

# THE DOUBLE VIOLENCE OF INEQUALITY: PRECARITY, INDIVIDUALISM, AND WHITE WORKING-CLASS AMERICANS

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## ABSTRACT

*This study explores the popularity of individualism among White working-class Americans in light of the structural forces that have negatively impacted their lives in recent years. Findings are based on data from semi-structured interviews with 20 non-Hispanic White custodial workers from five Appalachian universities across three U.S. states: Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia. Participants were asked a variety of questions about the causes of poverty and economic inequality in the U.S. in general, as well as the causes of their own personal fortunes. Data were analyzed utilizing grounded theory methods. Participants were found to be highly individualistic both in explaining poverty and economic inequality in the U.S. in general, as well as in explaining their own lives. Our results suggest that individualism remains popular among White working-class Americans. We argue that growing inequality is experienced as “double violence” by working-class Whites, both as structural violence and symbolic violence. We discuss the challenges this poses for tackling persistent poverty and growing economic inequality in contemporary American society.*

**KEYWORDS:** Individualism; Stratification Beliefs; White Working Class; Poverty; Inequality; Welfare; Symbolic Violence; Structural Violence

Increasing attention has been paid to the structural violence (Galtung 1969) experienced by the White<sup>1</sup> working class in the U.S. in recent years. This attention has centered on the ways in which structural transformations in the American economy over the past few decades have impacted their lives, as well as their reactions to these changes. Many live in regions that have been negatively impacted by the “trauma of a simultaneous economic, social, and political collapse” (Gest 2016:10). Today’s economy demands more educational attainment and different types of skills than were expected of workers in

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the article we use “non-Hispanic White” and “White” interchangeably for ease of reading. Here as elsewhere we mean “non-Hispanic White.”

previous generations, a shift which has left many working-class Whites behind. White working-class incomes and benefits have declined in recent decades, and their economic insecurity has increased (Luhby 2016; Draught 2018). As Lamont notes, “their living standards are in long-term and uninterrupted decline,” and as a result “the ideal of social success may appear increasingly unreachable to them” (2000:2).

Related to the financial impacts, there has been significant social fallout from their growing economic insecurity. White working-class Americans now come of age at a time when traditional markers of transition into adulthood—leaving home, attending college, becoming financially independent, and marrying and starting a family—have been delayed, postponed, cancelled, and/or remade (Silva 2013). A number of indicators of success and well-being are under threat, including labor force participation, marriage and divorce rates, social mobility, health and longevity, community engagement, and political participation (Lamont 2000; Silva 2013; Cherlin 2014; Case and Deaton 2015 & 2017; Chen 2016; The Economist 2017; Graham 2017; Williams 2017).

A few examples help to underscore this group’s lost ground. Since the mid-1990s, the average income of working-class White men has dropped by 9 percent (Luhby 2016). The percentage of White men aged 35 to 45 with a high school degree/GED or less who were unemployed or outside of the labor force rose from 15 percent in 1990 to 24 percent in 2016. Over that same time period, the percentage of these men reporting working 48 or more weeks the previous year fell from 73 percent to 69 percent. In 1990, 74 percent of Whites aged 35 to 45 with a high school degree/GED or less were married, but only 53 percent in 2016. Over that same time period, the percentage from this group experiencing economic precarity (incomes below the 125 percent poverty threshold) rose from 13 percent to 21 percent (Ruggles et al. 2018).<sup>2</sup> In addition, a recent study by Case and Deaton found increasing midlife mortality from the late 1990s to today for working-class Whites, due in part to increases in “deaths of despair,” such as those caused by drugs, alcohol, or suicide. The authors found that the mortality rate of middle-aged working-class Whites, which was approximately 30 percent lower than that of all middle-aged African Americans in 1999, increased to approximately 30 percent higher by 2015 (Case and Deaton 2015 & 2017).

Our research focuses on the White working class not because they have been the group most disadvantaged by growing economic inequality. On the contrary, non-White working-class Americans have fared worse on a number of indicators (in some cases much worse), as have the poor. Our interest stems from the fact that this group, unlike the poor and African Americans, has historically resisted structural explanations of economic disadvantage, instead preferring individualistic ones (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Lamont 2000; Silva 2013; Hunt and Bullock 2016; Williams 2017). This naturally led to the research question: In the face of their own growing insecurity, have their stratification beliefs become more structuralist? Have they come to reject dominant individualistic beliefs, which place the blame for their growing economic insecurity squarely on working-class Whites themselves? Or have they experienced this growing insecurity as “double violence,” where the symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) of dominant culture hinders their ability to recognize the structural violence (Galtung 1969) of forces like globalization, deindustrialization, automation, and neoliberalism? To help answer this question, we developed this exploratory study.

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<sup>2</sup> Those defined as “White” in this analysis are non-Hispanic White.

## AMERICAN STRATIFICATION BELIEFS

Scholars who study stratification beliefs examine “what people believe about who gets what and why” (Kluegel and Smith 1981:30). These beliefs consist of “information (veridical or non-veridical) about a phenomenon that an individual uses as a basis both for inferring other information and for action” (Kluegel and Smith 1981:30). Previous research reveals that Americans espouse a range of stratification beliefs to explain poverty and economic inequality in the U.S. Some beliefs are individualistic, holding individuals personally responsible for their social position (based on their work ethic and choices). Some beliefs are structuralist, blaming large-scale economic and/or political forces (such as the availability of living-wage jobs or the generosity of social policies). Americans also espouse cultural beliefs (which cite values acquired through socialization) as well as fatalistic beliefs (which cite non-structural factors outside of the control of individuals, such as luck) (Hunt and Bullock 2016). While Americans utilize a mixture of individualistic, structuralist, cultural, and fatalistic beliefs to explain poverty and economic inequality, the weight of the evidence—including hundreds of survey items and interview questions from numerous studies across a half century—confirms that individualistic beliefs tend to be the most popular (Feagin 1972; Huber and Form 1973; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Ladd 1994; Lipset 1996; Chafel 1997; Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Economic Mobility Project 2007; Hanson and Zogby 2010; Henrich et al. 2010; Pew Research Center 2012, 2014, & 2016; Hunt and Bullock 2016; ISSP 2018). Indeed, in her review of the major nationwide studies of American stratification beliefs conducted since the late 1960s, Chafel found that “an ideology of individualism prevailed in American society” (1997:445). This ideology (1) views the U.S. as the land of opportunity, (2) holds individuals responsible for their social position, (3) believes inequality is necessary to motivate achievement, and (4) views the American system as equitable and fair (Chafel 1997:445).

Two seminal statements on American stratification beliefs came from Feagin (1972) and Kluegel and Smith (1986). In Feagin’s 1969 nationwide survey, he found that 53 percent of Americans gave high importance to individualistic factors in explaining poverty, compared to only 22 percent for structural factors (1972:104). Most held either a skeptical or negative view of welfare recipients. An overwhelming majority (84 percent) agreed that too many people receive welfare who should be working. There was deep skepticism about the neediness of welfare recipients, as 71 percent agreed with the notion that many people getting welfare are not honest about their need. A majority (61 percent) questioned the fertility decisions of female welfare recipients, agreeing that many have “illegitimate” children in order to increase their welfare benefits (Feagin 1972:107). In addition to these findings, Feagin demonstrated that high scores on his antiwelfare index were strongly correlated with high scores on his individualistic-factors index (1972:108). Based on his data, Feagin argued that “an individualistic, blame-the-poor view of poverty is firmly entrenched in the American value system” (1972:103), as a majority of Americans held the poor responsible for their own poverty and were correspondingly reluctant to support new social welfare programs (1972:101).

Kluegel and Smith came to similar conclusions based on their subsequent 1980 nationwide survey, finding that adherence to the dominant ideology was widespread across all of the social groups they examined (1986:289). The authors found that most Americans believed that, in general, economic inequality was fair, because opportunities for economic advancement were widely available to all, and social positions largely reflected individual effort and talent. The most popular explanations (among 12

possible explanations) for American poverty were individualistic ones which personally blamed poor individuals themselves for their lack of thrift, lack of effort, and lack of ability<sup>3</sup> (Kluegel and Smith 1986:79). A large majority agreed (92 percent) that they personally had an average (54 percent) or better than average (38 percent) chance to get ahead compared to the average American (Kluegel and Smith 1986:47). A strong majority (70 percent) agreed that most Americans had a fair opportunity to make the most of themselves in life without anything holding them back, and 72 percent agreed that they themselves had the same fair opportunity (Kluegel and Smith 1986:44, 47). Most also agreed (70 percent) that the U.S. was the land of opportunity where everybody who worked hard could get ahead (Kluegel and Smith 1986:44). A majority (66 percent) even said that poor children had an equal (47 percent) or better (19 percent) chance of getting ahead compared to the average American (Kluegel and Smith 1986:49). Like Feagin, the authors found significant skepticism about welfare and welfare recipients and important correlations between stratification beliefs and welfare attitudes. Eighty-one percent agreed the government was spending too much on welfare, 77 percent said that most welfare recipients were not honest about their need, and 69 percent disagreed that most welfare recipients tried to find jobs to support themselves (Kluegel and Smith 1986:153). The authors found a very strong negative correlation (-.77) between egalitarian beliefs and welfare support, a moderately strong positive correlation (.47) between a structural view of poverty and welfare support, and a moderately strong negative correlation (-.39) between an individualistic view of poverty and welfare support (Kluegel and Smith 1986:160).

A variety of subsequent studies, using both similar and different research designs, have largely confirmed the prioritization of individualistic beliefs over non-individualistic ones in American culture (Ladd 1994; Lipset 1996; Chafel 1997; Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Economic Mobility Project 2007; Hanson and Zogby 2010; Henrich et al. 2010; Pew Research Center 2012, 2014, & 2016; Hunt and Bullock 2016; ISSP 2018). This does not mean other beliefs are absent. Most Americans will utilize a range of beliefs, including structuralist, cultural, and fatalistic ones, depending upon the circumstances. Americans just tend to be more comfortable with individualistic explanations for social stratification and utilize them more frequently. Individualism might be thought of as the default “rule” which explains the overall system of social stratification in the U.S., with other beliefs accounting for the “exceptions.”

While individualism’s popularity does reach across most social groups, the degree of adherence varies by race and ethnicity, income, gender, educational attainment, personal experience, religiosity and religious denomination, political orientation, and place. Whites, men, political conservatives, and economically-secure individuals, for instance, tend to be more individualistic than non-Whites, women, liberals, and the less-economically-secure (Feagin 1972; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Zucker and Weiner 1993; Robinson 2009; Bullock 2013; Hunt and Bullock 2016; Pew Research Center 2017). Most social groups prefer individualistic explanations to non-individualistic ones, even if the degree of popularity varies, with two notable exceptions: African Americans and the poor. Research suggests that both groups tend to firmly support both individualistic and structuralist beliefs. These studies reveal that the common experience of discrimination among African Americans, and the harsh experiences of everyday life faced by the poor, significantly increase these groups’ awareness of unequal structural barriers, which leads to the development of stronger structuralist views. The rest of the American population, including the White

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<sup>3</sup> Survey items throughout this article are sometimes shortened and/or paraphrased for ease of reading. Please refer to the original source for the precise wording for each survey item.

working class, tends to prefer individualistic explanations of poverty and economic inequality over other explanations (Feagin 1972; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Hunt and Bullock 2016).

## WHITE WORKING-CLASS BELIEFS

A number of scholars have shed light on the beliefs of White working-class Americans. Three particularly illuminating accounts include Michèle Lamont's *The Dignity of Working Men* (2000), Jennifer Silva's *Coming Up Short* (2013), and Joan Williams' *White Working Class* (2017).

Summarizing the privileging of individualistic stratification beliefs by the working-class Whites in her interviews, Lamont explains, "White [working class] workers do not privilege structural explanations...none provided a full-fledged structural explanation of poverty or of the precariousness of the condition of workers...they particularly resent that others receive help from the state" (2000:134). Silva's interviews with working-class Americans similarly revealed that they are staunchly individualistic and do not trust government or dominant institutions. They tend to "embrace self-sufficiency over solidarity and blame those who are unsuccessful in the labor market...the cultural logic of neoliberalism resonates at the deepest level of self" (Silva 2013:18).

As a general tendency, working-class Whites tend to place a heavy emphasis on hard work, personal responsibility, and traditional morality as means of struggling against the precarious nature of their lives and the social decay in their communities. They see these as the only means of survival and possible upward mobility for people in their social position. They believe that failure in these areas carries greater consequences for them compared to higher-class Americans. They attribute their own success to hard work and living moral, "settled" lives, while believing those who fail have laziness, immorality, and "hard living" to blame. They believe they have a future orientation and impulse control, unlike groups below them. Working-class Whites believe that, despite being lazy and immoral, the poor and African Americans receive government assistance unavailable to the working class. Because of this perceived illegitimate assistance, working-class Whites believe the poor and many African Americans are allowed to live easier lives than the White working class. They feel betrayed by labor markets, by the government, and even those people closest to them—they are on their own, with little trust in people or institutions (Lamont 2000; Silva 2013; Williams 2017).

## METHODS

This study was designed to explore whether White working-class stratification beliefs might be changing in a more structuralist direction in this age of growing inequality, given how this group has suffered due to structural forces beyond their control in recent decades. In order to accomplish this, we recruited non-Hispanic White custodial workers currently employed at universities throughout Appalachia. We chose the custodial profession because of the high concentration of working-class workers (workers without a college degree and in precarious economic circumstances), and Appalachia because the region continues to lag behind much of the country on a variety of measures of well-being (ARC 2015). We were particularly interested in university custodians, who work in an environment where different groups (students, faculty members, staff members, and administrators) have such a wide range

of educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. We first identified which colleges and universities qualified as “Appalachian”<sup>4</sup> and then contacted as many of their custodians as available contact information allowed. In some cases participants helped us identify other potential participants through snowball sampling. This was an incredibly time-consuming process. In many cases, contact information was either difficult to obtain or unavailable. Even after obtaining this information, initiating contact with workers often still proved elusive. Through our initial recruitment and additional snowball sampling, we ultimately confirmed participation with 20 custodial workers from five Appalachian universities across three states: Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia. A variety of definitions of the working class exist (see Gest 2016). Our sample meets a majority of these definitions based upon their combination of educational attainment, incomes, and occupation. Because of the small and non-random nature of our sample, we consider this an exploratory study.

We conducted interviews as soon as was convenient for the participants as not to lose their interest. These interviews took place mostly during the summer and fall of 2017. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for both the exploration of our core research questions as well as emergent areas of discussion. Some of the interviews were in-person, while others were conducted over the phone due to geographic distance. Only one of the co-authors conducted the interviews. While the interviewer was non-Hispanic White like the participants, there were a variety of differences (gender, social class, occupation, political orientation, etc.) whose impact the interviewer attempted to minimize. We received very positive feedback from our participants regarding our rapport and believe these differences were minimized to the extent possible, although an open discussion of racial inequality was clearly hindered by social desirability concerns on the part of the participants.<sup>5</sup> Some interviews wrapped up in 45 minutes, while others lasted over 90 minutes. We asked participants a variety of questions about the causes of poverty and economic inequality in the U.S. in general, as well as the causes of their own personal fortunes. As both an incentive for participation and a thank you for sharing their time and stories with us, participants were offered gift cards ranging from \$15 to \$25. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed word-for-word, removing all identifying information in the process. We analyzed the data utilizing grounded theory methods similar to those articulated by Charmaz (2006). The resulting analysis is organized around clear and consistent themes that emerged from across the interviews.

To qualify for this study participants needed to be non-Hispanic White, 18 or older, and currently employed as a custodian at an Appalachian university. Additionally, our Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol specified that they could not be knowingly pregnant, incarcerated, or impaired (cognitively or otherwise) in such a manner as to prohibit proper consent. Demographic variation beyond these qualifying characteristics depended solely on the non-random responses we received (see Table 1). We interviewed 15 women and 5 men. Participants’ ages varied widely, with 3 in their 20s, 4 in their 30s, 6 in their 40s, 4 in their 50s, and 3 in their 60s. None of our participants reported total household incomes

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<sup>4</sup> We used the boundaries defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission: [https://www.arc.gov/appalachian\\_region/CountiesinAppalachia.asp](https://www.arc.gov/appalachian_region/CountiesinAppalachia.asp). Universities qualified if they are located in a county within or directly bordering Appalachia.

<sup>5</sup> Although we cannot be certain, we believe our participants hid many of their more conservative explanations of racial inequality from the interviewer due to social desirability bias. Not only was the interviewer a stranger to our participants, but most of our participants have worked in university settings long enough to pick up on the ideological dividing lines.

that qualified them as poor, while only 20 percent reported incomes in the middle-class—the rest, 80 percent, were struggling somewhere in-between. Slightly more than half (55 percent) have needed public assistance at some point in adulthood. Only one of our participants has earned a four-year college degree, while the rest have either a high school diploma (80 percent) or GED (15 percent). Eighty-percent of our participants are Republican-leaning in their voting behavior, and 20 percent are Democrat-leaning. Later we will discuss other important sample characteristics in more detail.

**Table 1.** Sample Characteristics

| Participant Characteristic                 | Percentage of Participants |
|--|----------------------------|
| Age  |                            |
| 20–29                                      | 15%                        |
| 30–39                                      | 20%                        |
| 40–49                                      | 30%                        |
| 50–59                                      | 20%                        |
| 60–69                                      | 15%                        |
| Race/Ethnicity                             |                            |
| Non-Hispanic White                         | 100%                       |
| Gender                                     |                            |
| Female                                     | 75%                        |
| Male                                       | 25%                        |
| Educational attainment                     |                            |
| High school degree only                    | 80%                        |
| GED only                                   | 15%                        |
| 4-year college degree                      | 5%                         |
| Adult total household income               |                            |
| Working class                              | 80%                        |
| Middle class                               | 20%                        |
| Childhood social class                     |                            |
| Poor                                       | 45%                        |
| Working class                              | 50%                        |
| Lower middle class                         | 5%                         |
| Welfare need                               |                            |
| In childhood                               | 60%                        |
| In adulthood                               | 55%                        |
| Single-parent family sometime in childhood | 50%                        |
| Voting behavior as adult                   |                            |
| Republican-leaning                         | 80%                        |
| Democrat-leaning                           | 20%                        |
| Voting behavior of family of origin        |                            |
| Republican-leaning                         | 80%                        |
| Democrat-leaning                           | 20%                        |

## RESULTS

### Agency and Opportunity

A majority of our participants believe that Americans are autonomous individuals with a high degree of agency, that American society is largely a meritocracy, and that the U.S. offers virtually unlimited opportunities (see Tables 2 and 3). When asked what percentage of most Americans' lives is within their control versus what percentage is outside of their control, 90 percent of our participants answered 70 percent or more is within Americans' control, with 80 percent the most frequent answer. Tina's<sup>6</sup> sentiments were typical: "Everybody is in control of their own destiny...For the majority of people, I think they are in control. I'd say about 80 percent [of most Americans' life outcomes are within their control]." A strong majority, 85 percent, agree that the U.S. is the land of opportunity where everybody who works hard can succeed. A majority, 70 percent, also agree that the U.S. is a meritocracy. Eighty percent believe that, even when some people face barriers to success that others do not, these barriers can be overcome if they really put their mind to it. The same percentage agree that most Americans can earn a college degree if they really want to. Half of our participants agree that a poor child's opportunity to succeed is equal to the average American, with the other half believing it is worse.

**Table 2.** Beliefs Concerning Individual Agency in the U.S.

| Percentage of life within individual Americans' control | Number of participants who responded (%) |
|---|--|
| 100%  | 1 (5%)                                   |
| 90%   | 1 (5%)                                   |
| Between 80 and 90%                                      | 1 (5%)                                   |
| 85%   | 1 (5%)                                   |
| 80%   | 6 (30%)                                  |
| 75%   | 5 (25%)                                  |
| 70%   | 3 (15%)                                  |
| 60%   | 1 (5%)                                   |
| 50%   | 1 (5%)                                   |

**Table 3.** Beliefs Concerning Opportunity in the U.S.

| Belief   | Percentage of Participants Who Agreed |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| America is the land of opportunity where everybody who works hard can succeed  | 85%                                   |
| Even when some people face barriers that others do not, those barriers can be overcome if people put their minds to it | 80%                                   |
| Most Americans can earn a college degree if they really want to  | 80%                                   |
| The U.S. is a meritocracy  | 70%                                   |
| A poor child's opportunity to succeed is equal to the average American   | 50%                                   |

Previous studies such as Feagin (1972) and Kluegel and Smith (1986) asked respondents whether different poverty causes are "very important," "somewhat important," or "not important." While this is an effective way to pose this question, we took a different approach, asking participants to instead rank poverty causes in order of importance. In doing this, we believe that participants were more explicit in indicating how they prioritize poverty causes in relation to each other.

Posing the question in this manner, it is clear that most of our participants agree that individual-level causes of poverty are more important than non-individualistic ones. When asked to rank the six

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<sup>6</sup>This is a pseudonym we have given this participant. All identifying information has been changed for all participants.

causes of poverty that we provided—bad family upbringing, bad luck, lack of effort/laziness, not enough good jobs, poor choices, and poor quality schools—poor choices and lack of effort/laziness were by far the most popular choices, with poor choices slightly edging out the top spot. Seventy-five percent of our participants chose either poor choices or lack of effort/laziness as their top poverty cause, with 70 percent choosing one of those two choices for their second most important cause. The next most popular choice was bad family upbringing, followed by not enough good jobs, poor quality schools, and bad luck.

The data presented here strongly suggest that individualistic explanations of economic disadvantage are privileged over non-individualistic ones among our sample. There was strong support for notions of individual autonomy, virtually unlimited opportunities, meritocracy, and individual-level blame for poverty in American society.

Many of our participants echoed meritocratic sentiments similar to those expressed by Anne, who said, “I would say most Americans probably get back what they deserve.” Karen made similar remarks while also incorporating reflections on her own work ethic, saying:

I’m a hard worker, and I think anybody can do anything they set their mind to doing if they just try. America is the land of opportunity, I feel like, because you get out of it what you put into it. If you put more into life, then you are going to get something out of it. If you just lay around and do nothing, then more than likely you’re not gonna get nothing.

Jill similarly argued that, “You’re only going to get out of life what you put into it...If you keep going towards that goal and you don’t let up, I think you’re going to find success. Whereas if you don’t put much into trying to make something of yourself you’re never going to make anything of yourself.”

These meritocratic beliefs were associated with a strong sense that there are virtually limitless opportunities in the U.S. Anne noted the connection between opportunity and meritocracy, saying, “If you live or come to America, you can become or do whatever you want to do, there’s opportunities there if you desire to take them.” Amy admitted that one’s background matters, but only in a limited sense: “I understand your background may have a little bit of play in what happens to you. But you can accomplish anything you want. If you put forth the effort you can succeed. And here in America there are so many opportunities.” April noted that, given the number of opportunities available, the only thing preventing success is laziness: “I think there’s enough in this country that if we all work, I just think there’s a lot of opportunity. We could all be self-sufficient. I think a lot of Americans have gotten lazy.”

There was a strong tendency for participants to conflate negative and positive freedom when discussing opportunities in American society. Many of our participants believe that, because the U.S. is a wealthy country, and because its government is less oppressive than many others, all Americans are free to live whichever lives they choose for themselves. Ryan’s comments are a typical and illustrative example. He suggested that the high degree of negative freedom in a democratic society like the U.S. equals a high degree of positive freedom:

Well, we’re a democracy, and I just think we all have a fair chance. I think we all have a pretty good chance to be who we want to be in our country. We live in the society where we’re able to make our own choices, go to school, go to work every day. I mean, a lot of societies you can’t do that. I just think that in the United States we can.

The democratic nature of American society, combined with the country's wealth, convinced many of our participants that life in the U.S. is what individuals make of it. To not succeed in a democratic land of plenty, it was reasoned, must ultimately be the fault of the individual.

There was a strong tendency to equate the availability of student loans and financial aid with unlimited access to higher education for all. Other barriers to educational attainment, such as the unequal social distribution of capability development, were either downplayed or ignored. Many of our participants suggested that this belief was reinforced by their experiences of working in a university setting where they are frequently exposed to information concerning the availability of student aid. Jill's comments were typical: "Whatever you decide to pursue, I think the opportunities are there for everyone, especially in this day and age because there's a lot of opportunity to pursue higher education... So yeah, I mean I really do think basically it's the individual. It comes down to the choices and the decisions you make." She went on, later remarking, "I know 100 percent that anybody can [get a college education in the U.S. today]. You just need to apply yourself, and like I said, there's so many programs out there. So much so that I think anyone can." Anne made similar remarks:

I just think that the United States offers all kinds of programs to help the poor, people of different races, you know Blacks or whatever... I just think the programs are out there that anybody in the United States, no matter what their color, their financial position, no matter what. I think if you really want to go to college and succeed the opportunity is here.

Randy incorporated the availability of public K through 12 education into his reasoning:

If you really study hard or pursue what you want, you can get the education through the public school, which doesn't cost you anything. It will eventually pay off when you go to, say, community college, or get an online degree, or something. And you can pursue maybe even some scholarships or something if you really work hard enough.

This widespread belief that higher education is available to all Americans who put forth the effort clearly reinforces their other stratification beliefs concerning opportunity and meritocracy.

### Hard Work and Smart Choices

Most participants buttressed their assertions about the meritocratic nature of American society by focusing on the role of hard work and smart choices. Brenda's reflections were typical: "How much you put out is how much you get back. If you're willing to work for it eventually you'll get somewhere." Anne believes that too many Americans have become spoiled at the number of opportunities available in the U.S. and are not working as hard as they could be to grasp them: "I think the United States, the opportunity is here if you want to work for it. I mean there's people who grow up here and they think it should all be handed to them, they don't work hard. Then they wonder why they are in life where they are. I just think the opportunity's here if you work hard for it." Sherry stated that, "If you work hard, you can have anything you want in the United States. I mean you can go as far as you want. Get a good education and a good job." Randy cannot fathom that true commitment to the work ethic will not ultimately yield success in the U.S.: "I would say most people, if they really work at it, they give it 100 percent to achieve your best, you will succeed...I couldn't believe that you wouldn't be a success." Jill linked choices and individual fortunes, saying, "I think that we all have choices and decisions to make. I think based on what choices and decisions you make is going to be the outcome." Grace argued that rich

children can fail and poor children can succeed—it is not their background but their work ethic that matters: “If you put your mind to anything you can accomplish it. It doesn’t matter if you grew up poor or if you grew up rich. I mean, a rich kid could grow up with all the money in the world and still not make much of anything.” Karen believes that growing up poor does not mean you have to stay poor. Instead, you need to make a decision to leave poverty and work hard in order to be upwardly mobile (a decision she believes she personally made herself):

There is always room to go forwards, there is always room to go backwards, you just gotta choose which way you wanna go. Say I didn’t get adopted. Say I stayed with my mom and dad. I could have chosen to stay in that life, or I could choose to do better. I think being poor gives you even more motivation to strive to do better, to have more, because you didn’t have nothing as a child. Just because you’re poor doesn’t mean you are going to stay poor. You either wanna go up, or you wanna stay at the bottom.

A strong majority of participants, 80 percent, believe that, even when some people face social barriers to success that others do not, these barriers can be overcome if they really put their mind to it. Jill’s remarks reflect this widespread assumption:

Say you had a fire and you lost everything. Or you lost your job because of something that was totally unfair and had nothing to do with you. I still think you have the control in your life that you decide how you’re going to respond to that, and what you’re going to do to get out of it.

Many participants argued that because some people overcome long odds and achieve success, this is proof that all people can. Sherry, for instance, in explaining why poor children have the same chance to succeed as non-poor children, used a personal anecdote as proof of her assertion:

For one thing, I had a girlfriend I grew up with when I was a kid, she had nothing. Mom stayed home and didn’t work, she didn’t have nothing. I seen her as a kid try and go out and work at nine and ten years old. Babysitting, cleaning houses, anything that they can make a dollar at. People give them food, people give them clothes. I mean these kids had it really rough. And now they in big jobs.

### Laziness, Immorality, and Welfare

Given their strongly individualistic stratification beliefs, it is not surprising that most participants have a negative opinion of the American social welfare system (see Table 4). The vast majority, 75 percent, view welfare as having a mostly negative impact on society. This is likely related to their general suspicion of the morality and deservingness of most welfare recipients. These suspicions persist despite the fact that 60 percent of our participants reported needing welfare as a child, 55 percent reported needing welfare in adulthood, and most note frequent welfare use in their families and/or communities.

Negative views of welfare tended to focus on the assumed association between welfare and laziness, dependency, out of control fertility, drug abuse, and/or fraud. There was also a popular assertion that welfare recipients owe it to taxpayers to prove that recipients are moral and hardworking in exchange for receiving “other people’s money.” A majority of our participants support welfare work requirements (65 percent), and all support welfare drug testing. Seventy-five percent support family caps of some kind (welfare policies denying an increase in benefits to families for children born while the family is receiving

government assistance), with 60 percent reporting outright support and an additional 15 percent supporting caps above a certain number of children (typically after two total children).

**Table 4.** Beliefs Concerning Welfare in the U.S.

| Belief   | Percentage of Participants Who Agreed |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| Welfare recipients should have to pass a drug test in order to receive benefits  | 100%                                  |
| Welfare has a mostly negative impact on society  | 75%                                   |
| The government should either prohibit additional benefits for children born on welfare or set a limit to the number of children in a family who can receive welfare benefits | 75%                                   |
| Welfare recipients should be required to work in the paid workforce in order to receive benefits   | 65%                                   |

A major concern among our participants is that welfare incentivizes laziness and encourages dependency. Kimberly's concerns are a typical example, as she lamented, "It just encourages them, I feel like, to stay home and continue to be lazy and keep getting your free money." Sadie has similar concerns, remarking, "People think that they can live off of it instead of going out and getting a job. So, people who don't really need it are getting it just because they don't want to go and work." Tina also believes that welfare incentivizes laziness, and is particularly indignant because she believes she has used the system correctly, unlike other supposedly less-deserving recipients:

It is way out of control. It was made to give people a hand up, to get them out of their situation, give them the tools they need. And I think it has gotten way beyond what it was meant for. I have been made to feel ashamed in my adult life because I have worked and I fell on hard times and I had to get assistance for a short period of time. But when I see people make a career out of it and they go in and they're patted on the back, but I am made to feel ashamed because I can work. Well they can too, but they have never made the effort to work. I think whole families have been raised to depend on it, to make a career out of it. I know people that are living on public assistance that do better than I do, with me and my husband both working. And they brag about it. That's what makes me angry, because they are able to work.

Randy focused on laziness while also chafing at hardworking Americans having to pay for the welfare system:

A hardworking American has to pay for people to sit around and do nothing, and the welfare system allows it. And sometimes these people on welfare drives around in a big Cadillac. They never have a mortgage really to pay, or rent. And they're given food and food stamps, and everything is handed to them. They don't do anything to get it other than go down and do paperwork, and get checks and benefits and everything else handed to them. So it doesn't give a person a reason to work.

April shared sentiments similar to Randy's "Cadillac" remarks:

I think [welfare's impact on society is] pretty negative, with the people 'using the system' so to speak. People having a lot of kids, and just a lot of stuff. This is just me hearing people say that people were using food stamps and all this stuff, and they're driving around in nice cars, and all this other stuff that other people can't afford. Getting free handouts. It seems like people just ain't trying to work anymore.

Sherry highlighted laziness while also incorporating notions of abuse by recipients who do not really need welfare: "For me, I think it is mostly bad. I see it now all over. You see people that draws welfare that really don't need it. They are too lazy to go out and get a job. I mean they have a high school diploma, but they would rather live on welfare. They say, 'I can get this and this and this, and I don't have to get up early.'"

Amy has such a negative view of welfare, and believes so strongly that it incentivizes laziness, that she is willing to make life harder for herself and her family in order to avoid the indignity associated with welfare. She explained that she refuses to file for disability benefits that her son qualifies for due to her strong anti-welfare beliefs:

With my own son, he has a severe disability, reflux of the kidney. He has gone into kidney failure twice, at one point he was in grade five kidney failure and he was dying. It can happen at any moment, he could wake up today and be in kidney failure. He has no control over it. There is no medication for it, all they can do is monitor it. And I know this is going to sound cruel, but he qualifies for a disability check. If he received it, he would never have to work, if I got him this check. But I refuse to do it. If he wants it he is going to have to do it on his own, because I want him to go to college and see that there is better for him out there than getting a check every month, than getting welfare.

Another common theme that emerged from across the interviews was concern about the fertility of poor women and welfare recipients. There was widespread support for the notions that welfare recipients have out-of-control fertility, plan to have more children in order to increase their monthly welfare benefits, and are irresponsible if they become pregnant while poor. These widespread concerns helped explain the strong support for family caps. Some of our participants, like Katie, simply thought it was irresponsible to bring children into poverty, arguing, "You shouldn't be pumping out kids if you can't afford them." Amy focused both on the irresponsibility of bringing children into poverty while also framing welfare recipient fertility as an example of abuse:

You shouldn't get more benefits the more children you have. I mean I do think every American has the right to have a family and to have babies. But it is sad when people bring more and more children into a bad situation money-wise. I actually know a lady who had another child for more benefits. Whether she was telling the truth or not I don't know, but that is what she stated to me. And that isn't right. I don't think benefits should raise every kid you have. You should just get one set amount.

Sadie believes having children while poor is immoral and thinks that the government plays a critical role in discouraging such behavior:

If they get government assistance for that, I feel like it's making it easier for them to make the choice to have a baby. 'Cause when you make the choice, you gotta think about paying for the hospital stay, paying for all the equipment that they have to use. And I feel like if people couldn't afford that, they would get on birth control. I don't know, they would make better choices about having babies.

Jill made a similar observation:

I knew people who were on the system, they're pregnant with their third child, and I'm like, 'Aren't you worried about affording them? How are you going to afford them?' And

they're like, 'No, we'll just go on WIC.' They just accept that that is there and it's available and they're going to use it. It doesn't matter. Whereas for me and my ex-husband, we agreed on a number of children, and a lot of what went into that decision was affordability. I come from six kids, so I would have loved to have had a larger family. When you look at the cost of things and what you can afford, we decided two. It's like they're being rewarded in a sense because they had another child.

Others focused on the issue of welfare recipients using childbirth as a way to gain more in benefits:

A lot of people get on welfare for that reason. I've seen it, I've heard it. I'll just have another child, I'll have ten kids so I can get another check. Because welfare throws so much more money to them for a child. (Karen)

Well, I think a lot of them just don't want to work and I think that if they think they can have more kids, we're gonna get more money a month, and I think there ought to be a stop to that. I don't know what it is today. How do I want to say this? I think after two kids, they shouldn't get any more money. (Betty)

I agree with [family caps] because I know people that have kids to get a bigger check. So there needs to be like a family cap. I knew people, they admit it, 'I'm gonna get pregnant 'cause you know I need, you know either this kid's graduated or out of the house so they need more income and let's have another kid.' (Anne)

Of all of the topics discussed in our interviews, welfare drug testing seemed to provoke the most anger. This was routinely the part of the interview where participants became most animated. Every participant supports policies which deny welfare to individuals and their families if the adult welfare recipient cannot pass a drug test. Common themes were the immorality of drug use, the negative impact of drug use on the children of recipients, the notion that buying drugs keeps people in poverty, and the need to address the opioid epidemic. Here are some examples from across the interviews:

Even a time when I was a young adult I was aware of families that did the drugs, they all sniffed, they all drank. It's just really weird how they always had the money for the pleasure things, so to speak. But I think if you can't pass a drug test then you should not receive any help. Because obviously you're getting drugs from somewhere, and either you're stealing or you're buying. Either way it's just not a good thing. If you're dealing and you're making money that way, you shouldn't have to live off the system, which I know is against the law, and I don't condone that. If you're using cash to buy drugs, that's money you should be using for food, for housing. I'm all for that. (Jill)

Well, if you have money for drugs you should have money for food. (Ryan)

Because I feel like if you can afford drugs, then you can afford whatever else, whatever government assistance you're getting, from Medicaid to food stamps. If you can afford drugs, then you can afford food. If you can afford drugs, you can afford insurance. (Sadie)

This country has really been on kind of a drug epidemic. Society today is very addicted to these drugs. And if you're on welfare and you're accepting money from the government, and you're using that to spend on drugs, it's defeating the purpose of welfare. (Randy)

I think if people on welfare could get drugs and pay whatever money for that then they obviously don't need to be using the welfare system. (April)

You go for any job, number one thing, they will ask you for a drug test. I think if people gets on welfare, and tries to make a living off the welfare department, I think they oughta have to take a drug test. I seen so many of them up there, 'Oh, I got a check, I'm going out to get my drugs this weekend.' So what happens? Little baby goes without food because that adult decided he wanted his drugs. (Sherry)

Of course I would agree with [welfare drug testing]. If you can afford to buy drugs and use drugs, then I think you could definitely afford to somewhat support your family. So you shouldn't be getting assistance. (Kimberly)

Previous research suggests that individualistic and anti-welfare beliefs are associated with other stratification beliefs regarding race and gender. Americans who conflate poverty/welfare and race, assume African Americans are lazy and/or immoral, and/or have a negative opinion of single mothers (particularly Black single mothers), for instance, have been found to have much more negative views of welfare compared to Americans with opposing beliefs (Gilens 1999). While our participants' negative views of the fertility of poor women came through clearly in the interviews and surely impact their opinions of welfare, their views on race were harder for us to access. Despite our efforts to ask participants directly about the causes of racial inequality, they were extremely reluctant to talk about race, with most simply refusing to answer direct interview questions about racial inequality and largely avoiding directly addressing race at other points in the interviews. While their silence could mean many things, the existing literature suggests that it was likely an attempt to avoid revealing problematic views concerning race that participants know are not "socially desirable."<sup>7</sup> Despite not addressing race directly, however, we suspect that much of what our participants said about welfare was at least in part euphemistically referring to their beliefs about African Americans.

### Blaming Themselves

While a strong majority of our participants are individualistic in their stratification beliefs concerning the U.S. in general, most are even more individualistic when explaining their own lives (see Table 5). When we asked our participants if they had a worse, equal, or better shot of making the most of themselves in life compared to the average American, for instance, all but one (95 percent) said they had at least an equal shot compared to the average American, with two (10 percent) saying that they had a better shot. When we asked if they had a fair shot at making the most of themselves in life without anything holding them back, all but two of our participants (90 percent) said yes. A majority, 65 percent,

<sup>7</sup> Based on previous research, we find it likely that our participants hid many of their more conservative explanations of racial inequality from us due to social desirability bias. Not only had the participants and the interviewer never met before, but most of our participants are surely aware of the ideological dividing lines that exist in the university setting.

said they had either an equal (55 percent) or better (10 percent) shot at earning a college degree compared to the average American.

**Table 5.** Beliefs Concerning Participants' Personal Opportunity

| Belief   | Percentage of Participants Who Agreed |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| Your opportunity to succeed in life was equal to or better than the average American       | 95%                                   |
| You personally had a fair shot to succeed in life without anything holding you back        | 90%                                   |
| Your opportunity to earn a college degree was equal to or better than the average American | 65%                                   |

These results are quite striking, considering the decidedly unequal opportunities that their challenging backgrounds suggest they had available to them. The interviews were rife with stories of struggle. Most of the participants grew up in families that were economically insecure in some fashion. Of our 20 participants, half came from working-class backgrounds and 9 (45 percent) grew up in poverty. Only one reported growing up in a social class position higher than the working class (they reported a lower-middle-class childhood). Sixty percent of our participants reported needing welfare in childhood, and 55 percent in adulthood. Multiple participants reported significant periods of time where they would go hungry, as well as periods of time where their families would have their electricity or water shut off. There were a number of instances of abuse, including physical and sexual abuse, that the participants either witnessed or experienced themselves in childhood. Only one of our participants earned a four-year college degree (although a few others tried college for a short period of time without completing a degree). The rest of our participants either concluded their educational careers after finishing high school (80 percent) or with their GED (15 percent). About a third (35 percent) of our participants reported one or more of their parents dropping out of high school. Only one participant reported having a parent with a four-year college degree (representing just 2.5 percent of parents who held one)—his mother earned her bachelor's degree and his dad dropped out of high school. Making it to college was difficult for our participants based both on preparation and affordability. Single-parent families were common, with half of our participants spending significant amounts of time in childhood being raised by a single parent. About a third of our participants (35 percent) reported absent fathers (five left the family voluntarily during the participants' childhood, while the remaining two died during the participants' childhood years). Three (15 percent) participants reported an absent mother (two left the family voluntarily during the participants' childhood, while one participant's mother died during their childhood years). In adulthood, 80 percent of the participants earn working-class total household incomes.

Despite these struggles, hardly any of the participants are willing to see their lives in anything other than individualistic terms. Instead, they blame their own choices for their fortunes. This portion of the interview data underscores the value of utilizing a qualitative approach, which allowed participants to reveal how they make sense of individualism in their own lives in ways that would be difficult on a survey.

Anne, in explaining how she is responsible for her own life, said, "I mean it's hard to explain because I am just a custodian, but I got a job. I mean I can't complain. I'd say I have an equal [opportunity], I would say equal." Grace blames herself for not putting enough effort into school when she was younger, saying, "If I would have put the effort into it, I could have gotten to college. I just didn't choose that kind of path." Randy likewise cites his choices in explaining his life:

I believe that I could have done more in my life. I believe I could have been whatever I really wanted to if I would have tried a little bit harder. If I wouldn't of had doubt. I guess the biggest thing that holds anybody back is fear. I think the biggest obstacle for most

people is themselves, you know, fear, doubt, the unknowns, things of that nature. I believe I had the greatest opportunity to make something out of myself.

April similarly blames herself and the decisions that she made:

When it comes down to it, it was my choice. Just like everybody else, you end up with some regrets. There are a few things you'd like to have changed or done differently, but I wish I would have stuck it out with my classes. I just went to work instead of staying at home and doing some college and trying to get a better job. I guess I feel like it was more my choice, a poor choice.

Kimberly, despite many childhood struggles, believes she had an equal shot, saying, "I feel like everybody has that opportunity no matter where your struggle was. There's opportunities out there. Where there's a will, there's a way."

Sadie's story provides a good example of our participants' firm commitment to individualism despite their challenging childhoods. Sadie reported frequently going without food and electricity in childhood. Here she describes her family's struggles: "We could barely get by. My parents had trouble paying all the bills. We almost lost our house because we couldn't pay the mortgage. We had to beg schools to let us go on field trips, because we couldn't pay for it. It was embarrassing, because we had to pretty much beg for money." In one particularly heartbreak story she described having to fight with her siblings in order to secure a share of the scarce food supply in her household: "We were fighting over Shake 'n Bake, 'cause we didn't have any food...we were so hungry." She described her neighborhood as "pretty rough," saying, "We lived on a street everybody refers to as the ghetto. There was drugs, there was alcohol, there was people fighting." When she was five years old, she was molested by a neighborhood boy she described as "much older than me." In addition to all of these struggles, Sadie's mother and stepfather battled drug addiction and her stepfather regularly physically abused her mother. Police visited her home often in response, and her mother ended up in the hospital multiple times. To pay for drugs, Sadie's mother would sell the family's food stamps. The drug addiction that plagued her mother and stepfather eventually claimed her stepfather's life. Despite her extremely challenging childhood, Sadie believes she had an equal opportunity to succeed compared to the average American, saying, "I think everybody makes their own choices which affects what happens to you." She went on:

I am in control of my life. I'm the one who makes the choices. I can go out here and get a good job and go to school, pay for school, or I can go out here and I can get in trouble, and not be able to get that good job, and not be able to pay for school... It doesn't matter what you go through, you can always overcome that and come out on top. There's a way around all that stuff. You shouldn't let that stuff stop you from doing what you want to do.

After enduring a childhood that could only be described as unequal compared to most Americans, Sadie refuses to characterize her life in anything other than individualistic terms. In doing this, Sadie is like the vast majority of our participants. Almost all believe they had a fair shot at succeeding compared to the average American, and most frame their fortunes as resulting from their own poor choices.

Tina grew up poor in a family that relied on food stamps, WIC, and Medicaid. Her mother divorced twice while Tina was young, with an additional third engagement called off:

After my mom and stepdad got a divorce, my mom started dating a man for two or three years and then they got engaged. Well, he ran off one weekend and married a woman he was having an affair with, unbeknownst to my mom. She found out afterwards and then found out she was pregnant with my brother. And the man gave up all rights to my brother.

Despite her family's economic insecurity and a number of other challenges, Tina sees her life in individualistic terms:

When I was younger, if I would have used my head more and listened, then I would be exponentially better, and my children's lives would be better than they are now. I wouldn't be having to scrub toilets for a living, not that there's anything wrong with that. If I would have made better choices when I was younger, the outcome would have been drastically different. I was in control of that. I settled, and I know I settled.

Several times in the interview she described being in a "rut" that was her own doing. She hopes that her kids will use her example as motivation to strive to do better, saying:

My kids are my greatest accomplishments... I tell my kids all the time, 'Learn from my mistakes and do better for yourselves. Don't fall in the rut like I have in my life.' I feel like I didn't push myself hard enough, and I just settled, I let myself get in a rut. I got married very young, before I turned 18. I had my first child when I was 20, and my next one at 25. I was a stay-at-home mom up until my divorce from my first husband... Now I am 39 and I look back and my kids are basically all I have to show for it.

Karen is another illustrative example. She was born into a poor family along with her five siblings, and both of her parents struggled with alcoholism. Her father would frequently beat her mother "to a bloody pulp." The alcoholism and abuse were so bad that she was eventually taken away from her parents, at which point she cycled through 15 different foster homes before she even reached second grade. She would be adopted and raised by her older sister when she was six years old, facing somewhat improved but still insecure financial circumstances. In adolescence, Karen's uncle would subject her to four years of sexual abuse. Graduating from college was unheard of in Karen's family, and college did not work out for her, either. Despite all of this, she holds strongly individualistic stratification beliefs about the U.S. in general, as well as about her own fortunes. Karen believes that she had at least as good of an opportunity to succeed compared to the average American, saying, "I may of even had more of an opportunity than most kids."

Again and again it was the same story. Despite the odds clearly stacked against most of our participants in childhood, they refuse to believe they did not get a fair shot to succeed in life. As individualistic as they are concerning American poverty and economic inequality in general, they are even more individualistic when explaining their own fortunes.

### A Step Above

One factor contributing to our participants' individualism is their pride in having avoided the significant problems they observe in their families and communities. At different points throughout their lives, our participants have witnessed drug abuse, physical and sexual abuse, welfare fraud, chronic unemployment, absent parents, and/or a number of other problems related to poverty. Exaggerated or

not, it is likely that they observed and/or experienced a number of painful consequences of poverty in ways that middle- and upper-class Americans are much less familiar. Rather than recognizing the structural causes of these problems and joining in solidarity with those who were not so lucky, our participants instead use their perceived success as a means of affirming their own dignity. Many view their stable employment and avoidance of drug abuse as a source of pride, as some measure of success and social mobility that sets them apart from the poor and from the less-successful members of their families and communities. They may not be rich, or even middle-class, but they are proud not to be poor, and proud of achieving a measure of stability that was not easy to obtain given their backgrounds. Having successfully navigated very difficult circumstances, they are now critical of others in their families and communities who failed to follow their example of hard work and smart choices. They are proud of not having “given in” to the problems that ensnared those around them, and if they did it, they believe anybody can, thus reinforcing their individualistic beliefs. Many admit they are still struggling in adulthood, but they frame their struggles as different from those of the families and communities from whence they came. While they may still struggle financially, they are employed and sober, unlike the “lazier” and more “immoral” others around them. Because their struggles are happening within the context of stable employment and moral living, they believe this allows them to occupy a higher social position—differentiated not by income alone but more importantly by morality and work ethic—than those who struggle financially while also dealing with additional problems like unemployment and drug abuse. Previous research suggests that, in fact, people who perceive themselves as upwardly mobile may be more likely to favor individualism compared to those who are not as subjectively mobile (Gugushvili 2016).

In addition to the pride at having achieved some measure of success, there was also a palpable sense of relief on their part at having escaped very difficult circumstances. Our participants shared some extremely traumatic experiences. They faced problems up-close and personal in ways that many Americans never do. One gets the sense in reading their accounts that they desperately wanted to escape the homes and/or communities where these problems occurred, regardless of who was to blame for the problems in the first place. The drug abuse, the hunger, the family conflict—for many of our participants, their childhoods were filled with periods of time that were intensely scary and unhappy. They abhor drug use, for instance, in a way that suggests they have seen the worst of what addiction can inflict on individuals, families, and communities. They outwardly project the image of a stably employed, sober success story as a means to manage stigma in their interactions with others—but they seem to *inwardly* project this image as well, a message intended for oneself as a means to manage their own fear that they will ever again have to face the difficult circumstances in which they once found themselves.

### Seeds of Resistance

Individualistic explanations of poverty and economic inequality are clearly more popular than non-individualistic ones among our participants. Despite this, most of our participants utilized non-individualistic explanations for economic disadvantage when discussing specific anecdotal examples. This suggests that, while individualism may be their default explanation for abstract questions concerning poverty and economic inequality, it is not universally the case that they will depend on individualism. They are not oblivious to non-individualistic arguments, but seem to view such examples as the exception to what is otherwise the general rule of individualism.

Given the intimate ways in which our participants have experienced structural forces, it would have been surprising if structural concerns were completely absent from our discussions. It is clear in their responses that they are often very conscious of the ways that forces beyond individual control can impact people's lives. At various times our participants spoke about globalization, deindustrialization, job scarcity, systemic insecurity, the paradox of poverty amidst plenty, the decreasing value of a high school diploma, stagnating wages, and the inadequacy of the minimum wage, among other topics. The seeds of resistance to the dominant ideology are clearly present in their reflections on life in the working class. The challenge is translating these experiences into criticisms of dominant modes of thought. To accomplish this, our participants would need to view these examples as evidence of systemic problems, rather than exceptions to the overall rule of individualism and meritocracy. Without this reformulation, what is left is a population whose dominant tendency is to view abstract questions of autonomy and opportunity from an individualistic perspective, even if they feel the contradictory tensions created by their more structuralist concerns in other areas. Their individualistic perspectives persist despite contrary lived experiences and despite the ways in which this perspective denigrates them personally as well as the people that they care about in their families and communities.

## DISCUSSION

The picture that emerges from across our interviews is one of strongly individualistic stratification beliefs in explaining poverty and economic inequality in the U.S. in general, as well as in explaining our participants' own fortunes. Individualism is clearly the "default" belief system preferred by a strong majority of participants. Non-individualistic explanations are not absent but utilized in specific, limited circumstances. While our sample is small and non-random and therefore these results cannot be generalized to the White working class overall, our findings align with previous research suggesting that this group is strongly supportive of individualistic stratification beliefs and resistant to non-individualistic beliefs.

A number of themes are common across the interviews. In terms of their overall stratification beliefs, our participants view the U.S. as offering nearly limitless opportunities for all who desire to grasp them. These opportunities are viewed as available to all who make smart choices and work hard, regardless of where one starts out in life. Participants tend to view individuals as autonomous agents with a high degree of control over their lives. The U.S. is seen as largely meritocratic, where people's social positions reflect their choices and work ethic. Because of the perceived high degree of individual control over one's fortunes, success or failure is viewed as inhering within the individual. There is a strong emphasis on the importance of self-reliance and personal responsibility. Relatedly, depending on others (such as the government) is viewed negatively by most participants. In addition to this negative view of the welfare system, there is also widespread and deep suspicion of the morality and deservingness of the poor and of welfare recipients, particularly as it relates to their presumed poor work ethic, rampant drug-use, and out-of-control fertility. When unlevel playing fields are acknowledged, most participants still maintain that people in these circumstances will eventually overcome those barriers if they really put their mind to it. Additionally, many of our participants conflate negative and positive freedom.

When moving beyond their general stratification beliefs to discuss their own fortunes, our participants tended to be even more individualistic. As much as they may blame individual Americans for

their lot in life, they are even more critical of themselves. Despite very challenging working- or lower-class backgrounds, the belief in a high degree of control over one's life extended to participants' own lives. They largely view their own chances to succeed as fair and blame themselves for their shortcomings in life. There is a strong tendency to reject any notion that they are victims of circumstance. Our participants tend to distance themselves from the poor and other economically-struggling Americans (previous research refers to this as "dissociation" or "boundary work"), even though it is clear many are struggling mightily themselves. This distancing often takes the form of framing their stable employment and avoidance of problems like drug abuse as proof of their own success relative to many of their neighbors and family members. These accomplishments, seen as proof of their own work ethic and morality, reinforce participants' perceptions that if they can "make it" despite their backgrounds, anybody can.

There are a variety of possible explanations for why individualism remains so popular among White working-class Americans like the ones in our study. Our participants are mostly Republican-leaning in their voting behavior (80 percent) from similarly Republican-leaning families (80 percent) who have spent their lives in Appalachia (100 percent)—political and geographic characteristics which likely contribute to many of their beliefs concerning poverty, economic inequality, and government. Beyond these characteristics, research suggests a prominent role for dominant American stratification beliefs, White racism, and the process of dissociation/boundary work.

Research suggests that White Americans across all socioeconomic groups, save for the poorest, have historically found individualistic explanations of poverty and economic inequality more appealing than non-individualistic ones (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Hunt and Bullock 2016). This reflects the dominant cultural lessons Whites are taught about economic disadvantage throughout their formative years in childhood, lessons which are then reinforced in adulthood. As mentioned previously, working-class Whites apply individualism to their particular social location by placing a heavy emphasis on hard work, personal responsibility, and traditional morality as means of struggling against the precarious nature of their lives and the social decay in their communities. They attribute their own success to hard work and living moral, "settled" lives, while believing those who fail have laziness, immorality, and "hard living" to blame (Lamont 2000; Silva 2013; Williams 2017). Previous research suggests that, for our non-Hispanic White sample, it is likely that the internalization of dominant American stratification beliefs significantly contributes to their individualism.

Beyond the influence of dominant culture, previous research suggests that race plays a critical role. This impact is felt in two important ways: through the experiences of living in a subordinate group in an unequal society, and through group-specific socialization. The experiences of discrimination and racial inequality, for instance, give African Americans a much deeper understanding of how structural forces impact people's lives and helps reinforce a more structural understanding of inequalities. In terms of socialization, African Americans are more likely to be taught to see themselves in racial terms, while Whites largely are not. Whites also receive many negative messages about African Americans throughout their formative years, including messages which conflate race with poverty, welfare, laziness, and immorality (Gilens 1999; Lamont 2000; Silva 2013; Hunt and Bullock 2016; DiAngelo 2018). Additionally, working-class Whites have increasingly scapegoated other social groups, including racial and ethnic minority groups, for Whites' perceived loss of status in recent decades (Silva 2013; Hochschild 2016; Green 2017; Khazan 2018; Mutz 2018). All of this has a significant impact on Whites' racialized and more individualistic views of poverty, economic inequality, and welfare.

Our participants were extremely reluctant to talk about race and largely avoided addressing it. When asked specifically about the primary cause of African Americans' subordination in American society, for instance, too few participants agreed to even answer the question to allow an analysis. We suspect this silence reflects a desire not to reveal socially-undesirable beliefs about race. Much of what our participants said about the problems with welfare, however, was likely euphemistically referring to their beliefs about African Americans.

In addition to the importance of dominant culture and White racism, a number of studies have noted a process of "dissociation" or "boundary work" common to struggling Americans (Briar 1966; Rank 1994; Lamont 2000; Seccombe 2011; Silva 2013). This is a process whereby struggling Americans, in order to maintain dignity and/or manage stigma, set themselves apart from other social groups as well as members of their own social group. This phenomenon is pronounced among the poor, and welfare recipients in particular, but can also be found among the working class.

In Goffman's seminal work on stigma, he noted that a stigmatized individual possesses "an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind," and this attribute has a discrediting effect (1963:2–3). In response to the stigma of failing to live up to American expectations of self-reliance, and what this failure says about their own talents, effort, choices, and/or morality, many individuals will try to reduce this stigma by managing their own sense of self, as well as the impression that they project to others in their social interactions.

Seccombe (2011) and Rank (1994) observed this phenomenon in their respective studies. Seccombe found that most welfare recipients attempted "to distance themselves as far as possible from other recipients" (2011:61). They did this by arguing that they were on welfare due to circumstances beyond their control, while other recipients were often framed as responsible for their own plight. In Rank's earlier study he found a similar phenomenon: while 82 percent of his participants felt that they were on welfare due to circumstances beyond their control, approximately 90 percent felt that other recipients were either partially or fully to blame for their circumstances (1994:133, 142). When recipients in these studies dissociate themselves from other recipients, they are attempting to manage the stigma of welfare use by asserting the legitimacy and dignity of their own situation in opposition to the less-dignified and less-legitimate situations of others. They share the general public's negative view of welfare, and agree that most welfare-recipients are lazy, immoral, and/or undeserving, and they try hard to convince themselves and others that they are one of the few exceptions.

While the working class is not as economically disadvantaged or stigmatized as welfare recipients, they engage in a somewhat similar process of dissociation. They fail in some ways to live up to American standards of success, and therefore manage their own identities and the impressions they project to others in order to reduce the stigma of being economically-insecure. Lamont, for instance, observed what she called "boundary work" among this group. Lamont describes how the working class draws boundaries around other social groups, distancing themselves from those above and below as a means of maintaining a sense of dignity. The boundaries for the White working class, Lamont argues, are organized around issues of morality: "[Morality] helps workers to maintain a sense of self-worth, to affirm their dignity independently of their relatively low social status, and to locate themselves above others" (2000:19). Lamont describes this boundary work more fully:

Morality is generally at the center of these workers' worlds. They find their self-worth in their ability to discipline themselves and conduct responsible yet caring lives to ensure order for themselves and others. These moral standards function as an alternative to economic definitions of success and offer them a way to maintain dignity and to make sense of their lives in a land where the American dream is ever more out of reach. Workers use these standards to define who they are and, just as important, who they are not. Hence, they draw the line that delimits an imagined community of 'people like me' who share the same sacred values. (2000:3)

These working-class Americans believe they are better than those above them, for instance, because they believe they have more integrity, more sincerity, and better relationships. They believe they are above those below them—such as the poor and African Americans—because of their superior morality, discipline, work ethic, and personal responsibility.

In her later book, Williams (2017) catalogues a variety of working-class assumptions that contribute to the boundaries that they create between themselves and the poor. From the perspective of the working class, the poor receive government assistance not available to the working class, who work multiple jobs just to survive and would never suffer the perceived indignity of welfare use anyway. The poor succumb to despair, drugs, and alcohol, which the working class avoids through their commitment to traditional morality. Many in the working class grew up in the same conditions as the poor, yet walked the razor's edge and somehow climbed the socioeconomic ladder through hard work, smart choices, discipline, and sacrifice. Where the poor cannot control their impulses or plan for the future, the working class regularly forgoes immediate gratification for their long term goals. The working class must meet the impossible demands of full-time employment and childcare, while the poor do not work yet still have their childcare subsidized. The poor allow themselves to be seen as victims, something the working class would never endure. Yet, despite all of this, it is the poor who receive society's sympathy, not the harder-working and worse-off working class (Williams 2017:13–23). Whether or not any of these assumptions have merit, many in the working class nonetheless believe them. And in doing so, they draw boundaries around themselves and the poor in ways that make it more difficult to cite non-individualistic forces for both groups' plight and more difficult to develop the kind of solidarity that might emerge from that realization.

Our participants are engaged in a similar dissociation/boundary-drawing process. Unlike welfare recipients in some of the studies cited above, our participants maintained individualistic explanations of others' plight and of their own personal fortunes. To adopt a structural worldview for themselves would be seen as a claim to victimhood and/or an association with the poor, both of which conflict with their White working-class identities and worldviews. Our participants constructed themselves as a separate group from the poor and other struggling Americans despite the fact that many of our participants have struggled mightily throughout their lives. Like Lamont's participants, ours emphasized their work ethic (through their stable employment) and morality (through their lack of drug abuse). However much they struggle, they perceive their morality, commitment to hard work, and ability to maintain stable employment as at least some measure of success and dignity. Their perceived elevated status is differentiated less by income and more by their work ethic and morality. Because they are not poor and not on welfare, and because of their employment and sobriety, they feel they can make claims to fulfilling the American ethos.

In addition to this pride at having achieved some measure of success, there was also a palpable sense of relief on our participants' parts at having escaped childhoods filled with very scary and unhappy episodes. Focusing on their stable employment and sobriety not only projects an image outward to others that is less stigmatized, but projects a message inwards, intended for oneself, aimed at managing the fear that one will ever again have to face such difficult circumstances.

Such boundary work likely makes it more difficult for the working class in general, and our participants specifically, to identify with other social groups who are also struggling to varying degrees due to forces beyond their control. In this sense, the dominant American individualism displayed by our participants simultaneously provides them with a sense of dignity while also inhibiting the solidarity and structural orientation that together could be a politically-powerful force in addressing their plight and the plight of others. While their individualism may give them every day psychological relief from stigmatization, it also contributes to the perpetuation of their economic and social marginalization by reinforcing the economic and political structures responsible for their plight.

## CONCLUSION

Why should we care what Americans believe about poverty and economic inequality? After all, isn't what we *think* about economic disadvantage not really of concern as long as we *do* something about it? As appealing as such a notion may be, the reality is that how we act to address a social problem is related to what we believe causes it. Much like a doctor would not choose a treatment plan without first identifying the disease, people support particular approaches to addressing social problems based on what they believe causes them. Multiple studies suggest that one's stratification beliefs are linked to their policy preferences (Feagin 1972; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Gilens 1999; Appelbaum 2001; Bullock et al. 2003; Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Hunt and Bullock 2016). This helps us to understand why Americans, given their preference for individualistic explanations for a wide range of social problems, tend to be somewhat skeptical of more robust and structurally-oriented social welfare policies like the ones favored in many European countries.

This does not mean that Americans hate the poor or do not want to help them. Studies consistently find that Americans are morally committed to helping the poor (Piston 2018). This moral commitment, however, coexists alongside many contradictory stratification beliefs that create a tension that Americans must resolve when considering particular social policies. Alongside their moral commitment to fighting poverty, Americans hold stratification beliefs that cause them to be deeply suspicious of the morality and deservingness of welfare recipients (particularly African American recipients), to be adamant that assistance go only to the deserving poor, to be somewhat skeptical of "big government" and the effectiveness of government programs, and to prefer individualistically-oriented social policies. So while they are committed to enacting social policies to address poverty, Americans' "skeptical altruism," as we call it, places limits on how much support they are willing to show for the kinds of robust and structurally-oriented social policies that work so well to combat poverty in many other wealthy countries.

More robust and structurally-oriented social policies are likely necessary if we wish to achieve a more socially-just society. Studies suggest it is not economic performance or demographic characteristics that explain the high levels of poverty and economic inequality in the U.S. compared to other wealthy countries, but the comparatively minimalist nature of American social policies (Smeeding 2005; Brady 2009). The level of generosity of social policies explains why only around 5 percent or 6 percent of the population lives in poverty in countries like Denmark and Finland, versus 17 percent in the U.S. (OECD 2018).

The causes of the limited American welfare state are complex, but many scholars agree that it results from a combination of political and cultural factors (Alesina et al. 2001; Smeeding 2005; Brady 2009; Gilens 2012; Royce 2015; Michener 2018). As Alesina and his colleagues explain, the U.S. redistributes less than Europeans for three primary reasons: a majority of Americans believe that redistribution favors racial minorities, a majority of Americans believe that the U.S. is an open and fair society and that the poor have themselves to blame for their plight, and the American political system is structured in a manner that prevents redistribution (Alesina et al. 2001:39).

In a way, our current age of growing inequality commits a form of “double violence” upon struggling Americans like the White working-class custodians in our study. There is structural violence, which refers to “the avoidable limitations society places on groups of people that constrain them from achieving the quality of life that would have otherwise been possible...structural violence occurs through economically, politically, or culturally driven processes working together to limit subjects from achieving full quality of life” (Lee 2016:110). Forces beyond the control of the working class—such as globalization, deindustrialization, automation, and neoliberalism—have made them more insecure in a variety of ways in recent years. Rather than being natural or inevitable, this growing insecurity could have been avoided, or at the very least mitigated, if not for the deliberate choices made by those in power in the U.S.

A second form of violence is symbolic violence. Bourdieu defines symbolic violence as “every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990:4). We follow Bourdieu in arguing that dominant culture, in largely justifying social inequalities, protects them from serious challenges. Stratification beliefs internalized during socialization lead many to attribute the consequences of structural violence to individual failings and thus misrecognize a class system as a meritocracy. These dominant beliefs—disproportionately influenced by individualism, racism, sexism, and skeptical altruism—frame economic uncertainty, massive economic inequality, the loss of decent jobs, the fraying of the social contract, and persistent racial and gender inequalities in disproportionately individualistic terms. As we have argued in more detail elsewhere (Giroux 2008; Schubert 2008; Eppard et al. 2017), in order for all Americans, and particularly struggling Americans like the ones in this study, to challenge inequalities, they need the cultural tools necessary to identify and understand them.

We should not underestimate this symbolic dimension of our struggles. Addressing the insecurity of large portions of the population will likely require more than changing economic structures of domination, as important as that is. Symbolic violence renders structural violence partially invisible, and we cannot address what we cannot fully see. As Giroux argues, “Politics often begins when it becomes possible to make power visible, to challenge the ideological circuitry of hegemonic knowledge” (2008:113). To have a more egalitarian future, Americans will need a deeper and more structural

understanding of social problems. This new understanding must allow Americans to fully recognize the non-individualistic causes of their plight, their solidarity with other social groups, and the ways we can combat structural violence. In the absence of this, Americans are in danger of blaming structural failings on the wrong people—such as themselves, racial and ethnic minority groups, immigrants, single mothers, public employees, the poor, etc.—instead of directing their energy at transforming our society into something more just.

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