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Subcultural Hierarchy and Policing amongst Incels in Online Forums

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Abstract: While investigations into incels online have increased, most have focused on their potential for violence, their misogyny, extremist ideologies, and their mental health. Very little has been devoted to examining the nuances of that subcultural group. The research in this paper examines the hierarchy that has been established within the incel subculture, online, and how that hierarchy is policed using various mechanisms such as reporting "fake-cels" to the moderators to have them banned and insults. Findings show that there are clear hierarchical delineations of incels in general, with "blackpill" incels being the most extreme in their worldview and their use of science (albeit cherry-picked) to justify the incel ideology. The researchers also found that there is a hierarchy specific to the online forum from which data were gathered. The paper concludes that understanding incel subculture is salient in addressing the potential threats of violence and treating those individuals who no longer want to identify as incels. Future directions of research would be to examine why boys and men identify as incels.

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Involuntary celibates, more commonly known as incels, are an online community of people, almost exclusively male, who identify as a new type of sexuality. They would describe themselves as not being able to form, against their will, intimate relationships with women. Blame for such failings is placed on many different causes, including women being too picky, competition from "Chads,"[1] their personal failings, macroeconomic factors, changes in culture, et cetera. This paper seeks to examine the online subculture that they have formed, the hierarchy that becomes established within this group, how they police the boundaries of the group in total, and the hierarchy within the subcultural group of incels. Overall, it has been shown that inceldom can lead to extremism in other areas of social life and even violence in the real world (West 2023). While some therapists are attempting to create treatment or de-programming programs for reformed incels, as Van Brunt and Taylor (2020) outline, it becomes increasingly important to recognize the diversity of beliefs and the hierarchy that exists within this subcultural group.

The term incel was originally coined by a Canadian woman only known as "Alana," who started a website titled "Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project" in the 1990s. Her website was meant for her and others like her to explore the struggles of forming loving relationships (Taylor 2018). Since then, however, the term and motivations have morphed into a movement and online community of misogyny, self-loathing, and advocacy for violence against others—often women. An incel is a boy or man who wants to have a sexual and emotional relationship but finds that he cannot form one due to conditions that are outside of his control. They are celibate for reasons that are outside of their control—hence, the involuntary celibate, or incel, moniker.

[1] Incel term for a physically attractive male.

Overall, not a lot has been written on the topic of incels from a sociological perspective (Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020), though more academic studies are being produced. What has been written mostly focuses on the misogyny behind the movement and its relationship to right-wing extremism, violence—specifically mass shootings—and the potential for violence, of which there are undeniable links (Baele, Brace, and Ging 2023). Others have written about incels and mental health, believing that there is a psychological element, namely, depression, that leads to incel self-labeling (Costello et al. 2022; Sparks, Zindenberg, and Olver 2023). One can surmise, though, that there are social forces and pressures that push such individuals to accept their position in society as an incel and bring them to accept a distorted worldview, a process known as "taking the red pill." A worldview where women become objects of conquest and where failure to obtain those objects is an indication of being a failed male member of society (Brooks, Russo-Batterham, and Blake 2022). Any rebuffed advances are blamed on the objects of their affection—women—or on their male competitors whom women deem to be worthier of their sexual attention. In the incel worldview, their failings are externalized to others and blamed on societal shifts that have made incels less desirable in terms of being an intimate partner to the opposite sex. In short, incels feel oppressed by society in general, by women, conventionally attractive men, and, at times, the wealthy (the idea being that money can buy sexual access—not in terms of sex work, though), who are all distorting the sexual marketplace.

This paper seeks to indicate and examine the previously unremarked hierarchy within the incel movement. While many view the movement as monolithic, there are a variety of subsets of incels that vary in their level of acceptance of their position, much like any other subculture. Similarly, incels vary in their beliefs as to why they are unable to achieve their conquests or, as we shall see later, "ascend" in the incel vernacular. Likewise, there is an unofficial ranking amongst incels that can be defined through the individual's devotion to the incel identity, as well as other characteristics. Finally, this research explores how incels police themselves, defend their cultural boundaries, and mark people as either in or out.

Subculture and Hierarchy

Subcultures are groups of people who participate in mainstream culture yet also have their internal norms, mores, beliefs, and values. In the book *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (1997), Howard Becker explores the phenomenon of subcultures as it relates to deviance using participant observation research. During his observations, Becker finds that deviant subgroups tend to develop practices and rituals that serve to keep individuals within the group bonded. It is such practices and customs that distinguish the subculture from the rest of society. They help to identify those who are "in the know," to borrow from Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analysis, and those who are not—those who are part of the group and those who are outsiders.

An important question for this research is whether incels or inceldom are considered a subcultural group, community, ideology, or movement. According to the Incels Wiki, a site that is maintained by self-described incels, on their Frequently Asked Questions page, they simply say "no" with the following explanation:

> "Incel," isn't a single community any more than, for example, trans people are a single community. As far

> as self-identified incels or incel forums, these communities are fractured and generally do not advocate radical beliefs unless you want to call determinism and in some cases misogyny radical ideologies. Individual philosophies like the original blackpill definition or subcultures like 4chan culture emerge on some, but not all, forums dedicated to involuntary celibates and go in and out of fashion, and there is broad disagreement on the causes and consequences in these communities. Calling involuntary celibates a movement is like calling poor people a movement or ideology. To elaborate, 'pauperdom' is the state of being poor. This term is to poor people, what inceldom is to incels. Both are life situations, the terms 'incel' and 'pauper' denote a person affected by these things. Most people would widely agree that poor people aren't a movement, nor is there a specific ideology that which they adhere. Likewise, incels and inceldom are the same in that respect. [Incels Wiki 2022]

While the authors of the Incel Wiki make some interesting comparisons, they show a lack of understanding of some of the other groups to which they compare themselves. For instance, there is a trans community, or at least some people would define themselves as such (Lev 2007; Boylan 2014). The LGBTQIA+ community describes itself as a community and movement, as well, and does not identify as being a homogenous group. The moderators of the Incel Wiki page are making either false equivalencies, such as pauperdom, or are outright misinterpreting other historically oppressed subcultural groups and communities.

As the Incel Wiki FAQ page states, they do not believe themselves to be a subculture or their forums to be communities. When one compares the characteristics of subcultural groups and communities (whether terrestrial or virtual), it becomes evident that despite their protestation, their perception does not match the sociological reality. Incels are indeed a subculture. Ross Haenfler (2003) describes and analyzes cultures, especially when discussing past cultural theorists, and finds incels as being a subcultural group. Dick Hebdige's (2002) concept of "bricolage," the combining and remaking of cultural objects, also fits the idea that incels are a subculture, which is done by incels with non-material cultural artifacts, like ideas, values, beliefs, and, as will be discussed later, scientific findings. Incels have an ideology that binds them, define people as either in or out, police the boundaries of their group (as will be discussed in the findings), develop their lingo (use of specific terms and phrases), and have virtual meeting spaces. In short, incels are a subcultural group or community (when on one of their online forums).[2]

Just as society is stratified, subcultures also have a level of stratification. The hierarchies within subcultural groups may or may not be formal—such as in the case of leadership. In cases of leadership within a group, the determination of who leads and who follows, along with the various subordinate levels, can be the outcome of democratic decisions amongst group leaders (i.e., voting) or through some other mechanism like charisma (Weber 2004). Where stratification is more informal, such as with no clear leader, the determination may be about who is more into or serious about the group compared to those members who are seen as posers with only a superficial relationship to the subculture. Such types of divisions have been seen before, for instance, in the realm of cyber piracy (Yar and Steinmetz 2019). In

[2] The Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page of their Wiki page (https://incels.wiki/w/Inceldom_FAQ), which is written and maintained by those who run the incels.is website, clearly states that they do not believe themselves to be a subcultural group. The evidence indicates otherwise.

the case of cyber piracy, one's position within the hierarchy of pirates is based on levels of contributions to the community, motivations, and results. Commitment to the subcultural group, however it may be defined, is a salient factor in determining a group hierarchy. That is true of incels as well, where individuals' status within inceldom is weighted based on their commitment to the subculture.

Other studies have labeled or treated incels as a subcultural group. For instance, Stephane Baele, Lewys Brace, and Debbie Ging (2023) examine incel communications online, across platforms, and how they come to share and identify with their often extremist ideology. Their study largely focuses on the language that is used by incels in those various online platforms. Two other studies, by Brenna Helm and colleagues (2022) and Roberta O'Malley, Karen Holt, and Thomas Holt (2020), look at incels as a subculture more broadly but, again, focus on their language as a binding factor, their views toward women, how men are oppressed (a central tenet of inceldom), and sex. Where this study diverges from previous research is through the presentation of a subcultural hierarchy within inceldom and demonstrating how the boundaries and membership of inceldom are policed.

Self-esteem and social competition are necessary for understanding how the boundaries and the hierarchy of inceldom are created and maintained. The necessity of self-esteem in social groups is thought to motivate group members to adopt various behaviors and attitudes to attain status in their respective groups (Rubin and Hewstone 2004). Social competition in groups can be used to change one's position in the group hierarchy to protect the status of the group. Self-esteem amongst incels might seem to be a contradiction at first, as lack of self-esteem is often used as an explanation for why people become incels (Sparks, Zindenberg, and Olver 2023). Yet, incels seem to have an abundance of self-esteem online, with the problem being that no one understands them. Therefore, self-esteem, especially as it relates to incel hierarchies, must be understood in the proper context.

Applying theories regarding subcultural groups and hierarchical ordering has not been done when analyzing incels and their internal workings. The research presented here takes those previous concepts and applies them to this online group. While incels have been viewed as a single cohesive group in previous literature, that is not necessarily the case. There are gradations within the incel community based on their commitment to the incel identity, motivations, understanding of the social position, and, ultimately, acceptance of the identity. Understanding the hierarchy within the incel subculture can help future researchers, therapists, and law enforcement professionals in comprehending and dealing with incels, as well as other extremist groups.

Methods

The internet has become a resource that is rife with data for research in the social sciences. It has provided new subjects and topics for research, as well as allowing people to cross paths and connect who otherwise never would have in the physical world (Mann and Stewart 2000). Social media, in various forms, have served as an excellent source to connect. They have allowed people to find others to share in similar experiences and led to people expressing their "true selves," some of which may not be socially acceptable expressions in the "real world" (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimmons 2002). However, on the

internet, such behaviors and ideas have audiences who will echo back like-minded sentiments.

The World Wide Web has also allowed for the development of new research strategies, especially for groups that exist solely online, living virtual lives and managing an online impression (Chester and Bretherton 2007). As the internet at times encourages anonymity, virtual participant observation has become an in-vogue method for gathering data from online sources and social forums. The COVID-19 pandemic, likewise, has further pushed social science research into virtual realms, either out of necessity or as a measure of safety or comfort when interacting with strangers. Coincidentally, the COVID-19 pandemic has also made online interactions, both dating and otherwise, more pertinent as they were the main source of outside human contact.

Originally, the researchers wanted to investigate social media postings in dedicated incel groups, such as those found on Reddit, Twitter, Facebook, and Discord. However, it proved difficult because of issues of access. For instance, Reddit has quarantined sub-Reddits devoted to incel culture. In other social media platforms, groups for incels were set to private and would have required the research team to enter the groups to gather data, potentially exposing team members to harassment or other negative effects while also not guaranteeing access to those private, online groups.[3] Rather, the researchers discovered a website, incels.is, which served as a fountain of data for this study. The website appeared after social media outlets began to restrict incels online and became the *de facto* online community for incels, not bound by any of the user agreements attached to virtual forums like Facebook and Reddit. In short, that has become the *de facto* online gathering space for incels across the world. The researchers did not reach out or elicit responses from self-identified incels. Rather, an analysis was done on the content of their posts in the publicly accessible online forum.

The research conducted for this study was approved by the universities' institutional review boards, yet questions about the ethics of conducting online research remain. The website from which the data were gathered is a public forum, accessible to anyone with an internet connection. Therefore, there is no presumption of privacy regarding the data gathered. While incels who read this paper may identify their words, it is unlikely that they would be able to identify any of the other individuals reported here, aside from their usernames. No personally identifying information was collected during the research. As with any qualitative research, the participants, should they read the published work, may be able to identify their words. What is important is that others cannot identify the individual. That is maintained in this research.

To collect the data for analysis, the researchers began by recording posts in the forums related to feelings of isolation or being alone, which was the original subject of the research. The collection was initially done by copying and pasting entire threads, which included the original posts along with all the responses, into Microsoft Word documents. That process proved to be inefficient as there are over one million individual posts on the website in nearly 500,000 threads, with over 20,000 members.[4] To

[3] It is unknown whether the data would have been different if the researchers had accessed the private online groups on various other social media platforms. The users on incels.is seem to be very open in discussing aspects of their lives as incels, which is central to such type of research.

[4] There is a subset of around 200 threads that are labeled as "Must-Read Content," which serves as an orientation for incels that are new to the website. Such threads were included in

aid in the data collection process, the researchers employed a "web scraping" program called Octoparse, which is capable of recording all forums, posts, and responses, thus providing the researchers with a wealth of recorded data from which to conduct analyses. The researchers chose to "scrape" the 500 most recent forums, as going further would have resulted in a data set that was unmanageable.[5] Results from Octoparse were saved in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, which was then transcribed into Word documents and uploaded to the selected qualitative analysis program, Taguette. Taguette is an online, open-sourced, qualitative research program that allows the researchers to collaborate and "tag" posts in real time, allowing them to code and check each other's work.[6]

Once the posts were collected, they were analyzed for commonalities in search of themes that appeared across the individual experiences. Such methods are consistent with those espoused by qualitative researchers Glaser and Straus (2008) and Charmaz (2010). The researchers cross-coded each other's work to ensure inter-coder reliability, showing that the researchers were interpreting the findings in the same, or at least similar, manner (McAlister et al. 2017). The cross-coding ensures reliability and validity in the research findings (Franklin, Cody, and Ballan 2001). Sampling and coding were done until the researchers reached theoretical saturation, where no new themes or codes were arising out of the data (Charmaz 2008; Thomson 2010; Aldiabat and Le Navenec 2018; Saunders et al. 2018).

While the initial thrust was to examine why incels come to identify as such, it was not the focus here. Preliminary findings were presented at the Midwestern Sociological Society's annual meeting in March of 2023. Audience members expressed interest in the area mentioned earlier—the hierarchy of incels which many expressed not knowing about. Most knew about "taking the red pill," but they were unaware that there are different levels of being an incel, with the culmination being "black-pilled." They were also surprised to learn the use of cherry-picked scientific findings to justify the ideology of incels—something that is prominently displayed by those who claim to have "taken the black pill." Such interactions at the conference indicated a void in the literature that this study seeks to fill.

Findings[7]

The findings from this study are consistent with previous subcultural studies. When studying any group that is in some way separate from mainstream society, subgroupings and hierarchies are likely to form (Realo, Allik, and Vadi 1997). For instance, they happen in offices (Hofstede 1998), Greek life on college campuses (Reis and Trockel 2006; Butter 2017), sports teams (Halevy et al. 2012; Wagstaff, Martin, and Thelwell 2017), their fans (Tsiotsou 2013; Esmonde, Cooky, and Andrews 2015), and others. Here, the research examines the divisions within the online incel subculture, which have not been

the data collection process as they are seen as essential, by the admission of site administrators, to understanding inceldom.

[5] While 500 posts were analyzed, one will find some names repeated several times in the analysis. Such individuals are some of the most active in the incels.is website. The more they post, the more likely they are to be included in the analysis.

[6] Taguette can be found at https://www.taguette.org. It is a free, open-sourced, qualitative data management program that allows researchers to collaborate. A program (or application) can be downloaded to a device where the analysis can occur, or Taguette's servers can be used to complete the analysis. The researchers decided to use the servers, for ease of collaboration and concerns regarding security on personal computers.

[7] All texts from the discussion threads and responses are reported in their original format, unless otherwise indicated.

explored in-depth within the literature, and how incels come to define themselves within the bounds of different divisions. For instance, within the incel subculture, there is a hierarchy in which there is infighting amongst the incels over ideologies and possibilities. That phenomenon has largely been ignored in the literature and is a salient aspect to understanding incels. Also, themes regarding the use of legitimate scientific findings, albeit cherry-picked results, were explored in the analysis of the data.

Informal Hierarchy: Different Pills/Cels as a Typology

What has become evident throughout the data collection and analysis process is that there are different levels of hierarchy within the incel subculture. The basic subdivision of incels comes from the identification of different "pills," the main ones being "redpill" and "blackpill" incels, and the distinction from non-incels—"bluepills."[8] The concept of the pill originates from the scene in *The Matrix* (a movie released in 1999) where Morpheus offers the hero of the film, Neo, the choice between two different colored pills—red and blue. During the scene, Morpheus explains:

> This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill—you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. [*The Matrix* 1999]

The scene packs a lot of symbolism, but one thing is clear—the blue pill represents "being asleep" while the red pill represents "awakening" or "demystification" (Schlaerth and Puhrmann 2023). The first step for incels, then, like Neo in *The Matrix*, is to take the red pill, which is a symbolic phrase that indicates they have achieved an awakened state—a truer form of wisdom that is lacking in "normies." Normies, or non-incels, are known as "blue-pillers" or people who are still asleep. For instance, *LonelyATM* wrote in a thread that he started titled: "Getting blackpilled for the first time":

> my family and friends only gave me bluepill advice that always made things worse, it was a miracle to find blackpill, it showed me in minutes what dozens of people couldn't do in years. but now i know. It's a biological factor, her brain is sending her warning signals to stay away from me, my genes are garbage and she feels disgusted just imagining the two of us together. but if you were a chad and did the exact same things she would get into a relationship with you. sub 5 life is hell, you're forced to sit and watch while chads steal all your dreams from you, even though he's putting less than half the effort you put in.

LonelyATM expresses his frustration with his friends and family giving him advice to help him get a romantic partner, advice that he finds demeaning. To him, those people, who are "normal" in that they subscribe to the traditional and socially acceptable values of mainstream society, do not understand the personal and social issues that he must confront daily. They are unable to view reality, or his reality, much like anyone in *The Matrix* who presumably chooses to take the blue pill. In general, blue-pillers

[8] For a more comprehensive list of terms and listing of "pills" or "cels," consult the Incel Wiki website (https://incels.wiki/w/main_page) that operates like any other subject-specific online, open-sourced, encyclopedia, but can only be edited by incels registered to incels.is. Another source could be the book published by incel sympathizer Richard Wallace, *The Black Pill* (2020). The introduction to Wallace's book provides readers with the history and philosophy behind the red pill/blue pill dichotomy.

are largely looked down upon by incels. They are seen as naive, even dangerous. In a thread that was devoted to an incel who committed suicide, called "RIP to our friend schery6/2028chan," user *The Enforcer* wrote:

> I never want young people to waste their potential. It was a really nice talk tbh and enjoyed hearing his thoughts on things. I thought I'd gotten through to him because he seemed to take it onboard fairly well. I wanted him to succeed in life and not feel as isolated and down as he did. We should always strive to guide the younger people who find themselves here, not do what bluepillers do and lead them to a path of failure. I'm at least glad that he felt safe in these spaces and found community/support while he was still here though.

Generally speaking, blue-pillers are not incels, yet they are an important facet of understanding incel culture. Labeling people as having taken the blue pill helps to define the boundaries of the incel subcultural. There are in-group members, in the form of red- and blackpills, and everyone else—those outside of the group.

The second group of pills is also the most well-known in the literature concerning incels—redpills. They represent a diverse group of individuals within the incel subculture that includes men's rights advocates (MRAs), Pick-Up-Artists (PUAs), the Mano-Sphere, and those who think that looks, money, and status (LMSs) are essential to forming relationships with attractive members of the opposite sex.[9] Redpill groups believe that they are enlightened to the idea that there is a trend in society that is leaving them out of the chance of having sexual relationships. *Bruvdon*, at the beginning of a thread he called "Ramblings of a normie," writes:

> Hey everyone. I don't know what I would call myself, but I think most people here would define me as a 'normie'. In high school, I never really thought much about looks - I had a few crushes which is typical, but I was very sterotypically redpilled as far as dating went.

What sets redpill incels apart from other groups is that they at least still have hope to ascend or become "normal" by having sex, relationships, et cetera. Again, like Neo and the red pill in *The Matrix*, taking the red pill is symbolic of waking up and gaining a sacred type of knowledge creating hope. Indeed, red-pilled individuals still engage with the opposite sex despite repeated failures. User *Adson* started a thread called "I don't know what happened," in which he describes an interaction he had at an office party. During that interaction, he used a common PUA technique:

> All the time i accidentally looks at her she look at me. For the most part of the Event she was the only one i never interacted. **I tried my best to avoid her (i wanna stay mysterious)** being a sadistic and negativist i thought she was disgusted by my presence… **I am 100% sure she find something mysterious about me…** [emphasis added to highlight the technique]

Adson goes on to explain that he is not necessarily undesirable and describes what most would consider to be awkward behaviors during this interaction,

[9] Within redpills, other subgroups include gymcels—those who go to the gym to better fit into the expected norms of society. Another group is seamaxxers, who seek out partners in Southeast Asian countries because they believe they would be more desirable there due to their physical characteristics, while being average in the US, would be viewed as superior in a country such as Thailand.

yet he still has doubts as to the true intentions of the women he interacts with at the office. *Adson's* musings express that he still has hope with women but is in doubt of their motivations by expressing underlying sexism and misogyny.

Overall, *Adson* and *Bruvdon* represent typical beliefs of redpill incels. There might be something wrong in society or with themselves, but there is still hope of ascension. There is debate as to whether redpills are incels because they still try and can appear "normal." The incel subculture has come up with a term to describe those who think there is hope or who have had, or currently have, girlfriends—fakecels, a term used to denote position in the informal hierarchy.

While many incels aspire to ascend, that is, obtain sexual conquest or a meaningful intimate relationship, that achievement itself represents a contradiction within the incel subculture. Those who ascend are no longer viewed as incels because they are no longer involuntarily celibate. Failure to ascend is seen within inceldom as a success, or, to borrow from online forums, "failing so hard it is a success." Indeed, the aspiration to ascend is seen as a weakness amongst incels, a delusion. In other words, those who seek to ascend are fooling themselves and have not truly become black-pilled and are, therefore, not being true to their community. The lack of a commitment to inceldom places them lower within the hierarchy, as has been previously observed in other social groupings (Chase 1980). Hence, there is another contradiction within the incel culture—ascension is desirable, yet the desire to ascend is seen as a weakness.

The final major category of incels to discuss is blackpill incels. Black-pillers consider themselves to be the only ones who are truly understanding what it means to be an incel and fully buy into the ideology. Two very distinct characteristics set black-pillers apart from red-pillers. The first distinctive characteristic is that they have given up any hope of obtaining a relationship with a woman, as they believe that hope is a delusion. The title of a thread started by user *Spongebozz* sums up this mentality:

> Incel trait: you keep looking
> Blackpill incel trait: you keep looking for new posts on this forum

Spongebozz is suggesting that blackpill incels have withdrawn from mainstream society and have begun to seek other incels on the website. Other users responded that they were going to keep refreshing his thread when they were bored because what he wrote reflected many of their mentalities. That sentiment of solace and hopelessness is echoed by user *Knight of Cymry* in a thread he started called "How I ended up here," where he wrote:

> When I was growing up, I never would have thought that I would end up in my mid-twenties miserable, depressed, and alone, on a forum for other male sexless outcasts of society like myself. It's not the future that I envisioned, but the one that ultimately became my unfortunate reality.

He explains that in his failings at relating to women, he has found himself in an online forum amongst others like himself and, in doing so, has given up any hope of changing his situation. He goes on to explain that he discovered that about himself in high school after repeatedly being rejected by schoolmates—girls for relationships and boys for friendships. Another thread, titled "It's so sad that we replace socialization with this forum," sums up the blackpill incels mentality of hopelessness.

The second characteristic that distinguishes black-pillers from other incel types is their use of scientific findings to support their belief system (Burton 2022). However, it must be noted that black-pillers either selectively pick findings from legitimate physical and social scientific publications or take those out of context. They also use pseudoscience and debunked scientific research to lend credibility to their ideology and to justify their failings in the social world as well as their behaviors as incels. A clear example of such practice, although not explicitly part of the data collection for this paper, can be found in Martin Goldberg's self-published book, *Understanding and Overcoming the Blackpill* (2021), where he selectively uses studies from biology, evolutionary psychology, and various other social sciences to explain why many men are identifying as incels.[10] If one did not know better, he makes a convincing case through his organization of the research and the sheer volume of references and citations. However, Goldberg's work is just a better-organized version of what blackpill incels engage in.

Some blackpill incels use social science jargon to create theories of society that justify their ideology, explain their position in the social hierarchy, and serve to rally other incels around a cause. For instance, user *subhuman* started a thread called "Inceldom is the result of societal configurations, and they would still bring you suffering even if you 'ascend,'" where he outlines a theory as to why, even if incels ascend, they would remain societal rejects. He writes:

> This is a diseased world, and inceldom isn't the main problem but rather a symptom of the disease. Think about it like this. As an incel you are literally defining yourself based on women. It's not an individual phenomon with linear causality but more of a web of relationships to all the different whores and chads in the sexual market. Even if you somehow manage to ascend with a drunk girl or betabux some used up whore, the hostile sexual climate that made you an incel is still going to exist, mostly unchanged since you are just one small person out of billions and thus exert an insignificant amount of influence over the system. You will still suffer from it's effects, except you aren't able to control these: Devaluation of virginity and chastity…Abolition of gender roles…Individualism…Age of consent…Agepill…

The user *subhuman* puts together what appears to be a coherent theory as to why boys and men identify as incels. The entire post exemplifies the two characteristics of blackpill incels—the use of science (here, social scientific theories) and the feeling of hopelessness. Here, *subhuman* claims that even if one were to ascend, he would still be unable to shed the label of incel because of the various facets and macro-social trends in an evolving society. His threads and posts were very well received, earning him the title of "High IQ Post." Another user, *LifeMaxxer*, responded with the following missive:

> Inceldom is a natural phenomenon that occurs in the animal kingdom with any sexual species that competes for mates. In any game there will always be winners and losers. The mating game is no different. It's a sad fact of reality that some competitors in the game are quite literally born to lose, while others are made to lose through forces outside of nature (this is emergent and secondary). For this reason, inceldom cannot be defined in any other way, except through nature…

[10] Martin Goldberg fashions himself as a social scientist. However, the researchers were unable to find any background concerning his education or credentials. It should also be noted that Goldberg self-publishes many of his books, a sign that his research is not seen to be legitimate by the social science community, and his claims should be taken with the proverbial "grain of salt."

> Amongst humans there exists a distribution of sexual access and availability that is based on the sexual value of each individual human in each sex (so two distributions). This value is based on genetics first and foremost, but is also based on other markers of success and failure, depending on each sex. For men, the non-genetic success markers are status in the male hierarchy and access to resources - the former implying the latter (plus dominance), but the latter not necessarily being contingent on the former. For women, these non-genetic markers are chastity, age and submissiveness, with chastity being the winner by a very wide margin, followed by age in close second.

LifeMaxxer relies on evolutionary psychology to explain and justify the perceived societal slights that he and his fellow incels face. The use of that field is noteworthy because it makes the social hierarchy and its inequities appear as though they are natural and ultimately inescapable.

The explanations used by blackpill incels like *LifeMaxxer* and *subhuman* serve multiple purposes within inceldom. Much like disproven biological theories of crime that are taught in criminology courses, such explanations absolve incels of any responsibility for their failings and their behaviors. In other words, their inability to ascend is not their fault but rather a product of nature and their genetics. Also, as one cannot combat natural selection or genetics, explanations such as those give incels a reason to stop trying, to give up. It is absolution for no longer wanting to compete with "Chads" for "Stacys" and "foids" (female humanoids).

From the data, one can see the clear distinctions between the different pill takers within inceldom. Figure 1 provides a typology of the pills based on the data that have been collected.

Figure 1. Typology of Incels: Pill Colors

Type of Incel (Pill Color)	Description	Sub-Types (if applicable)
Bluepills	• Non-Incels • Often try to give self-described incels advice • Sometimes referred to as normies, which means "normal" people	• Fakecels • Women • LGBTQIA+ • Chads • Stacys • Foids
Redpills	• Still have hope to ascend • Attempt to use tricks to get the girl, display frustration when they fail • Place heavy emphasis on LMS • Generally part of the Man-o-Sphere	• PUA's • MRAs • Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW)
Blackpills	• Have given up on ascension • Most active in incel online forum • May use science to justify or support their ideology and position as incels	• No apparent variations

Source: Self-elaboration.

Not all incels are the same. In short, there are striations within the subculture of inceldom. For instance, bluepills, as stated earlier, are not incels but rather "normal" people whom incels either want to emulate or despise and blame for their involuntary celibacy. They are used by incels as a foil to explain their condition. Redpill incels are those who sub-

scribe to the incel ideology but maintain hope that they can escape. In their worldview, dating and sex are games to be played, with tricks and skills employed to ascend. Failure to ascend is then blamed on other people or on changes in society that have made them undesirable. In short, their failures are not their fault but everyone and everything else's fault. The key here, however, is that redpill incels maintain they have hope, and they need to change some aspect of themselves, such as "maxxing" out (looksmaxxing or gymmaxxing), to make them appear more desirable and fit into the rest of society. The final type of incel is the blackpill incels who, to put it bluntly, do not maintain any sense of hope in their ability to ascend. That group of incels is the hardcore believers in the incel ideology and will often use scientific findings to back up the ideology. They are also the most active members of the online community from which the data were drawn.

There are two reasons why having a typology that explains the subdivisions within inceldom is important. The first deals with the threats they may pose to others in the form of violence and mass shootings, as well as a general relationship to right-wing extremism (Townsend 2022). The second reason deals with deprogramming incels, that is, to treat those who want to exit inceldom and become "reformed." That is an area that needs further examination.

Informal Hierarchy: Interactions in the Online Forum

Until now, mostly the macro-structural hierarchy amongst incels has been examined, with little attention having been paid to the internal workings of incels online (see: Andersen 2023). The findings have explored the major differences in pills as they have been played out in the analysis. However, it is also important to note that those online forums have become virtual meeting spaces for incels to interact with one another, commiserate, share stories, pontificate, and find solace that they are not alone in the world. Those interactions online are seen as contributing to greater inceldom. Posting in the incel forums becomes a quantifiable measure of one's commitment to the identity of being an incel. Other organizations, formal and informal, have similar measures with varying rewards. For instance, in many jobs, such as in the legal profession, a person (ideally) receives greater rewards, usually pay, in return for the hours they put in; the people with the most billable hours receive the highest bonuses and then will be invited to participate in more prestigious cases (Abel 1989; Lazega 2001; Jiang et al. 2009). A similar pattern is seen in volunteer and social organizations—those who devote more time to the cause may end up in leadership positions, officially or unofficially (Okun 1993; Catano, Pond, and Kelloway 2001; Hustinx et al. 2022; Meyer and Rameder 2022). The incel subculture is no different—the more a person posts, the more prestige they will have amongst their incel brethren.

In formal and informal organizations, there are individuals who do not contribute a lot of time or effort, and they are often looked down upon or have their motives and devotion to the causes called into question (Willer 2009; Mallum 2017). A similar phenomenon can be seen within the incel subculture as well. Those who do not contribute often or a lot, or at all, are viewed with disdain within the incel subculture. For instance, a common term in internet forums that is used derisively for those who never contribute to online forums is the lurker. Lurkers are low on the informal hierarchy for a few reasons. First, because they do not contribute to the community, they are seen as merely taking some-

thing from those who share. Second, there is a perceived perversion to the lurkers: what is their true motivation? Are they merely voyeurs, getting pleasure from passively observing those brave enough to bear their pain on the internet? It is possible that they are too afraid to share, fear of being mocked (which happens within the incel subculture, but the nature of the ribbing can be up for debate)? The conclusion is their motivations do not matter, as they are unknown, and it is assumed that they are merely selfish yet are still viewed as part of the community (Sun, Rau, and Ma 2014). Lurkers, though, are still accepted, especially when they finally post. In the thread "I have no idea what my svm is. Serious I have no idea what my svm [sic][11] [sexual market value] is," started by a user known as *Anthrax*, user *PresidentCel* said:

> I just lurk and lurk. I lurked for like two years before joining in 2020. I'm the same way in real life. I don't say much…How was this forum back in your lurking days?

PresidentCel is telling his fellow incels in the thread that he was a longtime lurker but has now become an active user. He also recognizes that the forum has changed over time, has changed locations, et cetera.

Another important piece of the informal hierarchy is based on the number of postings an individual makes. Like lurkers, those who do not post often enough are viewed with derision. For instance, greycels are, to put it one way, novice incels. They are individuals who have made less than 500 individual posts on the website.[12] Sometimes they are referred to as new recruits to inceldom. For instance, in the post from *PresidentCel*, he is engaging in an interaction with another user regarding their status based on their number of posts who states:

> Based take btw:feelsYall: Not to be rude, but how could you have joined in early 2020 yet only have just over 500 posts? You're basically an honorary greycel.

So *PresidentCel* is called out for not having enough posts, but, conversely, because of his length of membership in the community, he is not a greycel either. In reading the entire thread, those posts did not seem to be a conflict between the two users but rather an observation with a response.

The number of posts a user makes, though, points to one of the contradictions in the incel subculture. Users are expected to participate, but if they participate too much, they are ridiculed. For instance, in the thread titled "Foid tried to cancel me on social media," started by the user *Vomitcel*, during a dispute in the thread, another user, *Khanivore*, wrote:

> Nah, you must know that majority of local angry birds are kids, and it shows you have 12,414 posts and wasted 82 days of your life on a board for losers. Aren't you a little ashamed of yourself?

That insult was directed at the original poster, *Vomitcel*, and meant to shame him for wasting so much time on the forum. Quantity of posts, then, serves as a double-edged sword—too few posts and you are viewed as a novice, too many posts and you are accused of wasting your time.

There are individual incels who post often, and/or post meaningful musings, who are admired by their fellow members. For instance, user *THE TRUE*

[11] Sexual Market Value (SVM) draws from Bourdieu's concepts of fields and capital, as explained by Martin and George (2006).

[12] Users who have less than 500 posts on the incels.is forum receive the label of greycel in their profiles and with all their posts.

CHIMPLER, in *Anthrax's* thread, "I have no idea what my svm is. Serious, I have no idea what my svm is," expresses that he misses some users who have seemingly gone silent. He writes:

> I fee like a lot of the content was better. I miss some of the old posters who are gone.

Those users whom administrators see as model contributors, especially when they post something poignant and meaningful, may have their threads added to the "Must-Read Content" or have their threads pinned. Such a move can serve as a badge of honor on any social media platform. In a thread titled "It's so sad that we replace socialization with this," started by *Deleted member 7448*,[13] *Deleted member 27249* states while quoting another comment (original user's comment is in added quotation marks):

> your personality said: "Damn this thread really got pinned by the mods :lul: You'd think they wouldn't promote a thread that is talking about how we'd rather be socializing IRL instead of this forum." @ anon1822 s posts are deserve to be pinned.

Anon1822 is the original poster (*Deleted member 7448*), whose post was not only pinned but also considered to be a "High IQ Post" thread by other users. Several members agreed with *Deleted member 27249's* observation. For instance, *Deleted member 27204* wrote: "Another high IQ post from you brother," while *Hate_My_Life* responded with "Top tier relatable content always," indicating that *Anon1822's* posts are often high quality. Several other responses echoed that compliment regarding *Anon1822*, which demonstrates that he has earned respect from his fellow incels due not only to the number of his posts but also the quality of the posts.

Incel subculture, beliefs, and behaviors are presented, often to the extreme, in their posts. They present themselves as attaining incel behaviors, hating on women, "ethnics," and those who are lower in the incel social structure. Such presentation is often to protect their status as an incel overall as well as to display their commitment to being an incel, which ties to how they are seen within the incel community, much as what happens within sports teams (Shang and Chih-Ming Ku 2018) and other organizations, like work (DiPalma 2004). It will be demonstrated later from their posts that while many of those individuals might present with low self-esteem, they are going to seek acceptance and self-esteem from the incel community. They participate in social competition behaviors to advance their status within the incel group. The level of commitment to incel behaviors and acceptance of the red pill or black pill ideologies increases the likelihood of an improvement of one's position as incel. Within the forum, such behaviors will appear as the positive activity.[14]

Policing and Conflicts Online

Incels are no different from other subcultural and informal associations. They share various norms and mores while also subscribing to a particular set

[13] Deleted member followed by a number is not necessarily a username. Deleted member labels take the place of usernames when a member has been banned by moderators or has, on their volition, deleted their account from the incels. is forum with the label replacing the original usernames.

[14] From the incels.is webpage's FAQ and Rules section regarding "How do ranks and stars work?": "You earn one star per 100 posts, up to 5 stars. Once you get 500 posts, your rank and color change, and you reset to one star again. Notice that for each rank, you need to have been registered for one extra week on the site, this is so spamming to skip ranks isn't possible. You can see all ranks in the Members section's sidebar. If you have the post count + registered time, simply be patient; the 'upgrade' process runs every hour."

of beliefs and values that help establish and maintain their identity as group members. Those cultural delineations set the subcultural group apart from the rest of the mainstream cultural members (Yinger 1960). As such, anyone who violates those norms or turns away from those beliefs is often informally punished for their indiscretions, while conflicts arising from those violations must be mediated through that informal enforcement (Williams and Copes 2005; Bryant 2014; Stamkou et al. 2019).

Some groups and individuals are not allowed the status of incels. Women, according to their ideology, cannot be incels, whether or not they face many of the same issues that incels do. User *WØLF* explains:

> Lesbian pill is brutal, it saves foid from being alone after whoring with chad, I see tons of single mothers going the lesbian route because they can't find good looking men to be married to…normies and chadlites will soon be replaced with other foids. foids will only pair with giga chads and giga pretty boys in the future and if she can't secure one she will take another foid because it is more valuable than any normie or chadlite.

WØLF is suggesting that while women may face some difficulties, they can always find a man to be with them, and if that does not work, they can fall back and be with their fellow women. It is implied that lesbianism is always an option for women, a choice if they are unable to find a desirable partner, something that is not an option for incels. However, following such logic, it is unclear why homosexuality would not be an option for those men. According to the incels.is forum rules, the following groups are explicitly banned from the forum:

> Women and LGBT Individuals: Banned on sight, no exceptions. This is a heterosexual male-only forum.
>
> Non-incel: Even if interested in blackpill philosophy, the community has voted not to allow non-incels.
>
> Under 18's: Forum accepts only those who are 18+, no exceptions aside from those grandfathered.

In terms of LGBTQ issues, all content related to that group is banned, unless it is to criticize the LGBTQ community. Strangely enough, "furries" and "bronies" were also included as banned for being part of the LGBTQ community and given their own name ("furfags").

Incels are protective, ironically, of their identity, especially regarding who is and who is not an incel. Certain groups are not allowed to be incels. Those who ascend, the term used by incels for having sex or getting an intimate partner, are, by definition, no longer incels. One of the other groups that is also banned is Chads, who are non-incels. Chads, whom incels believe are genetically blessed with the good looks that women desire, and are looked down on as being shallow, are not allowed to be incels. User *Fat Link* expressed disdain that more of those Chads were beginning to identify as incels in a thread he started called "More Chads are becoming…Serious More and more Chads are becoming incels strangely enough…" that sparked a deeper discussion within the forum about who is and who is not an incel. User *Burnscarcel* states the following during the debate while quoting another user, *WØLF*:

> WØLF said: tfw the head janny doesn't even know what a chad is Sheeit nigger the vast majority of JBW [Just Be White] theorists are all nodding their heads in agreement with me about him now as I type.

FFS you don't get much more Chadly than having his traits which are:

> White
> Probably tall enough
> Blue Eyes
> Square Jaw
> Asesthetic symmetrical face
> Looks financially successful…

Who is and who is not a Chad is up for debate in inceldom. The *Fat Link* post fomented a debate about Chads where they ended up discussing and debating whether or not certain individuals, who claimed to be incels, were, in fact, Chads. It is assumed, within inceldom, that true incels, the blackpills, have a certain base level of knowledge and should know how to define Chads. User *SlayerSlayer* sums that point up:

> The majority of you niggas have no idea how to rate looks objectively at all. I shouldn't have to post a pic of what a chad looks like because such fundamental blackpill knowledge should realdy be self evident if you're posting on these forums.

SlayerSlayer demonstrates two phenomena that have been discussed in this paper. First, he is highlighting the existence of a hierarchy, namely, that blackpills are the only true incels. Second, he is saying that anyone unable to identify a Chad is not a true incel and, therefore, should not be posting in the forums. *Slayerslayer's* post demonstrates both policing the boundaries of inceldom and the enforcement of incel hierarchy.

Further policing of inceldom and the incel hierarchy is evident during a dispute in the thread titled "Foid tried to cancel me on social media." The original poster (OP) was called out for his actions in real life, which entailed bullying someone with Down Syndrome with the hope of impressing a girl at his school. During that conflict, user *ElTruecel* accused *Vomitcel* (OP) of being a fakecel, while another user, *TheProphetMuscle*, in support of that accusation, chimed in with, "indeed OP will have an ascension post soon enough." The activities of *Vomitcel*, which he, himself, reported, were not deemed to be in line with inceldom. Immediately, *Vomitcel* was castigated for making fun of someone who could very well be accepted into the incel subculture. Indeed, other users began to point out other famous people with disabilities whom they were posthumously claiming would have been one of their own. User *Indari* identified the following historical figures as being incels:

> These men are the truest of incels; if you think your dating life is hard, theirs is infinitely harder.
> Beethoven went deaf; he was an incel
> Heaviside was hearing impaired; he was an incel
> Joseph Merrick was so severely deformed he was called "the elephant man"; he was an incel.
> That, my friend, is why I don't find it funny that you bullied a child with down syndrome.

Also, *Vomitcel's* motivations for attacking the classmate were not in line with inceldom—he was trying to do it to impress a girl. Ultimately, *Vomitcel* was reported to the website moderators and called a fakecel—serving not only as an insult but a technique used to police their boundaries. By reporting *Vomitcel* to the moderators, the hope is that he will be banned from the online social forum, which is the definitive way to police boundaries and punish those who violate the incel norms. Not only are you not able to participate in mainstream society, but now you cannot be part of the incel community.

Insults within inceldom serve two purposes and must be understood within the proper cultural con-

text (Mateo and Yus 2013). First, they are often used to bond with members of the group or to foment group solidarity (Dynel 2008). The insults may serve as a bonding mechanism, like "locker room talk" within sports teams (Curry 1991; Pennington 2016). The insults help other incels to feel as though they are part of the group when they use them against individuals who violate incel norms or characteristics, thereby reinforcing the "ins" and the "others." Second, they can also help a member feel as though they are part of the group if they receive a good-natured insult, thereby becoming a compliment. In the "Getting blackpilled for the first time" thread, two users hurled insults at the OP. *Michael15651* wrote:

> Yup. Stick to women in your own league, you subhuman POS.

Calling the OP, *LonelyATM*, subhuman is meant to reaffirm his position in society as an incel and reinforce that, by being subhuman, he is unlikely to ever ascend. However, *Michael15651* was called out by another user, *ElephantMan*, for being a greycel, which, as mentioned earlier, is lower in the incel hierarchy. Essentially, *ElephantMan* is telling the user, by reminding him of his position, that he is a novice and should be careful about insulting others, especially when someone starts a thread. Another user, *AsgardTheFatecel*, uses a similar insult at *LonelyATM*:

> At the end of the day you can put a cockroach in a suit but it's still a cockroach.

AsgardTheFatecel's slight serves the same purpose as *Michael15651's*, despite being harsher in tone, but it is not coming from a novice incel. In certain ways, it lets *LonelyATM* know that he has made it into the group. That he is one of them (the incels) now, especially since that at the start of his post, he admits to taking the black pill. Other insults used in the forum include homophobic and racist language and general "shitposting" that has been widely reported in other studies, a practice that further enforces the "us vs. them" mentality that is widespread in inceldom (Baron and Dunham 2015).

Conclusion

Attempting to study incels as a subcultural group in an impartial manner is difficult. It calls into memory the experiences, for example, of Bronisław Malinowski and his feelings toward the Trobriander Islanders off the coast of Australia, where he was less than thrilled about being interned there during World War I and viewed his subjects as backwards, unintelligent, vulgar, and unattractive (Baker 1987). Malinowski's ethnographic observations are an important lesson to researchers to remember our relationship with those being researched as well as attempting to view the world through their eyes. The same can be written regarding involuntary celibates, which is what this paper attempted to do—get into the world view of incels.

At the beginning of this paper, it was mentioned that incels do not view themselves as a subcultural group and compare themselves to either LGBTQIA+ members or to homeless people—that neither of those would be viewed by mainstream society as a subcultural group. Despite their claims, taken directly from their own FAQ page, the data indicate otherwise. As the findings show, incels set boundaries to determine who are and are not incels, they have their language and code words that serve as a shared dialect within the group, they have a common bonding area (online forums, especially incels. is, from which the data were taken), there is a shared belief system, and they interact with one another.

According to Gary Alan Fine and Sherryl Kleinman's (1979) conceptualization of subcultures, incels share many of the characteristics that they outline, such as having structural roles that help to spread information, media diffusion, membership, and weak ties (incels, seemingly, rarely meet outside of their online forum, but that is a matter for future research). However, the case could easily be made that incels are not a subculture, as they have withdrawn from mainstream society in certain ways, but rather a contraculture, where their norms and beliefs are contrary to mainstream society (Yinger 1960). Ultimately, though, Dick Hebdige's formulation seems most appropriate when discussing incels.

One question that should be asked at the end of all research, regardless of methods, is, "So what?" Why is the research on incels important, and ultimately, what is the point? The media has begun to report more on incels, especially in conjunction with a rise in mass shootings. When a mass shooting occurs, there is becoming a greater chance that the perpetrator may be an incel or have some connections to inceldom, as well as other extremist online influences. One thread started on February 14, 2023 by *YuiStillMyCope*, who has previously posted on the topic, is titled "The FBI defeated us in a very insidious way." Here, he theorizes that the FBI was beginning to infiltrate their community and expressed anger and frustration that incels were being labeled and treated as a terrorist threat. He blamed the FBI for, among many things, incels being censored (or quarantined) in social media:

> Undermine public opinion: One of the primary ways the FBI targeted organizations was by challenging their reputations in the community and denying them a platform to gain legitimacy. Hoover specifically designed programs to block leaders from "spreading their philosophy publicly or through the communications media". Furthermore, the organization created and controlled negative media meant to undermine black power organizations. For instance, they oversaw the creation of "documentaries" skillfully edited to paint the Black Panther Party as aggressive, and false newspapers that spread misinformation about party members. The ability of the FBI to create distrust within and between revolutionary organizations tainted their public image and weakened chances at unity and public support.

Whether or not *YuiStillMyCope's* claims are founded, government and non-government agencies have begun to take notice of their online presence. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has begun to pay more attention to the online activities of incels, recognizing that their ideology, when taken to its extremes, can lead to violence. The ADL has an entire page devoted to the subject that includes a glossary of terms for the uninitiated. For those reasons, gaining a deeper understanding of the incel subculture is vitally important, especially if it is to be viewed as a social problem.

If society is going to treat inceldom as a social problem, then, logically, a solution must be sought. On Reddit, there are incel recovery groups, therapists have begun to treat self-proclaimed incels for various ailments, and even rehabilitation facilities have started programs to "cure" incels. If such interventions are to be successful, then knowing about incel subdivisions becomes essential. A treatment plan for a redpill incel, such as PUAs or LMSs, would be quite a bit different than how one would treat a blackpill incel who has lost all hope and sees no way out, even justifying their position through science.

Previous studies, as well as the ADL, have treated incels as a homogenous group. They are viewed as

largely heterosexual, cis, white males who blame women and society for their inability to "get laid," find a girlfriend, form a meaningful relationship with a member of the opposite sex, or other manifestations of their failing. Where this research diverges is by finding the nuances within inceldom in identifying the existence of a hierarchy of incels and delving further into how they define and police themselves.

Finally, this research is part of a broader project devoted to studying incels, but more importantly, to gain insight into their lifeworld, or *Lebenswelt*, with the potential for *verstehen*, which should be the goal of the social scientist according to Weber (1946). It is limited in the data collection methods, as it merely examines online postings, which comes with its own shortcomings (Karpf 2012; Latkovikj and Popovska 2019). However, the amount of data collected is vast and worthy of further investigation. For instance, future directions of research could include aspects of popular culture that are consumed by incels (music, art, print, television, etc.), which might give a greater insight into how such artifacts shape the incel worldview and ideology. Another area, as suggested by others, would deal with incel attitudes toward sex workers. Yet another area of importance would come from incels who may have reformed—what led to the reformation, what are their relationships like, and have those relationships significantly altered their ideology? Some of these issues would require interviews. However, while interviews may be beneficial to such type of research, one would be limited by sample size and would not be able to reach the level of theoretical saturation that collecting online postings has been able to achieve.

If society truly wants to understand incels, then we must begin to examine the root causes as to what drives those men to identify as involuntarily celibate, give up, withdraw from society, and find comfort and solidarity online with other like-minded individuals. There are social conditions that are driving them away, conditions that incels are not entirely clear about. Only through a deeper investigation into the data will the incel phenomenon be truly understood.

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“Semester Marriages” and the Unintended Psycho-Social Challenges within Institutions of Higher Learning: Implications for Social Work Practice

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Abstract: The sexual economy prevalent within universities, as well as how young people perceive, interpret, and experience their sexuality, present complex dynamics, which, if not handled with great emotional intelligence, may disrupt their educational aspirations. This paper investigates the psycho-social implications of “semester marriages” within institutions of higher learning. Guided by principles of the qualitative approach and the theory of planned action, the paper disinterred that students experienced intense regret and guilt as a result of backstreet abortions. Soul-tie complications emanating from sharing the “wife-husband” bond also made it difficult for some students to move on after a breakup, leading to disruptions in their educational focus. In extreme cases, such an inability to deal with the adverse effects of “semester marriages” culminated in crimes of passion. The paper desists from pathologizing the “semester marriages” phenomenon and advocates for the strengthening of psycho-social support modalities within university settings to increase the accessibility and visibility of therapeutic services through a school social work model. Furthermore, universities, in partnership with other relevant stakeholders, are urged to prioritize sexual and reproductive education and services among the youth as provided for in the Constitution of Zimbabwe of 2013 to impart life skills that can equip students to make informed sexual and reproductive decisions.

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Introduction and Background

When young people leave home for university, they look forward to an independent life where the spying eyes of their parents and guardians cannot reach (Gukurume 2011; Quinlivan 2018; Naser et al. 2022). University life offers such a liberal environment with unlimited freedom, unlike in high school, where teachers are also *in loco parentis*. In the institutions of higher learning, students are treated as adults responsible for their welfare with minimum supervision on issues such as dressing, behavior, and relational interactions. That is a period characterized by great freedom of expression, experimentation, and trial and error endeavors. In an African nation such as Zimbabwe, where the grip of parental control is still tight (Mapuranga 2010; Makhubele, Malesa, and Shika 2018), transitioning to university can be perceived by young people as a period of living life. Life at "uni" or "varsity," as the youth often call it, can thus be a bitter-sweet moment for the young people as the excitement of being free can also be coupled with fear of various responsibilities and the unknown. That is because the university environment offers various experiences that can enhance or hinder one's academic aspirations, depending on how one perceives and experiences university life. Simbarashe Gukurume (2022) reveals that the university ecosystem provides a "sexual economy" for sexual transactions of different etiologies, making it a place of various experiences.

At the hierarchy of all the fantasies young people look forward to at varsity is the exploration of their sexuality and romantic relationships (Adam and Mutongi 2007; Gukurume 2011; Quinlivan 2018; Naser et al. 2022). That is in line with the provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Zimbabwe (2013), which allows the youth to enjoy their sexual and reproductive rights. Freedom from parents,

teachers, and other authoritarian figures allows the youth in a university setting to experiment with their romantic relationships. That has seen the prevalence of a phenomenon known as "semester marriages" within institutions of higher learning in Zimbabwe. While that living arrangement greatly resembles cohabitation, "semester marriage" is between a student and another student, often limited to time and space (Gumbo 2020). It also diverts from the sex-for-marks phenomenon, which aligns more with the sexual harassment of disadvantaged students, mostly females, by authority figures within the university system (Mafa and Simango 2021; Gukurume 2022). "Semester marriages" borrow some characteristics from what Victor Muzvidziwa (2002) termed *kuchaya mapoto*, which is a loosely structured transactional living arrangement characterized by urgency. On the other hand, the relevance of "semester marriages" is contextualized to the semester and also confined within university models of accommodation. It is a form of transactional and temporary living arrangement where the currency goes beyond cash to include other non-monetary benefits such as accommodation, sex, domestic benefits (cooking and laundry), as well as assistance with academic assignments. Therefore, a "semester marriage" will be defined here as a temporary living arrangement by students characterized by a sexual relationship and other mutual benefits but only relevant during the semester calendar. Thus, those specific characteristics bring about unique dynamics as different variables that influence this form of transactional arrangement.

The notion of cohabitation and "semester marriages" may not be an area of interest and contention in the Global North due to a different cultural orientation (Quinlivan 2018). Emily McCave (2007) highlights that the subject of sexuality in Western countries is embraced early through comprehensive sexual education. Jenny Higgins and colleagues (2022) further clarify that in the US, parents openly discuss sexuality issues, which helps in desensitizing the subject, as well as providing young people, including those within institutions of higher learning, with the knowledge they require to enjoy their sexual rights. However, in Africa, particularly in Zimbabwe, the phenomenon of sexuality is shrouded by embarrassing comments and normlessness where pre-marital sexual relations are somewhat considered a taboo (Mapuranga 2010; Gesinde, Adejumo, and Ariyo 2013). Through the processes of cultural erosion, westernization, and modernization thought, liberal sexual relations are slowly filtering into African societies, which once subscribed to a conservative approach to sexuality and sexual relations (Muzvidziwa 2002; Kang'ethe and Mafa 2014). Zimbabwean communities are not immune to that infiltration as the world is becoming a global village, borrowing behavioral traits from one cultural orientation to the other. Universities as subsets of the larger society have also resembled those characteristics through the prevalence of "semester marriages" arrangements.

Many studies on the cohabitation of students have identified some push factors such as lack of university accommodation (Kang'ethe and Mafa 2014; Svodziwa and Kurete 2017), poverty (Bhatasara 2011; Gumbo 2020), and a materialistic mindset (Masvawure 2010; Gukurume 2011), among others. In agreement, Ezebunwa Nwokocha (2007) states that sex has, for a long time, been used as a transacting currency to propel people ahead in various endeavors. Sex has been used to secure a job, a promotion, and to access other advantages. It is, therefore, not strange that "semester marriages" can be used to somehow facilitate educational aspirations.

Simbarashe Gukurume's (2022) findings reveal that students struggling with their assignments may engage in transactional relations with senior students to get academic assistance. A participant reveals, "When she needs help, like with assignments and all, after finishing her assignment, I hit that thing" (Gukurume 2022). It validates that the money factor alone is inadequate to explain the existence of other non-monetary forms of benefits enjoyed in some forms of transactional relationships, such as "semester marriages." Since various pull and push factors influence human behavior, there are also various reasons why such living arrangements may be adopted by students.

Other studies have also explored risky factors such as heightened susceptibility to HIV/AIDS infections (Makhubele et al. 2018; Gumbo 2020) and social aftermaths such as unintended pregnancies (Masvawure 2010; Svodziwa and Kurete 2017). Numerous attempts have been made at micro, meso, and macro levels of intervention to respond to those challenges. Some NGOs, such as SAYWHAT, have registered their presence within institutions of higher learning to provide sexual and reproductive health services. However, most of those interventions rely on the peer-to-peer model, which means that students are the main actors in providing the services. While that is a welcome and much-needed development because the model has its merits, the evidence on the ground suggests the presence of loopholes and gaps that need strengthening to instill a sense of responsibility as the youth enjoy their sexual rights (Muchabaiwa and Mbonigaba 2019; Mafa and Simango 2021). That may be attributed to the fact that the students lack the requisite knowledge, skills, and time to adequately offer counseling services, as well as sexual and reproductive health services.

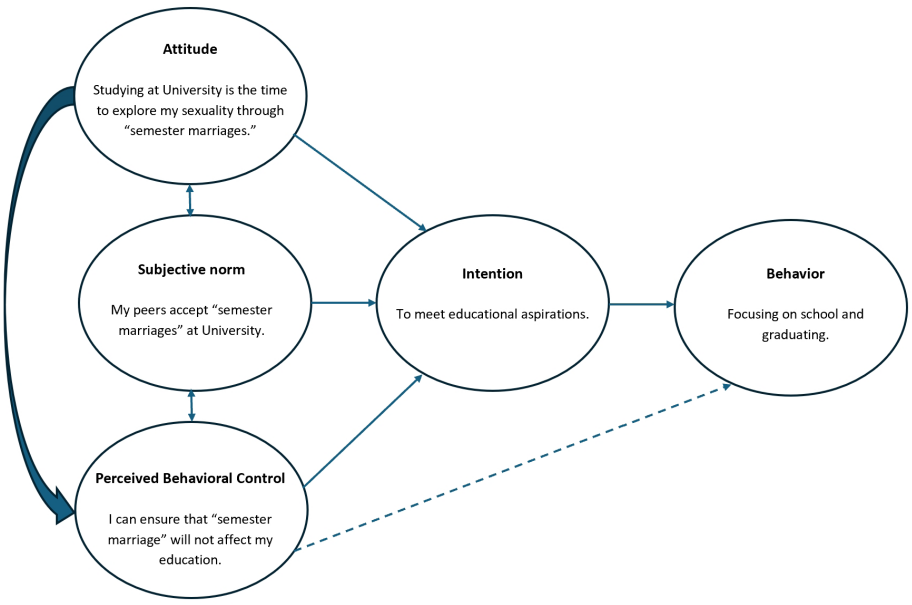
In as much as social deviancy theorists may focus on the morality of "semester marriages" (Kamerman and Kahn 1988), it is critical to underscore that the paper does not intend to debate the moral and cultural appropriateness of the phenomenon. According to the Constitution of the Republic of Zimbabwe (2013), everybody over the age of 18 years, inclusive of the youth, has the right to decide whether to engage in sexual activities or not and also to select a sexual partner, among other rights. Therefore, the researchers believe that an outright pathological view of that living arrangement can only hinder the needed progressive discussions that can contribute to the formulation of modalities and interventions that can cushion youngsters from the unintended consequences of "semester marriages." That is with the understanding and conviction that a decision to enter such a living arrangement is usually underpinned by multi-factorial etiologies, which may manifest as pull and push factors. Therefore, a shift from a pathological fixation point of view is necessary for sustainable and inclusive solutions.

While it is salient to look at various interlocking variables underpinning "semester marriages" for sustainable solutions and intervention, there seems to be an informational gap regarding the psycho-emotional consequences associated with that living arrangement among university students. From a social work perspective, mental health and emotional tenacity are vital to safeguard the advancement of students' academic pursuits as the person is always viewed through holistic lenses (Mele, Pels, and Polese 2010). That justifies the interrogation of the "semester marriages" phenomenon through social work lenses to suggest modalities that will strengthen students' emotional and mental muscles as vehicles and catalysts to the realization of their academic prospects.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The study was informed by Icek Ajzen's theory of planned behavior. The theory postulates that behavioral attainment can be predicted by analyzing personal attitudes, perceived behavioral control, social norms, as well as behavioral intention (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980). It means that an individual's decision to engage in specific behavior, such as a "semester marriage" arrangement, is influenced by their intentions in doing so, for example, the desire to meet their educational aspirations. Also, if the perceived subjective norms are regarded as positive, for instance, if the peers accept a "semester marriage" living arrangement, students are likely to engage in the behavior. Therefore, various behaviors meant to facilitate and translate to the planned outcome lie in planning to achieve educational aspirations. For example, a "semester marriage" will become a route leading to a desired outcome. In this study, the school social work model is proposed as a modality to equip university students to navigate through possible existential difficulties that are resident within the university environment, including their sexual experiences that may be through "semester marriages." Perceived behavioral control and self-efficacy, that is, the extent to which a person engaging in "semester marriages" believes they have control over their sexual experiences and the consequences thereof, also determine whether they continue or not. However, it is critical to note that, due to varying psychological, social, economic, and biological differences, the said theory may not fully capture the complexity of human behavior. An illustrative example of the utility of the planned action theory is shown below.

Figure 1. Theory of planned behavior



Source: Self-elaboration based on Ajzen (1985).

Methodology

This section offers details of the research design and the approach used in the study. The methods of data collection, tools, and analysis are also explored.

Specific Research Question

What are the psycho-social challenges associated with "semester marriages" within public universities in Zimbabwe?

Research Approach and Design

The paper employed a qualitative approach because of its exploratory and exhaustive strength (Creswell 2014). A narrative research design was preferred, for it allowed the researchers to obtain in-depth views and perceptions regarding the psycho-social experiences of students engaging in "semester marriages" from various data sources. Data were collected using three focus group discussions with peer educators picked from three purposefully selected universities using focus group guides. According to Lokanath Mishra (2016) and John Creswell (2014), the strengths of focus group discussions are that participants influence each other, allowing for snowballing and corroboration of contributions during the discussion. Data were then triangulated using interviews with relevant stakeholders through interview schedules. The study was conducted in three different cities where public universities are located (the names of the cities have been withheld because by naming them, it will be easy to identify the names of the public universities, thereby violating confidentiality and anonymity ethics).

Sampling Procedure and Techniques

Non-probability techniques were chosen to select the study participants to satisfy the requirements of qualitative studies. While convenience sampling was used to choose peer educators by their availability, purposive sampling was employed to pick various key informants according to the researchers' judgment (Doody and Noonan 2013). That ensured that only participants with the requisite knowledge and experience were chosen.

Study Selection Criteria and Sample Size

The cumulative sample for the study was 40 participants inclusive of 28 peer educators selected from the three (3) universities, four (4) Student Representative Committee (SRC) members, three (3) deans of students representing the selected institutions, three (3) health professionals, each picked from the three (3) universities, and two (2) representatives from NGOs offering sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services to students within institutions of higher learning. To justify the inclusion and exclusion criteria—peer educators and SRC members were selected as they handle students' affairs, including those related to sexual and reproductive concerns. The deans of students and health personnel also handle students' health and social matters. Likewise, selected NGOs giving counseling and SRHR services to the students provided rich information on the psycho-social implications of their cohabitation.

Table1. Summary of the Study Sample

Category of Participants	Distribution of Participants			Total
	University 1	University 2	University 3	
Primary Data Sources				
Peer educators (female and male)	9	8	11	**28**
Key Informants (Participants)				
Deans of students	1	1	1	**3**
SRC members	1	2	1	**4**
Health professionals	1	1	1	**3**
NGOs offering SRHR services	-	1	1	**2**
Total	**12**	**13**	**15**	**40**

Source: Self-elaboration.

Data Analysis

The thematic data analysis technique was used for this study. Firstly, the researchers transcribed the data to enable the familiarization process (Creswell 2014). The researchers then went through the transcripts of three focus group discussions and key informants' transcripts. Themes were then identified by looking at data patterns and frequency. Finally, data from all sources were integrated to develop themes and sub-themes, as shown in the presentation of findings section.

Ethical Consideration

The research process was guided by research ethics. According to the informed consent, all participants agreed to be part of the study after the researchers had explained its purpose and what was expected from them. Confidentiality and anonymity were also ensured—by not revealing identifying information for the universities and the participants concerned. Also, the study obtained ethical clearance from the university's research ethics committee in honor of the legality of research ethics.

Limitations of the Study and Its Findings

The study focused on public institutions in Zimbabwe. Thus, due to psycho-social and economic differences, the findings have limitations concerning their transferability to private institutions. Therefore, there is a need to carry out a study incorporating private institutions, possibly a comparative study, to have a holistic appreciation of "semester marriages." Still, the study used a qualitative par-

adigm and operated on a small sample. A quantitative or sequential explanatory study may be critical to providing data on the prevalence of "semester marriages" and the severity of the phenomenon. However, the findings of this study can be credited for disinterring the challenges through its exploratory strengths.

Findings and Discussion

The findings have established the guilt and regret of street abortion, soul-tie complications, emotional outbursts leading to crimes of passion, and disruption of educational focus as the unintended psycho-social consequences related to "semester marriages." Although the findings from this study may not be exclusive to students engaging in "semester marriages," the verbatim testify that live-in arrangements by students expose them to conditions that increase the likelihood of these stressful experiences.

The Guilt and Regret of Street Abortion

The study participants attested to the presence of guilt and regret in female students who commit abortions. Those intense emotions were also associated with sadness, isolation, and the fact that very few students sought psycho-emotional support. While both the male and female students in "semester marriages" do indulge and enjoy the sexual activity, there seemed to be feelings of unfairness arising from the realization by participants that there is an expectation that the female student in the relationship should ensure the prevention of any unplanned pregnancies. The findings established that, in the event of such an unforeseen incident, the female student also bears the liability of carrying out an abortion and enduring the emotional burden that comes from it. The results further showed that students find themselves contemplating between risking the end of their educational aspirations and terminating their pregnancy, with the latter being the subsequent resolve. The testimonies are given in the verbatim below:

> To add to the issue of unwanted pregnancy, there is a certain student who reluctantly came for counseling. She was in bad shape. She said she was cohabiting because all her other three friends were also cohabiting. She ended up getting pregnant, and when she told her boyfriend, he blamed her for not using contraceptives. He said he was not ready for such a responsibility, and she decided to have an abortion. She said she felt empty and very bad after the abortion, and she would isolate herself. She said she regretted having the abortion because she never had peace from that day. [focus group discussion, 3]

> As students' counselors, we know that there are a lot of students who are aborting, especially those who are cohabiting. Just a few of them do come to us, and they open up because of the confidentiality we offer. Most of them regret committing an abortion. [key informant, SRHR organization]

> When a couple stays together for long, they tend to stop using protection, leading to pregnancy. Such an unwanted pregnancy normally leads to abortion because students know their parents expect them to bring a degree. So, making a decision between keeping the baby and risking not having a degree and the regret after the abortion can be very stressful. [key informant, health professional]

Despite the availability of birth control methods for both men and women, the testimonials seem to reflect the presence of gender-biased opinions on the

use of contraceptives, with male students putting that burden on their female partners. That suggests exploitation of the biological disadvantage as supported by a patriarchal orientation, which puts the responsibility on women in general because, by becoming pregnant, they are the ones who bear the result of the sexual experience. As such, female students are more susceptible to emotional liability as they are the ones to navigate through the dilemma between pregnancy termination and ending their educational advancement. That corroborates the findings by Itai Hlonie Mafa, Simon Kang'ethe, and Victor Chikadzi (2020), who argue that the patriarchal society, which has double standards on sexuality expectations for men and women, inevitably creates a breeding ground that exposes women to emotional burdens as they are often left to nurse the wounds of sexual activities. The verbatim also suggests the presence of a seemingly self-evoked pressure to cohabit simply because others are doing it. That also corroborates the subjective norms (Ajzen 1985) in those students' circles manifested through peer pressure. Whether verbalized or perceived, peer pressure can push someone, especially the youth still in the exploratory stage of life, to engage in behavior without fully appreciating the outcomes. It is, however, interesting that the perceived control over sexual experiences conflicts with the intent. In that case, harboring "semester marriages" for the completion of their education is sometimes met with complexities such as unwanted pregnancy, which contradicts the ultimate goal of graduating. Clinical social work inference suggests that there is evidence of irrational thought that is not aligned with the best outcomes for those students. Hence, the theory of planned behavior can be infused into student orientation programs to shape their attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control toward attaining the intent (education) through rational and safe choices. Apart from that, the verbatim alludes to the fact that guilt and regret are exacerbated by the secrecy, shame, and illegality that characterize abortion, especially in Zimbabwe. That also points to the fact that subjective norms are not only confined to university culture, where "semester marriages" are normalized. They are also part of the broader societal accepted values and norms on issues of morality, in that case, abortion. That may explain why some students may coil inwards or adopt maladaptive behaviors in dealing with the guilt of abortion as they feel judged and misunderstood. Further still, buttressing the fluidity of the sources that inform subjective norms at university, it can be inferred that guilt and shame posit the centrality of Zimbabwean culture, which is pro-strict moral values.

Soul-Tie Complications

Besides the guilt from illegal abortions, the research participants also explained that some students in "semester marriages" struggled to move on after a breakup. The "marital" bond created through this living arrangement contributed to emotional complications, which led to intense psycho-emotional entanglements. The key informants further revealed that female students in those relationships were the ones who struggled more, such that some of them failed to attend classes. The findings showed that only a few sought psycho-social support to manage emotions and regain their functioning. Below are direct quotes supporting those findings:

> There are some female students who have come to talk to me, seeking my help on how to move on after a breakup. They will be saying, "How do I move on and forget about him now? We stayed together and shared everything and had sex, so how do I just for-

> get about him like nothing happened?" [focus group discussion, 1]

> Students on campus do change partners during the period they are here on campus. In the corridors there, you always hear of girls who are not going to class because they had a breakup, especially if the whole school knew that you were staying with a guy. It is hard. The shame, stigma, and feeling used. All that can really make it hard to just forget. [key informant, SRC member]

> Getting over someone may depend on the type of relationship you are in. If it is sexual and people are staying together as husband and wife, it's very difficult, especially when you see that person often and with another person. This is why it is hard for cohabiting students to move on. There are just too many emotions involved. [key informant, SRHR organization]

From the quotes, it appears as though the youth in universities indulge in risky sexual relationships without a clear understanding of the psycho-emotional repercussions involved. Moreover, it shows that some of the young people who choose to live in "semester marriages" set-ups lack the emotional maturity needed to build on the agency that can safeguard their emotions in the event of a breakup. That can be interpreted as deficient perceived control where students' capacity to handle the latent effects of an action is limited (Ajzen 1985). The level of emotional entanglement is heightened through live-in arrangements because of the intensity and frequency of interactions, weakening the tenacity of those youngsters to cope and focus on the school work after a breakup. When a couple spends much time together, the emotional bond built over time may lead to separation anxiety, which may be disruptive if psycho-social intervention is absent or delayed, as indicated in the findings. Moreover, the social judgments of "semester marriages" outside the university ecosystem seem to exacerbate feelings of shame, despondency, and possible regret, which further exposes cohabiting couples to emotional turmoil (Mapuranga 2010; Gesinde et al. 2013). Given the campus life where dating couples are not a secret, the emotional torture may be worsened when one sees their ex-partner with another lover. That may explain why some students fail to focus on their school work and, at times, commit suicide because of failure to fathom the repercussions of soul-tie implications.

Emotional Outbursts Leading to Crimes of Passion

The study further revealed that an inability to control one's emotions often leads to crimes of passion. The findings established that students in "semester marriage" arrangements sometimes find themselves in criminal activities such as domestic violence and even murder. Cheating and rumors of cheating were cited as triggers of such emotional explosions. Furthermore, the outbursts were, again, attributed to the emotional, financial, and social investments that characterize "semester marriages." "Semester marriages" arrangements and the crimes of passion were said to be mainly associated with students living off-campus. Quotes from a focus group discussion and a key informant are given below to elucidate the gravity of the issue:

> I remember there was a case of this guy who murdered her girlfriend because, during a holiday, there were rumors that the girl was cheating on him with an older guy. So the friends said that he was angry that how could she cheat on him with a "Blesser" after all he had done for her. He gives her shelter, food,

> and everything he has when they are at university because they live together off-campus during the semester. [focus group discussion, 1]

> We have cases of students who have these crazy moments and fight because their partner is cheating. When we investigate further, we find out that some of these cases come from students who will be cohabiting outside campus. Student Affairs has a couple of these on record. [key informant, dean of students]

The direct quotes show the rampant prevalence of domestic violence among students involved in "semester marriages." The findings also present off-campus accommodation as a breeding ground for "semester marriages" arrangements and criminal activities. While "semester marriages" are normally confined to the semester calendar (Gumbo 2020), the verbatim above shows that sometimes it can be difficult to put boundaries or an expiry date to such an intense emotional relationship. When those students stay together and are committed to one another, the dynamism of "semester marriages" as an artificial arrangement leaves loose ends, which may make it difficult to manage as the other person may have another relationship outside the campus life. Where boundaries are unclear and loosely defined, there is a high possibility of emotional entanglement, which may lead to violent crimes, as depicted in the findings. Cheating rumors and feelings of being used may also trigger psycho-emotional apprehension that may translate to a grievous outcome such as murder. For example, when a male student perceives or feels that he was used by a female student as a to-go guy for food, accommodation, and educational advancement, that may trigger aggressive behaviors when one's ego feels shuttered. That finds resonance with Simbarashe Gukurume's (2011) observations, who submits that students cohabit on campus as a transactional relationship to cushion themselves from hunger. In such cases, one may not expect emotional loyalty in a pseudo-relationship anchored on self-serving and calculated motives. Hence the revelation that students may underestimate the possibilities of emotions proving hard to tame and contain.

Disrupted Educational Focus

Finally, the participants revealed that "semester marriages" put much pressure on the students and can compromise their educational focus. The study findings showed that students in such living arrangements often mix up their priorities between their relationships and their academic pursuits. A key informant elucidated that sexual demands, household duties, and emotional expectations can push even the best-performing students to bunk, sometimes leading to low grades, forcing them to repeat their modules and even drop out. That is clarified below:

> Being a student myself, when you are cohabiting, it's a lot of pressure because you have to balance the school work and the relationship. It's like playing "hubby" or "wifey" while studying, and many times the school suffers. [focus group discussion, 3]

> There is a girl in our class. She used to be one of the best students, but when she moved in with her boyfriend, she was bunking school, and her grades started to fall. I think the live-in arrangement affected her focus on her degree. [focus group discussion, 1]

> It happens to many young people when they fall in love. They are excited about being with each other, and they lose themselves. University cohabitation intensifies these emotions, and students end up for-

> getting why they are here. Some end up getting pregnant, others drop out, and others repeat courses and all sorts of things. [key informant, dean of students]

Since students who may not be living with their partners do fail sometimes, the narratives prove that "semester marriages" are characterized by expectations that may compromise the educational focus and aspirations of students. That brings to perspective the default in students' behavior whereby the means conflict with the intent (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980). Given the mental immaturity, lack of sexual experiences, and emotional unpreparedness of many university students, the pressure may culminate in misplaced priorities. Young love, if not handled with emotional and mental intelligence, may be likened to a veldfire that is easy to start but difficult to manage and stop. It will be as if they are in their honeymoon bubble, and such intense emotions may cloud the priority list. As shown, such mental and emotional disorientations can disrupt educational focus, leading to failure and possible dropout. That highlights how the youth in love may miscalculate and underestimate the emotional and mental maturity needed to navigate through the murky emotions surrounding "semester marriage" arrangements to ensure that educational aspirations remain a priority. In agreement, Simon Kang'ethe and Itai Hlonie Mafa (2014) identified loss of educational focus as one of the unintended consequences of students in live-in arrangements. Njoki Wane, Damaris Parsiatu, and Dorcas Nyokangi (2018) also revealed that university students engage in risky sexual and transactional relationships, which reduce their ability to negotiate for better life choices, such as their educational ambitions. The degree certificate can be the ultimate sacrifice, especially where psycho-social support is either unavailable or inaccessible and inadequate. That is also corroborated by the theory of planned behavior, where attitude, subjective norms, and perceived control are not mere abstracts or elements in a mathematical equation. Their interrelatedness and connections are too humane to employ "semester marriages" as a means for educational attainment.

Implications of Findings and Recommendations

The findings from this study have highlighted a myriad of psycho-social consequences associated with the "semester marriages" phenomenon. Such findings have various implications for social work practice—a profession concerned with enhancing social functioning among individuals, families, groups, and communities (Chigondo 2019; Mafa and Simango 2021). Due to its values, skills, and clientele base, social work practice is strategically relevant to analyze the findings to strengthen the sexual and reproductive response within universities. From a critical social work perspective, it is important to look at "semester marriages" through diagnostic lenses to appreciate the various variables that cause and sustain the phenomenon. There is a need to ask the seemingly hard questions not in terms of the morality of the living arrangement or the lack thereof but to understand the phenomenon through the experiences of the university youths.

Such an analysis is salient as it brings to the fore the latent contributory and reinforcing factors surrounding the phenomenon. Failure to answer those critical questions may lead to shallow interventions and a bias toward a pathological view and a remedial approach to solving social ills. Thus, the paper proposes the introduction of school social work within institutions of higher learning to respond to the psycho-social challenges revealed in the find-

ings at both preventative and diagnostic levels of intervention. According to Martell Teasley (2004), school social work is a specialized form of practice that works within the school setting to assist with behavioral concerns and mental health interventions for academic advancement. School social workers are an integral link between school administrators, students, and families to foster academic success. They are, therefore, critical in creating a conducive environment that can incubate the educational intentions of students so that they can graduate and attain their educational aspirations (Chigondo 2019).

Firstly, the study concluded that female students mainly carried the emotional burden triggered by the guilt of backstreet abortion. Anchored on the social work principle of a non-judgmental attitude (Biestek 1963), the study does not seek to apportion blame or debate on the morality of abortion. Instead, the research wishes to tackle the reinforcers of psychological challenges to establish a holistic remedy. The university, as simply a semblance of society, mirrors the societal attitude that somewhat holds women responsible for the unintended consequences of sexual indulgence. The introduction of a school social work model would respond to such a psycho-social support gap by providing students with the psycho-emotional skills-sets that are needed to navigate through the emotional terrain triggered by "semester marriages" to ensure that the educational aspirations of learners are not derailed. Through the role of an educator, school social workers can further provide the needed awareness of the financial, emotional, health, psychological, as well as social consequences concomitant with "semester marriages" to regulate the unguarded attitude that a university is a place for sexual exploration. Such an attitude may lead to risky sexual behaviors, resulting in unintended consequences, as unearthed by this study and many other scholars (Masvawure 2010; Gukurume 2011; 2022; Gesinde et al. 2013).

While it has been established that some NGOs have been providing such services within tertiary institutions (Mafa and Simango 2021), there may be a need to augment the acceptability of the information and service through social workers' roles as educators and facilitators. Edutainment activities that may help to demystify and weaken the resistance to the use of contraceptives, such as condoms and morning-after pills, may go a long way in curbing the prevalence of unintended pregnancies, which ultimately leads to secret abortions and related emotional challenges. Such information may also challenge unprogressive attitudinal tendencies that promote sexual irresponsibility among male students. When the contraceptive responsibility is shared between the couple, it may minimize unintended consequences, such as unplanned pregnancies. Again, school social workers are best positioned to facilitate such discussions to dilute gendered and complex power dynamics based on the possession of scarce resources. Shared responsibility has the potential to lower the prevalence of unintended pregnancies and the prevalence of street abortions. Research shows that abortions have long-term effects such as complicated pregnancies, poor mental health, premature births, and other complications that may disrupt educational aspirations (Thorp, Hartmann, and Shadigan 2005).

Again, the paper has concluded that the possibility of soul ties among cohabiting students contributed to emotional turmoil in the case of a breakup. While the study acknowledged the presence of intense emotional attachment in any intimate relationship, the psycho-emotional immaturity of many university youths and the continued interactions after the breakup compromised the emotional

back-borne. There is a need to sensitize the youths on the emotional, physical, and health-related risks that are related to "semester marriages." During the orientation period, NGOs providing sexual and reproductive health services may seek an opportunity to inform, especially the first-year students, about such services. Again, social workers. Given that most of those services are driven by the peer-to-peer counseling model (students without proper training) (Mafa and Simango 2021), it is vital to have at least one social worker to strengthen the quality of services. Social workers are bound by the principles of acceptance, a non-judgmental attitude, and confidentiality, as well as the values of service and competence (Biestek 1963), which makes them instrumental for effective intervention.

Since the psycho-social challenges are experienced at personal and relational levels, sustainable solutions that can effectively offset the implications of those on the educational and sexual rights of university youths are sought to address their causes. Some push factors, such as limited accommodation and poverty, may sprout from structural flaws within the university system and perhaps the macro and economic challenges (Gukurume 2022). A remedial approach to addressing the unintended psycho-social ramifications of "semester marriages" may not yield long-lasting solutions. While the youth may have general information regarding STIs and sex, there might be a need to empower them on how to enjoy their sexual reproductive rights responsibly without compromising on their grades or pursuit of educational qualifications, as that is their intention from the planned behavior theory's lenses (Ajzen and Fishbein 1980). Through their role as advocates and policy implementers, school social workers can also spearhead the crafting and implementation of friendly policies that can respond to the needs of young people within institutions of higher learning. Thus, there is a need to strengthen harm-reduction policies and comprehensive sexuality education of a positive nature, recognizing that sexual expression is an essential aspect of one's sexuality.

Apart from that, modalities that strengthen the financial capacity of university students, such as food banks and student loans, may play a role in curtailing the prevalence of transactional "semester marriages." Social workers as brokers, together with other stakeholders, may spearhead those discussions to get a lasting solution, which would strengthen the financial capacity of the youth while simultaneously upholding their sexual and reproductive health and rights (Teasley 2004; Chigondo 2019). Thus, mitigation should be focused on all levels of interaction—individual, relational, institutional, and the macro level. Interventions should also address the differences in time (chronosystem). What worked for past generations might not be effective for this generation. Without that, the youth's future may continue being derailed as they adopt modalities to survive in universities, which may later cost them their educational aspirations.

Conclusion

The paper explored the unwelcome psycho-social challenges underpinning the "semester marriages" phenomenon. It has been concluded that although various etiological variables may push university students to such a living arrangement, many unintended adverse consequences may ultimately compromise their educational pursuits. The authors have, therefore, proffered for the introduction of social workers within university settings to strengthen the already existing modalities offering comprehensive sexual education, psycho-social support,

as well as sexual and reproductive health services. School social workers have been credited for that because of the many hats they wear as educators, facilitators, brokers, advocates, and counselors. That means they can work with university administrators, academics, students, as well as parents to ensure the realization of students' educational aspirations.

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The Dark Side of Agency: A Life Course Exploration of Agency among White, Rural, and Impoverished Residents of New York State

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Abstract: This study examines how people who have been constrained by extreme or chronic poverty, rural location, and adversity in interpersonal relationships make decisions and engage in agency through their narratives and everyday experiences. As a social scientific concept, the agency indicates the intentional behavior of individuals in the context of their environments, relations, and situations. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were collected with sixteen participants in rural south-central New York state who were living in extreme and/or chronic poverty. While exercising agency is viewed as important to the upward mobility of families and individuals in poverty, our participants encountered not only complex contexts for doing so but, at times, engaged in rebellious or counterproductive forms of agency. Furthermore, family ideology, such as traditional family values, shaped the perceived possibilities for forming one's life course. We find the structure-agency dichotomy less useful than a framework that incorporates additional sources of constraints on agency, such as embodiment and culture. We also encounter difficulty in applying the concept of agency to the experiences of our research participants in ways that point to the necessary reworking of the concept.

Laura Obernesser is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Her research focuses on family ideals—the desires, fears, and expectations held by individuals within families related to family life and how inequalities have effects on how individuals understand their relationship to societal expectations in the context of changing families—and agency—the behaviors and thoughts families engage in to cope with, and sometimes change, their realities.

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Agency, as a social scientific concept, references the intentional behavior of individuals in the context of their environments, relations, and situations. In this study, we examine how individuals who are constrained by extreme poverty, rural location, and adversity in interpersonal relationships make decisions and engage in agency through their personal narratives and everyday experiences. We draw on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individuals and couples in south-central New York. Many of the participants were identified as lacking skills in life management. Individuals and families were referred to the family planning program because agency workers identified them as in need of family planning-related education. Other participants encountered study advertisements in county mental health or social service offices. Examining the constraints on agency for those research participants not only furthers scholarly understanding of the challenges of poverty and interpersonal connections but also takes the discussion of human agency to a deeper level.

First, our study focuses on the importance of socio-historical context and social location for understanding individual lives. We thus identify four critical constraints on the agency for our research participants: embodiment, culturally informed identities and relations, structural positionings, and the agency itself. Geographical location, race, gender, mental health, and class shape how our research participants act and interpret their actions. Those dimensions of social relations limit the effectiveness of our participants' actions, but they also provide opportunities and options.

Mesmin Destin and Régine Debrosse (2017) described three components of status-based identity. According to Destin and Debrosse (2017:100-101), these three components are "narrative identity," "social identity," and "future identity." Narrative identity allows people to have purpose—that is how people tell stories about their past and how their past has brought them to their present. Social identity encompasses people's perception of their place within the social strata and how they experience their resources compared to social others (Destin and Debrosse 2017:100). People's perception of their resources is influenced by their social comparisons. It could, for example, feel richer for a middle-class person to live in a poor neighborhood than for a rich person to live in a rich neighborhood. Future identity is what people believe their lives could be (Destin and Debrosse 2017:101). Status-based identity could harm the sense of self of an individual should their status-based identity be unfavorable for them.

Many of the participants in our study have mental illnesses. Poverty is prevalent among people with mental illnesses (Sylvestre et al. 2017). John Sylvestre and colleagues (2017) argue that community mental health programs focus on individual-level interventions that are not effective at addressing poverty among people with mental illnesses who are damaged by their many barriers to daily life. "It is a damaging, distressing, and needless part of daily life of many that stunts their recovery" (Sylvestre et al. 2017:153).

We found instances in which gender, socioeconomic status, and family structure have played a role in what we call rebellious agency. Rebellious agency occurs in circumstances when individuals take actions that they know are not socially acceptable and understand there could be negative consequences. Tony Brown (2003:296) pointed to nihilistic tendencies, where individuals in African American com-

munities experienced pervasive pessimism and fatalistic worldviews about their perceived inability to escape the constraints of stratification that bound them, manifesting as self-defeating behaviors. Rebellious agency, we suggest, is a way to engage in an agency at all when there are no pathways available for the types of agency that could build toward a brighter future. We view rebellious agency as an additional category for thinking through how people exercise agency.

Second, we encounter a seeming paradox in the use of the concept of agency. Examples of life course agency in the interviews are common, but they appear to have limited effect. Disadvantaged people in poverty, especially those who appear rather not adept at agency, may exercise agency in less visible ways than others. Finally, acts of rebellious agency, while allowing individuals to engage in agency, do not improve and may hinder their life course. For those reasons, we propose that agency has a "dark side" that should be further explored to better understand decision-making among persistently disadvantaged persons.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of agency has been salient in life course and other sociological literature as a way to make sense of the interplay between constraints and decision-making and how it relates to socioeconomic mobility (Elder 1994; Hitlin and Elder 2007; Barnes 2008; Settersten 2015). The role of agency in the perpetuation of disadvantage throughout the life course is of major interest given concerns about increasing inequality (Dannefer and Huang 2017). Such discussions are often framed as a structure versus agency issue, such that structure is viewed as constraining the agency (Dannefer and Huang 2017). Most fundamentally, agency is a feature of human sentience that refers to the potential of, or actualization of, affecting the course of events in one's life. External or internal factors can constrain the ability of someone to affect the course of events. Agency and constraint thus co-exist. Sandra Barnes's (2008) study exemplifies the concept of agency within constraints, finding that even though a research participant was exercising agency regularly, the impact of that agency was limited by structural forces. It is thus not the agency as the capacity for people in poverty that is in question but the ability to exercise that agency and make something happen.

Steven Hitlin and Glen Elder (2007) identify four types of agency, which are used to unpack how individuals may be attempting to exert control over their lives—existential, pragmatic, identity, and life course agency. Existential agency, according to Hitlin and Elder (2007:177), involves one's ability to orient oneself and make decisions about one's life even when constrained. When we are confronted by new situations that cannot be accounted for by our routines, we make decisions in the moment, influenced by our biographies and personalities, thus exercising pragmatic agency (Hitlin and Elder 2007:177). Identity agency is the way individuals perform their roles in life; we routinely engage in activities and commitments that maintain a claimed identity. Finally, life course agency is described by Hitlin and Elder (2007:182) as having two components—engagement in actions that could have long-term consequences, and processes of self-reflection and a belief (or not) in the ability to achieve goals.

Agency is a complicated concept fraught with implications for our understanding of the human experience. Soran Reader (2007) suggests the emphasis on agency to the exclusion of our passivity—the

inevitability of our suffering, being acted upon, dependency as people—is deeply problematic, and those "other sides of agency" must be incorporated into our notion of personhood. Scott Landes and Richard Settersten (2019) argue that if the agency is a universal human attribute, it should be defined accordingly, not in exclusionary ways. For instance, Hitlin and Elder (2007:37) refer to "developmentally normal human beings" and "socially competent individuals" in their definitions of agency (Hitlin and Elder 2007:186). While Hitlin and Elder (2007) acknowledge that some individuals may have more agentic capacity than others, Scott Landes and Richard Settersten (2019) have pointed out that definitions that preclude those with cognitive disability, for instance, are deeply problematic if they limit personhood. Researchers must, therefore, acknowledge the complexity of agency, recognizing its applicability to all persons, including those of limited autonomy. Poverty researchers have argued for the importance of recognizing the agency of people in poverty to involve them in their solutions as equal partners. At the same time, scholars have warned against ideological uses of agency to justify reductions in social assistance and libertarian policies that deny the mutual accountability of individuals (Kohli 2019).

Thus, agency can be and is used in very different ways, with varying implications. One purpose is to recognize and incorporate the existential nature of humanity. It is also used to remind us that people have some power as individuals and should be treated as autonomous beings (Hitlin and Elder 2007). Finally, and most often, the agency points to the ability of individuals to respond in different ways to circumstances and events (Elder 1994). As Steven Hitlin and Hye Won Kwon (2016:433) state, "[u]ltimately, we suggest that agency has served as a popular and useful theoretical construct due in part to its slippery nature…which allows it to serve as a placeholder for scholars interested in carving out room for individual volition within a range of social forces."

Two problems are evident: 1) the understanding of agency as essential to personhood, such that those who seem to have limited autonomy may be viewed as lesser persons, and 2) the tendency to focus on the individual and view agency in contraindication to structure rather than as working hand-in-hand. We see a third problem—the mismatch between agency as experienced and empirically observed and common conceptualizations of agency.

As Hitlin and Kwon (2016) point out, the agency has not been studied in much cross-cultural life course research. Thus, the exercising of agency may not always manifest or appear how Western scholars expect. The variety of ways that agency is conceptualized creates some difficulty in pinning down the best ways to study it empirically. Thus, Hitlin and Kwon (2016:432) identify objective and subjective dimensions: "[s]ome people have more economic, social, or psychological resources for encountering life's vicissitudes…A greater amount of empirical work expressly on agency highlights its 'subjective' aspects, people's internal sense that they can influence their lives." Steven Hitlin and Charisse Long (2009) point out that children in Western societies are often taught to view their subjective agency as more powerful than it is relative to their objective agency. And it is easier for well-meaning adults to try to influence the subjective agency of youth rather than the objective realities (Hitlin and Long 2009). Whether considered as a matter of having choices or as a matter of exerting self-efficacy, the agency is viewed as "selective" (Kohli 2019). Some

people have it, and some do not—or not as much. Though less explored, agency may even be situationally dependent. And importantly for our purposes, the agency is linked to notions of precarity, such that "poverty" or "oppression" are effectively defined as "the denial of agency" (Dannefer and Huang 2017). But, is agency just about the ability to exert control, or does it also encompass the ability to try to exert some control, even if that effort "fails?" Perhaps agency is being exercised even when it does not appear to be. Are there positive implications of individuals exercising agency as choice or self-efficacy if it brings forth negative repercussions? Does the exercise of the agency have costs? We return to these questions in our discussion of results.

Poverty and Objective Agency

We can talk about agency in two ways—as objectively practiced, such that the individual took an action that made a difference in their life course, or as subjectively practiced, such that the individual feels that they have made a difference in their life course. Much literature is focused on the structural constraints on objectively practiced agency. However, Steven Hitlin and Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson (2015) argue that the framing of constraints as structural is limiting and calls for more precision. For instance, we ought to consider the effects of relationships and settings, as well as macrostructural contexts. Sometimes conceptualized as "linked lives," relationships are an important feature of life course study. Glen Elder (1998:4) holds that "lives are lived interdependently, and socio-historical influences are through a network of shared relationships." According to Richard Settersten (2015:222), relationships serve multiple functions in the life course, demanding alignment, judging of progress, forming identity, motivating, and lending stability, disruption, protection, and risk. The agency is also experienced *with* other people in our lives. For example, orientations related to goals for the future and desires held by individuals are often formed in relation to or cooperation with other people—social service workers, romantic partners, parents, friends, and adversaries. The social networks of people in poverty demonstrably affect a variety of outcomes, from employment stability to child neglect (Newman 2000; Blank 2005; Klärner and Knabe 2019). Family and intimate relationships are thus central to efforts to exercise agency.

In addition, the body may be viewed as a constraint on agency, especially if viewed through a relational perspective that acknowledges how structural conditions and cultural meanings come to inhabit the body. That is another way in which the individual is always already a contextualized subject. As disability scholars elaborate, the ability of someone to *do something* is as much a feature of the environment in which they operate as it is of the body. Increasingly, sociologists incorporate the role of the body in their research questions. For instance, scholars are interested in how food insecurity affects mental health of mothers and subsequent outcomes for children (McLaughlin et al. 2012; Coleman-Jensen, Steffen, and Whitley 2017), how family planning for pregnant women profoundly affects infant mortality, level of poverty, educational attainment, health outcomes, and life outcomes (Allen 2007), and how stress, powerlessness, and social isolation impact the mental health of women in poverty (Goodman, Fells Smyth, and Banyard 2010).

But, structural factors do not disappear. In this study, rural poverty involves a set of constraints

that affect individuals' ability to direct their lives. Many rural areas lack employment opportunities; a wide range of adequate health, emergency, social, childcare, digital, and educational services; and the socially vital "third places" outside of work and home (Brown 2003; Thiede, Lichter, and Slack 2016; Rhubart, Kowalkowski, and Pillay 2023). Decent-wage employment and population size have both been on the decline in rural areas and small towns, contributing to a "brain drain" with little support or expectation for improved life prospects for the young people who remain (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Dobis et al. 2021). The south-central region of New York state where this study takes place (forming a major part of the "Catirondack" region) has experienced sustained population loss since the 1970s due to declines in fertility, deindustrialization-prompted outmigration, and declines in immigration (Thomas and Fulkerson 2023). A decline in farming, particularly dairy, combined with a rising tourist industry and ample rural amenities and recreation, has led to increased second-home ownership (primarily by downstate residents) and short-term rentals that have reduced the supply of affordable housing (Thomas and Fulkerson 2023). Employment prospects, meanwhile, have declined with the disappearance of traditional industries in textiles and leather and the departure of manufacturing employers. More recently, counties in the study area experienced declines between three and five percent in labor force participation between 2010 and 2015, although 2010 represents a slight uptick from 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2023). The bulk of employment transpires in retail, hospitality, local and state government (including education), and the healthcare sector (Fulkerson et al. 2023).

Social networks in rural areas are also thought to be less varied, characterized by stronger ties, more personal interactions, and a greater burden for less reward compared to metropolitan areas (Klärner and Knabe 2019). While there can be positive results from repeated interactions with the same people, smaller social circles reduce privacy, and that can constrain action (e.g., Sherman 2006). Isolation is an issue due to transportation restrictions and spatial distancing from others. The rural context can be particularly problematic for those suffering from domestic violence as these same issues affect the options for escaping or hiding and for seeking assistance or protection from people who know the abuser. Social relationships in rural life can be more circumscribed even as they are more intense.

Thus, we rely on the important insight that all agentic action occurs in the context of and through social relationships, which may include relationships with social structures and institutions. Social structures and institutions constrain and enable agency. In addition, the agency is always dependent on interpersonal relationships. Our participants live in rural south-central New York, have impaired access to transportation, and do not interact very much outside family and a few service providers. The social relationships that our participants do have are, perhaps, even more influential than parallel social relationships may be for those not experiencing rural poverty. This paper's focus is on how some people in poverty describe their actions and how those descriptions connect to social relations, cultural expectations, and structural constraints. We find exercising of agency is conditioned by not only structural features but embodiment and cultural features. Agency frustrated by those various factors may be channeled into different, more problematic directions.

Poverty and Subjective Agency

Valerie Maholmes (2014:23) writes, "[o]ptimism is related to self-efficacy in the sense that self-efficacy involves an individual's belief in their own ability, whereas optimism involves expectations of good outcomes." Optimism is, for Maholmes, protective and useful. Optimism helps individuals imagine a positive trajectory for themselves despite the many potential perceived difficulties on the horizon for them. Yet, Carol Graham (2017) asserts that sharp inequality exists in the US not only in terms of outcomes but also in people's levels of hope and investment in the future. Graham examines how people in poverty—especially white folk in poverty in the past decade—show signs of hopelessness and desperation as they increasingly lack the buffers for stress found in social networks and the empowerment of education. Furthermore, people with difficult daily struggles have less resiliency to negative shocks and setbacks that then prevent them from making improvements to their lives (Graham 2017).

Optimistic thinking as a coping mechanism and method for people in poverty to improve their lives is, nonetheless, identified as effective—to an extent (Chen and Miller 2012; Maholmes 2014). Some working-class young adults in Jennifer Silva's (2012) study engaged in narratives of survival and triumph in the face of adversity in circumstances when societally valued markers of adulthood were unavailable. In Sandra Barnes' (2008) case study, her participant engaged in behaviors such as those described by Edith Chen and Gregory Miller (2012) to navigate the difficulties she and her family faced in their everyday lives. But, as Graham worries, what happens when those optimistic efforts do not yield fruit? Warren TenHouten (2023:92) suggests that hope can be "empty"; "[i]nsofar as the one holding such empty hope remains unaware of, or ignores, obstacles and difficulties, and expends time and energy with no result, hope can become irrational and self-destructive." Indeed, as we explore the role of optimism and hope, we find both benefits and hard limits.

Methods

In-person semi-structured interviews were conducted from 2011 through 2013 as part of a program evaluation effort with a local family planning organization in south-central New York state. Out of 16 total participants, 10 were with clients of the organization, recruited through a Family Planning Education Services program. The program involved intensive or as-needed case work with individuals or couples who were referred and expressed interest in assistance with family planning broadly defined. Case notes were shared with the principal investigator (PI), who also shadowed the initial case worker on home visits to clients in 2011 and met with the replacement case worker several times. As the caseload for the program declined in 2012, the PI made efforts to recruit research participants of similar circumstances (from a low socioeconomic background with various personal challenges) by advertising through community agencies and snowball sampling. That effort yielded six more interview participants, including two interviews with couples, before funding and potential research participant interest trickled to a stop. This project (#2011-46) was approved by the requisite Institutional Review Board, and a Certificate of Confidentiality (CC-HD-11-111) was obtained from the US National Institutes of Health to further protect subjects' confidentiality.

Our sample is not representative of poor or working-class individuals and couples in the area, and

our participants are predisposed to mental, physical, emotional, and other severe challenges that brought them to the attention of service providers or exposed them to study advertisements at the local mental health or social services agency. Interviews were typically conducted in the participant's home, as preferred by the participant. Their home life was often not very private and, in some cases, was not even a space designed for permanent habitation (e.g., a motel room or a jail). Interviews were conducted with couples as they expressed preference and as was often necessitated by circumstances. Other interviews were interrupted or overheard by family members and friends who stopped by or whom we could not ask to leave in the middle of winter, without transportation, and in small housing units where privacy was not an option. Interviewers tread cautiously in such cases, skipping questions about feelings about sexual intimacy, for instance.

Six of the 16 subjects participated in dyadic interviews. Although those interviews were conducted as dyads as a matter of necessity, other qualitative research has found that dyadic interviews provide unique advantages and insights. Dyadic interviews allow for the exploration of relationality and complex relationships (Hochman, Segev, and Levinger 2019; Topper and Bauermeister 2021), stimulation of deeper responses (Hochman et al. 2019; Morgan et al. 2013), and the revealing of convergence or divergence in couples' thoughts and experiences (Hiefner 2021). At the same time, we take into account how dyadic narratives likely reflect individual experiences and perspectives less than could fully private interviews. Interviews took place under varying circumstances as a result of the constraints of the research participants' living conditions. However, since we are not comparing interviews or seeking uniformity but examining them for general processes, such varying conditions inform as much as they limit the data obtained.

Questions on the interview schedule pertained to economic circumstances; family circumstances; goals and desires; personal challenges; past and current relationship experiences; ideal mothers and fathers; contraception and sexual behavior; and experiences with doctors, case workers, and other practitioners or service providers. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes to two hours. In the fall of 2012, we attempted to contact and arrange follow-up interviews. Many participants' phone numbers were changed or out of service, but we obtained three second-wave interviews with four participants, including one couple.

Study subjects range in age from 17 to about 50 years old. Four were 17 years of age, two of whom had children. An additional eight, including two men, were between 19 and 29. Three participants were in their 30s, one was about 45, and one (male) was about 50 years of age. All are white non-Hispanic and reside in cities or towns of populations less than 10,000—often less than 5,000. Three are men—all of whom interviewed as part of a couple—and the remaining 13 are women. All but one (woman, aged 17) identified as primarily heterosexual, which is not surprising for a family planning clientele recruited by referral. Most participants were unemployed at the time of the interview, although about three-quarters of the sample had held employment in the past. Educational attainment ranged from less than high school to a four-year college degree, although the most common response for those over 18 was a high school diploma or equivalent. The average number of biological children was just over one child per individual, although not all of their children were in the custody of their biological parents.

One couple had four children altogether, one participant had three children, four other participants had two children, one had one, and the remaining had none. Two mothers were pregnant at the time of the first interview.

Transcribed interviews were supplemented by field notes taken before and after the interviews and coded for themes and patterns. Central questions during open coding were: How do people reconcile goals and desires with barriers? What shapes expectations? How is the desire for autonomy and agency contingent upon relationships? What relationships matter and why? How do relationships affect goals/desires and meeting them? The authors took further steps to deepen and advance the analysis by creating analytical synopses and tables to draw connections between daily living conditions, relations, and the exercising of agency.

We primarily examine, therefore, how the participants talk about their experiences of and ideas about their life course trajectory. Guiding research questions during the final stages of analysis were: What kinds of relationships matter for autonomy and agency? What are participants' plans and expectations for their future, and how do such plans/expectations connect with major relationships, their past experiences, and objective conditions? When plans are derailed or expectations are thwarted, how do people react?

The methods for data analysis for our study were inductive. We coded our data for themes that were most important to the participants. As themes emerged, we created additional codes for those themes. A benefit of inductive research, according to Theophilus (2018), is that it allows the researchers to get a comprehensive understanding of the data. It highlights the themes that are most important to the research participants.

Findings

The participants in our study are unable to achieve many markers associated with achievement and maturity in American society such as home ownership, educational degrees, financial independence, and marriage. Many of the concrete desires the participants express for their futures center on family. Nonetheless, their lives often do not improve or change in ways they expect. Most participants exhibit forms of agency and show positive signs of resiliency and optimism. However, in some cases, their situation worsens with expressions of agency. We find four categories of constraints on agency and frame the results accordingly: the body, though always in relation to others and institutions; culture in the form of identities, values, and relations; structural positionings, especially in reference to institutions and opportunities; and agency itself, in the sense that the very need to exercise agency even under frustrated conditions can lead to acts that hinder future autonomy, but that still very much count as agency.

The Body in Relation

Poverty takes a toll on the body in ways that can hinder agency. All individuals are embodied and thus constrained by physiological realities, but physicality is an ability or disability in relation to the environment being navigated. Poverty directly affects both the physical experience and the context one must navigate. In this section, we discuss two main ways that the body in relation to others can inhibit agency. While not exhaustively, we focus on two specific processes: how being deprived of control over one's body inhibits agency and how health

issues can interfere with meeting social expectations, especially in terms of productivity and social markers of success.

Trauma and mental conditions play a role in life course agency. Many participants in our study reported very traumatic lives. Our sample also had victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Domestic violence is a trauma that (both directly experienced and witnessed), according to Carrie Moylan and colleagues (2010), early exposure could increase the chances for an individual to have behavior problems. Nina Papalia, Emily Mahnn, and James Ogloff (2021:74) pointed out that half of child sexual abuse victims are victims of sexual abuse as adults. Having psychiatric disorders related to early sexual abuse, such as PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), is associated with an increased vulnerability to additional sexual abuse in later life (Papalia 2021:83). One research participant, Opal, was molested by her father and had a history of abuse from men. She told the interviewer that it was after she reported her father that she began to engage in self-harm. She said that reporting her father harmed her relationship with her mother: "After I turned in my father and everything basically in my life fell apart after that point, my mother was no longer there for me, and I had been very close with my mother." Opal presents herself as a generally caring person who does fine in friend relationships but cannot do intimate or parent-child relationships. She does not have custody or formal visitation rights with her children but can see them whenever she wants. She told her interviewer that she feels "horrible" about not being a "better" mother but is comforted by the notion that at least she made sure they were safe—by not being their main caretaker. She indicated being pressured into having children; it took her a long time to convince doctors to permit a tubal procedure. That lack of control over her body does not seem to have helped her agency. Opal divulged that she became abusive once she started dating people and has walked away from "very good men" as a result.

Wendy, aged 17 at first interview, was sexually assaulted at an early age and experienced extensive problems with physical and mental health. At interview one, Wendy wanted to get her GED (General Educational Development) and go to community college for two years, then a four-year program, and then a Master's in Social Work. She also hoped to get a driver's license and establish independence from her parents. However, in interview two, she had made no headway toward those goals. Physical and mental health issues reinforced instability and limited ability to follow through. Wendy found out she had endometriosis, a painful condition, in addition to ovarian cysts that made it hard for her to walk or be generally active. Those conditions worsened Wendy's difficulty pursuing her goals. As a result, she dropped out of high school and then dropped out of the CDO Workforce. She did not feel she had made the steps toward adulthood that she should—having a GED, a license and a car, and a job or school career. Wendy's relationships with others were also fraught. She bounced around from place to place in living arrangements. Wendy told us she had difficulty getting along with people, including her mother, the partners of her parents, teachers, relatives, and her partner's family. Yet, she believed that she was a "good friend." She asserted her value multiple times, despite telling us that she felt devalued by others. Wendy reported taking care of herself, obtaining methods of contraception (and hiding it from her parents). She seemed to distrust authority figures in general. She was skeptical of her teachers and their knowledge, distrustful in her relationships with older men,

distrustful of her doctors, whom she feared could impart information to her parents, and most distrustful of her parents.

Prior research already suggests that the rural ecological context affects health through limited access to healthcare facilities and professionals, inadequate social capital, higher rates of food insecurity, and greater job insecurity (Scott and Wilson 2011; Coleman-Jensen et al. 2017). Many rural job opportunities, like certified nursing assistant and the extractive industries, involve regular physical labor that can lead to chronic medical problems while also excluding those who already have physical health issues. Opal, who was in her forties, said that she had to learn to "just deal with" degenerative disc disease. She still wanted to work at an adult home, as she loved doing before her work injury "took over" her back. A certified nursing assistant position is, however, no longer a realistic option for Opal.

Those cases demonstrate the relevance of the agency of the physical body and social relations in tandem. Histories of abuse and mental illness complicate the ability of individuals to make the choices they would like to make, and those histories operate not just through relations but through the body as well. Adequate health care depends not only on location and availability but also on the relationships that are formed between people. The distrust that reigns among many people in poverty (see: Levine 2013) undermines their ability to take care of themselves, address health problems, and conform to social expectations.

Culture and Identity Relations

Culture comprises the many social influences that provide meaning. Meaning involves interpretation, a sense of purpose, and the relative value of anything. Identity, then, is strongly linked to culture, as are those relations that individuals rely on to affirm their identity. Research participants sometimes described taking actions or holding preferences that accorded with identity agency, agentic action used to perform roles to align with societal norms and values (Hitlin and Elder 2007). For instance, some participants situated themselves in reference to "traditional values." When asked about their goals and where they see themselves in the future, many participants discussed marriage and other markers of the "standard North American family," including educational attainment, formal work, home ownership, and having children (Nelson 2006; Settersten 2015). Such markers, particularly marriage and child-rearing, feature as goals that participants view as realistic, even though they remained difficult to obtain in some cases. Nonetheless, those cultural meanings and values are readily available. In cases like Opal's or Wendy's, participants reject such values, but ascertaining whether that is a pragmatic response or the cause of their situation demonstrates how difficult it can be to parse out uninhibited agency.

The "family devotion schema," according to Mary Blair-Loy (2003:2), "promises women meaning, creativity, intimacy, and financial stability in caring for a husband and children." The "family devotion schema" is a cultural model that "defines marriage and motherhood as a woman's primary vocation" (Blair-Loy 2003:2). Marriage is not available to many low-income women, but it is still something participants in our study hope for. Katie McLanahan (2004:612) pointed out that assortative mating is an important factor in understanding low-income women's difficulty in the marriage market. College-educated women are more likely to marry and

less likely to divorce; they are more likely to marry college-educated men, who are also more likely to marry and less likely to divorce. Divorce rates are rising among non-college-educated women and are becoming lower among college-educated women. According to Pamela Smock, Wendy Manning, and Meredith Porter (2005), cohabiting couples base their decisions about whether to marry on how much income they have. Many cohabiting couples, according to Smock and colleagues (2005), see marriage as a destination to be arrived at after having completed other milestones, which are seen as prerequisites, such as college education, employment, financial stability, and home ownership. Marriage is seen as a privilege for low-income women and has a symbolic meaning of having "made it" in society (Cherlin 2004; Edin and Kefalas 2011). Cohabiting and non-marital relationships are more vulnerable to dissolution, but because low-income women with children often distrust men and find peace in their roles as mothers, they both hold hope for families that are "whole" and remain protective over their children from the pain caused by men who have left them (Edin and Kefalas 2011).

Participants described having a desire to marry and keep their intimate relationships intact even when they described those relationships as abusive or otherwise undesirable. The symbolic importance of marriage and family looms large. Sheryl, incarcerated at the time of the interview, hoped to get back together with her ex-husband after release from jail despite describing the relationship as abusive and controlling. Sheryl claimed a lot of responsibility and guilt for things she perceived to have gone wrong in the marriage. Even though both Sheryl and her ex-husband cheated on each other, she believed that if she had not made him jealous in the first place, their marriage "would have been fine." A participant we call Clare described hoping to get married before giving birth to her baby but feeling it out of her grasp: "Personally, I would like to be married before my second one comes, but that's not gonna happen." When asked about barriers to getting married and meeting her goals, Clare said, "Right now, where I live, we don't have transportation… There isn't reliable childcare…we can't afford it." For Clare, living in a rural area without transportation and her financial instability make marriage and the stability she associated with marriage unattainable. As Smock and colleagues (2005) found, cohabitors often believe something should change in a relationship before getting married with a marker such as home ownership. For many of our participants, marriage feels unattainable because they are unable to afford a wedding, do not own a house, or lack a good job. Complicating matters, many of them also believe it is wrong to have children before marriage, like Clare, who wanted to be married to the father of the child before her new child was born.

Romantic relationships were, nonetheless, viewed with great optimism by many participants. They spoke extensively about valuing their romantic partners and wanting to be good partners. Those who did not describe romantic relationships or marriage as a desire described how trauma from past abuse caused them to avoid relationships, but still placed high value on them. For example, Opal said her aversion to having children, sexual relationships with men, and having a family is an effect of her history of molestation by her father, the man she said she should have been able to trust the most. Marsha, on the other hand, was another survivor of sexual abuse but had a much more optimistic view of men despite having an ex-boyfriend she described as "mean," saying: "My boyfriend I'm with treats me really good…He's excited that we're expecting

a baby on the way…No one has made me feel like my heart was nothing but a piece of ice cream cone that just melts in his hands." Marsha described her new relationship as full of love and affection, a major improvement over previous experience.

Many of the participants greatly valued children and identified as good parents. Most either had children in the past or wanted to have children in the future. For instance, Marsha was pregnant during the interview. She let us know that she "really wants to be a mother" and she knows that Child Protective Services (CPS) will try to take her next child away because of her disability. She went into detail about how she believed she was a good mother:

> Let me tell you about when I had my twins with me. The father left the kids in wet, damp clothes, which is a no-no…Their clothes were damp. I've changed their clothes…Cleaned onesies…cleaned, dried pants, every day…That's one example right there. Of a good mother.

Although Marsha's children had been taken away by CPS, she expressed belief that she would get them back. She talked about praying for her first son to be a healthy baby and how her prayers were answered: "my first son was a miracle. Doctors had told me I was not able to carry a baby to term…I prayed every night to have a healthy baby." Her repeatedly expressed faith in God and prayers bolstered her credentials as a good mother in her eyes.

Traditional values serve to reaffirm worth by aligning oneself with a generally recognized and understood set of values in a context of uncertainty. Many women in our study aligned themselves with traditional values and identities affiliated with ideal womanhood and motherhood. The men in our study aligned themselves with traditional values and identities affiliated with ideal masculinity and fatherhood. Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas (2011) pointed out that pregnancy brings transformation to a woman's life and changes the way a woman is treated, often in a more profound way than it does for men. Participants in our study, such as Marsha and Valery, told us during the interviews that pregnancy was the most important time they had with their children. For Marsha, this was because she lost custody of her children, and having that precious memory of carrying her babies gave her peace. She was proud of how she went to her doctor's appointments and ate a diet that was healthy for her pregnancies. She told us that it was the best thing she ever did in her life. That was her reflection after her children had been taken away. For Valery, the pregnancy was what she said finally got her to stop using drugs. Participants often expressed feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness when discussing goals and current barriers. Aligning oneself with traditional values seemed to provide some sense of importance, success, and reward. Arguably, egalitarian values are not socially supported for people living in rural areas and poverty. In many cases, study participants were very contained within a small network. Thus, religiosity or family values provided validation for these rural, white participants, but they can also operate as major constraints. The rural context of circumscribed networks is such that family as an institution can exercise immense influence, especially over the relatively powerless.

Valerie described herself as "old-fashioned" in explaining what she believed mothers' and fathers' roles should be.

> [For young parents], their best option is, they need a father there…especially boys…need someone that's

> a role model to them…you should be out there busting your butt off…I'm kind of more old-fashioned. I think that the mother should stay home with the children. Get an education, but if they want to be a stay-at-home mom, be allowed that opportunity, and the man should be working as many hours as he can…and the mother should be taking care of the house…the children, and making sure that her man is taken care of also.

Like Valerie, Sheryl voiced a need for fathers to be a role model to their children. Sheryl also believed in a mid-20th century version division of labor for men and women. When asked about relationships, she said that a husband should be "decent" and that a wife should "take care of her husband and have dinner ready when he gets home from work."

Research participants did not always or immediately revert to traditional values narratives. For instance, Marsha does not invoke a traditional values explanation for her belief that fathers should pay child support—rather, it is a matter of fairness and responsibility. Yet, some clearly yearned for some sort of sense of security, normalcy, or a sense of worth. As Sarah indicated in discussing her desire for a real home for her and her new husband:

> Like it'll be like some place we are happy—like not even happy, like content, and somewhere I'll feel safe, and then we can start like just growing and working like to be better people and like productive people and just not having everything in the way like stupid things stopping us from functioning like people where it's not a huge deal to go to the laundry room or something.

Not all research participants try to fulfill that yearning through religion or traditional values, though they are clearly important to some. While traditional values may be an attractive rhetoric for many of the rural poor, it is not hegemonic.

Finally, evidence points to how relationships directly affect the agency. Nuclear family ties were not the only social bonds with such an effect. Valerie, a teenage mother, placed a high value on relationships with healthcare providers and social workers. Valerie experienced doctors calling child protective services on her and was told by health professionals that she was a "bad mother" for having a baby as a teenager. Valerie wished people understood that she is a "good mother"—she keeps her son clean, takes care of him, and loves him. Valerie had a lot of positive things to say about a doctor who "treated her well" and made her feel better about herself and her pregnancy: "My doctor told me that if I didn't have my son, I wouldn't have made it this far… You can judge me all you want for having a teen pregnancy; in reality, when he was born, he saved my life." Despite many turbulent relationships and negative experiences with healthcare providers, one doctor's attitude provided a different perspective on herself as a person and mother. Such relations can inhibit or support the exercising of agency.

Valerie and other participants in similar circumstances engage in identity agency by trying to work toward achieving markers of legitimacy, such as marriage and a standard nuclear family. Traditional values identity agency is accessible in terms of exposure to cultural norms and ideals, but such ideals are difficult to live up to in practice. Andrew Cherlin (2004) argues that marriage has become deinstitutionalized and more about the symbolic value and the display of success and legitimacy than the compelling necessity it was in the past. Yet, marriage remains "a much sought-after but elusive

goal" (Cherlin 2004:855). Those in the lower strata of society often express a strong desire to marry but wait to do so because they want to do it "right" (Cherlin 2004:857). Traditional values identity agency involves efforts to convince oneself and others of one's legitimacy and worth as a human being, even when faced with routine barriers to success. Having children is one such marker, but one that would provide more status and legitimacy if occurring within a marriage.

Structure

Structure refers to the set of constraints and enabling conditions that people face, including conditions that exist outside of the expectations of person-to-person interaction. That involves the social organization of resources, including employment opportunities, job conditions, policies, and other forms of material resource dissemination. Interviewers prompted participants to think about their life goals and trajectories concerning education, employment, family, and relationships. Participants did engage in that process of goal orientation in a variety of ways, prompted and unprompted. Though not mutually exclusive, discussions of life plans and histories often led participants to orient themselves either in reference to optimism and resilience or frustration and discouragement.

Many participants had optimistic narratives about their place within the social order, even when they referenced difficult circumstances and "unmovable boulders" in the way of their hopes and dreams. Some participants, however, expressed frustration and little hope for making improvements in their lives. Individuals with less optimism often referenced an external locus of control—they said things in their interviews about external forces (luck, fate, structural forces, higher powers) deciding what lay ahead for them in the future. Conversely, the more optimistic participants described how they would meet their goals and have success in the domains of romantic relationships, such as "starting over" with new family units and improving career options. Examples of how participants made sense of their ability to attain those goals include faith (usually religious), belief in their capabilities, and through their narratives of optimism and beating the odds. Structural constraints remain particularly brutal facts of life, frequently limiting the effects of agency as described in these narratives. The frustration related to low wages when employed, the lack of reliable transportation and childcare, and inadequate access to educational opportunities were palpable across interviews. The rural economic context certainly plays a role here—few decent-paying jobs, isolation, and poorly-resourced schools limit options.

Like Sheryl, many participants in our study discussed a desire to reassemble their family unit. For many of them, that meant getting their children back from foster care or family members, and for others, it meant moving closer to family members who lived distantly. Many of our participants experienced their children being taken away, the threat of more children being taken away, separation from extended family members of value to them, and general isolation, all related to financial constraints. One couple, Brian and Denise, described getting their children back as a major objective. Brian said, "Right now, I'm looking to upgrade to a different job…a bigger house and get the children back. Just work towards getting the things we need. Getting the car fixed. And moving forward as a family." To Brian, moving forward as a family needs to happen after he has reassembled his family by getting his children back.

Brian presented a more optimistic orientation than his partner, Denise. He said he was sure that he would get his children back, and he had friends who would give him a house. There is also optimism, if not always clear signs of agency, as regards employment. During Brian's first-wave interview, he seemed happy about his job, but by his second-wave interview a year later, he said he wanted a better job. When we asked Brian what kind of job he wanted, he described something with computers or related to video game creation. Brian is constrained by his geographical location. He lives in rural central New York, and although he has some education beyond high school, he must work within walking distance. He said a Dairy Queen opened down the road, and they would hire him. That was the only workplace he could walk to, but he had not talked to them at the time of the interview, nor did he know if they were hiring. Although Brian's agency is constrained by many barriers, he remains optimistic in his framing of the future. Though for some scholars, optimism is a form of agency (Snyder 2000), others question the assumption that agency is necessarily involved or effective (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2015). Brian's optimism seems useful for motivating him, but we observe that his optimism has at times also failed against the hard limits of reality. Furthermore, it is unclear to what degree such displays of optimism might be the result of complex interactional factors, such as a socioeconomically disadvantaged man's showing of bravado in interaction with a woman college student or professor.

Many participants in this study have goals that will be difficult to achieve given their circumstances. Some realize it, whereas others do not acknowledge that in the interview. Valerie said she planned to go for multiple programs at college after graduating high school.

> I'm gonna be finishing high school and then I'm enrolling to college to go for RN and ultrasound technician. If I graduate in time…But, right now, I dropped out of my classes for a few months because he—their father—just started working… But…I'm hoping.

For Valerie, waiting for the father of her children to obtain stability is the barrier to her ability to be upwardly mobile. Valerie expresses hope, but that might also be an expression of uncertainty.

Other participants described desires to be upwardly mobile through education and employment. Some participants were taking steps toward a GED and applying to college, while others described education attainment as far in the future. Clare, who was pregnant at the time, described having a desire to get a GED and get married before her second baby was born. "I'd like to go to school. First, I have to get my GED. And probably do something with, like, child development… having my own, I just want to know so much and learn so much more." Like Clare, Debbie described having a desire to go to school to study something she is passionate about, get married, reestablish a family unit, and be upwardly mobile. However, frustration often results as marriage and upward mobility feel out of reach. Denise, for instance, explained that her case worker would ask her to come up with a goal, such as getting a car. She finally got the car, and "the sun was shining" on her that day. Then, it stopped working almost right away. Denise described battling hopelessness and feeling like she was losing; nothing is ever enough. Denise's case suggests that people may be less motivated to exercise life course agency if their actions do not seem to matter.

Agency

Some individuals in our sample recounted engaging in what we term rebellious agency. Those are actions or attitudes taken by the subject in which they rebel against socially conventional ideas about what is good for them. We did not come across any such discussion of rebellious agency in our review of the literature but found it a necessary concept for interpreting the data. We propose that such a form of agency often happens out of frustration, desperation, resignation, and sometimes when other forms of agency have failed. In some circumstances, rebellious agency can feel empowering. Placed into the context of the life course/agency conceptual framework, the exercising of rebellious agency is an example of how individuals sometimes work against their long-term interests by asserting their dignity or expressing frustration. In doing so, subjects assert themselves, and, in effect, exercise agency for the very purpose of exercising agency. Those include specific actions in which the individual is trying to assert some control but is doing so in ways that do not even necessarily gain the approval of peers or any other key referent group. Such actions occur out of desperation or lack of control in the immediate context. And they often have immediate negative consequences. That notion of rebellion also highlights the double nature of agency as entailing both positive and negative outcomes and possibly having value simply in being exercised—somewhat but not wholly apart from the outcome or intention.

Participants can also exercise rebellious agency in ways counter to the purpose of the program or research project. For instance, Anna refused to give opinions on several issues, including what she looks for in a relationship, which could be interpreted to mean her life and goals are still an open matter. In answer to our question about family-related goals, she replied that she was "too young" to have children and dismissed the question. However, Anna's refusal to be pinned down in questions about her goals and expectations could be interpreted as a form of rebellious agency in that she is not allowing her life to be dictated—even by herself—just yet. That could be a lack of desire to exercise agency. Here, the paradoxical nature of the concept of agency emerges; perhaps there is an anti-agency agency. Perhaps the refusal to take action is a type of action that should be incorporated into the concept of agency. After all, using the concept of agency as a way of analyzing the data enables a more agentic reading of our research participants. Anna, for instance, did express some desires—she said she likes shopping, wants to get her own place rather than live with her mother "forever," and does not want her partner to be "mean." Perhaps her visions for the future are undeveloped, but her refusal to even make something up could be indicative of a sort of rebellion in the context of the interview.

When asked about her educational background, Belinda said, "well, I kinda sorta did something really bad. Last six months before I graduated high school, I did this. I broke the teacher's nose because she called me a certain little unmentionable name that sorta got me." Belinda has trouble expressing anger in healthy ways, although she uses wry, black humor to discuss her problems. She reported episodes of blacking out and lashing out (typically hurting only herself). Maybe she does not feel like she has a right to be angry or has internalized the patriarchal prohibition on anger displayed by women. She, too, indicated that she was molested by her father. We suggest that Belinda engaged in rebellious agen-

cy—hitting a teacher had negative consequences, but it made her feel empowered when she did it. Given Belinda's general self-effacing and shy manner, the retributive violence and episodic lashing out may constitute a form of agency that is, under the circumstances, necessary or therapeutic.

At one point in the interview, Opal pointed out that her parents (including her abusive father) were taking care of her oldest son. She said she would not let her father know her daughters but also pointed out that she is not afraid of him molesting her son (who is 11) because he is "terrified of gay men." Opal was victimized by a person who has control over her child. It is not surprising that Opal exhibited a lack of self-efficacy. As other researchers have suggested (Erdmans and Black 2008), many people in poverty must live with or continue to interact with people who have hurt them. Scholars who have studied the effects of childhood exposure to domestic violence and sexual assault (Moylan et al. 2010; Papalia 2021) have found that early exposure to adverse conditions in childhood, such as domestic violence and sexual assault, leads to an increased vulnerability to re-victimization. Opal said in her interview that she does not like men and experiences PTSD, which is, according to Papalia and colleagues (2021:74), associated with an increased vulnerability to additional sexual abuse later in life. That could be related to Opal's description of having bad experiences with men. She said there is only one man she lets near her, and he is a "friend" who "could not touch her." Those factors likely have a profoundly negative effect on agency and the ability to have healthy, fulfilling relationships later in life. She did set sexual boundaries with her friend by telling him he "could not touch her" and decided her daughters could not meet her father. A need to engage in self-defense is certainly conducive to rebellious agency.

Rebellious agency provides a clear demonstration of how agency derives directly from social relationships. Having significantly less control—especially over one's life—promotes the exercising of agency *in any way one can*, including actions that may be hurtful to oneself or others. In other cases, the exercising of the agency is in contradiction to authority or others who question the value or worth of participants like Belinda and Wendy. However, for the most part, rebellious agency is a resource for those without more effective coping strategies. It is well-known that even self-harm is a form of coping. Our results confirm others in suggesting the importance of emphasizing effective and helpful coping mechanisms for victims of abuse and degradation.

Discussion

Limitations of the Study

The data are restricted primarily to interviews; we do not have extensive observations of the participants. The second-wave interviews provide data from multiple time points, but only four of the 16 participants were interviewed a second time. As a non-representative sample, this study cannot indicate the general characteristics of the rural poor in New York state; rather, results reveal processes as opposed to descriptions of a population.

Understanding Poverty: Going Beyond Structure vs. Agency

According to Scott Landes and Richard Settersten (2019:2), "agency cannot come into being outside of an individual's preceding or current relationships, and that agency is conceived, nourished and continually sustained or not by interpersonal relationships." Relationships with other people were

perceived as both harmful and helpful by our participants in terms of conceptions of desires, optimism, goal setting, goal-reaching, having hope, and losing hope. Life course agency, or the act of making improvements to one's life, was often initiated in the context of relationships with other people, such as family members and romantic partners, social workers, and health care providers. For example, Anna and Wendy said they both wanted to leave home so they could get away from their parents and live independently. Two couples in our study described actions they were taking to improve their lives, identifying their "future together" as the motivation. Valerie said that she was bothered by having several different healthcare providers or different social workers. She said that it was important for her to have exposure to the same person every time so that it could be a "we" relationship with her doctors and service providers. Thus, people in poverty may place high importance on their relationships with doctors, social workers, family planning educators, and anyone they interact with within the service industry. Because many people experiencing poverty in rural areas may not always have much contact with other people outside their immediate circle, such micro-interactions with human services personnel can significantly impact their self-concept.

The rural setting of this study is an important factor. We believe geography is key to interpreting life course agency. We found instances where religiosity or family values provided validation, but they can also operate as major constraints. The rural context of circumscribed networks is such that the family as an institution can exercise immense influence, especially over the powerless. And to the extent that there is a rural "brain drain," those left behind are even more isolated from the sort of social capital that would empower them (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Klärner and Knabe 2019). And what moral capital can the rural poor access (Sherman 2006)? While the specific cultural conditions no doubt vary across place and time, "family values" have long operated as a form of moral capital in rural settings. Benefits to living in a rural area may in fact exist as well, such as closer interpersonal relationships than their cosmopolitan counterparts, but that often carries the caveat of having less privacy (Sherman 2006). Nonetheless, many participants described constraints related to place when discussing barriers and problems, including employment opportunities, quality of education, transportation, and services.

Gender also played a clear role in how much control participants felt they had in their lives and in the implications traditional values held for family roles and notions of responsibility. Thus, some women in the study embraced the roles of mother and wife as desirable and important, and that conferred both burden and meaning. Denise, for instance, went without medication for her intense back pain to take care of the children. Sheryl planned to stay in and improve a high-conflict marriage for "the sake of the family." The abuse that female participants were frequently subjected to as women impacted their ability to exercise agency as confident and free persons. Overall, the difficulty and hazards of meeting the standards of American mothers and wives illustrate how aligning themselves with such values can backfire.

Race was not referenced in the interviews. Yet, whiteness is a taken-for-granted status that can be difficult to interrogate precisely because it may go unmentioned. We cannot ascertain whether any of the participants felt racial threat, identified with white supremacy specifically in any way, or felt affiliation with or distance from people of color. Rough-

ly 95% of the 2010 and 2015 populations of the study area identified as white and non-Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau 2023), all of the research subjects appeared or identified as white, and none identified race as being salient in their lives. Although "family values" have sometimes operated as code for white culture (Løvdal Stephens 2019), the harkening to traditional values did not seem to come from a place of political or racist intent for study participants; rather, it was viewed as a way to improve their lives in meaningful ways. However, further research on the racial and political views of the chronically poor is needed.

Although culture does matter for the experiences of people in poverty, that does not indicate a coherent or generalizable "culture of poverty" (Seale 2023). Even among those research participants, we observed much variation in adaptations and survival strategies. Nonetheless, structural conditions are not the only barriers to the agency. As Pierre Bourdieu (1977) represented with his notion of habitus, adaptations to life experiences develop into cognitive, affective, and physical ways of being in the world that permit or limit possibilities for action before opportunities even come into the picture. Cultural resources, available sources of worth, and physiological limitations play important roles in the exercise of agency.

The Concept of Agency: Incorporating the Dark Side

For people in poverty, agency is often interpreted as those actions and decisions that help the individual or household to escape poverty. Because of that, life course agency tends to be of most interest to researchers over other categories of agency. People in poverty exercise agency but also face difficult situations with higher costs for certain actions, such as more negative penalties. We argue that there is a dark side to agency. The exercising of agency is a requisite for personhood. Our findings in the co text of the literature on agency, however, raise certain questions. How do we study "agency" for those people whose lives are defined by its denial? How can we presuppose it when optimism, self-efficacy, and/or subjective agency are discussed while recognizing the lack of objective agency as a fundamental part of the nature of disadvantage? If we consider subjective agency (having a sense of or belief that one has control over one's life) as important, then we must consider the actions that represent a desire for that control, even in situations where individuals are being denied it objectively. In much literature, the idea seems to be that objective constraints lead to a lack of subjective agency, which leads to a failure to exercise agency. Yet, there are efforts to exert some level of control nonetheless. In some cases, we might even view passivity as an effort to control *something*.

By studying people whose agency is severely but not wholly constrained, we gain insight into the human capacity to exert control over one's life. For instance, people in poverty or under severe constraints find ways to exercise agency, even if it is to their own or others' detriment. Although rebellious agency may be detrimental to people and others around them, that rebellious use of agency may be phenomenologically important to their sense of self, will to live, and basic dignity. That rebellious use of agency can be costly, both for people in poverty and for well-intentioned authorities who are trying to make improvements to the lives of the poor. Although consequences of rebellious agency can lead to negative outcomes, such as losing custody of one's children, it also has been characterized as therapeutic for

some of our participants when no other alternative seemed accessible to them at the moment or in the long term. Yet, those research participants would benefit in a more enduring way from changes in their circumstances and social realities. Improving circumstances for people experiencing rural poverty takes much more than an enhancement of subjective agency.

The notion of traditional values and the high value placed on family can also be seen as efforts to exercise agency, despite sometimes limiting the options of individuals. Hence our reference to the "dark" side of agency. Given the cultural toolkits available to people (Swidler 1986) and their social realities, efforts to empower or confer value on oneself can be simultaneously beneficial and self-defeating. There are even times when passivity might pay better dividends. On the other hand, individuals need to recognize the consequences of their actions for others. The relinquishing of agency can impair our ability to learn from mistakes. People have no choice but to exercise agency in some form or another; the question is what will result from the forms of agency our circumstances permit. It is worth remembering as we extol the virtues of agency, optimism, and empowerment in research on poverty and addressing poverty that, in practice and theory, exercising agency is not an unalloyed good. When the exercising of agency fails, whether life course, identity-related, or rebellious, it may incur psychological and material costs.

Conclusions

The central problem addressed in this article is that people in poverty are often unable to make what they would like to happen. Consequently, they require some other source of meaning and a sense of worth. Small acts of agency or perception of personal agency are critical, even if ineffective in changing one's circumstances—posing a quandary for researchers. While we have found those interviews instructive for understanding issues of agency for people in poverty, much work remains to be done.

If the concept of agency is to be used to understand life course poverty, we should embrace its complexity and paradoxes. Otherwise, we risk belittling or misunderstanding the socially disadvantaged. The exercise of agency may sometimes take the form of anti-agency; that is, rejecting control or the illusion thereof over one's life or rebelliously wrecking one's chances because that is the only way to have an impact. At the same time, the broader social science literature needs to continue beyond the framework of structure versus agency. Other social processes beyond structure play a role in conditioning acts of agency, including cultural processes, relationships, and embodiment. Future research is needed to explore how such processes unfold for people under severe economic and cultural constraints. Specifically, social network analysis combined with in-depth explorations of agency for people living in distressed rural areas would help answer some of those remaining questions.

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Pandemic as a Biographical Turning Point? The Experiences of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Biographies of "Essential Workers"

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Abstract: This article aims to answer the question of the biographical meaning of the pandemic in the experiences of so-called "essential workers" who performed their duties in the first line of struggle with the consequences of the COVID-19 health crisis. The analysis of workers' experiences helps us contribute to the ongoing debates on the role of macro-level events in autobiographical storytelling and the discussion on biographical turning points in sociology. The empirical analysis is based on a collection of more than 80 biographical narrative interviews in healthcare, social care, education, and logistics, from which we selected two stories of the pivotal significance of the pandemic crisis for biographical change for analysis. Biographical analysis makes it possible to describe which conditions are conducive to the inclusion of the pandemic in the main biographical story as a turning point.

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This article aims to explore the biographical meaning of the pandemic in the experiences of essential workers who were responsible for providing services critical to the functioning of society and the economy during the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] We define essential work as all activities, paid and unpaid, that are central for sustaining social reproduction in a crisis (Czapliński and Bednarek 2022; McCallum 2022; Mezzadri 2022). In the article, we focus predominantly on the paid work in key public services.

The experience of individuals facing threats to health and life, coupled with isolation in lockdown and profound changes in the sphere of work, implies interpreting the pandemic as an example of "unsettling events" (Kilkey and Ryan 2021), defined as the mass events that contribute to uncertainty and risk (Pustulka et al. 2023). As such, it could have been expected that it would generate a significant potential for a biographical turning point. In line with the interpretive tradition in sociology (Strauss 1977; Hackstaff, Kupferberg, and Negroni 2012; Kupferberg 2012), we use the latter term to describe a moment in the life course, usually unexpected, that involves the experience of fundamental identity shifts. In the article, we pose two questions. Firstly, under what conditions is the pandemic recalled in terms of a biographical turning point? Secondly, how are the ways of representing the experiences of the pandemic related to the coping strategies of informants in the sphere of work? Addressing those questions, the article aims at contributing to a body of research that tackles the issue of representing macro-social crises, such as war, systemic transformation or, more recently, pandemic, in biographical narrative interviews (Miller 2005; Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 2012; Piotrowski 2016; Kaźmierska and Waniek 2020; Kajta and Mrozowicki 2024; Moran and Dooly 2024).

The empirical basis consists of 89 biographical narrative interviews, collected according to Fritz Schütze's (1983) method, with workers in essential industries, such as education, health, social care, and logistics, conducted between 2021 and 2023. Each interview included a question about an entire life history and follow-up biographical and problem-centered questions that enabled us to explore the place of the macro-level crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, in the overall construction of individual biographies. A surprising result of our analysis is that most interviewees attributed a relatively limited significance to the pandemic as a life-changing event and recalled it mostly in response to more detailed questions on their working conditions during the public health crisis.

In the article, we focus on cases less typical of our sample in which the pandemic was interpreted in terms of biographical turning points. In the biographies analyzed, the health crisis triggered changes in the life strategies of informants and featured in the "spontaneous" first part of the life stories. In the article, the significance of the pandemic as a "catalyst" for individualistic and solidaristic types of coping strategies in the sphere of work is analyzed in detail. The main part of the article will present the case of a young doctor, Paulina, who, in the pandemic, decided to temporarily withdraw from intensive work into motherhood and family life, and the case of a medical caregiver, Antoni, who decided to

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co-found a trade union in a nursing home. In the conclusions and discussion, we juxtapose the observations derived from case studies with more general considerations based on research on the work experiences of essential workers.

Biographical Turning Points and Macro-Social Events: A Sociological Perspective

In sociology, the notion of a turning point refers to the interpretive tradition of research on identity transformations and transitions between statuses (status passages). Anselm Strauss (1977:86) referred to them in terms of "critical incidents" and defined them as "points in development when an individual has to take stock, to re-evaluate, revise, resee, and rejudge" (Strauss 1977:100). The American sociologist developed a typology of turning points, which includes a "milestone" (an incident that reveals the progression or retrogression of biographical experiences), a "challenge" (undergoing an attempt to live up to institutional and normative expectations, sometimes taking the form of social "experimental role-playing"), and a "betrayal" (abandonment or rejection by biographically significant others). The latter type also refers to being "deceived by events in general' (Hackstaff 2012:2). Strauss (1977) argued that all types of turning points can be more or less institutionalized, occurring in line with or against normative expectations in a given society. He conducted his analyses primarily at the micro (biographical) and meso-social (organizational) levels, pointing out the transition from status to status as a result of experiencing turning points. To a lesser extent, he was interested in turning points triggered by macro-level events, which include, for example, systemic transformation, war, natural disasters, or the experience of a pandemic, which is of interest to us in this article.

Other researchers and scholars have subsequently developed the study of turning points. Nicolas Legewie and Ingrid Tucci (2019:5), using a life course perspective, pointed out that the concept of a turning point "implies a radical or fundamental change in the direction of a life course trajectory." In doing so, they noted that the concept was used to analyze both subjective experiences (biographical continuity or discontinuity) and objective changes in the life course, which usually implied a breakout from the institutional pattern of biographical or career trajectories (an example would be a radical drop in income as a result of job loss). In a similar vein, Feiwel Kupferberg (2012:227) pointed out that the notion of a turning point refers to " the crucial nexus between social structure and personal agency that has been at the center of the sociological knowledge interest." He defined the concept as "subjectively unprepared life transitions" (Kupferberg 2012:251), distinguishing turning points from institutionalized transitions between statuses, such as graduating from primary school or entering employment.

The tradition of biographical research in sociology inspired by Fritz Schütze's (1983; 2005; 2008) method allows us to supplement both the understanding of turning points and point to the basic ways in which biographical experiences and macro-social events are interlinked. The concept of turning points can be related to the category of "metamorphosis" as one of the biographical process structures. They are understood as the basic principles that organize the life history "envisioned as an ordered sequence of personal experiences, and that orderliness implies the inner identity development of the biography incumbent" (Schütze 2008:168). The basic process structures are "biographical action schemes" (based on the active and intentional shaping of the life course), "trajectories of suffering" (expressing

the inability to actively shape one's life, reactivity to "outer events," and estrangement from oneself), "institutional expectation patterns" (when a person follows up "institutionally shaped and normatively defined courses of life," and, finally, "metamorphoses." A metamorphosis is a creative transformation of biographical identity by which "a new important inner development is starting in one's biography, that might be miraculous and irritating in the beginning since it is new and that initially prohibits pertinent competencies of the biography incumbent, and towards which she or he must find out what the very quality of it might be" (Schütze 2008:168).

It can be useful to briefly discuss how Strauss's typology of turning points and the concept of Schütze◎s biographical metamorphosis overlap and differ from each other. In our understanding, the main relation between the two categories is as follows. The metamorphosis can be seen as a broader biographical phenomenon that could be triggered by a turning point in Strauss' sense. However, metamorphosis is not a necessary outcome of turning points. The metamorphosis as a process structure is an analytical tool that allows us to understand the sense of biographical events and their significance for the individual's identity, and it is assessed as a positive shift in one's biography expressed in a language of ◎creative inner development◎ (Schütze 2008:190). In comparison, the different types of turning points (i.e., betrayal) proposed by Strauss could easily lead to the oppositional process structure of the trajectory of suffering, which, by losing control over one's life, has a decomposing impact on biography.

One of the characteristics of metamorphosis is the discrepancy between the biographical time in which biographical changes are taking place and the social time determined by institutional patterns—so the individual is often forced to redefine their social identity. Central to this redefinition is "biographical work," which, in Anselm Strauss's (1993:98) terms, is "carried out in the service of an actor's biography, including its review, maintenance, repair, and alteration." Biographical work makes it possible to incorporate "external" events into a biographically formed identity (a process Strauss refers to as "contextualizing"), come to terms with the consequences of failed actions, reconstruct identity, and transform, that is, to forge new directions in biography.

The question to be asked in the context of research on the biographical experience of pandemics is: how far and when do "shocks" experienced at the macro-social level, of an exogenous nature to individual biographical identities, become the subject of biographical narratives? Existing biographical research on the experience of various shocks and crises, including war (Kaźmierska 2008; Dopierała and Waniek 2016) or systemic transformation (Miller, Humphrey, and Zdravomyslova 2003; Mrozowicki 2011; Kaźmierska and Waniek 2020), can provide some theoretical inspirations. To analyze the wartime experience of Poles, Andrzej Piotrowski and the team in the project "Biography and National Identity" proposed the concept of "biographical vectors." They understand them as "the typical interpretative and communicative attitudes (frames, directions) adopted by narrators toward war and occupation experiences" (Piotrowski 2016:48 [trans. AM and JB]). The authors distinguish two pairs of vectors ("threat" and "resourcefulness" and "embeddedness in history" and "embeddedness in the milieu"[2]), the second of which is of particular interest to this article.

[2] We decided to translate the Polish category of *zakorzenienie* as embeddedness, which refers to a well-established concept in institutional sociology (Granovetter 1985) and seems to fit better into existing theoretical traditions than the concept of "rootedness" chosen by the editors of *Telling the Great Change*,

By "embeddedness in history," the authors understand the tendency of narrators to locate their biographical processes "in the framework [*na planie*] of historical and social macro-processes" (Czyżewski 2016:74 [trans. AM and JB]) and refer to "theoretical categories (knowledge) and (or) various ideological, historiosophical models" (Piotrowski 2016:48 [trans. AM and JB]). Contrastingly, the "embeddedness in milieu" has been defined as a vector that relies on "narrating and interpreting one's experiences in terms of the course of events and dependencies occurring in the micro-scale of the immediate living environment" (Piotrowski 2016:48 [trans. AM and JB]). As Marek Czyżewski (2016:76) notes, embeddedness in the milieu is present in most narratives, while embeddedness in history, referring to various types of ideologies, is much more often present in the narratives of symbolic and cultural elite.

For the study of the relationship between the level of biographical experience and macro-social change, the distinction introduced by Daniel Bertaux (2012:321) between "collective historical time" (understood as the time of social change," framed by specific dates and events) and "biographical time," which refers to individual experiences and life course diachrony, can also be useful. In the context of the research on the pandemic, it helps us to discuss the ways of framing the subsequent phases of the pandemic from the perspective of individual biographies that reach before the health crisis and represent various future-oriented life projects. Robert Miller (2005) discusses a range of factors mediating how historical time is included in life histories and refers, among other things, to generational effects (membership to a historically shaped generation), life course effects (the role played by specific phase of life), and period effects (pertaining to specific moments of data collection).

The salience of group membership and related resources (biographical, social, or cultural) for the ways macro-social crises are included in autobiographical storytelling is corroborated by biographical research on systemic transformation in Poland (Mrozowicki 2011; Kaźmierska and Waniek 2020). In the most general terms, telling the "great change" requires cultural resources to link the macro and micro levels, a kind of layperson's "sociological imagination" (Mills 1967) that reflects, among other things, civic engagement and political socialization (Kajta and Mrozowicki 2024). However, contrary to the suggestion by Czyżewski (2016), our earlier research (Mrozowicki 2011) shows that it does not necessarily imply belonging to symbolic and cultural elites and that "embeddedness in history" was also present in workers' milieus, involving, among other things, narratives about the experiences of trade union activism under state socialism.

Another perspective close to the biographically oriented analysis of collective phenomena is Mejella Kilkey and Louise Ryan's (2021:234) concept of "unsettling events" that "are transformations on the structural level that have implications on the individual level in ways that provoke reevaluation of migration projects." While the term was initially used in migration studies, it has been recently adopted for the analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine in the narratives of uncertainty and risk by the Polish young adults and their parents (Pustulka et al. 2023).

Kaja Kaźmierska and Katarzyna Waniek (2020). Moreover, the term embeddedness has been used to analyze the biographical material in the research conducted by one of the authors of this article before the book *Telling the Great Change* was published (Mrozowicki 2011).

The biographical experiences of the pandemic were the subject of a range of existing research, but the question of the place of health crisis in the context of entire biographies has not been explored. Unlike the current study, which adopted the biographical narrative interview method, the most of biographical research carried out during the pandemic in Poland made use of diary and memoir methods for data collection, which was justified, among other things, by restrictions to other types of fieldwork during lockdowns (Całek 2023; Łukianow and Orchowska 2023; Olcoń-Kubicka et al. 2023). The disadvantage of using the method is a relatively short period of individual experiences available for examination, as diaries or memoirs are focused on the times of the pandemic only. The results of such studies demonstrate contradictory effects of pandemic experiences, including both having more time for private and family matters (Całek 2023) and deep feelings of fear combined with economic and existential insecurity during lockdowns (Głowacka et al. 2022; Olcoń-Kubicka et al. 2023). Despite notable exceptions (Vermeerbergen et al. 2021; Muszyński et al. 2022), earlier studies have also not analyzed frontline essential workers' biographical experiences under COVID-19 in the context of earlier occupational careers, life strategies, or biographically shaped identities. In that context, our proposal to delve into the biographical case studies in detail and reflect more deeply on the biographical significance of the pandemic for frontline workers adds a novel perspective to the existing studies.

In the following sections, we will explore the ways of representing the experiences of work in the times of COVID-19 in life histories of frontline workers in healthcare (including COVID-19 wards established in hospitals) and social care drawing from a larger collection of interviews, gathered also in education (primary schools) and logistics (warehouses, courier services, and international truck transport). Paraphrasing an earlier study on precarious workers' experiences (Mrozowicki and Trappmann 2021), we ask when and for whom the pandemic became a biographical problem that triggered biographical work and led to transformations of their biographical identities. What is the relationship between framing the pandemic as a turning point and the ways of coping with its consequences adopted by workers?

Methodological Framework

Addressing the questions posed in the previous section, the empirical analysis in the article is based on biographical narrative interviews with workers, following the tradition established by Fritz Schütze (2008). They enabled us to explore various ways of interlinking individual life stories and pandemic crises, as well as the relevance of structural and cultural conditions shaping the coping strategies of informants, including the resources possessed by them and their biographical work aimed at managing the crisis.

Each interview consisted of three main parts. The first part followed a request to tell us the narrator's history of an entire life from the beginning up to the present moment. In the next part, the follow-up narrative questions were asked about the issues unclear and ill-developed earlier. In the third part, the motives and justifications of life decisions were enquired as well as specific, problem-centered questions asked about the issues such as the pandemic and work (with a particular emphasis on job quality), everyday life during COVID-19, civic and political activism (including trade unions), and the perceptions of social structure and conflicts.

Each interview was preceded by the informed consent of the informants for the interview to be conducted, transcribed, and used in the analysis of the collected data after anonymization. The anonymization was based on the removal of all details allowing the identification of the people interviewed, the change of names, and the abbreviation of proper names to letters different from the original. Interviews were collected with workers employed in four industries defined as essential in terms of their role in social reproduction and the provision of basic services during COVID-19—primary education (school teachers), healthcare (doctors and nurses in the hospitals), social care (carers, nurses, physiotherapists, and supportive personnel in nursing homes), and private logistics (truck drivers, logistic centers blue-collar workers, couriers, and food-delivery workers employed via Internet platforms). The informants were contacted through personal networks, advertisements on social media, and trade unions.

At the moment of finalizing the article (February 2024), 89 interviews were collected (53 with women, 36 with men) in the branches mentioned above (29 in education, 29 in logistics, and 31 in healthcare and social care) in locations diversified by the city size (large cities vs. medium-sized and small cities). All informants had work experiences in the industry both before and during pandemics, which enabled them to assess the impact of the crisis on their working lives. The interviews were carried out in 2021-2023, mostly on-site at the places chosen by informants and more rarely online (via MS Teams). Both cases selected to be analyzed in the paper were conducted traditionally during face-to-face meetings. While online and face-to-face interviews were of similar quality in terms of their "narrativeness" or richness in detail, in the case of the latter, it was easier to maintain close contact with the narrators. The absence of technical distractions that occurred in online interviews was also important for the overall interview atmosphere.

The case analysis conducted during team workshops was inspired by the sequential approach by Schütze (2008), including text sort differentiation, structural description, and analytical abstraction. For cross-case comparisons, interviews were also open and selectively coded in the Atlas.ti software in accordance with the grounded theory methodology (Charmaz 2006). The selective coding focused on the biographical role of the pandemic in the overall life experiences and the ways of coping with the pandemic in the context of life strategies and resources possessed by informants. The result of coding was the emergence of a preliminary typology of life strategies analyzed in terms of the configuration of biographical process structures reflecting the attitudes of narrators toward their biographies (Schütze 2005:306). The typology is based on two continua of properties: (1) the social ties dimension connected with the biographical relevance of social networks for pursuing life projects (privatism vs. communitarianism) and (2) the agential dimension related to general biographical orientations of informants toward their lives (proactive vs. reactive). Crossing the two dimensions, four types were identified: "survival," "resourcefulness," "relationality," and "solidarity."

The "survival" refers to a range of situational short-term reactive coping practices aimed at individualistic or family-based getting by without developing longer-term biographical projects. "Resourcefulness" means proactive, individualistic, or family-based attempts to combine various resources at hand to advance life projects. The "relationality"

refers to collective and cooperation-based efforts to maintain meaningful and broad social bonds (and often beyond it). Finally, "solidarity" concerns proactive strategies aimed at defending collectively defined interests. In the context of typology, biographical turning points can be defined as the unexpected transitions among the types of life strategies.

We used the typology in the article to select cases for detailed biographical analysis. In the research, we were particularly interested in the role of the pandemic in biographical turning points, changes, and shifts among the types of life strategies. For the empirical analysis, we decided to choose two interviews: Paulina, a resident doctor from a large city in Poland, and Antoni, a social worker working in a social care home, also in a large Polish city. Two cases were chosen to represent contrastive directions of the mobility between life strategies reflecting the ways of coping with the crisis. The case of Paulina represents a shift from the relational type (for the essential part of the narrator's life history, peer communities played an important role, and later, they were also important for the formation of social ties in the workplace) to family- and herself-centered resourcefulness. In Antoni's case, on the other hand, biographical turning points reflect a transition from resourcefulness toward an explicit commitment of a solidaristic nature, in which trade union activism plays a key role.

The main properties of the cases that will be discussed in detail in the course of the analysis are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. The main properties of the compared cases

Dimensions of the analysis	Paulina	Antoni
Biographical resources	Origin: middle-class family background Specialist qualifications A large family of origin support	Origin: working-class family background Individual resourcefulness Support of trade unions Religious communitarianism
Biographical vectors	Embeddedness in milieu Private proactivity	Embeddedness in history Collective proactivity
Experiences of the pandemic in the workplace	Deteriorated job quality leading to withdrawal from work into private life	Deteriorated job quality leading to union activism
Biographical role of the pandemic	The pandemic was a turning point, accelerating the transition to private resourcefulness	The pandemic was a turning point, accelerating the transition to communitarian solidarity

Source: Self-elaboration.

The similarities between the selected cases are important. Both narrators work in industries where the relationship between the worker and the recipient of services is one of providing care or supporting the healing process. At the same time, both sectors (healthcare and social work) are struggling with a long-term structural crisis related to insufficient funding, lack of skilled workers, or marketization processes affecting employment conditions or the quality of services provided (Kozek 2011). The pandemic crisis highlighted those problems, which, in the context of the biographical experiences of workers (doctors, nurses, carers, physiotherapists, and others), translated into increased levels of trajectory potentials, understood as dispositions to lose control over one's life and experience suffering (Riemann and Schütze 1991).

Similarly to most of the other interviews collected in the public services, the pandemic caused an amplification of the problems faced by employees before 2020, such as understaffing, insufficient equipment, and lack of adequate remuneration for increased efforts. What distinguishes the cases chosen from the bulk of the collection is that the story of the pandemic is triggered while still in the first part of the interview and plays a salient biographical role in reshaping the course of life. Thus, the pandemic becomes a biographical turning point for both Paulina and Antoni. In Paulina's case, it is an impulse to focus on her private and family life, and in Antoni's case—to deepen his engagement in the trade union's organization and mobilization of other workers. Both cases are also characterized by, less frequent in the whole collection of interviews, proactive attitude toward the challenges brought by the pandemic outburst.

In the next section, we will present the results of a case study analysis, exploring in more detail some of the analytical dimensions listed in Table 1. In the final part of the article, some more general observations related to the entire collection of interviews will be formulated.

Pandemic as a Catalyst of Resourcefulness: The Case of Paulina, a Resident Doctor

Paulina was born in the early 1990s in the countryside in the Lower Silesian Voivodship, in a family of local intelligentsia. Her father was for years the treasurer at the town hall in a large county town; her mother was a nurse and now works as a clerk in the public administration. Both parents have a university degree. Paulina has two sisters (one four years older and the other two years younger) with whom she keeps close contact. However, she emphasized that her family had been much larger since her childhood, with at least 20 people surrounding her. That was because both her mother and father came from large families, and her uncles and aunts also lived with their children in her home village. Since elementary school, the narrator has been involved in the Catholic church community, which manifested in singing in the schola, going on pilgrimages, and later, in activities in one of the associations of Catholic youth. Nowadays, Paulina is much less engaged in such activities, even though she declares herself as religious.

The narrator finished her medical studies in D. (one of the big cities in western Poland). During her one-year internship after graduation, she met her husband, Tomek, who worked as a paramedic in a hospital and, as a second job, ran a small company that offered medical security for mass events.

Paulina chose to specialize in neurology. She recalls the beginning of her work as a particularly difficult period due to the problems of reconciling her private and professional lives. Tomek lived in another city, which made regular commuting necessary. At the time of the interview, Paulina was working in a teaching hospital in Z. (a large city in the north of Poland), where work management was subject to a rigid formal hierarchy. She felt deprived of help and support from senior doctors. At many points, she had to make decisions affecting the health and lives of patients on her own, without always having adequate knowledge of what actions were advisable. The situation changed in the second year of her residency when two new doctors arrived on the ward who were willing to support Paulina and give specific guidance.

In the same year, Paulina and her future husband (who was by then her fiancé) decided to move back to D.-city where Tomek worked. Paulina was given a placement at a teaching hospital for three months, but the COVID-19 pandemic started, and she was called back to the hospital in Z.-city to assist with the treatment of the infected. An additional problem was that her fiancé's company had downtime due to the lockdown. As a result, Tomek moved to Paulina's place and found a job as a member of the smear team[3] in one of the cities in the same voivodship in northern Poland.

During the same period, Paulina became pregnant, and they started to plan a wedding with Tomek. Shortly before the event, however, there was a miscarriage. The narrator said little about that period other than that the wedding eventually took place under pandemic restrictions. During the second wave of the pandemic, Paulina participates as a volunteer in the transformation of maternity wards into the COVID-19 ward at the hospital in Z.:

> **Paulina:** I've just been on sick leave, I don't even want to duck, I just have this feeling that something needs to be done, and, yyy, I need to help somehow, that it's not correct if all of us, that nobody wants to go to that [COVID] ward. And somehow, I just wanted to go. I read up very hard, and I just called one of the doctors in our, yyy, ward who has already undergone coronavirus infection, had already passed [**Interviewer I:** Uhm], and he was, yyy, sort of the only one who said that he would go to this, yyy, [COVID] ward to work and I called him and said that in that case, I would join him.

The important context for the quote is its connection to Paulina's account of her uncle's severe coronavirus illness, which can be read as a motivation for her involvement in setting up the COVID ward. The quote can be interpreted in various ways. Firstly, it can be understood as the manifestation of Paulina's work ethos since the narrator emphasizes her responsibility as a doctor. Secondly, presenting the story in such a way leaves the impression of a bottom-up initiative. Similarly to some other interviews collected, those are the doctors who are presented as the initiators of the creation of the ward. A final important aspect is the exclusion of other professional groups (primarily nurses) from the narrative about establishing the new hospital unit, which is another feature of interviews with doctors in our collection. That is in contrast to the aforementioned nurses, who tend to generalize the experience to everyone working in the unit or the health system in general.

[3] Those were medical teams traveling to patients to swab and verify coronavirus infection.

At the time of the interview, Paulina was pregnant again, with a due date set for September. She has been on sick leave for several months due to her pregnancy and lived in her partner's flat in D.-city. She planned to take all her maternity leave and additional opportunities to stay at home and return to work—for residency—in early 2023.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a salient factor that affected Paulina's professional and family decisions in recent years. It is introduced through the story of her uncle's illness. However, the trajectory potentials increase also in the professional sphere. The pandemic makes it even more complicated to combine family life and work. At a later stage, lockdown and restrictions make it difficult to organize a wedding and reception, and all that is compounded by the story of the miscarriage of Paulina's first pregnancy, which she largely faded out in her interview. All in all, the time of COVID-19 is a difficult period, the significance of which is made more explicit following some of the additional questions the researcher asks (among others, about the memories of the beginning of the pandemic).

Even though the narrator does not talk about it explicitly, the pandemic crisis is also a period of extremely intense work and long shifts. Paulina has been severely ill with COVID-19, which (as far as the course of the illness is concerned) she also does not explicitly mention in the interview. In the latter case, the reason may be that she talks at length beforehand about the nurses' failure to follow safety rules on the ward, while her infection (probably during her lunch break, from a colleague) may also be the result of breaking such rules by herself. We wish to discuss a longer quote in which several dimensions of the pandemic crisis hitting Paulina's professional and private life are intertwined:

> **Paulina:** Er, well, then we had an unpleasant story because, er, I got pregnant and we were also planning that after three months, er, I'd go on sick leave, we'd be together, it was already after the first, let's say, a wave of the epidemic, between the first and the second wave, er, but there, in the fourth month, I miscarried [more and more quietly] so, er, it was already like I'd almost moved to D. because it was supposed to be that from next week I'm, er, already on leave [nervously laughs], well, but it turned out that I miscarried. And it was also such a hard time for us. I was still on sick leave there for a month, so yeah. We were getting married then [nervously laughs] at that time at the top of everything. Er, and somehow that September flew by, and then it was October, I was supposed to start this internship in cardiology again, to spend three months here, but then, er, the second wave [nervous laughter] of the epidemic broke out again, and I had to go back to Z. again, so I decided... And, and that was the time when this COVID ward was built, and I decided I'd go to the COVID ward to work, and [laughter] and that's how it started. Yyy, well, and then the next time... I was already laughing because, because this internship, I did this internship in, er, cardiology finally this year, in March. And I was just laughing, it was already, I was already pregnant, so I was already kind of not able to work in the COVID ward anyway, but then just as I was starting this, er, again, this internship in cardiology, the third wave broke out, and I say to myself: I don't believe it. [Laughs] I'll never do it! I'll have to go back to Z., and I'll never do it…Because also, if you're pregnant, you cannot be on duty.

Taking a closer look at the quote, we see that there is a flurry of important and difficult events in the narrator's life over a short period. Paulina mixes the narrative about changes in the sphere of work and career with the story of her wedding and, above all,

her miscarriage. A recurring thread that also ties that part of the interview together is the repeated interruption of a cardiology internship in D.-city, which was Paulina's original career plan during that period.[4] That theme allows the narrator to present seamlessly the key moments of her pandemic experience: getting married, losing her pregnancy with her first child, and getting pregnant with her second child. It does not appear from the interview that the pandemic was a factor leading to the miscarriage. However, it seems plausible that it was not a period in which Paulina could focus on her health and, for example, decide to take a longer holiday. Our attention was also drawn to the formal side of that speech—the narrator laughs nervously, interrupts her speech, and changes the subject frequently. It is possible to take those non-fluencies as indicators of the operation of trajectory potentials.

To sum up, the pandemic can be interpreted as a turning point at three levels. Firstly, it is the moment when Paulina's biographical plans to return to D.-city for a traineeship collapses. The biographical roadmap she plans to put in place with her husband has to be abandoned, and the narrator herself is forced to return to a hospital where she is not comfortable as an employee.

Secondly, the very work Paulina does undergoes drastic changes due to the pandemic regime introduced. The narrator, at one point, tries to influence the direction of those changes through her involvement in organizing the COVID ward, where she then worked. That is a period of very intense work (especially in the second wave when there are many more coronavirus patients in the hospital) but also the moment of the maturation of her professional work ethos.

Thirdly, the pandemic is a period in which there is a very strong intertwining of Paulina's professional and private plans. The narrator experiences a flurry of events over which she finds it difficult to maintain control.

The cumulative potential of the biographical trajectory is reflected in the ways of narrating about subsequent waves of the pandemic. The first wave is relatively quiet. There are not many COVID-19 patients in the hospital yet, and Paulina is preparing for her wedding. After some time (here, it is difficult to reconstruct an exact chronology), she becomes pregnant for the first time. The second wave is the peak of the build-up of trajectory potentials. Paulina experiences a miscarriage, returns to work, and decides to become more professionally involved, which leads her to take responsibility for organizing a COVID ward. It is important to recall the ways of representing her relationships with significant others in the workplace at that time. On several occasions in the interview, she emphasizes the not-so-good atmosphere in her hospital (hence her desire to move to another city as part of her internship), but during the pandemic period, especially at the time of setting up the COVID ward, she operates in a small medical team in which relations are close and supportive. The opposite is true of the relationship with the nurses, who, according to Paulina, were unwilling to work with COVID-19 patients and, on top of it, did not follow safety protocols. An additional source of stress was the relationships with patients who, in the later waves of the pandemic, made comments questioning the veracity of the pandemic and displayed anti-vaccine attitudes.

[4] The problems with fulfilling the original plan of residency are a common theme in the narratives of other young doctors as well.

The entire experience of the pandemic period leads Paulina to prioritize family values in her biography. That resonates with other parts of the interview, where we find evidence of the operation of a biographical vector of the embeddedness in the milieu. In this case, the family milieu. That implies a strong desire for biographical stability, which also involves maintaining a better work-life balance. Paulina maintains her ambitions for professional development (she is planning a doctorate, among other things), but in parallel, she wants to expand her family and finally set up their home in one place. She announced at some point the will to come back to D.—the city in which her husband runs his business. Since it restarted after lockdowns and they could also rely on close family support, she is determined to move back in the next two years. The transition from a more "relational" (focused on broad family and religious community) to a more "resourceful" type of life strategy started before the pandemic and was related to fulfilling professional goals and managing everyday life between various cities and places. The pandemic period is a time of change in priorities since Paulina started to be much more occupied with family- and child-related responsibilities.

Pandemic as a Catalyst for Solidarity: The Case of Antoni, a Nursing Home Worker

Antoni was born in the early 1960s in D., a large Polish city. He is the son of an electrician and a winder of electric motors, and his mother worked as a warehouse manager. He had an older brother and sister who died in the 1990s. He was brought up in the Catholic faith. When he was seven, he started to be an altar boy and served at mass even when he was already married. He graduated from a technical school with a specialization in electromechanics. After graduation, he started working on the railways. In the 1980s, he was a member of the Solidarity trade union. During martial law, he was allocated a council flat on the condition that he became president of the local ZSMP (The Polish Socialist Youth Association).[5] The narrator, due to his strong anti-communist convictions, refused, which ultimately entailed refusing the allocated flat and resigning from his job. That was difficult for him as he was already raising three sons with his wife at the time. He was then employed by the brewery as an electrician, where he worked for 18 years until the company closed down. Shortly before the closure of the brewery, he set up his own company offering electrical services and cleaning work.

In the second half of the 1990s, the narrator lost his flat as a result of a natural disaster and had to live temporarily in a student dormitory. In 2006, he began his studies in theology, which he completed with a Master's degree. That coincided with his sons' life problems. He briefly taught religion and ethics at school, which paid off financially, but ultimately, he gave up that work to run a housing renovation business as a self-employed. The business soon collapsed due to, as he said, "competition from the East." He then carried out various jobs like courier and postman, but due to his ill health (diabetes and eye disease) and an Achilles tendon injury, he had to find something more adjusted to his condition. In 2018, he took up a job as a medical carer in a nursing home. In 2021, he joined a small, radical trade union, in which he is now a member of the presidium. He has been serving in one of

[5] Związek Socjalistycznej Młodzieży Polskiej (ZSMP) (The Polish Socialist Youth Association) was the main organization for Polish youth funded in 1976 (as a result of merging three other socialist youth organizations) and strongly politically depended on the communist government.

the lay orders in the Catholic Church since around 2014. Recently, his son died, which shook him up a lot. He currently lives with his wife, daughter, and grandchildren in a council flat in D.

In the interview, Antoni focused on two dimensions of his life history—his professional work and his commitment to the Church. Faith is an important theme in the interview as it is used by Antoni to find the meaning of most situations in his life, including the death of his son. In terms of his professional work, Antoni presents himself as a very resourceful person. He mentions various kinds of extra work during the communist period, thanks to which he was able to earn a second salary (overtime, paid work outside his formal job description). Even after 1989, he showed great resilience to the successive crises he had to cope with. He faced a temporary loss of his flat, the closure of his company, the need to seek new employment, and family problems, all of which he eventually managed to overcome. When we compare those more and less important turning points with the experience of the pandemic, it becomes clear that Antoni makes use of different types of biographical resources. In the case of earlier crises, the ways of coping were largely based on individual capacities and skills: resourcefulness, assertiveness, and family support. The pandemic, on the other hand, is a period in which there is a shift in the biographical dimension—the vector of coping switches toward solidarity. Antoni becomes intensely involved in trade union organizing and co-organizes protest actions against rapidly deteriorating working conditions.

An important thread in Antoni's biography is his religious, moral ethos that gives him direction in the moments of trials. We see that already in the first instance of crisis when the narrator decides to give up his allotted flat because of his anti-communist convictions. The moral ethos also leads to much more emphasis on the history and macro-scale events as a context for biographical decisions. "Embeddedness in history" helps to interpret successive crises provoked by uncontrollable, external circumstances as "tests" for moral convictions. There is one more side of Antoni's religiousness and broader ideological and political context. In the last part of the interview, when asked about his political views, Antoni openly expressed homophobic and anti-European Union statements—both seen by him as a danger to a "normal" family.

In the sphere of work, moral ethos is manifested in the narrator's strong belief in the necessity to link work with dignity. On the one hand, the demands of the social care workers he represents have a pragmatic dimension (related, among other things, to salary increases), but on the other hand, Antoni emphasizes the indispensability of the work conducted in the nursing homes in the context of caring for people in need:

> **Antoni:** Well... I started a job in the last four years, you could say, as a caregiver... in the nursing home...A year later, the pandemic hit, and things started to get complicated, and...I saw a lot of things I just wasn't prepared for, for example, the deaths of people I worked with, whom I practically treated like, er... Like family because, after all, you worked with them. These are things that hit very hard. I was admittedly... that's what I felt it was going to be like, so somehow... I was supposedly mentally prepared for it. It turned out that I wasn't at all, that it was, nevertheless, this trauma somewhere inside me… it was progressing, although, at some point, you had to stand firmly on your feet, er… To get even closer to these people.

For the narrator, the meaning of care work is based on the relationship with the residents. However, the situation in nursing homes during the pandemic drastically worsened, which hit residents and social care workers as well. That, in turn, is linked to the activation of trajectory potentials, especially during the pandemic when the number of virus infections and deaths rapidly increased among nursing home residents. The health risk was a crucial factor in strengthening the emotional and psychological pressure on Antoni as an individual. But, his response was to engage heavily in the nursing home workers' mobilization.

In Antoni's autobiographical life story, the pandemic crisis is first and foremost a crisis experienced collectively as a member of a wider workers' community, which, again, points to the role of the "embeddedness in history" as a biographical vector organizing his narration:

> **Antoni:** Well, and in the pandemic, people started to leave their jobs…Why? Well, because... as carers, they had better working conditions in, for example, in hospitals. Er... And at some point, it started lacking workers...This is the feeling that we were actually left alone, on our own, on our own because, er... Nobody cared about our money, about everything…There is a group of people who are dedicated to this work, but so what when, er... Now with this current inflation, it's all gone up, well, we've tried just by setting up these unions...Well, and we're trying to at least stabilize all this, this work, our wages by what, what we're doing, by protest and, well... we're looking for some kind of response… in the city hall.

In the quote, we see the mechanism of transition from a feeling of being left unsupported as a frontline worker in a crisis to workers' self-organization and mobilization. The public health crisis deepened workplace problems that had been present before its outburst, such as chronic labor shortages. The narrator is very much committed to his work and combines his (religiously founded) moral ethos with the ethos of care, which does not permit him to leave patients in a critical situation (Kubisa and Rakowska 2021). However, his work situation during the pandemic, fraught with risk, intensified compared to pre-pandemic times, and emotionally charged, becomes unbearable and forces him to act not just as an individual but also as a co-organizer of broader movement leading toward establishing a trade union and protest against bad work conditions. In that context, we can see how the pandemic crisis becomes a turning point, giving impetus to the use of community resources and solidarity strategies to improve job quality without compromising the ethos of care.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article aimed to answer the question of the place of the COVID-19 pandemic in the biographies of workers who performed key frontline public services in the times of the health crisis. Given their strategic location for the protection of life and health and the provision of essential services during the lockdown, as well as the intensification and reorganization of work and the significant exposure of some of them to the deadly virus, we expected biographical interviews to be full of dramatic and emotional narratives about the pandemic. That has only been partially confirmed by the collection of biographical narrative interviews with frontline essential workers.

One of the aims of analyzing the material was to identify the conditions under which the pandemic

began to play a role as a significant turning point in the stories of our interviewees. The health crisis left the most traces in biographies in which crises at the macro level were accompanied by overlapping biographical crises: illnesses, deaths, and crises in families. As we can see in the case of Antoni, it may have also acted as a catalyst for resources built up in the course of previous experiences (including less tangible ones, such as moral values, e.g., ethical treatment of professional duties) and triggered new coping mechanisms (in this case, solidaristic ones based on trade union activism). In Paulina's interview, the pandemic, in turn, acts as a context for a shift from an overwhelming work to family life, the parenthood project, and the desire for a greater work-life balance. Having a miscarriage and becoming pregnant for the second time under the intense and risky working conditions trigger the biographical work done by the narrator, which leads her to declare her desire to withdraw from her previous scale of professional involvement.

The analysis indicates the intertwining of the pandemic as a turning point with the pre-pandemic biographical experiences and resources of our interviewees. Based on the categories introduced in an earlier study of war experiences (Czyżewski 2016; Piotrowski 2016), they can be described using the biographical vectors of embeddedness in the milieu (Paulina as a person focused on family and communities of friends since childhood) and embeddedness in history (Antoni inscribing his experiences in historical macro-processes: struggle against the authoritarian system and involvement in a Church organization). The research suggests that biographical vectors shaped throughout life histories were further reinforced by experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Paulina's autobiographical story moves toward anchoring the biography around her family. In Antoni's case, the opposite is true—the interviewee becomes more and more involved in trade union issues and, looking more broadly, a dispute of a political nature (since the nursing homes are managed by the city, any protest by the social care workers has the character of criticism of the local authorities). Moreover, if we return to the definition of the vector of embeddedness in history, we can evoke not only the question of telling one's biography against the background of historical events but also in the context of using ideological symbolic resources. In Antoni's case, such a function is fulfilled mostly by his Catholic faith and, in the last part of the interview, also by his radical political views (including open homophobia and anti-European Union stance).

Returning to Strauss's (1977) distinction of three types of turning points (milestone, challenge, and betrayal), it seems that, in both cases, the pandemic has the character of a challenge for the narrators. It forces change and adaptation, and their direction depends on the biographical resources at the disposal of narrators. However, one might wonder whether the other categories of turning points could also be found in the analyzed biographies. For Paulina, the pandemic crisis also partly has the character of a milestone—it triggers intensive biographical work, and while at the time of the interview, it is certainly difficult to determine whether that is complete, its direction toward redefining the meaning of professional work in biography is clear. Antoni, on the other hand, seems betrayed in the sense of being a member of a professional group left unsupported in a severe health crisis hitting both his patients/clients and him as a worker.

The cases of Paulina and Antoni are just two interviews from a much larger collection of biographical stories of essential frontline workers in education,

healthcare, social care, and logistics, collected in the "COV-WORK: Socio-Economic Consciousness, Work Experiences, and Coping Strategies of Poles in the Context of the Post-Pandemic Crisis" project. Even though both informants mentioned the pandemic in response to the question of their life histories, their narratives represent a more general tendency present in the collection not to include the details of the pandemic experiences in the main storyline and elaborate on them following more specific questions. In the cases similar to Paulina and Antoni, in which the pandemic was at all mentioned in the first part of the interview, we could identify three contexts for the autobiographical storytelling: (1) accumulation of trajectory potentials from pre-pandemic periods; (2) the overlap of personal and professional crises (including the experience of serious illness or death of a loved one, significant deterioration in the quality of work, or loss of a job); (3) the existence of ideological interpretive resources that facilitate the linking of macro and micro levels, which confirms earlier findings from biographical research on war (Piotrowski 2016) and systemic transformation (Mrozowicki 2011; Kaźmierska and Waniek 2020).

In other cases, referring to the categories introduced by Bertaux (2012), there was a sharper discrepancy between the "biographical time" of the experiences of informants and the "historical time" of the pandemic. The former referred to the core narrative, which, in most cases, ended "before the pandemic" or did not encompass it at all.[6] The latter, on the other hand, concerned the course of successive waves of the coronavirus outbreak, primarily experienced by the interviewees in the workplace, and referred to in the third part of the interview when the researcher asked specific questions (such as about the onset of the pandemic). The analytical findings so far allow two hypothetical reasons for such divergence to be identified. They include (1) the period effect (Miller 2005), which concerns the execution of the interviews during the pandemic, and (2) the collective nature of the pandemic as a phenomenon that affected (albeit unequally) all members of society and, especially over time, has been taken for granted as a frame of individual experience.

The first possible explanation is the close temporal distance of the pandemic, or rather the fact of being in it at the time of the interview. In that sense, it was a period that was not closed and, as such, may not have been worked through at the level of individual biographical work. The pandemic went beyond possible biographical closure (coda), being all the time a current event whose direction and meaning from the individual's perspective was not yet obvious. The initial communication chaos and the overloading of the information sphere with the pandemic topic did not help in its assessment either. If one looks at the public debate as a reservoir of different kinds of symbols and interpretations that individuals can use in reflective work on social phenomena that are important to them, it was, especially in the initial phase of the pandemic, an overloaded, unclear space that generated a sense of fear and anxiety (Delanty 2021). At the same time, it is important to note that in the biographical interviews, also in the first parts of them, there were references to the moment of life the interviewees were in at the time of the interview, and those were reflected more broadly. Most often, they referred to the issue of professional position or other main biographical activity (e.g., in the case of students, the importance of studying) rather than the pandemic itself.

[6] That is not the same thing—sometimes the story came up to the point of giving an interview, i.e., it nominally also covered the pandemic period, but the pandemic was not discussed in the autobiographical story.

An alternative interpretation concerns the collective nature of the pandemic. For many interviewees, it was only a context of biographical events and, at the same time, not part of an individual narrator's life course. For that reason, it was not described as something that happened to a specific individual and belonged to their special and unique life history. It was a collective phenomenon, affecting all members of the collective (such as war or economic crises). In the third part of the interview, in which we asked directly about what had happened to informants since the outbreak of the pandemic, we were confronted with extensive and surprisingly detailed statements about their experiences and the individual participation of the narrators. Importantly, those were stories in which the so-called communicative scheme of narration (Schütze 2005) was dominant. The interviewees reconstructed the individual moments of the pandemic in great detail, not necessarily sticking to a chronology but often "acting out" individual scenes. What is even more interesting is that, on several occasions, when comparing the first part of the interview (during which one expects more narrative communication) with the third part (where one rather expects to receive statements of an argumentative or theoretical nature that are the interviewees' answers to more theoretical questions), it was in the latter part that the narrative was more clearly present.

To conclude, it seems that we can speak of a certain case of mismatch between historical and biographical time that is interesting for biographical researchers. A very high narrative potential found in the questions about the period of the pandemic from its outbreak to the time of the interview suggests a crucial role of the third part of the interview for studying the biographical experiences of macro-social, exogenous shocks. Our attention was attracted to cases in which the place and significance of the pandemic have been more prominent and in which it played the role of a turning point for the entire biography of the person concerned. However, the biographical study of workers' pandemic experiences presented in the article confirms the observations of previous studies that "external shocks" are not "automatically" represented as biographical turning points. Further research should investigate more systematically and comparatively the biographical and communicative conditions that need to be met to link the biographical and historical time of the crises' narratives.

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How Reflection Works in Transformative Dialogue/Mediation: A Preliminary Investigation

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Abstract: Transformative dialogue and mediation (TD/M) is an approach to conflict resolution used in mediation and inter-group dialogues about social justice and race, political polarization, and ethnopolitical conflict. TD/M practitioners believe their approach supports the agency of participants and helps them interact with greater confidence, self-awareness, and understanding of the perspectives of others. However, previous research on TD/M has not yet addressed how it achieves those outcomes. This pilot study works to fill that gap by investigating how reflection, the most commonly used TD/M technique, is utilized in a facilitated meeting of the steering committee of a non-profit organization. We conduct a qualitative sequential analysis of a video-recorded interaction to investigate how TD/M reflection is done. We show how the TD/M facilitator of the meeting reflects participants' statements with the techniques of mirroring, substituting, and omitting and how the participants respond to those reflections with agreement or repair. The results of the analysis are discussed in terms of their implications for understanding how TD/M facilitation works.

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The transformative approach to conflict intervention has been widely used in mediation and dialogues in a range of conflicts, including social justice and race (Bush and Folger 2005; 2010; Press and Deason2020), political polarization, and ethnopolitical conflict (Cleven, Bush, and Saul 2018; Cleven and Saul 2021). It was first developed in the 1990s by Robert Bush and Joseph Folger (1994) as a new approach to mediation, which differed in key ways from facilitative mediation. First and foremost, transformative mediators see the most important goal of mediation not as facilitating agreement between parties but in reversing the negative spiral of interaction that occurs in conflict and improving the quality of conflict interaction, whether or not agreement is reached.[1] Practitioners of transformative dialogue and mediation (TD/M) believe their approach better supports the self-determination of participants and helps them interact with greater confidence and self-awareness while nurturing greater understanding of the perspectives of others. However, previous research has not yet addressed how it achieves those outcomes. This paper works to fill that gap by investigating the use of reflection, the most commonly utilized TD/M skill.

The TD/M skill of reflection differs from related skills used in facilitative mediation. Facilitative mediators typically paraphrase or reframe clients' perspectives and positions using language that is more conducive to getting to agreement (Moore 1996; Boulle, Colatrella, and Picchioni 2008; Frenkel and Stark 2012; Goldberg et al. 2017; Garcia 2019; Maxwell and Ingram 2022). That might include using very different language to describe the issues than the parties used. In contrast, the TD/M skill of reflection aims to mirror or reflect what the participant is presenting, using words as close as possible to those used by the parties themselves and may also reflect emotional display, or even silence or withdrawal from the exchange. In theory, reflections are used to help participants gain clarity about their situation, what they want to say, or decisions they want to make. Reflection is also meant to support participants as they interact with others.

The goals of this pilot study are twofold. First, the study aims to investigate how reflection is used by TD/M facilitators and whether it is utilized as described in the theoretical literature. Second, it aims to show how participants respond to reflection as a facilitator move. TD/M has ethical objectives on two levels—the facilitator's respect for the participant's self-determination is ethical regardless of any empirical outcome, and there are also goals of enhancing the participants' sense of agency and empowerment. It is the latter we focus on in this article by examining how reflections are constructed by the facilitator and how participants respond. With the TD/M approach, reflections are designed to empower the participant by mirroring their current thinking rather than using more directive methods, such as those often used in facilitative mediation. We conduct a qualitative sequential analysis relying on conversation analytic concepts and findings to examine how the TD/M reflection technique is used during a steering committee meeting of a non-profit organization.

While this study will be of interest to TD/M scholars and practitioners and scholars of mediation more widely, we believe this research has potentially greater significance as well. TD/M techniques are

[1] Practitioners of transformative dialogue and mediation are referred to as "facilitators" of the interaction; that is not to be confused with the term "facilitative mediation," which refers to a specific type of mediation.

designed to facilitate conversations between people on challenging topics, whether in the context of the mediation of a dispute or a community dialogue about racial justice or other social and political issues. As the United States and many other countries struggle with extreme political polarization, which may make it difficult for people to engage in political discourse, a better understanding of facilitation approaches such as TD/M is timely. We need to understand how such techniques work and how they impact the interactions between participants to best assist people to engage in difficult conversations constructively.

In the next section, we review scholarship on the TD/M approach and its use for mediation and dialogue. We then describe our theoretical perspective, methods and data, and our analysis of the reflections in the data. We show that reflections are constructed using the techniques of mirroring, omitting, and substituting and that participants respond to them with agreement or repair. Taken together, those actions constitute what we call reflection-response sequences. The paper concludes with a summary of findings and a discussion of further research directions.

Literature Review

The transformative theory of conflict (Bush and Folger 1994; 2005) differs in key ways from other perspectives on conflict, such as facilitative and narrative mediation (Moore 1996; Winslade and Monk 2000). Mediation programs in the US have typically focused on problem-solving and creating agreement between disputing parties (Moore 1996; Woolford and Ratner 2008; Bush 2013; Bishop et al. 2015; Seaman 2016). Christopher Moore (1996:54) acknowledges a continuum of mediator directiveness ranging from "orchestrators" whose "focus [is] on empowering parties to make their own decisions" to "dealmakers" who "are often highly directive in relation to both process and the substantive issues under discussion...[and who] are very prescriptive and directive with respect to problem-solving steps." Nonetheless, the mediation process he outlines is one where the end stage is achieving formal settlement (Moore 1996:67). In contrast, the transformative theory was described as building on a relational worldview rather than an individualist or transactional worldview (Della Noce 1999). While transformative mediators could be described by Moore's (1996) category of "orchestrators" since they seek to empower parties to make their own decisions, the goal of transformative mediation is not necessarily formal settlement but improvement of the conflict interaction between parties (though it may also include settlement if that is what the parties desire). That is based on an analysis of how people *experience* conflict and what people primarily want when seeking help from a mediator. Thus, in transformative theory, conflict is understood as a crisis in human interaction where people experience relative weakness and self-absorption that hinders them from interacting constructively with others or recognizing the perspectives of others. That experience can become a downward spiral that can degenerate, causing interactions to be negative, alienating, and ultimately dehumanizing (Bush and Pope 2002; Bush and Folger 2005).

Transformative theory posits that what people want most from mediators and other conflict interveners is support to shift their conflict interaction from negative to positive (Bush and Pope 2002). From that perspective, the role of transformative facilitators is to support people as they interact and help them gain clarity, and thus empowerment, without supplanting their agency.

Finally, the theory makes explicit premises that inform decisions interveners make as they mediate or facilitate people's conflicts (Bush and Folger 2010; Folger 2020). Those premises are based on beliefs about what constitutes success in conflict intervention and about people's motivation and capacity in their relation to others. Transformative theory posits that human beings have inherent capacities for both self-determined choice and compassionate responsiveness to others, even when confronted with adverse circumstances. A transformative mediator or facilitator's main role is to support but never supplant each person's voluntary decision-making and each individual's interpersonal perspective-taking (Bush and Folger 2010). Though transformative theory focuses on conflict as a crisis in human interaction, it also posits that people can shift from weakness to strength and from self-absorption to responsiveness to others with the proper support of a conflict intervener (Bush and Folger 2005).

There are five essential skills a transformative mediator uses: listening, reflecting, summarizing, checking in, and letting go (e.g., Bush and Pope 2002; Bush and Folger 2005; Simon and West 2022). Listening means attending to the moment-to-moment interaction between participants. Because the purpose of TD/M processes is to support participants in making self-determined choices about their interactions or the issues being discussed, and because those processes build on premises that assert the capacity of people to do it themselves, interveners must keep that in mind to avoid acting on the impulse to fix people's problems or make decisions for them—no matter how well-intentioned such impulses might be. That requires "listening to *how* the parties are talking rather than *what* they are talking about" (Bush and Folger 2010:37).

When reflecting, facilitators are trained to repeat back to participants what they said and the emotions accompanying their statements. The purpose is to "mirror" what was said, allowing participants to feel heard and supported and to give them the chance to edit what they said or to add to it. While reflections are meant to be focused on one speaker, summaries are meant to be a recapitulation of part of a larger conversation. They are focused on themes discussed and differences between participants' perspectives rather than commonalities. Reflections are addressed to one person in the conversation and follow immediately after that person's statement. Summaries, on the other hand, are focused on all the parties to the conversation and offered after parties have been discussing several themes. Finally, "letting go" means staying out when participants are interacting constructively to not interrupt constructive interaction.

Those transformative skills and core practices are currently used not only in the mediation of conflicts, including relationship, neighborhood, and workplace conflicts but also to facilitate interpersonal or intergroup dialogue. TD/M facilitators may use them in the context of one-on-one conversations as they meet with members of communities or organizations to co-create the dialogue process or with large groups (Cleven and Saul 2021).

Reflection is the most commonly used TD/M skill. TD/M reflections are directed only at the party currently speaking (Bush and Folger 2005) and are used immediately after that person has spoken (Simon and West 2022). Robert Bush and Sally Pope (2002:88) state that "[i]n reflecting a party statement, the mediator simply says what she hears the party saying, using words close to the party's own language, even (or especially) when language is strong,

loud, negative, or strongly expressive." That is very different from paraphrasing used in facilitative mediation, where mediators typically rephrase what a party has said in terms more conducive to reaching an agreement (e.g., Garcia 2019). A TD/M reflection is inclusive, and the intervener should not leave out parts of what the person has said (Bush and Pope 2002) or soften language to make it easier for others in the room to hear (Bush and Folger 2005). According to the theory, an effective reflection "will usually evoke an immediate confirmation response from the speaker," and if the reflection "misses the mark," it will evoke a correction from the speaker (Bush and Folger 2005:146).

Dan Simon and Tara West (2022:87) explain that when thinking about when to reflect, they look for

> a high degree of emotionality, particularly frustration or anger. Frustration suggests the person feels stuck—they would like to change the situation but don't know how… Anger (which is often tied to frustration) suggests the person is experiencing self-absorption—they're having a hard time understanding the other person's perspective or seeing the situation through their eyes.

In transformative theory, it is often referred to as signs of weakness and self-absorption (Bush and Pope 2002; Bush and Folger 2005).

Taken together, the transformative skills are designed to support participants in making positive interactional shifts. In theory, reflections allow a person to hear themselves better and allow other people to hear them from a distance through the voice of the intervener. Reflection also allows people to choose to alter what they have said (Bush and Pope 2002). The effectiveness of the reflection is therefore not only measured by the participant's response to it since both reflections that are responded to with agreement and those responded to by a revision of the reflection are presumably beneficial to the participant reflected. The reason for that is that, in either case, the person reflected gains clarity about what was said and, after revising the reflection presumably, gains the acknowledgment of the facilitator.

In the literature reviewed above, scholars describe how those skills and core practices *should* be used in the transformative framework. Both scholars and practitioners have made many claims about how such "moves" affect people and conversations, but existing studies have not specifically investigated how mediators reflect and how participants respond to those moves. James Antes, Joseph Folger, and Dorothy Della Noce (2001) assessed how the micro-level of conflict interaction changed in transformative mediation. That included documenting shifts in interaction to more calm and constructive conversation, but the authors did so by conducting focus groups with mediators after the fact. The study did not utilize transcripts or recordings of mediations, nor did it specifically connect the use of skills by the mediators to the specific changes in interaction. Della Noce (2002:299) studied transcripts of so-called individualist and relational mediations, focusing on what she refers to as "discursive moves and strategies." She writes that in the case of relational mediations, those closest to transformative mediation, such discursive moves and strategies were meant to "position the parties for constructive conversation" (Della Noce 2002:300). Strategies for doing so included orienting parties to their agency, orienting parties to each other, and "opening the parties' verbal conflict," for instance, focusing on disagreement (Della Noce 2002:301). Though Della

Noce (2002:301) does not use the term reflection, she notes that mediators were utilizing "second person in subject position" and "second person possessive adjectives" as well as subject names. Finally, she also notes that mediators use "open reformulations and questions that 'stay with' party-to-party content" (Della Noce 2002:301). Nonetheless, as Della Noce (1999:279) noted many years ago in an earlier publication, there has not yet been an "empirical examination of micro-level discursive practices" of TD/M beyond that described above. As far as we are aware, such a gap in the literature has yet to be filled. Previous micro-level research on the interactional organization of more common approaches to mediation (such as facilitative mediation) has documented not only substantial strengths but also some potential weaknesses, including the possibility of perceptions of bias, unintended consequences of attempts to empower weaker disputants, and challenges to the autonomy of disputants (e.g., Greatbatch and Dingwall 1989; Jacobs 2002; Heisterkamp 2006; Garcia 2019). In this paper, we fill that gap by empirically analyzing how participants use and respond to the most common TD/M technique—reflection.

Theoretical Perspective and Methods

The ethnomethodological perspective directs our attention to how social action and social organization are accomplished and maintained (Garfinkel 1967; Heritage 1984). Harold Garfinkel (1967) uses the term "documentary method of interpretation" to refer to how participants interpret their co-participants' actions (including utterances) to reflect an underlying pattern. That ethnomethodological insight is also explored in Lawrence Wieder's (1974) study of convicts in a halfway house, where he showed how the accounts given by participants, for example, staff members, used residents' behaviors as actions reflecting an underlying "convict code," which then reflexively explained the actions taken and the staff members' response to those actions. Similarly, in this paper, we explore how the facilitator of the meeting uses participants' actions as "documents" of underlying patterns, such as what TD/M theory considers weakness and self-absorption as they determine whether to reflect participants' statements and how to reflect them. Participants' response to the reflection (agreement or disagreement) displays their orientation to its accuracy.

Ethnomethodological studies of face-to-face interaction typically use the analytical approach of conversation analysis, a qualitative method for analyzing the procedures used to accomplish interaction, achieve and repair intersubjective understanding, and achieve goals in different types of interactional contexts (e.g., Schegloff 2007). As in ethnomethodological studies of work (e.g., Zimmerman 1969; Garfinkel 1986; Lynch 1991; Corsby and Jones 2020), conversation analytic studies of talk in institutional settings focus on how the work is done (e.g., Atkinson and Heritage 1984; Drew and Heritage 1992). For the TD/M facilitator, the meeting is the workplace and the work of facilitation is done through talk.

Conversation analysis enables the close and detailed examination of participants' actions in their sequential context so that participants' turns can be analyzed in terms of how they display an orientation to the production of prior turns. For example, conversation analytic studies of interaction in psychotherapeutic settings show how therapists use the sequential context and details of how clients' statements are produced to make inferences about clients' emotions, thoughts, or levels of self-awareness through the documentary method of interpretation (e.g., Muntigl and Horvath 2014;

Cannon et al. 2020). Danielle Pillet-Shore (2016:38) shows how parents in parent-teacher conferences can display their reluctance to articulate praise of the student, using hesitation, error avoidance, and "speech disfluencies, cutting off her in-progress talk each time it projects student-praise." Pillet-Shore (2016) also argues that those are conflict-avoidance moves that minimize the likelihood of conflict between the parent and teacher in the conference. On the other hand, when teachers praised the students, they did so "fluently (without speech perturbations, e.g., sound cut-offs or silences) and straightforwardly, without delay, mitigation, qualification, or account" (Pillet-Shore 2016:38). When conveying criticisms of the student's work, teachers constructed their turns with hesitation and pauses (including "um" and "uh"), cut-offs and self-repair, qualifications (such as "kind of"), as well as indirect formulations, which avoid specifying the student's responsibility for the problems (Pillet-Shore 2016:42).

Data

This pilot study is the first step in a program of research that will examine the use of TD/M techniques in a larger collection of interactions, including meetings, public dialogues, and mediation sessions. The steering committee meeting analyzed in this paper not only produces initial findings about how TD/M reflections are done and responded to but also demonstrates how the qualitative analysis of the interaction using conversation analysis can make visible the specific actions and ways of formulating and placing utterances that make the technique work. We will examine the sequential organization of the talk in the meeting to understand the interactional techniques used to accomplish reflections and to respond to them.

The participants in the meeting were members of the steering committee of a non-profit organization whose purpose was to facilitate inter-racial understanding and the transmission of knowledge about racism by organizing a series of dialogue events ("conversations") for the broader community. In the meeting, they discussed issues around planning a future conversation about race and trauma. Originally scheduled to be held in person, the meeting was conducted via Zoom due to COVID issues.

The study was approved by an IRB, and all participants signed consent forms. Participants were not specifically informed that TD/M uses skills like reflection, but as part of the consent process, they were informed that the purpose of the research was to study the process of facilitation. All participants had previously taken part in facilitated conversations using TD/M because the steering committee is closely connected to a community mediation center that uses the TD/M approach.

The online meeting was video-recorded and transcribed using the techniques of conversation analysis (see: Hepburn and Bolden 2017). A simplified version of Gail Jefferson's (2004) transcribing conventions is used in the transcript excerpts—words are spelled as pronounced, brackets indicate simultaneous talk, numbers in parentheses are timed pauses, colons indicate a sound was drawn out, underlining indicates stress or emphasis, a dash indicates a word was cut off abruptly, capitalization indicates loudness, degree signs indicate something spoken more quietly than surrounding talk, and ".h" or "h" indicates inhalations or exhalations. Nonverbal behaviors are briefly described in double parentheses, and tentative transcriptions are enclosed in single parentheses. Pseudonyms were used for all names and identifying information. We are calling the fa-

cilitator of the meeting Nora, and the participants are Leo, Rena, Ava, Tina, and Hal.

Both authors independently analyzed the data to identify all reflections that occurred. We agreed on all 13 instances of TD/M reflections we identified in the collection. A reflection is not the same as a formulation because it is not a summary or gist of what has gone before or the action being accomplished (Heritage and Watson 1979; 1980; see also Gibson 2022). However, as we shall show in the analysis, participants' responses to reflections have similarities with responses to formulations (Heritage and Watson 1979; 1980). For example, the recipient of the reflection may respond with a confirmation or agreement with the reflection, on the one hand, or a revision or correction of the reflection, on the other.

A previous paper (Garcia 2024) analyzed the turn-taking system in the meeting. The participants chose to let the facilitator (Nora) select the next speakers, and it was decided that they would raise their hands to request a turn to talk. Once selected by the facilitator, the participant had the floor for an extended turn, which was typically constructed of several turn constructional units (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). When the speaker was done, the facilitator could produce a reflection of that participant's turn or could select the next speaker.

The transformative theory of conflict proposes that changes occur both internally (in the perspectives, beliefs, or emotions of the participant) and externally (in actions, such as how participants contribute to the interaction and how they formulate their contributions). The facilitator is trained to identify aspects of a participant's actions that indicate a lack of clarity or need for empowerment. The facilitator is trained to reflect back, as closely as possible in the speaker's words, those aspects of the statement. The sequential analysis of the data shows how the construction and placement of participants and the facilitator's actions work together to produce reflection-response sequences.

We first analyze participants' turns that do not lead to facilitator reflections and show how aspects of the participants' turn construction led to a presentation of strength and confidence. We then analyze participants' turns that led to facilitator reflections and show how the construction of the turn displays some type of vulnerability or lack of clarity. Finally, we analyze how reflections are constructed, as well as participants' responses to reflections, and describe the reflection-response sequence.

Analysis

Participants' Statements That Are Not Reflected

In the data, the facilitator, Nora, does not reflect every participant's turn at talk. We found that the statements that are not reflected use techniques conveying greater clarity, certainty, or confidence than those reflected. For example, Excerpt 1 shows parts of Ava's lengthy statement about how white people and African Americans have experienced trauma differently and how those differences may affect the steering committee's choices about how to structure the next event they are planning—a public "conversation" about race and trauma. Ava's statement, although lengthy, makes a clear and coherent statement of how she sees the relationship between race and trauma and how she feels such differences should affect the committee's design of the event they are planning (as a single session or as two related sessions). Ava speaks with authority about the positions on race and trauma that she expresses:

Excerpt 1

1	Ava:	one of thuh things that I've been saying ever since we've started is that (0.4)
2		African Americans a:nd white (0.1) folks on two completely different pa:ths ((Leo
3		nods)) ((Tina nods emphatically)) ((Rena nods emphatically)) when it comes to:
4		dealing with issues around trauma and and bad experiences. so for example,
5		(0.3) most African Americans suffer microaggressions E:very day! ... most of our
6		parents, and their parents, all gave thuh kinds of conversations to their children?,
7		that ((Leo small nods)) would help them to survi:ve!, (0.2) from Jim Crow to:
8		((Rena starts nodding)) discrimination in thuh workplace! (0.4) So!, African
9		Americans are on uh much ((Rena nods)) dee:per different pa:th ((Tina nods))
10		(0.3) when it comes to dealing with (0.4) quote day to day microaggression
11		((Nora small nods)) kind of experiences that they learn to deal with relatively
12		early. ... so I think what we gra:pple with in presenting this topic is, it has two
13		levels of ((Tina nods)) (0.4) information. ((Rena nodding)) (0.3) we can talk
14		generally about theh historic trauma of racism on African Americans. that's uh
15		topic in itself. (0.4) that's uh topic about microaggressions?, that's thuh topic
16		about thuh hurt, thuh process of getting better and thee effect that this has had o~n
17		(0.1) generations of African Americans, is uh topic in itºself.º (0.5) if we want to
18		talk about E:veryone!, (0.4) because white folks have experienced trauma too!
19		(1.0) that's a big topic. that almost has to be (done) in two sessions because
20		we have to go back historically ((Tina nodding)) WA:Y back ((Rena nodding))
21		(0.5) um for what for Af- for white Americans to be in touch with with the:ir
22		traumatic experiences. because there's historical trauma for them too. ... so it's uh
23		big topic and ((Nora nods)) I've heard many many talks on it so (0.3) um ((Rena
24		smiles)) we're- we're going to have to do uh lot more interviewing uh lot more
25		information gathering to see ju:st how we can pare that down. so that thuh public
26		(0.4) community (0.5) (so truly) some people are not talking about this every day
27		so they have no idea. ((Tina starts nodding, hand over mouth)) (0.5) so we've got
28		to be able to reach all those people.=
29		=((Tina raises hand))
30		(5.0)
31	Nora:	Tina.
32		(2.0)
33	Tina:	Yeah Ava what I I I actually (0.3) think I started picking away at tha:t...

In Excerpt 1, Ava begins with a clear statement of her position that there are differences between African Americans and white people regarding trauma (lines 1-4). She then gives the example of the

microaggressions African Americans experience and their ability to learn to survive those as an illustration of how trauma can be experienced (lines 4-12). Ava uses the transition marker "so" (line 12) to introduce the upshot of that explanation. She explains that there are two paths they could take: focus the event on "theh historic trauma of racism on African Americans." (line 14), on the one hand, or include how whites have experienced trauma as well as how African Americans have experienced trauma ("talk about E:veryone!,"; line 18). The second option would entail having two sessions rather than one (lines 17-22). Ava's entire statement is clear, well-organized, and supported with examples. She draws relevant conclusions as to how the committee can organize the event to attract an audience. While there are occasional instances of hesitation or error avoidance (e.g., "and and" in line 4, "um" in lines 21 and 23, and "we're- we're" in line 24), her speech is relatively fluent and delivered in a calm, confident manner. While "I think" can be used as an uncertainty marker, Ava's use of stress on "think" ("I think" in line 12) conveys some level of confidence in her opinions rather than tentativeness. Her points and suggestions are made in direct declarative statements rather than as indirect or hedged suggestions. Here are some examples of statements she makes that convey clarity and confidence:

> most African Americans suffer microaggressions E:very day! (line 5)

> we can talk generally about theh historic trauma of racism on African Americans. that's uh
> topic in itself. (lines 13-15)

> so we've got to be able to reach all those people.= (lines 27-28)

When Ava reaches the end of her extended turn (line 28), Nora does not produce a reflection of it. Instead, Tina raises her hand (line 29). After a 5-second pause (line 30), Nora selects Tina as the next speaker (line 31). Tina then begins her response to Ava's turn (line 33).

In the next sections of this paper, we use several excerpts to illustrate our analysis of the 13 participant statements that the facilitator reflected. We begin by showing how the turns reflected were constructed in a way that made a reflection relevant.

Participants' Statements That Are Reflected by the Facilitator

In the data, the facilitator reflects turns that show a lack of clarity or self-confidence, self-absorption (sometimes displayed as frustration), or uncertainty. There are several ways in which participants' turns can display those underlying characteristics, including linguistic and paralinguistic aspects of the talk, such as self-correction or error avoidance (Jefferson 1974), the use of techniques to mitigate or display uncertainty (e.g., I think), requests for confirmation (e.g., questioning intonation on the ends of statements or the use of "you know"), or repetition.

Excerpt 2 shows a participant's extended statement that was reflected by the facilitator. There are several ways in which Rena's construction of her turn differed from Ava's turn in Excerpt 1. In general, the interactional techniques used and the details of its production created a presentation of less clarity, more uncertainty, and more vulnerability than Ava's turn did. First, note that Rena begins her turn in line 2 with "well" followed by "I think," which conveys tentativeness. She then uses an error correction format (hesitation "um" followed by a replacement—Jefferson 1974) ("[well] I think as um .h I think it's:").

Excerpt 2

1	Nora:	Rena. (0.2) you've got your [hand up]
2	Rena:	[well] I think as um .h I think it's:
3		easy to talk about thee opportunities um ((Ava nods)) because
4		.h with our pa:st: all of our past conversations big conversations
5		(0.2) we've rea:lly reaped thuh- thuh rewards of them:?, .h you
6		know that from thuh very first one of I didn't know .h u:hm: we've
7		seen so many other: (0.2) pro:grams and things come out of that so
8		.h I I I think that that's going to be thuh SA:me? (0.3) wi:th um this
9		upcoming one? (0.4) but I think thuh challenges of just ((Ava
10		nods)) um (0.2) is is how we present it. ((Ava smaller nods))
11		and ((Leo nods)) we go through this! .h every TI:me! you know
12		we- this is struggle for us to .hh be able to figure out just thee
13		exA:ct wa:y .h of how to present it so we gather (0.3) you know an
14		AUdience! heh ((Nora small nods)) we gather people who want
15		to come .h and um that's that's just uh huge challenge and I think
16		where we a:re right no:w?, ºofº .hh (0.2) of we know that there's
17		going to be rewards. because there have been in every one that
18		we've done so far and there have been .h additional programs that
19		have come out! of our past conversations. .h so I expect it'll be
20		thuh sa:me, (0.3) but it's just how do we get there from here right
21		no-h-heh-h-w!

Rena uses several interactional techniques in lines 2-21 of her turn that may have contributed to Nora's decision to reflect it. Bogdana Humă, Elizabeth Stokoe, and Rein Sikveland (2019) give an example of the recipient of a sales call "tentatively" agreeing to a sales visit by beginning their turn with hesitation (uh) and a brief cutoff of the first word of their response (see also Humă and Stokoe 2023). In Rena's statement, she uses several techniques that may indicate uncertainty, beginning in line 2 with "I think" and hesitations ("um"). Error correction is evident in line 2 ("I think as um .h I think it's:"), which may indicate the speaker is editing her utterance in progress (Jefferson 1974). Additional hesitation, self-repair, and error avoidance (Jefferson 1974) occur as Rena talks about the conversations (public events) the group has organized in the past. For example, there is self-repair in line 4 ("with our pa:st: all of our past conversations big conversations") and error avoidance in line 5 ("we've rea:lly reaped thuh- thuh rewards of them:?,"). In

addition, speech perturbations, repetitions, and hedges occur frequently (such as "I I I think that"; line 8, "is is"; line 10, "that's that's"; line 15). Also note the use of questioning intonation at several points throughout Rena's turn, which may convey less confidence and certainty than period intonation (e.g., lines 5, 8, 9, 16).

When Rena refers to the topic of a previous event the group had organized (titled "I didn't know"; line 6), she expresses a tentative expectation that positive results will also be obtained from the event they are currently planning (lines 8-9). She expresses uncertainty as she makes that claim (".h I I I think that that's going to be thuh SA:me?"; line 8). That part of her turn shows error avoidance (note the repetition in "I I I"; Jefferson 1974) and the use of "I think". Rena then produces a description of the challenge of trying to figure out "how to present" it (lines 9-13).

Emanuel Schegloff and Harvey Sacks (1973) describe the use of "so" in closing sequences as a transition marker (see also Jefferson 1984a on "so" as a transition marker in "troubles talk"). Rena uses "so" (line 7) to mark a transition between talking about previous conversations to talking about future expectations. One problem facing them in the future is the issue of gathering "you know an AUdience! heh..." (lines 13-14), which she describes as "uh huge challenge" (line 15).

Rena then repeats her entire argument in a shorter form (lines 16-20), ending with a statement of a problem "but it's just how do we get there from here right no-h-heh-h-w!" (lines 20-21). There is, thus, evidence in the excerpt of both strengths (previous successes and expressions of confidence in the likelihood of future success) and weaknesses or uncertainties (hesitation, self-repair, and error avoidance, and expressed uncertainty about how to achieve those positive outcomes with the event they are currently planning).

The analysis of Excerpt 2 reveals the interactional techniques through which Rena constructed her statement. Nora's subsequent reflection of the statement displays her orientation to it. As noted in the literature review section, the TD/M facilitator is trained to listen more to *how* the participants talk than what they say (Bush and Folger 2010). That does not mean they are not paying attention to the meaning of the words spoken but that they are also attending to how the turn was produced. Our use of conversation analytic transcripts, concepts, and findings to analyze how Rena constructs her statement reveals the interactional resources Nora can observe that inform how she does the work of TD/M facilitation. Nora's next action is a reflection of Rena's statement, which displays her orientation to Rena's statement as warranting reflection.

Constructing and Responding to Reflections

In this section, we analyze the facilitator's reflection of Rena's turn in Excerpt 2 to show how the reflection displays an orientation to the participant's turn. Nora uses three interactional techniques to construct her reflection of Rena's turn: mirroring, substituting, and omitting. Excerpt 3 begins with the last 3 lines of Rena's extended turn from Excerpt 2, followed by Nora's reflection of the turn:

Excerpt 3

have come out! of our past conversations. .h so I expect it'll be
thuh sa:me, (0.3) but it's just how do we get there from here right
no-h-heh-h-w!
(0.2)
((off screen voice or Nora?)): °right.°
(0.5) ((Tina raises hand))
Nora: °okay.° so so Rena for you: ((Tina lowers hand to forehead))
thu:h thee opportunities ((Rena nods)) thuh rewards are thee
easy part because you've ((Leo nods)) experienced it befo:re
and you've you've (0.3) (you) imagine that you'll experience it
again with this conversation but right now thuh cha:llenge i:s how
to get there. (0.2) and [how to]
Rena: [yep!]
Nora: how to present this topic.
(0.2)
Rena: ((Tina raises hand)) yeah how to get there from here chinh!=
Nora: =okay how to get there
from here. Tina!

The goal of reflecting is not to summarize an entire turn but to reflect the weaknesses and do so in a way that uses the participants' words, actions, and emotional valence as closely as possible. Excerpt 3 shows that Nora's reflection of Rena's statement starts by summarizing strengths and ends with the uncertainties Rena expressed, either explicitly or implicitly (lines 25-30). The interactional techniques Nora uses in the reflection include mirroring, omitting, and substituting.

Mirroring. The repetition of words or phrases is one way transformative mediators are trained to reflect a participant's statements. Nora's reflection pulls relevant elements from Rena's longer statement and mirrors them in a short turn. She uses several of the same words Rena used in her reflections (opportunities, rewards, easy, conversation, and challenges; lines 26-29).

Another way in which Nora's reflection mirrors Rena's statement is in the ordering of the elements in her reflection. Both Rena and Nora start with the strengths, such as the opportunities and the rewards, and then mention the challenges (such as how to get there and present it).

Omissions. One reason the reflection is shorter than the original statement is that some items are left out. First, there is repetition in Rena's statement that is absent in Nora's shorter reflection of it. Recall that in Excerpt 2, in lines 2-15, Rena described the rewards

and challenges; then, in lines 15 to 21, she briefly repeated those points. Nora's reflection refers to each of those points once rather than twice.

Second, parts of Rena's statement are left out of the reflection. For example, Nora does not include Rena's point about the need to get an audience for the event they are planning ("you know an AUdience!... gather people who want to come"; Excerpt 2, lines 13-15). Instead, she focuses her reflection on more general descriptions of opportunities, rewards, and challenges. The need to gather an audience is an example of a challenge that Rena provided in her statement, but it is not explicitly mentioned in Nora's reflection. Rena constructed her statement about the audience as a parenthetical comment within her broader statement. Charles Goodwin (1984) analyzed ordinary conversations and showed how parenthetical remarks are embedded in an ongoing story. The facilitator correctly interprets those items as peripheral to the main point and does not include them in her reflection.

Substitutions. Another way in which the reflection differs from the original statement is that there are some instances where substitutions are made instead of directly mirroring the original statement by using the same words or phrases. For example, while Rena conveyed her expectation that the event they are organizing will produce rewards, she conveyed uncertainty around this expectation (".h I I I think that that's going to be thuh SA:me? (0.3) wi:th um this upcoming one?"; Excerpt 2, lines 8-9). We noted above that several interactional techniques in the utterance that may indicate uncertainty.

Nora's reflection of the issue of future rewards also conveys uncertainty, but rather than mimicking the techniques Rena used in her turn, Nora uses the term "imagine" to convey the future-oriented expectation ("(you) imagine that you'll experience it again"; Excerpt 3, line 28). The choice of the word "imagine" conveys a future possibility rather than conviction that that is what will transpire. Such a formulation concisely conveys uncertainty while still capturing the tone of Rena's statement.

In short, there are several aspects of Nora's reflection of Rena's statement that display an orientation not just to the substance of what Rena has said but to how she constructed, organized, and produced her extended turn. In Rena's response to Nora's reflection, she first agrees with and then repairs the reflection once it has been completed (Excerpt 3, lines 31 and 34). The final action in the sequence is Nora's reflection of Rena's repair of the initial reflection (lines 35-36). Taken together, Excerpts 2 and 3 illustrate what we are calling a reflection-response sequence.

Rena's first response to Nora's reflection is a clear agreement with what Nora has said in her reflection so far ("[yep!]"; Excerpt 3, line 31). There is a slight overlap at the turn transition with Nora's extension of her reflection ("and [how to] how to present this topic."; lines 30, 32). Rena's statement of agreement overlaps Nora's turn continuation, which is an error in transition timing (overlap) rather than an interruption (Schegloff 2000).

When Nora's reflection reached an apparent transition relevance place (Sacks et al. 1974) at "thuh cha:llenge i:s how to get there." (Excerpt 3, lines 29-30), she paused briefly before adding an increment to her turn (Ford, Fox, and Thompson 2002; Lerner 2004; Bolden, Mandelbaum, and Wilkinson 2012; Schegloff 2016). Nora's completion of her turn ("and [how to] how to present this topic."; Excerpt 3, lines

30, 32) displays an orientation to the simultaneity with Rena's agreement by repeating "how to" in the clear as soon as the overlap is ended (Excerpt 3, line 32) (Schegloff 1987). The increment to Nora's turn extends her reflection by mirroring Rena's point about one of the challenges being "how we present it." (in Excerpt 2, line 10).

Rena's response to Nora's reflection thus far has displayed an orientation to the accuracy of Nora's reflection of her turn. However, after Nora's turn increment ("and [how to] how to present this topic."; Excerpt 3, lines 30, 32), Rena responds again. She produces another agreement token, which is followed by a correction of Nora's completion of her reflection ("yeah how to get there from here chinh!="; Excerpt 3, line 34) (Jefferson 1987). Note that Rena's turn-initial "yeah" (in line 34) is a less emphatic agreement than the "yep!" she produced in line 31 (Excerpt 3). In that interactional context, where Rena is a listener responding to a prior speaker's turn (Nora's extension of her reflection), "yeah" can be used to make a transition from a listener role to a speaker role rather than serving as a stand-alone agreement token (Jefferson 1984b). Rena does not produce "yeah" with completion intonation; instead, she flows through that agreement token with a repair of Nora's reflection.[2] In line 34, Rena refocuses attention on the issue of "how to get there from here chinh!=". Rena does not explicitly disagree with Nora's completion of her reflection but implicitly corrects it by shifting the emphasis from "how to present the topic" to "how to get there from here." In other words, Rena's concern is about what the steering committee is going to have to do to solve those potential challenges rather than concern about specific ideas about how to present the topic. Rena's turn ends with a sound that is something like a laugh particle ("chinh!"; Jefferson 1979), which seems to serve a mitigating function, thus contributing to the framing of her correction of Nora's reflection as an agreement rather than a challenge or disagreement.

Rena has not taken issue with the first part of the reflection, where the strengths are described, but has repaired the end of Nora's reflection, where the weaknesses or uncertainties are described. With her response to the second part of Nora's reflection, Rena displayed how it did not accurately reflect her position. By producing that correction, Rena displays for herself, the facilitator, and the other participants in the meeting a more accurate statement of what she meant. That repair furthers the transformative work of the meeting by helping all parties clarify their understanding of what Rena is saying.

After Rena's correction of the reflection in line 34, Nora very quickly responds with a second reflection ("=okay how to get there from here."; Excerpt 3, lines 35-36). Because Rena's correction of Nora's reflection was short, substitutions or omissions are not needed to reflect it. Nora uses the technique of mirroring and repeats Rena's prior turn almost verbatim. That second reflection is followed by the selection of the next speaker ("Tina!"; Excerpt 3, line 36).

In sum, the sequential analysis of Excerpts 2 and 3 reveals how the facilitator's approach to reflecting a participant's statement is accomplished. The strengths and weaknesses in the participant's statement that led the facilitator to reflect the statement are visible (e.g., through the use of such interactional techniques as hesitations, error correction, and

[2] Garcia (2022) describes "flowing through" as a "pre-emptive strategy at a possibly complete turn constructional unit to avoid providing space for a turn transition." Schegloff's (1982' 2000) term "rushing through" is similar, except it also involves speaking more quickly to provide less time for another speaker to take a turn.

questioning intonation). We have examined how the reflection was formulated to display an orientation to the elements of the statement being reflected. We identified techniques used by the facilitator (mirroring, omitting, and substituting) to accomplish the task of reflecting the statement. Rena's subsequent responses to the reflection display her interpretation of the reflection—clearly identifying where she agrees with the reflection and where she disagrees (as evidenced by her correction in line 34 [Excerpt 3]). The facilitator then displays an orientation to the participant's repair of parts of the initial reflection by producing a second reflection in response to the participant's repair move.

Taken together, those actions constitute what we refer to as a reflection-response sequence (participant's turn, facilitator's reflection, participant's response to the reflection, and, if necessary, facilitator's second reflection). The reflection-response sequence provides a framework for each party to display an orientation to their interpretation of the prior turn in the sequence so that reflections can be performed, verified as accurate or corrected, and a place created for a second reflection if necessary. The work of the reflection is to reflect the participant's position, perspective, emotion, or other action in a sequential context, which creates a space for verification and repair. That furthers the work of transformative mediation by providing for the accurate reflection of participants' weaknesses or contradictions to empower them or increase their self-awareness of their perspective. At the same time, it serves to display their perspective for the other participants who are listening to the reflection repair sequence, thus increasing their understanding as well. The participant's response to the reflection and the facilitator's subsequent repair or second reflection, if necessary, are parts of the process taught to TD/M facilitators.

In Excerpt 4, we examine a reflection-response sequence in which the facilitator successfully reflects the uncertainty and ambiguity in the participant's turn, resulting in the participant's agreement with the reflection. Leo produces his statement in lines 3 through 28, reaching a transition relevance place with completion intonation in line 27 and using embodied action to emphasize that completion (Goodwin 1984). Leo ends a repeated hand gesture, puts his fist under his chin, and stops speaking (note the 2.0-second pause in line 29). Nora then reflects the statement (lines 30-37). Leo expresses agreement with Nora's reflection, first through embodied action (head nods in lines 33, 35, and 39) and then with a verbal agreement after the reflection is completed ("absolutely."; line 39).

Excerpt 4

1 Nora: Leo!
2 (1.0)
3 Leo: When we first started on this subject of trauma, (0.4) you kno:w
4 trauma to me was always uh <u>phy</u>sical (0.8) ((Ava nods)) u:m
5 (0.3) manifestation. ((Rena nods)) (0.4) a:nd once I started
6 reading uh grandma's hands, ((Rena nods)) (0.7) ((Ava

smiles)) uh it became clear to me that trauma (an) was so much
more (0.3) a:nd in t- and in relating to what Ti:na was saying, (0.3)
one it makes it ((Leo starts gesturing)) especially in Afr-
African American ma:le!,
(0.3) ((Ava nods)) ((Rena nods)) makes themselves
vu:lnerable, (2.0) or feel as though they make themselves
vulnerable, if they SA:y you know this- (0.2) this happened to me:
?: (hm)=
Leo: =this was and it was uh traumatic effect! (0.3) but (you know)
most of us don't want to don't want to admit that ((Rena nods))
u:m we're ((Leo raises hand)) human! (0.2) priddy much. and
that things affect us. so- ((Leo gestures with pointed index
finger)) one of thuh things >you know< I look at is say how do I
bring (1.5) u::h ((Leo closed fist)) my peers:, (0.2) or ((Ava
nods)) ((Rena nods)) others that I know along on ((Nora
nods)) this journey!, (0.5) and s- and let them know that u:h ih-
there is no- uh judgment made on them because they relate to aye
trauma! (0.4) u:h it's it's human (con[ventional)]
??: [(chum] chum)]]
Leo: but they just need to have somebody u::h that they're comfortable
with (0.2) t' explain it to 'em. ((Leo ends repeated hand gesture
and puts fist under chin))
(2.0)
Nora: ºokay.º so for you as uh (0.2) as an African American male?, you
(0.2) you feel like its um (1.0) people are put in uh vulnerable
position to talk ((Rena nods)) about trauma they generally don't
want to talk about trauma, ((Leo nods)) (0.4) and you're
wondering, (0.4) how you as sort of that maybe thuh role model or
thuh representative ((Leo nods)) in this group! (0.2) can bring
your peers in to that conversation in uh way that will (0.4) make
them feel comfortable to talk about things.
(0.5)
Leo: ((Leo nods)) absolutely.
(0.3)
Nora: okay. (0.2) thanks.
(15 seconds)
((Tina raises hand))
Nora: Tina!

Leo's statement conveys strength and also vulnerability in several ways. Leo initially discusses trauma and his process of learning about trauma, starting in line 3. There are several instances of error avoidance and error correction (Jefferson 1974) throughout Leo's statement. Jefferson (1974) describes error avoidance as different from error correction in that the item replaced is never produced. Instead, the hesitation (e.g., "uh," pause, and/or cut off) displays a break in the production of the turn before its completion, which may indicate some type of problem with completing the turn. As in Garfinkel's (1967) discussion of the documentary method of interpretation, the error avoidance format may be taken to reveal an underlying pattern—perhaps the speaker is deciding what to say next or may be editing their utterance in progress. In line 4, Leo first says, "trauma to me was always uh physical", then pauses briefly. After the pause, Leo says, "u:m (0.3) manifestation." (lines 4-5). That use of the error avoidance format suggests time was needed to complete the turn (perhaps he was searching for the word "manifestation."). Leo then uses an error correction format (error, cut off, replacement—Jefferson 1974) in line 8 ("a:nd in t- and in relating to what Ti:na was saying,"). He also accomplishes self-repair in lines 11-13 ("makes themselves vu:lnerable, (2.0) or feel as though they make themselves vulnerable,"). It is not until line 9 that Leo clarifies that the points he is making about trauma refer "especially in Afr- African American ma:le!," (lines 9-10). It is not until line 16 that he includes himself in the category of persons experiencing feelings of vulnerability. He does not accomplish that inclusion through an explicit identification but instead through a transition in pronouns and other forms of reference. He had originally used "they" and "themselves" (lines 11, 12) to refer to those who may experience vulnerability, but then switches to "most of us", "we're", and "us." (lines 16-18), thus implicitly including himself in the category of African American males who may be made to feel vulnerable when admitting to experiencing trauma.

Nora's reflection of Leo's statement effectively conveys Leo's uncertainty in several ways, including hesitations, error correction, error avoidance, and self-repair. For example, after acknowledging Leo's statement ("°okay.°"; line 30), in line 30, Nora begins her reflection by centering Leo's experience ("so for you as"), then uses "uh", pauses briefly, and completes her turn with "as an African American male?," (line 30). She thus mirrors both the term he used to describe his racial/ethnic and gender identities while also mirroring the uncertainty and hesitation conveyed in his statement by her use of error correction format. Notice that Nora first used "uh" in line 30, which could be a filled pause, indicating hesitation, but could also be the indefinite article "a." When she completes the turn, she uses "an". That raises the question of whether she was performing an error avoidance move, perhaps cutting herself off before producing a word beginning with a consonant (e.g., "Black man") and replacing it with a word beginning with a vowel ("African American male?,"). The use of the same term that Leo used makes her reflection more closely mirror his statement.[3]

Furthermore, Nora uses "?," intonation in line 30, which indicates a questioning tone could be heard

[3] Jefferson (1974) shows how the use of definite and indefinite articles "the" and "a" can reveal when an error correction may be occurring. She shows how the "thuh" form of the definite article followed by cut off and/or hesitation (as in "I told that to thuh- uh- officer"; Jefferson 1974:189) can be a resource for participants to discover that a word beginning with a consonant (such as "cop") may have been replaced with a word beginning with a vowel (e.g., "officer") as the speaker was producing the turn.

in addition to the comma intonation conveying ongoing speech rather than giving up the floor. Nora's use of questioning intonation with the term "African American male?," may also work to mirror the uncertainty in Leo's statement.

Finally, Nora's reflection leaves ambiguous the nature of Leo's role in the process of communicating with people about trauma. She does not claim to know whether a "role model" or "representative" is the correct way to describe his role (lines 34-35). She uses several words to reflect the uncertainty or ambiguity expressed in Leo's statement. In particular, the use of "you're wondering," "sort of", "maybe" "thuh role model or thuh representative" (lines 33-35) convey that ambiguity. Notice that Leo nods in line 35, indicating his agreement with her characterization of his statement as she is in the process of producing it.

The reflection techniques Nora used in Excerpt 3 are also used in Excerpt 4. For example, Nora uses *mirroring* by repeating words Leo used in his statement (African American male, vulnerable, trauma, peers, and comfortable). She uses *substitution* by transforming the bulk of his longer explanation into the concise and open-ended "how you as sort of that maybe thuh role model or thuh representative ((Leo nods)) in this group!" (lines 34-35). One of the ways *omission* is used is by leaving out details of Leo's reasoning process as he described the challenge of inspiring African American males to attend the event they are organizing. For example, Leo describes how a book he read helped clarify his thinking about trauma (lines 5-8). That information is not included in Nora's reflection.

Leo responds positively to Nora's reflection in several ways. He nods his head during her reflection, thus expressing agreement with major components of her reflection (e.g., lines 33 and 35), and nods at the end of her reflection (line 39). Leo also produces a strong verbal agreement ("absolutely."; line 39). Note that Leo's "absolutely." has period intonation, thus displaying that his turn is complete. In the data, we found that a participant's agreement with a reflection ended the sequence. The next action is typically the selection of the next speaker by the facilitator.

The analysis of Excerpt 4 shows a use of reflection consistent with the goals of TD/M in terms of the transformative theory discussed in the introduction to this paper. The focus of the reflection on weaknesses or uncertainties in the participant's statement is evident in Excerpt 4, as opposed to Excerpts 2 and 3, in which both strengths and weaknesses were reflected. Leo expressed agreement with Nora's reflection of his statement, which lets participants in the meeting (as well as analysts) see that the reflection accurately reflected his turn; no repair or revision of the reflection was required. The excerpt also illustrated how reflection techniques can be successfully used to convey uncertainty and ambiguity in the participant's statement. The goal of the facilitator is not to "fix" the uncertainty; it is to reflect it accurately for the participant so that they and others can see the current state of their beliefs and emotions. However, in the TD/M approach, regardless of whether the reflection was accurate, it has fulfilled the goal of helping the participant clarify their thoughts. The sequential analysis of Excerpt 4 shows us how that was done—how the facilitator used the techniques of mirroring, omission, and substitution to construct an effective reflection of the participant's statement while, at the same time, displaying an orientation to those elements of the participant's statement that were responded to in the reflection.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this pilot study, we investigated how TD/M reflections are used and how participants respond to their use in a steering committee meeting led by a trained TD/M facilitator. We analyzed how participants' constructions of their turns were tied to whether the facilitator reflected the turn or not and showed how interactional techniques used by the participants contributed to the impression of clarity or uncertainty.

We found that the facilitator used reflection techniques we refer to as mirroring, substituting, and omitting. Mirroring is repeating all or part of a participant's action in the reflection; it can convey the emotional valence or level of certainty expressed in the participant's statement. The facilitator may also omit parts of the original statement from the reflection. The omission may have been used frequently in the data because the participants' statements tended to be quite lengthy. In transformative dialogues or mediations where utterances tend to be shorter, it may be that the omission technique is used less frequently; that is a topic for further research.

Substitution involves repeating a key concept or element of the participant's statement using closely related words rather than the same words the participant used or summarizing the gist of a longer statement. While such rephrasing can alter the meaning of what is being reported (Atkinson and Drew 1979; Hutchby 2005; Barnes 2007), in the data, the substitutions worked to reduce the length of the reflection without introducing inaccuracy (as evidenced by the participant's agreement with the reflection). That differs markedly from how facilitative mediators sometimes use significant paraphrasing or interpretation of what was said with the main goal of facilitative mediation being to get parties to agreement.

While the mirroring technique is specifically identified in transformative theory, substituting and omitting are not, and, to some extent, they contradict the goals of the approach. Further research should investigate whether their use extends to larger data sets and if so, whether they enhance or work against the effectiveness of the transformative approach to facilitation.

One goal of this paper was to discover whether reflection is used as described in the theoretical literature. We found that, in at least one instance, the facilitator reflected both strength and weakness in a participant's statements, which is a potential area of contrast with the transformative theory reviewed at the beginning of this paper. According to the theory, weaknesses or self-absorption should motivate reflections rather than strengths. Further research should explore whether reflecting strength as well as weakness is a common practice among TD/M facilitators and whether it is more or less effective than simply reflecting weakness.

We found that the participants in this pilot study produced what we call a reflection-response sequence. The sequence begins with the participant's turn and the facilitator's reflection of it and typically ends with the participant's agreement with the reflection. In 2 of the 13 reflections in the data, the participant repaired the reflection instead of agreeing with it. A participant's repair of a reflection may be followed by the facilitator's reflection of that repair move (the "second" reflection). Further research on the reflection-response sequence can lead to assessments of the effectiveness of different reflection techniques and evaluations of their accura-

cy and show how the sequence impacts the ongoing interaction and potential outcomes of the dialogue or mediation. In TD/M interventions, if a participant repairs a reflection rather than agreeing with it, it may mean the reflection was incomplete or inaccurate in some way. However, regardless of whether the reflection was accurate or not, transformative theory posits it helps the participant clarify their thoughts. Follow-up studies on a larger data set should examine the impact of both accurate and inaccurate reflections on participants and the subsequent interaction during the dialogue or mediation. In his study of client resistance in psychotherapy sessions, Peter Muntigl (2013) investigated how sequences (therapist's question, client's response, therapist's response to the client) worked to manage instances of client resistance and how the way those sequences unfolded impacted the trajectory of the talk in the session. Future research on TD/M reflections should explore how the reflection-response sequence unfolds and how that affects the trajectory of the rest of the dialogue or mediation that follows the completion of the sequence.

In terms of the application of conversation analytic theory, Pillet-Shore's (2016) study of parent-teacher conferences found a preference organization in the types of responses parents and teachers produced when discussing the student's work. Further research on the use of reflection-response sequences in mediations or dialogues facilitated with TD/M should be conducted to determine whether there is a preference for agreement after a reflection.

Further research should examine the use of TD/M reflection in a larger data set of meetings facilitated by several different facilitators. While this pilot study found that disagreement or repair of a reflection is rare (in our data set it occurred in 2 of 13 instances of reflection), a larger data set would allow for the study of more reflection-response sequences to investigate whether the second reflection is a common response to disagreement with a reflection.

Finally, a comparison of the TD/M reflection technique with related interventions used in facilitative mediation (e.g., paraphrasing) should be conducted. Such a comparison should examine how TD/M reflections may differ in their impact on participants and the subsequent course of the interaction when compared to paraphrasing and related techniques used in facilitative mediation.

In sum, the more we learn about how TD/M techniques such as reflection are practiced and responded to, the better practitioners can facilitate constructive conversations around conflict, whether in the context of meetings, mediation sessions, community dialogues about racial justice, or interactions about other social or political issues. TD/M techniques are designed to facilitate conversations between people on difficult and challenging topics. We need to understand how those techniques work and how they impact the interaction between participants to best help people engage in difficult conversations constructively. In a time of intense political polarization, not just in the United States but around the globe, that has potential applicability and interest far beyond those who study mediation and alternative dispute resolution.

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