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Becoming a Master Manager: An Analysis of SNAP Recipient Stories of Navigating Government Assistance

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by

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines experiences of utilizing government assistance in the United States. It focuses on the ways in which persons participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) communicatively managed their lives in relation to their role in the program. Specifically, the research reveals that SNAP recipients are master managers. After synthesizing the pre-existing body of research concerning social assistance in the U.S. and its effects on those who utilize it, the author argues that sharing the stories of marginalized groups can serve to reduce stigma surrounding government assistance participation. Employing a Feminist Standpoint Theory sensibility to elicit such stories, the author drew out narratives gathered through qualitative interviews with current SNAP participants. Findings indicate that communicative management of SNAP participation was experienced as multi-layered and complex. Positioned to navigate the carceral environment of the SNAP program, participants adopted various disciplined communicative actions as they managed program membership, stigmatized identity, and behavioral surveillance.

DEDICATION

For the study contributors who so generously shared their stories with me, and to

Thomas, Rowan, Lorelei, and Walt, with whom I create a new piece of our story every day

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I never expected to be a person who needed food stamps. As a child, I didn't even know what they were outside of some vague references in pop culture and the general idea that "food stamps" were something people on TV mentioned when they joked about "growing up in the hood." And I certainly didn't *know* anyone who used food stamps. At least that's what I would have told you then.

I grew up solidly middle class, surrounded by people who, for the most part, looked and sounded and lived like I did, mostly white, Southern, and in a single-family permanent dwelling. Our family of five (mom, dad, three biological children) shared a single-story, three-bedroom house on two and a half acres of land, nestled on the back loop of a quiet neighborhood just outside the city limits. My younger brothers shared a room, while I had a room of my own that connected to the hall bathroom, a coveted feature that the seven-year-old me claimed the first time we toured the house.

I was aware that there were plenty of people in our small town who had more than we did, but we were well maintained. My brothers and I often wore hand-me-downs from older cousins, the family only bought used vehicles, and my parents would never consider paying for "extra" cable channels available at the time, like Disney or HBO. And yet, our family also took annual trips to the beach or amusement parks, my brothers and I could sign up for whatever sport or extracurricular activity caught our eye, and fast food or pizza deliveries were a way of life. I didn't note this as remarkable at the time, but we also had regular access to any form of preventative or emergency health care needed. Wearing a secondhand windbreaker with new sneakers from Walmart to go to Universal Studios seemed like a fair trade-off.

While this background information may seem irrelevant, it offers clues as to how I formed my underlying ideas of what was a "normal" or "acceptable" quality of life. I didn't even realize these biases existed until I found myself unable to meet these imaginary standards as an adult with my own family. When I started to investigate why I was so resistant and embarrassed to accept that we needed social assistance, I realized that what I considered my "nice but nothing fancy" childhood was far more privileged than I ever comprehended. Being the first person in my immediate family to graduate from college, I expected my own childhood to be a model of the bare minimum for my own children. Instead, it became a seemingly unattainable, best-case scenario.

Somewhere between the birth of our first and second child, the program for which my partner was hired as an independent contractor was abruptly defunded and we lost our main source of income. He found work with a fledgling small business while I cared for the children at home, but the hours were long and the paychecks erratic. Reluctantly, I decided to apply for the Women, Infants, & Children (WIC) supplemental nutrition program at our local health department. During that process, the intake clerk noted that we would also qualify for food stamps, should we choose to submit the application to the Department of Human Services. After much consternation and consideration, my partner and I elected to follow through with the application process for the newly-rechristened Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), thus beginning our complicated on-again, off-again relationship with government assistance.

Finding a way to accept (if not embrace) my identity as a social assistance recipient was a long and trying path. I wanted to erase the previous few years, to pretend they never existed and I was completely, blissfully ignorant of how the welfare system worked. Graduate school was

supposed to be my new start. A chance to find my 'place' and pick up where I left off when I decided that I could 'spare' a decade to create a family. The kids were here and out of diapers, the marriage was solid, so it was time to figure out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life besides cook three meals a day and diagnose laundry stains. School had always been my safe zone, a place where I knew the rules and could get a tangible, immediate sense of accomplishment. I was excited to show up, learn new things, and discover what career options awaited. My financial struggles would be a non-issue, unimportant in the wake of studying communication theory and developing research skills and identifying gender portrayals and communication strategies in the media. Wouldn't they?

My "SNAP is in the past" attitude barely made it through the first day of school. I arrived at the Graduate Assistant office early in the morning and started making small talk with a last-semester student in the program. Barely ten minutes into the conversation she casually tossed a bomb in my brand new lifeboat: "You know, with the stipend we make and the amount of hours we work, you can qualify for food stamps. It's not much, but it helps." I froze. Not wanting to seem aghast at the suggestion of qualifying for food stamps (but also not wanting to reveal the depths of my experience with the program), I managed to get out what I hoped was a polite, "Really? Okay." I had gotten pretty good at hiding this part of my life over the years and I absolutely was not, under any circumstances, about to expose it to my new colleagues, especially on the *first day* of a two-year program.

I could count on one hand the number of people other than myself and my partner who were privy to our SNAP experience. However, as I watched the "Hey, you might be eligible for food stamps" welcome happen multiple times in our basement office over the following week, I began to marvel at the way the unsuspecting recipients of this announcement often acted as

though they had unwittingly found themselves party to a stereotypical drug deal—with hushed tones, nervous glances, and an immediate withdrawal from the interaction if someone passed by the door—rather than a discussion of how to subsidize their grocery bill. I recognized myself in those reactions, but I began to question *why* the idea of food stamps elicited such a response. Still, I kept my mouth shut.

Even then, I never would have expected that my Master's thesis would begin with a story about my own SNAP journey. It was with more than a little hesitation that I gradually "outed" myself as a SNAP recipient to an entire group of new friends and colleagues, a revelation that usually began by clarifying that "SNAP is what the food stamp program is called now." But revealing that previously-guarded part of my life opened up many hours of thoughtful conversations with members of my graduate school cohort about social services, insecurities, shame, coping, society, and life in general. We've learned to be more tolerant, more curious, more open about our struggles and shortcomings. Without realizing it, my colleagues and I were engaging in what Brené Brown's (2006) Shame Resiliency Theory refers to as "building critical awareness" (p.48).

As I grew more comfortable talking about my own SNAP experiences and simultaneously learned about qualitative research, I became curious about what types of (undoubtedly ingenious) qualitative studies had been written about the people who receive government assistance. I was sorely disappointed to find that much of the research about SNAP focused on quantifying or controlling a faceless population: how much soda do they buy with food stamps? What percentage of welfare recipients are overweight? How might people be convinced to buy more nutritious food with their food stamps?

Eventually, I realized that I had unintentionally inherited a new role, one that Goffman (1959) might describe as a "go-between" (p. 148), though I, with my childhood love of the television series *Get Smart*, think of my role as "double agent." Now I felt a unique responsibility and opportunity to serve as a link between the government assistance and academic worlds. Maybe, just maybe, if I could learn to speak the language of theory and qualitative inquiry, I could present my insider knowledge in a way that chipped away at the calcified view of low-income people as a one-dimensional population to be looked *at* rather than talked *with* and demystify the world of social assistance. In the process, I could challenge the notion that someone who receives government assistance is so easily differentiated from the researcher who studies them. If these tiny pathways could be made, or even just marked, my hope was that future research into government assistance and its recipients might be more human-centered and compassionate.

In academia, there is often an underlying pressure to conform to what is considered "professional" standards. One must be able to be "taken seriously" in order to gain respect as a scholar. As communication scholars and their colleagues have so astutely pointed out over the decades, that image of respectability often looks rather white, upper-middle class, and male (with a dash of distinguishing age). The old adage "fake it 'til you make it" can't quite account for the changes that would be needed for me to fit this mold, nor do I wish to forget or hide the ways that my life experiences as a woman, marriage partner, mother, daughter, sister, scholar, failure, friend, and socio-economic rollercoaster rider have profoundly shaped (and continue to shape) the person I am. Rather than nudging members of the academic community to hide their unique perspectives to better "fit" the standard image, I want to encourage people to use their

experiences to upend the expectations of what subjects merit critical inquiry, how studying those topics is approached, and who is qualified to participate in the exploration.

It is particularly crucial that academia embrace human-centered approaches to research and epistemology. When college students write papers, they are often charged with supporting their claims with "reputable" or "trustworthy" research and sent to pore over the digital racks of academic articles and studies. When new laws and policies are shaped that affect an entire country, the reasoning behind the changes is bolstered by the "facts" presented in scholars' papers. If no researcher has undertaken the task of thoughtfully representing under-served members of our community, the effects can be devastating. The privilege of being considered a "credible source" is immense and should not be taken for granted.

On an individual scale, it is important to continually recognize and assess one's own assumptions and biases. If learning that someone utilizes (or has utilized) government assistance changes your perception of their character, capabilities, or potential, that attitude calls for contemplation. Whether we admit it or not, our personal beliefs color the way we see the world and the people in it. Higher education is not a panacea for poverty, as much as we who are invested in it would like to presume otherwise. Between my husband and me, we possessed one Associate's degree, two Bachelor's degrees, a Master's degree, and—we prefer to believe—a fair amount of common sense, yet we still cycled in and out of the food stamp program for *years*. For many who have been fortunate enough not to need social assistance, I suspect that the nuances of how such programs function and affect the daily lives of their participants is not a concern. I know that it wasn't for me.

Nationwide, approximately 38 million individuals received SNAP benefits in October of 2018 (United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, 2019). In the

southern Appalachian county where this study was based, the Tennessee Department of Human Services (2018) reported that over 15,000 individuals from nearly 8,000 households participated in SNAP, with an additional 34,000 individual participants living in the surrounding three counties. This fall, I spoke to five local SNAP participants who graciously shared their time to talk about their experiences of applying, receiving, maintaining, and utilizing SNAP benefits.

To contextualize their stories, in the next chapter I review the existing research on SNAP recipients, the evolution from Food Stamp Program (FSP) to SNAP, stigma and shame associated with SNAP, and, finally, how storytelling can help reduce that shame. In Chapter 3, I discuss the method utilized to gather data for this study, and then in Chapter 4, I present the findings of the research, which suggest that SNAP recipients must become master managers in order to successfully navigate the world of social assistance.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

> Food is much more than just a means of survival. It permeates all other aspects of our lives from the most intimate to the most professional practices. It also is a key factor in how we view ourselves and others, is at the center of social and political issues, and is a mainstay of popular media. (Greene & Cramer, 2011, p. ix)

At its most basic level, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is all about food. Food tells who we are and where we came from. What we eat and how it is prepared can give clues about our social identities and life experiences, as well as what we value (Greene & Cramer, 2011; Lucas & Buzzanell, 2011; Moisio, Arnould, & Price, 2004). We use cooking to explore our creativity (Avakian & Haber, 2005). We know who "our people" are based on what foods we have in common. Familiar foods can comfort us during hard times, bringing families and communities together to bond over a shared experience (Avakian & Haber, 2005; Fisher, 1942).

Goodman, Johnston, and Cairns (2017) suggest that "While our daily diet clearly shapes our physical and emotional selves, we are not simply 'what we eat'. We are also the virtual, mediated foods we consume, desire, and discuss on screen." What we've seen on television or read online affects our relationship with food, including how we feel about *others* based on how they prepare, or, particularly in the case of SNAP recipients, procure and select their own food. Knowing how intimately food is intertwined with our sense of self and our way of understanding the world, it is no wonder that social and political issues involving food are so hotly debated.

In order to situate my study of the participants of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in the larger body of research on the subject, it is important to provide an overview of

the existing relevant research. In this chapter, I summarize existing research on food stamp recipients; review the evolution of the food stamp program and its accompanying political rhetoric; examine stigma and shame in the social assistance system; and illuminate the role of storytelling in amplifying marginalized voices.

Most academic research about social programs and their beneficiaries is primarily centered, unsurprisingly, in the fields of political science, public health, preventative medicine, and social work. Formal academic work on SNAP—still frequently referred to colloquially and in research as "food stamps" or "the food stamp program"—participants tends to be quantitatively-focused with a tendency to look "at" SNAP recipients rather than the experiences "of" SNAP recipients. Many studies focus on poverty in general. A significant portion of academic research about SNAP recipients focuses on:

- quantifying demographics of food stamp recipients, how often they enter or leave the program, or ways participation data may contain errors (Bhattarai, Duffy, & Raymond, 2005; Grieger & Danziger, 2011; Gundersen & Kreider, 2008; Issar, 2010; Mabli & Ohls, 2011; Ribar, Edelhoch, & Liu, 2010);
- investigating the body size (particularly the probability of obesity) of people who use food stamps (Almada, McCarthy, & Tchernis, 2016; Baum, Jolliffe, United States, 2007; Barragan, Gase, Butler, Smith, Simon, & Kuo, 2015; Van Ploeg, Ralston, & United States, 2008);
- statistical analyses of what SNAP recipients purchase with benefits (particularly soda or other "non-nutritious" items) (Ammerman, Hartman, & Demarco, 2016; Barragan, Gase, Butler, Smith, Simon, & Kuo, 2015; Collins & Klerman, 2017; Klerman, Collins, & Olsho, 2017); or

- modifying the behavior or habits of SNAP recipients (Ammerman, Hartman, & Demarco, 2016; Collins & Klerman, 2017; Everson, 2016; Klerman, Collins, & Olsho, 2017).

In contrast to the extensive research reporting on social assistance recipients through the lens of aggregate data and statistics, there has been little research focused on the individual, human-experience viewpoint of being a person who receives government assistance.

In an effort to highlight the multifaceted ways that qualitative methods have and could be used to explore experiences of life as a food stamp recipient, I offer a brief overview of three exceptional studies I encountered in my research. The first is an ethnographic participant research study which hails from the combined disciplines of Women's & Gender Studies and Sociology. Fujiwara (2005) sought to discover how Asian immigrants and refugees in the Bay Area of Northern California were affected by Clinton-era food stamp cuts. From 1996-1998, she conducted field work with community-based organizations focused on immigrants and welfare reform in order to understand how changes to the social assistance system impacted the local population, gradually becoming a participant researcher as she became involved with grassroots efforts to build an immigrant rights movement to restore food stamps.

Political science professor Campbell (2015) found herself thrust into the new and uncomfortable role of ethnographic researcher when a family crisis forced her brother and sister-in-law to try to navigate the social assistance world following a debilitating car accident. In Campbell's research, she tells her family's story of navigating the public assistance world while simultaneously using her expertise as a social policy expert to offer incisive commentary about the shortcomings of the U.S. social assistance system.

Finally, social welfare professor Rank (1994, 2005) spent more than a decade studying poverty and welfare in the United States. His mixed-methods research combines qualitative "in-depth interviews of and fieldwork on" people who receive welfare with a quantitative "large longitudinal sample" (p. 9) of welfare recipients. By doing so, Rank seeks to dismantle stereotypes about who receives public assistance, examine the social and political forces surrounding the government assistance system, and make a case for why poverty in the U.S. affects more than just those experiencing it. In order to understand why questions need to be asked about the experience of utilizing SNAP, we must first recognize the many years of the evolution the program has undergone to reach its current form.

Evolution of Food Stamp Program: History, Policies, and Perceptions

In the field of political science, policy feedback scholars argue that government policies "impart messages to beneficiaries" (Mettler, 2018, p. 17) about how they are viewed as citizens and how they are likely to be treated by the government (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Soss (1999) imparts that "[welfare] program designs are outcomes shaped by the fears, hopes, and discontents of policymakers and citizens" (p. 376). In order to interpret the message that participants in modern government assistance food programs receive, it is important to understand how that program was created, how it has evolved, and what messages to social service beneficiaries accompanied it along the way.

The first iteration of the United States food stamp program was created in 1939 as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. Its purpose was to address a paradoxical problem at the end of the Great Depression: farmers had surpluses of perishable goods, while cities were filled with hungry citizens. Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation national administrator

James S. Allen described the new food stamp program to the New York Times (1939c) as a way to combat "want in the midst of plenty" (n.p.).

People who received "relief," categorized by the New York Times (1939a) as "general relief, old-age assistance, aid to dependent children and aid to the blind" (n.p.) were eligible to participate in the new food stamp (or "relief stamp") program. Participants could buy $1-$1.50 worth of orange stamps per household member each week, with which they could purchase any type of food desired. Those purchasing bright orange stamps were also given free blue stamps valued at half the amount of the purchased stamps. Blue stamps could only be used for government-approved surplus foods, which at the start of the program included butter, eggs, citrus fruits, dried prunes, dry beans, wheat flour, whole wheat flour, and cornmeal (NYT, 1939b; NYT, 1939d; Shapira, 2018).

Grocers who agreed to participate in the food stamp program signed pledge cards promising not to cheat (or "chisel") the new system and to treat stamp customers the same as those using cash (NYT, 1939c). In preparation for the food stamp launch, grocers created displays featuring the surplus items eligible for purchase with blue stamps. The hope was that by making these items more visible and attractive, cash-paying customers would also be enticed to purchase the surplus goods. In order to be paid for food purchased with food stamps, grocers would transfer the stamps to pre-designed cards and deposit them at commercial banks, which were to treat the stamp cards as personal checks. The banks would then submit the cards to the federal government to receive cash.

Following the success of the trial programs in Rochester, New York, Dayton, Ohio, and Seattle, Washington, the New York Times announced in July of 1939 that the food stamp program would continue to expand, with Des Moines, Iowa as the next location (NYT, 1939f).

The goal was to initiate the food stamp program in more than 100 cities within the next year (NYT, 1939e).

At the peak of the initial food stamp program, 4 million people were purchasing food stamps (USDA, 2018c). Over the four years the program operated, around 20 million people purchased stamps and nearly half of the counties in the United States had participated at one time or another. The total estimated cost was $262 million. By spring of 1943, World War II was underway and agricultural surpluses were being shipped to feed Allied soldiers and European markets (Moran, 2011). The U.S. government determined that the problems of food surpluses and unemployment had been resolved and the food stamp program was stopped (USDA, 2018c).

Gone, but Not Forgotten

For nearly two decades after the first Food Stamp Program ended, requests for a new food stamp program continued to emerge from politicians, social workers, and former program participants (Moran, 2011). Many attempts were made over the course of the next decade to create a similar program (Moran, 2011; USDA, 2018c). However, it wasn't until John F. Kennedy was inaugurated in 1961 that a new food stamps pilot program was reinstated (Shapira, 2018; USDA, 2018c). Kennedy, for whom poverty was an important campaign issue (Rank, 1994), used his first Executive Order to expand a food distribution program. On February 2, 1961, it was announced that a new Food Stamps pilot program was in development (USDA, 2018c). The director of this new program was Isabelle Kelley, the first woman to lead a program for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Like the previous program, the new food stamp trial program focused on consuming perishables; however, the blue surplus-only stamps were discontinued (USDA, 2018c). Participants were still required to purchase stamps, which could then be used at grocery stores.

Making the FSP Permanent

Following a request by President Johnson, who declared a "war on poverty" (Rank, 1994, p. 16), Congress passed Food Stamp Act of 1964. This bill set the guidelines for a permanent Food Stamp Program (FSP) (USDA, 2018c). In 1964, the Department of Agriculture estimated that a nationwide FSP might potentially serve four million participants annually. By April 1965, more than 500,000 people participated in the FSP.

In 1968, when a group of primarily African American welfare-receiving mothers from the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) sought to voice their concerns about demeaning changes to the welfare system, Senator Russell Long of Louisiana referred to the group as "brood mares" and refused to allow them to speak before the Senate Finance Committee (Kinser, 2010). In response, Johnnie Tillmon, organizer of the NWRO, reclaimed the slur and led a "brood mare stampede" where welfare recipients "marched with their children, picketed welfare centers, and protested in front of congressmen's homes" (p. 73).

As the program continued to expand throughout the nation over the next decade, eventually the FSP served more than 15 million participants in July of 1974. Among other significant changes to the FSP, the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977 eliminated the purchase requirement, which had been deemed a barrier to participation for many of the low-income people the program was meant to serve (USDA, 2018b). This hypothesis was proven correct, as the first month that the purchase requirement was eliminated, January 1979, 1.5 million new participants joined the program.

During President Ronald Reagan's tenure at the dawn of the 1980s, concern grew within the government that the FSP was too large and costly. This was the time when "government cheese," as the five-pound blocks of American cheese in boxes stamped "USDA" were

colloquially known, was distributed to those receiving welfare or experiencing economic hardship due to deindustrialization (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2011; Poppendiek, 2014). Reagan's philosophy toward public assistance was highly neoliberal, focused on making welfare recipients "do [their] share" and "take responsibility" for their lives and financial situations (Rank, 1994, p. 19). A series of legislations aimed at trimming the program's budget were enacted in 1981 and 1982. Some of the most significant changes included: a gross income eligibility test in addition to the net income test, counting applicants' retirement funds as resources; subjecting participants who voluntarily quit their jobs to increased disqualification periods; and disallowing federal funding to be used for FSP outreach (USDA, 2018b).

Unsurprisingly, the tighter restrictions on the FSP led to fewer people qualifying for assistance. Eventually realizing that there was a growing problem with hunger in the U.S., Congress passed the Food Stamp Acts of 1985 and 1987, which, among other changes, eliminated sales tax on food stamp purchases, increased the household resource limit to $2000 from 1977's $1750 maximum, and introduced eligibility for homeless people (USDA, 2018b).

In President George H.W. Bush's 1992 State of the Union address, his administration's views on social service recipients were clear:

> Ask American parents what they dislike about how things are in our country, and chances are good that pretty soon they'll get to welfare. . . . When able-bodied adults receive government assistance they have responsibilities to the taxpayer. . . . A responsibility to get their lives in order (Rank, 1994, p. 20).

Beginning in the Bush administration, several states attempted or considered methods to alter the behavior of social assistance recipients through means such as paying women who received welfare benefits to receive implantable contraceptives, freezing benefits of women who gave

birth while using welfare, and increasing benefit levels for couples to encourage marriage (Rank, 1994, pp. 20-21)

In 1994, participation in the FSP peaked at 27.5 million people (USDA, 2018b). During President Bill Clinton's administration, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of August 22, 1996 (PRWORA) brought new changes to the FSP, including: new time limits for receiving food stamp benefits for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDS), removing eligibility for most legal immigrants to receive food stamps, and requiring all states to implement Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) systems by October of 2002. Due to these cuts and regulations, FSP participation declined significantly through the late 1990s (USDA, 2018b).

From Food Stamps to SNAP

The 2000s again brought major updates to the FSP. The 2002 Farm Bill (also known as the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002) restored FSP eligibility to certain groups of immigrants and gave states options for simplifying the program, among other changes (USDA, 2018b). December of 2007 saw the start of the Great Recession, when widespread job loss created a swell of newly-qualified food stamp recipients (Poppendieck, 2014). In 2008, Congress overrode President George W. Bush's veto to pass the 2008 Farm Bill. This law not only promised to increase funding to federal food assistance programs by $10 billion over the next decade, but also changed the name of the federal Food Stamp Program to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP], a maneuver designed to combat the stigma attached to the term "food stamps" (Shapira, 2018; USDA, 2018b). All states were encouraged to either adopt the new "SNAP" name or create an alternative moniker for their food assistance program. By the end of 2008, SNAP participation had increased to 28.2 million people (USDA, 2018b).

Unlike previous versions of the program which focused primarily on relieving hunger, the current iteration of SNAP increased focus on nutrition, making healthy choices, and staying physically active (USDA, 2018b). "SNAP-Ed," a nutrition education program, was created to teach low-income people how to buy groceries and prepare nutritious meals on a tight budget.

In 2017, the Trump administration proposed to expand SNAP work requirements as a strategy to cut $192 billion from the SNAP funding over the next decade—while simultaneously making it more difficult for people to qualify for Social Security disability benefits—in an effort to get people perceived by the administration as "able-bodied" adults receiving SNAP or disability benefits to "go back to work" (Alcindor & Robertson, 2017).

How Does the Current SNAP Program Work?

The SNAP application process and required forms vary for each state, but regardless of which state a person lives in, in order to qualify for SNAP a person has to meet both the gross *and* net income limits set by the federal government. These limits are based on the federal poverty level. For a single SNAP applicant, gross monthly income must not exceed 130 percent of the poverty level (or $1,316 per month) and net monthly income must not exceed 100 percent of the poverty level (or $1,012 per month after certain deductions are calculated). For comparison, the maximum income levels for a household of three to qualify for SNAP are $2,252 (gross) and $1,732 (net) monthly. Households are expected to spend approximately 30 percent of their own resources to purchase food, so SNAP benefit amounts are calculated accordingly (USDA, 2018e).

According to the USDA's (2017) website, SNAP benefits can be used to purchase "food for the household to eat." This includes seeds and plants which yield edible produce, but not ready-to-serve foods, dietary supplements, and alcohol (Bergmans, Berger, Palta, Robert,

Ehrenthal, & Malecki, 2017; USDA 2018e). While Congress has considered designating some foods as "luxury" or "non-nutritious," and thus limiting their purchase for those using SNAP benefits, it has been determined that such an action would be prohibitively costly to enact and has never been pursued (USDA, 2017).

There are many misconceptions in U.S. public opinion about SNAP and who receives benefits. Undocumented "non-citizens" (USDA, 2018d) are not eligible to participate in SNAP. In contrast to the stereotypical image of government assistance recipients who "refuse" to work, nearly two-thirds of all SNAP participants are children, seniors, and people with disabilities—people who are not typically expected to be part of the U.S. workforce (USDA, 2018c).

SNAP Participation as a Source of Stigma and Shame

> Most Americans work hard. Few would view themselves as prospective recipients of social assistance programs. . . . In truth, most people will encounter these programs at some point in their lives. Between the ages of twenty-five and sixty-five, two-thirds of Americans will live in a household that receives food stamps, Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) . . . Social assistance programs aren't marginal—they're mainstream. (Campbell, 2014, p. 32)

Means-tested social assistance programs are those which require that participants fall into certain income brackets to enroll. Along with SNAP, a few examples of means-tested programs include the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), and Medicaid. In theory, these programs simply help low and moderate income people receive food, medical care, and other essential services. In practice, the application and verification process—which Campbell (2014) describes as "so unpalatable that people will stomach any alternative, including a low-wage job, even if it is

economically inferior (p. 66)—is complicated and invasive, and the use of means-tested social assistance programs is fraught with social stigma and shame (Campbell, 2014; Chase & Walker, 2013).

Rank (1994) suggests that the stereotype of a public assistance recipient is "a good-for-nothing freeloader who drives a Cadillac, uses Food Stamps to buy sirloin steak, or watches soap operas all day," and describes such an image as "a classic icon of American culture" (p. 2). These stereotypes and others like them—such as women who have babies in order to receive more welfare benefits—are perpetuated not only on a person-to-person social level, but throughout the highest ranks of U.S. government (Campbell, 2014; Kinser, 2010; Rank, 1994; Rank, 2005).

A sampling of documented stereotypes about government assistance recipients identify them as:

- lazy (Hawkesworth, 1999; Rank, 2005; Mettler, 2018)
- predominately minorities (Rank, 1994, 2005)
- having many children (Hawkesworth, 1999; Rank, 1994, 2005)
- abusing drugs or alcohol (Rank, 2005; Mettler, 2018)
- freeloader/dependent on handouts (Rank, 1994, 2005)
- having bad character (Mettler, 2018)

Mettler (2018) suggests that "individuals' hostility to welfare may also render their own usage of social programs a source of shame" (p. 92).

Living near or below the poverty line can trigger shame, especially as the person experiencing financial hardship tends to not only have to deal with the logistical ramifications of their situation, but also is sharply aware of the social stigma associated with poverty (Chase &

Walker, 2013). Rank (2004) describes the experience of poverty in America as having "an especially bitter taste" because the hardship is taking place "within a context of abundance" (p. 42). Chase & Walker (2013) argue that shame is a "social fact which not only undermines human dignity but risks the atomi[z]ation of modern society" (p. 739).

People experiencing poverty may struggle to hide their financial situation from family, friends, or coworkers and pretend to cope in order to avoid feeling shame (Chase & Walker, 2013). This withdrawal from their social and support network can intensify one's experience of shame (Brown, 2006). Rank (2005) suggests that "many Americans perceive welfare use as something that happens to someone else and welfare recipients as atypical of the American experience" (p. 101). Because people contending with poverty may choose not to disclose their hardship in order not to seem different from those around them, others within their social circle may not realize that they do, in fact, know someone affected by poverty or who utilizes social assistance programs.

Brown's (2006) Shame Resiliency Theory contends that decreasing the shame-induced feelings of being "trapped, powerless, and isolated," can be accomplished in part by "recognizing and accepting personal vulnerability," increasing one's level of "critical awareness regarding social/cultural expectations," developing "mutually empathic relationships that facilitate reaching out to others," and possessing the "language and emotional competence to discuss and deconstruct shame" (pp. 47-48). Shame thrives in isolation and diminishes in the presence of meaningful connection. The ability of stories to build and sustain relationships between individuals is well documented (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillman-Healy, 1997; Muehlhoff, 2005; Stone, 1988). This connection-strengthening attribute of stories could make them a powerful tool for people seeking to decrease government assistance-linked stigma and shame.

Changing Perceptions of SNAP Through Story

Storytelling is a form of communication that serves important functions in all areas of our lives (Cockburn-Wootten & Zorn, 2005, p. 141). They weave the past and the future into the present, helping the living to maintain relational ties to and memories of those who have died (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillman, 1997; Wood, 2005a). Stories help to pass along values, beliefs, and convictions between generations and create a sense of meaning (Cockburn-Wootten & Zorn, 2005; Hudson, 2015; Muehlhoff, 2005). Vitally, stories create and maintain identities and help people make sense of their world, relationships, and experiences (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillman-Healy, 1997; Cockburn-Wootten & Zorn, 2005; Hudson, 2015; Muehlhoff, 2005; Taylor, Fisackerly, Mauren, & Taylor, 2013).

For the purposes of this study, "storytelling" refers to the recounting of experiences and how they are understood by the person sharing them rather than a conscious effort to present a structured narrative in a dramatized performance. When a person chooses to hide their struggles, their story is unlikely to be shared with others. This reluctance to discuss potentially stigmatizing or shame-related experiences can allow other, less knowledgeable "storytellers" to usurp the narrative and bend it to fit their own purposes. For SNAP recipients, this means that the stories being told about their situation are often found in the rhetoric of politicians and other unsympathetic parties, stories told in "terms that represent . . . but are not representative" (Defenbaugh, 2008, p. 1404) of their individuality and experiences. As Mettler (2018) describes:

> Ironically . . . it is typically those who are less cognizant or appreciative of government's role in their lives who speak most frequently in politics, whereas those who are most aware of the difference that government makes in their lives are more likely to refrain. The playing field of politics is tilted such that it overrepresents those who place little

> value on social benefits . . . and underrepresents those who could be its best defenders (p. 7).

While the focus of the study is to highlight the individual experiences of participants in SNAP, it is impossible to ignore the social and political consequences incurred when the majority of Americans only learn about social assistance programs from those seeking to end them.

By sharing their stories of utilizing SNAP, social assistance recipients can open the door to demystifying the world of government assistance for themselves and others, fostering connection and empathy while resisting stigmatizing stereotypes. Standpoint theory "seeks to include the experiences of subordinate . . . groups within the process of research inquiry in meaningful ways" and "embrac[es] the lived experiences of co-cultural group members as essential to scholarly inquiry" (Orbe, 1998, p. 23). Because of this emphasis on lived experiences and the necessity of collaborating with those whose lives are being studied, Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) (Hartsock, 1983; Wood, 1992) is an excellent framework within which to begin exploring experiences of utilizing SNAP.

A key assumption of Feminist Standpoint Theory is that individuals who are part of a subordinate group possess a clearer vision of the social order than those who are part of the dominant group, as they have been required to learn how to navigate both the subordinate and dominant social worlds (Hartsock, 1983; West & Turner, 2015). It is also important to acknowledge Wood's (2005b) call to "resist the idea of any absolutely privileged epistemological position" (p. 64). Possessing a subordinate standpoint can allow for more complete knowledge but does not guarantee superior knowledge.

In the spirit of Feminist Standpoint Theory, I focus this work on the situated knowledges of socioeconomically disadvantaged people in an effort to shed light on the social order as it

relates to one government assistance system. Throughout this study I seek to fill in the human gap apparent in much of the research about social assistance and to bring forward the lived experiences of government assistance recipients from their own perspective, rather than quantify or critique them as objects of inquiry. I also answer the call of social welfare researcher Rank (2005), who expressed the necessity of broadening interdisciplinary research contributions in order to "develop a new way of thinking about American poverty" (p. vi) and help explain how all of the specialized research from each academic discipline fits together "into the larger meaning of things" (p. vi). That is the kind of work our field was created to do: Communication and Storytelling Studies, reporting for duty. In the next section, I will detail the design of the project including who participated in the study and how they came to be part of it, how data was collected and analyzed, and the theoretical considerations that were built into the research process.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This research study emerged from my desire to open up a conversation between two worlds that rarely seem to overlap: academic and social assistance. I knew that I wanted to create a study that used an interpretive qualitative lens to examine how SNAP recipients navigate their social worlds. In contrast to the numerous existing studies that focus on quantifying SNAP recipients' food intake or grocery purchases or BMI, I wanted to illuminate the "sense of emotion, feelings, and an understanding of experiences" (Manning & Kunkel, 2014, p. 436) of being a SNAP recipient—a task uniquely suited to qualitative research methods.

I intentionally left the focus of this study wide in an effort to allow a more varied and nuanced picture of the participants' experiences to emerge. I incorporated the sensibilities of Feminist Standpoint Theory (Hartsock, 1983; Wood, 1992) throughout the research process, embracing my own role as a SNAP recipient/academic "outsider within" (West & Turner, 2018, p. 520) in an effort to amplify the voices of social assistance recipients and begin to untangle the "web of shame" (Brown, 2006) that often accompanies that social role.

Recruitment

Participants for the study were recruited via printed (see Appendix A) and digital (see Appendix B) flyers, as well as through personal referral. The first round of printed flyers was distributed in classroom buildings throughout the university campus, to the EBT/SNAP information table at the local city farmers market, and to the on-campus food pantry (which displayed the flyers both at their main location on campus and in their booth at the weekly campus farmers market). After the farmers market closed for the season, a second round of flyers

was posted in additional campus buildings and at local thrift shops, specifically those stores which also house nonprofit clothing distribution centers for underserved community members.

I posted the digital flyer several times on my personal Facebook over the course of eight weeks. The "public" setting was enabled so that the flyer would be visible to anyone visiting my page. Friends, family, colleagues, and department faculty and staff shared the digital flyer to their personal pages. I also posted the flyer on local social justice-focused Facebook groups of which I was a member. From one of those posts, a local nonprofit group which serves low-income families shared the flyer to their profile.

Participant Contributors

Participants were selected based on volunteer response and whether they fit the study participant criteria of being: 1) over the age of 18; 2) a current recipient of SNAP benefits; 3) able to speak English; and 4) able to meet with me for an in-person interview. All volunteers who self-reported as meeting the criteria were allowed to participate in the study.

Three participants were recruited via personal referral from mutual friends who were aware of the project. Two participants contacted me via email after seeing the recruiting flyers at the city farmers market information table. Recruiting, overall, was challenging. There were at least two weeks between when I began posting flyers and the first participant contacting me. As it turned out, she had not seen the flyer independently, but had been referred by a mutual friend. She was eager to discuss her experience with SNAP and we arranged to meet for the interview a few days after she contacted me.

The next two participants both contacted me via email. I discovered during the interview process that they had each seen the study flyer at the local city farmers market. Before setting up the interviews, both participants inquired via email about details of the interview process and

what types of questions would be asked. Once they were satisfied with the answers, we arranged a time to meet for the interview. The final two contributors joined later in November, having been referred by another mutual friend who knew that study recruitment had slowed since the farmers market closed for the season.

In the spirit of Feminist Standpoint Theory (Hartsock, 1983; Wood, 1992), from this point forward I will refer to the individuals I interviewed as "contributors" rather than participants or subjects. In contrast to simply being studied or observed, they have actively contributed to a more complete knowledge base. Each contributor had their own reasons for joining the study (including to normalize social assistance programs, to talk to someone about how SNAP has affected their life, to increase awareness about how people take the ability to buy food for granted, to present a different image of who in the community uses SNAP), but all shared generously and openly about their experiences, and when we parted at the end of each interview I found myself feeling connected to each contributor and deeply appreciative of their time and trust. To familiarize the reader with these individuals, I introduce below each of the five study contributors—Casey, Bobby, Drew, Alex, and Emory—and give a brief overview of their distinct circumstances that lead to their enrollment in SNAP. All names and identifying information have been changed to protect contributor confidentiality.

Casey, a young woman, first applied for food stamps after her then-husband was severely injured in an accident. His injury required surgery and an extensive recovery period, leaving her to financially support both of them. Eventually, they decided to relocate out of state to get help from their families. Casey's situation was further complicated when she contracted a disease that left her with a brain injury and unable to work. She and her husband separated, and Casey found

herself homeless and struggling to obtain food. At the time we spoke, Casey had secured a place to live, remarried, and was receiving disability benefits and food stamps.

For Bobby, a husband and father, the decision to investigate food stamp eligibility was an urgent and unexpected necessity after his wife was repeatedly hospitalized in the months following the birth of their child. Bobby was working two jobs at the time but had to quit one in order to care for his family. He discovered the option of government assistance after realizing that his family could not survive on the income from a single job. Soon after their initial experience with SNAP, Bobby and his family, like Casey and her husband, relocated to be closer to extended family. Even after he secured a new job as a church leader, Bobby's family qualified for food stamps and they reapplied for benefits.

Drew, also a husband and father, found his family's financial stability in jeopardy after he was laid off during the Great Recession. He had difficulty securing gainful employment, so he and his wife applied for SNAP "just to make sure we had food to eat for us and the kids." In the wake of the recession, Drew struggled to find sufficient work to support his family and they intermittently reapplied to receive food stamp benefits. He hoped that they would no longer need SNAP once his wife was able to find a job and they were both working.

Alex, a retired healthcare worker in her 60s, described how a scarcity of freelance work and looming mortgage payments pushed her to collect Social Security benefits early: "That all happened rather rapidly. I did not necessarily *plan* to retire then, there just was no more work available." She lamented that it was "a little tragic" that she would not have been able to survive financially without doing so, particularly with her college degree and 45 years of professional health care work. While discussing her retirement finance options with a Social Security caseworker, she learned that she was eligible for food stamps. After refinancing her mortgage

and finding part-time contract work teaching a continuing education class, Alex still qualified, at the time of this study, for a reduced amount of food stamps benefits.

For Emory, a full-time university student navigating independent living for the first time, SNAP offered the ability to supplement her student worker stipend and build a small emergency fund: "I have no other income and I have no other time to get any other jobs and for the first time in my life, I was really living on my own." Newly responsible for her own living expenses such as a car loan and medical bills, she was concerned about her ability to successfully support herself. When she learned that she was eligible for SNAP, she decided to apply so that "money I would normally allocate towards food, I can put into my savings" to cover unexpected expenses. Emory utilized SNAP benefits during the school year, but did not receive them during summer break when she had time to work multiple part-time jobs. She said she expected to not need SNAP again once she graduated.

I was pleased with the pool of contributors who volunteered for the study, as they represented a range of ages, sexes, and experiences. It should be noted that all contributors were white, born and raised in the United States, and spoke English as their first language, which means that their experiences with SNAP may not reflect that same experiences as people of color, immigrants, or those for whom English is a secondary language.

Data Collection

I conducted a single, one-on-one, semi-structured, qualitative interview with each of the participants. Interviews were held at the local public library. This location was safe and neutral, and all participants expressed that it was a convenient and accessible meeting place. The library allowed for both a quiet atmosphere and privacy during the interview. Because the library does not serve food or require purchases to use its facilities as would be the case in a coffee shop or

similar venue, there was no concern that the researcher was unduly influencing contributors by buying or offering to buy them food in exchange for their participation in the interview. Being mindful of my own experiences with SNAP and the budgeting concerns that often accompany it, I also wanted to make sure it was clear to contributors that they would not feel social pressure to make a purchase, as might happen if we were in a retail location.

A public library was ideal for conducting interviews because it provided the convenience and safety benefits of being a common public location combined with the opportunity to speak privately in a quiet study room. The main challenge with meeting at the library is that the study rooms could not be reserved in advance. Rooms were available first-come, first-serve only and were allotted three-hour time slots, which made securing one challenging. I would typically arrive at the library at least an hour before each interview in an effort to claim a room in which to meet the contributor. This strategy worked in every case but one. For Casey's interview, both study rooms were occupied for a time far beyond the time frame we had planned to be in the library, so we located an empty work table in a remote corner of the library to conduct the interview. Even after a librarian stopped by to let us know a study room was available, Casey elected to stay where we were and continue the conversation.

When conducting interviews, typically the contributor and I sat across the table from each other in a medium-sized study room with two audio recorders lying on the table between us. Interviews ranged from 22 minutes to 70 minutes, with most interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes. The conversations were guided by an interview schedule (see Appendix C) designed to elicit stories about the participants' SNAP experiences. In particular, the questions focused on how they learned to shop with SNAP benefits, how SNAP affects their current food shopping habits, who they talk to about their experiences using SNAP benefits, how they came to apply for

SNAP, and what they think other people's perceptions are about SNAP participants. The conversation was free to take natural divergences when contributors wished to share thoughts on related topics.

When designing the interview schedule, my goal was to understand how others experienced SNAP without assuming that their experiences or feelings mirrored my own. As such, I did not include any references to feeling "embarrassed," experiencing shame, or feeling self-conscious for using government assistance. I intentionally avoided introducing or encouraging ideas of negativity surrounding SNAP into the interviews or interview schedule, though I did not discourage contributors from voicing such thoughts or experiences if that was what they wished to share. I pulled from my own experience, the "basement conversations" about SNAP that I referenced in Chapter 1, and previous research about utilizing government assistance (particularly Campbell, 2014; Chase & Walker, 2013; & Gustafson, 2011) to create questions I felt were likely to resonate with current SNAP users' experiences.

Inspired by Carolyn Ellis' (2016) discussion on compassionate research and interviewing, my intention was to "honor, care for, and support" (p. 431) each person I spoke with for this project. I specifically avoided asking questions about participants' income or amount of SNAP benefits, as these are potentially sensitive topics which were not critical to the purpose of my study. Considering the level of scrutiny many SNAP recipients experience on a regular basis—which I knew from personal experience well before this study—I did not want to discourage anyone from speaking with me due to concern that I might be trying to judge or calculate their financial situation. Being mindful that receiving SNAP benefits can be seen as a stigmatized social status and/or source of personal shame, I made sure to remind the participants before the

interview that they were free to decline to answer any questions which they did not wish to answer.

While listening and responding to contributors during the interviews, I made a conscious effort to respect the individual and unique nature of the contributors' experiences with or feelings about SNAP and intentionally avoided assuming that their opinions mirrored my own relationship with SNAP. I tried to remain mindful of Bochner and Ellis' (1992) discussions of researcher reflexivity so that I could acknowledge and accommodate the reflexivity inherent in interviewing a person who shares a common lived experience without shifting the focus of the interview to my own viewpoint. Even so, I decided to be open about my own life, if asked, in an effort to minimize any perceived power disparity and avoid implying to the inquiring contributor that they were alone in their experience. If a contributor asked questions about whether I had ever participated in social assistance programs or experienced a situation such as the one they were describing, I answered honestly but chose not to elaborate unless they asked further questions, which no one did.

All interviews were audio recorded using a digital voice recorder and backup voice recorder. Before and after each interview, I wrote field notes to help me remember details of the interaction that were not captured by the audio recording.

Data Analysis

Using the audio recordings, I transcribed each interview verbatim, including any non-standard usages of grammar or syntax. I used transcription software and a pedal (which I had invested in at the beginning of the semester in anticipation of extensive transcription duties), which allowed me to more easily move back and forth throughout the recording as I typed in order to ensure accurate transcription. I assigned pseudonyms to the participants and anyone they

mentioned in conversation, as well as renamed places and other potential identifiers that could be used to deduce who the participants were or their current location. No identifying details were included in my data analysis or findings.

As I transcribed, I noted the time stamps of moments in the conversation that struck me as particularly insightful or correlated to a previous contributor's experience. I also tried in the transcripts to preserve the contributor's unique word emphasis, speaking pace, or non-verbal actions that accompanied particular moments (such as when a contributor began to shuffle papers to find the exact wording on a DHS document or search through their bag to find their EBT card to reference its design). While I enjoyed listening to and reliving the time with the contributors, my fingers could not quite keep up with the pace of our conversations.

While transcribing and in my initial readings of the transcripts, I attempted to familiarize myself with the contributors' stories and mentally connect the written transcripts with the experience of speaking with them personally. I wanted to ensure that my analysis and writing remained representative and respectful of the individuals who sat across the table and shared details of their personal lives with me. I found myself re-engrossed in their stories and noticed the ways the contributors' SNAP experiences often reflected pieces of my own. Knowing that it would be tempting, intentionally or not, to select interview excerpts or stories that served to highlight topics I would want to share about *my* SNAP experience or agreed with *my* point of view, I deliberately worked to keep the contributors' experiences and opinions at the forefront of the interpretation, coding, and analysis processes. After all, if I wanted to focus on my own SNAP experience, I could have written an autoethnography.

Drawing from Charmaz (2014), I used grounded theory sensibilities when coding the data, starting with initial coding, including line-by-line, and *in vivo* coding. Using the online

coding application Dedoose version 8.0.35 (2018) to view and annotate the transcripts, initial coding resulted in over 120 "micro" gerund and *in vivo* codes. After guidance to "zoom out—way out" (A. Kinser, personal communication, January 23, 2019), those micro codes were re-examined to identify redundancies and sorted into approximately six larger themes. Before merging themes, I made a duplicate copy of the project in Dedoose in order to preserve the original coding scheme.

Early in the process, my analysis tended to focus primarily on pragmatic issues reported by contributors: needing food stamps, getting food stamps, navigating the DHS system, using the EBT card, and dealing with other people. I also had nearly 30 emotion codes identified from instances of contributors expressing specific emotions involved in their experiences with SNAP. Rather than initially code all instances of when contributors share that something was "embarrassing" or "shamed" or made them feel "kind of nervous" as one emotion, I wanted to maintain the nuances of the contributors' emotional expressions for as far into the coding process as possible.

Being encouraged again to "zoom out" and synthesize the larger meaning of the contributors' stories, I sorted and recombined coded excerpts until three major themes emerged: membership, unwanted identity, and surveillance. Using the updated coding scheme, I revisited the transcripts in an attempt to identify other examples of the designated themes that might have been missed on earlier coding passes, then organized the coded excerpts into sub-themes within each category.

When writing the findings, my goal was to preserve the contributors' voices and intentions and present them in a way that might offer a critical perspective on life as a social assistance recipient—using my analysis to "plumb the archaeology of taken-for-granted

perspectives to understand how unjust and oppressive social conditions came to be reified as historical 'givens'" (Cannella & Lincoln, 2009, p. 54). I did not attempt to verify or justify the accuracy of any claims made in contributors' stories, following the belief in Feminist Standpoint Theory that "all knowledge is a product of social activity, and thus no knowledge can be truly objective" (West & Turner, 2018, p. 516). My purpose in interviewing the contributors was not to certify that everything they said was the whole, impartial "truth" or universally applicable to all SNAP recipients—but to allow them to share their stories and interpretations of their lived experiences in order to obtain "participant-driven understandings of how [those with marginalized identities] might navigate their social worlds" (Manning & Kunkel, 2014, p. 435). In the next chapter, I discuss the results of this endeavor.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

There is a tendency when speaking or writing about recipients of government assistance to refer to (and thus think of) them as a collective group: the poor, the needy, the underprivileged, etc. It is very easy in the social assistance world to become just another case number in a binder. In order to resist that mindset of a homogenous, faceless population and encourage the reader to do the same, I introduced the people who shared their stories with me in Chapter 3. It is important to keep in mind that the questions asked during the interviews were meant to highlight their SNAP experiences and our conversation focused primarily on that theme. While the contributors' SNAP-focused stories often revealed common experiences, the examples shared represent only a fraction of their full identities and life experiences and should not be considered evidence that all SNAP recipients think or experience the world in the same way.

The contributors possessed insights on the social assistance system that aren't often presented in mainstream discussions of government assistance programs. Having lived both with and without government assistance, they understood how each world functioned and knew how to successfully adapt to each, resulting in the contributors becoming *master managers* of their communicative worlds. The purpose of this study is highlight the contributors' specialized knowledge and add more voices and viewpoints to be considered in the epistemology smorgasbord.

The theoretical framework that serves as the motivation for the project and my goals for this chapter is Feminist Standpoint Theory and its assertion that members of a subordinate group have a unique viewpoint. It further asserts that this viewpoint is developed from learning how to

navigate both the subordinate and dominant social landscapes. In the "Managing Membership" section, I explore the pragmatic challenges inherent in maintaining SNAP benefits. Then, in "Managing Unwanted Identity," I utilize Goffman's theories about performance in everyday life and stigma to analyze the contributors' stories about how being a SNAP recipient affects their identity and social interactions. In the final section, "Managing Surveillance," I incorporate Foucault's theories about discipline and punishment in society to examine the ways that participating in SNAP opened contributors' lives up to increased scrutiny.

Managing Membership

Because I do not expect all readers to be familiar with the intricacies involved in being enrolled in a social assistance programs, I use the first part of this chapter to unveil the behind-the-scenes work of securing and managing a SNAP case. Similar to being tasked with a new part-time job, the intricate detail work of obtaining and maintaining SNAP benefits requires significant time, along with specialized knowledge and skills. In the following sections, I explore the ways receiving SNAP benefits affected the contributors' lives, discuss the processes and complications involved in managing one's SNAP case, and examine how contributors negotiate the ever-present possibility of losing SNAP benefits.

"It Does Make A Significant Difference": The Benefits of SNAP Benefits

> *My award now is [less than $20] a month. Which does not sound like much, but it does make a significant difference.* (Alex)

When designing the interview schedule, I specifically chose not to include interview questions focused on the dollar amount of SNAP benefits received. Even so, three contributors volunteered their monthly allotment in the course of conversation. The other two did not. When asked about what they considered to be positive about SNAP, responses tended to focus on how

the benefits personally impacted each contributor's life and ranged from unsentimental appreciation for its effect on their budget to effuse praise for the possibilities a SNAP disbursement represented. The emotional ties to SNAP benefits seem to directly correlate with how significant a role the benefits play in each person's life rather than the dollar amount received.

For Casey, receiving SNAP funds has the potential to be a euphoric event. Having the ability to choose and purchase her own food stands in sharp contrast to the struggles she faced to obtain food when she was homeless. She utilized free meals offered by soup kitchens for a while, but eventually stopped going

> because you get solicited for sex easily there. And I don't eat meat, so it's like, people are doing nice, bringing food out, but I don't eat meat so I can't eat half the stuff there. . . . But mostly just because of the men who go down there. . . . So it's like, you don't have food, you're really hungry … and … you're kind of just fucked. That's it.

Because of the harassment and sexual advances she experienced when trying to participate in free meal programs, Casey frequently had to choose between maintaining her personal safety and being able to eat. She chose to dress in bulky coveralls as a strategy to avoid drawing unwanted attention, but still had men approach her to ask if she was "working" as she walked around town.

Overcoming homelessness is often extraordinarily difficult (Gustafson, 2011). Eventually, Casey was approved for government assistance that helped her secure housing and other benefits. However, the intense stress of this time in her life left her with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Regaining food stamps after being homeless was a major improvement in Casey's life:

> It was miraculous (laughs). That's how I can describe it. I mean, it's awesome. To not have any food and be able to get food. You're flying in the sun and then you can go fill up your bucket for $100 or whatever.

For Drew, who was deeply embarrassed about needing to apply for SNAP, the ability to feed his family outweighed his concerns about being a SNAP recipient. SNAP benefits comprised the majority of Drew's family's food budget, but the funds were often depleted before the next month's benefits arrived. The week prior to the monthly benefit disbursement tended to be especially stressful as Drew and his wife endeavored to find food their children would eat while they were unable to purchase additional groceries:

> The positive about SNAP is when you've got hungry kids, and you've not been able to get the food you need for a week, and then you're able to go in when the benefits come in and actually get groceries and everybody's fed. There's a sense of relief in that. That's the only positive.

Casey also indicated that her SNAP benefits usually failed to last the full month. Unfortunately, this shortage of benefits (and the food they could buy) means that a cycle of feast and famine recurs as people who have spent days or weeks scrimping on food then receive an influx of SNAP benefits. As Casey related about seeing her benefits appear in her EBT balance, "When you're hungry and you're thinking [that buys a lot of food]. But in reality it only lasts two weeks."

In contrast to SNAP benefits' status as a necessity for Casey and Drew, Emory appreciated how SNAP allowed her financial flexibility:

> I ended up having to use [my own money] for car issues, so it's very good that I had that because then I can actually survive, whereas otherwise I would run out of money.

Though some might argue that the lack of expressed urgency or necessity in Emory and Alex's relationships to SNAP benefits should serve as evidence that they do not need or should not qualify for SNAP benefits, I disagree. The name of the program itself—*Supplemental* Nutritional Assistance Program—indicates that it is meant to *assist* people in *supplementing* their food budget, which is exactly how it functions for both Alex and Emory. One should not be required to be demonstrably destitute in order to benefit from SNAP. It is also a mistake to assume that SNAP benefits ensure that a person or family who qualifies is fed completely and nutritiously. While the program is meant to bolster recipients' grocery budgets, for many, SNAP benefits—insufficient or not—*are* their monthly food budget. Whether or not a person is able to obtain or retain them is intimately connected with how well they learn, follow, and/or resist program rules.

Knowing the Rules

All contributors had developed vast specialized knowledge of the food stamps program: where to shop, what to buy, who to talk to when an issue arose, and, most importantly, how to strategically interact with the staff in the local and state Department of Human Services (DHS) offices. These skills are vital to successfully navigating the world of social assistance, a system that is meant to serve people facing challenging life circumstances yet is designed and directed by people who likely have no first-hand knowledge of the intricate negotiations required to survive adjacent to the poverty line.

Contributors had to become experts of sorts in managing their SNAP cases. Breakdowns in the communication between DHS employees—the "official" managers of SNAP cases, and SNAP recipients—who function as the "unofficial-but-extremely-invested" managers of their

own SNAP cases, sometimes had dire consequences for the party with the least power but the most to lose.

"Just Getting Them On the Same Page Would Be Nice": Navigating the DHS Office

In order to apply, receive, and maintain SNAP benefits, recipients must learn to navigate their local branch of the state Department of Human Services office. Each person is assigned a caseworker who is responsible for requesting, verifying, and submitting any documents required to process a SNAP account. Alex describes interactions with her caseworker matter-of-factly, though she wonders if her straightforward experience is facilitated by her status as an educated, English-speaking white woman:

> I've got my worker's number, I know how to call her, all of those sorts of things. So I don't know that I have a problem with the way the program is delivered. I'm hopeful that the [SNAP application] information is available to people of color and people who do not have English as a primary language.

Knowing the caseworker's contact information, however, does not guarantee that SNAP recipients will be able to easily speak to their caseworker or get their questions answered. Several contributors described the difficulty of reaching a live operator in their local DHS office, echoing the experience that Bobby had:

> She never actually answers her phone. She just lets it go straight to voicemail. Or maybe she's always with somebody. Depending on which perspective you want to have. When you call in it takes about ten minutes to get to somebody because of the initial message. (laughs) "Here's our hours, here's our days, here's this, here's…" And you get all the way through and you finally can hang on *longer* to get somebody who's actually there.

Drew emphasized the importance of speaking directly to a DHS worker in order to confirm or correct any SNAP case-related issues. He also wondered about what underlying organizational issues might be contributing to the communication difficulties with and in the DHS office:

> It's very frustrating to go when you can't get an appointment, and you can't talk to a live person at the office…. I don't know whether they're overworked, or whether they— That's that issue of being able to talk to a person and explain and get answers as to why they're deciding what they're deciding.

While Drew was frustrated with the difficulties involved in communicating with the DHS office, he was careful to clarify that his negative opinions were primarily focused on the government assistance system itself or the failings of a few, specific individuals rather than a generalized, personal dislike of the people tasked with upholding a faulty system. Perhaps this segmentation of worker from system reflected the way he wished to be seen first as a person, then as a SNAP recipient. He repeatedly praised some of his past caseworkers who had been "very understanding, very helpful." He noted that the DHS office staff seemed to be in a state of constant flux and wondered if the communication gap was the cause or a symptom of a larger issue within the department:

> We've had good caseworkers and we've had bad caseworkers, where they switched. Instead of just leaving you with one person, they switch you every six months or a year for somebody new. I don't know whether they've got that much job turnover or if it's just the nature of where they shift it out.

Receiving and maintaining SNAP benefits requires a lot of legwork. Recipients are required to reconfirm all of their income, assets, and household information on a yearly basis,

with verification checks every six months. SNAP recipients are expected to initiate contact with the DHS office or their caseworker to report if their income or household information changes between the official semi-annual checks. Unless there have been significant changes to the SNAP recipient's circumstances, the mid-year verification often involves mailing back a single, pre-paid form confirming that the details discussed at the yearly check-in are still accurate. No other contact is required with the DHS office or caseworker unless one of the parties involved has a question.

While there are alternative options to face-to-face caseworker interviews (such as a phone interview, after which the applicant must submit verification documentation to the DHS front office via mail or personal delivery), several contributors expressed that meeting their caseworker in the office was the most effective way to ensure their case was handled properly. In fact, all contributors but Emory, who, during the school year, lived in a different city than her permanent address, relayed that they preferred to go to the DHS office and meet their caseworker in person for the yearly recertification interviews.

For Bobby, meeting the caseworker in person is the most efficient way to manage his time: "it's kind of pointless to do it over the phone and then drive out there with the paperwork when I can just drive out there and do it in one shot." Face-to-face meetings with caseworkers can also humanize the experience of being a social assistance recipient. For Drew, meeting the person who was handling his information allowed him to acknowledge his hesitations about participating in SNAP: "They were very kind, and we talked about me being embarrassed and how I shouldn't be, and that kind of stuff." That type of personal connection and support is less likely to occur in a phone call.

Some contributors had praise for their individual caseworkers but were less positive about the support staff in the DHS office. A few contributors specifically cited DHS office staff as an impediment to efficiently managing a SNAP case. Emory said that her caseworker was "great," but that other office staff lost her paperwork:

> They lost my verification of employment, the lost the verification of my housing, all that paperwork got lost and then I got a rejection letter in the mail. So I had to call them and be like, 'I sent this.' And the social worker is like, 'This happens all the time.' You could hear the annoyance in her voice that they lost it again. So I ended up taking everything in myself, drove there to do it, and the office workers, again it was very difficult.

Bobby discussed how frustrating it could be to get a definitive answer about the program's rules from the various employees of the DHS office, where the staff workers:

> tell different things. So, caseworker says one thing, front desk person says another, other front desk person says another, fill-in person says a fourth thing, whatever…. My wife was looking at getting a part-time job. So, I asked the caseworker, 'What do we do?' And the caseworker said, 'You report everything, any change.' But the front desk had already said you only report changes that take you over a certain dollar amount. And then the other one said you only report if it's gonna last for a certain amount of time.

These inconsistencies in relating the rules of the program later caused significant problems for Bobby and his family, as I illustrate later in this chapter.

Social assistance programs have complicated and ever-changing rules about what verifications are required, when and how to document changes, and who to contact to get clarification. And while DHS seems to expect absolute transparency and immediacy from those receiving services, it often fails to meet that standard itself. As the December 2018 partial

government shutdown turned into the longest in U.S. history, it was expected that funding for SNAP would be drained within a few weeks, leaving millions of people without sufficient means for purchasing food. To prepare for this possibility, the SNAP benefit release schedule was accelerated and benefits for both January and February of 2019 were dispersed in January.

However, the only way that SNAP recipients knew that this critical change was happening was by discovering the information on their own. In January, one of the contributors emailed me to ask if I would like to know their thoughts on the government shutdown and how it would affect them as SNAP recipients. He had recently renewed his SNAP case and the caseworker had discussed how his benefits might be affected by the shutdown. I replied that I absolutely did and invited the other contributors to send me their thoughts via email. While the four contributors who replied were very aware of how the shutdown did and might affect SNAP (as this chapter illustrates, successful SNAP recipients are master managers), I was dismayed to learn that none of them had received any direct notice from DHS about the situation at hand.

After receiving the contributor's replies, I was curious about where information about the government shutdown's effect on SNAP might be found. My search and the contributors' responses suggested that a person might be more inclined to discover such information if one:

- followed their state's Department of Human Service's Facebook page;
- downloaded the FreshEBT app on a smartphone or tablet;
- routinely checked their state's DHS website;
- happened to see or read about it in the news, either on television, in the newspaper, or, for most contributors, online;
- called their local DHS office or caseworker and knew to ask about the shutdown's effects on SNAP; or

- had a routine meeting scheduled with a caseworker that happened to coincide with the government shutdown.

Despite the DHS possessing multiple up-to-date contact methods for every SNAP recipient, contributors reported that no letters, calls, or emails were sent out to explain the impact of the government shutdown. It was apparent in the flyers posted online that DHS was concerned that recipients would think they were receiving a "bonus" disbursement (which is not uncommon if one's income has recently been adjusted or they are new to the program), yet there was no direct DHS-to-SNAP recipient contact attempted.

Despite the elaborate system of paperwork and oversight required of SNAP recipients, some contributors felt that whether or not they were eligible for SNAP benefits was ultimately a subjective decision heavily influenced by their caseworker. Casey shared strong feelings about a caseworker whom she believed to be unfairly requiring extensive, unnecessary verifications before approving her SNAP and disability benefits:

> There's a lady who's a bitch about it, too… She was giving me shit for [something in my paperwork] and tellin' me that I was gonna lose my food stamps and lose my disability and all that. For reasons that didn't even—she had no reasons.

Sometimes, the difference between receiving SNAP benefits and not receiving SNAP benefits can be determined by a missed piece of mail or a mistake by a caseworker. In those cases, SNAP recipients must serve as their own case supervisor and advocate in order to correct the problem. The insider knowledge of navigating the DHS that the contributors demonstrated was particularly critical when they discussed their worst-case scenario: losing SNAP benefits.

"We Keep Literally Every Piece of Paperwork": Losing SNAP Benefits

Much like the varied situations that lead them to apply for SNAP, the reasons that contributors lost SNAP benefits were uniquely personal. A miscommunication between SNAP recipient and caseworker or a misunderstanding between DHS employees within the same office can result in serious consequences for the SNAP recipient. It is unlikely that there will be a consequence comparable to immediately losing access to food for a caseworker or government employee who makes a mistake on a SNAP recipient's case.

To continue with Casey's story, she related how her SNAP benefits were cut after a routine eligibility verification. Casey's husband was attending school full time in another state and was not eligible for SNAP benefits due to his immigration status, so Casey's regular caseworker advised her not to include him on her benefit application. This was not a problem for two years. However, during her most recent recertification process, a supervisor in the DHS office wanted Casey to submit additional documentation regarding her husband's student status. Casey felt that the supervising caseworker had racist motivations and was targeting her for being married to an immigrant:

> On this whole Trump thing about like—I know that sounds political and everything, '*cause it is*—but if you are a immigrant or applied for anything that is a social program, your green card thing can be cut. He's not even on the [application] because he's not eligible…. He's not part of my household for people who are applying. Like my dog is not on the household, you know. And so I was trying to explain that to her and—she didn't want to let it go. And she cut my food stamps.

Casey was well-aware of the struggle she would face if she lost access to SNAP benefits, but she believed that she knew the rules and had correctly followed instructions given by her usual

caseworker. Casey did not want to acquiesce to what she saw as unfair demands and expected that the supervisor would have to follow the same rules that had approved Casey's benefits for the previous two years. However, that expectation proved to be false as the supervisor denied Casey's SNAP application and she lost SNAP benefits. In Casey's view, this action was a vindictive misuse of power in order "to prove a point."

Casey did not accept this decision as valid. She repeatedly called the supervisor to convince her to change the decision, though all of Casey's calls went straight to voicemail. She enlisted her doctors, family members, neighbors, and other contacts to inundate the supervisor and DHS office with letters pleading her case. One of Casey's health care providers revealed that several other patients had also experienced conflict with that particular DHS supervisor, a discovery which strengthened Casey's belief that the problem with her case stemmed from the supervisor's personal agenda rather than a failure to submit required documentation. Eventually, the decision to revoke Casey's SNAP benefits was overturned, despite the supervisor never directly responding to Casey's calls or letters. With no explanation of why her case was suddenly approved, Casey remained convinced that the debacle was instigated "because she saw [my husband's] name. That was all because of his name."

Emory's temporary loss of benefits was more straightforward and uncontested: her SNAP recertification date coincided with the start of the university's summer break and the subsequent end of her student worker contract. She had not yet secured a summer position with a stable schedule when it was time to submit verifications, leaving her unable to meet the 20-hours-per-week work requirement for SNAP eligibility. Emory worked a variety of temporary and part-time jobs over the summer to make ends meet. She then reapplied for and regained SNAP benefits once she received her student worker contract for the new school year.

Drew's story of losing SNAP benefits also involved an unpredictable work schedule and temporary work contracts, which caused his income to fluctuate erratically. His situation, like Casey's, was compounded by errors made by his caseworker in the DHS office. However, Drew attributed the issue to a series of incompetent caseworkers rather than the result of a personal grudge:

> When we first started we had a couple of caseworkers that kept adding on income when we reported it, but they would never take it away when it went away. So we were listed as making twice what we were actually making because they wouldn't remove income off of our files. Finally, we just let it go and went back and reapplied a couple of years later.

Despite trying to resolve the problems with his case for more than a year, Drew could not find a solution. During this time, his family's SNAP benefits steadily dwindled as the mis-counted earnings increased until they were deemed to have "too much income" to qualify for SNAP. The design of DHS protocols could not properly account for his non-standardized employment and income situation, so he was shut out of receiving assistance that, according to the income requirements of the SNAP application, he was qualified to receive.

As with Drew's case, a miscommunication with the DHS office regarding temporary work also lead to the first time Bobby's family unexpectedly lost SNAP benefits. His wife, Blake, was hired as a part-time/as-needed babysitter for another family. Bobby had been told by a DHS worker that they were required to immediately report any new source of income, so he submitted an update to their caseworker about Blake's upcoming job. A few days later, the hiring family's schedule changed and they no longer needed Blake's help. However, the DHS office had already processed the income as if Blake was working regular part-time hours for the full

month and being paid accordingly. Their SNAP benefits were canceled, and the family had to re-apply to correct the mistake.

It is possible to consider these scenarios of losing SNAP benefits as evidence of muted group theory in action (Ardener, E., 1975; Ardener, S. 1978; Kramarae, 2005). Because the forms and guidelines for the social services program are written by representatives of the dominant social group, these documents and procedures fail to account for the realities of existence as a SNAP recipient. For the dominant group, the DHS office, there seem to be little to no consequences for this failure in translation. Those assigned to the subordinate group, the SNAP recipients, get the sense that the DHS office holds that it is looking out for their best interest, if they would just be quiet and cooperate. Yet if they do not speak up, SNAP recipients are left to suffer the consequences of case mismanagement by the DHS. If members of the subordinate group attempt to address or question the dominant group, as Casey did, their queries are often met with silence or disdain as they are not considered to be part of the "privileged circle" of people allowed to voice their concerns (Kramarae, 2005, p. 55).

Bobby's family lost SNAP benefits a second time, again due to an error by DHS. He and his family had been on vacation and arrived home to two letters from the state SNAP headquarters: one which said he had an upcoming verification meeting, the other said that he had already missed the meeting and his family's SNAP account was canceled. The postmark on the verification meeting letter showed that it was mailed *after* the date of the scheduled meeting. I asked him what happens in such a situation:

> You freak out because it's a Saturday and (laughs) you can't talk to them until Monday. And then I drove up there and asked them what the deal is, and, uh, chewed out a few

> people, and they told me I can either appeal or do a new case. And I said, "I wanna do both. Want to make sure this works."

By this point, Bobby had enough experience dealing with the DHS office that he was wary of picking one option over the other. To ensure that his case was processed efficiently and his family's SNAP benefits were restored, he needed to make the right choice. However, it was nearly impossible to know which route to take and the staff in the DHS office were either unable or unwilling to help him decide the best path. If he chose to continue with his current SNAP case and appeal, the complicated process could drag on for weeks, delaying his family's SNAP benefits. If he chose to start a new SNAP application, at the very least he would be required to go through the entire intake process for a second (or third) time. In either case, there is one thing that is sure to be required: more paperwork.

> And you have to reverify everything. So now we keep literally every piece of paperwork we think they might want. . . I have everything backlogged, two years of it. . . . 'Cause I don't know. And I don't know what we'll do if there's a house fire or something and we lost that. Or, you know, water leaks are right on top of wherever the papers are. We'll be in real trouble.

Once Bobby realized that his family's SNAP benefits could be lost at any moment, he began to stockpile documentation to strategically prepare for the next time he might be required to spontaneously verify all of his family's financial information. Because Bobby knows that his family's ability to eat will be jeopardized if his case is mishandled, he began to carefully consider how he needed to manage future interactions with the DHS office in order to protect his family's food source:

> If we get another part time job, what do we do? And given what happened before, I am most likely not gonna tell them. . . . You know, because you can't. If they're gonna—if working for a couple days is gonna cost you a month's worth of food stamps until they fix it, it's not worth telling them until the last possible second that you have to tell them.

Bobby, who considers himself an honest person, is disillusioned with the competency of the system and those charged with executing it. He wonders if it is worthwhile to continue to play by the rules if he is going to continue to be punished for the DHS office's mistakes. Bobby's dilemma of wanting to do what is asked of him but knowing that doing so may have a detrimental effect on his and his family's food source is not an uncommon one confronting those receiving government assistance.

In Gustafson's (2011) insightful research on the criminalization of poverty and how it affects people who use public assistance, she found that "Many believed that hiding sources of income from the welfare office was not only in their interest but necessary to their economic survival" (p. 117). The unreliability and punitive nature of the system, which is meant to *help* a person who is struggling, can ultimately push that person to break what they see as unfair rules, thus committing the fraud that the system itself seemed desperate to prevent, thereby creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Where once there was a person experiencing hardship who turned to government assistance for help, now there is a stereotypical welfare recipient "cheating the system."

When navigating the world as a social assistance recipient, the intangible forces of stigma and shame can result in recipients being self-conscious of the way they are viewed in society and altering their behavior in order to be perceived as a member of the dominant economic group – or at least not identified as a member of a stigmatized group. Goffman's (1956, 1959, 1963)

work is useful in understanding how people navigate their social worlds and identities. In particular, his ideas about stigma, embarrassment, and everyday life performance offer a useful theoretical lens for examining how contributors worked to communicatively manage their identity as SNAP recipients and challenged the stereotypes and misconceptions associated with government assistance. It is to Goffman's ideas that I now turn.

Managing Unwanted Identity

Beyond the pragmatic issues involved with managing a SNAP case, there is an additional layer of socially-constructed stigma and shame in the United States surrounding the use of government assistance. While the original meaning of "stigma" referred to physical marks on a person's body (the Greeks had a ritual of branding people to designate them as property or criminals), Goffman (1963) suggests that gaining a stigma can be as simple as "possess[ing] an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated" (p. 5). If this difference is perceived negatively by others in a particular social situation, then it is considered an attribute which is discrediting, thus becoming a stigma.

As I've noted, the detail work of obtaining and maintaining SNAP benefits requires time, as well as specialized knowledge and skills. But there is much more to it than that. An unavoidable yet often overlooked aspect of utilizing SNAP benefits is the mental and emotional toll of identifying oneself—or being identified by others—as a recipient of government assistance.

During our conversations, contributors frequently spoke of the negative attributes of SNAP. Some problems were logistical, involving the increased mental workload of grocery shopping with a small budget or government program-related restrictions. Quite often, contributors revealed that the most challenging parts of receiving SNAP benefits were managing

the emotional, personal, and social side-effects of being associated with government assistance. While SNAP is meant to offer nutrition assistance for low-income community members, there is a cost to accepting these benefits, and that cost is much more complicated than it might seem. In particular, study contributors revealed that alongside their SNAP benefits, they received another, less welcome, benefaction: the unwanted identity of "SNAP Recipient."

"Government assistance recipient" is not a coveted title. Its possession confers an impression of neither success nor achievement. In fact, being identified as a recipient of government assistance can mark the person as socially or professionally undesirable. The stigma surrounding poverty or government assistance is deeply entrenched in U.S. society (Goffman, 1963; Schneider & Jacoby, 2007). In his classic work on social stigma, Goffman (1963) suggests that a person with a stigma is considered "not quite human," "inferior," or a threat to the social order, and is therefore discriminated against in ways that "reduce [one's] life chances" (p. 5). Goffman argues that "normals," in contrast, are those who are not perceived to possess such attributes. Contributors were acutely aware of the stereotypes associated with welfare recipients and had strong ideas about how those negative portrayals were circulated.

In an effort to keep my ideas connected with Goffman's insights, while making clear that the concept of "normal" is, and should be, a deeply contested notion, I use the term "the normalized" to show that assumptions about what is normal and what is stigmatized are socially constructed and imposed. It would be a disservice to my study contributors, my intention for the study, and my research ethos, if something I wrote could be misinterpreted as suggesting or affirming that people who receive government assistance are in some way abnormal.

“It’s Just Free Money”: Other People’s Perceptions

Social media was pinpointed by both Alex and Drew as a source of negative assumptions about SNAP and its beneficiaries. Social media users can easily filter online content while also being presented with “an overwhelming amount of ambiguous information” (Carpenter, Preotiuc-Pietro, Clark, Flekova, Smith, Kern, et al., 2018, p. 562) In light of this ease and “ambiguous or absent” (p. 562) social cues, social media users may choose to ignore or avoid information they dislike or do not understand and operate under the assumption that there are “minimal social consequences to misunderstandings online” (p. 562). This means that people often post or share opinions online that they might hesitate to announce in a face-to-face social interaction. Alex said that after culling her own social media “Friend List,” she still saw comments from friends-of-friends who presented “disturbing” attitudes about social programs and their recipients. Drew explained that he avoided social media “because it’s full of ignorance,” some of which was perpetuated by his family members who liked to “post crap” about government assistance. Clearly, online communication does have consequences.

Bobby identified “media” in general as failing to properly educate people about the intricacies of SNAP and other social assistance programs:

> Media is almost always against it. . . . So someone who doesn’t know about food stamps probably doesn’t know about WIC, doesn’t know unemployment, doesn’t know the other things. . . . They don’t know what the requirements are. They just think, “Well, I read once that it’s just free money.”

From a Cultural Studies perspective, media, as the “ultimate source of power” in our society (West & Turner, 2018, p. 426), are responsible for “profoundly sculpt[ing]” our culture in the United States (p. 425). Cultural Studies further holds that “the media are a tool of the dominant

class" (p. 426). If these claims are accurate, then Bobby is right to be concerned about how government assistance programs and their participants are portrayed in the media. If the media primarily highlight images that reinforce negative stereotypes of social assistance recipients, then stereotypes may be the only thing informing the general public's opinions on the system and the people who are part of it. Though they are under or misinformed, members of the general public often accept that they "know the Truth" about social assistance recipients because of what they saw on television or read online.

Beyond the idea that social assistance recipients are unconditionally bestowed with "free money" from the government, stereotypes of SNAP recipients that contributors identified included:

- reluctance or refusal to work
- being lazy
- cheating the system
- purchasing "luxury" food items such as steak and lobster
- having children to increase welfare benefits
- being a single mother
- living in a mobile home
- being an undocumented immigrant or refugee
- lacking education
- having an addiction to drugs
- making poor health and nutritional choices, and
- only interested in themselves and their own gain.

These stereotypes were cited as being used frequently to mock or criticize social assistance recipients. Some contributors expressed that by being a SNAP recipient and confirming one of these stereotypes (or being perceived as such), they felt burdened with an additional layer of stigma or guilt.

Peering beyond the person's limited financial capital, criticisms of social assistance recipients often scrutinize their character, morality, and perceived lack of personal responsibility (Alphonso, 2015; Bohon, 2017; Chase & Walker, 2013; Rank, 2004). Negative cultural perceptions about welfare recipients create problems much greater than simply the way people interact with each other in person or in troubling posts online. Politicians have repeatedly stoked the flame of "anti-entitlement" public opinion to garner support for cutting social services, including food stamps, Medicaid, and other programs that serve low-income Americans. Mendible (2016) explains how this stigmatizing tactic operates:

> Stigmatizing political narratives endow their cultural protagonists with moral authority and just causes. They arouse feelings of helplessness, anger, or fear in the citizenry, feelings that can be exploited and fetishized through an erasure or denial of the circumstances of their production and circulation. Exploiting negative predispositions toward stigmatized groups, leaders can deflect blame and accountability, instead casting these on target groups who are held responsible not only for their own but for the nation's problems (p. 11).

A current example of this tactic in use was evident when Ivanka Trump, daughter of U.S. President Donald Trump and bearer of the official government title "Advisor to the President," was interviewed by a Fox News correspondent in February 2019 (Garcia, 2019). As she stated, "I don't think most Americans, in their heart, want to be given something.… People want to work

for what they get…. They want the ability to live in a country where there's the potential for upward mobility."

Though she is referring to legislation proposing a new "living minimum wage" and does not mention social assistance specifically, Trump, who was being interviewed on national television as an official government representative, implies on a conservative news outlet's program that people who accept "handouts" (Calicchio, 2019)—a term often used as derisive code for government assistance programs—are not real Americans and are therefore deserving of scorn. Trump avoids addressing the larger social and economic problems involved in finding gainful employment and carefully chooses her words to prevent acknowledging that the "potential" for upward mobility in the U.S. does not ensure that the opportunity is realistically available to all working people. Her statements reaffirm the stigma of needing or accepting government assistance and give credence to the stereotype of people who receive government assistance as lazy, morally suspect, and unwilling to work.

"I Don't Think That's Called 'Getting Free Stuff'": Resisting Others' Perceptions

Throughout our conversation, Alex was concerned about how stigmatizing "anti-entitlement" rhetoric might undermine others' access to basic necessities through social programs. She puzzled over how anyone would be against helping others in their community:

> I'm perfectly happy to pay taxes. I'm perfectly happy to have social programs, and I'm perfectly happy to avail myself of them if I qualify. I have no problem with making sure that people have enough food to eat and somewhere to live and education. And I don't think that's called "getting free stuff."

By stating her willingness to pay taxes and support social programs, Alex pushes back against the assumption that social assistance recipients prefer to take from others and prioritize their own

gain without concern for contributing back to society. Alex also candidly addressed the challenge of minimizing welfare fraud while ensuring that food assistance remained accessible:

> I am pretty tired of this myth of the "wealthy welfare recipient." I'm sure that there are people that have abused the system. But again, I'm willing to accept that small amount of abuse for those people that need help.

The stereotype of government assistance recipients cheating the system was referenced by Bobby as he sought to identify why his good-faith attempts to follow the DHS rules and be forthcoming to his caseworker about a negligible income increase resulted in his family's SNAP case being closed: "They aren't expecting people to tell them things, I think. They don't have a good system for actually, like, having honest people deal with them, I guess. I don't know." Because the social assistance system "prioritizes fraud prevention over poverty alleviation" (Gustafson, 2011, p. 96), a vicious cycle is created wherein the system, which is designed in expectation of attempted fraud, unwittingly encourages participants to avoid being truthful.

DHS workers are primed to identify and report suspected deviance, with minimal leeway to adapt standard protocol to circumstances that do not strictly meet the preapproved procedure, such as the inability of the DHS office to correctly document Bobby's wife's temporary job. Because standard protocols to report income are, one can assume, developed by government employees with regular hours and steady salaries, and because normative assumptions about what "honest" work and pay should look like presume the same, the listed options do not necessarily reflect the reality of income flow for those applying for or receiving SNAP benefits. As such, DHS employees do not have a standard system to explain to SNAP participants how to correctly report their fluctuating income.

SNAP recipients who attempt to dutifully follow the income reporting rules are at risk of being penalized by a system that cannot properly interpret their inconsistent earnings, thus causing the participant additional unexpected hardship when their SNAP benefits are abruptly reduced or canceled. Those same SNAP recipients who tried to be completely forthcoming then become afraid of being penalized. They start withholding information from DHS to protect themselves, thus validating the DHS' original expectation of deceit. For Bobby, the negative way DHS responded to his attempts at honesty convinced him that the stereotype of people cheating the system might be accurate.

Aside from making clear that complex work is required for getting and keeping SNAP benefits, all contributors challenged the perception that SNAP recipients do not work in paid employment. Emory suggested that low wages often cause working people to apply for SNAP benefits in order to "get by." Alex offered the perspective that some individuals who are criticized for "refusing" to work might have a disability or be struggling to overcome addiction—either of which could make it difficult, if not impossible, to maintain a steady job—and that their inability to work was ultimately "not doing any harm" to society. Drew emphasized that he and his wife both "work hard" and are trying to find sufficient employment. By emphasizing their own employment history and presenting alternative viewpoints for why others may not be able to work, the contributors strove to defuse stereotypes often leveled at government assistance recipients.

For Alex and Casey, who were not working full-time, their personal job histories were presented as proof of their work ethic and willingness to contribute to society. Alex described her various positions held in the healthcare professions during her decades-long career. Early in our conversation, she was searching for a fitting word to describe the amount of her benefits when

she encountered the phrase "food stamp award" on a DHS document. She argued that *award* was "not the word, because I earned this," and identified "allotment" as a more accurate term. Casey, who is unable to work due to a disability, emphasized that she had paid into the system significantly before her injury: "I worked since I was 15, and I have had two jobs at the same time for a lot of that." She concluded that she was therefore not "taking anything" from anyone else by receiving social assistance.

As discussed previously, contributors strongly resisted the assumption that the SNAP benefits they receive are just "free money." While most contributors suggested that their current or past employment merited their receipt of government assistance, Emory's validation came from an unexpected source: her father. As Emory recalled, "My dad says, 'I pay enough in taxes. You might as well get something out of it.'" Emory's parents were proud of their daughter for finding a way to take care of herself. For her parents, Emory receiving "government money" (as she referred to food stamps) meant that their contribution to the system supported a worthwhile cause.

In Goffman's (1956) study of embarrassment, he proposes that every person is required to play multiple roles in their daily social interactions. Under normal circumstances, "audience segregation" allows for each of an individual's disparate roles to be performed in different social situations, enabling one "to be a different person in each role without discrediting either" (p. 269). If a role, such as "SNAP recipient," is believed to be incompatible with the social situation at hand (for example, a person's EBT card falling out of their wallet in front of a work colleague), embarrassment is likely to result.

Because Emory's parents feel positively about her SNAP identity, she does not fear embarrassment or shame when her SNAP-recipient role emerges during social interactions with

them. Her SNAP identity is compatible with her parental audience. If her parents perceived her SNAP identity as negative or she wished to hide it from them, Emory might avoid highlighting or revealing her role as SNAP recipient in the presence of her parents, focusing instead on fulfilling her social role of "daughter."

Wrestling with abstract concepts such as identity, embarrassment, and stereotypes can be mentally and emotionally exhausting, but in order for SNAP benefits to actually *benefit* a person, they must go out and embody the role of a government assistance recipient in public. These interactions are likely to require the SNAP recipient to perform multiple roles for multiple audiences. But social performances necessary for receiving and utilizing SNAP benefits come with an abundance of onlookers—and risks.

Managing Surveillance

> I don't think they understand how humiliating the experience is of exposing your income and every walk of your life to these counselors to get help. It's humiliating to use [SNAP]. I dare say most people who use it don't want to be using it. It's not a source of pride or a source of, 'Oh, we're getting one over on the government.'. . . No one's trying to go down to the gas station and get ice cream and soda. Everybody is trying to support their family. (Drew)

Not only do SNAP recipients have to confront stereotypes and learn to negotiate their world in a new way, they also have to contend with the complicated emotions that arise from possessing an unwanted identity. Chase & Walker (2013) found that recipients of government assistance often believe the social services system to be "dehumanizing," "punitive," and a source of shame (p. 746). Many of the stories told by the current study's contributors support that determination. Shame, which Brown (2006) defines as "an intensely painful feeling or

experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging" (p. 43), is a subjective and contextually-based "moral force" that tends to "serve power rather than challenge it" (Mendible, 2016, p. 6). The multidimensional roots of shame also are evident when Chase & Walker (2013) posit that shame:

> is almost always co-constructed—combining an internal judgement of one's own abilities; an anticipated assessment of how one will be judged by others; and the actual verbal or symbolic gestures of others who consider, or are deemed to consider, themselves to be socially and/or morally superior to the person sensing shame (p. 740).

Shame is often used as a weapon of control and a method of silencing those who do not hold power.

Contributors also described ways that participating in SNAP left them feeling exposed, vulnerable, and continually monitored. At first glance, those characteristics are eerily reminiscent of Foucault's (1977) description of Bentham's Panopticon, a prison constructed so that each prisoner is "alone, perfectly individualized, and constantly visible" (p. 200) to a watchman in a central tower. The goal of the Panopticon was to "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (p. 201). The assumption is that if one believes they are being watched, then they will self-monitor and continue to follow the established rules of the institution in order to avoid punishment—even if no one is actually watching their every move.

Though the idea of the Panopticon is daunting, even more concerning is Foucault's (1977) suggestion that "penitentiary techniques" (p. 298), such as surveillance, have expanded beyond the walls of the prison and permeated society. Purdy (2015) asserts that surveillance "constitutes and supports power and those with power" (p. 5) and that the "expanse and

intensification of the surveillance society" has served to revive repressive forms of power (p. 9), which seek to prevent certain types of behavior. It is evident within many of the contributors' stories that they experience a sense of being surveilled and that this has added pressure to their lives in ways they would likely not experience if they were not a SNAP recipient.

Who is Watching?

> This highly repressive treatment of those who are at lower socioeconomic levels of society, and the focus of legal mechanisms of surveillance (welfare, law enforcement, etc.) on this population, has the potential to produce a certain societal "truth," which can then further shape and cement the discourse of those on welfare and those in poverty as being "deviant." (Foucault, 2002, as cited in Purdy, 2015, p. 11)

Surveillance can come from many directions for a SNAP recipient. From the moment they apply for SNAP, a person is required to reveal intimate details of their household and finances to a caseworker they may never meet in person. That information is then loaded into a government computer system, where it is used to create a case file that will be updated and transferred and referred back to for whatever length of time a person remains in the program (and probably long beyond). In the next two sections, I discuss how contributors experienced surveillance both inside and outside the DHS office.

"It feels like a risk": Exposure in the SNAP application process. SNAP is a means-tested government assistance program, which refers to the fact that in order to receive benefits, applicants must have income and resources below a certain amount designated by the government. As discussed earlier, applying for and maintaining SNAP benefits requires an extensive amount of paperwork, which is submitted to and processed by recipients' local DHS

office. This process may sound benign, if tedious, but Purdy (2015) suggests that there is a greater purpose in it:

> These means-tests not only serve as qualifications and potential degradation ceremonies for those who are seeking welfare, but also are a point of surveillance and information gathering, providing knowledge of the individual to those systems which seek to influence them in some way. This process of means-testing thus serves as a form of power, with a gaze from an authority fixed on the personal details of one's life having the potential of producing self-examination and potentially even disciplining the behaviors of those who seek these benefits (p. 11).

Due to the sensitive nature of the information being exchanged and the impact its exposure could have on a person's life, one could assume that this data-gathering process is confidential; that an applicant's information and SNAP status are known only to their caseworker or the government workers in the office. Some contributors, however, raised concerns about how policies inherent to the SNAP application/verification process diminished their privacy and potentially put them at risk.

The waiting area in a DHS office seems designed to withstand potential conflict and quell confrontations. Typically, the open room is lined with rows of chairs, with social service applicants separated from DHS receptionists by a short wall topped with a large glass panel that extends to the ceiling. A locked door divides the waiting room from the main office space. At the waiting room front counter, there is an opening in the glass through which to slide paperwork to the clerk on the other side. In order for a SNAP participant to check in for an appointment or get information about their case, the front desk clerk typically asks for the person's social security number. Casey was concerned about the potential for identity theft when asked to say her social

security number loudly enough to be heard through the glass divider in a room filled with strangers:

> That's not cool. And then I say, "Can I write it down on a piece of paper?" and they act like, "Oh my god." And then you say, "Can I have the piece of paper back?" Because they're just gonna throw it out. Which defeats the purpose. . . . Sorry, I'm being proactive about me. . . . People would take because they're put in a position to take.

Another way that personal information might spread beyond the confines of the DHS office is in the process of verifying a SNAP recipient's reported finances. Bobby describes how the requirement of income verifications, which one might assume is a simple, straightforward process, is complicated by 'non-traditional' employers and could have unintended ramifications for the SNAP recipient:

> One of the problems during the sign-up process for food stamps is they do employer verifications. And if you do that in a state where they can fire you for any reason, it feels like a risk. . . . If we were to get a job change, as soon as we get the job, they're calling the new job to verify that we—yeah. It just feels like a weird system. I [work] in a little church. . . . So there's no W-2. . . . And there's no pay stub. So, I can show you a paycheck, but it looks like a little handwritten check. And I can show you the financial statement of the church, but that looks kind of weird, too. But it has my name on it. It has a salary. And it matches what's on the check. . . . But they still call the [church] secretary. . . . And you never know how they feel about government assistance.

There is a vicious cycle at play here: a SNAP recipient is required to work to receive SNAP benefits. DHS wants proof of this work. When the proof that the recipient has access to is deemed unacceptable, DHS directly contacts the recipient's employer. This DHS-to-employer

communication effectively "outs" the recipient as a beneficiary of government assistance, which could discredit them in the employer's view. Even if a DHS worker does not identify the specific reason that they require information on the employee, the call itself is enough to raise curiosity and concern. This newly-revealed "discreditability" could affect the recipient's social relationships at work and his employer's opinion of his job performance, leaving the employee vulnerable to job loss or subject to additional scrutiny. This potential shift from "discreditable" to "discredited" (Goffman, 1963) was a common fear for many contributors, fueled in no small part by the amount of surveillance they were subjected to when navigating the world as a SNAP recipient.

"So that's kinda weird": Shopping surveillance.

> *I understand that there are states where you have up to six pages of a document which delineates down to not only the items you can buy, but which brands. That is cruel, prohibitive, and not at all cost effective. Who has to monitor that? I don't think you can expect the cashiers to. So there has to be some sort of system in place to make sure that you don't buy Cocoa Puffs, that you buy…the store brand. Which the quality might be fine, but that's ridiculous.* (Alex)

Many of the contributors cited shopping for food using SNAP benefits as a potential source of confusion, stress, and shame. Between determining which items are eligible for purchase, keeping track of a limited food budget, and managing the social role of SNAP recipient (with its increased likelihood of public scrutiny), grocery shopping can get complicated. The practices and population of the store itself can add to the uncertainty.

Despite the fact that food is necessary to live and grocery stores and similar establishments are most people's only option to procure said food, I suggest that such stores, for

SNAP users, often function as a hybrid of what Goffman (1963) calls "out of bounds" and "civil places" (p. 81). At a civil place, the stigmatized person's presence may not be genuinely welcomed, but they are politely tolerated and conflicts are avoided. In contrast, at an out of bounds place, "exposure means expulsion" (p. 81). While it is unlikely that a SNAP user would be forcibly removed from a store, I borrow the essence of "out of bounds" to encapsulate the possibility for overtly hostile social interactions. Which place a store represents at a given moment often depends on the particular mix of people populating the store alongside the SNAP user. The line between a civil place and an out of bounds place is subject to blur at any moment, which could explain why many contributors expressed that they tended to be highly vigilant when shopping.

Buying the Right Thing

Goffman (1963) suggests that "unthinking routines for [the normalized] can become management problems for the discreditable" (p. 88). Contributors spent considerable time describing the way using SNAP benefits affected their shopping experiences, including the preparation involved before they left for the store. Emory's friend who introduced her to SNAP gave her a brief overview of what foods were allowed for purchase with food stamps, but she found the purchasing instructions from DHS confusing and "super vague." Her first shopping trip was riddled with stress as she tried to determine which foods were covered by her SNAP benefits:

> I knew I couldn't purchase things from the deli or the fresh food like the roasted chicken. And then I knew alcohol was off-limits as well…. So then it's like, can I purchase this chicken salad that's on sale that looks like it's in the deli? But is it not [eligible] because

> is it considered fast, fresh food? So I was very self-conscious about what I purchased. I didn't buy a bunch because I didn't know what I could get.

Bobby described how he studied the DHS paperwork to learn what was eligible for purchase with his SNAP benefits but still felt apprehensive about making selections once in the store because "you feel like you should get certain things or not get certain things. You kind of wonder if you're gonna get in trouble if you buy this or that."

Listening to their stories, it struck me how frequently the contributors seemed to blame themselves for their SNAP-related shopping stress rather than question the rationale behind why their grocery experiences felt so high stakes and potentially punitive. Bobby called it "just one of those nervous things" to wonder if he would be punished for selecting the "wrong" type of food at the grocery store. Emory intentionally bought fewer groceries in an effort to minimize the potential of making a mistake, then chastised herself for being overly cautious: "I think I made it more complicated than it needed to be, probably due to my own anxiety because I didn't want to accidentally try to purchase something I couldn't purchase."

The likelihood of selecting an ineligible item when shopping using SNAP is high. However, ringing up an item that SNAP will not purchase is not considered attempted fraud, so it carries no legal consequence. The computer system will automatically separate the ineligible items into a second transaction. Government policy focuses on prosecuting SNAP fraud in the form of lying on the application in order to get SNAP benefits or exchanging food stamps for cash, rather than on someone trying to buy a snack from the salad bar. Nevertheless, the perceived threat of punishment by DHS or fear of mis-stepping made many contributors very cautious about what they put in their cart. This suggests that the omnipresent social surveillance system is fulfilling its function to regulate behavior, as SNAP users take great pains to follow

orders, to the point that they will not even attempt to purchase something they need if they are not sure that it is within the rules. Consider, for example, Bobby's experience:

> At WalMart where they do the hot chicken off the bar.… I don't think you can buy it because it's hot, but once they put it in the refrigerated rack with a new tag on it, I think you can. I still haven't actually tried that, but you don't wanna buy something that you can't get and then have to either pay for it or leave it there—it's just not really clear.

Note the two options presented: pay for the item separately with another form of payment or leave the item at the register. For many SNAP users, unexpectedly paying out of pocket for SNAP-ineligible foods is not a viable choice.

It can be difficult to determine whether a newly-encountered food item will or will not be paid for by SNAP benefits for a myriad of reasons, e.g.:

- The item is mislabeled (which could allow either a SNAP-ineligible item to be purchased or reject a SNAP-eligible item)
- A particular store categorizes an item in a SNAP-ineligible way (such as a store that labels all foods housed in its deli section as "hot food" or "in-store meal" items, regardless of whether or not an item is packaged and refrigerated)
- A cold, in-store roasted chicken is still labeled in a way that classifies it as SNAP-ineligible "hot food."

Designations about what is or is not approved for SNAP purchase might also vary between grocery stores or vendors that accept SNAP. Drew summarized the quirks of paying with SNAP when he said, "Depending on the store, you can't just run by and pick up a deli item that's pre-made. . . You have to know which stores you can use the deli products and which you can't."

Drew's experience adds another consideration: potential public shame. He explains, "There was a couple of times I used the card where I went ahead and paid cash for it because I was too embarrassed to come back and change the purchase." Failure to successfully complete a purchase at the register is a shopping "faux pas" (Goffman, 1959, p. 210), which, when committed, raises the stakes of the social interaction. Now instead of only the SNAP user and the cashier being aware of the details of the transaction, the pause in the normal flow of the checkout line potentially raises the curiosity of those waiting in line. Even if others present near the register do not identify (or care about) the cause of the disruption, the SNAP user might be highly self-conscious about the impression they are making and the assumptions that others are forming.

Bobby lamented that store employees "aren't willing to think a little bit" about why an item that should be covered by SNAP is not ringing up properly. In his experience with WIC, the register's veto on an item can sometimes be overridden or circumvented by the cashier or manager. However, such decisions are highly subjective and difficult to predict, "so you have some people making exceptions and they'll just scan the green beans twice or whatever, and other people don't." This inability to predict what might happen at the register adds to the uncertainty many contributors described in their shopping experiences and further complicated their ability to manage their SNAP identity.

Cash, Card, or Discredit?: The Checkout Line

Wandering the aisles and selecting food is a fairly anonymous endeavor. There are no "right" or "wrong" foods when items are simply sitting in the cart, but in order to complete the financial and social interaction of grocery shopping, that vexing EBT card which, as Emory describes it, screams, "Flag! America!" must be brought into the light, potentially subjecting its

bearer to scrutiny from the normalized shoppers populating the check-out line. Every contributor had something to share about that unavoidable final step of grocery shopping: the checkout line.

What makes the checkout line such a troublesome area? Standing at the register is a moment where worlds and roles collide. A simple flash of plastic has the potential to transform an otherwise normalized person into an assumed deviant. The act of paying for groceries forces the SNAP recipient to confront their SNAP identity and decide how to present that role to an otherwise unaware audience. Goffman (1963) describes what happens in such "mixed contacts" (p. 12) during moments "when [the normalized] and the stigmatized" meet:

> There occurs one of the primal scenes of sociology: for, in many cases, these moments will be the ones when the causes and effects of stigma must be directly confronted on both sides. The stigmatized individual may find that he feels unsure of how we [normalized] will identify him and receive him (p. 13).

Even if the SNAP user is confident in their role, the cashier is professionally indifferent, and each plays their part, there remains the wildcard of other customers in line, watching and potentially waiting to disrupt the polite interaction by "causing a scene" (Goffman, 1959, p. 205). No matter how unremarkable the transaction at hand, there are certain predictable checkout actions that can signal SNAP is being used to others in the immediate area. The stakes are also raised because those with the stigmatized identity may dread that a small mis-step on their part will blot out their possibility of being seen as normalized and provide an exemplar of why negative expectations of their stigmatized group are accurate (Goffman, 1986).

Casey and Emory both mentioned having to swipe two cards or make two transactions when buying everyday non-food items such as personal care products or cleaning supplies. This phenomenon relates to how food stamps purchases are processed by the store computer system.

If ringing up a mixture of SNAP-eligible and SNAP-ineligible items, first the EBT card must be swiped to pay for the eligible food purchases. The register charges the EBT card for that amount, then recalculates the total due for the ineligible items, which must be paid for with a second debit/credit/gift card or cash. Emory recounted that she sometimes avoided purchasing non-food items when grocery shopping with SNAP in order to avoid the two-card scenario.

Some stores require customers to tell the cashier what type of card they will use for payment in order to prepare the register for the correct type of transaction. In this situation, the question is commonly posed by the cashier as "Credit or debit?" to which a SNAP user must know to reply, "EBT." To identify the EBT card as simply "debit" can, in some situations, cause the payment to be declined. Bobby describes having to verbally declare one's SNAP status as "kinda weird if you got a bunch of people in line."

'The Card': A Symbol of Stigma.

> Stoking economic discontent or social anxieties, those calling for the revival of shame, often wrapped in the American flag, warn of encroaching hoards. (Mendible, 2016, p. 8)

> I wish the card wasn't so obvious that it is what it is because it's giant—it's the flag…. It's very obvious what it is.… That is not the stereotypical blue credit card or something…. So I wish it wasn't as flamboyant in being American. (Emory)

The EBT card used to distribute SNAP benefits was the primary way contributors indicated that their SNAP identity could be revealed in public. The state-issued EBT card possessed by the contributors depicted a close-up image of the intersection of stars and stripes on a rippling U.S. flag. The words "Benefit Security Card" filled the top-right quadrant of the card's surface, with the contributor's name and card number printed across the bottom third of the card. An example of this card is included on the study recruitment flyer in Appendix A. As one's

status as a SNAP recipient is not immediately perceivable or a visible "defect" (as Goffman might indelicately refer to it) on their physical person, the EBT card serves as a "stigma symbol" (Goffman, 1963, p. 43) to draw attention to the SNAP user's membership in a stigmatized group. Drew recounts the moment he realized that the card made his SNAP identity visible to others in the store:

> I realized there was a distinct design on the card that set it aside as not just a credit card but as a food stamp card. Yeah, I just remembered that was the impression I had, that it was kind of embarrassing.

In an effort to maximize her likelihood of completing a grocery transaction without her stigmatized identity becoming apparent to those around her—of "passing," as Goffman (1963) would say—Emory preferred to use the self-checkout line and developed a particular manner of holding the EBT card so that it was not visible to others (p. 80). Scanning her purchases herself allowed her to avoid potentially awkward interactions with a cashier or having another customer waiting close to her while she completed her transaction. This is a strategy she adopted to manage the uncertainty of her first SNAP shopping trip, though she continues to use it to prevent revealing her SNAP identity to other shoppers:

> I went to the u-scan because I didn't know how it was going to work. Would it pop up saying it was EBT? And I didn't want anyone to know I was using it, so I was very discrete in swiping it and putting it back in my purse. I usually quickly swipe it and put it back in, unlike my debit card that I just hold in my hand.

Taking such a calculated approach to determine and pursue the path of least embarrassment is not uncommon. In Goffman's (1956) study of embarrassment, he recounts a very similar scenario:

> The individual is likely to know that certain special situations always make him uncomfortable and that he has certain "faulty" relationships which always cause him uneasiness. His daily round of social encounters is largely determined, no doubt, by his major social obligations, but he goes a little out of his way to find situations that will not be embarrassing and to by-pass those that will (p. 267).

Efforts taken to avoid embarrassment or maintain privacy can sometimes have unintended consequences. Ironically, Emory's attempt to be discreet once drew unwanted attention to her self-checkout transaction:

> I did have an incident recently where I was at a store I don't normally go to, I have my wallet in my hand and I hold it close until it's time to get [the EBT card]. I pull it out and I swipe it and put it instantly back in. And this employee got super suspicious of me, and she's watching me super close. It made me feel really self-conscious.

Emory wanted to successfully perform the role of Casual Grocery Shopper. However, her heightened awareness to her surroundings, persistent fear of being identified, and concerted effort to conceal the item which she believed most likely to discredit her resulted in a performance that signalled *this is someone who requires extra surveillance* to the store clerk, who had presumably been trained to recognize the signs of shoplifting or other criminal behavior.

Confrontations. The risk of being identified as a SNAP recipient loomed large in most contributors' minds when they used an EBT card. Even if they had never been directly accosted, contributors had prepared themselves for the possibility of a negative social interaction and often actively worked to circumvent situations where such confrontations might occur. In his description of the "carceral," Foucault (1977) examined how the power to identify and penalize

those deemed to be deviant has gradually shifted from the responsibility of a formal judicial and penal system to a more insidious system of socially-based control:

> By operating at every level of the social body and by mingling ceaselessly the art of rectifying and the right to punish, the universality of the carceral lowers the level from which it becomes natural and acceptable to be punished (p. 303).

The cumulative effect of dehumanizing cultural narratives and political rhetoric about recipients of government assistance has emboldened some people who consider themselves to be upstanding, hardworking citizens to accost those whom they deem to be a burden on society in order to demand that such ostensibly failed citizens show proper remorse for their shortcomings. These self-appointed "spotters," to borrow a term from Goffman (1959, p. 147), believe that they have sufficient knowledge to serve as protective agents on behalf of the public, "check[ing] up on" (p. 148) SNAP recipients to ensure that they are following the "standards" (p. 146) required to maintain their role as government assistance recipients.

Finding a SNAP recipient target for these reprimands is simple if you know what you're looking for: the conspicuously patriotic debit card; perhaps splitting purchases into two groups: one fresh/frozen/processed foods only, the other detergent or dog food or, more controversially, alcohol. If one is particularly vigilant, they might notice a feat of currency sleight of hand such as Emory performs, where cash or a second card is tendered immediately after the first has been safely tucked away. The visibility and vulnerability of someone using SNAP at the register was why the checkout line was a common site of conflict for several contributors.

Casey asserted that while she was not particularly bothered by people who "[got] an attitude" when she used her EBT card, she stayed highly aware of what was going on around her in the checkout line. Drew, aside from being concerned about possibly exposing his family's

SNAP identity to friends or social contacts in the store, worried that someone in line would cause a scene in front of his children, from whom he tried to hide the family's SNAP identity:

> You don't let people see you're using the card. I'm always afraid that, particularly at WalMart, or where you've got a long line of people, somebody's going to see it and start running their mouth about it. No one's ever done it, but I'm always afraid of whether somebody we know is seeing us use it, or some jerk who has a bug up their butt about people using SNAP benefits is going to start an argument in front of my kids.

Drew functions as a "disciplined" (Foucault, 1977; Goffman, 1959, p. 210) performer in the checkout line. In the dramaturgical view favored by Goffman (1959), Drew knows his role; he is discreet in its performance; he is ready at a moment's notice to improvise or deflect disruptions to get the scene back on track; and he is self-controlled (pp. 210-211). Drew is also disciplined in the more punitive Foucaultian (1977) sense: he is careful to follow the explicit and implicit social rules governing the interaction, as he knows that any deviation might result in punishment.

Because Drew's EBT-user role is a stigmatized identity and he is aware of how revealing it might be received negatively, Drew conducts himself in a manner that he hopes will allow him to pass as normalized, all the while mediating between his multiple social roles as customer, SNAP recipient, self-sufficient adult, father, and community member, among others (Goffman, 1963, p. 55). Drew's self-surveillance and disciplined effort to stick to the social norm (at the very least in appearance), and awareness that punishment might arise from any direction if he does not maintain his performance suggests that the experience of living within the "carceral network" (Foucault, 1977, p. 304) has caused him to "normalize" (p. 308) the idea of being observed, judged, and disciplined.

Alex was aware of the checkout-line challenges faced by EBT users before she joined SNAP herself. If she noticed someone who was, in her words, "receiving a lot of social pressure" because of their method of payment, she would intervene on the person's behalf. Since receiving her own EBT card, Alex described most of her shopping trips as "benign," though she has occasionally found herself the target of other shoppers' interest who "grumbled" or "inventoried" her purchases. She recounted a memorable exchange:

> One gentleman was a little discouraged that he felt he was *paying* for my ice cream. And that it wasn't a good choice in nutrition. He regretted making that comment to me, as I pointed out that *he* wasn't paying for anything—that I had worked as a professional [healthcare worker] for 45 years and that I had paid into the system and didn't expect that I would *live* long enough to exhaust all that I had personally contributed, number one. Number two, I chose a couple of items in *his* cart that I felt were poor choices. Since he extended that *kindness* to me, I certainly felt that he'd opened the door for that. And I ended our conversation with—there is a language warning here—that I didn't think that it was any of his goddamn business *what* I fucking eat.

By taking control of public attempts to shame or casually discipline her as a social assistance recipient, Alex creates a spontaneous, immersive educational opportunity where the person who perceives themselves as socially righteous is suddenly plunged into the subordinate role. By resisting the social norm that she, as a member of a stigmatized group, will meekly tolerate harassment by a member of the normalized group, Alex demonstrates her willingness to upset the social order and opens a path for others to do the same. Such resistance is critical to prevent the increasing normalization of the carceral network.

As evidenced by the contributors' stories, successfully participating in SNAP involves extraordinary communicative management feats. In order to receive and maintain SNAP benefits, recipients must function as managers and advocates for their own SNAP cases when interacting with DHS, which requires extensive planning and organization. Once a person is a member of SNAP, they must then face the task of managing the new identity of SNAP Recipient and the unwanted stigma that accompanies it. Simultaneously, SNAP recipients find themselves managing the intense surveillance and scrutiny of the minutiae of their lives that can emerge from any direction.

Feminist Standpoint Theory encourages us to start our research within lived experience and to invite traditionally marginalized groups to the table. Using Goffman's framework of performance in everyday life to analyze the contributors' stories, we can see how stigma and embarrassment raise the stakes of everyday interactions for SNAP beneficiaries in ways that non-SNAP shoppers likely take for granted. When Foucault's ideas about the carceral web in society are added to the analysis, it becomes clear that the slightest mis-step has the potential to brand one a deviant or invite punishment.

In stark contrast to the stereotype that recipients of government assistance are unwilling to work, the contributors' experiences show the continuous labor required to receive and maintain a SNAP case. By sharing their stories of navigating the social assistance system and the complex personal and social negotiations its membership requires, the contributors resist the dominant narrative about what it means to be a government assistance recipient and help others to better understand the inordinate cost of SNAP benefits.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

It feels strange that something that has been so all-consuming in my life for the past several months is really only the tiniest blip on the academic radar. But I hope that some part of my research catches someone's attention and helps them to think about the world differently or causes them to imagine the possibility of doing a study of their own. This project emerged from a realization that a significant portion of the research about SNAP recipients fails to consider or acknowledge the impacts that SNAP participation has on the everyday lives of the people who are part of the program. As someone with experiences of being both a SNAP recipient and a qualitative researcher, I felt I had a unique opportunity to offer a more human-centered approach to learning about the people who utilize SNAP. While small in scope, I believe this study adds a valuable contribution to the existing body of research on government assistance recipients by highlighting and amplifying the stories of SNAP participants' lived experiences, an element which is missing from much of the existing literature on the topic.

This study found that recipients of SNAP benefits must become master managers in order to navigate the pragmatic and social challenges they face when maintaining or using SNAP benefits. SNAP recipients must learn to effectively communicate with the government representatives who approve and control their access to SNAP benefits. They also often find themselves trying to negotiate who learns about their identity as SNAP recipients and how, when, or where that identity is revealed. This invisible communication and identity work is significant and affects the lives of SNAP recipients, yet it is rarely considered in discussions about social assistance, academic or otherwise.

The implications of this study could resonate across a variety of academic and social landscapes. For researchers, the contributor insights of this study could serve as encouragement to reconceptualize the standard method of conducting research focused on stigmatized or marginalized groups. For employees of the Department of Human Services, the findings reveal that the questions asked during the application and renewal process often do not accurately reflect the reality of SNAP recipients' lives. This inequivalence makes it harder for SNAP recipients to accurately follow DHS instructions, even when they wish to provide truthful answers. Understanding that SNAP recipients often feel communicatively isolated in relation to their SNAP member status, DHS caseworkers might consider suggesting additional resources for SNAP recipients that allow them to learn more about how to use effectively use SNAP and/or connect with others who have experienced being part of SNAP.

For grocery store management or clerks, it could be beneficial to understand that some SNAP recipients feel embarrassed and unsure in the process of shopping with SNAP benefits. They may also have previously experienced conflicts or hostility when shopping with SNAP. Either of these issues can lead to self-conscious SNAP users behaving in ways that might otherwise seem suspicious to store staff. This knowledge could help managers and store employees who might be frustrated with or wary of SNAP recipients to find ways to facilitate SNAP users' shopping and checkout experiences so that SNAP shoppers have greater confidence in their SNAP-eligible grocery selections and feel less likely to have their SNAP identity exposed to other customers during the checkout process.

For anyone connected to SNAP, whether as a political policy maker, social media commenter, or anything in between, the results of this study highlight the humanity of the individuals who utilize SNAP. The realization that each person who uses SNAP has a unique

story and circumstances is important to dismantling the stereotypes surrounding recipients of government assistance. Remembering that SNAP recipients are, first and foremost, people, is critical to fostering compassion, which is sorely lacking in the discourse surrounding SNAP.

I learned so much during this study about the different ways people manage their lives when SNAP is involved. I hope there will be more research that gives voice to marginalized and stigmatized communities. Before talking about that, I offer a treatment of my study's limitations in an effort to help the reader interpret my findings and strengthen future research. Then, I suggest ways in which future research on this topic might be expanded. Finally, I reflect on the research process and my challenges and growth as a student, researcher, and human being while conducting this study.

Limitations

I suspect that the time of year (late Fall) likely affected the volume of contributors. By the time the study was approved through the IRB and recruiting began, there were only about three weeks left in the farmers market season. The local farmers market accepted EBT and had a table set up to exchange SNAP benefits for food tokens, which proved to be a prime place to display the study flyer. As the information booth at the farmers market was the most successful recruiting site outside of personal referrals, if I had been able to distribute study flyers earlier in the summer, or even at the beginning of the spring farmers market season, I believe that I might have had a significant boost in the number of volunteers.

Because the farmers market's seasonal nature likely limited the number of potential volunteers, I think the study could have benefitted from finding alternative locations to post recruitment flyers. In addition to two farmers markets and social media, I posted flyers at nonprofit thrift stores that were within walking distance of the library interview location and at

the campus food pantry but did not receive any response from those locations. I suggest that future researchers look into what options there are for SNAP recipients to use benefits outside of traditional grocery stores or contact locally-based nonprofits that serve low-income people to see if they would help spread the word about the study.

While none of the contributors complained about the lack of compensation for participating in the study, I think that it would have been considerate and beneficial to provide some sort of tangible reward in exchange for their time and participation. Compensation also might have increased interest in the study for potential volunteers. Particularly when one is seeking to speak with people who have a known financial deficit, it would helpful (both to the project and the volunteers) if the researcher or research group provided participants with some sort of compensation. I suggest a gift card that contributors could use to purchase SNAP-ineligible foods or other items. A grant would be a possibility for this type of funding.

Finally, while I felt that I had an interesting mixture of wonderful individuals who volunteered for this study and I deeply appreciated their willingness to participate, they were all white, U.S.-born, native English speakers who were primarily able-bodied. I would be interested in seeing how the data would be affected by having a larger, more diverse group of contributors. In particular, it would be valuable to speak with future contributors who are SNAP recipients and simultaneously members of other marginalized groups such as people of color, people with disabilities, and elderly people, who might employ unique strategies for communicatively managing their experiences with SNAP.

Future Directions

There are so many ways I would like to see research on stigmatized and marginalized groups expand. A significant shift that I think might add value and nuance to research on many

subjects is for more researchers to be forthcoming about their personal connection to the subject matter. Of all the studies I read for this project, only two researchers explained that the reason they were writing on a particular topic was because of their personal experience. While there is nothing wrong with conducting thoughtful, responsible research on a subject simply because it interests the researcher, I suspect that more than a few researchers choose to write about a taboo or stigmatized topic because it is personally intertwined with their life in some significant way, but they don't want to risk losing face by claiming their connection to the subject. If a researcher chooses to ignore their own position as part of a stigmatized or marginalized group in order to maintain an ostensibly professional front, this situation can serve to perpetuate the idea that members of marginalized and stigmatized groups should not speak out or are not credible resources.

A consistent theme found in this study was a pattern of communication breakdowns between DHS staff and SNAP recipients. Future studies might seek to discover what contributes to those miscommunications and how they might be reduced. Perhaps one way of conducting the study would be to examine the organizational culture within local DHS offices. I think it would also be fascinating to analyze how the physical layout of DHS offices is determined and whether the design of the office space aids or hinders communication between government employees and the assistance recipients with whom they interact.

I would like to see additional qualitative, experience-focused studies conducted which focus on other types of government assistance such as WIC, Medicaid, or TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families). Those programs in particular tend to serve families with children, so it would be interesting to see how the experience of using government assistance programs functions for people with children.

The two contributors with children each compared how shopping with SNAP's EBT card differed from shopping with WIC coupons. As WIC is currently in the process of converting from larger paper coupons to an EBT-style debit card system, it would be fascinating to explore that transition and how it effects recipients' shopping experiences.

Related to the previous two ideas, another potential future direction would be to see how the parent(s) in families who receive government assistance manage communication with their child(ren) about their family's participation in social assistance. Do the parents hide the family's government assistance status from the child(ren)? How does the communication change as the child(ren) get older?

I would like to conduct an online-based version of this study where contributors could respond via message board, perhaps using Reddit or a similar platform, or by submitting answers to questions via a private form such as MailChimp or Google Forms to talk about their experiences using SNAP. I wonder how the experiences shared by online contributors would compare to experiences shared by the in-person contributors.

I think it would be interesting to see the how rural SNAP recipients experience the program as compared to urban SNAP recipients. This comparison between SNAP recipient experiences could be used for various dyads: age groups; length of time in program; political leanings; and many other demographic features.

There are multiple possibilities for expanding this research about the experiences of stigmatized and marginalized groups. I do not think we can ever try too hard to understand and respect the perspectives of people whose experiences may differ from our own. Particularly if we as researchers hope to find people who are willing to participate in our studies, potential contributors should be able to trust that we have their best interests in mind as they share their

stories and insights. As researchers, colleagues, community members, and human beings, I also believe it is important to share our challenges and experiences in an effort to foster connection and in service of letting others who are facing similar circumstances know they are not alone. In this way, we can work to collectively dismantle some of the antiquated power structures that affect all of our lives.

Research Reflections

This thesis process has been both a dream and a nightmare, sometimes within the same blink. It has made me a stronger, faster, more adaptable writer. It has found me sitting on the couch with my laptop at 3:00 AM, reluctant to go to bed because the words I wanted to say were finally coming through and I didn't want to risk losing them to the inevitable deluge of unexpected family or school mini-crises that would come with the morning alarm. (As a side note, at a certain point in one's life, there is no amount of ibuprofen, caffeine, and Pepto Bismol that can help you salvage the day that follows a 3:00 AM writing spree.) It has forced me to push the limits of what I thought I was capable of doing and to keep going when I thought I had nothing left.

It has also broken my heart. One of the contributors responded to my pre-interview small talk of "How's your day so far today?" with "You know, I am really hungry. We're gonna talk about food, too. I'm really, really hungry." I froze. In a split second, I tried to negotiate between my roles of researcher who has signed an IRB agreement saying that they are not compensating the participants and human being who was just told that the person sitting in front of her, who left their home to talk to come meet with her to talk about fact that they have a hard time getting enough food to eat, just said they are hungry. *What should I do?* Would it be insulting to offer them the remainder of the pack of crackers that might be in my bag? Probably, but I don't have

any cash, and they don't sell food in the library. It would *definitely* be frowned on by the IRB to put a participant in one's car and go to the nearest drive-through.

In the end, I didn't know what to do, so I did nothing. I managed to say something like, "Well, we'll be done here pretty quick," as though what they meant was "I was in a rush to get here and haven't had lunch yet" and not "I don't have any food in my house right now because I'm a few days shy of my SNAP disbursement and I don't have any way to buy something to eat." There just seemed to be too many ways that changing the prescribed course of action for the interview could result in unintended consequences. As a researcher, I didn't want to make the contributor feel pressured or obligated to stay because I had given them food. As a person, I didn't want to insult someone by assuming that they would be happy to accept my leftovers, even if I meant well and didn't have anything else to offer. Despite the awkward opening moment, we went on to have an incredibly candid and insightful conversation, but my inability to find a solution or offer to help in that moment still haunts me.

The contributors in this study have also been a source of great joy. Each time that a message arrived in my inbox from someone interested in participating was a thrill. Several contributors commented on how much they appreciated the chance to talk about SNAP, which made me feel like the project could mean something to someone beyond myself. *And they all showed up*. I didn't expect that to happen. I've been around enough human beings to know that even the best-laid plans are tenuous, subject to being forgotten or dismissed as the mood strikes. But every single one of the people who agreed to be interviewed showed up and showed up *on time*. They also came ready to share. There was never a feeling that they were reluctant to talk or felt obligated to answer questions. For a fledgling interviewer like myself, that in itself felt like a miracle and was most certainly a gift.

Throughout this process, I have been challenged to grow and adapt as a researcher. I found that no matter how prepared I was before an interview, I was always terribly nervous in the hour or so before the contributor arrived. I worried that the recording devices would fail or that I had forgotten the Informed Consent Document or official interview schedule. Waiting for the contributor to arrive, I was concerned about how the conversation might flow and whether or not I would be able to salvage the interview if the other person stopped talking or got upset or kept meandering away from the subject at hand. I struggled to find the balance between "don't make the interviewee uncomfortable by being too formal" and being *too* open and friendly, constantly second-guessing myself about whether or not I should acknowledge their statements with a friendly "hmm!" rather than "oh yeah" or "uh huh" lest the latter response be interpreted as complete agreement with whatever they had just suggested and an invitation to offer more statements in kind. This internal wrestling match was evident on the audio recordings as I vacillated between lengthy responses ("Oh, yes, I've heard about that before! Did you see where…?") and noncommittal near-grunts.

Overall, I was pleasantly surprised at how well the interviews went. I see the interviews' success due to a combination of factors including participants who were eager to share their stories, my focus on helping them feel heard and appreciated, and a shared notion that we were working together on something important. In any case, the joint effort between interviewees and interviewer created an atmosphere that fostered connection and communication, which resulted in many fascinating insights being shared during the interviews.

I think the prepared questions that I had were a good starting point for the conversations, but it would have been useful to create a specific "cheat sheet" to use for the interviews. When trying to remember what other questions I had planned to ask contributors, I tended to default to

reading the questions directly off the interview schedule as written. This clumsy technique tended to result in somewhat jarring transitions between topics, though I tried to acknowledge the awkwardness of this suddenly clinical style with a joke in order to keep the conversation relaxed. Fortunately, the contributors were all good-natured and we were able to laugh about it and move forward. I wish that I had been able to do multiple interviews with each contributor to see what other facets of their SNAP experiences would emerge over time.

Early in the planning process, I had a difficult time determining where might best serve as an interview location. I wanted to remain mindful of how the location could affect the willingness of contributors to share or the ability to talk and record the conversation without being interrupted or distracted by constant ambient noise. I also wanted to avoid locations that would require purchases in order to utilize the space (for reasons I detailed in Chapter 3). With this combination in mind, a library seemed like the ideal space. I considered the university library first, as it was close by and had private study rooms which could be reserved. However, while I did not assume that my contributors would be uneducated or unfamiliar with higher education simply because of their socioeconomic status, I was mindful that not everyone is comfortable on a college campus. It can be an intimidating place to navigate for anyone who isn't required to learn the layout. In addition, between the parking shortage and major construction happening on campus, I worried that potential contributors would give up before they managed to park and find the library.

My next choice was the local public library. I first considered the library as a potential interview location when I attempted to advertise the study on the community announcement board, only to find that the corkboard had been replaced by a digital screen and no one on duty was really quite sure which section of the library should or could display flyers for a study

asking people to talk about how they use food stamps. During this negotiation of which department should display flyers, one moment in particular struck me. I was talking with a librarian at the circulation desk when she picked up a flyer, read it, and mused, "Oh. I was going to say that I would put one up in the break room, but I don't think anyone *here* would be. Using that." I couldn't help but think, *you might be surprised*.

Despite not recruiting anyone from the public library to participate in the study, it proved to be the most practical and generally convenient interview location I could find. Two of the contributors specifically cited that it was within walking distance of their homes. Though a challenge to secure, the study rooms were comfortable, with plenty of space and huge windows that let in lots of natural light. The wooden door and glass-paneled wall separating each room from the main library allowed for private conversation while still being able to see and be seen by the library staff.

I felt this visibility added a sense of both security and openness to the atmosphere, as the contributor and I were not finding ourselves in some dark, out-of-the-way room with a stranger, talking about things that should not be discussed in polite company and hoping we didn't run into anyone we knew. Instead, we were just two people meeting at the public library to talk about something that interested both of us. If the contributor encountered someone they knew on the way in or out of the interview, there was no need to invent a cover story if they didn't want to discuss their participation in the research study. Casual browsing is reason enough to be in the public library. This might not have been the case if the interview was held in a location less frequented by the general public such as an office space, campus library, or church.

One of the most fascinating parts of creating this project was realizing how each class or workshop that made up my time in the Communication and Storytelling Studies program had

begun to clear a path for me to finish the project. This thesis can be traced from the very first day of Qualitative Research Methods course, when I had no idea what a thesis even *was*, when it became apparent that this new educational endeavor was going to require learning an entirely new vocabulary (here's looking at you, "hegemony," "epistemological," and "semiotic"). The project also had roots in my Popular Communication course where the deceptively enticing notion of watching TV as a method of research served as a gateway for discussions about Foucault and power structures.

My ability to undertake the thesis-writing process can be traced, too, to the Saturday library workshops that showed how to navigate the treasure trove of research available with the click of a button (and then how to organize, cite, and make sense of the resulting hundreds of articles that were subsequently downloaded). The first, tiny seed of this specific project appeared in an Issues in Communication and Culture course, then was sown in a Food and Communication course and bloomed with the pages of Goffman's *Stigma* in a Health Communication course. Finally, Feminist Standpoint Theory surfaced in a Communication Theory course just in time to show me where to find my seat at the academic table.

To future thesis writers: Start early. Stay organized. Go ahead and suffer through writing that terrible first draft so that you have something to build on a little at a time. Write enough drafts so that getting feedback starts to feel like a game instead of a death sentence. If you have a question or you're totally lost, *ask for help*. I can tell you that I never would have finished this project if I had continued to act like I had it all together instead of admitting that I felt lost and confused and had no idea how to move forward, even when I had to ask the same questions over and over until the answer clicked. If you are, as I was, are fortunate enough to have a thesis chair who is patient and caring and brilliant and wants to see you succeed, don't waste that. And don't

take it for granted when they don't open up a portal to another dimension and throw you through it after you've tried their patience for the thousandth time that week. At one point after several consecutive 14-hour days of writing to get back on track, my husband, Thomas, called to see how I was doing. The only thing I could think to say was, "tired, stressed, and gurgly." Don't do that to yourself. There is a better way.

I would like to close this whole crazy, messy, wonderful experience with a quote from one of my favorite TV shows, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*: "We're just covering up our problems. In order to fix ourselves, we have to start right here. Find that small, unbreakable you inside yourself" (Burditt & Fey, 2015). This program and this thesis have challenged me to find my "unbreakable" me. For that I am eternally grateful. I hope everyone reading this finds their "unbreakable" too.

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APPENDICES
Appendix A
Printed Recruitment Flyer

Study Participants Needed

SNAP Stories

Exploring Experiences of Utilizing the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

If you are 18 years or older and currently using SNAP benefits (food stamps), you can contribute to a study about how people experience the program by talking to a researcher about your personal experience with SNAP.

Please think about participating. Participation is voluntary.
If you have any questions or would like more information about the study, please contact:

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Photos retrieved from: https://snaped.fns.usda.gov/nutrition-education-materials/meal-planning-shopping-and-budgeting (Left); https://www.tn.gov/humanservices/dhs-program-integrity/recipient-excessive-replacement-card-tracking.html (Center); https://www.tn.gov/for-families/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap.html (Right)

Approved by ETSU Campus IRB / Approval Date: October 4, 2018 / Expiration Date: September 26, 2019

Appendix B
Digital Recruitment Flyer

Appendix C
Interview Schedule

Describe the first time you used your SNAP benefits to shop for food.

Possible prompts:

- Where did you go to shop? Why did you choose that place?
- Did someone teach you how to use the EBT card or SNAP benefits before you went shopping? How did you learn that information?
- Did you have any trouble using the SNAP benefits?

Does using SNAP benefits change the way you shop for food?

Possible prompts:

- How so / In what ways?
- What changes when you shop for food using SNAP benefits versus when you use cash/debit/credit?
- Where do you shop for food?
    - Is there anywhere you avoid shopping when using SNAP benefits?
    - Why?
    - Is that a different or the same place as when you don't use SNAP benefits (or before you had SNAP benefits)?
- When do you shop for food using SNAP benefits?
    - Is that a different or the same time as when you don't use SNAP benefits (or before you had SNAP benefits)?

Who do you talk to about your experiences using SNAP benefits?

Possible prompts:

- Case worker?
- Family members in home?
- Family members outside of home?
- Friends?
- Church?
- Support group?
- Internet forum?

What was your situation when you first applied for SNAP benefits?

Possible prompts:

- How long ago was that?
- Have you renewed SNAP benefits continuously since then, or have you signed up for them in an on-and-off basis?

How do you think that people who haven't or don't use SNAP benefits feel about those who do use SNAP benefits?

Possible prompts:

- Where do you see or hear that message?

VITA

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