

Introduction

Identity as a Weapon in the Moral Politics of Work and Poverty

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During an era of plenty, and despite intensive and often sympathetic reporting in the mainstream media about the persistence of poverty in the United States, public discourse continues to invoke negative stereotypes about the lives of the poor and the effects of dependence on welfare payments and other government-funded benefits on their families. Economists, sociologists, and ethnographers tell more complete and nuanced stories about poverty, Herbert Gans laments in his recent book, *The War Against the Poor*, but to no effect: despite research and scholarly argument, false stereotypes persist as journalists in all media tailor their accounts of poverty for an audience comfortable with hackneyed notions of what it means to be poor.

STORIES ABOUT POOR PEOPLE

Consider Jason De Parle's narrative of the life story of a welfare recipient, Opal Caples, in his report on welfare reform in Wisconsin in the *New York Times Magazine*.¹ De Parle uses the facts, dates, and circumstances of Opal's life to frame descriptions of the state's welfare-to-work programs from the perspectives of administrators, caseworkers, and public officials. Opal herself is an ambiguous figure. Bright and apparently capable, she doesn't seem to be fully committed to work. Problems with day care might explain her tenuous attachment to the labor force, but even when all her support systems are in place, De Parle remarks, "it wasn't a complete surprise to discover, earlier this month, that Caples was missing from work. . . . She and her boyfriend had had a fight, and he had moved out. She said she was too distraught the night of breakup to bother calling work." The consequences of her failure to let her employer know she won't be coming to work are uncertain. Opal might keep her job, she might lose this one and quickly get another, or she might find herself unemployed and unable to pay her rent. She might even be forced to give up her apartment and move in with her cousin. The audience doesn't know what comes next, and we're not going to find out; but De Parle does offer us a summary of Opal's

situation: “She’s striking off, on shaky legs, into an uncharted, post welfare world.”

De Parle is a good reporter. He spends time getting details: Opal’s marriage before childbearing and her subsequent single parenting, signs of job avoidance coupled with evidence of unreliable day care and inadequately compensated work. Though we learn much about what has *happened* to Opal Caples, we hear very few of her own words and almost nothing of her thoughts, how she judges her life and struggles for meaning. We don’t know enough about Opal to form expectations about her behavior—until De Parle tells us, “it wasn’t a complete surprise . . . to discover that Caples was missing from work.”

Why not? Because Opal’s is the story of the stereotypical welfare mother. The essential elements of her life appear to be those of thousands of her sisters. She moved from Chicago to Milwaukee to obtain higher benefits, her work history is erratic (“I knew I always had that welfare check!”), she looks for permanent employment—and it is relatively easy to find—only under the pressure of impending welfare reform. In this version of her life, Opal’s problems are made to seem her own. We infer that she can surmount them if she wants to, if she tries to. The question is not whether she faces hardship or difficult moral dilemmas—we can agree that she does—but what kind of faith we place in her. Is Opal Caples one of us or not? De Parle doesn’t answer the question.

In his thoughtful and exhaustively researched series of articles on welfare reform, De Parle presents the imperfect, sometimes perverse machinery of public assistance in precise and vivid terms. Yet the welfare recipients themselves are shadowy. We don’t learn how they got into the system, what they make of the support they receive, whether it will help them change their lives. We don’t learn much about Opal Caples as a person because she functions here as a type, a framing device. To see *her* steadily and to see her whole, we’d have to know much more about her background, her goals for herself and her children, how she values work and independence, how she has made choices in the past, how she makes them now, how she hopes to make them in the future. Certainly, Opal Caples inhabits the world we have created for poor African American women; but what strategies does she use to engage that world? Does she take the path of least resistance at every critical juncture in her life? Does “too distraught” always turn into absence from her job? What about “very happy”? Is she so marginally attached to work that any unusual event or emotion provides an excuse for staying home?

We see Caples through a narrow lens. This is how she looks now, when her children are small, at a point when she faces choices that are extraordinarily difficult for most women, whether poor or not. The particular material conditions that brought her to this moment are more or less hidden. Undefined as she is, though, we think we know her: she’s a welfare mother who lives on handouts. This snapshot is reductive, one-dimensional. Truly to know Opal Caples and women like her, and thus to deepen our discussion of poverty in the United

States, scholars must focus our attention across their life courses. That is what the contributors to this book aim to do.

The issue that underlies welfare reform is moral identity, or in political terms, citizenship. Citizenship encompasses our understandings of mutual and universal obligations between all members of society; it is often said to be embodied in guarantees by the state of fundamental civil, political, or social rights. In the United States, civil and political rights are constitutionally based, but social rights of citizenship—that is, assurances of a minimum quality of life—are controversial and difficult to establish (see, for example, Bussiere 1997). Following hundreds of years of English legal precedents, American social thought distinguishes between the *deserving* poor, who merit social insurance and protection against the hardships of a free labor market, and the *undeserving* poor, who merit help only in times of severe hardship, and under conditions intended to reform their flawed moral character. More strictly than other industrialized societies, we measure the worthiness of all our citizens by the level of their commitment to the labor market, as the Social Security and Medicare systems demonstrate. Both establish contracts under which a lifetime commitment to compensated work is the precondition for benefits. Involuntary work and work for no exchange value, by the enslaved and by women, violates that precondition. In the aftermath of slavery, the tradition that one must work for a wage in order to prove worthiness still disables all American women, and women of color in particular.

Many European countries conceive social citizenship differently: based on the corporatist representation of workers in some places and the strength of the labor movement in others, entitlement to a minimum living allowance extends to all members of society. Against this background of American exceptionalism, De Parle and other journalists try to do the right thing when they explore the moral character of the poor, the foundation of their citizenship. Yet the medium makes symbolic politics and stereotypes hard to avoid. Editors and readers alike expect reporters to construct their stories within the parameters of the public debate. Thus welfare recipients acquire identities that test their deservingness directly: they become heroes, lazy bums, passive victims, able-bodied, self-indulgent, or dangerous clients of a too-generous social support system. Political leaders create these identities for the poor in order to serve their own political, policy making, and administrative ends,² strangling public discourse on poverty policy and on alternative identities for the poor.³

Poverty continues to marginalize millions of Americans. If we expect them to change their circumstances by changing their behavior, we must turn away from the distortions of negative stereotypes and work toward a more accurate *social* understanding of their lives, an effort that depends on a clearer understanding of the interdependence of poverty and wealth and the ways in which our institutions maintain that interdependence.

SYMBOLIC POLITICS IN POVERTY RESEARCH

In two insightful essays written more than thirty years ago, Lee Rainwater and Herbert Gans envision the kind of writing and research that might disrupt the stereotypes on which the public debate about poverty is centered. Rainwater (1970, 9–10) proposes a psychological explanation for these stereotypes: we are susceptible to them owing to the great social distance between mainstream and “disinherited” members of society.

The central existential fact of life for the lower class, the poor, the deprived, and the discriminated-against ethnic groups, is that their members are not included in the collectivity that makes up the “real” society of “real” people. . . . Yet, at the same time, their activities are subject to surveillance and control by society in such a way that they are not truly autonomous, not free to make a way of life of their own.

As a consequence of our discomfort with our perceptions of the poor,

[we] develop some understanding that “explains” the fact that there are people among us who are not part of us. . . . In order to cope with the presence of individuals who are not a regular part of a society, its members develop labels that signify the moral status of the deviant and carry within them a full etiology and diagnosis, and often a folk therapy. . . . The social scientist inevitably imports these folk understandings into his own work. They yield both understanding and misunderstanding for him.

According to Rainwater, recognition that others live their lives under conditions we regard as intolerable starts the engine of stereotyping. We choose to believe that the poor are different from us, either because they have chosen poverty for reasons we would reject (they prefer being poor to working or are happy being poor) or because they are incapable of making choices that would improve their lot. The first assumption romanticizes the poor and celebrates their resistance and creativity. The second assumption denies that the poor are like us and marks them as sick, infantile, irresponsible, or deprived, arguing that theirs is an inferior citizenship that ought to be managed by others.

So we must begin our research anew and “strive first for a phenomenologically valid account both of the inner reality of personal life and of the social exchanges that constitute the pattern of social life of the disinherited. We must learn to become much more precise about how this inner reality and way of life came into being historically, and about how they are sustained by the larger social system in which they are embedded” (Rainwater 1970, 27). As we seek this precision, we put ourselves at some risk.

We will discover that a phenomenologically accurate account of the condition of the disinherited will make us and those who read us even more nervous

because the more accurate the account, the more it will heighten, at least initially, the deeply human perception that “they cannot live like that because I could not live like that.” . . . Yet if we are to provide a satisfactory intellectual grounding for systematic policy making in this area, we must somehow achieve such a complex, accurate diagnosis rather than merely a satisfying and anxiety-reducing one. (Rainwater 1970, 27)

The more accurate the account of the condition of the disinherited, the more nervous it makes us, the more discomfort or cognitive strain it causes, and the more strongly we resist it. What kinds of phenomenologically accurate information about poverty will help us overcome such resistance, in ourselves and in others? How will that research address the principal barrier to public acceptance of greater support for the poor, namely, the perceived moral identity of the poor themselves?

In a contemporaneous essay, Herbert Gans (1969, 203) praises Rainwater’s insight into the polar formulation (deserving–undeserving) of social support policies for middle-class and poor Americans.

Some feel that the poor share the values and aspirations of the affluent society, and if they can be provided with decent jobs and other resources, they will cease to suffer from the pathological and related deprivational consequences of poverty. . . . [M]any more social scientists share the feeling that the poor are deficient. Yet, others . . . suggest that poverty and the lowly position of the poor have resulted in the creation of a separate lower-class culture or a culture of poverty.

Gans concludes that all such judgments are based on oversimplifications of the kind Rainwater describes.⁴

The debate, however conceptualized, [is] irrelevant and undesirable. . . . Enough is now known about the economic and social determinants of pathology to reject explanations of pathology as a moral lapse . . . one cannot know whether the poor are as law-abiding or moral as the middle class until they have achieved the same opportunities—and then the issue will be irrelevant.

Gans understands that research also must address the critical moral issue that underlies welfare policy, namely, can the poor behave like the middle classes? Scholars who agree that they can, and who hope to influence the development of policies that will help the poor climb out of poverty must, he argues, convey their capacity to secure and hold jobs—passports to participation in mainstream life. To test this capacity, we must look not only at the sometimes maladaptive behavior of poor people, but also at their values and aspirations.

His reformulation of Rainwater’s prescription is important because Gans acknowledges the interplay between research and the moral politics of welfare. Like Rainwater, he also recognizes the value of contextualized ethnographic research for exploring the relationship between aspirations and actions. To understand this relationship, Gans observes, scholars must exam-

ine the individual's own interpretations of the "existential situation" through which character, identity, and motivation are formed.

The call by Gans and Rainwater for more phenomenologically accurate research sets a different agenda but nevertheless leaves perplexing questions unresolved. Exploration of the aspirations and values of the poor—the stuff of their identity—ought to undermine the negative stereotypes that hobble effective policy making; but how to organize such research? What kinds of information should ethnographers gather? Are words enough? Can the voices of the poor, direct and unmediated, persuade scholars, journalists, politicians, policy makers, and middle-class Americans that they are enough like us to deserve generous social supports? Or must they muster deeds, jobs they have held, classes they have taken, sacrifices they have made for their children, to win approval and access to resources that many of us take for granted? Rainwater and Gans don't explain how we are to develop a fairer discourse about poverty without constructing simplified counterimages of the poor or making them accountable to idealized aspirations and values that are rarely realized even by those who are wealthier.

What does it mean to hold a single mother with small children to the standards of the middle class? How do we expect her to enact her values under conditions of deprivation, and how could our understanding of the interplay between her actions and her aspirations be enriched? An idealized middle-class standard for self-sufficiency includes a steady job, trust that work will lead to betterment, rational micromanagement of income and work opportunities, instrumental use of social support to achieve some degree of autonomy, and belief in the value of formal education. Standards shaped by middle-class experience and embedded in the language of microeconomics and policy studies structure our public discourse about poverty. Qualitative research must foreground these standards and question their provenance if it hopes to uncover the many layers of impulse and action that feed the apparent deviance of the poor.

Critical to the mobilization of qualitative research in the area of poverty studies is that we acknowledge the effects of the deep racial fault line in American society on the identity, self-concept, and behavior of those we stigmatize as poor. Race is nearly invisible in mainstream policy research on poverty, and this despite an incontrovertible reality: not only are the experiences of persons of color who are poor different, but different at least in part because persons of color are perceived and treated differently. Martin Gillens (1999) observes a fundamental premise—unexamined in most research on poverty—of the public perception of welfare in the United States: welfare (much like crime) is a province populated by African Americans. Although Gillens limits his focus to attitudes toward welfare recipients, Katherine Newman's (1999) study of low-wage workers in Harlem slips almost silently from framing poverty as a debate about the availability of work into one about the moral character of poor African Americans. Newman assumes without saying so that most middle-class Americans view African Americans as potentially shiftless nonworkers

and welfare recipients. Without acknowledgment, Newman confirms what we have known since the mid-1960s—that our public discourse on poverty and welfare is almost exclusively a discussion about the African American poor.

Scholars who want to understand poverty and the public policy debates that surround it must grapple with race-coded discourse. Euphemisms such as the underclass, welfare poor, and cycle of poverty may sanitize language, but they cannot mask our racialized perceptions of poverty. Nor can they mask the continuing processes of cultural and institutional separation that isolate African Americans from the mainstream (Munger forthcoming). Our race-coded discourse about poverty divides the poor and working classes into two groups: whites who suffer the effects of declining wages, benefits, and job security and therefore are deserving; and blacks who a priori are stigmatized as potential welfare recipients and therefore are undeserving (Matsuda 1997). Until this divide is bridged, Gillens suggests, little will change in the symbolic politics of poverty.

Rainwater and Gans take for granted the need to demonstrate that the poor have the capacity to behave as we do, that they are like us. Although Gans suggests that the aspirations and values of the middle class set the standards by which we make moral judgments about the poor, neither he nor Rainwater names the characteristics poor people must demonstrate before we are willing to include them in the category *us*. Evidence shows that most Americans (along with the poor who share their values and aspirations) have complex, not simple or stereotypical, understandings of their own moral stature and dependency. Scholars must work to unravel these understandings and make transparent the process by which power holders, including voters and public officials, forge identities for the poor and judge their deservingness. The last chapter of this volume returns to these issues.

THE NEW ETHNOGRAPHY AS A POLICY DISCOURSE

Since Rainwater and Gans wrote their essays, and especially during the past decade, some journalists, biographers, oral historians, and ethnographers have shifted the ground of poverty research to mark out a larger terrain for their investigations of the lives of the poor. Poverty no longer looks static or monolithic. Now, as Michael Katz (1993) notes, we study it in many different contexts, in many different historical periods; and we begin to see the poor in new ways: not as passive victims of unfavorable circumstances and their own torpor, but as architects of survival strategies, social actors who are capable of political action.

Such shifts in perspective may heighten the ambiguity of the new ethnography as a corrective to familiar stereotypes of the symbolic politics of poverty. Counterhegemonic narratives of the lives of disadvantaged and oppressed persons show the poor as agents who are sometimes able to overcome economic

and social constraints and do for themselves. The more fully we understand the power of agency in poor communities, though, the more self-aware and self-determining the poor appear to be, the greater the likelihood that their poverty may be seen as a choice, the more they may seem to resemble the “dangerous classes” of early modern England. The more varied their circumstances—as immigrants, as members of Hispanic, African American, Native American, or Asian minorities each with its own unique concerns, as ghetto residents, welfare recipients, or part-time service industry employees—the more the poor may resemble a tangle of special-interest groups determined to drain the resources of the dwindling, canonical working and middle classes. As poverty policies move to the top of the political agenda once again, the risk may be that ethnographic research turns into advocacy and the identity of the poor skews toward new stereotypes in a repetition of the very pattern that concerned Rainwater.

Long before the Great Society programs of the 1960s, studies of poverty in the United States focused on the condition of African Americans in the urban enclaves where they lived, separated by custom (and often by law) from their white neighbors (Du Bois 1903; Frazier 1939; Myrdal 1944; Drake and Cayton 1945). Often, though, they were able to leave those enclaves during the day to work in secure and adequately compensated jobs created by the industrial economy. Indeed, the availability of those jobs brought African Americans from the rural South to the urban North, and often they created in their neighborhoods thriving and colorful and self-sustaining communities. Yet economic and social policies after World War II altered conditions for the worse for African Americans in the urban centers, as the ethnographer Elliot Liebow (1967) was among the first to note.

Liebow links deepening poverty with deindustrialization of the inner city through his descriptions of the lives of poor black men who congregated on the street corners of Chicago’s South Side. Ethnographic study of these men is important, he argues, because earlier research has targeted different groups—the “female centered” ghetto family, children at risk, and juvenile delinquents. Liebow’s methodology is crucial because other approaches—interviews or questionnaires, for example—tend to produce caricature rather than “a clear firsthand picture” of the real lives of real people. Liebow isn’t interested in testing hypotheses; he wants to understand the culture of the street corner and the “world of daily, face-to-face relationships with wives, children, friends, lovers, kinsmen and neighbors” of which the street corner is one small part. Above all, Liebow aims “to see the man as he sees himself, to compare what he says with what he does, and to explain his behavior as a direct response to the conditions of lower-class Negro life rather than as mute compliance with historical or cultural imperatives.” Attachment to family, feelings of pride, the sense of honor, fears and frustrations—Liebow documents a full range of emotions and values the men share with most other Americans, along with conditions that frequently lead to self-destructive behavior and failure to realize aspirations.

Liebow's study signals a decisive break with prevailing theories about the lives of the poor. Rejecting the notion that they developed a unique "culture of poverty" that tolerates conduct anathematized by middle-class Americans—conduct that perpetuates the cycle of poverty (see O. Lewis 1966)—Liebow explains the actions of poor men as responses to the specific conditions of their lives, including their relative isolation from the mainstream (Liebow 1967, 209, quoting H. Lewis 1967). Liebow refuses to reduce these men to their most visible pathologies (crime, drugs, paternity without marriage) or interactions with officials (as participants in poverty programs and subjects of law enforcement). Instead, his portrait of poor men allows readers to appreciate the complexity of poverty, the redundant mechanisms that limit opportunities and shape expectations, and the survival strategies that preserve some degree of self-esteem and accomplishment.

Another pioneer researcher, Joyce Ladner, acknowledges the importance of her origins as an African American who grew up in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, steeped in the social ferment and rising promise of the civil rights movement. In 1964, as a twenty-year-old graduate student working with Rainwater, Ladner began interviewing women in the Pruitt-Igoe housing project in St. Louis. Interested in black women's coming of age, Ladner approaches her subject with a conceptual armament informed by the dominant theories of deviance and pathology—terms typically applied to the black family by social scientists. What Ladner (1971) finds, however, challenges the thinking of more established scholars. She does not find young women with values that deviate from those of the mainstream, nor are the women mired in pathological behavior. Instead, she finds that "each girl is conditioned by a diversity of factors depending primarily upon her opportunities, role models, psychological disposition and the influence of the values, customs and traditions of the Black community" (xxxx). These resources, Ladner argues, combined with the cultural heritage of their communities, have been crucial in determining the kind of women they have become. Furthermore, she perceives the women to be "resourceful, normal women who were simply trying to cope with some of the harsher conditions of life. What other scholars had traditionally viewed as weaknesses and pathology, I chose to view as strength and coping strategies in dealing with stress." Black womanhood gains its strength, Ladner argues, from "a 'Black cultural' framework which has its own autonomous system of values, behavior, attitudes, sentiments and beliefs" (xxxi).

In *All Our Kin* (1974), Carol Stack, an urban anthropologist, focuses on the patterns of daily life, the rules of friendship, parenting, love, and work in a poor black community in a midwestern city. Fascinated with the intricate kin ties that entangle people and resources across generations, and starting her research at a moment when African American communities had begun to embrace political activity to secure their civil and social rights, Stack disposes of mainstream assumptions that black poverty is born of dysfunction and passivity to strip away the layers of racism that render the lives of African Amer-

icans unintelligible to most white observers. Her methodology—initially, participant observation of the daily routines of women her own age—represents a conscious rejection of the ethnographical tradition of consulting community leaders (usually males) first. Stack's work marks the leading edge of the movement to study political change and the social history of institutions from the ground up.

Stack's exploration of the textured protocols of daily life in the community she calls The Flats demonstrates the importance of human capital (knowledge received from an older generation) and social capital (supportive relationships within the community) in the shaping of identity. Together, the women of The Flats and their families functioned as a repository of social capital, and they were willing to expend their resources to help individual children succeed. (Thus they demonstrate that they share middle-class aspirations.) Yet their interdependence was so profound that it threatened to interfere with their individual freedom. For women to move away from The Flats—to leave the sustaining community of friends and kin ties without imperiling their collective capacity to support their children's chances for success—was sometimes difficult.

Liebow, Ladner, and Stack revealed that the poor do live differently from the middle class, yet their survival mechanisms are adapted to institutions that serve the needs of the mainstream. Their research transformed our understanding of poverty and pioneered a tradition of studies of poor communities that tries to answer questions about how young men and women manage the interplay of experience, values, and social institutions to survive the street and the job market; how families form and flourish or die; and how the experiences of racial and ethnic communities differ (MacLeod 1987; Anderson 1990, 1999; Bourgois 1991; Wacquant 1998; Dodson 1998; Sheehan 1976; Finnegan 1998; Dash 1996).

Yet such interpretive research is relatively rare compared with the rush of policy studies that try, on the basis of statistical data alone, to identify the most important causes of poverty and test the effectiveness of welfare and income support programs. Although the War on Poverty legislated better funding, the framework for poverty relief continued to emphasize deservingness (Marmor, Mashaw, and Harvey 1990), and if, for a brief moment, the poor—and especially the African American poor—appeared more deserving than before or since (Schumann and Krysan 1999), retrenchment began almost immediately when new work requirements were added to welfare programs in 1967. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Office of Policy Planning and Research 1965) complicated the picture by appearing to blame the black family for its own dysfunctions (see Katz 1989).⁵ The storm of protest against this report, along with the growing division between black and white civil rights advocates, made it difficult to continue ethnographic research on the conditions of African American poverty. Stack's insights into extended kinship networks among African Americans were lost to view as decades of

contentious tinkering with welfare and poverty relief—and scholarship that assessed the results of that tinkering—displaced ethnography that explored the identities of the poor and the importance of class and race in the social organization of institutions and communities of color. The new poverty research was dominated by policy studies conducted by economists who hoped to improve programs by adjusting benefits to ever-evolving notions of what welfare recipients truly needed. Through microeconomic modeling and quasi-experimental research on the impact of undesirable behavior (out-of-wedlock births, educational failure, drug use, long-term welfare dependency, and refusal to work), such studies perpetuated the stereotypes that continue to distort our discourse about poverty.

Increasing pressure for welfare reform in the early 1980s fed on the identification of the poor (Murray 1984; Mead 1986) as a small, isolated, largely African American underclass. The term itself evokes a negative image: a substrate of unemployed persons who rank below the working class. The word stigmatizes those it describes, devalues their family structures and child-rearing practices, and attaches pathology to their neighborhoods and norms. The theory of the underclass assumes that significant numbers of the urban poor are inescapably enmeshed in multiple dysfunction and that their destructive behaviors are only reinforced by public assistance. The idea certainly reinforces prejudicial assumptions about the poor as an undifferentiated mass of flawed humanity, as Michael Katz (1993, 21) argues: “Areas of concentrated poverty emerge from much of the historical and contemporary underclass literature as monolithic islands of despair and degradation.” The “rich array of people and associations within even the most impoverished neighborhoods” disappears when ethnography is silent, Katz says, and two of the most likely explanations of poverty—institutions and politics—are overlooked. In the last fifteen years a new ethnographic literature has developed, rich in detail and driven by the desire to address stigmatizing characterizations of the so-called underclass (see especially Wilson 1987, 1996; Edin and Lein 1997; Newman 1999).

The central figure in this research is William Julius Wilson, whose major accomplishment has been the restoration of poverty to the research agenda of American social scientists. Over the past two decades, Wilson has developed a theory of underclass formation that shifts responsibility for poverty from individuals to institutions. Although he accepts the hypothesis that a significant underclass marked with multiple dysfunctional behaviors exists in some urban ghettos, Wilson confronts the stigmatization of the poor by arguing that the formation of a ghetto underclass has been caused by a decline in the institutional environment—the loss of middle- and working-class families, the degradation of urban schools, the abandonment of inner cities by private organizations, the loss of businesses—and the replacement of these institutions of civil society by public supervisory and carceral organizations—the welfare and prison systems and the police. Wilson suggests that behaviors associated with the ghetto—joblessness, parenting without marriage, and a street culture of

crime and drugs—are related to lost opportunities for work and other forms of attachment to the values of mainstream Americans. Naturally, he observes, those behaviors and attitudes “often reinforce the economic marginality of the residents of jobless ghettos” (Wilson 1996, 52).

Because such behaviors and attitudes are found elsewhere in society, they cannot be regarded as ghetto-specific, and they cannot be counted as proof of the existence of a culture of poverty independent of material conditions. Nor is race the determining condition of the circumstances of African Americans who live in urban centers (Wilson 1980). Wilson has mounted a massive research project in support of the complex implications of his theory, which links urban ecology to poverty and rests on several important but contested ideas. Wilson assumes, for example, that joblessness reflects the collapse of the job market rather than choice, that access to good jobs would overturn joblessness, and that avoidance of marriage also is linked to joblessness. These hypotheses call for a comprehensive understanding of the lives of young men who “grow up in an environment that lacks the idea of work as a central experience” of adulthood and so acknowledge the likelihood that they will rely on illegitimate sources of income. Wilson’s research focuses on male joblessness and male work ethic rather than on women and their reasons for choosing not to form two-parent families or on the development of perspectives, values, and behaviors in the children of those single women.

Wilson and his team use in-depth interviews and other ethnographic approaches in their research, but they do not explore the discursive consciousness of respondents who claim that they value work, nor do they examine how those asserted values play out in their respondents’ lives. The interweaving of what poor persons say, what they do, and what they learn from the consequences of what they do—the materials of richly textured ethnographic research—has so far been beyond the scope of Wilson’s investigations, most of which have been conducted in the city of Chicago. It has fallen to others to document a broad range of experience, as Liebow, Ladner, and Stack have done, and to examine the varied family and work histories of a cross-section of ghetto residents (see, for example, Newman 1999).

Wilson’s theory has sparked controversy on all fronts: he has forced social scientists and advocates of the poor to reconsider the culture-of-poverty hypothesis that emphasizes individual responsibility and attributes poverty primarily to the bad behavior of the poor; and he has staked out new ground in his accounts of the complicated interactions that determine how individuals and families succeed or fail under conditions of poverty. The influence of specific institutions—schools, workplaces, governmental authorities, businesses and services targeted to the needs of the poor—will be part of the unfolding story, and subsequent studies now must account for the complex interplay between situation, identity, and choice.⁶ Thus, by raising questions about the decision-making processes that create the intricate life patterns of poor persons, Wilson has set the stage again for qualitative research.

Still, the culture-of-poverty theory, however discredited, remains the chief argument for welfare reform. There was no significant national debate about the causes of poverty between President Clinton's 1992 election campaign and the ceremony at which he signed the bill in 1996 that dismantled federal entitlement to welfare and imposed strict time limits and work requirements on those who receive public assistance. Although Clinton attacked the low-wage job market that provided neither health insurance nor job security for poor white Americans, the president encouraged the public to associate welfare recipients with failure to work and culture-of-poverty values that blighted their own prospects and those of their children. The problem of "the economy" and the problem of welfare were distinct because different identities were involved: the deserving poor who held jobs were white, the undeserving poor who subsisted on welfare were black.

In 1997, Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein published a study of how poor women generate and manage income to sustain their families. Culture-of-poverty theory suggests that welfare encourages avoidance of work. The theory idealizes the "normal" or "rational" mother who responds to the incentives of a labor market that offers her family a better life, and uses her to measure the worthiness of welfare mothers, who, by ignoring such incentives, enact their ghetto culture, display their immaturity (or irrationality), and invite behavioral reform through sanctions that force them into the labor market. Yet Edin and Lein explode that model as they explore the importance of noneconomic factors in decision making about work and welfare. The need to safeguard her children, they argue, often outweighs the marginal gains a welfare mother can realize from employment, and the absence of opportunities for advancement also may dissuade a woman from looking for work in the low-wage labor market. Through in-depth interviews with welfare recipients, Edin and Lein reconstruct household income and expenditure patterns—budgets—for their families. The mothers with whom they spoke could not and in fact did not survive on welfare payments alone, but supplemented their income in a variety of ways—by working off the books, soliciting support from absent fathers, and bartering for services. Thus the welfare mother proves to be industrious, inventive, and capable of subverting the system on which she depends for sustenance. Edin and Lein find that poor women who work also struggle to supplement their wages.

Edin and Lein have greatly enriched the cost-benefit analysis of the policy makers by providing counterexamples to the culture-of-poverty stereotype of women who receive welfare payments or work in the low-wage labor market. Their research on decision making, however, does not take into account the ways in which identity and poverty might interact to *produce* the stereotypical behavior that middle-class Americans expect of the poor. What should we make of those who conform to that stereotype?

Lucie White (1994) studies one welfare mother who readily admits to "bad" behavior. "I am lazy," she says, accepting the mainstream moral position that

interprets her failure in school, failure to work, and failure to form a two-parent family as matters of choice or preference. The commonplaces of public discourse about the poor powerfully affected her consciousness of herself. White, however, deconstructs her respondent's life course to disclose the true meaning of "I am lazy," which is that she made these "choices" because they were the only options left to her after every attempt to engage in traditional forms of self-help had been blocked by the dysfunctional organization of work and marriage that affects all women.

These focused ethnographies illustrate how qualitative research can illuminate moral identity by drawing attention to institutional and historical conditions that contribute to poverty. White and Edin and Lein decenter the discussion of underclass identity through detailed examinations of institutional realities that shape the decisions and ultimately even the self-concepts of poor women: a job market that offers low pay and no benefits; a welfare system that provides inadequate support for her family; oppressive conditions at work, in marriage, or in school. These constraints on the choices of poor women are subject to even larger social forces, the expansion of the low-wage service economy, inflation of housing prices, and exploitation of workers in the informal sector of the global economy. White and Edin and Lein move the discussion of identity from identity politics toward profound structural explanations for identity and action.

Owing to its success in expanding our understanding of institutional elements that constrain the behavior of the poor, White's description suggests that this welfare mother is not responsible for her condition. Her situation is not her fault, and she can't take responsibility for changing it. Her role is passive, her story is a classic victim narrative—a judgment that seems to confirm the stereotypical formulations of conservative critics of welfare policies, such as Lawrence Mead (1986). Edin and Lein rework the identity of the model welfare recipient so that we see her rational, self-sufficient activity and infer the instrumental values that make effective use of public assistance and other sources of income, formal and informal. She is a survivor, a classic heroine—a judgment that seems to confirm a different stereotypical identity outlined by other conservative critics of welfare policy, such as Charles Murray (1984).

In the longer run, the images of victim and heroine are too narrow to help us to a transparent understanding of identity and actions and circumstances that shape them. Where in Edin and Lein's account are the apparently blocked, counterproductive, and self-destructive lives created by the disastrous effects of poverty? Without them, how can we hope to acknowledge the needs of poor people for opportunities to rebuild their human capital, their self-confidence, their self-image? Where in White's account is her subject's potential work ethic, her sense of family responsibility, the capacity for strategic action that Edin and Lein discover in other poor women? Does White foresee a different future for her welfare mother? Might she mature into more responsible adulthood? Most women—most people—do; poverty does not lock us into patterns of pathol-

ogy. The poor display the same range of rational and irrational behavior, provident and improvident decision making, as other society members. Their failures and successes occur along a continuum of life stages and special circumstances, and with luck and social supports they can learn to change those circumstances over time.

As these two research efforts demonstrate, to characterize the agency of the poor without stirring up the negative identities we have constructed for them is difficult. If we show them actively adapting to their conditions, they may appear self-interested, manipulative, or dishonest. If we show them passively submitting to dependency, we condemn them to the disabling cycle of the culture of poverty. What kind of impact can such studies have on the play of public politics about welfare? They present powerful counterpoints to damaging stereotypes, show that decisions are contingent on circumstances created by the economy, the geography of the ghetto, and organization of low-wage work, and they invite further exploration of the processes that lie at the margins of conventional images of the poor. Still, these illuminating stories do not begin to examine the full effect of a life in poverty on both values and action.⁸ Nor do these accounts examine how other stories might become instruments of liberation for the poor, increasing their individual self-awareness and collective political potential.

UNDERSTANDING THE IDENTITY OF THE POOR

Our primary goal is to render the identity of poor persons more transparent and intelligible to power holders and the general public. If we understand them not as sinners or saints but as constituents of the mainstream like ourselves, we will be willing to allow them the same latitude to fail or succeed that we grant insiders within our own communities.⁹ The first challenge then is to identify the aspirations of the poor and explore the relationship between their aspirations, experiences, and activities such as work. Gans argues that an individual's behavioral culture—ways of behaving learned in specific situations—may change along with situations; yet a person's aspirational culture sets long-term goals that govern behavior when the situation permits. When Opal Caples fails to notify her employer that she does not intend to come to work, and because Jason De Parle does not offer what we regard as an adequate, responsible, grown-up situational explanation for that failure—"too distraught" isn't enough—we naturally infer that she lacks a work ethic. De Parle's story, however, does not and cannot weave the web of information against which we should judge Opal's reason for staying home, much less predict her behavior if she enjoyed greater job security, had safer day care, and expected that she would be able to provide for her children throughout their lives.

Public policy has been guided by particularly simplistic understandings of welfare recipients as rational maximizers (see the examples examined by

Williams 1992), and decades of microeconomic modeling of the effects of poverty programs have reinforced the idea that it is easy to move recipients from welfare to work by adjusting incentives and limiting moral hazards (the “natural” tendency to try to get an undeserved share of a “free” good such as welfare). Without actually demonstrating that such an approach will reduce poverty, reformers pay poor women the compliment of assuming that they will respond rationally to incentives or penalties that impact family finances.

This assumption reinforces a philosophy of welfare reform that is both morally deceptive and empirically invalid: morally deceptive because it embraces the notion that welfare recipients must be bribed or coerced to do the right thing, that they lack the moral character or will to act without such special prods;¹⁰ and empirically invalid because it ignores the complexity of the circumstances within which poor women must choose to secure resources for themselves and their children. Edin and Lein document shortfalls in the budgets of most welfare recipients, who share competing goals with welfare policy planners: successful family rearing and long-term employment. Public assistance doesn’t help poor women resolve conflicts between their children’s immediate needs and their own career goals and, as Christopher Jencks (1997) adds in his introduction to the study by Edin and Lein, other essential values that make a life livable beyond bare survival are entirely overlooked by welfare planners.¹¹ Jencks observes that recent policy changes hold welfare recipients to standards of rationality and efficiency far higher than those we set for ourselves.¹²

The very shortcomings of poverty policies challenge ethnographers to deepen our understanding of the causes and effects of poverty. How should they proceed? What questions should they seek to answer, and what theory might guide their inquiry? As Herbert Gans has suggested, identity may be the most important key to change. The choices we make depend both on our experiences and understandings of our capacities and preferences. Such understandings of the self and desirability of particular decisions about education, work, marriage, and childbearing draw on cultural resources provided by interactions with others and our interpretations of those interactions over a lifetime. For all of us, poor and affluent, identity and self-esteem affect the goals we aspire to and the choices we make in particular settings or situations to move us toward those goals. Edin and Lein help us to appreciate the need to explore the relationship between identity, goals, and decision making in the lives of poor women.¹³ Ethnography now must take another step.

Although Edin and Lein’s interviews generally confirm their belief that women find neither welfare nor low-wage work adequate to meet the needs of their families nor their aspirations for long-term independence, these accounts provide no discussion of the formation and maintenance of such aspirations, which are by no means uniform even in their nonrandom samples. Nor do we know about the effects of poverty on the formation and interpretation of these goals, the effects of limited opportunities on persons raised in poverty, or the

importance of the “irrational” goals suggested by Jencks—self-expression, happiness, self-esteem, and status—or the identity and value-shaping effects of the close networks of support that are an important form of social capital. Other than adding a little to resources provided by current welfare programs, we do not have a clear sense of the strategies for change that will work for these women.

Identity, as Herbert Gans argues, enables the poor to respond to opportunity, and thus is a key to change. Identity not only enables individuals to change, but also affects collective agency, the capacity of the poor to act as a group, binding social movement participants together through stories that create a shared sense of injustice (Cohen 1985). More fundamentally, identity incorporates a sense of efficacy, the element whose absence leads to working-class quiescence (Croteau 1995; Gaventa 1980). For brief periods in American history, the poor (and for still briefer periods, welfare recipients) have been able to assume identities as legitimate contenders for justice (for example, the National Welfare Rights Organization; see Piven and Cloward 1977). Of course, identities of competence and active participation are much more difficult to create and sustain when poverty is stigmatized and welfare is unpopular. Yet the poor have other potential identities: they comprise a larger constituency than welfare recipients; they share a class interest as well as a position of relative political powerlessness and economic insecurity; and they can learn to exploit their own numbers by agreeing on a few common stories of injustice and working together to achieve collective agency.

A final challenge awaits ethnographers dedicated to understanding poverty and our poverty policy. Research that presents in their own words the perspectives of those at the margins of the American economy by itself seldom has had the power to move our society to adopt more enlightened poverty policies. So we must explore how public perceptions of poor persons are created and how they grow. Beyond viewing the poor as citizens who share mainstream values and aspirations with the rest of us, scholars also must address the symbolic politics of poverty, examine the reasons for the prevalence of stereotypes, and liberate the political will by exploring the bases on which we evaluate the perceived moral identity of others.

The chapters that follow are not organized around familiar topics of poverty policy research. Instead, they problematize the concept of poverty as they examine particular life events spurred by, but not easily confined within, issues of employment or family formation or parenting or peer relations. The interpretive method intends to capture the multiple perspectives of social actors in those events, to bring into play all the sources of meaning that inform action. The more open-ended the observations and conversations between researcher and subject, the further they reach across time and space, the more they evoke the experiences of a sympathetic audience, the more complete the picture of individual identity and the more valid the interpretations of motivations and goals. The contributors are not of one mind about the significance of the

subjects' perspectives. For some, the poor are able research assistants who provide data about circumstances that outsiders would find hard to describe and who depend on their interviewers to assess those data. For others, the poor seek help and knowledge as they speak for themselves, but they do *not* seek (or need) an interpreter or a tribune.

Participants in the workshop included scholars whose primary commitment is to qualitative research, those who pursue quantitative methods, and others who concentrate on economic or sociological theory building. Together, we considered the relationship of ethnography to hypothesis-driven forms of social science and to statistical research methods in particular. Some participants were concerned about connecting stories to the institutional and historical patterns that shape experience to theory and general findings. Others worried that full and accurate depictions of poverty would be complex, discouraging, and from the viewpoint of public policy making, counterproductive, exactly as Rainwater anticipates. Contributors address these issues both in the ethnographic chapters and commentaries—freestanding essays that may raise questions independent of the research or provide counterpoint to the ethnographies.

The book is divided into three parts, each of which reflects the variety of ways in which issues of identity function in poverty research. In the first part, the formation of identity, in particular the formation of identity as a low-wage worker, occupies center stage in different settings and through different activities. The second part continues this focus through studies of the dilemmas of family, shelter, and welfare faced by the most marginal workers. In the third part, identity becomes a moving picture as we consider how self-awareness and capacity for change are linked. The conclusion draws together the vision of life in poverty that emerges from the chapters and commentaries. In this emerging vision, the playing field for moral judgment about the deservingness of the poor is leveled both by better understanding of the way institutions, politics, and policies contribute to continuing inequality and poverty, and by our deeper and growing understanding of the poor as moral actors whose behavior sometimes has seemed unaccountable. The theme proposed for this vision—democratizing poverty—surfaced in resonances among the lives of those stigmatized as poor or welfare dependent and the lives of a much larger group who consider themselves part of the mainstream.

Each chapter explores identity and the capacity for economic survival from a different angle, and the commentary complements what the ethnographers have learned with perspectives from other fields of study and by suggesting further questions. Part I paints a complex picture of work aspirations by describing the lives of low-wage workers. Carol Stack views work aspirations through the eyes of a maturing teenager in Oakland for whom work is important but only one of many pressing interests that keep her out late, up early (when she can manage it), and teetering on the brink of disaster in school. Ruth Buchanan views aspirations through the stories of adult workers in a new global low-wage industry—telemarketing—who are attempting to move up the lad-

der through low-wage work while balancing family, education, and other important commitments. Comments by Saskia Sassen, Philip Harvey, and Carl Nightingale consider tensions between work and the shifting constraints on low-wage opportunities in a global economy. Ethnography confirms that work ethic is interwoven with aspirations for a better life. The commentaries force us to confront what will happen to these aspirations when there are not enough jobs (as Harvey demonstrates), when the informalization of low-wage labor truncates the ladder to better jobs (as Sassen shows us), and when the political and economic needs of global institutions isolate and exploit those at the margin (as Nightingale argues). Low-wage workers are not deadbeats but individuals who have fully embraced the work ethic and are attempting to give it meaning in an extremely inhospitable labor market.

Part II provides another window on work aspirations by exploring dilemmas in the lives of adults on the extreme margins of the low-wage labor market. Policy makers are particularly vocal about poor men, homeless mothers, and women on welfare, who seem to exemplify their concerns about lack of commitment to mainstream values. Kathryn Edin, Laura Lein, and Timothy Nelson explore poor men's family and work aspirations; Aixa Cintrón-Vélez describes homeless mothers in shelters; and Julia Henly compares women on welfare to other women in low-wage jobs. Their chapters illuminate the struggle to prioritize work, family, security, and daily survival when personal resources are insufficient. We learn that all of these individuals highly value work and family, though they often are perceived otherwise, and face daunting choices with few available resources. Sanders Korenman, a former member of the President's Council of Economic Advisers, affirms the policy-making value of in-depth descriptions of the complex choices and trade-offs facing marginal workers. His commentary on policy reminds us that policy makers have had little trust in the values and aspirations of marginal workers, and their policies are either punitive or address aspirations only indirectly by offering small improvements in resources as incentives for self-help. More trusting policy makers would be more generous and impose fewer restrictions to discipline recipients. Ethnographic research strives to create greater trust by providing more accurate portrayals of the poor, but policy makers often remain skeptical.

Part III considers the poor's capacity to change. The continuing skepticism of lawmakers encourages us to seek answers to poverty not only by creating a wider political consensus about the deservingness of the poor but also by increasing the poor's capacity for self-help. While policies for relief of poverty often presume the poor do not want to change, ethnography suggests that the poor are exactly like the mainstream—desiring a better life—but often are trapped by limited opportunity and a dominant culture that imposes negative images of them. Interventions that increase self-esteem, improve understanding of personal and institutional barriers to change, and convey practical forms of self-help build on the poor's aspirations for change. Lucie White describes

remarkable personal encounters occurring in a government Head Start program that supply just the right mentoring and encouragement to help a woman break free of self-doubts and a destructive relationship. Frances Ansley describes how whole communities have learned about shared aspirations and possibilities for change through exploration and education guided by experts committed to participatory research—a form of inquiry that puts research skills at the disposal of the communities and groups to be benefited rather than politicians and policy makers. By such different and creative routes the poor and oppressed can attain greater self-understanding and take the initiative. Commentaries by Joel Handler and Michael Frisch that conclude this section explore hurdles faced by these aspiring agents of change—first, reaffirming their identity as individuals with capacity for change, and second, discovering what needs to be done.

Studies of poverty and low-wage employment that rely on understanding the perspectives of poor persons have an important role to play in creating a more effective policy debate. Interpretive research offers a direct response to the emphasis of some journalists, scholars, and politicians on the moral shortcomings of the poor. The voices of those who are struggling at the margins remind us that work and prospects for work shape perceptions and interpretations and, as a consequence, identities and choices for economic survival; they provide an eloquent response to the moral entrepreneurs of welfare reform whose characterizations of the poor often draw on stereotypes created by our reductive public discourse about poverty.

The value of firsthand interpretation of work and poverty lies not just in its capacity to reveal the otherwise hidden interplay between social circumstances, identity, and action but also in its power to make the experience of poverty—and thus the actions of those who live within it—intelligible to others. To interpret the causes and significance of life trajectories may be difficult, because the conclusions drawn from narratives often are ambiguous. The new ethnographic literature on poverty has been criticized for this ambiguity, especially for the moral ambiguity created by stories that show poverty as inextricably bound up with individual choice and seem to undermine their central implication: that a hierarchical, competitive socioeconomic structure makes poverty immensely more likely to occur in the lives of some individuals than in the lives of others. The *fact* and *effects* of poverty may be overlooked, while the very humanity of the poor—their ordinary virtue and fallible decisions—forecloses further discussion of the conditions that produce inequality and oppression. The contributors to this volume are particularly sensitive to the importance of integrating ethnography with research on the social structure and institutional contexts of poverty in order to provide a full understanding of these perspectives. Narrative, a powerful conveyor of identity, exerts a powerful influence on perceptions of the poor at all levels. Carefully crafted narratives such as those in this volume are therefore particularly timely correctives to the use of their identity as a cudgel with which to beat the poor.

NOTES

1. Jason De Parle is a Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist. De Parle’s stories are as close as we may get to compassionate and objective reporting. He has provided a careful journalistic record of nearly every aspect of welfare reform, frequently based on in-depth interviews with recipients and administrators.
2. Images and arguments made in the political arena often are more extreme than perceptions of the public at large. The public’s ambivalence about poverty relief is discussed further in the concluding chapter.
3. In a democracy, politicians attempt to invoke a sense of community, one that they can lead, and politics in the process creates membership—insiders and outsiders—by reinforcing the identity of ideal citizens. Politics and ascriptions of deservingness and undeservingness therefore are inseparable (Smith 1997).
4. Gans also took up Rainwater’s point that stereotypes are institutionally reinforced by psychological strain and the material and psychological benefits derived from them. Information provided by scholars that contradicts these stereotypes may be resisted not only because it increases cognitive strain, but because there are considerable institutional benefits to maintaining them. Nevertheless, as Gans argues, the starting point for change always will be to challenge and problematize the stereotyped identities of the poor and the presumed differences between poor and nonpoor. Robert Wuthnow (1996) has rediscovered these arguments in *Poor Richard’s Principle*, which decries the increasing materialism of society. Wuthnow argues that our discontent with materialism is manifested in middle-class life in many ways, one of which is our mistrust of the poor. Many believe that the poor have been corrupted by welfare, an attitude that projects our own loss of moral basis for our life goals (287–89).
5. As Katz notes, Moynihan placed great emphasis on unemployment as the ultimate source of social disorganization, but that emphasis was quickly lost in the public debate.
6. To date, the institutional implications of Wilson’s theories—such as the experiences of ghetto residents in school, on the job, with public authorities, and the history of these institutions—have been left to other scholars (see, for example, Sampson and Groves 1989). Further, Wilson’s own research downplays the role of race, but others have demonstrated that geographic entrapment of the African American poor and the disappearance of available jobs are due in part to race (Massey and Denton 1993; Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991).
7. Some of these questions have been answered in their own further research; see chapter 6, this volume, and Edin and Lein 1997.
8. Such stories create another, less benign possibility, namely, that they may provoke other, radically contrasting but equally “valid” stories based on instrumental framing that demonize welfare recipients, not only in the work of scholars with a more conservative social vision and the mainstream press, but in stories told in dining rooms and workplaces.
9. We have not yet given sufficient thought to Rainwater’s parting concern, that the moral ambiguity and complexity of the lives of poor persons make for weak pol-

itics on behalf of egalitarian reforms. The more accurately we portray the poor as ordinary human beings under pressure of extraordinary circumstances, he argued, the less likely we are to persuade a public that employs stereotypes to reinforce values central to its beliefs about society. Rather, what we must do is to understand the foundations for the deservingness or undeservingness of the poor. With such an understanding of how the mainstream applies its citizenship rules to itself, we may be able to show that the moral identity of the poor is as complex and varied as the experience of the mainstream, yet shaped by the cultural and material conditions of poverty in intelligible ways. The central issue, therefore, both morally and politically, is whether the poor have and are perceived as having the will to better themselves given opportunities to improve their lives. The more they are revealed to hold values intelligible to the mainstream, the more generous will be the political responses of the mainstream.

10. Yet it is assumed the poor are rational enough to respond to such incentives. This is consistent with characterization of the poor as amoral but entrepreneurial members of the dangerous classes.
11. Amartya Sen (1999) has made a similar argument criticizing world development economics for reducing well-being to income, a concept he counters by noting that African American men in urban areas have many times the income of citizens of Bangladesh but a far shorter life span.
12. McCluskey (1998) has demonstrated that “efficient” reforms hide politically contestable choices by labeling decisions to reduce benefits to the poor as elimination of transaction costs, externalities, and moral hazards.
13. A number of different theoretical frameworks could be chosen to guide such an inquiry. In my research (Engel and Munger 1996) on the legal consciousness of individuals I have employed Jerome Bruner’s cultural psychology to explore the formation of “distributed identities” through interaction with other individuals over the course of a life. We have found that identity plays an important role in decisions to bring rights to bear on opportunities for employment. Similarly, the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu emphasizes the importance of viewing action as a form of improvisation with a cultural field and habitus that provides elements of understanding and interpretation of events and their consequences, methods of acting, and expectations of the consequences of action (see, for example, Wacquant 1998).

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