

"TRYING TO GET OUT OF THE HOLE": COMMUNICATIVE RESILIENCE AND
SENSEMAKING AMONG ADULTS EXPERIENCING FOOD INSECURITY AND
ECONOMIC PRECARITY

by

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Bachelor of Arts, 2023

Texas Christian University

Fort Worth, TX

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of

Bob Schieffer College of Communication

Texas Christian University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Degree



Spring

2025



BOB SCHIEFFER
COLLEGE of COMMUNICATION

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Thesis approved:

04/15/2025

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April 24, 2025

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2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank God for this amazing opportunity and for opening this door in my life. Quiero darles las gracias a mis papás Dora, Roberto, Maria y Yubini por siempre apoyarme y estar a mi lado. Gracias por venir a este país para darme esta oportunidad. Para mis tíos y tías, específicamente Marlyn, Jairo, Milton y Silvia, que siempre me apoyan y me brindan sus buenos deseos y me compran un cafecito en mis días difícil. I would like to thank my church family, Teadran, Shala and Pastor Karen for cheering me on during my educational journey and always reminding me that God has a purpose for me. I would like to thank the food bank that sparked this passion in me, Inspired Vision Compassion Center, for allowing me to be a part of your journey.

This one goes out to Amorette for always supporting me and being my #1 ally during my time in this program and in life. This genuinely would not be happening without you. Our countless meetings, texts and Milano cookies will always hold a dear spot in my heart. To my lovely committee, Kristen (CJS) and Timothy for all of their amazing comments and direction; and for always having an open door where I can talk about thesis, or just about any random thought I have. To our amazing department that has loved and help me grow into the scholar I am now; I will forever be thankful that I worked with the best people in our discipline. To my amazing friends that have gone through this program with me, I will always cherish our time together.

Lastly, I want to dedicate this to the participants that shared their experiences and entrusted me with their stories.

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ABSTRACT

"TRYING TO GET OUT OF THE HOLE": COMMUNICATIVE RESILIENCE AND SENSEMAKING AMONG ADULTS EXPERIENCING FOOD INSECURITY AND ECONOMIC PRECARITY

by

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47 million Americans are food insecure (Feeding America, 2025). Working class individuals are likely to be threatened by food insecurity (Dougherty, 2018). Therefore, this study focuses on the lived experience of individuals who are employed, in order to better understand the threat of food insecurity on the average American. This study examined food insecurity, and precarity through the lenses of sensemaking (Weick, 1995), and communicative theory of resilience (Buzzanell 2010). This study proposed that individuals experiencing economic hardships that result in food insecurity go through the Sensemaking process which aids in building resilience. Rationalization through dreaming, and universalizing allow individuals to make sense and enact resilience. Furthermore, this study revisited the roles of disruption, the connection between underemployment and sensemaking, and the role of networks.

CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION

I met Megan¹ three years ago when she started going to the food pantry where I worked. She came in when I was working in our main office registering people to receive food. It was a slow day, so, I decided to have a longer conversation with her to ask her about her day. We swapped stories about the hot weather and talked about how we could not wait for it to cool down outside. Then, she started crying. I offered her some tissues and she quickly composed herself. She apologized for her tears and then told me her story.

Megan had been in an abusive marriage, where she had worked some, but was not working much. The little money that she had she saved in order to leave her abusive home with her children. She confided in me that she was struggling making ends meet. Between food stamp benefits, her salary from her full-time job, and help from family, she just did not have enough to feed or clothe herself or her children. She mentioned that sometimes she would not eat dinner in order to ration out her food to her children. She shared how anxious and depressed she was while going through this process. She even expressed how she considered going back to her abusive ex-husband, so her children were well-fed. That is the detail that shifted something in me.

Here was a brave woman that changed her living situation for her safety, yet she regrets the change because she does not have enough for her children. It was gut wrenching to hear her story and then hear that detail. For years, Megan came to the food bank. We gave her food, drinks, clothes, toys, and external resources to help her get back on her feet. We provided healthcare for her children, and external resources to help her get back on her feet. After a couple of years, Megan stopped showing up to food pantry. After a while I was concerned, so I found

¹ In order to respect her privacy, her name has been changed in the story.

her number in our registry and called her. She answered very happily and shared with me how well she was doing. She was off of food stamps, got a raise at work, and was able to provide for herself and her children. It was wonderful the difference that two years could make. Megan talked about how appreciative she was for our food bank and that we helped her get back on her feet. She talked about how it took time to make sense of her situation, and finally feel like she could disclose her situation and ask for help. Furthermore, she expressed that this experience made her stronger and that in the future if she were in a difficult situation, she would be able to work past it. Megan's story is the inspiration for this study. Megan's experience is not an individual instance of food insecurity and precarity. 47 million Americans are food insecure (Feeding America, 2025). 47 million food insecure individuals demand sensemaking.

This study examined food insecurity, and precarity through the lenses of sensemaking, and communicative theory of resilience. This study proposed that individuals experiencing economic hardships that result in food insecurity go through the sensemaking process which aids in building resilience. Rationalization through dreaming about the future, and universalizing allow individuals to make sense of their circumstances and ultimately enact resilience. Furthermore, this study revisited the roles of disruption, the connection between underemployment and sensemaking, and the role of networks.

Food Insecurity and Precarity

Food insecurity, and precarity (defined as “the condition of continual wage insecurity;” Bahrainwala, 2020, p. 1) are situations that are prevalent in everyday lives that we turn our attention from. In Megan's case she was food insecure and in a precarious financial situation for only two years; that is not the case for everyone. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, 2024, para. 4) defines food insecurity in the instance that “a person is food

insecure when they lack regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life. This may be due to unavailability of food and/or lack of resources to obtain food.” Food insecurity, defined by the USDA is “a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food” (USDA, 2024, para. 6), and impacts 18.6 percent of Americans (USDA, 2024). This number has risen 4.6 percent since 2021 (USDA, 2024).

Working class individuals are likely to be threatened by food insecurity (Dougherty, 2018). Therefore, this study focuses on the lived experience of individuals who are employed full-time, part-time, or are self-employed, in order to better understand the threat of food insecurity on the average American. Dougherty et al., (2018) argued that not having enough food was a material experience but also a discursive experience. Essentially meaning that the act of food insecurity is multifaceted and not a one-dimensional experience of not having food. Food insecurity surpasses the material experience and is a discursive and social situation. This is important because it impacts how food insecurity is talked about and the resources made available to people experiencing it. In the same study, individuals experiencing food insecurity due to unemployment, expressed that they felt they would be stigmatized or judged for their situation if they shared it; therefore, they stayed silent and did not disclose their needs to those who could have potentially helped (Dougherty et al., 2018).

Food Insecurity, Precarity and Theory

People rationalize events through the process of sensemaking (Weick, 2005). In the case of food insecurity and precarity, those are experiences that are ongoing and impact the lived experience of everyday life. Furthermore, the act of being food insecure or experiencing precarity is one that creates questions about how one got that situation or how one will overcome

the situation (Weick, 2005). Sensemaking is inherently tied to resilience; the understanding of how one has gotten to a situation may also help an individual bounce back from the situation. Sensemaking starts with chaos and the unknown, and the food insecurity experience is one of literal unknowns of where one's food will be coming from. The unknowns that grow out of precarity are those that structure the sensemaking process and allow for the situation to be understood and constructed (Weick, 1995).

Once a situation is made sense of, though the sensemaking process occurs and reoccurs, the individual may enact the resilience process, though the resilience process is not necessarily a separate entity of sensemaking, of reintegrating to daily life after there has been a disruption (Richardson, 2002). Communicative resilience is not within an individual but rather it is the process of discourse, messages and narrative that allow an individual to move past a disruption in their lives (Buzzanell, 2010). For individuals that experience food insecurity and precarity, the resilience process allows them to create a new normal, revise their identity, and displace negative feelings associated with their experience and craft them in a more positive light (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). This study will, therefore, examine food insecurity, and precarity through the lenses of sensemaking, and communicative theory of resilience.

CHAPTER TWO. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

This study examines food insecurity, and precarity through the lenses of sensemaking, and communicative theory of resilience. This study argues that individuals experiencing economic hardships that result in food insecurity go through the sensemaking process which ultimately aids in building resilience. Sensemaking is a way to structure the unknown (Weick, 1995) and when experiencing economic hardship such as underemployment, food insecurity or precarity, one may try to structure the unknown through sensemaking. Underemployment, food insecurity, and precarity will be seen through sensemaking, and communicative theory of resilience in order to shed light on how individuals come to terms, overcome, and manage their financial instability.

Sensemaking

Sensemaking can be seen in the experience of individuals experiencing economic hardship and food insecurity because before the individual can act upon their circumstances and potentially reach out for help, the individual must understand their experience. Furthermore, the organizations that help individuals that are experiencing economic hardship or food insecurity also serve as a means to make sense of their situation. Sensemaking means to literally make sense of a situation (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is a way to structure the unknown. It involves placing stimuli into some kind of framework that allows the stimuli to be comprehended, understood, explained, attributed, extrapolated, and predicted. Sensemaking can be viewed as a social interaction process that through which retrospective accounts to explain stimuli that are surprising. Furthermore, sensemaking, to an extent, occurs when there is an interrupt in ongoing activity; disruptions of ongoing activities can be a trigger to sensemaking. Sensemaking starts

with chaos; everything continues around the situation and the individuals must see what is going on and decide to take the cues that are occurring to make sense of them (Weick et al., 2005).

Sensemaking is an issue of language, talk, and communication (Weick et al., 2005).

Sensemaking occurs when there is a difference in the world that is perceived and the experience that is being lived; it occurs when there is “no obvious way” to engage in the world (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). It works to filter, frame, and create something more tangible (Weick, 1995).

Sensemaking is being thrown into an “ongoing, unknowable, and unpredictable” experience in which the individual is trying to answer questions to the story that is being told (Weick et al., 2005). The process of sensemaking is (1) grounded in identity construction, (2) retrospective, (3) enacted, (4) social, (5) ongoing, (6) extracted from cues, and (7) plausible.

The types of stories that are told and reconstructed impact identity in sensemaking (Bird, 2007). The constructed identity of being someone that is undergoing hardship or food insecurity will impact the sensemaking process. Sensemaking is grounded in identity (Weick, 1995).

Sensemaking begins with the “sensemaker”. The self is a crystalized being that is a conglomeration of the many selves that are created and recreated in our social world. The self and identity are impacted by how others view the organization that one is a part of. Furthermore, the self is impacted by how others see and perceive us. Individuals have a sense of self that is impacted by how they are viewed by others and fear stigmatization (Dougherty, 2017).

Stigmatization is a fear of individuals that are experiencing hardships or food insecurity (Dougherty, 2018). They fear that they will be judged for not working hard enough or not having enough or even needing external help to get by. Sensemaking occurs in the service of maintaining a consistent, and positive self-concept. In a study analyzing the silence of organization members (Bisel & Arterburn, 2012) found that individuals created constructs for

what their roles in an organization are and what the roles of others in that same organization are. If these roles are somehow challenged or there is a change in these roles that are unexpected sensemaking can occur and individuals find a way to deal with this disruption in their own identity. Furthermore, people learn about their identities by projecting them into an environment and observing the consequences. Individuals have schemas, subjective theories that are socially constructed about the self or others, that identify a sense of self, and a sense of others around them (Harris, 1994). This essentially means that during the sensemaking process the self exists in the situation that is being made sense of and ultimately the situation is made sense of through the lens and view of the person imposing their self into the situation. Furthermore, people react and shape the situation. The situation that is being made sense of is an ongoing instant that is shaped with the reactions of those around it. This means that not only do situations exist, but we impact the situations as we live them and try to make sense of them.

In light of food insecurity and precarity, the situations are actively occurring, therefore identity is shifting as the situation shifts. These identities that are occurring can be viewed actively as they occur or can be seen retrospectively. Sensemaking is retrospective (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking deals with meaningful lived experience. Retrospective sensemaking is about individual experience implying that each episode is its own entity to make sense of. To create and give something meaning one must pay attention to it; however, attention to something occurs after the fact, therefore, when creating meaning it is retroactive and about things that are in the past. One cannot make sense of something that is currently occurring or something that is to come; one makes sense of something that has already happened. When we look back and make sense of something, whatever is occurring in the present moment can impact how we make sense of something and the meaning that we assign to something. For example, if a person has

experienced food insecurity in the past, they have made sense of the situation. But, if they are currently experiencing it again, their previous sensemaking is being changed since the situation is being reproduced. Being fired did not just occur to me but it happened to someone else, therefore the experience is shared with another. Sensemaking is about the cues that occur that impact how we come to conclusions about events that happen organizationally and in our lives.

Furthermore, since sensemaking is retrospective, it happens through remembering and memories. When thinking about food insecurity, it may not be a specific instance that has occurred that triggers retroactive sensemaking, but rather a culmination of events that have occurred or an experience. Since sensemaking occurs through memories, anything that affects or impacts the remembering process will affect the sense and meaning that is created. If our memory fails us, we cannot fully make sense of something. Sensemaking is retroactive because there must be a response to a stimulus for an event to be defined and to trigger the sensemaking process. Since sensemaking is retroactive and reliant on the memory of the self, hindsight is biased; actions are only known once they have been completed meaning that our actions go before us and precede us. Meaning is not attached to the experience itself but rather it is tied to the attention that is directed toward the experience. Essentially, meaning is something that we have to give to something, it is not something that exists by itself. The experience of food insecurity is one that has been detailed with guidelines.

For example, the USDA (2024) has a questionnaire, titled Survey Questions Used by USDA To Assess Household Food Security, that is used to determine whether an individual is on the spectrum of experiencing food insecurity. In this instance, meaning is created because an organization has defined the situation, and then the individual takes their lived experience with food insecurity and contextualize it with the definitions and aids that are given. The retrospective

meaning that we assign depends on goals and projects that are also changing. As our goals and projects shift, the importance that we assign changes. Retrospective sensemaking in our everyday lives involves a short turnaround time between the experience and the reflection period to make sense, in these cases memories are rich and fresh. Retrospection does not make events transparent, but rather it makes them clearer. Once feelings of “order clarity, and rationality” (Weick, 1995, p. 29) occur, the retrospective sensemaking process ends. Dougherty and Smythe (2004) argued that retrospection was an important part of the sensemaking process. The individuals that experienced sexual harassment thought about their experiences retrospectively and depended on retelling the story to others in order to gain clarity. In their cases, retrospection helped them make sense of an event that was confusing to them, and by sharing their stories retrospectively they were able to cope with the events with humor and with socializing with others that are a part of their organization.

Food insecurity is something that is created and recreated in an environment. Food insecurity and hardships are creations of space and time. These consequences of space and time allow for individuals to exist within these situations and ultimately alter the situation around them, since environments are social creations. Sensemaking is enactive of sensible environments (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is enactive because people often produce parts of the environment they face or are a part of. Enaction assumes that there is action that is occurring and a definition of space, time, action and establishment. Enaction assumes that there is the creation of new things inside an environment that did not exist there beforehand. Individuals enact and create the environment which they a part of which further constrains one’s actions and inactions; the environment does not exist on its own. “People create their environments as those environments

create them (Weick, 1995, p. 34). Forms of enacting include noticing, manipulating, interpreting, and framing. Creation is not the only outcome of action.

Sensemaking is social (Weick, 1995). When thinking about sensemaking it is important to remember that human thinking and social functioning work together. Sensemaking in an organization is in its essence social. An organization is a network of shared meaning that is sustained through common language and social interactions (Weick, 1995). Therefore, organizing and sensemaking are social phenomena that occur together. Since sensemaking is social, it is understood that the actions of one person will impact the sensemaking and actions of another. Sensemaking is not a solitary event since “what a person does internally is contingent on others” (Weick, 1995, p. 40). For example, when seeing the experience of nurse that is concerned about a patient, the nurse’s sensemaking experience is impacted by previous discussions with other nurses who may have seen a difference in the patient, or discussions with the doctor to voice these concerns (Weick et al., 2005). In this example, sensemaking from the point of view of one nurse is impacted by others that are around her, which she could have discourse with. Social realities are created and recreated through discourse and conversation, therefore, when paying attention to the sensemaking process, one must pay attention to the discourse and conversations that surround an event or situation.

Food insecurity and financial hardship are ongoing events that do not have a beginning or end. Similarly, sensemaking has no clear beginning or end. Sensemaking is ongoing (Weick, 1995). In the sensemaking process there is no clear beginning or end; it is an ongoing process that retroactively occurs retroactively and rationalizes behavior (Weick et al., 2005). To understand sensemaking is “to be sensitive to the ways in which people chop moments out of continuous flows and extract cue from those moments” (Weick, 1995, p. 43). This means that to

understand sensemaking we must understand the punctuation given to moments in time. People will define moments differently and the cues that trigger the sensemaking process will be different for different individuals. You cannot sit and reflect on your actions since things keep moving and changing. The sensemaking process occurs actively amidst other events that are culminating. Before undergoing the sensemaking process, events just look like events that are arbitrary and there appear to not be any patterns to situations. However, with every representation of an event, there is an interpretation. Furthermore, language is action and through discourse you are creating and recreating a situation that is undergoing the sensemaking process.

Sensemaking is focused on and extracted by cues (Weick, 1995) and “it seems like people can make sense of anything... the phenomenon is everywhere” (p. 49). Sensemaking tends to be prompt which means that more often than not the product is seen not the process, however, sensemaking is a process and a product. Once bracketing or isolating a cue occurs, the world is simplified (Weick et al., 2005). When talking about cues they are “simple, familiar structures that are seed from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring” (Weick, 1995, p. 50). Essentially cues are the starting point for a larger sensemaking process. Cues serve as a containment of what is to come; they interact with their surroundings in order to become something larger. The product of a cue depends on the context and the discourse that surrounds it. Context affects what is extracted as a cue in the first place and furthermore, it affects how the extracted cues are then interpreted. Events must be picked up on and noticed in order for the sensemaking process to begin. We notice “things that are novel or perceptually figural in context, people or behaviors that are unusual or unexpected, behaviors that are extreme and (sometimes) negative and stimuli relevant to our current goals... our attention also orients us to situationally or personally primed categories. Recently, frequently, and chronically

encountered categories are more accessible for use, and they profoundly influence the encoding of stimuli” (Taylor, 1991, pp. 265-266).

With sensemaking even the “small” has meaning; small structures and situations can have “large” impacts (Weick et al., 2005). The seven properties of sensemaking are built into “how can I know what I think until I see what I say?” (Weick, 1995, p. 61).

1. Identity: How and what I think are dependent on who I am.
2. Retrospect: To make sense and learn, I must look back.
3. Enactment: Through my words and discourse I create the object and reality that is seen and made sense of.
4. Social: The cues that I make sense of are determined by my socialization and the audience that will hear the conclusions I make.
5. Ongoing: My conversations, and discourse occur over time simultaneous to the world around me.
6. Extracted cues: The cue that I make sense of is a singular moment from a larger context.
7. Plausibility: I strive to know about events contextually and plausibility overrules accuracy.

Sensemaking is a way to bring order to chaos. During crisis, organizational members “must work to create order out of chaos and make sense of events that are not routine” (Coffelt et al., 2010). Sensemaking is likely to occur where there has been disruption in day-to-day life. In the case of food insecurity and economic hardship, they disrupt the daily events of life; they arguably disrupt one of the most basic tasks of daily life – eating. With a disruption as large as food and the ability to access food, individuals need to make sense of their newfound condition and understand what it is they are experiencing. The sensemaking process for individuals

experiencing economic hardship and food insecurity occur in order to redefine the experience and understand the impact of the experiences they are feeling. The sensemaking process is important in order to build resilience, since the situation must be defined as a trigger in order to begin the process.

Communicative Theory of Resilience

Economic precarity and food insecurity are disruptions that occur in the day-to-day lives of individuals that challenge the everyday routines and expectations that people have. Resilience is a process that occurs through discourse, interaction, and material considerations (Buzzanell, 2010) that attempts to reintegrate an individual into their lives after a disruption in life (Richardson, 2002). For resilience to be enacted, there is a triggering event or turning point that enacts sensemaking, which in turn causes the resilience process to begin. Communicative resilience is not a trait that an individual holds, but rather is a process of discourse and narrative.

Buzzanell (2010) highlights five processes that are enacted in the resilience process. The five processes are (1) crafting normalcy, (2) affirming identity anchors, (3) maintaining and using communication networks, (4) putting alternative logics to work, and (5) legitimizing negative feelings while foregrounding productive action.

When thinking to material realities and the enactment of normalcy in cases of unemployment, normalcy is crafted in order for individuals to feel as if their day-to-day lives are not experiencing large hardship, but rather to feel as if their situation is manageable. The same concept of normalcy can be applied to individuals that are experiencing economic hardship and food insecurity. Job loss affected the daily lives of individuals and impacted everything from social standings in a community to future retirement plans. Unemployment caused disruptions in emotions and routines, yet families claimed that they continued their normal lives and bounced

back from the events that they were experiencing (Buzzanell, 2010). To highlight this in action, families shared that they continued with their routine of going out to dinner on Friday nights but the restaurants they visited were not their usuals, due to pricing. Participants also shared, for example, that they may continue to go out on Saturday mornings but instead of going out and spending money they would go out to places that would not cost anything. This crafting of normalcy shows us that families want to feel as if their lives are “normal”, however that is best defined to them. They talk to their families about this new normal and bounce back quickly. Resilience is about crafting a new normal (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012). They change their actions to best fit their current situation. Resilience is shown through being able to adapt and change to their newfound struggles and difficulties created by unemployment or not having enough money.

Affirming identity anchors is defined as “relatively enduring cluster of identity discourses upon which individuals and their familial, collegial, and/or community members rely when explaining who they are for themselves and in relation to each other” (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 4). In essence, affirming identity anchors means that individuals defined their identities and redefined their identities through difficult times. They were able to assert who they are and what they do through discourse. In some cases, individuals continued to re-anchor their identity as they would before the event that triggered resilience. For example, some individuals continued to enact their role of “breadwinner” or “provider” in order to push back on the uncertainties they were facing. Furthermore, some families relied on religion to affirm their identities. When going through difficult times, some sought God and their Christianity to anchor them in their identity.

Then, there is the promotion of social interconnectedness, which can be tied to social capital that is seen through Buzzanell (2010). Religion promotes a sense of interconnectedness which in turn creates interpersonal intimacy and allows for the creation of social capital.

Religion allows individuals to feel connected to other individuals and create a sense of community that allows them to rely on one another and even use social capital in times of difficulty. Lastly, there is the search for a relationship with the sacred. Some individuals want to be connected with a god or a divine being, and they turn to religion in times of difficulty as a form to connect with their god or the divine being they believe in. Religion works in many ways in order for individuals to build resilience through their faith. Faith is something that is used by individuals that are experiencing hardship in order to reframe their present situation and the outcomes that can occur from their situations.

Another aspect that is important to resilience is the use of social capital which is seen through using and maintaining social networks. In light of food insecurity this can be seen as asking or receiving help from outside sources. In a study about unemployment and food insecurity (Dougherty et al., 2018) the researchers found that some participants felt hesitant in asking for help and did not disclose their struggles, but when directly asked about their struggles the participants were open about them which in turn resulted in them receiving help from a loved one. Resilience through a social network in this case looked like the receiving of help from an external source, which is reliant on the use of social capital and rapport that individuals have with each other. Doerfel and colleagues (2008) analyzed the how businesses to reintegrate and reopen following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Organizations that held more social capital and had more developed relationships were able to reopen with more ease. Help from peers was more accessible to those with more social capital and strong ties. Individuals have “linked lives” in which they are connected to others that have experienced a similar situation (Lucas and Buzzanell, 2012).

The experience of having a “linked” life means that one is not alone on the road to recovery and that there are other individuals experiencing the same hardships that can support and help alleviate the struggles that an individual may be experiencing. For example, when talking about unemployment and economic hardship families would discuss the situations that are occurring in order to provide clarity on the situation, problem solve and come up with solutions to economic hardship and use empathic response to foster resilience (Lucas and Buzzanell, 2012). Families turn to each other to maintain their social network and in order to relate to individuals they are directly tied to that are experiencing hardship. Furthermore, it was seen that low-income families often did not shield their children from information about finances because they did not have the resources to do so socially. Furthermore, children that experience hardship financially in their adult lives either developed perseverance from experiencing the hardship or had anxiety when it came to finances (Lucas and Buzzanell, 2012). Food insecurity is an ongoing phenomenon whose end is unclear and to which there is a spectrum of hardships.

By putting alternative logics to work, individuals incorporate contradictory way of thinking in order to reframe the situation that they are currently experiencing. For example, if a family has recently experienced unemployment or loss of work hours, they could say that at least they have more time to spend with family or pursue other hobbies. In this example, the individual is reframing their way of thinking in order to change their perception of the situation. Making light of a difficult may make it easier to grow past the triggering event and enact the resilience process. Resilience alludes to an individuals’ ability to achieve a productive outcome by reframing their situation and putting alternative logics to work (Agarwal & Buzzanell, 2015).

Lastly, there is legitimizing negative feelings while foregrounding productive action. This essentially means that individuals are still being productive and getting ahead, on whatever they

may be focusing to work on, while still understanding and making sense of the negatives that are occurring in their lives. Individuals continue to infuse “positive emotion to displace or mitigate negative feelings that can diminish productive actions” (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2012, p. 191). This process allows for individuals to maintain productiveness and action while still acknowledging their circumstances and understanding that they could cause negative emotions. Backgrounding of negative emotions is a decision that is made in order to legitimize the right that one has to feel anger or sadness or negative emotions. It is enacted because it is understood that these negative emotions might be counterproductive to what one is trying to accomplish or the goals that an individual may have. Communicative resilience is enacted by reframing one’s emotions about a situation.

The five processes (1) crafting normalcy, (2) affirming identity anchors, (3) maintaining and using communication networks, (4) putting alternative logics to work, and (5) legitimizing negative feelings while foregrounding productive action, that Buzzanell (2010) highlights show resilience occurring through communication.

Overall, resilience is a process that is enacted through an event that looks differently for each individual. The act of experiencing economic hardship or being food insecure could be considered a trigger. Buzzanell (2010) highlights five communicative processes that occur with resilience. Then, there are processes that are guided by faith and religion, and lastly, I discussed resilience through the lens of positivity and reframing. The experience of being food insecure is one that is not broadly studied in the communication discipline in light of resilience. Resilience is a phenomenon that intends to help individuals to “bounce back” from their difficult situations. Experiencing food insecurity can be defined as a difficult situation that enacts and triggers

resilience. Furthermore, the process of building resilience can help us understand food insecurity through a lens of rebuilding and reframing. The study asks:

RQ1: How do individuals experiencing financial hardship make sense of their situation?

RQ2: How do individuals experiencing economic hardship communicate and enact resilience?

CHAPTER THREE. METHODS

Framework

A qualitative recounting of individual's experiences allowed for a more holistic view of people's experiences and allowed for a focus on the lived experience of individuals (Tracy, 2013). Qualitative research allowed for us to better understand the self that is perceived by participants, their relationships, the groups and organizations they are a part of, and the cultural contexts of which they are a part of (Tracy, 2013). Furthermore, stories serve to "construct, and shape experience" (Tracy, 2013, p. 29). Qualitative inquiry privileges participant voices to illuminate lived experiences. Furthermore, the researcher is a complete participant meaning that the researcher is intimately involved with the context that is being studied and has experience in the field of food banks and food insecurity (Tracy, 2013).

Researcher Position

Prior to this study, I have worked at a food bank, Inspired Vision Compassion Center (IVCC) for four and a half years. I have done everything from handing out food, to registering individuals into our digital system. Throughout my time here, I have learned about food insecurity directly and have encountered hundreds of thousands of families experiencing food insecurity. This project has been inspired, in part, by my lived experience at IVCC and I take a lot of my lived experience from volunteering with me in this project. I have become attuned to the nuances of this job and have insight about the organizing of a food bank that is unexplored in literature. Furthermore, I have familiarity with the first-hand consequences of food insecurity and the multiple facets of the experience of food insecurity and precarity. That being said, I hope that the passion in this project allows me as a researcher to enrich the existing literature surrounding food insecurity and precarity, and furthermore, allows me to share the words of my participants.

Data Collection

Following IRB approval, I recruited individuals that were employed full-time, part-time or self-employed and described their situation as being precarious, experiencing lack in their day-to-day lives and/or experiencing self-defined food insecurity. With permission of forum moderators, I posted a text post to several subreddits including r/economy, r/foodstamps, and r/foodinsecurity in order to recruit individuals that were part of communities that are open to discussing the general economy or their own personal situations. I posted flyers, in English and Spanish, to my personal Instagram and Facebook and encouraged friends and followers on these platforms to share the flyers. I also reached out to two local food banks and asked if they could post the flyers as well and was granted permission to recruit participants in-person for on-site interviews. I also used snowball sampling, allowing participants to recommend others in their personal networks who might also be interested in interviewing (Tracy, 2013).

Signed consent was received from each participant and each participant was explained the nature of the interview and the types of questions they would be asked. Interviews were semi-structured in order to allow for follow-up questions and probing (Tracy, 2013). Interviews were conducted in-person, via Zoom, and via phone calls. Each participant was asked how they would feel the most comfort and were given the option to select the location or medium of their interview. Interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and were transcribed.

Participants (N=15) included individuals that were employed and experiencing some degree of precarity, lack, or food insecurity. Most participants identified as women (80%, n=12), though there were also men (13.3%, n=2), and nonbinary (6.6%, n=1). Age ranged from 23 to 70 years old (M=42.5). Participants had a high school degree (26.7%, n=4) associate's degree (13.3%, n=2), bachelor's degree (60%, n=6), master's degree (13.3%, n=2), and doctoral degree

(6.6, n=1). Each interview was audio-recorded and was transcribed using AI yielding 396 number of pages, single spaced. In order to protect participant's identity, participants were assigned a number. All names or potentially identifying were redacted and participants were referred to as their participant number.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Tracy's (2013) iterative approach involving primary- and second-cycle coding. Tracy's (2013) iterative approach allowed emic themes to emerge from the data in a participant voice while using a method of constant comparison to theory and existing literature. Emergent themes are viewed through the lens of theoretical framing. First, I primary coded the information which entails reading over the data several times and creating first-level codes which contains a list of themes seen in the data (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002). First-level codes focus on what is present in the data. These primary emergent themes were used to create a coding schema for second-cycle coding. In this stage, I coded individual lines of data using the developed schema from primary-cycle coding, keeping a coding log of all coded data. The coding log included a short description of the code and examples of where those themes are present. In secondary coding, I examined the codes that were identified in primary coding and organized and synthesized them. Second-cycle coding then reassembled the data, which grouped together various codes under categories that made conceptual sense.

CHAPTER FOUR. RESULTS

Data analysis yielded 10 emic themes categorized into three families. Themes fell into one of three major families: (1) experience, (2) rationalizing, and (3) coping. Experience is composed of “Not Enough”, “Money Management”, “Health Struggles”, and “Underemployment.” Experience is focused on the lived day-to-day experience of participants living with economic precarity and food insecurity. Rationalizing is composed of “Brighter Future Ahead and Big Dreams”, “Others Depend on Me”, and “Universalizing.” Rationalizing is focused on the behaviors and communicative behaviors that participants enacted in order to rationalize their situation or how they cope with their situation. Coping is composed of “Escapism”, “Networks”, and “Turning to God.” Coping behaviors were used by participants in order to cope with their food insecurity and economic precarity.

Experience

Experience includes day-to-day life and how it is impacted by the experience of food insecurity and economic precarity. The “Not Enough” experience is related to not having enough food, or money and focuses on the participants’ experience with not having enough and how that impacts their lives. Furthermore, it depicts the experience itself and serves as a building block to understand the rest of the theme. “Money Management” is how individuals manage their money in light of the “not enough” experience and the behaviors they enact, such as budgeting, in order to make ends meet. “Money Management” illustrates the actions of participants once they realize they do not have enough and how they manage finances in light of their struggles. “Health Struggles” shows the mental and physical struggles that participants experience and how it manifests in their lives. It shows the spirals that occur with health and the “not enough” experience. Lastly, there is the theme of “Underemployment” which focuses on the vocations,

jobs, and education and what happens when participants have gotten their education and a job but still experience not having enough money or food. Each of these themes shows the experience of participants with not having enough food and money and the ways that their lives are impacted, whether it be with how they manage money, take care of their health, or working.

Not Enough

The “not enough” experience was shared by all participants in one form or another. The “not enough” experience is divided primarily between not having enough money, or food (or in most cases of participants not having enough of both). The “not enough” experience highlights stories of individuals struggling to make ends meet and even having the nutritious foods that they need.

Participant 3 shared her experience of living paycheck to paycheck, and having additional difficulty obtaining nutritious food when a store she could afford closed:

Okay, so as things got more expensive, I was not able to just go out shopping. Mmhmm, as a matter of fact, I could only shop at the 99-cent store. And guess what?! They closed down the 99-cent store. So then, I really couldn't buy groceries. And I was not buying groceries. I would have to go to the Compassion Center. I would not spend anything, and I would save \$40 for gas for the entire week. I don't understand that because that was one of the ways I could shop for my vegetables. A dollar twenty-five here, dollar twenty-five there. Okay that was fine. I could get my vegetables but when they closed that down, I'm like, “well, crap.” So, I don't really buy the fresh vegetables anymore; I can always buy them in a can... I don't want to, but I will. I will sacrifice that in vegetables, instead of buying the fresh.

Part of the not enough experience is rationalizing the importance of things and deciding what is more crucial to existing. First, there is extreme budgeting that she mentions, leaving only \$40 for gas and not even having a budget for food. With the experience of not having enough there is the deciding what is more important for day-to-day life. While food is a necessity, it is not at the forefront of Participant 1's mind, gas is. The decision of rationing for gas ensures that Participant 1 can continue going to work and continue to get home. Without gas, Participant 1 would have a difficult time getting to and from work and consequently she would have a difficult time holding a job, which would impact her ability to receive a paycheck. The decision to budget for gas, though it may seem like a small decision, has large consequences that impact the overall well-being of the participant.

Availability of food, healthy foods at that, is something that participants struggled with.

Participant 1 shared:

Um, so it's like those are the times where we can afford multiple meats. Like we can get chicken and beef at the same time. Whereas now, it's kind of like, we choose one for the week. Um, or just rely on eggs for the week. But eggs are going up in price, too. What the hell is going on? Give me a break!

In her experience, she has to choose between protein that is available to her, often making the decision to opt for eggs instead of meat because that is what is cheaper in comparison to meat. She shared that sometimes there are moments that they (herself and her partner) eat Spam or ramen noodles, since that is all that is available to them in the moment. Processed foods were brought up on five occasions, mostly to highlight that they are not nutritious and are "bad" for people. Accessibility to food is impacted by financial security. Participant 5 shared:

Yeah, so I am not a big believer in processed foods. I think we all know how many chemicals and horrible things can be in processed foods, but that's what we've left people in the middle and lower classes to eat because that's what's cheap.

The spiral of impacts of not having enough money or food included negative health effects. This was particularly pronounced for participants with co-morbidities or pre-existing health conditions. Participant 7, a cancer patient and former owner of a company, shared her experience with food and food stamps. After her diagnosis with cancer and diabetes occurring simultaneously, Participant 7 shared that she has changed her eating habits and opted for a plant-based diet, when it is available to her. However, she is limited by the food stamps that she received as they often ran out during the middle of the month:

All the time. But I try, well given my circumstances, I have to eat very healthy. I was diagnosed with diabetes and cancer. I actually am on food stamps now, again. I was off of it for a little while and now I'm back on it and I don't get a lot I think about two hundred a month. No, 280 a month is what I get and by the time you fill up your cart with the stuff that you need you could spend easily just one shopping trip \$200. I try to eat a plant-based diet, I try to eat healthy. The stuff that's good for you is overly expensive. And the stuff that's bad is actually pretty reasonable but I see the prices going up on that too now so yeah, I mean I run out of food stamps halfway in the month is basically what happens and then I have like 2 weeks I don't have anything no food stamps to buy any food that's why I go to the food bank when I can.

There are some interesting dynamics occurring in her story. First, there is the fact that affordable food is typically not good for you and is “bad”, as she described it. The quality of food that is available to individuals struggling financially is described as worse by participants. They shared that the cheaper stuff that is made available to them is worse for them and in some cases, it impacts their health and how they feel, which will be discussed in the following section. Second, there is the fact that Participant 7 is a recipient of food stamps, yet it is not enough to make ends meet. Participants were experiencing not having enough food and money, and through these experiences had to reach out to outside organizations and governmental agencies. Though they had resources available to them, those resources were still not enough. Working, receiving food stamps and going to food banks was not enough to make ends meet. Furthermore, asking for help and receiving assistance came with stigma and negative emotions that they had to work through. There is a stigmatization of individuals who receive governmental assistance, and the hoops that are jumped through to receive the little assistance they get is also immense. Participant 7 shared her experience of signing up for assistance when she had kids at home, and shared that there were many hoops she had to jump through, and she was still rejected.

The experiences of participants not having enough highlight different systemic issues that underly their precarity while simultaneously highlight their struggles and how they aim to continue living while struggling with their finances.

Money Management

When thinking about precarity and food insecurity one of the prevalent themes was money management and how participants managed their money while trying to find a balance and a “new normal”; the two prevalent experiences with money management are debt and budgeting. Money management is a part of the “not enough” experience because it highlights

instances in which individuals have to budget or think more consciously of their money in order to make ends meet. 10 out of 15 participants talked about money management and how they managed not having enough money to make ends meet.

Participants shared that being in a financially difficult spot made them think about money more often than not. Furthermore, the experience of not having enough impacts interpersonal relationships. The “not enough” experience was new to some participants that had not previously experienced precarity. This newfound precarity felt like a rite of passage in which they had to experience lack in order to learn how to overcome it and grow. One participant talked about how she felt as if her relationships were transactional because she was receiving help from others. Experiencing financial precarity and food insecurity is a new concept for Participant 1 and throughout the experience she cannot help but feel like her relationships are forged by needs. Participant 1 shared:

Yeah, I think that growing up I was really privileged because my parents tried to shield me from any like financial insecurities they had. So, if they were struggling when it came to money, they did not tell me and they did not show me, and I get it because I'm a kid and I maybe shouldn't know if I don't have to. So, I think I grew up with this mindset of if I want this little extra thing at the grocery store, they'll give it to me. I can get it. And so, then I grew up and started having to understand financial things a little more and that was absolutely not the case and so it was kind of like a mental shift. And I'm so thankful for the fact that I was able to be privileged... and so my point is that now it's just a very different experience. So, then my struggle is that I feel like it's hard not to feel like some of

my interactions and relationships are transactional because of it. Because I think that a lot of my daily thoughts are about finances.

She shared that a lot of her daily thoughts are about finances now, comparing her current reality to her perceived reality as a child. Growing up in self-described privilege, impacted the way that Participant 1 views money. Growing up she felt secure, since her parents did not make her aware of any difficulty, if they existed. This impacted her current situation in which she has had to adapt to not having enough, since this the first time that she is experiencing this. Though there is not a clear disruptor in her situation, the disruption of not having enough still exists in her situation. The interesting thing to note with Participant 1 is that on more than one occasion she talks about her relationships being transactional. She is receiving something from others, whether it be money or financial support and that makes her relationship seem transactional. While this is not explicitly stated by other participants, it can be seen that the act of receiving help from others is transactional in the nature of relationships. Furthermore, Participant 1 shares that her daily thoughts are about finances, mimicking the words of Participant 5. She shared

When you don't have money, it's pretty much all you can think about. And I think that's been true of like constantly looking over my shoulder, being nervous. Um, cause my dog needs to go to the vet again and she's sick and she needs this medicine, and I blew a tire on my car and how am I going to pay for that? Um, and like man, I really can't afford to get sick right now. I can't afford to, um, be racking up a doctor's bill or whatever else. I think it puts it in extreme amount of anxiety on you to the point where like I was almost irritable because I was just so stressed out all of the time. And I was frustrated because it, it was clearly something that other people were going through, but no one was talking about it.

Um, and it was, there was a little bit of embarrassment too because it's embarrassing for your friends to be going out and you can't tell them why you can't go out. That's hard.

Not having enough money is in the foreground of the thoughts of participants; wondering if they will have surprise expenses or if they will rack up doctor's bills. Furthermore, there is a lot of anxiety that occurs among participants. 12 out of 15 participants shared that they feel some varying level of anxiety when experiencing economic hardship. There is clear frustration with the situation and even some embarrassment in social situations. Participant 5 shared that a lot of her coworkers would go out to lunch or coffee and have some sort of way to escape their reality through social events, but Participant 5 could not afford to participate in these social events. Not being able to go out then serves as a point of frustration that impacts the emotional well-being of Participant 5, as she later shares that feels like she has no escape from her day-to-day life.

All participants in one way or another talked about how their "daily thoughts are about finances." Not having enough and having to manage money in a strict manner lead them to only think about money. Living paycheck to paycheck lead Participant 1 to talk about how she felt "awful."

But living paycheck to paycheck just feels awful, I think, because I'm always uncomfortable about money, um, and part of me kind of feels like I deserve that struggle because of like in early on I didn't experience that and I don't know it's a weird little thing I have going on in my brain, I think. But, yeah, it's like enough but it's really uncomfortable enough living paycheck to paycheck. Yeah, and I pretty much exclusively buy food and sometimes here and there when I need

clothing, I will spend it on that but then like have zero spending money before like a couple of days before the end of the paycheck.

Participant 1 noted that she feels like she “deserves” the struggle because she never experienced it a young age. On more than one occasion, she talks about “deserving” the struggle, and it seems like part of being an adult and part of the experience of living is to struggle economically at one point or another. Furthermore, she talked about living paycheck to paycheck and living uncomfortably. This uncomfortable existence she describes where she basically only buys food and sometimes other necessities is mimicked by eight other participants, where they talk about how it is uncomfortable for them to live paycheck to paycheck.

I don't have anything in savings. I don't have anything in retirement. I don't have anything, you know, like I literally live, like paycheck to paycheck, every single penny is accounted for in my situation. So, every dollar has a place that goes to every penny that I make, everything is, you know, before I even get it, my money is already accounted for. So, like I don't have anything, and it scares me because I don't have anything. I don't have retirement. I don't have savings. I have nothing. So, I'm getting older, and I have nothing. I'm going to have to work for the rest of my life until like I'm a hundred years old probably because I don't have anything saved. I don't have emergency funds. I literally live paycheck to paycheck.

Participant 15 talked about how every cent that she makes is accounted for and how even before her paycheck comes in, she knows how the money is going to be spent and how it will be allocated. Furthermore, Participant 15 is in a situation where she does not have any extra funds for retirement or even emergency funds. This situation is expressed by Participant 2, she shares: “Shit, made me feel like I had to go into my 401K to get some more.” Her paycheck is not

enough, she is having to dip into the savings to make ends meet. Dipping into her retirement savings now, could hurt her further down the line when she ultimately retires. She has to decide between having enough now or having savings for when she retires. Not having the money to manage in her present situation spirals to a point that she has to decide whether the financial security now is worth having less financial security in the future.

All participants talked about having to budget or managing their money to an extreme in order to make ends meet. One participant goes as far as to call themselves a “budget Nazi” she stated:

So, I’m kind of a budget Nazi because I really didn’t want to get to get into debt and I really took pride that I had managed my money so well in undergrad. However, my monthly bill that was around \$76 at Walmart, I tried to get the exact same food, the exact same dog food for my dog, all of that went from \$76 to \$125. And that’s pretty intense jump for someone whose money left over at the end of the month is less than \$150. So, that was pretty intense, so I started shopping at Aldi instead and I could get not everything, but most things I needed for around that range of \$76, \$80. I just had to be really strict about food, I had to be really strict about snacking. I couldn’t go eat out, I couldn’t go get coffee out, things like that. It was whatever we end up with the cart has to last a month and we have to make it happen. Realistically, I had to cut out breakfast for my budget. I just wasn’t going to happen. And I mean there’s things you can cut, there’s things you can’t cut.

For this participant specifically, she talks about cutting out breakfast from her budget because she could not afford to buy the extra food. Whatever food she bought at the beginning of the

month was meant to last her all month, and she did not have wiggle room in order to snack or eat out, or even eat breakfast. She made this decision in order to stay out of debt. Here it is seen that decisions have to be made to either have just enough for now, or in her case not even enough for three meals a day, or enough for the future. The participant decided that it was better for her to not have debt in the future, and she made the tough decision to skip out on breakfast. Similarly in budgeting, Participant 11 shared their experience with shopping for groceries.

I mean, you know, we're always going for the, you know, the off-brand stuff whenever we can. I mean, a couple trips ago, we were looking at, because I was trying to like, like, I've been making these like parfait things for breakfast or whatever, like eating yogurt with like granola and now we were looking at the yogurt, me and my roommate in the yogurt section, and I was looking at like the individually packaged one, because I was like, oh, that could be useful, right? Because then I don't have to like every day, like you know, make you know, in the morning or the night before, like, set it up, and everything. I can just grab it and go. That's like way easier. But then we were looking at like the price per ounce on there, and it's like, okay, that's actually like way more expensive to get the individually packaged instead of like the big containers or whatever.

Through their experience, they show how shopping for groceries is a conscious experience through which they have to find what is cheapest and not the most convenient. When shopping on a budget, convenience is no longer a priority or privilege, but rather the value is more important. Participant 11 is also in a situation where they are paying medical bills and live in debt. They pay the minimum requirement monthly for a hospital stay they had, and they live

paycheck to paycheck trying to get rid of this debt. Three participants talked about debt to a varying extent. The worst of it being felt by Participant 13, she shared the following.

So, I have taken out loans and now I'm in more debt than I've ever been. I'm in trouble with the IRS. I've never been in trouble with the IRS. And so, I had to try to find somebody to help me to keep them from doing that. And so now I have to pay them to help me keep the IRS from garnishing my wages. So, I keep getting more and more in debt trying to get out of the hole, if that makes sense.

Had she paid the minimum payment the IRS was asking for, she would be paying them \$3,000 monthly. Participant 13 works multiple jobs. She is a licensed professional counselor and grant writer. Between these three jobs, she still does not have enough money to pay off this debt. The interesting part of Participant 13's phrasing is that she says that she keeps getting in "more and more" debt "trying to get out of the hole." In order to come out of her debt, she is having to pay someone to help her deal with the IRS which eats into her budget. In order to come out of debt, she has to continue to get into debt, in hopes that one day she will be economically sound. The experience of food insecurity and economic precarity is not exclusive to unemployed individuals. Throughout this study, I found that a lot of the individual experiencing food insecurity and precarity, that spoke with me, are professionals or business owners. For this study, I will be using the term underemployment in order to highlight their experiences.

Health Struggles

Health struggles related to economic precarity, and food insecurity could be divided between mental health and physical health struggles. Physical health struggles were tied to the quality of food and external circumstances, while mental health struggles were tied to precarity and not having enough money. Health was a particularly acute area of difficulty for participants.

Health problems were both a cause and effect of not having enough food, money, or time. Health problems caused further financial insecurity due to lost work, lost wages, and lost clientele.

When thinking about health and food insecurity, specifically, there is a tension between access to “bad” foods and how participants feel. Two participants talked about how they felt worse when they ate “bad” food, but how it was the only thing that they could afford. There is a cycle between what types of food can be afforded and how a person feels. Furthermore, if participants feel worse, they are less likely to feel good while at work, which then impacts their ability to make money. Participant 1 shared:

Oh my God, that’s another thing I forgot to mention when it comes to how it affects my life. I feel like a big deterrent of me fully feeling [pause] not being able to choose healthy choices. I don’t really get very much produce or anything. And I can’t really make meals that are substantial. I feel like that contributes a lot to my weight and me just feeling healthy. Because after eating ramen and eggs and Spam, it fills me up and make me feel like shit. It makes me feel dumpy and gross. I don’t know. I feel like that is another way that it really, really affects my life. My weight gain and the way that I feel about my body has been shattered. But I can’t really do a whole lot about it besides go religiously work out. But I’m depressed. I can’t do that.

Participant 1 shared her experience with eating foods that might not be as nutritious for her and how it impacts her physical health. Having food, even if it is bad quality helped her feel full, but it left her feeling “like shit”. Her physical health took a toll since she does not have enough money to buy produce and foods that are more nutritious for her. Furthermore, her experience is intertwined with her experience of mental health. Later in her interview, Participant 1 shared that

her financial situation makes her feel a little depressed and not feel her best. The depression that occurs then further impacts her health as she states that the only way to combat her bad eating habits would be to exercise, but she is depressed and “can’t do that.” Not having enough nutritious foods is something that impacts multiple facets of health and is not a black and white problem. Furthermore, there are direct effects of not eating well and being stressed. For example, Participant 5 shared her struggles with working out and trying to eat healthy and how her cortisol levels spiked.

I think my health, truthfully, took a turn. Despite working out, despite eating, trying to eat as healthy as possible, my cortisol just shot up through the roof, and I put on weight. I mean, if you’re a woman that’s just how it goes. It’s not like, you know if you’re not, if you’re super stressed out as a girl your body is gonna respond negatively and that’s what mine did for sure. Yeah, high cortisol, I was irritable. I ended up eating a lot of sugar, a lot of headaches, a lot of poor sleep, getting frustrated with people because people just didn’t understand like how little money I had to spend.

The stress in combination with eating “as healthy as possible”, which is limited with low finances, caused her cortisol levels to spike which then in turn caused physical symptoms to be noticeable in her day-to-day life. Three participants talked about how affordable foods are typically more processed or foods that are not as healthy or “good” for them. Unequal access to food leaves participants speculating the health benefits of pricier alternatives. Participant 6 went as far as to say that if healthier foods were cheaper, people would be healthier:

I feel like if we would be more healthier if the actual healthy stuff wasn’t so expensive. You go to McDonald’s, they got the five buck meal, and you go try to

get a salad and it's almost like 12 bucks. I just think if they lower the prices on healthier stuff, a lot of people would probably be healthier, too.

To him, health and nutrition are tied and one of the reasons why people are not as healthy as they can be is because of the food options that are made available to people that are experiencing financial insecurity. If someone is already struggling with their finances, as participants have shared, they will opt in to the cheaper options which then impacts their physical health and feeling healthy. Participants are forced to eat alternative meals and items that are not healthy choices for them but fill them. Furthermore, participants are then worried about their physical health since they are not able to eat nutritious foods.

Alongside the conversation of food is the conversation of healthcare and health. With worse health than others who may have a healthier diet, three participants talk about healthcare and how it impacts their health. Participant 3 shared:

Okay, so healthcare is another thing that needs to be addressed due to the fact that even though you get healthcare at a job, so you have like your basic a month what they take out of your check. Okay, so my healthcare I have to pay \$5,000 deductible in order for it to start working. That means if I go to a doctor within the network, I have to pay \$100 every time I go... So, which is more important? Your health or saving money to get groceries? How do you balance that out? Mmhmm, because I don't go to the doctor unless it's an emergency because I can't afford it. So, your healthcare, I mean, yeah, they give you other options, but they take more out of your paycheck. And if they took more out of my paycheck, I couldn't pay my rent. So, I had to choose the one where they only had one and only took \$20 out because if they took \$30, I wouldn't have enough for rent... So, I don't go to

the doctor unless I have \$100 to spend on the doctor... Healthcare is ripping us off left and right.

Participant 3 shared her feelings on the healthcare system and the reality that she faces. With high deductibles, she has to budget out if she can go to a doctor. There is a choice that is made between making ends meet and health. Participants are having to decide whether their health and healthcare is worth not being able to make ends meet. Participant 7 developed diabetes later in her life due to not being able to eat healthful foods and not having access to preventative medicine. She now struggles with access to insulin and medications to keep her healthy. She has to make the choice between living a healthy life and having enough money to eat. However, she exists in a vicious cycle where she needs to have access to healthy foods for her diabetes, but they are more expensive. So, she either has to take more medication or eat healthier foods, but both alternatives come with a literal cost associated with them. The “not enough” experience here is seen with not having enough to live a healthy life. Healthcare is not just about going to the doctor when you are sick, but it is also about preventative medicine to aid in overall well-being. Participant 3, though she has access to a doctor, does not have equitable access. Meaning, she can find a doctor and she has health insurance, but she does not have enough money to see one. Furthermore, she discussed that if she took the better insurance offer at work, those extra \$10 would cause her to not have enough money for rent. So, here she is making the choice between being able to see a doctor or having a place to live. That is a decision that people should not have to make, but it is the harsh reality that she lives in.

Participant 7 is diagnosed with terminal cancer, and upon being diagnosed realized that she did not have enough money for her treatment or the money to be able to see an oncologist and the rest of her care team. Once a successful business owner, she was now struggling to see a

doctor for her new diagnosis. She then turned to external resources and applied to Medicaid in order to receive some assistance with her medication and treatment plan.

I can't afford all my prescriptions. I'm on Medicaid for breast cancer and cervical cancer and they don't cover everything. They don't. Medicaid does not pay for every prescription. I find myself a lot looking for grants and stuff, but they're always full. Every time I try to apply, they've already been filled up and you have to wait. You hope you can get it the next time around. I've been doing this for a year. And I've only gotten approved one time, and that was for \$750 from Susan G. Coleman and that was it. So, \$750 extra money in one year is a lot. It's a lot and it's not a lot. I mean they've increased my rent to where I'm at. I mean if my boyfriend had to pay all the rent, I would be homeless I wouldn't have my own place anymore.

The assistance that she receives for her medication and treatment is not enough. With her diagnoses, it is difficult for Participant 7 to hold a stable job. Depending primarily on the governmental assistance she receives, in this case Medicaid, leaves her looking to outside agencies to be able to afford her medication and treatment. She even shares that her boyfriend pays her rent and helps out with her expenses in order to make ends meet.

Apart from physical health are the struggles that of mental health on the ability to work and continue living a healthy life. Mental health is also a cause and effect of bad health results from insecurity, and beath health means further insecurity. In five cases, participants shared that they mental health either hindered them when working or was an outcome of work. Participant 1 shared that when she worked, she had to make the decision between having stable mental health or the extra money, stating:

Honestly, I probably use the word guilty a lot every time we talk about everything today. So, just a warning. It was at first a thing where my parents really pushed me to get a job while I was in my undergrad, like my freshman year of undergrad, because they were struggling, and they were the main source of money for me. And so, they wanted me to get a part-time job because they needed me, like they needed my help as well to support me. So, I couldn't really support myself alone, and I don't really know at that age if I'm supposed to, but I struggle because I also really struggle with my mental health. So, just school alone was really hard as it is, but then trying to put a job on top of that was really difficult because I really could only handle so much workload. And I wanted to devote all of it to school, so the main chunk of my mental load was for school or from school and for school. But then when it came to a job, that was really exhausting because it was a lot of like pretty much constant over-stimulation. So, that made it really difficult for me, to want to even go in the first place.

She shared that a lot of the mental health struggles that she had were exacerbated with having a job and being in school. She had to decide between having enough money and having a good mental state. But, if not working, she would not have enough money which would lead her to more mental health struggles. So, she is in an interesting position, where regardless of her decision, she would have mental health struggles. If she worked, she would feel overwhelmed by her job and school, but if she did not work, she would start feeling depressed again because she did not have enough money. It was as if she had to pick the lesser of two evils and decide which situation would be less taxing on her.

Mental health struggles were noted by all but one participant, some were on the verge of suicide and suicidal ideation. Depression arose from not having enough food or money. Depression then hindered the ability of participants to work and keep a job, which in turn kept impacting their access to food and money. Participant 10, shared her experience with depression and a suicide attempt, stating:

Muchas veces quería ya no estar aquí en este mundo y me deprimía muchísimo. Sentía que todo el peso que traía encima era demasiado. Sentía que pues que nadie a nadie le importaba lo que yo sentía. Días a veces no tenía para, no me alcanzaba para la renta y me sentía muy desesperada, la verdad mucho. Por muchos años pasado si vivía así. Cuando mis niñas eran pequeñas, yo había días que no tenía que darle de comer a las niñas y así viví muchos años así sintiéndome que no valía nada. A veces yo en realidad sentía que no avanzaba porque nada de los que yo hacía, yo miraba, como digamos, un progreso... Fue mucho, fue un tiempo muy difícil... Estaba muy deprimida. Estaba en mal estado. Quería acabar todo. Gracias a Dios me encontró una vecina cuando vivía en Virginia. Estaba sola con las niñas y sentía que ya no podía. Mi vecina me llevo al doctor que me lavaran el estómago. Estaba deprimida.

[English translation: A lot of times I didn't want to be on this Earth, and I got very depressed. I felt the weight of everything on top of me and it was a lot. I felt like what I felt didn't matter to anyone. Some days, I didn't have enough for rent, and I was desperate, very desperate. I lived that way for many years. When my girls were little, there were days when I didn't have anything to give them to eat and I

lived for many years feeling like I was worthless. Sometimes, in reality, I felt like I never advanced because none of what I did, I saw, how would I say, that I progressed... It was a lot; it was a difficult time... I was very depressed. I was in a bad state. I wanted to end it all. Thank God a neighbor found me when I lived in Virginia. I was alone with the girls, and I felt like I couldn't. My neighbor took me to the doctor so I could get my stomach pumped. I was depressed.

Through her story, Participant 10 shared the depth of the feelings she was experiencing. Not having enough to provide for herself and her daughters sent her into a deep depression where she tried to take her own life. The weight of her experience of not having enough money was so profound and it impacted her deeply. When thinking about depression and food insecurity and precarity there was a spiral that occurred with some participants in which they felt bad and burdensome for not being able to take care of themselves, which then caused more depression, and the cycle continued. Participant 7 shared her experience with depression:

Oh yeah, I mean, you know, it's not easy. I feel, I cry a lot, like I beat myself up. It actually put me, since all this has happened it put me into like depression. I've had to start going to see a psychiatrist. I've had to do therapy once a week just to cope with my feelings. So, I let it out in therapy with my psychiatrist or doctors or whatever, because I feel like I'm a burden to every single person because I mean, I've always been the one that always helped.

Participant 7 shared her struggles with her mental health and shared that she has started seeing both a psychiatrist and a psychologist in order to deal with the depression her situation has caused. She feels burdensome to those around her since she is used to being the person that helps others out. Furthermore, these feelings of being a burden exacerbate participants' mental health.

Insecurity affects mental health and make her feel like interpersonal relationships are at risk because she feels like a burden which further worsens mental health. These feelings of being a burden were seen with six other participants, as they shared that needing assistance from others to a varying degree, made them feel burdensome. For some participants it was not depression that manifested but anxiety. Anxiety occurred from not having enough food, or money. Anxiety and anxiety symptoms were talked about by three participants. Anxiety makes daily tasks harder, and participants noted that it manifested itself in different ways. Participant 13 shared her struggles with anxiety and how anxiety manifested itself into physical symptoms:

But to be really honest with you and especially lately, I haven't done really, really very well to the point where my whole body is just in pain and my anxiety, I can't sleep. I can go to sleep, but then I wake up and mornings are really hard for me because that's when everything is in the forefront of my mind and I'm thinking the worst-case scenarios.

Anxiety in her case has manifested physically to the point in which she is in pain and cannot sleep. Mental health struggles take on a physical aspect and are not just mental but rather can be debilitating in other aspects of participants lives.

Mental and physical health struggles were caused in most part by not having enough money or food. There is a vicious cycle between being mentally and physically healthy and having access to equitable healthcare and enough resources for day-to-day life.

Underemployment

I define underemployed individuals as individuals who have a job (part-time, full-time, or self-employed) but are experiencing some degree of economic precarity, and in most cases food insecurity. When theorizing about food insecurity and economic precarity, it was interesting to

see that a lot of the participants were educated and business owners and were still struggling to make ends meet.

Participant 9 is a nurse's assistant and has worked at hospitals the majority of her working adult life. Participant 5 is getting a master's degree and holds second jobs with the local government. However, educational attainment was no guarantee of financial security. Participant 6 is a business owner that "lately [has not] had a lot of work." His clients have decreased, and he has not had enough clients for a year. Participant 7 had a cleaning business that unfortunately went under when Covid started. She now does contract work and works from home. 11 out of 15 participants had some varying degree of college, varying from associate degrees to doctoral degrees, and most held stable jobs even throughout covid. Some participants experienced precarity and food insecurity severely that it made them go back to school in hopes of a better future. Participant 15 shares that she had two or three jobs at the same time in order to make ends meet. While getting a divorce and going back to school, she worked three jobs and was only home to sleep before she went to her next job.

Five participants noted that they were not compensated fairly considering that there was minimal work-life balance, and they were working around the clock, working long hours, or had a toxic work environment. "All hell breaks loose" as soon as Participant 13 gets to campus for her job as a counselor. From the moment she steps on campus, well past the time she leaves, she is dealing with individuals, whether it be students, teachers or administrators, around the clock. Similarly, Participant 1 shares that there is no work-life balance, and she is constantly doing work which complicates her feelings with being compensated fairly.

Oh, I think that's like a big feeling regarding do I get fairly compensated...

because there is no work life boundary, so, I feel like I'm always working. So can

you possibly be fairly compensated when you feel like that, when you feel like you are constantly devoting mental energy because if I'm not devoting the mental energy to actually doing the assignments and doing the preparation for classes, I'm devoting mental energy to the imposter syndrome that results from doing all of this stuff at once. So, I absolutely, I take it home with me and I take it everywhere I go.

With the constant mental load, it is difficult to feel as if she is being compensated fairly. Furthermore, Participant 2 shared that while she is "comfortable" to some degree, they (her employers) "could give [them] more." She goes on to discuss how much physical labor she does, at 62 years old, and discusses that she needs to be compensated more because of the hard work that she does.

Several participants shared that their day-to-day lives were primarily work, and it was frustrating that even though they worked long hours they still did not have enough money to make ends meet. 7 out of 15 participants talked about working more than 40 hours per week or holding more than one job in order to make ends meet. In an extreme example, Participant 13 worked three different jobs. She was working three jobs in the hopes of making ends meet. Working multiple jobs is not enough to make ends meet. Participant 10 shares:

Yo en el día trabajo 16 horas. Todos los días del lunes a viernes trabajo 16. Y el sábado no más trabajo 6. No. Yo hago \$10 por hora en la noche y \$12 en el día, por todo el trabajo que hago. No me alcanza. Pero si no trabajas mucho [pause] Porque yo trabajé no más exactamente las ocho horas y me salían \$630 a la quincena y no me alcanzaba. Tenía que vender comida para poder alcanzar.

[English translation²: In one day, I work 16 hours. Every day Monday through Friday I work 16. On Saturday, I work 6. No. I make \$10 per hour at night and \$12 in the daytime, for all of the work that I do. It's not enough. But if you don't work a lot [pause] Because I used to work exactly eight hours and I made \$630 biweekly, and it wasn't enough. I had to sell food to make ends meet.

The stress and hours required for work left participants feeling exhausted and feeling unable to manage other areas of their lives. Participant 1, for example, talks about the double edges sword of working and having free time. She feels exhausted from work and has little time for herself to unwind or let off steam. Participant 10 shared the struggle between working longer hours and resting. In her interview, she goes on to share that some days she gets home and heads straight to bed, not even eating dinner, because of how tired she is. Before working these long hours, she made food to sell at home in order to make ends meet. So, even though she was not at work, she was still working and selling food in order to supplement her income. Even though she works long hours, she does not make enough money to get by. Her experience helps us see that it does not matter how many hours a day you work, it is still possible to live precariously while working.

While there was the conversation of being compensated fairly or more, there was one participant that detailed company policies and how workers are asked to “help out” the company. Participant 3 details how the clientele of the company she works for has recently decreased and how there has been very little work. To combat this low clientele, the company has asked employees to “help” them out by leaving work early for unpaid hours. With Participant 3 there is this tension between the well-being of the company and the well-being of the employee. The

² Translations were completed by primary researcher who is a heritage Spanish speaker.

company takes precedent, and they value company time and resources to the point where they are phrasing sending people home as “helping” the company out.

Rationalizing

Rationalizing is comprised of behaviors that participants enacted in order to rationalize and make sense of their situation. While experiencing economic precarity, and food insecurity, participants found ways to rationalize their situation. Part of rationalizing was seeing their situation as temporary, looking forward to a brighter future, and universalizing their experience. Rationalizing is comprised of “Brighter Future Ahead of Me and Big Dreams”, “Others Depend on Me”, and “Universalizing”. “Brighter Future Ahead of Me and Big Dreams” focuses on the dreams and aspirations that participants had for themselves, their children, and their grandchildren. They use the future as a way of escaping their present reality and as a way to rationalize the hard experiences they are going through and all of the hard work that they do. They rationalize their long hours and multiple jobs by thinking about how their future will be impacted. Then, there is “Others Depend on Me” which details how participants have others, whether it be pets, children or grandchildren, that depend on them, and how they are able to manage their experiences of having dependents but having difficulty providing for them. Lastly, there is “Universalizing” which illustrates how participants think about their struggles and rationalize that many other people are going through them. This rationalizing helps them better understand their struggles and helps them think of their experience with economic precarity and food insecurity in a new light.

Brighter Future Ahead and Big Dreams

When talking about their experiences with food insecurity and economic precarity seven participants talked about the brighter future that was ahead of them and the big dreams they had.

A way of rationalizing with their situation was to think about the future that they could potentially have. To participants, food insecurity and economic precarity were momentary situations that would ultimately end, and they would live what they thought to be a “good” and “healthy” life. Ranging from a degree to marriage, participants dreamed about what life would be like after overcoming precarity.

Participant 1 talked about her experience with school and banking on the fact that she would have a master’s degree that would open doors for work and ultimately impact her lifestyle. Even though education was not a guarantee of economic stability, she rationalizes her current situation by dreaming about what life will be like once she has completed her education and enters the workforce.

Oh man, well, you know, I’m really banking on this master’s degree getting me a job that makes me feel comfortable on a day-to-day basis. Me and my partner talk all the time about like, oh, well, one day I’m gonna have a fancy job, and have lots of money and it’s gonna be great, and this is all gonna be worth it.

Here Participant 1 rationalizes the struggle she is going through right now because in the future there will be a perceived benefit from this uncomfortable situation. However, participant’s experiences show us that education does not mean that they will be financially stable or food secure. It is also worth noting that comfort is the goal. There is not an extravagant goal in mind or talks about what she would spend money on if she were financially stable, but she did talk about being comfortable. Comfort is the outcome of “fancy job” and is ultimately what she dreams of.

Participant 3 talked about how she hopes and dreams of a better paying job, and she knows that one day she will be able to have it. She talks about the transition between her old job

and this new job where she is making slightly more money. By making more money she will be able to afford a new car. Up to this point, she has not really had a reliable car and even talks about how if her car “breaks down, she don’t have any way to get to work.” Her car is necessary for her everyday life, but it is not reliable, she shares:

So, I need another car. And my goal is to save money back very week to where I can buy a decent car just so that I can, you know, if that one happens to break own, then I’m okay. I’m gonna be okay.

Participants rationalized their behavior by saying that they were going to be okay. There was a salient belief that by having their basic necessities met, they would be okay, because they would have everything they need. They were not dreaming of extravagant vacations or brand-new cars, but rather they were dreaming of better than what they have. This dream of better helped them believe that they would be okay once their basic needs were met.

When thinking about the future and what it holds, there were a lot of emotions at play. 5 out of 7 participants that talked about their future talked about the position that they were in and what it meant for them emotionally. Participants talked about feeling bad about their current situation and how their current reality made them feel like a “loser” or “less than” in comparison to others around them. However, they realize that there is a temporary aspect to their emotions, as they will ultimately overcome economic precarity and food insecurity.

Your perception, your perspective is really entirely dependent on where you’re standing, what’s around you. And so, that helps me to remember like right now I feel like a loser right now, I feel really negative right now, I’m feeling depressed, but it’s because where I’m at right now and what’s around me is a lot of lack.

The emotions that she felt are temporary and are dependent on her surroundings. When she overcomes this “lack” she talked about she will feel better. When talking about this outlook on life and how she is able to separate her feelings from herself, she talks about how she had to learn to have this outlook. Reframing and focusing on productive action helped her be able to set aside her feelings and focus on the things ahead of, such as the job prospects that she has. When talking about the things that she is looking forward to she mentioned:

I’m definitely looking forward to being able to earn enough income to get myself out of the debt that I’ve gotten into. I’m looking forward to being able to save up money to buy a home again. I’m looking forward to having enough money that I don’t have to worry about the things I need, right? Like when you have to shop by price tag, and you have to really justify not only what do I need but what do I need the most.

Her dreams are simple, she wants to have enough to not worry. The seven participants that talked about what the future holds for them all talked about being comfortable and having enough. Participant 5 talked about “the sacrifices [she] is making right now will help [her] substantially”. Again, here we see that the participants felt like the difficult things they were going through right now would have a pay out and would be beneficial to them in the long run. After graduating graduate school, Participant 5 will be able to “have a savings again, and a paid off car.” She said, “it’ll pay off in the long-term.” Education is seen as an investment, as its benefits were not seen by participants while they were going to school, but rather they feel like being educated will open doors and opportunities in the long run. 7 out of 15 participants talked about education being an investment, whether it was for themselves or their children. Education is seen as an out to economic precarity, and as a solution to experiencing economic instability.

Participant 6, a business owner, talks about how the struggles he is overcoming are not for his own comfort but rather for the comfort and well-being of his daughters and so “they can have a better future.” The brighter future for Participant 6 is not for himself but for his daughters. He believes that his hard work will have paid off, if his daughters are educated and live a comfortable life. This depicts that there is a generational mindset to dreams and future. He talked about how his parents set him up to be a business owner and how he is setting up his daughters by sending them to private school and college. Similarly Participant 13 shared that her “hope is to set [her] grandkids up for success” by sending them off to college. Her dreams surpass her children and go to her grandchildren that live with her.

Participants rationalized their situation by dreaming big not just for themselves, but for their children and grandchildren. Education was seen as a steppingstone and as a tool to succeed in life. Education, furthermore, was an investment for the future and would help accomplish dreams.

Others Depend on Me

In connection with dreams impacting children and grandchildren, there is the theme that others rely and depend on the participants and their struggles are only theirs to have. Some have pets that depend on them, and others have children or grandchildren that depend on them. Participants rationalize their situation and behaviors by reminding themselves that others depend on them. Their situations are not only impacting themselves, but rather there are others around them that are also impacted. This then further impacts their behaviors and how they feel about the economic state and food insecurity.

Participant 5 described when she thought about rehoming her cat saying that pets are “a responsibility for life” and that she really could not rehome. While moving across the country in

the last year, she brought her cat with her and did not get rid of her. While it is costly to have a pet and Participant 4 describes pets as being like “children” she took care of her cat because the cat depended on her. Participant 4 talks about her dog and how taking care of her dog is a taxing job. As inflation has made the prices of everything increase, the cost of pet food has also increased. They also talked about how the vet is expensive and there are many costs associated with having pets. Having pets served to explain participants behaviors for having multiple jobs or working long hours. They had to take care of their pets, and therefore rationalized that they were working hard in order to ensure that their pets, along with themselves, were living as comfortably as possible.

The costs of pets had Participant 7 feeling “guilty” and “selfish” for getting her dog. She shared her experience saying that she feels selfish because she does not “even have enough money” but she does have the support of family, and they help her “with the dog food when [she] needs it. The relationship with her dog is symbiotic one. Her dog has a loving home, and she is able to get the emotional support that she needs. The three participants that talked about pets depending on them talk about the emotional benefits of having a pet and share that sometimes they feel guilty for having a pet when they are struggling to make ends meet. However, they rationalize having a pet due to the emotional benefits they have. Participants talked about how spending time with their pets helped them relieve stress and how it was helpful for them to have someone to spend time with them. Ranging from resting on the couch, to going on walks every morning, participants shared that pets were helpful when experiencing economic hardship and food insecurity.

Six participants talked about having children or grandchildren depend on them. Participant 6 has a young daughter, and a college aged daughter. Participant 6 talks about how he

is “investing in their [his children’s] education.” When thinking about his family, and the money that he spends on private school and college for his older daughter, Participant 6 rationalizes the money he spends on their education because it is an investment in their future. Providing for his children is a part of his “job” and he felt like he had to work in order to provide for them in the best way possible. Furthermore, providing for his children served as a rationalizing tool for the long hours he works and for the constant mental load he endures from owning a small business. Participant 13 talked about how she “loves to help people,” whether it be her grandchildren or the children she counsels, she has many people depending on her. Her grandchildren depend on her for their necessities, ranging from food, shelter, and money for fieldtrips, as she details when she recounted when her granddaughter went on a fieldtrip. Furthermore, her students depend on her. While there is not a financial burden, there is a socioemotional burden that is placed on her. She talks about how her time at work is a revolving door where she is a “true advocate for students.” The long hours she works are rationalized by the fact that she is helping others. She views helping others as her calling, and by helping others, even if she has long hours and constant mental burden, means that she is completing what she loves in life. The long hours and the constant mental load are worth it for her, because she is advocating for others and helping them out.

Two participants shared that they had custody of their grandchildren and that they have had a second round of raising children in their lives. Participant 15 shared her experience where she details that while she does make good money, she has a lot of people under her roof depending on her. She is raising three grandchildren (whose mother is in and out of their lives), and her teenage daughter. While raising the four of them, she notes:

Income wise it has changed because I make more money but financially, I'm still struggling because I have a lot of people that I'm paying for everything, right? And so more people, more food, more groceries... so it's like I'm in a better place financially, but not really.

She rationalized working long hours because others depend on her. Participant 15 has improved her life, as she is now a medical assistant and is no longer working long hours at gas stations and factories, but a lot more people are dependent on her and she is not able to make the money last as long as it needs to. However, she did go through more schooling in order to better provide for her children and grandchildren. She used the fact that others depend on her to motivate herself to go back to school and make a better living for herself.

Participant 13 shared her experience raising her grandchildren. She has custody of a young boy and a teenager, and she struggles financially providing them with everything they need. She shared that she thought she would be done raising kids, but external situations have left her with her grandchildren. Participant 13 works multiple jobs in order to try to make ends meet and she does so because others depend on her.

Lastly, Participant 14 talked about her experience raising two girls sharing how difficult it is to raise well-rounded children.

As a mom, obviously you have this natural instinct to protect your children at all costs. And knowing that you don't have basic things for your children [pause] my kids were one and a half year old and I think six months... If you don't have your basic needs met like food and shelter and clothing how in the hell are you gonna think about something more like education or entertainment or travel. How can you actually raise a well-rounded human being?

Being able to provide for her children has repercussions such as providing them an education. There is a spiral that occurs in her mind that goes from being able to provide food for her children and then wondering how she can provide them an education. Here she showed that being able to provide basic necessities for her children means much more than providing food and shelter, but rather means being a well-rounded human.

Universalizing

When coping with food insecurity and economic precarity, one of the ways that participants coped with their situations is through universalizing the situation. Participant 1 said that “everything is so fucked up.” Asserting that everything is “fucked up” helped her rationalize her situation and helped her see that the situation is not exclusively hers, but rather there are other people going through this situation. Participant 3 shared that “times are tough for everybody.” She believes that it is not just her experiencing economic hardship but rather everybody is having a hard time. She goes on to say “and it’s not just, it’s not just the elderly, it’s not just the middle income, low income, it’s everybody. Even the people with two incomes coming in, they are struggling just as well.” She described the experience she has at her company where the company gives them an extra \$50 per month. She said that the company realized how difficult the economic situation is and that instead of giving them raises, they give everyone a little bonus per month in order to supplement how much they are receiving. It is clear that the company she works for realizes and notices that their employees are struggling financially, and try to help them, however, Participant 3 talked about how the extra \$50 per month are not nearly enough in this economy, and the money ends up going toward gas in order to get to and from work.

Participant 6 shared how his clients are also struggling and how they do not have the money to hire the participant and his company.

We have the clients, but the clients just, they're going through the whole economic thing, too. And for them, window cleaning isn't as important as it would be, like when they were actually, the economy was better. You know, they see it maybe as something they can do without... but you got to understand that most of our clients are wealthy, wealthy people that actually you know, have the actual funds to, you know, have their homes windows cleaned.

Through his experience he talked about how his clients, individuals, and dealerships alike, do not have enough money for something like window cleaning. With the loss of clients over the last year and half, Participant 6 has found himself being food insecure at times and not having enough money for his family. He universalizes the experience by sharing that even wealthy individuals are having a difficult time. If he believes wealthy individuals are having a difficult time in this economy, then the average individual would naturally have a difficult time in this economy. It is also interesting to note that participants cite the changes in the economy as the stressor that has impacted their day-to-day lives.

Coping

Coping is related to behaviors that participants engaged in, in order to cope with their experience with food insecurity and economic precarity. Coping is comprised of “Escapism”, “Networks”, and “Turning to God.” “Escapism” depicts the behaviors that participants engaged in, in order to cope with food insecurity and economic precarity. Escapism ranged from playing video games to walking a dog. “Escapism” shows how participants escape their reality, but also what happens when participants do not have an escape. “Networks” focuses on friends, families,

and strangers that help participants cope with their experiences. Lastly, there is “Turning to God” that shows the experiences of participants and how they engage with their faith, scripture, and prayer in order to cope with their situation.

Escapism

When coping with food insecurity and economic precarity there is a varying degree of escapism. Escapism was used as a way for participants to avoid or escape from their situation in order to better cope with it. Six participants shared their experience with escaping their reality. Ranging from walking the dog to playing video games, participants escaped their reality in several ways. Escaping their reality allowed participants to have a way to let off steam, and not think about their problems. Escapism served a form of coping in which participants were able to let go of their situations and find a way to relieve stress.

Participant 1 shared how escaping her reality leads to negative behaviors and impacts her life. She talks about “revenge procrastination” and how at night she tries to take advantage of the time she loses in the day to her job.

Oh God, yeah. It is so draining. And that’s where my, like, revenge procrastination... I forgot what it’s actually... I think it’s called that, like bedtime procrastination or something. Where I will not go to sleep for forever, because the nighttime is, like, the time I’m in bed rotting on my phone is the only time where I truly feel like what I’m doing is relaxing and for me. Like, yes, I’m doing all of the work for my master’s for myself but it’s also like, I don’t know how to properly explain that. But yeah, so it affects my mental health because I’m constantly drained. Definitely medicated during the semester.”

Through what she calls “bedtime procrastination” Participant 1 is trying to take back some of her time and is trying to use her time for herself, but ultimately it leaves her feeling drained and impacts her mental health. When employing escapism, there are sometimes negative consequences for the participant. However, this “bedtime procrastination” is the only time that she gets to herself. While it may lead to less sleep, or not feeling as great during the day, it is her time to relax and not think about her economic situation.

Participant 7 shared the story of getting her puppy. It was a joyous time to have someone to spend time with, and the puppy helped bring emotional support to her. However, she felt guilty that she got a dog, considering that she is struggling economically. The puppy brings her some level of happiness and has improved her mental health; however, she then feels guilty for having something that brings her joy. She calls herself “selfish” for having gotten a dog. While participants found pet dependency stressful, as mentioned in the earlier section, pets were also a source of coping and escaping their reality. Participant 7 also does diamond art and reads; however, these things require money. Diamond art is something that brings her some peace and some enjoyment, but she has to spend money on it which then plays into her financial insecurity. So, sometimes she has to make the decision of feeling worse economically in order to participate in a hobby that will be good for her mental health, however, being economically unstable impacts her mental health negatively. It is a cycle that plays out in her life.

Participant 4 shared that she had no escape because she was not able to afford one.

I wasn't eating out. A lot of my co-workers go eat out. They go do social things.

They go grab coffee together. And when you are poor, you have less opportunities to be social and have fun. And you get in this really hard cycle of not making ends

meet, being frustrated, working really hard and then not having a release at the end of it because you can't afford to have a release.

Here she highlighted that an escape is necessary, however, when struggling economically, a release is rare. There is an endless cycle of needing a release and not being able to afford one and becoming more frustrated. She shared that the way that she has a release is thanks to her boyfriend that will take her out to dinner or will bring dinner to her. Having an escape is something that is needed, but it is difficult to be afforded.

Participant 11 talked about how when spending money, he weighs out whether it is a necessity or not and the amount of joy something will provide him. He questions if the joy is worth it, especially since he struggles with his mental health.

No, I mean, I can't just be spending [pause] I never spend money willy-nilly or whatever, right? Like, every time I, you know, buy something that's not like a necessity, I, like, you know, have a little conversation with myself and I'm like, you know, like, yes, you know, this will provide some joy, but like, is that worth it? And the, you know, it's always like, because, you know, my mental health is something that I've struggled with for, you know, a really long time, you know, there's a thought of like, oh, you know, I feel find right now, maybe I don't need to continue to take antidepressants, because like, you know, even though they're not even that expensive, but like, you know, it's just like another cost and everything.

Even buying his medication is viewed as a way of escaping his reality and he questions whether he needs it because of the cost. Joy is viewed as something with a high cost and participants have to weigh out whether the joy, they will get is worth the price they have to pay.

Participant 13 struggles with her mental health, particularly anxiety, and her anxiety physically manifests into symptoms she can feel physically.

But to be really honest with you and especially lately, I haven't done really, really very well to the point where my whole body is just in pain and my anxiety, I can't sleep. I can go to sleep, but then I wake up and mornings are really hard for me because that's when everything is in the forefront of my mind and I'm thinking the worst-case scenarios. And so, I have to talk myself into, okay you know that if you get up and start moving, start your day, you're going to get better faster. You're going to start thinking more clearly. And that you know, that helps. But also, walking the dog. I love my dog. We got the dog for my granddaughter to help her, but it's helped me more than any of us.

Anxiety is often at the forefront of her thoughts and one of the ways that she has learned to cope with her anxiety is to spend time with her dog and walk her. She says that the dog has helped more than any of them. Here again, we see how owning a pet is a way that helps with coping with financial insecurity and food insecurity, however, having a pet can also be viewed as detrimental to their mental health. There is a decision that participants have to make, emotional stability via escapism which can better mental health and worsen finances, or better finances which are still not enough and worsen mental health. Regardless, the mental health of participants is being impacted in both directions regardless of the choice they make.

Networks

When thinking about the role of social support on economic precarity and food insecurity, 12 out of 15 participants cited having some form of support, to some varying degrees, from friends, family and even strangers. There were three types of networks identified. First,

there were internal networks (friends, family, partners, etc.), external networks (nonprofits and food banks), and governmental networks (comprised of governmental human resources). A fourth network will be discussed in the following section. Networks provide emotional escapes and allow participants to cope with their situation by sharing their experience. Furthermore, networks allow participants to share their experiences and be helped by those in their network and supplement their food insecurity and economic precarity.

Friends and family were the strongest networks to participants. 10 out of 12 of the participants that noted having support networks went to friends or family. Two exclusively went to external networks or governmental networks.

Participant 1 shared that “a lot of her relationship with her mother” is her mother “sending [her] money here and there, and that’s how [she is] getting food currently.” In Participant 1’s experience, part of ability to afford food is directly impacted by her mother and even her partner. She said that “with [redacted partner name], the reason I’m getting lunch today is because [redacted partner name] sent me some money.” Here it is seen that food insecurity and access to food, at least for Participant 1, is in part impacted by her mother and her partner. If they did not send her money for food, she would not have the ability to eat. She shared that life with her partner has made the experience of economic precarity and food insecurity easier to handle. Having a partner to depend and lean on has made it easier, to some varying degree, to be able to overcome the hardships she is experiencing. Additionally, participants talked about how having a partner or a relative that understands their economic hardship helps them emotionally. Having a network that understands the struggle they are going through helps them cope with their situation because it makes them feel seen and understood. Furthermore, they feel like they do not have to

explain their circumstances and experience their negative emotions again, because the other person understands what they are going through.

Participant 3 stated that “hopefully with this new job, [she] will have money so that [she] won’t have to ask [her] daughters for money.” Even though she had support available to her she did not want to ask her daughters for money because she felt guilty and ashamed of asking for help. Eight participants talked about feeling ashamed or guilty about asking for help from others, noting that they may be going through something themselves or that they felt like they were burdensome to others. Participant 1 talked about how she feels her relationships are “transactional” because she is getting money or support from others. This feeling is further talked about by Participant 3 when she talks about the differences between receiving help from a food bank and receiving help from her daughters.

But, with my daughters it’s different because I know they have families, and they don’t really have a lot of money either. So, I try my hardest not to ask for money from them. Like I said, I will do what I have to.

Instead of asking her daughters for help she goes to a local food bank and receives help from them. She says she does not “have nobody else to really help [her] out except [redacted food bank name].” Having to go to a food bank makes her feel “very” stressed out and “very” worried. This feeling of stress was talked about by seven participants. When asked who she shares her stress with, Participant 3 talked about her close friend that understands the struggle of precarity and food insecurity. Here, we see again that going to a network that understands what you are going through helps participants cope with their situation because their friends and family that understand the situation come into it with compassion and not judging them.

But I do tell [redacted friend name] because she understands, and she deals with people struggling every day. And then another thing is I'll read a scripture in the Bible. And that is basically the only thing I can do when I get into these emotional, I guess what do you wanna call it, mud hole.

Participant 7 described her networks or lack thereof in some cases. She primarily goes to her boyfriend who has “been financially helping [her] pick up what [she] can't pay, and it's been burdened for him.” She has her boyfriend help her with what he can. Participant 7 is currently receiving chemotherapy and radiation for breast cancer, and her boyfriend drives her to her appointments and makes sure that she has the medication that she needs. Participants shared that their networks helped them with tasks or money when they needed it. Participants talked about networks and expressed how their networks sometimes provided food, rent money, or gas money in order to help in their difficult times. Participants talked about having a partner that help them as a positive. Partners that understand and help when the participants are experiencing economic hardship and food insecurity help with the emotions of the participants. Participant 4 mentioned that her partner sometimes brings her a package of meat or some canned goods when he visits her. This gesture serves to portray that the partner understands the economic situation of the participant, but furthermore, it also depicts that networks help directly with the situation. Not only do networks impact emotions and coping, but in some cases, they may literally help with the financial situation or with the food insecurity.

Participant 10 shared that in order to combat her food insecurity, she went to local food banks.

Oh, sí, en esa época me iba a los bancos de alimento donde dan comida. Donde yo vivo, sí hay bancos de alimento, pero hay que registrase. Pero en esa época yo iba a los bancos de alimento para que me alcanzara la comida.

[English translation: Oh, yes, in that time I went to food banks where they gave me food. Where I live, there are food banks, but you have to register. But, in that time I went to food banks in order to have enough food.

Participant 10 sought external networks in order to combat her food insecurity. Participant 10 talked about how she felt ashamed to go to a food bank but felt “so relieved that somebody was giving [her] food.” Participant 14, an immigrant not familiar with governmental agencies and food banks, shared that she started doing her own research and found nonprofits and government organizations with resources. She talked about how initially it was difficult to ask her friends for help because she felt like a “beggar”. She goes as far as to say that even though “you have friends it doesn’t necessarily mean that they’re gonna help in the long-term.” She turned to nonprofits in order to supplement the groceries she was able to get. Finally, Participant 13 shared the role of her church in helping her with her situation when she was younger. She had been in an abusive relationship, and had experienced precarity and food insecurity after splitting from her then partner. This food insecurity and precarity have withstood the test of time and have been continual struggles in her life. She shares that then and now; she has found help in her church communities to help her overcome her situations. Similarly, eight participants cited God or the church as helping them through difficult times.

Turning to God

When discussing networks and ways to rationalize what was occurring in participant's lives, eight of them mentioned turning to God, and using scripture and faith to overcome hardship. Participant 2 shared that she "talked to God, really. He helps [her] more than anybody." She believes that when she needs a little extra money, that God will provide it in a way that nobody else can provide it. She mentions that God can provide everything that she needs, but people in her network might only be able to give her advice or a couple of dollars. Turning to God serves as a coping mechanism in which participants talk about their struggles as being taken care of by divine intervention. Prayer and turning to God are forms in which participants coped with their situations. When overcoming the hardship of not making enough money, she turned to God and had the faith that He will help her overcome her hardship.

Participant 3 shared that she feels "very stressed out, very worried, even though [she] has God, and [she] knows that He'll never fail [her]". The sentiment that God will never fail is mimicked by four other participants where to some vary degree, they share the sentiment that God will never fail them. They turn to God as an act of network building, and it is interesting to think about God as a network. As discussed, networks were typically comprised of close friends, family members and sometimes even strangers, and here we have instances of a third being that is being trusted and turned to, even though there might necessarily be a physical relationship built. There is faith and trust in God that surpasses physical and economic needs. Participant 3 continued to talk about how on an

...emotional level [she] will turn to God. And then another thing is [she] will read a scripture in the Bible, and it reminds [her] that God's got this. He's got you and that is basically the only thing [she] can do.

When thinking about the role of God and religion on participants they felt that the Bible, and prayer were places of comfort and release. Participant 3 shared that she “stay[s] at home and just focus[es] on God.” In tough times she does not find a physical outlet to let out her feelings or share what is going on in her situation, from the comfort of her home she has the support and the escape from reality that she needs. Participant 3 also talked about the Bible and how she turns to it in difficult times:

So, the Bible is the main thing that I really turn to. To remind myself, hey, you’re not alone in this. It’s gonna be okay. Or like his passage says, my sheep are everywhere, and they unite in hard times.

Participant 4 describes her experience with faith and what it means to her while overcoming hardship.

Some people are more fortunate and they’re more on the top and some people are less fortunate, and they go through more valleys but if you’re doing it with the Lord, you’re gonna be okay. You know, they just completely believe that so if it gives me anything, it gives me hope. And I have an assurance that no matter what, He works all things together for my good. He doesn’t ever leave me.

There is the feeling that participants will be okay, and while this serves as a way to rationalize behavior, it is also a way in which they cope with their situations. When talking about her experience overcoming economic hardship and food insecurity, Participant 4 had a clear message of what her life is like, and that God has a plan for her. She talked about the role of God’s plan in her life and what it means to her recounting the story of the Crucible and talking about the purification process. The Crucible is a metaphor used in the Bible to describe how individuals go through trials and tribulations in life and that they are purification moments that are meant to

shape and grow the individual. Through these trials, individuals turn to God to help them through rough times and ultimately come out of the other side more refined. Participant 4 talks about this specifically through the lens of Proverbs 17, where the Bible talks about the Crucible and furnace for silver and Gold and how God tests hearts.

She described how “He knew [her] before [her] parents did,” and how “He knew the circumstances [she] was being born into.” A form of coping with hardship is to turn to scripture and find solace in there being a “plan” for every person’s lives. Participant 5 said that she thankfully has not “starved and knows that the Lord will provide.” There is a belief that God provides needs regardless of situation. Participant 6 talked about his experience with faith and says:

At the end, I do feel like it’s going to be okay because I’m a believer in God and I know that He has a plan for us... I just got to keep having the faith... And sometimes I shouldn’t ask why, but he know when the perfect timing will be.

From his experience, there is again this reinforcement that God has a plan, and that He has perfect timing. Furthermore, Participant 13 talked about how she trusts in God because He “has never let [her] down.” She continues by describing her faith, stating:

So, my faith is the strongest thing that helps me cope. I often say I don’t know how anybody is going through these times or really goes through anything that [pause] I mean a lot of people are going through things I don’t know how they do it without knowing the Lord because that’s my rock, [pause] that’s my rock. Like people always let us down, but God, He never does. And He’s, yeah, He’s like, I know He’s my father, He’s, my friend. He’s the one that, you know, that I tell everything to.

Here faith is the strongest coping mechanism Participant 13 has. Her faith is strong, and she even goes as far as to say that she does not know how others that do not have faith in God go through things. Here, the congregation or church itself is a form of a network, but here it is clear that God is a network within itself.

When asked to leave us with final words about her experience, Participant 13 urged others to “keep the faith because things are going to change, and things are going to get better.” Participant 15 mimics these words by sharing her experience where “He answered [her] prayers and took [her] out of the situation that [she] was in.” Even though she is still struggling economically and with food insecurity “every year it gets better and better.”

Faith keeps people going. Faith and having God gives people the ability to believe in something greater than themselves and allows them to cope with their situation by believing that times will change because they believe in God. Faith in God allows them to think positively and foreground positives in their experiences. They focus less on the negatives and think about productive action and how they will overcome the situations they are in.

Summary of Results

The research was driven by the questions: (1) how do individuals experiencing financial hardship make sense of their situation and (2) how do individuals experiencing economic hardship communicate and enact resilience? Sensemaking occurred in several ways, but the most prominent was to make sense of their situation via Biblical texts and faith. Through faith, and faith-based organizations, individuals are able to come to terms with their situations and accept them as a divine trial rather than an earthly struggle. Individuals use their faith to cope with the situations they are going through and faith helps them understand that there is a divine plan or something greater than themselves that dictates their situations. Furthermore, participants

universalize struggles. They believe that economic precarity and food insecurity are common and that many people are experiencing them in the current economy. Understanding that more people than themselves are experiencing these things helps them come to terms with their situations and leads them to understand their struggles as being shared. Furthermore, universalizing struggles allows them to feel less alone and isolated in their struggles. However, the same vehicles that help them feel less isolated also impact their networks and their abilities to ask close friends and family for help while they are struggling.

When thinking about enacting and communicating resilience, we have to think back to Buzzanell's (2010) five processes: (1) crafting normalcy, (2) affirming identity anchors, (3) maintaining and using communication networks, (4) legitimizing negative feelings while foregrounding productive action, and (5) putting alternative logics to work. First, when thinking about crafting normalcy, it is evident in the data that participants find ways to continue living their lives as normal though they may be experiencing economic hardship. Several participants shared that while they used to do activities that they would spend money on, now they found activities where they did not spend as much money. Furthermore, participants found alternatives to specific foods. Additionally, they altered their day-to-day lives in order to account for having less money, not enough money or not enough food. For example, Participant 3 shared how she started buying canned vegetables because she could not afford fresh vegetables. These small actions of making changes help participants shape a new normal.

Participants affirmed their identity anchors through religion and faith. Eight out of fifteen participants shared that their faith and their identity in Christ helped them overcome their hardships. There was a sense that they were reframing who they are in Christ and that this reframing helps them overcome hardship. Furthermore, having an identity anchored in Christ

helps them understand their struggles because they understand that their struggles are not an “earthly” struggle but rather it is a spiritual and divine tribulation that they are having to overcome. Additionally, participants shared that when they are struggling whether it be with their finances or with their ability to get food, they are undergoing a cleansing, like that of the crucible, and once they overcome these hardships, they will be in better shape than when they started.

Participants maintained and used communication networks, and their networks helped them overcome hardship. Networks were comprised of strangers, God, church families, biological families, and friends. These networks shifted from person to person, but each participant had someone they could turn to in times of need. Networks served the purpose of information sharing and catharsis and providing resources. Participants went to networks in order to share their experience and release the emotions and tensions that they were feeling. Additionally, their networks provided resources, whether it be money or food. Networks helped by providing what they could. However, in the instances of strangers as a communication network, there are different dynamics at play as they are not familiar with the participant and their job is to help.

Legitimizing negative feelings while foregrounding productive action was also at play. Participants focused on what they could do to overcome economic hardship and food insecurity, while still understanding that the negative emotions they were feeling were valid. This looked like sharing their feelings in therapy or with friends and acknowledging that their circumstances were difficult while still going to work, budgeting their money or going to a local food bank for assistance.

Lastly, there is putting alternative logics to work. This overlaps somewhat with affirming identity anchors. Alternative logics that were used were coping with the Bible and with God. They used the logic that their situation was predetermined in order to overcome their circumstances and better understand what they were going through. They understood their circumstances through different lenses that helped them come to terms with their situation.

CHAPTER FIVE. DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications

Rationalization through dreaming about the future, and universalizing allow individuals to make sense of their circumstances and ultimately enact resilience. Furthermore, through coping mechanisms such as escapism, turning to God, and relying on networks, participants were able to cope with their food insecurity and economic precarity. 18.6 percent of Americans (USDA, 2024) experience some varying degree of food insecurity; that number has risen in the last couple of years. With an increased level of food insecurity and uncertain political climates impacting inflation and tariff regulations on goods, economic precarity and food insecurity need to be theoretically studied. Results of this study suggest three important theoretical implications: (1) Role of Disruption, (2) Underemployment and Sensemaking, and (3) Redefining Networks.

Role of Disruptions

Where existing resilience research suggest the presence of an initial disruption, findings of this study suggest a more nuanced view of resilience where no obvious disruption exists. The findings of this study suggest that for some, there is no clear disruption that enacts resilience, since the disruption in some cases is gradual or generational. Scholars have assumed that resilience is enacted in the face of a disruption, an event that changes the state of normality for the individual. Richardson (2002) defines resilience in terms of bouncing back from “disruption.” However, here it is seen that the experience of food insecurity and economic precarity, while inherently disruptive to day-to-day life, is not perceived as disruptive by participants since the experience was ongoing, and without end, which can be seen as the nature of insecurity.

There were some instances in which food insecurity and economic precarity were generational and were something that the individual had experienced before in their lives. In these cases, food insecurity and economic precarity were not disruptive, but rather they were situational experiences. Generational precarity and food security will be defined as precarity and food insecurity that have persisted from childhood (assuming that parents were food insecure) and recurring into adulthood. For some participants, they had a momentary positive disruption in which they experienced security for some time and then continued to experience precarity. For example, there were participants that shared experiencing food insecurity in another country and how it impacted their lives. They experienced some security when coming to the U.S. but after a while experienced precarity again. It was as if there was a positive disruption amidst the ongoing food insecurity and precarity they experienced.

The experiences participants described were, in fact, negative, but they cope by rationalizing their experiences as “purifying” or trials, or in a couple cases, part of God’s plan. This suggests a more nuanced view of coping and resilience that includes elements of sensemaking. An axiom of sensemaking is that it is retrospective and ongoing (Weick, 1995). When thinking about precarity and food insecurity, they are ongoing events that an individual is processing and making sense of. Through sensemaking they are better understanding the situation they are going through and are finding ways to cope with the situation they are going through.

This suggests a more nuanced view of resilience, as well, that is not a short-term bounce “back” from a disruption to a better normal (Buzzanell 2010). Instead, participants realize that their ongoing financial situations, though in most cases were always their normal, are out of line with others in society. There is no bouncing “back” when there is no “back” to refer to.

This suggests a more encompassing definition of resilience that accounts for ongoing situations without an obvious catalyst. The results of this study suggest that such a view of resilience might include a closer examination of the rationalizing techniques that enable ongoing coping and resilience. This study suggests that ongoing resilience is achieved through rationalizing the ongoing negative situation in ways that comparatively normalize it in society like universalizing or reframe their situation as purifying or in some way comparatively better than others. When thinking about universalizing specifically, participants assumed that others were going through their same circumstances, and in some cases believed that others were worse off than them. This rationalization through universalizing allows participants to reconfigure what they think about the world around them and normalize their existence. For others, the trials they were going through were divine and a sort of cleansing. For them, food insecurity and economic precarity meant that they would be in a better position after “bouncing” back from the ongoing situation than when they started, and ultimately would be better off than other individuals that had not experienced the same circumstances.

Underemployment and Sensemaking

The biggest contribution of this line of research is the concept of underemployed individuals. Underemployed will be defined as individuals that work part-time, full-time or are self-employed and do not make enough money. Underemployed individuals may be business owners or have higher education, but they are still experiencing food insecurity and economic precarity. When getting to know the participants of this study, it was evident that the majority of them were educated and held good jobs and even owned businesses. This proved to impact the sensemaking process that participants went through. Since their precarity is ongoing, and

sensemaking is theorized to be retrospective (Weick, 1995), participant's ways to make sense varied.

Sensemaking is understood as being a retrospective process and outcome (Weick, 1995). This study suggest that people rationalize and cope not by retrospective sensemaking, but by a constant and ongoing process of reframing their own situation in terms of imagined or potential good outcomes. Participants dreamt of a "better" life. They dreamt of an education for themselves, or their children and grandchildren. Participants dreamt of being better off financially and living a life where they were not experiencing food insecurity.

Sensemaking not only occurred retrospectively but it happened for events that were ahead of them. By dreaming about what the future holds for themselves and their children, and grandchildren, participants have made sense of their current reality but also the shifts that will occur. There is a future sensemaking that is occurring. For example, several participants talked about how having a degree would open doors for them and they would be able to have a high paying job and live comfortably, this is future sensemaking. By which they are rationalizing and coping with their reality by imagining a future for themselves and those that depend on them.

Redefining Networks

An aspect that is important to resilience is the use of social capital which is seen through using and maintaining social networks (Buzzanell, 2010). In light of food insecurity this can be seen as asking or receiving help from outside sources. For example, in a study about unemployment and food insecurity (Dougherty et al., 2018) the researchers found that some participants felt hesitant in asking for help and did not disclose their struggles, but when directly asked about their struggles the participants were open about them which in turn resulted in them receiving help from a loved one. Similarly, Doerfel and colleagues (2008) did a study analyzing

the ability for businesses to reintegrate and reopen following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Organizations that held more social capital and had more developed relationships were able to reopen with more ease. Help from peers was more accessible to those with more social capital and strong ties. Individuals have “linked lives” in which they are connected to others that have experienced a similar situation (Lucas and Buzzanell, 2012).

However, the data suggests that the strength of social capital is not important when it comes to creating and being a part of a social network. In participants’ cases, their networks were comprised of strangers, at times, with which they did not have social capital. The integration of strangers into a network exemplifies that social capital is not always necessary for participants in order to receive help. This is seen through participants that went to food banks, and governmental agencies for assistance. It can be understood that in a situation of precarity, social capital is not necessary since the situation and complexities of insecurity outweigh the need for social capital. When redefining networks, we can see that while there may be social capital, in the cases of family and friends, social capital is not required to receive assistance.

Literature suggests that help from peers was more accessible to those with more social capital and strong ties (Doerfel et al., 2008). However, in the case of food insecurity and economic precarity, help was more accessible to participants that knew about external resources that were there to help them. For example, a participant talked about going to a food bank for the first time after another woman shared her experience about a food bank. While there is a tie with the friend that told her about the food bank, there is no tie between the food bank and the participant. The food bank and its workers are now a part of the participant’s network, though they do not have rapport built or any type of tie; they are a weak tie at best. Social capital and

strong ties, while they were present in the help provided to some participants was not exclusively how all participants received help.

Practical Implications

The data suggest two practical implications related to food insecurity and economic precarity. First, the role of God and strangers as a network, and second, the importance of food banks and open-door policies. In 2023, 13.5 percent of U.S. households were food insecure to some varying degree (USDA, 2024). Eight participants shared that the church and their faith impacted their experience with food insecurity and economic precarity. When thinking about networks, God or religion is not typically conceptualized as a network, typically there are the networks of friends and families. Furthermore, there are some networks that are comprised of people that are strangers and then over time become friends. When thinking about the conceptualization of God as a network, it is important to think about the difference of coping with God as a confidant and friend and coping with God through religious texts. Participants that talked about their experience with faith and the Bible cited that God was like a friend to them and served the role of a confidant when they were undergoing difficult times. God was a being they turned to in difficult times and served as a sounding board for the things they were going through. While participants did not cite hearing directly from God, they did share that they prayed and spent a lot of time talking to Him, because He was there for them. Furthermore, there is the use of scripture and religious texts to help affirm identity anchors and serve as a network. Religious texts held scriptures that were meant to be comforting to people and serve as a way to make sense of their situations. Additionally, religious texts shared stories and parables of others experiencing hard times that while they were not similar to food insecurity or economic precarity, still helped individuals cope with their situation. For example, one participant shared

the story of the crucible and how God purifies people. She shared this in light of her experience and shared that she was going through a purification process, and that is why she was able to make it through her situation. God and religious texts are networks to that help with coping and overcoming difficult situations.

Additionally, the data made it clear how important food banks and open-door policies were. Some participants shared the difficulties they had receiving governmental assistance and how at times they felt like they were jumping through hoops to not get much. One participant shared how it was time consuming and difficult to get food stamps, but that the food stamps did not even last a month. In her story she shares that the only way she made it through was to go to food banks and places that had an open-door policy. An open-door policy means that the food bank is not checking household income or immigration status, but rather they are serving everyone that comes to them for food. These open-door policies were especially important to immigrant communities and participants that struggled in this country, while they were not used to receiving aid from outside resources since nonprofits were not a large source of help in their home countries. Food banks help supplement the gaps that are left by low wages, not enough work, and not enough governmental assistance. Food banks and open-door policies are building bridges in people's lives so that they have enough to live.

There are several ways that food banks can use this data to better serve their communities. First, there is the conversation about foods that are received in food banks. Participants talked about how the food that they received sometimes was not the best as some of it was processed, or it just was not enough to supplement what they had. Food banks and pantries can make more educated decisions on what donations to accept or look for, and how much they should give per person. Furthermore, knowing the situation of the participants may lead food

banks to opening more days a week or allowing participants to come more often depending on their need. The majority of food banks in the DFW area are open for limited hours or limit how often participants can come through for food. Knowing the need and the impact that they, food banks, have on their participants can impact the resources available to them.

Limitations and Future Research

The results of this study suggest directions for future research. To begin, limitations to this study include sample representation and sample availability. This sample is representative of two foodbanks in the DFW Metroplex, and do not show regional variety. Future research might examine a broader sample in different regions. Studying in different regions might show different employment opportunities, costs of living and different day-to-day lives. A broader region studied may yield a larger data set. Furthermore, this study allows participants to self-define their level of precarity and food insecurity, and there was not a measure used to define food insecurity, therefore the level of food insecurity being experienced varies greatly depending on the person. This study relied on a sample of individuals who were seeking and receiving help at food pantries. Future research might seek sample of food insecure people who have not received such services. This has implications for the finding that service provider networks are important and could provide a point of contrast. Such a study might shed further light on the hurdles such as stigma that food insecure individuals face to receiving assistance.

Another large limitation is the perceived accessibility of individuals experiencing food insecurity and economic precarity. Throughout the recruitment process it was evident that individuals experiencing economic hardship and food insecurity did not want to speak up about their situation due to stigmatization and fear of judgment. It should be noted here that obtaining sample for this study was exceptionally difficult, as individuals experiencing insecurity were

very reluctant to talk about their experiences. Having interviewers in-situ, with more personal networks to pull sample from, might be helpful. Difficulty finding sample suggests a future direction for research – how stigma might limit seeking communication networks, as suggested by Buzzanell (2010).

Conclusion

With growing rates of food insecurity (USDA, 2024) and economic precarity walking alongside it, the experiences of individuals impacted by these circumstances should be studied. More than being a study and project, this research aims to shed a light on the harsh realities that people are living in. This is meant to serve as a testament of individual's experiences and aide nonprofits and governmental agencies alike, to better understand the communities that they are serving. Communicative resilience and sensemaking serve as vehicles to understand these phenomena and explicate the experiences of individuals through a different lens. I think back to the story Megan and her experience with food insecurity. I think of how it took two years for her to overcome economic struggles, but how ultimately, she felt stronger because she surpassed them. I wonder how many more stories of overcoming economic hardship exist out there and how they could possibly help others struggling in similar situations. I think of my participants and the vulnerability they had to share some of their deepest struggles and am thankful that they trusted me with their stories. Economic precarity and food insecurity are growing and as things grow so should our understanding of them.

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Professional Experience

Graduate Assistant 2023 – Present

Texas Christian University

Taught two courses of Communicating Effectively each semester

Facilitated class meetings and discussions with over 20 students per session

Constructed lesson plans for each lab and coached students through public speaking anxiety

Education

M.S in Communication Studies

2023 - Current

Texas Christian University

Thesis: “Trying to get out of the hole”: Communicative Resilience and Sensemaking Among Adults Experiencing Food Insecurity and Economic Precarity

B.A IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES

2021 - 2023

APPLICABLE EXPERIENCE

Presenter

National Communication Association

Nov 2024

“You’re not working hard enough... you’re not trying hard enough”: An Analysis of Privacy Management and Coping and Resilience Among Young Adults Experiencing Food Insecurity