Prospectus

The Meaning of Work and Self-sufficiency for Rural, Work-Eligible Adults

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PhD-Social Psychology
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Problem Statement

The Center for Business and Economic Research (Poverty Estimates for Alabama Counties, All Ages in Poverty, 2015) reported 905,682 Alabama residents at the poverty level and the Bureau of Labor’s preliminary results for February 2017 indicated that 6.2% residents were unemployed. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Fiscal Year 2015 (2016) listed 889,380 recipients of supplemental nutrition assistance; and there were 116,893 disability recipients between age 18-64 (“Social Security Administration Southeast Information Office,” 2017).

Alabama and states around the nation continue to struggle with how to create greater access to education and jobs. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson’s “war on poverty” resulted in the Office of Economic Opportunity, OEO, which urged marginalized citizens to utilize community action agencies’ anti-poverty programs to help themselves. Per the Huffington Post, many of the programs created under the OEO provide services and advocate for marginalized Americans today in rural communities. The Office of Community Services lists state agencies that provide federally funded services to residents under the administration for children and families. In the state of Alabama, federally funded Community Services Block Grants (CSBG) are distributed by the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA). CSBG grant programs assist low-income residents with employment assistance, education and skills training, clean water, minority business ownership, and eliminates health and safety hazards (“Alabama Department of Economic and Community Office,” n.d.). The collaborative efforts of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, US Department of
transportation, US Department of Agriculture, and the Environmental Protection Agency assist rural communities with improvements to housing and transportation access, healthy living environments, and quality of life ("Smart Growth in Small Towns," n.d.).

Despite the advent of government and community programs created to encourage self-sufficiency, individuals in rural areas remain challenged to move out of poverty and into economically viable lifestyles. Individuals still rely on assistance from the social security administration and the state department of Human Resources, DHR, in the form of financial assistance, food assistance, child support, or medical assistance. In February (2017) reports indicated child care payments for 27,310 children in Alabama at $6,488,090.45; 379,443 food assistance recipients received $97,570,523; medical assistance paid to the state Medicaid agency for 4,096; jobs training program includes 4,308 mandatory enrollees of which 2,322 were employed, 746 in work activities, and 328 were noncompliant (Detailed Monthly Statistical Reporting for DHR Services, 2017).

Previous research has acknowledged structural variables (e.g., job availability; community resources) and individual difference variables (e.g., attachment style and affiliation, autonomy, and life meaning) as factors that may influence individuals’ motivation to seek work or training programs (Devloo, Anseel, DeBeuckelaer, & Salonova, 2015; Yiolong & Xinxin, 2013; Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016). However, little research has been done to explore the social and cultural meaning of work and self-sufficiency (McClain & Wallus, 2014).

Pizzolata and Olson (2016) conducted a qualitative study of 45 female students enrolled in community college as a part of welfare to work program. The study results indicated that there were impediments for participants at the poverty level seeing their own value since socialization
and culture influence development and environment sets boundaries for what individuals know. The comments provided by participants during their interviews indicated views of low self-value. The researcher noted that study participants were of low socioeconomic status and viewed their caseworker and other authoritative figures as more valuable. The authors suggested that future studies should evaluate the views of male participants since the study participants were women. Gender differences might further expose the influence of socioeconomic class on self-value. Prior research has studied the role of positive social support and self-efficacy (Rollo, Gaston, & Prapavessis, 2016); and how social context is correlated to goal pursuit (Fishbach, Steinmetz, & Tu, 2016). The study conducted by Pizzolata and Olson (2016) indicated that the participants were unable to choose their course of study and they did not question their caseworker’s decision to enroll them or dis-enroll them in a program of study.

The role of social identity is significant in the context of family and community; it is associated with educational attainment (Vasile 2015) relationship choices (Schwartz, Lindley, & Buboltz, 2007) and employment interests (Hong, Stokar, & Choi, 2016). These contextual factors may independently or collectively affect social identity, motivation, and self-concept. Further research is needed to better understand the social and cultural meaning of work for working age adults.

**Purpose**

The purpose of the proposed qualitative study is to understand the meaning of work and self-sufficiency for rural, working age, adults. Interview data will be collected to explore the meaning of work and self-sufficiency through the stories participants share about their aspirations for work and sustainability.
Significance

The stress of economic hardship may negatively influence the perceived value of work, education, and aspirations for a better life. Work values impact individuals’ work-related behaviors and perception of work outcomes (Chen & Choi, 2008; McClay 2016, Vijayakumar 2007). It is hoped that the results of this study can be shared with government and educational organizations to improve the understanding of the social obstacles to work and risk for a negative life trajectory associated with a negative worldview (Boston, Dunlap, Ethridge, Barnes, Dowden, & Euring, 2015). This study differs from previous qualitative inquiries on this topic because it will include both male and female participants’ perspectives of work, goal pursuits, and other factors that may influence the attainment of self-sufficiency.

The study may also contribute to positive social change through improving the understanding of the meaning of work and self-sufficiency as it relates to Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1977, 1986, 2009). This model proposes that the social structure and substance of interactions among individuals at different levels shape the content and course of human development. Consideration of the wide range of developmental influencers that individuals experience may aid in the development and implementation of better strategies to assist marginalized individuals find and maintain work meaning and self-sufficiency.

Background

The following list provides background support for this study.

1. Baumann, Hamin, and Yang (2016) and Deuchar (2014) described ways that the meaning of education and work ethic affect individuals’ educational and work pursuits.
2. Bronfenbrenner (1977) described the ecology of human development and practical application for researchers desiring to understand the human organism throughout the lifespan relative to their environment and its influence.


4. Fishbach, Steinmetz, and Tu (2016) explored how social context influences goal pursuit.

5. Kramer (2001), Kreiviniene and Perttula (2011) explained the process and treatment that recipients experience while pursuing government assistance.

6. Liang, White, Mousseau, Hasse, Knight, Berado, and Lund (2016) investigated the ways environment influenced future goals of 10 adolescents enrolled in a college prep program.

7. Pizzolata and Olson (2016) studied students enrolled in community college as a requirement of the CALWORKS program. Students reported feeling disenfranchised and devalued. Findings indicated persistent poverty suppressed development, socialization and culture influenced epistemological development and the students’ environment set boundaries for how and what they knew.

8. Stapleton, O’day, Livermore, and Imparac (2006) elaborated on disability policy and requirements for eligibility and fallacies contrived by applicants with faith in the system.

Framework

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1977) will serve as the framework during this research. Participants’ ecological environment at the microsystem level, mesosystem level, exosystem level and macrosystem level will be investigated for the influence on development. Bronfenbrenner (1977) summarized each of these levels as follows:

- The microsystem level consists of place, time, physical features, activities, the participant and their role;
- The mesosystem is comprised of the interrelations among settings and contains the developing person;
- The exosystem does not contain the developing person but affects the setting in which he exists; and
- The macrosystem is the general prototype which exists in the person’s culture or sub-culture, it is ideology manifested through the customs and practices of daily living.

The ecology of human development converges biology, psychology, and social science as they bear on how the individual evolves in society. Further, the ecological transition of individuals involves role changes in behavior relative to societal position at each of the ecological levels; and, activities engaged in by individuals or those they are exposed to influence similar behavior (Bronfenbrenner 2009). This model will be used to understand how participants see themselves in relation to the different levels of their own “ecology”; and to discover how the meaning of work and self-sufficiency is experienced at each of those levels.

Research Questions

The research questions of the proposed qualitative study are:
1. What is the meaning of work for rural, work-eligible adults?
2. What is the meaning of self-sufficiency for rural, work-eligible adults?
3. How do rural, work-eligible adults describe their living environment and their relationship with the people whom they spend their time?

Nature of the Study

The researcher is considering a basic qualitative research design for the proposed study, as the intent is descriptive and exploratory (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). Also under consideration is a narrative method, which focuses on the collection and analysis of participants’ stories (Riessman, 2008) which could provide a rich understanding of the social and cultural environments of participants.

Purposive sampling will be used to develop a sample of 20 participants between the ages of 18 and 64 years in rural West Alabama. The researcher plans to travel to a predetermined neutral location for interviews, and collect observational data on the artifacts that represent the social and cultural ideology of participants.

Possible Types and Sources of Data

1. Interviews with working age individuals who are currently receiving public assistance benefits or have received them within the past 10 years.
2. Observational data of the community where participants live.

References


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