

**HUNGRY AND HESITANT: AN EXPLORATION OF THE EXPERIENCE OF STIGMA
AMONG ON-CAMPUS FOOD PANTRY USERS.**

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated first and foremost to my daughter, Isabella. May you continue to ask questions and challenge the world around you. I would also like to dedicate this to my late grandfather Herb who believed in me and my place within education.

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Food insecurity on college campuses has been a mainstay with the research community over the past decade. Studies indicate that between 20-59% of college students struggle to access affordable, quality, and nutritious food, leading to numerous negative academic and mental health outcomes. Students who are hungry report lower academic performance and campus engagement, while also reporting higher levels of anxiety and depression. To address this issue, campuses across the country have established on-campus food pantries meant to serve students, staff, and faculty. Unfortunately, a number of barriers have been identified, with stigma being the leading reason that individuals do not visit the pantry. The current phenomenological study seeks to understand the lived experience of stigma as a result of using an on-campus food pantry at public institutions using semi-structured interviews with ten students. These findings help to fill in critical gaps in the research while also helping policymakers and administrators as they develop strategies and practices that promote service utilization and inclusion, while providing food pantry staff and volunteers with critical data useful for enhancing customer service and informing best practices.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	1
Abstract.....	3
List of Tables	5
List of Figures.....	6
Chapter One: Introduction	7
Chapter Two: Literature Review	20
Chapter Three: Methodology.....	53
Chapter Four: Findings	65
Chapter Five: Discussion	102
Appendices.....	128
References.....	134
Vita.....	144

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 USDA Categories of Food Security22

Table 2 Participant Demographics.....66

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs	24
Figure 2	Stigma Management Theory	47
Figure 3	Data Collection Process	68
Figure 4	Emergent Theme 1: Fear of Being Seen as Poor	70
Figure 5	Flowchart Illustrating Food Pantry Shopping Experience.....	74
Figure 6	Emergent Theme 2: Hardship as Fundamental to Being a College Student.....	78
Figure 7	Emergent Theme 3: Collective Struggle as a Product of COVID-19.....	86
Figure 8	Navigation Strategies Consistent with SMT.....	100
Figure 9	Conceptual Map of Thematic Analysis.....	105
Figure 10	Frequency Word Cloud.....	114

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Food insecurity among college students has become the focus of recent research, with evidence of numerous negative outcomes to one's well-being and academic performance (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Henry, 2017; Nazmi et al., 2018). These findings have thrust the conversation centered on basic needs and education into the national, state, and local discourse. Meanwhile, higher education in the United States has witnessed a number of changes over the past several decades. Today, more than ever, institutions of higher education are enrolling minority students, more students from underrepresented groups, more women, and more non-traditional students (Broton, Frank, & Goldrick-Rab, 2014; Nellum, 2015). Past research has examined the influence of culture (Yosso, 2005), first-generation status (Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011; Nichols & Islas, 2016), and ethnicity (Crisp, Taggart, & Nora, 2015) on college student success, both in terms of the lived campus experience and of degree completion. Evident in the research is that first-generation students, students of color, and those from marginalized groups struggle to complete their degrees (Snyder & Dillow, 2013).

In addition to changing student demographics and the associated disparities, the cost of attendance has increased dramatically (Clotfelter, 2017). Past research has demonstrated that after accounting for all financial grant aid that is awarded, a student whose family is in the lowest socioeconomic status (SES) quartile will pay as much as 59% of their income to attend a four-year university (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017). According to Broton and Goldrick-Rab (2017), only 14% of students from the lowest socioeconomic quartile will earn a bachelor's degree. By comparison, more than 60% of students from the top quartile go on to complete their degree. Moreover, as the cost of higher education continues to rise, students are often forced to make critical decisions about how and where to spend their money, and quality food has too often

become a luxury for America's college students. What was once considered a rite of passage, the old stereotype of poor college students surviving on ramen noodles, has only stoked the fire, creating an unrealistic expectation for college students. Over the past decade, the idea of students surviving on inadequate food supplies has a new name: food insecurity.

Food insecurity is indeed a global problem that affects hundreds of millions across the world (United Nations, 2019). Even in developed countries such as the United States, food insecurity remains a public health crisis that demands the attention of various institutions including education (Nazmi et al., 2018). Researchers in K-12 education have long realized the connection between student hunger and performance (Alaimo, Olson, & Frongillo, 2001; Bailey-Davis, Virus, McCoy, Wojtanowski, & Vander Veur, 2013; Burris, Bradley, Rykiel, & Himmelgreen, 2020). For this reason, numerous programs have been implemented to combat student hunger (USDA, 2018). Programs such as the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program are just two examples of the more than a dozen programs servicing K-12 students. Yet, when students transition to college, they suddenly find themselves without the nutritional support that has been, for many, a critical piece of their learning (Camelo & Elliott, 2019).

Food insecurity on college campuses has been the focus of recent research, with a number of scholars reporting on both the prevalence of food insecurity (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Chaparro, Zaghoul, Holck, & Dobbs, 2009; Nazmi et al., 2018), and the impact it has on student success (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018) and wellbeing (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Eisenberg, 2015; Henry, 2017). Researchers have found that food insecurity among college students is associated with decreased academic performance and campus engagement, while also reporting increases in depression, anxiety, and diabetes. Moreover, researchers have explored

institutional responses to food insecurity (Broton, Frank, & Goldrick-Rab, 2014), interventions (Twill, Bergdahl, & Fensler, 2017), and service use barriers (El Zein, Matthews, & Shelnett, 2018). Taken together, this body of research provides a comprehensive understanding of the effects of food insecurity and what institutions of higher education are doing to address the issue.

In an attempt to understand lackluster retention and completion rates, numerous studies have examined the rates of food insecurity on college campuses, with estimates varying widely depending on the region and school (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Camelo & Elliott, 2019; Chaparro, Zaghoul, Holck, & Dobbs, 2009; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Nazmi et al., 2018). Within the California State University system, Crutchfield and Maguire (2018) found that 41.6% of students were experiencing either low or very low food security. This is more than three times the national average of 12.3% for the general population (Coleman-Jensen, Rabbitt, Gregory, & Singh, 2017). The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as the lack of access to adequate, quality food by socially accepted means (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2017). Simply put, today's college students are struggling to find access to food, which is hindering academic and personal well-being, while consuming more of their available resources to be successful.

Past researchers have found that students of color, first-generation students, and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly more likely to be food-insecure than their white counterparts (Camelo & Elliott, 2019; Dubick, Matthews, and Cady, 2016). In light of this prevalence, recent research has attempted to understand the felt impact of low food security on college students. Furthermore, research suggests the most common strategy to combat student hunger is the establishment of on-campus food pantries (Henry, 2017). Given the operational costs of running a food pantry and the need to make data-driven decisions,

educational leaders have called for in-depth analysis of program effectiveness and usage (Broton et al., 2014). Evident in the existing literature is that many food-insecure students fail to utilize the resource. El Zein, Matthews, House, and Shelnett (2018) identified a number of barriers to pantry usage, with stigma being the most widely cited reason for not visiting the on-campus food pantry.

Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs Theory provides a backdrop from which to understand the connection between basic needs and achievement. Rooted in psychology, Maslow's theory explains human motivation via a five-tier pyramid ranging from physiological needs to self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). The underlying premise is that one cannot meet higher-level needs without first addressing more basic needs such as shelter and food. The theory is not without criticism, however, with some noting the fluidity of the stages and pushing back on the basic tenets of the theory, citing a lack of empirical support (Osemeke & Adegboyega, 2017). Furthermore, Alderfer's (1969) ERG model expands and, in some ways, improves on the work of Maslow. Focusing on needs related to existence (E), relatedness (R), and growth (G), the model asserts that movement through the stages is not linear, noting that conditions must not be met in one stage for an individual to thrive in another. When examined together, both models highlight the importance of meeting one's most basic needs. Moreover, and despite its flaws, Maslow's theory has served to inform basic needs efforts in public schools across the country and is now beginning to influence policy at the college level (Camelo & Elliott, 2019). Likewise, Maslow's theory has been used to understand motivation and student learning among students across all educational levels (Tomlinson, 2014). Much attention is given to motivation strategies among college students, and justifiably so. In order for students to develop long-term work ethic, they must be able to draw on intrinsic cues rather than performing

for mere external rewards (Tomlinson, 2014). This leaves food-insecure college students in a precarious position. For if they are to meet course expectations and be intrinsically motivated to achieve, they must first satisfy their most basic of needs. Failing to do so places unrealistic expectations for both students and college administrators.

Background

Contemporary stigma research dates back to Goffman (1963), who identified three primary forms of stigma: abominations of the body, blemishes of character, and tribal stigma. Particularly relevant to the current study is the second form, blemishes of character. This includes those who are seen as weak, dishonest, and may present with mental illness, be incarcerated, or suffer from addiction. In the case of college students dealing with food insecurity, this may extend to the idea of a moral failing. Current research on college students and food insecurity has indicated that feelings of embarrassment or not wanting to be judged by others for not being able to care for themselves are critical factors that influence one's decision to visit an on-campus food pantry (El Zein, et al., 2018; Henry, 2017). To understand stigma, past researchers have examined the phenomena from a myriad of frameworks including social assistance stigma (Stuber & Kronebusch, 2004), "dirty work" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), stigma consciousness (Brown & Pinel, 2003; Gyll, Madon, Prieto, & Scherr, 2010), ethnic stigma (Huynh & Fuligni, 2011), and stigma management (Meisenbach, 2010).

Past research has explored stigmatizing identities, as well as the outcomes of felt stigma. However, research on college students' experience of stigma because of food insecurity remains limited. The majority of research on college food insecurity has focused on prevalence rates and outcomes associated with food pantry engagement (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Camelo & Elliott, 2019; Payne-Sturges, Tjaden, Calderia, Vincent, and Arria, 2018), leaving a significant

gap in our understanding of students' lived experiences. Despite evidence that stigma represents the greatest barrier to on-campus food pantry usage, we know relatively little about the experience of stigma among college students.

Stigma Management Theory (Meisenbach, 2010) provides a theoretical framework for how individuals make sense of stigma. The theory suggests four separate coping strategies that are based on one's acceptance/denial of the stigma and its applicability to the self, and the acceptance/denial of the social perception of the stigma (Meisenbach, 2010). Research on governmental support programs such as the Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) program and Medicaid has shed light on Stigma Management Theory and its applicability to social support stigma (Powell, Amsbary, and Xin, 2015). However, more research is needed among college students who use food pantries (Camelo & Elliott, 2019, El Zein et al., 2018). In fact, I was not able to find any research to date applying Stigma Management Theory to college students and their experience of stigma resulting from their use of an on-campus food pantry.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological investigation is to gain a better understanding of the experiences of stigma among college students using an on-campus food pantry at three locations within the California State University system. Despite the ubiquity of prevalence studies within the greater body of research on food insecurity, researchers have called for deeper understandings of food insecurity and associated barriers through qualitative means. Fong et al. (2016) argue that quantitative data on food insecurity lacks context and misses critical information, highlighting the need for future qualitative inquiries. El Zein et al. (2018) make the case that more research is needed to examine service use barriers, whereas Camelo and Elliott (2019) called for greater exploration of food insecurity among college students, with special

attention given to pre-college experiences. Furthermore, the current study seeks to understand the implications of the current COVID-19 pandemic on food pantry usage and associated stigma. In keeping with the purpose of this study, the following research questions were developed to guide this inquiry:

Research Question 1: How do college students experience stigma as they use a campus food pantry?

Research Question 2: How do students navigate the stigma experienced as a result of using the food pantry?

Research Question 3: How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected food pantry stigma?

Significance of the Study

To date, the majority of research into food security and college students has maintained a narrow focus, looking primarily at prevalence rates and academic outcomes (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018). As a result, greater emphasis has been placed on improving retention and completion rates, and identifying potential barriers, while failing to explore the lived experiences of those using the pantry and how they come to terms with stigma. The current study has the potential to benefit numerous stakeholders who wish to address food insecurity, retention rates, and equity among college students. First, institutional administrators who have a solid understanding of how students experience stigma as a result of using a campus resource might be better equipped to put forth solutions that are both effective and considerate of changing student demographics. Moreover, students who continue to use on-campus food pantries despite the stigma have the potential to inform outreach strategies and targeted interventions. Legislators who wish to improve student outcomes and bolster the state's economic outlook may potentially gain valuable insight into the student experience as it pertains

to food insecurity at the largest four-year system of higher education within the state of California.

Insights gained from the present study also have the potential to provide a roadmap for pantry staff and volunteers wishing to enhance the user experience. Knowing how students process and experience stigma as a result of using the pantry can inform best practices and improve customer service among staff and volunteers who have an important role in ensuring that those in need are able to fully utilize the resource.

Lastly, the goal of the current study is to apply Stigma Management Theory (Meisenbach, 2010) to college students struggling with food insecurity in order to further the research community's understanding of stigma and the experience of using a campus food pantry. Although Stigma Management Theory has been applied to other settings including participation in WIC (Powell, Amsbary, & Xin, 2015) and help seeking for mental health concerns (Reichert, 2012), its applicability to food pantry usage is unexplored.

Research Design

For the current study, a phenomenological approach (Husserl, 1931) was used, through which the lived experiences of participants can be uncovered through reflective lifeworld research (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nystrom, 2008). Using semi-structured interviews with food pantry users at three California State University campuses, the aim of the study was to interview between 10 and 15 participants who have used an on-campus food pantry. For phenomenological inquiries, Polkinghorne (1989) suggests a sample size of between 5 and 25, which supported the current study (n=10). Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVivo for Windows software. Coding was two-fold with the first type of coding being inductive in nature, allowing for the emergence of categories and themes. The second type of

coding utilized *a priori* codes derived from strategies outlined in Stigma Management Theory (Meisenbach, 2010). Furthermore, the current study differs substantially from previous work on college student food insecurity. Rather than exploring the overarching effects of food insecurity on academic performance or prevalence rates, the current study seeks to better understand the lived experiences of the participants, allowing for the emergence of richer data.

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

It is important to be mindful of intentionality as it applies to the current study. A number of assumptions, delimitations, and limitation require thoughtful consideration for both the researcher and intended audience.

Assumptions

The aim of the current study has been to understand the lived experience of stigma among college students who use a food pantry. Previous research has repeatedly identified stigma as a barrier to using the food pantry. Based on prior findings (see El Zein et al., 2018; Henry, 2017), the current study assumed that stigma is universally salient to pantry users, with differences in coping strategies consistent with Stigma Management Theory (Meisenbach, 2010). Furthermore, it was assumed that participants would answer questions open and honestly, with responses representing their personal experiences. Participants for the study were recruited at three public universities. In order to ensure pantry usage, the researcher coordinated with local pantry operators to verify usage.

Delimitations

The goal of the current study has been to examine the experiences of stigma among college students at three public universities across the state of California. Moreover, participants for the study were drawn from institutions with varied population characteristics such as rural,

urban, and suburban. The study did not include students at private universities, nor did it include for-profit organizations. Although food insecurity at private institutions exists, the demographic landscape of public schools in general, combined with recent graduation initiatives makes public schools a more interesting and timely study. In addition, the focus of the current study was limited to the experience of on-campus food pantry users, rather than the wider reaching community food banks or distributions. There exists a greater body of research on community interventions, suggesting that explorations focusing on college students are needed. Lastly, the current study focused on student experiences, choosing not to explore the experiences of staff and faculty, who also benefit from campus food pantries. Again, given the current focus on retention and graduation rates, students represented the main area of focus.

Limitations

Participants for the current study were recruited via purposive sampling facilitated through local campus food pantries. Because of this and the nature of qualitative research in general, the results should not be generalized to the greater population. In addition, the study was conducted during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Data gleaned from the study should be viewed as a snapshot contained within public health warnings and social distancing protocols that may influence students' abilities to engage with campus resources. Moreover, face-to-face interviews were conducted over Zoom teleconferencing platform, which may have interfered with the researcher's ability to read body language and interpret specific nuances. While the reliance of teleconferencing proved challenging in some regards, it also provided greater flexibility and participation, allowing the researcher to interview students from across the state with ease. Although the current public health landscape is noteworthy, the experience of stigma is universal (Goffman, 1963) and is a significant predictor of engagement (El Zein et al., 2018),

present before, during, and after the current pandemic, thus highlighting the need for the study and the practical implications gained from such an investigation.

Operational Definitions of Terms

In order to provide clarity and context for the current study, the following definitions reflect contemporary understandings based on the literature. In addition, these terms are expressed in the researcher's own words and serve to provide a foundation from which to understand the current study.

College and University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA): Nationwide organization that supports the development of on-campus food pantries at institutions of higher education through workshops, toolkits, and research.

Food Insecurity: The lack of access to quality, nutritious food by acceptable means resulting in reduced caloric intake and missed meals. The USDA identifies two categories and four subcategories, which are further explained in chapter two.

Food Pantry: Campus-based resource that provides food to currently enrolled students at no cost through varied procedures.

Food Recovery Programs: Campus-based services that work to alleviate food insecurity and reduce waste. Programs include mobile notification systems and meal-sharing provisions.

Edible Garden: Campus-based gardens that serve the institution by helping to supply much needed produce for food pantries, while also providing opportunities for agricultural research and service learning.

Summary

Pursuing a higher education has become synonymous with increased earning potential and improved quality of life (Broton et al., 2014). At the same time, the cost of such pursuits has

risen disproportionately as compared to wages, causing many students to make tough decisions about how and where to spend their money (Henry, 2017). Moreover, institutions of higher education are enrolling more students from diverse backgrounds, more first-generation students, and more returning students who are often balancing multiple responsibilities, such as providing for their family and working full-time jobs (Mehta et al., 2011). This balancing of multiple responsibilities and increased financial demands place students in precarious situations where they must make critical decisions about food access. In addition to the changing landscape of higher education, both demographically and financially, researchers have pointed to food insecurity as a public health crisis that negatively influences academic, psychological, and physical health outcomes for students (Nazmi et al., 2018). Furthermore, researchers should entertain the possibility that the current COVID-19 pandemic may serve to exacerbate these outcomes. As a result of shelter-in-place orders and significant economic losses across the nation, many students now find themselves having to adapt to a new way of navigating their educational experiences, at the same time doing so with reduced financial means. Conversely, the COVID-19 pandemic may provide for richer data. By inquiring about participant experiences before and during the pandemic, the researcher seeks to explore noteworthy differences brought on current policy related to social distancing and stay-at-home orders.

Findings associated with low food security begin to appear in elementary school-aged children and persist through adulthood (Alaimo et al., 2001; Henry, 2017). Past research has provided valuable insight into the prevalence of food insecurity among college students, associated outcomes, and barriers to service utilization. Stigma remains one of the most widely cited barriers to using a campus food pantry, which is supported by more than half of a century of empirical research. Despite the contributions to both food insecurity research and stigma

research, there remains room for exploration, specifically as it pertains to the experience of stigma among college students who are food-insecure. Indeed, very few studies have examined service use barriers in any depth (El Zein et al., 2018). Instead, past research has offered little to address the problem. To that end, the goal of the current study is to fill in the gaps of previous research, adding to crucial understandings of food insecurity and stigma. What follows is a comprehensive review of the literature, methodology, findings, and discussion related to policy and practice as well as recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the current phenomenological study is to understand the experience of stigma among college students who use an on-campus food pantry. To support that inquiry, three research questions were identified: (a) How do college students experience stigma as they use a campus food pantry? (b) How do students navigate the stigma experienced as a result of using the food pantry? and (c) How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected food pantry stigma? To address these questions, there are two separate but equally critical bodies of literature, one of which being on stigma dating back over 50 years that helps to provide a foundation for understanding the experience of today's students. Conversely, research on food insecurity only began to enter the national discourse in the last twenty years or so (Alaimo, Olson, & Frongillo, 2001; Broton, Frank, & Goldrick-Rab, 2014) with college food insecurity research only occurring in earnest over the past 7 years (Cady, 2014; Dubick, Matthews, & Cady, 2016; Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Eisenberg, 2015; Patton-Lopez, Lopez-Cevallos, Cancel-Tirado, & Vasquez, 2014). The scope of this literature review is two-fold. The first is to provide an in-depth understanding of food insecurity prior to and within higher education. Food insecurity is a global issue, which has tangible effects on communities. Public schools have served as the backdrop for much of the research on food insecurity and associated outcomes (e.g., Alaimo, Olson, & Frongillo, 2001; Bailey-Davis et al., 2013; Burriss et al., 2020). Building on research among school-aged children, this literature review will explore findings among college students while also examining past research on associated outcomes, institutional responses, and barriers to service use that often prolong food insecurity. Secondly, the review of the literature will explore historical understandings of stigma, including those associated with social assistance, stigma attribution, stigma consciousness, ethnic stigma, and stigma management. Stigma has

been found to be a significant barrier to food assistance access (Camelo & Elliott, 2019; Dubick et al., 2016; El Zein, et al., 2018; Fong et al., 2016; Yu et al., 2019), therefore warranting a comprehensive examination. Nestled within the body of stigma research lies Stigma Management Theory (Meisenbach, 2010), which serves as the primary theoretical framework for the current study. Finally, a discussion of stigma management theory will conclude the chapter.

Food Insecurity

Food insecurity has become a public health crisis that affects as many as 42 million Americans (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2017; Nazmi et al., 2018). This crisis, however, is not unique to the United States. In 2015, the United Nations presented *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*, which identified food security as critical to the health and prosperity of the worldwide population (United Nations, 2019). Included within the report was the goal to end hunger and achieve food security through improved nutrition and sustainable farming practices. Of particular concern was the percentage of individuals who are food-insecure and malnourished. According to the United Nations (2019), 770 million people worldwide experienced extreme food insecurity in 2017. These findings are particularly salient in less developed regions of the world, with African nations reporting the highest levels of food insecurity and starvation (United Nations, 2019). Despite the prosperity of countries like the United States, a relatively high percentage of Americans are food-insecure, prompting widespread research (Nazmi et al., 2018). In addition to international and domestic trends, local data confirms high levels of food insecurity, especially among those from marginalized groups. Kaiser, Baumrind, and Dumbauld (2007) examined food insecurity in the country's most populated state, California. Their findings indicate that women, people of color, people who were depressed, and those without a college education were significantly more likely to be food-

insecure as compared to the rest of the state’s population (Kaiser et al., 2007). Furthermore, the global pandemic has only served to increase those disparities. In addition, economic forecasts suggest worsening conditions for many Americans, pointing to the possibility of increased food insecurity rates among society’s most vulnerable citizens.

Contemporary researchers have adopted the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) definition of food insecurity as the lack of access to quality, nutritious food by acceptable means resulting in reduced caloric intake and missed meals (Henry, 2017). For the purpose of this study, the USDA classifications of *low* and *very low* food security will be used to frame the discussion of food insecurity (USDA, 2018). Table 1 illustrates the two broad categories and four subcategories of food security, as well as definitions for each. Moreover, these definitions are ubiquitous in the food security research, serving as a benchmark for understanding food insecurity (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Camelo & Elliott, 2019; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Henry, 2017; Moreno-Yamashiro, 2019).

Table 1

USDA Categories of Food Security

Category	Sub-category	Definition
Food Secure	High food security	No reported indications of food access problems or limitations.
	Marginal food security	One or two reported indications. Little or no indication of changes in diets or food intake.
Food Insecure	Low food security	Reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet. Little or no indication of reduced food intake
	Very low food security	Reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake

Note. Adapted from Moreno-Yamashiro (2019).

A significant body of research has examined food insecurity as it relates to school-aged childhood experiences (Alaimo et al., 2001; Burris, Bradley, Rykiel, & Himmelgreen, 2020; Yu, Lim, & Kelly, 2019) and more recently among college students (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017;

Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Nazmi et al., 2018). In addition to demographic explorations and prevalence studies, food insecurity research has also examined negative health outcomes (Seligman, Laraia, & Kushel, 2010), academic concerns (Camelo & Elliott, 2019; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018), and mental health outcomes associated with low food security (Cady, 2014; Henry, 2017). The connection between food insecurity and personal well-being is not a new concept in the research. Needs theory posits that humans have a series of needs that must be met in order for the individual to reach their full potential.

Maslow (1943) proposed a Hierarchy of Needs model to explain human development and its connection to needs. At the base of the pyramid (see Figure 1) are physiological needs such as food, water, sleep, breathing, and shelter. As one's basic needs are met, the individual is then able to address higher-level needs such as belonging, self-esteem and critical thinking, and self-actualization. The same is true throughout one's lifespan. Likewise, if students are unable to have their basic needs met, they are unlikely to reach their potential in the classroom. As such, researchers have explored the prevalence and outcomes associated with food insecurity at both the K-12 level and within institutions of higher education. Figure 1 below provides an overview of Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs model. Within education, students are expected to demonstrate social skills, creativity, and respect for others. These behaviors are less likely when lower-level needs are not first met.

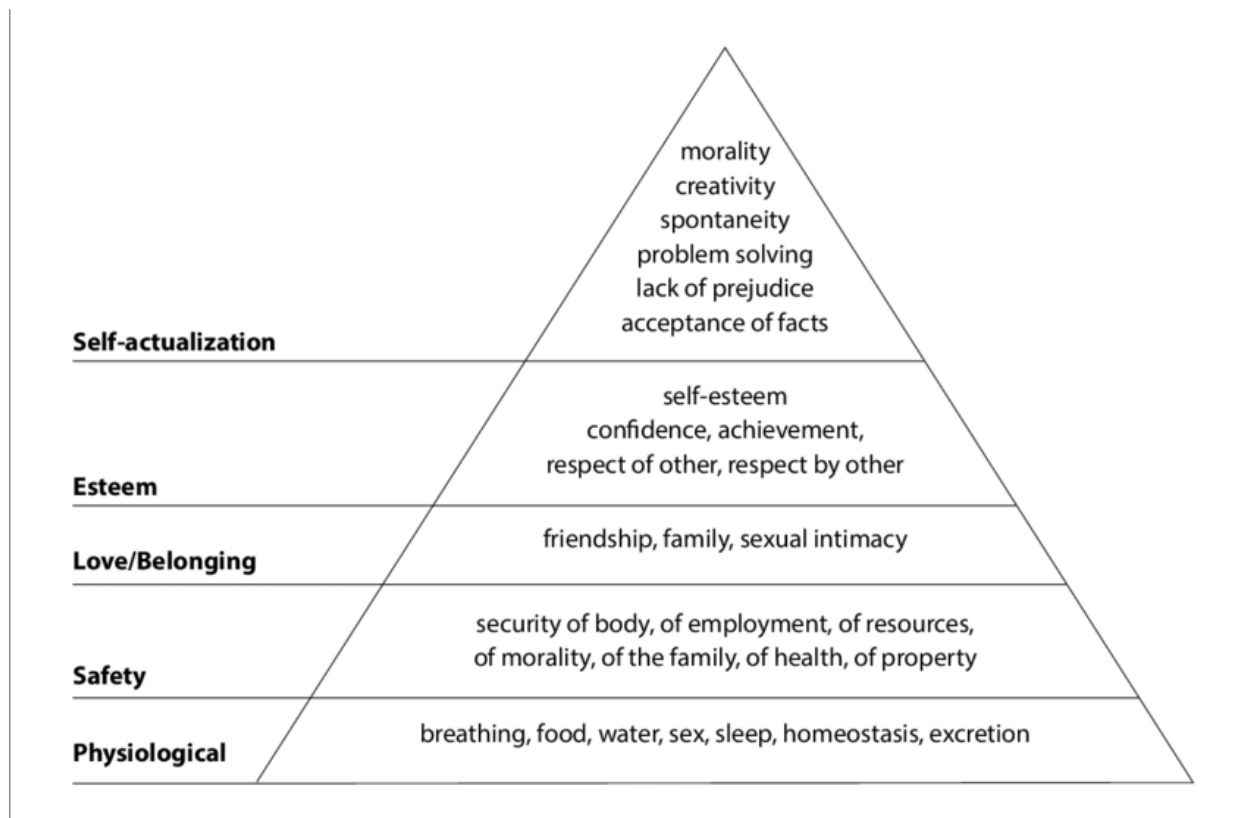


Figure 1. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs depicting the various levels of human needs with basic needs captured at the bottom of the pyramid. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-pyramid-of-Maslows-Hierarchy-of-Needs_fig2_283645391

Childhood Food Insecurity

Research on food insecurity among school-aged children has been popular over the past two decades, primarily focused on the connection between hunger and academic performance (e.g., Alaimo et al., 2001; Bailey-Davis, Virus, McCoy, Wojtanowski, & Vander Veur, 2013; Burris et al., 2020). Past studies have explored this connection in depth, while also shedding light on negative outcomes associated with being food-insecure. Alaimo et al. (2001) found through regression analysis that children between first and sixth grades who were food insufficient had lower academic scores, were more likely to be held back a grade, and tended to have greater difficulty in social settings with peers. These findings were consistent for teenage

students, with both groups demonstrating a connection between food insecurity and behavioral problems leading to suspension (Alaimo et al., 2001). Moreover, past research has demonstrated the long terms effects of such deficiencies. According to Broton, Frank, and Goldrick-Rab (2014), “Food insecurity at kindergarten predicts impaired academic performance in both reading and mathematics, and that girls appear to be especially vulnerable” (p. 11). Because of findings such as these, there has been a national push and federal support for food assistance programs at schools across the nation. The National School Lunch Program is but one example of the more than a dozen programs designed to address food insecurity among children in the K-12 educational system (Broton et al., 2014; USDA, 2018). Although these programs help to supplement the nutritional needs of American students, they are not without their shortcomings.

Burris et al. (2020) studied the experience of food insecurity in schools among high school students. Through interviews and focus groups with teens from community centers around the Tampa Bay, Florida, metro area, Burris et al. (2020) examined barriers to access as well as coping mechanisms employed by food-insecure teens. Focus group data yielded several themes resulting from participation in free or reduced-price meals at their respective school sites. Participants reported poor food quality and safety concerns surrounding the food available at their schools (Burris et al., 2020). Moreover, many felt that the amount of food was not adequate. In addition to the real-time experience of receiving free or reduced-price meals, there were additional emotional costs associated. Participants overwhelmingly reported feeling a lack of personal autonomy as well as stigma and bullying as a result (Burris et al., 2020). Likewise, in an exploration of student and parent perceptions of free breakfast programs in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Bailey-Davis, Virus, McCoy, Wojtanowski, and Vander Veur (2013) uncovered similar results. Focus-group data revealed discrepancies between student and parent perceptions,

with students reporting being hesitant to utilize the assistance for fear of being teased (Bailey-Davis et al., 2013). Parents, on the other hand, were aware of the potential stigma yet also realized the benefit, noting “free is awesome because times are hard” (Bailey-Davis et al., 2013, p. 255). Evident in the research is the connection between food insecurity and academic and mental health outcomes. Federal and state responses to food insecurity meet critical needs of students; however, they simultaneously run the risk of producing emotional harm and baggage that has the potential to follow students as they journey into higher education.

Given our understanding of the effects of food insecurity on student development, and the negative emotional consequences of receiving assistance, it is critical to make the explicit connection between findings among children in K-12 educational systems and those in higher education. College-going students, once on the receiving end of significant assistance for the majority of their educational careers, suddenly find themselves without familiar safety nets. Despite the lack of support, challenges evident in K-12 education remain long after high school graduation.

Food Insecurity in Higher Education

Despite the national focus on the implications of food insecurity among school-aged children, less attention has been given to college students (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Camelo & Elliot, 2019). Interestingly, many students who have relied on food assistance programs their entire educational careers suddenly find themselves having to meet their needs without institutional assistance as they move upward through the educational pipeline (Broton et al., 2014; Cady, 2014). In fact, the majority of college food insecurity research has focused on prevalence rates (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Chaparro, Zaghoul, Holck, & Dobbs, 2009; Patton-Lopez, Lopez-Cevallos, Cancel-Tirado, & Vasquez, 2014), with few studies fully

exploring the academic and personal outcomes or the experiences of being food-insecure in college. Prevalence research emerged nearly a decade ago, with early studies providing institutional and/or regional snapshots of food insecurity on college campuses. In one of the earliest studies, Chaparro et al. (2009) examined the rates of food insecurity among students at the University of Hawaii-Manoa by surveying 441 students at random using the USDA Household Food Security Survey Module. They found that 21% of student were food-insecure, with another 24 % at risk for food insecurity, highlighting the need for more research (Chaparro et al., 2009). In the decade that followed, researchers examined food insecurity rates across the country. Patton-Lopez et al. (2014) found that nearly 59% of students at the University of Oregon were food-insecure, representing one of the highest percentages nationwide. Nestled within this range, the California State University (CSU) system sits in the middle. According to Crutchfield and Maguire (2018), 41.6% of students within the CSU are food-insecure. In addition to system-wide data, the study examined rates at individual campuses. Of particular note was the consistency across the state, with campuses in each region (e.g. rural vs. urban; North, South, Central) reporting similar results. The large sample size ($n=24,324$) and multiphase approach lends a great deal of generalizability to these findings regarding students at public universities. However, Nazmi et al. (2018) suggested that statewide, the problem may be more pronounced. In addition, there was significant variation by ethnicity and generation status, with students of color, those with limited financial means, and first-generation students disproportionately affected by food insecurity (Camelo & Elliott, 2019). In fact, college students report food insecurity at nearly three times the rate of the general public (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2017; Nazmi et al., 2018).

In an effort to understand the root causes of food insecurity among college students, many scholars have explored financial constraints (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Broton, Weaver, & Mai, 2018; Camelo & Elliott, 2019; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Dubick, Matthews & Cady, 2016; King, 2017). More specifically, researchers have pointed to a sharp increase in food insecurity nationwide (Nazmi et al., 2018) combined with the rising cost of attending college (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017) as a critical turning point in college food insecurity and retention rates. From 1997 to 2007, household food insecurity in the U.S. remained relatively stable, with mild fluctuations between 10% and 12%. However, Nazmi et al. (2018) suggest that rate increased to somewhere between 14–15% over the next seven years as a result of the economic downturn in 2008. Meanwhile, tuition rates and the cost of living have steadily increased over the past two decades (Broton et al., 2014; Camelo & Elliott, 2018). For example, a student whose family earnings fall into the bottom quartile in terms of annual income will be expected to spend as much as 40% of their income to attend a 2-year college, and nearly 60% to attend a public 4-year school (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017). More concerning still is the relatively low completion rates of those same students. Broton and Goldrick-Rab (2017) noted that a mere 14% of students from the lowest quartile will earn a bachelor's degree within 8 years. By comparison, that number doubles for students from middle class backgrounds and is quadrupled for students from the highest quartile of earners. Moreover, as enrollment at the country's universities increases, so too does the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those from marginalized groups (Broton et al., 2014; Clotfelter, 2017). Camelo and Elliott (2019) support these findings, noting that students of color and first-generation students make up a much greater percentage of students in higher education than at any time before.

Prevalence researchers have suggested that research methods, sampling strategies and chronology may influence the data. Many prevalence studies look for food insecurity across two data points: the past 30 days, and past year. Because students often find themselves in very different living situations depending on the time of year, reported prevalence rates might be contradictory, or underreported (Nazmi, et al., 2018). Over the past six years, prevalence studies have become ubiquitous in the food security research. A more recent body of research has begun to explore the (a) academic and mental health outcomes of food-insecure college students (Cady, 2014; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Dubick et al., 2016, Maguire & O'Neill, 2017) as well as the (b) interventions implemented by institutions of higher education (Broton et al., 2014; Fong, Wright, & Wimer, 2016; Henry, 2017; King, 2017, Moreno-Yamashiro, 2019).

Researchers have noted that it is not enough to simply understand how many students are food-insecure (Fong et al., 2016), insisting on the wide range of potentially negative outcomes associated with such disparities demands greater attention. Indeed, college students are more than the sum of their academic pursuits. Researchers and college administrators alike have realized that a holistic approach to student success and well-being is critical to academic and personal development. To that end, contemporary researchers have examined various outcomes associated with food insecurity including mental health concerns, physical well-being, and academic implications stemming from being food-insecure.

Mental Health Outcomes

Given the alarmingly high rates of food insecurity among American college students, researchers have explored the experiential costs of going without adequate nutrition. Indeed, researchers have suggested that quantitative data surrounding food insecurity is lacking context and often misses critical information surrounding both service utilization and perceived need

(Fong et al., 2016). Qualitative research by Henry (2017) explored the lived experiences of food-insecure students in Texas via semi-structured interviews and focus groups, finding considerable evidence for decreased academic engagement and increased mental health problems. These findings are consistent with and show evidence for the continuation of emotional trauma first experienced in school-aged children (Alaimo et al., 2001; Bailey-Davis et al., 2013; Burris et al., 2020). Food-insecure students reported overwhelming feelings of shame as a result of not being able to care for themselves (Henry, 2017). In addition to feelings of shame and embarrassment, other negative outcomes were discovered. Students reported having less time for co-curricular activities such as school events, club and organization meetings, networking opportunities, and physical activities (Henry, 2017). These findings are consistent across the country, as evident by research conducted within the California State University system. Crutchfield and Maguire (2018) found that food-insecure students within the CSU reported greater anxiety over their academics as compared with food-secure students.

Perhaps more troubling are the rates of depression and anxiety among college students that are increased as a result of not having enough to eat. Henry (2017) found that food-insecure college students reported higher rates of severe depression and anxiety, leading to adverse education experiences and increased reliance on mental health services. Among very low food-insecure community college students, the findings are even grimmer. Fifty-five percent of respondents reported being depressed, 52% were diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, 16% had an eating disorder, and 20% had experienced severe suicidal ideation (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Eisenberg, 2015). Researchers have made clear the connection between food insecurity and mental illness. Likewise, and perhaps a precursor for diagnosed conditions requiring treatment, Cady (2014) found that food-insecure students reported higher levels of alienation and shame.

These findings lay bare the context that has plagued many college students. Not having enough to eat increases a student's likelihood of experiencing mental illness, which in turn inhibits one's ability to advocate for themselves and engage with support services.

Academic Outcomes

In addition to the mental health consequences associated with reduced food intake, there are academic concerns that affect students. A critical component of the college experience is being able to attend class, engage with faculty and peers, and utilize resources such as textbooks and supplemental materials (Moreno-Yamashiro, 2019). Qualitative data from Maynard, Meyer, Pearlman, and Kirkpatrick (2018) highlighted the constant state of worry around being able to pay for educational expenses. At the same time, students desired a sense of autonomy and did not want to have to rely on family or others for financial support. Dubick et al. (2016) found that college students regularly struggle to engage with academic courses at appropriate levels. Twenty-five percent of students reported having to drop a class for financial reasons, 53% reported missing class, and 55% had financial trouble that prevented them from purchasing textbooks (Dubick et al., 2016).

Against the backdrop of the existing struggle for students to afford college and be successful (Broton et al., 2014), increased financial burdens associated with having to make decisions between buying food and textbooks further disadvantages students. As a result, student who are food-insecure report lower GPAs, delayed completion, and increased drop-out rates as compared with food-secure students (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Payne-Sturges, Tjaden, Caldeira, Vincent, & Arria, 2018). Other research examined the ways that students cope with mounting financial pressures and the influence they have on their academics. College students in Australia reported having to spend more time working or looking for supplemental

employment and resorted to pawning valuables to afford college supplies (Hughes, Serbryanikova, Donaldson, & Leveritt, 2011). It is widely believed that going to college is the recipe for success, leading to better wages, better health, and well-being. That belief, supported by empirical evidence (Broton et al., 2014), propels many students to make significant sacrifices in order to stay engaged and be successful in higher education. Despite these sometimes extreme measures, the academic struggles associated with financial strain and food insecurity leave many students performing well below their potential.

Physical Health Outcomes

Food insecurity is far reaching and has a significant bearing on students' well-being (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2015). Past research has demonstrated that children who are food-insecure are more likely to report developmental problems (Alaimo et al., 2001). These negative outcomes do not suddenly disappear when college students take their first steps onto campus. Payne-Sturges, Tjaden, Caldeira, Vincent, and Arria (2018) uncovered similar findings surrounding the connection between food insecurity and mental health outcomes among college students in the United States. Using multivariate logistic regression modeling, they found students who were food-insecure reported higher levels of depression and anxiety in addition to higher rates of diabetes, hypertension, obesity, and poor sleep patterns (Payne-Sturges et al., 2018). Still other research suggests these rates of illness may be underreported. Seligman, Laraia, and Kushel (2010) suggested that those living in a food-insecure household are less likely to accurately report having diabetes. Moreover, diabetes is increasingly present in those who are food-insecure due to insulin resistance (Seligman et al., 2010). The connection between poor nutrition and disease is cause for concern and highlights the importance of addressing food security among students.

Environmental factors associated with a college education have also been shown to exacerbate physical health problems resulting from being food-insecure. O’Neill and Maguire (2017) found, in their study of college students, that food insecurity was linked to lower levels of concentration, headaches, and low energy. Fluorescent lighting commonly found in university classrooms (O’Neill & Maguire, 2017) magnified these physical experiences brought on by inadequate nutrition and food insecurity. Evident is the connection between food insecurity and overall physical well-being. Although hunger and lack of concentration may be problematic in the moment, so too are the long terms consequences such as obesity and hypertension (Payne-Sturges et al., 2018).

The negative outcomes associated with food insecurity such as academic concerns, mental health issues, and physical illnesses require the attention of policymakers and college administrators. To better meet the needs of students, institutions of higher education have sought to address food insecurity in creative ways (Broton et al., 2014; El Zein et al., 2018; King, 2017; Moreno-Yamashiro, 2019; Twill, Bergdahl, & Fensler, 2017). By using strategies common to community efforts such as food distributions, edible gardens, meal-sharing programs, and food pantries, college campuses are attempting to address needs that were previously only served in the K-12 system.

Institutional Responses and Interventions

Intutions of higher education have found themselves in a precarious situation over the past decade. In light of overwhelming data suggesting very high levels of food insecurity among college students and the associated negative outcomes (Broton et al., 2014; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Henry, 2017), college administrators have been tasked with finding solutions to meet students’ basic needs. Likewise, many administrators are under immense pressure to

increase lagging retention and graduation rates (Broton et al., 2014). In doing so, campus leaders and decision-makers have attempted to use community-based best practices such as food pantries, as well as implement more progressive strategies on their respective campuses.

In their longitudinal study of food insecurity among college students in Wisconsin, Broton et al. (2014) surveyed 3000 students from more than 40 public two- and four-year colleges. In addition, they conducted 59 interviews with college administrators, faculty, and service providers at eight public institutions across the country. Interview data produced three distinct themes in the ways institutions responded to students' basic needs. The first group of respondents believed that it was the institution's responsibility to meet students' basic needs holistically. Another group of respondents questioned the deservingness of certain students, suggesting the university should not admit those with potentially significant financial barriers. The last group expressed what Broton et al. (2014) categorized as "wishful thinking" (p. 26), where they sympathized with students in need but did little to mitigate those barriers. Those respondents in the first group reported being more mission driven and apt to implement programs to address student basic needs. Some schools made adjustments to financial aid disbursement timelines while others provided textbook assistance programs to free up more cash for students. Still, others formalized inclusive dining plans and relocated existing resources (i.e. food pantries and food application assistance) (Broton et al., 2014). In the years since, researchers have given greater attention to these interventions (Dubick et al., 2016; King, 2017; Moreno-Yamashiro, 2019), delving deeper into the specifics of long-term solutions to food insecurity among college students.

Food recovery programs. One of the more common interventions on college campuses are food recovery programs (Dubick et al., 2016; Moreno-Yamashiro, 2019). Although varied in

procedural specifics, common recovery efforts include meal-swipe programs and mobile notification systems that alert students to available food around campus (Moreno-Yamashiro, 2019). Many campuses utilize debit card systems that enable students to purchase food at campus locations (King, 2017). However, once depleted, these cards are of little value to students who may not have the financial means to reload them. Meal swipe programs and meal donation programs provide an opportunity for students to donate unused meals or dining dollars to students who do not have enough to eat (Moreno-Yamashiro, 2019). These programs are particularly attractive to administrators and students alike because they allow for greater anonymity for program participants (King, 2017).

Another common food recovery intervention is the use of mobile notification systems that allow colleges and universities to notify students about leftover food at events (Dubick et al., 2016; King, 2017). These notification systems take different forms with two of the more common being through downloadable apps and push notifications via students' campus portals (Moreno-Yamashiro, 2019). However, this intervention is not without its limitations. Students struggling with food insecurity may not have access to updated smartphones or expansive data plans that would facilitate high levels of engagement with mobile apps (Moreno-Yamashiro, 2019). Nevertheless, notification systems that alert students to available food on campus satisfy two needs: feeding hungry students and reducing food waste.

Edible gardens. Still another widely used intervention on college campuses is the planting of a garden. Campus gardens serve students through coordination with the campus food pantry while also providing opportunities for educational enhancement and service learning (Chaparro et al., 2009). Edible gardens also provide student volunteers the opportunity to engage in community building through shared work experiences with peers (Dubick et al., 2016).

However, edible gardens are not always practical for campuses dealing with limited capacity. Campuses in densely populated areas are often space-limited, leading many in the field to explore alternative growing methods that can be scaled to smaller areas.

On-Campus food pantries. To meet the needs of the economically disadvantaged, communities have long since provided assistance via food banks (Purdam, Garratt, & Esmail, 2016). Unfortunately, these critical resources are often unavailable to college students. Family size parameters, proof of residence requirements, and the distance from campus all serve as barriers that prevent many college students from accessing community food banks (Twill et al., 2016). Indeed, across the literature, the most common intervention used to address food insecurity on college campuses has been a food pantry (Moreno-Yamashiro, 2019). Although campus food pantries are relatively new interventions, the first pantry dates back to 1993 at the University of Michigan, which has grown to include more than 640 pantries supported by the College and University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA) as of 2018 (Moreno-Yamashiro, 2019). Despite the ubiquitous nature of food pantries on college campuses, the tasks of planning, funding, building, and maintaining day-to-day operations remain complex (Twill et al., 2016). Moreno-Yamashiro (2019) noted that there is a wealth of information designed to help institutional leaders along the way in the form of best practice guides, policy manuals, and cut and paste templates with everything from marketing materials to position descriptions (Twill et al., 2016). Despite the widely available information useful for implementation, King (2017) notes that the biggest challenge for campus food pantries lies in the sourcing of food. Many pantries rely on donations from students, faculty, and community members, while others receive greater funding through corporate donors and institutional grants (King, 2017). Pantries also vary considerably in their operational models. Some campus food pantries are open every day,

while others are only open 2 or 3 days per week (Moreno-Yamashiro, 2019). Moreover, campus food pantries vary in their check-in system (swipe vs. paper sign-in) and methods for food allocation (e.g., point system vs. number of items, number of visits per week or month) suggesting there are multiple strategies for pantry operation (Moreno-Yamashiro, 2019; Twill et al., 2016).

Evident in the literature is that campuses are engaging in a variety of programs designed to alleviate food insecurity among students that is associated with diminished academic performance (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018), physical health outcomes (O'Neill & Maguire, 2017), and mental health concerns such as depression and suicide (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2015). Despite significant efforts on the part of institutional leaders, many food-insecure students do not utilize the campus food pantry (El Zein et al., 2018; Fong et al., 2016; Twill et al., 2016). A related body of research has explored these barriers with the most significant barriers being lack of information, self-identity, and stigma (El Zein, et al., 2018; Henry, 2017). Despite good faith efforts on the part of college campuses to address food insecurity, these resources are only helpful to the extent they are used. To that end, researchers have explored various barriers to service utilization.

Service Utilization Barriers

Many colleges and universities have been charged with addressing students' basic needs while simultaneously being asked to improve retention and graduation rates (Broton et al., 2014). In an effort to alleviate food insecurity among their students, campuses have implemented a variety of interventions including meal-sharing programs, food recovery systems, edible gardens, and food pantries (Dubick et al., 2016; Moreno-Yamashiro, 2019; Twill et al., 2016). Despite these efforts, researchers have explored a number of barriers that often prevent students from

taking advantage of much needed assistance. Meal sharing programs, notification systems, and campus gardens offer greater anonymity and therefore do not face the same level of apprehension as do campus food pantries (King, 2017). In an exploration of perceived barriers to using the food pantry, El Zein et al. (2018) found that students who were experiencing low and very low food insecurity were more likely to report more access barriers. Among the most common were (a) lack of information, (b) hours of operation, (c) self-identity, and (d) social stigma (El Zein et al., 2018). Lack of information and hours of operation have been widely cited barriers to using the food pantry (King, 2017). However, social stigma was the most commonly cited reason for not visiting the food pantry. These findings were consistent with past research that pointed to the prevalence of stigma as a determining factor in one's decision to use on-campus food pantries (El Zein, et al., 2018; Fong et al., 2016; Henry, 2017). Moreover, these findings mirror research with school-aged children that identified social costs associated with receiving free or reduced cost meals in school (Burriss et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2019), providing evidence that these experiences of shame and stigma are not unique to a given educational environment.

Stigma

The word *stigma* dates back to early Greek society where it was used to describe body markings that signified something bad or unusual about one's moral character (Goffman, 1963). Today, stigma is represented in the societal labels and judgements made about those who are different or are deemed deficient in some way. Goffman (1963) notes that, as a result of such stigma, the individual in question is reduced in our minds from a whole person to one who is discounted. As a result, the stigmatized person is likely to experience discrimination and one's defensiveness about the stigma only serves as further proof of their perceived deficit (Goffman,

1963). Goffman's conceptualization of *normals*, or those who aren't stigmatized, is a critical component to the experience of stigma and its influence on one's social identity. In the current study, people who are not food-insecure or do not use a food pantry would be considered *normal*. By contrast, those who use a food pantry may be sensitive to the way others view them and in turn refrain from seeking assistance.

Falk (2001) argues that stigma exists and will continue to exist in society because it serves as a means of defining in-groups and the distinction from the *other*. Stuber and Schlesinger (2006) take it one step further, suggesting stigma may be beneficial in the eyes of some as it serves to deter people from using already burdened social assistance program like Medicaid and welfare. Moreover, past researchers have suggested that stigma serves an important societal function by promoting group survival (Smith, 2007). Despite these contrary and potentially controversial perspectives on stigma, most scholars agree that any benefits are outweighed by the negative outcomes (see El Zein et al., 2018; Huynh & Fuligni, 2011; Henry, 2017; Meisenbach, 2010; Powell, Xin, & Amsbary, 2015; Stuber & Kronebusch, 2004). Early research on stigma focused heavily on the concept of "dirty work" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), which sought to provide a conceptual framework for understanding the role of stigma and one's professional life. Building on the previous work, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) proposed a typology that grouped professions according to physical, social, and moral taint as experienced by those in high and low prestige occupations. Although the model is more applicable to group level experiences of shared professions, the underlying explanation of how individuals experience and make sense of stigma remains relevant to the current discourse on stigma management. Stuber and Kronebusch (2004) expanded our understanding of stigma to include identity and treatment stigmas, with the former related to fears about being labeled with negative

stereotypes, and the latter related to the non-stigmatized person's outward treatment of the stigmatized. Stuber and Schlesinger (2006) make this distinction more salient, noting that treatment stigma produces more feelings of discrimination, whereas identity stigma underscores the individual's internal assumptions of the self. According to Stuber and Kronebusch (2004), both have been found to influence an individual's decisions about whether or not to participate in assistance programs.

Contemporary research has examined the various ways in which stigma is both experienced by the individual and those who are more likely to become stigmatized. Researchers have examined stigma associated with social assistance (Cook & Barrett, 1992; Stuber & Kronebusch, 2004; Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988), stigma consciousness (Brown & Pinel, 2003; Gyll, Madon, Prieto, & Scherr, 2010), ethnic stigma (Huynh & Fuligni, 2011), and stigma management (Meisenbach, 2010; Reichert, 2012). Each of these separate pockets of research represent critical understandings of the human experience. Taken together, they provide a greater context for the experience of stigma across multiple domains including college students who are food-insecure and rely on institutional assistance. The remainder of this section on stigma provides a synthesis of the literature on social assistance stigma, stigma attribution, ethnic stigma, and stigma consciousness before a discussion of the theoretical framework centered in the present study.

Social Assistance Stigma

Social assistance programs such as Medicaid and food stamps have long been a source of social stigma for those who make use of the resources. Cook and Barrett's (1992) writings on congressional and public support for welfare programs explain that much of the negative attitudes associated with public assistance comes down to the idea of deserving. In other words,

when recipients of means-tested government programs were deemed undeserving of such support, public perception was more negative and stereotyping increased. Cook and Barrett (1992) proposed five dimensions along which deservingness was conceptualized. The first is that the individual must be truly in need. Second, the recipient must have no other means available to meet the need. Third, the individual receiving help must not be viewed as being at fault for their situation. Fourth, recipients need to be viewed as having the will to live independently. Lastly, recipients must demonstrate good stewardship over the benefits if they are to garner public support and avoid being stereotyped. Taken together, these dimensions support a central theme: We, as a society, should only help those who are worthy of assistance (Cook & Barrett, 1992). Moreover, Stuber and Kronebusch (2004) suggest that individualistic values promoted in many western cultures only serve to further the divide. This notion is echoed in the work of Broton et al. (2014) who recognize that the concept of deservingness, as it applies to those in need, has long since been used to frame discussions about who is worthy of assistance. Cook and Barrett (1992) do make a distinction, however, between types of programs. They argue that programs like Medicaid are much less susceptible to negative stereotypes and the resulting stigma because the general perception is they are more needs-based and therefore less likely to be taken advantage of as compared with programs like food stamps. These underlying assumptions related to policy and congressional support for social assistance programs are more than simple theoretical musings; rather, they lay the foundation for and are supported by extensive research.

Stuber and Kronebusch (2004), examining participation in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Medicaid through a mixed methods design, first surveyed and then interviewed more than 1,400 individuals at 23 community health centers across ten states. They

found that participants and non-participants overwhelmingly expressed concern over embarrassment about using the services. Participants feared being seen as lazy or unable to care for themselves and their children. In addition, participants reported the application process to be humiliating and reduced care from others as a result of their being on welfare. As a result, treatment stigma, or the label of receiving services, significantly reduced enrollment in assistance programs (Stuber & Kronebusch, 2004). Furthermore, Stuber and Kronebusch (2004) suggest more research is needed to gain a better understanding of stigma itself. Although food insecurity among college students and resources made available to them do not carry the same societal ramifications, historical underpinnings of stigma as a result of receiving assistance remain central to the current study.

Stigma Attribution

A separate but related body of research has examined other factors that influence the extent to which a behavior or situation is viewed unfavorably (i.e., the use of food stamps, Medicaid, or other social support). Weiner et al. (1988) examined the attribution of social stigma among college students in the United States and Canada. The first experiment assessed individual attitudes about responsibility for the onset of stigmatizing attributes. In the second experiment, subjects were provided either no information relative to stigma onset or information indicating personal responsibility, finding that the perceived onset-controllability of the stigmatizing aspect was critical to the external perception. For example, stigma related to physical disabilities was viewed as onset-uncontrollable by the stigmatized and therefore produced feelings of pity and liking, while also promoting help-giving behavior. Onset-controllable stigmas such as being dependent on social assistance are viewed much less favorably and resulted in judgements not to help (Weiner et al., 1988). Further building on that

premise, Powell, Amsbary, and Xin (2015) suggest this is due to a belief that those on welfare would rather rely on others than look for employment of their own. When it comes to an individual being the beneficiary of social assistance programs, research suggests that stigma plays an important role, both for the stigmatized and those who stigmatize them. Through a series of five focus groups with participants in the Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) program across three distinct locations, Powell et al. (2015) found several rationalizations for non-participation associated with the burden of stigma including shame about using social assistance, spousal objections, and social perceptions about financial expectations. Despite overwhelming need, many individuals are hesitant to seek help out of fear about what others will think of them.

Ethnic Stigma

A separate body of research has examined ethnicity-based negative treatment, which is particularly salient for college students adjusting to higher education. Students from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to experience greater vulnerability as they transition to college. Huynh and Fuligni (2011) noted that students from minority backgrounds have less access to quality programs in high school that help to prepare students for higher education. As a result, these students often face added discrimination and stigma based on their ethnicity. Huynh and Fuligni (2011) examined the attitudes about perceived discrimination and societal devaluation among Latinx and Asian students, beginning in the 9th grade and continuing two and four years into college. Hierarchical linear modeling was used to analyze changes in perceived discrimination and perceived devaluation over time. The results indicate an increase in societal devaluation while simultaneously experiencing less discrimination. However, Huynh and Fuligni (2011) found that Latinx students experienced higher levels of discrimination than other groups, with the level of stigma corresponding with more negative stereotypes about their

ethnicity. This in turn may cause others to question the legitimacy of their acceptance to the university (Huynh & Fuligni, 2011). Moreover, Guyll, Madon, Prieto, and Scherr (2010) highlight the plight of Latinx students in the United States who struggle to keep pace with their European American classmates in terms of academic achievement. They suggest that self-fulfilling prophecies, stereotype threat, and stigma consciousness all influence the relationship between acculturation, ethnic identity, and stigma consciousness on academic achievement (Guyll et al., 2010). Ethnic stigma is not limited to the experience of college students. Vahabi and Damba (2013), using a mixed methods design, explored the barriers of Latinx immigrants using food resources in Toronto. They found that language barriers, cultural differences, and increased economic pressures were associated with decreased acceptance and participation in critical assistance programs (Vahabi & Damba, 2013). The research highlights the extra layer of stigma as experienced as a result of ethnicity. This is not separate from other forms of stigma; rather, it serves to compound pre-existing problems for those from already marginalized groups. Systemic racism and the associated disparities provide even greater context to the multitude of stigmatizing identities and the ways they are experienced, particularly by people of color.

Stigma Consciousness

Stigma consciousness is conceptualized as the extent to which an individual is self-conscious about their belonging to a stereotyped group and their expectation of being stereotyped by others (Brown & Pinel, 2003). Major, Quinton, and Schmader (2003) found that people higher in stigma consciousness perceived higher levels of discrimination, were more likely to attribute negative social interactions to their personal identity and were more likely to view ambiguous feedback as discriminatory. These findings have greater implications for those pursuing higher education. For Latinos, increased stigma consciousness has been linked to lower

academic performance in college (Guyll et al., 2010). Moreover, stigma consciousness is particularly relevant to the current study as it serves as a precursor for understanding the ways students experience stigma.

Stigma and College Food Security

Stigma related to college student food insecurity has been studied to an extent (Dubick et al., 2016; Fong et al., 2016). However, the existing research lacks depth and focuses more on service barriers (El Zein, et al., 2018) and academic outcomes (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018). In the majority of food insecurity research, stigma remains a tertiary discussion point, rarely discussed in-depth. Of noteworthy exception, ethnographic work by Henry (2017) provides much needed context to the experience of stigma among students at the University of North Texas. In her study, participants reported excessive worry about what others would think of them if it were known they used the on-campus food pantry. Moreover, feelings of shame coupled with isolating behaviors designed to avoid stigmatizing situations left many students disengaged from academic and co-curricular activities (Henry, 2017). However, the study failed to explore the ways in which students make sense of stigma. Other research, albeit limited, has examined stigma associated with food insecurity within inner-city communities. Xu, Zhu, and Bresnahan (2016) found that the messaging around nutritional assistance played an important role in addressing public health at the community level. Moreover, nutritional and neighborhood barriers served to exacerbate stigma, particularly for women and people of color (Xu et al., 2016). These studies help to shed light on the subject while acknowledging the need for more research.

Goffman (1963) provided some of the earliest writings relating to stigma management, which included “strategies that accept, avoid, reduce, and deny stigmas” (Meisenbach, 2010 p.

273). Although the work of Goffman was instrumental in our understanding of stigma, his work was only a jumping off point as researchers attempt to explain the ways in which an individual processes feelings about being stigmatized. In addition to Goffman's (1963) seminal work and those who followed, recent research has examined stigma from a more practical perspective, including stigma associated with participation in means-tested programs and personal attributes such as ethnicity and gender. In order to frame the current discussion on stigma as it relates to college students and food insecurity, it is critical to ground the study in theory. Meisenbach's (2010) writings serve to provide a backdrop against which the current study will unfold.

Theoretical Framework

Stigma Management Theory (Meisenbach, 2010) stipulates that stigma is determined by both the stigmatized and by the non-stigmatized and provides a range of possibilities for how the individual makes sense of the stigma. Meisenbach (2010) notes that individuals' need for stigma management arises from the myriad negative outcomes that result from stigma such as discrimination, ridicule, and devalued social identities. To the extent that stigma represents a universal phenomenon, Stigma Management Theory (Meisenbach, 2010) assumes the following:

Axiom 1: Stigmas are constructed based on perceptions of both the non-stigmatized and the stigmatized.

Axiom 2: Stigmas shift and are shifted by discourses and material conditions.

Axiom 3: Stigmas vary by degree in breadth and depth.

Insofar as these assumptions are met, Stigma Management Theory proposes that individuals can either accept or deny that the stigma exists in the public discourse. Secondly, the individual can either accept or deny the applicability to the self, thus leaving four quadrants that house various stigma management strategies (Meisenbach, 2010). It should be noted, however,

that the shifting conditions outlined in Axiom 2 are relevant to the current global pandemic, specifically how social distancing and stay-at-home orders have influenced material conditions associated with stigma. The typology produces four distinct strategies, with each featuring a number of sub-strategies. Figure 2 illustrates Stigma Management Theory and its four quadrants.

	<i>Accept</i> that stigma applies to self	<i>Challenge</i> that stigma applies to self
Accept public understanding of stigma (status quo)	<p>ACCEPT-ACCEPT</p> <p>Accepting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Passively (silently) Accept ◇ Display/Disclose Stigma ◇ Apologize ◇ Comfort via Humor ◇ Blame Stigma ◇ Isolate ◇ Bond with Stigmatized 	<p>ACCEPT-CHALLENGE</p> <p>Avoiding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ <i>Hide/Deny Stigma Attribute</i> ◇ Avoid Stigma Situations ◇ <i>Stop Stigma Behavior</i> ◇ <i>Distance Self from Stigma</i> ◇ Favorably Compare
Challenge public understanding of stigma (change)	<p>CHALLENGE-ACCEPT</p> <p><i>Evading Responsibility for</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Provocation ◇ Defeasibility ◇ Unintentionality <p>Reducing Offensiveness of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Bolster/Refocus ◇ Minimize Source ◇ Transcend/<i>Reframe</i> 	<p>CHALLENGE-CHALLENGE</p> <p>Denying</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Simply Deny ◇ Logically <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Discredit Discreditors</i> - <i>Provide evidence/info</i> - Highlight logical fallacies <p><i>Ignoring/Displaying</i></p>

Figure 2. Stigma Management Theory Illustration (Adapted from Meisenbach, 2010).

The first proposition is accepting the stigma and its applicability to the self. In this situation, the stigmatized individual is likely to accept public understanding of the stigma while also incorporating it into their sense of self (Meisenbach, 2010). Strategies include passive acceptance, using humor to reduce the discomfort of others, and openly displaying the stigmatized attributes. Stigmatized individuals may also apologize for their embodiment of the stigma or blame the stigma itself for negative life outcomes. Also noteworthy, those who accept

the stigma and its applicability to the self are more likely to socially isolate themselves (Goffman, 1963; Meisenbach, 2010).

The second proposition of Stigma Management Theory is accepting the stigma exists yet denies its applicability to the self and is characterized as an avoidance strategy. Meisenbach (2010) states, “avoiding sub-strategies include: hiding the stigma attribute, avoiding stigmatizing situations, distancing the self from the stigma, eliminating the stigma behavior or attribute, and making favorable social comparisons” (p. 280).

Those who accept the public perception of the stigma yet differ in the level to which they accept the applicability to the self generally employ one or both of the two previous propositions. The third category pivots to include strategies for those who accept the stigma applies to the self but wish to challenge public perceptions of the stigma by either evading responsibility for the stigma or reducing the offensiveness of the stigma (Meisenbach, 2010). Evading responsibility may include claiming one was provoked into the behavior, that the stigmatized behavior is unintentional, or defeasibility on the part of the stigmatized. Meisenbach (2010) notes that this strategy attempts to change the public opinion about the stigma attributes, while also accepting that the individual is, indeed, in possession of the stigma. Individuals may also seek to reduce the offensiveness of the stigma by either bolstering/refocusing, minimizing, or transcending. Bolstering/refocusing aims to redirect attention to a non-stigmatized part of the individual’s identity. Minimization seeks to highlight the ways in which the stigma attribute does not harm others. Transcendence coping strategies seek instead to reframe the stigma into something positive, thereby reducing the negative outcomes associated (Meisenbach, 2010).

The final proposition is characterized by challenging the public opinion and denying the stigma’s applicability to the self by either ignoring or denying the stigma. Meisenbach (2010)

suggests denial often comes in one of two forms: simple denial and logical denial. A simple denial is straightforward and seeks to challenge both the existence and applicability of the stigma. Logical denials are more complex and seek to refute the stigma by providing counter evidence and/or by logically challenging the underlying assumptions that lead to a stigma label (Meisenbach, 2010). Stigmatized individuals may also attempt to ignore the stigma altogether. Both strategies feature proactive means by which to address the stigma; however, denial strategies seek to eradicate the stigma altogether and its applicability to all who share it.

Although unrelated to food insecurity, Stigma Management Theory has been applied to various groups including college students, specifically to understand the connection between stigma and mental health treatments. Mental illness can become more evident as individuals transition to college, with onset of various disorders occurring between the ages of 18 and 24 (Turetsky & Sanderson, 2017). Indeed, researchers have found that as many as 20% of college students are diagnosed with depression or anxiety (Eisenberg, Gollust, Golberstein, & Hefner, 2007), a figure that is likely underreported due to mental health stigma (Reichert, 2012). To better understand the discrepancy between depression and help seeking, Reichert (2012) used Stigma Management Theory to explore help seeking decisions and coping mechanisms used to deal with internalized stigma. Reichert (2012) found that respondents employed coping mechanisms consistent with Stigma Management Theory, with greater preference for evading strategies when correlated with perceived onset controllability. Somewhat more closely related to the current study, other researchers have applied Meisenbach's (2010) theory to social assistance programs. In their study of participation in the federal WIC program and stigma as a communication barrier, Powell, Amsbary, and Xin (2015) found that participants' experiences of stigma were consistent with Stigma Management Theory. The research makes clear the

connection between stigma management and proactive behaviors that improve the quality of one's life. Given the range of stigmatizing attributes displayed across society and the inverse relationship with positive outcomes, more research is required to examine adaptive coping strategies.

Summary

Research indicates that food insecurity is both a global and local problem, with as many as 770 million people worldwide experiencing extreme food insecurity (United Nations, 2019) and upwards of 42 million in the United States (Nazmi et al., 2018). The effects of food insecurity have been well documented, with researchers identifying a variety of negative outcomes associated with unmet basic needs. School-aged children who are food-insecure are more likely to experience academic problems, have to repeat a grade, and at increased risk for suspension/expulsion (Alaimo et al., 2001). As a result, school systems nationwide have implemented free or reduced-price meal programs designed to combat childhood food insecurity and improve academic outcomes (Broton et al., 2014). Unfortunately, these programs also produce feelings of shame (Burriss et al., 2020) and a lack of autonomy (Bailey-Davis et al., 2013) that often follow students in their college careers.

Food insecurity among college students is nearly three times the national average (Nazmi et al., 2018) with factors such as increased tuition costs and changing student demographics influencing students' abilities to meet basic needs (Broton et al., 2014). Moreover, food-insecure students are at increased risk of academic peril (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018), are more likely to experience depression and anxiety (Henry, 2017), and often experience negative physical outcomes (O'Neill & Maguire, 2017; Seligman et al., 2010). In an attempt to address food insecurity among students, colleges and universities have utilized a variety of strategies often

seen in community-based efforts such as meal-sharing programs, campus gardens, and food pantries (King, 2017; Moreno-Yamashiro, 2019). Indeed, food pantries have become common place on many campuses; however, many students who are food-insecure do not use the pantry (Twill et al., 2016). Researchers have uncovered several barriers to service utilization with stigma being the most widely cited reason as to why a student does not visit the food pantry (El Zein et al., 2018). Given the extensive body of research on the prevalence of food insecurity among college students and the associated negative outcomes, it is concerning that more students do not take advantage of the resource. However, stigma remains a powerful barrier identified in the literature and one that deserves a more comprehensive exploration.

Stigma has been a mainstay in the social science research community over the past 50 years, including focuses on occupational stigma, better known as *dirty work*, social assistance stigma, ethnic stigma, stigma consciousness, and stigma management. Given the broad nature of past stigma research and the current problem of food insecurity on college campuses, scholars and policymakers have called for more research. Indeed, the vast majority of research on college food insecurity has been quantitative in nature, often focusing on prevalence rates and academic outcomes (Nazmi et al., 2018). Camelo and Elliott (2019) suggest more research on students' lived experiences, especially prior to entering college is needed. El Zein and colleagues (2018) argue that future research should focus on student perceptions regarding barriers to using campus food pantries. Fong et al. (2016) note that survey data yield incomplete understandings of individual experiences, suggesting that more qualitative approaches are required as we further our understanding of the current problem. In addition to these prior recommendations, Stigma Management Theory is yet to be applied to college students who deal with food insecurity and rely on campus food pantries. In addition to calls for more research, qualitative research

methods are necessary to flush out some of nuance embedded in discussions around food security and stigma.

The practical significance of the current study is relevant for both institutional administrators and food pantry workers. Administrators who have a better understanding of service use barriers including stigma have the ability to make more informed decisions about food pantry implementation and communication with students. As many colleges and universities attempt to evaluate the efficacy of their food security efforts, data related to student experiences has the potential to provide valuable insight. In addition, pantry staff and volunteer workers stand to gain important information about the user experience that can, in turn, be used to inform best practices and improved customer service. At a time when food insecurity among college students has been thrust into the spotlight, it is critical to examine the ways in which colleges and universities address those needs while also being mindful of sociohistorically significant barriers such as stigma.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry is to understand the experience of stigma among those who use on campus food pantries. To support the exploration, three research questions were identified: (a) How do college students experience stigma as they use a campus food pantry? (b) How do students navigate the stigma experienced as a result of using the food pantry? and (c) How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected food pantry stigma? A review of the literature revealed that few studies have examined the experience of stigma among college students using a food pantry (El Zein et al., 2018; Fong et al., 2016; Henry, 2017), with the majority of previous research focusing on prevalence rates and academic and personal outcomes (see Broton, Weaver, & Mai, 2018; Camelo & Elliott, 2019; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Nazmi et al., 2018).

Given the individualized nature of personal experience, it was important to collect data that may provide deeper context than is typically gained using quantitative methods. Indeed, the richness of the data collected gave life to pre-existing research on rates and experiences of stigma, as it is associated with food insecurity. The advantage of using qualitative methods is that it allows the researcher to delve considerably deeper into the subject matter, providing access to subjects' internal thoughts, reactions, and lived experiences. Quantitative data on the other hand, rich in statistical findings from large samples, fails to capture the nuance of something as complex as the lived experience of stigma. Given the focus of the current study being the experience of stigma, qualitative inquiry represents the most appropriate method.

Research Design

A qualitative design was selected because it provides the researcher with the opportunity to investigate phenomena that cannot be easily understood via statistical analysis. Moreover,

qualitative inquiry supports the epistemological understanding that knowledge is acquired subjectively through interpretation. Berghofer (2018) noted that phenomenology, at its core, functions as an epistemological exploration. To that end, phenomenology was chosen as the most appropriate method of inquiry for the current study.

Phenomenological Approach

The origins of phenomenology in research date back to early 20th century Germany and the work of philosopher Edmund Husserl (Kockelmans, 1976). Husserl first began using the term phenomenology in psychological research in 1900, where he suggested the “Descriptive phenomenology of inner experience” (Kockelmans, 1976, p. 3) was necessary for empirical psychology and epistemology. Indeed, Husserl maintained that the body was the lived center of experience and essential to deeper levels of knowing (Husserl, 1931). Husserl conceptualized embodied personhood as residing in the ‘lifeworld,’ a concept later discussed, and rooted in the intersection of meaningful situations, gestures, and practical lived activities (Husserl, 1931). Fuchs (1967) argues that Husserlian phenomenology represents an expansion of the metaphysics of presence common in western philosophy. Central to phenomenology, however, is the focus on first person accounts of the conscious lived experience (Fuchs, 1967). What separates conscious experiences apart from other ways of interacting with the outside world is that we do, in fact, experience them rather than simply observing or engaging (Kockelmans, 1976). Over the next century and beyond, phenomenology has progressed from its philosophical roots into a full-fledged form of inquiry, often used to illuminate the experience of important and timely phenomenon. For example, phenomenology has been used to study the experiences of sexual trauma among women veterans (Brownstone, Holliman, Gerber, & Monteith, 2018), the physical experience of Multiple Sclerosis (van Der Meide, Teunissen, Collard, Visse, & Visser, 2018),

and the experience of fall risk among elderly women (Hallrup, Albertsson, Bengtsson, Dahlberg, & Grahn, 2009). Common to each of these studies was the focus on the ‘experience’ of some phenomenon experienced, each representing a rather profound situation. Moreover, phenomenology has been used broadly in the social sciences, often used to study phenomena within education and the dynamics of psychotherapy (Boschini, 2015; Brownstone et al., 2018).

Theoretical Approach

In order to understand the experience of stigma by those who use campus food pantries, it is necessary to understand their lived experiences. Consistent with understanding the experience of stigma, Creswell (2016) posits the most appropriate approach is that of phenomenology. Moreover, the focus on the lived experience and essence of a particular phenomenon suggests working from a Husserlian (1931) influenced framework is the most appropriate course of action. Therefore, the current study utilizes reflective lifeworld research (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nystrom, 2008). Hallrup, Albertsson, Bengtsson, Dahlberg, and Grahn (2009) note that life often manifests itself through experience; therefore, understanding one’s life experience of a phenomenon is likely to produce richer data while also exploring the experience in context. Reflective Lifeworld Research (Dahlberg et al., 2008) and, more broadly speaking, phenomenology are applicable to and have been widely used in healthcare (van Der Meide et al., 2018), education (Boschini, 2015), and social work research as a result of their focus on the lived experiences of human existence. Indeed, the reflective lifeworld approach seeks to *lay out* the experience of others, giving context to the experience itself.

Reflective lifeworld research is phenomenon oriented and, as such, treats data gathering as a means by which the researcher attempts to understand a phenomenon (Dahlberg, et al., 2008). Given the expansive research on stigma (Falk, 2001; Goffman, 1963; Henry, 2017;

Stuber & Kronebusch, 2004) and its universality (Meisenbach, 2010), reflective lifeworld research provides a solid foundation from which to work. Dahlberg et al. (2008) suggest researchers be mindful of three factors when gathering data. First, one must consider the nature of the phenomenon. Depending on the complexity of the phenomenon, a variety of methods may be warranted. Dahlberg et al. (2008) caution against becoming tied to one particular method of data collection, noting that some phenomena dictate a change in methods the further they are explored. Second, the research question in its context has an influence on the choice of collecting data. Researchers should be sure to explore phenomena consistent with the target population and the environment. Lastly, the aim is to go to the *things* themselves by practicing a bridled approach to the phenomenon. A bridled approach is one in which the researcher focuses on the phenomenon throughout the study, setting aside one's preconceived ideas. Dahlberg et al. (2008) suggest this can be done by being prepared to let the phenomenon itself reveal how it should best be studied, without the researcher imposing themselves on the phenomenon.

Credibility

In order to capture participant experiences, inductive coding will be used to generate codes, categories, and themes emerging from the interview data. Despite having limited personal experience with food insecurity, the researcher currently serves in a Basic Needs leadership role. As such, the researcher is inextricably tied to food insecurity mitigation efforts and perceived barriers on the local campus and at the system level. Because of this, the researcher has had the opportunity to learn from students dealing with food insecurity and how it impacts their well-being. This concern for student well-being combined with graduation initiatives led the researcher to explore the topic further. Also worth noting is that the researcher acknowledges such work may cast unforeseen expectations among participants that affect the interview process.

Moreover, the researcher was aware of potential biases and their role in the data collection process. To address such biases, the researcher has explored and reflected upon in writing, Milner's (2007) framework for understanding researcher positionality (See Appendix C). Milner (2007) suggests that researchers examine their own biases as well as the experience of historically marginalized groups in order to become aware of potential pitfalls. In addition, the researcher wrote memos throughout the study and relied on member-checking (Creswell, 2014) to provide validity to the current study. Given the researcher's relation to food security efforts, several of the participants were already familiar with the researcher. This helped with rapport building and allowed for deeper levels of vulnerability as the interviews progressed.

Dahlberg et al. (2008) highlight the importance of and means by which data is collected. Among the data collection methods central to reflective lifeworld research are interviews, where the researcher is an active participant in the process (Dahlberg et al., 2008). This type of process requires enhanced active listening skills in order to fully understand the experiences of others. With a background in counseling, the researcher was trained in and practices regularly the type of listening needed to conduct such interviews. Unlike everyday conversations that may or may not be open, interviews should function as open dialogues allowing the researcher to understand the essence of things via the informant's lifeworld (Dahlberg et al., 2008). Indeed, when one wants to know about the experience of others, the best way is to ask them. In reflective lifeworld research, interviews should exist as open dialogues that provide both the researcher and participant greater clarity about the phenomenon itself. The focus should remain on the phenomenon rather than the interviewee. Another feature of interviews within this approach is the focus on immediacy. Not unlike Gestalt therapy that focuses on the "here and now," interviews that have a sense of immediacy are more likely to be free of clichés and second-hand

thinking (Dahlberg et al., 2008). If successful, the interviewee is likely to do their own reflection about what the phenomenon means to them. To this end, participants were asked to reflect on the interview experience before the conclusion of the interview and after the fact to provide them the opportunity of exploring any insight that may have been gained because of the process.

Despite its longstanding value to healthcare, education, and other social sciences, reflective lifeworld research approach has not been used to study the experience of stigma associated with food insecurity and food assistance. This gap in the literature, combined with contemporary calls to better understand barriers to food pantry usage among college students, makes this approach particularly relevant. Moreover, these findings might support the efforts of the research community and policymakers to address food insecurity on college campuses.

Participants

The participants for the current study were recruited to explore the experience of stigma associated with using an on-campus food pantry. This section discusses inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants in the current study.

Selection Criteria

Participants for the current study were recruited from three sites within the California State University (CSU) system. In addition to regional variation, each of the three campuses feature distinct population densities and, to a lesser extent, demographic differences that provided for richer data collection. The CSU is the nation's largest four-year university system, enrolling nearly half a million students annually (California State University, Office of the Chancellor, 2018). In addition to the sheer volume of students, the CSU serves a diverse student body with students of color representing more than half of all students. Moreover, nearly a third of students are first generation, and half receive Pell Grants (California State University, Office

of the Chancellor, 2018). Because of the rich diversity and high numbers of students on financial aid, the CSU represents an ideal location to study the intersection of food insecurity and stigma.

For the purposes of phenomenological studies, Polkinghorne (1989) suggests the appropriate sample size is between 5 and 25. To that end, the researcher recruited 10 participants from the various locations who have used the on-campus food pantry at least once and were over the age of 18. However, the researcher recognized that upon reaching saturation in the data, reductions in participants may be acceptable. For the present study, participants were verified as being current students who have used the food pantry at least once in the previous year.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling by way of a recruitment flyer and faculty and staff distribution. The flyer read, in part, “We are seeking students who have used the food pantry to share their experiences both with using the pantry, and perceived barriers to usage.”

Recruitment flyers were posted in on-campus food pantries and distributed to faculty for posting in their respective learning management system (i.e., Blackboard, Canvas, etc.). Likewise, the researcher coordinated with local food pantry staff to assist with participant recruitment. Given the rates of food insecurity and the number of students who use campus food pantries, the researcher did not foresee any issues with gaining participants. Furthermore, the use of human subjects called for approval through the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), which was obtained prior to eliciting participation.

Exclusion Criteria

Participants for the current study must have used the campus food pantry at least once in the previous year. As such, those who have not used the pantry or who had not in more than a year were excluded from the study. By asking participants to reflect on their experiences, it was important to reduce the time between the experience and the interview. In addition, staff and

faculty who may also use the food pantry were excluded from participation due to the connection between food insecurity, academic performance, and graduation initiatives. Lastly, those without stable Internet service or who were unable to access adequate technology necessary for the interview were excluded from the current study.

Data Collection

For the purpose of data collection, the researcher utilized semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes designed to shed light on participant experiences of using the pantry and the associated feelings. Using a modified version of Seidman's (2006) three-stage interview process, the researcher incorporated elements of each into one session. The first stage focused on the participant's life history, focusing on how they came to find themselves in the current situation or environment. The second stage explored the details of the experience, concentrating on the lived experiences. The third stage allowed participants to reflect on the meaning, providing them the opportunity to focus on meaning-making within the experience of the phenomenon.

Prior to the interview, each participant was contacted for the purposes of scheduling and ensuring the necessary technological requirements, at which time informed consent documents were emailed to participants. Interviews took place over Zoom and were digitally recorded for later analysis. The researcher began the interview by collecting demographic information such as ethnicity, generation status, major, and year in school. The following set of questions focused on background information and rapport building before moving on to specific questions about the experience in the food pantry. So as not to prejudice or lead the interviewee, the word stigma was not introduced until the final stage of the interview (see Appendix B for the interview protocol).

Somewhat related to Seidman's (2006) model for phenomenological interviewing, Crutchfield and Maguire (2017) have provided an interview protocol intended for replication and further studies on food insecurity. This instrument was adapted to fit the current study. Questions related to background information and food security came from the Crutchfield and Maguire (2017) protocol, whereas questions related to food pantry experience and stigma were those of the current researcher. Likewise, the researcher intended to nestle the Crutchfield and Maguire (2017) protocol within the framework proposed by Seidman (2006). Comprised of three sections, the protocol began with questions designed to gain background information and build rapport, followed by a series of questions related to food insecurity and the experience of using a food pantry, and closed with a series of questions pertaining to perceived barriers and coping strategies.

Data Analysis

Data were collected via face-to face interviews using Zoom teleconferencing, recorded through the teleconferencing platform, and transcribed using NVivo transcription services. Once transcribed, NVivo for Windows was used to analyze and code the data into categories that provided the foundation from which themes were identified. The preliminary step of coding is essential to the data analysis process, as it provides for the real-time assessment of strategies and helps to add clarity to the data (Banks, 2017). Given the nature of phenomenology and the research questions, interviews represented the ideal method for understanding the lived experiences of each participant lifeworld (Dahlberg, et al., 2008).

Upon completion of transcription, coding occurred in two forms: inductive and deductive. Inductive coding utilized in vivo codes, taking words and short phrases stated by the participant (Saldaña, 2016). Following the initial coding, significant codes were grouped into

categories allowing for the emergence of themes. The final thematic analysis included both emergent themes from inductive coding as well as themes reflecting the theoretical framework discussed below.

The second form of coding used was deductive in nature, which was used to analyze statements and themes consistent with a priori codes based on the four quadrants of Stigma Management Theory (Meisenbach, 2010). Located within each of the four quadrants are coping strategies that individuals use to make sense of stigma that will provide the basis for A Priori codes. Quadrant one includes strategies such as (a) accepting the stigma, (b) displaying or disclosing the stigma, (c) apologizing, (d) using humor to diffuse tension, (e) blaming the stigma, (f) isolation, and (g) bonding with the stigmatized. Quadrant 2 includes strategies such as (a) hide or deny stigma attribute, (b) avoid stigmatizing situations, (c) stop stigma behavior, and (d) distance oneself from stigma. Quadrant 3 identifies strategies for (a) evading responsibility and (b) reducing the offensiveness of the stigma. The fourth quadrant includes (a) simple denials, (b) logical denial, and (c) ignoring the stigma.

Data Security

In order to ensure confidentiality and protect participants, a number of protocols were used. First, the researcher used a HIPAA protected Zoom account to conduct the interviews. Second, each participant was provided with an informed consent prior to the interview. Informed consent forms as well as all identifiable information were kept in a locked cabinet inside the researcher's office with no other personnel having access. For transcripts, each participant was assigned an ID number in order to protect confidentiality. After each interview, the digital recording was uploaded to the researcher's desktop computer. Moreover, recordings were kept on a secure, password-protected workstation located in the researcher's office. Informed consent

forms are stored in a separate locked cabinet in the researcher's office and will be retained for a period of no less than three years, upon which time will be shredded. Audio recordings and interview transcripts were permanently deleted at the completion of the study.

Summary

The goal of the current study was to gain insight into the lived experience of stigma among college students who use an on-campus food pantry. Because stigma is best conceptualized as something one experiences, phenomenology represents the most appropriate method. Moreover, Dahlberg and colleagues' (2008) reflective lifeworld research provides a framework for uncovering and understanding each participant's lifeworld. The participants for the current study, recruited from three CSU campuses within California, were asked to participate in 60- to 90-minute semi-structured interviews via Zoom using an integration of Seidman's (2006) three-step interview framework and Crutchfield and Maguire's (2017) interview protocol. Once complete, audio recordings were transcribed, coded, and categorized using NVivo for Windows qualitative data analysis software. Themes that emerge from the data have the potential to inform policy and practice around food pantries including outreach, interventions, and improved customer service. School administrators, policymakers, and those responsible for the day-to-day pantry operations will potentially gain valuable insight as a result of the current study.

It would be irresponsible to discuss the current study and data collection methods without acknowledging the COVID-19 global pandemic and the limitations it has placed on the way we interact as human beings. In order to stop the spread of the virus, experts have suggested, even mandated, social distancing efforts that make traditional face-to-face interviews unlikely. In order to have some semblance of face-to-face interactions, the researcher used a HIPAA

protected Zoom account to conduct all interviews. Although better than the alternative of phone interviews, video conferencing did present a unique set of challenges that must be considered. The researcher had to be flexible, both with individuals' tolerance for and understanding of the technology. In addition, limited Wi-Fi connections and unstable internet service had the potential to interfere with the interview process. Because of these concerns, the researcher sought to remain patient with participants as well as with the process. Fortunately, all participants were able to access stable internet service and were familiar with the technological aspects of the interview process including the Zoom teleconferencing platform. The next chapter includes a discussion of the findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological investigation is to explore the lived experiences of students who use an on-campus food pantry, specifically, how students experience and navigate the stigma associated with using food assistance resources. Moreover, the current study seeks to understand the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on both usage habits and the experience of stigma. To guide the study, three research questions were identified: (a) How do college students experience stigma as they use a campus food pantry?; (b) How do students navigate the stigma experienced as a result of using the food pantry?; and (c) How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected food pantry stigma? Improved understandings of stigma may help administrators and practitioners develop and implement policies that promote food pantry usage while also informing best practices used by food pantry staff.

University students were recruited from three on-campus food pantries within the California State University and asked to participate in face-to-face interviews via Zoom. Given the various safety protocols implemented to combat the virus, many pantries either were closed or operated on a drive-up basis, limiting the access to participants. Prior to each interview, participants were provided an informed consent, which was signed and returned to the researcher via email. Demographic data were collected at the start of each interview and are presented below in Table 4.1. In order to ensure confidentiality, each participant was given a pseudonym. Participant age ranged from 18 to 58, allowing for a wide range of experience and generational context as it related to food insecurity and social norms. Sixty percent of participants identified as Latinx, and likewise, 60% were male. In line with system wide data related to demographic makeup and enrollment trends, 70% of the participants were first-generation students, further

supporting their inclusion in the study based on calls from past researchers for greater inquiry into those who are first in family to attend college (Camelo & Elliott, 2019).

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	First Generation	Age
Larry	African American	Male	No	44
Kirk	African American	Male	Yes	22
David	Caucasian	Male	Yes	58
Maya	Latinx	Female	Yes	18
Jessica	Latinx	Female	Yes	22
Tyler	Caucasian	Male	No	21
Melissa	Latinx	Female	No	24
Michael	Latinx	Male	Yes	27
Brian	Italian/Latinx	Male	Yes	22
Sandra	Latinx	Female	Yes	22

A total of ten interviews were conducted over the course of four months via Zoom to allow for adherence to mandated safety protocols and social distancing. Each interview began with basic introductions, followed by a brief explanation of the research and an outline of the interview process. In addition, the researcher explained to participants that the interview would be recorded and that only the audio file would be stored on the researcher’s password-protected office computer. During each interview, the researcher made handwritten field notes meant to highlight major statements, note follow-up questions, and describe contextual cues such as emotional expression and body language. The interview protocol served to as a guide for the

researcher. However, the semi-structured process allowed for greater flexibility and probing of meaningful topics as well as unanticipated emergent themes.

At the conclusion of each interview, the audio file was uploaded to NVivo Transcription where the file was transcribed and downloaded as a Word document onto the researcher's computer. Upon completion of the transcription process, the document was uploaded into the NVivo for Windows desktop software package for further analysis. Two copies of each transcript were uploaded to allow for separate analyses which will be discussed in the following section.

Coding Process

For the current study, the coding process consisted of two types of coding: inductive and deductive. Inductive coding was used to gather and identify major themes expressed by the participants related to their experiences surrounding using the pantry and the experience of stigma (Research Question #1). Moreover, the researcher sought to understand the ways the global COVID-19 pandemic has shifted or influenced the experience of stigma when using a food pantry (Research Question #3). In the initial round of coding, short phrases and statements were first identified and then assigned a code that was reflective of specific words or feelings expressed. Subsequent rounds of coding allowed for the grouping of codes into subthemes based on their relationship to similar codes. It should be noted, however, not all statements were coded, and not all codes were presented sufficiently so as to support their inclusion in further analysis. Likewise, sentiments expressed that were inconsistent with the research questions were not explored in great detail or included in the thematic analysis. Upon analysis of subthemes and categories of codes, several emergent themes were revealed.

After the initial process of inductive coding was performed, deductive coding using *a priori* codes derived from Stigma Management Theory (SMT) (Meisenbach, 2010) was conducted in order to understand the way students navigate the experience of stigma, including what coping strategies are used (Research Question #2). Participant statements were evaluated and coded based on their correspondence with the strategies outlined in each of the four quadrants of SMT: *accept-accept*, *accept-challenge*, *challenge-accept*, and *challenge-challenge*. Because the data were analyzed against the backdrop of existing theory and *a priori* codes, the process was less labor intensive and allowed for the identification of significant themes quickly. Member checking, consistent with Creswell (2014), was used to verify the accuracy of the data content and interpretation. Figure 3 below illustrates the data collection process, beginning with recruitment and ending with data analysis.

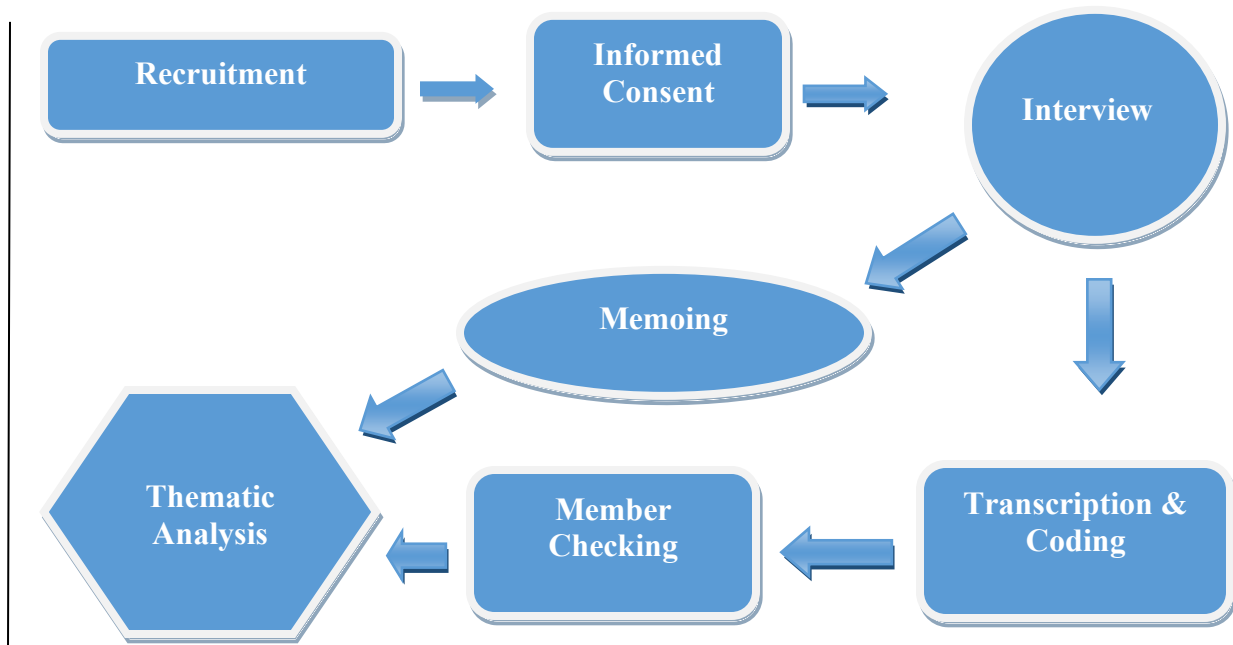


Figure 3. Data collection process. Note the pathway from recruitment to thematic analysis, including the steps taken to ensure accuracy of transcripts and enhance thematic analysis.

Participants were contacted following the interview and sent copies of the transcript with assigned codes in order to gain insight or corrections in relation to the data. In each case, the participant verified the accuracy of the transcript and supported the analysis. In one case, the participant indicated he had grown and matured as a result of participating in the interview process. This small yet powerful articulation further supports the use of reflective lifeworld research and its potential to help participants gain greater personal insight (Dahlberg et al., 2008). Moreover, the researcher conducted extensive hand-written memoing after each interview. This process helped to capture contemporaneous observations while also helping to inform the evolving semi-structured interview process.

Findings

Data were collected and analyzed through an iterative process (Saldana, 2016), revealing that the experience of stigma remains a complex phenomenon. Although complex and therefore individualized in experiences, several themes related to stigma emerged across the interviews. Participants shared personal experiences that provided valuable context and much needed insight into the way stigma is internalized. Three themes emerged through the inductive coding process: *fear of being seen as poor or less than, hardship as fundamental to being a college student, and the collective struggle resulting from the COVID-19 global pandemic*. In addition to these emergent themes uncovered through inductive coding, the data revealed a number of strategies used to navigate stigma that were consistent with Meisenbach's (2010) Stigma Management Theory. What follows is an in-depth analysis of the study's main themes including key statements made by participants that highlight and support the thematic findings.

Emergent Theme 1: Fear of Being Seen as Poor

Perhaps the most profound and ubiquitous experience of stigma as associated with using a college food pantry was the fear of being seen as poor or less than others, an identity first expressed in the work of Goffman (1963). Participants, almost universally, expressed a desire to avoid negative public perception surrounding their using the campus food pantry. Nestled within this theme were several subthemes that spoke to the unique means by which college students experience stigma: fear of being seen by others, pride, and that going with others made it easier to access the food pantry (see Figure 4).

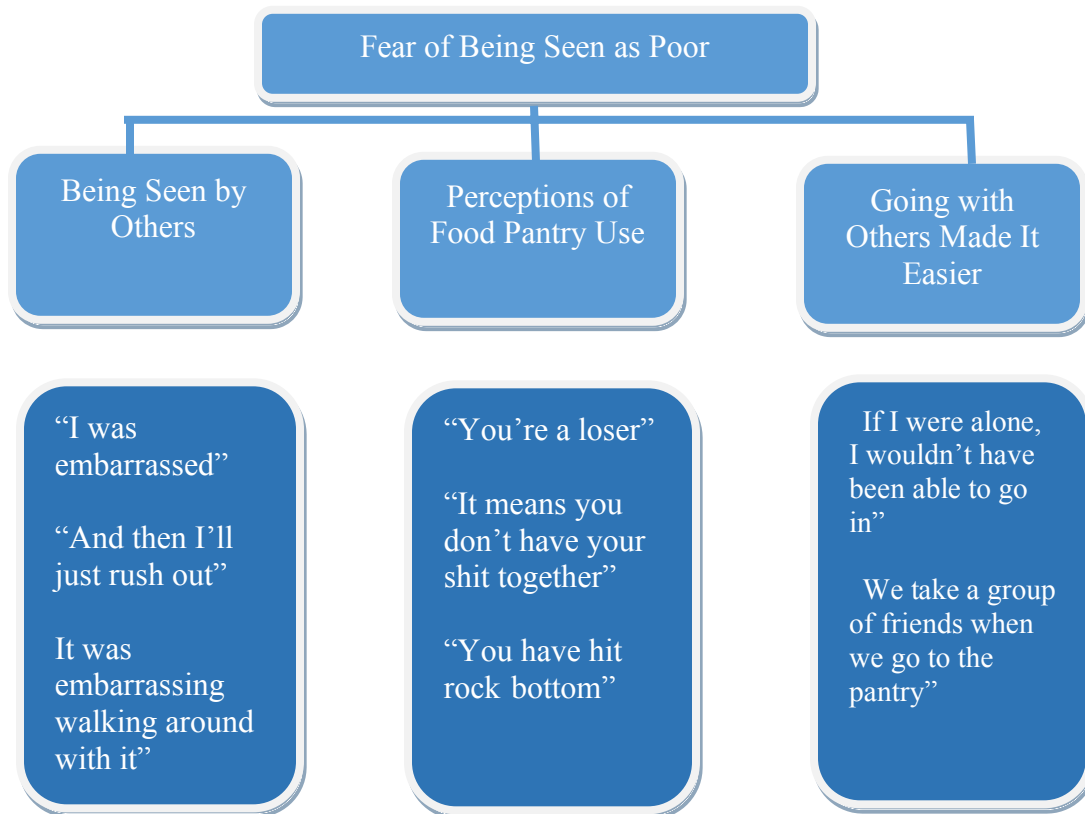


Figure 4. Emergent Theme 1: Fear of Being Seen as Poor. Included are sample excerpts with key phrases used by participants to describe their experiences when using the pantry.

The fear of being seen as poor was a common sentiment shared by participants, with many using a variety of strategies to either reduce or avoid discomfort. The following analysis of these subthemes explores these experiences in greater detail.

Fear of being seen by others leaving the pantry. Participants overwhelmingly expressed mixed feelings related to their experience of the food pantry. When asked about how they felt shopping in the pantry, participants reported feeling comfortable shopping, even expressing gratitude and appreciation. As one participant said:

Oh, every time I go, it's super positive. The two people that work there, I forget their name right now, but I can see their faces kind of long dark hair, and the other one wears glasses and he's kind of got a shorter haircut, kind of, you know, happier. Like, they're just they're happy to be there. And then, like, you know, they really understand inclusiveness because I think that one of them was telling me, you know, challenges that they were facing in other areas on the campus. (Larry, 44, African American)

This statement captures the sentiments of most participants when they were asked to reflect on their experience using the food pantry. The pantry proved to be a welcoming environment and one that people were eager to use for subsequent food needs. Another participant likened the experience to shopping at a grocery store stating, "So when you go in, you just it's just like a grocery store, because you pick up a shopping basket, and you're just walking through the different aisles, and there you go!" (Tyler, 22, Caucasian). The idea that an on-campus food pantry would evoke similar feelings to that of shopping in a mainstream grocery store supports the notion that students generally feel comfortable visiting the pantry.

Despite the positive feelings expressed in terms of the shopping experience, several participants spoke specifically about the difficulty of leaving the pantry due to the social stigma associated with receiving assistance. These experiences appear to exist upon a continuum with responses ranging from a minor inconvenience or cost of use to an almost paralyzing fear of being seen and the need to adjust one's personal behavior to avoid such feelings. For some, they

spoke about it in terms of feeling shy or embarrassed. Jessica, a 22-year-old Latinx first-generation student explained, “And in leaving, I would feel like, I think that’s kind of like my shyness and embarrassment, like is anybody outside anybody that I know now? And then I’ll rush out!” Another participant echoed the feelings of embarrassment, explaining that he tried to hide the food he got, so that nobody would know where it came from. Michael, a 27-year-old first-generation student said, “I felt like I had to hide the food. Because I didn’t want to be lugging the food around campus. Walking around with a loaf of bread and protein drinks would be embarrassing.” Evident in this type of response is a theme consistent with past research, that leaving the pantry produced the conditions that could lead to feelings of embarrassment. Yet others felt a greater sense of shame, at times choosing to not take food out of fear that others would see them. One interviewee, in explaining her decision not to use the pantry initially, said:

Um, the big thing is that when you think about, like the food pantry, you think of someone that like is absolutely like she has hit rock bottom. And I think that that’s a mentality a lot of the times where, you know, well, I, I don’t want to get food from the food pantry because I’m able to kind of get food through my own means. I remember he would always ask me, like, oh, do you want to take like you want to get your points? And I’d be like, No, no, no, it’s OK. Because I was, like, embarrassed. And I told myself I was like, no I don’t want to be seen walking out of the food pantry with a bag. So I was really embarrassed. But also at the same time, I knew about, like, the stigma of like food pantries. And so it was kind of like I was stuck in this loop. I was like, no, no, no. Like students like, come on, like, don’t be embarrassed, like, come get food. But for me, I was like, no, no, no. But I don’t want to do it myself. So the first time that I actually got it, I think it took me a while. It was like it was like it took me a while to kind

of build up to that point where I was like felt comfortable to actually get food. (Melissa, 24, Latinx)

As she described the ambiguity being experienced in the moment, the participant seemed as if she was having a type of *ah-ha* moment while also seeming to feel exposed or vulnerable. She appeared as though she felt guilty for having initially said one thing, only to reevaluate later in the interview. Although she was well aware of the stigma and could acknowledge the logical fallacy of it, it continued to be a significant barrier to using the pantry. The fear of being seen leaving the pantry by others proved problematic at first, yet she was able to diffuse the tension by other means. Reflecting back, she noted:

In the beginning, it was like I would just be embarrassed to even be in the food pantry, like, looking for the items. I'd be like, let me just look real quickly and then walk out and then make it to my car. I would never, like, carry my groceries anywhere except like my car, so I usually do it like at the end of my volunteer shift, which by then it's like dark. (Melissa, 24, Latinx)

This student highlighted an experience common to many food pantry users. In order to avoid embarrassment or being seen by others, students often resort to hiding food, making excuses (i.e., finishing a shift), or waiting until it was dark before leaving the pantry.

Perhaps most interesting is the juxtaposition of competing feelings surrounding a singular event, using the food pantry. Despite experiencing positive feelings upon entering and shopping in the pantry, participants reported feelings of shame and embarrassment when leaving. Because of these feelings, the participants in this study revealed the desire to hide their pantry use from others. Figure 5 illustrates the competing feelings about using the pantry including participant excerpts.

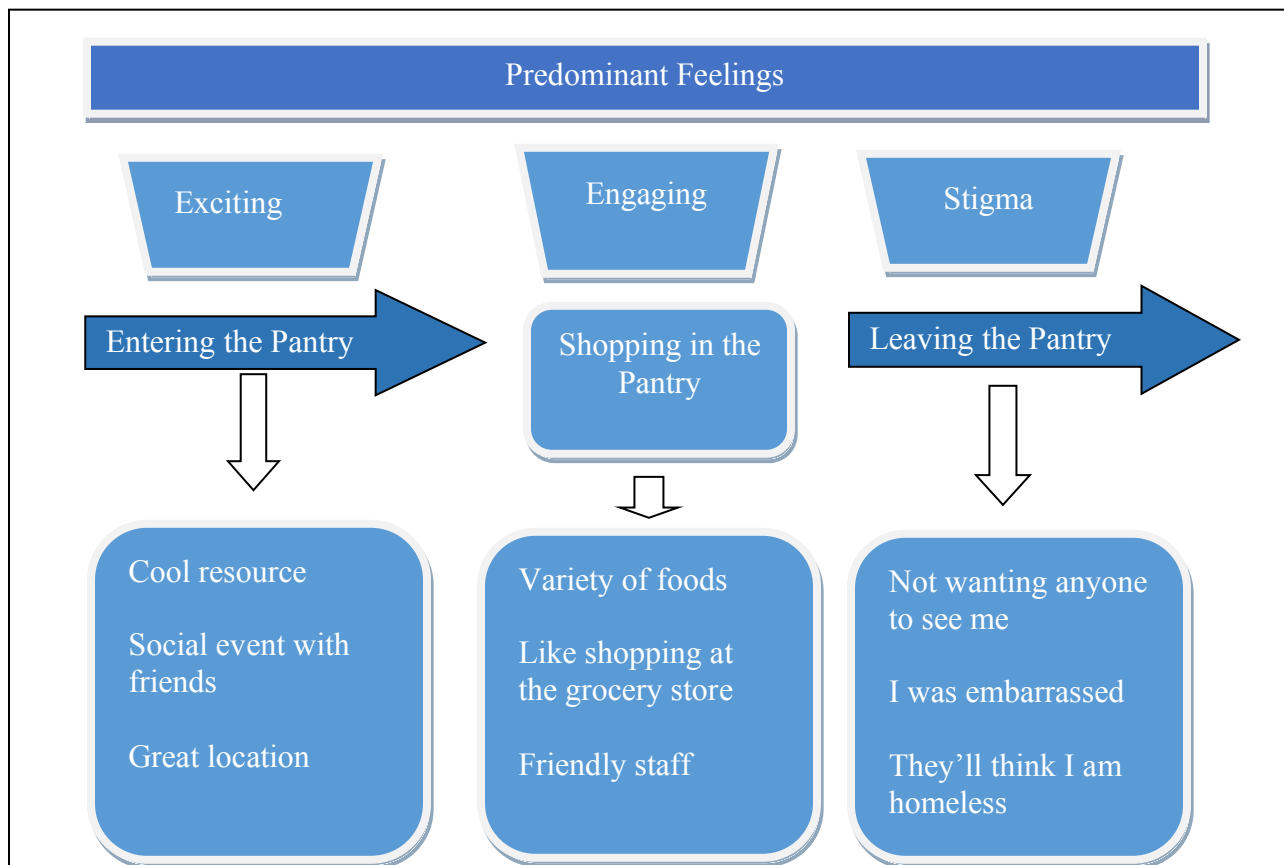


Figure 5. Flowchart depicting the food pantry shopping experience. Note the continuum of experiences surrounding the singular event.

Past research (see Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017; El Zein et al., 2018) has highlighted the influence of stigma as a determining factor in one’s willingness to reach out for assistance. Building on these findings, participants in the current study echoed the sentiments uncovered by Henry (2017), where students expressed high levels of embarrassment about using the pantry. Students reported a wide range of experiences when they talked about going to the food pantry. For many, the trip to and inside the pantry was a positive experience characterized by feelings of community and pleasant interactions with others. Leaving the pantry, however, brought up

experiences of stigma. These findings suggest that the most negative feelings (i.e., shame and embarrassment) are not fully experienced until the end of the shopping trip.

Perceptions of food pantry use. College is a time of self-establishment where young adults assert their independence and strive to prove mastery over self-sufficiency. Indeed, for many, college is seen as the transition to adulthood and the means by which individuals learn to provide for themselves. Regardless of the merits of such an expectation, the inability to do so may lead some students to feel inferior. Indeed, several participants shared their experiences of what being viewed as poor did for their sense of self-worth. Evident in the interviews was the connection between using a pantry and not being able to care for oneself, resulting in a diminished sense of autonomy. Brian, a 22-year-old, first-generation student explained the connection between using the pantry autonomy saying, “Using the food pantry is something low class and that just shows that you don’t have your shit straight.” This student, in particular, drew a parallel between perceptions around socioeconomic responsibility and seeking assistance, a finding consistent with past research (Purdam et al., 2016). Moreover, the experience of being poor produced an extra layer of stigma that influenced the way students used the food pantry. As another participant put it, “People who go to the pantry are associated with homelessness, especially, you know, it's not just it’s not just being poor. It means that you don’t have a place” (Larry, 44). Others likened using the pantry to hitting rock bottom, again hinting at homelessness and not being able to care for oneself. Still, another described the experience in a blunter manner: “When you use the pantry, you’re poor, you’re a loser” (Michael, 27, Latinx, first-generation).

Conversely, others expressed gratitude that they were not poor and, in fact, like others who they perceived to be less advantaged economically. Maya, an 18-year-old Latinx student

explained, “[And also] it makes me feel grateful because I know that I’m not one of those people that are there because this is all they have.” Although she relied on the pantry, the implication that others were worse off was a distinction that seemed to provide a sense of comfort. Such an experience was echoed by others. Another student said, “I can’t take it because I don’t need it as much as somebody else does” (Sandra, 22, Latinx, first-generation). Regardless of individual need and in response to perceptions about others’ need, these experiences reported by the participants suggest that the fear of being seen as poor or unable to care for their well-being was detrimental. Aside from the descriptions of the experience, participants found themselves increasingly emotional as they reflected on what using the pantry meant for their self-esteem. For one student in particular, this moment in the interview was incredibly difficult. What first manifested as contemplative thinking and subtle pauses when speaking gave way to tears and a request to take a short break. This exchange and collective experience between the researcher and participant illuminated the complexities of talking about stigmatizing identities and behaviors and provided contextual clues to the vulnerability of the student experience related to food insecurity. Likewise, the experience supported assumptions made by Dahlberg et al. (2008) about the reciprocal nature of reflective lifeworld research.

Going with Others Made It Easier. Being seen as poor was particularly salient for participants as they used, or attempted to use, the pantry. Many expressed hesitation, even temporary refusal, to take food based on not wanting to be seen by others. However, several participants described strategies to mitigate those feelings, specifically through the presence of others. Consistent throughout the interviews was the idea that going with friends made it easier to visit the pantry initially. As one male participant said, “But it definitely helped going there with someone because it’s something that I probably I likely [*sic*] would have not done by

myself” (Tyler, 21). This sentiment was shared by others. As another student said, “I went in there just because I was like, a lot of people and my friends were there. But if I was going to be alone, I wouldn’t have gone in there. I didn’t know how it worked. I didn’t know how, like, people would see me” (Sandra, 22, Latinx, first-generation). Still others harnessed the power of social connections with contemporaries to facilitate going to the pantry. By engaging with friend groups, Greek organizations, and other peers, students experienced greater comfort and less embarrassment when using the pantry. One student reflected, “We all take a group to go to the food pantry and get stuff. So I feel like having a group of friends that are kind of like within my friend group, it normalizes getting food from there for me” (Jessica, 22, Latinx).

Being seen as poor encompassed a myriad of complexities that influenced both the likelihood of engagement and the experience of stigma as a product of using the food pantry. Students experienced high levels of stigma associated with poverty and potential perception of lacking personal autonomy. Despite the food pantry being a positive experience, leaving the pantry proved painful for some to the point that they avoided much needed support. This experience supports past research on the weight of stigmatizing identities and behaviors (Henry, 2017; Purdam et al., 2016). At the same time, the students utilized social support systems to make it easier to visit the pantry, highlighting the importance of being accepted by others and the common struggle known to many college students.

Emergent Theme 2: Hardship as Fundamental to Being a College Student

The second theme that emerged from the data was that of hardship and its centrality to life as a college student. While it may take many forms, hardship puts in motion the conditions that often lead to stigmatizing identities. This theme consists of the following subthemes: financial instability, personal trauma and mental illness, and homelessness (see Figure 6).

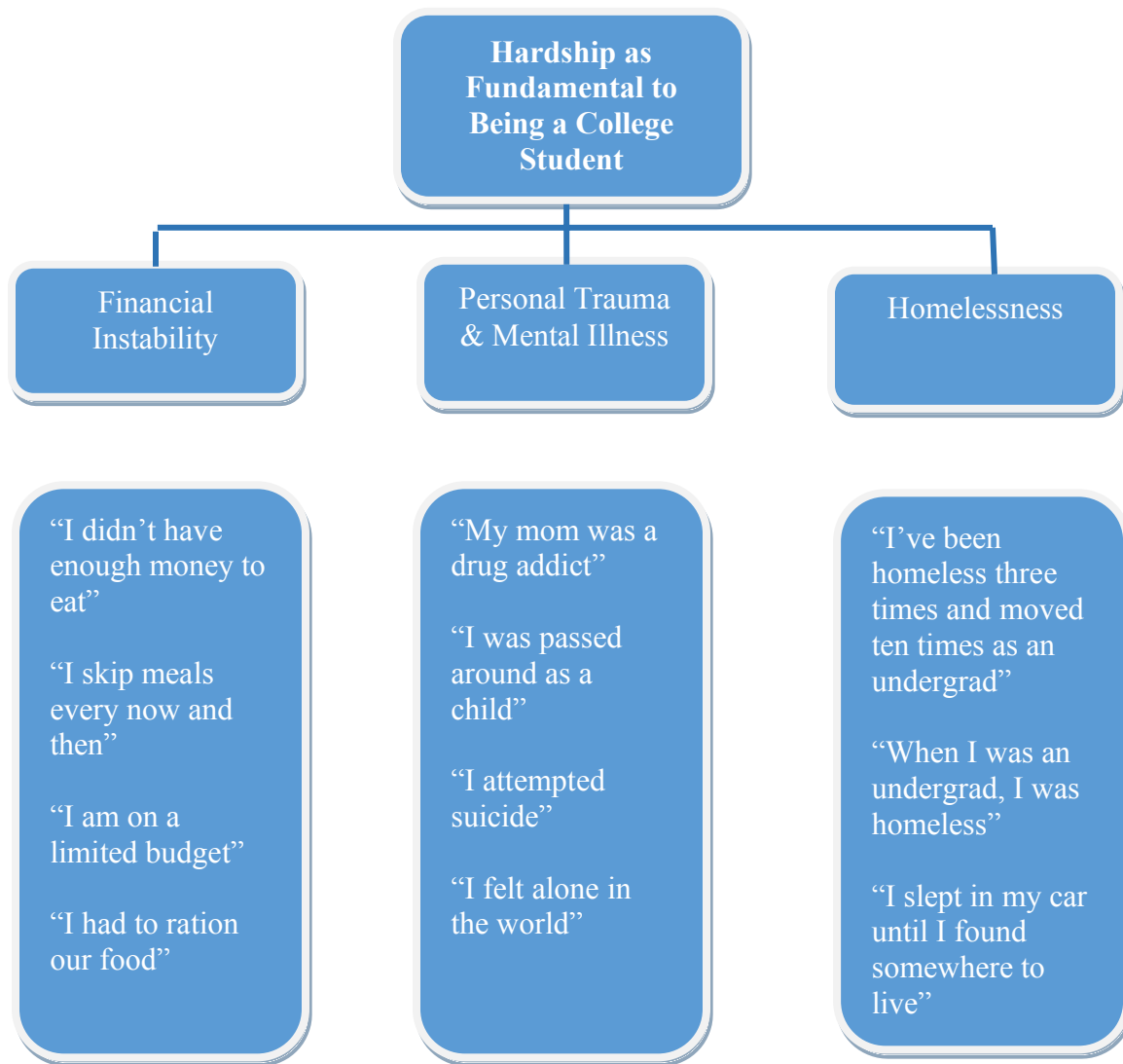


Figure 6. Emergent Theme 2: Hardship as Fundamental to Being a College Student. Included are sample excerpts with key phrases used by participants to describe their experiences of trauma.

Across the subthemes were countless experiences of hardship and struggle that inhibited their sense of belonging and interfered with academic pursuits. Among the most common was the experience of working from limited budgets and going without, including food and other basic necessities.

Financial Instability. Students who use the food pantry often reported lacking the financial means to provide a consistent source of food and care for themselves. As previously

mentioned, the cost of attending a college or university has risen tremendously over the past several decades, leaving students far more financially exposed and at risk of not being able to make ends meet. David, a 58-year-old first-generation student explained, “Well, I’m on a limited budget, so I have to go to the different food banks to supplement my income in order to survive.” The dilemma of having to meet basic needs on a limited budget was repeated throughout the interviews. In reflecting on the previous year, one student explained:

But when I was living on my own, it was very hard. So there was a time where it was money issues. I didn’t have enough money to eat. My car was breaking down, and my rent and things are going on that I had more priority that I needed to pay at the moment. So food was an issue for me sometimes, and I would have to skip meals. (Jessica, 22, Latinx)

Skipping meals was another common experience among the participants and was often accompanied by psychological distress. When describing his typical day, Michael (27) said, “And so my day-to-day man, it’s a little bit of a struggle, and I can, if I’m being honest enough, psychological. You know, just financially, sometimes, you know, I have to skip meals every now and then.” In order to make ends meet, some students have resorted to working multiple jobs, even while caring for extended family members. Despite the extra income, limited access to food due to financial concerns remained a constant struggle for some. One participant, who helped care for his elderly grandparents said:

And at the same time, I had to ration too for myself because I had to sustain my grandparents. So I sustained them up until their deaths just recently, in this past fall semester. They died from COVID. And I had to ration, you know, how to do military rations. I had to figure it out, and we managed to get by to all three of us. And that was

one of it. That was one of many things. And then on top of that, how to manage them. I had to get two jobs right on top of that, sometimes three. (Brian, 22, Italian/Latinx)

This particular student's experience of caring for others and having to balance outside obligations supported similar findings in past research on first-generation college students. Mehta et al. (2011) found that first-generation students are often required to work more than their peers and have additional familial responsibilities that make attending class and co-curricular events more difficult.

Interestingly, many of the students who reported the highest levels of financial instability as students also grew up in poverty and reported having to go without food as children. Moreover, they were acutely aware of the struggle, even attempting to take on some of the responsibility for financial responsibility. As one female student noted:

I think financially sometimes it was difficult. We always said like, oh, we're tight right now. And I think that we were very aware of it. Like as kids, we kind of knew, OK, going to the store like we could only there was one time, one experience that I remember, and we had like a hundred bucks. And we're like, well, we have one hundred bucks until this date. And so we could only spend this much money when we go to the store. And so we kind of knew that going in. And I remember I was like very conscientious where I was like, OK, well, we can get tortillas, we can get like eggs, we can get beans, we can get things like that. (Melissa, 24, Latinx)

Other students shared childhood experiences of both food insecurity and poverty in general. One student, while describing the experience of living with his grandparents in a small, one room apartment, noted, "And it was like a tiny, tiny room. So like sometimes I would sleep in the backyard looking like I know my grandparents would stay warm, but we couldn't be

overcrowded” (Brian, 22). Students in the study implied that past experiences of going without basic resources helped to frame or normalize their current experience. Regardless, the experience of not having enough to eat and having to rely on limited budgets or food banks in childhood proved to be consequential and an experience common to many of the participants.

Personal Trauma and Mental Illness. The researcher uncovered throughout the interviews and subsequent analysis that the struggle to maintain mental well-being was salient for participants, both within past and present contexts. Several of the students talked about current struggles with mental illness, which in some ways added to their sense of shame and embarrassment, while also serving as a backdrop against which they attempted to navigate the challenges of food insecurity. For many students, mental illness made it more challenging to engage with institutional supports. For others, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have increased the likelihood that they would need additional basic need and mental health supports, leading to increased stigma consciousness (see Brown & Pinel, 2003). One student, while discussing why he has a hard time connecting with others, shared the following,

So I personally feel like I was kind of passed around a lot as a child. So I grew up with different family members present. And then my mother and my mom and stepdad had split up and at that time. There was there was just the transition, and so my mother just couldn't really handle what was going on and so this was my seventh grade year of middle school. And so that summer, we had just pretty much got shipped off to Arizona, to Tucson. Until my junior year of high school and then and then I moved back to Bakersfield, my father had ended up going to prison and so I moved back to Bakersfield and graduated high school, moved back to another rough neighborhood. (Michael, 27)

The early experiences of not having a solid family structure have made it difficult to fully engage and trust those who offer support. Parental incarceration, substance abuse, and uncertainty continued to reveal themselves during the interviews. One student, while describing her childhood explained:

Well, growing up, my mom was a drug addict, and my dad was an alcoholic, so it was it was pretty rough, I would say. My mom went to prison as well for a few years. So there is a time where I wasn't with my mom. (Jessica, 22, Latinx)

That lack of parental support continued to impact her academics even into college, where she battled mental illness and homelessness. Another student shared an even starker example of exclusion, "I was an abused child and voted out of my family at age 11, went to live with my grandmother, and I left home at 16 and haven't been back" (David, 58). In each case, this lack of belonging added to feelings of isolation and stigma. For another student, his mother's drug problems and eventual criminal indictments led to catastrophe. Her legal challenges and subsequent suicide meant that he was without vital parental support, both financially and emotionally. Brian, 22, explained, "So about seven years ago, my mom committed suicide, but she made some bad errors. She remarried and with the wrong person in the process, she was committing fraud on her immigration pathway to Citizenship." Past research has suggested that college students often find themselves in a position of vulnerability and asking for help can be difficult when past experiences have not been positive (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017). Furthermore, negative parent-child experiences meant, for some, that skills related to help seeking and the inability to trust made it difficult to thrive as college students.

Other students shared their recent experiences of mental illness that have contributed to their academic and financial struggles. The motivation to succeed was a sentiment that many

shared, although it proved to be difficult in the presence of hard times. One student described the process:

I lost it. And that's so scary to lose that because I was like, well, that's the only thing that drives me. And so I was like, what drives me now? And I think I struggled with depression. So it was hard. I felt alone. I felt just like alone in the world. (Melissa, 24, Latinx)

Others noted that their depression led to eventual suicide attempts and inability to function academically. When talking about her first year in college, one female student commented:

If I would drink alcohol, my true feelings would come out and that would scare people because it was very dark, like I had a very dark mindset and I tried to commit suicide. So this happened and I basically just told them the whole thing, like I've been drinking, smoking, I've been cutting. And they found out and they took me to the mental institution. (Jessica, 22, Latinx)

These struggles were not isolated to her freshman year. In fact, they have persisted throughout her time in school, leading to multiple hospitalizations and outpatient treatments. Although not directly tied to food insecurity, the stigma surrounding mental illness adds yet another layer of shame and embarrassment for many students who are struggling to reach out for help.

Homelessness. Homelessness and food insecurity are commonly co-occurring hardships that place students in increasingly vulnerable positions that increase the likelihood of dropping out of college. Several of the students interviewed shared their experiences of homelessness, both as a child and while in college. One participant in particular had struggled to find housing multiple times while a student at his current university. He shared,

So I've pretty much been homeless three times during college and I have moved 10 times. And not because I don't pay my rent, it's just because somebody got married again and needed me out or somebody, you know, I just didn't get along with them. One house was doing drugs. And so it's been a challenge. (David, 58, Caucasian)

When asked what he has done for housing in those moments, he said, "I just slept in my car until I could find somewhere to live again."

Lack of appropriate housing significantly compounds the issue of food security as not having a place to store food and prepare meals makes adequate nutrition nearly impossible. Moreover, both circumstances lead to reduced academic engagement and higher levels of anxiety. Another student talked about suddenly becoming homeless and the toll that took on her as she reflected,

My last semester of my undergrad, I was homeless because my roommate bought a house. And at the time I was taking seven classes, had an internship, had like so many things, I was working at the time and it was very, very stressful and hard. So at that point, like we ended up arguing back and forth because she told me that I could not move in with her to her new house, so I had to look for a new place or I would have to look for a roommate to take her spot, at least for the time being. So I started crying. I was really stressed out. I didn't know what to do and got really sick. (Jessica, 22, Latinx)

The influence of both food insecurity and homelessness made it increasingly difficult for students to access and engage with university programs in the way they desired. Although some students suggested these struggles contributed to their sense of appreciation for what they have, those unmet basic needs impose significant academic and professional barriers for students.

Emergent Theme 3: Collective Struggle as a Product of COVID-19

The third emergent theme centered the COVID-19 global pandemic, which has presented us with perhaps the most significant public health crisis of our lifetime thus far. Between the countless lives lost, drastic yet necessary prevention efforts, and the eventual economic recession, the pandemic has left a mark on society that has impacted educational institutions, medicine, and the economy. In addition, social distancing and stay-at-home orders have caused many to lose employment while also increasing rates of depression amidst the mandated isolation. College students have been equally susceptible to these consequences, with many being forced to rely on food and rental assistance to survive. What emerged in the thematic analysis was the idea that COVID-19 has changed the way students access food pantries on university campuses as well as altered the discourse surrounding, and experience of, stigma. This theme consists of the following subthemes: access and safety, need, collective struggle, and the changing experience of stigma (see Figure 7). The following thematic analysis provides an overview of the four subthemes as well as contextual support through reflection of personal experiences. Participants shared, with great insight, the way the global pandemic has shifted their personal experiences as well as their perceptions of others in light of challenging circumstances.

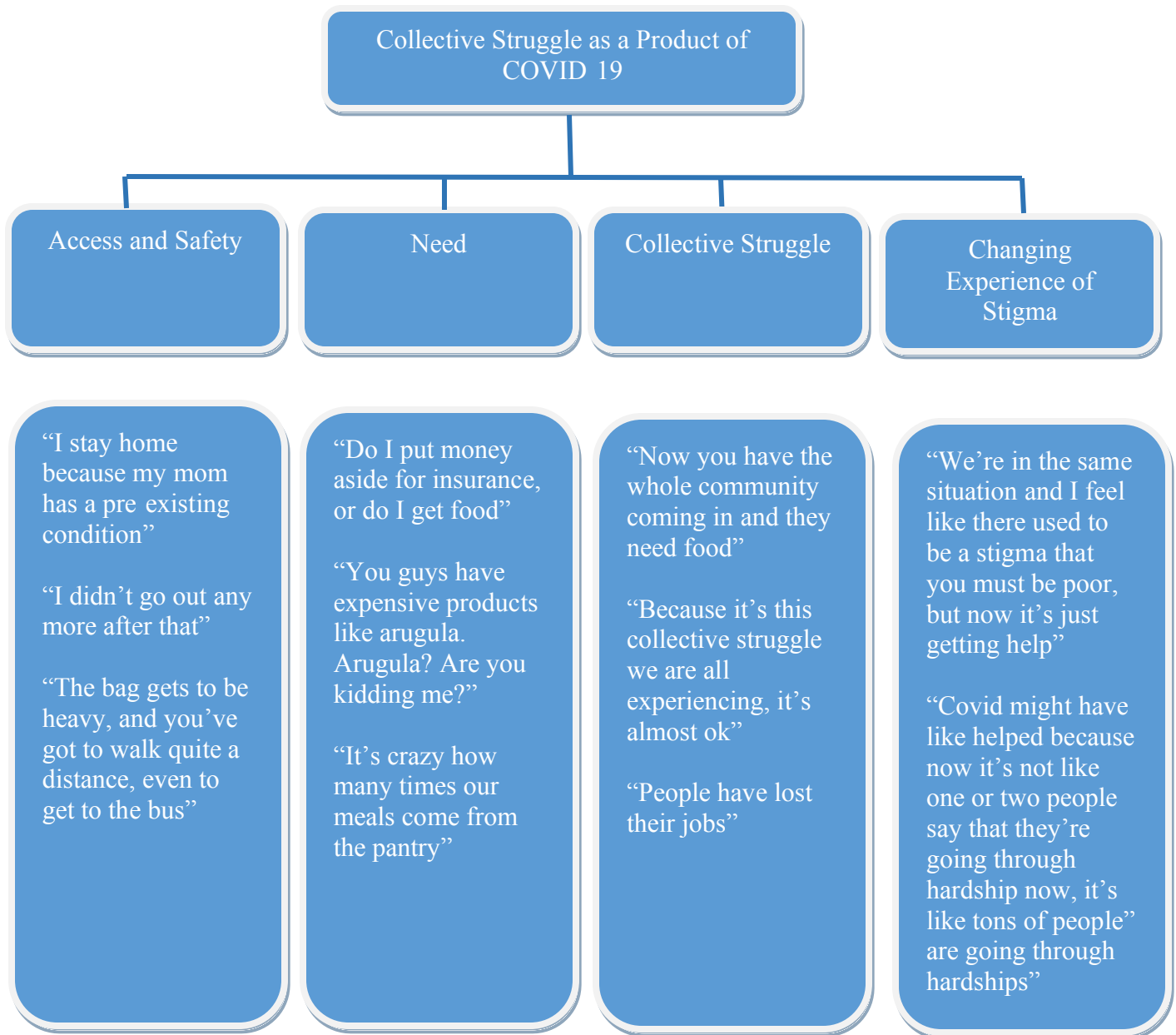


Figure 7. Emergent Theme 3: Collective Struggle as a Product of COVID-19. Participant excerpts are included to highlight the student experience during the pandemic.

Access and Safety. Past research has indicated that more than 4 out of every 10 college students are food-insecure (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018), with many relying on campus food pantries to access quality food. Prior to the pandemic, food pantries were thriving enterprises, with many seeing hundreds, if not thousands of students per week. However, the transition to

virtual learning and widespread closing of many campus operations has fundamentally changed, for the time being, the way students access the food pantry. For some students, issues of safety in the face of a deadly virus have caused them to avoid visiting the pantry. When explaining why he hadn't used the pantry during the pandemic, one student commented, "The multiple times you place yourself in a space where there's high traffic or not even high traffic, just multiple people, there's a certain percentage that arises of exposure" (Larry, 44, African American). The concern that being around people could lead to high personal costs proved to be a significant barrier. Others were concerned for the safety of vulnerable family members and friends. As one student noted, "For example, I stay home because my mom has a pre-existing condition. So like, if I caught it, she's in a bad spot. So that's why over the course of the summer, I didn't go to the pantry" (Kirk, 22, African American). The welfare of others was expressed by several students, including Jessica, a 22-year-old first-generation student who said, "And I think I went there one more time and then I stopped because I was scared, but because her mom is high risk. So I was very scared and cautious. I didn't go out anymore after that."

Other students reported that transportation issues prevented them from accessing the food pantry the way they did when campuses were open to in-person learning. Distance from campus, not having access to a car, and the ability to carry food long distances were all prohibitive in regard to shopping in the pantry. Larry, a 44-year-old male student explained:

And, you know, when you walk out of there, sometimes you have to bring bags of stuff and it's got like a head of cabbage and a gallon of milk and a bag of carrots and a couple bottles of pickles or something. And that gets to be very heavy. And when you're walking off campus, you've got to walk quite a distance from there, even just to get to a bus.

Others noted the lack of transportation and living far from campus were problematic. As Kirk, a 22-year-old first-generation student noted, “Well, I know some people don’t have a car or something like that to get there. Could be I don’t have a car and so I probably wouldn’t go to the food pantry, you know, because the store is down the street.” Even when students reported having access to vehicles, the distance from campus and having other options closer to home caused many of them to reduce their use of the pantry during the pandemic.

Need. Students who have used the pantry explained that the pantry filled a critical void in terms of having access to quality, nutritious food, and that the pantry being open during the pandemic was vital to their well-being. One student put it this way,

I think it’s there’s been times no, it’s financial for sure. I mean, I have to decide, you know, put money aside for insurance or car insurance or, you know, a couple bucks for not even fast food. Like, I can’t even eat fast food. It has to be for groceries. And so there is times yeah, we all have ingredients for one thing, but not for the other. And so it’s like I’m eating, but it’s not, it’s hardly satiating at times. And so the food pantry is like essential, I know I can count on it. (Michael, 27, Latinx, first-generation)

As was the case prior to the pandemic, students continue to operate on limited budgets, and having access to the food pantry was an important means of ensuring they had enough to eat. Sandra, a 22-year-old Latinx female student put it this way, “The food pantry does help like me and my roommates a lot. It’s crazy how many times our meals have come from the pantry.” Others expressed concerns over the price of healthy food, noting that fruits and vegetables are often inaccessible for those on a budget. In that, they noted that being able to shop in the food pantry helped them to consume healthy items they previously thought to be out of reach. One student shared the following, “I feel bad for the people that can’t get in the pantry because

sometimes you guys have some very expensive products, like arugula. Are you kidding me? Like, fresh arugula? I couldn't believe it" (Larry, 44, African American). College food pantries and the offering of fresh produce provided critical nutrition to students, many of whom were experiencing and continue to experience financial hardship during the pandemic.

Collective Struggle. The pandemic and resulting economic downturn have affected millions of Americans as well as individuals around the world. We see evidence of this each time we turn on a national news broadcast. Football stadiums turned into food distribution sites, cars lined up for miles to receive food, and so on. The fact that so many people have been affected has, in turn, created a sense of collective suffering. This bonding experience, albeit through catastrophic means, has given many people of sense of community and comfort knowing they are not alone in their struggles. This idea was well summed up by Melissa, a 24-year-old Latinx student who said:

Because everyone knows. I mean, all the time, like literally we had students on campus, like lose their jobs, right? We have people that can't pay their rent. So I think because it's like this collective struggle, this collective thing that we're all experiencing, it makes it almost like it's ok.

This collective struggle managed to level the proverbial playing field, creating both a sense of togetherness and the realization that it is ok to need help. Another student went so far as to highlight the positive aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic when they shared the following:

Now you have the whole community coming in and they need food. And that's understandable because a lot of people, you know, they're hurting a lot. Some people lost their jobs... And thankfully, look at the positive effects of covid. It's humbling people,

but it's that some people might take it the right way and they see the benefit of using it maybe down the line, you know, as a as another source of income. (Brian, 22)

That realization has, perhaps temporarily, altered the experience of stigma among those needing food assistance.

Changing Experience of Stigma. Receiving social assistance or visiting a food bank or pantry has long been a source of stigma, often to the point of being a significant barrier to much needed resources. Prior to the pandemic, stigma was cited as the most commonly cited barrier as to why students do not visit the pantry (El Zein et al., 2018). However, the collective struggle and seeing one's self in the other has changed the way stigma is experienced, at least in the current climate. Participants in the current study indicated they felt less stigma when using the pantry because they saw so many others in need. Against the backdrop of shared struggle, we see manifestations of past research. Stigma management theory (Meisenbach, 2010) stipulates that public discourse shifts based on current conditions, and therefore it would be premature to extrapolate too far these changes. Despite that, participants overwhelmingly expressed a shift in the way they experience stigma in light of the pandemic and struggles of those around them. Tyler, a 21-year-old Caucasian student said, "I believe actually that it might have decreased the stigma about going to it for me, because a lot of people have been hit hard by the pandemic." The fact that other people have also been hit hard has changed the way people see themselves when needing help because as they put it, "Covid might have like helped because now it's not like one or two people say that they're going through hardship now, it's like tons of people are going through hardships" (Maya, 18, Latinx, first-generation).

Others drew direct connections to the expression of stigma and the fear of being seen as poor. The fact that so many people were struggling meant that using a food pantry no longer

carries the same connotations it once did and is therefore much more acceptable. When asked about it, Michael, 27, explained, “Well, you know, there’s no stigma, like we’re not poor now. We’re in the same situation and I feel like there used to be a stigma that you must be poor, but now it’s just getting help.” The idea that stigma could be shifted based on the situations of others was further highlighted by Melissa, a 24-year-old Latinx student who said, “I think because a lot of people are struggling and it’s so evident, it’s almost like this collective struggle. And so, I think because of that, it makes it ok.”

What is clear is that the collective struggle has changed the way stigma is experienced by those who rely on the food pantry to meet basic needs. The COVID-19 pandemic has, in a sense, leveled the playing field, causing many to struggle in ways they had previously not experienced. For students, knowing that others have a similar lived experience has resulted in less shame and embarrassment surrounding using the pantry.

A Priori Coding in Accordance with Stigma Management Theory

The experience of stigma resulting from using social supports has been well documented (Broton et al., 2015; Henry, 2017; Purdam et al., 2016) although to a very limited degree with college students as it relates to food insecurity. Stigma Management Theory (SMT) presents a framework for understanding how stigma is both experienced and communicated (Meisenbach, 2010). The theory posits that individuals can either accept or deny the applicability of the stigma to the self and likewise accept or deny the public perception of the stigma, thus leading to four basic outcomes. Within each response outcome or quadrant are various strategies used to manage stigma. The following sections will explore each of the four individually, providing examples of each found through the interview process.

Accept-Accept. Individuals may choose to accept the stigma associated with a particular identity or behavior. Within that acceptance, individuals may invoke a variety of strategies to make sense of and internalize stigma. One such strategy is to passively accept the stigma by accepting the public understanding of the stigma and incorporating it into one's self-concept. For some, that presents as a passive acceptance of the stigma. One student put it this way:

I remember he would always ask me, like, oh, do you want to take like you want to get your points? And I'd be like, No, no, no, it's OK. Because I was, like, embarrassed.

And I told myself I was like, no, like, I don't want to be seen, like walking out of the food pantry, like with a bag. So I was I was like, really embarrassed. (Melissa, 24, Latinx)

By acknowledging the stigma and the way it influenced her behavior, the student navigated the experience in ways consistent with accepting the stigma. The same student, after talking about stigma in retrospect, had somewhat of an epiphany, noting she was not as far from it as she thought.

If I can mention real quick, though, because I know you were talking about like the stigma now and I know I said like, I have no, like, embarrassment, but then I was, like, reflecting a little bit. I got into like I entered like a new relationship, for example, and something that I realized was this person, I wouldn't want them to know I was getting food from the food pantry. (Melissa, 24, Latinx)

Interestingly there were some avoidant strategies present that as well including distancing and hiding the stigma consistent with past research (Reichert, 2012). That notwithstanding, there remained a passive acceptance of the stigma that was, in that moment, surprising even to her. Dahlberg et al. (2008) suggest this kind of reflection is at the heart of reflective lifeworld

research and provides greater insight to the researcher and subject alike. Another student remarked that, because of the stigma, he felt singled out and looked down upon, stating:

Because I'm walking around with a loaf of bread like it's embarrassing, like it was embarrassing, then I take the bus like say you're walking around with like a loaf of bread and, like, protein drinks. And it's like that could be looked at like you're poor, you're a loser. (Michael, 27, Latinx, first-generation)

Another common strategy is to blame the stigma for one's actions. As one put it, the consequence of the social stigma, which she fully accepted, prevented her from using the pantry. She shared the following:

I don't want to get food from the food pantry because I'm able to kind of get food through my own means. So I was like I don't absolutely need it. Like it's not going to make or break me getting food from the food pantry. And then second reason was that I don't want people to think that, like, I'm struggling. So I think it was like the mixture of those two things that stopped me from going. (Melissa, 24, Latinx, first-generation)

Although not as common as other strategies, participants blamed the stigma itself, albeit subtly, highlighting the acceptance and accompanying discomfort in discussing the subject.

Other strategies employed were bonding with the stigmatized and the use of humor. Many students experienced greater comfort in the presence of others who were also engaging in stigmatizing behaviors or situations. Jessica, a 22-year-old female student remarked, "I think another thing that really helped me was I would always tell my friends to come with me like I wouldn't go by myself." These sentiments speak to the benefits gained from being connected to others, even in the face of social and internalized stigma. Still, others spoke of using humor to deflect stigma. One in particular noted that his mother would often make fun of them and their

food options, saying “But she would still make fun of it. Like my mom would still. Like, what are you doing with that ghetto, like, off-brand stuff?” (Michael, 27). This particular excerpt highlights the work of past scholars who have examined social stratification and perceptions about those in need. As noted by Nazmi et al. (2018), more than 40 million Americans are food-insecure, suggesting the problem is widespread. However, as noted by others (see Broton et al., 2014; and Weiner et al., 1988), ideas of deservingness and the applicability of stigma to certain individuals are highly influential in terms of self-concept. Although less common, bonding and humor were both identified as coping strategies when faced with stigma.

Accept-Challenge. The second set of strategies are composed of the interplay between accepting the public understanding of the stigma and challenging the applicability to the self. Common techniques include hiding or denying the stigma, avoiding stigmatizing situations, and distancing the self from the stigma. The desire to be seen, untethered to stigmatizing identities, despite social perceptions can be powerful, as evident in the way students described their experiences. The first technique identified was that of hiding or denying the stigma. Jessica, 22, said, “I wouldn’t want my friends to think, like, I don’t want them to know I’m going through a hard time, you know, and then I’m screwed.” Regardless of the need that had been previously disclosed, the choice to hide that from friends highlighted the need to reject the stigma label.

Others expressed a desire to avoid certain situations all together in order to protect their sense of self and not accept the stigma label. One student, while explaining why they didn’t want to visit the pantry, said, “I guess this is the typical thing, like, oh, I don’t want a hand out or anything” (Kirk, 22, African American, first-generation). Even within that statement, it was clear the student felt the need to couch it in abstract and generic language as to imply it is more a struggle for others that he can simply relate to. Jessica, a 22-year-old Latinx student shared

similar apprehension, although in a more direct manner, stating, “So I was like, man, I don’t want people to think like I’m poor. Like sometimes I was poor, but I want people to know that’s not their business.” In the face of hunger and poverty, students initially insisted on avoiding situations that would cause distress and invite greater levels of stigma.

Another technique used to challenge the applicability to oneself is that of distancing the self from the stigma. This type of distancing can take several forms but typically includes externalized language and making favorable comparisons to others who are affected to a greater extent. Indeed, distancing the self from the stigma was one of the more commonly used means by which students made sense of and communicated about stigma. For some, it takes the form of using externalized language and talking about the stigma as it applies to others. For example, one student said when talking about the relationship between stigma and food pantry usage, “So that’s not necessarily me, but like, I’ll see it from other students” (Kirk, 22). He was far from alone in the desire to place stigma as something that only others feel. Another student explained it this way:

So I can definitely see kind of a stigma around it, because I think a lot of people wouldn’t really want to go to a food pantry, but they have to go get free food like that kind of there’s a little bit of a stigma to that. But personally, I’ve never felt that way. (Tyler, 21, Caucasian)

It is important to note at this point that none of these strategies or techniques are meant to be construed as disingenuous or lacking insight (see Meisenbach, 2010; Reichert, 2012). Rather, they represent the myriad ways that people come to navigate stigma. Moreover, reflective lifeworld research (Dahlberg et al., 2008) acknowledges that individuals are the experts on their personal experiences, and the researcher should let the phenomenon unfold organically. In

keeping with that point, Maya, an 18-year-old female student, expressed a similar experience noting, “Which I don’t know, for me, it’s kind of hard to just say it, but I feel like some people would be embarrassed about it, especially just because I don’t know, because you’re getting free food.” Similar phrasing came up repeatedly as students sought to distance themselves from any outward experience of stigma, often casting it as the problem of others. That same student displayed a more pronounced type of distancing, one in which the individual seeks to favorably compare their position to that of others. She explained it by saying, “And also it makes me feel grateful because I know that I’m not one of those people that are there because this is all they have” (Maya, 18). Despite using the pantry almost weekly and it serving to help feed her family, she maintained psychological distance from others based on her perception of need, thus creating a detached other to possess a greater level of stigma.

Students used a variety of means that demonstrated a rejection of personal applicability while simultaneously acknowledging the legitimacy of social understandings of stigma. Hiding or denying the stigma attribute ensured that the stigma could not be applied to the individual, similar to that of avoiding stigmatizing situations. Stigma resides in the space between the stigmatized and stigmatizer; therefore, removing oneself from the situation or remaining in the shadows helped to soften the experience of stigma and its interpersonal implications.

Challenge-Accept. First conceptualizing and then navigating stigma requires the individual to either accept or challenge the public understanding of stigma. This theme is comprised of strategies used when a person accepts the applicability to the self but rejects the public perception surrounding the stigmatizing attribute or behavior. One of the primary means of doing so is that of reducing the offensiveness of the stigma, either through minimizing the source or attempting to reframe the stigma through transcendence. Several of the students

interviewed explained the way they had come to terms with the stigma, often affirming the usefulness of the pantry and refuting the merits of the stigma. As Jessica, a 22-year-old female student put it:

Like everybody goes through a hard time and it's nothing to be ashamed about. Like you just need to go in there, get your food and get out. So I try to, like, talk myself that it's OK to have help with, like food or with things like that. So I would always just try to talk myself, like to calm down and everything's fine.

Another student was more matter of fact in her response when she said, "I get hungry, and I'm human. So I don't think I should be judged for being hungry or needing to eat right" (Sandra, 22, Latinx, first-generation). The ability to reframe the experience helped some students to feel empowered and access resources that were previously stigmatizing, whereas others noted the universal need for adequate nutrition as a reason.

Other students referenced the changing social dynamics surrounding college students and need, noting that over the past few years the expectation of stigma had shifted to one of acceptance rather than something to be ashamed of. When comparing his experiences of using the pantry five years ago, and then today, one student said:

Yeah, but just throughout the time it's been so normalized because I just feel like there was more people who are like we they're just like you just. I noticed it more like there was like waves of people coming out of the room, like I would notice, like I would just take a mental note, like, wow, do you see that person? Doesn't even look like he would need a pantry. (Michael, 27, Latinx)

This excerpt echoes the feelings surrounding collective struggle described earlier. For students, being aware of, and seeing others in similar positions helped to reduce the feelings of shame and

embarrassment, further augmenting the public perception of stigma. Another student put it this way:

I think there's definitely been a shift in terms of like the willingness of everybody to use the pantry. Everybody was happy when they got their food box. So I think that the just like looking just like from a social thing happened like there was nobody that was like, I don't want to that. They kind of understand like, oh, this is what it's like to not be able to pay your bills or lose your job and struggle from month to month. (Kirk, 22)

Once again, we see the shifting nature of the ways students come to reject the public understanding of stigma, consistent with axiom 2 of Stigma Management Theory.

Challenge-Challenge. The fourth and final theme outlined in Stigma Management Theory posits that some individuals navigate stigma by rejecting both the applicability to the self as well as the public understanding of the particular stigma. The most common strategies or techniques used are simple and logical denials. Logical denials were employed by students in the study who sought to explain their using the pantry. One particular student explained that life experiences and the universal need to eat dispel the idea that using a food pantry should carry with it any stigma. He explained it this way,

I don't have a problem with that because I've been poor most of my life and I didn't have a problem standing at the cafeteria at the school or going, are you going to eat that? Don't throw it away. Are you going to go away just so that I would have food? So there's a mind change there that takes place. Are you going to are you going to eat or are you going to be prideful? I never had problems asking because somebody could just say no. I had no problem going over to a friend's house or something and saying, hey, I'm hungry, can I eat something? (David, 58, Caucasian, first-generation)

Still, others further dismissed the stigma on less pragmatic and more philosophical explanations, refuting both the personal and societal experience of stigma. One student said:

So, from my perspective, I always figured I always view stuff like that as. If you need it, do it. Personally, it's a little bit hard to kind of explain or really think about why people would refuse that kind of help. I think stigma is a stupid concept, honestly. (Tyler, 21, Caucasian)

By rejecting the influence of stigma on both the individual level and social understanding of the phenomenon, students were able to access resources without the additional considerations that others had to first come to terms with.

As outlined in Stigma Management Theory, individuals use a variety of strategies to navigate and communicate about stigmatizing experiences. Students in this study shared experiences ranging from passively accepting the stigma to denying its presence based on logical arguments. Others were more ambivalent, choosing to hide or distance themselves from the stigma in order to avoid social disapproval. Still, others sought to change the narrative by reducing the offensiveness through reframing. Figure 8 illustrates the range of strategies consistent with SMT through participant excerpts.

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Accept-Accept</u></p> <p>“So I was really embarrassed”</p> <p>“I wouldn’t want them to know I was getting food from the food pantry.”</p> <p>“And it’s like you’re poor, you’re a loser.”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Accept-Challenge</u></p> <p>“I don’t want people to think that, like, I’m struggling.”</p> <p>“I wouldn’t want my friends to know I’m going through a hard time”</p> <p>“I don’t want a hand out or anything”</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Challenge-Accept</u></p> <p>“Everybody goes through a hard time and it’s nothing to be ashamed about.”</p> <p>“I don't think I should be judged for being hungry or needing to eat right”</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Challenge-Challenge</u></p> <p>“I had no problem going over to a friend’s house or something and saying, hey, I’m hungry, can I eat something?”</p> <p>“Are you going to be prideful, or are you going to eat?”</p>

Figure 8. Navigation strategies consistent with Stigma Management Theory (Meisenbach, 2010).

Regardless of how individuals made sense of the stigma, it is evident that the basic tenets of the theory are applicable to college students and their experience of stigma arising from using the food pantry.

Summary

This chapter presented a complex thematic analysis of data gained through semi-structured interviews conducted with college students in order to provide a deeper understanding of the lived experience of stigma as associated with using an on-campus food pantry. Although stigma is widely considered to be universally relevant, the data revealed highly individualized patterns of experience of and response to stigmatizing events. Two forms of coding were used to analyze the data. Inductive coding sought to explore the lived experience of stigma and the way that COVID-19 has influenced that experience when using a food pantry, supporting research

questions 1 and 3. Deductive coding using a priori codes derived from Stigma Management Theory (Meisenbach, 2010) were used to understand the way students navigate the experience of stigma as well as the strategies and coping mechanisms employed.

Inductive coding revealed three main themes: *fear of being seen as poor, hardship as fundamental to being a college student, and the collective struggle as a result of COVID-19*. Furthermore, this chapter utilized subthemes and excerpts of participant interviews to provide valuable context to the experience of stigma. Deductive coding revealed a variety of coping strategies consistent with SMT were used by students to understand, make meaning of, and communicate about stigma. Participants reflected a wide range of responses, including *passively accepting the stigma, distancing the self from stigma, reducing the offensiveness, and the use of logical denials to refute the merits of this particular stigma*. Each technique or strategy supported the *accept* and *challenge* outcomes of Stigma Management Theory.

These findings support the myriad ways that stigma is both experienced and understood by college students. The participants in this study spoke candidly about the ways they experience stigma and the societal underpinnings of shame and embarrassment that make it difficult to use the food pantry. However difficult, each participant was able to navigate that stigma and eventually use the critical resource. The following chapter will explore these findings in context and provide connections to practice and policy. In addition, the limitations of the study as well as implications and suggestions for future research will be discussed.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current phenomenological investigation has been to understand the lived experience of stigma by college students using an on-campus food pantry. Likewise, the researcher has sought to understand the implications of the current global pandemic on the experience of stigma. To guide the study, three research questions were identified: (a) How do college students experience stigma as they use a campus food pantry? (b) How do students navigate the stigma experienced as a result of using the food pantry? and (c) How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected food pantry stigma? By understanding the lived experience of stigma, the researcher intends to use these findings to support practical solutions to addressing food insecurity on college campuses through policy reform and the identification of best practices.

This chapter will first provide an overview of the study, including a brief discussion of the methodology and contextual factors that influenced data collection. Thematic analysis of the main emergent themes will provide important context and connections to policy and practice. The chapter will conclude with a discussion about the study's significance in relation to past research including action items for consideration, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

Summary of the Study

The current phenomenological study was grounded in reflective lifeworld research developed by Dahlberg et al. (2008) so as to better understand the lived experiences of college students who use on-campus food pantries. Reflective lifeworld research acknowledges that the participant is the true expert on their life and supports the use of interviews to draw out the essence of those personal experiences. Particularly relevant to the current study was the way that

students experience and navigate perceived stigma when using the pantry. Participants were recruited from three locations within the CSU who had used the on-campus food pantry at least once, although each participant noted multiple visits to the pantry, with most being regular users. Consistent with the system-wide demographic trends, more than half of the interviewees were Latinx and 70% were first-generation students. Interviews were conducted over Zoom teleconferencing to accommodate social distancing as well as state, local, and campus policies related to face-to-face gathering as a result of COVID-19. It should be noted, however, many campus food pantries remain closed or are operating as drive-up services in light of the pandemic. As a result, recruiting participants from the full range of campuses was not possible. Also noteworthy is that saturation was reached prior to the last interview, which supports the current sample size and guidelines set forth by Polkinghorne (1989).

Participants were first asked to describe their experiences growing up (See Appendix B for complete interview protocol). These questions were designed to build rapport and provide the researcher with background information about each participant's life prior to becoming a college student. Within these discussions, experiences of childhood trauma, neglect, and isolation were ubiquitous. Although not directly related to the current research questions, these data highlight the struggles that many students experience well before they step foot on a college campus. Likewise, these early experiences serve to shape the way individuals interpret and experience the world around them. The next section of the interview focused on the experience of using the pantry and the associated barriers. Participants were asked to reflect on what it felt like to use the pantry, both upon entering and leaving, and what feelings arose as a result of their visit. According to past research, the idea of stigma represented the most widely expressed barrier to service use, consistent with past research (El Zein et al., 2018). The final section of the

interview focused on how participants navigated or made meaning of that stigma. In addition, participants were asked to reflect on the way that COVID-19 has influenced their experience of stigma. Dahlberg et al. (2008) suggest that one goal of reflective lifeworld research is to allow participants to reflect on their responses in the moment with the hopes of gaining clarity. Indeed, several participants experienced varying levels of insight during the interview, even processing through conflicting feelings in real time.

Interviews were recorded via Zoom and the audio file was saved to the researcher's password-protected computer which was kept in a locked office on campus. Upon completion of each interview, the audio files were uploaded to NVivo transcription, an online transcription tool, and then analyzed using NVivo for Windows desktop software. Two forms of coding were used: inductive and deductive. Inductive coding was an iterative process, which allowed for the emergence of subthemes and eventual themes. Three main themes emerged from the inductive process: *fear of being seen as poor*, *hardship as fundamental to being a college student*, and *the collective struggle as a result of COVID-19*. Deductive coding utilized a priori codes derived from Stigma Management Theory (Meisenbach, 2010). These codes, spread across four quadrants, reflect the various ways individuals understand, make meaning of, and communicate about stigma. Deductive coding yielded four major themes: *accept-accept*, *accept-challenge*, *challenge-accept*, and *challenge-challenge*. Figure 9 presents a visual representation of the relationship between underlying conditions that influence the experience of stigma, as well as the coping strategies used to navigate stigma. Particularly noteworthy is the way that *collective struggle* exists alongside of stigma influencers, offering relief and justification for stigmatizing identities.

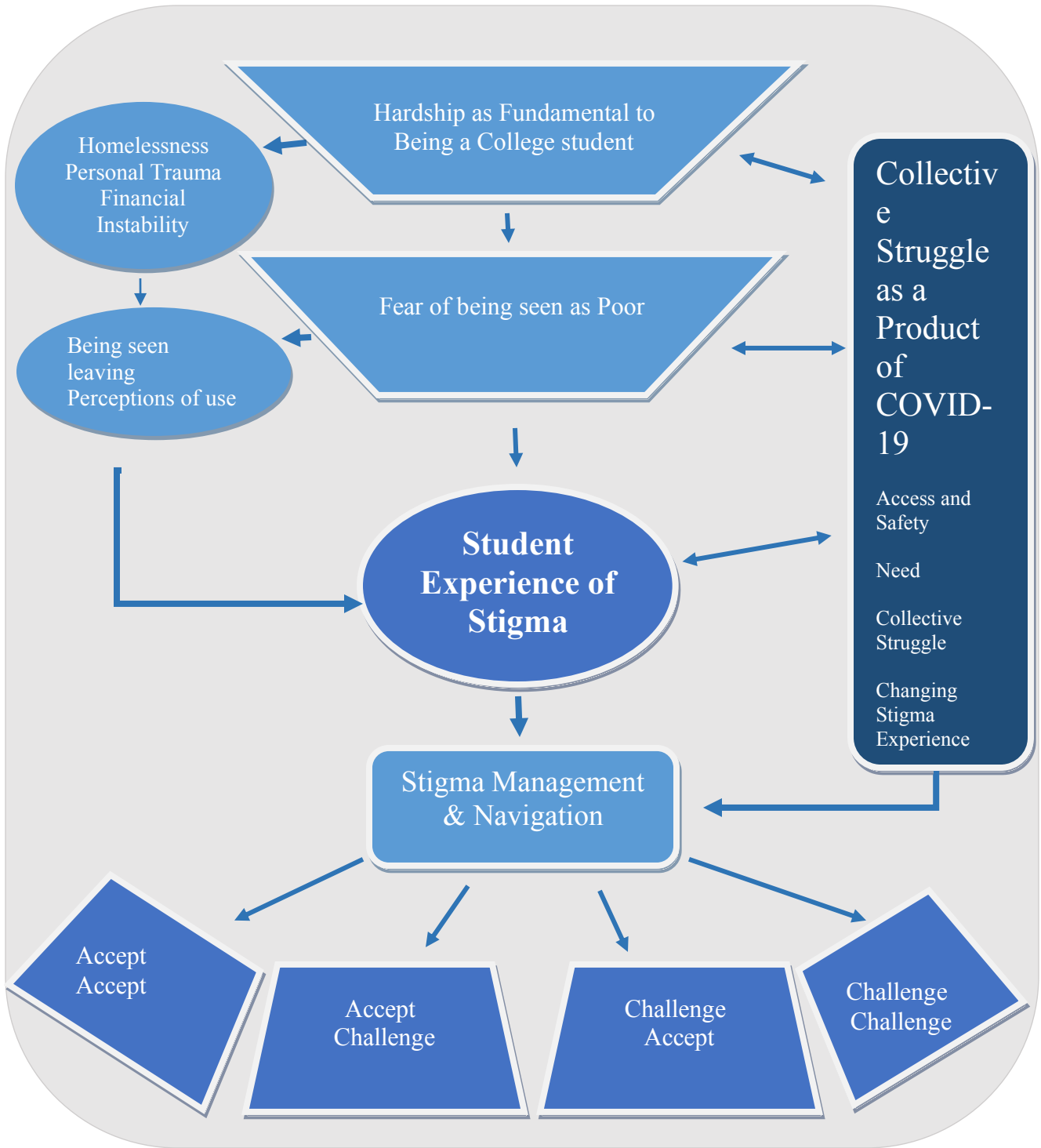


Figure 9. Conceptual map of thematic analysis.

It should be noted that the experience of stigma does not happen in a vacuum; rather, it operates in accordance with social expectations and at the public and personal level. The above figure demonstrates the influence of social perceptions and socioeconomic factors on the ways students experience stigma leading to a variety of navigation strategies based on Stigma Management Theory (Meisenbach, 2010).

Situating the Emergent Findings in the Existing Literature

The emergent themes presented in the previous chapter expand on the work of previous scholars who have examined both food insecurity and feelings of stigma. The following discussion will explore each theme in detail, providing a deeper discussion of the findings and their application.

Emergent Theme 1: Fear of Being Seen as Poor

Throughout the interviews and subsequent coding processes, the idea of being seen as poor or less than was a common expression, with participants going to great lengths to avoid being seen in a negative light. Indeed, past research indicated that the desire to be seen as part of the in group, especially when explored in the context of social assistance, remains central to many (Smith, 2007; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006). Students in the current study expressed great concern over being seen by others as they left the pantry, suggesting that others would think less of them knowing they might be struggling. Inherent in these statements is the assumption of struggle or the equating of visiting the pantry with poverty. Again, these findings were consistent with past research that found that participants reported negative feelings resulting from the stigma associated with relying on others for help (Purdam, Garratt, & Esmail, 2016). Despite expressing very positive experiences while shopping in the pantry, many students chose to hide their food or leave at specific times so as to avoid being seen by their peers.

Interestingly, participants reported quite conflicting feelings tied to a singular event: visiting the pantry. Whereas they appreciated and even enjoyed the shopping experience, the act of leaving was one that brought about increased anxiety to the extent that it determined behavior and altered the course of action for some.

When examined through the lens of food insecurity among college students, these findings present a perplexing reality. As noted by Crutchfield and Maguire (2018), more than 40% of college students are food-insecure, and Nazmi et al. (2018) suggest the problem extends far beyond students, with many Americans in crisis. However, despite the high levels of food insecurity on college campuses, the fear of one's peers knowing they are using the food pantry represents a significant barrier to service utilization. Echoes of past research are evident in the current study as it relates to deservingness and outside perceptions. In their examination of school aged children who received free and or reduced meals, Burris et al. (2020) found that students reported high levels of personal embarrassment and bullying as a result of getting free food. These finding were not unique to younger kids. Henry (2017) found that college students reported excessive worry about what others would think of them if their using the pantry were known. Broton et al. (2014) attribute much of this pressure to the idea of deservingness and that many students struggle to find their place among their colleagues who they perceive to be in greater need. Despite these seemingly contradictory realities (i.e., high rates of food insecurity and fear of being seen as struggling), there is reason to believe change is possible. Xu et al. (2016) found that messaging around resources played a critical role in reducing stigma. Administrators and those working to address basic needs on college campuses may want to consider improved messaging related to food pantry, highlighting to students that they are not alone. To date, much of the outreach regarding food insecurity rates has been directed towards

staff and faculty, with little direct messaging to students explaining the prevalence and outcomes associated with food insecurity. It is possible, even likely, that if students know how common their struggle is, that there will be less apprehension about using and being seen in the food pantry.

Also contained within the first theme were perceptions about using the pantry and what it meant in terms of self-concept. Understandably, one might be tempted to conflate this with the fear of being seen, as they are indeed very much related. However, the idea of personal pride interfering with pantry usage brings up a variety of feelings in students that have potentially negative outcomes. College represents a unique stage in one's life, one of autonomy and striving for self-sufficiency. Participants in the current study expressed deeply held beliefs that using the pantry made them unworthy, negatively affecting their sense of self. Whereas some participants likened using the pantry to hitting *rock bottom*, others internalized to the extent that they began talking about themselves as *losers* and *not having their shit together*, showcasing the extreme and unhealthy ways that students incorporate food insecurity into their self-schema. Conversely, others drew comfort in knowing they were not like others who needed it more, adding another layer of embarrassment for those in need, albeit inadvertently.

Past research provides clues that support the current findings surrounding pride and being able to care for oneself. Powell, Amsbary, and Xin (2015), in their exploration of WIC users, found themes consistent with what was expressed with the students in this study. The idea that using government support was a proxy for laziness or unwillingness to work proved to be prohibitive in both contexts. Stuber and Kronebusch (2004) found that participants expressed fear of being seen as lazy or unable to care for themselves as a barrier to enrollment in temporary aid. It is worth noting here, the connection between old and new. As was the case more nearly

two decades ago, social pressures surrounding assistance loom large in the minds of would-be beneficiaries of timely and appropriate support. It is imperative for policymakers and university administrators to be mindful of this as a major barrier to service utilization. Decision makers who are mindful of these feelings have the potential to target marketing efforts to promote inclusion and reduce the stigma around using campus resources. Rather than treat food pantries and other assistance programs as something to hide, educators can and should make an effort to address stigma head-on, while affirming the worthiness of students separate from their social or economic standing.

Theme 1 illuminated the idea that the experience of going with others made it easier to visit the pantry. Once again, the fear of standing out from the norm was a barrier for many. Because of that fear, they relied on the presence of others to facilitate their visit. Interestingly, this buffer existed only in the presence of others who were also using the pantry. Whether it be happenstance or a result of careful planning, many students expressed that they would not have gone to the pantry to begin with if not for others. Basic needs leaders should be mindful of this, as group and/or classroom visits help to normalize the food pantry. By bringing in students in groups from the beginning, universities have the potential to mitigate much of the resistance up front, allowing for students to visit the pantry with the safety of knowing they are not alone.

Emergent Theme 2: Hardship as Fundamental to Being a College Student

Thematic analyses revealed that students are struggling across multiple domains as they attempt to obtain a college education. As noted by Broton & Goldrick-Rab (2017), the cost of attending college has increased dramatically over the past several decades, with students needing to spend much more of their income on education than did past students. Likewise, many students from the lowest SES never complete their degrees, further compounding their financial

and emotional woes. Participants in the current study expressed, overwhelmingly, struggles that impeded their academic progress and negatively impacted their emotional well-being.

Financial instability remains a reality for the majority of the students in the current study. Participants reported having to skip meals regularly, make difficult choices about what bills to pay, and visiting numerous pantries in the area to have even the slightest chance of getting enough food to eat. Past research has demonstrated that financial instability negatively impacts academic progress for college students. Dubick et al. (2016) found that financial instability and food insecurity were inextricably linked and combined to interfere with classroom engagement and the ability to buy textbooks and necessary materials. Moreover, those conditions increased the likelihood that a student would drop out or fail classes. Still, others highlight the physical and emotional toll that financial instability takes on students in the form of depression and anxiety (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Eisenberg, 2015), academic worry (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018), and physical ailments such as obesity and increased risk for diabetes (Payne-Sturges, Tjaden, Caldeira, Vincent, & Arria, 2018). Although not directly related to the experience of stigma, financial instability promotes the conditions that feed shame and stigma and create yet another hoop for students to jump through when trying to access help. Given the numerous negative outcomes associated with financial instability, universities should seek creative ways to reduce student costs. Open-source textbooks, transportation assistance, and increased employment opportunities on campus are but a few means by which educational institutions can support students financially.

Another common experience revealed in the analysis was that of personal trauma and mental illness. As previously mentioned in relation to financial hardship, these do not relate directly to the experience of stigma when using the food pantry. They do, however, contribute to

a foundation of stigma experience that informs the way students process and make sense of support seeking in college. In a sense, using the food pantry represents another layer of stigma to be navigated for someone with a history of trauma and mental health concerns. Participants shared their experiences of being neglected as children, being raised in homes with violence and substance abuse, parental incarceration, and struggling with depression throughout childhood. For many, these experiences have only continued into their college experience. Depression and suicidal ideation, crippling anxiety, and losing sight of one's purpose continue to plague the students in the current study, often making it hard to reach out for help or being so consumed with other pressing crises that food assistance takes a back seat. Efforts to support student mental well-being have enjoyed increased support in recent years and those efforts should certainly continue. However, the connection between mental health and basic needs requires more attention from administrators and practitioners. Students who are food-insecure are among those most likely to benefit from counseling and psychological services on campus. Moreover, universities should strive to eliminate the separation between mental health and basic needs efforts on campus.

In addition to having to make difficult choices about money and mental health challenges, participants shared experiences of being homeless, both as children and as college students. Past research has demonstrated that as many as 11% of college students are either homeless or at risk for homelessness (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018). Limited financial means, conflict with parents and other roommates, and job loss have all contributed to student homelessness. Stigmatizing in its own right, homelessness carries a variety of negative social connotations. Coupled with food insecurity, participants reported feeling overwhelmed and internalized stigma to unhealthy levels. Moreover, homelessness and food insecurity are often

co-occurring and should be addressed in unison to provide holistic support for students. Basic needs leaders on campus should continue to incorporate housing resources into current pantry operations, ensuring that all that use the pantry can be made aware of available housing support.

Emergent Theme 3: Collective Struggle as a Product of COVID-19

Throughout the interviews and thematic analysis, the overarching connection to the current global pandemic was unescapable. In fact, rarely did a question not lead back to COVID-19 in one way or another. In March of 2020, the state of California implemented a number of measures designed to mitigate the effects and slow the spread of the deadly virus. Among those were the transition to distance learning across the educational system and statewide and then regional stay-at-home orders, resulting in empty campuses and increased feelings of isolation. As a result of our way of life drastically changing, seemingly overnight, participants expressed a variety of experiences unique to the pandemic.

Campus food pantries represent a vital resource for many food-insecure students on college campuses. With as many as 40% of students reporting food insecurity, food pantries across the state and nation have grown in numbers substantially to meet the needs of hungry students (Moreno-Yamashiro, 2019). Prior to the pandemic, students were able to use the pantry on campus without fear of adverse health consequences. Nearly a year into the pandemic, that comfort level has changed drastically. Students expressed high levels of concern regarding visiting the pantry for fear of being exposed or exposing others to the virus. Pre-existing health conditions of close others and personal responsibility had led many to stay home despite needing assistance. Still, others expressed concerns over transportation as inhibitive to using the pantry, noting that many have food banks closer to home that are more convenient. During times of such economic uncertainty, the cost of driving across town or from an outlying area was too

high. To address this issue, some campuses have implemented delivery services that bring the pantry to the student's home, reducing the transportation barrier. Despite these efforts, the fear of getting sick remains salient for many, and until vaccines are widely available, it is unlikely that worry will subside.

Throughout the interviews, students shared their experiences of being in need and the ways the pantry gave them access to otherwise unattainable food choices. Because of the pandemic, many students lost employment, and the pantry became their main source of food. Others relied on the pantry to access produce that was often out of reach. As an extension of student financial instability, increased need as a result of the pandemic seemed to make the pantry, for those who had access and felt safe, even more vital to student well-being. Basic needs teams and pantry staff should take great resolve in the fact that students report high levels of satisfaction. Likewise, safety protocols and social distancing efforts implemented to ensure well-being should continue into the foreseeable future. Moreover, regular messaging regarding best practices around cleaning and food sourcing should be the focus of food pantry staff over the coming months as we return to more in-person service delivery.

The COVID-19 pandemic has represented a major departure for students, both in terms of the way they access their academic pursuits and on a deeply personal level, with isolation and social distancing changing even the most pedestrian routines. Despite the myriad of negative outcomes associated with the pandemic, evidence suggests an unexpected and somewhat positive outcome. Participants expressed comfort in knowing they were not alone, speaking warmly of the collective suffering seen around them. Not that joy was taken in others' pain, rather they saw it as more of a bonding experience that eased the burden of asking for help. Indeed, people from across different walks of life have shared common experiences of hardship. The sense of

community, albeit forced and in many ways tragic, has helped students to feel less alone and more understood in general. Moreover, the collective struggle has fundamentally changed the experience of stigma surrounding food assistance. Figure 10 provides an illustration of how students talk about using the pantry and the subsequent feelings of shame and embarrassment.



Figure 10. Frequency Word Cloud of participant experts contained within three emergent themes.

The above figure gives life to and enriches the data gleaned through the thematic analysis and emergent themes. Students reported feeling embarrassed about using the pantry, specifically when leaving. Moreover, the social stigma associated with using the pantry was pervasive, although mitigated somewhat by the collective struggle as produced by the pandemic.

A substantial body of literature has explored, in great depth, the stigma that many people experience when using food assistance programs like food banks and various forms of government assistance (see Cook & Barrett, 1992; El Zein et al., 2018; Henry, 2017; Powell, Xin, & Amsbary, 2015; Stuber & Kronebusch, 2004). Moreover, stigma as a barrier to service utilization has not been limited to community and government resources. El Zein et al. (2018) found that stigma represented a significant barrier that prevented students from using on-campus food pantries, suggesting that more research was needed to understand the phenomenon. The perception that so many people are experiencing similar economic misfortune presents an opportunity to shift the public discourse on stigma. Participants shared their experiences of seeing themselves in others, noting this reflection reduced the stigma they experienced using the pantry. The longevity of this new-found perspective remains to be seen; however, it is worth highlighting that the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent food insecurity nationwide has fundamentally changed these students' experiences of stigma and made it easier to visit the pantry. They experienced less shame and embarrassment after seeing so many others in similar circumstances.

It is doubtful that anyone would suggest the pandemic has been a positive event. At this point, more than half a million Americans have been lost to the virus, and the economic fallout from stay-at-home orders and lost wages will likely be felt for years to come. However, the nearly universal experience of hardship, at least to some extent, has served to build a sense of community that otherwise may not have happened. Not unlike, but on a much larger scale, that which we see after national tragedies, the participants expressed greater compassion for others and themselves, creating a sense of togetherness that promotes community building. What remains to be seen, however, is whether and for how long the lessons learned will be salient.

During the pandemic, it became commonplace to see food lines stretching for miles at various locations across the country, making clear to anyone watching that the problem extended far beyond any of our small, encapsulated lives. And that awareness, for many, provided a sense of comfort, changing the perception about needing assistance and reducing the associated stigma. Now, on the heels of nationwide vaccination efforts, the country is poised to begin the long road back to normal, whatever that means. And in that new normal, it will be interesting to explore how long the compassion and sense of togetherness brought about by a global pandemic actually remains. Regardless, the changing experience of stigma as a result of the pandemic further supports previous assertions about how to address food insecurity on college campuses. For the participants in this study, knowing they were not alone reduced much of the stigma they previously experienced when using the pantry. Continuing to normalize food insecurity on campus through universal marketing campaigns may serve to maintain the sense of collective struggle that has helped students feel more empowered to seek help. Likewise, food pantry operational staff and decision makers should be intentional about communications, including statistical information, when advertising on social media and print.

Stigma Management Theory (SMT)

Thematic analyses derived from deductive coding yielded a wealth of information pertaining to the ways that students navigate the experience of stigma as a result of using an on-campus food pantry. Moreover, the strategies outlined in SMT provide a framework for understanding the ways that students communicate about and make sense of stigma. Each of the four quadrants consists of techniques and strategies demonstrated by participants in this study that provide insight into critical thought processes that have the potential to inform policy and

practice. Each quadrant (*accept-accept*, *accept-challenge*, *challenge-accept*, and *challenge-challenge*) will be discussed in the following section.

Accept-accept. One of the more prominent themes that emerged in the analysis was that students often accepted both the public understanding of stigma and its applicability to the self, augmenting personal behaviors to reduce anxiety about their shopping trips. Within that acceptance, students reported feelings of shame and negative self-concepts as a result of having to use the pantry. Despite these negative experiences, they continued to use the pantry because it meant they would have enough food to eat. Still others blamed stigma for their lack of using the pantry, at least initially, noting the social costs were too high despite the fact they would benefit from the assistance. Some used humor to deflect from painful feelings arising from their circumstances as a way of acknowledging the stigma. In retrospect, one could infer that students who used humor were attempting to get in front of, or own on their own terms, difficult conversations surrounding feeling stigmatized. Lastly, and somewhat related to the collective struggle discussed earlier, the participants chose to bond with other stigmatized individuals. This idea of connection cannot be overstated as it appears to have positively influenced the experience of stigma for students. When students know others are experiencing similar struggles, they may feel less shame and be more proactive in seeking assistance. Educators can use this to their advantage, creating programming (i.e., speaker series, panel discussions, marketing campaigns) that affirm the collective experience of students in an effort to reach at-risk students who may be hesitant about using the pantry.

Accept-challenge. Those who accept public understanding of stigma, but deny that it applies to the self, engage in a variety of avoiding behaviors and strategies to navigate the experience of stigma. Participants in the current study shared experiences of hiding and/or

denying the attribute, avoiding stigmatizing situations, and distancing themselves from the stigma itself. Although uncommon, others sought to favorably compare themselves to others who they thought to be worse off, expressing gratitude that they were not like *those people*. Evident in the analysis is the weight of social stigma and the mental and emotional toll it takes on individuals who may need help. Moreover, there exists some evidence that the rejection that the stigma applies to the self was, for some, a coping mechanism that helped reduced cognitive dissonance around using the pantry. Through the use of avoidant strategies, participants further externalized stigma as something only other people felt, despite engaging in other behaviors that suggested stigma played a role in their using the pantry. Particularly noteworthy was the inclination towards self-preservation and not wanting to be labeled as poor or struggling by others. Likewise, other students employed abstract language to discuss stigma. By discussing stigma in generic or theoretical ways, students at times suggested it was something they could relate to but struggled to internalize the experience and fully articulate verbally. The implication for practitioners is that students may not always be aware of, or ready to confront, the realities of social stigmas related to food assistance and, more generally, poverty. Universities should continue to incorporate social justice themes into existing academic coursework and create opportunities for faculty to create curricula that both addresses food insecurity as a public health crisis and addresses the role of stigma as a barrier.

Challenge-accept. A third theme consists of the individual accepting the stigma as applicable to the self but choosing to reject the public understanding. In these situations, one can either evade responsibility for the stigma or reduce its offensiveness by reframing or transcending it in a way that challenges outdated and maladaptive beliefs. In the current study, this emphasis on reducing the offensiveness was ubiquitous and provided insight into how

administrators can address food insecurity among students who may be reluctant to use the pantry. By reframing food insecurity as something that affects nearly all students and suggesting that using the pantry is simply one of many campus resources, students explained that they experience less stigma using the pantry and are intentional about the way they talk to others as well. Changing public discourse has also contributed to a shift in the way stigma is experienced. The efforts of colleges and universities over the past decade has begun to normalize food assistance and change the way students think about being in need. Although more work lies ahead, these findings suggest that current efforts have been fruitful, and there is reason to be hopeful going forward.

Challenge-challenge. The final theme consists of rejecting both the social understanding of stigma and the applicability to the self. In the current study, this manifested in a variety of logical denials that sought to discredit the idea of stigma by pointing out the fallacies of such arguments. Lifelong poverty, although detrimental in many ways, was also suggested to be helpful in navigating stigma as an adult. By seeing access to food as a basic human right, students refuted the idea that it was anything to be ashamed about, going so far as to describe it as a stupid concept in general. However much one may agree with such sentiments, it is worth noting that this line of thinking does little for those who experience stigma as a barrier to seeking help. Conversely, and potentially helpful, these are the very individuals which institutions can and should hire to work as food pantry team members and outreach ambassadors. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) makes clear that we learn by our interactions with others. Students who either reframe stigma, those in the *challenge-accept* group, or those who use logical denials to refute stigma altogether, represent ideal candidates as they can help to model healthy understandings of reaching out to institutional supports. By incorporating elements of

SMT into interview and hiring processes, administrators can ensure better fits by aligning candidate perspectives with performance tasks and job training.

Significance of the Study in the Context of Past Research

Food insecurity represents a global, national, and local public health crisis, requiring intervention across the board to address the problem. At the global level, *Sustainable Development Goal 2* presented by the United Nations (2019) calls on leaders to address food insecurity, maintaining that access to food is critical for global health and prosperity. Nearly one billion people worldwide experience food insecurity and starvation (United Nations, 2019), a reality that demands more than rhetoric. Past discussions about food insecurity have too often focused on lesser developed countries, and understandably so. Global poverty rates suggest more needs to be done in places with limited economic resources. However, what has been lost until recently is the fact the problem is not limited to other parts of the world. As Nazmi et al. (2018) point out, more than 40 million Americans are food-insecure. That figure, in light of the global COVID-19 pandemic, is likely far too conservative at this point as many have found themselves without work and relying on supplemental food assistance. In addition to global and national reports, past research has examined rates of food insecurity among college students, shedding light on the problems faced by many.

Food insecurity on college campuses has been the subject of more recent research efforts, while providing backing for a number of policy implementations designed to address the issue. Crutchfield and Maguire (2018) reported that nearly 42% of California State University students were food-insecure, findings consistent with those of researchers across the country. Likewise, increased food insecurity rates have been associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression (Henry, 2017), decreased academic engagement (Dubick et al., 2016), and countless negative

academic and personal outcomes (Broton et al., 2014; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018). To address the issue of food insecurity, institutions have incorporated food pantries on campus (Moreno-Yamashiro, 2019; Twill et al., 2014). Despite these efforts, service utilization remains low with stigma representing a significant barrier to using the pantry (El Zein et al, 2018). Indeed, a number of scholars have called for more research. Stuber and Kronebusch (2004) suggested more research is needed to understand the experience of stigma. Fong et al. (2016) agree, noting that more qualitative research is needed on the subject as quantitative investigations often miss critical data and nuance.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The current study adds to this body of literature by filling in the gaps and building on the work of previous researchers. Thematic analyses yielded a greater understanding of the experience of stigma among college students who use a pantry. In addition, the application of Stigma Management Theory (Meisenbach, 2010) to college food insecurity provides for greater understanding of the ways in which students navigate stigma. Likewise, the student experience is complex and cannot be separated from academic achievement. As institutions focus more on retention and graduation rates, there is a need to address student well-being holistically, including interventions to address food insecurity. In accordance with these findings, the researcher recommends the following to improve practice and inform policy advocacy at the state and local level.

Use empirical support for marketing purposes. By using both quantitative and qualitative data pertaining to food insecurity when marketing the pantry to students, administrators can help to normalize food insecurity and encourage usage. Too often, these materials are directed at staff and faculty in an attempt to educate the campus. Although a

valuable and noble effort, limiting these efforts to only staff and faculty misses an opportunity for challenging the public discourse among students who are struggling to meet their basic needs. Students who are able to see that others are in a similar position may feel more comfortable using various food supports, including the pantry.

Capitalize on current discourse. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a sense of community as it relates to the collective struggle reported by the participants in this study. Interview data highlighted the unique set of challenges and opportunities the global pandemic has helped to illuminate among students. Campus leaders can build upon this sense of community going forward to increase engagement by normalizing experiences of food insecurity on campus and in the community. The more that students see the issue as global in scale, the less likely they are to experience shame and embarrassment about using the pantry.

Peer educators. Incorporate students, particularly those who demonstrate transcendent strategies or provide logical refutations of stigma, as peer ambassadors. By modeling adaptive understandings of stigma, these individuals can help to normalize the experience of using the food pantry. Practitioners should incorporate material from Stigma Management Theory into training curriculum for peer educators, allowing for the identification of students who can promote engagement and reduce stigma through outreach efforts.

Create opportunities for students to visit the pantry in groups. Participants in the current study indicated that being able to visit the pantry with others reduced the fear and embarrassment, making the initial visit easier. By doing so, students feel a greater sense of connectedness and more likely to return to the pantry in the future. Faculty should be encouraged to build pantry engagement into existing curriculum. This is possible in several ways. One way is for faculty to physically take the class to the pantry and encourage students to

sign up. Faculty members wield significant influence with students and by taking the class as a group, may increase the likelihood students will return. Another strategy would be for instructors to build service learning/volunteer opportunities into courses. Providing students the opportunity to donate time or resources helps to build community, in turn changing the narrative around food assistance.

Develop enhanced training programs. Based on the findings in the current study, improved training for food pantry staff and volunteers is warranted. Evident in the analysis was how important the role of food pantry workers was in terms of the shopping experience. Through education about stigma and implementation of best practices, those working in the food pantry have the opportunity to positively influence the student experience and further normalize using the pantry.

Increase opportunities for student employment. A college education has become increasingly expensive for students, with financial instability representing a barrier to success for many. Administrators and policymakers should advocate for the expansion of student worker positions on campuses. By doing so, students have the opportunity to earn money while also increasing their connections to campus resources and supportive peers and professionals.

Incorporate stigma discussions in advocacy efforts. Much of the previous research on food insecurity among college students and subsequent policy implementations have focused on well-being and academic implications, and understandably so. Institutions of higher education are very much in the business of helping students complete their degrees and obtain meaningful employment. Indeed, the CSU has incorporated student well-being and basic needs into its *Graduate Initiative 2025* campaign, highlighting the importance of, and dedication to meeting students' most basic needs. Future advocacy efforts can enhance these endeavors by educating

policymakers about the lived experiences of students and their attempts to navigate stigma associated with using the campus food pantry. Likewise, greater priority should be given to funding efforts to raise awareness about and reduce stigma on individual campuses and across college systems across the country.

Incorporate stigma research in Basic Needs Ambassador Trainings. Across the CSU, campuses have begun implementing ambassador training programs in order to educate staff and faculty about basic needs and campus resources. By educating participants about barriers such as stigma, campuses can empower staff and faculty to include stigma reduction messaging into conversations with students, further serving to challenge the public discourse around food assistance.

These action items, although not exhaustive, provide a jumping off point for university officials and policy advocates who want to address food insecurity and increase student engagement. In addition, these strategies help to create a more inclusive campus where students are more likely to access critical resources and persist towards degree completion.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The current phenomenological study provided an in-depth understanding of the ways in which students experience, communicate about, and make meaning of stigma. Thematic analyses yielded three dominant themes associated with the student experience and a range of strategies consistent with Stigma Management Theory that provide context to student coping mechanisms. As a qualitative inquiry, these results cannot be extrapolated beyond the participants in this study, nor can it be assumed that other individuals share the same experiences. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed the way students interact with the institution and should be considered in an interpretation of the results.

Reflecting on the study and emergent themes, several recommendations for future research have been identified.

We cannot separate this study from the current pandemic as it has influenced nearly every aspect of daily life, and likewise influenced these findings. Stay-at-home orders and institutional safety protocols meant having to use Zoom teleconferencing to conduct interviews. Despite the drawbacks, such technological use made it possible to interview participants from great distances easily and without jeopardizing their safety. Furthermore, food pantries at most universities in the system either closed completely or implemented modified operations in response to the pandemic, making recruitment efforts more challenging. This proved not to be an issue as saturation was reached prior to conclusion of the interviews. However, the participant pool remained limited. Future research should attempt to address this limitation in two ways. First, subsequent investigations may benefit from more in-person recruitment and data collection strategies. By recruiting from a wider variety of pantry locations under normal operations, researchers have the potential to draw a more representative participant pool. Second, researchers may want to consider using focus groups to flush out some of the finer nuances of using the pantry. The idea that using the pantry represents a communal or social experience suggests that greater insight might be gleaned from a group setting.

Future research should also be expanded to provide clarity to the issue. The focus of the current study was to understand the experience of stigma by those who have used a food pantry, excluding those who have yet to visit. Current users provided significant insight into the user experience but fail to provide a complete picture. As Crutchfield and Maguire (2018) note, more than 4 in 10 students are food-insecure, suggesting that more students are in need than use the pantry. More research is needed into the lived experience of those who report being food-

insecure yet choose not to visit in order to more fully understand the barrier that stigma represents. Mixed methods inquiries that first identify students who are food-insecure yet refrain from using the pantry will help to identify an unexplored group of students. Moreover, follow-up interviews may help to illuminate student perspectives not present in the current study.

Another area of future research pertains to the chronological conditions of the study and global pandemic. As represented in the data, the pandemic has influenced the experience of stigma, serving to normalize reliance on outside supports. Indeed, students spoke often of the collective struggle and the sense of community it helped to foster. Over time, the economic fallout will improve, and many will likely see a return to some semblance of normal. Future researchers should explore if and how the experience of stigma shifts based on global economic and social trends.

Future research should attempt to expand the breadth of student experiences by incorporating the voices of students at different institutional levels, both public and private. Although the current study focused on a singular institution type (public, 4-year), more research is needed on the experience of stigma among students at private institutions as well as community colleges. It is possible, if not likely, that student demographics vary greatly across institution types, allowing for the possibility of divergent experiences of stigma related to financial hardship resulting from differing economic backgrounds.

Lastly, this study represents one of only a few that applies Stigma Management Theory to college students, and the first to food insecurity and service utilization specifically. More research is needed into the experiences of students through such a theoretical lens. By better understanding the ways in which students navigate stigma, school administrators will be equipped to address food insecurity, among other highly stigmatized behaviors such as disability

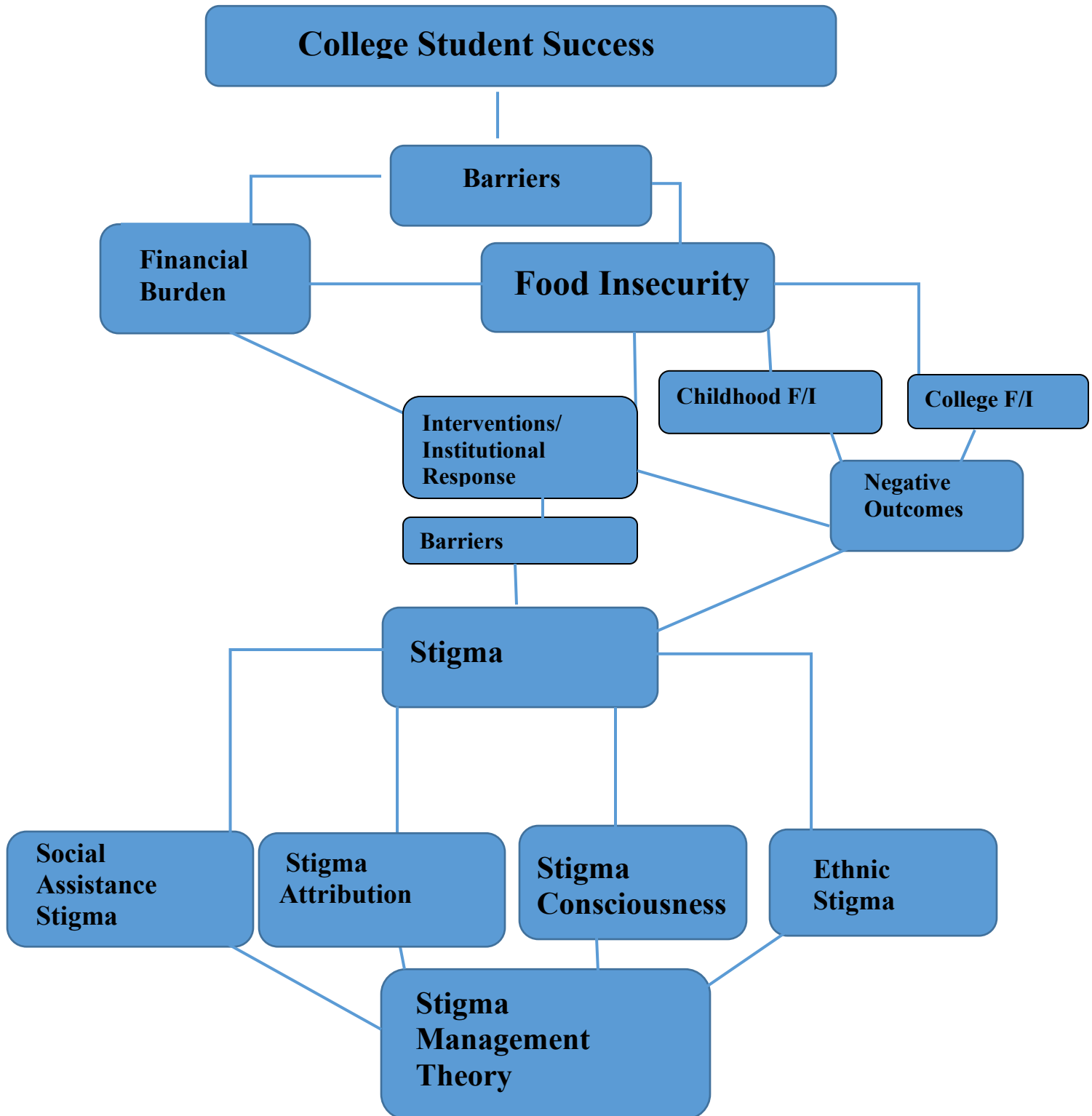
related services and mental health counseling. Moreover, future research should incorporate diverse methodologies to foster greater understanding. Ethnographic studies focused on the interactions of pantry staff and users may provide greater clarity regarding the in-pantry experience.

Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenological investigation was to understand the lived experience of stigma among college students through reflective lifeworld research (Dahlberg et al., 2008). Participants were recruited from food pantries within the California State University in the fall of 2020 and spring of 2021. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, using a semi-structured interview protocol. The interview protocol was an adaptation of Seidman's (2006) 3-stage model and drew heavily from the interview protocol used by Crutchfield and Maguire (2017) in their study of food insecurity and homelessness. Inductive coding yielded three dominant themes: *fear of being seen as poor*, *hardship as fundamental to being a college student*, and *the collective struggle as a product of COVID-19*. Deductive coding using a priori codes derived from Stigma Management Theory (Meisenbach, 2010) demonstrated a variety of ways that students navigate and make meaning of stigma based on the acceptance or denial of public understanding of stigma, and the acceptance or denial of its applicability to the self.

The current study contributes to the emerging body of research on college food insecurity and furthers the understanding of how stigma is experienced. Moving forward, administrators and basic needs leaders should be mindful of the multiple factors associated with food insecurity as well the way students experience stigma as a barrier to service utilization in order to improve students' lives, both in terms of academic achievement and person well-being.

APPENDIX A: LITERATURE REVIEW CONCEPT MAP



APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Demographic Questions

1. What year in school are you?
2. What is your major?
3. Are you a first-generation student?
4. How old are you?
5. What is your race-ethnicity as you identify?
6. What is your gender as you identify?

Semi-Structured Interview

- Life History and Rapport Building (*Focus on letting the participant tell their story*)
 - Please tell me about your life when you were growing up. Tell me about your family and any meaningful experiences you think would better help me get to know you.
 - Please tell me a little about your life right now as a college student.
 - What led to becoming a student at [your college/university]? How did you choose this school?
- Experience (*Try to draw out stories of participant experience*)
 - Please describe your access to food.
 - Tell me about your experience using the food pantry?
 - What does it feel like when you are inside the pantry shopping?
 - How does it feel when you leave the pantry?
 - How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your use of the food pantry?
 - What are some of the barriers that have influenced your use of the food pantry?
- Reflection on meaning of the experience
 - How do you make sense of, or deal with the barriers associated with using the food pantry?
 - In what ways do you think the COVID-19 pandemic influences potential barriers to using the pantry?
 - Is there anything else you think I should know?

APPENDIX C: REFLECTION ON RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

As I began the reading, I was struck by the obvious connections to my potential research topic. The article spoke directly to conducting research with individuals from different races and cultures in a way that honors their experiences of systematic oppression, while also using the power of research to serve those same people. After a brief review of Critical Race Theory and previous research on race and color, Milner (2007) discusses, at length, the responsibilities of researchers to consider dangers that are seen, unseen, and unforeseen. What follows his warning about potential dangers is a framework that researchers can and should use to understand themselves in relation to others whom they conduct research with or about. Milner (2007) suggests reflecting on several questions before embarking on such a research journey. In the following section, I will delve into my racial and cultural heritage, looking specifically how they inform my research choices and shape my views on the current state of education.

My racial and cultural heritage is a bit murky, although I remain convinced that I am predominantly of European descent. My biological father took his own life when I was two, and it has been nearly impossible to get answers about my heritage as it relates to him. What I do know is that my mother's family traces back to the Southern United States and ultimately parts of Europe such as Germany. Of interest is my connection to one of the oldest rivalries in our history, the Hatfields and the McCoys. My grandmother was a Hatfield, and, from an early age, I understood the pride that was derived from such a belonging. These racial and cultural identities have had a profound impact on the way I experience the world, both in terms of the self and the self in relation to others. From a personal standpoint, I married into a large Mexican family, and our cultural differences make for the occasional misunderstanding. I am often asked for the "white people" perspective, bringing my race to the forefront. At the same time, these

differences have also made for a far richer experience, one I would not have without them. From a societal perspective, as a white heterosexual male I have a premium on privilege. My privilege is evident in nearly every aspect of my daily life. It is my awareness and understanding of that privilege that provides me with the opportunity to affect change for marginalized groups. My research allows, and even demands, that I use my place of influence to advocate on behalf of those with less of a voice—or, at the very least, a voice that, when used, comes with severe social and political repercussions. Given my cultural background and the way I often find myself at odds with what that means, I tend to interpret the experiences of others from a place of both curiosity and frustration—frustration that stems from my own culture’s role as the oppressor and the way that many who are racially and culturally like me are so vehemently opposed to the mere suggestion of such inequality. In terms of balancing my racial and cultural selves with my research, I would like to think it drives me to conduct research that will better understand and serve marginalized groups. On the other hand, I need to be mindful of the way other cultures might experience me and must be sensitive to these historically rooted feelings.

Race and culture play a tremendous role in society, especially in the United States and education is no exception. Major disparities exist between white students and students of color in our educational system related to outcomes (Maruyama, 2003). It is an education system designed to meet the needs of people who look like me and too often fails to meet the needs of the rest of population. As educational researchers, we bear a responsibility to address these injustices system-wide. Education, at a fundamental level, is about providing access to all and, with that access, providing the opportunity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds the means to better their personal circumstances.

The historical landscape of my racial and cultural background is one of dominance. For the past 300 plus years, it has been an advantage to be a white male. We were afforded basic rights well before anyone else. People of color, women, and subsequent immigrants were marginalized at best. The landscape that shaped my life was rooted in being the “norm” and not having to worry about adjusting to anyone. I can look back at my early courses in American History to see this play out. My culture was depicted as superior, where other groups were either discussed negatively, or more often, not at all. Furthermore, I was able to see myself everywhere; movies and TV, print media, and in our elected leaders. I was fortunate, however, to grow up in a town with a large Latino population, allowing me to develop close personal relationships with those of a different culture. Through these experiences, I started to see people in a different, more inclusive way. Then in my early 20s, I moved to the Bay Area and spent the next couple of years working in Oakland. Once again, my eyes and heart were opened to experiences that were vastly different from my own. For perhaps the first time, I saw extreme poverty—poverty that was also on display in the local schools. These schools did not look like the schools I had attended or schools just a few miles away for that matter. At the time, it was a perspective changing experience. As I moved forward into education, I began to see the complexities of the situation and wonder how schools just a couple of miles apart could be vastly different. By no means are these experiences exhaustive, but they are key examples of subtle ways I developed a worldview that augmented my racial and cultural history.

As I begin my journey as an educational researcher, I want to honor the experiences of other cultures, while simultaneously serving them. I want to contribute to research that helps marginalized groups. Issues such as poverty and inequality, specifically in education, are basic rights issues, and I want to be part of the solution. Looking at my family of origin and the way I

was raised, it would have been much more likely for me to have a completely different set of values and understandings about race and culture. I am fortunate to have had experiences shape my worldview and intend to take advantage of knowledge gained.

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VITA

Jason Watkins was born in Texas and grew up near Bakersfield, CA, where he currently lives. Jason earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's in school counseling before beginning his work in academia in 2014 at California State University, Bakersfield. Jason has served in various capacities, most recently as the Assistant Director for Basic Needs and Assistant Director for Services for Students with Disabilities. Jason has been an adjunct lecturer in the Departments of Psychology and Advanced Educational Studies since 2015 and hopes to continue serving in the classroom.

Upon completion of his dissertation, Jason hopes to continue his research on food insecurity as he realizes it is critical to student success. As a first-generation student, he understands the unique set of challenges that many students face and hopes to be a force for change moving forward. Jason is passionate about education and helping students achieve their personal and academic goals, and he looks forward to serving in higher education for many years to come.