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Conclusion

Democratizing Poverty

Frank Munger

By now, studies of poverty policy have examined in detail the incidence, causes, and consequences of the behaviors that, according to underclass and culture-of-poverty theories, keep people poor. Mainstream research, however, doesn't try to evaluate the identities attached to poor persons by such theories, nor does it question the assumptions that individualize responsibility for poverty.¹ Ethnographers set out to counter the norms of such policy research and redeem the poor by uncovering complex interactions between individuals and institutions that illuminate their motivations and their instrumental decision making. Interpretive studies show that poor persons make appropriate use of cultural and material resources to survive and get ahead. These survival strategies often are extraordinarily creative, but they are no less dependent on human and social capital—knowledge, “soft skills,” and networks of supporting relationships—than those of people who live in greater affluence.

By broadening our understanding of the needs of the poor and the limitations of the environments in which they live, ethnographies overturn the notion that poverty is monolithic and highlight the many different settings in which the working poor struggle to make lives that fit their unique circumstances. Moreover, as Sanders Korenman (see chapter 5 commentary, this volume), a former member of the President's Council of Economic Advisers, confirms, qualitative research has an important role to play in the development of more effective poverty policies.

The contributors to this volume address the causes of poverty by exploring the influence of social and institutional continuities on individual perceptions and choices that cut across traditional policy variables and subject domains, and in so doing, they examine life experiences with a wide-angle lens. Indeed, their studies make it difficult or even impossible to factor poverty into distinct variables.² In these ethnographies, work, family formation, street life, and interactions with public agencies—life elements that look like starting points in traditional poverty research—appear as outcomes: arcs that begin with the development of perceptions, values, and expectations, and end in action. Social structure occupies an important place in these accounts of consciousness and action, as the perceptions of poor persons are shaped through encounters over

their lifetimes with public institutions, family relationships and networks of friends, the physical layout of cities and neighborhoods, police beats and bureaucracies, neighborhood commerce, the location of jobs, and the organization of employment. As we focus on how perceptions develop, we turn away from narrow measurements of the effectiveness of welfare programs to examine the social and institutional structures and resources that influence the capacities of individuals and groups to survive and change.

Discussions of how individuals are constituted as social actors by these fundamental structural relations lead to the question of how research might help persons and groups become active agents of further change. Michael Frisch (chapter 7 commentary, this volume) describes interpretive research as a “dialogue of possibility” in which subjects are themselves creative actors who understand what it means to live within the unfavorable conditions scholars set out to study. Since they share the experiences of other poor persons, they often achieve a “multivalent” vision (to borrow again from Frisch) of their circumstances, a vision that incorporates the possibility of different life trajectories and resists the categorical interpretations of those whose experiences of poverty, class, and gender are different. Frisch suggests that this multivalent vision might write a new vocabulary of connection and collective action for poor persons who share the experience of marginalization and who have been excluded from the theater of ordinary politics. Thus the role of scholars in generating narratives may be catalytic rather than interpretive.

Identity is also crucial to the symbolic politics of poverty, and if we are to overcome public resistance to more generous social supports for the poor, we must decipher how identity issues are used to gauge moral deservingness in the first place. The contributors herein address this important issue—Rainwater (1970) left it unresolved—only indirectly. How will ambiguities that arise from ethnography’s more complex descriptions of the identities and the lives of the poor affect the symbolic politics of poverty? Ethnographers themselves often are divided about interpretations of causation, autonomy, and the sources of individual agency—questions central to the moral politics of poverty and policy making.

This last chapter will look at the expanded mission for ethnography that emerges from the other essays in the volume. First, I will examine the persistence of stereotypes of the poor and explore how such stereotypes contribute to governmentality, the ideological structure that underlies public control of social life. Stereotypes of the poor prove their value to our national discourse by legitimating particular forms of public dominion and control. They justify the phenomenon of durable inequality, which scholars and members of the public alike often attribute to differences in individual character or accidents of birth. Further, such stereotypes reinforce exploitation of those disadvantaged through the familiar social divisions of race, gender, class, and citizenship. The following section then looks at the evidence for public beliefs that underlie the symbolic politics of poverty and find ambivalence there. The final sections of the chapter

describe the resources the identity project must draw on to transform our discussion of the lives of the poor and move toward the broader goal: democratizing poverty.

POWER, POLITICS, AND THE IDENTITY OF THE POOR

Although he calls for valid phenomenological analysis of the lives of the poor, Rainwater (1970, 12) predicts that our stereotypes will be resistant to change because they have deep psychological roots in the guilt we feel, knowing that we derive "various kinds of gains and gratifications from the existence of the disinherited." Fear of poverty, as well as fear of the poor, offers an explanation for the persistence of stereotypes about those who live at the margins of the American economy. We may retreat to hackneyed images of the poor so that we won't have to admit how *similar* we are. None of us is immune to feelings of marginality or worries about stable employment or concern for the safety of our children; and it is impossible not to recognize the moral complexity of our own lives in the dilemmas that confront the poor. So our need to distance ourselves from them is an expression of our deep aversion to the stigmatization they suffer; and the more insecure we feel, the more we seem to cling to our conviction that the poor have failed to work hard enough and that we can avoid their fate by industriousness and good citizenship.

Poverty and Governmentality

Rainwater's theory grounds our stereotypes of the poor in the basic psychology of perception rather than in politics. If he is right—if our views of the poor are rooted in our own psychological needs, if cognitive dissonance alone determines both our perception of poverty and the policies based on that perception—then to change the nature of welfare programs indeed would be difficult.³ Yet the public seems to feel ambivalent about the identity and deservingness of the poor, and widespread stereotyping in public discourse and public policy may depend less on psychological need than on the fact that stereotyping serves the self-interest of more privileged groups. Gans (1995) describes the advantages we, the nonpoor, derive from such stereotypes: they reinforce the identity of the nonpoor by justifying avoidance of the "dangers" posed by the poor, by making the nonpoor feel superior as possessors of traits distinct from the traits of the poor, and by contributing to spatial stigmatization that justifies patterns of exclusion and social control. Each of these benefits is realized through concrete practices by nonpoor individuals and institutions—through standards for public behavior and policing, regulation of land use, and decisions about the placement of transportation routes as well as other public interests and needs—that might be hard to justify without our stereotypes of the poor.⁴

Most important, these stereotypes isolate the poor from the mainstream labor force, confining them to the margins of the labor market, where they serve useful roles as a reserve army of occasional workers who supplement the needs of the legitimate economy by cycling in and out of work (off the books) and who cost their employers nothing more than an hourly wage. If immigrants, members of certain ethnic groups, African Americans, and residents of the decaying urban cores experience greatly reduced quality of life as a result of their exclusion from well-compensated work, then that is a cost they pay to protect the privileges of others. If their exclusion prompts them to become providers of illegal goods (drugs, for instance) desired by many who are not poor, then their response to the absence of work only proves to these others that they don't deserve honest employment.

Gans's description of the functions of poverty shows how deeply implicated it is in *governmentality*, the replication of power in the everyday ordering of our lives (Foucault 1977; Hunt 1994). Since its benefits promote the interests of politicians, welfare administrators, and the public at large, stereotyping of the poor serves as one of the organizing principles of governmentality.⁵ Suburban residents, for example, manipulate the concept of blight and the stereotypical identities of those who cause it in the symbolic politics of neighborhood building and preservation. Inner-city schools, too, because of the poor children who attend them, represent the unspoken Other that proves the superiority of suburban schools and justifies their elitism. Thus poverty, like crime, is exploited as a means of governance.⁶ The identity of the poor becomes a key to the manipulation of economic policies. Stereotypes of welfare recipients are used to reinforce an image of an Other whose morally undeserving behavior explains and motivates policies of redistribution and regulation.⁷ Economic dependency, like crime, is perceived as a pervasive threat, and in order to serve as a symbol of dependency, welfare recipients must be constructed as nonworkers who refuse to accept the discipline and risk of the labor market in exchange for its rewards.⁸ Similarly, policies that "responsibilize" employment for the regularly employed—by cutting wages and benefit levels on the grounds that they represent excess "fat" in the operating budgets of the corporations that drive the mainstream economy—are justified to prevent the transfer of burdens borne by workers to the larger economic community (Rose 1999).⁹

Poverty, Identity, and Durable Inequality

The poor set a baseline for categorical distinctions between those who receive the full benefits and protections of the welfare state and those who must be required to take up more of its burdens. What makes them useful, of course, is the subtle, unspoken link between poverty and durable inequality (Tilly 1998).¹⁰ The poor have a gender, a race, often an immigrant status, and a class identity—the emphasis depending on context.¹¹ Welfare to work plays well as a recom-

mendation for teenage, single-parent African American women, although this group is in truth a small minority of actual welfare recipients (Handler and Hasenfeld 1997). Displeasure with illegal immigrants has been redirected to support denial of benefits to all immigrants, both legal and illegal. Images of undisciplined blue-collar employees as a class that exploits unearned union benefits, workers' compensation, or health care coverage are deployed to justify cutting back on labor protections and insurance, even as we praise the individual worker and raise the Earned Income Tax Credit or minimum wage. All of these identities reinforce the notion that employment protections pose moral hazards for poor or unemployed workers, who may need the harsh discipline of the unregulated labor market to keep them honest and industrious.¹² Under pressure to informalize work, increase the scope of contingent labor, and undermine the social contract with labor that has prevailed since World War II, these identities of poor and dependent persons become powerful political tools.

Low-wage workers are victims of such deregulation and reform, as Saskia Sassen (chapter 2 commentary, this volume) demonstrates in her discussion of the effects of the global transformation of work on the lives of low-wage laborers. Trends in globalization have contributed to the informalization of work. Expansion and consolidation of producer services, such as financial and information technology, along with concentration of corporate headquarters in the economic cores of major cities, has established "a new regime of economic activity" that depends not only on a highly skilled cadre of workers, but also on low-skilled workers who maintain, build, clean, deliver, copy, word process, answer phones, and especially, meet the rapidly rising demands for personal services for the wealthy. In addition, the postindustrial economy has "downgrad[ed] a broad range of manufacturing sectors." Sweatshops and home work have proliferated as the American firm has reorganized the lower-level workforce, all but eliminating union-negotiated protections and benefits in the private sector and significantly lowering the expectations of employees, while at the same time maintaining sufficient managerial capacity to enforce the discipline that the new regime requires (Gordon 1996). Finally, informalization extends beyond the manufacturing sector to distribution of goods and services that cannot compete with "cheap imports or for space and other business needs with the new high-profit firms engendered by the advanced corporate service economy" (Sassen this volume, 75).

The creation of low-wage informal work has played an essential part in the economic boom that signals America's role as leader of globalization, and in large cities, low-wage workers represent the engine on which the new globalized economy depends. The theory of comparative advantage in the global economy predicts that the number of jobs in sectors in which the United States is dominant (primarily highly skilled jobs in technology and professional services) should grow, while the low-wage job market should decline as manufacturing industries move to Third World societies where low-wage labor is plentiful and cheap. Sassen's research demonstrates, however, how crucially

low-wage workers function in advanced technological societies to sustain technological and financial industries, specialized manufacturing, and a broad range of service industries.

The growing importance of low-wage work in the global informal economy would lead us to expect that employers would support reproduction of the pool of low-wage workers in order to keep wages low and keep groups that supply such workers insecure and competing with each other. Indeed, poor minorities, women, and some workers from the formerly unionized industrial workforce do constitute a large pool of low-wage laborers; but American businesses want more. They welcome illegal immigrants, support welfare-to-work reforms, and continue to undermine benefits, wage increases, and job security. These practices have their most oppressive effects on workers with the least bargaining power, whom durable inequality has kept isolated, segregated, or stigmatized as a social group. Thus even in a time of full employment, low-wage workers, especially those in categories defined by durable inequality, experience great insecurity, and many do not find jobs at all (Freeman 1994).

Identity legitimates the uneven effects of informalization on particular social groups. As long as workers in the low-wage labor pool are seen as inexperienced, undisciplined, unsocialized, and undereducated, few will question the effects of informalization. Gender has done this identity work before: historically, women's identity—both their emotional-intellectual identity and as men's dependents—suited them for low-skill, low-pay, low-benefit work. In such terms, the entire low-wage workforce has been feminized by the notion that informal and low-wage jobs are “starters,” valuable because they teach the soft skills and motivation workers need to move up the employment ladder.

For those who don't share it, this identity successfully masks the problem of aggregate shortages of jobs that offer sustainable employment for low-wage workers. Other structural features of the low-wage job market explain why even those who do not find low-wage jobs accept the mainstream interpretation that failure to do so is their fault. Harvey (chapter 2 commentary, this volume) argues that most workers, including low-wage workers, have some experience of the success of individual job searches, but little understanding of the aggregate job shortages that confront them. His analysis of the economic implications of job queues and the interaction of queues and shortages demonstrates that the problem of poverty related to low-wage work and unemployment can only be solved by increasing the number of jobs for low-wage workers. Efforts to improve job readiness and job search strategies won't help much. As long as the discussion of low-wage jobs continues to focus on the motives and character of the unemployed, policies that shift the risks of unemployment to the poor will prevail.

The rollback of employee benefits, increasing job insecurity, and welfare reform, like the new politics of crime control, proceed from entrenched assumptions about the behavior of employees, the poor, and welfare recipients. These related changes in governance are supported by stereotypes of dependent and

outsider groups. Gans does not underestimate the difficulty of changing our approaches to poverty and, more generally, our approaches to economic and social inclusion of the poor. Gans addresses this problem, in part, by urging a campaign to "debunk" stereotypes. Yet his own description of the entrenchment of stereotypes makes it clear that unless this effort is targeted to the specific constituencies that benefit from stereotypes and to their motives for maintaining them, efforts to bring about change may fail.

HOW THE PUBLIC PERCEIVES THE MORAL IDENTITY OF THE POOR

We have considered how the identity of the poor has been exploited to serve the interests of privileged groups, and how it continues to reinforce enduring inequality. Yet how does the public identify characteristics of the poor and translate them into moral judgments? Gans suggests that the aspirations of poor persons and their capacity to change are critical to our judgments of their deservingness; but aspirations are not observable. They function out of sight, on the borderland of identity, where poverty, welfare, and the meaning of community are negotiated.

We get a rough picture of the public's view of the poor from polling data. Shortly after the victory by the political right in the off-year congressional elections of 1994, a *New York Times*/CBS poll confirmed that the public subscribed to negative stereotypes of persons who received welfare assistance, and endorsed reductions in benefits as well as imposition of work requirements. In the same poll, at the height of the conservatives' power and just as the United States was beginning to emerge from a severe recession, the public also expressed its willingness to pay for job training, child care, and other benefits for needy parents, even if those expenditures triggered tax increases (Dowd 1994). Such apparently contradictory modes of understanding public provision for the poor are long-standing. In recent surveys, more than 85 percent of all adults endorsed the idea that recipients should be required to work for their welfare benefits. Among liberals and conservatives, blacks and whites, women and men, the statistics told the same story. A large majority of respondents also endorsed relatively generous benefits for those who are trying to comply with work requirements but who need education or services to do so. Moreover, a majority agreed that such benefits should be extended beyond standard time limits if necessary, even at increased cost to the public.¹³

In the contemporary politics of welfare reform (and the context of increasing insecurity in the workplace, even for many who once enjoyed job security), the requirement to work has acquired overwhelming importance. The idea that welfare recipients should work has simmered since the 1960s, when the AFDC program began to be viewed as a semipermanent subsidy game for inner-city, never married African American mothers. In the deracinated politics of the 1990s, the turn to policies that discipline the poor along with other

workers has replaced more overtly racist politics spurred by the white backlash of the 1980s (see Simon 1997). The outcry against affirmative action, school desegregation orders, bilingualism, and immigration has been subsumed into a politics of citizenship that ignores differences in needs and values and homogenizes regulation of welfare state benefits on the basis of a single principle: that the deserving person—the person who works—will be rewarded. In this environment, the disciplinary component of poverty policies is reserved for those who share the stereotypical identity “nonworking” and who fall into one or more other familiar categories—ethnic, female, immigrant, or inner-city resident.

Members of the public draw sharp distinctions between themselves and welfare recipients. A recent poll conducted by the Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation (1998), revealed that only about 7 percent of respondents said they believe persons on welfare have values very like their own.¹⁴ Further, only 6 percent of Americans identify themselves as poor.¹⁵ This low rate of self-identification is striking in a nation with an official poverty rate of about 13 percent, and where at least twice as many of us are functionally poor by many scholars' estimates.¹⁶ Nearly one third of all American adults identify themselves as working class—and this includes a majority of those whose incomes fall well below the poverty line. Rainwater's (1970) cognitive dissonance theory explains why most people, including those who are objectively poor, believe that poverty is a status that places individuals outside the realm of ordinary experience and isolates them from the larger community. Most of the poor deny that identity in their own self-perceptions, and with good reason: the poor are stigmatized, and not the least factor, the stigma is racial (see Gillens 1999). For whites, the poor are black. For persons of color, the poor are lazy, self-destructive, and above all, not like us.

In fact, although the differences between wealth and poverty may be relatively clear at the extremes, the differences between poor and nonpoor *persons* is largely artificial. In objective terms, individuals' incomes fluctuate over their lifetimes. Huge numbers of people move into and out of employment, and whether they are classified as poor or nonpoor, they share a range of common experiences. Their similarities blur the distinctions between successful and unsuccessful, deserving and undeserving. This is why, paradoxically, they are reluctant to acknowledge either their own experiences of economic insecurity or the citizenship of the nonworking poor. Many Americans are threatened by unemployment and involuntary underproductivity.¹⁷ Many, especially women, are compelled to work in roles that are not typically defined as productive. In practice, these niches of dependency exist in tension with the dominant norms of citizenship, and whether they want to admit it or not, persons who occupy them must continually negotiate their status. The prevalence of niche identities is growing in the postmodern economy, and our rising consciousness of such identities may set the stage for transformations of our collective understanding of the meaning of poverty and low-wage work.¹⁸

Notwithstanding the patriarchal values, racist presumptions, and insensitivities to individual differences that seem to inform our welfare policies, the public—or at least large segments of it—may take complex and more benign views of poverty. We may hope that negative perceptions of poverty in some survey data do not reflect the fundamental values of those who have shared job insecurity. We may hope that resistance to adequate provision for the poor is a product of misperceptions about responsibility, fears about the future, and complex responses to racial politics. We may hope that a spirit of fairness will succeed in the end, and that arguments based on race, gender, or lifestyle only mask our deep and insistent suspicion that the poor really are like us. We may hope that appeals to ascriptive differences may be weakened by evidence that individuals are meeting their obligations as citizens, whether or not work in the conventional labor market results from their efforts.

THE IDENTITY PROJECT

What can interpretive research do to address the persistence of political, social, and psychological strategies that secure the interests—and assuage the fears—of some groups in society at the expense of others? First and foremost, such research can particularize identity, show that it is not merely a cluster of clichés slapped on the poor by power holders who need justification for the policies they make. Ethnography can demonstrate that identity is a real, personal possession, owned privately by each of us, poor and nonpoor alike; that it organizes our sense of self, unlocks (or locks) our agency, our capacity to act and react, to make the most or least of opportunities and obstacles. By unraveling their individual identities, by showing how those identities develop under conditions that are hidden from politicians and the public, and by celebrating their embrace of familiar values and goals, ethnography can redeem the poor.

Yet as Rainwater predicted, and as we have seen, complex and ambiguous stories about people in poverty sometimes are difficult to comprehend. One ethnographic strategy tries to validate the decisions (and thus the lives) of the poor by showing that they are rational, that they enact mainstream values despite severe constraints. This approach calls for selective investigation of the circumstances and decisions through which the poor succeed in acting autonomously and strategically as they seek to resist or escape poverty. A second strategy constructs stories that show how the poor—even those who have the will to change—are captured by their poverty, trapped by the social ties that at once enable survival and smother autonomy. The behavior of poor persons who suffer extreme oppression sometimes must be understood as a product of that oppression, and not as an expression of resistance, subversion, or double consciousness. Handler suggests in his commentary (this volume) that prescriptions for change are greatly complicated by the fact that poverty has an effect on capacity for self-help as well as on opportunities for self-help. Only after personal and institutional transformations empower the poor to

shape new identities for themselves, he argues, will they be able to make their own way through the world.

If the dialogue among these different approaches to ethnography only complicates our picture of the character of the poor, then ethnography has failed. Qualitative researchers go further, however, and transform the questions we ask about poverty. They foreground the agency of individuals as they examine the resources available for the development of personal character and the situations and interactions in which these resources can be deployed. Increasingly, qualitative researchers focus on the role of institutional environments in the lives of the poor as encounters with those environments guide individual agency and feed or thwart the capacity for change. Conceptually, ethnographers explore sophisticated frameworks for understanding the experiences of the poor and the effects of poverty on behavior. Empirically, they track changes in the low-wage job market, the increasing privatization of dependency and risk on which that market is founded, and the creation of durable inequalities that restrict and allocate opportunities by race, immigrant status, class, and gender.

Carol Stack (chapter 1, this volume) introduces us to the world of low-wage work through the eyes of teenagers who begin their interactions with that world in fast-food restaurants in Oakland and Harlem. They may be at the bottom of the employment ladder now, but they are also at the peak of hopefulness about moving up. Stack enters their lives to find out what means most to them, how they expend their not-quite-unlimited energy. Work turns out to be central to these young people. Many of us who have jobs in the mainstream learned about work by being connected to the world of our parents, and through them, to the landscape of adult life. Oakland teens often get less effective parenting than we did, but they commit themselves to work because they too understand it as a pathway to adulthood. For all the energy and promise of the young woman Stack follows through the critical passages of maturation, fast-food work is likely to lead nowhere. Although the young workers learn many unnamed skills, there is no next level of related employment; there is no up from this job. Unless the worker can draw on other forms of capital—education, financially capable parents, or a relative in business—her work experience may not carry her anywhere but to another low-wage service job. The teenager has played by the power holders' rules and overturned the negative stereotypes through which they see and judge the poor. So what is her reward? What happens to *her* expectations?

The answer may strike us as painful, but it is inescapable: the careers of low-wage workers, like Stack's teens, are circumscribed by the durable inequality that defines their life worlds and by important differences in social and human capital that affect the significance of low-wage job opportunities. In chapter 2, Ruth Buchanan's detailed examination of the experience of finding and holding a low-wage job in the telemarketing industry in Canada illuminates a related effect of globalization, namely, the exploitation of individuals in niche labor markets. Employment in telemarketing is an important paradigm because

there is no apparent shortage of potential employees for work that is often demanding and stressful.

Buchanan's study points to an important transformation in the low-wage nonindustrial workforce, once overwhelmingly female, but now drawing both men and women. Telework has many of the qualities that jobs in the historically segmented gendered labor market had: it is low-waged and contingent, with little recognition of the skills it requires. The image of low-wage workers—including workers in the new informalized manufacturing sector—indeed has become feminized in the sense that they are represented as lacking experience, discipline, and commitment to full-time work. The actual composition of low-wage workforces (women with family responsibilities, immigrant women, men with limited education) often confirms this stereotype, but as Buchanan shows, people accept low-wage jobs because of limitations on their human and social capital, not because they are poorly motivated or uncommitted to full-time employment.

For women, the decision to enter the low-wage job market is complicated by family responsibilities and by the structural dependency that these responsibilities (they amount to unpaid labor in the home) create. In the case of female single parents, the stereotypical image of the low-wage or contingent worker is particularly ironic. Female single parents are poor because of widespread expectations for women's care work and because of increasing privatization of care work as benefits are withdrawn from jobs and public funding decreases. Julia Henly (chapter 5, this volume) examines low-wage employment by women in matched samples: one group of women works in low-wage jobs; the other group subsists on welfare. The study finds that differences in social capital—namely, supporting relationships that provide additional income and access to child care and other resources—are critical determinants of the choice between work and welfare. Thus Henly's research shows that women can't take advantage of opportunities unless they have personal resources to invest in those opportunities; and it shows great differences in the amounts of social capital women can command.¹⁹ Henly's research reinforces the basic principle that economic success is not derived from self-sufficiency but rather from being able to be dependent on others. In the male working world, of course, it often is assumed that a family will provide critical support for personal well-being. Such an assumption is inappropriate with respect to poor working women.

For women, another hidden issue—personal security (or more accurately, for poor women, residential insecurity)—is central to the capacity for employment. Housing typically costs low-income families a far larger proportion of their income than affluent families are likely to pay. Instability of income, which is much more likely among the poor, often has drastic consequences, as the stories behind the statistics for homelessness demonstrate. Domestic violence, of course, is another a major cause of homelessness. Aixa Cintrón-Vélez's interviews with women who are residents of shelters describe their situations in

terms that the nonpoor would not predict (chapter 4, this volume). Shelters can offer more than security, Cintrón-Vélez suggests. They also may provide a source of identity. One woman reported that she became capable of self-help in the security of the shelter; it allowed her space in which to develop greater self-confidence and discover a new identity. Although a woman forced to enter a homeless shelter looks like a displaced person to middle-class observers, the resident herself may experience the shelter as her only secure residence, and a foundation for self-confidence.

Reinforcing and extending Stack's findings about the importance of social capital among poor women and men, Cintrón-Vélez shows that identity can be fundamentally affected by the social capital provided by a residence.²⁰ Cintrón-Vélez's window on life in shelters also leads back to public policies that affect the need for shelters. Recent changes in welfare law that establish strict employment requirements have forced many families without jobs off of public assistance, and homelessness is one of the consequences. Cintrón-Vélez's research reveals still further irony. Although residential security can be an important key to the stability and self-confidence required for employment, housing is almost never mentioned among the kinds of social capital subsidies that will enable the poor to secure work and succeed at it. Indeed, as Cintrón-Vélez points out, public spending for construction of new housing that might be accessible to the poor has been greatly reduced over several decades. At the same time, many local governments offer subsidies for upscale conversions of existing housing stock that might have been used for poor families.

Family is a central concern of both poor men and women. The low-wage job market has made it extremely difficult to keep a two-parent family intact, but those who are unable to do so often maintain different forms of attachment. Edin, Lein, and Nelson (chapter 3, this volume) offer an important corrective to the prevailing vision of the dysfunctional role of poor men. The failure of many poor fathers to maintain regular employment that supports the family is read broadly to indicate even greater dysfunction—namely, their complete noninvolvement as sources of economic support and as parents. This interpretation is incorrect. Edin and Lein (1997) discover that fathers constitute an important, if irregular, source of income and other help for the mothers who are raising the fathers' children. In their essay in this volume, Edin, Lein, and Nelson find that fathers *want* to be fathers. Their inability, however, to share custody because they lack steady employment—despite years of effort to secure it—leads to a lifestyle that resembles, the authors conclude, extended adolescence. Although the motivations and values of many poor men match those of the mainstream, the unavailability of low-wage work takes a severe toll on their identity. Since they sometimes see themselves shut out of the domain of parenting, family, and work altogether, these men believe that their lives should be conducted according to different rules.

Ethnography undermines the foundations for stereotypes—and at the same time makes sense of such stereotypes as that of the detached, uncaring, un-

employed African American father—when it shows how inequality that confronts broad sectors of the poor, working poor, and low-wage mainstream is sustained, in part, by the social organization of low-wage employment. If we can document how the low-wage job market and the privatization of dependency affect all the working poor and many in the middle classes as well, the familiar negative images of poor women and men will lose their power to shock us. Interpretive research renders the ambiguous moral character of the oppressed poor irrelevant when it shows that social institutions create risks for the poor by compelling them to adopt extraordinary survival strategies and encouraging (mal)adaptive identities. This research also demonstrates that the most effective social policy for ending poverty begins with the transformation of the social environment in which the poor live.

Ethnographers recognize that identity is always dependent on contingencies, and as we document the interplay between meaning, action, and situation in the lives of poor persons, we observe and report discrete moments in the uninterrupted evolution of their perspectives—their values and aspirations—under the pressure of constant change. Sanders Korenman (commentary, this volume) responds to the continuous possibility for individual change by proposing that longitudinal studies are essential to test the long-term effects of poverty policy. We do not live our lives within the boundaries of social templates, but within the contexts of our evolving consciousness.

The development of motives, perspectives, and meaning—consciousness—provides room for individuals to maneuver. Thus we find openings in ethnographic narratives of poverty for change and empowerment. Identity is a resource that may create space for action.²¹ Lucie White writes of a Head Start participant whose identity has many “potentials” that “come in and out of focus as she interacts with different people in different social domains.” The woman’s experiences at Head Start acted as a catalyst for change that increased her effectiveness in managing her life. White examines the critical events in that stream of change, particularly the woman’s discussion of herself and her situation with a mentor and interactions with peers, and attempts to map her subject’s course through the process. Similarly, Aixa Cintrón-Vélez describes an evolving consciousness of possibility that challenges the presumptions of outsiders about the oppressiveness and bleakness of homeless shelters. The resident who said that a shelter provided her first experience of stability claimed that this experience changed her outlook on life. Her subsequent ability to make changes in her behavior made her hope real, not an illusion.

Identity also is a critical element in narratives of collective change. Participatory research described by Frances Ansley has provided groups of workers experiencing the traumas of economic marginalization in the United States and elsewhere with opportunities to examine, understand, and ultimately organize a collective response. For example, in discussions of their plight with union leaders and academics, American workers in Tennessee who lost their jobs to Mexican maquiladoras were able to derive a new sense of identity—not crafted

by outsiders who helped the group get started—that oriented their anger away from the Mexican workers and toward their former employer and the government that provided aid for the move to Mexico (Ansley and Williams 1999).²² The discovery of possibilities for collective participation in efforts to change the balance of power in oppressive social relations may be one important route toward change.

Ethnography that finds hope for change and empowerment is particularly respectful of the perceptions of the poor, Michael Frisch notes (commentary, this volume). Although elites often describe the poor as fatalistic—a characteristic of Oscar Lewis's concept of the culture of poverty—the poor often make realistic assessments of their circumstances, and they make rational choices about their actions, given the knowledge they have.²³ Frisch contends that the conditions of poverty create opportunities for perception not available to others: outsiders can learn about those conditions, and about how poor persons use *their* knowledge of those conditions, only from them. Narratives thus can make room between abstract generalizations about the oppressiveness of poverty and the individual who maneuvers to change his or her circumstances.

DEMOCRATIZING POVERTY

We have seen that stereotypes of the poor serve a variety of political purposes. We also have seen that consensus about severely restricting the provision of benefits to the poor is illusory. Attitudes toward public assistance policies are deeply conflicted. Fear of poverty and shame caused by declining economic fortunes can explain the psychological need of working-class Americans to distance themselves from images of poverty and make poverty the personal responsibility of poor persons. Yet many who express hostility toward poor African Americans—especially welfare recipients—and immigrants also support the extension of the social safety net provided by the welfare state to others. This ambivalence reflects an important reality: that much of the rhetoric of welfare reform can be said to have served the purpose of reinforcing the work ethic of the working class itself. Explicitly, welfare reform reminds the working class of its entitlement to respect for being employed. Implicitly, reform reminds workers of their insecurity and dependence on their employers (Matsuda 1997; Kost and Munger 1996).

Those who have not shared in the economic miracle of recent years—including many white males who have lost union jobs and watched economic advantages erode for themselves and their children—now face the same kinds of insecurity that confront minorities and women in the low-wage labor force. If our goal is to democratize poverty, to make it *available* as social construct and lived reality to others, Americans at all income levels must begin by acknowledging their own experience with economic insecurity at some time in their lives. That insecurity may only have amounted to the threat of poverty; but it

allows all of us to see into the world that poor people inhabit, to imagine ourselves there, confronting the same hard choices between work and school, and between work and family. When we recognize that the dilemmas of the poor are like ours, we understand that they also share many of our aspirations and values. When we realize that they share our aspirations and values, we understand that the poor are like us. Once we realize how alike we are, we recognize the importance of programs that address issues of durable inequality, different forms of low-wage labor, and the structural dependency of women.

Ethnographic research harnesses empathy in the service of this project, and it helps us document for other working Americans a fundamental truth: but for the limiting and transforming experiences of poverty, most poor persons are capable of active participation in mainstream institutions. Ethnography makes the barriers to that participation transparent by invoking widely shared experiences of the coercion, humiliation, and insecurity of the labor market. Of course, more is at stake here than the need for an accurate portrayal of the perspectives, capacities, and moral character of the poor. Truly to democratize poverty, we must attempt to change the self-perceptions of the mainstream. To that end we propose a model of moral equivalence between Self and Other, one that justifies the citizenship of the welfare-needing poor by demonstrating that most are low-wage workers at some point in their lives, and that all are potential workers.²⁴ The perception that they are deserving is the key to income supports and other services for the poor.²⁵ So perceived, the poor are seen to share the many risks and oppressions of the labor market with those in the mainstream. In fact, so perceived, their identity is transformed, and the poor are entitled to become members of the mainstream, to enjoy the full benefits of citizenship. (Consider, for instance, employment protection policies that cover other workers: the Fair Labor Standards Act, pension rights, and Social Security and Medicare.) During the New Deal, just such a transformation in identity was accomplished for elderly persons with minimum work histories who received a guarantee of federal old-age insurance.

The oral historian Alessandro Portelli (1991) observes that the atrophy of movements for radical social change has left citizens of many Western societies to face social problems alone, as the obsession with self-sufficiency and autonomy in moral, academic, and policy discourses amply demonstrates. The task of oral historians, he argues, is to convey difference as interdependence rather than as a form of hierarchy. Portelli is describing conditions for effective oral history fieldwork, but he understands that fieldwork offers a paradigm for research and, indeed, we also might argue, for policy. Meaningful change requires self-awareness on many levels. Research and policy are not only forms of intervention, but opportunities for mutual enlightenment and increased self-awareness—both for those who need help and for those who want to provide it. Empowerment of the poor in their own lives, as we are empowered in ours, is the most democratic prescription for change, and it is reinforced by our civic culture of self-help. Whether as members of a voting public, elected decision

makers, or academics committed to the production of knowledge, we—the holders of power—can achieve this democratic end only if we recognize similarities in our experiences, goals, values, and moral stature, and accept the equality of our differences of race, gender, and class, which then will cease to matter as sources of enduring inequality.

NOTES

1. Much of this research grew from the encouragement given by Congress after 1980 to experimentation and innovation by the states in administering welfare under federal grant programs. Innovations intended to change the behavior of poor mothers included combining welfare to work, training and education, and sanctions for having children while receiving welfare. While these so-called experiments (few met standards of scientific rigor) potentially told us that individuals worked incrementally more or had incrementally fewer children under threat of sanctions, they did not test whether individuals will respond to significant opportunities, adapt to change, and act on aspirations or values. While some of these programs suggested that the poor can be pressured to find work, although the gains are small, they also suggested that sustaining self-sufficiency through employment in the low-wage job market is extremely difficult (Handler and Hasenfeld 1997). The research did not sustain the underlying premises for these programs—namely, that the micromanagement of poor women's meager public assistance will increase their capacity to enter the mainstream or achieve a better life for themselves or their families in the longer run. In all of this research race has been suppressed. Race became a politically difficult subject for poverty research after the split in the civil rights movement in the 1960s and as poverty policy entered the era of "benign neglect" (Katz 1989). In recent poverty policy studies, race is omitted because it is deemed neither a direct cause of impoverishment nor a factor directly affecting the success or failure of relief programs. Yet race, like gender, is an important factor in the interplay of institutions and lives. Poverty is a racially coded concept, and welfare is racially coded still more clearly than poverty. Welfare policy has been influenced by the continuing patterns of institutional segregation whose origins lie in our troubled history of race relations. Countering racial stereotypes is an important part of redeeming the poor.
2. Although traditional policy research analyzes the statistical effects of family structure, human capital, and economic resources on poverty, it does not employ more direct approaches to understanding who the poor are, what they are capable of doing, and how they might respond to different circumstances. Traditional policy research presumes that the lives of the poor require micromanagement by welfare providers; it tests whether particular forms of micromanagement produce statistically measurable changes in behavior. In contrast, the values, capacities, and perceptions of the poor—their identity—is central to the work presented by the contributors to this book.
3. Rainwater (1970, 27) concludes that redeeming perspectives on the poor may meet psychological resistance. He says, "such accounts will inevitably present the social scientists and policy makers with what Alvin Gouldner (1970) has called 'hostile

information,' that is, information that challenges their most deeply held beliefs about what people are like, why they act as they do, and what this implies for political action."

4. Further benefits accrue from scapegoating the poor by blaming them for systemic and institutional failures. For example, human services agencies may evade their obligation to administer effective poverty relief policies by characterizing the poor as unresponsive and irresponsible. Gans notes related economic functions of stereotypes imposed on the poor. The identity of the poor is the *raison d'être* for the human services industry. Separating and treating the undeserving and deserving poor is the purpose of their work; therefore, they have an enormous investment in maintaining this distinction.
5. Public administrators attempt to create an appropriate sense of the meaning and purpose of an agency's tasks among staff members. Their shared sense of meaning is created in part by the professional discourses they employ to describe what they do and in part by myths they use to legitimate the agency externally. Discourses that suggest that what they do is effective, notwithstanding the failure of their clients, have an obvious appeal. Professional and political discourses that incorporate stereotypical characterizations of the poor have just such reinforcing implications concerning administrative effectiveness, and they may readily become part of the basis for the shared meaning of the activities of an agency, whether a welfare office, police department, housing inspection unit, or motor vehicle licensing office.
6. This discussion draws on the insightful analysis of Jonathan Simon (1997), who argues that growing distrust of the Other—the poor, the nonwhite, the "criminal element"—has altered governance of our society. Governance no longer presumes that the mainstream and the Other can coexist out of mutual respect and respect for civil order. The social connections between individuals that previously formed the basis for decentralized order and control have broken down—at least across the social divides of race and class.

Instead, power is exercised by means that rely on no mutual interaction at all, but rather on management by an algorithm designed into the system. The growing distrust is reflected in the evolution of quotidian practices of social control that make up governmentality. Culture-free regulation through spatial separation is replacing interactive communication and collective choice. Containment of norm violators is replacing disciplinarity and rehabilitation. Risk management is replacing democratic choice and interpersonal managerial decision making. The image of the criminal Other—a person of color, poor, predatory, and urban—drives a wide range of public policies. The identity of the Other legitimates policies of containment, separation, statistically based crime prevention such as profiling, and punishment that affect not only criminal justice but also land use, transportation, public funding of schools, national electoral politics, and other major institutional arenas in which governance structures social interaction.

7. Welfare reform in particular illustrates the role of the poor in governmentality. First, the desire of a large part of the American public to equalize the burdens of widespread economic insecurity secured political support for strict work requirements for welfare recipients. Thus while work requirements may well have reflected the

displaced anxiety of workers, they also served an explicit purpose embraced by a large part of the public. Second, support for strict limits on welfare resulted not only from the desire of the American public to equalize economic insecurity, but from a successful effort by promarket conservatives and business to promote the belief among wage earners that economic insecurity is necessary, normal, and legitimate (Kost and Munger 1996; Matsuda 1997). Both interests were served by placing restrictions on welfare and punishing welfare recipients for not working. Belief in the undeservingness of the poor made it possible to take for granted that to be forced to work regardless of the hardship created would be good for the poor. This stereotype also helped weaken support for a plausible alternative policy, namely, making all workers more secure, because the stereotype assumes that no one is entitled to be more secure.

8. Nothing in the new welfare law requires that recipients who must enlist in "work experience" projects as a condition of receiving their grants be provided the benefits—or wages—of "employees," even though they may be performing identical work. For example, a recent ruling by the New York Court of Appeals held New York's state constitutional provision requiring payment of "prevailing wages" for public works employees inapplicable to workfare workers. *Brukhman v. Giuliani*, 94 N.Y.2d 387 (2000).
9. In the present fiscally conservative political environment, employment security, previous employee benefit levels, and legal rights to contest employer decision making all are represented as forms of freeloading that must be controlled through public policies that "responsibilize" employees in the name of the common good, which is defined as efficiency and wealth maximization (see McCluskey 1998). Workers' benefits not related to the bottom line become legitimate targets for cuts because they are constructed in economic discourse as a form of economic fat, privilege, and immoral dependency, the mirror-image reverse of efficient, market driven, and therefore fair labor policy.
10. The sociologist Charles Tilly (1998) describes processes by which societies maintain "durable inequality" in the distribution of access to privileges and benefits. Inequality, Tilly argues, is often by category, not individual by individual. Thus women historically have been channeled into low-wage unskilled work, African Americans are confined in neighborhoods and communities that offer fewer opportunities to build human capital and where social capital may be less adapted to linking with the mainstream economy, and immigrants are confined to illegal, desperately low-paid and underregulated work. Even before society judges and interacts with each individual, these groups start from distinctive positions of disadvantage. Tilly notes that such categorical divisions often explain how roles that seem open to all are regularly occupied by persons from a particular social class, gender, or race. For example, as the American economy has boomed over the past few years, many wage earners have benefited, but low-wage workers have fallen far behind. Moreover, the allocation of low-wage jobs disproportionately to women, minorities, and immigrants is an example of durable inequality based on processes of exclusion and marginalization that render persons in these categories available for low-wage and contingent work but less available for higher-paid mainstream jobs.

11. Durable inequality is maintained, in part, by means of the identities that establish boundaries between groups (Tilly 1998, 64):

Thus, as combinations of solidary and competitive interactions generate ostensibly racial barriers, they also produce genetically framed stories of each group's origins and attributes. . . . Different combinations of encounters, barriers, and stories generate definitions of categories as centering on class, citizenship, age, or locality.

12. Many government subsidies create a moral hazard, namely, the risk that recipients will change their behavior to make themselves eligible for more of the subsidy. Since subsidies are intended to induce changes in behavior, evaluation of the so-called moral effects of a subsidy actually depends entirely on judgments about whether the subsidy induces too much or too little reliance. The language of moral hazard is misleading, since in principle no clear threshold exists above which the motive for seeking an incrementally higher subsidy is corrupt, rather than precisely what the law was intended to achieve. Judgments about whether reliance is too great or too little are strongly colored by political preferences (see McCluskey 1998). A great deal of research already suggests that the costs and benefits of welfare are a great deal more complex and create far less moral hazard than the reformers and public have believed (Edin and Lein 1997; Secombe 1999; Zucchini 1997).
13. A recent survey by Jobs for the Future (2000) indicated that 70 percent of all Americans favor government help for child care and training after adults leave welfare and enter the workforce. Nearly 90 percent of those favoring such government support would continue to favor it even if it required a substantial increase in government spending. Surveys available from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research show that these views are enduring. Polls conducted in 1996, shortly after the new welfare reforms became law, showed that majorities favored providing increased job training and day care benefits even after adults left welfare and even if it meant an increase in taxes. See Kaiser Family Foundation 1996, Questions 26 and 40; Coalition for America's Children 1996, Questions 62 and 72.
14. Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation 1998, Question 15.
15. NBC/Wall Street Journal 1998, Question 7.
16. A 1997 poll by the Pew Research Center (1998) reported that 17 percent of the adult population acknowledges having lived in a family that received welfare.
17. Controversies range from traditional labor value issues about the meritoriousness of wages negotiated by unions and entitlement of strikers to unemployment benefits, the meaning of *employee* in a reengineered and downsized world, and the status of women under Social Security.
18. This rise in niche identities is linked to Anthony Giddens's (1990) perception that the modern (postmodern) world relies increasingly on trust between individuals and entities connected by extended webs of global interaction. As economic roles change in the way described here, however, trust directly is affected. We want Third World workers to be engaged in a free market economy partly because we then can trust them politically, since they will respond to familiar incentives and values. As workers in our own society work less, we trust them less, and we trust the poor least of all because their link to the materialism of wage labor has become

weakened. Robert Wuthnow (1996, 287–89) suggests that the lack of trust is a projection of the misgivings we have about the weakening, in each of us, of the moral values that have historically guided and limited our materialism.

19. Human capital resources include soft skills, knowledge, and trust, which yield confidence in oneself and a fit between identity and work. Much has been made of the soft skills deficit (Tilly 1998; Holzer 1996), but for many, the issue is not human capital but social capital and the conflict between economic work and care work.
20. Identity may be affected in more than one way. Cintrón-Vélez's study suggests that residence in a shelter is a stepping-stone to employment. Stack's earlier study (1974) suggests that reciprocally binding relationships can help individuals take advantage of opportunities. Yet these binding relationships also may create an expectation that resources will be distributed and will not be used to facilitate the independence of those who want to return to school, rent an apartment outside the neighborhood, or marry and seek employment elsewhere. Contrasting behavior is displayed by the street-corner men in Liebow's research, who avoid forming relationships based on borrowing and, as a result, have greater freedom from commitments, but also less social capital than the women described by Stack.
21. Space also may be created by public narratives that validate the perception that power—including power to interpret the meaning and effects of poverty—always is shared between dominant social and political groups and the poor themselves (Frisch 1990; Handler, commentary, this volume). Counterhegemonic consciousness always has figured prominently in social history as a form of resistance (Scott 1990; Ewick and Silbey 1998; see also Du Bois 1903 on dual consciousness).
22. Ansley's account of the conversations among the workers make it clear that they did not accept the suggestion of the union steward discussion leader. Rather, the workers subtly shifted the terms and conclusions of the discussion. They simply responded to the question that they had framed for themselves rather than the one posed by the self-appointed discussion leader. The consequence of this discovery of identity was a strong commitment to collective action to reach out to the Mexican workers.
23. My own research interviews with poor women show that their opportunities for higher education sometimes are constrained, notwithstanding superior performance in secondary school, by their lack of literacy, as it were, in the culture of higher education among those whom they trust (Munger forthcoming).
24. I am not advocating victim narratives. Victim narratives create empathy by describing the effects of misfortune experienced by the deserving; they do not explore the qualities that make an individual a citizen. Victim narratives link suffering to our sense of duty to one another as citizens, but also place victims in a bind. Victims deserve their victimhood only if their behavior is perceived to fit model citizen behavior, an ideal few of us measure up to in reality.
25. Post-1996, funding for poverty relief has increased. Two explanations have been offered. Korenman (commentary, this volume) ties the rise in the minimum wage and increasing support for child welfare to the extraordinary economic boom that has reduced the economic insecurity on which welfare reform played. The Nobel Prize-winning economist Robert Solow (1998) links rising support for welfare to

charitable impulses validated in part by the increased work requirements under welfare reform—both values must be satisfied to obtain political support. According to either theory, changes in poverty relief programs will be temporary and will leave untouched the underlying problems of the low-wage labor market as well as other institutional causes of poverty.

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