

Statement of Research Agenda

Despite the belief that domestic violence (DV) cuts across all socioeconomic statuses (SES), there is scant research exploring DV in affluent (e.g., upper-middle, upper class) populations. Although research consistently shows that risk for DV perpetration is higher for women with fewer economic resources, these findings are possibly skewed given the relative silence surrounding DV in affluent communities, and the overreliance on agency samples (e.g., shelters, hospitals), which generally tap into the experiences of women with fewer resources. Indeed, affluent individuals may also take extreme measures to keep their family lives and experiences secret. The highly secretive nature of DV in affluent families, stereotypical images of who experiences DV, and societal beliefs regarding the wealthy have the potential to negatively impact affluent women's ability to receive help when they attempt to leave an abusive relationship. For example, upon disclosing their experiences with DV, affluent women's experiences are often ignored or minimized by friends and family as well as individuals within social service institutions whose goals are to assist survivors of DV. The lack of research on affluent individuals and families in general is hypothesized to be driven by a misconception that their experiences are relatively benign given their financial fortunes, and, therefore, do not warrant the same attention as more disadvantaged groups.

The broad objective of my research agenda is to contribute to the understanding of how affluent families and communities construct and manage private “family issues,” such as DV. To advance this objective, my research centers around two goals: (1) highlighting the role of community culture and expectations surrounding the management of private family issues and (2) exploring the roles of societal institutions, such as the legal and school systems, community professionals (e.g., health care professionals, police officers, mental health providers), and the media in the management of these private family issues.

Goal 1: Highlighting the Role of Community Culture and Expectations

Limited clinical and empirical research has examined cultural values and norms present in affluent communities, including perfectionism, materialism, competition and accomplishment, maintenance of social status, and privacy. While many characteristics of affluence are understandably viewed as advantages, researchers such as Suniya Luthar and Susan Weitzman have examined the potential negative effect of these cultural values and norms on affluent youth and mothers. Although important, this research does not examine the role of community culture and expectations to understand the process through which families construct and manage experiences, such as DV, that are believed to be private family issues.

To address this gap in the literature, my dissertation research examines how community and societal-level norms and expectations influence how families manage and construct their experiences when DV is present. Guided by a theoretical integration of community social organization framework, communication privacy management, and feminist theories, I conducted 27 in-depth interviews with affluent mothers and professionals (e.g., therapists, police, social workers) who work with this population. Preliminary analyses indicate that affluent mothers manage their experiences by compartmentalizing their private and public identities for the purpose of maintaining the image of the “traditional family ideal” and protecting the status quo of the community. Mothers maintain the image of the traditional family ideal by presenting

themselves and their family as successful in a variety of domains; actively participating in the school system and the community; and, only discussing selective aspects of their marriage and home life with family and friends. By compartmentalizing the realities of their home life from the facade of the traditional family idea, mothers also protect the status quo of their community. Protecting the status quo of the community entails preserving the positive reputation of the community as safe, education driven, and family oriented.

While some mothers and professionals describe barriers to disclosure of DV that are common for women of all SES groups, such as fear for their children's safety, many of the barriers to breaking the private/public dichotomy may be unique to this population. For example, one common barrier to calling the police to report DV is the concern that an arrest would result in the publication of their family name in the newspaper blotters. Although mothers compartmentalize their private and public identities at various points during their marriage, they ultimately do break this strict dichotomy when they disclose the abuse to others. However, breaking this private/public dichotomy has the potential to violate community norms around privacy of family issues that may have negative repercussions for the mothers and their children, such as losing clients in their professional role and their children getting excluded or bullied by peers.

In the future, I plan to examine the following research questions: (1) Why are some community and family issues, such as children with autism or bullying acknowledged and supported within affluent communities while others, such as DV and child abuse, ignored or minimized? and (2) How are the cultural norms and expectations around family privacy similar and unique across different affluent communities (e.g. different United States' regions, suburban versus urban)?

Goal 2: Exploring the Roles of Societal Institutions, Community Professionals, and the Media

Research has shown that affluent families', particularly affluent mothers', use of professional services is potentially different from other populations. For example, affluent families are less likely to call the police or contact DV shelters. However, affluent families are highly involved in the school system and often seek services from mental health professionals. Research has shown that professionals sometimes ignore or minimize the needs of affluent women because they assume these women do not experience DV or have ample access to the resources necessary to leave an abusive relationship. More research is needed to understand how abused affluent women navigate their interactions with professionals and social institutions and the role these individuals play in the management of private family issues.

Preliminary findings from my dissertation research indicate that important community professionals, such as police officers, may downplay the presence of DV in affluent communities to maintain the facade of a safe, family-oriented community. Others professionals who work with affluent women also minimize the severity of DV experienced by their clients. For example, a subsample of court-appointed custody evaluators in my Master's thesis research recounted severe acts of violence, such as a husband running over his wife with his car, but then reported not hearing about any examples of "real DV" (i.e., broken bones, visible bruising, high levels of coercive control) in their case load. Thus far, similar findings are emerging in the examples provided by some participants in my dissertation data. For example, one professional described a client who was shoved against the wall by her throat but then qualified her example by saying,

“Affluent women do not experience severe violence like lower income women” (e.g., visible bruises and injuries requiring medical attention).

In the future, I plan to address the following research questions: (1) Under what circumstances do societal institutions and professionals work together to either silence or foster intervention around private family issues? and (2) What role can societal institutions, community professionals, and the media play in helping communities and families address private family issues aside from DV?

Methods for Studying Family and Community Level Processes

To achieve these goals, I use qualitative research methods informed by a feminist theoretical framework. Given the lack of theoretical or empirical knowledge on private family issues (e.g., DV) in affluent families, qualitative data collection and analysis are especially well suited for examining this hidden topic. Further, qualitative research emphasizes treating the individuals they study as experts on their own lives and experiences, which is in line with feminist frameworks. My dissertation research seeks to advance existing knowledge by using grounded theory and ethnography in conjunction to examine how affluent families and communities construct and manage their experiences with DV. The use of grounded theory ethnography fosters conceptual and theoretical connections in a specific context; therefore, my research moves beyond superficial descriptions of a setting towards a theoretical understanding. While many of the characteristics of affluent families are understandably viewed as advantages in our society, my research examines ways in which privilege, social class, and status are potentially complicated for affluent families, especially affluent women who experience DV. In keeping with feminist research, my research agenda values feminist praxis that bridges research, advocacy, and the families impacted by DV. Through participation in community and professional seminars and workshops as well as dispersing information about my researching findings to members of the community, I am able to give back to those who have helped me with my research.

Future Research Plans

My future plans involve continuing my work toward the two previously stated goals through the use of innovative and collaborative research methods. Ultimately, I will disseminate my research findings through a variety of avenues, including academic publications, a book geared towards a professional audience, and workshops and seminars targeting non-academics.

My long-term research agenda involves an expansion of my central substantive area to more thoroughly understand the role of community culture and expectations as well as the societal institutions that potentially play a role in minimizing and silencing private family issues, such as DV in affluent families. To this end, I plan to collaborate with quantitative and qualitative researchers within sociology and family studies but also in other fields, such as criminal justice and educational policy. In keeping with my past and current research experiences, I will continue to incorporate undergraduate and graduate students in my research projects. I believe that this future research will successfully attract external government and private funding due to the creation of strong collaborative research projects with a variety of researchers, students, and community organizations as well as innovative research designs aimed at advancing theory and practical application.