

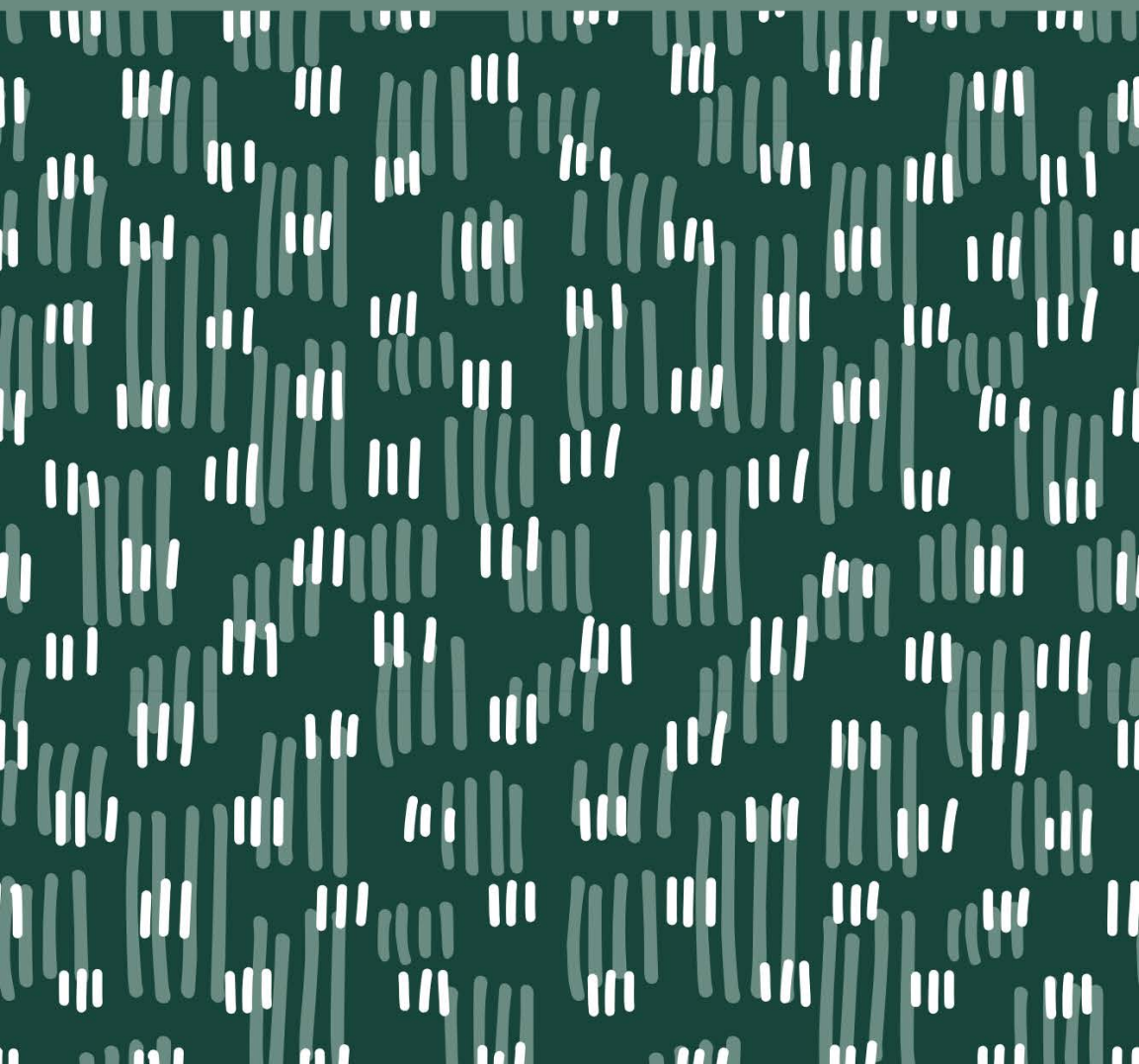
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Letter from the Editors

Welcome to the inaugural issue of The Bailey Commons. This peer-reviewed undergraduate journal's focus is on creating space for students enrolled in the Bailey Scholars Program (BSP) at Michigan State University to have the opportunity to learn about and benefit from engaging in the peer-review journal process. Our goal was to create an opportunity for students to present their research work, art, or other intellectual work while learning how to navigate a peer-review process. Students published in The Bailey Commons leave MSU with a peer-reviewed publication and with the valuable skills on how to showcase their intellectual work and skills around revising work, communication, and presentation to a general audience. We offer this issue to you as a showcase of just some of the many talented students who come through our spaces. And to suggest, as our last article in this issue does, that "Bailey has the potential to be truly transformative if we take the opportunity to imagine differently about how we can learn, know, and be".

In this first issue, we present four works by recent graduates that highlight the interdisciplinary nature of our program, our students' interests and various perspectives on real world issues. These works illustrate how our students critically think and express their knowledge from a variety of perspectives. Our journal presents five very different perspectives. Four of these intellectual works come from current or recently graduated BSP undergraduates. These papers look at varying issues to provide approaches and problem-solving for real world issues.

Sociology graduate and former student leader Lauren Golden starts our issue with a discussion of the way sexuality stereotypes and cisgender heterosexual male gender expression have been discussed in the literature. In her literature review, she illustrates the many interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives have constructed an idea about how we understand gender. She demonstrates how entrenched sexuality-based stereotypes which can be restrictive, particularly for cisgender heterosexual men's ability to authentically express their gender. This review fills a gap in the interdisciplinary theoretical literature by exploring the previously underexplored way in which those who occupy socially privileged positions are also constrained by those systems that many who are marginalized are also oppressed by. The second article by BSP recent alum and Biomedical Laboratory Science major, Tamara Robaciu, discusses utilizing Open Space Technology (OST) as a methodological tool for community-level research. In this retrospective analysis, Robaciu argues that to help supplement school-based and caregiver-based education, community-level interventions that utilize Open Space Technology have the potential to provide more authentic representations of community partners' priorities and dynamics. In this thorough analysis, we are provided with both the methodological process and broader methodological considerations of using OST and a strong case for advocating for its use because of its malleability and its ability to

maximize participant comfort and research data yielded.

The third article in our inaugural issue comes from recent BSP graduate and Sociology and Interdisciplinary Studies major Riley Michael. In this brief literature review, Michael provides an overview of, and call for proposed future research on, the underexamined issue of educational neglect. As an often-understudied issue that receives a broad lack of public attention, Michael sheds light on how policies, processes, and ideologies about schooling collide to produce instances of educational neglect, particularly for homeschooled children. Michael calls for additional research on the students who are homeschooled to ensure their experiences are not ones of educational neglect and to more thoroughly create data and a knowledge base of experiences of students who are outside of traditional public/private education.

The final article from our students comes from our most recent Student Director and Biomedical Laboratory Science major, Sydney Sharon. In her work on advocating for strong gun legislation, Sharon presents the argument for gun control from a public health perspective. In her piece, she targets federal policy makers and argues that gun violence is preventable, and policy makers have an obligation to protect their constituents.

The final entry comes as a collaborative exercise from the 2024-2025 BSP faculty and graduate fellows whose expertise comes from a variety of colleges across campus including the College of Social Science, the College of Music, the College of Education, the Broad Business College, the College of Natural Science, and the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Reflecting on the influencing work of mimi khu'c, our fellows created a Tarot card for the role of the convener, looking particularly at the shifting dynamics of higher education and implementing the Bailey Scholars Assessment Model (our tool for student ePortfolio assessment) as reflection to better understand our process in creating this card. The project is offered as a disjuncture, aligned with the ethos of Bailey and our learnings throughout the year. We want to deeply thank our BSP alumni who dedicated time and intellectual energy to this peer review process. They worked diligently to provide these papers with constructive and substantive feedback that was embedded in a deep ethic of care and support. We look forward to continuing our collaboration with other BSP alumni who are interested in working with helping our students continue to grow and thrive.

Why Commons?

The idea of a “commons” existed before the first Bailey core course met. It existed before the first scholar was recruited, before our iconic tree was designed.

Dr. Frank Fear, our founder, friend and the first director, put pen to paper, recording the ideas he and the other founders had about the commons.

“The Commons will be a frame of mind, a way of life, and a place,” he wrote. “It will be all these things at once. It will be a vibrant place, the center stage of Bailey, connected in multiple ways to the common theme of ‘learning.’”

I can’t begin to count the number of times I’ve heard someone describe something with “That’s so Bailey!” or “That’s not very Bailey.” In many ways, Bailey has become a way of life. It’s become a way we experience the world; with curiosity, grace, compassion, and the idea that we will leave spaces we visit better than we found them.

This document of ideas, however, focuses on the actual physical space the Bailey Scholars Program would be housed. The founders asked for a secure, accessible space that allows for 24-hour entry, hospitable with windows, kitchen, comfortable furniture, and hardware for learning.

This 28-year-old document does give a few lines to the feeling of Bailey; what this peer-reviewed undergraduate journal aspires to be:

“It will be an open, caring, and self-regulating way of interacting where faculty and student distinctions will be blurred by a common commitment to personal and professional growth...a spirit of openness, a sense of feeling welcomed, and desire to stay connected to Bailey over time must permeate what we do and how we do it.”

I wonder if the folks who brainstormed the founding tenets of this community predicted and hoped that the barriers that separate students and faculty — the recognized pursuers of knowledge and the staid, terminal holders of it — would break down a bit more than they have in the coming three decades.

We launch this journal in hopes of precipitating the further erosion of those barriers, to declare that undergraduate students can be both pursuers and holders, and that the faculty who teach them never cease their curiosity, either.

This is what we mean with the creation of this digital place known as The Bailey Commons.

Sexuality Stereotypes and Cisgender Heterosexual Male Gender Expression: A Literature Review

Lauren Golden,
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Introduction

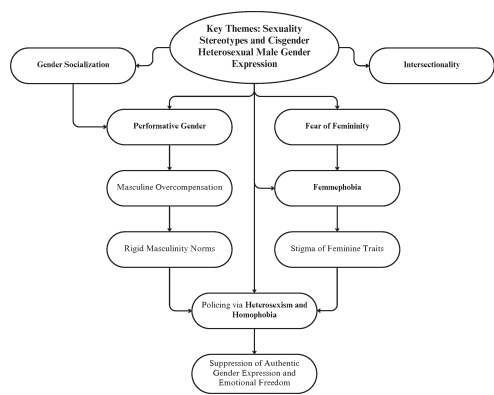
Why is it that when a man wears pink or expresses emotional vulnerability, his sexuality is so often called into question? Rigid societal norms about gender and sexuality impose strict boundaries on acceptable forms of self-expression, linking gender presentation closely to assumptions about sexual orientation (Herek, 2004; Kimmel, 1994; Risman, 2004). These norms uphold narrow expectations of masculinity rooted in heteronormativity, limiting the range of acceptable ways men can express themselves and shaping how they navigate their behavior, appearance, and social roles within society (Connell, 1995; Pharr, 1988). While research has expanded on masculinity and queer identities (Connell, 1995; hooks, 2004), the broader social forces that enforce conformity to traditional masculine ideals affect all men, including those presumed to benefit from social privilege: cisgender heterosexual men. Understanding these pressures to conform to society's expectations of gender expression is essential because it reveals the mechanisms through which gender is socially regulated and exposes the structural, social, and cultural costs experienced by individuals who deviate from normative expectations (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009; Hoskin, 2020; Sedgwick, 1990).

Past research has demonstrated that societal stereotypes linking gender expression to sexual orientation significantly shape perceptions of masculinity among cisgender heterosexual men (Herek, 2004; Kimmel, 1994). Studies have shown that when men exhibit traits culturally associated with femininity, they are often presumed to be gay or, at minimum, not heterosexual (Herek, 2004). Conversely, men who display traditionally masculine traits are typically assumed to be heterosexual, reflecting pervasive societal expectations that closely associate masculinity with heterosexuality (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009). These stereotypes have been found to impose constraints on men's behavior, appearance, and self-presentation, creating social pressures that discourage deviation from conventional masculine norms due to the fear of negative social sanction or being perceived as lacking in masculinity (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009; Kimmel, 1994).

Building on this foundation, this paper explores how these stereotypes and assumptions influence cisgender heterosexual men, particularly regarding performative gender, intersectionality, fear of femininity, femmephobia, gender socialization, heterosexism, and homophobia. This paper argues that the pressure to conform to traditional masculine norms can limit men's self-expression and perpetuate harmful societal biases (Connell, 1995). By examining these interconnected factors, this paper aims to shed light on the complexities of gender presentation and its impact on cisgender heterosexual men.

Furthermore, this paper seeks to understand how these pressures affect men from diverse backgrounds, considering the intersectional aspects of race, class, and other social identities. This research contributes to a broader understanding of gender dynamics and the challenges faced by men in expressing their authentic selves.

Understanding how cisgender heterosexual men navigate gender presentation requires a multidimensional lens that accounts for the complex social and structural forces shaping gender and perceived gender expression. Drawing from existing gender discourse, the following concepts have emerged as key frameworks necessary to frame this review, as they offer critical insight into how normative masculinity is taught, enforced, or challenged. Performative gender (Goffman, 1959; West & Zimmerman, 1987) captures the everyday performance of masculinity in social contexts, revealing how men adapt their behavior based on perceived social expectations. Intersectionality (hooks, 2004; Hoskin, 2020) is critical for accounting for the compounded impact of race, class, ability level, and other social identities on gender expression. The fear of femininity (Kimmel, 1994; O’Neil, 1981) and femmephobia (Hoskin, 2020) explain why men often avoid traits coded as feminine, illuminating how both internalized and institutional pressures contribute to the devaluation of femininity. Gender socialization (Martin, 1998; Risan, 2004) shows how these gender norms are instilled early and reinforced through schools, families, and media. Finally, heterosexism and homophobia (Herek, 2004; Pharr, 1988; Sedgwick, 1990) contextualize the societal consequences of gender nonconformity, especially how deviations from traditional masculinity are policed through assumptions about sexuality. These frameworks collectively offer a nuanced and comprehensive lens through which to analyze the complex dynamics shaping cisgender heterosexual male gender presentation. A conceptual map of these key themes and their relationships is presented in Figure 1 to guide the structure of the literature review. Despite the growing body of literature on masculinity and queer identities, the specific ways that sexuality-based assumptions constrain



gender expression among cisgender heterosexual men remain underexamined. This review addresses that gap by synthesizing literature across these intersecting domains to better understand how systems of heteronormativity and patriarchy police all forms of gender variance, not only among queer men, but also among those assumed to hold social privilege. Undertaking this synthesis is critical, as it highlights overlooked dynamics that enforce conformity within dominant masculinities and reveals the broader social mechanisms that sustain gender regulation. By doing so, the review provides a foundation for expanding theoretical frameworks and informing more inclusive approaches to gender expression across diverse masculinities.

Performative Gender

Performing gender is a fundamental aspect of social life for everyone, as individuals alter their gender expression based on their surroundings and social interactions (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This concept of altering how someone presents their gender based on their social environment can also be attributed to role theory, which finds that gender is learned and enacted through different roles in different social situations (Goffman, 1959). As West and Zimmerman (1987) describe in their piece, *Doing Gender*, gender is an “emergent feature of social situations” and an outcome produced as a result of “rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society,” displaying the performative nature of role theory concerning different social situations. In essence, men adjust their behavior and presentation to fit within the norms and expectations of their current social environment, whether it’s a hypermasculine workplace or a more inclusive social gathering.

As a result of these social expectations, the division of gender in society is perpetuated as individuals change how they “perform” their gender to socially “fit in” based on differing social environments. A cisgender heterosexual man who prefers presenting outside traditional hypermasculinity is likely to feel more comfortable expressing himself around groups open to non-conforming gender expressions and less comfortable in groups with opposing views (Weeks, 2015). He may adopt different behaviors and mannerisms depending on whether he’s with his family, friends, or colleagues. This constant adjustment can be exhausting and can lead to feelings of inauthenticity and disconnect (Hochschild, 1983).

Typically, men in a hypermasculine environment would feel most comfortable dressing according to expressed gender norms and less comfortable dressing outside such norms with those who connect sexuality and gender. In a setting with other masculine-presenting men, the “virtually unattainable” standards of optimal masculinity are reinforced, leaving men to “continually strive to satisfy [them]” and in turn generate hypermasculine overcompensation (Willer et al., 2013). Social constructs that are deemed central to masculinity include “power, aggression, competition, independence, social status, and anti-femininity” (Lewis et al., 2018). In turn, men may consequently

present in a hypermasculine manner attempting to make their masculine power evident to society. Such hypermasculinity is described as masculine overcompensation, defined as “a phenomenon wherein males whose masculinity is called into question react by endorsing or exhibiting exaggerated displays of stereotypically masculine characteristics” (Lewis et al., 2018). This can lead to a cycle of competition and pressure, where men feel the need to constantly prove their masculinity to their peers (Kimmel, 1994).

Moreover, if a cisgender man identifies as gay, he may be expected to dress more flamboyantly or femininely in LGBTQIA+ environments to meet certain societal expectations (Butler, 1990). These men may only feel comfortable expressing their gender when in situations directly linked to sexuality since it is deemed more socially acceptable. Conversely, feminine men who identify as heterosexual can feel the need to clarify explicitly that they are not gay simply because of how they dress. This is shown throughout the media with celebrities choosing to push the boundaries of gendered clothing expectations. They are, in a sense, forced to justify their sexuality solely due to their clothing style being associated with stereotypes about certain sexualities (Bollas, 2024). The constant need to clarify and justify one’s identity can be emotionally taxing and can contribute to feelings of marginalization (Goffman, 1963). The ongoing need to manage and adapt one’s gender presentation reinforces how fragile and conditional masculine identity is under societal expectations.

Intersectional Approach

Intersectionality is a crucial sociological perspective since various overlapping social identities play a large role in the gender expression of men (Hoskin, 2020). Race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, disability, and class all influence how certain members of society express their gender (Hoskin, 2020). Different intersectional aspects can hinder individuals in society and can impact one’s sexuality and expression of gender in combination (Hoskin, 2020). Understanding these factors provides a more nuanced perspective on how power structures and social inequalities shape gender expression. For example, a Black man may experience pressure to conform to specific masculine norms to counteract stereotypes about Black men, while a working-class man may face different expectations based on his socioeconomic status (hooks, 2004).

Further, certain ethnicities and cultures overlap with the category of gender regarding their customs and norms because cultural clothing or traditions can provide different standards on how gender should be expressed that contradict those of the nation of residence (Lindemuth et al., 2011). Sexuality also connects with gender expression due to the presuppositions about how different sexualities should express themselves, as well as the comfort and ability to express one’s gender as a result of different sexuality identity communities. Men in the LGBTQ+ community may find solidarity and support in expressing their gender identity, while those outside these communities may face more challenges (Weeks, 2015).

Additionally, class and disability play large roles in the ability to express their gender identity when sometimes they are not given the resources or are not in the ideal environment to be able to express themselves how they desire accurately (Shakespeare & Watson, 1996). Men with disabilities may face barriers to expressing their gender identity due to physical limitations or societal perceptions of disability (Shakespeare & Watson, 1996). Celebrities and those in higher social standings have much more security in deviating from social norms if they have a safety net of supporters who are accepting of that behavior and have the resources to not worry as much about how their social environment will be impacted (Bollas, 2024). This highlights the privilege and power dynamics at play in gender expression. Since cisgender, heterosexual, white, and male identities hold dominant societal positions, men of different racial backgrounds may amplify their gender expression to align with hegemonic masculinity, striving to attain power and move closer to the ideal (Connell, 1995). They may feel compelled to embody hypermasculine traits to counteract stereotypes and gain social acceptance. These overlapping identities compound the constraints on gender expression, revealing that masculine norms are enforced unevenly across lines of race, class, and ability.

Fear of Femininity

Fear is a driving force for most societal actions, specifically a fear of deviating from what is deemed normal in society (Foucault, 1977). Regarding gender presentation, the assumption that all feminine-presenting men are bound to rest somewhere on the sexuality spectrum other than straight is directly connected to men's fear of femininity (Kimmel, 1994). Gendered stereotypes about sexuality reinforce heterosexism in society, and the fear of being perceived as anything other than straight due to these stereotypes fuels both homophobia and misogyny. This dynamic is often linked to femininity, as traits classified as feminine are frequently devalued and stigmatized in a patriarchal society (Kimmel, 1994). The fear of femininity is not just a personal issue but is deeply embedded in societal structures and expectations (Hoskin, 2020).

The most prevalent examples are a perceived loss of socialized power and control. Men are socialized their entire lives to connect their strength and masculinity to the control and power that patriarchal societies use to dominate the world (Kimmel, 1994). Presenting in a non-hypermasculine manner provides a threat to this stereotypic notion of "optimal masculinity", and men fear the risk of losing their societal respect as a result. This is very damaging for men as they "lose emotional freedom when certain gender norms are pushed", since expressing any sort of emotion is not seen as masculine (O'Neil, 1981). The restriction of male behavior to maintain hegemonic masculinity can additionally create issues regarding career identity with men. In the workspace, men can feel like they need to prove their masculinity to gain power and status, further lacking acceptable and safe spaces for value to not be deemed simply on gender expression through traits, values, clothing, or mannerisms. The pressure to

conform can lead to stress, anxiety, and a sense of alienation from their true selves (hooks, 2004).

In sum, misogyny about the negative correlations with feminine traits makes men fear femininity as it would make them inferior in the workplace, and in turn, society. The constant devaluation of feminine traits perpetuates the idea that men must distance themselves from anything perceived as feminine to maintain their social standing (Butler, 1993). This fear can also extend to personal relationships, where men may feel pressure to conform to traditional gender roles to avoid being seen as weak or inadequate. The impact of this fear is far-reaching and affects various aspects of men's lives.

Femmephobia

One theoretical approach to feminism studies defines this societal fear of femininity as "femmephobia". Femmephobia refers to the "devaluation and regulation of femininity and suggests a separate, perhaps overlapping, phenomenon specific to gender", which has proven to be a substantial reason why men fear any display of femininity (Hoskin, 2020). Within this approach are the bases of masculine and feminine themes that provide a foundation for the socialized assumptions of men towards masculinity and femininity. The three listed masculine themes are "masculine privilege, masculinity as protective, and masculinity as the norm", highlighting the dominance of hegemonic masculinity and the social advantages granted to men who conform to traditional masculine norms. (Hoskin, 2020). These themes completely differentiate from the feminine themes of "feminine inferiority, femininity as target, and femininity as inauthentic" (Hoskin, 2020). This dichotomy reinforces the idea that masculinity is superior and femininity is inferior, leading to the devaluation of anything associated with femininity (Butler, 1990).

The devaluation placed on femininity leads men not only to refuse to acknowledge their femininity but also to fear the social repercussions of actively embracing it (Kimmel, 1994). Even if a man feels most comfortable presenting in a more feminine manner, societal norms rooted in the assumption of feminine inferiority discourage any sense of ease in doing so (Connell, 1995). These gendered expectations are further reinforced by homophobic stereotypes, which link femininity in men to queerness, leading to assumptions that any man displaying feminine traits must be gay (Herek, 1986). As a result, men who present femininely face a dual stigma: first, they are devalued for their perceived femininity, and second, they risk being categorized as part of a socially marginalized group: the LGBTQIA+ community (Sedgwick, 1990). This intersection of femmephobia and homophobia creates a particularly hostile environment for men who defy traditional gender norms.

With connotations of feminine expression or attributes holding connections to multiple subordinate groups, men are threatened to lose their power in society if they fall into those assumptions. One of the only things a hegemonically masculine and heterosexual society

will place on male femininity is a great number of deterrents, not an incentive or opportunity to feel established and comfortable. This is depicted through male femininity being termed “subordinated masculinity” rather than male femininity (Hoskin, 2020). Since femininity threatens a male’s place in society, it is deemed as a subordinate trait for men to hold. It is also much more discouraged for men to break gender norms as the “repercussions for gender role violations are greater among those assigned male at birth” since they are descending the power structure (Hoskin, 2020). Female masculinity is seen as women attempting to reach up the social hierarchy, whereas a cisgender heterosexual male presenting femininely is seen as desiring to move down from the top of the social hierarchy. The sexuality-based stereotype of all feminine men being seen as homosexual also perpetuates violence on men, further deterring them from accepting their femininity (Herek, 2004). Research by Queens University professor Rhea Ashley Hoskin (2020) on interpersonal violence has found “discomfort with male femininity to be a better predictor of whether or not an individual reports having acted upon sexual prejudice violently, over and above previous predictors of aggression”, showing that assumptions connected to sexuality are allowing violence as a result of homophobia to men who are assumed to be gay solely due to their gender presentation (Hoskin, 2020). Ultimately, the subordination of women through misogyny is perpetuated with femmephobia, contributing to heterosexual males’ fear of femininity. In turn, the social punishment of male femininity reinforces broader systems of power that equate worth with masculine dominance, leaving little room for gender variance among men.

Gender Socialization

Early gender socialization plays a crucial role in reinforcing strict adherence to traditional gender roles and expectations (Risman, 2004). Rigid gender socialization impacts children’s, and later adults’, perception of gender identity and personal beliefs surrounding the nature of femininity and masculinity. Gender socialization is taught throughout society but is easily reinforced by social institutions (Connell, 1995). Early socialization teaches men values and beliefs surrounding optimal masculinity and expected gender roles to follow. This is done through the utilization of the hidden curriculum, the theory that there is a “hidden school curriculum of disciplining the body is gendered and contributes to the embodiment of gender in childhood, making gendered bodies appear and feel natural” (Martin, 1998). These values that are being taught follow the subconscious beliefs of fear of femininity and learned sexism. From a young age, boys are taught to suppress their emotions, be strong and independent, and avoid anything associated with femininity (Kimmel, 1994). They are often encouraged to engage in activities that reinforce these traits, such as sports or competitive games, while discouraged from expressing emotions or engaging in activities seen as feminine (Bem, 1981).

Traditional gender beliefs typically view that “men are superior to women and therefore have the right to devalue and restrict women’s

values, roles, and life-styles," which only perpetuates the fear that men have to deviate from masculinity and fall into this devaluation (O'Neil, 1981). As a result, when a man fears femininity in himself, he is truly fearing society's negative perception that feminine individuals are "weak, dependent, and submissive" (O'Neil, 1981). This fear is not just about personal identity but is also about social status and power (hooks, 2004). Restrictive gender role norms prevent individuals from expressing themselves freely, as those who uphold these roles devalue those who deviate from traditional gendered behaviors.

The fortification of the fear of femininity in men stems from patterns of gender role strain and conflict, such as power, socialized control, and homophobia (O'Neil, 1981). Since masculine men occupy the top of the social hierarchy, any deviation such as expressing feminine attributes is perceived as a loss of power and an unwanted move toward subordination, fostering a fear of femininity among men who seek to maintain their dominant social status (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 1994). This fear is linked to the maintenance of socialized control and hegemonic masculinity, as patriarchal societal structures dominate the world's social control (Willer et al., 2013). Hegemonic masculinity, with its emphasis on dominance and control, reinforces these power dynamics, and research has shown that "dominance and control are central to hegemonic masculinity in the American context" (Willer et al., 2013). Homophobia also plays a significant role in heterosexual males' fear of femininity, as gay men are often stereotypically associated with being feminine, thus occupying two subordinated social positions: being gay and feminine (Sedgwick, 1990). This stereotype, which assumes that all men who display feminine traits must be gay, further entrenches the fear of men expressing femininity due to deeply rooted societal heterosexism (Herek, 1986). Given this hegemonically masculine socialization, there are few societal incentives or positive opportunities for men to challenge traditional gender roles or stereotypes (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 1994). These early social messages create long-lasting constraints that prevent men from exploring or embracing expressions of self that deviate from dominant gender norms (Martin, 1998; Risman, 2004).

Heterosexism and Homophobia

One of the main rationales utilized against male femininity, or just non-traditional masculinity, is heterosexism. The assumption that heterosexuality is the only correct sexuality and that anything deviant from that is incorrect creates extreme prejudice (Herek, 2004) manifesting in various forms, from microaggressions to systemic discrimination, and it significantly impacts how men perceive and express their gender. Heterosexism reinforces the idea that men must adhere to specific masculine norms to be considered "real men," thus discouraging any deviation toward femininity (Kimmel, 1994). This can lead to a sense of shame and self-doubt for men who do not conform to these expectations (Brittan, 1989).

Homophobia, the fear and hatred of homosexuality, is closely linked to heterosexism (Pharr, 1988). It serves as a tool to police gender

boundaries, as any display of femininity in men is often interpreted as a sign of homosexuality, leading to ridicule, rejection, and even violence (Sedgwick, 1990). This fear of being labeled gay can drive men to perform hypermasculinity as a defense mechanism, further perpetuating harmful stereotypes and limiting their emotional and behavioral range (Connell, 1995). Men may go to great lengths to distance themselves from anything perceived as feminine to avoid being associated with homosexuality (Herek, 2004). They may avoid certain clothing styles, hobbies, or social interactions to maintain a “masculine” image.

The intersection of heterosexism and homophobia creates a hostile environment for men who do not conform to traditional masculine norms. They face constant pressure to prove their heterosexuality and masculinity, which can lead to anxiety, stress, and a sense of alienation (hooks, 2004). This pressure also affects men within the LGBTQ+ community, who may feel compelled to suppress their true selves to avoid discrimination and violence (Meyer, 2003). The mental health consequences of this pressure can be severe and long-lasting.

Moreover, the association of femininity with homosexuality reinforces misogyny, as it devalues both women and gay men (Pharr, 1988). This interconnectedness of oppression highlights the importance of challenging both heterosexism and homophobia to create a more inclusive and equitable society where men are free to express themselves without fear of judgment or reprisal (Butler, 1993). It requires a fundamental shift in societal attitudes and a commitment to dismantling the systems that perpetuate these prejudices. By creating a more accepting and inclusive environment, we can empower men to embrace their authentic selves and challenge the harmful stereotypes that limit their potential. Traditional notions of masculinity often discourage men from seeking help or expressing vulnerability (Real, 1997). This can make it difficult for men to challenge these pressures and seek support when they are struggling. Together, heterosexism and homophobia work to constrain masculinity by punishing any perceived deviation from heterosexual, normative gender behavior.

Conclusion

This literature review set out to examine how entrenched sexuality-based stereotypes restrict cisgender heterosexual men’s ability to authentically express their gender. The key frameworks, including performative gender, intersectionality, fear of femininity, femmophobia, gender socialization, heterosexism, and homophobia, were selected because they illuminate how normative masculinity is constructed, regulated, and resisted across multiple dimensions of identity and power (Connell, 1995; Herek, 2004; Hoskin, 2020; Kimmel, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1987). By synthesizing these intersecting domains, the review responds to a gap in the literature: the underexplored ways in which even socially privileged men are constrained by systems that equate masculinity with heterosexuality and dominance (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009; Herek, 2004).

As found in the review, men often feel pressure to conform to dominant forms of masculinity, especially when femininity is associated with weakness or queerness, which reinforces both misogyny and homophobia (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 1994; Pharr, 1988). Further, this review showed that these pressures to conform to hegemonic masculinity are not experienced equally. Men from marginalized backgrounds, including men of color, working-class men, and men with disabilities, often face greater barriers to authentic self-expression due to intersecting forms of inequality, which necessitated the use of an intersectional approach for this review (hooks, 2004; Shakespeare & Watson, 1996). These dynamics are not just personal but are shaped by broader institutions such as schools, media, and the workplace, which all reinforce ideas about what masculinity should look like (Martin, 1998; Risman, 2004).

Understanding the relationship between sexuality-based stereotypes and gender expression is vital for deconstructing the social structures that restrict men's freedom to authentically express themselves free from social stigma or internalized judgment (Connell, 1995; Herek, 2004; Kimmel, 1994). A comprehensive literature review on this subject plays a crucial role in consolidating existing scholarship, highlighting research gaps, and deepening our understanding of the nuanced ways masculinity and sexuality intersect in shaping gender performance. By critically engaging with these entrenched norms, this review lays the groundwork for fostering inclusive environments where diverse masculinities are validated (Hoskin, 2020), and gender expression is disentangled from assumptions about sexuality (Sedgwick, 1990).

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Open Space Technology as Reveal: Examining Open Space Technology as a Methodology for Community-Level Research

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Abstract

Community-level interventions into child sexual abuse (CSA prevention) are a growing area of interest for violence prevention efforts. Community-level CSA prevention programming focused on attitude shifting can serve as a powerful supplement to school-based and caregiver-based education and deconstruct the taboo conceptions that impede community readiness for further CSA prevention strategies. One method to help mobilize community members to create meaningful community-level interventions for CSA may be supporting conversations that cultivate a more approachable, less rigid environment that could ease potential tensions. Open Space Technology (OST) is a radically different approach to large group problem-solving that places the reins of the conversation in the hands of the participants and allows them to self-direct to yield more authentic representations of a partner community's priorities and dynamics.

This manuscript is a retrospective analysis which describes the process of using Open Space Technology (OST) as a rigorous qualitative research methodology for a component of the Cultivating Communities for Change (C3) project, funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. An OST event, conducted in a Western Michigan County, is presented as a case study to demonstrate the utility of OST for community-based research. The efficacy and adaptability of OST is examined by contrasting the expected direction of the C3 project prior to the usage of the method in comparison to what future priorities for the project were identified and emphasized following the first OST session to improve the project's direction. Alterations to the traditional OST process during the C3 project are investigated to demonstrate OST's ability to take the shape best suited for a specific research project. Group empowerment through OST is analyzed through retrospective research team member interviews.

OST serves as a powerful tool for acquiring qualitative data from partner populations in conjunction with traditional methods and is highly flexible in how it can be adapted to best suit a project's needs. Reciprocity between research teams and their partner communities achieved through OST illuminates areas of primary concern for a social science project and allows for more pertinent and yieldful allocations of project time, energy, and resources for maximal impact. Any researcher hoping to utilize OST effectively takes on a challenge in finding what OST means to them, their ambitions with the project, and their relationship with their partner populations in ways other methodologies cannot fully capture due to their limitations.

I. INTRODUCTION TO C3 AND OPEN SPACE

Community-level interventions for child sexual abuse (CSA) prevention are a growing area of interest for violence prevention efforts. Traditionally, the responsibility of CSA prevention has been placed in either education disseminated by the caregivers of the child (Edwards et al., 2020; Russel et al., 2024) or through the schooling systems (Morris et al., 2016; Rudolph et al., 2022). However, there exist limitations in effectiveness of these approaches, including critiques on the onus of prevention being placed primarily on the child (Rudolph et al., 2022), barriers of participation faced by caregivers (Russel et al., 2024), and reluctance to engage with educational programs due to the perception of CSA as too taboo to discuss openly compared to other forms of violence (Edwards et al., 2020). Elaborating on taboos, community normative attitudes regarding CSA often repeat misinformation regarding the nature of CSA, which when held yields a community perception of CSA as unpreventable (Fix et al. 2023); spread of this misinformation is thought to be linked to perceived negative consequences of discussing CSA with the child (Rudolph et al., 2022), leading to perpetuation of inaccurate community attitudes.

Despite potential for community-level programming to aid in child sexual abuse prevention, research shows that consideration of community-level engagement remains underutilized by caregivers (Russel et al., 2024), involvement of community structures and neighborhood processes remain underexplored in research, particularly in rural communities (Maguire-Jack et al., 2020), and community-level mediators have been underexplored in school-level research (Morris et al., 2016). This remains so even with evidence that community-level interventions which emphasize collective efficacy have been found to be effective in reducing rates of child maltreatment, including CSA (Wang & Frost, 2025; Abdullah et al., 2020), and that shifts in normative ideas brought on by CSA-focused community-level programming, when allowed to diffuse and reach saturation through early adult adopters, have the potential to effectively reach youth and set the stage for behavioral change (Banyard et al., 2020). Community-level CSA prevention programming focused on attitude shifting can thus serve as a powerful supplement to school-based and caregiver-based education and deconstruct the taboo conceptions that impede community readiness for further CSA prevention strategies (Banyard et al., 2022).

Interested in exploring the potential for community-level interventions that foster long-lasting efforts in CSA prevention on these merits, the SPARK4Change laboratory at Michigan State University initiated the Cultivating Communities for Change (C3) project. C3 aims to reduce the rate of child sexual abuse in a West Michigan county through three key means: shifting community socio-normative attitudes surrounding CSA towards adoption of CSA prevention as a communal responsibility, creating accessible technology resources to caregivers discussing child development and CSA prevention, and empowering existing organization invested in CSA prevention through expanding and

interconnecting efforts between agencies. This led to the forging of partnerships between community organizations in the county and the research team as the partnership would allow for the research team to create a comprehensive map of the current state of CSA prevention efforts in the county, allow the organizations to continue with their strengthened CSA prevention efforts following the end of the project, and allow for more flexibility within the project's budget it was more of on-the-ground interventions. Given preexisting knowledge of the West Michigan County, a multiphasic approach was chosen to assess the readiness of the citizenry to discuss CSA and the best means by which to proceed with the actionable segments of the project. The first phase, of which this retrospective analyzes a part of, was centered on mapping the current state of existing CSA prevention efforts in the West Michigan community whilst gauging prevalent normative attitudes surrounding CSA and assessing the predominant concerns held by community members on children's rights and children's safety. Data gathered here would later go on to influence approaches to interventions in the following phases. However, conducting data collection in as organized a format as a focus group was expected to create participant discomfort due to the aforementioned topic sensitivity of CSA, and thus, the need for a methodology which could capture the data of interest while cultivating a more approachable, less rigid environment that could ease potential tensions arose. The answer to this conundrum was to enlist the help of Open Space Technology.

The unique characteristics of community-specific data garnered by the Open Space Technology method provides a stepping-off place from which a partner community can begin to work together towards their recognized common good regarding the rights, safety, and well-being of children— and by default, CSA. Employing OST produces a safe space and collaborative framework whereby participants with diverse perspectives were empowered to take ownership of the developing OST meeting agenda, revealing to participants their mutual areas of concern and interest. This ability to lead the direction of the conversation confers participants a sense of control and autonomy, aiding in lowering conversational barriers and increasing comfort. The themes revealed during the session hold potential to inform collective action steps specific to their community. Participant identified theme driven discussion groups subsequently provide rich data that when analyzed provides insight into potential opportunities for collaborative initiatives to address CSA in Western Michigan, leading to overall mutual participant-researcher beneficence.

Open Space Technology

Researcher and storyteller Brené Brown (2010) posits that it is the power of vulnerability that unlocks opportunities for storytelling in her work, and thus “maybe stories are data with a soul.” The thesis of her compelling TEDx talk was that, for social science efforts to emerge and evolve into their fullest forms, the researcher must reciprocate the vulnerability shown by participants telling their stories by ceding some control over research projects/processes, achieved through holding space and adjusting said projects/processes’ direction to follow the

course mapped by the narratives which emerge. How then does one illustrate the soul of their data in their project? Achieving this goal requires reciprocity in a manner safe for both parties that is often challenging when using conventional methodologies. Open Space Technology (OST) is one method that social scientists may embrace to help create safe spaces in which community members are able to candidly, and comfortably, share their experiences and corresponding stories around difficult social science topics.

Much like Beanie Babies, scrunchies, and hip-clad Walkmans, Open Space Technology received its moment in the sun in the late nineties before fading into the background. Initially designed by journalist Harris Owen, OST was created from a blend of lessons learned from his time in the business sector with observations he made watching community gatherings in West African villages (Owen, 2008). The most pertinent finding which guided his design philosophy in the creation of OST was that the most meaningful conversations often occurred in the informal spaces surrounding the central forum itself: for example, at water fountains, during breaks, or in lines at the restroom. This influence is readily apparent; unlike contemporary methodologies at the time, OST distinguished itself with its radically different approach to large group problem-solving by placing the reins of the conversation in the hands of the participants, allowing them to self-direct and freely enter those informal spaces. In Owen's own words, he designed OST to operate so that the "structure is so perfectly fit to the people and the work at hand, that it goes unnoticed in its proper role of supporting (not blocking) best work" (Herman, 2015). Further developed and maintained by its avid community following his passing, OST today is a model whose fluidity and emphasis on authenticity empowers participants to engage in radical change not only within the conversational sphere of the meeting, but in the greater world afterwards as well.

With the potential for fostering authentic conversations and its self-directed, self-evolving format that allows for continuity in the partner community, OST was thus deemed by the SPARK4Change research team as a powerful tool for the C3 project in conjunction with traditional interview and survey work. While traditional community collaboration was considered, it was not an option available to the research team due to the nature of the project's design: C3 was inherently designed to partner with well-established existing organizations with an investment in CSA prevention with the intent to leverage funding and resources so that these organizations may empower community members and encourage long-lasting changes towards CSA prevention without researcher reliance. Project funds in-and-of themselves also had to be kept in mind, and as PI leading the project additionally had prior experience with using OST in previous research, the integration of the methodology into C3's framework was more seamless without accruing much additional cost. Lastly, as the ultimate goal of the project was to raise awareness around CSA and shift normative attitudes in the West Michigan County towards those promoting the rights of children and aiding child sexual

abuse prevention, OST lent itself neatly as a means to begin the conversations necessary to accomplishing this shift in the research environment and throughout the community. This paper therefore serves as a retrospective analysis of the first OST session held during the C3 project as a case study to further learn how the method can be utilized in social science research, with its focus on explaining the tenets of OST as illustrated through the day's proceedings, demonstrating how it may be effectively used in community-centric social science research, and discussing key takeaways from the experience for teams interested in using OST for their own projects.

The Basics of Open Space Technology

OST has simple requirements for the space it will inhabit. The host assigns the session a central thematic issue, with an appropriate theme for OST being "when the work to be done is complex, the people and ideas involved are diverse, the passion for resolution (and potential for conflict) are high, and the time to get it done was yesterday" (Owen, 2020a). As for the amount of participants, OST officially states it accommodates 5 to over 2000, but warns that "less than 20 participants, and you tend to lose the necessary diversity which brings genuine interchange" (2020a, para. 7). After assembling the people needed, all that is left is to find an accommodating venue, dot it with seats here, coffee here, and food there, and observe how the space is filled. How the participants conduct themselves during the session is informed by OST's four principles and one law (Herman, 2015), originally outlined by Owen to serve as flexible yet form-giving rules that shape how an OST event progresses for both organizers and participants. They are as follows:

Whoever comes is the right people

Participants may arrive to an OST session with disparate backgrounds, varying levels of expertise, and contrasting opinions on the topic at hand; what unifies them and makes them apt for the task is their shared passion on that matter. Whether fifteen or fifteen-hundred invitees arrive at a session, their plurality is their strength and their presence is proof of the motivation that will yield the necessary change. In Owen's own words (2020a), "in a strange way, the group present is always the right group."

Whenever it starts is the right time

When the people have gathered, when the gratitudes are given, and when the officiator ensures all those in attendance understand how the session is to be run, OST begins no sooner and no later than what is on the clock. To use OST's own glossary metaphor for it (Heft, 2015), a session run with OST begins with settling in; a phase where the cold room becomes warm with the people within it.

Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened

In a world of what-if's, OST asks organizers to find the value in what was. Predispositions and expectations are natural to have, but in a format ever-variable and inherently malleable, attempting inter-session comparison detracts from the thesis a session concludes with.

Owen himself writes in his essay titled *Opening Space for Emerging Order* that “(i)t may, therefore, turn out that the one thing we always wanted (control) is not only unavailable, but unnecessary ... Emergent order appears in Open Space when the conditions for self organization are met. Perhaps we can now relax, and stop working so hard” (2020b, para. 29). Through release of control, all can now see what they have managed to accomplish and plan the next step accordingly.

When it's over, it's over

Simply put, a had conversation cannot be stretched further and a conversation in motion should not be cut short. If everyone feels that they have shared all the insights they have and received all that they could take away, the pen is capped, the page collected, and everyone breaks for bathrooms and bagels. It is the end of the present round of work, for the “creative moment has a nasty habit of occurring very quickly, and just because the session or meeting was scheduled to take two hours is no reason to sit around and waste time after the moment has passed” (Owen, 2020a). Removing the pressure to fill a lull in the conversation simply because the lull exists gives the words that are spoken more power, for someone did not have to say them—they wanted to.

The Law of Two Feet

The previous four maxims are principles for the simple reason that they did not predate OST in its creation, but rather were the observed truths found in the creation process itself. That this then is the only law does not mean it comes with a special gravitas, but that it is prescriptive rather than descriptive (Owen, 2020b), a tool to stow in the pocket later and use when appropriate. The Law of Two Feet tells every participant that at any time they feel that they are neither adding nor learning from the conversation at hand, they are free to move from their position to anywhere they feel that they can. It is Owen's belief that the only barrier to a successful OST session is stagnation, as “(i)ndividuals can make a difference and must make a difference. If that is not true in a given situation, they, and they alone, must take responsibility to use their two feet, and move to a new place where they can make a difference” (2020a). The power of this law is therefore quiet but vast, allowing for the self-curation of a participant's experience that contributes to an overall better experience for all those involved.

Framework of the OST Session

The principles and law of OST may appear arbitrary, contrary to how we conceptualize rules as boundaries with clear litigation. This is on purpose: allowing both organizers and participants the right to self-determination of their OST experience is essential so that the method best suits and supports those present in a way best tailored to the current group as opposed to any other, or even the same group at another place in time (Owen, 2020b). While the methodology is overall intended to be fluid, there is a loose framework for a session's proceedings that does not dictate the actions of the participants but rather provides the conversational stage upon which action can take

place. Owen outlines a basic framework for an OST session, as well as an extended framework with optional components based on the session's length and the extent of the group's camaraderie (2020a). The outline of a typical OST session is as below, and during each phase, the principles and law remain in full effect:

OPENING: A generally informal round of establishing conversation takes place ranging anywhere from modest catching-up between participants from an established shared background (such as a work team) or a quick set of introductions between participants unfamiliar with one another. Structured and detailed icebreaking tends to be less effective and hamper the fluidity of Open Space's identity.

AGENDA SETTING: The group decides the priorities and direction of the session's discussion stemming from the session's original thematic prompt. This agenda is created first by creation of what Owen calls the Community Bulletin Board (2020a), in which participants identify the opportunity or issue they perceive most relevant to the theme, transcribe it onto a piece of paper, and post it publicly for other participants to see. Once all participants have posted to the bulletin board, then the metaphorical Village Marketplace opens, and all participants select which identified topics under the conceptual umbrella they would like to discuss without limit as to how many topics they select. These selections form the basis for the formation of subsequent conversational groups.

OPEN SPACE: With the groups created, conversation ensues and is recorded by the members each subgroup with free flow of participants between groups per the Law of Two Feet. Conversations progress according to the principles.

CLOSING: Participants, having finished their conversations neither sooner nor later than when they have found appropriate, gather in a central circle and are encouraged to share their experiences, their thoughts, and their decisions on what course of action they will be taking next. There is no obligation to speak, and often in larger sessions it is impractical for everyone to speak, so groups may sometimes nominate a representative. No formal structure is needed for the closing statements, but they are nonetheless serious

OPTIONAL PHASES: Depending on the duration of the OST session, both throughout a single day and over multiple days, other phases may be woven into the framework. This can include morning announcements and evening reflections, made to refresh participants on the status of a group's conversation and the storytelling of how the group reached said point, as well as celebrations, which are encouraged to be spontaneous rather than preplanned. Additionally, while

formal reporting breaks to leadership and other groups is discouraged, for the purpose of research efficacy, it can be included in subtler fashions into the other phases to produce analyzable data through adaptations. An example of such an adaptation will be demonstrated later on when discussing specific alterations of the basic OST framework for the C3 project.

With the tenets elucidated, the philosophy behind Open Space Technology becomes clear: OST's approach to change-making is that of a self-regulating conversational process whose fluid blurry edges paradoxically define its open and unfiltered approach to problem solving. It is important to clarify that the conversational environment within OST is not its own closed system wherein the host cannot interfere, but rather, the host's responsibility is that of facilitation, making its tenets clear to the participants and intervening when necessary to preserve conversational equilibrium (Owen, 2020b). If participants are to profess their true feelings on a subject with their peers in an authentic, vulnerable fashion, then the researcher must allow their work to submit to authentic, vulnerable passions, with all the risks and enrichments that entails. Only then can the mutualism of OST shine to lift both parties higher than where they could reach on their own.

The History of Open Space Technology

Showing how Open Space Technology can be used in research requires understanding of its evolution from a fad of the office synergy zeitgeist of the mid-to-late 1990's into a full methodology. Early writings from the turn of the century, such as those of Margaret Neal and Martin Leith, focused on its applications within corporate hierarchies with mixed reception. Neal's writing (1996) expresses an optimism for how OST could facilitate productive discussion regarding the future of managerial strategies and highlights aspects of the process that she found empowering and appealing for participants as a participant. In contrast, Leith's work (1996) turns more critical, recognizing the appeal of an enthusiasm-charged methodology like OST, but comparing its efficacy against other large group models of the time. In his view, OST failed to establish both a clear picture of the current reality or a unified image of a shared future and that this was detrimental to the methodology's overall efficacy.

After this period of inquiry and reflection, talk of Open Space Technology would decline within the public eye for both the corporate and research sector, but the method could continue to appear sporadically. Roger F. Cooper (2011) would cite OST as an example of an open system in discussion of employable paradigms to reduce bias in the field of psychologists in management, describing OST as a variable method that is capable of great empowering highs as well as circuitous and ineffective democracy with how a session results as contingent on the participants. Tiit Elenurm (2012) echoes this fluctuance in his case study analysis of the "My Estonia" initiative for Estonian policy in which he investigates how well that OST fulfills its

obligation to the “open space” metaphor. He concludes similarly that the variability within OST prevented it from fully embodying that open space thought metaphor, again reinforcing the idea that there exists a more right group of people, organized at a more right time, who could conduct a more right version of the meeting that was held in direct contrast to the philosophies of the principles. A unique facet of Elenurm’s was the transition of the OST strategy to inhabit a digital space as well as a physical one as an interesting innovation, which allowed a total reach of 0.8% of the 2009 Estonian population (2012, p. 60) versus the relatively smaller scale ventures of the years past. This reach ultimately increased the diversity of thought within these conversational pockets, which Elenurm found enriched the discussions at hand.

Following these projects, Open Space Technology would appear here and there, as an inspiration for an innovation in the work of Choain and Malzy (2019) or as a point of comparison in the case of Salicru (2020). Chiefly, what these sets of papers share in their content was that they approached OST as not a means to an end, but an end in itself. Neal’s writing is about the experience of participating in OST. Leith’s writing is about OST under the scrutiny of his analytical framework. Cooper touches on it as a point of departure; Elenurm holds a case study to evaluate merits of metaphor and business ideology. The dissimilarities in these implementations and reviews of OST demonstrate a period of time in which the method was still finding its identity yet also shows the very adaptability of the method across different disciplines and for different purposes. In that sense, they are unified in seeking the communal voices of their populations of interest and the fidelity of open space as a changemaking process. However, it is of note that these inquiries largely remained in the realm of organizational theory and were interested in OST for its conceptual merits rather than its efficacy as a means to gather data. It would take time for shining examples of what OST is capable of doing in a research project to fully emerge.

Open Space Technology in Academic Literature

Time passed and the social science projects utilizing Open Space Technology in academic research eventually emerged. Mannarini, Fedi, and Tripetti’s inquiry (2009) was the humblest implementation: what factors were most likely to influence an individual’s future willingness to participate in civic engagement opportunities? Their evaluation into the reception of OST as a local civic engagement model in Italy reviewed five total civic sessions using six different correlative metrics. Ultimately, OST was met yet again with mixed reception from participants in line with the prior findings. Those taking part found that at its best the methodology was easy to adopt with little onboarding cost and stirred a plethora of strong, hopeful emotions regarding the issue at hand, and at worst, the lack of tangible result production and initial confusion gave them little motivation to pursue further meetings. With such high variability in responses, Mannarini et al. conceded that a singular session of OST by its nature tended to yield a low sense of cognitive closure in participants, a finding which suggests

the method may be better suited to a longitudinal project rather than an isolated incident. Nevertheless, it was clear to Mannarini et al. that to promote further engagement, an OST session had to be accessible, perceived as fruitful, and leave members with a sense of time well spent.

Achieving exactly these three takeaways was a project preceding Mannarini et al.'s work. Lightfoot, Pappas, and Chait (2003) utilized Open Space Technology as a tool for civic engagement in the context of effective citizen engagement in state disability planning. Seeking "more meaningful and extensive public input" (2003, p.8), the DD Council operating in 1997 Lightfoot et al. were reflecting on used OST over six town hall events, which focused on challenges faced by the disabled community and subsequent strategies to address them. Notably, several modifications were made to the OST process to increase accessibility to disabled participants, an example of an advantage the method's malleability brings. What Lightfoot et al. found was not only did the DD council shift their priorities based on the community input received using OST, but that OST was able to highlight a priority with education that the council had previously deemphasized within their planning. The counselors were able to reemphasize education and also incorporated a majority of the suggestions participants had for remediation strategies, making it so that the final policies were a reflection of the disabled community they served. Dialogue was fostered, time was used efficiently, and the participants gave universally positive feedback towards their experiences using OST. Despite the positive reception, Lightfoot et al. does note that this satisfying fidelity was not guaranteed through the executive body of the council alone, and had there not been earnest effort to incorporate the conclusions of the OST sessions, the important illumination of the community's priorities OST achieved would not have resulted in much change at all.

It is Ross's work (2019) that pushes OST to its limits in demonstrating how it empowers participants by allowing recognition of their own parallel ambitions in other community members. Her work analyzes the "Be the Peace, Make a Change" project hosted by the Second Story Women's Centre in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, in collaboration with Lunenburg County over a three-year period with a focus on addressing violence against women through "a focus on building trusting partnerships both locally and provincially, inclu(ding) of men and boys, (and) engaging schools and youth, as well as survivors" (2019 p.2). What her review found was not only did the forums inform the actions of the central body organizing it, but that the OST sessions in turn inspired independent concurrent organizations to form; ones helmed by participants collectively focused on the topic which resonated the most with them within the discussed umbrella of violence against women. These independent organizations would go on to yield lasting change in the community with some of their operations even continuing past the conclusion of the Be The Peace, Make a Change project. What function Open Space Technology served here then was not only to inform the conveners of the project about the community's

priorities regarding preventing violence against women; it allowed community members to recognize the shared desire for change reflected in one another. Working to prevent violence became not the responsibility of a central agency, but the responsibility of all those who wished to prevent it through what means they had to prevent it. It became the work of the community.

If Mannarini et al.'s work (2009) shows the environment necessary for research teams to cultivate in order to foster community investment through the OST process, Lightfoot et al.'s work (2003) demonstrates the power to affect policy that investment created, and Ross's work (2019) further exemplifies how that investment could persist past the original project to create long-standing sociocultural changes and continued civic engagement. It becomes self-evident then that while OST should not be treated as the cure to civic engagement by itself, it is nonetheless a powerful tool in creating lasting community effort that can be incorporated into many social science spaces. The potential for OST to be an invaluable research asset for an innumerable variety of projects becomes clear. How much OST is able to achieve during a project's life, as Brown's (2010) emphasis on the soul of data earlier echoed, is how much control a team is willing to cede in the effort of weaving the partner community into their project's identity. At its worst, Open Space Technology is a loose and confusing format whose lack of concrete conclusions and firm guidance leaves participants listless. At its best, Open Space Technology is a means by which individual members of a community can truly see themselves in one another as they face a looming communal issue, and through this recognition, this illumination, the path to lasting progress can not only be started but maintained. Most implementations of OST, especially upon first use, will likely fall somewhere in between these. The following case study retrospective is thus designed to help first-time adopters grasp what sorts of challenges they will face during their projects, how to adapt when these challenges rear their head, and what can be learned from them to better further usage of the OST methodology.

Using Open Space Technology for the C3 Project

As previously described, the C3 team worked with Western Michigan County community partners to develop a phasic intervention schema for prevention of child sexual abuse, first building up from the broader topic of children's rights before later introducing specific violence prevention strategies that target CSA within the county's borders. Having OST as the primary methodology allows the data collection process to evolve along with the socio-normative attitudes of the community, characterizing not only the state of the community at a single point in time but also illustrating the growth attained in regards to children's rights and CSA that occurs outside of direct observation. In turn, the research team grows alongside the community thanks to the conversations the method fosters, allowing both parties to continue to grow after the project's completion. It is evident then that OST is truly the heart of the C3 effort; it captures the narrative, solidarity, and soul in the data that a formatted table, map, or chart cannot. This

section aims to show how the methodology was able to accomplish this feat.

Whoever Comes is the Right People

For the first implementation of OST in this Western Michigan County for C3, initial invitations to the event were sent to two main groups: community professionals with existing experience in work involving children's rights and identified non-professional community members with pre-existing investment in the topic. While it remains the eventual goal of the C3 projects to invite all community members who wish to participate to subsequent OST sessions, restraint needed to be exhibited in order to ensure that participants had sufficient familiarity with the topic as to characterize the challenges faced by their community and identify important community resources or figures already addressing children's rights accurately enough that their input could direct future C3 planning efforts. Additionally, while a Principle Investigator is well-versed in facilitating OST, for many of the C3 research team, this was their first time facilitating an OST event. Given this fact, a smaller and more selective cohort size was deemed manageable as team members acclimated to the format themselves.

Whenever it Starts is the Right Time

The OST event was held at a locally recognized and accessible community gathering place provided by one of the C3 team's community partners, who was the event's main sponsor. The space was arranged in such a way that participants would be seated initially in a large circle facing their fellow participants, but also with enough space to sustain six additional smaller discussion circles for when the conversational sub-groups diverged. Each sub-group was provided with a large paper pad easel and markers with which they could scribe their sessions. Prior to entering the atrium, a check-in desk was set-up so that all participants could sign consent forms upon arrival, as well as leave their contact information should they desire for further communication. Children were welcome at the event, though not as participants given that community members had to be older than eighteen to enroll. A supervised activity space separate from the main discussion area was provided for all children in attendance.

Two sessions were allocated for the day, one occurring in the early afternoon from 1:00 PM to 4:30 PM and one in the afternoon at 4:00 PM to 7:30 PM, with provision of lunch occurring in the transitional period between the two from 4:00 PM to 4:30 PM. Prior to lunch, an open brunch bar with several light snack and refreshment options was available throughout the event for participants to peruse as frequently as they would like, capturing the idea of the "conversation at the coffee table" that Owen often liked to cite as one of the hidden places of idea generation during his sessions. While there are no direct means by which this coffee talk is measured as it occurs out of the conversational records, it is generally thought that the deliberations which occur there are reflected in later discussion and in post-session decision-making between participants. Posters were hung throughout the room that listed the principles and law of Open Space should

participants need to review them again after their initial introduction to the format.

Framework for C3 and OST Modifications

Several intentional modifications (contrasted by later modifications that were made in media res, as will be detailed further on) were made to the OST process during the two OST sessions in order to host the day in a conscientious, accessible, and trauma-informed manner for the many people engaging with the format for the first time. These were:

The alteration of the initial sub-group identification process during the OST session. Participants were instructed to write down their primary concern underneath the umbrella promoting children's rights and well-being within their community. Participants were invited to identify a concern, question, or passion around the topic by writing them on paper provided in the middle of a larger circle. Three research team members aggregated the responses into overarching themes that were then displayed over an empty wall. The primary purpose behind this commonality identification and linkage process was to make the format more accessible for those in the conversation while also illustrating to the team relevant areas to address in the debrief section. As to why the research team aggregated the results into themes and not participants, this was partially for comfort due to the C3's teams comfort with the format and partially to ensure the data gathered could be translated into a format where the data could be parsed in a format conducive to the research effort. A fully de-condensed community bulletin would lead to difficulty in data processing and likely confusion on behalf of the participants due to potential thematic overlap. This process of thematic condensation can be compared to thematic qualitative analysis mapping, an established form of data grouping seen in similar social science projects (Naeem et al., 2023).

The reconvening of all participants back into the central group at the end of the session to discuss future planning and assess participant sentiments regarding what they experienced during the OST event. This debrief also served as a time for any dissemination of materials prior to the end of the event.

The delivery of gifts to all eligible participants as a thank you for their time and participation. Said gifts were provided in the form of an e-gift card to a local establishment.

The presence of a designated social worker (licensed and pursuing an MSW) who was available to aid any and all participants that required assistance with processing

discussion content. This was done to create a safe environment for all participants, allowing them to seek guidance if the conversation triggered them or otherwise became emotionally overwhelming.

The provision of a scribe from the available research team members for the discussion sub-groups if necessary. While the scribe of a sub-group would ordinarily be one of the group's own participants, this was made difficult by the unequal initial distribution of participants between the sub-groups and ensuing hesitancy it caused for the smaller discussion circles. Given that there was also a need for the process to be modeled for research team members interacting with the scribing process in OST for the first time, it was deemed tolerable in the moment for a team member to scribe for one of the three sub-groups. However, the potential for researcher bias regarding what was ultimately recorded and conversational derailment due to deference towards the researcher by the participants remain factors of concern to consider when reviewing the results. Ideally, this divergence from standard protocol will not need to be made for further OST events and all future scribes should be participant volunteers, but later discussion of in media res difficulties will demonstrate why this had to occur.

The introduction of the chime timekeeping system during each system. While the second and fourth principles of OST were honored to their fullest capacity, real life time constraints in the research process set a maximum duration for each OST session. Therefore, every thirty minutes, a team member would use a mellow sounding bowl to catch the attention of all in attendance and remind them that they had the ability to transition or stay with their respective subgroups at any time. While the aforementioned Law of Two Feet remained applicable at any moment throughout the process, for those unaccustomed to OST, having an official designated time inviting them to do so allowed participants to self-pace throughout the event with greater ease.

The availability of child-friendly activities to address conflicting child-centric responsibilities provided by the research team and a child-focused endowment from Michigan State University. Children's programming included an available quiet space, several play activities such as toys and board games, a puppet show, and a book reading from an author affiliated with Grow Engage Read Imagine (GERI), an ongoing initiative between the research team and community research partners. Books were provided in English and in Spanish to the children at the end of the program as well as to the adult participants after their session ended.

Day-of-Proceedings for C3

Session 1

Creating Time and Space

During the morning session, 18 community members joined the first discussion as participants. They were initially brought into a central circle, with no barriers between them, and were introduced to the philosophy of the OST format with the team's modifications, including the law and principles as well as the half-hour notifications that would remind them of their ability to move freely between circles/discussions.

Creating the Community Bulletin Board

To begin the session, participants were invited to join a large circle of chairs and to help themselves to food and drink from a refreshment station. After a short period of time, participants were then instructed to take a piece of paper and marker from the center of the circle (laid on the floor) and write down the topic or topics they most wanted to discuss in regards to the rights of children in their West Michigan County. Once all participants finished writing down their topic(s), participants were provided the opportunity to introduce themselves and their proposed topic(s) of conversation/discussion to the larger group. All papers were collected by four research team assistants, posted on a large empty wall visible to all participants, and sorted based on common ideas shared between them. Once organized into groups, each set of ideas was labeled by the four research team members based on the shared thematic held between them, and a corresponding discussion sub-group was created per priority thematic.

Once these priority themes were identified, participants were encouraged to visit the snacks and beverages again. Meanwhile, conversational sub-group spaces were created throughout the room by the research team utilizing chairs with an accompanying easel-sized notepad equipped with a large marker. Each circle was then designated as the discussion space for a respective priority theme and its corresponding sub-topics, though there was no formal rule that discussion content from another group could not be brought into a group's topic if relevant.

Opening the Village Marketplace

Participants were invited to initially join the sub-group focused on the topic(s) they wanted to discuss first and self-selected accordingly. While groups were instructed to assign one participant in the group to act as a scribe and record their conversations, two groups did initially recruit research team members to serve as their scribe out of mutual unfamiliarity with the process. Once with a scribe, participants freely discussed ideas and issues underneath the respective topic's umbrellas with all OST rules and principles in full effect, allowing for full movement between any of the groups at the participants' leisure. Research team members were instructed to take notes about the happenings they observed within each group in a discreet manner, however, some team members did ultimately make minor contributions of their own to the discussions in practice.

The only formal interruptions employed were the half-hour chimes that reminded participants of the fluidity of the event and to take advantage of moving to a different discussion group should they wish to. A total of three chimes/announcements were made during the first session using a singing bowl to cut through the noise of conversation, with participants being provided with adequate time to evaluate their current standing in the conversation, whether they would like to move, and if so, where to. Each prompt came with an additional reminder of the main discussion themes for each group. Following the third rotation and the last round of conversations, participants gathered back into their central locations and presented their recorded notes to the team for further analysis.

Closing and Expressing Gratitude

A short debrief was then held between the research team and the community regarding how their data would be used to guide the C3 project and field any comments, suggestions, or concerns about their experience today. Scribed records were placed underneath their respective headings on the wall for everyone to review. This debrief also included dissemination of the GERI book to all willing participants and distribution of the e-gift cards through their provided e-mails. All participants were then thanked for their contributions and were then guided towards the two food trucks in the parking lot where they could redeem their complimentary meal vouchers provided for a late lunch or dinner.

Session 2

Creating Time and Space

Unlike the first session, the second session featured supplementary child-friendly activities provided by members of the research team available for both participants and research team members to utilize; this was done because the second session was hosted after school hours and many of those in attendance were parents, making a lack of child-friendly programming a potential barrier to attendance otherwise. 6 community participants attended the second session, with 7 participants and research team members enrolling 13 children in the afternoon's activities. The children's activities spanned the entire three-hour duration of the second OST session.

Creating the Community Bulletin Board

As the first session's participants went to receive their meals, the participants of the second session arrived and redeemed their meal vouchers alongside them. In contrast to the first group, the second group saw significantly lower participation rates compared to the count anticipated from the number of RSVPs received. While theoretically possible within OST's framework for a session to be held with a small group, the current number of participants meant that proceeding with the same process of requesting a topic idea from and consolidating them into distinct thematic groups would have divided the conversation uncomfortably and unintuitively, particularly for those who had no prior exposure to how OST operates. A rapid on-the-spot

pivot had to be made that would translate the tenets of OST into a more approachable single group format.

Opening the Marketplace

Therefore, the rules of the session were rapidly adapted into what became a hybrid of Open Space Technology and the traditional focus group. Participants were free to introduce and discuss their own topics of prominent concern under the umbrella of children's rights as they pleased, though they were not aggregated into central themes and only one all-encompassing group was made without division into subgroups. Given the lower community participant enrollment, the research team members now fully entered the OST space as fellow participants and facilitators. When conversation between community members lulled, research team members suggested open-ended topics regarding children's rights in the community that the participants could expand upon as they desired to provide conversational direction. This adaptation was made so that participants, who were observed to be somewhat hesitant to voice their opinions at first in such a small group, were able to come into their own and proceed through the session at their own pace. Of note, the shift in structure introduced a degree of rigidity that limited usage of amenities such as the coffee station, indirectly limiting opportunities for internal reflection and casual participant conversation. While this radical change in format brings into question whether it was truly a session of Open Space Technology without traditional exemplification of its rhythm, principles, and law, participants' comfort was prioritized over adherence to the format when it came to the session's resolution.

Closing and Gratitude

The second session then ended similarly to the first with a debrief and book giveaway. Children were signed out from the children's activity space by their guardians and thanks were given. All participants were thanked for their time and delivered their gift cards, marking the end of that day's events.

Results of the OST Process (Whatever Happens is the Only Thing that Could Have Happened)

In the first session, three distinct themes emerged from the initial brainstorming session as identified by the researchers from the community bulletin: community engagement, belonging/identity, and safety concerns. Each of these themes received their own respective group with the belonging and identity groups initially being the largest and the safety concerns group initially being the smallest. During the discussions of these topics, participants were initially hesitant to move between groups and fully play with the freedoms given to them with the OST format. However, as they grew more familiar with utilizing OST, each group's conversation came into their own; by the second call for time, all participants had moved from their original group to a new one. Participants freely left to peruse the snack bar and engaged in conversation while their hot water hissed from the large kettle and into their cups. This allowed for a space with less direct observation for participants to communicate among themselves and have

introspection, and while direct data was not drawn from these asides, they nonetheless provided vital space for participants to return to the conversation with highly valuable and reflective insight. Tones of the conversations ranged from serious and somber to lively and enthusiastic with both strains of conversation filled with personal experiences of participants. For example, the discussions of identity featured large stretches where a child's relationship to social media and the internet remained the leading subject, while the community engagement group leaned more towards topics of organization funding and representation on organization decisions board. These topics were then able to intermingle outside of their original group and further characterize how these sociocultural forces shaped the daily lives of children, parents, and the county's citizenry as a whole. What the OST model allowed for in this process then was not only the self-direction of the community participants regarding the discussion of these topics, but how they were able to weave together a complex model of the community regarding the measures in place and how they measured up to the challenges the community faced. To use metaphor, the intermixing of the colors between the conversational palettes were able to paint a fuller, richer picture of the community as a whole.

The second session faced greater challenges than the first due to the smaller size, requiring the previously mentioned on-the-spot adaptations to the format in order to produce usable data and maintain participant comfort. This group's discussions, having received more prompting, had more of a tightened focus on child sexual abuse versus children's rights as well as more targeted discussion of community attitudes regarding this topic in addition to unsung community heroes who promoted the rights of children. With fewer people, there was naturally less data generated compared to the first session.

With this considered, the aforementioned question of whether the second session with the guided format truly counted as a traditional OST implementation is roused once again, particularly when contrasted against the outcomes of the first session. There is additionally room to question if even the first session modeled OST properly given the presence of research team members applying observational pressure during notetaking and potentially introducing bias as scribes. If the purpose of the methodology is to be self-directed with freedom to transition between groups as one likes, it may appear that the law and principles were deviated away from in such a way that the second session cannot be judged as an OST session and the first is subject to scrutiny. This is where a recognition of the format's history and ethos is necessary; OST is an ever-evolving, non-rigid methodology. Conceptualized in an era where high-stakes conversations were held in a lounge over coffee or on the stage of a greater consortium, OST has evolved to function online, has been bent to accommodate for different demographics as seen in Lightfoot et al. (2003), and has, at all times, adapted to fill the role required by its participants at the right time, in the right place, with the right people. To compare the first and second sessions, subject to different

circumstances, comprised of different people, and molded to fit the need of that cohort at that time; to attempt to deem one as more valid or valuable than the other as a data gathering session or as an example of OST betrays the very *modus operandi* the greater OST community operates by. Each session showed a different face of this county's community— each touched upon different topics with different ease, and rather than put the two in contention via comparison, each should be honored for how they contributed to the research team's holistic understanding of the county and its citizens. As the previously mentioned third OST principle states, whatever happened, happened, and what the research team can glean from it, they will utilize in preparation for the next session. This is the spirit necessary for OST as a methodology to achieve its maximum potential.

OST as a Reveal

Glean the team did. The topics of identity formation, belongingness, community engagement, and safety were anticipated as likely areas of focus given the research team's previous experiences with conversations surrounding children's rights and child sexual abuse. However, beyond the community's interactions with these expected topics, new unanticipated sub-themes emerged as priority concerns throughout the OST session. Of particular interest between the two groups was the role of local businesses in the promotion of children's rights and child sexual abuse prevention. More specifically, the predominant idea was that the local economic sector was a large face of the county's community, particularly with small business owners, and therefore had a responsibility to help create safe spaces for children and families. Therefore, increasing local business representation in community events through sponsorships or other fundraising would form a link between the children's rights efforts and economic flourishing, encouraging community members who may not have had initial interest in the former to onboard thanks to the latter. While the importance of economic provisions and financing was of course considered by the team in the cascade affecting children's rights in the county, the importance it held to community members was not previously highlighted to the degree it was in the OST sessions. It was through the fact that OST allowed self-direction of the conversation that this theme was brought to the team's attention to be targeted and incorporated into future events. Speaking plainly, without OST, this hierarchy of priority in the community's goals would not have come to the team's attention as it did, nor would the individual community members have found it a shared concern between them. This is the power of Open Space Technology: it gives reprise to the key words many thought have already been heard.

Considerations and Key Takeaways

II. OPEN SPACE AS A METHODOLOGY

Strengths and Weaknesses of OST as a Methodology

With hosting the first planned OST session of several throughout the C3 project, the team experimented with many different factors and

many lessons were learned. What advice can then be given to other teams utilizing OST for the first time? When considering whether a social science research project should utilize Open Space Technology over other methodologies, the aims of what the project seeks to achieve and the limitations the project functions within must be considered. The ideal use case demonstrating the respective strengths and weaknesses of the methodology are as follows:

The ideal OST project is a longitudinal effort.

Convenings employing OST start when they start and end when they end, but Owen's original conception of OST envisioned a single session spanning anywhere from hours to several days. While some projects may be able to collect the required data from a single session, to maximize the potential of OST is to host several sessions, be they with different demographics within the same umbrella population or repeat sessions with returning participants to assess progress and changing sentiments. An ideal project would incorporate both of the aforementioned to create the most complete picture of the sentiments and priorities of the collaborating community. Therefore, the projects most likely to reap the greatest benefit with OST as a methodology are those which span several months if not several years as opposed to those with limited timeframes.

The ideal OST project begins its preparations early.

Establishing a baseline picture of the partner community is essential for determining when and where an OST event should be held to maximize community engagement. For example, attempting to quickly plan an OST event and scheduling for the weekend of a beloved community festival bodes poorly for the success of the event and reflects a lack of sufficient investment in the community from the research team. Furthermore, early conversations with community partners are essential to clarify the respective roles and responsibilities between the community partners and research team members, preventing future muddying and subsequent complications. Early OST event scheduling and invitation issuing is also essential to ensuring high levels of attendance as it permits participants to make appropriate schedule adjustments. Therefore, in addition to being longitudinal, projects hoping to use OST as a methodology should exercise significant foresight and account for the preliminary resource investment required for effective OST events in their planning

The ideal OST project has a budget to support its costs.

Relative to other methodologies, the immediate monetary, time, and labor costs associated with OST tend to be greater. To host a session of OST requires all members of the research team serving on the convening team to have been educated and trained on how to facilitate an OST session effectively. Disseminating information and advertising about the event to reach potential participants is a non-neglectable expense. Securing a venue for the expected duration of the event, provision of food and drink, and other appropriate logistical decisions to foster an environment conducive to a satisfying OST session, additionally accrues costs, particularly if, as previously suggested,

multiple sessions of OST are held. Therefore, a project with a budget able to support these endeavors or community sponsors willing to extend resources will be able to most effectively utilize OST during its course.

The ideal OST project has the flexibility with which to incorporate the voice of the community.

Utilizing OST in a way that fully embraces its potential requires the research team to at times place their personal priorities on the backburner. The participants in their engagement provide their perspectives, primary concerns, and proposed solutions regarding the topic at hand; it is therefore expected that the research team will modify their approach towards the overall project goal in accordance with this engagement to a significant degree to achieve community-specific progress. Projects that have existing intervention strategies they want to evaluate the efficacy of in a pre-and-post-implementation manner, projects which come with their assumptions already made and questions already written, or projects that cannot incorporate the information gained from OST into their project plans in a meaningful capacity will likely not be able to effectively utilize the data gained using OST as a methodology.

With these guidelines in mind, one can use the C3 project's implementation as a point of comparison to gauge if Open Space Technology would make a great contribution to one's own project. Remember that scalability is an inherent feature of the OST system and that method alterations are not only feasible but actively encouraged by the method's spirit. Consider OST a baseline format. Tailor its principles and law to suit the project's heart.

Team Reception of OST

Of equal importance when considering the community's reception of the OST event is consideration of the research team's own response to the event. This retrospective, after all, reflects not only the introduction of OST to the community but to many of the research team members as well. For an onboarding process to occur seamlessly for a research team and their community partners, onboarding has to be both comfortable and approachable. While feedback regarding the participants' reception of OST was not collected at the end of the first event, informally, many participants responded positively and stated that they would attend future OST events. Additionally, research team members participating in the OST process for the first time reflected on their experience with it after the session's conclusion. One member was surprised by the ease in which participants were able to speak on the difficult topics at hand, "since people could feel the sincerity of the space, they felt comfortable sharing." Another member reports similarly, adding that "there were tensions present, but none of them seemed to influence the flow of the Open Space." A team member from the partner county stated that she was "hesitant to take part in the groups. Even though I live in Grand Rapids, I haven't worked in the social services, I don't have children, and I'm not very plugged into the community," but the OST session "gave me the opportunity to learn a

lot without feeling a pressure to contribute to the conversations. . . I was so proud to be involved in this!" Across the board, team members who both participated in or simply observed the discussions held the sessions in high esteem with near universal positive impressions, impressed by the ability of the participants in the format to hold well-flowing conversations without rigid guidance. Echoing the experiences of the participants, they slowly adjusted to the rhythm set by the OST format and felt rewarded when they were able to completely embrace the process, going on to make recommendations about how to improve the data gathering process for all parties involved in the next session. For a methodology to invigorate its research team in such a way is an important part of the research process and, independent of the value to the project, a beautiful and exciting thing to witness. One can hope that these sentiments will be echoed by the participants, putting both the C3 team and the community on a hopeful converging path forward into the next session.

Navigating the IRB

As previously discussed, OST has a long history of use in corporate and non-profit spaces, but is less frequently used in academia (Woezik et al., 2019). Thus, IRB staff may be unfamiliar with OST and need additional information to evaluate OST projects. In this next section, we describe key considerations for navigating the OST IRB process. Solomon and colleagues (2016), remarking on emergent research designs used in community engaged research, recommend IRBs take a flexible approach in consideration of the limitations and tensions present when using human subject's protocols initially designed for biomedical fields, in social science research. For researchers, Solomon and colleagues (2016) advise approaching the IRB from a place of shared goals and highlighting the familiar. For this project we decided to frame our presentation of OST to IRB using a more familiar research protocol, focus groups.

Compared to an IRB for a focus group, receiving IRB approval for the project required additional considerations in four main areas: data, data collection, the roles of team members, and assessing risk. Clearly describing these sections to the IRB staff required additional documentation and detailed explanations of how and why the OST process is structured in a way that differs from traditional focus groups. A direct comparative supplement table detailing this descriptive process with further detail is provided in Appendix A.

Data.

When framing the data being collected consider the aims of the OST project. OST seeks to facilitate a collaborative process that results in overarching aims, goals, or priorities that are meaningful for participants. We found that the key things to convey to the IRB were the type of information that is considered data, why it was being collected, and how it contrasted that with focus group data (See Table 1. for additional details). We also provided a rationale for the differences that was rooted in the OST method and examples of forms that the data may take.

Data Collection Materials

Similar to a focus group, OST does involve a focused gathering of participants with a shared aim. Unlike a focus group, OST does not have traditional data collection materials such as a list of pre-identified questions. When describing the data collection and materials for IRB we found it helpful to frame the discussion around three points, how the information will be recorded, who is recording the information, and the roles of the community partner.

Clarifying Roles

Another unique aspect of OST is the ability for participants to act as scribes/note takers. It is essential to explain this in detail to clearly demonstrate that group leaders are not researchers. This can be explained as a continuation of the discussion, not data collection for two reasons. First this is a record of their own experiences that is necessary for the groups perspectives and experiences to be included in the final data that is gathered in the debriefing. Second, this is similar to participants providing written responses to open ended questions, these responses are data however the process of writing out one's response, does not make one a data collector.

Community Partners

IRB is at times at odds with community involved or engaged research (Solomon et al., 2016). In order to support IRB in understanding the role of community partners, we found it helpful to detail their participation in each phase of the research study. Community partners in some forms of research including community based participatory research, are collaborators and may contribute to the project design, data collection, and/or analysis. While other phases of the larger project included community participation and collaboration, the OST portion of the project, sought only to understand community members perspectives. Thus, the community partner acted in a support role for organizing the space. Our community collaborator had no official research role, we explained their role and the limitations of their role to help IRB to understand the nature of their support.

How to assess the risk of participation without pre-planned questions

To collaborate with the IRB on risk assessment, we provided information about how we assessed and planned to mitigate risk in the absence of pre-determined questions. We focused on the nature of risk mitigation with sensitive topics that may be raised during the group. We also shared our plan for mitigating risk; similar to conducting a focus group on a difficult topic, would include having licensed social workers on hand should someone be distressed and resource sheets at the welcome table. We also described how the OST process itself helped to mitigate risk with the "Law of Two Feet" which reminds participants they are free to leave a group at any time, and the situated the necessity of participant autonomy in determining the level of risk to introduce by providing field specific context.

How OST Shaped C3 Moving Forward

One's first time hosting an OST session is an opportunity to see

what preconceptions the team had regarding what would benefit the community and project held true and which were less actionable in practice. There is no contradiction in saying that while both of the sessions C3 held brought value in a way only each respective session could, future efforts can be made to help make the experience more comfortable and satisfying for all involved. Both what was done, such as the children's activities and on-the-spot adaptations, and what was not done, such as facets of the recruitment process, could be handled differently moving forward as to improve takeaways and turnout.

For instance, the great deviation in the second session from the original planned format was necessitated by the relatively low turnout for that event. Despite the provision of children's programming and delivery of invitations in advance, less community members ultimately arrived to the session than had indicated they intended to go. Many factors contributed to this lower turnout, including but not limited to the amount of time between the sending of the invitations and the later time of day chosen for the event, which overlapped with post-school hours. Invitations were unfortunately delayed due to process requirements at the time, shortening the timeline beyond what was initially anticipated. Therefore, in the future, the C3 team intends to send invitations further in advance and schedule both the first and second sessions of the second OST event for earlier in the day; this is to ensure that both sessions overlap with the duration of the school day as to allow for greater scheduling flexibility where parents, guardians, and community members.

Following this thus comes the question of children's activity provision. While the children's activities and GERI book provision were very well received by community members, research team members, and the children who utilized them, the amount of time and energy put into the programming did not translate into increased turnout during the second session. Therefore, it puts into question whether providing the service again would see return on the energy invested. While it is possible that the children's programming could be removed altogether with both sessions being held during the school day, another option that would incorporate the community priority of involving local businesses would be to make arrangements with a local licensed childcare provider if the community members vouch that such a service remains important for them to have during the session. Both plans are viable depending on the community's needs.

Lastly, given the emphasis on local business involvement, the C3 team intends to have greater degrees of sponsorship, affiliation, and incorporation of local businesses during the next event as to create strong community ties between the economic sector and the rising movement in the county towards the promotion of children's rights and prevention of child sexual abuse. Many local businesses have had their partner programs evaluated with selections made for the second OST event. In addition to this, the addition of an exit survey to help gauge participant's satisfaction and emotional reception of the OST process could help guide future adaptations to the OST sessions in the future.

It is the hope of the C3 team that these alterations to the second OST event will make the experience overall more enjoyable for participants and demonstrate fidelity as to how their feedback has influenced the direction of the project, therefore allowing for the continued collection of fruitful data through OST on these subjects. Seeing inclusivity, belongingness, community engagement, economic prominence, and child safety as highlighted by the session will allow the project to more effectively target the specific concerns to the county for better progress towards the ultimate goal of child sexual abuse prevention. It was only thanks to OST that these shifts in direction could reliably be deemed as both appropriate and desired by the community, creating a vision of the C3 project that is stronger and clearer than ever before. One can thus imagine what radical, exciting changes that OST can make for other social science research projects, partner communities, and the research community as a whole.

Conclusion

With the review of the founding ethos, history, and case study usage of Open Space Technology, this paper aims to have provided a thorough picture of OST as a methodology when applied to social science research. Researchers contemplating usage of OST in their own projects may reflect on the experiences and analysis described in the paper to determine whether their own project is a candidate for fruitful usage of OST. The methodology serves as a powerful tool for acquiring qualitative data from partner populations in conjunction with traditional methods and is highly flexible in how it can be adapted to best suit a project's needs. Any researcher hoping to utilize OST effectively takes on a challenge in finding what OST means to them and the population invited to join in the process; however, the clarity and depth of the population provided by OST is a feature unique to the methodology that is otherwise quite difficult at times to encapsulate. It is with this in mind that hopefully the usage of OST will not only illuminate the path forward for members of the West Michigan County worked with during C3, but later light other research paths with the guidance of this process paper. The review hopes to show that in both ideal and less-than-ideal scenarios, as exemplified by the two sessions, OST can be quickly adapted to fit the needs of the population at hand when conducting social science research to maximize both participant comfort and research data yield. This adaptation can be done thanks to the model's fluidity as the framework of OST's principles and law are loose enough to bend to the lived scenario without compromising its integrity. The method is best suited for long-term social science collaboration research with the budget to support the more involved process and the willingness to adapt the research's direction in reciprocity to the participants' input. Foresight to reduce the degree of researcher influence into the OST process remains necessary and tends to come easier with more experience with the methodology, and the sense of empowerment it imbues upon research teams and participants who engage with it encourages further experimentation to yield the ideal version of OST for the specific needs of the project. At best, to utilize OST is to cut the caution tape strung around one's surroundings and weave it into a greater form of understanding. At

worst, utilizing it feels akin to being tangled in a web of nebulousness. For social science, this radical experimentation with methodology marks a new way to conceptualize how researchers interact with their partner populations and grasp what form the soul of their data takes.

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	Focus Group	OST	Rationale	Example
Data	Participant responses to predetermined research questions asked by the researchers.	Similar to a focus group, OST seeks to understand participants' experiences. Unique to OST is a focus on overarching aims, goals, or priorities that are meaningful for participants as the data.	The data collected as a part of an OST project is unique because the data is the outcome of the multifaceted process that includes responses from all participants that are organized into main themes that arise from the group discussions.	<i>The data gathered during the groups are participants' collective perspectives about the rights and safety of children in Kent County; this data is needed in order to numerize how community members prioritize the and rights of children in Kent County and the illuminate a collective path forward for future activities.</i> <i>Data may include written notes or photographs of the card papers for later data analysis.</i>
Data Collection Materials	Predetermined research questions asked by the researchers.	Similar to a focus group, OST does involve a focused gathering of participants with a shared aim. Unlike a focus group, OST does not have traditional data collection materials such as a list of pre-identified questions. There are no formal data collection forms. In Open Space identified data is garnered for group discussions.	OST seeks to facilitate a collaborative process that is participant led. The data is a result of participant's perceptions cannot be not pre-determined by the researchers.	<i>A scribe/note taker will memorialize the conversation on a large flip pad piece of paper that will subsequently be linked by the research team on a designated wall in the room for attendees/participants to visualize the emerging themes that arise from discussion groups. A debriefing is held at the end of the meeting, where all participants can view that scope and breadth of data gathered.</i>
Roles	Researcher led.	Participant led. However, similar to written responses in focus groups, participants are active in recording their experiences. In OST some participants also record, or scribe, the experiences of the group.	Participants are active in recording the experiences of the groups; however they are not conducting research.	<i>This leader is an active participant, not a member of the research team. Every group will have a participant leader and if needed a research team member will act as a scribe and memorialize discussion points.</i> <i>assist in book reading in English and Spanish to the children who accompany their parents. In addition, Safe Haven Ministries will be briefed about the underlying Open Space process through a FTT training via Zoom prior to the event</i>
Roles	Researcher Led.	Community partners are engaged.	Community partners are a key part of community engaged work. However for this OST project, they will not be interact formally with any phase of the research activity.	<i>While Community Partner staff will be present at the event, the extent of their involvement will be to make sure tables around the perimeter of the room are well stocked with snacks and beverages, direct attendees to food trucks for dinner, and may assist with childcare.</i> <i>They not answer questions on the behalf of the research team, and would not be privy to any data gathered beyond the results of the thematic analysis provided by MCU to identify community priorities around the rights and safety of children – a deliverable for the overarching grant. In addition, they will not be checking anyone into the event. The caveat is that because of their community involvement, they may know several attendees personally/professionally</i>
Assessing Risk	Based on the nature of the topic and predetermined research questions.	Based on the nature of the topic and the intended participants.	The attendees/ participants decide their own agenda by posing individual questions to the group at large. This is a completely community-centered self-directed methodology. We capture what they say by taking de-identified notes at each group discussion to be analyzed.	<i>I often tell my students that the best social worker is an invisible social worker. Our job in this particular research activity is to be invisible and to allow attendees/participants discussions to evolve organically and subsequently link the data collected from each group on a designated wall so that they can visualize the emerging themes and priorities voiced by their neighbors and other community members. This process is compelling and rigorous but is hard to wrap your head around given that we are not coming with predetermined questions or an agenda.</i>

Educational Neglect and Sampling Limitations

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Alternative K-12 education, such as homeschooling, has become a more common choice for parents in America since the 1980's (Reich, 2002). With this growing popularity has come several legislative, policy, and scholarly debates about the expectations for how children should be educated at home. Additionally, as homeschooling regulations have generally seen a trend of becoming more relaxed (Reich, 2002), regionally specific concerns about the efficacy and safety of home education have emerged since states are generally allowed to determine their own criteria and handling of educational neglect (Kelly, 2010). The Midwestern region of the US is of particular interest due to its characteristic lack of mandated reporting and tracking of homeschooled children (CRHE, n.d). To contextualize the significance of the Midwestern region in this literature review, the Coalition for Responsible Home Education's database of homeschooling laws by state provides four levels of homeschooling regulation; two states (New York and Hawaii) are ranked the highest, having both regular progress tracking and enrollment reporting of homeschooled children. The states with the lowest level of oversight have no expectation of progress tracking or enrollment reporting; of the eleven lowest level states, six are in the Midwestern region (CRHE, n.d). This literature review seeks to provide an overview of the discourse surrounding educational neglect of homeschooled children in the Midwestern region of the United States, which takes a noticeably relaxed approach to homeschooling regulations (CRHE, n.d), as well as considers how future scholars and policymakers can improve the discussion about homeschooling and efforts to prevent educational neglect in this population.

Despite the growth in popularity as a modality of education in the US, the existing discourse about home education and educational neglect remains bounded by the sampling limitations presented by the homeschooling population (Kelly, 2010). Sampling limitations for homeschoolers arise in part because the US does not adhere to a standardized method to track the number of children who are homeschooled, nor those who are experiencing educational neglect. Educational neglect is not universally defined, however to contextualize the subject matter of this literature review, ChildUSA (n.d), an organization committed to reducing harm and spreading awareness about child neglect, broadly defines educational neglect as the failure to provide a child with a sound and basic education through excessive or chronic truancy, failure to enroll a child in public school or provide an adequate alternative, or failure to provide a child with disabilities access to academic accommodations. Legislative differences between states regarding the definition, reporting, and handling of educational neglect in the context of homeschooling creates a sampling barrier between researchers and participants (Kelly, 2010). The lack of

reporting on homeschooling and educational neglect also creates a gap in research that results in the absence of diverse voices and perspectives of formerly homeschooled adults themselves.

Recognizing the need to understand whether educational neglect is occurring in homeschooling families, Shelton and Hitt (2024) provide alternative methods to overcome challenges in sample collection caused by the absence of comprehensive tracking of homeschooled children and the lack of a shared national definition of educational neglect, using examples from the Midwestern state of Missouri due to their nonexistent reporting standard for homeschooling. Moreover, the Coalition for Responsible Home Education (CRHE) has compiled the first national database for educational neglect, which has analyzed over 500 cases of abuse involving homeschooled victims (CRHE, 2024). These pieces together suggest there is movement in a productive direction for data procurement in this field. Without a representative sample, and the inability to easily reach Midwestern homeschoolers due to their legal isolation, it is challenging to make any claims about the practice of homeschooling's efficacy or safety in this region, as students with positive experiences are likely more accessible for studies (Lubienski, Puckett, and Brewer (2013).

Scholarly Focus and Gridlock

Homeschooled children in the Midwestern region are rendered invisible both in policymaking and academia by the lack of shared legal definition of educational neglect as well as the lack of consensus on what is considered appropriate degrees of tracking and reporting on the progress and learning outcomes of homeschooled children (Green, 2015). Existing research, limited by this lack of reported data, heavily focuses on the political and legislative question of whether a parent has dominion over their child's education, and if so, to what extent can they over-ride the obligations of the state to ensure a sound and basic education to all children (Green, 2015). Resulting from the aforementioned absence of a standardized definition of educational neglect coupled with the unique characteristic of the Midwest not requiring reporting or tracking, scholars find themselves in a debate of ideology concerning the legal, moral, and political grounds for either increased or decreased oversight for homeschooling in certain states (Reich, 2002). Landmark Supreme Court cases, such as *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972), which gave the Amish the right to educate their children at home as a form of freedom of expression that cannot be overridden by the state's obligations to provide compulsory education, are used as social datapoints for evaluation in lieu of the lived experience of homeschooling and educational neglect. *Wisconsin V. Yoder* 1972 would set a precedent that would go on to influence other Midwestern policy and legislative philosophy (Green, 2015). Since the ruling of *Wisconsin V. Yoder* 1972, more recent cases that have found exceptions to the level of parental authority over a child's life and suggest that homeschooled children should be given the option to legally bypass the decision of the parents to homeschool them given the potentially lifelong impacts of early educational opportunities and development, (Walden, 2017).

Researchers producing work focusing on the policy aspects of homeschooling, and the moral and philosophical ideology behind those policies, tend to fall into two camps; those who support deregulation of homeschooling, and those who advocate for more regulation of homeschooling; Both camps often cite the lack of empirically supported evidence of the other's claims as being suggestive of either the presence or the absence of a social problem within homeschooling and education policy, depending on the author's stance. Ray (2013) argues that scholars in support of mandated regulation and oversight for homeschooling to prevent educational neglect lack sufficient proof of harm to the existing and previously homeschooled populations. Rather, it is argued that the data suggest homeschooled students are capable of developmentally outperforming their public schooled peers thanks to their home-based education (Ray, 2013). The absence of sound reporting to track educational neglect in homeschooled children allows room to doubt that there is a need for reform that could potentially infringe on a well-meaning homeschooling family's privacy (Ray, 2013). Contrastingly, as Lubienski, Puckett, and Brewer (2013), point out, much of the data used in studies that suggest homeschooling is superior to public schooling in terms of learning and social outcomes, including past work by Ray, is taken directly from organizations, or organizations closely associated with, the Homeschooling Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), or the National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI), Ray's own research institute founded in 1990 (NHERI, n.d). This method of data analysis and sampling is vulnerable to bias in that only the highest performing homeschooled students are represented in the sample, eclipsing the lived experience of students who did not succeed in homeschooling (Lubienski, Puckett, and Brewer, 2013). Although I have only shared two examples of conflictual scholarly discourse, there are many others contributing to the noise of policy and ideology discussion but providing little solution for the shared issue of a lack of representative data for homeschooling populations.

Limitations of Knowledge on Homeschooling and Educational Neglect

In reviewing the current state of knowledge on the topic of homeschooling and the potential vulnerabilities to educational neglect for home-based education in the largely deregulated Midwestern region, it would appear that researchers are severely limited by the lack of data that is available to them. Homeschooled children in states that lack reporting mandates, like those in the Midwest, are essentially rendered invisible by the law. Green (2015) describes the invisibility of unreported homeschoolers as a discrete and insular minority, inherently in need of additional legal protections (*United States v. Carolene Products Co.*, 1938). Moreover, as previously mentioned, homeschooled students' inability to report or track their activities and experiences limits scholarly discourse when evaluating the outcomes for homeschooled students (Lubienski, Puckett, and Brewer, 2013), unlike other areas of inquiry.

Proposed Future Research

Through the use of more readily accessible data, future research would better contribute to the understanding of what occurs in Midwestern homeschooling settings, how frequently (or if at all) is educational neglect occurring in homeschooling families, and how home based education should be positioned in society as it pertains to the rights of a child to a sound and basic education (Gutman, 1999). While many of the referenced materials both acknowledge and utilize the sampling site of the Midwestern states due to their comparatively low regulation of homeschooling, few if any have taken the time to examine what sets the Midwest apart from the rest of the country, which I propose misses an opportunity to fully understand the extent to which educational neglect can occur in homeschooling families. Moreover, the reliance on demographic data has caused scholarly stagnation in this area of study, and therefore I suggest alternative analytic methodology, such as interview based qualitative research that invites formerly homeschooled students to discuss their experiences, or artifact analysis of the assignments given to homeschooled students as an example of learning outcomes. Within scholarship, there is a lack of mention of media reporting on educational neglect; where researchers have become stuck, journalists in the meantime have been able to narrate the conditions of, and instances of, educational neglect occurring in the homeschooling, even gathering statements from lawmakers referring directly to policy reform (Altavena, 2022). In lieu of access to a truly representative sample, newspaper reports and other oral histories about educational neglect could provide another means of data collection for future researchers to give a voice to students who would otherwise be unable to advocate for themselves. In a broad summary, future research needs to expand its methodological approach, move away from discussion about who is right, and focus on how to better serve the homeschooled population and reduce harm brought about by educational neglect. The Midwest serves as a convenient site due to its high levels of deregulation, and understanding the regional politics will be beneficial to scholarly insight as well.

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Advocating for Health Through Policy: A Case for Stronger Gun Legislation

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Defining the Issue

In 2024, the U.S. Surgeon General released a public health advisory categorizing firearm violence as, "A public health crisis in America" (The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, 2024). Gun violence has been a rising issue of public health concern in recent years, with both intentional and accidental shootings becoming an almost daily news headline. According to the Gun Violence Archive, as of February 18th, 2025, there had already been 36 mass shootings since the year had begun (Gun Violence Archive, 2025d). A mass shooting is defined as an incident in which four or more people are injured or killed by a firearm (Gun Violence Archive, 2025a). The quantity of mass shootings per year has consistently surpassed 365 incidents since 2019, indicating that there have been more mass shootings than days over the last 5 years (Gun Violence Archive, 2025b). One factor contributing to the high incidence rate of gun violence in the United States comes from lax gun control regulations. Currently, there are no requirements for gun owners to complete any form of safety training prior to purchasing a weapon. Additionally, there hasn't been a ban on large-magazine or semi-automatic weapons since the previous ban expired in 2004 (Masters, J., 2025). In comparison, countries like Australia and Canada have banned non-military ownership of assault-style and semi-automatic weapons and require prospective owners to go through various safety trainings and screening processes before they are able to purchase a gun. Canadian buyers must undergo a 28-day waiting period before obtaining a gun (Public Safety Canada, 2025), and Australians must demonstrate "genuine need" for the weapon, with personal protection not being considered sufficient (Council of Australian Governments, 2017). These stringent regulations have proven successful in preventing gun violence and have drastically decreased gun homicides in these countries. In 2019, the United States experienced 4.12-gun homicides per 100,000 people, while Canada and Australia experienced 0.5 and 0.18 per 100,000, respectively.

In America, gun control has emerged as one of the most polarized political topics of the 21st century, in part due to differing interpretations of the Second Amendment. Under current precedent from the 2022 New York State Rifle and Pistol Association, Inc v. Bruen case, the Supreme Court has determined that the Second Amendment protects constituents' rights to carry concealed firearms outside of the home (Charles, 2025). According to the Supreme Court Justices who offered a dissenting opinion from the Court's ruling, this decision to uphold a historical interpretation of the Second Amendment limits the States' ability to decrease deaths caused by gun violence (New York State Rifle & Pistol Association, Inc. v. Bruen, 2022).

Goals and Objectives

Advocating for a federal gun control law is an important action to take in order to combat gun violence. Gun violence is not inevitable, and by highlighting the increasing rates of gun-related morbidity and mortality across the United States, the goal is to appeal to policymakers, encouraging them to pass legislation in support of stricter gun laws. Common-sense laws, such as required background checks before achieving gun ownership, as well as a ban on assault weapons, could be implemented to prevent mass casualty events from occurring. While the general public should still be educated on responsible gun ownership practices, constituents alone should not hold the responsibility for curbing gun-related injuries. In fact, it has been reported that 72% of Americans support legislation requiring licensure issued by law enforcement prior to gun ownership, and only 23% support concealed carry without it (John Hopkins University, 2023). These statistics demonstrate the public's willingness to comply with stricter gun policies, and pose the question: if most Americans support common-sense gun legislation, why hasn't stricter gun policy been implemented? One answer to this question may be the circulating myths perpetuated by minority gun lobbyists, that owning guns makes people safer (Winny, 2024). This logic stems from the idea that owning a gun could save you during a violent event, ironically failing to acknowledge that gun legislation could help prevent people needing to protect themselves from these events in the first place. Another common rhetoric used by these gun lobbyists is that the primary cause of gun violence is poor mental health (Jordan, A., 2022). Similarly, this fallacy is easily debunked by comparing the mental health trends amongst countries that experience less gun violence than the United States. The 2022 Mental State of the World report disclosed that 25.8% of Americans were distressed or struggling (Sapien Labs, 2022), while 26.1% of Canadians, and 32.1% of Australians reported the same. If poor mental health were truly to blame for high rates of gun violence, countries like Canada and Australia should report higher rates of gun homicides than the U.S.

Target Audience(s)

The target audience for this advocacy is federal policy makers. Specifically, those in opposition to imposing national laws which would regulate gun control. It is evident by looking at records of recent gun violence events that stricter gun legislation is necessary across the country. Notably, the last five shootings as of February 22, 2025, occurred in 5 different states (Gun Violence Archive, 2025c). Additionally, urging state or local policy makers to address the issue would likely result in different levels of gun regulation across the country. This leaves individuals with the opportunity to travel across state lines to purchase their weaponry under state governments with looser gun legislation. Federal policy makers, on the other hand, reserve the ability to pass legislation which evenly applies to every state in the nation. This method not only allows for equivalent implementation of regulation but will also aid in revealing which states require more intervention than others. If all states are subject to the same gun laws, it will be possible to compare the incidence rates of

gun violence across different states, revealing which regions could benefit from stricter investigations before gun purchases are made.

Communicating the Story

The most important change that would benefit constituents would be to pass federal law requiring those purchasing firearms to petition their local court. This legislation would mirror the laws found in Australia, which require prospective owners to demonstrate a “genuine need” beyond personal protection in order to purchase a gun. Petitioning requirements could strengthen the current federal legislation which requires automated background checks, by guaranteeing a human would review the request rather than the process being completely in silico. The current system used for background checks, while non-labor intensive, has proven to be ineffective at curbing the rates of national gun violence. The Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) reported that less than 2% of ownership applications were denied in 2020, yet nearly 80% of guns seized after usage in violent incidents were traced back to legal dealerships (U.S. Department of Justice, 2023) (Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, 2024). Comparison of these numbers indicates that most perpetrators of gun violence have passed the background check, clearly highlighting the need for more stringent regulations.

With new legislation, a local Judge could instead determine the likelihood of the weapon being used in a criminal manner. In Michigan, the Extreme Risk Protection Order Act, also known as the “Red Flag Law”, allows for members of the community to petition the court to take away the right of another to purchase a weapon, if that individual is deemed dangerous (Executive Office of the Governor, 2023). Rather than resting the responsibility on the community to act, a Judge, who more closely represents the interests of the area, could greatly assist in evaluation. This additional step could further discourage those looking to purchase a firearm for malicious intent from ever beginning the process in the first place, as one would be under oath and face-to-face with a Judge. While it must be acknowledged that resting these decisions in the hands of a single individual may emphasize the implicit bias of that individual, it is clear that a change is needed from the current system. One benefit emerging from having a Judge review gun ownership requests, is an opportunity to learn. If a Judge grants an individual permission to own a gun, and then that individual uses that gun for violence, the Judge can amend the way they make decisions going forward. The current automated system, by contrast, is unable to develop its decision methodology based on the consequences of previous decisions. This benefit, in addition to the fact that local Judges are elected by their constituents, may outweigh any potential infliction of implicit bias.

Resources and Support

Resources can be raised using a multi-pronged approach that utilizes both traditional and modern fundraising efforts, as well as political lobbying & education. There are a multitude of organizations in support of gun control that could be sought out to support in these

advocacy efforts. For example, March for Our Lives, Everytown for Gun Safety, and the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence. Partnering with these organizations means that funds and volunteers are already available, and any further efforts will only strengthen that existing. Additionally, these organizations seek to educate the general public in addition to policy makers, which is an important strategy to achieve change (Regidor et al., 2007).

Another approach combines lobbying with education. Lobbying helps inform government decision-making and can address regulatory gaps in existing legislation (Foster, 2024). When performed ethically, lobbying can encourage the government to make difficult decisions through the introduction of expertise and valuable expert information. While policy makers should stay informed on issues of public health concern on their own, it must be acknowledged that most legislatures do not have a history within the public health sphere. Therefore, education from public health officials, like presentation of impact statements, ensures that policy makers fully understand the risk lax gun regulations pose to the public, encouraging informed policy change (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017).

Monitoring & Evaluation

The most important measure necessary to evaluate the success of advocacy comes from the continued surveillance of gun violence incidents (American Public Health Association, n.d.). It is pertinent to have access to updated and accurate records regarding gun violence incidents to effectively raise awareness about the public health risks associated with lax gun control. Notably, gun violence data was unavailable in the U.S territories of Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia (D.C.) until 2024. Access to this data, in tandem with that of previously available states, helps paint the complete picture of gun violence in America. Data from the Gun Violence Archive could serve as an important resource in the observation of these incidents. Another measure of success would come in the form of policy implementation. To institute or push back against gun control is a high-ticket item on every politician's to-do list. These clashing viewpoints prevent powerful legislation from being passed by legislative bodies, and instead continuously subject constituents to the risk of gun violence due to unsafe gun regulations. Legislation, such as common-sense laws, or nationwide Extreme Risk Protection Orders, would serve as evidence that lobbying and education have worked. By witnessing policy change, it will be evident that advocacy efforts were successful.

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**The Convener:
[witty subtitle]**

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The convener is unwell.

This academic year, we have been in conversation with scholars, thinkers, and intellectuals (e.g., Ahmed, 2017; hooks, 1994; Khúc, 2019, 2024; Lorde, 1988) who unsettle and disrupt the academy by prioritizing humanization through their teaching and learning. One reason why we all love being a part of Bailey is that our general worldview on people and learning aligns with what Bailey espouses in its mission and values. Bailey creates space, inside and outside of the classroom, to imagine education differently than traditional approaches and pedagogies. Accordingly, we get excited about the opportunities to work with students as co-learners to co-create shared experiences and learning.

This humanizing approach to education does not happen seamlessly in Bailey. It takes commitment and vulnerability from conveners and co-learners to unsettle conventional approaches to teaching and learning in the classroom. Often in our conversation as conveners, we discuss the challenges that arise in our classes that give us hope as well as frustrate us when we fall back into the education paradigm with which we are familiar. In these conversations, we check in with each other—to vulnerably share our own experiences as conveners and to care for one another. Over the year, we shared how each of us are differentially unwell (see Khúc, 2024) depending on our current life circumstances and positioning within the university. Our un/wellness shapes how we show up in Bailey spaces and how other fellows and scholars relate to us.

In engaging with this project, we have come full circle. In our summer meeting in 2024, we discussed Mimi Khúc's (2019) project *Open in Emergency* to think about un/wellness in our lives. We constructed our own "emergency" kit with items to support us throughout the year. As part of the *Open in Emergency* project, Khúc and her colleagues created a Tarot deck, among other items, to critique and reclaim mental health in the academy. To bookend our year, we revisited *Open in Emergency* and engaged in a project to (co)create a Tarot card to reflect, explore, plan, and resist in this time of profound unwellness.

Although limited, Tarot has been used as a way of knowing and being to theorize pasts, presents, and futures in a violent academy (see Gutzwa & Gonzalez, 2024; Khúc, 2019). Khúc (2019, 2024), in particular, centers the creation and use of Tarot cards to decenter

Western epistemologies when considering the mental health of Asian Americans. In her book, *Dear Elia: Letters from the Asian American Abyss*, Khúc (2024) illustrated her approach and process to (co) creating Tarot cards for the Asian American Tarot deck. She created an activity where participants answered a series of questions which were then synthesized into a card description. We draw inspiration from Khúc's project to create our own Tarot card based on our lived experiences as conveners in the Bailey Scholars Program. We offer our (co)created Tarot card in alignment with the Bailey ethos as one way to unsettle dominant ways of knowing, being, and learning.

The Convener Card: Dandelions and Termites

Here, we present our (co)created Tarot card and its synthesized description (see Figure 1 at right). Throughout our conversation, we kept returning to the imagery of the dandelion and the termite—two paradigms of existing in and resisting the academy as conveners and in our other roles. For us, this card represents both the dehumanization often perpetuated in the academy but also hope for more liberatory and humanizing education—a possibility we see in and through Bailey.

Note. After our collective conversation, the art for the Tarot card was generated in part by a large language model artificial intelligence system.

The Convener is the sixth card in the major arcana, a tribute to the six steps in the learning assessment model. The Convener teeters back and forth between despair and hope, but mostly hope on days in the Bailey community—a dandelion that grows defiantly through the cracks in the stone foundation of the crumbling university, termites hidden among the roots, chewing steadily through institutional structures. Those who built the university foundation hate the dandelion and termite. The academy sees them as pests to be dealt with—but the dandelion and termite persist in its resistance, finding new cracks as old ones are sealed and new sources for nourishment and shelter as old spaces are destroyed. In the foundation, we are all differentially positioned within the university and thus, we all have differential demands for our labor—not all of our labor is recognized or valued equally.

The dandelion symbolizes our desire for learning and growth for students and each other, our seeds drifting outward in the wind to find fertile ground to grow new worlds. The termite demonstrates our tenacity in a hostile environment, finding spaces of resistance and repurposing technologies for our own liberatory and humanizing goals. Drawing The Convener is a reminder that we are persistent and resilient as we seek transformation, often in spite of the institution itself. It is an ode to all those who plant seeds of care, equity, and true learning in inhospitable academic soil. The Convener is also a caution about the precarity of existing in the academy and the burnout and emotional toll that comes with striving to be a "Good Convener." We



Figure 1
The Convener Tarot Card

will continue to exist, our presence an irritant for the academy. As long as we center the humanity of our students, we will be good conveners.

Collective Reflection

Aligned with Bailey and our expectations for our scholars, we used the Bailey learning assessment model to explore our learning throughout this project. The model consists of six steps: envision, prepare, do, gather, reflect, and connect. Each section of the reflection was written by a different fellow—hence the varied voices below. While these sections are integrated into a collective reflection, we have left each voice to speak for themselves, rather than be polished over into an undifferentiated whole. We are comfortable with the messiness of collective knowledge creation.

Envision

Dandelion-

Being pulled into the envision position, the Convener card wants you to explore your aspirations for communal transformation. This includes thinking about personal growth and group learning, while reasoning with biases from yourself and others to tear down the veil over people's eyes. Rather than mastery, seek curiosity, connection, questioning, and the courage to remain in challenging spaces. As the dandelion sprouts, it begins its journey breaking this impenetrable foundation to foster learning and growth. Think about how presence can be a radical form of leadership and to stay here, envision your next step. In this moment, ask yourself these questions:

What does it mean to guide without controlling?
Are you prepared to sit in the discomfort of change, not as a fixer, but as a witness, a seedling, ready to grow?
Can you envision learning that unravels the hierarchy, through using such gentle strength?

To envision as a convener is to dream of learning that is not a product, but a shared process.

Termites-

Pulled in reverse, the Convener appears as a termite, quiet, relentless, and in community. As a convener, you do not stand at the front of the room demanding attention, but you move beneath as a guiding force surfacing as needed. In this existence, you can move under the foundation, making choices that can create gaps in which others may appear. In this space, you need to ask yourself: "What needs to be undone before something new can be imagined?"

Asking this question helps you envision a start, a beginning, learning to unbuild with care, to challenge what has always been assumed, eroding what no longer serves its people. This card suggests a vision

of learning, one that is decentralized, often invisible, yet essential. As a convener, hope eats at the foundation for a new future to emerge. The termite helps tear down the walls that keep others from fully showing up. To envision as a termite is to believe that real transformation doesn't start with power, it starts with persistence.

Prepare

We have prepared for this in a number of ways. As scholars, educators, students, and academics, we have collectively spent 137 years in the academy. This preparation has taken many forms but ultimately has firmly rooted us in a collective recognition of the ways in which the academy can both foster growth and also instantiate the kinds of oppression seen in other institutions.

Additionally, over the last academic year, this group of conveners spent most of the academic year meeting together weekly to discuss readings, how classes were going and to learn about and from each other. We built a rapport together of trust and accountability and also some playfulness. It was because we had spent so much time cultivating strong bonds that we were able to engage as fully and as vulnerably as we did with this activity—to envision ourselves as termites and dandelions - willing to find the cracks in the foundation.

Do

The “do” is tricky. If you do too much, you're denying your students the opportunity to create their own learning experiences and micro-community. Do too little and you'll be surrounded by ten to 15 undergraduates that can't develop an attendance policy, let alone a learning objective. As a convener, you have to walk a tightrope between co-learner and convener. You are both termite and dandelion. But how much you are of each depends on each individual moment and circumstance.

Gather

The evidence of our joint learning project comes in two parts.

Part 1: the fill-in-the-blank style reflections we each filled out

Each of us filled out these sheets with leading questions to reflect on our individual experiences as conveners in the academy. We then met as a group (with yummy food) and discussed what our responses had in common, what was more personal and individual, and where we agreed. An interesting topic arose during this time: our own insecurities. Many of the grad fellows felt like imposters, fearing speaking out and not contributing anything of value. Others feared saying things that applied only to themselves instead of discussing what applied to the collective. We took time during this stage of our project to reflect on these feelings and support one another, encouraging all voices despite fear, which lead us to open and

honest conversations. We also added an additional component to our reflections – we answered the same questions from the perspective of the university. This conversation led into the second portion of our evidence.

Part 2: Our Tarot card

Our Tarot card depicts two elements that we discussed as a group. First, is the idea of dismantling the negative aspects of the institution from its foundation, such as racism, sexism, classism, and greed. We aspire to “clean up” the foundation so to speak by fighting against these systemic issues. This conversation resulted in a triumphant cry that “we are Termites!” (thank you, Marcie!). But we also talked about how cleaning up the entire foundation of a massive institution is a daunting task that may not always be possible. Sometimes, the best we can work towards on any one day is to thrive in the cracks that already exist, taking care of ourselves and blooming while we attempt to widen those cracks. We decided that, while we aim to become termites, sometimes we must settle for being a dandelion – expanding the cracks we see while we do our best to thrive in a harsh environment.

Reflect

The convener engages in regular reflection to question, reframe, and reimagine their place in the institution and in the Bailey community. As a dandelion working within the existing institutional fractures, the convener serves, cares for, and values others. Within these limited spaces, the convener values a diverse community who shares intellectual and emotional labor, engages in self and community reflection, and curates safety for intellectual risk-taking. The convener-as-dandelion guides learners to develop tools that combat oppressive systems by prioritizing student agency, critical thinking, scholarly depth and rigor, and accountability. The convener deftly toggles between challenging and honoring limitations, co-creating knowledge with flexible practices that adapt to the people and context. Like the dandelion, the convener models resilience. Though some may see the dandelion as a weed in an untended garden, the convener sprouts and inspires through creativity, joy, passion, wonder, curiosity, collaboration, and presence.

As a termite, the convener also tinkers, disrupts, and dismantles institutional means of harm. The convener values justice, empowerment, whole person wellbeing, and life-long learning. They resist systems that oppress through pauses, disruption, and disjuncture, breaking down the traditional hierarchies and what constitutes “expertise.” The convener also builds with hope, dream-building, self-care, and good boundaries. Ultimately, the convener labors to undermine the ways in which the institution harms and aims to reassemble the institution to cultivate the life-affirming values of Bailey and its community.

Connect

The convener seeks connections and deep relationships, symbolized by complex root systems and colonies of termites. In this process of being and becoming termites and dandelions, we learned from one another, grew closer to each other, and thought about what it means to hold these convictions outside of Bailey. We each have overlapping yet unique positionings in higher education—as students, faculty, professional staff, educators—here and beyond. As the dandelion seeds are blown to other places to take root or the termite leaves the colony to start anew, we stay connected to each other in our disruptive nature. Quietly (and loudly) fighting for a more just, liberatory and humanizing future.

Conclusion

In this article, we shared our collective creation of a Tarot card, The Convener, and our reflections and learnings from working on the project. We offer this project as a disjuncture, aligned with the ethos of Bailey, to humanize the experience of convening and demonstrate our own learning throughout the year. While this article is static, we offer readers an invitation to be critical of their own experiences in the academy and in Bailey. Bailey can be a refuge, a community, a space for learning. And, as we discussed through this project, Bailey has the potential to be truly transformative if we take the opportunity to imagine differently about how we can learn, know, and be.

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