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ABSTRACT

The dominant ideology regarding poverty in the US is one of individualism. Polls have shown time and again that the majority of people hold the opinion that impoverished individuals and families have the capability as humans to rise out of poverty but are not doing so because of individual failings. While structuralist arguments are also prevalent as a counter-argument, this study intends to analyze what the effects of the internalization of these or any ideology surrounding poverty have on its persistence. By analyzing qualitative data obtained from nine focus group interviews, encompassing three sectors of society in three counties in upstate NY, we have uncovered several underlying attitudinal components that show various understandings of poverty. These understandings, once internalized, feed into the stigma or stereotypes surrounding perceptions of poverty, and have an affect on the behavior of both the affluent and the impoverished. This dichotomy in behavior, which is apparent and observable to all in society, perpetuates the inherent and underlying attitudes that were analyzed in this study and were determined to play a role in the persistence of class distinctions.

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Identity, Perception and Economic Behavior Explaining Persistent Poverty

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It is only from the moment that [the poor] are assisted . . . that they become part of a group characterized by poverty. This group does not remain united by interaction among its members, but by the collective attitude which society as a whole adopts toward it. Poverty cannot be defined in itself as a quantitative state, but only in terms of the social reaction resulting from a specific situation. Poverty is a unique sociological phenomenon: a number of individuals who, out of a purely individual fate, occupy a specific organic position within the whole; but this position is not determined by this fate and condition, but rather by the fact that others attempt to correct this condition.¹

Georg Simmel

The gap in economic achievement in the United States is large, and growing quickly.² The disparity between the rich and the poor continues to grow, as America's middle class threatens to become a memory. By loose definitions, the privileged class, comprised of managers and professionals, constitutes about 20 percent of the population, while the wage-earners and working class, those living from paycheck to paycheck, comprise about 80 percent.³ This is loosely defined because those at the very top, the wealthiest business owners and employers, exist far above the world of professionals; conversely, their counterparts at the very bottom, the excluded or marginalized populations, are mistakenly grouped in with wage-earners. One possible question is: why do so few benefit from the American economic system, which promises free movement for everyone willing to work for it, while others get left behind? What separates one person's 'American Dream' from another's 'American Nightmare'? This paper asks an

¹ Lewis A. Coser, *Masters of sociological thought; ideas in historical and social context* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971) 183.

² Mark R. Rank and Thomas A. Hirschl, "Rags or Riches? Estimating the Probabilities of Poverty and Affluence across the Adult American Life Span," *Social Science Quarterly* 82, no. 4 (2002): 652-53.

³ Robert Perrucci and Earl Wyson, *The new class society: goodbye American dream?* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 30. See also Perrucci and Wyson's breakdown of class structure in the United States, p. 29.

important, related question: why does the system seem to be internalized, often enthusiastically, by both the affluent and the impoverished?

Internalization is the adoption or embracing of a situation through unconscious assimilation. This is evidenced in many ways, including via opinion polls in the US. In 1993, about 98 percent of people believed Americans were poor because of a “lack of thrift,” 89 percent believed it was a “lack of effort,” 75 percent believed a “lack of ability,” and 83 percent because of “irresponsibility.”⁴ All of these opinions suggest that impoverished individuals have the ability to rise out of poverty but are not doing so because of poor decisions or because they lack the intellectual capacity to do so.

Statistics based on a study of the life course, or the “social processes extending over the individual life span, especially with regard to the family cycle, educational and training histories, occupational careers,” show that by the age of 75, more than half of all Americans will have experienced at least one year of poverty, as opposed to affluence, in their lives.⁵ “Poverty” is defined by Rank and Hirschl as an income threshold via the US Census Bureau, which in 2008 stated \$21,834 for a two-parent family of four.⁶ For a single-parent family of four (three children), the threshold was bumped up by \$76. “Affluence” is defined as ten times the poverty level.⁷ The proportion of Americans experiencing poverty at any given point in their lifetimes suggests that individual volition is not, in and of itself, enough to give one rise to affluence.

Demographic differentiation showed substantial results as well. For example, of white males with more than 12 years of education, more than 66 percent had experienced one or more years of affluence. For a black female with more than 12 years of education, only 17.4 percent could expect a year or more of affluence. These data suggest that, perhaps, not just anyone has the ability to embrace their American Dream and rise to the top.

There is another component, however, which suggests that even the poor will internalize an inherently unequal system: organizing against such a system would

⁴ See Matthew O. Hunt, “The Individual, Society, or Both?: A Comparison of Black, Latino, and White Beliefs about the Causes of Poverty,” *Social Forces* 75, no. 1 (1993): 293-322; See also Joe R. Feagin, *Subordinating the poor: welfare and American beliefs* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975); and James R. Kluegel and Eliot R. Smith, *Beliefs about inequality: Americans' views of what is and what ought to be*, Social institutions and social change (New York: A. de Gruyter, 1986).

⁵ Rank and Hirschl, “Rags or Riches?,” 654.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Rank and Hirschl, “Rags or Riches?,” 651.

contest the *individualistic ideology* on which our nation was founded. Indeed, one might hear individuals at the very top talk of their rise from very humble beginnings, through hard work and perseverance. It seemed to work for them, so why not me? It is, however, potentially paradoxical to consider the phenomenon of poverty as an individual failing. Those who are defined as impoverished – whether by the Census income threshold, the perceived opinion of another individual or, especially, through self-identification – may be prone to unproductive or even destructive behaviors. Embracing an individualistic perception of poverty necessarily requires those who are struggling financially to embrace a feeling of individual failure. As such, people might respond in ways that include concealing their own situation, refusing aid when they need it, or to interpret their own situation as an incomparable circumstance, i.e. they are poor because they've gotten a raw deal but others in identical situations are there because of individual failures.⁸

The reasons behind persistent poverty are evidenced to have, to some extent, a psychological component.⁹ This raises the question of whether the perceptions of individuals who self-identify as poor differ from those of the affluent, and whether these perceptions could affect behavior. Some behaviors point to a reproductive quality of persistent poverty within certain social groups, though the quality can manifest itself in many different ways. Evidence for this can be found by comparing the demand for welfare programs between urban and rural US communities. There is a greater percentage of rural poverty than urban poverty, yet the urban poor population is significantly more likely to turn to welfare as a solution.¹⁰ This aversion to welfare participation by the rural poor illustrates one example of a detrimental behavior that could be caused by a group mentality that the welfare system is only for individuals that are “too lazy” to get a real job or are looking for a free ride.¹¹ In reality, it is likely that persistent rural poverty is caused by a lack of human capital (a brain drain) in a given rural region, and a lack of effective social networks through which individuals can obtain higher paying jobs, especially within the area. In this case, welfare could be a helpful crutch to sustain families while looking for jobs and could assist in the job search.

⁸ See Erving Goffman, *Stigma; notes on the management of spoiled identity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963); See also Mark R. Rank, *Living on the edge: the realities of welfare in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

⁹ See George Akerlof and Rachel Kranton, “Economics and Identity,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115, no. 3 (2000): 748.

¹⁰ Mark R., Rank and Thomas A. Hirschl, “A Rural-Urban Comparison of Welfare Exits: The Importance of Population Density,” *Rural Sociology*. 53, no. 2 (1988): 195-196.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 191.

Other behaviors could include consumption practices that go beyond an individual or family's means. The mentality that causes this is a fundamental point of contention for researchers of social economics. An economist might argue that all decision processes are in the hands of the individual, that the individual is the focal point for all study and that society is nothing more than an amalgamation of individuals. A sociologist, on the other hand, might counter with a more structuralist argument, that individuals are engrained with forces from their environment that determine their individual character, and that society functions as a structural force greater than the sum of its parts. While both are reasonable perspectives, neither fully encompasses an answer to the plight of the poor.

Stigma

Barrett suggests, based on economic models, that “the poor should have every incentive to invest in human and physical capital accumulation and to adopt new technologies to improve their lot.”¹² This suggests that resources other than consumption capital (income) could be acquired as a technique to improve one's socioeconomic status. Other resources include investment capital (wealth), skill capital (education and job experience), and social capital (friends and networks).¹³ The obstacles inherent in this approach, however, are many. To invest in your skill capital, you need the wealth to pay for an education. More complicated still, accumulating social capital requires an investment as well.

Social identity, the basis on which individuals make new relationships, is an established means of categorizing individuals and is present in almost all societies.¹⁴ Anticipations about social intercourse allow people to deal with others and, to the extent that individuals lean on what they understand to be self-evident, develop normative expectations that turn, eventually, into demands about how another individual should act.¹⁵ Put simply, we categorize other people based on little information. The word “stigma” itself originated in ancient Greece and was used in reference to bodily signs of an individual that revealed his moral character and status. Taken in context with an individualist society, this concept can help explain how the poor are stigmatized based on the social

¹² Christopher B. Barrett, “On the Relevance of Identities, Communities, Groups and Networks to the Economics of Poverty Alleviation,” in *The social economics of poverty: on identities, communities, groups and networks*, ed. Christopher B. Barrett (New York, Routledge, 2005), 1.

¹³ Perrucci and Wysong, 16-17; 23-27.

¹⁴ Goffman, 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

information that categorizes them as such. Social information, transferred via unspoken signs or symbols, can take the form of ‘prestige symbols,’ or ‘stigma symbols.’¹⁶ For example, one could be sporting lapel buttons suggesting membership in a particular country club, or they could be driving a particularly run-down car. If one is to build up their supply of social capital, and join networks from which he or she can acquire contacts and resources putting them at an advantage in the job market, for instance, they must necessarily replace their stigma symbols with prestige symbols, investing relatively large amounts of money in the hopes of large returns in the future.

Attempting to gain membership in particular social groups is not a new phenomenon, nor is it ignored by economists. In fact, Barrett has noted that preferences, rules and expectations will define the norms and expected behavior within a group. His research of social economics works to explain the relationship between individual and group behavior as a central point between individualistic and cultural deterministic theories of poverty. In a powerful admission, he states that “there are inconsistencies between models of pure rational choice and observed human behavior, emphasizing the role of social norms.”¹⁷ This could help to explain some poor economic decisions as investments in prestige symbols, since expectations of the poor include that they “improve their lot” based on their own volition. On the other side, expectations of wealthier groups could include disassociation from the less wealthy, resulting in the tendency to judge individuals based on their stigma symbols – assuming they can’t afford a nice car because they are lazy.

From a different perspective, this could also explain the reluctance of many Americans to receive aid, even when it could provide a necessary stepping-stone for them. Individualistic ideology can cause aversion to welfare programs when taxpayers (including both the rich and the poor) feel that they are paying, in spite of their own individual accomplishments, for someone else to avoid their individual responsibilities. Potential aid recipients are discouraged from entering programs because of feelings of anxiety and embarrassment. Rank suggests that Americans have a tendency to allow the words *welfare recipient* to “evoke the image of a good-for-nothing free loader who drives a Cadillac, uses food stamps to buy a sirloin steak or watches soap operas all day.”¹⁸

What, then, are the varying understandings of poverty held by people in

¹⁶ Ibid., 45-46.

¹⁷ Barrett, “On the Relevance of Identities”, 3.

¹⁸ Rank, 2.

American society? Are these understandings internalized and, if so, how do they affect the perceptions and subsequent behavior of individuals? Finally, do these effects serve to perpetuate class differences within communities and among people?

Methods

Research for this study has been conducted with the purpose of uncovering the perceptions of the poor from various members of society. Focus group interviews were held in three counties in upstate New York: Hamilton, Schuyler and Tompkins.¹⁹ Three target groups were identified in each of the three counties. One includes the “elite” members of the community, another the front-line social service providers, and finally a group of low-income residents.

The target counties were chosen based on availability of local informants (most of whom were provided by area Cooperative Extensions), and on the diversity of community members. Ithaca is technically an urban area, since the city’s population is 5,360.88 people per square mile, above the Census Bureau threshold of 1,000, and its surrounding territories are above the 500 people per square mile minimum.²⁰ Tompkins County also has progressive influences from three institutions of higher learning – Cornell University, Ithaca College and Tompkins Cortland Community College – and is demographically diverse in each of the three target groups. Schuyler County, on the other hand, is very prominently White, with a variety of poverty that tends to be seasonal and cycles up and down in accordance with a yearly influx of tourists. Hamilton County, the archetypical “rural poor” target community, has an interesting perspective based on an aged population and high levels of elderly poverty.

In this study, the “poor” are defined as those in our target communities who were identified by local informants as eligible candidates for our low-income focus group. In order to compare perceptions of community members with their understandings of poverty and behavior thereof, the focus group moderator asked a series of questions intended to induce discussion in which participants reveal their perceptions about America’s poverty issue and the current relevance of the “American Dream” ideal by relating their own experiences. By providing narratives about who they are, participants allow us to make comparisons

¹⁹ See table in Appendix [p. 202].

²⁰ See U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Management Division Glossary, <http://www.census.gov/dmd/www/glossary.html> (accessed August 14, 2010).

between their stated opinions and behaviors, as well as interactions between one another, which uncover the desired information.

Focus group discussions were chosen as the format because of their ability to produce qualitative data that is concentrated in the context that we provide.²¹ The chief advantage of focus group research is the development of group dialogue, which encourages a deeper response, beyond simply answering the questions of the investigators.²²

The perceptions of poverty and of the nature and origins of particular ideologies were discussed in three focus groups per region, comprising three previously determined tiers of society, the “elites,” “direct social service providers” and “low-income individuals.” The operational definition of these three groups requires that (i) they were identified as eligible candidates for these groups, based on certain criteria (see below), by local informants, and (ii) that they arrived and participated, of their own volition, in the focus group discussion that they knew to be intended for the specified group, thereby self-identifying as a member of the group.

The criteria used by the local informants to identify members of each group are broken down as follows. Elites are members of the community that exhibit political or economic authority in influential organizations, both public and private. Direct social service providers are front-line workers that develop and distribute aid, assistance programs, information or counseling intended for those in need of economic assistance. Low-income individuals are identified by our informants as recipients of programs, assistance or counseling or are recognized by the service providers to exhibit any of several symptoms of poverty including chronically low annual income, low employment security, and little or no ability to secure adequate levels of health care, insurance, disability services, or sufficient nutrition.

The decision of each member of each group to openly participate in the study is the first indication that they have accepted, or internalized, their membership in that group as a component of their identity. This assumption, in conjunction with their uncovered sense of identity and personal behavior is helpful in analyzing the relationship between identity and economic behavior.

²¹ Richard A. Krueger and Mary Anne Casey, *Focus groups: a practical guide for applied research* (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 2000), 11.

²² *Ibid.*, 12.

Findings

The focus groups did not meet the ideal criteria of eight to twelve people per discussion, especially in the low-income groups, and especially in the more rural areas. We believe there are two reasons for this. Primarily, one is likely to find that there are more impoverished households in rural areas than would be indicated by welfare program participation, reflecting reluctance to self-identify as poor, an obvious impediment to this study. This has been shown to be the case in rural New York, in particular.²³ Second, Tompkins County is more urban to begin with, and our recruiters had been existing advocates for the poor in the area, with established contacts with low-income individuals that are willing to participate in movements for social change.

Table 1 provides the demographic composition of the focus groups, showing that more women were present in the low-income groups as well as among the social service providers. Additionally, the ethnic composition of each Tompkins County group was significantly more diverse, with both black and Hispanic individuals represented, while the other two communities were 100 percent white in all three group interviews.

The first question was intended to elicit responses to the fact that most Americans experience poverty at some point throughout their lives, and to invoke discussion of personal anecdotes that point to the reasons for this economic hardship. This question was, first and foremost, an anchor that we used to gauge the ideological theme that would surround each particular group in each particular region. We found that this worked, and we uncovered strong ideologies surrounding poverty debates that were both individualist and structuralist in nature.

Leading arguments in an economic analysis of poverty center around individualist vs. structuralist arguments. Both of these arguments were prevalent in our discussions, however we were more interested in the effects that internalization of these perspectives has on participants in the American economic system. The mentality relating to poverty is less important to this study than are the effects of embracing this or any ideology as an element of one's identity.

²³ Thomas A. Hirschl and Mark R. Rank, "The Effect of Population Density on Welfare Participation," *Social Forces* 70, no. 1 (1991): 226-29.

Understandings of Poverty

The original question guiding this research asks whether understandings of poverty affect the perceptions of people and their subsequent behavior and relationships with each other. Different class-consciousnesses might develop from perceptions of poverty and of the impoverished based on a particular viewpoint, i.e. whether one is experiencing it, surrounded by it, or seeing it through an intellectual, or otherwise specific, lens. Though individualism, as the method for rising out of poverty, prevails as the dominant mode of thought in America many participants involved in this study – especially those that can be defined as *experiencing* poverty as opposed to *intellectualizing* it – point to structural limitations as opposed to individual ones as the main cause for concern.²⁴ In Hamilton County, for example, where 20 percent of the population is over the age of 65 and more than half is over the age of 45, costs of health insurance and retirement constituted a substantial portion of the discussion.²⁵ This focus on elderly poverty may be a reason for their shift away from individual failure as the main cause for poverty, as once one has entered retirement age, their willingness to work hard is irrelevant. One piece of the discussion illustrates this:

Jane: Something no one mentioned is the economy in this area is so adversely affected by the fact that we're so restricted - through the Adirondack Park Agency and some other organizations that restrict development - there are no jobs because you can't build a factory, you can't do anything that they don't approve of, and they don't approve of anything. Then you have many, many people who want to work in the worst way, the only way, the only place they have to live is their home and they can't afford to go and buy another. And so they stay in our area, they're living (at) such a marginal means that (they) hardly make enough to pay their taxes.

Jack: Right.

Jane: And you can't live on Social Security, I've proved that.

Jack: Not by themselves, my mother in law does - and we're in Fulton County. But my father-in-law worked in the mills, and they didn't get any benefits because-

Jane: That's right.

²⁴ See Feagin, *Subordinating the poor*; See also Kluegel and Smith, *Beliefs about inequality*.

²⁵ See "Census 2000 Data for the State of New York," <http://www.census.gov/census2000/states/ny.html> (accessed August 14, 2010).

Jack: Social security, but she's in senior housing so at least some of that's subsidized.

Jane: But she couldn't be in her own home.

Jack: And you've got energy costs, you've got property taxes, you've got insurance costs.

Jane: I'm 78 years old - I tried to live on my Social Security and I could not - there is no way you can. So I got a job, I had to. I worked in an insurance agency in Northville until I became supervisor.

Here, poverty is characterized as a lack of options available in a particular community. Underemployment, as opposed to unemployment was identified as a particular problem. A lack of social capital was also identified – in the sense that when there is no network through which to find a job, many people (especially the elderly that have more bills than they do versatile experience) become stuck in a cycle of poverty, and according behavior. This perspective was shared by members of the low-income group in Schuyler County, who shared stories of unforeseen illnesses in their families, the treatment for which they could not afford, lack of employment opportunities and other insurmountable obstacles that they saw as structural determinants of poverty. Even in these groups, however, different ideologies were apparent. Consider the following excerpt from the Hamilton County elite discussion:

Conor: One of the things I think that happens is - with age too - if you're in poverty at a young age, there's always hope, because through your own initiative or - you know, there's that dream out there, that there's the possibility I could work myself out of this whether it be physically or whether it be going back for further training and education. As you get older, and something happens, then if there's not hope as much as desperation. Because you don't have that future thing - it's always- okay - what in - I think probably that things start to close in on you. As an older worker or anything else. And if you're unemployed you still – it's even worse, you might have the mortgage to pay but there's all of these other things that lead to depressions, desperation, and possibly substance abuse, whatever.

Conor's words illustrate an example of a situation in which, even when economic conditions and existing policies are specifically targeted as the root of the poverty problem, individualism is turned to as a potential escape. Conor cannot find a job because he is too old, but the younger people in the same

circumstance can easily overcome these obstacles, making their situations incomparable. This idea is reflected throughout Hamilton County, where focus group participants were particularly concerned about poverty of the elderly, a situation in which individuals lack the physical or social capacity to escape poverty through their own volition.

Elite groups in general, however, tended to embrace an individualistic ideology. As a result, their understandings of poverty cause them to be frustrated at the behavior of poor people, assuming that it is this behavior that stands in their way of affluence. In Schuyler County, where elite groups targeted family composition as a major reason for augmenting poverty in America today, the behavior of poor people is called constantly into question. Consider the following exchange:

Lily: It's just dysfunction. They might be what we'd consider a family for a very short period of time but then they change partners. And then there's a new partner and then there's a new person introduced into that family. And they're there for a short time, and then they leave. So there's you know there's instability of adult influence in the children's lives that I deal with, it's frightening.

James: One of the things that I see which is - I'm not sure if it answers your question - is priorities. Probably 80 percent of the people that come to our food bank are smokers. They choose to buy cigarettes but they can't afford food. So they - where they put their priorities is - obviously it's not toward the food. Because it's a resource that's provided for them. So they use their expendable income on other things.

Internalization and Effects on Behavior

As mentioned above, individuals that self-identify as poor, but internalize an individualist perspective of poverty would, logically, have to consider themselves a failure. Fang and Loury discuss the extent to which poor people embrace an identity of “less than,” and will dis-identify with success, even when it is an event or effect, not a lack of effort, that has induced the financial struggle.²⁶ Not only can they not afford an obstacle such as teen pregnancy, for

²⁶ Hanming Fang and Glenn C. Loury, “Toward a Theory of Dysfunctional Identity,” in *The social economics of poverty: on identities, communities, groups and networks*, ed. Christopher B. Barrett (New York, Routledge, 2005), 12-15.

example, but they place themselves in a mental grouping that categorizes them as unable to compete, so they behave accordingly.

Internalizing individualism does not always, however, result in feelings of failure. It could also result in a unique phenomenon, best exemplified by an exchange within the Tompkins County low-income focus group discussion, between Brian, a black male, and Lindsay, a white female:

Brian: 400 years of slavery. Before we came here there was poor white people. It's, I mean, not being funny but, if your poor and white that's kinda like we're, we're, Black people have been conditioned for me to fight against him. Or me to argue with you or fight against you or try to rob you if you in the Bronx. I've been conditioned to do that. I've been conditioned to try to rob you if I don't have no money, if I see you with a nice gold chain on. I've been conditioned to do that.

Lindsay: You don't think I wouldn't if my baby's not going to have no food on the table, you don't think I wouldn't take a gun up into a store and take whatever I needed?

Brian: And they say affirmative action. No black person is going to take any white person's job that they feel they deserve. Because believe it or not, the door will always open up for ya'll. Always. White women benefited most from affirmative action.

Brian, in his conclusion that Lindsay has every opportunity to move up the social class structure through her own resolve, simultaneously identifies individual failure as the prevailing cause of poverty while contending that he, because of his identity as a black man, has been dealt a raw deal and as a result has barriers to social mobility that he cannot overcome through personal determination.

Internalizing structural forces behind poverty also seems to have profound effects on the individual. This is observed by Schuyler County service provider, Christine:

Christine: The point of it is when you live your life under stress, and poverty creates stress, you feel overwhelmed. You are not capable, you are using your reptile brain, you're not using your intellect. Everything becomes overwhelming. Everything becomes too difficult to do. So you grasp at what's easiest. And potato chips, eating half a bag of potato chips will fill your tummy. Maybe it's not going to sustain your life, but when you're overwhelmed, when you're under stress, and poverty is stress inducing.

Christine, through her observations of the overwhelming stress that comes from living in poverty, the causes of which are too much and too many for one to take on alone, also identified behaviors – in this case poor nutrition – that can result from this stress. This is very similar to Conor, from Hamilton County, in his observation that structural poverty, like joblessness, cannot be beaten and can lead to potentially destructive behavior, like substance abuse.

Very common in the low-income group interviews were descriptions of this type of poverty-induced stress. Being impoverished, for many of them, means being forced to make decisions that you do not want to make. Consider the following exchange between Rebecca and Natasha, both low-income group participants from Schuyler County, who were forced to make difficult decisions when faced with an uninsured medical emergency in their families:

Rebecca: Yeah, dental is a big problem for people who are raising children. I can go around with a toothache and put up with it but I can't see my 10 year old being up half the night because she's got a toothache. There's not a dentist around to deal with and then try to make the decision I have Tylenol and codeine, should I give her one? Maybe I should, maybe I shouldn't because it's not prescription, you know, things like that.

Natasha: My mother came because she had Alzheimers. Eventually I went to, then the 911 thing hit in New York so everything was frozen. I couldn't even get a job, I couldn't even find anyplace. I wanted to go to Cornell to work to the hotel over there because I was a catering director for a big hotel/casino in Savannah. I had good work experience. But it's like, that was impossible. They weren't taking applications. So here I was and I didn't know what to do and my money was going and going and going and going and it was gone. And then, you know so I had my mom and she fell, broke her hip, she fell again, broke her other hip, then she had to have a pacemaker and so she was on Medicare, she wasn't on Medicaid, she was on Medicare and so all these astronomical bills come folding in. There was not money to pay for those. She was getting a little bit violent. So on the family Leave Act, I took off work for a year and I stayed home to take care of her and see if I could get her in a place that could really take care of her. I had to work very hard to get her into a place, no one would take her. So finally I got a hold of a home from the agent and they talked to me and they said the only way you would do this is to take your mother to the hospital and leave her and walk away. And I says this is my mother we're talking about here. So finally one day she picked up a ladder and she threw it at me. Now my mother was 110 pounds, little

lady, and she picked up this ladder and threw it at me and it broke my kneecap. And so I said I can't do this anymore. So finally I took her there and left her. And needless to say I had to hold my own with my cousin that works at the hospital, which he no longer speaks to me ::laughs:: and uh this is she will smile at me. And uh but you know this is something I had to do. I had to do this for my mother.

Rebecca: And it was the hardest thing you ever had to do.

Natasha: And it certainly was. And so I took her there and finally they got her in to the home in Elmira and she was there for over two years. She just passed away about three weeks ago (crying).

This exchange reflects a situation in which both Rebecca and Natasha, because they couldn't afford the health care that they needed in order to provide for their families, were forced to make decisions that they would normally never consider. They had internalized a completely helpless situation in which there was no help for the crisis that they faced and, as a result, were forced to choose between the lesser of two evils. Though they felt that they had little choice, the perspective of an outsider, such as Natasha's cousin, spotlights only the behavior exhibited by the individual, not the stressful situation that led up to it.

Direct service providers, because they were physically surrounded by poverty as opposed to seeing it through any type of lens, revealed an ability to explain factors behind behavior that elites or others have no way to relate to. For example, the relationship between domestic violence and the extent to which a family relies upon limited resources is analyzed by one service provider, who targets Christmas in particular to reveal a function of cyclical challenges:

Tracy: I got to tell you, I've been doing this 17 years and in the last couple of years I have seen this pattern. If you disagree with me, try to open my eyes because it's a burden to me to have to think about it. But we have all these families, I'm going to target Christmas, but at Christmas time, they are adopted by maybe altogether with individuals and services five different Christmases. This is what I see because I do outreach in the homes. I go in after Christmas, and they're in what I call La-La world because they've had a phenomenal Christmas. Because they've been adopted by all these people. Plus, what they've done with their limited resources. Then comes January, and February and La-La is over and they are desperate again. We can't provide for them anymore in that wealth because it's not Christmas anymore. People don't do that every day of the week. They get desperate and I

see domestic violence rise, I see child-abuse rise because now they are mean and ugly and they're back to relying on their own money or lack of and I just get so upset at Christmas time. And, also, with the inability to really screen where they're going to take advantage of these wonderful programs that all of you provide. There's no real screening to know how much of that they are tapping into and create such a monster in them. And I, this year at Christmas, I was just horrible! What are we doing to these folks? We're making them think that that's what Christmas is about

Many of the low-income focus group participants detailed aspects of their lives that places stress on their families. While it might be easier, when viewed through a particular lens, to characterize stress-induced behavior as “bad,” when heard from the perspective of the impoverished individual, it invokes a different response. Consider the following excerpt from the low-income group in Hamilton County:

Suzanne: I'd get up in the morning and I'd work all day at Gore, and I'd come home and I'd do a superman change into a waitress uniform, and I'd work all night. And then I'd get home and do breakfast because I had a bed and breakfast also, and cook breakfast, and go back to work. And at one point the tourists were coming through town, and the people were staying at my bed and breakfast, and so I served them breakfast in the morning, then they got to the mountain, and I was running the children's program there - I checked their kids into the children's program, and then they went out to dinner that night and I was their waitress. And they were like: What are you- the only person in this town?! And I'm like: You know, I said you know, it was kind of bizarre for them to see me in all these different positions. And they said: Well when do you sleep? And I'm like: Oh not very much! And the scary part was that there wasn't enough hours in the day for me to make enough money to pay my mortgage. And that was when I - when I just really - hit the wall, and it was like - something's got to give here, something's got to change, because there just wasn't enough hours in a day to make enough money.

Suzanne has illustrated her perspective of poverty in her area as a function of underemployment, as other Hamilton County residents had said. This is a structural limitation and has the effect of compounding itself in the community since fewer jobs lead to out-migration, especially of the most educated for whom it is easier to find work elsewhere, leaving the community with fewer consumers and thus fewer businesses to provide jobs. What is striking, however, is the resistance with which aid programs are met. Several group participants

mentioned how few people they've ever seen in the Department of Social Services' intake line to receive programs, and one mentioned with disbelief that there is no homeless shelter in all of Hamilton County. Because of the stigma associated with receiving government benefits, especially in rural areas, few people are interested in signing up even if it will greatly benefit them. One service provider actually detailed the ways in which she would "trick" people into signing up for programs:

Nancy: My best, my best tool with people who are reluctant, because I had this conversation last night for two hours with a girl who needs public assistance at this point, she's going through a divorce, she's working three jobs to support her family, she's right in that spot, and she will not sign up, not get the services that are available to her. And I said, and my biggest tool with that is that: If you don't take advantage of that, if you don't use those services, the girl who comes here next year, there won't be money for her. Because the county, the government agencies, if they don't use that money, then we won't get it next year. Because the government agencies will proceed to ask, Well they don't need it. So if you don't utilize it now, next year or five years from now, or ten years from now, when someone comes along who needs it, it won't be there. So that's why it's important that you utilize this now. Not to say that you have to be on it the rest of your life, or even for the rest of the year, but right now you should take it because that's what it's there for. And if you don't take advantage of it, that benefit's not going to be used, and nobody will have it. And I think that's the- that's the hardest thing is getting people to utilized these funds.

Though the conclusion can easily be drawn that the refusal to get aid is an example of the counter-productive behavior that traps individuals in poverty in the first place, the stigma that low-income individuals perceive to be associated with aid programs is so strong that they will forego the aid and continue to work several jobs that don't cover their bills. Internalizing the stigma surrounding aid perpetuates the urge for an individual to not be "that kind of person."

Connecting Class Differences

The stress depicted by low-income group participants was often described in conjunction with an inability to hold everything together, as we could see with Suzanne, who spends every waking hour of the day at one of her jobs but still cannot afford mortgage payments. The exchange between Natasha and Rebecca in Schuyler County, as well, provides an example of a scenario in which

overwhelming stress results from the inability to provide for one's family, yet when viewed from an outsider perspective, as Natasha was viewed by her cousin, the decisions that result from this stress are seen as categorically poor.

Psychological effects of the stress that comes from poverty cause particular behaviors, which are seen differently by those experiencing poverty than by those intellectualizing it. The Schuyler County elites, as we have seen, pointed to the breakdown of family as a cause for poverty, not as an effect of the stress that poverty has on families.

Michelle - It's just organized chaos. . . . I see a lot of the reasons for poverty and such is that - From my opinion - it's the breakdown of a lot of family - Because when I was a child, I didn't know anybody that didn't have moms and dads, and whatever. It was just the regular families. And now I hardly know anybody who does have what we would consider a normal family or something. And so I see a lot of that and um, the worse - it certainly puts a lot of women, mostly, I think, into single parenthood. They're not capable, many of them, in supporting their children in the way that - maybe they have been accustomed to, when it was mom and dad, two incomes.

This differentiation in perspectives has demonstrated a strong impact on differentiation between social classes. Perceiving the way that you are seen, as an impoverished individual, by an elite member of your community or by the providers of your services differentiate you from them and can result in reluctance to receive aid, or irrational investment in prestige symbols so as to avoid being stigmatized. Some of the low-income participants in Schuyler County had the following to say about this:

Linda: Well I think it would help if, you know, people that were there to help you, didn't treat you like garbage. I think that would be, you know or actually helpful.

Rebecca: It makes you so you don't even want to go ask them.

Linda: Yeah like maybe if they treated you like people or, you know, like you were worth something or just because you didn't have money, you know, like they'd treat you a little bit better. You know what I mean, like that would be helpful to me.

While elites, as demonstrated by Michelle above, tended to throw up their hands in a way that implied no identification with the way that the poor handled their situation, direct service providers tended to internalize the structural difficulties felt by the poor and, as a result, targeted the ineffectiveness of welfare programs used as relief. Christine, the service provider from Schuyler County, observes the mentality of the elites in her area and summarizes what she, as a welfare provider, believes to be the realities of welfare in America:

Christine: I think that there's another issue that's part of this in that the general perception of poverty is that it's deserved, the people are lazy, they are generational. Yeah, they may be generational, especially here in Schuyler County or in other rural counties, it isn't so much, it's more the prejudice that they face. You talk to people and they'll talk about welfare mothers who keep having children so they can stay on welfare. Actually, the percentage is about equal, the percentage of children, number of children per family of those on welfare is about equal to the number of children amongst the general population.

Generally speaking, the greatest majority of recipients of temporary assistance only receive for a very limited time. We do not have large numbers of people that are on years and years and years. So, I think when you have a conservative, fiscally conservative government that has these perceptions about poverty, because they don't see exactly what we are talking here, their thought is, "We're going to take care of it by making it more difficult." And, consequently, you have the 60 month limit on welfare benefits for and then you're off. Yeah, that's very good and it's useful. It got people off the temporary assistance rolls, but they are worse off than they were before. So, I think my point is that the conceptions of people living in poverty held by those in government are not always realistic.

Christine's perspective was shared by other service providers. They did not seem to think that the programs they administered were abused, nor that they were undeserved by the people receiving them, but rather that the ability for one to navigate through the red tape was a determinant of their economic situation. Another participant reported:

Melissa: We had a youth in our workforce development program that worked with us for about two years and we had a position open. We offered it to her and it was substantially a lot more money -- four dollars more an hour. She sat down, she was a single mother, and she crunched the numbers and her child care assistance, her Food Stamps, all these programs that she was receiving, she would lose out. She

knew the programs because she was a referral person at the desk to other clients so she knew the system well. She was better off, she declined the position because she would be in a worse place financially if she had accepted the position.

Behaviors that result from a particular mode of self-identification not only have effects on one's ability to adjust their economic and social situation, but it makes these situations identifiable by observation. Class differences do not necessarily take the form of an "us vs. them" mentality, but rather many forms. These could include, for example, a paternalistic view among elites of the vulnerability of poor individuals. An individual in the Schuyler County elite discussion had this to say:

Tiffany: I think one thing I've seen with my children's friends - are the credit cards. And I can give you eight names right now - that went bankrupt. But they lost it with the credit cards. And I don't know if you receive, but I receive through one of my credit card, they offered me 2 percent for six months. But in those six months if you miss one payment you go to 30 percent. It's an immediate 2 to 30 - one payment bad.

Tiffany, herself very quickly made aware of the hazards in this behavior, was particularly concerned with for the safety of her lower income children, the easy prey. In this case, Tiffany's perception of the poor characterizes her as structuralist and sympathetic; in other cases, perceptions of different classes categorize behavior as productive or unproductive, but heavily ideological. One exchange in a direct service provider group illustrates this:

Elizabeth: I think one of the very touching stories in my experience with this rent to own [this refers to a program designed to rent products to individuals that cannot afford to pay full cost up front] is our educators' work with families that are getting sucked into the rent to own and really work it out on paper how much you are paying for that TV or that microwave or whatever. It's 10 times what you could buy it for. I remember talking to an individual trying to convince her not to participate in that. Her response was so eye-opening for me. She said, "but they're giving me a chance. They're giving me a chance to be like other people." There's the emotional. There's the vulnerability. I know if I have this I'll feel a little bit more like... it's the same thing as (I worked in nutrition education for years) why are you buying the potato chips? Because potato chips are what normal families have. Or what higher income families have. So it is that

stereotype of what you're supposed to have. They're getting that from everywhere. The media. Society.

Behavior that results from indentifying as poor might be the result of stress, or from something else. Elizabeth, above, spoke of unnecessary expenditure on luxury items. This could be the result of simply trying to escape one's situation. If our society depicts the average individual as having a big screen television, than those that do not would logically be considered below average. While elites viewing poverty through an intellectual lens see this as a categorically poor economic decision, people that are not actively studying your situation might still notice the lack of a big screen and categorize the individual accordingly. Buying a big screen television is a way of presenting a prestige symbol so as to avoid the stigma that could arise from not having one. If one intends to rise to affluence by investing in their social capital, than avoiding this stigma is essential.²⁷ In essence, to avoid being categorized as poor, low-income individuals sometimes have to behave in a manner that others consider to be the cause of their poverty in the first place.

Discussion

This research is limited in its ability to explain the perceptions of Americans at large. The scope of our capacity to conduct interviews allowed only for relatively small groups that were geographically isolated. The intent, however, was to induce expression of underlying perceptions held by individuals, representing different sectors of society, most of which are not regularly articulated. Because beliefs and perceptions are very basic and inherent in nature, we make the assumption that those uncovered in this study are commonly internalized understandings of poverty among the participants' counterparts throughout American society.

Differentiations in social categories are identifiable based on observed status and behavior. Observations of status might include whether or not one has an expensive TV set, a prestige symbol, vs. a smaller, cheaper set, a stigma symbol. Observations of behavior could be someone smoking at the food bank – they need assistance buying food but not cigarettes. People behave according to the perceptions they hold and the perceptions that they believe others hold. In the case of poverty, poor individuals want to avoid the stigma that comes with being

²⁷ See Christopher B. Barrett, "Smallholder Identities and Social Networks: The Challenge of Improving Productivity and Welfare," in *The social economics of poverty: on identities, communities, groups and networks*, ed. Christopher B. Barrett (New York, Routledge, 2005), 214-18; 233-36.

seen as poor, so that they are not limited by it. As a result, they might buy expensive luxury items even when they are using food stamps to feed their families, or leave their mother at a hospital so that the state is forced to provide for them because they can't afford to. This behavioral strategy is seen by someone who is not impoverished, someone analyzing poverty through an intellectual lens, as a categorically poor decision, a waste of money or an individual failure.

Internalizations were present in each focus group discussion. Conor, in Hamilton County, exhibited the internalization of structuralism. Age, something uncontrollable by the individual, was the source of his assumption that it is far easier for a young impoverished person to work their way out of poverty than an older person, because the young individual has more time, through his or her own volition, achieve affluence. An elderly person, on the contrary, is structurally limited in their movement as they are bound by retirement, lack of social and physical capital, and geographic isolation.

Jane, also in Hamilton County, took these structural limitations and internalized a helpless situation. She is surrounded by people whose choices are limited because of chronic underemployment and insufficient benefits like social security – the only source of income that she has at the age of 78. Through her exchanges with other members of the discussion, she made her trapped feeling clear: there is no way out of this kind of poverty.

Does Jane's understanding of poverty as an overwhelming, inescapable force affect the way that she behaves? Christine, the service provider would certainly think so. As she stated, "poverty is stress inducing." She saw this stress resulting in poor decision making, such as eating a bag of potato chips instead of a nutritious meal. Tracy, another service provider, noticed changes in family dynamics – including increased involvement of Child Protective Services, in months following Christmas. She supposed that stress was induced as a result of the reality check that came when Christmas time was over. Families that do not have a substantial income obviously still want to provide their children with a Christmas that is on a par with their peers, but this can only be achieved through the charity of others or by overspending.

Brian, of the Tompkins County low-income interview, may not have been aware of his affinity for individualism as it pertains to Lindsay, but his analysis of racial injustice is not unfounded, either. Loury builds on the idea of stigma as it pertains specifically to racial differences and, like Goffman, he describes how

identity is used as an indicator, which prompts certain behavior, including *responses* to behavior of others.²⁸ “As we encounter one another in social space, we perceive the physical markings on one another’s bodies and go on to play our respective parts, enacting scripts written long before we were born”²⁹ Categorizations are taught and preserved as social facts, and they can either put us at ease, or confuse and distress us, especially when these categorizations are deviated from. We lean on these categorizations and we expect them to be upheld, lest the stigmatized groups – according to Loury this includes the racially different, for Goffman it was the blind, the deaf, the “cripple,” the former mental patient and the homosexual – not behave like themselves and disconcert us. Loury uses this analysis to explain the cultural isolation of his example – “black ghetto-dwelling teenagers” – who live on the edge of American society but can never cross over the gap to achieve what most Americans take for granted.³⁰ This cultural isolation does not exist because the teenagers are born into a world of under-performance; they live on the edge because others perceive them to. These perceptions are embraced, or internalized, as a function of the color of their skin. This is but one example of detrimental internalization of identity.

If individuals internalize their understandings of poverty as part of their identity (the simplest example being *poor* vs. *not poor*), and identity determines behavior, then we can assume that peoples’ understandings, based on their observations, determine the way that they act and how these actions are perceived by others.³¹ Someone who is struggling financially might internalize a structuralist approach to poverty because they do not have a chance to look past the obstacle that stands directly in their way of affluence, which makes them feel overwhelmed. The stress that results from this feeling could, in turn, affect their ability to hold a family together, their smoking habits, etc. Someone who is not struggling financially, however, also understands poverty through only the observations they make. As a result, they observe correlations between poverty and smoking habits, or poverty and single-parent households. They might make the assumption that the behavior determines the circumstance, which may be true to an extent, but they do not have a vantage point from which to view the other side, which would demonstrate that poverty-induced stress causes this behavior,

²⁸ Glen C. Loury, *Racial justice: the superficial morality of colour-blindness in the United States*, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, Identities, Conflict and Cohesion Programme Paper Number 5, May 2004, [http://www.unrisd.org/UNRISD/website/document.nsf/d2a23ad2d50cb2a280256eb300385855/0a3b836d101a5a4580256b6d00578931/\\$FILE/loury.pdf](http://www.unrisd.org/UNRISD/website/document.nsf/d2a23ad2d50cb2a280256eb300385855/0a3b836d101a5a4580256b6d00578931/$FILE/loury.pdf) (accessed August 4, 2010).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁰ Loury, *Racial justice*, 16.

³¹ Akerlof and Kranton, 740-41, 748.

not the other way around. Because of these differences in perspective, differentiations in the ways that people categorize one another are inevitable. Internalizing a structuralist perspective might make someone think they have no options, while internalizing an individualistic perspective might cause someone to assign blame. Either way, the distinction is apparent to both parties.

The understanding of poverty that people hold determines where they see themselves in relation to the world around them. If you live in poverty, and think everyday about the work that needs to get done to pay rent or buy diapers or food, very little time is left to imagine the effect that this stress has on certain elements of your behavior or the effect that certain behaviors have on your situation. Similarly, whether you are affluent or impoverished, if you understand the American economy to be surmountable by individual volition, judgments are inevitably made about those who are struggling. Elites are able to analyze the behavior exhibited by the poor, such as an inability to hold families together or the decision to buy cigarettes with such limited funds, without analyzing the stress that induces such behavior. Because of the difference in perspective, this observation serves to differentiate the affluent from the poor, definitively and observably separating them from one another based on the way that each behaves. Though people make judgments based on stereotypes all the time without realizing it, it is likely that many individuals would not want to consciously judge another based on an unavoidable social fact. Judgments made from observed behavior, however, are easier to make consciously and do not inhibit the judges from assigning blame, even though they are not seeing the whole picture.

Observations and experiences of poverty lead to understandings, which are internalized and affect the way that we behave and perceive the behavior of others. Michelle, a Schuyler County elite, blamed the breakdown of the family as a cause for persistent poverty, not a result of it. Many of her peers agreed. Internalizations of a helpless feeling also resulted in certain, often counter-productive behaviors. These behaviors exhibited by the impoverished, however, are all that is seen by those who are simply interested in poverty, not personally impoverished. James, another Schuyler County elite, took note of the number of smokers that he sees in the food bank he runs. Like Michelle, he attributed what he saw as a cause of poverty – they would have more money if they didn't blow it all on non-essentials – as opposed to a result. Because of this, James could make generalizations about individuals trapped in cycles of poverty (“Where they put their priorities is obviously not toward the food”).

Generalization has a definition very similar to that of *stereotype*. Leaning on stereotypes characterizes many facets of social interaction; we know that all people make generalizations based on what they see. This, however, paves the way for a situation in which an individual might try to invest in their social capital, especially if they have a small consumption capital, in order to improve their lot, as discussed above. They could rent the larger TV set, for example, when they don't have the money to buy it, even though the sum of all the payments they will make will greatly exceed the original cost. Investing in social capital is also difficult with stigma symbols as clearly visible as the behavior exhibited by impoverished individuals, which results directly from the fact that they are poor. When groups are too exclusive to join, one cannot accumulate enough different forms of capital to pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

Class differentiations were apparent in every focus group interview. Some service providers talked about generational poverty, for instance. People identify with their families and internalize the behavioral norms that come with it. If this includes viewing teenage pregnancy as a "stopping point" for the mother's educational achievement, as one social service provider observed, then they will do so. This, however, is a characteristic of *them*, not *us*. In each group, behaviors or perceptions of one another were discussed and used to analyze reasons behind persistent poverty. What this suggests is not only that individuals classify one another, but the nonchalance of the classification points to the fact that members of society are acutely aware of which groups are stigmatized and which are heralded. It has been suggested by other researchers that groups serve as a mirror to their members, reflecting those qualities to which each member can identify and relate. The group can, in this way, confirm the self-image of individuals that belong to it, and as a result community relations will reproduce themselves. Personal feelings such as pride, embarrassment, anxiety or discomfort can be shared throughout the collective identity, determining behavior, as expectations or norms are violated or upheld. As a result, the norms that exist in both the poor and the better-off groups prescribe their behavior, potentially reinforcing counter-productivity of the former and judgment of the latter.

To the extent that this study represents the views of the US population at large, we see that Americans do internalize, to a large degree, their understanding of the problem of American poverty. This internalization places their understanding of themselves within a particular social category. Identification in this category, such as the "poor, helpless single parent," can lead to counter-productive and even self-destructive behavior. This behavior, when viewed through the intellectual lens of someone who does not live day to day surrounded by poverty,

will alter the perceptions of the viewer. These perceptions, and the stereotypes, generalizations, and expectations that they create, are the driving force behind the formation of attitudes surrounding poverty, and the potential class distinctions that result. This can help to explain survey data, which depicts Americans blaming irresponsibility and/or laziness as the causes behind poverty. Depending on their perspective – i.e. the lens they look through – this conclusion can often make the most sense.

To conclude, the relationship between the conceptualization of poverty and its pervasiveness suggests a self-fulfilling prophecy in which everyone plays their role complacently, and the system is upheld. All that it takes, however, is an open dialogue between the different actors in the community to understand where the other comes from, and that they do not have to behave in accordance with each other's perceptions. The findings in this study illuminate many understandings of poverty and point to the self-fulfilling prophecies that could result from them. This was not lost on study participants, either. Several seemed to understand that their beliefs depended on their viewpoint, and even that their perspective affected others. In order to see that a crystallized understanding of poverty defines certain individuals as permanently impoverished, people must be aware of the way they understand one another. One program in Schuyler County was referenced in two of the three discussions, called "Bridges out of Poverty":

One of the best things, I've seen, is - we had a workshop at DSS, that was called "bridges out of poverty" and it was one of the best explanations of poverty I've seen. Just the whole concept - but partly that - that we in the middle class - or if we are in the middle class, or upper class or whatever - do not look at things in the same way, even. That for instance we would look at - that some of us would look towards the future. But people who are living in poverty can't really do that. They're struggling to get through today.

Whether one is poor or affluent, they perceive poverty through a lens that is their own. They might see it as this all-encompassing force that threatens to devour them at any moment, or they might see it in a historical context that culminates in the creation of a glass ceiling that exists above them, and them alone. The point, however, is not to accept your perspective as your own, but rather to share your perspectives in open dialogue, as we have attempted to do in this study. This dialogue has the potential to exist in the everyday world and across the sectors of society that we separated for observation. If identification and perception are what defines poverty, and if it is the stigma surrounding this

definition that perpetuates the class distinction, then maybe the solution is to see and be seen out of the context of social categories. Maybe a wealthy person won't judge you for smoking if you were to sit down with them and discuss the past week – perhaps you finally have a few extra dollars after working seven straight 16-hour days at a minimum wage job and finished paying for your car to be fixed at last. Such a conversation could be a far superior investment in social capital than the purchase of prestige symbols.

Suggestions for Further Research

Conducting research on the relationship between identity and poverty requires the gathering of qualitative information. Future studies could include focus group interviews that cover more a greater geographical breadth as well as a longer timeline so as to demonstrate a potential change in attitudes in focus group participants after their participation has ended, via perhaps a survey or follow-up interview. Similar studies would work to broaden the scope of this research and uncover similar or different underlying perceptions of poverty among different regions in America.

Constructive dialogue presented itself as a formidable solution at the conclusion of this study. If the investment in social capital is risky at best as a way for an individual to overcome poverty, providing a community-wide resource to facilitate the acquisition of social capital without significant investment from the individual would illustrate its actual importance in persistent poverty. Further inquiries into this field, therefore, might include the analysis of a program such as Bridges out of Poverty, or the development of a new program in which dialogue is facilitated in a community-wide capacity, with evaluation methods that include assessments of participants' attitudes and perceptions of the poor and of their own situation before and after their participation in the program, while continuing to make qualitative observations regarding the behavior and attitudes of people participating.

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Appendix: Focus Group Composition by Gender and Race/Ethnicity

	Elite			Direct Providers			Low Income		
	Hamilton	Schuler	Tompkins	Hamilton	Schuyler	Tompkins	Hamilton	Schuyler	Tompkins
Gender									
Men	4	7	6	1	-		-	-	6
Women	2	5	6	8	12	9	2	4	9
Race/ethnicity									
White	6	12	10	9	12	8	2	4	6
Black	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	7
Hispanic	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	1
Asian	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Total	6	12	12	9	12	10	2	4	15