

Health Challenges for Poor Women in Rural Communities

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Central Research Questions

This research focuses on poverty and health among low-income white women in rural Pennsylvania through the examination of patient narratives. Marginalized populations are more likely to have poor health and less likely to receive good medical care. The relationship between economic disadvantage and health is complicated, and conducting this research is crucial to improving the physical and emotional well-being of poor women in poor communities.

The central research questions for my proposed project are: How does poverty impact a woman's physical and emotional well-being? How do experiences within a formal healthcare system impact and inform women's everyday approaches to their own health and well-being, as narrated by women themselves?

To answer these questions I will be analyzing over 40 qualitative interviews conducted with women who have not earned a college degree living in rural Central Pennsylvania. As a resident of the Social Justice residential college, an intended sociology major, and a lifelong Pennsylvanian, I am drawn to this contributing to an effort to counteract the persistence of rural and racial multigenerational poverty and health inequalities.

Project Description

Methods and Anticipated Outcomes

This project will use a qualitative research approach where semi-constructed interviews were conducted to explore poor women's well-being. I am analyzing the interviews of 40 non-white women living in rural, Northeastern Pennsylvania (specifically Schuylkill and Northumberland counties). Interviews previously conducted (in Summer 2019) answered questions such as: "Do you feel like you can make ends meet? What kind of health issues are you currently experiencing? Do you feel hopeful about your future? Do you trust your medical doctor? What would you like to change about your healthcare under Geisinger?" Conducting interviews with such open-ended questions such allows subjects to go off on tangents, to vent, and to share intimacies. . ." that would not be shared if subjects simply filled out a survey (Conley, 2019). Much can be learned from such qualitative interviews.

The 40 interviews have been transcribed and are awaiting analysis. On average, the interviews lasted between 1.5 and 3 hours, and the transcribed interviews are between 70-100 pages. My process of analysis is guided by a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is a research methodology that uses inductive reasoning rather than the model of the scientific method. Beginning with the collection of qualitative data like that already collected in Schuylkill and Northumberland, researchers review the data in search of repeated ideas, concepts or elements which are then organized into “common themes” from which solutions can be drawn (Conley, 2019).

I will be looking for key quotes, bibliographic information, and patterns in physical health and mental health treatment to include within individual patient health narratives to explore how economic disadvantages impacts women’s physical and emotional well-being. Furthermore, I will investigate how these women experienced their healthcare within a formal healthcare system. Once I have identified key patterns on women’s reflections on their own health and how they are being treated by a formal healthcare system, I will link these findings to larger a larger literature and theoretical perspective. For this reason, I cannot, at this time, anticipate outcomes. Because this research is guided by a grounded theory approach, outcomes will be discovered over the summer.

Research Value

The primary value in this research project is its potential to shed light on the barriers that working class women have to better health. As reported by the United States Census, in the region being studied only 16% of residents have a college degree, and the poverty rate is 14%. This research will explore the proven link between socioeconomic status and disease outcomes and the generational lack of access to health resources has reproduced the prominence of disease in underprivileged families (Phelan *et al.*, 2010). Sociological studies of working-class Americans in rural settings have documented how isolation and lack of effective mental healthcare and substance abuse treatment strengthen barriers to social mobility such as unemployment and low wages and contribute to the persistence of multigenerational poverty (Phelan *et al.*, 2010). However, not much research has been done on the ways in which “despair”

that comes from poverty reveals itself biologically and behaviourally for an individual or how economic and social distress produce unhealthy coping mechanisms. There is very little research allowing the voices of the “unheard” in regards to their own health. Furthermore, we need more data on how the experience of poor health such as pain or depression may in turn affect people’s ability to escape poverty.

Sharing Results

In addition to the Kalman Research Symposium, I will also present my findings at the Eastern Sociological Society Annual Meeting in February 2021. The hope is that the results of this research will also be published in a peer-reviewed social science journal. Dr. Durden has previously published with students in various journals, including *Social Science and Medicine*, *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care*. By starting as a first year on a large research project, I also have the time to develop the research skills to develop an Honors Thesis and eventually publish my findings.

Faculty Mentoring Relationship

I have been in contact with Professor Elizabeth Durden since the summer before I arrived at Bucknell, but I first met her at the Sociology talk on Junior Day in 2018. From our first conversations, I knew I was interested in working with her and hoped to be selected to work as a Presidential Fellow on a project of this sort. When I was not assigned to be her P-Fellow, I began work on my current project, but re-introduced myself to Prof. Durden. She subsequently adopted me as an informal advisee, helped me select my second semester classes, and enrolled me in her half-credit social science research methods course, UNIV 140. Her presence in my life has been invaluable, and her work’s intersection with my interests has been nothing short of miraculous. I look forward to deepening our relationship over the summer, as we will be in the same place the entirety of my time on campus.

Works Cited

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