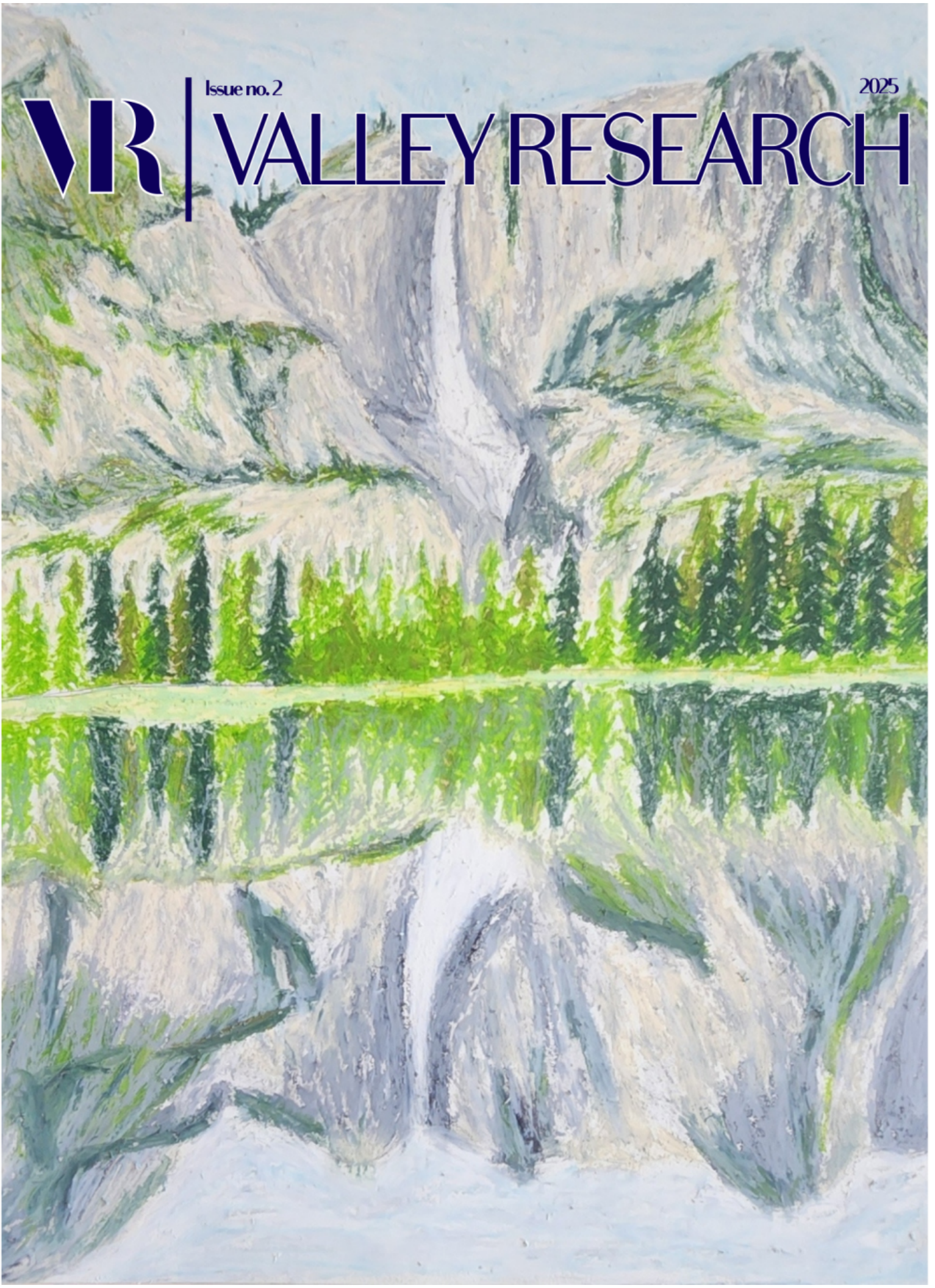


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VR | VALLEY RESEARCH



Valley Research

A social scientific, interdisciplinary academic journal showcasing student research and inquiry from Merced College.

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Acknowledgements

David M. Chambers

The Central Valley is a complex, contradictory place. As a relatively impoverished agricultural region set adjacent to immense wealth in the largest subnational economy in the world, the valley's ethnically and economically diverse population faces unique challenges. In many ways the Central Valley is a bell weather of trends the rest of the country will later experience. Though immensely interesting, attention to the region is often neglected in popular culture and academia. Furthermore, the perspectives of its people seem relatively non-existent in those same realms. Representing the voices and studies of students and scholars from this region is needed. Growing up in Merced, I've long known the depth of my valley peers' thought and their unique perspective. I'm honored to help foreground that perspective into the future. This issue of Valley Research is further evidence of the importance of valley voices.

I'm continuously impressed with the excellent students at Merced College and California State University-Stanislaus that have created this journal. This issue of the Valley Research Journal came out with especially committed effort. Some members of the editorial team experienced the loss of close and beloved family members in the process of producing this issue. Despite this, these editors remained committed to the completion of the journal. For that they deserve special thanks. This issue was financially supported by Merced College President's Circle Grant of Merced College, awarded by Merced College President Chris Vitelli, supported by Merced College board members John Pedrozo, Joe Gutierrez, Mario Mendoza, Ernie Ochoa, Carmen Ramirez, Sue Chappell, and Kory Benson.

The efforts of our Student Editors have been key to publishing this issue. Maggie Devins has played a pivotal role as the journal's primary director, as Dr Dean Caivano has taken new employment outside the area. Having served as a student editor for the first issue, Maggie has taken on a guiding role in getting the journal to print. Sierra Kelley served as the primary copy editor with painstaking attention to detail. Our subject editors did a wonderful job as liaison's between faculty reviewers and subject-specific article authors. Sociology Amanda Cole acted as Anthropology editor, Diego Segovia-Alvarez was Philosophy and psychology editor, James Neal acted as History Editor. These student editors consistency and commitment kept the journal alive during the transition from Dr. Caivano's editorship!

Faculty Reviewers and mentors include, Jackie Alvarez, Susie Williamson, Adam Fong, Michael Lorenz, Susan Flatt, Tyler Schafer, Jeffrey Beuchler, Max Hallman, David Chambers, Jennifer Whitmer, Ann Strahm, and Whitney Russell. Your time and attention in this and future issues is immensely appreciated.

Lastly, thanks to the burgeoning community of student scholars across Merced College and CSU-Stanislaus. Your work is what this issue is all about. Thank you putting in the work and having the courage to share your voices. These efforts are deeply appreciated.

Introduction

Sierra L. Kelley, James Neal, and Diego Segovia-Alvarez

The second issue of *Valley Research* has finally arrived, and it almost did not happen. Starting here at Merced College it had seemingly ended after only one issue due to our founders moving on to bigger and better things. However, being the only research journal in California that is dedicated to the social sciences, we found it necessary to revive. The rise of anti-intellectualism has led to the social sciences being abandoned by many in favor of majors that are likely to produce higher paying jobs. But the point of education is not to make more money, it is to learn and grow. Social science is an incredibly important discipline because it teaches us not only about the people of the past, but the people here today.

The importance of social science is critical during this current political climate because it fights to protect human existence. As you read through the second volume of *Valley Research*, we implore you to keep in mind the humanity in each work as it is not as blatantly stated. This volume invokes questions about what it means to be human and how confusing that experience can be as we explore philosophy, creative expression, sociology, and psychology.

Modernization, preservation, and evolution are all defining factors of the social sciences, an ever-shifting field with innovations in uncertain times. Within this edition of *Valley Research*, tensions between preserving the past and embracing the future become particularly acute. Modernization brings ideals and promises of progress, but lays waste to long held traditions often uprooting cultural foundations. At the same time the preservation of long held practices, whether it be architectural, artistic, or historical, they serve as constant anchors for identity and continuity. The evolution of art and culture reveals how societies join these two together to adapt, reinterpret, and innovate through turbulent changes. This issue examines how the delicate balance between change and continuity persists while enduring transformation and the resilience of cultures throughout history.

The Relationship Between Work-Life Balance and Stress Among College Students

Deserina Padilla, Bianca Martinez, Clarita Carlos, Haylee Solis, Litzzy Anguiano, Richard Schlotthauer, Valerie Ojeda, and L. Susie Williamson

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between work-life balance and stress among college students. College students face unique challenges in navigating responsibilities and outside school, such as work and family. This balance or imbalance may affect a student's mental health. Interactions with others, primarily with their instructors, can also add or decrease the amount of stress that the average college student encounters on a day-to-day basis. The study seeks to examine how high academic workload leads to stress in students, a stress that is influenced by internal and external factors. Students experience many different emotions when they are transitioning to a college and the demands of everyday life. This study found that most students experienced moderate levels of stress and were able to somewhat balance life and work demands. However, the study found that stress was not affected by work-life balance alone. There were many factors that contributed to the types of stress that the average college student experiences in day-to-day life and these articles help explore all of the different variables. With this study it'll guide us to see the pressures students face.

The Relationship Between Work-Life Balance and Stress Among College Students

Achieving work-life balance is a common issue for college students because it is typically the first time they are juggling multiple demands (Sprung & Rogers, 2021). In this study, the relationship between *work-life balance* and *stress* among college students will be examined. For the purpose of this study, work-life balance is defined as the ability to allocate sufficient time to both schoolwork and personal life. Understanding how stress impacts college students is important because college students experience unique demands balancing school, life, and work (Sprung & Rogers, 2021). College students experience academic pressure along with other factors that play a role in their overall mental health. It can create a tremendous amount of stress. While trying to stay on top of assignments and dealing with work life (Jenkins et al., 2021). Handling multiple responsibilities and academic work can lead to increased stress and decreased life satisfaction. Wang and Thong (2025) found that academic stress had both direct and indirect effects on perceived stress and life satisfaction.

One of the major factors that can take a toll on a student's mental health is the type of energy that is received from their professors. Many professors have a large workload and can get overwhelmed from their own work stress as well as other day-to-day stressors. (Jögi, 2022). Lastly, events like the COVID-19 pandemic also played a significant role in how students' mental health was affected due to the fact that sleep quality worsened and stress increased (Benham, 2021). The role of internal factors such as perceived stress, life satisfaction, and locus of control alongside external influences such as work-life balance, teacher stress, and the impact of COVID-19 will be explored to gain a deeper understanding of how these affect a college student's academic stress and mental health. Additionally, differences in perceived stress by type of student (art majors and student athletes) will be examined. Based on the current studies, this study sought to answer the question, how does higher academic workload lead to stress in college students?

Perception of Academic Workload

Knoster and Goodboy (2020), surveyed 302 students in diverse majors and identified a positive correlation between how students perceived academic demands and stress. This indicates that students who perceived the workload to be hard experienced more stress compared to students who did not. The study found this was influenced by how capable students felt about their abilities. A moderate correlation was found between academic stress and a student's grade, suggesting that stress is one of the factors that may influence grades. Sprung and Rogers (2021) found an association between work-life balance and anxiety, which provides further support for the relationship between academic workload and mental health (Jenkins et al., 2021) discovered results that later showed mindsets about stress vary as a function of their source, suggesting that the mindset is related to academic performance and well-being. Additionally, Benham (2021) observed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, students experienced increased academic stress and lower self-efficacy due to the sudden transition to online learning and lack of structure, further demonstrating how the perception of workload is affected by external circumstances and broader crises.

Factors Contributing to Academic Stress, Work-Life Balance and Effects on Mental Health

A study conducted by Karaman et al. (2019), revealed a relationship between locus of control, life satisfaction, and academic stress. The study revealed that students who felt less satisfied with life tended to have greater stress. Internal and external locus of control influenced how a student perceived the stress. Students who doubted their own skills internally felt more stress compared to those who felt capable. Women experienced greater stress, indicating the role of individual characteristics in stress (Karman et al., 2019). Sprung and Rogers (2021) proposed that work-life balance was correlated with anxiety and depression. They found that greater work-life balance is significantly correlated with lower anxiety, lower depression, and lower perceived stress in a sample of 111 full-time college students. They also found that perceived stress explained the relationship between work-life balance and anxiety. Sprung and Rogers (2021) indicated that mental health challenges are related to the multiple roles that college students are expected to fulfill. Researchers note that work-life balance significantly affects college students' well-being.

College Student Health and Academic Performance

Jenkins et al. (2021) found college students viewed their stress as debilitating or as enhancing. Those who found stress enhancing had higher grade point averages and also had better mental health. This type of stress mindset is beneficial for a student's overall well-being and academic performance. The presence and energy of a professor can also have a major impact on a student's mental health and academic performance. Having a professor who comes into the classroom extremely stressed out and presents negative energy has an impact on students. Just as a professor who comes into the classroom energized or passionate about what they are about to teach may help reduce a student's mental health issues as well as increase their academic performance (Yoon, 2002). This became particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, where Benham (2021) found that inconsistent instructor engagement and low emotional support contributed to worsened mental health outcomes and student disengagement during remote learning.

Additionally, Knoster and Goodboy (2019) discussed how a student's interpretation of workload and stress can affect how they choose to deal with stress. When students view the workload as difficult, their stress levels increase, and this may lead to less effective methods of coping. However, when students trust their abilities, they find positive ways to handle stress. Having a positive mindset typically leads to positive outcomes. Wang and Thong (2025) positive emotions broaden the scope of attention, cognition, and action in the moment, as well as build physical,

intellectual, and social resources for future use. Wang and Thong (2025) positive emotions broaden the scope of attention, cognition, and action in the moment as well as building physical, intellectual, and social resources for future use. Lee et al. (2021) suggested that sharing the concept with new students of work-life balance and potential struggles of role conflict might help shift the way students think about their challenges. Malloy et al. (2025) had suggested that social support and other adaptive coping strategies are known to help reduce stress in college students. Having good social connections can help decrease mental health difficulties.

Perceived Stress and Mental Health

Fruehwirth et al. (2023), studied the data of 885 first-year students from the age range 18–20. This study took place at a large public university in North Carolina. The study detected deleterious behaviors, including insufficient sleep and eating disorders. The data collected showed 19% of students reported symptoms of eating disorders, while 42% reported insufficient sleep, and 43% percent insufficient vigorous physical activity. This research revealed insights into how college students developed eating disorders and stress related to their mental health. Work-life balance, like good sleep and regular exercise, is related to lower anxiety and depression. These protective factors are important to recognize because they can positively impact students' mental health (Sprung & Rogers, 2021). When students don't have a proper work-life balance, it exposes them to various mental health issues such as depression. If students do not know how to properly respond to these emotions, it leads to other severe health issues, causing unhappiness and sometimes suicide. Lui et al. (2022) have found depression, pessimism, and hopelessness accompanying psychological pressure will affect students' academic performance and interpersonal communication. During the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, many students struggled to maintain a decent schedule as an event like this caused changes in schedule and focus on school (Benham, 2021). Karman et al. (2019) identified stress as stemming from factors such as academics, family, life goals, and job hunting, highlighting the importance of having a proper balance between work and life demands. It is indicated that the transition college students have to adulthood is the peak onset and prevalence for a lot of mental health disorders (Malloy et al., 2025). Therefore, if students cannot find work-life balance, many negative effects can happen to their mental health.

Sleep and Stress: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Benham (2021) investigated the relationship between stress and sleep quality in college students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study revealed that students' stress levels increased, and their sleep quality worsened during the pandemic. This research underscores the critical role of sleep in managing stress and the need for better sleep hygiene, especially during times of heightened uncertainty and academic pressure. About 32 percent of students fail to attain the 7 hours of sleep recommended by federal guidelines. Poor sleep habits can increase irritability and mood swings. Which can create a big amount of stress (Fruehwirth et al., 2023). Lee et al. highlighted that sleep was negatively associated with academic stress and that sleep is one of the top ten stressors for college students.

Majors that have Higher Mental Health Issues and How Sports Can Assist in Reducing Stress

Lee et al. (2024) found that fine arts students struggle with stress and mental health more than students in other majors, which similarly shows that individual characteristics can impact stress response. Lee et al. (2024) conducted a study to assess how mental health and stress differ between students majoring in fine arts versus students who were majoring in other subjects. A total of 454 undergraduate students were surveyed about mental health, stress, and time spent on academic

work. The results showed that fine art students reported higher rates of mental distress and stress, as well as more time spent doing academic work. The researchers note that people in artistic fields tend to have more significant mental illnesses than those not in artistic fields, which may be stressors that art students encounter. Lee et al. (2024) highlight that the study was compared to students in fine arts and some psychology majors who may be engaged in some art form, such as community theater. A couple of unique stressors of fine art students are competition for limited spots for performances or galleries. Students are more likely to respond differently to critiques due to the personal nature of their work (Lee et al., 2024).

Liu et al. (2024) explored how sports interest and a supportive sports atmosphere can help alleviate academic stress in college students. They found that students who are actively engaged in sports and surrounded by a positive sports culture experience less stress. This highlights the potential of integrating physical activity and community support as effective tools for stress management in higher education. The study also revealed that sports participation indirectly boosts emotional resilience and self-confidence, which are critical for coping with academic demands. Furthermore, a strong sports atmosphere encourages peer interaction and social bonding, both of which contribute to lower perceived stress levels.

Educational Dialogue, Effects of Proximal and Distal Stress, and Classroom Climate

Muhonen et al. (2023) conducted a study to find the connection between teacher occupational stress and student performance in school. The results indicated occupational stress from teachers had a negative link to high-quality dialogue, which then affected the students' performance. Educational dialogue is considered one of the best ways for student-teacher interactions. This can build shared knowledge through classroom talk. Teachers play an important role in student participation, which can lead to students feeling encouraged to share their thoughts. Teachers' occupational stress is made up of negative emotions through work-related experiences. This can cause strain on their performance. Jōgi et al. conducted research through monitoring the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) (See Appendix A) and learned that stress is rooted in the relationship between teachers and their environment and depends on teachers' evaluations of their environmental demands and the resources available to cope with these demands (2020).

Malloy et al. (2025) believed that the transition for young adults to college forms challenges for students as they are increasingly finding independence from parents and academic demands. A study was formed to examine proximal and distal stress in college students' socioemotional health. Results indicated that stress for these college students had increased the likelihood of the students experiencing mental health difficulties and higher negative effects throughout the term. The low quality of social support and connection had also increased mental health issues. Malloy et al. (2025), stated health professionals within the college setting should assist students with coping skills and emotional regulation when facing stressors.

Teacher-student relationships have a significant influence on various outcomes. Investigations into how the relationships are shaped and what determines the quality of those relationships are of great importance. These interactions can feed an individual's curiosity in a particular subject, or they could completely put a person off from the subject, regardless of how interesting they once found the topic, all due to the interactions with the instructor (Yoon, 2002). The purpose of this study was to examine the amount of stress that the average college student faces on a day-to-day basis. With a heavy workload, the stress that occurs on an individual's mental health became obvious once all the data was evaluated.

Method

Participants

As a group of seven, seventy students were interviewed to determine the effects stress has on the day-to-day lives of college students. The participants who were chosen to undergo this study were all students who attended Merced Community College or some other University. Luckily, we were able to grab a vast range of participants. Participants included both males and females and represented different ethnic backgrounds. Many of these college students are young and adapting to their new responsibilities, so this study helped others see the amount of stress they encounter. The demographics helped focus on individual behavior and experiences.

Instrumentation

The research instrumentation included a survey created by the researchers to measure the variable, academic stress, and the Perceived Stress Scale Inventory. This survey consisted of 10 questions. Only 7 out of the 10 questions directly measured academic stress, such as “What are different things you may stress about in your daily life?” The remaining 3 served as filler questions. The open-ended survey was scored as a Likert-type scale with 1 depicting an individual with no work-life balance, and 5 indicating a perfect work-life balance. To measure a participant's perceived stress, the Perceived Stress Scale Inventory was used. This inventory consisted of 10 questions and used a Likert-Type Scale 1, indicating “Never” to 5, indicating “Very often”. Cronbach's alpha value is reported from 0.78 to 0.9. The inventory has strong validity and reliability, and internal consistency. The survey measures how students perceive their own stress, for example, the first item of the survey is, “In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?”

Procedure

A qualitative correlational study was designed with 70 local and online university students. The seven researchers had two different surveys provided to each of the students. 10 of the surveys were conducted online using Google Forms. The researchers used the survey information to analyze the data by inputting the scores from the Perceived Stress Scale into Excel to find the mean, standard deviation, and correlation between work-life balance and stress. Additionally, the seven group members gave verbal informed consent to the participants, ensuring them that their identities would remain anonymous and only the information that they willingly gave would be used in the study.

Results

The dataset consisted of three variables: Perceived Stress Scale score (range: 0-40), Work-Life Balance (range: 1-5), and participant sex (male or female). The total number of participants was $n = 70$. Frequency was calculated for the sex variable, and 71.43 % of the sample was female. The mean and standard deviation were calculated for the PSS and Work-Life Balance variables, with $M = 22.57$ and $SD = 6.31$ for the PSS and $M = 2.92$ and $SD = 1.18$ for the Work-Life Balance. The correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between the PSS and the Work-Life Balance variable, and was $r = -0.29$, which is a weak negative correlation. This indicates that higher stress scores are associated with lower work-life balance scores. Based on the mean, students reported being able to moderately balance work and life demands. The standard deviation captured the different experiences when it came to balancing some students reported having little to some balance. The PSS mean demonstrated that most college students experienced moderate stress. The

weak correlation between work-life balance and PSS suggests that work-life balance alone is one of the factors that leads to stress, however, it is not the sole factor.

Discussion

The impact of stress on college students can vary greatly depending on an individual student's demands. Within this paper, researchers examined the differential effect of stress by student type, perception of stress, health behaviors, and work-life balance. Academic stress affects college students' ability to work on assignments and pay attention during lectures, but it also affects their overall mental health. Jenkins et al. (2021). Students may find themselves overwhelmed with both the demands of college and personal life, causing anxiety and academic pressure. This leads to less life satisfaction and more stress. Not only does it affect their personal lives, but also the management of emotions and thoughts.

The amount of stress and fatigue that a single person is able to place on an individual's life is astonishing, teachers can shape a student's life and help them reach their dreams, unfortunately with the amount of stress that teachers are under their good intentions can be misperceived and cause a student to lose all interest in the related field. COVID-19 only caused more stress and caused a sudden shift to online learning, isolation from peers, uncertainty about the future, and health fears dramatically increased levels of anxiety and stress among college students (Benham, 2021). Based on the present study, most students experienced moderate levels of stress and were able to moderately balance schoolwork and life demands. However, the relationship between the two was not strong enough to suggest that work-life alone affects stress, suggesting that more research is needed to discover what other factors, along with work-life balance, contribute to stress in college students. This finding aligns with past studies, which have explored stress as being affected by various external factors such as life demands and internal factors such as locus of control and perceived stress (Knoster & Goodboy, 2019).

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Natural Relief: Why People Choose Cannabis Over Pharmaceuticals

Yvette Moths

INTRODUCTION:

Public attitudes toward cannabis have changed dramatically over the last decade, largely due to shifts in policy, wider availability, and a gradual loosening of long-standing cultural stigma. Although cannabis was once closely associated with criminality or irresponsible behavior, it is now legally accessible in most U.S. states, whether for medical or recreational use, creating space for new conversations about its place in everyday health and wellness.

My interest in this topic developed unexpectedly when I learned that a close friend—someone highly organized, academically driven, and in the middle of earning her master's degree in education—used cannabis regularly to manage stress and improve her sleep. Her success, stability, and responsible lifestyle sharply contrasted with the stereotypes I had grown up believing about cannabis users. This moment made me realize how powerful stigma can be in shaping assumptions, even when those assumptions do not match reality. It also made me aware of the gap between how cannabis use is publicly perceived and how it is actually experienced by ordinary adults. That shift in my own understanding became the starting point for this study and shaped the lens through which I approached participants' stories.

Existing research suggests that cannabis may help relieve symptoms related to mental health and chronic pain with fewer side effects than certain prescription medications (Lucas & Walsh, 2017). As more people openly acknowledge using cannabis for self-medication, a more nuanced picture is emerging of its role in modern wellness. This study seeks to explore the motivations behind cannabis use and the personal factors influencing why individuals choose cannabis as an alternative to prescription pharmaceuticals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cannabis has long carried a complicated reputation in the United States. For decades, it was grouped with illicit drugs and associated with criminal behavior, even as people continued to report personal benefits from its use. Research over the past several years has helped shift this narrative, showing that cannabis may have therapeutic value for certain conditions, including anxiety, chronic pain, insomnia, and other mental health symptoms (Bottorff et al., 2013; Lucas & Walsh, 2017; Pritchett et al., 2022). As legalization has expanded, public attitudes have moved alongside it, creating an environment where individuals feel increasingly comfortable discussing their cannabis use and exploring it as part of their own wellness routines.

A growing body of literature highlights the role of **self-medication** in cannabis use. Studies show that many adults turn to cannabis because it feels more accessible, more affordable, or less intimidating than formal medical treatment (Kvamme et al., 2021). Others describe cannabis as a safer alternative to prescription medications, especially when past experiences with pharmaceuticals included side effects, emotional blunting, or dependency concerns. While demographic patterns vary, some research suggests that younger adults and those with higher education may be more likely to self-medicate with cannabis—although this is not a universal trend (Wallis et al., 2022). At the same time, researchers caution that cannabis can exacerbate anxiety symptoms for certain

individuals, underscoring that its effects are highly individual and not uniformly positive (Wallis, 2002).

Legal access has also changed how people think about and use cannabis. As of the writing of this article (May 2025), the majority of U.S. states allow cannabis use in some capacity—whether medical, recreational, or both. **In the United States, 39 out of 50 states have legalized cannabis in some form – 15 for medical use only and 24 for both medical and recreational use.** This wider availability has lowered barriers to access and reduced the need for medical gatekeeping, making cannabis a practical option for people who may not feel comfortable seeking professional help or who have had negative experiences with the medical system (Kvamme et al., 2021). With legalization has come a noticeable shift in stigma: conversations about cannabis use are more open, and social judgment has softened, allowing many users to view their own consumption as a reasonable and even responsible choice.

Some studies have also examined cannabis as a substitute for prescription medications, including stimulants commonly used to treat ADHD. While some individuals report symptom relief, researchers remain cautious about long-term effects, particularly in younger populations (Devinsky et al., 2020). These uncertainties highlight a need for more comprehensive research, even as interest in cannabis as a therapeutic tool continues to grow.

Altogether, the literature paints a clear picture of an ongoing shift. Many people are turning to cannabis to manage mental health symptoms, pain, or sleep disturbances, especially when conventional treatments fall short or create new challenges. The combination of legal accessibility, evolving social norms, and personal experiences with pharmaceuticals has created a landscape in which self-medication is easier and more acceptable than ever before. As stigma continues to decline and individuals speak more openly about their experiences, researchers have an opportunity to better understand how and why cannabis is becoming part of everyday wellness practices.

METHODS:

This qualitative study was aimed to understand why individuals choose cannabis over prescription medications to manage symptoms related to mental health, sleep disorders, and/or chronic pain. Because the goal was to learn directly from these individuals personally lived experiences, semi-structured interviews were used to allow participants to share their stories in their own words while still covering the core topics needed for the research.

Participants

Ten adults (consisting of seven women and three men), aged 23 to 52, were recruited through convenience sampling from a local community Facebook group. All participants reported using cannabis to self-medicate and were not under the formal care of a medical professional for cannabis use. Participants provided informed consent, and identifying details were removed to protect privacy. Although the group was small, it is not meant to represent all cannabis users, their experiences offered valuable insight into their everyday decision-making.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted either in person or by phone, depending on what each participant preferred. Conversations via phone lasted about 45 minutes. To help participants feel comfortable and to keep the interviews more informal and open, no audio recordings were taken; the responses were documented through detailed handwritten notes and text messages throughout the sessions. Interviews included demographic questions and open-ended prompts about cannabis use, perceived benefits, side effects, and comparisons to prescription medications.

Data Analysis

After all interviews were completed, the handwritten notes were reviewed multiple times and coded manually. I grouped recurring ideas into broader themes related to motivations, experiences with pharmaceuticals, personal beliefs, and emotional or physical outcomes. Because qualitative analysis is influenced by the researcher's own background and assumptions, I approached the coding with awareness of my evolving perspective on cannabis use. The goal was not to generalize the findings to a larger population, but to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals make sense of their choices and how their lived experiences shape their decisions.

RESULTS:

Analysis of the interviews revealed several recurring themes that help explain why participants chose cannabis over prescription medications. Although each person's situation was unique, many of their experiences and motivations overlapped in meaningful ways.

1. Management of Mental Health and Eating Disorder Symptoms

Participants shared that cannabis helped them cope with anxiety, depression, overstimulation, or sleep difficulties. They described cannabis as giving them a sense of emotional steadiness that they struggled to find with prescription medications. Several people said they felt more "like themselves" when using cannabis compared to how they felt on antidepressants or sleep aids.

- *"Antidepressants made me feel numb; cannabis helps me sleep and wake up feeling normal."* – Participant #1
- *"Edibles help me calm down when I feel overstimulated or stressed."* – Participant #9
- *"It gives me more patience with my kids and helps me unwind at night."* – Participant #10
- *"I struggled with an eating disorder for years—cannabis helped me enjoy food again."* – Participant #6

2. Avoiding the Side Effects of Prescription Medications

A major reason participants turned away from prescription drugs was the frustration and discomfort they felt from medication side effects. People described emotional blunting, concerns about dependency, changes in libido, and feeling tired or disconnected from themselves while on prescribed treatments.

- *"I don't get side effects with cannabis. Dependency on prescriptions scares me."* – Participant #8
- *"I was tired of feeling nothing emotionally, and the medication ruined my sex drive."* – Participant #5

3. Preference for Natural Options, Cost, and Accessibility

Participants talked about wanting a more natural approach to managing their symptoms. They expressed a desire for remedies they felt they could control and understand. Cannabis fit into that preference more easily than prescription medications.

- *"I know what's in my edibles. I can't pronounce half the ingredients in my medication."* – Participant #4
- *"I couldn't afford \$80 a month for prescriptions—cannabis was cheaper."* – Participant #3

4. Changing Perceptions and Reduced Stigma

Several participants described how their attitudes toward cannabis had changed over time. Some had grown up believing that cannabis was dangerous or addictive, often due to family messages or cultural stigma. As legalization expanded and they learned more, these beliefs shifted.

- *"I used to judge people who smoked or used cannabis daily; now I realize how wrong I was. I'm a teacher."* – Participant #2
- *"Growing up, I thought cannabis was as addictive as cocaine."* – Participant #7

Participants noted they were more open to discussing cannabis use with strangers or researchers than with family due to lingering stigma.

The interviews revealed a clear pattern in how participants made sense of their decision to use cannabis instead of prescription medications. Many people described long, difficult experiences with antidepressants, sleep medications, or pain prescriptions—most commonly the emotional numbness, fatigue, or loss of libido that came with them. These frustrations played a major role in their shift toward cannabis. Their stories align with existing research showing that many adults choose cannabis because they see it as safer, more tolerable, or simply more effective for their everyday needs (Lucas & Walsh, 2017; Piper et al., 2017). Participants also expressed a strong desire to avoid dependency on pharmaceuticals, a concern that appears frequently in recent studies on self-medication and medication substitution (Wallis et al., 2022; Asselin et al., 2022).

Another meaningful pattern was the personal transformation many participants described regarding their own beliefs about cannabis. Several entered adulthood with the idea that cannabis was dangerous or comparable to harder drugs—messages shaped by family attitudes, cultural narratives, or school-based drug education. Hearing participants reflect on this shift highlighted how deeply stigma can shape people's assumptions. Their experiences are consistent with research showing that legalization and increased exposure to accurate information have softened public perceptions and encouraged more honest conversations about cannabis use (Bottorff et al., 2013; Kvamme et al., 2021).

For participants in this study, cannabis was not an escape or a source of chaos; instead, they talked about it as something that helped them feel calmer, more grounded, and more capable of meeting the demands of work, parenting, or personal well-being (Feingold, 2020).

The findings also show how strongly people value a sense of control over their health. For many, cannabis felt more natural or straightforward compared to prescription medications. This belief, while subjective, played a significant role in shaping how participants interpreted the benefits they experienced. Their comments mirror broader research that suggests individuals are increasingly drawn to holistic or self-directed approaches to wellness when traditional treatments feel impersonal, inaccessible, or ineffective (Pritchett et al., 2022; Lucas & Walsh, 2017).

While this study offers meaningful insight into why people choose cannabis, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The sample was small and localized, and all information came from self-reported experiences. These accounts do not represent every cannabis user, nor do they capture the full range of potential medical or psychological effects. Still, the personal narratives shared here highlight a growing cultural shift toward seeing cannabis as a legitimate tool for emotional and physical support. This echoes recent research showing that stigma reduction, changing laws, and greater openness have made it easier for individuals to explore alternatives outside of the traditional medical system (Bottorff et al., 2013; Kvamme et al., 2021).

Taken together, the experiences of these participants invite more open, compassionate conversations about cannabis use. Their stories challenge outdated assumptions and show the value of listening directly to individuals when trying to understand why cannabis is becoming a more common choice for managing stress, pain, and mental health symptoms.

CONCLUSION:

This research set out to understand why individuals choose cannabis as an alternative to prescription medications, particularly for managing anxiety, stress, chronic pain, and sleep-related issues. Through interviews with ten adults, several consistent themes emerged. Participants described turning to cannabis after experiencing side effects from prescription drugs, feeling emotionally disconnected while medicated, or becoming frustrated with the long-term costs and dependency

risks associated with pharmaceuticals. Many also wanted an option that felt more natural and within their personal control. Their experiences showed how deeply everyday challenges—such as sleeplessness, overstimulation, or emotional strain—shape decisions about health and wellness.

Across interviews, people spoke about cannabis not as a gateway drug or a last resort, but as something that offered balance, comfort, or relief when other approaches fell short. For some, cannabis supported emotional well-being or improved their relationships with family. For others, it provided a sense of stability that prescription medications had not. These accounts reflect broader trends seen in recent research, where cannabis is increasingly viewed as a legitimate tool for self-care rather than something associated with stigma or irresponsibility.

This study does have limitations. The sample size was small and drawn from a single online community, and the findings rely on personal reports rather than clinical measurements. Because of this, the results cannot be generalized to all cannabis users or to every health condition. Even so, the stories shared here add valuable perspective to ongoing conversations about cannabis use and show how individual experiences often differ from long-held assumptions. As legalization expands and stigma slowly declines, it is likely that more people will feel comfortable discussing their use openly. Continued research is needed to explore long-term effects, potential risks, and the contexts in which cannabis is most helpful.

Overall, the narratives in this study highlight an important shift in how people manage their health—one that emphasizes personal agency, lived experience, and the search for practical relief. Listening to these experiences helps create a clearer understanding of why cannabis has become a meaningful option for many individuals navigating the gaps between their needs and the limitations of traditional treatments.

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The Impact of Structural Racism and Socioeconomic Status on Preventative Healthcare Access in Stanislaus County

Sierra Cresswell

Introduction

Growing up, I have witnessed first hand from friends and family how racism and poverty can affect someone's health. I noticed that it was the norm for individuals who lived in low-income neighborhoods not to visit the doctor. It was not that they did not care about their health, but rather due to economic reasons or negative experiences that they had with their health insurance in the past. Preventative healthcare refers to medical services that are aimed to prevent diseases and maintain health. One of my close friends in high school had awful asthma and would not go to a doctor since her family could not afford to pay for insurance or even pay out-of-pocket. It is experiences like these that made me understand not all people have the same level of access to healthcare that can have great impacts on their health later on.

Stanislaus County is in a healthcare crisis due to the high rate of substance use and a shortage of funding for public health services. For example, they are cutting county provided healthcare services in Modesto, leaving them with only two health centers (Carlson 2024). There isn't enough funding for doctors and other healthcare providers, making it hard for everyone in the community, insured or not, to get the proper care they need.

Most research about the access to healthcare is done in urban cities, but my research will look into rural Stanislaus County. I decided to research this topic by conducting interviews and surveys to find out experiences people have faced when it comes to healthcare and how it affects their access to preventative care.

Literature Review

The link between structural racism and socioeconomic status has created many obstacles for minority groups, particularly in Latino and African American communities (Williams and Mohammed 2009). Structural racism is the way that discrimination has been embedded into institutional policies that only affect certain racial or ethnic groups, which are typically found in healthcare and the education system. (Williams and Mohammed 2009). Some examples of this are shown through health insurance companies that have been historically known for charging higher premiums for Black individuals, and some states refusing to expand Medicaid (government funded health insurance) leading to a large majority of these populations to be uninsured (Gee & Ford 2011; Bailey, Feldman, & Basset 2020).

Socioeconomic status is also shaped by structural policies that affect access to healthcare, education, and employment. Researchers have repeatedly found that low educational attainment is one of the main contributing factors when it comes to an individual's overall health and health literacy (Stormacq, et al. 2019; Cutler & Lleras-Muney 2006). Studies showed that those who had higher educational attainment had a better understanding of health literacy leading them to have healthy behaviors and access to preventative healthcare, whereas lower educational attainment was linked to low health literacy and poor overall health (Stormacq 2019). Job roles and how much an individual gets paid is another contributing factor to these disparities. Most low-paying jobs do not offer health insurance or benefits leaving many uninsured and neglecting their health (Blumberg & Holahan 2012). The idea that those in lower socioeconomic and racial minority groups experience healthcare disparities is not new, however we can try to find common themes in what causes these disparities to raise awareness on these issues.

Methods

To find out more information on how socioeconomic status and race play a role in health conditions and access to preventative healthcare, I used a mixed method research approach to get deeper insight from the individuals who are affected. By combining both qualitative and quantitative data I am able to go beyond

just identifying the problem, but also understanding some of the root causes of it through their stories. I decided to survey and interview 10 individuals around Stanislaus County from different races and socioeconomic status' to see the disparities in their healthcare experiences. I chose family, friends, coworkers, and classmates from all different backgrounds to participate in my research.

I started the survey off by asking demographic information such as age, race, employment status, and highest level of education to show the diversity between the participants. Next, I asked questions about their healthcare access, unfair treatment they may experience, any barriers preventing them from receiving care, and community resources that they may use. Based on the survey results, I chose to interview 3 people who seemed to face some disparities when it came to healthcare access due to education, income, or structural racism.

Table 1. List of Survey Questions

1. Do you have health insurance?
2. If yes, is it through government assisted programs, private insurers, or your employer?
3. How far do you live from the nearest healthcare facility?
4. How do you feel about going to the doctor? (ex. nervous , vulnerable, relieved)
5. Have you seen a doctor or any healthcare provider in the past 12 months for a routine check-up?
6. If not, what were the primary reasons you did not get preventative care?
7. How often do financial concerns (ex. cost of healthcare, insurance premiums) prevent you from seeking preventative care?
8. Have you ever felt that your race/ethnicity affects how healthcare providers treat you? If yes, please explain.
9. Are there community programs or services near you that help provide access to preventative healthcare (ex. free clinics, educational programs)?
10. What would make you seek preventative healthcare?

Results

The survey results showed clear disparities of access to preventative healthcare which

were influenced by structural racism and their socioeconomic status. Out of the 10 participants, the majority were Latino/ Hispanic 50%, 20% were African American, 20% were White, and 10% were Asian. Only 60% of participants had health insurance either through their job or government funded programs such as Medical. About 40% of participants, majority from Latino/ Hispanic and African American groups, noted that they did not have insurance which limits their access to preventative care.

When it came to actually using preventative healthcare in the last 12 months, 40% of participants stated they have annual checkups, 20% get quarterly checkups, and 40% never got any preventative care. When asked what the main reasons were for not seeking preventative care, their reasons were because of high copays, long wait times for appointments, and nervousness. Financial concerns was the most common theme among all participants. When asked how frequently financial issues interfered with them from receiving preventative care, 30% said rarely, 40% said sometimes, 20% said often, and 10% said never. They answered that they would be more likely to utilize preventative care if they had more understanding doctors, less wait times for appointments, and lower costs.

When asked about why they did not have healthcare coverage 2 of the 4 said that it was because they did not qualify for government assistance programs because they make “too much”. They weren’t able to be covered by programs such as Medical or Medicaid, but they weren’t able to afford their own private insurance. The other 2 who claimed to be uninsured stated that it was because they worked part-time and did not qualify for benefits through their employer.

During the interviews, participants shared stories of experiences they have had at the doctor when seeking access to preventative care.

Participant 1: I remember during COVID in 2020 I ended up going to the hospital with severe pain in my abdomen. The doctor seemed to quickly dismiss me and just sent me home with some ibuprofen. I could tell she thought I was exaggerating to get strong prescription meds and refused to do any tests or x-rays. Turns out my appendix had ruptured.

Participant 2: I personally have not had any negative experiences when going to the doctor but I know my parents who only speak Spanish have a hard time due to the language barrier. We usually have to have someone in our family to come with them to translate or else they won’t get the proper care they need.

Participant 3 : I feel like one of the main barriers to accessing preventative healthcare is definitely wait times. One of my family members is on Medical and to get an appointment for an urgent medical issue the wait time is over two months. If she needs immediate care she usually has to go to urgent care or the ER to get treated quicker which ends up with high out of pocket costs.

Discussion

The results from the surveys and interviews showed that both socioeconomic status and race significantly influenced access to preventative healthcare in Stanislaus County. Latino/Hispanic and African American participants were more likely to be uninsured and not get routine check ups. These trends aren’t just by choice, but because of inequalities that have existed for hundreds of years. Due to structural racism, these communities have a harder time obtaining a quality education, inexpensive healthcare, and well-paying jobs which plays a part in their health outcomes (Rosenblum and Travis 2015).

When it came to socioeconomic status, people with lower educational attainment (only a high school diploma or some college) or those with only part-time jobs were more likely to be without health insurance and claim that cost was one of the main reasons they didn't seek preventative care. Those who reported they had an associates degree or higher reported to have full insurance coverage. Education plays a major role when it comes to health outcomes because those with higher education tend to have better knowledge on health as well as a stable job which provides them with benefits like health insurance (Lott 2012).

Even those who had insurance mentioned that they still didn't regularly see the doctor due to how difficult it can be to navigate insurance claims. Some challenges they mentioned when it came to their insurance was denied claims and how they had to appeal the denied claims and pay the out-of-pocket costs until it was settled. Experiences like these gave them a bad reputation with the healthcare system leading to them trying to avoid it at all cost unless needing emergency care.

These results were not surprising to me. Living in Stanislaus County, I have seen from family, friends, and coworkers how hard it can be to receive quality healthcare whether you're insured or not. These trends come from long standing systemic issues. This is what gave me the inspiration to do my research on this specific topic and try to find the underlying causes of this.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings in my research showed a strong correlation between race, socioeconomic status, and healthcare, but further studies with a larger group sample would need to be conducted to confirm these claims. The research showed that it is not as easy for those in racial/ethnic minority groups, particularly those with less education or lower income, to utilize preventative healthcare. Most participants shared similar concerns of high costs and long wait times when it came to seeking preventative care, even when they actually needed it.

The purpose of this research was to shed light on the health inequalities that are happening in our community. Bringing awareness to these real life experiences people are facing everyday and paying attention to their concerns is necessary when it comes to improving unequal policies. Everyone should be able to depend on preventative healthcare, not just those who are able to afford it.

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Food Insecurity Among Fresno's Farmworker Community

Janette Mejia Plaza

The Central Valley is a fertile farm belt that expands for about 20,000 miles and supplies one fourth of the nation's food (USGS). Fresno County alone is considered to be one of the most agriculturally productive counties in the United States and is also home to the region's largest farmworker population. Despite robust agriculture in Fresno County, more than half of the farmworkers who live there are food insecure (Brown and Getz 2011). Food insecurity is defined as the "limited access or lack of access to a nutritionally sound and culturally appropriate diet from reliable mainstream sources" (Guptill, Copelton, and Lucal 2023). In the United States, where our current food system provides 4,000 calories per person, which is one and a half times more than the amount that is needed, the production of hunger is the result of intentional policies that exclude immigrants from basic necessities like food (Guptill, Copelton, and Lucal 2023).

Sociologist Tanya Maria Golash-Boza states that the position of farmworkers in America resulted from the job restructuring, after neoliberal reforms in the Global South pushed many into economic migration to the United States (Tanya Maria Golash-Boza 2015). For example the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) forced subsistence farmers from Mexico into farming jobs in the United States when crops from the US flooded the market in Mexico at lower prices made possible by subsidies from the US government making it impossible for farmers to compete. The agrarian capitalism of California was from the beginning reliant on the influx of farmworkers from Mexico to create the highest profits while farmworkers survived on the thinnest margins (Brown and Getz 2011). The United States Farm Bureau and Californian farmers fabricated the need for cheap Mexican labor by first legalizing the supply through the Bracero Program in 1943 to increase agricultural output needed during WWII (Hernández 2023) allowed for 200,000 Mexican nationals to enter the United States legally. A year after the Bracero Program ended, the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 capped immigration from the entire world to 120,000 people. This was a slap in the face for many farmworkers that had toiled on U.S. farms to only be treated as disposable. In the words of President Harry S. Truman, Mexican braceros were "ready to go to work when needed; to be gone when not needed" (Hernández 2023).

California agrarian capitalism continues to devalue the labor of farmworkers by underemploying the labor force. There are approximately 882,000 farmworkers to fill 412,300 jobs, creating an environment rife for exploitation where excess farmworkers can be deported "when not needed" (Hooker et al. 2024). In agrarian capitalism, farmworkers are responsible for the reproduction of their own labor. The oversupply of farmworkers to jobs forces farmworkers to perennially look for work. Farmworkers are prone to higher levels of food insecurity, because they are not employed throughout the year. It is estimated that farmworkers are only employed at rates half that of regularly employed workers (Brown and Getz 2011). For the transgression of being illegal, farmworkers are sanctioned by being denied access to means-tested programs and the food from the farms where they work. Without year-round employment and access to CalFresh (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), food insecurity among farmworkers continues to persist. In America we have seasonal workers that get financially rewarded year-round, we just call them teachers.

Food insecurity and poverty in Fresno County is defined by its persistent poverty- a state of poverty affecting at least 20% of the population over a span of 30 years (Benson, Bishaw, and Glassman 2023). Due to the large presence of farmworkers in Fresno County, the solutions to address food insecurity in the Central Valley should focus on the expansion of CalFresh benefits

for all, regardless of legal status. In Fresno County, there are approximately 72,000 farmworkers with up to 82% of them coming from Mexico (NCFH 2023). Farmworkers on average are most likely to be male, single, and approximately 39 years-of-age (La Cooperativa 2023). Compared to different geographical regions, immigrants in the Central Valley are least likely to have a path towards citizenship, and it is estimated that 75% of total farmworkers in California are undocumented (Community and Labor Center 2021). During the Covid Pandemic, undocumented farmworkers were excluded from receiving stimulus checks and immigrant women were among those most likely to lose their employment (Community and Labor Center 2021). The low naturalization rate in Fresno County (44.2%) and over-representation of Mexican nationals in the farmworker population, are examples of how agrarian capitalism's demand for a reserve army of labor relies on the exploitation of immigrants who have little legal protection. Representative Brandon Gill, a MAGA Republican from Texas, recently shared on social media that "cotton was still harvested after slavery ended and our food will continue to be picked after mass deportation"(Gill 2024). According to Golash-Boza (2015), threats of mass deportation are messages that keep labor compliant through fear. Farmworkers are beholden to the legal landscape shaped by the Farm Bureau which favors the interest of farmers. The American Farm Bureau has historically voted against farm worker protections, including the Farm Workforce Modernization Act, which proposes a legal pathway for citizenship for farmworkers (UFW 2022).

Efforts to solve food insecurity by the California Department of Food and Agriculture's Office of Farm to Fork (CDFA-F2F) exclude farmworkers. CDFA-F2F created a working group with different stakeholders in the Central Valley to address the issues affecting the most marginalized communities. Included among the working group was the Farm Bureau but not the United Farm Workers. At a state level we have decided that the economic interests of big agriculture trump the human rights of farmworkers. Senator Melissa Hurtado, who represents the 16th congressional district of the Southwestern Central Valley, proposed the Food4All Act (SB245) to extend CalFresh benefits to undocumented immigrants. This bill was modified to only allow undocumented immigrants 55+ to be eligible for services, despite the fact that the average age for farmworkers is 39. CDFA-F2F operates from a position of promoting food with dignity, but dignity is not extended to farmworkers. Our appreciation for farmworkers is based on moral grandstanding- we seemingly understand that they provide for our meals while commodifying their labor. Cal/OSHA heat protection enforcements have declined by 30% over the last 7 years even as we continue to have climate-related heat waves (Lopez 2024). In response to The UFW requesting workers compensation for heat related accidents, Governor Newsom decided it was not in the fiduciary interest of the state to do so (Kuang 2024). In our current political climate of protectionism and nativism, we have scapegoated immigrants as the reason for our economic hardships although they contributed \$8.5 billion dollars to California's economy in 2022 (Davis, Guzman, and Sifre 2024).

To address the issues of food insecurity in Fresno's farmworker community we should first decommodify their labor by advocating for work protections from the environment and employer retaliations. The contributions of farmworkers are vital to our existence although their existence is *out of sight, out of mind*. Expansion of CalFresh benefits should include all people since our food system is robust enough to feed everyone. Employers should face legal sanctions if Cal/OSHA heat protections are not enforced. To ensure that farmworkers are considered in legislation that addresses food insecurity in the Central Valley, state departments should be audited for any conflicts of interest. If food insecurity can only be solved within the current framework through government programs like CalFresh, a path to citizenship should be considered to afford farmworkers access to means-tested programs and eligibility to employment that provides year-round employment with benefits. Solutions within the current framework would only reproduce

the conditions that create hunger among farmworkers if they exclude people on the basis of legal status.

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Shattered Soul

James Bullock

Sixteen, they locked me in,
A cage of steel where shadows spin.
A child's mind, but a man's fate—
Twisted, sealed, they closed the gate.
They said, "Survive, or die alone,"
So I killed the boy, and made him stone.
With every blow, I lost my grace,
A stranger now, with a broken face.
No dreams remained, only fear,
No peace, just pain drawing near.
The quiet screams inside my chest,
Where innocence died, denied rest.
I traded my soul for breath to take,
Each wound a debt I couldn't break.
They forged my heart with fists and lies,
Built a monster beneath my eyes.
I hate the shell they made of me,
This hollow thing, devoid of sympathy.
No kindness left, no warmth to give,
Just a beast that struggles to live.
I wanted purity, not this curse,
Not this nightmare, dark and perverse.
But the world taught me hate and dread,
Taught me to fear the blood I bled.
Each scar a mark of how I fell,
Each night a war, a silent hell.
The rage, the pain—they're all I know,
A monster forged in shadows' glow.
You think you see me, but you don't—
You see the ashes, not the smoke.
The hollow shell that's walked through years,
Haunted by a lifetime's tears.
They made me this—there's no release,
A twisted frame, no soul, no peace.
A hollow man, with no true name,
A shadow scarred by guilt and shame.
I curse the day I crossed that line,
When my soul was sold, when I resigned.
For what they built, it's all I've known—
A broken man, a heart of stone.
Now the monster's all I am,
A soul erased, a fractured plan.
I begged for mercy, they turned away,

So now I stand—betrayed, astray.
A boy gone dark—can you see?
What they've done, what they've stolen from me?

Artistic Evolution

James Neal

Modern Art has evolved rapidly since the nineteenth century bringing into question, what art can be. The intense realism slowly shifted to more abstract ideals and more imaginative pieces pushing the boundaries of art at the time. Claude Monet was the pioneer of the Impressionist movement; his expert use of broad brush strokes with vibrant colors started an immense shift into abstract art. The start of the Impressionist movement began with the introduction of Monet's *Impression, Sunrise, 1872, oil on canvas*. This work depicts the French port city La Havre, with brush strokes very clearly visible and a large emphasis on the lighting from the sun cascading onto the water. This painting began using the idea of painting in “plain air” which was the technique of painting what was directly in front of you to try and capture the natural light of the subject. With the whole goal of the movement centering around how light affected their subjects and the environment, “The Impressionists wanted to create an art that was modern by capturing the rapid pace of contemporary life and the fleeting conditions of light” (Gresh 7). Monet's various different works and the Impressionist movement were a precursor for the Modernist movement that would radically shift the artistic movement of the modern era to coincide with shifting western ideals. Leading to the expanse of many different movements that would evolve in the post impressionist movement at the turn of the twentieth century.

The post impressionist movement evolved from impressionism with paintings and subject matter becoming more obscure and abstract. The leaders of this post Impressionist movement were Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Cezanne. Van Gogh's most famous work was *The Starry Night, 1889, oil on canvas*, which was created from his room in the asylum he admitted himself to depicting his view at sunrise overlooking an imaginary village. Van Gogh's work follows the trend of Impressionism but goes even further on to neglect realism and drift more into the imaginary pulling upon symbolism to convey their messages as opposed to a literal representation. Paul Cezanne explored the ideas of multiple perspectives in his art with items being out of proportion or purposely misdrawn to better encapsulate the symbolism he was trying to convey in his works. For example in his painting *The Basket of Apples, 1893, oil on canvas*, “So very tentatively, Cézanne began the purposeful destruction of the unified image. Look again at the cookies, or whatever they are, stacked upon the plate in the upper right. Is it possible that the gentle disagreements that we noted result from the representation of two slightly different viewpoints?”(Zucker 8). Cezanne was exploring the use of different lines of perspective to experiment with how the eye captures art. While all other art of time was typically drawn with one forced perspective. Both Van Gogh and Cezanne were a huge contribution to the coming changes in art at the turn of the century and directly inspired many Fauvist painters.

The Fauvism movement only lasted for a short period of time before branching out into Cubism and Futurism. Henri Matisse was a French painter known for his work in the early twentieth century during the Fauvism movement. Following post impressionism the Fauve movement continued the already shifting landscape of abstract art with vibrant color. Matisse was known for his wildly sensual figures like in the painting, *Bonheur de Vivre, 1906, oil on canvas*. In Matisse's painting he depicts a vibrant meadow filled with nude women of varying sizes seen in different perspectives and is similar to other Fauvist paintings that came before. The varying use of perspectives were directly inspired by Cezanne's own works, who Matisse studied under, finally capturing the essence of his ideals. The paintings vibrantly outlined women and no clear meaning

draws upon the symbolic ideas that Post Impressionist painters were trying to convey. Keeping in line with the expressionist movements of the time, “The Fauves emphasized the expressive potential of color, employing it arbitrarily, not based on an object’s natural appearance” (Spivey 3). The emerging fauvist movement in France led to many of the artists using it as a base to springboard off into more diverse styles with their own subject matters.

A coinciding movement of the time was German Expressionism, with a notable distinction being the use of dull clashing colors. Emil Nolde, a German painter, created the work known as *Masks, 1911, oil on canvas*. This work depicts several different masks from various different cultures from across the world coinciding with the imperialist ideals of the time. This style of art in Europe was uncommon at the time. His style of art was keeping more in line with the symbolist movement that had come before. The clashing and vibrant colors make “the masks melt into and rise from the canvas, creating a grotesque, mocking chorus of faces. His inclusion of the motif was also based on his intense study of African and Pacific masks” (Die Brucke 10). Both of these styles further pushed the ideas of what abstract art could be with the newly emerging Cubism posed to take the limelight.

“Just as Post-Impressionist color influenced the Fauves and Expressionists, Cezanne’s radical structural and spatial innovations inspired Cubism, a movement that continued modern art’s refusal of linear perspective and the singular vantage point that dominated western painting since the renaissance”(). Just as art always evolves Cubism was the next big step in the abstract movement. Pablo Picasso and George Baraque both were leading the charge in the new Cubist movement with the use of sharp lines and out of proportion figures, it was the true evolution of Cezannes work. Picasso's work *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*, 1907, oil on canvas, was an evolution the previous works made by Cezanne *The Large Bathers, 1906, oil on canvas* which directly inspired Matisse’s *Bonheur de Vivre, 1906, oil on canvas*. Picasso's painting depicts several nude women standing on a street corner in varying sizes with abstract lines and distorted faces while in contrast to the previous paintings was a literal interpretation of something he saw as opposed to an abstract imaginative work. Instead of using bright colors Picasso opted to use more dull realistic colors to give it a modern setting compared to previous work in which the vibrant and fantastical were on display. Like German Expressionist Picasso also incorporated masks he had seen from African art. The woman in the bottom left’s face is distorted to resemble it because of the art he had seen in museums due to France being a major colonial power at the time. Picasso perfectly combined the abstract use of figures to tell his own symbolic, distorted story and “is also about Picasso’s intense fear ... his dread of these women, or more to the point, the disease that he feared they would transmit to him. In the era before antibiotics, contracting syphilis was a well-founded fear” (Harris 12). This artistic movement finally led to the Futurist movement in Italy.

Futurists tried to explore figures and the space around them through the use of the abstract. Being the home to the Renaissance the trend in art had typically been to make the most realistic art as possible. With the shifting ideals and outbreak of expressionist style paintings that changed greatly. Artists such as Umberto Boccioni began making free standing statues and his paintings trying to capture the moving dynamics that could not be captured on a still standing canvas. The Futurist movement consisted of works focused on speed and chaos, a direct contrast to the older Renaissance art becoming a direct social movement against the aforementioned. One of Boccioni’s paintings, the *States of Mind I: The Farenells, 1911, oil on canvas*, depicts a train station with a train at the time moving so fast the image has become distorted and blurred. “Boccioni captures the dynamism of movement and chaos, depicting people being consumed by, or fused with, the steam from the locomotive as it whizzes past” (Umberto 10). With the industrial revolution largely being over and the incoming tensions of World War I the modernization of art was in overdrive. The idea of an

artistic revolution continued into modern art with the idea of what art could be coming into question and leading to an increasingly different view of what constituted art into the turn of the millenia.

Art has always continued to evolve in new and enlightening ways building on what has come before. Art has always been the essence of true human expression and tells so many stories about the time periods and the culture of when it was created. This always leads to a window of ideals and opportunity to experience what came before in new and enlightening ways. Whether it's the Classical era inspiring the Renaissance or Impressionism leading to Cubism, people will always find new ways to innovate and explore their inner ideals through the use of art, coining the question; What is art?

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The Fall of the Qing Dynasty: A Brief History

Joshua Lybarger

At the end of the 19th century, China's very existence was threatened by internal and external factors. Throughout the century China had failed to modernize. The country had been cut apart and exploited by European powers who had their sights set on expansion within Asia. Forced to sign unfair treaties and with no way to resist due to their inferior military technology, the Chinese people suffered for decades. The Qing dynasty refused to adopt new systems of commerce and government, and conservative ideologies prevented progress. The Qing government proved incapable of reform, which spurred the rapid adoption of new ideas in the early 20th century, and the subsequent end of the Qing. Britain's dependence on foreign trade and its rapidly expanding navy led to inevitable conflict with China. China had zero plans to begin trading en masse with the West. In the words of Emperor Qianlong in the 1790s, ". . . we possess all things. [addressed to the king of England] I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufacturers."¹

Because China was unwilling to trade, European powers would force their cooperation through military action throughout the next century. Enormous amounts of opium would be produced by Britain in India. "Following the British conquest of large parts of India, the British invested massively in the manufacture and distribution of opium, seeing it as a way to solve the problem of their balance of payments with China."² The East India Trading Company distributed licenses to sell opium to private traders, who would then make their way to China. The amount of opium imported by China would exponentially grow from 1729 to 1880. Chinese officials were aware of the dangers opium posed; they knew it was an addictive substance with harmful withdrawal symptoms and opium was outlawed in the early 19th century. In 1839 Lin Tse-hsü, a commissioner for the emperor, writes a letter addressed to Queen Victoria: "Consequently there are those who smuggle opium to seduce the Chinese people and so cause the spread of the poison to all provinces. Such persons who only care to profit themselves, and disregard their harm to others, are not tolerated by the laws of Heaven and are unanimously hated by all human beings. His majesty, upon hearing of this, is in a towering rage."³ It is unlikely that letter ever reached Victoria. By 1838 forty-thousand chests of opium had already found their way into China. Harsher anti-smuggling efforts introduced in 1839 would spark a conflict between the British Empire and China known as the Opium Wars.

British businessmen eventually got their way in 1840. "Meanwhile, in England, commercial interests were pushing for war with China. William Jardine, of the major opium trading firm Jardine, Matheson, and Company, sailed to London to lobby for war."⁴ William Jardine would have his way.

¹ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (2025, February 13). Qing dynasty. Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Qing-dynasty>

² Ebrey, Patricia Buckley, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China, Second Edition* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 236.

³ De Bary, William Theodore, *Introduction to Oriental Civilizations: Sources of Chinese Tradition* (Columbia University Press, 1960), 668.

⁴ Ebrey, Patricia Buckley, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China, Second Edition* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 239.

A British fleet consisting of sixteen warships and thirty-one auxiliaries set sail from India that same year. Chinese ports were ill-prepared for the iron-hulled steamships they would find themselves facing. With negotiations out of the question, China ceded Hong Kong, repaid all expenses of the expedition, and allowed direct communications between officials of both countries. In 1841, a second expeditionary force left British shores with ten thousand men.

Strategic locations along the Chinese coast were subsequently occupied, including Shanghai. Once British forces had arrived outside Nanjing, Chinese officials had no choice but to sue for peace, instead of fighting a losing war with unconditional surrender being the most likely outcome. “The treaty of Nanjing, concluded at gunpoint, raised the indemnity to twenty-one million ounces of silver, abolished the Co-hong, opened five treaty ports, (Guangzhou, Xianmen, Fuzhou, Ningbo, and Shanghai), and fixed the tariff at 5 per cent.”⁵ This treaty granted further rights to British merchants doing business in China. “The ‘most-favoured nation’ clause provided that if another nation extracted a new privilege from China, that same privilege would be extended automatically to Britain.”⁶ For every unfavorable privilege granted to rival powers, China would be forced to extend the same deal to Britain, or else. This treaty was obviously onesided. The Qing dynasty’s hands were tied, and every colonial power knew it, as well the Chinese citizenry. In Guangzhou (one of the port cities opened by the treaty) posters were put up all throughout the city denouncing the British and threatening violence to anyone who dared enter. An excerpt taken from the placard reads:

We declare that sooner than obey the proclamation and suffer these wild barbarians, we will act in opposition and adhere to the old regulations of our government . . . With united hearts, we will destroy them in order to display celestial vengeance and manifest public indignation.⁷

Their resistance would be in vain. It was treaties like these that brought on the Century of Humiliation, in which China was torn apart and sewn back together in a manner that was beneficial to European empires.

Chinese officials did not view colonial powers on the Chinese coast as a threat to its longevity. Their primary concerns surrounded rebellions and uprisings. Simply stating that Chinese peasants were not happy with their government would be the understatement of the 19th century. They were quite eager to take up arms. “In 1813, 100,000 followers of the millenarian Eight Trigrams sect rose not far from the capital itself, seizing several cities in the north China plain and even penetrating the Forbidden City in Beijing.”⁸ After the Qing dynasty demonstrated their inability to stave off foreign threats, the latter half of the 19th century was witness to a shocking number of rebellions. An excerpt from *Proclamations of the Xiamen Small Sword Clan* reads: “The Qing dynasty has been governing China for more than two hundred years. Corruption of the officials and oppression of the people clearly indicate that its mandate has come to an end.”⁹ This proclamation came from a secret society which would work in conjunction with the massive Taiping Rebellion and take several cities. Unrest among

⁵ Ebrey, Patricia Buckley, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China, Second Edition* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 239.

⁶ Ebrey, Patricia Buckley, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China, Second Edition* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 239.

⁷ Ebrey, Patricia Buckley, *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook, Second Edition* (Free Press, 1993), 311.

⁸ Ebrey, Patricia Buckley, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China: Second Edition* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 240.

⁹ Ebrey, Patricia Buckley, *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook, Second Edition* (The Free Press, 1993), 319.

the populace caused by foreign interference would threaten the Qing dynasty's authority until its collapse in the early 20th century.

Compounding the modernization issue, the Qing dynasty took a conservative approach to government. The recent collapse of the Ming dynasty was still fresh in everyone's minds. It was concluded that open and forward-thinking dynasties were volatile and unpredictable. Punishments for things perceived as deviant became harsher, like homosexuality. Theater and literature were both frowned upon by scholars since they were thought to be licentious. Book banning was common, and theaters closed frequently. Confucian scholars viewed progressive thought as the primary downfall of the Ming. Conversely, the Ming valued emotion and spontaneity. In the 1860s Chinese officials feared the collapse of the Qing if no action was immediately taken.

Reform-minded officials had to try to revitalize the dynasty. Their first goal was to re establish local control and restore the economy by reducing government expenditures, repairing, transportation and infrastructure, and inducing peasants to return to abandoned land. They drew on a large body of writings on tax assessment, water-control, grain transportation, defense, suppression of bandits, and similar statecraft topics.¹⁰

A man named Hsüeh Fu-ch'eng never held a high position in government, but he acted as an advisor to influential figures such as Tseng Kuo-Fan and Li Huang-chang. One of his essays, *Suggestions on Foreign Affairs*, advocates for change and adaptation for the new era. "When change in the world is small, the laws governing the world will accordingly undergo small change; when change in the world is great, the laws will accordingly undergo great change."¹¹ These same officials also aimed to set up dockyards and factories like those found in the Western powers. With modern guns and warships, they would be capable of enforcing their borders and staving off hostile powers. This is a case of too little, too late. And these reforms still met opposition from neo-Confucianists, even as the Qing dynasty was crumbling around them.

The fruits the dockyards bore would not last long, either. The warships constructed would be destroyed in one hour by French forces during the 1884-85 conflict over ownership of Vietnam. Simply mimicking Western militaries and practices would not be enough. Western leadership and training were a necessity for any country that wished to fight back. Japan, which had found themselves in a similar predicament in the second half of the 19th century, quickly industrialized. Professional training and sharing of scientific knowledge by Germany allowed the Japanese to win the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. And just thirty-six years later, the superbattleship *Yamato* would be commissioned. China had failed to modernize in the 19th century. Modernization took the form of factories, dockyards, stock markets, and imperialism. Their isolationist policies were the direct opposite of this. The dynasty was treading water and had been for decades. They had failed to implement the economic policies which allowed western empires to exert power all over the globe. "Li Hongzhang, in particular, became convinced that guns and ships were merely the surface manifestation of the Western powers' economic strength and therefore in order to compete China had to modernize its economy."¹² The West's true strength came from their economic might.

¹⁰ Ebrey, Patricia Buckley, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China, Second Edition* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 244.

¹¹ De Bary, William Theodore, *Introduction to Oriental Civilizations: Sources of Chinese Tradition* (Columbia University Press, 1960), 715.

¹² Ebrey, Patricia Buckley, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China, Second Edition* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 245.

The turn of the century heralded a new China. The populace promoted new ways of thinking—they constructed universities and sought to combat corruption. A revolution succeeded in toppling the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the revolutionaries attempted to install a republican government. Nations that cannot adapt are relegated to the history books, and the Qing dynasty is one such example. The coming conflicts with Japan would stifle modernization and weaken the young republic. Even after the defeat of Imperial Japan in 1945, the Communist Party had molded peasants into a highly effective fighting force, which culminated in a civil war. China would not fully modernize until the birth of Communist China. A mixture of internal and external threats, as well as conservative thinking impeded progress for over 150 years. China's inability to defend itself against technologically superior forces necessitated modernization, but they had failed where Japan had succeeded. Instead of completely copying a Western style of government, China had only attempted to mimic their industry. Conservative ways of thought, such as isolationism, contrasted with the West and their rapid adoption of new policies and technologies. In the end, China suffered dearly for it.

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The Neolithic Site of Çatalhöyük

Kathia Contreras

Introduction

About 11,500- 5,000 years ago, the Neolithic revolution occurred. During the revolution, humans went from being scattered nomads to settled agriculturalists. It was an enormous jump that humans made which paved the way for the society that we live in today. One of the most important cities that was formed during this era was what is now known as The Neolithic Site of Catalhoyuk which is located in central Turkey. This site represents a large settlement which was inhabited 9,000 years ago. It was originally found by David French and James Mellart, two British archeologists during the 1950's, more specifically 1958. Since 1961, this site has been thoroughly dug and searched through by numerous amounts of individuals and teams. Groundbreaking discoveries and findings were uncovered during early excavations at Catalhoyuk, but the evolution and diverse archeological research methods are what has allowed archeologists to reconstruct an accurate narrative of life during the Neolithic era. From simple traditional digs, to more advanced technologies and collaborations, research methodologies play a cardinal role in the unfolding of Catalhoyuk

Early Excavation Methods (James Mellaart's Era, 1960s)

James Mellart was the first to dig through this site; David French and Mellart found the site while driving 45km Southeast of Konya when they suddenly noticed a peculiar hill that was rising from a barren plain. When the two archeologists examined the mound, they realized they had discovered an untouched Neolithic site. Mellart and his team began their excavation in 1961 and ended their work in 1965. He focused on doing his excavations in a thorough and careful manner, although it is clear that he and his team were unable to have access to any of the technology that we have today. This caused them to make false presumptions about certain artifacts that were found such as the “mother goddess”. His team consisted of Turkish researchers and workers; together they found 160 buildings due to large-scale digging. The excavations led to beautiful discoveries such as wall-paintings and clay figurines. Thanks to James, The Neolithic Site of Catalhoyuk became universally known. Although Mellart made history with his incredible discoverings and finding the site itself, there were technological and contextual limitations to the early work of Catalhoyuk.

Modern Multidisciplinary Methodologies (Ian Hodder, 1993–2018)

Mellart and his team undoubtedly did incredible work with this site, but twenty-eight years later, Ian Hodder—a British researcher— began to work on Catalhoyuk for the next twenty-five years. Unearthing this site beautifully with the help of researchers that came from 47 different countries and excavated over 30,000 number of units. It was called the Catalhoyuk Research Project, and it recently came to an end in 2018, but there is still ongoing research based on their findings.

The first excavation started in 1993, where Hodder and his team began to first work on “soil scrapping and surface findings” (Tarkan, et. al 2021). It wasn't until 1995 that they found the first building from their own excavation. A year later, they began to post publications of their surface studies and excavation techniques. In 1999, they spent 6 months in “South Area” where they “reached the lowest layer which represents the tracks of first settlers of Catalhoyuk.” (Turkan, et. al 2023). Their first publication where they brought data to a “significant level of analysis” was happening during the year 2000. Their website stated: “These four new volumes would be the first study containing the excavation results analyzed in-depth by the members of the 120-strong team.”

(Tarkan, et. al 2021) A new library and seminar were added in 2001 and in 2002 the construction of the South Shelter was completed for shielding archeologists from the sun. This same year, a team from Berkely completed an excavation on Building 3 on the northern part of the site. In 2003, the project celebrated its 10th anniversary, and an incredible advancement was made during this year as well. “Towards the conclusion of the season, the newly established Geo-Magnetic Team started tracing the settlement’s plan with a Cyrax® 2500 3D Portable Laser Scanner. This equipment made it possible to register Çatalhöyük’s Neolithic structures in a way that never been possible before.” (Tarkan, et. al 2021). Overall, Hodder’s team excavated 27 sites in total, identified 595 of spaces, published 461 publications, identified 7,900 features, 18 levels, and revealed 162 buildings.

An estimated occupation of the East Mound area in this site was between the time frame of c.7100 to 6300 BC. Archeologists digging this site had “a 21m sequence divided into ‘levels’, XII (earliest) to 0 (latest), by Mellaart (Reference Mellaart1964), with the later addition of four ‘pre-XII’ levels (Cessford Reference Cessford2001), probably represents almost the entire duration of occupation” (Orton, et. al). Archeologists came to the conclusion that c.7100 to 6300 BC were the correct dates of human occupation by using radiocarbon dating on levels 12 to 2. Radiocarbon dating—a method used for determining the ages of organic materials—was also used to identify dates from the West mound and multiple different trenches. Another big dating technique that was used for this site was the Bayesian statistical analysis which supports the analyzing of radiocarbon dating. There was a small section available for reading:

“Excavations on the surface of the East Mound reveal changes in household construction and burial chambers. Bayesian analysis of 56 AMS radiocarbon dates from these layers allow the date and pace of these changes to be established in detail. Settlement activity on the East Mound ceased just after 6000 cal BC, and was followed by the cessation of Neolithic burial activity a few decades later.” (Marciniak, et. al 2015).

Another technique that archeologists used for this site was the analysis of wall plasters. This technique allows archaeologists to create estimates of the duration of the building in which the wall is in. “A variety of approaches including analysis of radiocarbon dates, ethnographic analogies and the counting of wall plasters, believed to possibly occur annually, suggest that buildings at Çatalhöyük were occupied for between fifty and a hundred years.” (Cessford, 2003). This visual assessment helped guide archeologists to make educated guesses on how old they think these structures are. These rectified methods that were used by Hodder's new team, transformed the site of Catalhoyuk, and the interpretations within the artifacts as well.

Recent Excavations and Turkish-Led Research (Ali Umut Türkcan)

There is also a new excavation team working on this site which is now led by Ali Umut Turkcan from Anadolu University. Ali Umut Turkcan works in the department of Archeology in Anadolu University and has done research in Archeology of Anatolia. He has also “worked in Çatalhöyük between 1993-2010 as field archaeologist, specialist on stamp seals and figurines” (Turkcan, 2023). Turkcan states “In a space [in Catalhoyuk site] called Space 66 which has been filled with rubble, a marble figurine was found with an obsidian point stuck into a lime lump at the bottom of the curtain Wall. The find with its context and outstanding style became a special example in Çatalhöyük figurine repertoire.” (Turkcan, 2023). This is part of a small section of the article that is in English, which is probably what the article is mostly based upon. This shows that even as current as two years ago, archeologists are still uncovering fossils from this extraordinary site. It is clear that Turkcan is continuing the impeccable legacy of Hodder. It’s also important to note that Turkcan has already worked at Catalhoyuk during Hodder’s excavation. He is familiar with the site

and has a vast amount of knowledge of it too. The inclusiveness of the globalization of this site and the innovative respectful practices of archeology can be seen displayed throughout Catalhoyuks legacy.

Interpretation of Artifacts and Ecofacts Through Evolving Methods

Since Ali Umut Turkcan's findings are all written in Turkish and are fairly new, I will be mainly focusing on Ian Hodder's Çatalhöyük Research Project and their work from 1993 through 2018. A notable quote which comes directly from Hodder's Project website states: "Every time I climb the 21-meter mound, my heart races with excitement. Although I have been working here since 1993, every time I step into those lands, I go weak at the knees. After all, the land I am stepping through contains the details of a mesmerizing settlement that hosted 3000 to 8000 people, 9000 years ago.' Ian Hodder." (Tarkan, et. al 2021).

Two thousand and four proved to be a successful year for Hodder's team when it came to artefacts and architecture:

"The news of our finding of a mother goddess figurine spread far and wide. This limestone figurine that was quite worn, fit all the classical measurements of the naked women representations found and described by Mellaart at the higher levels of the settlement during the 1960's excavations. Throughout the excavations that have been ongoing since 1993, no earlier precedence of this important figurine has been found. Therefore, this unique figurine found in a midden fill cause quite a bit of excitement in our team." (Tarkan, et. al 2021).

Shortly after—in 2005— an artifact was discovered caused a "revision of the existing theories and the reevaluation of certain predictions that had not been fully explored." (Tarkan, et. al 2021). They found a figurine with a partially missing head which they had initially interpreted as a goddess, but was then identified as a bear "by means of an intact stamp seal" (Tarkan, et. al 2021). This is an example of how better technology and methods lead to more accurate reconstructions of the past.

In 2008, Hodder's team began to have what they call "Mellaart's season", which means they finally found something at the great scale of James Mellaart's excavations. During this season, they found well-preserved bases that had bull horns, as well as wall paintings. A year later, they found a skeleton that seemed to belong to an adult male with "a carbonized black brain". Something incredible happened in 2010, which blew my mind away. The University of California, Merced participated in the excavations! They had also brought 3D laser scanning solution which ended up becoming one of the techniques that the project used. In 2011 and 2012, they found a 2.5 meter-wall with a wall picture, as well as a wall pattern made of handprints in Building 77, and an obsidian mirror.

One of the oldest pieces of linen fabric was found in 2013 on Building 52 in the North Shelter. The fabric was burned, and labs were conducted that demonstrated that the fabric had been weaved out of flax. It was incredibly well preserved as well. Since this was the 2010's, in 2014, registrations began to be executed digitally. During this time, they also began excavating one of the largest areas of the site which was for Building 132. Finally, during the last two years of their research, they found that "A very significant finding was discovered in North Area. In Building 132, we found a plastered, painted head with two obsidian pieces as eyes. The fact that this head showed parallelism to a Neolithic sculpture with obsidian eyes found in Şanlıurfa was a rare situation." (Tarkan, et. al 2021). In 2016, they found a female figurine which was exceptionally well preserved.

Some highlights of their findings are presented through a virtual museum on their official website. Ranging from almonds and baskets to human bones, there are 42 categories in which they organized these artifacts. Within these 42 categories they highlighted their characteristics in smaller categories such as: arched-botany, lithics, fauna, clay, human remains, and conservation. A list of all the artifacts the Çatalhöyük Research Project found includes:

Almonds, animal figurines, animal stamp seal, antropomorphic figurine, barely, baskets, belt hook, blue pigment, bone necklaces, bone needle, bone points, bucranium, chaff, clay balls, cooking pot, face pot, fish hook, quern, handstone, hearth, leather, leopard stamp seal, mace head, mandible, micromorphology, oak, obsidian core, obsidian mirror, obsidian projectiles, pea, pelvis, plaster, reed mat, shell, skeletons, stone axe, human mandibles, textiles, teeth, wall paintings, wooden beads, and five bone rings from a burial.

Since there is a vast number of artifacts, I would like to focus on a few and go more in depth about them. One artifact that caught my attention was the obsidian mirror, which is categorized in the lithics section. A short description of this artifact states that most mirrors at the time were made of incredibly polished obsidian. In contrast to the thought of them using these mirrors to apply cosmetics, it is believed that they used these for divination or other purposes. Another set of artifacts that piqued my interest were the five bone rings from a burial, which was put in the “fauna” category. Found in 1997, these rings were found at a burial that belonged to an adolescent. Archeologists believed that this person did not wear all 5 rings at the same time, but rather separately. They also believed that the people who buried this person thought that the deceased teen would want these rings buried alongside them. In 2012, an interesting artifact was discovered, this was the bone necklace, put in the fauna and human remains category. It is thought to be a gift for the grave that it was found in. Especially because it was found above the skeleton's chest and not around their neck. This artifact was made from metapodials of “dog-sized foxes” and “sheep-sized” long bone cortices. Without the technology that Hodder's team used, they would not have been able to better interpret any of these incredible artifacts.

Broader Implications for Archaeology and Human History

Catalhöyük shows a spectacular representation of methodological evolution. Thanks to its long continuous research and digging, we have been able to see the ways in which different archeological methods help interpret and uncover the ways in which this site used to function at its prime. This settlement could be dated to 7000 BC, but 7100 BC is the date in which the first settlers came to Catalhöyük. During Catalhöyük's peak, it was a “place where various groups of people from diverse cultures would come and settle and could live together” (Tarkan, et. al 2021). Archeologists also identified that during 6500 BC Catalhöyük developed greatly. It was a time where more efficient cooking pots were created, domestic cattle and milk were introduced, there was an increase in housing and population density, and decorative features like figurative art emerged.

During Catalhöyük's peak, the settlement's climate was mostly moist and rainy. This site is surrounded by mountains on all sides. You can assume that they also had a handful of rivers and lakes because they had a great resource of fish. They also had access to water birds and eggs. In the article “Çatalhöyük and Its Landscapes”, authors Gianna Ayala and John Wainwright state that, “Neolithic Çatalhöyük most likely sat within a broad channel belt of multiple anastomosing channels with a series of drier islands and localized wetter areas. There would have been a mosaic of conditions, with riverbanks supporting tree and shrub vegetation, and the islands providing areas for cultivation.” (Ayala and Wainwright, 2020) In the drier areas of this settlement wild animals would roam around and agricultural fields were present.

Due to collaborative and long term research, we are able to make these statements and ideas of what life might have looked like during those Neolithic years. With the great amount of ideas, multiple perspectives, and many years of research from great academics, we have been able to understand human societies a lot better. The archeological dig of Catalhoyuk shows us that how we study sites matters just as much as what we find from the sites.

Counterargument and Rebuttal

I can admit that Hodder's team felt as though Mellart's excavations were bigger than what they had been doing. Mellart was the first to find the site and the first to dig it. He also found the biggest buildings and uncovered many historical artifacts. Which is also why Hodder's team had a "Mellarts Season", which was when they would find something in the site that they thought could compare to Mellarts findings. I do believe though that Hodder's part in Catalhoyuk was crucial. Their research created more depth, accuracy, and better interpretation. Hodder's team took this excavation very seriously. Not only did they work on it for 25 years, but they also journaled everything. Most people who worked at Catalhoyuk journaled their experience there. They also did a thing where they would try to interpret sites before they even began to dig. The techniques used in Hodder's work helped shape Catalhoyuks legacy and made it clearer for us to understand.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Catalhoyuk is a mesmerizing time capsule of the past. This site contains important historical information and holds great significance to our past. It is amazing how many fossils were dug and how much was discovered over the span of more than 30 years. It is truly a rare gem that should be treasured and preserved. When I first began researching Catalhoyuk, I did not expect to find so much information on it. I certainly did not expect the vast number of artifacts, structures, and fossils that were found either. It is incredible that we were able to find a whole settlement still full of life after so many years later. Catalhoyuk has captivated and shown me how humans have always (and will always) lived in an endless cycle of repeated history, just in different circumstances. The evolution of the archeological methods used throughout this site's history has shown that it has improved in a way which helps our understanding of Catalhoyuk. The site of Catalhoyuk has shown us the livelihood of the Neolithic past, and it is of high importance that we continue researching this place. The more that time passes, the better our methodological techniques will be, and the more we will be able to interpret accurately. Researching and studying Catalhoyuk has shown us that the comprehension of our history can be manipulated by how it is discovered.

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Aztec Philosophy: Delving into the Nahuatl Mind

Diego Segovia-Alvarez

In the United States there are particular images people have in their head when they hear the word “Aztec”. Typically, it is one of a bloodthirsty warrior, or a priest ripping out the heart of a human sacrifice. Rarely are they thought of as intelligent or introspective, I have even heard my fellow Chicanos say something along the lines of “The Spanish did them a favor”. This is in large part due to pop culture depictions, but also to a very Eurocentric worldview and a reluctance from academics to represent indigenous cultures. For this very reason, I wanted to examine the philosophy of the Aztec people to see how they are similar, and more importantly how they differ from, traditional Western thought. In doing so we can learn from how they view the world while also humanizing indigenous cultures and beginning to embrace their knowledge. For clarification, the term “Aztec” is in reference to *Nahuas* or *Nahuatl* speakers in the basin of Mexico broadly.

Firstly, it is important to address the belief by some that the Aztecs did not have philosophy. To answer this question would require a definition of philosophy. For the purposes of this essay, we will use the one proposed by Miguel Leon-Portilla in his book *Aztec Thought and Culture*. Leon-Portilla is a Mexican anthropologist, historian, and philosopher whose work is foundational in the field of Aztec philosophy. He states, “Genuine philosophizing arises from the explicit perception that problems are innately involved in the essence of things. A sense of wonder and a mistrust of the solutions derived from tradition or custom are requisite to the formulation of rational questions about the origin, the true nature and the destiny of man and the universe. The philosopher must experience a need to explain to himself why things happen as they do” (Leon-Portilla 3,4). In essence, philosophy questions and seeks answers for the world around, beyond “traditions or customs” such as religious views. Going off this idea, Leon-Portilla proves the case that the Aztecs in fact did practice some form of philosophy. He does so by examining early poetry, including that of the famous Nezahualcoyotl; “Truly do we live on earth? Not forever on earth; only a little while here. Although it be jade, it will be broken, Although it be gold, it is crushed, Although it be quetzal feather, it is torn asunder. Not forever on earth; only a little while here,” (Leon-Portilla 7). In this passage, the writer questions the permanence of all things on earth and the nature of truth. This short poem shows the Aztecs had concepts of what Western philosophers call metaphysics and epistemology. Further proof of Aztec philosophical thought comes from Bernardino de Sahagun, a Spanish monk who spent years studying the culture of the Nahuas. In Sahagun’s “General History,” he refers to the Aztec *tlamatinime* as “Sabios o Philosophos”, meaning wise men or philosophers, indicating his belief that their roles in Aztec society fit that of philosophers (Leon-Portilla 10). Additionally, the claim that the Aztecs did not genuinely philosophize is a Eurocentric narrative, and it is necessary to disprove in order to overcome the bias against indigenous cultures. Having established the legitimacy of Aztec philosophy, we can now examine the different philosophical concepts or views they held, focusing on the areas of metaphysics, ethics, epistemology and aesthetics.

Beginning with metaphysics, we have two opposing views. However, these views are not representative of genuine differences in views among pre-conquest Aztecs. Rather, these are interpretations of the information we have. Due to the erasure of much of pre-conquest history, we may never know which is closer to reality. Most popular interpretations view the *teotl*, or Aztec divinity, as gods or deities in the traditional polytheistic sense with each representing a different domain. Leon-Portilla discusses the god above all the others, Omteotl, the god of duality,

who all the other gods and the universe come from (Leon-Portilla 30). Expanding forward, we have two sides - the Lord of duality known as Ometechutli, and the Lady of duality known as Omecihuatl - and together they created everything in existence. Leon-Portilla suggests this is symbolic of human reproduction (83). This belief is a form of dualism in which all things could be attributed to either the active masculine or the passive feminine aspects of Ometeotl. The opposing view given by James Maffie, Professor of Philosophy and Indigenous Studies at the University of Maryland, on the other hand suggests that the Aztec tlamatime see teotl as something else entirely. In his book *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion*, Maffie describes teotl as “continually dynamic, vivifying, self-generating sacred power, force, or energy” (Maffie 21-22). This energy did not merely create all of existence, rather it *is* all of existence, an idea Maffie calls ontological monism. This means that all things in existence, including plants, humans, and animals are made up of teotl. Since everything in existence is made up of the same “substance”, it follows that it is self-generating, given that this energy could not come from anywhere else. This way one could imagine the depicted teotl, such as Tlaloc, to be the rain itself rather than a god of rain. Similarly, the practice of auto-sacrifice or bloodletting which was previously conceived as providing sustenance for the gods, is now seen as teotl self-generating as humans offer their sacred energy to the universe. Though both interpretations have critics, I feel it necessary to point out that the interpretation put forth by Leon-Portilla seems to be more Eurocentric as its dualism harkens back to Plato; however, this could be seen as attempting to legitimize Aztec philosophy by comparing it to well established ways of thinking. Though Leon-Portilla and Maffie disagree on Aztec metaphysics, their ideas concerning epistemology seem to have some connection.

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of knowledge, questioning the truth of what can be known. Continuing with Maffie’s interpretation, we find an interesting connection to his metaphysical view. As we established, for him the Aztecs’ metaphysical view was that of ontological monism, or the belief that the universe consists solely of a singular thing. With this then comes the epistemological claim that all that humans perceive is not real, but is merely an illusion created by teotl, called *teotl nahual* or self-disguise (Maffie). He makes a clear distinction that this is a matter knowledge, not one of existence or metaphysics, contrasting with Plato “Plato employed the notion of illusion: to characterize an inferior or lower grade of reality or existence... This conception of illusion commits one to an ontological dualism that divides the universe into two fundamentally different kinds of existents: illusion and reality” (Maffie). In essence, the Aztecs did not see illusions as a different kind of existence that is not real but rather a kind of knowledge that is not true. This may not seem significant, but it is important to differentiate and to demonstrate how this illusion does not contradict the belief in the singularity of teotl. A similar idea is put forth by Leon-Portilla in “Aztec Thought and Culture”, with a key difference, that being the truth found in “flower and song”, also known as poetry or art. He writes, “True poetry derives from a peculiar type of knowledge, the fruit of authentic inner experience, the results of intuition. Poetry is, then, a creative and profound expression which through symbol and metaphor, allows man to discover himself and then to talk about what he has intuitively and mysteriously perceived,” (Leon-Portilla 76). So, through flower and song man is sometimes able to find a semblance of truth in the illusion of the perceivable world. This connects to the idea in Aztec aesthetics, that objective beauty is found only in teotl. Maffie states that art in the traditional sense does not exist in Aztec culture, rather art and creativity is meant to help humans “maintain balance”, something which will be elaborated on when discussing ethics. Furthermore, the products of human creativity, flower and song, only have aesthetic value “if they genuinely present and truly disclose teotl” (Maffie). This idea, in conjunction with Leon-Portilla's, further supports the metaphysical idea of ontological monism; if through poetry

humans are able to genuinely present *teotl*, they then discover genuine truth. Lastly, we will discuss Aztec morality and the idea of “maintaining balance on the slippery earth”.

Nahuatl, the language spoken by the Aztecs, is filled with metaphors that create a rather unique meaning that is very different from a more straightforward way of speaking. For example, the name of the deity Quetzalcoatl is a metaphor. With the first half *Quetzal*, a type of bird, representing the heavens; and *coatl*, meaning serpent representing the earthly. Together the name takes on the meaning, not only of the feathered serpent, but also of that which is of the earth and the heavens (Maffie). Quetzalcoatl is also a name given to certain Tlamatinime, with a slightly altered meaning, as he who knows of the heavens and the earth (Leon-Portilla 19). But what exactly does this have to do with the moral views of the Aztecs? Well, this manner of speaking relates to the central idea of Aztec ethics, the metaphor of maintaining balance on the slippery earth. Quetzalcoatl, balance between heavens and earth, is a wise man who knows of the heavens and the earth, and guides those to help maintain their balance. The Aztecs believed life was full of misery and to avoid it humans must ‘walk a narrow path’, so as to not ‘fall’ into this misery or misfortune (Maffie). So, what exactly does it take to be a moral person or to be in balance? “Humans must conduct every aspect of their lives wisely The balanced, middle path since it avoids excess and imbalance, hence mistepping and slipping, hence misfortune and ill-being,” (Maffie). Avoiding excess as an ethical stance is similar to Christian beliefs, as the seven deadly sins are merely various forms of excess, such as greed, gluttony, and lust. But avoiding excess is not the only facet of staying balanced, it also involves acting wisely. Wisdom to the Aztecs refers to the knowledge of how to perform various tasks, including how to participate in the selfregeneration of the universe, and how to perform rituals that “genuinely present *teotl*; authentically embody *teotl*; preserve existing balance and purity; create new balance and purity;” as well as participate in flower and song (Maffie). Aztec ethics can also be compared to Aristotelian virtue ethics, in that it focuses not on what actions should be taken, but what kind of person one should be. Not only that, but the idea of maintaining balance is strikingly similar to Aristotle's golden mean, stating that virtues are a balance between two extremes (Vaughn 151).

Clearly this idea of maintaining balance encompasses more than just ethics, as it ties together ideas of ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, and aesthetics all into one framework. This is because the Aztecs did not perceive these as separated groups but saw them as interconnected, each informing the other to form a single cohesive belief system (Maffie). This in a way is symbolic of their metaphysical belief in the universality of *teotl*. Just as there is only one thing which constitutes the whole of existence, there is only the single area of philosophy, with perceived groups being interwoven and feeding into one another.

After examining the ideas and differing views of Aztec philosophy, it is clear that they had a complex set of beliefs with their Tlamatinime acting as philosophers trying to explain the world around them while guiding others on how to maintain balance and live a good life. It is similar enough to pre-conceived ideas of philosophy, yet unique in its own way. This is to be expected, as the Aztecs lived in a completely different environment with ideas built atop different reference points. Western philosophy finds its beginnings in ancient Greece with Socrates and Plato, so their DNA is found throughout it. However, with the Aztecs it is Teotihuacan, the Toltecs, and the Olmecs. Still, it is unsurprising to find similarities given that they too were rational human beings. I was first drawn to this topic because I personally felt that I lacked a connection to my culture, doubly so as a Chicano growing up in the United States, and that the indigenous culture had been all but wiped out. I think it is important to share these ideas so others who feel like me can reconnect with that lost culture and show that indigenous cultures are worthy of being presented in academic spaces.

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Freezing on I Street

Sierra Kelley

The snow falls silently, sticking to the ground and casting the world in a thick white blanket. The wind is the kind that you feel deep through your bones, the kind no amount of layers can protect you from. Usually, I would complain about the cold, I would much rather want to be inside than outside, but tonight I do not notice. I walk past house after house adorned with various decorations for the winter holidays, but I am unable to appreciate their beauty. My feet scrape against the snow and salt on the sidewalk as I carry forward with no direction. Searching for something, but not sure what. Fighting with my mom was hardly a rare occurrence in my household. Lately, it was all we did; however, tonight was different.

By the time I reached high school, it was just my mom and me. My mom was on disability and was not allowed to work and as a single mother of a young teenager that left us financially vulnerable. Depending on the wrong people we ended up in a situation where we became homeless. For two years we roamed around alternating between homeless shelters and living in our car, until it was totaled in an accident, before we landed in a low-income apartment nestled in a small town in western Massachusetts. A tiny first-floor two-bedroom-one-bathroom apartment with only our two mattresses, a couch, a chair, and a rickety old kitchen table for our only furniture. Though we finally had a place to live I still watched as my mom struggled to scrape enough money together to pay rent, buy groceries, clothes, and to support her cigarette addiction. I hated seeing my mom suffer so I decided that I needed to get a job; the only place hiring me being a McDonald's on the other side of town. To free up more time in my schedule for work, I quit my third year of volleyball saying goodbye to a sport I loved hoping that it would not be forever. I also decided to drop my AP classes so that I would not have to spend so much time on homework, but I ended up behind anyway.

This was my first Christmas when I had my own money to buy gifts and I was very excited about it, maybe even going a little overboard getting my teachers presents too. Every Friday after Thanksgiving, I would receive my paycheck from McDonald's and go about the same routine. Assuming I did not have to work I would wake up in the morning buzzing with excitement. I would get dressed pulling on a gray winter coat my mom bought me when I was ten, I notice a new tear in the seam of the sleeve and silently hope to myself that it will at least last until next winter. I grab the only pair of winter boots in our house, my mom and I share them, they were these beat up old things the once soft wool inside now matted down, the fabric over the toes is stained from the salt used to salt iced over sidewalks, and the soles are held together by glue, duct tape, and hope. The last thing I grab is my second-hand scarf wrapping it around the lower half of my face and neck, it reeks of stale cigarette smoke, and it reminds me of my grandma.

We had a first-floor apartment with a side door that made for swift exits without being noticed. Though I am positive I could walk out the door right in front of my mom and she would not notice. The sun peaks through the naked tree branches reflecting off the snow and it hurts my eyes when I first step outside. The half-melted ice on the sidewalks crunched under my feet as I headed to the only second-hand store in town; a small Goodwill no bigger than a shoebox. Though it sold mostly clothes, there was a small section for household items and decorations which is where I plan to get my gifts from, on a good day I would find a couple things before going back to the apartment. I did this routine once a week leading up to Christmas, until I had a decent collection of poorly wrapped gifts hidden in my closet.

Unfortunately, I had to work Christmas Eve. Thankfully I did not get stuck with the nightshift, but I still did not get back to the apartment till about 9:00 p.m. My mom is sitting on the enclosed porch in the dark, all I can make out really is her silhouette and the red ember of her cigarette. She does not say anything as I walk by.

We do not have any Christmas decorations up or a tree, so I gather my gifts and place them in a pile under the living room window. It is a rather small pile, but I am proud to have at least something to give. As I am adding the last present my mom comes inside from smoking, she looks at me and my little present pile with a look in her eyes I had never seen before. After a pause her demeanor changes and the hair on the back of my neck rises like I am in the presence of danger.

“What’s this?” she asks with a smile on her lips that does not meet her eyes.

I told her that I knew we could not “have” a Christmas this year, so I decided to use the extra cash I earned from McDonald’s to get some small things from Goodwill and that it was not much. She lets out a deep sigh through her nose as she looks away before looking back to me, something she does when she is mad.

“What’s your fucking problem? Do you enjoy making me feel bad?”

She spits these words at me with venom, I do not remember much of what was said after that. Once my mom is done yelling at me, she storms off to her room slamming the door. However, I am glued to the floor unable to move.

What’s your fucking problem? Do you enjoy making me feel bad?

I am still sitting on the floor in my only pjs, the words echoing through my head. I analyzed them repeatedly.

What’s your fucking problem?

I do not have an answer.

I sat on the floor for what felt like hours before realizing my mom was not going to come back out of her room. I get up slowly, my joints cracking loudly as I stand and approach her door. I knock twice,

Tap. Tap.

I wait a few moments, but she does not say anything.

“Mom?”

Silence.

Finding the already small apartment borderline claustrophobic I turn around and disappear out the door without thinking, standing barefoot on the sidewalk, I pick a direction and start walking. Snow falls around me hitting the ground just as silent as my mother had been, a gust of wind rips through the empty street and straight through my bones but, I do not feel it. I walk with no sense of direction just going where my feet carry me.

I notice a warm yellow glow cast against the snow in front of me and find myself drawn to it, overcome with the need to bask in its light. Standing here I look to see where this warm light is coming from and find myself looking into another family's life. I know I should not be looking into someone else’s house, but it’s like my feet have cemented to the ground and I am unable to look away. From where I stood, I could just see their huge Christmas tree beautifully decorated in red and

green, wrapped in gold ribbons and colorful lights with a big gold star placed on top. Under the tree sat all their presents stacked tall and neatly wrapped. A woman walks into view her face is round with rosy, red cheeks and her blonde hair is tucked behind her ears; I notice she has on red plaid matching pjs. She is holding a plate of Christmas cookies, and I can tell by the splotchy frosting on some of them that the family made them themselves. She approaches the coffee table at the center of the room turning to look over her shoulder at a little boy who trails behind her. He could not have been more than six or seven, holding a glass of milk with both hands. She smiles so warmly at him, the wrinkles around her eye scrunch up and the laugh lines around her mouth become deeper and it reminds me of when the sun first breaks through the clouds on a rainy day.

My attention is torn away from the woman smiling by a little girl dashing by the window. Her blonde hair tied into pigtails with her mouth open in a gaping smile even though I cannot hear it I can tell she is laughing. The kind of squealing laugh young kids do when they are so full of pure joy that their little bodies cannot hold it. Her little legs carry her through their living room as the last member of the family finally joins the picture. The father chases behind the little girl a grin splitting his face into two as he swoops up the young girl into his arms spinning her around in a bear hug before collapsing with her onto the couch.

The fire in their fireplace flickers and it is then I realize just how cold I am. My feet and hands had long gone numb, and I could feel that the tips of my ears and nose were red. A shiver racks through me as my breath comes out in puffs of translucent clouds. The harsh cold brings me back to my harsh reality, realizing that I do not recognize where I am, nor can I recall the steps I took to get there I pat my hands against the pockets of my sleep shorts. No phone. Looking first to the right, further down the street before looking left up the street noticing how the snow is now coming down faster and has covered any tracks. I curse to myself.

I look both ways again before choosing to walk to the left, glancing once more at the warm and happy family inside their house. It felt like I had been walking for hours, and I could not tell if I had even walked to a new area or if it was somewhere I had already been.

“Why does everything look the same in the snow” I say out loud to myself through the chattering of my teeth. Just as I was about to give up, I finally started to recognize where I was and before long, I could see the apartment just barely outlined through the snow. As the front door becomes more visible, my steps become slower; I now notice how the salt from the ground has rubbed the bottom of my feet raw and each step is more painful than the last. My hands shake as I reach for the stairs practically crawling up them on all fours and I have almost made it to the front door and then, *nothing*.

I had collapsed onto the stairs; I am not sure what made my body just give up and seize from moving but I laid there for hours, days, weeks, unconscious in the snow just inches from safety.

I wake sometime later startled that I am outside and not in my bed. I try to stand up and find it extremely difficult, I try standing up again but to no avail. I looked down at my bare legs and realized that I had started to freeze to the ground, tiny particles of ice sticking to the tops of my thighs and knees. I sigh to myself, and I curse to myself for even being out here in the first place. Taking a deep breath, I count to three.

One.

Two.

Three.

After three I pull myself up ripping bits of skin off as I sever myself from the ice and I find myself being grateful I did not collapse on a flat surface or else the damage might have been worse. I gasp as I fully stand to my feet before reaching out for the door handle, my hand is shaking so bad I can barely manage to grab it. Finally, I make it into the apartment and there is no fire burning in a fireplace, no children's laughter, no homemade cookies, but I am grateful to not be outside anymore. The walk from the front door to my bedroom has never felt longer as I trudge my way to my bed, collapsing for the second time that night. This time at least I was met with the springs of my mattress and not the icy concrete of the steps outside. I know in the morning I'll have to clean my blood out of the carpet and pick the gravel out of my wounds but, for right now I just sleep.

Looking back at this memory now almost ten years later, I am first filled with pity for my younger self before condemning my reckless abandon. I often find myself wondering what would have happened if I never woke up that night. Would my mom walk outside seeing me frozen to the stairs and wail to the world? Would she feel guilty over the last words she had said to me? Or would she have stepped over my body sitting down in her usual spot, lighting up her cigarette? These questions will remain unanswered for eternity and perhaps that is for the best. Thinking about the family in the snow and seeing that small glimpse of a loving household made me realize how dysfunctional my own family was and how I wished to change that. Realizing how deeply I yearned for a loving family of my own, with a home full of laughter and warmth from the fireplace where I would create happy memories for my children and to give them the love I never received. However, until then when things start to feel too difficult to bear, I remind myself that I am no longer barefoot in the cold freezing slowly to the staircase and I am almost home.

Where The Fire Never Left Me

James Bullock

I was not born for soft places. I was born where men don't flinch, where pain sits at the table like kin, and scars are stitched into skin like family names.

My childhood smelled like dust
and diesel, like barns with no
lofts, like creek water and
scraped knees, like poker games
and stories told slow — the kind
of slow only old men master.

We didn't have much, but we had
each other — and sometimes that
was war, sometimes that was
church. I learned love with
calloused hands.

I learned loss in whispers. I
learned strength because weak
was never an option.

I played with cousins like we
were kings of dirt roads, riding
wagons off barn roofs, chasing
flight in rusted wind. We thought
we were invincible. We were
wrong.

But God, we were alive. Then

life...

life threw me places no child
dreams of — behind
walls, behind fences, behind
eyes that forgot how to cry but
never how to watch. I saw things
they don't write down.

I lived things that don't fit in
pretty sentences.

I lost time.

I lost people.

I lost parts of me I'll never get
back.

But I never lost me. Not the real
me.

Not the fire-born, country-fed,
hard-headed me.

The me that Poppy would nod at.

The me Grannie prayed over.

The me my brother still laughs
about when we remember who
we were before life sharpened us
into weapons. I am not what I've
done.

I am what I survived.

I am what I remember. I am what
I protect.

And some nights —
quiet, long, honest nights — I sit
alone — ghosts on one side, God
on the other — and I tell them
both:

I'm still here.

I'm still burning.

And the fire never left me.

