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Myth or Reality? Exploring Intergenerational Social Assistance Participation in Ontario, Canada

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Is there an intergenerational causal link in social assistance (SA) participation? There is a dearth of research addressing this question, yet the belief in 'welfare dependency' is unreservedly embraced. The limited research that does attempt to tease out a causal link in intergenerational SA participation remains equivocal. Qualitative research is largely absent in welfare scholarship—research that might provide a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics underlying SA receipt. We employ an exploratory qualitative analysis to understand SA participants' experiences and perspectives on intergenerational SA usage. We find that the two causal mechanisms underlying intergenerational SA usage, the learning effect and conformity effect, require further investigation. The theoretical foundations fundamental in explaining a causal intergenerational link are shaken by our grounded theory approach.

Keywords: Conformity; intergenerational social assistance use; learning; social assistance; welfare

Introduction

Is there an intergenerational causal link in social assistance participation? Do parents on social assistance cause their children to eventually go on welfare? There is a dearth of research addressing this question in Canada. And yet, the belief in “welfare dependency” (Misra, Moller, & Karides, 2003), which positions people in low income brackets outside the social relations of waged labor and as “dependent on the state” (Scott, London, & Meyers, 2002), is hegemonic (Smith-Carrier, 2011). Not only is the nature of welfare dependency socially constructed to be long-lasting within the individual’s life course, it is thought to be generational in nature; the lone mother on welfare is believed to set the course for her “feebleminded” children (Piven & Cloward, 1971), fueling an endless cycle of dependency (Fraser & Gordon, 1994). Widely embraced in society, the notion of welfare dependency sanctions the vilification of social assistance (SA) participants (Smith-Carrier, 2017) and contributes to a policy climate in which it overshadows the more socially-inclusive goal of poverty reduction. The limited quantitative research that does attempt to tease out a causal link in intergenerational SA participation—that SA receipt is transmitted from parents to their children—remains equivocal. What is largely absent in welfare scholarship is qualitative research—research that might provide a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics underlying intergenerational SA receipt because of its attention to individual meaning, perceptions, and behaviors (Padgett, 1998).

The purpose of this study was to test the theories identified in the intergenerational SA literature. Qualitative research is particularly useful in exploring, confirming, and refining theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and yet there has been a dearth of qualitative studies in the extant literature; qualitative research on intergenerational SA receipt is thus long overdue. We employ an exploratory qualitative analysis to understand SA participants’ experiences and perspectives on intergenerational SA usage and to explore the dynamics that may contribute to shared parent-child SA access, allowing us to consider whether theories cited in the wider literature prove as useful as promised.

The Intergenerational SA Literature

While the hypothesis of welfare dependency dates as far back as the British Poor Laws (Fraser & Gordon, 1994), it became highly politicized and accepted in the academic milieu and by the general public around the same time governments began their retrenchment of welfare state provision (Orloff, 2002). The attention drawn to the "spider's web of dependency" of the "welfare culture" (Pear, 1986) in the late 1980s in the U.S. triggered the introduction of tighter eligibility criteria, welfare-to-work requirements, and time limits on access. At the same time in Canada, and especially in Ontario, politicians became concerned about the swelling of the caseload and the expense of maintaining what they perceived to be a profligate system that served only to maintain "dependents'" addiction to welfare (Smith-Carrier, 2011). Ontario thus adopted a "tough love" approach aimed at breaking the "cycle of dependency" through the introduction of Ontario Works (OW), which was framed as giving people "a hand up, not a hand out." Under the policy, benefits were cut by 21.6%, and the "passive" system of SA entitlement based on need was jettisoned, replaced with an "active" one (Fuller, Kershaw, & Pulkingham, 2008) in which participants were mandated to work for their benefits or be sanctioned for non-compliance (Gazso, 2012). While these reform measures were largely instigated due to the ostensible pervasiveness of intergenerational welfare use, there remains a dearth of literature that conclusively affirms "dependency" or that illuminates the nature of intergenerational patterns of SA receipt.

Quantitative research that does exist tests "welfare dependency" as the result of a causal link or an intergenerational correlation between parent-child SA participation. If the link is causal, it is primarily thought to be derived from two key factors: (a) a learning effect: children of SA participants may learn how the system works from their parent(s) on SA; and/or (b) a conformity effect: children may find receipt to be less stigmatizing as a result of having a parent(s) on SA (Beaulieu, Duclos, Fortin, & Rouleau, 2005). If the link is instead correlational, intergenerational SA participation is thought to derive from common environment-specific characteristics affecting both parent and

child. Knowing if parent–child SA participation is causal or correlational is crucial, because either finding will yield disparate policy implications focused on reforming individuals or structures. For example, policy aimed at breaking the learning and conformity effects arising from a causal link might involve adjusting SA eligibility criteria and benefit levels versus policy focused on ameliorating correlated environmental factors (i.e., the lack of job or educational prospects shared by parent and child) (see Beaulieu, Duclos, Fortin, & Rouleau, 2001; Penman, 2006; Stenberg, 2000).

Numerous American quantitative studies have tested the intergenerational transmission of SA hypothesis, although many studies are now dated and employ less than ideal sample sizes, observation windows, or age ranges of participants, which have likely biased estimates (Page, 2004); results are, overall, inconclusive. Some more recent work has emerged in Europe. In Sweden, Edmark and Hanspers (2012), using a sibling difference method (to isolate causal effects from correlated factors), found a high positive intergenerational correlation, but not a causal effect, whereas Stenberg (2000) found an intergenerational correlation only in households where particular social problems were present (e.g., a father with a criminal record). In the UK, Schoon et al.'s (2012) study on parental "worklessness" found that it alone did not cause poorer outcomes in children and adolescents (e.g., related to cognitive ability, education, behaviors, and attitudes), but these were adversely impacted by the complex and multilayered socio-economic factors facing "workless" families.

Currently only one study exists that tests intergenerational SA transmission in Canada (Beaulieu et al., 2005). Using administrative data in Quebec, Beaulieu et al. found a significant parent-child correlation that derived from conforming and learning effects, both of which suggest a causal link—but the answer was not definitive. Study data revealed that, on average, a one-percentage unit increase in parental participation during a child's pre-adult years (age 7–17) generated a 0.29 percentage unit increase in the child's participation rate during early adulthood (age 18–21). The authors conclude, however, by stating that this link may, in fact, be due in part to the occurrence of events correlated with parental participation, not distinct from it (Beaulieu et al., 2005).

Some studies point to a “welfare culture,” akin to a “culture of poverty,” as a possible vehicle for intergenerational SA receipt (see Antel, 1992; Baron, Cobb-Clark, & Erkal, 2008). However, few studies identify which cultural values specifically are transmitted from parent to child, and rarely are these included as variables in intergenerational welfare analyses. While many affirm the importance of cultural values, there are equally others who argue that the lack of opportunities and resources shared by parent and child is more likely to influence SA use (e.g., Bartholomae, Fox, & McKenry, 2004; Martin, 2003). The dynamics or mechanisms underlying the intergenerational SA link continue to remain unclear (see also Moffitt, 1992). Indeed, Rank and Cheng (1995) suggested just over two decades ago that “previous research has been marked by its absence of a theoretical understanding of the intergenerational use of welfare, which has been a critical oversight” (p. 674). Frequently, in the absence of a clearly delineated theoretical framework, a classical economic theoretical lens is applied, albeit implicitly.

As statistical models alone cannot provide the appropriate explanations for intergenerational SA use, the importance of robust theoretical understandings on the mechanisms underlying SA receipt are imperative. To date, there have been few to no (to our knowledge) qualitative research studies that endeavor to tease out the dynamics affecting intergenerational SA usage in light of established hypotheses about cause and effect in quantitative research. This study pursues this objective.

Methods

Sampling & Recruitment

After securing ethics approval from three institutional review boards, we worked with the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) to identify and recruit our participant sample. In the spring of 2016, the MCSS sent a letter introducing the study to parents within a subset of the OW population, according to the following inclusion criteria: parents, ages 32–70, with children, ages 18–64, both in receipt (or formerly in receipt) of SA from one of the three research sites: London, Toronto, and Hamilton, Ontario. The letter specifically targeted parents for recruitment, and requested, employing a referral/

snowball sampling approach (Patton, 2002), if they were interested in referring their adult children (ages 18–64) to the study. Parents and/or their adult children interested in hearing more about the study were asked to contact one of the researchers via phone using the contact information provided. To ensure the complete confidentiality of both parties was respected, parents did not know whether their adult children participated in the study, and vice versa. Over the phone, the researcher reviewed the informed letter of consent. If the candidate verbally agreed to participate, the researcher scheduled an interview at a mutually convenient date and time. Interviews were held at coffee shops, the local library, or in participants' homes. At the time of the interview, the researcher secured informed consent in writing. Participants were informed that they would receive \$30 in recognition of their time and contributions to the study, they could choose not to answer any questions, or could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty (and still receive the \$30; none withdrew).

We completed a total of 31 (1-1.5 hour) interviews with parents and adult children (conducted separately) (London, $n = 12$; Hamilton, $n = 9$; Toronto, $n = 10$). Most interviews were conducted separately with parents on SA and their adult children, but in two cases, the adult child of the parent was present at the interview. There were four dyads in the data (parents linked to their adult children; neither party was aware of the other's participation). The sample of participants was quite diverse, including single parents, immigrant and native-born families, lone working-age adults, and young people. Experiences of abuse and trauma in participants' backgrounds were common, presenting in various forms (i.e., domestic violence, child abuse, and/or family neglect); as a result, there were 17 participants (more than half the sample) who had personal experience with child welfare. The health and mental health of participants was also compromised in many cases, with a number of participants reporting chronic conditions (e.g., diabetes, bipolar depression) or relatively new ailments (e.g., back injury).

In-Depth Interviews

Our in-depth interviews with participants aimed to identify the social, economic, health, and environmental factors

affecting parents and children who are participating (e.g., on OW), or have participated in SA in the past. An interview guide was employed, outlining sample questions and probes, as necessary. The questions posed address the environmental factors shaping participants' SA use (e.g., how would you describe your neighborhood?), potentially indicative of shared determinants or an intergenerational SA correlation, and individual factors influencing participants' SA receipt (e.g., how did you learn about SA?), possibly reflective of a causal link. Interviews were digitally recorded, unless the participant preferred that hand notes be written instead (two participants asked that the digital recorder be stopped at one point and that written notes be taken, although later requested that the recorder be re-started).

Analysis Strategy

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and entered, with written notes and memos, into QDA Miner Lite for analysis. We employed concurrent data collection and analysis, memo-taking, and the constant comparative method; data from one set of interviews were compared to subsequent interview data, an iterative process that informed successive data collection and analysis. This inductive procedure was used to generate categories and themes that captured participants' thoughts and experiences of intergenerational SA receipt. In addition to ascertaining emergent categories, we analysed the corpus of the data using a priori codes, specifically in relation to SA learning, conformity, and categories reflective of shared determinants of parent and child. We employed a process of open coding (the process whereby categories were identified and their properties and dimensions uncovered), followed by a subsequent round of coding to refine the categories identified and link them across various dimensions for both the predetermined codes and the emergent categories.

To ensure trustworthiness in our analysis, we used thick and detailed descriptions in our analysis, met frequently for peer debriefing (Creswell, 1998), and employed theory and interdisciplinary triangulation (Padgett, 1998). Several key themes emerged in the data analysis; the first two sections of our findings document the themes related to the key effects (learning

and conformity [or imitation]; see Beaulieu et al., 2001) identified in the literature as being salient in establishing a causal link in intergenerational SA receipt, and the third section relates the themes that emerged with respect to the shared determinants of parents and their children.

Findings

The Learning Effect

Recall that the premise of the learning effect is that children learn how to use SA while living with parents accessing benefits, again, increasing the likelihood of their receipt (Beaulieu et al., 2005; Moffit, 1992). Two main themes emerged in relation to the learning effect: being unaware of parental SA receipt and learning about SA.

Unaware of parental SA receipt. During their childhood, not all adult children were aware of their parents' past experiences with SA; for some, they became aware of this shared history much later in life, if at all. A few (adult) children spoke of the shame and embarrassment their parents must have felt in hiding such information from them. For instance, Kobena noted,

They didn't really say anything about it. I wasn't sure how their feelings were back then. It would have been more informative to me if I knew growing up exactly what was going on in that part. Now I understand that they probably felt embarrassed, like how I feel embarrassed now. I feel like they felt like I would not understand them. They're one of the parents that if you don't ask, you won't know.

Similarly, for Selina, SA usage, along with many other important topics, was not a conversation she was free to explore with her parents.

No, there was never talk of that. There was never anything discussed in front of the children. We went to our bedrooms and then whatever discussed was discussed. Ever. I can never remember being included in the conversation.

In Daanis's case, the realization of the very existence of SA did not come until she was in adulthood. When asked, "So, you don't think your parents were ever on Ontario Works?" she responded, "No. When I first came to the city I didn't even know there was such thing as welfare." Kali was also unaware that her parents or son ever accessed SA (this was either a sampling error or she simply was not informed). Discussing how her parents felt about SA when she was a child, she shared,

I don't think they looked at it (SA) in a negative way. I think they looked at it as a last resort and something that you would want to avoid. I don't remember talking about it or even if I hung out with anybody as a kid that was on assistance.

Learning About SA

Although some participants admitted to learning about SA from their parents, others felt they had learned about it from other significant people in their lives. Friends were the apparent source of SA information for Kobena.

I learned about income assistance through, while I was in high school...a couple of my friends were on it and I learned it through them. They told me about how Ontario Works can help you get your own place. All these things. I think the reason they told me is cause they knew I was on it, well my parents were on it, but I wasn't speaking about it 'cause I didn't know until later on, right? I learned about it when I went through the divorce with my ex, because then I needed to be on it...I didn't want to be on it.

On the other hand, Wenona claimed she learned about SA from her grandmother (Kobena, above), who she had lived with since age "8 or 9" (given that her father was an alcoholic and "wasn't stable enough" to care for her).

Well, my grandma told me that I had to eventually pay my rent somehow when I lived with her. She wanted me to grow up like that and pay rent and get a job like that. I didn't want to do that so she told me to get on assistance, so that's when I got on it. But I heard about it from my parents back then when I was little. I didn't really care for it or try to go on it.

Very few parents (two expressly) admitted to advising their children to turn to SA when under-employed or unemployed. One was Lisa, whose parents had never been on SA (that she was aware of), but who had a son with post-traumatic stress disorder (from being in the Navy) who she had advised to access assistance.

I had to tell my son (what) to do. He was determined he didn't want to be on it but I told him your job is not giving you enough hours to survive to pay the rent. You need to be responsible for your bills, so you need to go to OW for help. Even some of the programs like (agency name) won't touch you unless you're on income assistance.

The other participant who stated they gave their child advice about SA was Abla. Abla was an immigrant from Africa, who had experienced deep poverty during his childhood in Ghana. He had two sons and two daughters; one of his sons had recently broken up with his wife, and had difficulty getting enough work hours. Abla realized his son was on OW, then gave him advice:

I realized just last week that he's on Ontario Works. So I call him and I advise him...I said, "You should tell them if you want to go back to (college) or (university); they are there to help you. They will direct you. Don't put your mind on the money they are giving you." He took my advice. So yeah, it's good as a last resort to help you move on.

The presence of a learning effect appears questionable in these data. While some participants had claimed they learned about the existence of SA from parents and/or friends, few admitted to giving or being given specific advice about how to access or navigate the program. Indeed, many parents stated that they would not recommend the program (to their children or anyone else), and would only do so if the person had absolutely no "other support system" to turn to.

The Conformity Effect

Structural versus individual explanations and welfare stigma. Explanations, either individual or structural, for "welfare

dependency” are inherent in the existing quantitative models; the former pointing to deficiencies within the individual, the latter reflecting environmental constraints leading to SA use. Explanations of SA receipt directly or indirectly tie into participants’ views of and experiences with stigma (see Baumberg, 2016) and thus fit within the findings related to the conformity effect. That is, the conformity effect is said to reflect the decrease in stigma that children purportedly experience as a result of living with parents who have received SA. In relation to stigma, participants were all acutely aware of the inferior status ascribed to SA recipients. Adil, whose parents immigrated to Canada, expressed,

There definitely is (stigma). You can’t deny that. It’d probably be that people think those receiving income assistance are too lazy to find a job or just should not be in a situation where they should have to be receiving income assistance...Maybe they might think the money is going to waste or it’s constantly going to people who aren’t looking to get a job anyways. I think that’s the stigma floating in the air.

The experience of going to the SA office resulted in a visceral reaction for Selina, “Once I went into the (welfare) office I felt dirty. I had to come home here and scrub my skin. It was like, I hate this, I hate this, I hate this! It was the most horrible experience.”

On the whole, participants typically attached structural explanations to justify their own need for assistance, while ascribing individual explanations to explicate others’ SA receipt. For example, Cian (whose parents had been on SA when he was a child, and has two adult daughters presently on SA) shared, “Well, I blame the economy. For sure. Like I said, my oldest daughter has worked in retirement homes but now there’s no jobs out there and if there is, it’s like McDonalds, Mr. Sub, and all that...” He went on to say, “Like me, I’d love to have a job but nobody will take on an old man who’s four years from retirement...” A lack of employment opportunities was clearly on Kali’s mind as well:

I have never struggled as much in the past year finding a job in my profession. I don’t know if it’s the economy. I’ve applied at (fast food restaurant) and was told that I’m over qualified...

So it has been a nightmare over the past year trying to find suitable employment. I'm registered with all the temp companies, I've knocked on doors...

Indeed, individual explanations proliferated in the interviews, albeit commonly when referring to other people (often denoted in the use of the third person, not first), not participants themselves. Niimi expressed, "I figure possibly they got fired from their jobs or they're young and they're just starting out. Homeless...(they) got in an accident or (have) a disability." "I think...a lot of mental issues" (Paul) created a need for SA, or because of "losing a job, marriage or separation, moving, or unexpected illness or needing to look after an aging parent" (Gwen). Gwen also felt SA receipt had more to do with an individual's "personality, some kids are more motivated to succeed or they feel it's more important to make it on their own."

A few participants were suspect of others' need for assistance. Paul (who had experienced significant abuse from his parents as a child, who were not to his knowledge ever on SA, and had two children, one from whom he was presently estranged) shared, replete with expletives,

If you're young enough, go out and get yourself a goddamn job! Get off! What the hell are you doing? If you're 20 years old, or even 17...go out and get a job...I think it's time for parents to get off their friggin' ass and give them a kick in the ass, and say, "Hey, get the hell out and get a damn job. We're not supporting you anymore."

Structural and individual explanations could also be combined. Possibly beneath Daanis's explanation below is the repeated history of social and economic marginalization within Indigenous communities.

I think it's cultural in some instances, or your environment, like if you were brought up that way. Like, I don't mean to be mean to say it, but welfare breeds welfare, right? Like if that's how you were taught you survive month to month, like, I don't only just see it in the city. I see it on the reserve too. That's how you know how to survive.

Participants thus resisted the hegemonic stereotypes of SA recipients to depict themselves, but simultaneously endorsed them to characterize others. Abla explained,

The idea that you're maybe inept or stupid or lazy or don't want to work...But...I know myself. I know how hard I work to get an education, and it's just unfortunate that I haven't been able to get a job. So why would I carry this load of people thinking that you're a bum.

While some "just look(s) at it (as a way) to get by" (Wenona); other groups "scam the government just so that they have extra money" (Odina). Individual participants in our study, however, use it as "a temporary solution...to help (me) move forward" (Linda).

Parental expectations. Should the conformity effect be interpreted more broadly, as children's desire to conform to their parents' expectations of them, we found that none of the adult children we interviewed, whose parents were on SA, directly indicated a desire to conform to their example (role modeling). Becoming a "welfare recipient" was simply not an aspirational goal. Although some expressed being subjected to specific parental expectations as a child, others did not. In response to the question asking if their parents had particular expectations of them as a child, almost all of the participants who answered in the affirmative stressed that "education" (Gwen) and "hard work" (Ronica) were of utmost importance. Kobena, an older Indigenous woman, commented that her parents "always encouraged me to further my education...they encouraged me to go to (college)...They always encouraged me to do my best."

Several participants discussed how they had worked hard to instill a work ethic into their children, regardless of their personal employment situations and how these changed over time. Isi explained,

(E)ven being a mother on welfare, I really worked hard to show them that I'm not just a lazy person. I've applied for many jobs, I went and done house cleaning throughout four years of my life. I mean, I've done lots of different jobs to show them that you have to work to make a living...People just don't hand you things, you know. You have to work for what you want.

Marianne, in her late 30s, was resolute that her children would not access SA.

They are not going on OW; I'm going to make sure they work. That is why I am working my butt off to make sure that's not happening. No, never. Their dad wouldn't allow it either. Their dad works two jobs and has a savings account for both my kids to make sure that never has to happen.

In this way, parents on SA were constructed to be the negative case example of what their children should not become as adults. Rather than taking the perceived easy route of assistance, as constructed in the welfare dependency argument, here, an avoidance narrative dominates. Adil shared,

I do think that people do learn from each other. I know I'm definitely learning from my parents. To do that differently from what they've done in the past.

Many participants discussed how they had strived to conform to their parents' expectations for them, irrespective of the economic class of their parents. Gwen acknowledged, "I don't think I really liked school all that much but I really wanted to do well to please my mom." She also noted,

I met my husband-to-be when I was 15. I was far too young to be leaving school and even thinking about getting married, so my mom said, "No, you're going to finish high school and go on to university." And I did.

Other participants stated that their parents did not verbally communicate their expectations for them as children, although this was typically the case when there was violence in the home. Marianne, who lived with an abusive father, shared,

I'm sorry, but I don't think so. I think our expectation was, no nothing...Like if we were to get into trouble all we would do is get sent to our room and then we would just cry to get out...

The findings suggest a need for the conformity effect to be problematized. Overall, parents endeavoured to model a strong work ethic (even while on SA), aiming to send the message to

their children of the value of “work, not welfare.” The stigma of welfare does not appear to be in any way reduced for participants’ children; rather, the stigmatization of SA use by others became shared knowledge by parent and child, further perpetuating the stigma of being on SA, making it seem scary and undesirable to children in particular. As such, children’s conformity is more aligned to the view that welfare dependency is a problem *per se*, not conformity to the individual practice of dependency.

Shared Determinants—or Intergenerational Link?

In the extant quantitative literature, and explored here in qualitative research, intergenerational experiences of SA use are said to arise from shared or correlated environmental factors (e.g., growing up in similar impoverished neighborhoods, having comparable educational/employment opportunities, etc.). Various themes emerged in these data that point to shared determinants, expressed here as “linked lives” (see McDaniel & Bernard, 2011).

Living in Impoverished Neighborhoods

Many, but not all, participants came from similar backgrounds as their parents. Kobena shared, “The neighborhood that we lived in was, like ah, low income area where low income families live, so some were on it (SA)...some were not. A lot of my friends understood.” Isi described how

(Her children) got teased a lot in that time. I didn’t have the money to keep their clothes clean all the time...I had to go to food banks all the time. I had no help from their father...it was really hard, they were teased...so we were stereotyped, just being in that neighborhood, you know? And I didn’t have a drug problem, or nothing.

Jenn described her neighborhood: “It was kind of embarrassing and rough. Everybody coming into school with new clothes, and we’re sitting there wondering where our next pair of shoes are.”

Intergenerational Transmission

To tease out the underpinnings of causality, expressed through the presence of conformity and learning effects, we asked pointedly if participants believed there to be an intergenerational link in SA receipt. Responses were mixed, albeit again typically reinforcing the notion that learning and/or conformity effects may be at play for others, but not for participants themselves. Proposing a link, Kobena claimed, "I think there is. The kids kinda see what their parents are doing and...if they see that it's okay then they themselves are going to get on it too. If it's not harming their parents and if their parents openly talk about it, then they have an understanding about it." Some, as in the case of Adil, believed in the existence of a link, but again, not in his particular case.

I think that people who were raised in a household that is receiving income assistance will continue to carry out that norm. I think it's become a routine for them and people are afraid of change and that routine carries on. Personally, in my position, I think that I'm unique from other people. I'll do my best to get my life more on track.

Ronica, who talked earlier about the value of hard work, reasoned that an intergenerational link might be forged if individuals are raised not to value themselves.

Maybe it is how they value themselves...how the parents value themselves and how the children see the parents valuing themselves. Because if you have a positive attitude about lifting up yourself, then your children are going to see that. But if you don't care, they must see it as something good, (as) I don't care either. Easy money, why do I have to go out and work?

The idea of being "raised properly," implying being raised with a strong work ethic (as discussed in the conformity section), is similarly echoed by Jade:

I think the way they (people on SA) were raised, to be honest. If you were raised properly, I would think, that you would try to go to college or go get a job, and do things the right way. Which is not to say that we weren't raised properly, but we

could have been raised a little better...I mean my mom did her best. I do think that living with my dad with the drinking and stuff I think played a part in the way we were raised.

She also claimed, "I mean, for some kids they must have had a really loving and supporting household for them to just go out and get a job right away and never to go on OW."

In contrast, some participants, like Joseph, were not convinced that an intergenerational link exists. Joseph shared, "No, my son would rather be working; he'd like to get out to work." Or, if a link does exist, it was thought to do so because parents make SA appear attractive (re: the learning effect). Isa explained,

No, it's not hereditary, no. It's what you choose, it's your children and if you're a mom who is on assistance, and...you're making it seem like it's the best life, like a party life, then of course your children are going to think the same thing. But I was not very proud of being on assistance...it helped us out and I was not proud standing in food bank lines, but I did it, you know, because we needed to eat.

Data presented here confirm that many (but certainly not all) parents and their adult children face similar challenges (impoverished neighborhoods, limited choices, insecure attachment relationships) affecting their life trajectories in ways that led both to access SA. The correlation of disadvantage surfaced time and again, as participants recognized they had little choice but to access assistance.

Discussion

Intergenerational Relations

Certain fields of study in intergenerational relations have traditionally postulated a relationship between the behaviors, values, and attitudes of parents and their children concerning divorce (Diekmann & Schmidheiny, 2013), criminal behavior (Besemer, Ahmad, Hinshaw, & Farrington, 2017), education (Addio, 2007), and economic mobility (although the latter shows remarkable variability by country) (Corak, 2013). In other areas, however, a link shared across generations is far less certain—for

instance, child maltreatment (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Even if an intergenerational link is established, what remains murky is the nature of the relationship, that is, whether the association is causal or correlational, and the possible factors underlying each. Our study suggests that the proposed causal mechanisms of intergenerational SA receipt may be unclear, because theoretical understandings on their origins and pathways—the learning effect, the conformity effect, shared determinants—may not be entirely robust—that is, they may not fully capture why parents cause their children to go on to receive SA, if a causal relationship does exist.

The Learning Effect

The learning effect is premised on social learning theory (SLT), which suggests that children observe others and encode their behavior through the “reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral and environmental determinants” (Bandura, 1977, p. vii). SLT assumes three key principles: (a) people, including children, learn through observation and imitation; (b) mental state (cognition) is central to learning, mediated by both external and internal reinforcements (e.g., satisfaction); and (c) learning does not necessarily lead to changes in behavior. Taylor (2004) suggests that SLT aligns with what many developmental psychologists posit: children from the ages of 0-7 are most likely to learn from significant relations (i.e., parents), whereas children from the ages of 7 to early teen years typically model and demonstrate what they have learned from others, including their peers.

Not all adult children in our sample were aware that their parents had received SA when they were younger. If they had, they learned of this receipt during their adolescence or young adulthood, not during the formative years when learning from significant relations (i.e., one’s parents) is purportedly most pronounced. Some parents described withholding their past SA involvement from their children in an effort to hide the shame and indignity of its use. Yet, if adult children had little to no knowledge of their parents’ SA access during childhood, when did this learning take place? Even if adult children had knowledge of their parents’ prior SA access, few (only two, in fact, in the entire sample) shared

they had received specific advice from them on how to navigate the system in order to personally claim benefits. The vast majority of parents claimed they did not want their children to access SA and would recommend it as an absolute last resort (i.e., in times of “desperation” [Lisa]), and even then, only temporarily.

Returning to SLT, children must observe their parents’ behaviors in order to imitate them, and they must be motivated to do so. In what ways, then, would adult children be motivated to access SA? Not one participant in our study sample appeared motivated to pursue a life “on the dole.” Rather than instilling in their children the motivation to be “dependent” on the system, many of the parents in our sample, while on SA or off, endeavoured to drill into their children the value of education and hard work. The supposed values and attitudes associated with SA use (i.e., the lack of motivation to work, dependency) were certainly not verbally reinforced with participants’ children. Many parents had similar expectations of their children as would be expected in the general population, and if they did not, there appeared to be other factors at play (e.g., a few adult children claimed that their parents did not have expectations of them as they grew up, yet their parents were also those dealing with a history of trauma, abuse or illness, or who had resorted to substance use to cope with their adverse experiences).

Consistent with Dunn’s (2013) research that failed to find a reduced work ethic among less-educated people relative to those with more education (with the former group more likely to say a bad job is preferable to unemployment), a strong work ethos—imparting the values of education, hard work, and personal responsibility—so engrained in mainstream society was not lost on our study participants. Several claimed they had worked hard, but still could not get ahead; others had significant health issues or past experiences of trauma and abuse to contend with that made acquiring and maintaining gainful employment exceedingly difficult. Many of the immigrants in the sample had struggled when they came to Canada and had no other recourse but to resort to SA; their children followed suit, but typically only as a stepping stone before commencing post-secondary education. Many adult children faced similar challenges as their parents. In the case of Indigenous participants, both parent and child experienced the (intergenerational) impact of colonial oppression, racism, trauma,

and the shared determinants of place (comparable impoverished neighborhoods) and status (living in poverty).

Several adult children discussed wanting to live up to their parents' expectations for them with regards to education and employment; they did not aspire (or desire) to conform to a lifestyle living on SA. These findings are at odds with Barón, Cobb-Clark, and Erkal's (2008) study in Australia, which found support for the cultural transmission of work-welfare attitudes, but are consistent with Lee, Singlemann, and Yom-Tov's (2008) study that found no statistically significant difference between attitudes toward work of adult children on the American Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program and the general population.

Ambivalence About Welfare Stigma and The Conformity Effect

The stigma associated with SA receipt (an indicator of the conformity effect, insofar as parents' SA participation is said to reduce the stigma of participation for their children), found to be a deterrent to people (presumably rationally) contemplating accessing benefit uptake, is so profound that parents appeared far more likely to dissuade their children from receiving benefits, rather than encouraging them to do so. Welfare scholarship suggests that children, given their parents' prior SA receipt, are less likely to be affected by welfare stigma than children from non-SA accessing families (Beaulieu et al., 2005), yet there is nothing in our data that would suggest that the stigma of SA use was any less intense for our participants than it may be for the non-SA participating population (as was also reflected in Baumberg's [2016] research in the UK).

According to Goffman (1963), social stigma is defined as the individual characteristics that negatively differentiate deviants from non-deviants. Hand-in-hand with social stigma is stigmatization, the devaluation of deviant individuals/groups resulting from a negative evaluation of their personal character. Baumberg (2016) further conceptualizes stigma as fitting within three constructs: (a) self-stigma: an individual's own feeling that claiming benefits conveys a devalued identity; (b) stigmatization: the perception that other people will devalue your identity; and (c) claims stigma: stigma experienced in the process of claiming benefits (as in Selina's comment that she felt "dirty" in the welfare office).

Never-married “welfare moms” have been publicly pilloried and stigmatized as deviants who eschew traditional work and family values. Yet, despite the stigmatization they recurrently encounter, mothers on SA in Jarrett’s (1996) study believed “that their ability to manage the challenges of motherhood under conditions of poverty elevated their status, despite stigmatizing images to the contrary” (p. 372). In our study data, the role of stigma similarly does not appear to play out in a direction consistent with the conformity effect. Congruent with Baumberg’s (2016) study, our data show that both parents and children are continually subjected to stigmatization for their participation on SA (see Kobena’s comment about SA participants being seen as the “scum of the earth”), although at the same time, participants did not overwhelmingly experience self-stigma. Participants commonly believed they were exempt from individual explanations associated with SA use; they personally were not part of the groups that “abuse welfare” (e.g., Isi’s statement). Our study participants did not make a rational calculation, based on the stigma attached to benefits uptake, whether to access SA; they did so because they had no other choice. The conformity effect does not appear to hold in these data.

Shared Determinants

Consistent with Calvo-Armengol and Jackson’s (2009) model of “overlapping generations” (p. 125), underscoring the importance of shared neighborhood characteristics in predicting parent–child behavior, and much of the income mobility literature, which commonly reveals neighborhood stratification patterns marked by race (in the U.S., see Sharkey, 2008) and class (in Sweden, see Ham, Hedman, Manley, Coulter, & Östh, 2014), environmental factors appear to be particularly salient in predicting child SA use among our participants. The cumulative exposure to disadvantage and intergenerational transmission of neighborhood effects have been documented in Canada (Finnie & Bernard, 2005), although are said to be substantially less than in the U.S. (Oreopolous, 2008). Solon (2017) argues that American intergenerational income elasticity is significantly higher (0.4 or 0.5, as opposed to 0.2) than previously assumed (from estimations derived from short-term data). Challenging the notion that the growing gap is of little concern, Solon (2017)

suggests that the playing field is far from level, and children from families living in low income are at a “substantial disadvantage” (p. 5) relative to those from well-off families. Accordingly, proponents of the structural explanation of intergenerational SA receipt find that exposure to disadvantage is more likely to affect a child’s SA participation than is their parents’ prior welfare use.

Limitations of the Study

To ensure absolute confidentiality, parents and their adult children were recruited to the study separately, which meant that we could not assure that all research participants derived from the same family (guaranteeing participation from two or more generations). Consequently, we had only four dyads in the study—a limitation that restricted the full exploration of dynamics across generations. Moreover, as this study involves qualitative research, the findings cannot be used for the purposes of generalization. These data do, however, suggest that the underlying theoretical underpinnings of intergenerational SA use warrant re-examination in future research.

Conclusion

This qualitative study aimed to explore the dynamics of intergenerational SA receipt, including considering the causal effects and correlational associations that may underlie SA use across generations. Our data suggest that the theoretical foundations of causal pathways of intergenerational SA receipt be further problematized; the learning and conformity effects are less than decidedly identified, and not borne out in our research, especially to the same extent as shared determinants. The complexity of factors (including child maltreatment, trauma and violence, interrupted education [for some], the strong sense of welfare stigma, variable awareness of parental SA receipt, housing instability, and neighborhood poverty) intertwine in participants’ lives such that it appears difficult to establish predictable patterns in SA receipt. Are there too many spurious relationships and unobservable effects to allow for robust generalizable statistical models that govern SA receipt? To make policy decisions based on research presenting such conflicting results is not helpful, and

yet policy-making to date has favored (more punitive) theoretical orientations (i.e., the cultural-behavioral model) over others (e.g., the structural model)—harming SA participants in the process. There now appears to be some evidence to question the validity of econometric models that definitively estimate causal relationships in intergenerational SA participation.

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