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Caught in between: neoliberal rhetoric and middle-income families in Canada and the United States

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**ABSTRACT**

In both Canada and the United States, middle-income families feel neglected by policymakers but struggle to balance their financial need and desire for government support on the one hand with neoliberal beliefs in self-reliance and self-responsibility on the other. The focus of this paper is on the tensions experienced by middle-income participants in both countries as they try to negotiate a place for themselves amid these competing discourses. Specifically, this paper analyzes participants’ struggle to juxtapose their place in the ‘shrinking’ or ‘forgotten’ middle class, against their desire to be ‘good’ citizens who take responsibility for themselves and their families. This analysis plays out against the backdrop of different socio-political environments and in the context of the 2007–2009 global recession which exacerbated the already increasing pressure on the middle class. It is argued that these contexts have shaped how participants in each country feel about the government support they require, deserve, and reject.

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**Introduction**

They’ve never really addressed families like mine before. It’s just like they forget the middle people. They think you know, yeah, you’re working, you’re not asking for government hand-outs, so they just kind of don’t provide any assistance for us. (Amy, USA)

Over the past decade, the plight of the ‘forgotten’ middle class has received increasing attention as a significant social problem (e.g. Sullivan, Warren, & Westbrook, 1989; Warren & Warren Tyagi, 2004). Worldwide, there has been much talk about the decline of the middle class (Williams & Boushey, 2010), with catchy headlines such as ‘the middle-class squeeze’ (Weller & Staub, 2006) and the ‘vanishing’ middle (Warren, 2006) gaining attention in both popular media and academic circles.

In economic terms, the ‘middle-class squeeze’ refers to the rising level of income inequality that has taken place during the past decades in industrialized countries, and more specifically to economic imbalances resulting from the combination of stagnant
middle-class wages and the rising cost of goods and services (Erickson, 2014). For the middle class itself, this ‘squeeze’ has thus come to signify increasing financial vulnerability together with a growing difficulty in maintaining a middle-class lifestyle (Cohen, 2015).

The changing financial situation of the middle class has taken place in the context of a neoliberal political climate that emphasizes free markets, deregulation, privatization, and individualism (Brown, 2006, 2003). Moreover, neoliberal ideology is unusually wide-ranging in that it has also reshaped social and cultural logic in important ways (Evans & Seawell, 2013). Indeed, individuals are now largely expected to be both self-reliant and self-disciplined (Lavrence & Lozanski, 2014), and it has been well documented that the ‘responsibilized’ citizen is at the core of contemporary neoliberal societies – a phenomenon that Tyler (2013) and others have constructed as a pervasive form of social and cultural governance that contemporary citizens must contend with (see Gilbert, 2013 for further examples).

Following from Hall and Lamont (2013), we understand neoliberalism as a social process that consists of ideas and policies that have come together to create a pervasive ideology. In this paper, we explore the experiences of parents in middle-income families in Canada and the United States as they negotiate a core component of this ideology – the discourse of responsibility – in the context of finite economic resources. Our focus is on the experiences and perceptions of middle-income parents as they attempt to carve out a place for themselves between ‘responsible’ citizens and citizens deserving of a certain level of support from their government. As a social process, neoliberalism has gained momentum and acceptance by engaging the population in a project of self-reliance and responsibility (Carabine, 2001; Rose & Miller, 2008), and it is this tension that we wish to investigate through the experiences of our middle-income participants.

In addition, our Canadian–American sample offers us a distinct opportunity to juxtapose the experiences and perceptions of parents in two countries that share similar ideological and economic trends, but that also have divergent welfare traditions. Specifically, we ask: (1) how is the neoliberal discourse of responsibility negotiated by our middle-income participants in the context of finite economic resources? (2) Do Canadian and American participants differ in the ways they engage with this tenet of neoliberalism?

We begin this paper by providing a brief sketch of relevant historical trends in the two countries, including the ascendancy of neoliberalism, the contours of the contemporary economy, and the state of the middle class, and highlight a body of empirical literature to which our study contributes. We follow this with a description of our data and methods, and then with our findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of our results and their relevance for other countries.

The economic, social and political landscape of families in Canada and the USA

The political context

Many of the social and economic policies adopted by governments in the industrialized West during the last three decades have reflected neoliberal goals and orientations. Broadly understood, neoliberalism is in the first instance a political regime that has become a widespread governing ethos (Connell, 2010). The political and economic
practices of neoliberalism include a normative privileging of the individual and a preference for the private sector over government funding, with the overall goal of advancing the interests of capital accumulation (Harvey, 2005).

Along with Great Britain, the United States has been a hotbed for neoliberal policy development since the late 1970s, and thus has a long history of policies designed to stabilize markets and protect capital interests rather than to support the needs of families (Braedley & Luxton, 2010). In countries such as Canada and Australia, with well-established histories of welfare state policy provisions, the roll-out of neoliberal reform was a much more uneven process. However, the entrance of the conservative Harper government in Canada in 2006 saw a refocusing of national policy towards deregulation and privatization, and since this time, social spending in Canada has largely been both regionalized and privatized (Bezanson, 2010).

As noted above, the omnipresence of neoliberal economic and political rationalities has given rise to a hegemonic cultural discourse that has had pervasive effects on the ways contemporary citizens live in and think about the world. As Harvey (2005) suggests, ‘it [neoliberalism] has become incorporated into the common-sense way many interpret, live in, and understand the world’ (p. 165). To achieve this, proponents of neoliberalism have had to recruit supporters, something that is done largely through claims to egalitarian constructs such as equal opportunity, the expansion of wealth, and freedom of choice (Connell, 2010).

For people living in Canada and the United States, the ways in which neoliberal practices are lived affect people’s options (Bezanson, 2010, p. 92), and one’s relative class status affects that engagement (Heron, 2008). For example, neoliberal reforms have intensified class divisions and facilitated labor exploitation through the production of a ‘low wage racialized labour force’ (Connell, 2010, p. 87). As such, it was crucial to the large-scale implementation of neoliberalism that the middle class absorb – rather than reject – the extra work and financial costs associated with neoliberalism (Gray & Aglias, 2009). The abjection of marginal groups, including the ‘undeserving poor’ was also critical to a neoliberal project that requires a low-wage labor force to propel it forward (Tyler, 2013).

**The economic context**

In parallel to changes in the rhetoric and politics of governments, the economies of western societies have been radically transformed during the past decades, resulting in increasing job insecurity, stagnant incomes, and rapidly rising competitiveness (Weller & Staub, 2006). Arguably, these changes have made it much more difficult for families in the middle of the income distribution to maintain their socioeconomic status (Budd, 2010; Warren, 2006). In particular, Kalleberg (2011) posits that the decline of the middle is closely linked to two labor market shifts: reductions in secure well-paying jobs with benefits, and the steady rise in precarious employment. In conjunction with growing employment instability and nonstandard work hours (Presser, 2003), these shifts have resulted in uncertain prospects for the future of many families in both Canada and the United States. For example, families in both countries that had previously achieved a comfortable standard of living are increasingly negotiating situations of insecure employment, fear of job loss, and uncertainty around retirement funds (McDaniel, Gazso, & Seong-gee, 2013).
In view of these changes in the economic context, both Canadian and American politicians have called for initiatives and measures to support the middle class. Examples include President Obama’s Middle-Class Task Force, Hilary Clinton’s campaign theme ‘rebuilding the road to the middle class’, and the recent Canadian Liberal Party’s vision for a middle-class road. In practice, however, the focus on the middle class has been veiled in both countries under the rhetoric of self-responsibility.

However, when it comes to the actual economic situation of the middle class in Canada and the USA, there are important differences. While income inequality has indeed increased in both countries during recent decades (OECD, 2011), and while middle-class families in both countries have seen an erosion of their financial security, there are indications that the actual magnitude of this insecurity is higher in the USA than in Canada. For example, even prior to the recent recession, the percentage of indebted households among the middle class was higher in the USA than in Canada (OECD, 2006). Subjectively, American middle-class households are also less likely to report that they easily make ends meet as compared to their Canadian counterparts (Gauthier, 2015b).

The welfare state context

In the welfare state literature, the US and Canada are often constructed as similar cases (Hantrais, 1999). Both countries are classified as liberal welfare states (Arts & Gelissen, 2002) and both are characterized as providing low levels of support for families (Théve non, 2011). Historically, however, there are important differences in terms of the government’s approach to welfare provisions in the two countries – notably the stronger tradition of comprehensive coverage in Canada, especially when it comes to healthcare and the provision of maternity and parental leave (Banting, Hoberg, & Simeon, 1997), and the larger safety nets provided to low-income families in Canada (see Luccisano & Romagnoli, 2007 for a detailed description). In particular, the stronger redistributive dimension of Canada’s welfare system, as compared to the American one, continues to translate into more support for low-income families and a lower child poverty rate (Banting, Hoberg, & Simeon, 1997; Scott, 2008). In recent decades, the two countries have however followed more similar paths by engaging in major welfare reforms that reduce welfare caseloads and are driven by an increasing emphasis on self-responsibility (Schafer, Emes, & Clemens, 2001).

When it comes specifically to middle-income families, the actual level of support provided by the government in both countries is very similar if the comparison is restricted to taxes and cash transfers. Canadian middle-income families pay slightly more income tax and receive more cash family benefits than their American counterparts, but the net transfer is nearly the same (Gauthier, 2015b). Moreover, in both cases the families’ middle income renders them non-eligible for programs targeted at lower income families. The two countries differ, however, when a broader package of cash and services are included. For example, Bradshaw and Finch (2002) estimated the value of the child benefit package including taxes, cash benefits, education, health, and other benefits for an average two-child family to be slightly higher in Canada than in the USA. In other words, while the disposable income of Canadian and American middle-income families is comparable (after taxes and transfers), the value of services received by Canadian middle-income families is higher.
The two countries also differ in terms of public attitude towards the welfare state. For instance, Lipset (2013) has stressed significant differences between Canadians’ orientation to collectivity, equality of opportunity and apathy toward strong government, and the deep-seated American interest in meritocracy, individualism, and anti-statism. In fact, using comparable public opinion polls data from representative household surveys, Corak, Curtis, and Phipps (2010) found that Americans are more likely to view the state as hindering their ability to achieve the ‘good’ life. The authors suggest that this belief may be interconnected with the increased level of difficulty American parents have in maintaining a ‘strong foothold’ in the labor market, with high levels of inequality and low rates of mobility merging to fuel the American understanding that the role of the welfare state is inconsequential in determining their outcomes.

**Empirical studies of neoliberalism in two countries**

Researchers in both Canada and the US have examined the adoption and impact of neoliberal principles in the daily lives of families in a variety of empirical settings. For example, Hursh (2007) studied the transformation of public education in the United States within the context of neoliberal policies that hold teachers and students responsible in new ways, and promote parental choice and competition between schools. Moreover, Reich (2014) found that neoliberal cultural frames of individual choice inform mothers’ accounts of why they refuse state-mandated vaccines for their children, and Scott, London, and Edin (2000) explored the responses of low-income women to work mandates implemented as part of neoliberal reform (e.g. the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act).

Similar Canadian studies have shown the discourses of individual choice and personal responsibility to be pervasive in this country as well. For example, Roy (2008) demonstrated the widespread and enveloping presence of such principles in popular English-Canadian women’s magazines and described how this reinforces women’s feelings of individual responsibility to create and maintain specific health practices. Moreover, Wall (2001) established an important link between an ascending child-centered breastfeeding discourse and the neoliberal preoccupation with individual responsibility, and Kemp and Denton (2003) explored perceptions of risk and responsibility in elderly Canadians and found that these principles have deep connections to their attitudes about state support and normative patterns of familial and employer assistance.

What all of these studies have in common is a focus on the ways in which discourses and policies related to neoliberal reform are taken up in the lives of contemporary individuals and their families. Our study contributes to this body of empirical work by investigating whether and how men and women in middle-income families negotiate the discourse of personal responsibility within their families in the context of finite financial resources. We also consider differences in how participants in the two countries engage with these discourses, and link these to the broader economic, political, and welfare context they are living within.

In sum, with this paper we critically explore whether and how our middle-income participants navigate desires for welfare inclusion in a neoliberal political context that emphasizes self-sufficiency and self-responsibility. By focusing on the middle-income group, we furthermore extend recent analyses focused on low-income and welfare recipients (e.g.
Scott et al., 2000) and answer calls for more studies on the experiences of those located in the middle of the income distribution (Carlson & England, 2011; Gornick & Jantti, 2013). Moreover, by comparing and contrasting the experiences and views of Canadian and American families, we contribute to a very small body of cross-national qualitative studies on families (Mangen, 1999; Ogmundson, 2002).

The ‘Families in the Middle’ (FIM) study

The data for this paper come from the ‘Families in the Middle’ (FIM) study, which was a collaborative project into the financial situation, hopes, fears, and realities of middle-income families in Canada and the United States. As part of this study, we interviewed 156 parents with a middle family income who had at least one child between age 9 and age 14. The data were collected between 2008 and 2010.

Our definition of middle income followed that of other authors and encompasses a range of 75% to 125% around the median family income (Pressman, 2007). In 2009, the median family income was the same in both countries, around US$60,000, thus resulting in a middle-income range of US$45,000–75,000. By using such a definition, we opted for an income approach to identifying ‘families in the middle’ as opposed to a social class approach. Our decision to do so was driven by two key reasons. First, it parallels the approach used in most of the other middle-class studies carried out in recent years (e.g. Gornick & Jantti, 2013), and second, it is congruent with the broader discourse of middle-class squeeze and its underlying financial dimension.

We used multiple channels to recruit participants for the project, including schools, sport organizations, community centers, parents’ groups, press releases, and social media. As is the case in similar qualitative cross-national research (Lewis & Smithson, 2006), the initial sample was not nationally representative but strategic in that it aimed at capturing American and Canadian parents at a similar stage of their life course (i.e. with school-age children) and facing similar income constraints (i.e. middle income). In particular, our decision to focus on parents with at least one child aged between 9 and 14 years results from the broader aim of this project being on parents’ investment in their children and their hopes and fears for their children’s future. One consequence of studying parents with children of that age is that our data on perception of government support do not capture policies and programs targeted at younger children - for example, the cost and availability of childcare facilities. On the other hand, we are capturing parents at a point in their life when they reflect on their financial situation and contemplate future expenses for their children’s higher education (Napolitano, Pacholok, & Furstenberg, 2014).

The in-depth, semi-structured interviews were generally carried out in the participants’ homes by a local member of the research team and lasted from one to two hours. All interviews were conducted in either English or French. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from our respective universities was granted before field research began. All names are pseudonyms and have been ‘Anglicized’ to further protect respondent anonymity, since persons with varied ethnicities and nationalities are represented in the sample.

As mentioned, the fieldwork was carried out in 2008–2010, that is, precisely around the time of the recession. This was not part of our original research design and had not been foreseen when we had applied for funding. When we started the fieldwork, we
consequently had concerns that the recession would greatly impact the experience of our participants and would make our findings specific to this period of time. For that reason, we probed further by asking participants how the recession had impacted their financial situation. Our data show that while most of our participants knew someone who had lost their job or was afraid of losing their job, very few of the people we spoke with were directly affected by the recession (Iversen, Napolitano, & Furstenberg, 2011). Moreover, it became clear in our conversations with participants that their experience of financial strain had accumulated over time (Budd, 2010). As such, the perceptions of ‘just managing to make it’ and ‘living paycheck to paycheck’ were in place prior to the recession (Gauthier et al., 2013). This is in line with other studies having shown that the economic woes experienced by the middle class long preceded the last recession. In particular, observers have commented on the ‘serious systemic vulnerabilities that existed for the American middle-class before the recession’ (Treas, 2010, p. 3), including growing financial insecurity and consumption hardships. In short, while our data were collected during a very specific and unusual period of time, our results reflect some of the long-term trends that have altered the economic and political context of families.

Our sample (N = 156), is mainly composed of married or cohabiting parents (74%), who are employed (65%), are homeowners (85%), and have at least some post-secondary education (74%). On average, participants in our sample have 2.5 children and the majority were women (87%). Moreover, and while we use ‘middle income’ as the socio-economic status identifier for the inclusion of participants in our study, the majority of the participants self-identified as being part of the middle class (84%). In regard to socio-demographic characteristics, the profile of our middle-income participants was very similar across our two countries.

Beyond these averages, our sample displays much heterogeneity in terms of both the family composition and family circumstances of our participants. Such heterogeneity speaks to the various ways people from diverse backgrounds find themselves in the middle of the income distribution: a situation also noted by Atkinson and Brandolini (2013) in their recent cross-national analysis of the middle class. What our participants do share, however, is that all were clearly above the poverty line and yet would not self-identify as wealthy or rich. Instead, and as will be shown later, being in the middle and especially being stuck in the middle was a widespread perception among our participants.

Analytic methods

The data for this research were compiled from qualitative interviews that explored middle-income participants’ experiences of parenting and family life in two countries. Broadly, participants engaged in semi-structured interviews that fostered discussion about the day-to-day realities of family life on a middle income. From the outset of this research process, the intent was to explore, analyze, and describe the specific experiences of middle-income families – a task for which qualitative research is well suited (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008).

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed in their original language using the qualitative software Atlas.ti. Every attempt was made to do verbatim transcription. Codes were both created and applied as team members read through the
transcripts, with patterns, themes, and categories emerging out of the data rather than being imposed from the outset (Charmaz, 2000). While we did not employ a purely grounded theory approach in our coding analysis, we did draw on specific aspects of this approach to coding because the research team felt it crucial to engage the data in ways that would allow layers of experience to become visible. Thus, our analytical approach to sorting the data involved applying codes to concepts and emerging themes (e.g. personal responsibility) and significant events of interest in need of further exploration (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Findings

Perceptions of government support

The perception that those in the middle of the income distribution are overlooked by their government was repeatedly reflected in the narratives of our participants in both countries, and often by the same terms. Parents regularly related their middle-income status to falling in a ‘gap’, ‘hole’, ‘pocket’, and ‘middle ground’, while others emphasized feeling ‘squeezed’, ‘caught in the middle’, and ‘stuck’. Annabelle – a married full-time working mother of two from the US – offers her perception of this:

To me it seems like if you’re very poor there’s a lot more help, but once you get to be not as poor, but certainly not well off, it sort of fades away, there’s nothing. I mean, it’s like there’s not a lot of help for middling, middle income people.

Similarly, Ralph – a divorced full-time working father of two, also from the US – describes the disconnect he sees between people in power (e.g. policymakers) and ‘normal’ guys like him.

Everything’s so entrenched. I mean, this whole system, you know, these special interests get these guys in office and the laws are finagled so that they take care of that. These guys just don’t have a clue what it’s like for a normal guy like me – I swear they don’t.

In Ralph’s view, government policies and initiatives rarely meet the true needs of the citizens they are supposed to be serving – a disconnect he sees as stemming from divisions of class and experience.

Canadian middle-income participants held nearly identical sentiments about being left out. Sophie – a divorced mother from Canada – offers one such example:

we are more and more taxed … so that at the end … the middle class is being eroded.

Similarly, Edith, also Canadian, says:

the middle class suffers from enormous difficulties, since on paper they make a fortune while in practice it is extremely difficult to make ends meet.

Sophie’s comments link to Ralph’s account in that they highlight a divide between government policy and support and the economic realities of middle-income Canadians. However, they also provide a window onto an ideological tension that had been mounting at the time of interviewing: the longstanding perception of the middle of the population as a self-sustaining and privileged group vs. a counter discourse that positions the middle as a group increasingly squeezed and dwindling.
Canadian parents’ narratives also show that they perceive policy eligibility criteria as disproportionately focused on low-income families. For example, Megan – a married stay-at-home mother of two from Canada – describes frustration over her eligibility for very limited tax breaks.

you’re just sort of on the border line between you know, you don’t have lots of money to have it flowing around and not be worried about it, so almost it used to be called the working poor. We’re not the working poor but it’s like the middle income people always seem to get hosed.

Megan draws attention to what she perceives as a thin line between the working poor and the stretched middle – a view that she goes on to link to her understanding that middle-income families are often underpaid and overtaxed. Similarly, Janet – a married full-time working mother of three from Canada – explains how her family’s income excludes them from many of the benefits the government makes available, yet falls short of allowing them to live without financial worry and strain.

I think that in families you know, like us, where you have you know, well we’re middle class, you know, I think we take a hit on everything, because we make too much money to qualify for all sorts of [pauses] incentives or tax credits or breaks, and we don’t make enough money to not worry about it … but I always think that they, somehow we get caught in the middle.

Not unlike Janet, participants from both countries emphasized feeling that they were not getting ahead in life and partly blamed the government for it. Michelle – a married stay-at-home mother of two from Canada – perhaps best summarizes this recurring theme when stating ‘it just seems, you know it’s the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, the ones in the middle are just stuck’. And while this sentence may appear clichéd and could possibly have been spurred by similar headlines being reported in the media at the time, it remains that this theme was echoed in the sentiments of a wide segment of our participants.

Neoliberalism and the notion of self-responsibility in two countries

Families in both Canada and the US espoused valued ideals such as hard work and individual initiative. Many described themselves as wanting to live ‘government-free’ and be ‘self-reliant’. As the narrative of Ashley – a divorced full-time working mother of two from Canada – shows, many families did not want ‘handouts’ but at the same time, still wanted a little extra help from the government:

Ashley: You know, I’d like to see a few more tax credits, for the middle income, but not actual handouts. I don’t know if hand-outs are a good idea unless you’re starving, yeah. But it’s difficult because my kids don’t need to go to a private school, they – you know we don’t need to go on a vacation and they don’t need to play hockey, um so I suppose I shouldn’t really be getting money from the government unless it’s to pay for their education, like you know pay for their books for public school or their food that kind of thing, right. And I mean I know I’m talking on both sides of my mouth ’cause I really want to have all those things, but really when you think about it the support should go to the people that absolutely can’t do it, but then what’s the definition of can or can’t right?
Interviewer: What do you think could be changed to improve your family’s situation?
Ashley: Me get a better job, um […] move to a place where it’s less expensive, um, me make tough choices about changing schools, that kind of thing.

While Ashley wavers between wanting more for her family and emphasizing that it’s probably not the government’s responsibility to provide that, when asked to make a definitive statement about how her family’s situation might be improved, Ashley places the responsibility of provision squarely on her own shoulders.

Similarly, a number of participants draw on the individualistic language of ‘choice’ when discussing their financial circumstances, ultimately leading to accounts that depict themselves as responsible for both their family’s standard of living and increasing level of financial insecurity. For example, Cara – a married full-time working mother of two from the US – invokes choice when describing the tension between her responsibilities and her wishes for a bit more government support.

I’m making choices to have a certain kind of a lifestyle. Um, so I don’t, I, I’m very, I’ve been very lucky, very fortunate, so I don’t know that I really have any expectation that I should be getting more help or support. Um, sometimes though, I suppose there is some sense of, gosh, I’m working so hard [chuckles] and barely making it.

Cara describes her family as undeserving of government support because she has chosen to have a ‘certain kind of lifestyle’. However, throughout her interview, Cara offers no indication that her family has an overly expensive lifestyle. On the contrary, she describes her street as the ‘dividing line between well-to-do neighborhoods and not-so-nice neighborhoods’, and also explains that she rarely spends money on items for herself.

Gauging the desire for government support across two countries

As shown above, many of the participants in this study walked a fine line between embracing the notion of self-responsibility and expressing a certain level of ambivalence about being self-reliant and government-free. In other words, participants regularly emphasized the desire to qualify for some level of support, but many were also quick to justify or renege on that desire when asked follow-up questions about it.

On the whole, however, we have found that the wish for more government support was more characteristic of our Canadian participants than their American counterparts, and that this is quite visible in talk about wanting or deserving more from their government. Julie – a married full-time working mother of three from Canada – offers one example of this when discussing her perception of the level of government support Canadian families are currently offered:

A bit more support from the government, it would be great. This is what I have to say because I think that we are not supported. Families are not supported […] Paying for school books, paying for this, and paying for that. Honestly, there is no support. With the exception of the family allowances for the two [children] but it is a drop in the bucket by reference to what a child costs. So, I think that the families are really not supported. It is really sad.
In line with Julie’s sentiments, Jake – a separated full-time working father of two, also from Canada – is critical of the lack of investment of the government in the areas of education and health.

If I had a say in that, I would heavily fund education and health care … They’re investments. I don’t feel that the government supports parents very well. I mean, look at the sort of bullshit we just went through with the school district bringing in a user fee for the school bussing … And what about this other nonsense of building a brand-new school, and the kids’ parents have to get together and buy the playground … What’ll be next? The parents have to buy the toilets? … We already buy the pens, the pencils, and the paper and all that, ok? … Last time you bought a vehicle, did it come with tires and wheels?

Asked what he would like to see happen, Jake states:

I would really, really like to see more government funding going to supporting parents and childcare, because we now live in a financial situation where most parents are having to work.

Similarly, Megan – a married stay-at-home mother of two from Canada – describes her frustration over her eligibility for limited tax breaks.

I mean my husband got a six thousand dollar raise or something and suddenly we’re not eligible for Child Tax Credit. You know, we get a hundred dollars a month for [daughter] until she turns six. So we kinda use that for clothing and things for her, umm, but I just don’t think you get enough.

Finally, Natalie – a married part-time working mother of three from Canada – asserts that the government should be involved in helping citizens to ‘better’ themselves.

more funding, encourage, encourage more funding. They [the government] try, I think there’s more things about being active that type of thing, but education-wise too. Like when we did go to Europe, the year when my husband was in university, university, because he was still German, it’s free. How many people would go to university if they didn’t have to worry about the costs? How many people would be getting more education and bettering themselves, bettering their families? So I think the government could do more, for sure.

Natalie moralizes her desire for enhanced government support for families like hers by grounding her claim in the need for higher levels of educational attainment for Canadian families. Furthermore, in line with Natalie’s sentiments, Canadian participants commonly looked to countries in Europe when constructing accounts of necessary governmental improvement, while American participants were more likely to use Canada as a point of comparison.

In contrast, American participants demonstrated a higher level of uneasiness about accepting government support for their families. For example, Chris – a single full-time working father of one from the US – best summarizes this theme in response to the question: ‘would you seek government assistance if your financial situation deteriorated further?’:

Chris: If I had to.
Interviewer: If you had to. So what kind of situation would that be like, do you think?
Chris: No food on the table. I’d have to be pretty desperate.
Chris’ son has a serious health condition that requires Chris to put large amounts of time and financial resources into caring for him. This is a dire situation for Chris, who goes on to explain that he is finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet.

Chris: We cut it real close sometimes, but I’ve never had to hold on a bill for lack of funds. Except for maybe the mortgage until I get paid, but it’s never late. It’s always on time. [Whispers] Though every month seems to get a little bit closer, trying to make it.

Despite his increasing level of financial insecurity, however, Chris maintains that he would only seek help from the government if absolutely necessary (e.g. if his family was starving). Furthermore, when asked about his hopes for his son’s future, Chris emphasizes not wanting his son to have to rely on the government for assistance.

I think umm just being happy, that would be a biggie and umm, at least being able to take care of himself. Not relying on the government and all that.

Not unlike Chris, when asked if there has ever been a time when she turned to the government for financial assistance, Samantha – a married stay-at-home mother of two from the US – stated:

Samantha: No, no.
Interviewer: If the situation called for it, would you?
Samantha: Well, as a last alternative.
Interviewer: In what kind of situation would you ask for help?
Samantha: If something dreadful happened to [husband] where he couldn’t work anymore and if it was that I wasn’t able to work to bring in money. I’m not saying that I wouldn’t sell my home and go live in an apartment, but I don’t want to be on the street or anything like that. It’s my responsibility to feed my kids and have health care for them.

Unlike a number of her Canadian counterparts, Samantha does not feel that the government has a responsibility to support the healthy development of her children. Moreover, the lengths that she and Chris say they would go to in order to provide for their children without seeking help was a sentiment that did not exist in our Canadian sample.

In sum, while participants from both countries showed ambivalence about accepting government support, our data show that middle-income participants from the American sample were less likely overall to embrace the idea of receiving support.

**Discussion and conclusions**

The focus of this paper is on the perspective of those who must manage and negotiate government policies and decision-making, by considering their responses to economic challenges in daily life. Overall, our examination of participants in middle-income families in the US and Canada reveals that they have similar feelings about being ‘strained’ and ‘left behind’ by their governments, but also that they experience and perceive these challenges in varied ways.
Similar to the findings of Corak et al. (2010), the Americans in the FIM study were somewhat more skeptical of the benefits of government support than their Canadian counterparts. Furthermore, the theme of the importance of being ‘self-sustaining’ was more prevalent in the American data. This finding is quite interesting given that in comparison to Canadian participants, Americans described higher levels of financial strain and less job security on average (Gauthier et al., 2013).

In addition, we found that for our participants, the level of satisfaction they felt toward their government was related to their expectations, which are to some extent lodged in their country’s values and cultural ideology, and to some extent in their life experiences and perceived needs. Important historical and cultural differences exist between Canada and the United States, which may have consequences for how participants in each country perceive government support and their relation to it. For instance, it is possible that Americans in this sample were more adamant about remaining self-sufficient in part because of the long history of stigma that is attached to welfare and dependency in this country (Kunitz & Pesis-Katz, 2005; Sherman, 2013).

The entrenchment of neoliberal ideology in the US complicates matters even further. Existing research has shown that the discourses of individual choice and personal responsibility often come together to construct work as a ‘moral imperative for Americans of all income levels, whose fulfillment is necessary to most understandings of success’ (Sherman, 2013, p. 413). In this way, self-sufficiency is upheld as the gold standard of full citizenship. Relying on government assistance in the American context is thus both multifaceted and complex – which is visible in the talk of our participants who discursively carve out a place for themselves between feeling ‘forgotten’ by their government, and viewing government aid as a last resort. However, our data also show that Canadian participants with a middle income are quite similar in terms of how they construct feeling ‘forgotten’ by their government. Not only did they describe themselves as ‘in the middle’ and ‘stuck’ without adequate policy help, but contrasted their situation with their perception that government help is instead directed to lower income families (greater assistance) and higher income families (greater tax breaks).

Yet, even though our Canadian and American participants use nearly identical rhetoric to describe themselves and showed a certain level of ambivalence toward accepting government aid, important differences emerged in how participants from each country expected deficiencies in safety-net supports to be managed. For example, Canadian participants generally expected more from their government and attached less symbolic meaning to the acceptance of assistance. Meanwhile, American participants were more likely to suggest that they were undeserving of government support and less likely to embrace the idea of receiving aid overall.

Following from Kalleberg (2011), one possible explanation for the above is that yearly increases in rates of low-paying jobs with minimal benefits have worked to normalize the notion of precarious employment and reduce the expectations of citizens with a middle income. Moreover, the ideological ascendancy of the ‘self-sufficient’ citizen fits well with this supposition by supporting the premise that security is something we *strive for* rather than something that is provided by our government. Interestingly, it has recently been shown that even in instances where increased utilization of aid did occur in North America, self and societal stigma attached to this usage did not abate (Sherman, 2013, p. 427). Unfortunately, however, the size of our sample precludes us from making this
type of causal connection with certainty. However, it is very clear that the breadth and depth of the narrative material collected reveal insights into how the political is experienced personally by our participants, and extends knowledge of how the generally under-researched population of middle-income families feel they are faring in the US and Canadian contexts.

In addition, it is entirely possible that our findings may be applicable to countries other than Canada and the US. For instance, given the recent political and economic trends in Australia (Gray & Aglias, 2009), it is possible that researchers would garner similar findings when speaking with middle-income families in the Australian context. However, future research is needed to explore whether this is indeed the case.

It is also worth noting that our participants responded within the context of an economic recession, and thus their accounts may have differed had we spoken with them at another point in time. However, the economic and political ideology of neoliberalism existed in both countries well before this specific temporal period, and while our participants may have been experiencing increased financial pressures during the time of interviewing (although this was not heavily suggested) it is their engagement with neoliberalism that we are most interested in explaining here.

Notes
1. Our data having been collected prior to Obama’s healthcare reform, we do not cover this topic here.
2. Specifically, in both countries our middle-income families were eligible for tax credit for dependent children, and in the case of Canada for family benefits (the Canada Child Tax Benefit). In both countries, however, our middle-income families exceeded the income threshold for other means-tested programs (e.g. the Canadian National Child Benefit Supplement) including work-related tax benefits targeted at the working poor (e.g. the Canadian Working Income Tax Benefit and the American Earned Income Tax Credit).
3. More information about the FIM project, the research team, and the sample is available in Gauthier (2015a).

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