. The second is the assumption of

interactants. It has been evaluated that awareness context theory assumes rational interactants who manage information (including identities) (Timmermans 1994; Mamo 1999), whereas Honneth's theory assumes affective or emotional and existential subjects. Nevertheless, we can interpret that Strauss' (1997) idea of personal actors who have both emotional and rational aspects is equivalent to Honneth's idea of subjects when considering Strauss' entire perspective. Thus, we can assume a variety of existential persons with distinctive personalities, who sometimes behave rationally or emotionally in interactions or a mixture of both. That assumption makes the incorporation of the limited Honneth's theory into awareness context theory possible. Furthermore, this incorporation extends the usefulness of the theory. The third point is the difference between the perspectives of SI. Strauss defines concepts empirically, whereas Scheff defines concepts operationally. It is necessary to place Scheff's concepts into Strauss's theoretical perspective by regarding them as sensitizing concepts. Additionally, Scheff's perspective has two aspects, coordination and attunement, in interaction with the recursive structure of mutual awareness, whereas Strauss' (1997) perspective has both a social structural process and an affective or emotional interpersonal process in interaction. The consensus and recursive structure in Scheff's perspective can be placed into the awareness context theory in Strauss' perspective because both have the same two aspects in interaction. Therefore, we can legitimately place both information management and social recognition processes by existential interactants into Strauss' perspective of the awareness context theory, which means that the theory can include Timmermans' (1994) and Mamo's (1999) modified versions of the open awareness context.

Reconsideration of the "Dialogue" Case

Case and Method

This section reconsiders the case study of "dialogue" that I have researched (Yamaguchi 2008; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2018) as the second step to incorporate the concepts of critical theory into SI. The case *Param-Sendai* refers to a grassroots citizen activity group in the Miyagi prefecture of Japan, established in 1998 and virtually dissolved in 2011. Its purpose was to create a dialogue between *Zainichi* Korean and Japanese people. *Param* was a small group with 10-15 frequently participating members, although the group had approximately 100 registered persons on its mailing list. *Param* did not require formal registration for participation. Membership was very loose and subjective. Anyone who voluntarily joined the dialogue was treated as a member. Therefore, the degrees of their commitment to and motivations for participating in *Param* varied. The group held regular gatherings for dialogue once or twice a month in a meeting space at a public facility of the Sendai city government that supports citizen activities, as well as casual gatherings for dialogue at a roadside, a member's house, a restaurant, a pub, and so on. The number of Japanese members was greater than that of the *Zainichi* Koreans in most gatherings. In regular gatherings, the dialogue was generally practiced in the format of 4-15 members sitting in a circle, taking time for self-introduction among the members when a new participant joined. The themes of the dialogues concern *Zainichi* Korean issues, such as the recognition of their history, Japanese and Korean names, the experience of discrimination, and conviviality (*kyosei*).[8] I participated in the group as a member, specifically as a dialogue practitioner, with my research interest in face-to-face communication between different ethnic persons. I observed dialogues at 87 gatherings (with handwritten field notes and memos) from May 2003 to March 2008, interviewed 15 members (5 semi-structured interviews[9] and 44 casual non-structured interviews), and collected documents on the group's activities. The data included research records of dialogues and gatherings, transcriptions of interviews, memos of personal communications with other members, documents such as newsletters and emails, and my experiences as a member. I analyzed the social world using Strauss's (1993; 1997) theoretical perspective and his version of the grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2005; 2008; Corbin and Strauss 2008). This methodological procedure largely involves (1) open coding of the data, (2) coding and categorizing of the data based on Strauss' theoretical perspective and constant comparisons of codes and categories, and (3) theoretical samplings and saturation based on my research interest (however, these steps have been interrelated, sometimes moved back and forth, and partially overlapped chronologically). The reconsideration of the case in this paper also extends to the procedural process. The analytical aim was to construct a substantive theory of the case and verify and modify formal theories by corroborating them in the case study.[10] This is legitimate, even though it is neither the construction of a substantive the-

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[8] I use the term "conviviality" proposed by Inoue (1986) as a translation of *kyosei* (see also Yamaguchi 2008). *Kyosei* commonly means that various people live together, whereas Inoue used it as an academic and normative ideal to criticize homogeneous symbiosis.

[9] The main questions were: (1) time of and motivation for participating in *Param-Sendai*, (2) impression of *Param*'s activities and members, (3) changes in self-identity after committing to *Param*. These interviews were conducted in 2014. The number of interviewees was limited because *Param* had virtually been dissolved. The analysis in this study was mainly based on field notes, memos, and documents, whereas semi-structured interviews were supplemental.

[10] See also Ragin and Becker (1992) and Schwandt (2007) on the case and its research.

ory from the comparison of specific cases nor the construction of an entirely new formal theory from the comparison of various cases, as sociologists typically assume. The attempt to construct or modify a grounded theory from one or a few cases has previously been carried out (see: Timmermans 1994; Strauss 1995). However, it has not proposed a sufficiently elaborated and warranted grounded theory. A formal theory can be modified by its application and abductive reasoning in a specific and complex case because it has an open-ended character (see: Charmaz 2008; 2017). Thus, this reconsideration of the case study includes both descriptions that express the specificity of the case and explanations as to which theories apply (see: Schwandt and Gates 2018). When directly quoting the data, the following relevant information has been included—the participant (alphabet representing fictitious name), as well as their ethnicity (and generation if known), approximate age, and gender; place and date of data collection.

Social World and Symbolic Universe of the "Dialogue" Case

The relation of "dialogue" to Japanese society in this case, as described below, is equivalent to the social world's relation to the symbolic universe (or collective symbolization) in Strauss's (1993) theoretical perspective. The members involved in the case evaluated Japanese society and its people. The people were unaware of the histories and circumstances of the *Zainichi* Koreans, as seen in the narratives: "Japanese do not understand [*Zainichi* Koreans] at all" [Ms. T, *Zainichi* Korean, 40s, Newsletter No. 7, 2000] and "there are many people who did not know they were *Zainichi* Korean until they had grown up" [unknown, Newsletter No. 2, 1999]. They held stereotypes regarding *Zainichi* Koreans, as seen in:

"I had the stereotype that [all *Zainichi* Koreans] have wretched life stories" [Mr. C, Japanese, 40s, gathering, 1/8/2005] and "*Zainichi* Koreans are generally thought to have come to Japan by forced immigration as laborers" [Mr. S, second-generation *Zainichi* Korean, 50s, gathering, 16/9/2006). They sometimes discriminate against *Zainichi* Koreans, as seen in: "ordinary people may casually use such [discriminatory] words regardless of the generation" [Mr. W, Japanese, 60s, gathering, 20/5/2006]. The *Zainichi* Koreans used Japanese names to hide their ethnic identities to avoid these challenges in this society, as seen in: "there are many *Zainichi* Koreans who use a Japanese name [instead of a Korean name]" [unknown, Newsletter No. 2, 1999] and "otherwise we [*Zainichi* Koreans] will be bullied by Japanese" [Ms. T, *Zainichi* Korean, 40s, Newsletter No. 7, 2000]. I analyzed and concluded that the lack of face-to-face communication channels between people who represent *Zainichi* Korean and Japanese identities was revealed in the society (Yamaguchi 2012).

The members rarely experienced communication channels representing *Zainichi* Korean and Japanese identities in Japanese society. They were either of two types—a friendly cosmetic sociality or communication where people represent ethnic groups based on the knowledge of their stereotypes. The former was seen in the narrative: "a *Zainichi* Korean friend cheerfully behaves to Japanese, but does not talk about worries concerning a *Zainichi* Korean, whereas a [Japanese] friend shows kindness [to them] by supposing the standpoint of the *Zainichi* Korean [even though they know little]" [Ms. D, Japanese who married a *Zainichi* Korean, 40s, Newsletter No. 15, 2005]. The latter was seen in "[an old Japanese said,] not only you [*Zainichi* Koreans] had a very hard time but also we [Japanese] did [in the empire period]" [Ms. A, second-generation *Zainichi*

Korean, 70s, Newsletter No. 1, 1999) and "[a Japanese person said,] we apologize [to the *Zainichi* Koreans] that we had done" [Ms. A, second-generation *Zainichi* Korean, 70s, gathering, 29/10/2005]. However, there were no dialogues among the people (Yamaguchi 2012).

The members evaluated the communication modes (or substantive forms, in other words) of Japanese society. People living in the society could not talk about political issues, as seen in the narratives of "topics are too light when I talk with my friends and I cannot talk about political issues" [Ms. H, Japanese, 40s, gathering, 16/2/2008] and "I have a feeling of being trapped because there are many taboos around me" [Ms. D, Japanese who married a *Zainichi* Korean, 40s, gathering, 22/8/2004]. Therefore, the members participated in their surrounding communication by learning about fashionable topics, as seen in: "I watch TV programs to join surrounding communications" [Ms. D, Japanese who married a *Zainichi* Korean, 40s, gathering, 22/8/2004]. Further, they could not express their personal opinions in this society. That was seen in: "people do not ask for deep reasons...they later hate a person who asks [avoiding an answer when they were asked]" [Ms. A, second-generation *Zainichi* Korean, 70s, gathering, 8/2/2004] and "I got a contradictory opinion when I voiced my opinion in another small group, so I definitely will not express my opinion in the group because it makes for a bad human relationship" [Ms. K, Japanese, 40s, gathering, 19/5/2007]. In other words, the expression of personal opinion underscored people's differences and communication based on the differences impeded good human relationships in this Japanese society, outside the *Param-Sendai*. The members abided by the communication modes while living in the outer world. I argued that the modes were an embodiment of the

Japanese mindset of harmony termed *Wa.*[11] That was a norm and value in everyday life for people in this Japanese society that excluded personal opinions to remove the seeds of confrontation and exerted social pressure on people to obey homogeneous symbiosis. Issues concerning *Zainichi* Korean on which *Param* focused were political and led to a confrontation between *Zainichi* Koreans and Japanese, as seen in: "I can talk about political issues in *Param*, although I can't talk about them with my friends [in the outer world]" [Ms. H, Japanese, 40s, gathering, 16/2/2008] (Yamaguchi 2012; 2013).

The members could practice dialogue separate from the conditions above through ideal settings of "recognizing differences" and "saying definitely." The former ideal was seen in "we do not behave in a way that each shares the same opinion, but recognizes different opinions" [Ms. A, second-generation *Zainichi* Korean, 70s, gathering, 2/10/2004] and "recognizing differences means a stance of learning from others" [Ms. A, second-generation *Zainichi* Korean, 70s, interview, 11/8/2006]. The latter was expressed in: "we must not set taboos in dialogue, especially on the issues concerning *Zainichi* Koreans" [Mr. E, Japanese, 70s, gathering, 22/8/2006]. In sum, the dialogue represented a mutual learning practice of personal opinion based on each experience on the issues concerning *Zainichi* Koreans, being independent of the Japanese mindset (*Wa*) (Yamaguchi 2008; 2011).

Form of "Dialogue" and Its Social Bond

The form of its dialogue is illustrated below. Its example is between Ms. A (second-generation *Zainichi*

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[11] Cultural and ideological characters of Japanese society, such as *Wa*, have been proposed in the literature (for example, see: Komiya 1999; Brown 2007).

Korean, 70s) and Mr. E (Japanese, 70s), who lived during the empire period.

Ms. A: I didn't want to walk with my grandmother when I was a child because people found that she was [*Zainichi*] Korean when she spoke Japanese with different intonation [from native Japanese intonation]. It was disgusting [said with negative emotion]. [I thought the above because] I was taught that Korea was worthless and Koreans were third-class citizens in Japan…

Mr. E: I grew up learning emperor-centered historiography. [I was taught that] Tea and *Sen no Rikyu* were great cultures that were originally in Japan. I can sing a song I learned at that time with lyrics denoting that Japan is a country with great cultures…However, its cultures have been very influenced by Korean and other cultures. [gathering, 22/8/2006]

The members participating in the dialogue did not represent ethnic groups, but personal identities, including ethnic identities.[12] The dialogue was practiced between "you as *Zainichi* Korean" and "me as Japanese" and vice versa. The difference of opinion was founded on the person rather than on the ethnic group. Further, the dialogue accepted being both rational and emotional, as a *Zainichi* Korean member said, "[replying to the opinion that emotion in dialogue can be expressed in *Param*,] yes, otherwise we cannot treat the issues between Japan and Korea" [Ms. A, second-generation *Zainichi* Korean, 70s, gathering, 20/1/2007]. This practice was accompanied by histories and circumstances, including discrimination and a dominant-subordinate relationship between the *Zainichi* Koreans and Japanese.

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[12] I referred to Strauss (1997) for the relation between personal identity and collective identity and Strauss (1993) for the representation of identity.

Furthermore, *Zainichi* Korean members expressed their emotions specifically through their personal opinions (Yamaguchi 2011; 2018).

Additionally, the members formed intimate interpersonal ties with each other to practice dialogues. This is demonstrated in: "the dialogue will not make sense if each does not take a stance to accept others, and if each has, it will become mutual reliance and friendship" [Ms. A, second-generation *Zainichi* Korean, 70s, Newsletter No. 8, 2001] and "it is good that we will become friends as individuals" [Ms. D, Japanese who married a *Zainichi* Korean, 40s, gathering, 17/6/2006]. Thus, learning personal opinions in the dialogue indicated acknowledgment of personal identities. Moreover, the ties were a social bond intended not to collapse the dialogue owing to the formation of challenges, wherein the members living in the Japanese society brought its communication modes into the dialogue. The risk of collapse was seen in the Japanese members' narratives: "I have felt something like a barrier of *Zainichi* Korean" [Mr. C, Japanese, 40s, gathering, 2/2006] and "I was quiet while I met with new *Zainichi* Korean members" [Mr. Z, Japanese, 20s, gathering, 2/2006] (Yamaguchi 2013; 2018).

Reconsideration of the Practice of "Dialogue"

We can further clarify the character of the practice using the concepts coined in this study. The communication channels of this Japanese society are closed awareness contexts around *Zainichi* Korean identity. Two other conditions behind this are: (1) almost no significant difference in physical appearance between the *Zainichi* Koreans and Japanese because they are both East Asian and (2) almost no explicit ethnic or cultural difference in everyday communication between the groups because the

Zainichi Koreans have gradually assimilated into Japanese culture through a generational transition. The two types of communication channels of open awareness context around *Zainichi* Korean identity rarely revealed in the society can be explained by appropriating the modified version of open awareness context on medicine, nursing, and care (Timmermans 1994; Mamo 1999). They indicated that the two types are (1) a cosmetic open awareness context in which people regard a focused ethnic minority identity, but do not go deep and (2) a stereotyped open awareness context in which people accept the minority identity, but only with stereotyped knowledge of it. By appropriating the modified version to the case, we also observe (3) an active open awareness context[13] wherein people accept the deeper implications of the minority identity as *Param-Sendai* did. This means that *Zainichi* Koreans' identities are reified in this Japanese society because of stereotypes and discrimination. Thus, *Zainichi* Koreans experience a severe lack of social recognition, causing them to face an identity crisis in this society. Furthermore, people living in the society recognize both forms of law and collective evaluation through the Japanese traditional community mindset known as *Wa*, which excludes personal opinions and political issues, including *Zainichi* Korean issues. In this mindset, we observe the meta-power of communication mode (substantive form), which complements the meta-power of communication channel and its accessibility (Hall 1997), and the indirect power as the way to enhance homogeneity, which complements the power as the way to make a difference (Wolfe 2002). Therefore, we find that the dialogue is a practice to create an active open awareness context around *Zainichi* Korean identities and

issues and a context of mutual recognition by forming intimate interpersonal ties to make the dialogue possible within and against the Japanese society in which their contexts and powers work.

Reconsideration of the Practice of "Dialogue" in Its Difficulty

However, the practice did not imply any attainment of consensus (or mutual understanding in a relatively wide sense) and mutual recognition and faced difficulty. That was particularly exemplified in a series of events. On an issue concerning *Zainichi* Koreans, Ms. A (second-generation *Zainichi* Korean, 70s) expressed her emotions in the dialogue. However, Mr. C (Japanese, 40s) could not express his emotions in a similar manner. According to him, "I found myself being calm even when she emotionally replied with a mixture of both sympathy and antipathy, losing her calm" [Mr. C, Japanese, 40s, Newsletter No. 17, 2007]. She told him several times, "you and I are inevitably divided" [Mr. C, Japanese, 40s, Newsletter No. 17, 2007]. Thus, he became aware of the gap in empathy between them. After becoming aware of this, he made several attempts to understand her opinions and the accompanying emotions (based on my experiences of participant observation in Param). However, he could not reach her standpoint. As he explained, "as a member of the majority, I realized that I could not understand *Zainichi* Korean colleague's mindset of *Param-Sendai*, despite her being the closest to *Zainichi* Koreans" [Mr. C, Japanese, 40s, Newsletter No. 17, 2007]. Finally, through the events, he became aware of the gap in understanding. Thereafter, he changed the ideal of conviviality (*kyosei*) into attempting to understand and recognize each other under the impossibility of their attainments, as seen in: "I come to think that we have to live together in the despair that we are

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[13] According to Timmermans (1994), active open awareness is equivalent to open awareness proposed by Glaser and Strauss.

inevitably divided, through my repetitive experiences of awareness of the gap" [Mr. C, Japanese, 40s, Newsletter No. 17, 2007] (Yamaguchi 2008; 2018; original data have been added above).

Experiencing these gaps may be a realization of the impossibility of exchanging personal standpoints in the dialogue because he, "as Japanese," could understand what she, "as *Zainichi* Korean," said only by guessing her history and circumstance from his perspective. The members seemed to be aware that their understandings were no more than guesswork from their standpoints, as seen in the dialogue, for example, "I was born after the Second World War, so I do not directly realize the war's impact, but I have to know what Japan has done [from others' opinion]" [Ms. K, Japanese, 40s, gathering, 18/1/2004] (Yamaguchi 2018:41). These experiences imply that the members were aware that mutual recognition in the form of love and collective evaluation would never be attained because of the impossibility of attaining understanding and empathy between the *Zainichi* Korean and Japanese members.

Reconsideration of the Character of the "Dialogue" Case

The despairing events make clear the purpose of *Param-Sendai*'s activity. As noted earlier, the dialogue created the contexts of active open awareness and mutual recognition. That implies, in the three forms of recognition, that the group members formed intimate interpersonal ties (love), respected each other as members of the gathering (law), and recognized and learned their ethnic identities and opinions (collective evaluation). However, the dialogue was regarded as the unending process of consensus (or mutual understanding) and mutual recognition because of the impossibility of attaining

understanding and empathy. Thus, its purpose is to practice dialogue.

Having reconsidered the case with the perspective coined in this study, I can now find a path to elaborate and expand my findings of the case (Yamaguchi 2008; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2018)—a social justice inquiry in Japanese society. The awareness of the impossibility of attaining mutual recognition in the forms of love and collective evaluation in the dialogue can compel the members to search for universalization of the form of law in the dialogue. I found new significance in two narratives by Mr. C (Japanese, 40s), who experienced despairing events.

When I face [and understand] others of *Zainichi* [Korean], I have to stand in a position in which I have to come back to the specificity of others inevitably dropped from the universality of others, even if I search for their universality, at the end of their specificity [historicity]. It may be a position to refuse abstract, in other words. That occurred in the [despair] experience. [Mr. C, Japanese, 40s, Newsletter No. 17, 2007]

I have made sure again; it is the first step of conviviality [*kyosei*] that I understand the difference of "loneliness" for the *Zainichi* Korean friend who faced miscommunication with me and then tried to get close to "loneliness" for *Zainichi* Koreans…If it is impossible to love [other], it is important to acknowledge the existence [of the other]…being outside [of the self] and try to care for and coexist with [them] as much as possible.[14] I now think it might be a hint of conviviality. [Mr. C, Japanese, 40s, Newsletter No. 17, 2007]

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[14] In this sentence, Mr. C assumed Japanese and *Zainichi* Koreans as teachers and students' relationships because he was a high school teacher. However, he pointed out that this may apply to human relationships (Newsletter No. 17, 2007).

These narratives signify universalistic ranges superseding the extent of the *Param-Sendai* members—the mutual recognition forms of law between persons at the existential level. The former narrative signifies a legal form of mutual recognition open to the heterogeneity of a person at the existential level under the impossibility of understanding others. The distortion and abstraction of the specificity of the existential *Zainichi* Korean members arose when Mr. C tried to understand the *Zainichi* Korean members in the dialogue. That is when he searched for a common and general part (e.g., names, such as "human" or "person") the self and others can share. Thereby, the dialogue for conviviality entails a legal form that people mutually respect, not a common and general part as comprehensible, but their existential specificities as incomprehensible. The latter narrative signifies a legal form of mutual recognition with which people form and maintain intimate interpersonal ties under the impossibility of empathizing with others. It entailed a practical ethic that a person can care for others to the extent that the self respects the other, who is not epistemologically but rather ontologically heterogeneous because the existential other is outside of empathy by the existential self. The two legal forms are not teleological, but procedural. They are not for attaining a consensus (or mutual understanding) or mutual recognition, but for proceeding with the dialogue. Therefore, we may say that the universalization of the legal forms of mutual recognition seen in the *Param-Sendai* is one attempt at "the struggle for recognition" as a social justice inquiry, which turns the legal forms of the traditional community of Japan accompanied by homogeneous pressure into universalistic forms open to heterogeneity.

Conclusion

This study attempts to incorporate social recognition from the limited critical theory of Honneth into the awareness context theory in Strauss' SI by reconsidering a case study of "dialogue" between *Zainichi* Korean and Japanese people in Japan. It proposes both a substantive theory of the case as a social justice inquiry in face-to-face communication between the ethnic minority and majority in Japanese society and a formal theory of awareness context with social recognition from the perspective of modern society. In conclusion, I note four points using abductive reasoning related to the reconsideration, in addition to the limitations of this study and suggestions for future research.

The Character of the Case and Its Substantive Theory

The "dialogue" case proposes a channel and mode of face-to-face interaction of active awareness context between *Zainichi* Koreans and Japanese against the power of the channels and modes of communication of the closed awareness context around *Zainichi* Korean identities and issues in the Japanese society accompanied by the homogeneous and harmonizing mindset called *Wa*, which reifies *Zainichi* Korean identities. Generally, the closed awareness context and reification of *Zainichi* Korean identities remain present in contemporary Japanese society. Thus, the interaction mode of dialogue proposed in this study can be useful for dissolving them (contrastingly, Lee's [2016] argument regarding dialogue is oriented to its use for reforming *Zainichi* Korean society). The interaction mode has the universalistic forms of law, that is, it is open to the heterogeneity of existential persons that is practiced by interactants being aware of the

impossibility of attaining consensus (or mutual understanding) and mutual empathy and is practiced for itself. The practice of "dialogue" has a character of reasonable dissent (see: Shalin 1992b; Bohman 1999) in pragmatist thought, which is opposite to the convergence of rational consensus as reported by Habermas (1985; 1986). Further, it is characterized by a joint action open to the heterogeneity of existential persons who have both reason and affection or emotion and are located in different histories and circumstances. The character of the interaction mode both indicated the significance of social justice inquiry in contemporary Japanese society and allowed for the elaboration on and expansion of awareness context theory.

This study's findings regarding dialogue make clear its significance by connecting it to social justice inquiry. This case study proposes a social justice inquiry (Charmaz 2005; Denzin 2007) from the standpoint of a local actor living in a non-western society—a substantive theory of "the struggle for recognition" that forms an active open awareness context between *Zainichi* Koreans as an ethnic minority and Japanese as a majority, in Japanese society accompanied by the contexts of closed awareness, cosmetic open awareness, and stereotyped open awareness around the *Zainichi* Korean identity reified by the Japanese. However, the theory is not a strategy of the social movement in which the minority collectively resists the majority, as Honneth's theory (2005) and Seo (2012) focused on, or in which highly motivated activists are involved, as Lee (2018) focused on. It is rather a strategy of the "public sphere" (Bohman 1999:471) in pragmatist thought—an organization of face-to-face interactions open to the ethnic or cultural minority identity and personal opinion on the minority issue against the ethnic or cultural majority's power

of communication channels and modes (see also Yamaguchi 2013). In other words, it is a grassroots communication strategy that realizes liberal democracy as the form of modern society in Japan, liberating people from the communitarian Japanese mindset of *Wa*.

Extension and Elaboration of Awareness Context Theory

This study extends the awareness context theory. The substantive theory signified in the case opens up new applicability of the awareness context theory that has been used in medicine, nursing, and care—an analysis of conflicts, powers, and creative practices between the majority and minority who differ in cultural or ethnic background. The modified open awareness contexts (cosmetic, stereotyped, and active) can be useful for empirical interaction studies in their relationship because they are formulated around stereotypes, taboos, and discrimination.

This study elaborates on the awareness context theory. The management of both information and affective or emotional social recognition by existential interactants can be analyzed using the formal theory of awareness context coined and verified in this study. Additionally, there are two notable points in this study's findings: (1) the understanding of information and social recognition that overlap in interaction, but have different processes (this case illustrated a process from the awareness of the gap in empathy to the awareness of the gap in understanding) and (2) the open awareness context does not necessarily mean the attainment of consensus or mutual recognition, unlike the operational definition by Scheff (1967; 1970). The awareness context theory refers not to ends, but contexts. Thus, they

are not inherently stable, including "contingency" (Strauss 1993:36) and "uncertainty" (Mamo 1999), in the course of interaction.

Expansion of the Theoretical Perspective of SI

The incorporation of Honneth's limited theory into Strauss' SI can sensitize the conditions of modern society and add an analytical focus on conflicts between traditional cultural communities and modern society. It revitalizes the theoretical significance of Strauss' SI and expands the scope of SI. The theoretical perspectives in SI, particularly generic formal theories, have not been sufficient for the theorization of contemporary modern societies. For example, Blumer assumed an open and egalitarian modern society with his belief in democratic progress (see: Hall 1997). Strauss (1993) theorized interactions in multiple global worlds. Goffman (1959) theorized interaction order in modern Western society (see also Rawls 2000). However, they do not theorize discernible conditions between traditional cultural community and modern society, as seen in Honneth's theory, because they took the modern for granted in their theories.

More significantly, Strauss' theoretical perspective, as coined in this study, facilitates an inquiry into their conflict processes in the empirical studies of a non-western society (see also Joas 2000 on its importance). It overcomes the limitation that Honneth's theory virtually seems to assume Western societies to be modern (see: Honneth 2014) and expands the scope of SI that has not tackled the cultural specificity of society (see: Jacobsen 2019b). The reconsideration of the case study described and explained some of the cultural specificities of Japanese society—the practice of "dialogue" in which affection and emotions were expressed by its members who were aware of the empathy process and even tried to achieve it, which is unfamiliar in Western societies (Scheff 2005a), and conflicts between the values and norms of the Japanese mindset (*Wa*) and the forms of "dialogue."

Implication of the Study

This study highlights that a theory generated from an empirical study includes the interest of a researcher (Charmaz, Thornberg, and Keane 2018) and the cultural specificity of a researched society. Thus, we can suggest the importance of setting the realms of the cultural specificity of society and research interest in addition to the distinction between substantive and formal theories. For example, the interest of a researcher influences whether they search for grounded critical theory (Denzin 2007), critical grounded theory (Charmaz 2005; Gibson 2007), or both a substantive theory with a critical perspective of modern society and a formal theory that has discernible conditions of modern society, as seen in this study. A substantive theory includes the components of society, such as interactant, identity, interaction, social world, and the symbolic universe, along with cultural specificity, as seen in this study. I do partially disagree with the notion of Charmaz and colleagues (2018) that generic sensitizing concepts (i.e., a formal theory) can provide a place not to end inquiries, but to start them. I believe that a formal theory can be a research purpose or interest and has applicability that is not restricted by cultural specificity, differentiating from a substantive theory as a means of solving a problem related to some practical research interest in a substantive situation. Formal theories are significant in their generic usefulness. They make it possible to analyze interactions accompanied by non-western cultures, and interactionists with different research interests

can use them. Thus, this study's attempt is possible and legitimate. Therefore, formal theories can be common frameworks by which conventional interactionists, interactionists adopting critical theory, and interactionists researching non-western society can interact, discuss, or even be opposed. Thus, the academic field of SI can be a pluralistic arena that embodies the freedom to values rather than "value-free sociology" (Langman 2019:184), which embodies freedom from values.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

As this study proposes a hypothesis to open new prospects rather than warranted knowledge validated by sufficient studies, it leaves scope for further research. The substantive theory proposed in this study tested and fit one case, and its further elaboration, by comparing it with other cases, is open to substantive areas such as the public sphere, the minority-majority relationship, which differs in cultural and ethnic background, and Japanese society.

Further empirical verifications of social recognition as a sensitizing concept are also required. The relationships between understanding, recognition, and awareness in the awareness context theory require further elaboration through empirical studies.

Nevertheless, this study encourages the research project of SI to meet critical theory in empirical studies. Critical theory tends to be an "ivory tower-based armchair philosophy" (Langman 2019:185). This paper proposes that we do not have to be workers who modify critical theory in empirical studies, following the critical or progressive logical structure proposed by a desk-working philosopher. We can be creators who generate grounded theories from empirical studies based on our respective research interests while learning partially from critical or progressive theories.

Acknowledgments

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