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UNDERGRADUATE THESIS

Welfare in America: Perspectives on White Poverty and Human Rights

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Introduction

I grew up in between several small towns in East Tennessee. My sisters and I, fortunate enough to be raised in a middle-class family, spent most of our time in Clinton and Norris. This was where we went to school, spent time with friends, and went swimming during the summer. Our house, however, was nestled on the borderline between Norris and Lake City. Lake City is a town of less than two-thousand people, with fewer than ten successful businesses and two small schools. We would drive through every once and awhile, but only so we could get somewhere else. When a nice-looking gas station popped up in the area, that was where we sometimes got our milk. It was cheaper there than anywhere else we were willing to drive to.

Lake City was an enigma to me for most of my childhood. I never felt like I lived there. The name was on our address labels and mailbox, but I hardly spent time there. For a while, I doubted that anyone did. When I was in high school, “Lake City” was changed to “Rocky Top” in an attempt to attract tourists, businesses, and (for some reason) a water park resort. The attempt was unsuccessful. I still write “Lake City” when I have to give my address and no one ever corrects me.

There were plenty of places in Lake City that my sisters and I were not allowed to go alone. We were told to stay away from the motels and the trailer park neighborhoods. The people that lived there were dirty, lazy, and trashy. The women had lung cancer and the men were drug dealers and sexual deviants, we were told in more kid-friendly language. The worst part of all? Most of them were on welfare. To my family, that was one of the greatest sins of all.

To be fair, my family was not solely to blame for the notions that were planted in my brain when I was younger. These things were told to me by teachers, classmates, friends,

television shows, books, political commenters, and politicians. I was a kid, and whatever I heard just happened to stick. As I got older, however, I started to see the things differently.

College was a primary driving factor. I began to talk to the kinds of people that I had never really talked to, and learn about things that had not crossed my mind before. I figured out that many things that I had been taught were not necessarily true. This complicated how I saw my life within the context of everyone else's. The world looked different. My childhood looked different. My own backyard looked different.

The inspiration behind this project lies in the drastic change in perspective I had regarding poverty, race, and class that I have experienced over the past few years. A few paragraphs from Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, however, were principally responsible for the idea. In the book, he cites a poll from 1992 in which two separate yet similar questions are asked and two drastically different answers are given. When CBS and the *New York Times* asked a group of people whether more money should be allocated to welfare programs, a majority of the responses given were "no." When asked if the government should help the poor, however, a majority answered "yes" (Zinn 2003:612). After reading the passage, I immediately thought of the ways in which my family and teachers discussed the issue. There was a consensus among them that welfare was a waste of money, or a hand-out for people who did not deserve it. Rejecting the expansion of social welfare programs, then, would be easy for them to do. On the other hand, not many can confidently say that they believe the poor should not be helped. This poll that Zinn referenced essentially asked the same question — just phrased in a different way. To me, it seemed as though "welfare" was the negative, hot-button term that drove people away.

I was intrigued by what I had read, as it not only challenged my own perceptions of the welfare system but of poverty in general. Furthermore, as thought about this within the context of my own childhood, I thought about what these issues meant to the people that had become invisible to me — the people that I was not allowed to talk to, the people that were “bad news,” the poor whites. This is where the wondering ended and the research began.

The purpose of this paper is to address the American welfare system, as experienced by poor whites in a variety of different contexts. I examine the system from multiple angles — including its strengths, weaknesses, and the ways in which it is can be possibly restructured to better address widespread poverty in the United States. The implications of whiteness, poverty, and the intersection between the two will also be discussed. All of these topics will be analyzed with a human rights perspective, meaning a perspective that considers the United States’ relation to human rights and the values that these rights imply.

As I will show, interactions between poor communities and the welfare system are problematic in a variety of ways. For instance, the current system lacks circumstantial specificity and adequate capacity-building mechanisms. Furthermore, welfare has been historically a temporary fix to the long-standing problem of systemic poverty in the United States. Many poor Americans (or, in the case of this research, poor white Americans), still experience conditions of poverty that are not often alleviated by current social welfare programs. These findings speak to the generally weak condition of the American welfare state and reveal how American culture perceives and addresses social and economic rights.

From an anthropological perspective, the “welfare state” exists beyond a category of poor people who lack economic agency. Rather, welfare is a lived experience that considers the social

networks and relationships that exist between welfare recipients and the communities in which they live (Russel and Edgar 2002:2,6). This work attempts to utilize this framework while reviewing literature that considers several facets of the welfare system — including racial and class implications, historic marginalization, and perceptions of welfare that have changed over time.

I've included the story above about myself because I believe that it offers insights into the point of view from which I am working from. Sandra Morgen et al. (2010:13) write that, "Our understandings of the complex experiences and dynamics we studied are inflected not only by our positions in the matrix of gender, race, and class relations but also by the knowledge we have accumulated as social scientists and activists and by the theoretical assumptions and frameworks we brought to our work". As someone who grew up as a simultaneous insider and outsider of a poor white community, the intersection of race and class and its application to welfare studies is a personally relevant topic.

This project will predominantly focus on social welfare programs that address employment, income assistance, housing assistance, and access to healthcare. It should be noted that the term "welfare" in the United States is intended to address a wide variety of issues, from Medicare to drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs. The semantics behind the term is arguably one of the reasons that welfare policy has been historically difficult to implement in American society. However, this project is not intended to debate exact meaning, but rather to analyze interactions within the welfare system under the broader lens of human rights. The paper begins with an analysis of what a human rights perspective entails, as well as brief discussion of white poverty and the history of welfare. I evaluate ethnography and other social research regarding welfare in America to gain a better understanding of how the system shapes interactions between

the poor and the state. I then discuss policy recommendations and possible implications for this research.

Human Rights and American Exceptionalism

The discussion of political, economic, and social issues with a human rights perspective requires a basic understanding of what this kind of perspective entails. Generally, a human rights perspective prioritizes issues from a critical mindset that considers the inherent rights of the individuals that are affected. Studying welfare and poverty from a human rights perspective does not imply that the United States' violation of any human rights law through their treatment of the poor. From a legal standpoint, this is because the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is not a binding document. Furthermore, the United States has not ratified the International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). However, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) has been ratified, and the two "generations" of rights are very much interdependent on one another. For instance, individual liberty and security (civil and political rights) is dependent on an adequate standard of living (a social and economic right).

An analysis of the American welfare system and welfare policy with a human rights lens holds those in power to a standard that evaluates their willingness to address the most basic human needs of those that they are obligated to serve (in this case, a government serving its citizens). For this reason, this paper encompasses areas such as housing and healthcare, which are significant components of a person's wellbeing and are often integrated into welfare structures on the state and federal level. Without access to certain basic resources, most human rights cannot be fully realized and fulfilled.

Human rights rely less on legal parameters and more on sets of relatively universal values such as dignity and respect. Tanya Maria Golash-Boza's analysis of immigration policy from a human rights perspective reflects this well, writing that such a frame of reference "presumes universality equally and dignity and recognizes that people are members of families of communities" (Golash-Boza 2012:4). While her work focuses on the experiences of illegal immigrants affected by immigration policy and this paper focuses on white communities affected by poverty and welfare policy, the same principles apply. Examining such issues within the context of human rights reminds the reader (and, to an extent, the researcher) that the injustices described are being experienced by people who have been deprived of certain inherent material and immaterial possessions — food and shelter in addition to respect and dignity. A human rights perspective, then, establishes a moral urgency.

One of the reasons that this perspective is so useful to studying welfare and poverty in the United States is that it has the capacity to dissuade American exceptionalism. An extension of Western exceptionalism, this ideology is based on the belief that egregious hardships — such as widespread poverty — only occur outside of America, often in a less "Westernized" setting. Johan van der Vyver asserts that this idea emerges from the acknowledgement of the United States as an international "superpower", a somewhat odd label given the country's mixed history of "engagement" followed by "isolationism" (2001:776). That is, the United States has been historically prone to global militarization and expansion (from Latin America to the Middle East) while also warning other countries to stay away from issues that involve American interests and advocating against getting involved in global conflicts (especially in the case of historical declarations like the Monroe Doctrine). This superiority perpetuates an "us versus them" mentality, in which power and capital is used to rationalize a false ideology. Since the American

government holds so much power in the global community, they have been able to project themselves as a morally upright body that is virtually capable of wrongdoing and justified in correcting the wrongdoing of others.

Andrew Mwenda speaks to this in his response to hearing that the federal government held in order to address the human rights situation in Rwanda in 2015. He argues that America is in no place to pass judgment on others because they is responsible for rights abuses on a daily basis. He cites that the state frisks, seizes, jails, and even kills people of color on a consistently discriminatory basis (Mwenda 2015). Mwenda's message introduces an extension of American exceptionalism — human rights imperialism. In this case, the imperialist or colonist (in this case, the United States) is attempting to dictate what is a human rights abuse and what is not to the “Third World,” without thinking critically or retrospectively about their own human rights record.

Statistics have proven that the distance Americans try to create between themselves and other regions of the world is, in many ways, imagined. When compared to other developed nations, America has one of the highest levels of income inequality, perpetuated by wage gaps and what economist Timothy Smeeding deems weak “income support systems” (2005:968-969). At face value, this may not be interpreted as a human rights issue. However, a recent report by the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on Poverty by Philip Alston exposes the effects of income inequality in the United States. He calls America “a land of stark contrasts” — while many Americans thrive and are recipients of one of the world's most wealthiest countries, over 60 million Americans live in some form of poverty, many of whom experience what he calls “Third World conditions of absolute poverty” (HRC 2018:3). The use of the term “Third World” dispels the notion that inferior “Third World” societies exist only outside the scope of the United

States. “Third World” becomes less of a place and more of an adjective used to describe something that is abject and/or poverty-stricken. A human rights perspective, then, becomes a means to frame poverty as a perversion of values and proof that Western nations are not exempt from criticism regarding the treatment of their people and are not necessarily superior to “the Third World.”

The existence of American exceptionalism then brings up the issue of “universal rights”. While rights rely on a universal set of values, they are often interpreted and exercised in culturally specific ways. Therefore, a human rights framework will not only hold the United States to a set of abstract standards, but will also provide insight into how American citizens and the American government experience and conceptualize certain rights.

“Whiteness” and Poverty

Before moving too extensively into the literature, it is necessary to provide a brief analysis of the historical overlap between race and class. Whiteness, in short, is the conceptual representation of the experiences of white people. John Hartigan Jr. acknowledges whiteness as an “unmarked” category in which white people do not often have to consider the implications of their race (Hartigan Jr. 2010:86,116). Studying racial experiences as categories requires a presumption of boundaries between races, boundaries that emphasize difference. Class and economic status may serve as a bridge for these differences. Just as race has the ability to transcend class, class has the ability to transcend race. Therefore, an analysis of white poverty can be used to partially deconstruct assumptions made regarding whiteness — that is, assumptions that relate class to race and race to privilege (Moss 2003:6). Such an analysis also provides insight into how the conditions of the welfare state apply in different social contexts.

Whiteness studies are few and far between. There are many speculations on why this is, some having to do with a hallmark characteristic of whiteness itself. In a general sense, white people are characterized by their tendency to disassociate themselves from a collective racial identity (Hartigan Jr. 2010:86). It is then possible that the reason that the “white experience” has not been extensively studied through research and ethnography is that white people are often not comfortable with acknowledging their experiences as a result of their race or perceptions of their race. The experiences of poor whites are even more difficult to study because poverty is also an uncomfortable subject.

Anthropological studies on “the poor” transcend common poverty studies. Poverty is not a thing, and it is not possessed by anyone. Instead, poverty is a lived relationship between those who are financially secure and those who are not, and the effects of this relationship (Desmond and Western 2018:310). This definition is an important one to consider because it acknowledges poverty (and to a greater extent, the impoverished) as dynamic, rather than a stagnant and arbitrary social condition.

Another facet of poverty studies concerns the perceptions of poverty by those who are not experiencing poverty, as well as opinions on poverty by those who are impoverished themselves. Through a series of structured interviews with Americans from widely differing demographic backgrounds, Patricia Homan et al. found that interviewees consistently believed that causes for poverty are directly dependent on the type of poverty being considered. They organized these types into two “schemas” of poverty — intergenerational poverty and downward mobility (2017:1030-1031). The former refers to those who are born into poverty, and the latter refers to those who become poor during their lifetime. Interviewees used these two groups to categorize their thoughts on poverty with respect to factors such as race and education. For example, a

majority of interviewees believed that those born into poverty were mostly Latino or black, while those who are downwardly mobile are mostly white (Homan et al. 2017:1034-1035). These opinions and preconceived notions are integral in the discussion of poverty itself, as the ways in which people perceive an issue is a strong indicator of how they will respond to campaigns, policy and legislature that address the issue. An acute awareness of different perceptions of the poor and how people become poor may indicate why certain elements of welfare policies are supported and/or opposed. Targeting the morals and intentions of the “undeserving” poor, then, becomes an arguing point for welfare opponents.

Brian Steensland’s analysis of failed welfare reform supports this idea. In his discussion of Richard Nixon’s failed welfare reform from the 1970s, he argues that guaranteed income policy failed primarily because it dressed multiple types of poverty, and therefore dissuaded the argument that the U.S. welfare system was only tailored to help the “undeserving poor” (2008:219). Brian Steensland heavily relies on the dichotomy used by Homan — that, is the “deserving” vs “undeserving” poor — in discussing the relationship between welfare advocates, welfare opponents, and welfare policymakers. This dichotomy is interesting because it implies poverty as an experience that can be excused because those who experience it sometimes deserve the conditions in which they are forced to live by. Rights, then, are no longer rights. Rather, rights in America are something that is *earned*.

Attempting to pinpoint the origins of poverty in the United States is as difficult as definite poverty itself — that is to say that is a nearly impossible task. This is because that the origins of poverty are multifaceted and are highly dependent on factors such as race and location. Throughout their interviews and discussions regarding poverty structures, Homan et al. created types of attributions to poverty, from “structuralism” to “interactionism”, many of which are

stooped in American ideals of “rugged individualism” and “self-reliance” (2017:1023-1024,1036). Interactionism, for example, relies on how people in poverty relate to others, such as their peers and family members . This is seemingly subject to a variety of factors — time, place, and race, to name a few. In the case of American culture, class and perceptions of poverty are stooped in neoliberal values, especially individualism and self-sufficiency. Therefore, poverty should not be acknowledged as single-dimension, stagnant condition prescribed to someone “down on their luck” — rather, it the product of interactions between people, communities, and institutions.

Origins of poverty in America, furthermore, are historic and systemic. The uneven distribution of wealth has created wide gaps between the richest Americans and the poorest Americans that spans decades and ends in similar ways — economic marginalization and exclusion from the national capitalist system. The route by which Americans get here, however, is different depending on cultural history and race. Those who are poor in Rio Grande Valley, for example, are mostly immigrants who rely on the volatile needs of cheap farm labor, while the poor who live in the Mississippi Delta are mainly African-Americans that are still attempting to disentangle themselves from the social and economic disadvantages perpetuated by slavery (Pickering et al. 2016:11). White poverty is not a single linear path. Rather, it is the product of relationships between race, class, and institutions that construct and enforce certain lifestyles — in the case of this paper, the welfare system.

Just as analyses of white people are relatively scarce in race studies, white poverty is an awkward subject matter within whiteness studies. One of the reasons behind this, Kirby Moss argues, can be attributed to the inability of white people to “acknowledge poverty and banality within its own ranks” (2003:3). This choice of phrase solidifies the existence of “ranks” or

“orders” of race, with white people existing as the seemingly incorruptible superior force. White poverty disenchants this superiority as it deconstructs common privileges associated with whiteness, such as the access to certain economic advantages.

Ethnography and anthropological analysis regarding the experiences and opinions of poor white often connects race, respectability, dignity, and poverty. White poverty exists in a compelling place at the intersection of race and class. The appearance of being white tends to bring about presumptions of economic stability, as this is one of the central characteristics of the commonly perceived “white experience”. Kirby Moss’s ethnographic study of poor whites deems this experience as a kind of “positive” stereotyping that carries “assumptions of privilege” (Moss 2003:56). However, when a white person is found to not be economically successful, they are distanced from the benefits associated with their race. Moss’s interview with a poor white woman (Sharon) validates this experience — she states that her whiteness, coupled with her attractive appearance, leads strangers to believe that it is not possible for her to be in poverty. Once they discover that she is, however, she is immediately negatively stereotyped. They assume that she is on welfare and criticize her economic decisions (Moss 2003:55-58). This speaks to two trends associated with white poverty: 1) being white and in poverty creates a unique experience in which breaking away from normative assumptions connected to whiteness is an offense to what it means to be white — subject to a sense of superiority and unearned privileges — and 2) poverty is often associated with being “on” welfare, a negatively perceived entity within itself.

Moss’s observations and the subjects of his ethnography illicit a recurring theme that, while not explicitly stated by Moss himself, is important in how poor whites are perceived: appearance. The way that white people appear — such as how they dress and how they speak —

to an outsider is a strong influencer on the “positive stereotyping” that poor whites experience. This is exhibited through Sharon, as well as Denise, a single mother. She lives with family in a middle-class neighborhood with her children, yet feels entirely isolated from “middle-class sensibilities”. She is either scrutinized or ignored entirely by neighbors, and she asserts that this has to do with her class status in relation to everyone else’s. Moss argues, however, that the isolation she experiences has to do with her class as well as her “whiteness”. The complexity of her case — feeling isolated from a normative “poor” community because she is white and takes refuge in a relatively wealthy neighborhood while also being isolated from the “white” community because she is too poor — speaks to what Moss calls a diversion from the white “paragon image” (2003:85-90). The use of the term “paragon image” when it comes to whiteness is useful in that poor whites are disassociated from such an image. Denise and Sharon exemplify how the complexities within their class condition remove them from ever achieving the idealistic portrayal of a white person.

Such portrayals can be mediated by appearance — the appearance of driving a nice car that belongs to a wealthy family member, like in Denise’s case. However, this appearance can only stretch so far. She only drives the “nice-looking” car because her car is constantly broken and in need of repair. Nevertheless, she feels uncomfortable when she drives to the welfare office to receive her assistance check because she feels like she is being misunderstood by her peers and those responsible for her economic viability (2003:89). Denise, like many working/lower class white people, occupy this liminal space — essentially, too white to be poor and too poor to be white.

John Hartigan Jr.’s *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit* explores the concept of appearance and its alignment with white norms and standards. In a

separate work, he defines such experiences in accordance with, but not limited to: racial resentment towards policies that address inequality, a desire to avoid discourse on race, the privilege of not having to consider their race in everyday interaction, a strong appeal to merit as a means to criticize those that are inferior, and an adamant attachment to place (Hartigan, Jr. 2010:86-116). The experiences of poor whites adhere to some of these characteristics, but can deviate depending on their class and personal circumstances.

Hartigan Jr., during a conversation with two small business owners in a predominantly white district in Detroit, found that some contributed the “white flight” and subsequent degradation of the city was due to entrance of “hillbillies” — that is, coal miners and lower-class white people from the southern United States (1999:26). While Hartigan Jr. does not explicitly make the connection, there is a linkage between the way in which a white person appears (poor, dirty, etc.) and the way in which this person is perceived in terms of a “type” of whiteness. In this case, the “hillbilly” is a source of trouble for more “respectable” whites in the area. Just as there is a distinction between “good” and “bad” poor people in America, there is a distinction between “good” and “bad” white people. The South, for example, signals the presence of “bad” white people. This conceptualization is influenced by appearance as well as place.

The loss of respectability and dignity, a social consequence of poverty, becomes interestingly transfigured once race is considered. Allan and Florence Bérubé, in their study of the experiences of poor whites in trailer parks, found that respectability was achieved through the ways in which the members performed certain “respectable tasks” — such as cleaning their trailers, controlling their children, and maintaining their front lawns (1997:26-27,32). This behavior may be viewed as an attempt to conceal a less desirable aspect of their life — their poverty — and counteract the negative stereotypes often associated with it. A negative label

prescribed to those who are poor and white, for example, is “white trash”. This term is, retrospectively, a heavily racial term — “white” is an adjective to “trash”, thus implying that trash is normally “non-white” (Hartigan Jr. 1997:46-47). This observation extends beyond the perceptions of class and acknowledges the implications behind race that exist, regardless of economic boundaries.

Regardless of the attempts of poor white to separate themselves from poverty and its negative stigmatizations, the marginalization and humiliation of poor whites has proven beneficial to many higher-class individuals. This degradation is perhaps most relevant in contemporary media, in which the Southern poor white is debased for the sake of a popular stereotype. April Thompson argues that depictions of “the hillbilly” in literature and television aid in the enforcement of a “myth,” or a kind of fiction used to manipulate ideologies in favor of those who are wealthier and therefore more powerful (2014:7). Her argument seemingly makes sense of the opposition that exists between the lower-class and upper-class in white America — the myth has been maintained for so long that it has become a reality for many. The negative stereotyping of lower-class whites, then, through pejorative terms such as “redneck” and “white trash”, is one of the ways that people may distance themselves from those who deviate from the common “white image”. Annalee Newitz makes similar comments when considering the treatment of lower-class whites. Specifically, she posits that poor whites are demeaned because they translate to the middle-class as “primitive,” and this is clearly manifested in popular television shows like *Kalifornia* and *Cops* (Newitz 1997:134-138). This form of humiliation, which paints poor whites in a negative light, creates an association between poverty, bad manners, and savagery.

Hartigan Jr. approaches this connection within the context of whiteness, in which the lower-class southern white is perceived as “inherently violent” by northern whites (1999:26-28). This assertion exemplifies an interesting point that is explored further in *Racial Situations* — poor whites (and, within the context of Detroit ethnography, poor Appalachian whites), are sometimes stereotyped and conceptualized in a similar vein to black people. Hartigan Jr.’s research verifies this. When describing the entrance of southern poor whites into Detroit’s social fabric, an interviewee claims that, “...the feeling towards the white Appalachians was about the same as the black and white feeling was” (1999:30). This statement can be interpreted in a variety of ways. First of all, the interviewee seems to implicitly acknowledge that black people in Detroit are often treated poorly and tension exists between them and a majority of other white people. However, by using “Appalachian” to describe the types of whites that are entering the area, southern poor whites are given a category that extends beyond “black” and “white”. They are a different kind of “white” — separate from the “normal white”.

This separation is seemingly historical — in the 1950s and 1960s, Wayne State University conducted a survey that asked subjects what they deemed to be the most “undesirable” population in Detroit. Poor whites were only a couple of percentage points below criminals and gangsters, while black people and “foreigners” (presumably immigrants) were listed at 13% and 6%, respectively (1999:31). Given the heavy racial tensions that existed during this time period, these results are surprising. However, they speak to the extent by which poor whites are perceived as their own isolated entity, one that deserves to be “marked” due to its deviations from the “unmarked” white experience.

This class-based separation is a contributing factor in the perpetuation of a mentality in which one group reigns superior over another and must actively fight to maintain that superiority

— “us versus them.” Thompson explains this well, by reasoning that such a stereotype gives those who use the term a kind of “moral authority” in which their “social position” is justifiable because it “proves that we are simply more deserving than they” (2014:53). Her argument supports a strong point: stereotyping is often a method employed by those who want to place themselves above the ranks of the people they stereotype. It should be noted, however, that this idea somewhat contradicts Moss’s theory on “positive stereotyping” — in the case of the woman he interviewed, whiteness (coupled with attractiveness) immediately brought on assumptions of relatively high social standing and economic prosperity. Therefore, white poverty is subject to layered stereotyping that is dependent on circumstance.

Place, for instance, is an important contributing factor in conceptions of whiteness and poverty. Thompson’s research focuses on the poor Southern white. This choice suggests that poor whites in other areas of the United States are subjected to different experiences based on different historical circumstances. Hartigan Jr.’s studies in Detroit support this idea. The discord that exists between whites in Detroit and southern whites is highly dependent on “the local” and the cultural differences that exist within a local/regional space. Cultural disparities (especially with respect to behavior) between the northern and southern United States play an important part in the original Detroit residents’ tendencies to label the newcomers as “hicks” or “hillbillies”, terms that are often specific to people from the American south.

The experiences relayed by poor whites discussed thus far support the existence of a set of implied expectations and attributes prescribed to white people. White people are accustomed to a certain set of economic, social, and cultural values that speak to their “whiteness”. Such values are subjective, but have overarching themes concerning prosperity, civility, and adherence to the “norm”. The difference between “whiteness” and the experiences of other races is that,

when observed superficially by an outsider, they are often “stereotyped” in a positive light — simply by being white and being decent appearance, they are assumed to be well-off and well-adjusted to society. Deviations from this expectation/stereotype frequently results in social isolation and critiques on their lifestyle, as exhibited through Kirby Moss’s and Hartigan Jr.’s case studies.

The marginalization of the lower-class (or, in the case of this research, lower-class whites) infringes on human rights-based values. These are not outright human rights violations and therefore not subject to any kind of legal recourse. However, as stated previously, human rights-based values are interwoven into the fulfillment of civil and political rights, rights that the United States has formerly acknowledged through ratification. Dignity and respect are universal concepts that transcend social, especially racial, boundaries. As Rhoda Howard-Hassman writes, “A person cannot live a life of dignity without the fulfillment of her economic human rights: poverty is undignified and impedes participation in wider social and political life” (2011:26). Many social and economic rights (and rights abuses) are difficult to cite in terms of physical evidence. They are based in intangible concepts, but often affect a person’s ability to find work and to pursue relationships. Therefore, the harsh conditions and adverse experiences of poverty itself guide my judgement.

The American government, unfortunately, is historically evasive in addressing such issues. This is because they subvert responsibility through an exercise of ideological reinterpretations. For example, the United States has not ratified pivotal human rights documents and are not signatory to a several human rights conventions, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Yet, exceptionalism ideology has become an unyielding part of American and Western identities, making them less likely to face serious consequences for any

demonstrated inability to grant certain rights to their citizens. However, rights abuses and the absence of human indignities are rooted in material inequality (Howard-Hassman 2011:30). Therefore, evidence of disparities such as income inequality in America provides a stage by which the degradation of basic rights and needs can be put on display.

The (Brief) History of Welfare

The American government is not a cold, unfeeling puppet-master in the grander scheme of income inequality. Over the past several decades, social welfare policies have been implemented in order to address conditions of poverty. Before extensively evaluating the efficiency of the welfare system and its significance in terms of race and poverty, it is important to first outline brief historical context regarding installation of social welfare programs in America.

Welfare is not a new concept. Its origins are nearly two-hundred years old, and been expanded and restructured repeatedly and over time (Amsterdam 2015; Morgen 2010:19). Therefore, current cultural and economic structures within the welfare system have not emerged in a vacuum. Rather, they are a product of decades of interactions between politicians, policymakers, system officials, welfare advocates and welfare opponents.

In the early twentieth century, with the establishment of the Social Security Act of 1935, the welfare system became the two-tiered program — that is, the program that is used in the United States today. The first tier concerns social insurance (wage replacement) programs that serves as income support to Americans. The second tier covers “means-tested” programs, or programs that provide goods and services to those who are unable to afford it — such as food stamps or school lunch programs for children. Howard Zinn (2003) describes the welfare system

as a partial solution to growing income inequality in the United States. For example, the top ten percent of Americans (in terms of income) had thirty times the income of the bottom 10 percent of Americans in 1977 (Zinn 2003:571). The gap between the rich and the poor has continued to grow.

Relationships between welfare recipients and welfare stakeholders have evolved and devolved over time in correspondence to political agendas, social movements and cultural stigmas. Sandra Morgen et al. (2010) gives a brief yet comprehensive summary regarding welfare restructuring, beginning in the early nineteenth century. The authors describe welfare as a set of interconnections between poverty, poverty assistance, and capitalism (Morgen et al. 2010:19). They evade rhetoric that labels the welfare state as some kind of hegemonic and enigmatic force that occasionally hands money to the poor — rather, it is a set of relationships between different stakeholders across the social and economic spectrum.

In response to the growth of industrial capitalism and the growing dependency of Americans on public resources, “Poor Law Reform” was implemented in order to indirectly coerce the poor into participating in low-wage labor in order to survive (Morgen et al. 2010:20). This strategy was enforced by the rationalization that, no matter how low, any kind of wage was better than no wage. With this problematic ideology came another, and it has become integral in today’s current understanding of poverty — the “deserving” versus the “undeserving” poor.

The distinction created between those who “deserve” certain kinds of social/economic aid and those who do not is highly subjective but with certain recurring themes. Those who are deemed the “deserving” poor are described as being victims of circumstance, or not being able to control their descent into poverty — whether it be due to a disability or through aging. On the other hand, the “undeserving” poor are associated with being “able-bodied” and yet unwilling to

contribute to the workforce due to laziness or over-dependency on public resources and social insurance programs — thus, they were responsible for their own poverty and were not justified in receiving aid (Morgen 2010:20-21). The implicit ideology at work here, then, is that social welfare programs are a reward for those who demonstrate certain qualities rather than an inclusive system that facilitates mutually beneficial interactions between the poor and the state. Furthermore, poverty is treated as didactic tool that is supposed to drive people to make better decisions, regardless of whether they have control over what has happened to them or not.

The first large shift in the American welfare system took place during the Great Depression. Morgen et al. argues that the extensive infrastructure for the welfare system was created in response to the pressure that “economic elites” received (2010:20-21) The “undeserving” versus “deserving” ideology that had been cultivated during the nineteenth century was being challenged as the capitalist market that was supposed to benefit the American public was now responsible for sending millions of Americans into poverty. Therefore, due to the crumbling legitimacy of the market, social welfare programs were established in 1935 across the United States as a means to redistribute resources. This, in turn, could be seen as an attempt to make capitalism hold its appeal to a national audience and counter fears of spreading communist and socialist beliefs.

After the establishment of this basic infrastructure, the United States’ welfare system slowly grew over time. It experienced a particularly large-scale expansion under Lyndon Johnson’s administration and the “War on Poverty” that took place during this time. Morgen et al., citing data from the Economic Policy Institute, explains that federal investment into growing welfare programs exhibited a large payoff in which poverty rates were cut in half across many demographics, including single-mother families and black children (Morgen et al. 2010:23). The

authors' use of this data is integral to the argument that using government spending to address poverty in America is not an unrealistic task because it has, in fact, been successfully done before.

However, declining poverty rates came to a steady halt in the 1980s, under Ronald Reagan's administration. In an effort to reduce taxes, public spending was drastically reduced by substantial cuts in welfare programs. Morgen et al. note that this drastic change represents the beginning of a "paradigm shift" in which the welfare system is reconstructed and subsequently downsized through public policy. These policy changes garnered support for the general public, Morgen et al. argue, due to a combination of "the growing hegemony of conservative neoliberal ideologies" and "racialized discourse" (2010:23-24). This logic adequately explains the emergence of racist imagery and class stereotyping that is one of the hallmarks of the anti-welfare case — that is, the argument that America's welfare system does not alleviate poverty and is often taken advantage of by "welfare queens" (a heavily racialized label) and irresponsible social deviants. Supported by the notion of the "deserving" versus "undeserving" poor, anti-welfare politicians (and their supporters) are able to justify cuts in welfare simply by stating that those who receive welfare benefits oftentimes do not deserve them.

In *The Failed Welfare Revolution*, Steensland discusses guaranteed annual income (GAI) policy that failed to pass in the 1960s under the Nixon administration. Although his analysis relies on what he deems "political sociology", there are many applicable themes related to anthropology and the lived experiences of welfare recipients, opponents and advocates. For example, Steensland cites both a "pervasive distrust of the poor" and the rejection of an "entitlement mentality" as reasons that welfare policy has been consistently negatively stigmatized (2008:225,230). These sentiments are as relevant today as they were almost fifty

years ago, and are dependent on a person's personal values. Disdain for an entitlement mentality is associated with the rejection of "handouts", or assistance for something that is not deserved. The distrust that a person or a community has for the poor, in a similar vein, is rooted in the belief in a poor person that receives aid is likely to "abuse the system" somehow. Ironically enough, those who hold contempt for "big government" or "the system" are the ones who often speak up when they feel like the welfare system is being abused. The problem then lies less in "the system" and more in the people that are benefiting from it, deserved or otherwise.

Another, more abstract line of reasoning behind historical welfare opposition relies on the idea of worth. Steensland argues for the existence of "cultural categories of worth," in which those who are "deserving" and "undeserving" are prescribed based on hegemonic cultural values (2008:232). Although he does not specifically elaborate on examples regarding such categories, there are multiple instances in which this can be applied. Poor people, for example, are prescribed worth in the United States based on their ability and/or willingness to work. If you are employable and exhibit a commitment to finding work, then your worth is greater than someone who is perceived as unwilling to work. Guaranteed income subverts the idea of worth for a "baseline amount" of assistance that does vary based on cultural perceptions of who is worth more or who deserves more. This approach is arguably very much human rights focused because it enforces a kind of economic equity that is attempting to be universally applicable. Steensland argues, however, that these GAI programs were hard for many welfare opponents to accept because they challenge the ways in which worth is assigned (2008:238). In this way, cultural hegemony that ties morality and self-worth to class seems to have trumped the desire to create positive welfare policy outcomes. Morality and worth are also tied to other constructs, such as

race. Therefore, welfare policy has the potential to be shaped by and in accordance with whiteness, poverty and the experiences that exist at the intersection between the two.

Morgen et al., Zinn, and Steensland all offer different ideas regarding how the contemporary American welfare system has emerged, with several recurring themes. First of all, welfare is based on a set of relationships that are underscored by competing interests. While social welfare programs have been marketed as safety nets for the most poor, it has not incorporated the interests of the poor. Rather, it has been used to lessen the perceived effects of income inequality while legitimating the capitalist structures responsible for such inequality. Furthermore, welfare has historically been used on a temporary basis in which self-sufficiency is constantly propelled by policy and enforcers of that policy.

Shortcomings — Morgen, Moss, Otto, and Ehrenreich

A comprehensive analysis of the strengths and shortcomings of the American welfare system requires a multifaceted approach that examines the issue from several angles. This section examines literature that evaluates welfare from reformist perspectives, healthcare perspectives, and ethnography-based perspectives.

In *Stretched Thin*, an ethnography that studies welfare reform and restructuring in Oregon during the late 1990s, Morgen et al. consult a basic set of questions regarding how different groups of people that affect or are affected by the welfare system “experience and interpret welfare restructuring” (2010:8). The consideration of varied experiences and impressions of welfare is essential in understanding what aspects of the system are favorable and what aspects are lacking. The authors conducted interviews with welfare workers, current welfare recipients and former welfare recipients in order to assess the condition of Oregon’s restructured welfare

system in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century.

State actors and policymakers in Oregon tailored their assistance programs to be measured by performance measures that are underscored by neoliberal ideologies. For example, the state's Adult and Family Services (AFS) goals focused on job placement, getting those who received assistance off of assistance as soon as possible and reducing caseloads for workers, and ensuring that those who have previously received aid will not need to receive it again in the future (Morgen et al. 2010:47). These objectives speak to the state's emphasis on promoting self-sufficiency and garnering an environment in which employment and labor is a primary focus for welfare program recipients. Another reason, Morgen et al. argue, lies in program administrators' ability to declare "statistical success" on their services without having to address the more convoluted, complex aspects of what makes such a program "successful" (2010:51). This argument partially explains why large-scale, deep-rooted upheavals in welfare policy are difficult to accomplish — when reformists argue that current policy is lacking, defenders of the current system can use data drawn from AFS and similarly structured organizations to argue that the ongoing structure is acceptable as it is and does not require extensive change.

Morgen et al. examined welfare offices in three areas in Oregon — Bridgetown, Woodside, and Coastal. Each office experienced variations in terms of resources, clients, and the perceived treatment of clients. For example, the Bridgetown office serves a racial segregated and highly impoverished population, while the Coastal office and community comprises mainly working class, predominantly white clients (2010:71-72). Ideally, each office would be run and resourced in response to demographics and need.

In reality, this was not the case. The Coastal area, for instance, was given almost twice as many welfare case managers as the Bridgetown area. Furthermore, recipients from the Coastal

office expressed more instances of satisfaction with their experiences than their Bridgetown counterpart (Morgen et al. 2010:118). There are multiple important points to consider here. First of all, this finding supports the notion that the Oregon system did not distribute their resources based on need. It is possible that resources were distributed based on assumptions of race and class. Recipients that could be offered less in-depth, complex modes of assistance because their needs are not as great would allow system officials to tout higher success rates in shorter amounts of time. Poorer communities with greater systemic inequalities would likely take longer and more carefully constructed means with which to address conditions of poverty. Time and cost, then, become factors to consider.

Through interviews with welfare clients and welfare workers, Morgen et al. found some recurring themes in term of experience. One of the most glaring problems concerns the mismatch between the needs of recipients and the help that they actually received. For example, a recipient who worked a full-time job but could not afford the premium for her company health insurance was rejected from the state's welfare-based health insurance program because her salary was above the required family income range. Furthermore, as her income fluctuated, benefits such as food stamps and child care subsidies were continuously given and taken away (2010:117). Social welfare programs, in this case, were tailored to a set of prescribed "standards" based on income rather than the needs of the recipient — that is, perceived need was valued over actual need.

One of the central tenets of Oregon's welfare system is the integration of recipients back into the workforce, if they were not working already. Therefore, income assistance programs were closely tied to work readiness programs. Many who were coerced into work readiness classes described them as "unhelpful" and compared them to elementary school programs, arguing that they were overall a waste of time and money (2010:125). The fact that these classes

were mandatory and a failure to participate in them resulted in a “freeze” on a financial assistance for most recipients speaks to the “work before welfare” sub-culture that surrounds the system.

Furthermore, the obvious dissatisfaction with the work readiness program demonstrates the system’s inability to adjust in response to clients’ input. Several admitted that when they complained or expressed anger to existing welfare policy, that were labeled as “troublemakers” by case workers and local officials (2010:129). This is a problematic dynamic not only because of classist undertones, but because these workers are capable of responding in particularly harmful ways. They are capable of depleting or withholding aid, and could potentially remove a recipient from a program altogether given a decent enough justification. In one instance, a woman who expressed anger and frustration in front of her case worker was warned that her behavior would negatively affect her case (2010:129). The results of these kinds of interactions are multifaceted. Recipients may not be fully honest about their needs or feelings for fear of angering a worker and losing their aid. Those who do not suppress their feelings will be seriously disadvantaged by a system that may arguably be disadvantaging them already. Constructive criticisms and suggestions for improving the program will be lost in the widening social gap between those who need welfare and those who provide it.

It should be cautioned, however, that case workers and local welfare officials are often not to blame for clients’ negative experiences. The resources and help that case managers provide to clients is highly dependent on funding that they receive from the state and the agencies that sponsor certain programs (Morgen et al. 2010:118). Furthermore, not all recipients of Oregon’s system were subject to negative experiences. Some expressed general satisfaction with the help that they received and cited their experience as rewarding, helpful, and relatively

pleasant (Morgen et al. 2010:116,122). The purpose of Morgen et al.'s study is to not frame the state's welfare programs and welfare officials as careless villains, with poor communities who receive aid as despairing victims. Rather, their work is meant to deconstruct preconceived notions of welfare and poverty by analyzing how various stakeholders and actors operate in a certain setting, and make suggestions based on these analyses.

Oregon's welfare system speaks to issues regarding the American welfare state as a whole. While there are differences between each area regarding the efficiency of welfare program implementation and the success of welfare system restructuring, there are general themes that can be drawn from all of the experiences that are noted. Welfare restructuring as a whole relies heavily on neoliberal ideology — that is, an ideology that strongly promotes self-sufficiency and indirectly punishes dependency. This is supported by the authors' conclusions regarding welfare administrators' philosophy when crafting and employing welfare programs throughout the state. The phrase “work is better than welfare” is circulated often when welfare policy is discussed, and this influenced the measures for success that were drafted with the Adult and Family Services program (2010: 49, 51, 74). Essentially, the purpose of these programs seemed to be a means to an end — rather than supporting individuals in the long term, benefits were given to people so the government could claim that an attempt to help was made and aid could then be taken away.

Morgen et al. give insight into why Oregon's welfare system is structured in this way, arguing that welfare administrators and policymakers, swayed by neoliberal ideologies, do not see welfare as a tool to mitigate widespread poverty — rather, welfare provides an avenue for self-support (Morgen et al. 2010:85). To them, welfare programs are not anti-poverty programs,

and therefore anti-poverty measures are not the responsibility of the state (or federal) government.

The authors of *Stretched Thin* do not directly address the dynamics of white poverty within the context of welfare reform; however, they make subtle notes regarding the implications of race within the implementation of such programs. A series of white female recipients express concern over the sensitivity of caseworkers to their needs, calling them “clueless” and apt to subjecting them to unfair and humiliating treatment (Morgen et al. 2010:119-120). There are many reasons as to why this occurs. Although the authors do not compare the experiences of poor white women to those of poor white men, it is possible that the issue is highly gendered. Depending on the gender of the caseworker, female clients may be taken less seriously and considered less with less urgency than male clients. Alternatively, the degrading treatment these clients experience may be due to their whiteness — in tandem with Moss’s observations on “positive stereotyping,” white clients could be subjected to certain kind of isolation because of their race. Once poor whites become enough downwardly mobile to need government aid, they are subsequently judged because they are deviating from common “white” expectations.

“Whiteness,” however, is dependent on how white people perceive themselves in addition to how they are perceived by others. Since it has been established that white people are subject to certain implicit privileges because of their racial identity, it also possible that their adverse experiences can (at least partly) be contributed to the fact that class mitigates some of these privileges and “levels the playing field,” so to speak. This is not to say that poor whites are subject to the same kinds of injustices that people of color are. Rather, the unspoken entitlements given to and possessed by white people are humbled by poverty, and through that white identity

itself is reconstructed.

Mary Otto approaches welfare policy from the framework of oral health. While a seemingly small part of health policy and social welfare overall, Otto argues that inaccessibility to professional and comprehensive dental care severely affects opportunities for economic and social advancement. Appearance heavily influences the likelihood of finding jobs and being accepted into social circles. Furthermore, the appearance of bad teeth are reflective of a kind of socioeconomic failure. If someone is suffering from dental issues, whether it be gum disease or an excess in cavities, their chances of being accepted into these spaces drops drastically. Otto notes that this situation is ironic because American institutions, especially welfare institutions, rely so heavily on promoting self-sufficiency and progress in the workforce (2017:VI).

Issues concerning dental care, however, are a very practical matter of accessibility to resources and affordability. According to the American Dental Association, the latter is the largest prohibiter to receiving professional dental care (Otto 2017:35). The poor, then, become those who suffer the most because they are disadvantaged in terms of income. In an ideal setting, social welfare programs would be able to provide assistance. However, dental insurance and basic dental care benefits are separated from such programs, including Medicare and Medicaid (Otto 2017:114). In this respect, the current relationship between welfare institutions and the poor is not comprehensive and does not consider the most important aspects of healthcare.

The separation of comprehensive dental care from social welfare programs, and the inaccessibility to dental care in general, has proven to have more serious consequences. In Ohio alone, eighty-four thousand people made dental-related emergency room visits in 2014 that could have arguably been prevented by easier access to dental care (Otto 2017:54). It should be noted

that, over time, the expensive nature of these hospital stays is under the burden of the state and its taxpayer. Rather than investing in the dental care of fellow underserved Americans, they are investing their money into crises that could have been averted.

The detrimental consequences of inaccessibility to dental care raises the question: is dental care a human right? Tooth pain is a universal human experience, as are many of its effects. It inhibits participation in everyday life — including sleeping, eating, speaking, and working. Furthermore, as exemplified above, a lack of proper dental care can lead to serious medical problems, as well as death. Therefore, within the context of human rights documents, specifically those pertaining to social and economic rights, the lack of comprehensive dental care in America reveals a serious flaw in the state's ability to fulfill the inherent needs of its citizens.

In Kirby Moss's study on poor whites in America, he does not make welfare policy a primary concern in his ethnography; however, he does create multiple connections between white poverty and welfare aid. In one instance, an interviewee ("Sharon") rejected assumptions that the welfare system makes life "easy" — in fact, she asserts that if she did not have to be on welfare, she would choose not to be (2003:55). Behind this statement, there are many implications to consider. First of all, her belief about the welfare system deconstructs a common misconception about people on welfare: the misconception that those who are on welfare do not want to be dependent of constant government assistance. Sharon's hesitation to be on welfare, moreover, may be a result of a reluctance to be associated with the stigmatizations that are associated between the welfare system and its recipients — laziness and over-dependency, for example.

In a separate encounter, Moss finds an interviewee (“Denise”) who is in an ironic situation: she is in worse economic shape while receiving less welfare aid and working than she would be if she was not working and receiving more welfare aid (2014:86). Her experience is ironic because one of the purposes of welfare, arguably, is to put citizens in a better economic position than they were before they received assistance. Moreover, this experience strongly diverges from a common misconception regarding welfare recipients: they take advantage of the welfare system and its benefits in order to receive a “free” and/or “easy ride” through life (that is, receiving money and/or services without having to do much work). The problem that she faces speaks to an instance of gross mismanagement and misappropriation of resources within the welfare system that leaves those in need at a disadvantage.

In the early 2000s, social activist and journalist Barbara Ehrenreich challenges the United State’s social and economic structures, as well as perceptions that those who are poor are byproducts of “laziness”. In *Nicked and Dimed*, Ehrenreich inserts herself into a lifestyle comprised of minimum wage work in various parts of the country. She soon finds that such a lifestyle is not very sustainable, and takes a physical and emotional toll. Some of her most poignant observations, however, are the ones she makes about the people around her. These are the people who take such experiences as reality, rather than as part of an experiment. Ehrenreich writes that her co-workers inability to obtain affordable housing is a “principal disruption in their lives” and is a result of wages that are not “financially viable” (2001:25). Poverty is not only experienced through economic insecurity — rather, it is experienced in a very physical sense as well. Ehrenreich and her co-workers, for example, describe chronic pain and fatigue associated with work that requires them to be on their feet for a majority of the day (2001:33). She also describes bouts of emotional distress in relation to feeling overwhelmed, mistreated, and

humiliated (2001:35.47-48). Yet, she continues to work for the (then) minimum wage of seven dollars an hour in an attempt to get access to resources that she and her co-workers realistically cannot afford. Therefore, the argument that those who need support from the government are not “deserving” because of some kind of personality flaw is substantially weakened. That being said, Ehrenreich’s methods for crafting these arguments are unconventional and do not fit into the established customs of ethnography. Nevertheless, her study speaks to continuously shifting discussions on poverty, class dynamics, and the American economy. In considering the lived experiences of poor and/or working class communities, from Moss to Ehrenreich, we are challenged to reconsider that it means to be and think about poverty and “the poor.”

Although she does not mention the welfare system explicitly, Ehrenreich’s research raises a lot of questions regarding the role of welfare in such circumstances. In the first chapter, Ehrenreich makes one of the most powerful statements in the book. She writes: “*There are no secret economies that nourish the poor; on the contrary, there are a host of special costs*” (2001:27, emphasis added). Such “special costs,” including access to healthcare in the case of low-wage jobs that don’t offer benefits, leave considerable gaps in viability for poor individuals and communities. The welfare system, if properly tailor to the needs of those who could benefit from it, has the potential to “fill in” some of these gaps.

Discussion

Academic literature relating to the welfare system and poverty is eclectic, making it difficult to sort through information that bears current relevancy. Making connections between the welfare system, white poverty and human rights makes the subject all the more convoluted, with many complexities to account for. My investigation of a fraction of the relevant research

has produced several ideas that should be considered when moving forward in creating a more effective and comprehensive welfare policy that has the potential to benefit a greater number of people.

Brief Recommendations: Capacity Building, Specialization, and Ideas for Future Restructuring

Before making assertions on how the welfare system should be tailored to the needs of Americans, it is important to (at least in part) address the question: What is the purpose of welfare, or what *should be* its purpose? Thus far, welfare has been discussed from multiple different angles and from a variety of perspectives — while this does provide a more comprehensive understanding of the “welfare experience,” it also blurs consensus regarding how much (or how little) the welfare system should be expanded to fit the needs of the American poor.

In most respects, the answer to this question is subjective. In their analysis, Morgen et al. describes welfare state programs in the twentieth century as successful “social safety nets” that “modulate” inequality caused by the United States’ ubiquitous capitalist market (2010:26). This interpretation, while acknowledging income disparity and its systemic causes, implies that such assistance programs are only purposed for a “just-in-case” scenario in which Americans who are down on their luck can still receive basic goods and services. Given the accounts from Kirby Moss, Mary Otto, and Sandra Morgen et al., the current welfare system (“current” meaning post-Clinton Administration) fails to fulfill this purpose.

Rapid and efficient policy change regarding America’s welfare state has failed for many reasons, one of them being Americans’ national consensus towards such programs. Many believe that social assistance is not an irrefutable need and only applicable in certain circumstances of

poverty. This is supported by Homan's findings regarding the "schemas" of poverty and the public's opinion on each, as well as Steensland's discussions on failed welfare reform. From the perspective of Morgen's analysis on welfare restructuring in Oregon, assistance programs are treated as a temporary commodity, rather than an inalienable right. Their success is ultimately measured by how quickly recipients no longer need them. In this way, the welfare system is compromised because it fails to satisfy two opposing ideologies: the belief, grounded in neoliberalism, that social or economic aid should focus solely on harboring self-sufficiency that supports a free capitalist market and the belief, grounded in Marxism and democratic socialism, that fair economic opportunity is a right that should be achieved by any means, cost and market benefit aside. In an attempt to mediate between the two, band-aid solutions are seemingly used to solve complex issues that require more thought-out, long-term remedies.

Welfare in the United States has been structured and re-structured as a temporary fix to a deeply ingrained problem — that is, widespread poverty. Therefore, a part of the solution to welfare system reform requires proactive action that helps alleviate poverty. Raising wages in highly impoverished communities and expanding programs that assist marginalized individuals such as single mothers and people of color are a few of the many places to start. The welfare system itself would benefit from a shift in values that focuses on the causes behind the need for welfare as well. For example, rather than focusing on the rate by which recipients no longer need welfare as a measure for success, it would be more plausible to measure success by factors that speak to the actual *welfare of individuals*. Job security, job mobility, access to education and healthcare are a few standards that could be evaluated. These measurements would require a more community-engaged approach, one that looks at qualitative rather than quantitative results. This would suggest that the term "welfare" may need to be reevaluated altogether. Rather than

basing standards of aid on income or broad economic conceptualizations of “success,” welfare could stand to incorporate other indicators of well-being.

It should be acknowledged that expanding and reorganizing assistance programs and implementing them in this way is a task that is easier said than done. This is in part due to the appropriation of public spending in the United States. Zinn notes how federal budgeting has historically favored military and defense spending over anything else (2003:572,612) and government spending records and budget proposals from 2006 to 2018 verify his assertions. In 2006, for example, the Bush administration used 63% of its discretionary spending on military and national security expenses (The Balance 2019). In 2016, the number was reduced to about 50% under the Obama administration (The Balance 2019). These spending records bring up multiple important points that are not covered by Zinn’s arguments regarding misappropriation of government funding — 1) Government spending in general is in disarray, regardless of political party or affiliation and 2) Discretionary spending is not being properly allocated to fit the needs of the everyday citizen.

A large portion of these federal budgets, admittedly, have also been allocated to entitlement programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and military retirement programs — 53% of the total budget in 2006 and 63% in 2016, for example. However, it should be noted that these programs are not social welfare programs that provide services such as income assistance and yet make up the largest portion mandatory government spending (spending on government programs that is mandated by federal law). In 2006, Social Security and Medicare/Medicaid alone occupied nearly 75% of all mandatory government spending, with the rest being used for federally mandated welfare programs (The Balance 2009). These numbers speak to a significant

issue — in order to affect change in how the welfare system is funded, an extensive upheaval and reconstruction of the government budgeting and spending system may also be required.

Capacity building is an integral part of implementing successful policy and efficiently utilizing available resources. Paskett et al. acknowledges this in their assessment of disparities in cancer related health disparities in Appalachia, in which they recommend that the Appalachian Community Cancer Network (ACCN) take advantage of the resilience of white rural Appalachian communities, provide education on health screenings and similar procedures that would increase the rate of early cancer detection, and address the needs of communities on a circumstantial basis (2011:1080). Not only do the authors' recommendations acknowledge Appalachian residents as part of a community with agency, but they also seek to address the idea that disparities in health, education, and social opportunity to not occur at one stagnant rate across a population — rather, issues flare and recede from town to town, and family to family. Mary Otto takes a similar approach in her discussion of access to dental care in marginalized areas. Specifically, she argues that communities be given greater access to fluoridated water and that dentists and dental hygienists be sent to underprivileged regions in the United States (2017:60-61). Otto's recommendations address the root of the problem — rather than using healthcare professional to address problems at their most severe, she suggests that access be expanded as to avoid extreme problems in the first place. This approach is optimal in capacity-building settings.

In addition to capacity building, the current welfare system could strongly benefit from welfare programs that are more specialized — specifically according to need, state, or even region. By approaching needs-based programs on a very general scale, the needs of poor Americans in specific and circumstantial conditions are not being addressed. Poor white

Americans, for example, have different needs and expectations as opposed to black or Asian Americans. Poor Americans in rural Appalachia experience poverty differently than Americans in large urban cities. Morgen et al.'s study of welfare reform in Oregon proves that welfare is experienced in highly differentiated ways, according to circumstances that include income and race. Each office operated rather differently and depended on the pool of recipients, the workers, and the resources. Furthermore, some offices required less assistance than others. This is not meant to imply that a certain state, county, or even local community should be offered "preferential treatment." Rather, this means that resources should be distributed based on need, and needs vary based on place.

Yet who determines need? The current welfare system, then, should not only be reconsidered with respect to how it is built, but who has a say in building it. In *Stretched Thin*, Morgen et al. argues that welfare policy has been constructed and reconstructed to the needs of certain stakeholders, often the "economic elites" who are pressured to enforce a neoliberal, capitalist market (2010:21). In this sense, the welfare system becomes the output of a set of interactions between the upper class and a need to produce and profit. The needs of those that the system is intended to help are lost in the margins.

An effective system, then, relies on policy and guidelines that rely on past experiences and current demands of the poor. This is where anthropological fieldwork and social research is useful. Work that recognizes the specific needs of the poor, like Otto and Erenreich, while also studying the relationships of poverty that exist within cultural communities with respect to factors such as race and history, like Moss and Hartigan Jr. have done, allows a holistic space with which effective welfare policy can be created. The employment of such policy, furthermore, will require determination and willpower. The reinvention of the welfare system, as Morgen et

al. writes, is not a straight implementation of a set of rules but rather a continuous “negotiation” of principles and reality (2010:84). Therefore, the relationships between welfare policymakers, workers and recipients will require a kind-of “push and pull” based on current need and circumstance.

The stigmatizations and negative connotations associated with being “on” welfare should also be addressed. In his ethnography of poor whites, Moss found that many people he interviewed expressed embarrassment with needing assistance — as Denise puts it in her interview, “I don’t like it, but I need it” (2003:86). This is where a big contradiction lies; while social assistance is often a human need, especially in a deeply unequal society, it is also a source of shame. Welfare policy, then should be discussed and marketed as less of a gratuitous government service and more of a right that encourages economic equality in a seriously unequal society.

Rights in America — A False Reality?

Taking human rights into consideration, the experiences that have been discussed in this project reveal a wide range of cases in which basic needs are not met and basic rights are not fulfilled. Rural communities have been subject to late cancer detection, citizens have died because of oral health issues that could not be adequately treated, and work opportunities have been subverted due to a lack of resources in welfare offices. Dignity and respect have been squandered by cultural stigmatizations regarding race and class, stigmatizations that have been perpetuated by both local communities and the state.

The United Nation’s Report by the Special Rapporteur offers interesting input regarding the United States’ ability to fulfill social, economic and political rights. Relying on government

statistics and observations by the United Nations' Human Rights Council, the document argues that the lower class's inability to participate in political life and find work are not only byproducts of poverty, but reasons as to why anti-poverty policy up to this point has been ineffective (2018:7-9). The document's author, Phillip Alston (the Special Rapporteur), seemingly interprets poverty in America as a cycle perpetuated by problematic ideals such as "welfare to work".

The US is one of the richest countries in the world, yet is the most economically unequal in of all "advanced" industrial nations (Howard-Hassman 2011:30). American citizens are subject to some of the most abject forms of poverty as a result of substantial income inequality. Therefore, the notion that the United States is exceptional or superior in its ability to adequately address human rights and provide for its people is an illusion. Johan van der Vyver's analysis of American exceptionalism lists multiple reasons for why this so, including the country's failure to ratify global human rights instruments and actively demonstrate its "universal respect" of "fundamental freedoms" (2001:777-778). This statement deglamorizes the relationship between the United States and the global community and supports the act of holding America, a country with immense political and economic capital, accountable for its actions in the social sphere.

Earlier in the paper, I argued that the distinction created in the United States between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor substantiates the claim that American culture often treats as something that is *earned*, rather than something that is inherently possessed. This then raises questions regarding the values that exist within human rights — dignity, for example — and how these values are interpreted in the United States. Rhoda Howard-Hassmann frames rights in multiple ways, including within the context of biological need and how economic rights align with such needs (2011:29-30). Human rights, then, are not simply interpretive spaces for social

justice to operate. Rather, they are mechanisms to enforce a baseline level of equality that ensures the fulfillment of basic human need and attempts to alleviate human suffering.

Suffering, however, occurs beyond explicit physical pain, and this is where more abstract values such as dignity and security come in. Social, psychological, and emotional suffering are integral to the integrity of the human being, and material inequality tends to exacerbate such suffering. The more the poor feel separated, both literally and metaphorically, from the rich, the greater the likelihood that impoverished communities will be subject to persistent indignities (Howard-Hassmann 2011:30). Interviewees, from Moss's ethnography on poor whites to Morgan's ethnography on welfare reform in Oregon, experienced social isolation and separation due to economic inequality. They expressed feelings of insecurity and disenfranchisement. In the case of poor whites, such disenfranchisement left them feeling separated from communities in which they wanted to take part in. However, such experiences have seemingly fallen into the background of America's public policy consciousness.

Howard-Hassmann raises a very crucial point that answers the question as to why the United States considers second-generation (economic, social, and cultural) rights with less severity than first-generation (civil and political) rights. She asserts that America is a country heavily influenced by social minimalism, or an ideology that relies heavily on personal autonomy as a means to make choices and handle the consequences of these choices. While personal autonomy is ideal in theory, social minimalism also dissuades any kind of obligation that society has to assist the individual (2011:39). This belief system fits almost perfectly into neoliberal ideologies, in which self-sustainability is adamantly enforced. Welfare policy has been tailored to neoliberalism. Therefore, the current welfare state in American is a product of social minimalist beliefs that contradict the basis of social, economic and cultural rights.

Social suffering, furthermore, is often more implicit than outright forms of physical suffering. It can occur through everyday interaction, and worsens gradually over time. Social, economic, and cultural rights are often not prioritized for this exact reason. The violation of a civil or political right, such as the right to not be tortured or the right to a fair trial, are considered more imminent threats to a human's well-being than the right to social security. However, the consequences of the inability to fulfill second-generation rights can become just as detrimental. In her analysis of dental care in marginalized Appalachian areas, Otto recounts several instances in which people have died as a result of inaccessibility to adequate resources, including healthcare (2017:51-54,109-112). The argument that social and economic rights are less important, then, is no longer an entirely valid argument.

Human rights are idealistic. There are many competing social ideologies, economic structures, and political regimes that consider rights to be an afterthought. However, difficult does not mean hopeless. Forensic scientist and human rights advocate Adam Rosenblatt acknowledges the idealism that human rights entail, but poignantly states that "...there is no specific limit on human agency that prevents us from achieving these things" (2015:163). At the very least, restoring the basic tenets of rights to the most marginalized is a doable task. After all, as Howard-Hassmann argues, a majority of citizens in industrial democracies already enjoy the experience of dignity on a daily basis (2011:28). These people, however, are socially visible. Acknowledging invisible populations is therefore a crucial step in restoring rights and values to those who have been forced to live life without them. Research that speaks to the needs of such communities is a means to accomplish this. This research, specifically, is an attempt to help articulate such needs.

Policymakers and welfare officials are fully capable of working with communities to fulfill the rights of those in need. Furthermore, those who experience human rights abuses are not simply hapless victims. The recommendations mentioned previously are a crucial step to addressing the abuses that American citizens in poverty have faced. Another important step is to acknowledge rights as less of an idealistic goal and more of a moral urgency for local, national, and global communities.

White Poverty and Welfare

From a broader standpoint, studying welfare system effectiveness with a focus on white poverty has brought about important points on the intersection of race, class, and social justice. Many poor whites, whether openly admitted or not, experience marginalization in some shape or form. They feel disenfranchised, and therefore commit to ideologies that nourish the injustice that they feel, therefore allowing them to feel more important relative to the world around them.

It is important to once again caution, however, that the marginalization and mistreatment of poor whites does qualify the statement that the poor white population as a whole is in “just as bad” of a situation as people of color. While the poor white women interviewed on their experiences with the Oregon welfare system do experience obvious disenfranchisement, for example, Morgen et al. note that the amount of negative experiences associated with women of color are considerably higher (2010:120). The purpose of this work is not to pit the experiences of two groups against each other and decide which one is “worse,” because this question has already been answered through data based on ethnography and other forms of social research. Rather, it is to expand on a critical analysis of white racial identity and the different considerations that are taken once class is involved.

Considering white racialization and identity within the context of poverty, I argue, makes the “unmarked-ness” of whiteness, as Hartigan Jr. calls it, becomes more self-evident to poor white people because their class separates them from predominant conceptions of “whiteness” — the presumption of unmitigated access to certain “priveleges” like housing and healthcare — and when human rights are considered, even more so. The conditions of class — whether labeled “working class” or outright “poor” — and the effects that these conditions bring on their livelihoods and their access to basic resources positions poor whites differently to the world around them than, say, a middle or upper class white person. This has the ability to not only shift perceptions of class, race, and rights within poor white communities, but also emphasize the importance of institutions such as government-mandated support — that is to say, welfare programs. Furthermore, it is important to consider the experiences of white communities in urban *and* rural communities. Anthropologists that wish to pursue poverty studies should be careful to not let one area become less visible in research because each has interesting input to offer, from Hartigan Jr.’s study of whiteness in Detroit to Otto’s studies of healthcare access in rural Appalachian communities.

The valuable perspectives that poor white spaces offer regarding class and welfare proves that being white is not problematic, but rather the expression of white identity and the embodiment of “whiteness” is. The act of being white in the United States immediately prescribes privilege in nearly every facet of American culture; however, this does not occur in a vacuum. Annalee Newitz explores this idea, emphasizing that that white identity is not the problem — white social practices and institutions are (Newitz 1997:150). Privilege, superiority and inequality are byproducts of centuries of exploitation through unequal power relationships between whites (often white males) and everyone else. Such power relationships are perpetrated

by institutions in America that perpetuate the ideals of capitalism and neoliberalism. While race plays heavily into the makeup of these institutions, they also rely heavily on the perpetuation of class dynamics in which the most wealthy make the rules. Thompson's analysis of the "hillbilly" as an invention by upper-class whites in the nineteenth century supports this notion.

As Morgen et al. writes, "Poverty is a *class condition*" (2010:193, emphasis added). Poverty is not a consequence of race, but is often exacerbated (or sometimes mitigated) by it. Although the inability to access certain resources disproportionately affects people of color, class creates a common ground by which all racial groups can identify in some shape or form. White identity and other racial identities, then, have the opportunity to make sense of each other's experiences on this front.

This project, however, focuses on white racial identity. One of the consequence of this study and studies similar to it is that it creates a space for discussions on what it means to white — specifically, what it means to be poor and white. As Hartigan Jr. mentions, white people tend to not have to think about their race and how their race fits within the broader social world with which they live. White poverty, however, forces people and communities to reconsider how race is interpreted and how race is a lived experience that communities of color must grapple with on a daily basis.

Conclusion

This literature review is a brief and condensed assessment of multifaceted, complex issues. There are many aspects to consider that are beyond the scope of this project. For example, the welfare system currently addresses (for the most part) the needs of citizens. It does not account for the needs of immigrants, refugees, or the like. Furthermore, there are plenty of

cultural factors that can complicate the intersection between race and class, such as experiences regarding gender and age. For example, children in poverty tend to be much more vulnerable to negative life experiences and outcomes than adults. With respect to these topics, there is still plenty of work to be done.

In the grander schemes of poverty, racial identity, human rights and “the political,” there is a recurring desire to create blame. *Who* is at fault for systemic poverty and unyielding income inequality in the United States? *Who* is responsible for bias that occurs across the racial spectrum? *Who* can take responsibility for the corrupt politicians, the human rights abuses and widespread oppression that occur on a daily basis? The problem with these questions is that they assume a single perpetrator, some inherently evil puppet-master that controls all of the bad things that plague American (and the global) society. In reality, there is no single wrongdoer. These problems are a result of historical, longstanding systems and functions that encourage domination, hierarchy and capitalism. Addressing such issues requires a re-examination and breakdown of enduring, problematic ways of doing and ways of being for the sake of more comprehensive, equitable ones that are flexible and subject to change. In the case of poverty and income inequality in the United States, deconstructing and rebuilding the welfare system is a good place to start.

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