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A Qualitative Exploration of Women's Work Aspirations and Beliefs on Meritocracy

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Meritocratic beliefs continue to be widely accepted in the United States; nonetheless, upward mobility is out of reach for many American women due to pervasive barriers to accessing decent work. The present study aims to explore American women's work aspirations and beliefs in the American Dream (the premise that no matter where people come from, with hard work, they can achieve prosperity) in light of the gap between this notion and the social inequalities in their working lives. We conducted semistructured interviews with 17 American women from diverse racial, educational, and work backgrounds to examine these women's work aspirations and beliefs on the American Dream. Qualitative content analysis yielded 3 domains: (a) aspiring for work that fulfills essential human needs, (b) multilayered influences on women's work aspirations, and (c) making sense of work aspirations in relation to beliefs on the American Dream. Our findings highlight the importance of relationships and systemic factors in shaping women's work aspirations. In addition, women's beliefs on the American Dream reflect complex interactions between endorsing meritocratic beliefs and their personal experiences. Implications for counseling psychology theory, research, and practice are discussed.

Public Significance Statement
This study shares voices of American women from diverse backgrounds by documenting women's work aspirations and beliefs in the American ethos of meritocracy in relation to their working lives. It provides insights on individual, interpersonal, and systemic factors that affect women's work-related experiences and aspirations.

Keywords: women, work aspirations, meritocracy, American Dream, psychology of working

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The American Dream (Adams, 1931), or the notion that anyone can achieve prosperity through personal merit and agency (e.g., ability, hard work, and determination) regardless of one's social identities and locations, is a core example of the meritocratic belief system in the United States. Based on the presumption that meritocratic systems are free from bias, those who fail to live up to the American Dream are often blamed for a dearth of ability or dedication (Seron, Silbey, Cech, & Rubineau, 2018). Indeed, this meritocratic ideology perpetuates the assumption that upward social class mobility can only be constrained by individuals' lack of skills or effort (McCoy & Major, 2007). Additionally, the American Dream is a mainstream conviction in the United States; it is widely shared by people across different segments of American society including women, people of color, and White Americans from various socioeconomic backgrounds (Ledgerwood, Mandisodza, Jost, & Pohl, 2011; Xian & Reynolds, 2017).

Despite this American ethos, marginalization plays a key role in constraining economic advancement for certain groups in the United States (Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Autin, 2016). In particular, American women face pervasive challenges in their working lives, including workplace sexual harassment, exclusion from science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, and pressure to manage competing childcare and employment demands (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; Jung & O'Brien, 2019). Furthermore, modern transformations within the world of work involving growing inequality and a decline in the availability of decent work have added unique difficulties for women (Blustein, Kenny, Di Fabio, & Guichard, 2019). The inception of the women's rights movement in the 1960s has brought considerable advances for women in the world of work, yet women continue to be disproportionately poor and insecurely employed (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2017; Young, 2010).

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Results from the present study were presented in a symposium presentation at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association in 2018 and was titled "Holding Hope: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Women's Work Dreams and Views on Meritocracy."

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While there is a clear incongruity between the meritocratic ideology and the work experiences of many American women, no prior research has investigated the ways in which women make meaning of their working lives considering the disconnection between women's lived experiences and the American Dream. Using in-depth interviews with 17 women, we report the results of a qualitative study that provides an examination of the relationship between the reality of the participants' lives at work and the American ethos of meritocracy. This study represents a critically needed exploration of women's subjective experiences in light of the existing gap between dreams and reality for many Americans as reflected in our foci on women's aspirations, the influences on these aspirations, as well as their beliefs on the American Dream in relation to their personal aspirations for their working lives. In the following sections, we first explain the conceptual framework that has informed this study and then discuss the nature of women's aspirations in relation to the American Dream.

Conceptual Framework: Psychology of Working Theory

Our study is grounded in psychology of working theory (PWT; Blustein, 2006, 2013; Duffy et al., 2016), which offers an inclusive perspective that applies to all those who work and want to work. While traditional career development theories largely privilege those who have a degree of choice in their working lives, PWT articulates the serious barriers that persist in accessing decent and dignified work for many of working age around the world. Indeed, contextual factors are placed at the forefront of consideration in PWT (Duffy et al., 2016). PWT describes how sexism, racism, heterosexism, ageism, and other forms of marginalization, as well as economic constraints, severely impact the opportunities and resources of many who work and seek work (Blustein, 2006). PWT also places emphasis on macrolevel forces, such as economic conditions, in shaping access to decent work (Duffy et al., 2016).

The concept of decent work is central to PWT. Decent work is defined as access to adequate compensation and health care, safe working conditions, hours that allow for free time and rest, and organizational values that complement family and social values (Duffy et al., 2016). Furthermore, decent work is conceived of as a fundamental human right (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2008) and as central to human well-being (Blustein et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2016). A core assumption of PWT is the notion that—when one is able to access decent work—working optimally has the capacity to fulfill needs for power and survival (i.e., the biological needs for food, shelter, and safety, as well as needs for access to the opportunity structure); social relationships (i.e., the basic human needs for connection, belonging, and social contribution); and self-determination, (i.e., the need for authentic engagement in life via autonomy, competence, and relatedness; Blustein, 2006). Nevertheless, access to these basic needs is limited for those who are held back from attaining decent work by social and economic inequities, constituting a significant human rights issue around the world (Blustein et al., 2019). In stark contrast to the American ethos of meritocracy, or the assumption of a "level playing field" for everyone, previous studies have supported the tenets of PWT by demonstrating that individuals who experience greater economic constraints and marginalization are less likely to obtain decent work (see Blustein et al., 2019 for a summary of research on PWT).

PWT is an informative theoretical framing for the present study, which informed our research questions. Specifically, we explore women's work aspirations as they relate to work-related barriers that result from sexism and other contextual forces, which perpetuate a lack of access to decent work according to PWT (Duffy et al., 2016). Indeed, our study design operates from the standpoint that as a group that experiences considerable marginalization, women disproportionately possess limited access to work that fulfills core human needs (Blustein, 2006; Fassinger, 2008). This theoretical framework is particularly illuminating for deepening understanding of how women make sense of the ways such inequity operates in their personal work aspirations considering the meritocratic ideals that support the social order and status quo. Moreover, this study investigates the interactions of contextual factors and psychological processes in relation to women's work aspirations, which is also an essential focus of PWT (Blustein, 2006, 2013; Duffy et al., 2016).

The Reality of the American Dream: Aspirations and Barriers

The United States has the highest level of income inequality and one of the lowest rates of social mobility in the developed world (Kraus & Tan, 2015; Narayan et al., 2018). In spite of the evidence for growing levels of economic inequality and differential access to resources (Saez & Zucman, 2016), the majority of Americans endorse the American Dream or other individualistic, meritocratic ideals that overlook these systemic inequities (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010; McCoy & Major, 2007; Xian & Reynolds, 2017). For example, economic mobility across generations is less likely in the United States than in many other developed nations; however, compared with data from 27 other countries, Americans are more likely to agree with statements such as "people get rewarded for intelligence and skill" as well as "people get rewarded for their efforts" and are less likely to affirm the belief that "coming from a wealthy family is essential to getting ahead" (Isaacs, 2016). These findings contrast evidence from recent surveys that indicate that a high proportion of Americans report experiencing stress due to a lack of financial resources, having difficulty making ends meet, and perceiving less control over their financial situations (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2018). Thus, there is a growing disparity between meritocratic ideals and reality for many, causing this belief to play a complex role in the lives of Americans.

Contextual barriers limit women's access to decent work and make it harder for them to achieve the American Dream; full-time working women in the United States earn 82% of what working men earn when comparing median, annual salaries (BLS, 2017). When accounting for race and ethnicity, wage disparities uncover the compounding effects of gender, racial, and ethnic prejudices, with Latina and African American women earning about 60% of what White men earn (BLS, 2017). In addition to providing unfair and inadequate compensation for women, the workforce is highly segregated according to gender (Kantamneni, 2013) and race (Flores, Martinez, McGillen, & Milord, 2019), contributing to the wage gap. Studies have demonstrated that women are kept out of and/or held back in certain male-dominated industries (e.g., tech-

nology) and in leadership positions as they have limited opportunities for advancement (Fassinger, 2008; Fouad, Singh, Cappaert, Chang, & Wan, 2016; Kantamneni, 2013).

Gendered job segregation particularly affects women of color given that these women are overrepresented in low-paying and less flexible sectors with restricted benefits, such as the service sector (U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, 2016). Gender and race-based discrimination reduces women's workforce participation, earnings, and promotion in some industries such as STEM fields (Fassinger, 2008). Furthermore, workplace harassment (Fassinger, 2008; McDonald, 2012) creates physically and psychologically unsafe work environments for women, further limiting their access to decent work. Major obstacles remain even for women with higher education. For example, women hold nearly two thirds of the student loan debt in the United States, posing financial barriers to their upward social mobility (American Association of University Women, 2017). Women are also largely expected to shoulder the demands of personal care work, such as caring for young children or elderly, which can interfere with opportunities for economic security and occupational advancement (Richardson, 2012). Consequently, women's work aspirations and choices are constrained by roles in family life (e.g., gendered division of household labor) and workplaces that lack flexible work arrangements and childcare (Fassinger, 2008).

Not surprisingly, as decent work continues to be an elusive aspiration in most parts of the globe (Blustein et al., 2019; ILO, 2008), women remain overrepresented in vulnerable forms of employment, including minimum wage and part-time jobs, and precarious work settings (Kalleberg, 2018). Due to competing organizational and family values in many workplaces, precarious work is often the only form of work that affords the flexibility enabling women to manage their household and work responsibilities (Kalleberg, 2018). While American women face numerous challenges in their working lives, which may be compounded by increasingly limited opportunities, according to a recent study, American women endorse meritocracy at *higher* rates than American men (Xian & Reynolds, 2017). Further explicating these findings is a body of literature, reviewed in the sections that follow, that points to the coexistence of positive and negative aspects of endorsing meritocratic ideals for socially disadvantaged groups.

The Complexity of Endorsing the American Dream

Research by social psychologists that has explored the complex functions of believing in the meritocratic system is informing our understanding of the relationship between women's aspirations and the often harsh realities for women within the workplace (e.g., Jost & Hunyady, 2003; McCoy, Wellman, Cosley, Saslow, & Epel, 2013). By positing that individuals have an incentive to rationalize the status quo so that existing sociopolitical systems are perceived as fair and legitimate, researchers have argued that people benefit from perceiving society as fair even when it is unfair to oneself or one's social group. In particular, meritocratic beliefs offer a perception of control, which is linked to both physical and psychological well-being, giving groups with considerable disadvantage and a marked lack of perceived control in their lives a greater need to favor the existing social order than groups with relative advantage (McCoy et al., 2013). One's motivation to justify the system involves defensive cognitive and behavioral processes that protect and support meritocratic ideologies, such as the belief that hard work leads to success, despite the contradictory evidence (Ledgerwood et al., 2011). Thus, individuals with high levels of social disadvantage might have an incentive to endorse the belief that the status quo is fair and just even when this notion directly contrasts their lived experiences. From this perspective, harboring a belief in the American Dream may transform low-status groups from "have nots" to "soon to haves," motivating people to make organized efforts toward their advancement (McCoy et al., 2013; p. 308).

Notwithstanding arguments for the palliative effects of believing in meritocracy, this ideology has also been identified as problematic because it carries the assumption that socioeconomic status differences are merit-based, thereby blaming the poor for their poverty (Ali, Fall, & Hoffman, 2013). Believing in the American Dream has potentially harmful gender implications (Seron et al., 2018) because such meritocratic ideals overlook the existence of the gendered division of labor in American society (Connor & Fiske, 2019) and the substantial barriers women in the United States have to overcome to achieve prosperity (Kantamneni, 2013). In addition to justifying social inequalities, meritocratic ideals may serve to justify biases and discrimination (Jost & Hunyady, 2003), maintaining the gendered status quo and hierarchy in the United States. Indeed, some scholars have deemed that maintaining meritocratic myths about the social system is destructive to women's well-being as several studies indicate that women who believe in such ideals are likely to blame themselves, rather than the systemic inequities and injustices, for their lower status relative to men (Foster & Tsarfati, 2005; McCoy & Major, 2007; O'Brien, Major, & Gilbert, 2012).

These findings echo literature within counseling psychology that demonstrates the importance of challenging belief systems that maintain the status quo (e.g., Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Diemer, McWhirter, Ozer, & Rapa, 2015; Kenny, Blustein, Gutowski, & Meerkins, 2018). Contrary to perspectives from scholars in other disciplines articulating the potential benefits of endorsing meritocracy (McCoy et al., 2013), a number of counseling psychologists (e.g., Diemer et al., 2015) suggest that developing a critical awareness of systemic and structural barriers to success, which entails rejecting meritocratic ideals, may advantage low-status groups by providing a self-protective understanding of the inequalities these groups consistently face. Quantitative research with women supports this stance (e.g., Foster & Tsarfati, 2005; Major, Kaiser, O'Brien, & McCoy, 2007). For example, in one study with a sample of 58 undergraduate women, those who read that inequality against women was pervasive had higher self-esteem when they rejected meritocracy (Major et al., 2007). Hence, critically resisting the meritocratic ideology may help marginalized people by offering less individualistic explanations for their disadvantages or lack of success and by allowing them to preserve their esteem as well as plan and prepare for social injustices they might encounter (Major & Townsend, 2011).

The Present Study

Considering the prevalence of the belief in meritocracy in American society, it is important for counseling psychologists to explore the psychological and vocational implications of believing

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in the American Dream in an era of diminishing job security and stability. While the social psychology literature, which mostly uses quantitative research designs, offers insights into the ways in which meritocratic beliefs can benefit or harm women, using a qualitative design allows for further depth and breadth in understanding women's work aspirations and their general views of the American Dream as they relate to their working lives. In this study, we used qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Patton, 2002) to explore women's work aspirations and the link between women's work aspirations and their beliefs in the American Dream, the promise that no matter where a person comes from, they have equal opportunities to achieve prosperity. Considering the social inequalities impacting women's work lives, our goal was to gain an in-depth understanding of women's work aspirations including the factors that shape them. Thus, we were interested in understanding both individual and contextual aspects of women's work aspirations. In addition, we explored women's work aspirations in relation to their meritocratic beliefs, which may be consistent or inconsistent with their lived experiences (or the realities of work life). The sample for this study was derived from a broader exploration of the nature of working in America (Blustein, 2019). The results from this larger project set the stage for the present—more circumscribed—exploration of work aspirations and beliefs in the American Dream among women. The overarching findings from this study (Blustein, 2019) identified the complexity of the experience of working; some prevailing themes emerged including an overriding sense of erosion and instability, which reflected very real and painful experiences within the contemporary American labor market. In the present study, we used the interview data from the larger project (Blustein, 2019) to conduct a deeper analysis of the nature of the meritocratic beliefs among women, which was not explored in the original study from which these data were generated.

Method

A qualitative research design fits well with our aim to produce an in-depth exploration of women's work aspirations and their beliefs on meritocracy. In particular, we used conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Patton, 2002) to analyze the interview data. We also followed the recommendations of Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, and Ponterotto (2017) of maximizing methodological integrity, which involves *fidelity* and *utility*; therefore, we took rigorous steps to ensure fidelity to the phenomenon under study by focusing on the lived experiences of the participants. Moreover, we aimed to enhance utility by choosing an effective research design and method to achieve the study goals. Content analysis is a research method for "the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278), and it is typically appropriate to use in research that concerns describing a phenomenon for which there is limited theory or literature. It allows for extensive and authentic data without compromising the depth of the participants' perspectives and experiences. Another advantage of this approach is that it is rooted in the actual data, so it enables researchers to obtain direct information from the participants rather than imposing predetermined theoretical perspectives or data categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Interviews

Following the institutional review board (IRB) approval from our institution, we conducted semistructured interviews with a racially and ethnically diverse group of nine graduate student interviewers (six women and three men) from counseling psychology and mental health counseling graduate programs. The third author, who has extensive qualitative research experience, trained the research team on conducting semistructured interviews. Building on the tenets of PWT (Blustein, 2006, 2013; Duffy et al., 2016), our team developed the interview questions through several research meetings. The questions explored a wide array of topics pertinent to working including family, education, and participants' personal hopes, dreams, and disappointments about work. In addition, the interviews included a definition of the American Dream and a question regarding the participants' views on this belief, which was not explored in depth in the broader project (Blustein, 2019). The interview process was intentionally constructed to include questions and themes that could lead to multiple studies. For example, participants also responded to an interview question on their solutions to the work-related crises in the United States, which was the focus of a prior qualitative investigation (Kozan, Blustein, Paciorek, Kilbury, & Işık, 2019) and not examined in the current analysis.

We developed two interview protocols: one that we administered to participants who were employed in market work and one that we administered to participants who were out of the job market. While most of the questions in these protocols were identical, including questions about people's personal and work lives (e.g., "What are your hopes and dreams about your work life?" "What have been the most difficult obstacles in achieving your hopes and dreams in your work life?" and "How has your work life [currently or previously, depending on the participant's working condition] influenced other parts of your life?"), the second interview protocol also explored experiences pertaining to unemployment, care work, and previous market work (e.g., "What was the most important part of the last job you had?" "How has your current situation [unemployment or caregiving] affected your hopes and dreams?" and "How has your unemployment or caregiving status influenced other parts of your life?"). All of the participants were asked the following question, which focused directly on the themes of this study: "The American Dream is the idea that anyone can achieve prosperity if they work hard. Do you think that is true?"

Prior to the interviews, the participants completed a demographic questionnaire that provided background information regarding their social identities such as age, gender, and race. We used participants' responses to this questionnaire to consider the findings in their relevant contexts (referred to as *contextualization*; Levitt et al., 2017). We conducted in-person, phone, and online interviews due to different locations of the participants. In-person interviews were done with 10 participants living in the same region, and the rest of the participants were interviewed via phone or an online video calling service. The interviews took approximately 60–90 min. We continued to conduct interviews until we reached data saturation (Morrow, 2005); therefore, we ended data collection when no additional information could be obtained from new interviews. Sixteen graduate students (nine women and seven

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men) in mental health counseling and counseling psychology programs transcribed the interviews.

Participants and Procedure

In line with the broader project (Blustein, 2019), we used maximum variation (i.e., heterogeneous) sampling, a subtype of purposive sampling (Patton, 2002), to obtain rich information about our research question. Maximum variation sampling allowed us to capture a wide variety of working experiences among the participants and to examine the research phenomenon in depth and breadth (Creswell, 2013). Given our interest in interviewing Americans from diverse social identities with different levels of access to educational and vocational resources, we recruited participants through multiple means including a one-stop career center in a northeastern city, social media, and our personal contacts across the country. All the participants reviewed and signed a copy of the informed consent before they participated in the study. We did not provide financial incentives for the participants at the outset of the data collection. However, we later offered $20 gift cards to recruit more participants and to reach out to participants from diverse socioeconomic and working backgrounds, including unemployed and underemployed individuals, improving the fidelity of our study. The research team was careful to assess any differences in the quality or experience of conducting the interviews after we introduced the incentive, and we did not discern any change in the tone or process of the overall data collection. Further, the IRB at our institution approved of this change, and we modified our informed consent procedures as appropriate.

The participants, 17 American women, included all women interviewed for the larger project (Blustein, 2019), who responded to a question about their beliefs on the American Dream. Participants' ages ranged from 23 to 64 years ($M = 38.88$; $SD = 13.63$), and they came from diverse racial, educational, and occupational backgrounds. Specifically, the women in this study identified as White ($n = 10$), African American ($n = 3$), Asian American ($n = 2$), and Multiracial ($n = 2$). They lived in various U.S. regions, including the Northeast ($n = 10$), West ($n = 2$), Midwest ($n = 2$), Southwest ($n = 1$), and Southeast ($n = 1$), and one woman, originally living in the Northeast, moved to Central America for work. The participants' education levels were high school graduate ($n = 2$), some college ($n = 4$), undergraduate degree (e.g., BA; $n = 8$), and professional degree (e.g., PhD; $n = 3$). Five of the participants were unemployed (two of these women were also students), one participant was underemployed, and the rest of the participants were employed full time (see Table 1 for additional demographic information).

Data Analysis

The research team. The core data analysis team consisted of the first and second authors: a female counseling psychologist who identifies as an ethnic and religious minority in the United States and a White female doctoral candidate in counseling psychology. One of the critical elements of conducting qualitative research involves researchers' attention to managing their subjectivity through explicit efforts to reflect on their biases and assumptions both individually and as a group (Morrow, 2005). Fidelity in qualitative research is maximized when researchers are able to recognize the potential impact of their views on the data collection and analysis, taking steps to limit this impact in order to gather a clearer picture of the phenomena (Levitt et al., 2017). We were engaged in self-examination throughout the study, which included writing and discussing our personal reflections on the notion of American Dream considering our subjective experiences and social identities. Thus, we made deliberate attempts to monitor our beliefs, biases, and assumptions that could potentially affect the data collection and analysis.

Specifically, we uphold a social justice perspective in psychology and value advocacy for those who are marginalized. Based on our social identities and locations, each of us had differing levels of access to opportunity structures, impacting our views of the American Dream. Each of us had personal histories of social mobility, and we each experienced ethnic/religious and/or gender-based discrimination that affected our work lives. Additionally, in our clinical work, we provide psychological services for individuals who face significant barriers to obtaining decent and dignified work. Given our personal and professional experiences, as well as

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Race	Age	Education	Work status
Ashley	White	54	BA	Unemployed
Sarah	Asian American	23	HS	Unemployed
Tanya	African American	43	BS	Dental hygienist
Cindy	Multiracial	52	BS	Unemployed/student
Kim	African American	31	BA	Per diem employee
Jen	White	51	AA	Part-time teaching assistant
Tina	African American	32	BA	Unemployed/student
Erin	White	41	PhD	Unemployed
Susan	White	44	BS	Paralegal
Kate	White	24	MS	Researcher/graduate student
Molly	White	27	BA	Fundraising operations supervisor
Reina	Multiracial	33	BA	Wellness director
Pat	White	62	BA	Business manager
Kelly	White	64	MA	Social worker
Diana	Asian American	26	AA	Customer service associate
Amy	White	25	BA	Server/bartender
Leslie	White	29	HS	Quality controller

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our in-depth familiarity with research supporting the negative impact of economic constraints and marginalization on upward mobility, we believe that systemic injustices continue to interfere with prosperity and well-being in the United States. In addition, we integrated *reflexivity* (Levitt et al., 2017) into our research team meetings during which we (the first and second authors) analyzed the interviews. For example, as women in a helping profession, we reflected on how some participants' values around taking care of others were similar to our vocational interests of providing mental health care.

Conventional content analysis. After our team transcribed and reviewed the interviews for accuracy, the first and second authors, who are experienced researchers in content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Patton, 2002), started the analytic process by reading transcripts multiple times and writing memos for each transcript to note initial impressions and patterns. Summarizing our first understandings of participants' beliefs and experiences allowed us to express and manage our personal reactions to the data. Next, we proceeded with the coding process that included creating in vivo codes, categories, and concepts (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Following the conventional content analysis procedures (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Patton, 2002), the first phase, in vivo coding, involved identifying direct quotes from each transcript text that reflected participants' views, beliefs, and experiences. In the second phase, we searched for meaningful patterns within and across the transcripts to sort the in vivo codes into fewer content-related categories. This phase included writing brief summaries about the original quotes from the participants. The third level entailed organizing the categories based on their relationships with each other and embedding them into overarching chunks or clusters of concepts (i.e., domains).

During the analysis, we met every other week for four months to discuss each coding phase, reflect on our reactions to the interviews, and discuss our ideas about the codes, categories, and domains. After we worked independently at each level of coding, we reviewed each other's list of codes and discussed points of disagreement until we reached a consensus on the codes. When necessary, we revisited the participants' quotes to resolve areas of disagreement between us. Throughout the analytic process, we went back to the interview transcripts multiple times to check the accuracy of codes, categories, and larger concepts/domains, adjusting where appropriate. At the end of the analysis, we developed a final list of domains, categories, and codes that we compiled with participant quotes.

Results

Three domains emerged from the analysis of women's work aspirations and beliefs on the American Dream. These domains include (a) aspiring for work that fulfills essential human needs, (b) multilayered influences on women's work aspirations, and (c) making sense of work aspirations in relation to beliefs on the American Dream (see Table 2 for a list of domains and categories). In the following sections, we explain these domains as well as the categories that fall under each domain, using pseudonyms for participants. The following terms signify the numeric range of participants who described any given experience, consistent with other qualitative studies: "some" (one to six), "many" (seven to 12), and "most" (13 or more; e.g., Chang, Voils, Sandelowski, Hasselblad, & Crandell, 2009). We made minor modifications in the quotes to ensure clarity and conciseness.

Aspiring for Work That Fulfills Essential Human Needs

When describing their work aspirations, women in the present study highlighted the essential functions of work in their lives. Most participants described aspiring to work that met their physical, psychological, social, and economic needs. Within this domain, women's work aspirations involved work that allows them to (a) contribute, (b) survive, (c) make social connections, and (d) engage in meaning making.

Women aspire to work that allows them to contribute. Most participants valued building and maintaining a sense of self-worth

Table 2
List of Domains and Categories

Domain	Category	Frequency
Aspiring for work that fulfills essential human needs	Women aspire to work that allows them to contribute	Most
	Women aspire to work that allows them to survive	Many
	Women aspire to work that allows them to connect and relate	Some
	Women aspire to work that allows them to make meaning	Some
Multi-layered influences on women's work aspirations	Women view their work aspirations as being shaped by relationships	Most
	Women view their work aspirations as being shaped by societal factors	Many
	Women view their work aspirations as being shaped by personal factors	Some
Making sense of work aspirations in relation to beliefs on the American Dream	Women endorse the American Dream despite experiencing barriers to their work aspirations	Many
	Women reject the American Dream recognizing the barriers to achieving work aspirations	Some
	Women reject the American Dream recognizing the role of privilege in achieving work aspirations	Some
	Women redefine the American Dream to be consistent with their work aspirations	Some

Note. Some = (one to six); many = (seven to 12); most = (13 or more).

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and competence by contributing to others' lives through their work. For example, Cindy explained, "I want what I do to mean something to someone, to make their life better." These women emphasized that work provided more than financial gains and structure in their daily lives. Indeed, some of these participants deemphasized monetary gains, competition, and power when expressing their work aspirations. Kate, a graduate psychology student, underscored nonmonetary job attributes when describing what work meant to her: "It's not a paycheck and it's not just a place that I go. For me, work is an environment where I'm valued for what I can contribute."

The value of helping other people consistently appeared in women's descriptions of their work aspirations. Most participants desired work that allowed them to serve or provide care for others in various capacities (e.g., providing direct individual services, systemic advocacy). As Erin, a researcher who was unemployed and searching for work at the time of the interview, described:

> I think I'm a little part of the world, and I try to do my best to help people feel better in their lives: fighting against viruses, against cancer. So, I try to find a way to make health care and education affordable to everyone all over the world. This is my mission.

Some participants described the role of their "caretaker" identities in shaping their work aspirations. Tanya, a health care provider who lost her job after her department closed, viewed work as a way to practice gratitude by serving people in the community. She defined "helping" as a critical aspect of her identity: "I love serving people. I love helping. That's who I am." Likewise, Kate explained, "I'm very much a caretaker, which is probably why I got into this field."

Women aspire to work that allows them to survive. Many participants described a desire to meet survival needs, such as needs for food and shelter, when discussing their work aspirations. This domain was especially salient in the narratives of unemployed participants and those who struggled to, in Molly's words, "make ends meet." For example, Sarah, who was unemployed for 3 years after working at a daycare, stated her dream of making a decent income to meet her basic needs through working: "We all need a job to pay for a roof over our heads and food in our stomachs . . . It would make me happy having a roof over my head." Beyond meeting basic needs, some of these participants also emphasized security and stability. Ashley, who was laid off from her longtime career after her job was offshored during the Great Recession, explained her aspirations for her work life: "I want to feel secure . . . I don't think I will be retiring at sixty-five. I haven't been really stable."

Women aspire to work that allows them to make social connections. Some participants aspired to a work life that enabled them to connect with people (e.g., coworkers, customers) and develop fulfilling and meaningful relationships. As Pat stated:

> That's my number one reason why the job, my socialization opportunities in my daily life. I live on an island. I can isolate very easily out here, and so that's my number one goal. It usually is. It's usually the people, the people I work for.

Tanya, who lived in an urban area, similarly underscored the importance of "working with my co-workers . . . just being with people." Tina, who has been unemployed for the past 2 years but used to work in retail, echoed this perspective: "When I'm dealing with people, when I'm interacting with customers, I come alive."

Women aspire to work that allows them to engage in meaning making. Some participants noted their desire for work that fulfills the need to grow, make meaning, and engage in self-realization. These women emphasized the psychological aspects of work that enabled them to participate in interesting, meaningful, and motivating activities that contribute to their personal development. Kelly reported: "I think that it is so important that you choose something that you really love. I hope that's one thing that I really passed onto my kids." Amy, who worked as a server, revealed her wish for more opportunities for growth: "I would like to bartend more than serve ideally . . . I would like to be more challenged. I just don't feel challenged anymore." Leslie was dissatisfied with her job as a quality controller and similarly hoped for a more fulfilling work experience: "You just feel like people should love what they do." In contrast, Reina's work as a wellness director was not only decent but also personally fulfilling and meaningful:

> Even though my title is a wellness director and it's how I earn my money, it's my occupation, but really how I identify myself or my meaning in my life is that it's more of a lifestyle rather than something I earn my money for . . . I'm really excited actually. It's so much fun. My job doesn't feel like work, and school doesn't feel like school. It's just like I keep learning and sharing. It's so much fun!

Summary. Taken together, women's work aspirations involved work as a means of contributing, surviving, connecting with others, and meaning making. Most participants emphasized making a positive impact on others' lives, and many aspired to secure work that allowed for providing the basic necessities for themselves and their families. Some participants aspired to work that enabled them to foster social connections and engage in personal growth or meaning making.

Multilayered Influences on Women's Work Aspirations

The second domain refers to the factors that participants saw as linked to their aspirations about work. Women viewed their aspirations as being affected by an intersection of *relational*, *societal*, and *personal dimensions*. This multi-layered set of influences shaped women's work aspirations in complex ways. We elaborate on these influences next.

Women view their work aspirations as being shaped by relationships. Most women viewed their relational contexts as having a reciprocal relationship with their work aspirations. Women's relational contexts included their social relationships both at work and outside. Specifically, all participants described the effects of relational support from professional and personal connections, or lack thereof, on their capacity to live their work aspirations.

Women view their work aspirations as being shaped by work relationships. Participants identified a range of experiences in their work relationships, including feeling supported, connected, empowered, betrayed, bullied, and underappreciated by their coworkers, employers, and managers. These diverse experiences served to either support or undermine their work aspirations. Some participants revealed that they felt supported in their work rela-

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tionships, which in turn helped them feel, in Kelly's words, "capable of doing the things that [my mentors] felt I could do." These positive relationships helped some women in this study hold onto their dreams about working in the face of hardships. For instance, when Kate was applying to graduate school, she knew very little about the process, but was able to find a mentor who "really walked me through the process and told me the books to buy, and I couldn't have possibly done it without her."

While some participants, like the previous examples, relayed experiences with supportive workplace connections, many perceived negative social relationships at work as a significant barrier to actualizing their work aspirations. Diana worked as a customer service associate for several years at the same company and was never promoted despite watching less-senior employees who she trained advance ahead of her within the company. She noted the lack of compassion or constructive feedback when she brought this to the attention of her managers, which had a negative impact on her working life:

> I went to talk to my store manager and there was not a lot of sympathy. There was not a lot of feedback there. I just felt like he was just there to listen to me, but that was it. Nothing happened. There's plenty of times I went to talk to him and he was just . . . nothing happened. So, at that point I felt like, gosh what am I gonna do? The next step is to either call the district manager or remain where I'm at. I do not know. So, I just keep to myself.

Women view their work aspirations as being shaped by personal relationships. Most women viewed their relationships outside the workplace as influencing their career trajectories. Many women detailed supportive relationships that promoted their aspirations. For instance, Diana felt that her husband's aunt furthered her aspirations: "She encouraged me to go back to school. She encouraged me to get a better paying job, so we can be more successful, happier."

In contrast to supportive examples, many participants described a lack of social and emotional support that created challenges for them as they eventually had to make sacrifices that compromised their work aspirations. For some women, caregiving roles and family responsibilities also influenced their work aspirations. Many women viewed working as central to taking care of significant others and tried to model the value of hard work for their families. Some sacrificed their work lives and financial security for family responsibilities. Some had difficulty balancing work and caregiving roles and wished they had more time to spend with their families. In some cases, problems in intimate relationships (e.g., divorce and domestic violence) interfered with women's aspirations about work and education. Leslie explained:

> I was just a few classes away from graduating with an associate's degree. Then, I met this guy I dated, and he was just super controlling and very jealous. So, I totally just made him my number one priority, and I didn't finish school. I just feel like when I was younger and in high school I just had bigger dreams and goals than to be working at a call center, you know? So things got a little side-tracked.

Women view their work aspirations as being shaped by societal factors. Many participants viewed their work aspirations as being impacted by the larger social context of working, including social inequalities and limited access to decent work. Many participants brought up psychologically and physically unsafe working conditions, inadequate and unequal pay, work overload, and limited time for self-care. For some women, these indecent work conditions were linked to physical and mental health concerns such as depression, self-doubt, diminished energy, or cardiovascular concerns. Additionally, women who were unable to maintain decent work expressed a lack of certainty and stability in their working lives, which were far from the American Dream. As Kim, who worked per diem and continued to search for another job, stated: "Whether I'm working or not, it's just not stable because I could work 20 years on the job and I could lose it the next day." Molly worked multiple jobs and often made "sacrifices" to meet her employers' expectations. Kim dreamed of a more decent and dignified work life: "I would like more rights . . . I did really great work the last couple of years. I deserve to be paid for that, compensated for that, and [to have] more security and stability at my job."

Closely related to indecent work conditions, many participants talked about racism, sexism, discrimination, and sexual harassment in the workforce. These women elaborated on how such injustices impacted their work aspirations. For example, Tina, an unemployed and homeless woman, noted an incident in which she perceived discrimination during the job hiring process. She further opened up about the obstacles she faced as an African American woman in the workplace and shared the role of race-related stress and racial stereotypes in how she presented herself to others:

> Being African American you gotta be careful . . . I say for one be determined, be strong because there's a lot stereotypes with being African American like we're not educated, we do not want to go to school, we do not want to learn, we just wanna get help from the government. So, when you have goals, you have to fight the stereotypes. The stereotype might piss you off, it might get you [to feel like giving up], "You know what? I'm just gonna just stop it completely." Because you have to fight this by walking down the street. You have to be very strong and keep the idea, keep the agenda always in your head everyday when you go outside because you will get distracted, especially in work.

Many women also noted economic problems that affected working in the United States. Kim struggled with poverty, making it hard for her to obtain education and work. To her, joblessness also meant homelessness and being "set up to fail." Some participants striving to have better work lives continued their education while working; however, this came with the price of work overload. For Molly, the high cost of education combined with a heavy workload affected her well-being: "It'd be nice if education was just cheaper because if I wasn't paying almost a thousand dollars per credit, I wouldn't be working two part-time jobs and I wouldn't have to worry."

Women view their work aspirations as being shaped by personal factors. According to some participants, their personal characteristics influenced their work aspirations. When facing work-related barriers, participants adopted different approaches. Some women blamed themselves for a lack of success in their work lives. Kelly, for instance, reflected on how her personality played a role in her previous failures: "I thought I wasn't smart enough. I thought I wasn't dedicated enough, or disciplined enough . . . I just had no self-confidence whatsoever to feel like I could do things, [or to feel] that I was capable [and] worthy." On the other hand, some women viewed themselves as possessing

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positive attributes and resources (e.g., resilience, spiritual strengths) to overcome work-related setbacks. This was reflected in the attitude of another participant, Cindy, toward the barriers she faced as an unemployed woman:

> I do not let it stop me. I continue where I need to go and I might learn something from that. From my perspective, I learn most when I fail, when I have a setback. So, once I have that, it doesn't mean I stop. It means I go, learn from it, and keep going.

Summary. In short, women described contextual and personal influences on their aspirations for their working lives. Most participants described relationships that supported or undermined their achieving their aspirations. In addition to the social/structural factors that often diminished their ability to live up to their aspirations, women discussed personal attributes that either hindered or helped them.

Making Sense of Work Aspirations in Relation to Beliefs on the American Dream

The last domain describes how women understand their work aspirations in the context of their beliefs in the American Dream. While many women agreed with the notion of the American Dream, some rejected it, considering unequal access to resources in the United States, which impacted their work lives and aspirations. In addition, some women came up with their own definitions of the American Dream while endorsing meritocratic beliefs.

Women endorse the American Dream despite facing barriers to living their work aspirations. Many participants believed in the American Dream, emphasizing individual factors such as persistence, hard work, and personal responsibility. Some of these participants endorsed this meritocratic belief in concert with holding hope for their working lives. These participants believed in the American Dream even when the ideal of meritocracy contradicted their experiences attempting to live out their work aspirations. For example, despite sharing the "huge challenge" of "living with no money" or shelter while achieving her work aspiration of earning a degree from a community college, Tina endorsed the American Dream, emphasizing the role of hard work in achieving one's aspirations:

> Yes [the American Dream] is true because if you are like me, if you're homeless, you gotta [work] really, really hard to get a job, so you definitely have to work hard. That's the reason why we go to school, to work hard, [to make a] career. That is definitely true, especially in America.

Similarly, Susan, who worked as a paralegal after her criminal record made it impossible for her to find a job in her original field of nursing, believed:

> There are so many different ways, even for someone like me, to succeed . . . I think that it's there. It is a lot more difficult for somebody who doesn't have that kind of education and experience but it could happen.

Erin, who was also unemployed and looking for work at the time of the interview, recognized the obstacles she has faced while believing that with persistence and the "right" connections, it is possible for everyone to achieve the American Dream:

> Totally agree [that the American Dream] is true. You need to find the right way. You need to find the right person, but even if I had a hard time in my life, I think you find angels on your way. You find people; you just need to knock on the door. And if you cannot come in through the door, you try the window . . . I'm not saying that it's easy, but as soon as you work hard and you really want to achieve, it's possible.

As such, these participants held a belief in the American Dream in conjunction with a sense of optimism about their futures. They believed that as long as they continued to "work hard" in the face of the setbacks, they would reach their aspirations. Yet, for some women including Leslie, endorsing the American Dream coexisted with a sense of self-blame for failing to meet their work aspirations: "I would say that the only thing that's blocking me living the American Dream would be myself."

Women reject the American Dream recognizing barriers to achieving work aspirations. Some participants denied that the American Dream existed and perceived contextual barriers to their achieving their aspirations. For example, Kim referred to her personal story as a homeless woman when rejecting meritocratic ideology: "No, I don't believe it because I work hard and I'm in a shelter. That's not my American Dream . . . I don't believe it." Molly similarly referenced her personal challenges with meeting her work aspirations when rejecting the notion of the American Dream: "If I'm working two part-time jobs and going to school and still struggling . . . That's not the 'American Dream.' That sucks."

Women reject the American Dream recognizing the role of privilege in achieving work aspirations. Some participants with more economic resources shared a disbelief in meritocracy as they recognized their privileged access to resources and the effects of social inequities on access to work. Kate acknowledged her privileges as a White woman with access to resources, which she believed helped her achieve her goal of getting a doctoral degree:

> [The American Dream is] absolutely a myth! I couldn't have made it as far as I have without a role of lucky streaks and lucky connections for jobs . . . I didn't have nearly those privileges as a lot of some of my classmates did, but I still made it because of my privilege.

Likewise, Kelly, who articulated how her identity as a woman constrained her career aspirations (e.g., "I thought I was stupid at science and math. It never even occurred to me that I could [work in engineering]. . . that I was capable of anything like that"), underscored the role of racism, sexism, and family background in one's success:

> There is a lot of institutional racism, and the color of your skin has a lot to do with it. If you're a woman, there are certainly gender biases. I think some people have so many options right from the get go. If you come from a family that values college and secondary education and is helping [their] kids to do that, or if you have the means to do that. . . . Those are all the things that give you a step up the ladder that most people just do not have anymore.

Women redefine the American Dream to be consistent with their work aspirations. Some women (Cindy and Pat) believed that anybody could live the American Dream if they worked hard. Yet they challenged the definition of the American Dream based on economic power and prosperity and highlighted other objectives as part of their own American Dream. For Cindy, wealth and

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financial success were less important than contributing to the public good: "The way I was raised, prosperity was never the goal. So, the goal was to be able to give back to people in your community and to be part of the community, working together for the mutual benefit." Pat also underscored having a personally meaningful and satisfying life as central to her own definition of the American Dream:

> Prosperity is all relative. What does it take to live the dream? I know people who are living the dream and who do not have much of anything, but they will say, "I am living the dream." They are happy as can be, and they are completely content, and they have next to nothing . . . I get as much, I would say much more satisfaction, at just volunteering that I do. I work really hard, and do not generate any revenue at all, but to me that is all part of the American Dream: being able to give. The more you do, the more you get, so it's all interrelated.

Summary. Taken together, women's understandings of the American Dream varied in the context of their personal working lives. While many participants, some of whom were coping with significant systemic barriers, endorsed the American Dream, others rejected this meritocratic ideal and articulated the influence of social inequities. Some of the women who rejected the American Dream benefited from social and economic privileges and prosperity in their own lives. Finally, some participants redefined the American Dream to encompass a broader definition that goes beyond the material functions of work, emphasizing the importance of making a social contribution and meaning making.

Discussion

The present qualitative study is among the first to our knowledge to qualitatively explore American women's work aspirations and beliefs on meritocracy, particularly the American Dream, in the context of the gap between this dream and the injustices women face in their work lives. To this end, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 American women from diverse backgrounds. Three domains emerged from the conventional content analysis of the interviews: (a) aspiring for work that fulfills essential human needs, (b) multi-layered influences on women's work aspirations, and (c) making sense of work aspirations in relation to beliefs on the American Dream.

Women's Work Aspirations

One of the valuable aspects of the present study is its contribution to understanding American women's work-related experiences at individual, interpersonal, and contextual levels. A central finding reflects the critical role of relationships in shaping women's work aspirations, beliefs, and overall working lives. Women's views about work reflected their relational needs and values, which include contributing, helping/caring, and connecting through work. This finding is consistent with the main tenets of PWT (Blustein et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2016) as well as with relational perspectives in psychology (e.g., Jordan, 2001; Richardson, 2012). However, these findings go beyond extant literature and theory as they demonstrated that many participants, particularly those with relatively secure and stable work lives, seemed to undervalue competition, status, and financial power, which not only impacted their work aspirations but also shaped how they conceptualized what the notion of the American Dream entailed, as they challenged traditional definitions of this concept that focus on financial prosperity.

Interestingly, survival and power needs (Blustein, 2006, 2013; Duffy et al., 2016) were less salient in the work aspirations of the women in the present study, except for those who struggled to meet their basic needs (e.g., homeless and/or long-term unemployed women). Further, when the survival aspects of working surfaced in interviews, women's descriptions went beyond individual-level survival and entailed providing for their families or for significant others. Women's views of survival were inseparable from their families' survival and welfare, which, at times, led them to make sacrifices from their work dreams and goals in order to maintain relationships and/or to provide personal care for the family. This finding echoes prior work that illuminates the importance of care work in women's work lives as it interacts with their market work experiences (Blustein, 2011; Richardson, 2012). Yet it builds on this work by demonstrating how many women may redefine their personal "American Dreams" to be consistent with the prominence of care work and other relationships in their lives.

Moreover, women in the present study unanimously emphasized the reciprocal link between work and relationships, describing these two domains as different but interconnected. Work and relationship domains either promoted or constrained each other. For some women, supportive personal and professional relationships enabled them to engage in work that was satisfying and fulfilling. For others, disconnections and conflicts in important relationships, such as their relationships with family, intimate partners, coworkers, or employers, limited their access to the work they had hoped for. Similarly, problems within participants' work lives (e.g., long-term unemployment, lack of work-life balance) seemed to impact women's satisfaction with their relationships, a finding that provides support for relational approaches to working (Blustein, 2011; Kenny, Blustein, & Meerkins, 2018; Richardson, 2012; Schultheiss, 2007).

The role of systemic barriers, including discrimination, workplace sexual harassment, and financial hardships, was also salient in the stories of women in the present study. Indecent and precarious work conditions impacted women's work lives as most of the women in this study dreamed of safe, stable, and meaningful work which allowed them to live based on their values of connecting, contributing, and helping. Corroborating PWT-informed research (Blustein et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2016), a lack of decent work (or work in general) was linked to a number of physical and mental health concerns that in turn shaped women's engagement in work that meets (or fails to meet) their basic human needs for power and survival, social relationships, and self-determination (Blustein, 2006, 2013).

Women's Beliefs on the American Dream

Another goal of this study was to explore women's beliefs in the American Dream considering the mismatch between the American Dream and women's work lives. Equal access to opportunity structures has been diminishing in the United States (Narayan et al., 2018; Saez & Zucman, 2016), yet many Americans continue to uphold meritocratic ideologies, exemplified by widespread endorsement of the American Dream (Isaacs, 2016; Major & Townsend, 2011; Xian & Reynolds, 2017). More than half of the

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women in the present study also endorsed this belief by asserting that anyone can succeed through determination and hard work. In addition, women's beliefs in the American Dream did not necessarily match their living and working conditions. Surprisingly, most of the unemployed/underemployed and homeless women in our study endorsed strong beliefs in the American Dream, supporting the views of Jost and colleagues on meritocratic beliefs among members of socially disadvantaged groups (e.g., Jost, 2019; Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Ledgerwood et al., 2011).

Some women in this study reported perceiving hard work, persistence, and other individual assets as the only way out of poverty, leading them to support the notion of the American Dream. Endorsing meritocratic beliefs might also serve as a way to maintain one's hopes for the future. At the same time, these meritocratic beliefs are likely to come with psychological (e.g., lower self-esteem and psychological well-being) and social (e.g., lower motivation for social action to challenge the status quo) costs for women who are disadvantaged and marginalized (Jost, 2019) given ongoing social injustices that continue to limit their access to decent and dignified work. Our finding that some women from relatively privileged backgrounds based on social class and work experiences were more aware of the social injustices and systemic barriers to living the American Dream than those who were socially disadvantaged further support these theoretical assertions (Jost, 2019; Jost & Banaji, 1994).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, the findings provide further insights into the importance of many of the constructs in PWT, including social contribution, survival, relatedness, and self-determination. In addition, the narratives attested to the prominent role of relational and macrolevel contextual/systemic forces, which emerged as key factors in women's capacity to develop and implement their dreams in the world of work. The emergence of the complex meaning-making pathways that women used to explain how they related to the American Dream points to some new areas of research and theory building in PWT. For example, the ways in which people understand macrolevel factors may serve as a moderating factor that may play a significant role in the linear PWT model developed by Duffy and colleagues (2016).

From the counseling practice perspective, the current study conveys the complex interactions between women's work aspirations and beliefs on the American Dream, which has defined so much of the ideology in the United States about aspirations and achievement. In addition, the results underscore the ways in which external expectations may shape and influence individuals' reactions to barriers and struggles in their lives. These inferences have significant implications for counselors. Counselors may find it useful to help clients reframe and critically assess the validity of inferences about the role of macrolevel factors and individual agency in one's educational and career pursuits. This perspective may help to reduce self-blame and enhance critical consciousness for some clients, which may serve as a powerful antidote for women who hold themselves responsible for disappointing outcomes of their efforts.

Second, the pervasive role of relationships was evident in many of the interviews; this observation underlines the relevance of relational perspectives (e.g., Blustein, 2011; Jordan, 2001; Richardson, 2012; Schultheiss, 2007) in counseling practice. Being mindful of the reciprocal link between work and relationships, counselors may engage in inclusive psychological practice (Blustein, 2006) that integrates interventions focusing on work and nonwork contexts through helping clients explore how their work-related experiences overlap with their relational experiences as well as other domains of life. For example, counselors may assist clients in understanding how changes in their work lives are likely to impact their personal and work relationships. They may use interventions to support clients' relational competence (Jordan, 2001) and resources, which can contribute to clients' success and satisfaction regarding their work lives and help them achieve their aspirations. Lastly, it is important to note the crucial role of family in either fostering or constraining women's work aspirations. Although caregiving, or providing care for one's family and community, is often socially and economically marginalized and relegated to women in many cultural contexts (Richardson, 2012), our results suggest that care work also has capacity to provide psychological benefits; therefore, it should be valued alongside market work as an esteemed activity for all genders (Blustein, 2019).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The present study possesses several limitations to consider when interpreting its results. First, although using maximum variation sampling allowed us to explore a diverse group of women's subjective experiences and beliefs in depth and to share the experiences of women with differing levels of access to the opportunity structure, our participants were largely White, cis-gendered, and from the Northeast, limiting the transferability of the results across different contexts. Future research should investigate the perspectives of women from diverse geographic regions, women from a broader array of racial and ethnic groups, immigrant and refugee women, and women who identify as sexual minorities (e.g., transgender, lesbian, and bisexual women).

Second, as we were particularly interested in understanding women's work aspirations and beliefs in the American Dream, considering the mismatch between the meritocratic ideals and reality for women and the marginalization women face in their working lives, we were unable to explore the work aspirations and meritocratic beliefs of Americans from other gender groups, such as those who identify as transgender or nonbinary. Perhaps some of the themes that emerged in this study pertain to Americans more broadly, regardless of their gender identities; as such, it is impossible to ascertain which results are uniquely important to American women. Future research with nonbinary groups may unveil important insights into how gender shapes work aspirations and meritocratic beliefs for individuals with varying levels of privilege afforded to them based on their identified genders. Indeed, studying the perceptions of Americans who are transgender and/or nonbinary is particularly important, as these groups faces considerable marginalization within their working lives (e.g., Tebbe, Allan, & Bell, 2019).

Third, our goal was to examine how women in the 21st century view their work aspirations and understand the American Dream considering the challenges they face in the American workforce, and our results reflect the current subjective experiences of women in their working contexts. Thus, it is hard to determine which

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challenges the participants described were due to the current work climate and which may have existed prior. Future research might shed further light on how macrolevel factors, such as shifts in the availability of decent work and the growing prevalence of precarious work conditions, predict Americans' work-related experiences and beliefs on the accessibility of the American Dream in the long term.

Conclusion

This qualitative study sought to examine American women's work aspirations and beliefs on the American Dream in view of the contextual factors that affect their work lives, using PWT as a conceptual framework. Our results echo relational perspectives on working (Blustein, 2011; Richardson, 2012; Schultheiss, 2007) as well as the core tenets of PWT (Blustein, 2006; Duffy et al., 2016) by highlighting the key role of relational and societal factors in women's work aspirations. In addition, women's beliefs on the American Dream underscore the complex ways individual and contextual factors are linked to individuals' understandings of meritocratic ideologies. Participants' views reflected a discrepancy between the mainstream American ethos of meritocracy and the sexism and other barriers that pervade work experiences for many American women. These results inform directions for future research grounded in psychology of working and provide notable implications for social justice-oriented psychological practice.

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