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Social Work Practice and Systemic Stigmatization of Low-Income, African American, Single Mothers

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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M.S., University of Georgia, 2004

B.S., Georgia State University, 2003

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

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Abstract

In the United States, low-income, African American, single mothers meet with little success in financial stability and career and educational attainment because of difficulties in escaping systemic inequities that impede their socioeconomic well-being. The focus of this action research study was to examine how bachelor social workers (BSW) and master social workers (MSW) understand the impact of systemic stigmatization on the socioeconomic well-being of low-income, African American, single mothers. The theoretical framework that guided this study was stigma theory. A Zoom focus group was conducted with 5 social workers (i.e., BSW and MSW) who work with low-income, African American, single mothers. The data were organized and analyzed using inductive content analysis, resulting in the primary themes of (a) perpetuation of the cycle of poverty, (b) client disempowerment, (c) educating clients about opportunities and empowerment, and (d) counteracting the stigma of assistance seeking. Strategies developed from the findings of this study that could be used to contribute to positive social change include sensitivity awareness trainings for providers regarding systemic stigmatization and client empowerment. The findings also indicated the need for policy changes that impact the financial, career advancement, educational growth, and overall well-being of low-income, African American, single mothers.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Amanda Mae Dearing and Columbus Dearing, and my daughters, Samara and Christall. Although dear ones, you were not physically here to see this accomplishment, you were never out of my motivation to stay true to myself, true to my goal, and true to my faith.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and the Literature Review

The impact of systemic stigmatization presents challenges for low-income, African American, single mothers regarding their socioeconomic well-being (Taylor & Conger, 2017). Systemic stigmatization refers to a systematic social process of devaluing individuals or groups based on actual or perceived differences, such as gender, race, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic positions, behavior, or ethnicity (Health Policy Project, 2014). Discrimination often follows stigmatization and involves an additional injustice placed on people who maintain marginalized recognition or social positions through legislation, policies, or systemic practices (Oskooii, 2018). In the context of this study, the definition of socioeconomic well-being includes financial stability and career/educational opportunity.

In this action research study, I explored social workers' perceptions, experiences, and challenges when working with low-income, African American, single mothers as they attempt to adequately navigate and respond to systemic stigmatization. The knowledge gained from this action research study can add to the existing social work practice knowledge regarding models, strategies, and techniques used with African American, single mothers of low-income status. The findings can facilitate positive social change in that social workers may employ enhanced and informed understandings to assist low-income, African American, single mothers as they address the impact of systemic stigmatization on their socioeconomic well-being. Low-income, African American, single mothers often have difficulty navigating systemic stigmatization that affects their overall well-being, including equitable opportunities that

allow them to become financially stable, educationally empowered, and have career opportunities (Moras et al., 2018). This difficulty can limit their ability to become successful community members.

Systemic stigmatization is manifested through unjust practices and discriminatory perceptions of persons based on various characteristics that differentiate them from other society members (Oskooii, 2018). Systemic stigmas are commonly related to ethnicity, sexual identity, race, socioeconomic positions, and specific health conditions (Rao et al., 2019). Systemic stigmatization and discrimination impact specific vulnerable populations based on their socially identified status (Cook, 2015).

The research findings can guide social workers in helping to mitigate the effects of systemic stigmatization on the socioeconomic well-being of low-income, African American, single mothers. According to Campbell-Grossman et al. (2016), studies are needed to understand how to better support low-income, African American, single mothers regarding the impact of systemic stigmatization on their overall well-being.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this study is that, in the United States, many low-income, African American, single mothers, who make up nearly 30% of all single mothers (Fontenot et al., 2018), often struggle with socioeconomic well-being due in part to enduring systemic stigmatization throughout their motherhood years (Richard & Lee, 2019). The U.S. Census Bureau (2019) reported the poverty rate for Black, single female-headed households was 29.8% compared with 17.5% for White (non-Hispanic), single

female-headed households and that median household income was lowest among Black households when compared with White, Hispanic, and Asian households.

Rao et al. (2019) noted that systemic stigmatization could affect individuals' socioeconomic development. The feelings of inadequacy that systemic stigmatization enforces can affect how individuals perceive themselves, hinder or impede their getting help and treatment, and engulf them in a cycle of coping with issues that affect their socioeconomic development (Hughes, 2018). According to Hughes (2018), these feelings of inadequacy may result in many low-income, African American, single mothers seeking help from nonprofit organizations and churches rather than seeking welfare benefits. Many feel that if they do not accept conditions related to surveillance and job search requirements required to receive certain benefits, they will face punitive outcomes. Furthermore, this population often perceives the welfare system's application processes as intrusive, leaving them feeling unworthy of receiving needed assistance (Hughes, 2018).

According to Hughes (2018), single mothers of low-income status experience stereotypical perceptions and are subjected to stigmatization by society. As a result, systemic stigmatization can impact an individual's financial stability, educational success, and career/goal aspirations (Smith-Evans et al., 2014).

Historically, many African Americans, including African American, single mothers, shy away from applying for social welfare services such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, and other benefits and financial assistance due to fear of facing systemic stigmatization, which adversely affects their

economic well-being (Richard & Lee, 2019). According to Minoff (2020), the work requirements under certain social welfare programs are unjust for the most vulnerable population groups in our society. Minoff stated that these work requirements "are provided on the assumption that people do not want to work, and therefore should be coerced to work by public policy" (p. 1) and further added that Black people's work ethic has been questioned more than any single group of people. This perception can result in an individual embracing feelings of inferiority, embarrassment, and intimidation, resulting in a reluctancy to acquire the help needed for sustaining a productive life-style. This unjust perception can perpetuate cycles of poverty and stigma-related issues that affect an individual's overall well-being (Moras et al., 2018).

There is little understanding of social workers' experiences in addressing the social work practice problem related to the impact of systemic stigmatization on low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being. Social workers may help support low-income, African American, single mothers by acknowledging their perceptions, experiences, and challenges regarding the impact of systemic stigmatization on these individuals' socioeconomic well-being. Through this study, I seek to fill this practice gap.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to examine how bachelor social workers (BSW) and master social workers (MSW) understand the impact of systemic stigmatization on low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being. Also essential to this study was the challenges social workers

face in addressing the impact of systemic stigmatization on this population and the strategies that could be useful to mitigate the effects of systemic stigmatization on socioeconomic well-being. In the extant literature, there is little understanding of social workers' experiences in addressing this social work practice problem.

The following three research questions guided this study:

RQ 1: How do social workers describe the impact of systemic stigmatization on low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being?

RQ 2: What challenges do social workers face when addressing the impact of systemic stigmatization on low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being?

RQ 3: How do social workers help mitigate the effects of systemic stigmatization on the socioeconomic well-being of low-income, African American, single mothers?

For this study, a low-income, African American, single mother was defined as the head-of-household, who is not married, with one or more children, and who pays the sole cost of family expenses. Additionally, the mother has a household income at or below the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (2020) Poverty Guidelines for 2020 with a base of $12,760.

Socioeconomic well-being is when an individual is living above the federal poverty level and does not rely on state or federal assistance programs to sustain their livelihood (Tan et al., 2020). Systemic stigmatization is defined as additional injustices

placed on people who retain marginalized recognition or social positions through laws, legislation, or political practices (Oskooii, 2018).

Through this study, I acquired data that could enhance and inform social workers' efforts in assisting low-income, African American, single mothers as they face problematic experiences due, in part, to difficulties in navigating systemic stigmatization that impedes their socioeconomic well-being.

Nature of the Doctoral Project

In this study, I used a qualitative action research design. Action research involves the researcher and participants working together to understand a problematic situation and develop strategies to address it through collaborative understanding and communication (Guy et al., 2019). The rationale for using action research in this study was that it allowed the participants' direct involvement with the problem to define it, discuss challenges, and identify solutions for addressing the impact of systemic stigmatization on the socioeconomic well-being of low-income, African American, single mothers, which was the focus of this project study.

I obtained data for this study via a focus group comprised of social workers who met the established criteria. The criteria for inclusion in the focus group were: (a) a BSW or MSW social worker employed by the Georgia Department of Family and Children Services, (b) English speaking, and (c) work with low-income, African American, single mothers for at least 5 years. Social workers selected to participate in the study met the criteria and were best prepared to answer the research questions due to their training and experience. I sent emails regarding the action research project to potential social workers

listed in Georgia's Department of Family and Children Services provider registry. Additionally, a recruitment flyer requesting participation was placed on the information board of this department's corporate office.

I used a qualitative method of inductive content analysis in this project. The inductive analysis is used to distinguish themes by examining documents, recordings, and other printed and verbal material (Elo et al., 2014). Audio recordings, upon receiving written consent, were used to ensure the accuracy of the data collected from the focus group. I used the qualitative analysis software, MAXQDA, to code and categorize the acquired data.

Significance of the Study

This study involved acquiring pertinent information from social workers to enhance and inform social work practice regarding the impact of systemic stigmatization on low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being. The data obtained in this study could add to the knowledge base of social work practice used with low-income, African American, singles mothers. As stated by Campbell-Grossman et al. (2016), low-income African American single mothers can benefit from studies that address ways that will help them navigate and respond to the impact of systemic stigmatization on their socioeconomic well-being. This action research study can help fill practice gaps that result in missed opportunities to provide meaningful support to low-income, African American, single mothers. Additionally, other potential implications for positive social change can be achieved by sharing information obtained from the social work participants with organizational leadership and

policy practitioners. This information includes social workers' perceptions of the impact of systemic stigmatization and the practical challenges they face when addressing the impact of systemic stigmatization on low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being. The sharing of this information could lead to revised application practices for welfare benefits at the organizational level or the development of new policies.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Understanding stigma and its effects on the overall well-being of an individual's life was essential to this study. Goffman developed stigma theory in 1963, and this theory's premise was defined as any physical or social characteristic or trait that belittles an individual's social identity to disqualify them from being entirely socially accepted (Hall, 1971). Goffman stated that stigmas are not reflections of inherent weaknesses in an individual's physical persona or character but are socially created labels by others' perceptions or beliefs in a society (Hall, 1971). Goffman further stated that individuals who are the target of stigmatized beliefs may fail to live up to societal expectations and what is perceived as normal behaviors, thereby disqualifying them from complete social approval (Hall, 1971).

In stigma theory, Goffman identified three main types of stigmas:

- Stigma association involving mental illness.

- Stigma association involving physical deformation.

- Stigma attached to identification with a specific race, ethnicity, religion, ideology, etc. (Hall, 1971).

Bos et al. (2013) further advanced Goffman's stigma theory by providing a theoretical review of the stigma concept that included a beneficial classification of four types of stigmas:

- Public stigma: The adverse treatment of someone possessing a stigmatized condition, by the experience or expectation of stigmatization and, by the adjoining psychological discomfort experienced by people with a stigmatized condition.

- Self-stigma: Can result in mental consequences for an individual's well-being because of their awareness of public stigma and the social devaluing associated with their circumstances or condition.

- Stigma by association: Being devalued solely by being in association with someone in a stigmatized condition.

- Structural stigma: How societal ideologies and institutions perpetuate or aggravate a stigmatized status. It acknowledges that stigma reproduces existing social inequalities and is perpetuated by control and the exercise of social, economic, and systemic power.

In alignment with this study, structural stigma was specifically emphasized based on systemic inequality policies in the United States regarding government-enacted programs; social, economic, and educational disparities; and racial and gender wealth gaps that affect many disadvantaged and vulnerable people.

Values and Ethics

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2018) Code of Ethics core value of social justice was pertinent to this study's topic regarding social work practice regarding systemic stigmatization with low-income, African American, single mothers. The related ethical principle that calls for social workers to challenge social injustice was the guiding principle from the NASW (2018) Code of Ethics identified in this study. Within the context of this ethical principle, social workers pursue social change by working with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Low-income, African American, single mothers may benefit from social workers' social change efforts that primarily focus on issues of poverty, marginalization, discrimination, stigmatization, welfare inequities, and other forms of social injustice. Moreover, these efforts ensure that African American, single mothers of low-income status have access to needed services and resources, equality of opportunities, and meaningful participation in decision making for their overall well-being.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to examine how social workers can assist low-income, African American, single mothers adequately navigate and respond to the impact of systemic stigmatization on their socioeconomic well-being. In searching for literature related to my topic, I reviewed articles accessible through the Walden University, Georgia State University, and the Atlanta University Center libraries. I identified articles from databases, such as SocINDEX, PsycINFO, PsycArticles, Sage Journals, and ERIC, to obtain, review, and retrieve academic literature on relevant topics

to my action research project. Google Scholar was also used to acquire peer-reviewed articles essential to the study. I selected the empirical studies reviewed for this project study to acquire past and current pertinent data regarding the identified key variables of *stigmatization*, *systemic stigmatization*, *African American single mothers*, *low-income mothers*, *socioeconomic elements*, *well-being*, *social work roles in social injustice, social work with low-income African American single mothers*, and variations of these themes.

Most of the included literature for this research project was published between the years of 2013 to 2020; however, older, formative studies with significant relevance were also included. Search results for this study ranged from 11,000 to 14,000 articles that addressed various types of stigmatizations specially related to marginalized groups that include race, gender, sexual identity, and socioeconomic positions. Searches resulting in fewer than 15 articles specially addressed social workers and systemic stigmatization regarding low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being.

Systemic Stigmatization

Systemic stigmatization is a powerful social process of devaluing people or groups based on real or perceived differences, such as behavior, sexual preference, gender, age, or ethnicity (Health Policy Project, 2014). Systemic stigmatization can be identified as structural stigma in society in that it can create obstacles for persons with a mental, behavioral disorder, or embedded perceived beliefs (Hatzenbuehler, 2016). Structural means that stigma is a belief held by large groups of society in which individuals with the stigmatized situation are unequal or are part of an inferior group (Bos et al., 2013).

Structural inequality or stigmatization is also referred to as a privilege system created within an economy by institutions that include legislative laws, business operations, and executive policies (Hanks et al., 2018). This systemic stigma can prevent certain groups from achievements within their society. The discrimination that follows systemic stigmatization can place the stigmatized persons in negative societal conditions that affect their overall well-being.

Wealth in the United States stands as a significant primary systemic inequality (Herring & Henderson, 2016; Howell & Elliott, 2018). According to Hanks et al. (2018), the level of an individual or family's wealth or total assets is the door that opens to a variety of possibilities in U.S. society, including job opportunities, selecting neighborhoods in which to live, education for their children, and the ability to acquire economic stability in retirement. In the United States, wealth is unequally dispersed by race, particularly among White and Black Americans (Hanks et al., 2018). Hanks et al. stated that Black American families have a fragment of White American families' prosperity. According to Shin (2015), this disparity primarily appears to be problematic for low-income, disadvantaged families of color, but it intensifies all Americans' political and economic outcomes. Additionally, some federal policies often reinforce the wealth gap by enacting policies that increase the wealth of those whose wealth status is secure (Shin, 2015).

Systemic stigmatization remains prevalent in discriminatory lending practices (Korver-Glenn, 2018). Shin (2015) stated that mortgages obtained by families of color tend to have higher interest rates. Wells Fargo, in 2012, admitted to leading potential

Black and Latino homebuyers into subprime mortgages but offered prime mortgages to potential White homebuyers with similar credit profiles (Kuebler, 2013). In research regarding *racialized* individuals of post-World War II, Rothstein (2018) noted that the racial history of housing policy in the United States, including residential segregation and discriminatory credit practice, have increased systemic inequality in homeownership.

In a qualitative study that involved investigating a sample of 220 statements randomly selected from cases that identified discrimination in fair lending lawsuits, Massey et al. (2016) provided evidence regarding discriminatory practices in mortgage lending. The reviewed cases showed systemic injustices that involved obvious predatory lending and overturning of redlining violations of the *Fair Housing Act* (Massey, 2015) and the *Equal Credit Opportunity Act* (Smith, 1977). The stigmatized systemic actions of the lending institutions identified in their study included not offering racial-ethnic minority loan applicants the most current options that have lower fixed interest rates and fees. The lending institutions also applied undue stress to racial-ethnic minority applicants that suggested the only way they could expedite their loan process was to submit their loans as subprime loans. The authors stated that the lending institutions in this study acknowledged that they usually made assumptions that their African American customers were not as intellectually competent as their European American customers; therefore, they could more easily manipulate them into applying for subprime loans with high-priced conditions.

Systemic Stigmatization and Socioeconomic Status

According to Rao et al. (2019), stigma can increase an abundance of socioeconomic burdens on individuals who hold marginalized identifications or societal positions. Jung (2008) addressed the hypothesis that stigma attached to lower-socioeconomic status has unfavorable effects on overall psychological well-being, including life satisfaction and psychological distress. The sample used involved 1,139 participants, of which, 45.7% ($n = 520$) identified as White, 51.4% ($n = 586$) identified as Black, and 2.9% ($n = 33$) identified as Other and were not included in the analysis. The recognized stigma of socioeconomic status was measured by participants' acknowledgments of their unfair treatment or discrimination experienced regarding their income level or social class. Other variables in the study included unfair treatment or discrimination experienced in the past and daily livelihood, including financial stress, wage levels, age, and recognized race stigma. The study results revealed a higher percentage of Blacks (13.5%; $n = 79$) acknowledged the stigma of socioeconomic status than Whites (3.5%; $n = 18$). Mostly, perceived stages of socioeconomic status were associated negatively with life satisfaction (beta = .224; $p < .05$) and positively with psychological distress (beta = .305; $p < .01$) after controlling for another predictor. Jung's study showed that socioeconomic stigma might be more prevalent for Blacks than for Whites.

Hirsch and Jack (2012) offered an improbable look at how systemic stigmatization could be implemented in U.S. society and its association to socioeconomic status. Their study involved conducting 150 interviews with middle- and working-class

African American men and women and acknowledged economics as one of the most dominant concerns faced by the African American community. In their qualitative study, the authors noted a new perspective on how African Americans define and conceptualize their understanding of racial inequities as well as their views on stigmatization about the barriers encountered economically. Their respondents connected consumer-motivated economic issues to a lack of economic solidarity and a class division among African Americans. More precisely, the authors combined the problems of lack of solidarity directly with African Americans' vulnerable financial position. The authors' findings showed that the need for togetherness across all economic spectrums in African American societies is essential for challenging the persistent racial stigmatization.

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (n.d.) noted examples of systemic stigma-related practices that can affect an individual's socioeconomic status, including barriers in recruitment and hiring that are discriminatory, the exclusion of females from qualified positions that have frequently been held by men, preemployment inquiries that are illegally designed to discriminate against individuals with disabilities, and discriminatory age practices regarding reductions in forced retirement and benefits.

Systemic Stigmatization and African Americans

The 2020 U.S. Census was 99.98% complete in October 2020, with African Americans making up 47.4 million of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). African Americans are primarily considered to be in the population groups referred to as "hard-to-count" (O'Hara, 2019). More than 1 in 3 African Americans live in this hard-to-count group because their census tabulation is hindered by language barriers, low

literacy, and lack of internet access (US Census Bureau, 2020). This systemic perspective can significantly affect African Americans in how they are stigmatized regarding receiving certain goods and services. Being in this group can result in African Americans receiving inadequate political representation and unequal access to essential public and private resources (Berry-James et al., 2020). The lack of adequate counting of African Americans may result in their being denied or limited in an impactful voice in policy decision making that may result in the lack of representation for their community needs.

Fleming et al. (2012) conducted an interview study that analyzed 150 randomly sampled African Americans to understand how stigmatized individuals understand their experiences with stigmatization. Additionally, the interviews involved assessing the appropriate responses regarding the best approach when coping with stigmatization, including reactions involving specific encounters. The sampled participants included interviews with middle- and working-class African Americans. Responses were categorized about how a stigmatized group reacts to perceived stigmatization that included ostracism, misrepresentation, racism, and discrimination (Fleming et al., 2012). Fleming et al. found that African Americans are more likely to confront racism than diminish racist conflicts in their response to racism. Additionally, African Americans believe that the most practical way to address racism is to *teach the ignorant*. The authors also concluded that many questions were not answered, including if women are more prone to confront racism than men, are the working class less likely to confront racism than the middle class, and does past experiences with discrimination determine responses to racism.

Acquiring good employment opportunities that can help establish a productive and fulfilled lifestyle has significantly impacted African Americans concerning historical systemic inequities. According to Weller (2019), regardless of educational achievement, African American employees often encounter a higher unemployment rate than their European American counterparts. Developing higher education initiatives that lead to equitable employment can help obtain more opportunities to receive jobs and include significant needed benefits; however, regardless of their education level, African American workers continue to face barriers in the labor market regarding employment discrimination, occupation segregation, and unequal compensation (Weller, 2019).

Further emphasizing this phenomenon, Ajilore (2019) acknowledged the ongoing existence of these barriers because the labor market is systematically designed to create the Black-White unemployment gap. Ajilore stated that the Center for American Progress's (Cawthorne, 2008) findings noted the continual and purposeful 2-to-1 racialized unemployment gap. Since the collection of unemployment data by race first became accessible in 1972, African Americans have shown an unemployment rate continuously double that of their White counterparts, and this 2-to-1 racialized gap has continued throughout some of the most productive economies and some of the most severe economic downturns (Ajilore, 2019).

Lamont and Mizrachi (2012) outlined a range of *destigmatization* strategies that certain stigmatized groups, of which African American are included, embrace during their everyday lives. Their systematic qualitative study provided insightful data from various studies that included a comprehensive view of responses to stigmatization by

ordinary people from various perspectives. The data included how these groups

rationalize their stigmatized experiences; how they compromise and alter social

interactions and boundaries; as well as how their responses are supported and limited by

institutions, political national ideologies, culturally engrained beliefs, and circumstances.

The everyday responses by certain stigmatized groups addressed in their study were

defined as "the rhetorical and strategic tools deployed by individual members of

stigmatized groups in reaction to perceived stigmatization, racism, and discrimination"

(p. 2). The study highlighted findings from Fleming et al. (2012) that found African

Americans obtain recognition by maintaining dignity and protecting themselves in coping

with stigmatization by changing the negative meanings associated with their group

through "educating" the ignorant and in not conforming to the stereotype depicted on

them. In some situations, this group is constrained to confront absolute inequalities due to

their given needs and dependence on resources. The authors also noted that African

Americans are significantly influenced in their resolution tactics concerning the

prevalence of racism and injustice in the United States resulting from dependency on

essential needs and resources. Lamont and Mizrachi determined that more examinations

of responses of certain stigmatized groups are needed for more comprehensive

understanding of the existence and nonexistence of group limitations experienced by

these groups.

Systemic Stigmatization and Low-Income, African American, Single Mothers

The challenges faced by low-income, African American, single mothers are

connected to barriers that impede their financial stability and career/goal and educational

success (Taylor & Conger, 2017). The barriers for this population have their roots in the systemic stigmatization embedded in the framework of U.S. society (Bertocch & Dimica, 2014; Damaske et al., 2017).

Low-income, African American, single mothers are a stigmatized group. They possess characteristics that convey a social identity that developed within stigmatizing societal beliefs and perceptions. Stigmatization adversely impacts self-esteem and deprives people of socioeconomic opportunities (James & Amato, 2013). Most low-income, African American, single mothers experience difficulties obtaining employment and have few other options to sufficiently care for their families. The payments from TANF that are often received by this population group have declined in the past two decades even though other government programs have increased (Gluchman, 2017; Haskins & Weidinger, 2019). Although there has been a large increase in total government support to low-income families since 1986, the dispensation of that support has immensely changed (Hamilton et al., 2019; Hardy et al., 2018).

Many disadvantaged and vulnerable individuals' socioeconomic needs are primarily rooted in financial stability, career opportunity, and educational success (Cook, 2015). An individuals' psychological developmental process interactions in a social environment directly determine how their socioeconomic needs will impact their overall well-being (Perzow et al., 2018). Stigmatized individuals' socioeconomic needs are often impacted by encountered systemic stigmatizations. In a regression study using 2215, unmarried single mothers, Radey (2018) identified that most low-income individuals' vulnerability stems from the design of the economy, including restricted (a) adequate

incomes, (b) steady employments, (c) schooling opportunities, (d) reasonable welfare, (e) reasonable living conditions and (f) reasonable child supervision.

Financial Impact

Financial stability for African American single mothers of low-income status is impacted by specific government enacted programs. The TANF program is designed to provide temporary financial assistance to low-income families (Falk, 2013). The TANF block grant provides federal funding for states to create welfare programs for low-income families. TANF focused on the importance of working and forced recipients to obtain employment immediately, requiring many low-income families to obtain employment that would not meet their needs (Falk, 2013).

Additionally, compensation for time off at most low-income paying jobs is not required and depends upon the number of hours worked to qualify for the Family Medical Leave Act benefits. This Act is a U.S. labor law established in 1993 that required covered employers to provide their employees with job-protection, which would provide 12 weeks of unpaid leave per year for specified family and medical reasons (Heinrich, 2014). Typically, low-income African American single mothers do not work at jobs where they would qualify for this benefit due to not meeting work hours requirements.

Low-income African American single mothers have been forced into additional financial and economic concerns because of stringent requirements and limitation regulations regarding instrumental government programs such as TANF, Earned Income Tax Credit, and Child Tax Credit programs (Weil, 2017). The chief reason for the decline in income for low-income single mothers during the last decade was the loss of TANF

cash assistance that was not replaced with other income sources (Ahn, 2014). TANF

income fell, in part, because of a sharp drop in the number of families TANF served. The

number fell by more than half due largely to the welfare law's work requirements, time

limits, and other restrictions that proved to be problematic for most recipients (Trisi &

Sherman, 2016). TANF dispersions on cash benefits to low-income families changed

from 30% to 20%, lowering access to assistance that bridges the gap between what

families earn and what they need to sufficiently meet their family's basic needs (McKeen,

2021).

Low-income African American single mothers experience challenges with

financial stability because of the racial wealth gap that exists due to racial labor markets

(Chan & Moffitt, 2018). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), the median income

estimate for White Americans was $72,204, White alone, not Hispanic was $76,057;

Asian Americans was $98,174, Asian alone or in combination was $97,150; and Black

Americans was $45,438, Black alone or in combination was $46,073. Additionally, a

study conducted by Shapiro et al. (2014) showed that a wage gap existed with income

increases between African Americans and Whites because "every dollar increases in

average income over the 25-year study period added $5.19 wealth for White households,

while the same income gains only added 69 cents of wealth for African American

households" (p. 4). The Economic Policy Institute researchers concluded that what is

influencing the continuation of wage gap disparities is discrimination and increasing

compensation inequality in general to be the primary reason (Fan et al., 2016).

In contrast to widely held myths about the responsibility of closing the racial wealth gap being placed on the need for behavioral changes by Blacks. Darity et al. (2018) conducted an analysis based on the Survey of Consumer Finances 2016 that revealed a different perspective. The analysis showed Blacks could not close the racial wealth gap by modifying their behavior or accepting more "*personal responsibility*" (p. 4). The report indicated that there are no actions that Black Americans can take autonomously that will have much of an effect on decreasing the racial wealth gap. For the gap to be closed, the report stated that America must undertake an extensive social change created by acquiring important national policies that will establish a direction toward addressing the long-standing consequences of slavery. This report indicates that closing the racial wealth gap needs a specific assessment of the causes of the disparity and an insightful action to produce systemic reform and permanent change (Darity et al., 2018).

Progress in closing the gender earnings based on median annual earnings has also slowed immensely. It has definite problematic financial and economic issues for all women, especially women of color, and even more for women heads of household (Fan et al., 2016). According to Rosenfeld (2017), if the pace of change in the annual earnings ratio continues at the same rate it has since 1984, it would take until 2059 for women and men to reach equality in earnings. Additionally, the pace of change would be substantially longer for women of color. Black women would reach equality in median annual earnings with White men in 2119 (Rosenfeld, 2017).

Naples (2018) provided insightful information regarding how mothers are marginalized based on identifications such as ethnicity, immigration status, class, and special needs, and how these mothers manage marginalization. There were three essential questions addressed in this study that focused on outlining what structural barriers and stigmas mothers faced, how they experience and react to negative social forces, and how the laws and policies that were established and implemented benefitted some mothers while other mothers were denied the same privileges. These questions were examined by scholars who determined that barriers are frequently established and implemented by state institutions. Inadvertently, more hardships arise for single mothers using these institutions. For example, according to some case managers in Georgia (Freeman, 2015), the TANF program encourages caseworkers to focus on work versus education. Therefore, driving a significant number of low-income African American single mothers into working at low-income paying jobs instead of providing encouragement to further their education would improve their economic status (Freeman, 2015). The lack of understanding or refusal to acknowledge systemic injustice for disadvantaged, vulnerable women could result in life-long struggles for this population group.

Public assistance has increased for low-income, African American, single mothers who experience financial, physical, socioeconomic, and psychological issues (Glenn, 2016). In the United States, research efforts have been conducted on public assistance and welfare mothers (Weiss, 2017). However, little research has been conducted that describes the perspectives and impactful experiences of single mothers. Past research has documented that social stigma is associated with the use of public assistance programs

(Baumberg, 2015; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006). This research primarily stated that participation in such programs is sometimes offered as proof that those who benefit from such assistance embrace undesirable work behaviors and should be placed in the lowest considered employable status (Baumberg, 2015). Frequently identified within this stigmatized perception are low-income African American single mothers (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016).

Contrary to the findings in the research conducted by Baumberg (2015), Turner' (2020) research study' findings with 21 low-income single Black mothers in Virginia, showed that these mothers acknowledge but defy dominant perspectives that label them as welfare queens and baby mamas. The participants perceive as a primary aspect of their motherhood responsibilities is socializing their children around race and class. The study showed that Black mothers of a low-income status who receive public assistance must struggle with enhanced state scrutiny, the degrading of their ability to sufficiently mother, raising their Black children in racially motivated environments, and navigating a neoliberalist economic system. The participants in this study acknowledged that the employment opportunities afforded to them are not financially equitable. However, they sought these opportunities because their primary goal is to provide for their children. The mothers added that receiving public assistance is not viewed by them as a privilege but a necessity to ensure their children's needs are met.

A literature research report, which included a primary section on systemic challenges faced by specific vulnerable populations, was conducted for the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation Administration for Children and Families, U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services (Quint et al., 2018). This report involved in-depth interviews with 30 low-income families. The report stated that 1 in 5 American children (14.5 million) live in poverty, with a high percentage being Black and Hispanic children within single mother homes. Interviewees in this research acknowledged the challenges faced based on the qualifications placed on them regarding receiving welfare grants that pressured them to accept low-paying employments in order to receive certain benefits. These low wage-earning employments would not provide enough income to sufficiently care for their families resulting in on-going poverty conditions.

The recipients indicated their feelings of being stereotyped and stigmatized because they were placed on a "moral hierarchy" scale due to unjust perceptions. The study showed that these mothers hold a concern for their families and that future qualitative research should focus on helping parents understand the positive and negative aspects of receiving benefits.

Career Impact

Low-income, African American, single mothers are often marginalized by society through perspectives that impact their overall life experiences. A qualitative study conducted by Richard and Lee (2019) with racial minority working single mothers at lower-middle income levels, provided data showing the complex interaction between individual, environment, and system factors compared to multiple subsystems that influence racial minority single mother's career development and experiences. At the individual level, racial-minority mother's experience discriminating experiences and oppressive associations related to multiple racial-minority identity, personality, level of

education or training. The example at the mesosystem level revealed that racial minority single mothers' workplace environments displayed additional challenges that include stereotyping and discriminative policies created by their place of employment. At the macrosystem level, the example showed how systemic policies impacted racial and ethnic minority working single mothers concerning hiring policies that influence opportunities within the framework of career growth, economic competence, and occupational mobility. Participants expressed greater career difficulties that included prejudicial and stigmatization experiences, rigid working policies, and lack of social assistance (Richard & Lee, 2019).

Educational Impact

The dismantling of legalized racial segregation in education continues to exist although decades of legal attempts have occurred. The impact of this disparity results in low-income, African Americans being disproportionally enrolled in schools without access to quality resources, credentialed teachers, rigorous course offerings, and extracurricular activities (Smith-Evans et al., 2014).

Empirical research has been conducted involving quantitative and qualitative studies by social scientist researchers and clinical social workers that address *education inequality* (Downey & Condron, 2016; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Lamont, 2018). The research studies' goals involved recognizing the injustice of educational disparity for people who are vulnerable to unequal, segregated school systems. However, research studies fail to acknowledge the effects of this systemic injustice that places low-income,

African American, single mothers into problematic cycles that affect their overall well-being (Abdullah et al., 2015).

There is limited research that acknowledges that this population group primarily received their formal education from inferior school systems (Cook, 2015). Cook's (2015) contended that low-income, African American individuals are often perceived as not valuing education. This perception is rooted in a stratified social system that strives to equate value with status. Cook further stated that some essential cultural and socioeconomic opportunities and benefits are disproportionately available to some of the most vulnerable population groups in the United States. Therefore, according to Ornstein et al. (2017), this population lacks the benefits of an excellent educational background to ensure job quality that leads to higher wages.

Social workers can affect systemic education inequity by promoting social justice within societies, professional practice, and educational institutions (Lee & Hudson, 2017). Social scientists and the social work profession have long engaged in research related to educational, health, and well-being disparities and the needs of various populations defined by culture or socioeconomic status (Conger et al. 2010; Golin, 2017).

Summary

This section addressed the foundational basis of this action research study, including an introduction to the study, problem statement, purpose and research questions, nature and significance of the study, theoretical framework, values and ethics, and professional and academic literature review. Further outlined in this section was the potential of social work practice toward addressing systemic stigmatization in low-

income African American single mothers' overall well-being. Although both qualitative and quantitative studies were identified in the literature review, no studies were found that reported findings on this topic using action research with social work participants who work with low-income African American single mothers.

The following section includes the analytical steps of the data collected in this project study. The data collected may be used to enhance and inform social work practice with current and future social workers who provide services to low-income African American single mothers.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

The problem under study was that, in the United States, many African American, single mothers of low-income status, who make up nearly 30% of all single mothers (Fontenot et al., 2018), often struggle with breaking difficult life cycle experiences that include financial stability, career/goal, and educational attainment due in part to systemic stigmatization throughout their motherhood years (see Richard & Lee, 2019). As stated by Campbell-Grossman et al. (2016), studies are needed to understand better how to assist low-income, African American, single mothers as they manage and cope with the impact of systemic stigmatization on their socioeconomic well-being.

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to examine how BSW and MSW social workers understand the impact of systemic stigmatization on low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being, the challenges social workers face in addressing the impact of systemic stigmatization on this population, and the strategies that could be useful to mitigate the effects of systemic stigmatization on socioeconomic well-being. The findings could enhance and inform best practices for social workers to use when working with African American, single mothers of low-income status.

This section includes a discussion of the research design, methodology, sources of data/data collection, data analysis, and ethical procedures before concluding with a summary. In this section, I also provide the analytical steps of the data collection process.

Research Design

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

RQ 1: How do social workers describe the impact of systemic stigmatization on low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being?

RQ 2: What challenges do social workers face when addressing the impact of systemic stigmatization on low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being?

RQ 3: How do social workers help mitigate the effects of systemic stigmatization on the socioeconomic well-being of low-income, African American, single mothers?

In this research project, I used an action research design, which was aligned appropriately with the purpose of the study. Action research is an approach that incorporates a professional social researcher's skills and experiences with the problem definition and understanding of local participants to address a particular set of organizational, community, legislative, or environmental problems (Convery, 2019). Together, these actions form a collaborative learning association to clearly define and decide what data are needed to understand the problem and create hypotheses about the applicable causes.

Focus group discussion is one collection method used in qualitative research (Almutrafi, 2019). This method's aim is to obtain data from a purposeful selected group of individuals instead of from a statistically representative sample of a boarder group for the purpose of obtaining an in-depth understanding of a social issue (Mishra, 2016). For

this study, a focus group was the appropriate data collection method because it involved

obtaining the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of social workers who work

directly with low-income, African American, single mothers. This direct provision of

service allowed the participants in this study to share information that could enhance and

inform social work practice in how to assist African American, single mothers of low-

income status regarding navigating and responding to systemic stigmatization.

Methodology

This action research study involved data obtained from a focus group. Focus

group discussion is often used as a qualitative approach to understand social issues

(Nyumba et al., 2018). Researchers use focus groups to acquire data from a purposely

selected group of individuals rather than sample representation from a larger population. I

recruited participants for this study from social workers from Georgia's Department of

Family and Children's Services registry who provide services to low-income, African

American, single mothers. Data were collected from the focus group using seven

questions for discussion. All data were thematically analyzed by procedures

recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). The procedural steps are discussed in the data

analysis section of this study. The rationale for this chosen data collection procedure was

to provide information through discussion to fulfill this study's requirements. The focus

group took place over a Zoom virtual meeting with five participants. I contacted selected

participants by email and sent them two attachments: the consent form for participation in

the focus group and a document that provided a detailed outline of the protocol of the

focus group meeting (see Appendix A). The meeting was audio recorded per the

agreement signed by each participant.

Participants

I used purposive sampling to recruit participants for this study. Purposive

sampling is a nonprobability sample selected based on a population's characteristics and

the objective of the study (Etikan et al., 2016). The rationale for using purposive

sampling for this action research project was that the focus group was comprised of social

workers who currently worked with low-income, African American, single, head-of-

household mothers. The focus group consisted of five social work participants employed

by Georgia's Department of Family and Children Services. According to Avella (2016),

focus groups function more effectively with about four to 12 people, and groups

comprised of more than eight can be difficult to negotiate. The rationale for this chosen

data collection procedure was to provide information through discussion. These

participants would more likely have the knowledge needed to answer the research

questions. Eligibility for participation included: (a) being a BSW or MSW social worker

employed by the Georgia Department of Family and Children Services, (b) being English

speaking, and (c) having worked with low-income, African American, single mothers for

at least 5 years.

Recruitment

The participants in this project study were social workers who worked with low-

income, African American, single mothers and were employed by Georgia's Department

of Family & Children's Services for at least 5 years. As an approved provider with this

department, I had access to the provider's directory, which includes the email addresses of other providers, that is given exclusively to providers. I recruited participants from this registry. An approved recruitment email was sent to potential participants and included my personal professional information, the reason for the recruitment, and a brief description of the research to be conducted. A flyer was also placed on the information board of the home office of Georgia's Department of Family and Human Services. The flyer highlighted the reason for recruitment, the topic of research, Zoom meeting acknowledgment, and my contact information.

Instruments

The instrument for this action research study was a semi structured discussion guide with open-ended questions developed from information obtained from my review of the literature on the topic. The semi structured discussion guide consisted of a prepared set of meeting rules, a prepared set of questions, and topic areas to be covered. The use of a semi structured guide in a focus group applied structure to the discussion. I also created the data collection process guide that described the format the focus group meeting followed (see Appendix A). The guide also included the estimated allotted times for welcome and introductions, instructions, focus group questions, questions from the group, the participant demographic questionnaire, and closing remarks. The focus group questions were developed based on the problem, literature review, and the theoretical framework (see Appendix B).

Data Analysis

I collected data for this research study using a focus group in a Zoom meeting setting. To support the data analysis, the focus group was audio recorded, and the data were transcribed verbatim. All data were thematically analyzed using a six-step process recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) that involved:

1. Familiarizing with the data by repeatedly reading and rereading them.

2. Generating lists of codes.

3. Combining the codes into themes and subthemes.

4. Analyzing the themes theoretically.

5. Defining each theme.

6. Writing the results of the analysis.

Qualitative research requires two main strategies that promote rigor and quality, and these strategies confirm the authenticity of the data and the quality or trustworthiness of the analysis (Noble & Smith, 2015). A more rigorous research process will result in more trustworthy findings (Cuervo-Cazurra et al., 2016). In this study, I used purposive sampling to ensure the participants had expertise with the population relevant to the study and were well suited to address the topic. Additionally, the study's rigor was supported by recording, transcribing verbatim, and analyzing the data.

Transferability is a trustworthiness concept (Noble & Smith, 2015). In this project study, I achieved transferability through the participants' various shared perspectives and experiences, the methodology, and the interpretation of the findings. Participants'

demographic information was provided in adequate detail for readers to determine transferability.

Credibility is a crucial internal validity criterion in action research that suggests whether the study measures what it intended (Noble & Smith, 2015). Credibility in this study was established by member checking. In qualitative research, participants provide feedback to improve the study's accuracy, credibility, validity, and transferability (Thomas, 2016). A summary of the transcribed data of the meeting was provided to each participant, so they could perform member checking.

Dependability is essential to trustworthiness in qualitative research because it serves to confirm that the research study's determinations or conclusions are consistent and repeatable (Lewis, 2015). I aimed to ensure dependability by conducting a thorough analysis of the data collected, so if viewed by other researchers, they would come to similar findings, interpretations, and conclusions about the data. The step-by-step process performed in the data analysis process is included in Section 3 of this study.

Confirmability is the last criterion of trustworthiness that a qualitative researcher should establish. Confirmability involves verifying that the participants influence the conclusions or findings more so than the researcher (Noble & Smith, 2015). I asked the research participants to member check their transcribed interview to establish confirmability. I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the focus group to document participants' statements and add personal feedback that expressed my insights and ideas. The reflective journal also helped to reduce my own biases or opinions from being

reflected in the data. In this project study, I followed all required appropriate steps set forth by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

I used MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software package, for coding, annotating, retrieving, and analyzing data in the final analytical objective to outline and formalize the accuracies of this research project (see Woolf & Silver, 2018). Inductive analysis was the qualitative method of content analysis used in this action research project. Researchers use inductive analysis to identify themes by studying documents, recordings, and other printed and verbal material (Elo et al., 2014). To ensure the accuracy of the data from the focus group session, I used audio recordings to transcribe participants' responses verbatim into a Microsoft Word document. To organize the data, categorization and coding were employed. In addition, to identify and organize the collected data, hand coding was used. The objective of using this process was to obtain a clear understanding of the collected data and information that pertains to the research questions. I used transcript-based analysis to analyze the data obtained (see Salvatore, 2015). The transcribed information from the focus group session involved deleting all identifying data (see Ioannidis et al., 2014). The qualitative data were then typed, organized, and sorted using categories based on keywords and themes.

Ethical Procedures

Walden University's IRB reviewed this action study. Before the focus group took place, I emailed all participants a copy of the consent form in which I described the purpose of the study; methods and intended uses of the research findings; expectations of the participants (e.g., their consent for the group session being audio taped); and the risks

and benefits, if any, involved. The consent form also included a statement informing the participants that their involvement was voluntary and that they had the ability to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Participants had the opportunity to review the consent form and ask questions about the study through email. Once all questions were answered, those who chose to continue participation were asked to reply to the recruitment email with "I consent" in the body of the returned email to me. I also asked the participants to print or save a copy of the consent form for themselves.

Some ethical challenges are unique to the focus group methodology. The primary three ethical challenges are:

- Knowing exactly how the focus group will progress is impossible to gauge (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). Unexpected interactions may defer from the data collection process plan. In this project study, I was able to keep the discussion on track by clearly stating each question and monitoring respectfully as the responses went forward.

- Confidentiality may be problematic because of the limited control of group participants outside of the group (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). For this study, there was one focus group meeting. I requested that participants refrain from discussing the content of the discussion outside of the focus group.

- Risk of harm related to the fact that some topics of a sensitive nature may evoke emotional behaviors that can become problematic (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). For this project, I was able to monitor the discussion, and there were no occasions during the discussion that required intervening to establish calm and

steer the group's discussion back to the original intent. A list of free local

resources was also provided to participants to access in case of emotional

distress.

As the researcher of this action research study, I have exclusive access to the

acquired data, transcription, and audio recordings. Participants were assigned a code

name to ensure their confidentiality. This procedure was designed to help participants

feel comfortable and secure in their sharing. Transcripts of the data were stored on a

password-protected, external hard drive that only I can access. A locked file cabinet in

my home office secures all information related to this project study. This information will

be secured for a period of 5 years as designated by Walden University. After this, all data

will be discarded. All stored data on my personal electronic devices will also be

permanently deleted at this time. I will be the only individual to have the key that will

access all files, documents, and acquired information maintained in the locked file

cabinet.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to examine how social

workers can assist low-income, African American, single mothers adequately navigate

and respond to the impact of systemic stigmatization on their socioeconomic well-being.

In the practice literature, there was little understanding of social workers' experiences in

addressing the social work practice problem. The obtained data can add to social work

practice by providing a better understanding of how to help low-income, African

American, single mothers break difficult life cycle experiences that include financial

stability and career/goal and educational attainment due in part to systemic stigmatization throughout their motherhood years (see Richard & Lee, 2019).

In Section 2, I provided the methodology and analytical steps of collecting data from a Zoom focus group. Ethical procedures were outlined that formulated the integrity of the study. The participants were BSWs and MSWs employed by Georgia's Department of Family and Children's Services who provide social work services to the population group that was the focus of this research endeavor. The study findings could enhance and inform best practices for social workers when working with African American, single mothers of low-income status.

In Section 3, I will provide the results of the study.

Section 3: Analysis of the Findings

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to examine how BSW and MSW social workers understand the impact of systemic stigmatization on low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being. I also asked the social workers to share the challenges they face in addressing the effects of systemic stigmatization on this population and for strategies that could help mitigate the effects of systemic stigmatization on this population's socioeconomic well-being. In the practice literature, there was little understanding of social workers' experiences in addressing the social work practice problem.

I collected the data for this research study by holding a focus group of five social worker participants in a Zoom meeting setting. The focus group meeting lasted approximately 2 hours and was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, which provided support in the data analysis process. The resulting data were thematically analyzed.

There were three research questions addressed in this study:

RQ1: How do social workers describe the impact of systemic stigmatization on low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being?

RQ2: What challenges do social workers face when addressing the impact of systemic stigmatization on low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being?

RQ3: How do social workers help mitigate the effects of systemic stigmatization on the socioeconomic well-being of low-income, African American, single mothers?

Section 3 includes a discussion of the data analysis techniques, validation and legitimation process, sample characteristics, and findings before concluding with a summary.

Data Analysis Technique

After receiving Walden University IRB approval (IRB Approval No. 02-19-21-0630718), I immediately began the recruitment for participation in this study. As a provider with the Georgia Department of Family and Human Services, I identified four sections from the provider registry as primary areas from which I could recruit appropriate participants for this study. I sent an email to the head of each section that detailed my request for participants. Within 2 days, the names and contact information of recruitment possibilities were sent to me. Over a week and a half, I contacted, by email, 10 potential candidates. Using this method, six social workers who expressed their commitment to participate in this study by returning the consent form emailed to them were recruited. One participant failed to appear for the focus group meeting, resulting in the participation of five social workers. The Zoom focus group meeting was recorded and transcribed per agreement by all participants.

Sample Characteristics

The final sample consisted of five participants who provide social work services to low-income, African American, single mothers. The participants are briefly described below using their assigned pseudonyms for this study.

Participant A: A Black, male social work agency proprietor who has provided social work services to low-income, African American, single mothers and their children for 21 years.

Participant B: A Black female who has provided social work services to low-income, African American, single mothers for 20 years.

Participant C: A Black male and an MSW 2021 candidate. He has provided social work services to low-income, African American, single mothers for 5 years.

Participant D: A Black, female social work agency proprietor who has provided social work services to low-income, African American, single mothers for over 27 years.

Participant E: A Black, female proprietor of a social services agency that has provided social work services to low-income, African American, single mothers for 16 years.

The Zoom focus group meeting was conducted on March 6, 2021. The meeting was audio taped and transcribed. After the focus group, I checked the audio recording against the transcribed data several times and used member checking to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the collected data. The reviewed transcribed data were then downloaded into a Microsoft Word document. The audio recording and the Microsoft Word transcribed information were uploaded to MAXQDA for coding, annotation, retrieval, and analysis. I thematically analyzed all data using a six-step procedure process.

Coding

In qualitative research, coding is defined as the process of labeling, organizing, and interpreting data (Elliott, 2018). In this study, I developed the coding scheme by highlighting the words, phrases, and statements of the participants as they related to the questions of this study in the transcribed data. The notations were then outlined in the transcribed data that was downloaded to a Microsoft Word document and then uploaded to MAXQDA. I completed multiple reviews of the data to highlight emergent codes. I then conducted constant comparisons of the codes with one another to combine similar codes. The final coding of the data resulted in 37 codes. As indicated in Table 1, the most common code to appear referred to the need for models of escaping the poverty cycle ($n = 5$). Other notable codes included, dependence creates vulnerability ($n = 4$), earning client trust ($n = 4$), empower clients ($n = 4$), advocacy ($n = 3$), building client self-efficacy ($n = 3$), excessive housing expenses can increase dependence ($n = 3$), policies that express and reinforce negative stereotypes ($n = 3$), and pressure to conform to a negative stereotype ($n = 3$). The frequency of the remaining codes was 12 ($n = 2$) and 15 ($n = 1$).

Table 1

Initial Codes

Initial code (alphabetical)	Frequency
Adversarial attitude toward provider	2
Advocacy	3
Assistance may take the place of education	2
Bias in favor of men	1
Building client self-efficacy	3
Can be conscious	2
Can be unconscious	2
Dependence creates vulnerability	4
Earning client trust	4
Ed. resource disparities can perpetuate low self-worth	2
Educate about marriage and family	1
Educate about opportunities	2
Educate providers	1
Employer bias against HBCUs versus PWIs	1
Empower clients	4
Excessive housing expenses can increase dependence	3

Initial code (alphabetical)	Frequency
Feeling ashamed when asking for help	1
Finding needed resources and accommodations for disabilities	2
Gaining client compliance	2
Gendered parenting roles make woman responsible for family	1
Housing assistance can create dependence	1
Lack of incentive for case managers to optimize outcomes	1
Need for encouragement of education	1
Need for models of escaping the poverty cycle	5
Need to educate single mothers about childrearing	1
Not enough low-income housing	2
Not seeking needed assistance	1
Offer models of success	2
Policies that express and reinforce negative stereotypes	3
Pressure to conform to a negative stereotype	3
Single motherhood because of slavery	1
Single parents bear a disproportionate financial burden	1
Stigmatization can disrupt education	3
Stigmatization can prevent career success	1

Initial code (alphabetical)	Frequency
Supporting client dignity	2
Systemic gendered income inequality favors men	1
Systemic racial income inequality favors Caucasians	2

Note. HBCU=Historically Black College & University; PWI=Predominantly White Institution

Themes and Subthemes

After the development of the coding organization of this study, I systemically combined the codes into themes and subthemes. The themes and subthemes were identified by analyzing the transcribed data to determine how the codes answered the research questions. This resulted in a picture of the patterns of the participants' responses. The identified themes and subthemes of this study were developed from the shared experiences, challenges, and suggestions of the participants. As detailed in Table 2, there were four themes and eight subthemes identified in the data analysis from the information obtained from the focus group meeting. The themes represent the overall response to the research questions, while the sub-themes were used to further explain or provide examples of the themes. The final 37 codes were grouped in the following themes: (a) perpetuation of the cycle of poverty, (b) clients' disempowerment, (c) educating clients about opportunities and empowerment, and (d) counteracting the stigma of assistance seeking.

Table 2

Grouping of Codes Into Themes and Subthemes

Theme
    Subtheme
        Code
	Frequency

Theme: Perpetuation of the cycle of poverty	17
Subtheme: Racial inequities	2
Bias in favor of men	1
Employer bias against HBCUs versus PWIs	1
Subtheme: Limitations on income	8
Single parents bear a disproportionate financial burden	1
Gendered parenting roles make woman responsible for family	1
Finding needed resources and accommodations for disabilities	2
Systemic racial income inequality favors Caucasians	2
Systemic gendered income inequality favors men	1
Single motherhood because of slavery	1
Subtheme: Lack of role models	7
Need for models of escaping the poverty cycle	5
Not enough low-income housing	2
Theme: Clients' disempowerment	21
Subtheme: Housing assistance	4
Housing assistance can create dependence	1

Theme	Frequency
Subtheme	
Code	
Excessive housing expenses can increase dependence	3
Subtheme: Socioeconomic well-being	9
Lack of incentive for case managers to optimize outcomes	1
Pressure to conform to a negative stereotype	3
Stigmatization can prevent career success	1
Dependence creates vulnerability	4
Subtheme: Disrupted education	8
Stigmatization can disrupt education	3
Need for encouragement of education	1
Ed. resource disparities can perpetuate low self-worth	2
Assistance may take the place of education	2
Theme: Educating clients about opportunities and empowerment	13
Need to educate single mothers about childrearing	1
Building client self-efficacy	3
Empower clients	4
Educate about marriage and family	1
Offer models of success	2
Educate about opportunities	2
Theme: Counteracting the stigma of assistance-seeking	23
Subtheme: Supporting client dignity	6

Theme	Frequency
Subtheme	
Code	
Educate providers to support client dignity	1
Supporting client dignity	2
Advocacy	3
Subtheme: Making assistance feel less threatening	17
Not seeking needed assistance	1
Feeling ashamed when asking for help	1
Can be conscious	2
Can be unconscious	2
Gaining client compliance	2
Earning client trust	4
Adversarial attitude toward provider	2
Policies that express and reinforce negative stereotypes	3

Note. HBCU=Historically Black College & University; PWI=Predominantly White Institution

Validation and Legitimation Process

I kept a reflexive journal throughout the data analysis process of the study. As stated by Mortari (2015), keeping a reflexive journal is used to "legitimate and validate research procedures" (p. 1). Maintaining a reflexive journal also helps a researcher examine their perspectives and goals in the focus of their research endeavor (Palaganas et al., 2017).

To examine my personal biases and to ensure the findings would not be distorted, I found it essential to keep a reflexive journal because my credentials and work experience with low-income, African American, single mothers is like that of all the participants in this study. To address my biased perspectives, I documented how I responded to the feelings, experiences, and expressions of the participants in the study. My journal documentations also helped me to examine my objectives, beliefs, and emotions as they relate to the population and subject matter of the study. Maintaining this journal and documenting the direct expressions and emotions of the participants during their discussions increased my empathetic feelings regarding the impact of systemic systematization on the socioeconomic well-being of low-income, African American, single mothers. The process of keeping the reflexive journal allowed me the time to reflect on the importance of maintaining the ethical standards I had to adhere to as set by the Walden University IRB in the implementation of this project study.

In qualitative research, member checking is a technique for exploring the credibility of the results of the data collected in the study (Thomas, 2016). Member checking is achieved by the feedback response of the study participants. Collecting the

participants' responses to the validity of this study provided the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis obtained, as I previously outlined in Section 2.

Initially, the focus group was to be conducted in a reserved room location at a public library. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my original, face-to-face interview plans had to be amended in compliance to the state of Georgia shelter in place and stay at home mandate. As a result of this worldwide pandemic, Walden University's IRB approved a change to be procedures allowing me to conduct a Zoom focus group as an acceptable replacement for in-person focus group meetings.

I used member checking to allow participants to provide feedback that helped to validate the transcribed data. Each participant in this study received a copy of the Microsoft Word-transcription of the participants' responses in the Zoom focus group meeting via email. I asked the participants to review the data and return their responses to me within 3 days. Three participants responded to me via email within the 3-day window with their acceptance of the transcribed data as valid. Two participants replied with their valid approval of the transcribed data in 4 days.

Limitations

Initially, the focus group meeting was scheduled to be held in person in a public library setting. Plans changed because of COVID-19 in-person requirement restrictions set forth by the state of Georgia. The Zoom focus group was scheduled, which complied to Walden University's acceptance of online focus group meetings. On the scheduled day of the focus group session, technical issues resulted in a delay of the meeting's onset. Since the meeting was by Zoom, there were no other options as to where and how the

focus group session could move forward. Although this limitation occurred, all participants elected to wait until the technical issues were resolved.

One participant was technology challenged. Santhosh et al. (2020) acknowledged that the increased need for online meetings would require individuals familiarizing themselves with many technical processes. I was unaware of the technical challenge this participant had before the day of the focus group meeting. Although there was not a professional technologist available to address this issue, I, along with other participants, helped in explaining some technical processes resulting in the participant' ability to share in the focus group productively.

Findings

I identified four themes from the data collected in this study that had a direct relationship to the research questions. The identified themes and subthemes are discussed in detail, including quotes from the focus group participants. Minor grammatical editing was done in some quotations to increase the clarity.

RQ1 Theme: Perpetuation of the Cycle of Poverty

Participants voiced the belief that systemic stigmatization creates roadblocks that reduce the likelihood that African American, single mothers, can escape poverty. "From a systematic standpoint, it is sort of like a process that keeps happening over and over again that people really don't know is happening, but it's like from generation to generation" was how Participant C described systemic stigmatization as perpetuating the cycle of poverty. The cycle is evidenced through the roadblocks of racial bias resulting in reduced opportunities for educational advancement, limitations on income,

and a lack of successful role models. Participant A reinforced this theme:

"Unfortunately, a lot of the clients return because they're not prepared to sustain what they have once you get them off your caseload. So, in that aspect, things are stacked against them." Participant A further described how "the poverty mentality is reinforced because that's all you see; you see poverty; you don't see yourself getting out of poverty." While describing the perpetuation of a cycle of poverty as a primary impact of systemic stigmatization on low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being, participants provided examples of three subthemes to illustrate how the perpetuation of poverty is reflected in the realities faced by African American, single mothers. Those subthemes are discussed in the next subsections.

Racial Inequities Impact Education

Participants shared their observations of racial inequities in educational systems as a significant issue that can perpetuate the cycle of poverty. Participant B pointed out that "in some school systems, little Black girls are often discouraged to seek to goals that are seen as above them because of their race or the neighborhood they come from." Participant B further added that in Black communities these beliefs are "deliberately rooted in many of these families because the system is channeled in certain neighborhoods to benefit certain kids more so than others."

Participant D added her observation of educational systemic inequity over many years working with Black single mothers. Participant D shared her belief that some Black young women anticipate a better life because they chose to attend a historically Black college & university (HBCU) school, but that the "reality does not match their

expectations." Participant D furthered acknowledged that some of these mothers do not receive employment offers and compensation comparable to persons graduating from an Ivy League school or even an HBCU that is considered in a more affluent school category.

Limitations on Income

Participants also engaged in conversations regarding how they observed the effects of systemic stigmas on African American, single mothers' incomes. Participant E described:

> African American women have been told, if you get pregnant, you are now a part of that group. That group cannot get a higher education that they cannot get a better career that group cannot have a high level of financial status.

Participant D shared her belief that the cycle of poverty is further exacerbated among African American women, stating "wealth inequity that exists among men and women is more in Black women because their incomes are typically lower than White women." Participant D also described a disparity in the post-graduation experiences of HBCU graduates. Participant D shared that she has observed some single Black mothers who have acquired a college education but are struggling to financially care for themselves and their children. Participant D furthered shared that these mothers find themselves in need of government assistance because of not receiving financial assistance from the fathers in addition to childcare expenses, housing expenses, school loans, and healthcare issues primarily due to stress.

Lack of Role Models

Another common subtheme was the lack of role models to encourage
African American, single mothers, to think beyond their current circumstances.
Participant E voiced that without positive role models,

they get sort of comfortable and doing it one way and they just forget about other

ways of possibly doing something so their careers paths are impacted and they

don't seek other career opportunities, because they're so stuck on having things one

way, which is the way they've always had it.

Another participant described it this way,

Nobody told them that the only way you're gonna get ahead, you got to try to

think out of that box that you're in . . . Nobody tell them stuff like this, these

girls that I deal with are young parents, they're in this situation because nobody

told them they don't have to be in that situation.

Participant D shared her belief that low-income, African American, single
mothers, can be empowered by including certain role model examples in social work
dialogue with this population group. She suggested role models would,

instill in a sense that, yes, women can you know go to college, they can be in

leadership roles and you know, help them focus on, you know some of the

black women who are successful now you know we can look at Michelle

Obama and just regular everyday people who are doing well, who came from

poor backgrounds, you know where they didn't have a lot economically. And

just sort of you know, reinforce these kinds of stories and I think that would

definitely have an impact, even when it comes to single moms.

In summary, participants shared common views of the impact of systemic

stigmatization on African American, single mothers. Without exception, participants

expressed concern over how systemic stigmatization perpetuates the cycle of poverty

experienced by these mothers, reducing their opportunities for educational, financial,

and career success. Participants further described how examples of successful African

American female role models are not widely celebrated or discussed, which exacerbates

the sense that the cycle of poverty cannot be broken.

RQ2 Theme: Clients' Disempowerment

When the focus group discussion turned to challenges the participants faced

when working with low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic

well-being, the participants expressed concern that the system in place for low-

income mothers "disempowers not empowers" this population group, thus limiting

their opportunities to improve their socioeconomic well-being. Disempowerment was

described in different ways. Participant B described it as when policies and services

"provide more of a negative connotation of that group versus the positive

connotation and they reinforce a lot of negativities." Participant A used the terms

"negative reinforcement" to describe how systemic stigmatization disempowers

clients. Similarly, Participant D further described the disempowerment:

I think it all boils down to one word and that word is control. Like, I think it's I

think it's designed to control the minds and the actions of single mothers. But

it's in the disguise of something that's helping them like I know I understand the impact of the assistance of everything that we have to assist single black mothers, but I think that is like. it's sort of like saying the person that feeds you has the same power to starve. like they control everything they give you but they're giving it to you to make it seem like we're helping you out, so I think, from a financial aspect, we see that more clearly sort of making them dependent on the government, because the government is the person giving the assistance.

Because of societal expectations and the acceptance of the beliefs by recipients, providers find it challenging to address the stigmas that exist. Participants described this theme as being evidenced most clearly in three areas: housing assistance, socioeconomic well-being, and disrupted education.

Housing Assistance

Participant E shared her experience when working with low-income, African American, single mothers, regarding housing. She stated that most of her clients lack motivation to improve themselves financially because the system can provide them with vouchers to obtain housing at a rate they see as the only option they have for their family. However, Participant E went on to say "where you're gonna be able to take that voucher for somebody to allow you to live in their house with six children? It's just not gonna happen - it's slow it's a slow process."

Participant E stated that the system knows there are not enough housing availability to meet the need of those with vouchers to purchase housing, but the

program remains in place. Some mothers wait for very long periods of time because the amount of the voucher to purchase housing is so appealing. This participant views this program as an attempt to control vulnerable populations and it helps to continue a cycle of dependency. Participant A added that there are difficulties a provider faces when trying to convince a client in this situation to consider pursuing other options that may benefit her and her family. For instance,

> I had a parent that the judge did not want to close the case out because the judge, said that the parent didn't have appropriate housing. This particular woman she lived in an extended stay for about 5 or 6 years, and I had to convince the judge that . . . she called that stable housing.

Socioeconomic Well-Being

Because of placed impressions and the acceptance of the beliefs by recipients, providers find it challenging to address the stigmas that exist that contribute to their clients being stigmatized. Participant A shared that certain government programs for vulnerable population groups foster dependency and, "can become a way of life that can be passed down from generation to generation." Participant A added that the existence of programs that foster dependency also permits stereotypical labels to be placed on individuals that most often affect their self-value and self-worth.

All participants engaged in a discussion that referred to the importance of encouraging their clients "not to conform to how they are perceived, and not to accept less than what they need." Participant C shared that many of her low-income, single mother clients, do not advocate for themselves. They often verbalize "it is what it is," and

ultimately accept what is given to them because of assumptions made prior to their appointment with an agency to receive help. Participant C further stated that being stereotypically viewed by a prejudice system does affect how most of her clients view themselves including their career goal aspirations, and a lack of a positive view of a better life for themselves and their children.

Disrupted Education

Participant A acknowledged that after working with low-income, African American, single mothers for more than 20 years, he has observed that more emphasis is placed on this population to acquire any type of employment than on encouraging seeking out educational opportunities that will help to improve the conditions of their family. Participant A further stated that operating in a system that promotes this mindset decreases an individual's "self-empowerment."

Participate D shared her experiences of working in school systems during her more than 27 years. She stated that in low-income communities, the teacher' resources, professionalism, and curriculum development were not adequately developed to successfully prepare an individual for a life of overall socioeconomic well-being. Participant B added the "frustrations" a provider experiences as they cope with clients who are victims of disparity in school systems. All participants acknowledged agreement of frustration feelings based on their experiences of providing services to African American, single mothers, who have backgrounds in sub-standard school systems.

In summary, participants voiced concern over the impact systemic stigmatization has on the overall well-being of African American, single mothers. The ongoing struggles

result in disempowerment, frustration, and hopelessness that overshadow efforts to make positive change.

RQ3 Theme 1: Educating Clients About Opportunities and Empowerment

Education by social workers with African American single mothers can help mitigate the effects of systemic stigmatization on this population by implementing financial, educational, and career assistance strategies. Participant C shared his belief that social workers have "help for single Black mothers but very little involvement in educating them in how to use the help." He added that the need for more conversation on the full ramification of the assistance that is provided is needed for the help to be fully effective for the client. Participant C stated the importance of educational conversations regarding financial help should be emphasized. He noticed in his service with low-income mothers, that a lack of understanding how to manage their finances has a significant impact on their socioeconomic well-being.

Participant C added that overall dialogues with clients that better inform them of opportunities they may not have considered, can be beneficial to a client's establishing an improved outlook for their future. This participant further stated that the provider should not only inform but explain the possibilities that the opportunity can afford them. Participant E shared low-income mothers need to, "have an objective far beyond their present situation," and providers as they conduct their delivery of services, should strive to encourage this population on a regular basis to broaden their objective viewpoints on life. All participants in this study agreed that their experience in working with African

American, single mothers of low-income status, have shown that most do not embrace positive objectives for themselves.

Participant B shared her belief that "self-esteem" should be taught early in the elementary years," and "what a person looks like or a family's financial situation should not result in how that person is looked at." Participants engaged in discussion that involved the significance of the need for social work classes in school systems especially on the high school level that would include classes on marriage and family type courses. Participant D shared her belief that the lack of training in these areas in many home environments can contribute to an individual making bad decisions that can result in long-term consequences.

Participant A stated that many social work clients do not feel empowered to advocate for themselves because of their belief that "the system" will always have control over their lives. This participant added that social workers, especially for their most vulnerable clients, should teach them to stand up for themselves and involve these clients in the decisions that are made for their lives. Participant A further discussed the importance of social workers staying aware of their responsibility to advocate for their clients because many vulnerable clients struggle with the ability to understand and/or articulate their needs.

RQ3 Theme 2: Counteracting the Stigma of Assistance Seeking

Participants acknowledge their responsibility to mitigate the impact of systemic stigmatization on African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being, by counteracting the stigma of assistance seeking. However, mitigation efforts may be

difficult, because as Participant A described, clients often "don't look at you, as someone who is there to help; they look at you as the enemy." He further stated, "it takes a lot to break down those barriers to get them to trust you."

Regardless of the difficulty, the participants acknowledged the need to address the stereotypical impressions regarding their clients' assistance-seeking initiatives. As Participant A stated: "My job is a change agent, I will leave you better than you were when we met -- that's it." Ultimately, low-income mothers seek government assistance to help with the overall well-being of their family that require applying for cash assistance, housing assistance, and childcare assistance. Participants shared information about how to address this theme in the following two ways: supporting African American, single mothers' dignity, and making assistance feel less threatening to African American single mothers.

Supporting Client Dignity

Participants in this study were eager to share their experiences and observations regarding how they can be instrumental in counteracting the systemic stigmatization of assistance-seeking by supporting the dignity of African American, single mothers. The importance of how to appropriately support clients was highlighted. Participant B emphasized the significance for providers to respect the dignity of their clients without prejudice behavior, and if providers behaviors are in any way condescending, "clients may tend to feel devalued." Participant B further added that "if the value of an individual is not perceived from the people giving the support, systematic stigmatization is going to continue."

Participant C added to this discussion by stating that a significant way a provider agency can help to address the shame and reluctancy some of their most vulnerable clients experience in seeking assistance, is in the selection and appearance of their business location. Participant C who is a MSW candidate and has worked with low-income, African American, single mothers for 5 years, acknowledged his awareness of unsafe locations and the poor physical appearance of some of the agencies he has worked in. Participant C stated that he felt "dignity and respect was not showed for the women attending these agencies."

Participant A identified a primary challenge he experiences with his clients is breaking down barriers of how he is perceived in the delivery of services to them. Many of his clients have a history coping with systemic stigma and they tend to view him as a part of the system they have issues with. Participant A added that the strongest initiative he puts forth to his clients is that he may be "a part of the bigger system but he is there for them." Participants in this study acknowledged through their years of experience in working with African American, single mothers of low-income status, that most of this population group have feelings of reluctance in seeking assistance because of the problematic system that they have to go through.

Making Assistance Feel Less Threatening

Participant A shared that in a professional setting, emphasis by a colleague was placed on why a particular client needed the services she was seeking that included Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits and some other benefits. Participant A added that emphasis was placed on how the client was dressed and the kind of car she

was driving to warrant a need for assistance. He felt as though his colleague was prejudging the client before hearing her whole story. Participant A shared they later found out the client maintained a sense of self-value and self-respect despite her circumstances. This client had some drastic changes in her circumstances. Many of her personal possessions she had for an extended period and has strived to maintain them very well. Participant A stated the importance for providers to "check themselves" when it comes to fairly dealing with their clients. Participant D added that some clients when they are not treated with dignity and respect will "resist the help needed for their families."

Participant D shared her experiences with the impact of systemic stigmatization because of unjust policies that are deliberately proposed and enacted. She added that throughout her years of social work service to many communities, she realized that some resources and services are rooted in the system, meaning some districts which have been disproportionately developed, create stigmas some vulnerable populations will face. Participant D stated that providers need to stay aware of this disparity to help their clients cope in a system that has helped to create the barriers they must overcome.

In summary, social workers make various efforts to mitigate the impact of systemic stigmatization on African American, single mothers. Their actions focus on educating clients to increase self-efficacy and understanding of the opportunities available to them as well as counteracting the impact of societal negative messages around accessing services and being a service recipient.

Summary

The objective of this study was to examine how BSW and MSW social workers understand the impact of systemic stigmatization on low-income, African American, single mother's socioeconomic well-being. Data collected from the Zoom focus group consisting of five participants provided essential information that can be used to help social workers mitigate the effect of systemic stigmatization on the socioeconomic well-being of low-income, African American, single mothers. The analysis identified four themes that can be used by social workers in their practice with this population group: (a) perpetuation of the cycle of poverty, (b) clients' disempowerment, (c) educating clients about opportunities and empowerment, and (d) counteracting the stigma of assistance seeking.

Overall, participants in this study acknowledged the impact systemic stigmatization can have on the overall well-being of their clients. Emphasis was placed on the "roots" of social inequities that are prevalent in U.S. society and the government enacted programs that support this injustice. To combat systemic stigmas in the social work profession, the initiatives as highlighted by the participants are found in the need for comprehensive trainings in financial and career opportunities awareness, sensitivity awareness trainings for providers regarding systemic stigmatization; empowerment strategies; and enhanced and informed advocacy endeavors for the creation of policies that will fairly provide educational opportunities that can help to influence the socioeconomic well-being of an individual' life.

Section 3 addressed a thorough review of the study's findings. Section 4 involves discussion of the findings of the study as related to the application for professional ethics in social work practice, recommendations for social work practice, implications for social change, recommendations for future research, and a summary of the conclusions derived from this project study.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine how BSW and MSW social workers understand the impact of systemic stigmatization on low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being. I also asked the social workers to share the challenges they face in addressing the impact of systemic stigmatization on this population and the strategies that could be useful to mitigate the effects of systemic stigmatization on this population's socioeconomic well-being. In the extant literature, there is a limited understanding of social workers' experiences in addressing this social work practice problem. The study findings could enhance and inform best practices for social workers when working with African American, single mothers of low-income status.

The study was guided by the following three research questions:

RQ1: How do social workers describe the impact of systemic stigmatization on low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being?

RQ2: What challenges do social workers face when addressing the impact of systemic stigmatization on low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being?

RQ3: How do social workers help mitigate the effects of systemic stigmatization on the socioeconomic well-being of low-income, African American, single mothers?

The following four themes emerged from the data analysis of this study that can be instrumental in enhancing social work practice with low-income, African American,

single mothers in their attempt to adequately navigate and respond to systemic stigmatization: (a) perpetuation of the cycle of poverty, (b) clients' disempowerment, (c) educating clients about opportunities and empowerment, and (d) counteracting the stigma of assistance seeking.

Key findings in this study showed the impact systemic stigmatization can have on the overall well-being of individual lives. Furthermore, the "roots" of social inequities that continue to exist in U.S. society and the government-enacted programs that support this injustice surfaced in the study. The ways in which the findings in this research study can extend social work practice knowledge are: (a) by the inclusion of comprehensive trainings in financial and career opportunities awareness, (b) sensitivity awareness trainings for providers regarding systemic stigmatization, (c) empowerment strategies, and (d) enhanced and informed advocacy endeavors for the creation of policies that will fairly provide educational opportunities that can help influence the socioeconomic well-being of an individual's life.

In the final section of this qualitative study, I provide a discussion of the study findings and how these findings may be applied to professional social work practice. The section begins with an explanation of how the findings may be applied to the professional ethics of social work practice. The section continues with discussions of recommendations for social work practice, implications for social change, recommendations for future research, and a summary of the conclusions derived from this project study.

Application for Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

This study is aligned with a primary ethical goal of the social work profession and with two ethical principles outlined in the NASW Code of Ethics. The Code of Ethics Preamble acknowledges that "a historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's dual focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society" (NASW, 2021, para. 1). Key to social work is the consideration of various forces that formulate, assist, and acknowledge problems in living (Congress, 2017). Therefore, confronting the numerous ways low-income individuals are stereotyped regarding their socioeconomic reality is a concern for the social work profession. Low-income families are often perceived as not valuing opportunities such as equal education (Strauss, 2013). Cook (2015) contended that this viewpoint is grounded in a systematic social system that endeavors to compare value with status. Additionally, in the United States, some essential cultural and socioeconomic opportunities and benefits are disproportionately unavailable to some of the most vulnerable population groups.

The first NASW ethical principle aligned with this study is that of challenging social injustice. This principle clearly states that "social workers pursue social change particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people" (NASW, 2021, para. 2). The social change endeavors by social workers are also primarily focused on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice. All study participants shared about their clients' experiences with systemic stigmatization and how this injustice impacted their service provision efforts with low-income, African American, single mothers. This challenge involved breaking

down barriers to successfully work with this population group because of their involvement with "the system" where they felt disrespected, stereotyped, and labeled as well as that anyone involved with "the system" would always treat them in this same manner.

The second ethical principle aligned with this study is the respect social workers hold for "the inherent dignity and worth of an individual" (NASW, 2021, para. 3). This principle involves social workers treating all clients with respect, care, and mindful considerations that consider cultural and ethnic differences. The social work participants in this study acknowledged that to help mitigate the effects of systemic stigmatization, they must acknowledge the significance of their dual responsibility that includes helping the client interact with the broader society. They further added that, by acquiring understandings of the impact of systemic stigmatization, they can better help their clients in building helpful strategies and establishing socially responsible self-determination initiatives, such as self-value and self-worth, that can help them as they cope with this injustice.

<div align="center">**Recommendations for Social Work Practice**</div>

Application to Comprehensive Social Work Practice

Social workers' unique opportunities to empower societies include motivating individuals to take vital roles in framing social service, providing education programs, and authorizing long-lasting economic independence (Forenza & Eckert, 2017). These efforts by social workers can help toward mitigating the effects of systemic

stigmatization on the socioeconomic well-being of low-income, African American, single mothers.

The findings from this study showed some essential ways social work practice can be enhanced in addressing the effects of systemic stigmatization on the socioeconomic well-being of low-income, African American, single mothers. In the following subsections, I provide comprehensive recommendations.

Educational Institutions

One practice idea mentioned during the focus group was the need for the addition of family, marriage, and overall healthy living training in educational institutions. Emphasis was placed on the integration of this training in school social work where the role of a school worker would involve conducting classes on self-esteem and self-worth awareness. Castro et al. (2020) acknowledged that "stigmatization is a new relation factor for low-self-esteem." (p. 6). This educational training, as highlighted in this study, should start early in educational institutions because many low-income, African American, single mothers lack environmental influences that encourage healthy lifestyles that foster the importance of valuing one's self in a positive manner.

Social Work Strategies, Models, and Techniques

Existing strategies, models, and techniques that are used to work with low-income, single mothers can be enhanced by the inclusion of specifics that address the impact of systemic stigmatization on the overall well-being of low-income, African American, single mothers. Williams et al. (2016) provided insights into employing structural family therapy (SFT) in the changing context of modern, African American,

single mothers. In response to the impact of "macrosystemic variables like racial tension and high poverty levels" (p. 33), Minuchin created SFT in the 1960s to equip parents in their positions in the family subsystems. Williams et al. recognized the struggles regarding systematic stigmatization encountered by African American, single mothers. Although many changes have occurred, racial minorities in the United States still face sociopolitical obstacles.

The primary goal of this research study was to bring to the forefront the impact of systemic influences that impede the overall well-being of African American, single mothers. Included in SFT are initiatives that address social issues that can impact an individual's life, making it uniquely suited to work with African American, single mothers of low-income status. While many other therapeutic methods rely on psychological processes to affect behavioral change, structural family therapists work to disrupt family patterns and habits (i.e., behaviors, before addressing emotional or psychological needs). Williams et al. (2016) pointed out the importance of social workers acquiring understandings of how to help low-income, African American, single mothers as they struggle to improve their overall well-being. All participants in the current study emphasized the significance of social workers helping this population to break negative patterns in regard to how they cope with systemic stigmatization. These patterns include poor self-perceptions, belief in others' negative perceptions, and acceptance of limitations that are placed on them because of certain stereotypical views.

Application to Researcher's Personal Practice

The findings in this project provided data that can be used in professional provision of social work services to African American, single mothers. A majority of my social work practice involves working with African American, single mothers, most of whom are of low-income status. I will use the information shared by the participants in this study to develop programs in my practice that assist low-income, African American, single mothers as they cope with systemic stigmatization. The initiatives will involve the following:

1. Integrating educational workshop opportunities regarding systemic stigmatizations in my social work practice that involve how to manage public assistance programs that include financial, childcare, and housing supports.

2. Acknowledgment of systemic stigmatization in therapy and counseling sessions that involve engaging in dialogue that directly addresses feelings and coping strategies and techniques that can assist in coping with this injustice.

3. The implementation of empowerment strategies and techniques in therapy and counseling sessions that deal purposefully with systemic stigmatization. The initiatives will focus on self-worth, self-value, self-advocacy, and positive reinforcement.

4. Dialogues and practice assignments in therapy and counseling sessions regarding received assistance. Focus will be placed on management skills that include financial and career planning that appear to be difficult areas for low-

income, African American, single mothers to successfully cope with in their struggles to acquire economic stability.

This study provided data that showed the importance of acknowledging the impact of systemic stigmatization as a significant concern in the overall well-being of African American, single mothers. Internalizing the beliefs and perceptions of stigma can be a strong determining factor in the outcome of a person's livelihood (Hing & Russell, 2017). The integration of addressing the impact of systemic stigmatization in my social work practice is an essential goal of my social work practice because of the importance it holds in the overall well-being of low-income, African American, single mothers.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research is "synonymous with generalizability" (Aloe et al., 2020, p. 1). Transferability is established by providing the reader with confirmation that the research study findings could be applicable to other circumstances, conditions, patterns, and populations (Smith, 2017). While the findings in this study are not generalizable due to the small sample participant size of five, transferability to other populations or settings will be determined by future readers of this study. With the thorough description of participant demographics, study location, and direct quotes, the reader will be allowed an opportunity to examine transferability for themselves.

Limitations

This project involved limitations that may have impacted the comprehensive findings of the study. I collected data from one focus group with a sample size of five participants. My initial objective was to acquire at least seven participants. As indicated

in Section 3 of this study, although I received six completed consent responses, one

participant failed to connect to the Zoom focus group session, reducing the total number

of participants to five. Additional focus group meetings with more participants could

have enriched the study. Guest et al. (2017) acknowledged that the more groups you can

have in a research study, the more ideas and opinions can be collected. Freeman (2006)

also stated that if the topic of the study is of minor concern to participants or if they have

little experience with the topic of study, at least three or more focus groups should be

conducted. I believe this limitation was sufficiently satisfied because of the years of the

participants' experience in working with low-income, African American, single mothers,

which ranged from 5 years to more than 27 years.

Finally, I experienced issues relating to audio quality during the transcribing of

data into a Microsoft Word document. Extra efforts were taken to ensure the transcribed

data were accurate. I checked the audio recording against the transcription several times

and increased the volume to high levels to help identify all inaudible data. In addition to

repeatedly checking the audio recording against the transcribed data, I used member

checking to help ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the collected data.

Recommendations for Future Research

Findings from this study revealed the need for additional research into social work

practice that supports social workers' better understanding of the impact of systemic

stigmatization on the socioeconomic well-being of low-income, African American, single

mothers. Social workers provide significant opportunities that help to support

individuals' overall well-being. According to Simons et al. (2018), the effects of stigma

and the discrimination that follows create burdens for an individual that can influence all aspects of their life.

Because this study only included one focus group of BSW and MSW participants, future researchers may enhance the findings by conducting more focus groups that include social work participants who work with African American, single mothers of low-income status. Future research could also involve the inclusion of social workers beyond solely BSW and MSW participants and could further be enhanced by acquiring participants outside of the urban Georgia area where this study was conducted.

Future research with other perspectives that provide services to stigmatized groups could also be conducted to further enhance and inform understandings of the impact of systemic stigmatization on the socioeconomic well-being of individuals' lives. The research may include their observations and experiences with stigmatization, how they coped with it, and what they perceived as the consequences.

Recommendations for Dissemination of Findings

Social workers have unique opportunities to present their research studies in professional settings to enhance and inform the social work profession. There was limited data available in the literature that addressed the impact of systemic stigmatization on low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being. In order to help fill this gap, I desire to share the findings of this study at local social work seminars and meetings. I will develop a pamphlet that will be provided to all attendees at these seminars and meetings. Also, I will strive to present the findings of this study at NASW state conferences. I will ensure I have the information discussed available in pamphlet

form so that participants in the conference can have information to review and share with

their constituents.

In order to present to policymakers regarding findings in this study that relate to

policy changes to benefit low-income single mothers, I will request from my state

legislator's office the necessary documentation to request appearance before the

legislature. Upon receiving approval, I will present findings from this study that

specifically deal with the welfare programs that involve the requirements of low-income,

single mothers when receiving certain benefits. These mothers receive credits in order to

continue receiving benefits that are necessary for the welfare of their family. A primary

requirement is they must seek employment and obtain employment regardless of pay.

However, these mothers do not receive credit when they seek to advance educationally

that could ultimately improve their economic status. Low-income, single mothers, would

be helped if they could receive credits for educational advancement without penalty of

losing necessary benefits for their family. Policymakers need to be made aware of this

dilemma low-income single mothers face.

Implications for Social Change

This project study has the potential for positive social change for African

American, single mothers of low-income status, on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels.

Micro Level

The participants in this study recommended some noteworthy changes that can

help low-income, African American, single mothers as they cope with systemic

stigmatization on the micro level. Data obtained in this study acknowledged the need for

more dialogue between client and provider that extends beyond just the delivery of services. All participants agreed that educating clients on the "ramifications" involved in the services received can result in better use of services and in better outcomes.

There is also a need for more sensitivity training for those who are responsible for providing services to low-income, African American, single mothers. The training may involve behavioral strategies and techniques that show how to respectfully approach and deliver services to clients. How a person is respected can affect how they may value themselves and in turn can influence how they receive and use valuable resources and supports that are available for them. Participant B said that, "if the value of an individual is not perceived from the people giving the support, systematic stigmatization is going to continue."

Mezzo Level

All participants in this study shared the belief that African American, single mothers of low-income status, often have not had training experiences and or influential role models that could prepare them for making healthy life decisions. On the mezzo level, a recommendation from this study to address this gap involves the inclusion of classes in school systems, especially on the high school level, that would include marriage and family living skills, financial awareness, and career planning. The lack of training in these areas, and in some home environments, can contribute to an individual making poor decisions that result in long-term consequences. This training could be offered through small group settings designed to provide opportunities to practice skills

aimed to increase efficacy when dealing with public welfare services, self-advocacy in meeting educational and career opportunities, and financial decision-making.

Macro Level

Low-income, African American, single mothers are often dependent on government assistance, which on a macro level can influence their socioeconomic development by how systemic stigmas are effectively perceived and dealt with. Several reports claimed that some welfare reform programs are successful (Haskins, 2016; Moffitt & Garlow, 2018; Roulstone, 2015). However, other studies show problematic trends that depict, for many who are in need of government assistance, life grows more complicated after engaging with welfare reform programs (Shaefer & Edin, 2018; Tach & Edin, 2017). For low-income, single mothers, the receiving of access to childcare vouchers and cash assistance benefits are in jeopardy when they seek higher educational initiatives above the high school level. This higher education initiative does not count in many states as "work" resulting in this population losing these benefits. The initial Welfare Reform Act of 1996 and the revised act of 2016 that limited access to cash assistance also includes the restriction of the definition of "work" as qualifying for certain benefits. Work credit is largely limited to vocation-focused educational training, and only for a maximum of 1 year. This restriction systematically affects low-income single mothers by placing them in an unjust position of choosing between attaining an educational opportunity that could improve their economic situations and their overall well-being and losing benefits for themselves and their children. The revision of the Welfare Reform Act to include educational attainment above the high school level as

"work" credit so low-income single mothers can receive these benefits, is an essential policy change that needs to occur as an advantage for this populations' overall well-being.

Summary

Many low-income, African American, single mothers experience difficulties in coping with the impact of systemic stigmatization on their socioeconomic well-being. They have a difficult time navigating in a system that supports unjust influences that affect their financial stability, career, and educational attainment. It appears as though the long-term existence of marginalization, disenfranchisement, and discriminatory practices in U.S. society has hindered their possible progress and movement (Cook, 2015).

Social workers serve in a unique position of providing informed understanding of systemic stigmatization encountered in their social work service with low-income, African American, single mothers that can help mitigate the effects of systemic stigmatization on their socioeconomic well-being.

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to examine how BSW and MSW social workers understand the impact of systemic stigmatization on low-income, African American, single mothers' socioeconomic well-being. Data for this study were acquired by conducting one Zoom focus group that consisted of five participants. The work experience of the participants with the population group of my study ranged from 5 years to more than 27 years. Participants provided information that can enhance social work practice in understanding the impact of systemic stigmatization on the socioeconomic well-being of low-income African American single mothers.

There were four themes and eight subthemes identified from the data acquired in this study: the identified themes were (a) perpetuation of the cycle of poverty, (b) clients' disempowerment, (c) educating clients about opportunities and empowerment, and (d) counteracting the stigma of assistance-seeking. The subthemes were (a) racial inequities, (b) limitations on income, (c) lack of role models, (d) housing assistance, (e) socioeconomic well-being, (f) disrupted education, (g) supporting client dignity, and (h) making assistance feel less threatening.

Participants in this study shared significant information based on their professional experience working with low-income, African American, single mothers. The data provided can inform and enhance social work best practices with this population group. Social workers can benefit from the collective data that can assist in their understandings in how systemic stigmatization impact the socioeconomic well-being of low-income, African American, single mothers; the challenges they face in their provision of service to this population group regarding systemic stigmatization on their socioeconomic well-being; and, suggestions to help mitigate the effects of the impact of stigma stigmatization on their socioeconomic well-being.

Social worker roles have evolved over the years to include an awareness of the many growing needs of their clients (Butler-Warke et al., 2019). The unique opportunities social workers hold in communities can inform and impact the greater need for empowerment and advocacy for some of the most vulnerable populations. Social workers' distinctive abilities to empower societies include motivating individuals to take vital roles in framing social service, providing educational programs, and encouraging

long-lasting economic independence (Forenza & Eckert, 2017). These efforts by social workers can help mitigate the effects of systemic stigmatization on the socioeconomic well-being of low-income, African American, single mothers.

To address systemic stigmatization in the social work profession, the data obtained in this study encourages initiatives that involve: educational trainings in financial and career opportunities awareness; sensitivity awareness trainings for providers regarding systemic stigmatization; and, empowerment strategies. Also, emphasized in the findings of this study is the need for significant policy changes when policies place African American, single mothers of low-income status in jeopardy of losing certain benefits when they seek higher education above the high school level and the creation of policies that will fairly provide educational opportunities that can help to influence the socioeconomic well-being of an individual's life.

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Appendix A: Discussion Guide

Date: _____-   Time: _____

Meeting Information: Zoom Focus Group

Estimated Allotted Time	**Format**
15 minutes	**Welcome and Introductions**
10 minutes	**Instructions** •Please speak one at a time, to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to speak. •Please respect the insights, ideas, and opinions of others- all participants' sharing's are valid although you may not agree. •Although notes will be taken, everything that is shared will be kept confidential- there will be no names placed against comments. •If there are any additionally questions that do not relate to the discussion, there will be time allotted at the end of the meeting.
1 hour 20 minutes	**Focus Group Questions** •Please see Appendix B
10 minutes	**Questions from the Group**
5 minutes	**Thank you and Close** •**Reminder of how participation will be used.** •**Thank all participants**

Appendix B: Questionnaire

Questions for Focus Group

1. How do you define systemic stigmatization? (Please see this researcher' definition at the bottom of the questions)
2. Can you share with us your thoughts/feelings/opinions about the impact of systemic stigmatization on the socioeconomic well-being of low-income African American single mothers? Could you speak specifically about:
    a. Financial impacts
    b. Educational impacts
    c. Career impacts
3. In your social work experience, what challenges have you faced when helping low-income African American single mothers whose socioeconomic well-being has been impacted by systemic stigmatization?
4. What has been your experience (s) with addressing the impact of systemic stigmatization on the socioeconomic well-being of low-income African American single mothers in your social work practice?
5. To what degree do these stigmas affect how low-income African American single mothers receive and accept certain support resources?
6. What are your thoughts about how social work practice could mitigate the impact of systemic stigmatization on the socioeconomic well-being of low-income African American single mothers? Could you speak specifically about:
    a. Financial impact
    b. Educational impact
    c. Career impact
7. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Researcher' Systemic Stigmatization Definition
Systemic stigmatization refers to a systematic social process of devaluing individuals' or groups based on actual or differences such as gender, race, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic positions, behavior, or ethnicity. Discrimination often follows stigmatization and involves an additional injustice placed on people who maintain marginalized recognition or social positions through legislation, policies, or systemic practices.