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Gabriel Baskin April 9, 2018

There is No Such Thing as a Free Lunch: Stigma and Media Portrayals of the School Lunch Program

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Abstract

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This paper analyzes the stigmatization of the free and reduced lunch program and its participants by looking at how two elite, national newspapers frame and portray the program and its participants. I delve into existing theories on stigma and framing before delving into the stigma associated with the free and reduced lunch program. I conducted a content analysis of 49 newspaper articles from *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* and found that articles that indirectly reference the program negatively portray parents and students. These articles often associate the program with poverty and racial minorities. Articles directly referencing the program provided a greater variety of frames. The impact of these frames may largely depend on readers' opinions of the free and reduced lunch program.

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Introduction

Only 64 percent of houses eligible for free and reduced lunch choose to participate (Carson 2015). Much of the research on school lunches focuses on obesity and nutritional content and generally ignores the social aspect of eating. However, the nutritional content of school lunches, particularly the National School Lunch Program, remains moot if students do not consume these meals.

In order to identify the potential causes of this relatively low participation rate, this paper tries to understand why participation does not match eligibility by focusing on the stigma surrounding the free and reduced lunch program. By analyzing the content of newspaper articles, this paper hopes to explore the coverage of the free and reduced lunch program, investigate how society may construct this perspective, and inquire how social factors might impact program participation.

Previous researchers have studied the stigmatization of the free and reduced lunch program (Poppendieck 2010; Glantz et al. 1994; Bailey-Davis et al. 2013; Mirtcheva and Powell 2009; Best 2017; Bhatia et al. 2011; Spruance et al. 2018). I hope to build on the work of this scholarship by exploring how individuals form their perceptions behind this stigmatization. Studying the stigmatization of free and reduced lunches remains of the utmost importance because this stigma could affect not only what students eat but also if they choose to eat at all. Students bear the cost of this stigmatization by reducing their nutritional intake. This has both a personal and a broader societal cost. One researcher found that “reduced educational outcomes due to malnourishment cost society an additional $19.2 billion dollars” (Carolan 2016:179).

Literature Review

In this literature review, I outline the broad sociological theories used as a framework to analyze the free and reduced lunch program before delving into the current scholarship on school lunches. This literature review begins by addressing the concepts of symbolic boundaries, social boundaries, and boundary work as well as sociological theory on taste to provide theoretical explanations for understanding the stigmatization of free and reduced lunch. Next, I explain the details of the free and reduced lunch program as well as the daily meal options presented to students. I then examine the previous scholarship on stigmatization of free and reduced lunch eligible students and families and how this stigmatization provides barriers to participation. The literature review concludes by exploring the importance of media frames in shaping opinion and reinforcing symbolic boundaries.

Theory

Symbolic and social boundaries inform the overarching sociological theory behind this research project. The seminal work of Lamont and Molnar (2002: p.168) define symbolic boundaries as "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space." Actors can express symbolic boundaries "through normative interdictions (taboos), cultural attitudes and practices, and patterns of likes and dislikes" (Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki 2015: p.850). The socially constructed symbolic boundaries can form between and within groups through the creation of group identity (Lamont and Molnar 2002). This paper focuses on the ways symbolic boundaries work in intergroup interaction. Due to the way these boundaries define groups, symbolic boundaries often contribute to the formation of inequality. This occurs as individuals use these boundaries to "acquire status and monopolize resources" by defining position relative to others (Lamont and Molnar 2002: p.168). Symbolic

boundaries also contribute to the reproduction of class as the dominant group defines their own culture as higher-ranking and other groups' cultures as inferior (Lamont et al. 2015).

Symbolic boundaries help form social boundaries. Lamont and Molnar (2002: p.169) define social boundaries as "objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities." While symbolic boundaries indicate what individuals think, social boundaries indicate what individuals do. Individuals must first construct symbolic boundaries before they implement these conceptions as social boundaries. Not all symbolic boundaries become social boundaries, however, as "only when symbolic boundaries are widely agreed upon can…they become social boundaries" (Lamont and Molnar 2002:169).

The concept of boundary-work explains how individuals maintain symbolic boundaries and turn them into social boundaries. Lacy (2004:912) defines boundary-work as "the strategies group members employ, and the criteria that they draw upon, to construct a symbolic divide between their group and out-group members." Through boundary-work, individuals actively construct and maintain symbolic boundaries. This active form helps illustrate the ways boundary-work serves as "the process by which groups defend the boundary that defines their culture when they are confronted with outsiders" (Lacy 2004:912). Previous scholars have argued that boundary-work occurs in both external and internal ways (Lacy 2004). Society can externally construct these symbolic boundaries. On the other hand, members of the group can create symbolic boundaries through self-portrayal. Individuals turn symbolic boundaries into social boundaries and uphold these boundaries through their boundary work.

Symbolic boundaries, social boundaries, and boundary work help structure the discussion around school lunch stigmatization. This paper examines the symbolic boundaries drawn

between free and reduced lunch eligible students and non-eligible students. When some students decide which lunch option to choose and others stigmatize free and reduced lunches, students may be engaging in boundary-work to help delineate these two groups. Through these practices, individuals help "construct a symbolic divide between their group and out-group members" (Lacy 2004:912). The consequences of these symbolic boundaries and boundary-work could have significant consequences. Previous scholars (Belot and James 2011; Golley et al. 2010; Hinrichs 2010) have found eating lunch influences educational outcomes. Students who feel stigmatized may choose not to eat at all, affecting their educational outcomes. This may create social boundaries, or unequal access to material and nonmaterial resources (Estrada et al. 2016).

Bourdieu's (1984) work on cultural capital, status, and taste help explain how and why students may use food to draw symbolic boundaries between groups. In his 1984 book, *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) articulates the ways in which tastes reproduce hierarchy through cultural capital. Many tastes, including that of food, help demarcate class-identification. Bourdieu (1984: p.177) illustrates this point by noting that as an individual ascends the class structure, consumption of "heavy, fatty, fattening foods" which are also "cheap," such as "pasta, potatoes, beans, bacon, pork," declines. Rather, taste consumptions shift to foods that are "leaner, lighter, non-fattening foods" such as "beef, veal, mutton, lamb, and especially fresh fruit and vegetables" (Bourdieu 1984: p.177). Tastes deemed as desirable can serve as a form of cultural capital. Cultural capital can increase an individual's ability to tap into social and economic capital, enhancing or maintaining their position in the social hierarchy (Carolan 2012). While food may appear mundane in everyday life, food serves as a critical marker of status because of its social implications. Thus, food can help distinguish students by class and cultural capital at school.

School cafeterias serve as an important social arena. Previous scholarship has found that students' food can act as a form of "social camouflage" or make the student stand out (Ludvigsen and Scott 2009:429). Conformity among peers is a significant aspect of cafeterias. A study interviewing school children found that when making decisions in the cafeteria, "friendships are often valued over and above what food is eaten" (Ludvigsen and Scott 2009:429). Surrounded by one's peers, the cafeteria is a distinct place where students can assert their position in the social hierarchy. Students can use food with social value to maintain or raise their social status with their peers. On the contrary, low-status food can diminish one's social rank. How food is valued, however, relates much more to social value than intrinsic value.

The concepts of stigma and stigmatization are essential in the discussion of school lunches. Goffman's (1963) work, including his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, popularized the study of stigma in the social sciences. Goffman (1963:3) defined stigma as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting" which makes an individual "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one." Modern scholars have provided a developed definition of stigma. Link and Phelan (2001) describe four key components that depict stigma. In the first step, they find individuals engage in a "substantial oversimplification" in order to "create groups" (Link and Phelan 2001:367). In the case of school lunches, this could take the form of dividing students into categories of free and reduced lunch recipients and non-free and reduced lunch recipients. The second component of stigma, Link and Phelan (2001:368) argue, "occurs when labeled differences are linked to stereotypes." This label links "a person to a set of undesirable characteristics that form the stereotype" (Link and Phelan 2001:369). In terms of free and reduced lunch, individuals could label participants as poor and connote stereotypes of poverty. The third component occurs when individuals create a divide between "us" and "them"

(Link and Phelan 2001:370). The final component of stigma occurs when "the labeled person experiences status loss and discrimination" (Link and Phelan 2001:370). This takes the form in ways such as "disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination" (Hegtvedt and Johnson 2017:84). Within the context of school lunches, stigma could lead to social separation between free and reduced lunch participants and non-participants in particular at the cafeteria and in school more generally. In addition to effects from peers, this could also lead to discrimination from lunchroom attendants, teachers, students' parents, and other adults in the school setting.

Link and Phelan (2001) also describe three overlapping spheres that individuals experience stigma from. They argue stigma can come from structural factors that provide institutional barriers that stigmatize individuals, social factors such as stereotypes and discrimination, and a final individual factor in how a person responds to the social and structural factors (Link and Phelan 2001). A unique aspect of the spoiled identity of free and reduced lunch participants compared with other spoiled identities is the ability to influence the various factors. Some identities, such as being a convicted felon, feel a lingering stigma due to institutional factors (Moore, Stuewig, and Tangney 2015). However, the free and reduced lunch label may not bear an equal institutional stigma as it does hold the significant length and applicability on applications or jobs compared to something such as a felony. Furthermore, social forms of stigma, such as discrimination, differ for free and reduced lunch eligible students compared to identities such as race. Unlike overt forms of identification, eligible students ultimately choose if they want to participate in the free and reduced lunch program. Thus, if students feel stigmatized, they may choose not to participate in order to potentially reduce the social factor of stigma.

Background on School Lunches

The main source of meal options for school lunches comes from the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). The program originated in 1946 under Senator Richard Russell (D-Ga). In the 50s and 60s, President Nixon expanded the program to provide free and reduced lunch to poor children (Levine 2008). Today, about 94,000 public and private schools choose to participate in the NSLP. Although schools are not required to participate, approximately 95% of public schools choose to participate. This program feeds about 31 million students every day, 21 million of which are receiving their lunch either for free or at a reduced cost (Poppendieck 2010: p.4; "National School Lunch Program Facts" 2016).

The National School Lunch Program allows schools to remain autonomous regarding menu planning but set some nutritional standards that schools must meet to receive funding. If schools meet these nutritional guidelines, the federal government will subsidize the cost of the meal at a rate based on student family incomes. The federal government subsidizes all students regardless of family income by providing schools 26 cents per meal sold. Students belonging to families of four or more members earning a total of $39,000 (between 135% and 185% of the poverty line) qualify for reduced lunch (Poppendieck 2010 and Best 2017). The price of lunch and reimbursement the government subsidizes depends on the family income, but usually ranges in a 30 to 40 cent reimbursement from the federal government (Poppendieck 2010: p.4). Students from families of four or more members earning a total of $27,000 (below 135% of the poverty line) qualify for free lunch. The government provides a $2.72 reimbursement for these free lunches (Poppendieck 2010 and Best 2017). If a school chooses to participate in the NSLP, then all students, regardless if they are paying full price or receiving the lunch for free, receive the same meal (Poppendieck 2010).

Another source of food available to students comes from competitive foods. Poppendieck (2010:4) defines competitive foods as "à la carte lines, food courts, school stores, and vending machines… sold in competition with the federally regulated meal." Competitive foods differ from the NSLP in that they are not federally subsidized, are sold based on market value, and are subject to different standards (Poppendieck). Thus, if students want to purchase a competitive food, they must have the means in order to do so. Recently, following the passage of the Healthy Hungry Free Kids Act in 2010, has the USDA created subsequent nutritional regulations specifically for competitive foods ("Final Rule: National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program…" 2016). Competitive foods are very prevalent within schools. According to a Center for Disease Control School Health Policies and Programs Study, "32.7% of elementary schools, 71.3% of middle schools, and 89.4% of high schools had either a vending machine or a school store, canteen, or snack bar where students could purchase foods or beverages" ("Foods and Beverages Sold…" 2006). Free and reduced lunch participants, however, receive no subsidy for these foods (Poppendieck 2010). Schools often rely on the sale of these competitive foods to recoup the losses from the sale of the National School Lunch Program. The government subsidies for the program in addition to the amount students pay for these meals often do not cover the full costs of making these meals. This is often exacerbated by the nutritional standards that often require the purchase of more expensive ingredients. Consequently, schools use competitive foods to help bridge the financial gap (Poppendieck 2010).

Students have a few other meal options. In some schools, students have the option of eating off campus at restaurants or supermarkets near their school. Researchers refer to schools with policies allowing students to leave campus during lunch as an "open campus" (Poppendieck 2010:197). Some schools restrict certain students from this, such as only offering upperclassmen

this opportunity, known as a partially open campus. Around 35% of schools have open or partially open campuses (Poppendieck 2010).

Other options for students include bringing lunch from home or simply not eating at all. Students can also bring a packed lunch from home. Students may bring food from home or choose to bring food from a variety of options such as a restaurant, convenience store, or supermarket with them to school. It is also important not to assume students eat lunch. Research from Gross et al. (2004) conducted surveys with students in Maryland on their meal consumption practices. They found that overall, eight percent of students sampled skipped lunch at least three times a week; this increased in urban settings where fourteen percent of students sampled skipped lunch (Gross et al. 2004).

Previous research has indicated that students on free and reduced lunch may feel stigmatized for their participation in the free and reduced lunch program. Researchers (Glantz et al. 1994; Poppendieck 2010) used qualitative interviews with students and administrators to examine the stigma around free and reduced lunch. Poppendieck (2010) found that elementary students were generally open with their lunch status, but that stigma associated with the program began in middle and high school. Students described being “chastised” and “made fun of” by their peers for being a participant (Poppendieck 2010:191- 192). Furthermore, some participants in the free and reduced lunch program felt “embarrassed” and “worthless” because they “don’t have that much money” (Poppendieck 2010:192).

The stigma on free and reduced lunches may influence participation in two main ways. First, families may become less likely to apply and fill out the forms to receive free and reduced lunch. Second, eligible students choose not to participate and receive their free or reduced lunch (Poppendieck 2010). In both situations, stigma plays a role in contributing to eligible students

not participating in the free and reduced lunch program. The research of Glanz et al. (1994) also finds stigma in both student participation and parental application in the program.

To protect students from stigmatization, the government has tried to shield the identity of free and reduced lunch eligible students. The Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act, which created the NSLP, specifically states that there cannot be "any overt identification of any child by special tokens or tickets, announced or published list of names, or by other means" (Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act 2014). In a separate memorandum, the USDA has published additional specifications on reducing overt identification. These specifications include prohibiting schools from using any payment method that is "colored or coded" in any way that would identify the free and reduced lunch participants (USDA 2012:2). The specifications also prohibit separate service lines for free and reduced lunch students and encourage the sale of competitive foods in the same lines as the free and reduced lunch lines (USDA 2012:2).

Despite the efforts of the government, the mere presence of alternatives may contribute to free and reduced lunch stigma. Sociologist Amy Best (2017) explains that students with the means to eat off campus will likely do so. Consequently, students participating in the free and reduced lunch program becomes more easily identified, heightening the stigma. Students eligible for free and reduced lunch may choose to eat off campus as well to avoid social costs. Empirical evidence using survey data lent support to Best's (2017) argument by finding, "The availability of fast food restaurants was significantly associated with a lower probability of participating in the free/reduced-price NSLP among high school students" (Mirtcheva and Powell 2009:491-492). The presence of alternatives helps demarcate free and reduced lunch participants by creating alternatives for the other students to choose. These alternatives include "competitive"

foods from within the school such as "à la carte lines, food courts, school stores, and vending machines" (Poppendieck 2010:4). Researchers discovered that competitive foods influence participation in free and reduced lunches. Using a pre-post test in San Francisco schools, the researchers found that after the schools removed à la carte options, participation both free and reduced lunches increased at all schools sampled (Bhatia et al. 2011).

Not only do competitive foods offer more options compared to the NSLP, but also they diminish the status of school lunches. Previous research demonstrated that children tend to "classify their food according to binary principles" (Ludvigsen and Scott 2009:421). The availability of other options such as competitive foods and off campus meals may make participation in the main school lunch line "uncool" and, consequently, cause increased participation in these alternative meals (Poppendieck 2010:198). Free and reduced eligible students may feel that they are self-imposing a "self-esteem tax" or "coolness penalty" by choosing to participate in their school's main food line (Poppendieck 2010:198).

School demographics also influence the stigmatization of school lunches. Through participant observation at schools with high and low free and reduced eligibility, Amy Best (2017) found that students were relatively open about their lunch status at a school with a high proportion of free and reduced lunch eligible students. On the contrary, at a school with a low proportion of students free and reduced eligible, Best (2017:201) describes a "magnified" stigma and "never observed a single student openly discuss his or her lunch status." The empirical work of other researchers (Mirtcheva and Powell 2009; Marples and Spillman 1995) support Best's (2017) findings. Mitcheva and Powell (2009) found that the proportion of participation of students in the free and reduced school lunch program increased in schools with higher free and reduced lunch eligibility.

Students' unsatisfactory opinions of the quality and taste of their meal may contribute to the stigmatization of free and reduced lunches. Students may not want to participate in the NSLP because of their opinion of their schools' meals (Glantz et al. 1994; Marples and Spillman 1995). Poppendieck (2010) argues students' negative perceptions of school meal quality stems partially from their perception of free and reduced lunch students. Poppendieck (2010:194) argues that "the food is disparaged precisely because poor kids… eat it." The stigma, she argues, originally belonging to the students, now "clings to the food itself" (Poppendieck 2010:194).

Although many contextual factors may explain why students feel stigmatized for their participation in the free and reduced lunch program, how and why parents become stigmatized is far more uncertain. Much of the literature focuses on the stigmatization of students, omitting this second significant stigmatization that influences free and reduced lunch participation. Like other social programs, stigmatization likely comes from "outsider" and "insider" perspectives (Williams 2009:38).

Qualitative research has illuminated how many parents from free and reduced lunch eligible families view the program. Glanz et al. (1994) found that some parents felt stigmatized for participating in the free and reduced lunch program. The findings broadly grouped the stigma into four categories: not being able to provide for one's family, being criticized for not being a good parent, feeling like they are abusing the system, and feeling associated with being poor (Glantz et al. 1994). Parents reported feeling "shame" in participating as they felt they were unable to feed their children (Glantz et al. 1994:26). Non-eligible parents described how some people "abuse the system" and "have children just so they can receive assistance and not work" (Glantz et al. 1994:40). Glantz et al. (1994:25) also found many parents associated the program

with “poor people” and some eligible parents did not want to feel like they were “taking a handout.”

Additional qualitative research found that parents are aware of the social stigma their children face in the cafeteria for their participation in the free and reduced lunch program. Regarding the school breakfast program, some parents articulated that they prefer their child to eat at home rather than bear the social cost of participating in the program (Bailey-Davis et al. 2013). Glantz et al. (1994) noted that some students tell their parents not to sign them up because of the stigma while others tell their parents they simply will not eat the meals if their parents sign them up for the free and reduced lunch program.

Perceptions of free and reduced lunch help portray this stigma. Spruance et al. (2018) used mixed-methods to study parental perceptions of the school breakfast program, available also at free and reduced prices for eligible students, in Utah. They found political attitudes to be one major theme, with one respondent applauding the low participation rates claiming it showed parents “take parenting responsibilities seriously, make it a priority to feed their own children, and not expect the government to fill this need” (Spruance et al. 2018:146). A similar study surveyed parents and found a similar perception of the school breakfast program. Many parents associated the school breakfast program with poverty and government assistance. Furthermore, the study found an association between the parental viewpoint that the school breakfast program is for children whose parents “do not have enough money or time, or do not care enough to provide breakfast at home” was negatively associated with participation (Askelson et al. 2017:114). While the breakfast and lunch program have some differences, perceptions of the government provided meal likely do not greatly vary. One research study asked respondents if they had favorable or unfavorable feelings toward federally subsidized child nutrition programs.

Among respondents, 82% reported favorable feelings for the school lunch program and a comparable 80% favorable feelings for the school breakfast program (*Americans' View on Hunger* 2014).

Outside of stigma, parents have several reasons for not signing their students up for the free and reduced lunch program. Parents may have misconceptions about their income status and if it subsequently qualifies for the program (Glantz et al. 1994). Depending on immigration status, parents may fear repercussions from the immigration authorities for turning in the information requested on free and reduced lunch applications (Poppendieck 2010).

The Role of Media

This paper examines the role of media in creating stigma around the free and reduced lunch program and its participants. The concept of framing helps explain how media may create this stigma. Goffman's (1974) book, *Frame Analysis*, argues that humans engage in organization and classification to make sense of the world around them. Goffman (1974:21) described frames as a "primary framework" that "allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label" situations with a multitude of interpretations. Many scholars (Gamson et al. 1992; Iyengar 1991) have shown that media coverage plays a critical role in framing and constructing social reality. These frames create serious impacts as they help decide "which problems viewers take seriously" (Iyengar et al. 1982:855). Gamson et al. (1992) explained it best when they wrote:

> "We walk around with media-generated images of the world, using them to construct meaning about political and social issues. The lens through which we receive these images is not neutral but evinces the power and point of view of the political and economic elites who operate and focus it. And the special genius of this system is to

make the whole process seem so normal and natural that the very art of social construction is invisible" (Gamson et al. 1992:374).

Media frames can influence opinions in different ways. Previous scholarship has found differences between "episodic frames" that portray specific events or individuals and "thematic frames" that portray systematic or structural factors (Gormley Jr. 2012:76). In the case of poverty, for example, episodic frames portray the individual as responsible for their poverty while a thematic frame shifts the responsibility onto society (Gormley Jr. 2012:76).

Media frames can have a significant impact on opinions of public policy for children. Manuel (2009) conducted a survey experiment whereby she used a variety of frames to measure support for children's policies. Manuel (2009:25) found the framing of children's policies "improved policy support between the treatment and control groups" depending on the frame. Framing can "broaden the base of support needed to successfully pursue policies that attend to the development needs" of children (Manuel 2009:25). Gormley Jr. (2012) conducted a similar experiment with different fake newspaper articles framing a social spending policy for children. He found similar results indicating media frames can influence public support (Gormley Jr. 2012). A nuance in his results found that positive economic frames had a more significant influence on support compared to a moralistic frame (Gormley Jr. 2012).

Media and media frames may help influence symbolic boundaries. Through media portrayal, media can "reinforce" symbolic boundary "distinctions" (Estrada et al. 2016:555). Previous scholarship found that media can reinforce symbolic boundaries through the frames used to delineating the differences between "us" and "them" (Estrada et al. 2016:571). Media could also contribute to the transformation of symbolic boundaries into social boundaries. Lamont and Molnar (2002) argue that symbolic boundaries become activated into social

boundaries only when society widely agrees upon the symbolic boundaries. This enables the boundaries to form "into identifiable patterns of social exclusion or class and racial segregation" (Lamont and Molnar 2002:169). Depending on how individuals frame the media they produce, media could disseminate symbolic boundaries and therefore influence the social boundaries.

Because media has such a strong presence in framing perspective and influencing symbolic boundaries, studying media could provide more information about the underlying stigma in the free and reduced lunch program. Analyzing media frames regarding free and reduced lunch could illustrate public discourse on free and reduced lunches. If students and parents find media framing free and reduced lunches in a manner that negatively portrays the participants and the program, this framing could influence participation in free and reduced lunch. Parents might feel media stigma either through their own reading or in interacting with their peers. As previously discussed, parental stigma could influence participation rates through applications or internal family rules that prohibit their child from participating. Media frames could also influence student participation. Negative media frames could transmit to students through their interactions with teachers and staff at school. Additionally, parental perceptions could transfer to children, thus students could feel stigmatized from their peers because of the worldview they have learned from their parents. Finally, older students may encounter this framing from their own interpretation of the news.

This review of related scholarly literature provided the framework and context for understanding the free and reduced lunch program and its associated stigma. The following sections will provide information on the methodology, collection of data, and content analysis for this study.

Methodology

The methodology of this paper was inspired in part by the research of Appelrouth and Kelly (2013) who used content analysis to study symbolic boundaries. These researchers conducted a content analysis of rap music and analyzed the various frames within rap music. Through their content analysis, the researchers attempted to gain a better understanding of the symbolic boundaries of rap.

In order to understand how media portrays and frames the free and reduced lunch program and its participants, I chose to conduct a content analysis of newspapers. I analyzed newspaper articles from January 1st, 2010 to December 31st, 2010 because that time period allows for a year of data around the passage of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, passed on December 13, 2010. The law reauthorized the school lunch program, updated school nutritional programs, and provided an additional $4.5 billion to expand the program ("Child Nutrition Reauthorization Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010"). I chose to analyze the time period around this event because it is the most significant national school nutrition legislation in the 21st century. This legislation likely attracted the most significant recent journalism about school lunches and the free and reduced lunch program. Analyzing news articles both before and after the law's passage allowed for my dataset to include articles on the bill as it circulated through the legislative process and journalism on the topic once the bill became law.

Like the Appelrouth and Kelly (2013) study, I chose which papers I would analyze based on subscription rates. Given that this study focuses on the impact and influence of newspaper frames, I selected the most circulated papers. I examined The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, both in the top three of newspapers in total circulation in the United States during the time period I analyzed (Kirchhoff 2010). I chose to omit the newspaper second in circulation, USA Today, to focus on two newspapers with slightly different political perspectives. A Pew

Research Center study found that readers of The New York Times tended to be liberal-leaning while readers of The Wall Street Journal tended to be conservative-leaning (Mitchell et al. 2014). Additionally, the media bias rating website AllSides, which rates media bias based on blind surveys, found The New York Times left-leaning and The Wall Street Journal editorial to be right-leaning with The Wall Street Journal news section to be centrist ("Media Bias Ratings" 2019). By comparing both newspapers, I tried to capture the full spectrum of political opinions.

I used the New York Times Archive and ProQuest article search to retrieve the articles for this dataset. I searched the term "free and reduced lunch" to pull up relevant articles. I also searched "free and reduced lunches" in case any article referred to the program in the plural; however, the second search retrieved the same articles as the first query. I chose to only search with one term because the search results pulled in relevant phrases. For example, the search automatically included articles with the phrase "free lunch" and "free or reduced lunch."

The search yielded 120 articles from The New York Times and 25 from The Wall Street Journal. I suspect the large difference in number of articles results from The Wall Street Journal's focus on financial news. I reviewed each article individually in case the search had included articles that were not topically relevant. I removed several articles from The Wall Street Journal group because they were not applicable for this study. For example, several articles were initially selected because it mentioned the phrase "free lunch" however, this was in context of the colloquialism "there's no such thing as a free lunch." Other articles were duplicates that appeared in the European edition of The Wall Street Journal; these duplicates were also removed. This resulted in a total of eight Wall Street Journal articles included in the final dataset.

Some New York Times articles were removed from the 125 original articles. Several were duplicates of the same article, which I removed to avoid double-counting. Other articles

also were removed for including the phase “free lunch” in reference to the expression and not in the context of the school meal program. This occurred in many articles which referenced “free lunch” fiscal policies. Some topically irrelevant articles that the search included were also removed. For example, the search included a travel article that mentioned which hotels provide “free lunch.” Other articles were included in the initial query because of the inclusion of the word “lunch.” These included articles which mentioned working lunches, often in the context of politics. Some articles appeared in the initial search because of inclusion of the words free and lunch but not together.

After removing the unrelated articles, my data set included 49 total articles, 41 of which from the New York Times and eight of which were from The Wall Street Journal. I created a dataset which included basic information on the articles including an article number, the authors name, the source, the title of the article, the date the article was published, if the piece was published in the opinion section, and the total word count.

I hand coded each article based on a general theme in addition to using MaxQDA to highlight any discernable patterns within the text. I divided the codes of the articles into two broad categories: One set of codes was designated specifically for articles referencing the free and reduced lunch program. Many of these articles focused on the legislation regarding the school lunch program. The second set of codes corresponded to articles not directly about the free and reduced lunch program. These articles included other topics such as education, demographics, etc. but were not written directly about the free and reduced lunch program. For each code I provide a description of the code in addition to quotes from the article that contributed to my decision to code the article in the way I did.

For articles specifically referencing the current laws or upcoming legislation on the free and reduced lunch program, I coded the article as directly referencing the free and reduced lunch program. Articles that talked about the specific of the programs or implementation within current schools also fit into this "direct" category. I decided to code articles with only one code to avoid some articles distorting my findings if they presented multiple codes while others only had one. However, I found that articles seemed to fit into one code or another, with any overlap only occurring in one or two lines. The codes for articles that directly referenced the program were as follows:

Benefits of the Program

Code: BOP

Author highlights the value of the free and reduced lunch program in benefiting students.

Examples from articles: "For these children, school lunches represent the bulk of the nutrition they receive during the day, and it is imperative that there are no gaps in providing these meals" (Lugar 2010).

Nutrition of the Lunches and Students

Code: NL

Article references the National School Lunch Program by examining the nutrition standards in the new bill or found at a school cafeteria. This can be in either a positive reference or negative reference.

Examples from articles: "The bill would give the Agriculture Department new powers to set nutritional standards for any food sold on school grounds…" (*Healthy, and Safe, School*

Lunches 2010). “Congress gave final approval on Thursday to a child nutrition bill that expands the school lunch program and sets new standards to improve the quality of school meals, with more fruits and vegetables” (Pear 2010b). “The bill gives the secretary of agriculture authority to establish nutrition standards for foods sold in schools during the school day, including items in vending machines” (Pear 2010b).

Expansion of the Program

Code: EP

Article focuses on the expansion of the free and reduced lunch program. This can come in the form of financial expansion or participant expansion.

Examples from articles: “It would also expand the number of low-income children eligible for free or reduced-priced school meals” (*Tomorrow’s School Lunches* 2010). “Now, just 40 percent of students need to be eligible for free or reduced lunch to secure the federal funds” (Medina 2010). “Also, for the first time in over three decades, it would increase federal reimbursement for school lunches beyond inflation—to allow for the cost of higher-quality meals” (Pear 2010a). “And it will expand a program to provide after-school meals to at-risk kids” (Martin 2010).

Local Reduction of Program

Code: LRP

Article mentions school district, town, city, or school, making reductions, cuts, or no longer participating in subsidized meal programs.

Examples from articles: “Additional cuts will come by reducing the number of schools that participate in a program that provides free lunches to all students, and by holding principals accountable for unpaid lunch fees from students beginning in June 2011” (Otterman 2010b). “The Department of Education is ending its practice of giving every student a free lunch without their parents having to prove their need” (Newman 2010).

For articles that did not directly reference the specifics of the free and reduced lunch program, I coded how the article referenced the free and reduced lunch program rather than coding the themes from the articles themselves. I used MaxQDA to code the patterns and trends within these articles but chose to code exclusively by how these articles referenced the free and reduced lunch program. The codes for articles that indirectly referenced the program were as follows:

Reference to Income Composition

Code: IC

Author mentions free and reduced lunch qualification percentages to indicate the income composition of a school or neighborhood.

Examples from the articles: “About 88% of Renaissance’s 135 students qualify for free or reduced lunch” (Martinez 2010a). “The Urban assembly’s student population is about 94% black and Hispanic, and nearly 70% qualify for free or reduced lunch” (Martinez 2010b). “More than half qualify for free or reduced lunch” (Hu 2010b).

Reference to Poverty or Negative Student Associations

Code: PNA

Author mentions free and reduced lunch percentage and references it directly to poverty, or references the educational setbacks of participants of the program.

"At Santa Fe South, 95% of the students are poor enough to qualify for a free or discounted lunch" (Jordan 2010). "About 20% of students are poor—qualifying for free or reduced lunch—up from 10% in 2000" (Campoy 2010). "…the average student eligible for free and reduced-fee lunch is approximately two years of learning behind the average student who doesn't need such assistance" (Klein, Lomax, and Murguia 2010). "'You show me the school that has the highest free and reduced lunch, and I'll show you the worst test scores, folks,' said Mr. Bauer" (*So Its Granny's Fault* 2010). "Most of P.S. 132's students are poor enough to qualify for free and reduced lunches, and 58 percent are black or Hispanic" (Hu 2010a).

Reference to Economic Burden to Society/community

Code: EBS

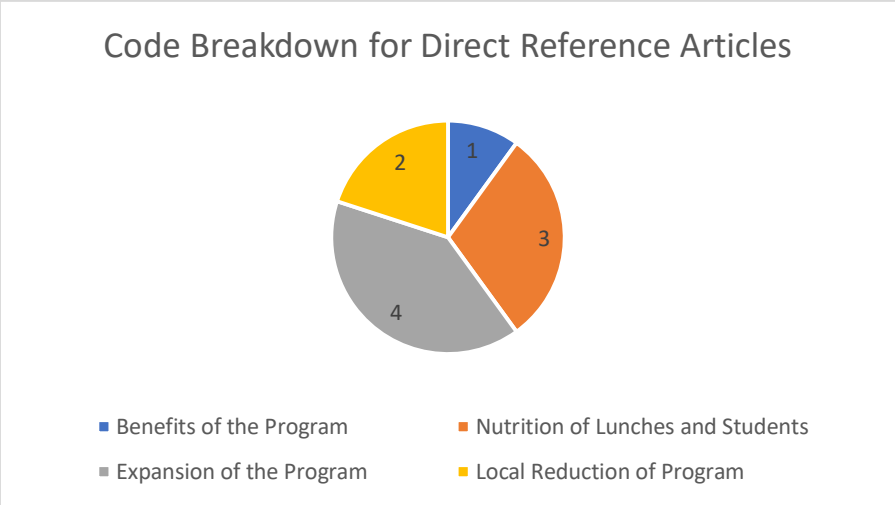
Author references the free and reduced lunch program when talking about social spending. Articles often include reference to national debt. Article references the government paying for this social spending.

Examples from the Articles: "Cutting spending on these "entitlements" is widely seen as an inevitable ingredient in any credible deficit-reduction program" (Murray 2010). "For years, the city has picked up the tab for students whose parents failed to provide the school with their lunch fees" (Otterman 2010a).

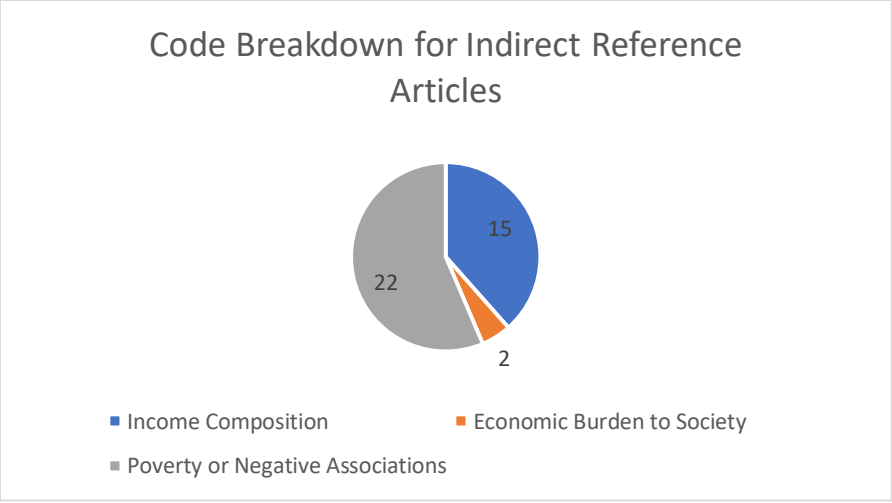
Results and Content Analysis

Before qualitatively analyzing my data, I shall first outline the details of my dataset. I do so in order to help the reader better understand my data, not to make any representational claims

regarding the data. The data composed of 10 articles directly discussing the free and reduced lunch program and 39 articles that addressed the program indirectly. In the indirect reference category, 22 articles fit the code of "poverty or negative associations," 2 fit the code of "economic burden to society," and 15 fit the code "reference to income composition." For the articles directly referencing the lunch program, four fit the code "expansion of program," two fit the code "local reduction of the program," three articles fit into the code "nutrition of lunches and students," and one article fit the code "benefits of program." Graphs one and two illustrate these percentage breakdowns.



Graph 1



Graph 2

When coding the indirect reference articles, I noticed authors adding modifiers to the phrase "free and reduced lunch" as a way of describing the lunch program or those eligible for it. I recorded these phrases under the code "poverty or negative associations" because of the ways the articles mentioned the program. A majority of the responses in the indirect reference category chose to reference the free and reduced lunch program in association with poverty rather than simply using it to describe the population the authors wrote about. To illustrate this point, consider the difference between the following sentences: "About 88% of Renaissance's 135 students qualify for free or reduced lunch" with "Most of P.S. 132's students are poor enough to qualify for free and reduced lunches, and 58 percent are black or Hispanic" (Martinez 2010a; Hu 2010a). The latter clearly denotes that the recipients of the free and reduced lunch program are poor rather than simply stating their income level. Articles in this category often used the phrase "poor enough" or "overwhelmingly poor" to describe the free and reduced lunch participants (Jordan 2010; Smith and Butrymowicz 2010). The author insinuates that the program is for not just those under a certain income level but rather those with significant poverty. This may connote stereotypes of poverty with eligible students and their families. It may also associate free and reduced lunch meals with poverty. This could explain why many non-eligible students view school lunches as not "cool" and "'poor people's food,'" and consequently choose not to purchase a NSLP meal (Poppendieck 2010:194).

The negative associations code also included articles which referenced the free and reduced lunch program regarding participants' poor academic achievement. This included comments such as: "'You show me the school that has the highest free and reduced lunch, and I'll show you the worst test scores, folks,' said Mr. Bauer" and "A study last year from McKinsey concludes that the average student eligible for free or reduced-fee lunch is

approximately two years of learning behind the average student who doesn't need such assistance" (*So Its Granny's Fault* 2010; Newman 2010). Mr. Bauer, who was quoted in the article *So Its Granny's Fault* (2010), was the Lieutenant Governor of South Carolina, equated paying for the free and reduced lunch participants as "feeding strays" (*So Its Granny's Fault* 2010). These comments illustrate the negative descriptions free and reduced participants can receive in newspaper articles.

The association between free and reduced lunch program participants, poverty, and poor academic achievement may stigmatize the program. Authors repeatedly connect the program with poverty and poor academic achievement. This could influence public perception of participants as extremely poor and low intelligence. This may help explain why so many respondents in the Glantz et al. (1994:25) study associated the program with "poor people."

In addition to modifiers about income or intellect, racial connections appeared in several instances when describing the composition of a town or school. The articles almost always mentioned the racial composition in the same sentence or directly before or after mentioning the percentage of free and reduced lunch participants. I found this in articles in both the income composition and the reference to poverty or negative student associations coded groups. This quote from an article coded income composition helps illustrate: "The Urban Assembly's student population is about 94% black and Hispanic, and nearly 70% qualify for free or reduced lunch" (Martinez 2010b). This also appeared in articles that referenced poverty: "Fifty-five percent of enrolled students nationwide are black or Hispanic, the alliance says, and more than a third qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, a common measure of poverty" (Gabriel 2010).

Race was also referenced when discussing the education system more generally. The articles often included sentences referencing an increase in minority or immigrant influx into the

education system. These examples from the articles illustrate this theme: “But the numbers also herald the future of the country as a whole, as minority students are expected to exceed 50 percent of public school enrollment by 2020 and the share of students poor enough to qualify for free or reduced-price lunches is on the rise in every state” and “This time, the disputes often are set in the suburbs themselves, driven by a flood of new arrivals -- many from Latin America -- who have rapidly reshaped school populations in districts across the country” (Dewan 2010; Campoy 2010).

By using racial frames, authors may connote stereotypes the public has with free and reduced lunch participants. As seen through the text examples above, the authors clearly draw a strong association between race and free and reduced lunch participants. This may influence public perception by linking the public’s views on race with views of the free and reduced lunch program.

One interesting finding was the way the articles described children. The articles did not explicitly state whether the students they were describing in their articles were participants of the free and reduced lunch program, however, the students described were from schools with an overwhelming majority of free and reduced lunch participants. The articles depicted the children in these articles as troubled. Some articles focused more on describing students as deviants, focusing on participation in “gangs,” use of “drugs” and alcohol, and being “out on the streets” (Jordan 2010; Hu 2010c). Other articles focused on behavioral problems. The articles described these students as “disruptive in class,” a “brat,” and frequently getting into altercations with other students (Hu 2010c; Jordan 2010).

By connecting free and reduced lunch participants with wording associated with deviance, the newspapers may negatively frame participants of free and reduced lunch program.

In my literature review, I cited a scholar who believed that "the food is disparaged precisely because poor kids… eat it" (Poppendieck 2010:194). The negative portrayal of free and reduced lunch participants may influence public perceptions or participants. This in turn may be transferred to the food and itself.

The articles also described parents in an interesting way. Again, the articles did not explicitly state that these parents were from free and reduced lunch eligible families, however, these were the parents of the children described in the previous paragraphs. The description of parents fit into two sets of frames, that of parental delinquency and their status as immigrants.

The articles framed the parental delinquency in a variety of ways. Some of the articles focused on parents' inadequacies in helping their children academically: "His parents didn't show up for parent-teacher meetings" and "'Their parents aren't telling them to register for college-entrance exams'" (Jordan 2010). Other articles depicted parents largely absent from their children's lives: "Her father left home when she and her brother, Richard, were toddlers" and "Ms. Gomes, a 17-year-old senior whose father is largely absent and whose mother works long hours at a factory" (Jordan 2010; Zezima 2010). The articles also framed the parents as immigrants. Articles highlighted how the students came from immigrant parents: "Laura Corro was born in Tacoma, Wash., the daughter of Mexican immigrants" and "'Many of the parents are first-generation immigrants, and they are struggling to get by'" (Jordan 2010; Medina 2010).

The portrayal of parents may negatively influence perception of eligible families. These articles frame parents as generally absent from their child's life and not committed to their child's education. These may have contributed to perceptions of participants' parents as individuals who do not take parenting and in particular the important task of feeding their children "seriously," and consequently rely on government to "fill this need" (Spruance et al.

2018:146). These frames of parents thus may shift societal perspective from the belief that the free and reduced lunch program helps children from families with financial need to a perspective that the program helps children from families with financial need and delinquent parents. These frames may contribute to the feelings of shame the eligible parents felt, and the feeling from other parents that eligible parents are not good parents (Glantz et al. 1994).

The final frame I coded for in the indirect column was articles framing the lunch program as a financial burden. One article referenced the free and reduced lunch program as an "entitlement" that would need to be cut in order to reduce the deficit (Otterman 2010a). Other articles focused on students not paying for their lunch fees and relying on either the Department of Education or city to "pick up the tab" (Otterman 2010a). These articles referenced students not paying for full-priced and reduced-price lunches making it difficult to separate framing of the school lunch program more generally and the free and reduced lunch program.

This frame may influence the financial portrayal of the program. Several non-participant parents worried that families contributed to an "abuse" of the system (Glantz et al. 1994:40). The frame of an economic burden incurred on society from the lunch program may contribute to this feeling. It may also influence eligible families as many chose not to participate in the program because they did not want to feel like they were "taking a handout" (Glantz et al. 1994:25). Portraying the program as an entitlement may contribute to this sentiment among eligible families.

The articles that directly referenced the free and reduced lunch program focused on a variety of frames. The effects of these frames may depend on the reader's view of the free and reduced lunch program.

One article positively framed the free and reduced lunch program by highlighting the importance of the program. The article highlighted the importance and size of the impact the free and reduced lunch program has on its participants: “But if we don’t pass the bill immediately, we will imperil programs that have proved vital to our youth, families and schools for decades, and that are especially important during this time of economic stress” and “Twenty-one million children—roughly two-thirds of the students eating school lunches— benefit from the program” (Lugar 2010). The impact of this framing likely varies with the opinion of the reader. For those in support of the program, this frame may help provide evidence of the importance and impact of the program. For those who oppose the program, however, this framing may serve as examples of the vastness of a program they do not support.

Several articles focused more on the nutrition and quality of the school lunch program. Some articles positively framed the nutritional improvements of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act: “The standards would require schools to serve more fruits and vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy products” (Pear 2010b) and “The bill would… expand the use of local farm products, organic food and school gardens, and require the government to notify schools more quickly about tainted foods” (*Healthy, and Safe, School Lunches* 2010). Other aspects of articles negatively framed the nutritional standards for failing to “ban all trans fats” or highlighted the poor “quality” of current school meals (*Healthy, and Safe, School Lunches* 2010, Severson 2010). Because of the balance in framing, I think this may have a relatively neutral effect on general perceptions of the free and reduced lunch program.

A few articles noted local school and school districts’ decisions to reduce involvement in a program that involved providing free lunches to all students. An example includes: “It will not be so easy to get a free lunch at some city schools next fall. The Department of Education is

ending its practice of giving every student a free lunch without their parents having to prove their need" (Newman 2010). Other articles echoed these cutbacks: "Additional cuts will come by reducing the number of schools that participate in a program that provides free lunches to all students, and by holding principals accountable for unpaid lunch fees from students beginning in June 2011" (Otterman 24).

The effect of this media frame likely depends on the views of the audience. For supporters of the free and reduced lunch program, this frame may increase backing for the program. Proponents of the program may view these local reductions as reasons why the program needs more funding and expansion. For those against the program, this may contribute to the opinion that this program is an unnecessary entitlement. If schools are choosing to stop participating, some may argue, then the program must not be necessary and rather is an entitlement funded through tax dollars.

The final code for direct articles I found discussed the expansion of the free and reduced lunch program. Some articles referenced an expansion of eligible students: "It would also expand the number of low-income children eligible for free or reduced-priced school meals" (*Tomorrow's School Lunches* 2010). Other articles focused on the increase in funding under the new legislation: "Also, for the first time in over three decades, it would increase federal reimbursement for school lunches beyond inflation — to allow for the cost of higher-quality meals" (Pear 2010a). Some articles also discussed the costs associated with the proposed increase in the program: "At issue is how to pay for additional spending on the school lunch program and other child nutrition projects eagerly sought by the White House. A bill that the House is expected to consider within days would come up with some of the money by cutting future food stamp benefits" (Pear 2010a).

The effects of the media frames on the increase of the program again likely depends on one's view of the program. To supporters of the program, this frame could positively portray how the program now serves more students with more available funding. To opponents of the program, this expansion of the program could perpetuate the thinking that this program is simply an entitlement. Additionally, knowing that expansion may come at a cost may intensify an individual's feelings that the program is an economic burden.

One interesting thing to note was the number of authors framing the conversation. Overall, many authors wrote multiple of the articles in the dataset. This gives the authors tremendous framing power to shape the way issues are talked about. For example, one author, Winnie Hu, wrote nine of the 49 articles included in my dataset. In most of her articles she repeated the phrase "poor enough to qualify for free and reduced lunch." I also noticed this phrase in several other New York Times articles, indicating that an editor may have influenced the addition of this and potentially other phrases.

Conclusion

Media portrayals of the free and reduced lunch program may contribute to the stigmatization of the program and its participants. Indirect references of the program in media connect it with poverty and racial minorities. This may influence public perceptions of the program, particularly depending on an individual's views of poverty and minorities. The newspaper articles negatively portrayed the children assumed to be eligible for the program as troubled deviants with behavioral problems. The articles also framed these parents negatively by portraying them as neglectful parents who are immigrants. These portrayals may influence public perception and linked back to several themes from other qualitative research on stigma felt by participating parents and students. Articles that directly addressed the free and reduced lunch

program utilized a variety of frames such as focusing on the expansion of the program in the federal government, reduction of local free lunch policies, and the expansiveness of the program. The effects of these frames on individual's viewpoints likely depends on one's opinion of the program.

There are several limitations with this study. Because I conducted a content analysis, I could only analyze the ways newspapers make meaning of the free and reduced lunch program and speculate on how this may influence eligible student and family participation. Utilizing an experiment would allow future researchers to analyze the relationship between media and public perceptions and determine if a causal relationship exists. One major limitation was only assessing two national newspapers. Other forms of media, such as social media, could have a greater influence on public perceptions compared to newspapers, limiting the impact of newspaper frames. I also omitted important media perspectives from local newspapers and Spanish newspapers. Thus, my analysis may be limited to the demographics of the readers of The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal. Additionally, media portrayals may have shifted since 2010. Future researchers could use more updated data and include a wider range of newspapers. Another limitation with my study is that many children may not be directly reading these articles. Future researchers should conduct a content analysis on children's media such as young adult books, cartoons, and movies to see how this media targeted toward youth depicts the free and reduced lunch program.

Future researchers should continue to study the stigmatization of the free and reduced lunch program and its participants. Far too often research on this topic focuses on the nutritional content of school lunches. Researchers should continue to analyze the way students decide their eating choices based on the social context around them. Further research could compare free and

reduced lunch participation at schools with different policies regarding competitive foods and off campus privileges. This would help assess the stigmatization of the program from a policy perspective. Future researchers could also examine the roles race play in participation as well as the impact of teachers and administrators on participation.

In general, newspapers, schools, parents, and students should all be cognizant of how they talk about the free and reduced lunch program and its participants. This framing could potentially have significant ramifications by stigmatizing the program and potentially affecting the development and education of scores of children. To quote former First Lady Michelle Obama “We can all agree that in the wealthiest nation on Earth, all children should have the basic nutrition they need to learn and grow and to pursue their dreams, because in the end, nothing is more important than the health and well-being of our children” (Lee 2010).

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