

COMPASSIONATE INDIVIDUALISM:  
SYMBOLIC STRUGGLES IN AN AMERICAN HELPING PROFESSION

By

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To Papa

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BACHELORS OF SOCIAL WORK	BSW
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD	IRB
INSTITUTIONALIZED POWER RELATIONS THEORY	IPRT
LATENT COALITIONS FOR EGALITARIANISM	LCEs
LEFTIST COLLECTIVE POLITICAL ACTORS	LCPAs
MID-ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY	MAU (THE FICTIONAL NAME GIVEN TO THE UNIVERSITY IN THIS STUDY)
UNITED STATES	U.S.
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA	UF

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This dissertation examines the worldviews of social work students and how they either reinforce or challenge existing American cultural assumptions about poverty, inequality, and welfare. It also examines the factors which shape these worldviews, including highly-individualistic American cultural assumptions. Social work students were chosen because they typically perceive themselves as oppositional to many of these assumptions, and thus provide a unique insight into the power of American culture.

This study was framed by the work of Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Pierre Bourdieu, Mark R. Rank, Alice O'Connor, David Brady, and others. The impetus for this study was the notion that many social problems are socially constructed and as much a result of the way we think about them as they are about individual characteristics or actions. When individual-level characteristics and actions are considered, they need to be analyzed in terms of their relationship to the social structure. Despite this, the public and social scientists have largely focused on the individual, likely due to the influence of American cultural assumptions that support the individualism perspective; as a result,

welfare policy has reflected this micro-level focus. This study examines the effect of these individualistic cultural assumptions on people pursuing a helping profession.

The study findings are based on an ethnographic study in a U.S. BSW program consisting of eight months of fieldwork, 25 interviews with students, and document analysis of course materials. The findings suggest that, even in a “liberal” and somewhat structurally-minded field such as social work, highly-individualistic American cultural assumptions are mediated through personal experiences, family upbringing, and students’ studies to produce “compassionate individualism.” This means that most BSW students who graduate from MAU have individualistically-oriented worldviews supporting common American cultural assumptions about poverty, inequality, and welfare, albeit in a somewhat more “compassionate” form than typically expressed by the dominant culture. This suggests that the influence of American culture is very strong for all people across all fields, and that cultural assumptions and social scientific knowledge about these social issues need to be more structurally-inclusive before these social problems can be solved. We cannot create what we cannot first imagine.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Social institutions and the individuals of which they are constituted do not exist outside of or disconnected from society and culture. Despite many American cultural beliefs about the independence and freedom of the individual, we are never completely free from social forces. Sociological research and theory support the notions that (a) individual characteristics, actions, motivations, etc., all have important relationships to social institutions and structures, relationships that can be at least somewhat deterministic in our life chances and outcomes, and that (b) to understand individual-level actions/choices we must also understand their relationship to the social structure. This reality is not always apparent to many individuals, as is evident in much of the rhetoric concerning particular institutions. The educational system, for instance, is an institution which many Americans feel is a “great equalizer” and meritocratic in nature; yet the field of sociology and other social science disciplines have provided a wealth of studies rendering this assumption highly questionable and problematic. Another such institution is the social welfare system, which despite many motivated individuals seeking social justice, tends to reflect many cultural assumptions about poverty and inequality. Institutions and individuals exist within societies and cultures and thus tend to reflect their hierarchies and assumptions. This does not mean that hegemonic culture is monolithic and unchanging; there is certainly considerable resistance at any given historical moment to dominant modes of thought, and history is full of periods of social change. Dominant modes of thought tend to persist, however, and they tend to be mediated and altered in the short term rather than completely repudiated by social institutions.

I developed this study to examine a group of individuals who are likely highly motivated to “change the world” and seek social justice: undergraduate social work students. I chose them specifically because, through self-selection into their academic major, it would seem like they might be more likely to resist and challenge dominant modes of thought concerning poverty and inequality than students pursuing other fields. As stated previously, however, no institutions or individuals exist outside of or disconnected from society and culture. This study examined this supposition and found significant support for the notion that American cultural assumptions play a significant role in influencing the poverty/inequality worldviews of social work students.

Students in a Bachelors of Social Work (BSW) program are at the intersection of many competing and possibly contradictory concerns and worldviews: their own individual concerns about welfare and social justice (which likely prompted their selection of academic major), American cultural assumptions about poverty, inequality, and welfare, the perspectives of the academic social work field in a university setting, moving into a career in which they will impact individual lives, and the explicit and implicit goals contained within social welfare policy at the federal and state levels and how these are mediated through the goals and institutional culture of an individual social welfare office. How do the beliefs of BSW students (and the degree to which these reflect American cultural assumptions), their educational training, and policy and institutional constraints affect their ideas about poverty and the poor?

Through conversations with BSW students, observations of classroom interactions, as well as document analysis of course materials, I aimed to provide a rich and nuanced ethnographic account of this intersection. At the conclusion of this project I

felt that I had come to a better understanding of how resilient individualistic American cultural assumptions are even in a field that might be traditionally perceived as a challenge to the status quo. Once individualistically-oriented American cultural assumptions were mediated through the personal experiences, family upbringing, and college studies of BSW students, students tended to espouse a worldview based on “compassionate individualism” that was slightly different than the dominant form of individualism in the U.S.; this worldview largely reproduced many of the individualistically-oriented American cultural assumptions concerning poverty, inequality, and welfare, although these assumptions were framed in a much more compassionate and somewhat less-demeaning manner than might be encountered in dominant American culture.

The following chapter is a review of relevant theoretical ideas and empirical literature that framed the development of this project and contributed to my initial understanding of this topic, as well as the methods utilized to conduct this study.

## CHAPTER 2 THEORETICAL TOOLBOX AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In this project I adopted a “toolbox” approach to the theoretical framework. What I mean by this is that, rather than adopting one particular sociological paradigm or attempting to “test” a particular theory, I highlighted particular ideas and concepts from multiple theorists and perspectives that I think contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon in question. In doing so, I have chosen not to test a particular theory or support a particular perspective, but to examine my research questions with these concepts as “guides” or “sensitizing concepts.” These concepts helped me to understand what has been done before and they offered some insight into important aspects of the social world in question that I may have wanted to examine. These concepts helped orient the basic framework of the project in a particular direction, yet the toolbox mentality also left the project open to new and unforeseen avenues of inquiry. This was a qualitative study that relied on an inductive ethnographic method, so the work of these theorists and scholars helped orient the project and define a tentative starting point from which to build this study and help lead to inductive data and conclusions.

Of particular relevance to this project were selected ideas, arguments, and theoretical concepts of Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Pierre Bourdieu, Noam Chomsky, and David Brady.

## Theoretical Toolbox

### Antonio Gramsci

Antonio Gramsci's version of the concept of "hegemony" refers to the role of dominant culture in maintaining the status quo and its social hierarchies in a given society through civil society institutions (including families, the educational system, the media, the church, etc.). Hegemonic culture presents a particular version of reality, one that serves power and which is diffused throughout society by such civil institutions as schools and media institutions (among others). The perpetuation of hegemonic ideologies through civil society is particularly effective because it comes to be seen as objective truth (ignoring the role of power in the social construction of knowledge); thus hegemony is largely achieved (or "won") through consent in modern capitalist societies rather than the less-effective method of coercion<sup>1</sup> (force). Maintaining class differences cannot be achieved by force alone, it must be largely achieved through the manipulation of what people think, thus creating justifications of domination that are internalized by all social classes. Gramsci argued that through socialization within myriad institutions, oppressed people internalize ideologies that maintain and reproduce their own oppression and domination and come to see this domination as natural, inevitable and socially-just; in fact, many ideas that function to dominate whole groups of people are seen as "common sense" by all social classes. These ideologies may not be completely

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<sup>1</sup> Jones notes that, "The balance between the two [coercion and consent] in modern democracies seems to have shifted markedly away from the overt use of force. Governments cannot coerce their opponents without risking a severe loss of ideological credibility. . . . A successful hegemonic formation will be one in which conflict is minimized, since hegemony is dependent upon the existence of an 'individual who can govern himself without his self-government entering into conflict with political society'" (Jones 2006:51-52, with a quote from Gramsci 1971:268).

false and may contain some truth<sup>2</sup>, but the end result of this mixture of facts and myths is the continued domination of marginalized groups in society. Gramsci argued that, “A ruling power that asks for consent and yet which cannot give voice to the aspirations of those in whose name it rules will not survive indefinitely” (Jones 2006:47). Social organization and its justifications have to seem natural and like common sense and people have to feel invested in its legitimacy for social hierarchies to persist.

The concept of hegemony refers to “the ways in which a governing power wins consent to its rule from those it subjugates” by establishing “moral, political and intellectual leadership in social life by diffusing one’s own ‘world view’ throughout the fabric of society as a whole, thus equating one’s own interests with the interests of society at large” (Eagleton 2007:112-116). Hegemony is a “process without end” in which those who rule “must be constantly alert to the volatile demands of its subalterns and to the shifting context within which it exerts its authority” to maintain their power (Jones 2006:48). Eagleton notes that:

It is preferable on the whole for power to remain conveniently invisible, disseminated throughout the texture of social life and thus ‘naturalized’ as custom, habit, spontaneous practice. Once power nakedly reveals its hand, it can become an object of political contestation. . . Dominant power is subtly, pervasively diffused throughout habitual daily practices, intimately interwoven with ‘culture’ itself, inscribed in the very texture of our experience from nursery school to funeral parlour.” (Eagleton 2007:114-116)

Eagleton goes on to ask, “How do we combat a power which has become the ‘common sense’ of a whole social order, rather than one which is widely perceived as alien and

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<sup>2</sup> Jones states that, “How, Gramsci asks, could people survive if their ideas and concepts about society were all false? It is logical that there must be a kernel of practical understanding in most people’s conception of the world. Simply in order to be ruled, a person must actively participate in a particular conception of the world” (Jones 2006:55).

oppressive?” (Eagleton 2007:114). This is the power of hegemonic culture: if we are to defeat oppressive ideologies, we would have to purge them from the minds of the very people who willfully accept their own oppression. Successful hegemonic rule occurs when people govern themselves through their own thoughts, which seem to come from their own logic and also seem completely natural. Jones explains further how the status quo becomes so natural and desirable in our minds in modern democracies:

Why, might we ask, do people accept the leadership of others? . . . One answer to this is that hegemony is not simply a question of meanings and values; it also takes economic, material and legal-political forms. A ruling power that ensures that its subordinates have enough to eat, are in paid employment and have adequate access to healthcare, childcare and holidays has gone a long way towards winning their hearts and minds. Equally, parliamentary democracies appear to grant subordinate people a good degree of legal-political autonomy through granting them various rights and through allowing them to vote, to regularly change their government and to stand for election themselves. (Jones 2006:48)

The reason that culture is so important in Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony (and his ideas about how society might be changed) is because culture appears to people to be “disinterested.” Civil society is the “key mechanism” in the dissemination of dominant culture and is effective because “it blurs the distinction between political authority and everyday life. What takes place in our homes, in our leisure activities, or in the shops seems, for the most part, apolitical” (Jones 2006:48). To truly overhaul the social order people need to be convinced that they are being unjustly controlled; the power of culture to legitimate social hierarchies and maintain the control of the elites is grounded in the fact that it is not seen as controlling people at all. Culture appears organic and disinterested and it is difficult for the average citizen to see who has disproportionate control over culture and how this maintains certain power relationships. Gramsci argued that, “There is no need for someone to experience a blinding

conversion to an idea—it is often already deeply enmeshed in the structure of their lived reality” (Jones 2006:48). Most revolutions, especially those in advanced capitalist democracies, have to be won through a “war of position”; that is, they have to be won through the symbolic meaning that we give to our existence through culture. Gramsci argues that, “Modern capitalist regimes have developed a tightly woven network of practices and institutions which guard against internal disintegration and make revolution a political and psychological impossibility” (Jones 2006:31). Civil society, or the “ensemble of organisms commonly called ‘private’” (Gramsci 1971:12) (the political parties, the church, the schools, the media, families, etc.) is connected to the economy and those in power and reproduces that power, but this is not obvious to the naked eye of the common citizen. Our everyday existence is situated in civil society and thus these structures become our everyday life and common sense, “so it becomes increasingly difficult to recognize that civil society has some connection with the operations of power” (Jones 2006:32). Ideas and values that develop out of power relationships are thus reproduced in private everyday life and therefore seem completely natural, desirable, unchangeable, etc. For Gramsci, the economy and culture “interact as a circuit” (Jones 2006:34) reinforcing economic organization and the interests of the elites; the economy and culture “constantly impact each other with no level assumed to be the primary level of determinacy” (Jones 2006:34).

Because we learn in school (from respected teachers and professors who appear to be simply conveying “objective” scientific knowledge) that economic laws are “natural” and not socially developed and orchestrated (and are actually quite problematic), we may not question the social structure even if we find ourselves at the

bottom looking up. If we believe, for instance, that poverty is mostly the result of individual failings (as most Americans do), we may not fault the social structure when we find ourselves impoverished; instead, we may ask ourselves what we did to get ourselves into poverty, and what we need to do as individuals to get ourselves out. Combatting poverty, inequality, and other social problems becomes a matter of combatting much of our common sense understandings of the world with ideas that seem alien to us; without combatting this internalized and oppressive common sense, however, we unwittingly reproduce socially unjust social hierarchies regardless of our own position on the social ladder.

### **Louis Althusser**

Louis Althusser made a substantial contribution to the adaptation and expansion of the Marxist conceptualization of ideology, most notably in his book *For Marx* (1969) and his essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," contained in his book *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1971). In *For Marx* (1969) Althusser defines ideology as a coherent "system (with its own logic and rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and a role within a given society" which is "an organic part of every social totality" (Althusser 1969:231-232). Althusser would later develop his version of ideology further in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1971), arguing that ideology "represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 1971:162). Althusser believes that we are immersed in ideological environments at all times, from the family to schools to mass media, and are constantly bombarded with ideological ideas and assumptions. These assumptions help us to understand and interpret the world and motivate our actions. While it is certainly the

case that ideology often functions to legitimate domination and oppression, all people (including those in power) are beholden to ideologies because, “Man is an ideological animal by nature” (Althusser 1971:171). Althusser argues that, “The ruling class does not maintain with its own ideology, which is the ruling ideology, an external and lucid relation of pure utility and cunning” (Althusser 1969:234). Ideology is not simply a myth “fabricated and manipulated” by the ruling class to fool the dominated classes, but is “active on the ruling class itself and contributes to its moulding” (Althusser 1969:235). Dominated groups in society internalize hegemonic ideologies and thus consent to their domination just as the elite and powerful in society internalize ideologies and discourses that legitimate and justify their privileged positions. While all social classes may produce their own class-specific ideologies, even these (while qualitatively different in many ways) usually justify dominant ideologies and discourses in some manner as well. This interlocking system of ideologies legitimates and perpetuates inequality and domination, with the “bourgeois ideology [dominating] other ideologies” in society (Althusser 1990:30).

Althusser goes on in *For Marx* to argue that ideologies are unconsciously internalized by individuals, contained in countless forms in our vast bank of “common sense” understandings and everyday practices. People hold ideologies but are generally unaware of the “theoretical presuppositions” contained within them (Althusser 1969:69). Because so many ideas and discourses are present in every social setting at all times, we are constantly immersed in an ideological social world, and we never take the time (nor could we) to stop and consider the validity of each idea or set of ideas (there are simply too many, we would be consumed in perpetual contemplation—many

simply have to pass without evaluation so that we can act and live and interpret the world around us at a desirable speed). A great deal of ideology goes unquestioned. Althusser notes that, "Ideology is indeed a system of representations, but in the majority of cases these representations have nothing to do with 'consciousness': they are usually images and occasionally concepts, but it is above all as structures that they imposed on the vast majority of men, not via their 'consciousness.' They are perceived-accepted-suffered cultural objects that act functionally on men via a process that escapes them" (Althusser 1969:233). He argues that the lived relation between people, or the real world existence, "passes through ideology, or better, is ideology itself" (Althusser 1969:78). The real conditions of existence, or the physical reality existing on Earth that has yet to be given symbolic meaning, passes through and always takes on the symbolic, ideological nature that is attached to it; because of this, we perceive that we are living out that symbolic relationship, not the more basic real world relationship that actually exists (we are "fooled" into thinking we see the ideology rather than the real conditions of existence before they are given ideological symbolism). Althusser argues that people experience the "imaginary relation between them and their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 1969:233). This is not to say that our perceptions are completely false, but a distortion of our actual existence; we may in fact see something that "really exists," but cannot escape the fact that this always passes through an interpretive lens and is changed in some manner because it has to be given meaning to make sense to us. An ideological representation "makes allusion to the real in a certain way," but it is only partially true, and "bestows only an illusion on reality" (Althusser 1990:29).

Although ideology may seem to some like a purely symbolic phenomenon that exists only in our minds, Althusser argues that ideology has a material existence; ideologies become institutionalized in the everyday practices of institutions to the point where they precede individuals entering those institutions and influence them once they enter (Althusser 1971:165-166). We do not enter every institution in our world and construct them from scratch. We may make some changes and alterations, but certain everyday practices, discourses, and take-for-granted assumptions are institutionalized before we arrived, and strongly influence how we act once we get there, even if we rebel against small portions of this “common sense” understanding of the world (it is easy to identify the fact that many apparatuses and their practices exist before we do). He argues that our ideas are “material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject” (Althusser 1971:169). We may believe these ideas to be our own, but they existed before we arrived and now that we are here within these institutions (or apparatuses) they govern our actions and perceptions. Althusser argues that ideologies “always exist in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material” (Althusser 1971:166).

Althusser argues that ideology interpellates individuals (Althusser 1971:170-186) both (a) as subjects, helping them to believe that they alone are responsible for the production and genesis of their thoughts, beliefs, and actions, and (b) as being submissive to the mode of production of their particular society, so that they will “work by themselves” without anybody having to force them to fit into the existing social order (Althusser 1971:181). The idea that individuals exist and can act in complete freedom

from social forces and express their individual agency is the very idea of being a subject, which is in itself ideological, and result of the “subject ideology” interpellating or hailing the individual (Althusser 1971:173-177). Thus, ideology “‘functions’ in such a manner that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals,” transforming “individuals into subjects,” through the process of interpellation (Althusser 1971:174). Ideology contains ideas about the nature of subjects, ideas that exist before we are even born. Once we are born and enter society we are acknowledged as subjects by the ideology of the subject present in society, and accept that identity and act out our lives as if we are subjects. The very idea of subjects and freedom is created through ideology and imposed on individuals upon birth, thus helping us to ignore/misrecognize/fail to see the vast and powerful social forces shaping all aspects of our lives. In fact, to truly understand a particular culture’s views towards the poor and their responses to poverty (such as welfare), we might look no further than the most powerful ideology of them all: that of the subject.

Althusser believes that science holds the key to unlocking the true nature of our physical relationships, which we symbolically misrecognize due to ideology. Althusser believes that ideology is different from science because its practical function is of greater importance than its theoretical function (Althusser 1969:231). I find Althusser incredibly useful in understanding the role of institutions in perpetuating dominant ideologies, but his differentiation between science (which supposedly provides a “real” account of the world) and ideology (which does not) is problematic in many ways. Other theorists and scholars have (I believe more accurately) made the argument that

ideologies inform knowledge production at all levels<sup>3</sup>, including what might be considered strictly scientific knowledge (even if this form of knowledge is less ideological it is still informed as such in some manner by the individuals constructing it as science). Nevertheless, I believe Althusser makes a critical contribution to the understanding of the role of institutions in maintaining hegemony; I do not believe this particular weakness detracts from some of his other very strong contributions as this particular supposition is not foundational to those other theoretical claims (rather, it is a method through which he wishes to combat ideology, through science).

In his essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1971), Althusser explores the institutions (or apparatuses) that help to institutionalize the ideologies that maintain the status quo, reproduce the capitalist relations of production, and ensure the consent of the dominated classes to their own domination. There are two types of apparatuses that Althusser is concerned with in this essay: the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs).

The RSA consists of the government, the administration, the army, the police, the courts, the prisons, etc. (Althusser 1971:142-143). The government is a "machine of repression" that ensures the domination of workers by capitalists, enabling owners of the means of production to subject workers "to the process of surplus value extortion" (Althusser 1971:137), which is one of the primary methods for maintaining economic domination within society. The state primarily functions by violence and repression (although does not always need to do so and can employ ideological means), and

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<sup>3</sup> Steven B. Smith articulates this argument further, arguing that detaching science from human interests is "questionable to the extreme," as "the very subject matter of social and political inquiry is constructed by the choice of what is essential for us," and is based on the "values, standards, and interests of the particular thinker standing at a particular point in time" (1984:136). He argues further that by virtue of being humans, researchers cannot choose to be without values and interests.

reserves to itself the right to use violence in the interest of maintaining the preferred social order.

The ISAs include religious institutions, the educational system, the family, the legal system (considered both an RSA and an ISA), political parties, trade unions, mass media, and culture (Althusser 1971:143). As the name suggests, ISAs function primarily by ideology (although violence is sometimes used as a secondary function). The ideology of these different ISAs is unified despite some inconsistencies and contradictions, “beneath the ruling ideology, which is the ideology of the ‘ruling class’” (Althusser 1971:146). The ISAs contribute to the reproduction of the capitalist order in many ways: the political system by inculcating the justifications for the methods of governance (democratic ideology), mass media by bombarding citizens daily with messages infused with capitalist economic ideologies, such as patriotism, sexism, moralism, etc., the cultural apparatus through similar messages concerning nationalism and sexism (think football in the U.S.), etc. (Althusser 1971:154).

The ruling class has control over the RSA and ISAs (although this control of the ISAs is not as strong as the control over the RSA), and cannot hold power for a long period of time without winning hegemony over and inside of the ISAs (Althusser 1971:146). Althusser allows for social change in acknowledging that the dominated classes can occupy positions in the ISAs and create sites of class struggle, develop and utilize counterhegemonic ideologies, and spur some social change. It is just the case that the ruling class usually maintains its hegemonic ideological dominance within ISAs despite some brief periods of upheaval.

Unlike in pre-capitalist societies where the church was the dominant ISA, the educational system (or educational ISA) is the dominant ISA in modern capitalist societies (working hand-in-hand with the family ISA). While children spend a great deal of time interacting with their families, they also spend a considerable amount of time inside of the school building listening to teachers. This inculcation occurs at a time when children are most vulnerable and some of their lifelong dispositions are being formed and may harden permanently; the ruling class knows this, and is eager to inculcate this vulnerable audience who are obliged by law to attend. Schools instill both the skills needed by capitalist workers and the belief system that reinforces this mode of production, and ensures that the “exploited to exploiters and exploiters to exploited” relationships are perpetuated (Althusser 1971:156). The educational system teaches children both the “techniques and knowledge” necessary for workers (reading, writing, etc.), as well as the “rules of good behaviour, i.e. the attitude that should be observed by every agent in the division of labor,” which includes an understanding of and respect for the established division of labor and the “rules of the order established by class domination” (Althusser 1971:132). He explains this more clearly:

The reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order. . . the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class ‘in words.’ (Althusser 1971:132-133)

Schools, along with many other apparatuses, produce and inculcate knowledge “in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology” (Althusser 1971:133). Schools are able to achieve this and hide the manner in which they perpetuate class domination with remarkable success because our discourse defines the school as a neutral setting,

devoid of ideology, where merit rules and the best, brightest, and most highly motivated succeed. This is not necessarily because teachers know explicitly that they are tools of the ruling class, but because they too are embedded in the system of ideology and institutionalized ideological practices that every other individual and institution is embedded within: our society, our culture (Althusser 1971:157). Like every other individual in every other institution who is bombarded with and internalizes ideologies daily, most “do not even begin to suspect the ‘work’ the system. . . forces them to do “ (inculcation of hegemonic ideologies) (Althusser 1971:157). The practices of the school seem as natural as the practices of the church did centuries before.

### **Pierre Bourdieu**

Much of Pierre Bourdieu’s work and theoretical orientation has impacted the development of this project. One very important idea from this work is Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence (see Bourdieu 1991 and 1998, and Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 for more detailed explanations of this concept). Symbolic violence refers to a type of violence that is done to human beings through the manner in which society is organized. Although different than physical violence, symbolic violence is still as powerful (if not more powerful) than physical violence, according to Bourdieu, because it is “more effective, and (in some instances) more brutal, means of oppression” (Bourdieu and Eagleton 1992:115). Acts of symbolic violence are acts that convince people that domination, oppression and inequality are natural, organically/spontaneously formed, inevitable, and/or justified, instead of the reality which is that they are the result of deliberate human actions. The result of symbolic violence is that socially-orchestrated domination, oppression, and inequality are instead perceived by the population at large (including the oppressed) as the natural result of

the actions of the oppressed individuals rather than the structure of society; through symbolic violence, a complex system of power and domination is misrecognized as a largely meritocratic social order where individuals are responsible for their position in the social hierarchy.

Bourdieu asserts that a person cannot objectively analyze the world because they have internalized the assumptions and logic of the world in which they live, coming to a strong belief (through socialization) in a “legitimate vision of the social world and of its divisions” (Bourdieu 1987:13); he writes that, “The agent engaged in practice knows the world. . . too well, without objectifying distance, takes it for granted, precisely because he is caught up in it; he inhabits it like a garment. . . he feels at home in the world because the world is also in him, in the form of the habitus” (Bourdieu 2000:142-143). Individuals (from all social classes) internalize the categories and rationalizations of the world around them that justify and legitimate domination and inequality, categories and rationalizations that benefit those in power. These categories and rationalizations influence how everyone in society interprets the world, and while there is certainly some class-specific understanding, many of the major explanations of the world (such as Western economics) overlap all social classes and influence their understanding of the world. Because of this, powerful individuals in society “let the system they dominate take its own course in order to exercise their domination” (Bourdieu 1977:190). In the process of internalizing these justifications, social organization becomes perfectly legitimate to dominated individuals, because the social structure seems justified by their own internalized logic and beliefs. In this way domination is maintained because we support that domination through our distorted

interpretation of the social structure. Bourdieu notes that, “Symbolic domination. . . is something you absorb like air, something you don’t feel pressured by; it is everywhere and nowhere, and to escape from that is very difficult” (Bourdieu and Eagleton 1992:115). Impoverished individuals in society consent to their own domination, not because they enjoy domination, but because their own common sense understanding of the world legitimates the social structure and justifies their oppression. An impoverished individual in American society may be the victim of massive social forces that shape their experience and position in the social structure, yet misrecognize their position as meritocratic and simply the result of personal failings. Inequality that might be otherwise recognized as unjust social organization and the result of imbalances of power is misrecognized and reproduced from one generation to the next, maintaining an unequal and unjust status quo.

Many institutions in society commit symbolic violence and help construct the misrecognized social world. A misrecognized social world is one in which social divisions are not seen as being the result of the influence of power, but seen as the result of some natural, disinterested process. Our educational system is one pertinent example: the manner in which the educational system is organized privileges middle- and upper-class students over lower-class students. Yet we are convinced by schools and myriad other institutions, such as families, churches, media, government, etc., that these institutions and society at large are meritocratic; this belief masks the fact that, according to Bourdieu, all institutions in society both reflect the larger stratified social order and help to perpetuate it. In fact, almost all social institutions act in this manner, masking oppression and inequality and convincing us that our place in the social order

is largely earned and based mostly upon our own effort. Bourdieu asserts that, “Symbolic violence rests on the adjustment between the structures constitutive of the habitus of the dominated and the structure of the relation of domination to which they apply: the dominated perceive the dominant through the categories that the relation of domination has produced and which are thus identical to the interests of the dominant” (Bourdieu 1998:121). Like Marx’s false consciousness, Bourdieu argues that the dominant groups in society are able, at least in part, to successfully ensure that dominated groups in society view their domination in terms favorable to the dominant group. Because of this, (while there are certainly class-specific beliefs and attitudes) there is considerable overlap between all social classes in terms of what they consider “common sense,” and lower- and middle-class individuals espouse common sense interpretations that justify their own domination. The logic of capitalism and Western economics, for instance, becomes embedded in our culture to the point where its legitimacy is unquestioned, and the manner in which it rationalizes and naturalizes inequality and oppression is unquestioned, even championed, by those in positions of little power in society.

Bourdieu does not frame symbolic violence in the same manner that Marx does with the concept of false consciousness, as Bourdieu allows for ample amounts of resistance and inconsistencies across the social order which play out in various fields. The end result, however, is somewhat consistent with Marx: those in positions of power in society have a disproportionately large influence on the “common sense” of a given society. The manner in which people interpret the world is partially their own, but is also influenced in a significant manner by people who have the power to shape the

knowledge of a given culture. Because of this, middle- and lower-class people may internalize justifications and rationalizations about an unequal social order even to the extent that those explanations might serve the interests of people who have a considerable amount of power over them. As Bourdieu notes, symbolic violence is the “violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:167).

A misrecognized social order is the result of countless social institutions committing symbolic violence to help obscure and distort the production, maintenance, and reproduction of inequality and domination in society; this study focuses on the contribution to that misrecognition by the field of social work. Following Bourdieu’s logic, one might assume that social work programs and social welfare institutions both reflect the stratified social order and help to maintain and perpetuate it. The reason that these institutions are unique is due to the unique manner in which poor individuals interact with them. Social welfare institutions provide help to poor individuals, but also attempt to regulate their behavior and fix their “deficiencies,” making many judgments about why they don’t quite “fit-in” to mainstream society. These many judgments may also influence how the poor think about themselves, contributing to their misrecognition of a deeply unequal and oppressive social order.

Throughout much of this project, I will often refer to the social welfare “field,” and the manner in which Bourdieu uses the term field is a helpful tool. Summarizing his field concept, Bourdieu contends that “a field is a field of forces within which agents occupy positions that statistically determine the positions they take with respect to the field, this position-taking being aimed either at conserving or transforming the structure of

relations of forces that is constitutive of the field” (Bourdieu 2005b:30). Referring to the field of television as an example, Bourdieu asserts that television is “a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field.” He goes on:

It [the field of television] contains people who dominate and people who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field, and, as a result, their strategies. (Bourdieu 1998:40-41)

Conflicts that occur constantly in different fields, at their core, are conflicts over “the imposition of the legitimate vision of the social world. . . they are the site of internal struggles for the imposition of the dominant principle of vision and division” (Bourdieu 2005b:36). Bourdieu’s field concept refers to various social spaces with clearly defined rules that different social actors (who also bring with them into the field their individual dispositions) follow in competition with one another for power and control using their accumulated capital (cultural, economic, social, and symbolic). The rules in a particular field (such as the field of social welfare) are based on the “doxa” of that field, or “the universe of tacit presuppositions” (Bourdieu 2005b:37), which justifies the logic of those rules, often ignoring that they are socially constructed.

In the social welfare field, there are countless social actors, each occupying a particular position and adhering to the rules of that field and strategizing for power and control in an ever-present struggle over the “truths” of the field. In this sense, there is a high probability that there are many different ideologies present in the field at one time (and within the one institution, or subfield, being studied at a given time—the institution being studied is a separate social space within the larger field of social welfare). The

argument in this project is not that everybody within this field holds the same beliefs about poverty, but that these ideas exist at different points in the social space of the field, and the ideas that exist more predominantly in positions of power and/or in the social space may matter more for ideological outcomes. So if, for instance, most of the members of this BSW program believe that individuals cause their own poverty through their individual failings, and that belief is strongest in the positions within that social space that affect the ideological outcomes the most, then that particular ideology will matter more in terms of the worldviews which those students leave their program with. It may not matter if there is considerable resistance if the ideological culture of the social space they are interacting in is stacked against them. How this works in reality is one of the main goals of this research: what is the ideology at different points in the social space of a BSW program? What is the overall ideological culture, and what are the dominant political and economic messages being received by students? Where are their worldviews coming from?

Another of Bourdieu's concepts that informs this project, and that is helpful in understanding the taken-for-granted assumptions in a given program or institution (such as a BSW program), is "doxa." Bourdieu's concept of doxa refers to "a set of fundamental beliefs which does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma" (Bourdieu 2000:16). This set of unquestioned beliefs is shared by a large group of people within a field and shapes the manner in which we interpret the world; it restricts the manner in which we are able to interpret the world, creating very limited understanding based upon narrowly-defined preconceived categories which are viewed as legitimate. What results is conventional wisdom and unquestioned

“common sense” that influences the manner in which we interpret the world very narrowly as to maintain specific perspectives and rule out countless possible alternative perspectives. This is useful when thinking of the field of social welfare, which incorporates unquestioned beliefs from the larger culture into the culture of social welfare, which also has its own set of beliefs and practices. One important goal of this project is to understand how individual preferences, culture, and federal and state welfare policy are mediated through the doxa of a BSW program.

Bourdieu’s notion of habitus refers to the manner in which our position in the social hierarchy influences our perceptions, attitudes, practice and experiences; the habitus is the “internalization of externality” (Bourdieu 1990b:55) where our social position and experiences “become durably incorporated in the body in the form of permanent dispositions” (Bourdieu 1993b:86). Different social classes are socialized and inculcated in such manner as to lead them to act out their social class position, helping to perpetuate the class system. Furthermore, it is not only our attitudes and perceptions that are influenced, but our bodies as well; we also come to embody our social class positions. People have a significant amount of individual agency, but their actions and perceptions must also be understood by their position in the social hierarchy and how that influences their perspective. Our habitus influences much of the unquestioned “common sense” that helps us interpret and understand the world around us. Bourdieu asserts that, “As an acquired system of generative schemes, the habitus makes possible the free production of all thoughts, perceptions and actions inherent in the condition of its production” (Bourdieu 1990b:55).

If we think of the social structure as geographic space, being positioned at a different point in geographic space presents the viewer with a completely different view of the world; for instance, if two individuals are standing at different points in the same classroom, and are facing in different directions, their perception and experience will be different and highly dependent on where they are standing in that room and which direction they are facing. Bourdieu asserts that, "Points of view depend on the point from which they are taken, since the vision that every agent has of space depends on his or her position in that space" (Bourdieu 1990a:131). This study considers many contexts (culture, BSW programs, welfare policy, etc.), but individual beliefs are important as well and habitus thus becomes an important concept.

Empirical studies reveal that early childhood experiences have a profound and often disproportionate impact on long-term dispositions, life chances, and outcomes, something Bourdieu incorporates into his theoretical work. Bourdieu argues that an individual's habitus "tends to ensure its own defence against change through the selection it makes within new information by rejecting information capable of calling into question accumulated information" (Bourdieu 1990b:60-61). Bourdieu goes on to note that, "Through the systematic 'choices' it makes among the places, events and people that might be frequented, the habitus tends to protect itself from crises and critical challenges by providing itself with a milieu to which it is as pre-adapted as possible, that is, a relatively constant universe of situations tending to reinforce its dispositions" (Bourdieu 1990b:60-61).

Bourdieu argued that countless social classes existed in a given society based on "their overall volume of capital, understood as the set of actually usable resources

and powers—economic capital, cultural capital and also social capital” (Bourdieu 1984:114). Although each form of capital is different, they can each be converted into other forms of capital (having a large amount of cultural capital, for instance, can help one gain economic capital). Economic capital is the “root of all the other types of capital” (Bourdieu 1990a:252), and consists of economic assets, such as wealth and property. Cultural capital consists of both formal competence (such as educational credentials), and informal cultural competence (tastes, habits, knowledge, etc.), with the upper class legitimizing their cultural competencies as superior and more worthy of social rewards. These competencies can be employed in different social interactions to gain an advantage (or face disadvantage). Specific types of cultural competency are rewarded in society, and our level of cultural competency is inherited from our parents. Social capital refers to social network connections and the opportunities that they afford. In the U.S., many job opportunities are gained through these types of connections, underscoring the importance of social capital.

Although much of Bourdieu’s analyses focus on economic, cultural, and social capital, he theorizes other forms of capital that are also important in understanding society. One such form of capital is symbolic capital. Symbolic capital concerns a person’s prestige and reputation (Bourdieu 1984:291) which is “recognized as legitimate, that is, misrecognized as capital” (Bourdieu 1990b:118). We can use as an example the question of where we look for experts on matters of economics. When large media institutions are reporting on economic issues, their journalists are not often experts in the field of economics, so they may seek commentary from people who are perceived to be experts, such as economists, who possess a large amount of symbolic

capital regarding issues of the economy. Their opinions are of course highly subjective and require a large amount of interpretation of data, but by virtue of their symbolic capital they are often given legitimacy on these issues. This is helpful when evaluating the ideological culture of a social institution addressing an economic issue such as poverty. A BSW program is preparing their students to deal with impoverished individuals, and they depend upon the analyses of experts to help mold the perspectives of their students who will eventually be in the field. During interviews I asked students which expert opinions they respected in regards to poverty, and the role of symbolic capital in this evaluation was critical. In my later discussion of Noam Chomsky and his criticism of modern economics, it is unclear whether these expert opinions represent objective reality or whether they serve power under the guise of “objective” and “disinterested” scientific evaluation by people who possess symbolic capital (and thus earn the trust of the public and justify otherwise unjustifiable domination). The concept of symbolic capital is very helpful in understanding how inequality is reproduced, highlighting whose opinions get heard in the different sciences, for instance (such as the disproportionate value of economic insights from economists versus those of sociologists).

Bourdieu wrote extensively about the role of education in modern society and argued that the educational system is the principle stratifying force in modern society, consecrating “social distinctions by constituting them as academic distinctions” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:201); in fact, he urged sociologists to “determine the contribution made by the educational system to the reproduction of the structure of power relationships and symbolic relationships between social classes” (Bourdieu

1973:71). The main functions of the school system are to conserve, inculcate, and consecrate the dominant culture in a given society, and to reproduce and legitimate existing inequality through the maintenance of class relations (although the reproduction and legitimation of the class system is misrecognized as meritocratic and based on the efforts of free individuals). The school is an “institution specifically contrived to conserve, transmit and inculcate the cultural canons of a society” (Bourdieu 1971:178).

One of the most important forms of capital according to Bourdieu, cultural capital, is both produced and transmitted by educational institutions—and this importance is supported by substantial empirical correlations between social class and educational outcomes (and labor market outcomes). Bourdieu argues that the school system, to a large extent, simply perpetuates the existing social order and maintains differences in cultural capital that children inherit from their parents. He argues that the acceptable knowledge, that is types of knowledge and the categories and classifications through which we interpret the world, are socialized into the minds of children through the school system. While Bourdieu does highlight the role of individual agency in much of his theoretical work, it is clear that many of these categories and classifications are influenced and shaped by those in power, and serve their interests.

Bourdieu notes that “the educational capital held at a given moment expresses, among other things, the economic and social level of the family of origin” (Bourdieu 1984:105). Here he emphasizes the manner in which social class differences are maintained and perpetuated by the educational system, a system which is misrecognized as a meritocratic institution. This is done in large part due to the transmission of differential levels of cultural capital from parents to children, and the

manner in which schools reward the accumulation of specific types of cultural capital. Bourdieu theorized that educational institutions, like many other institutions in society, reflect the social hierarchy and maintain it, contrary to the American narrative that schools are the ultimate leveling force; Bourdieu argues that “the educational system directly contributes to the reproduction of social classifications” (Bourdieu 1996:121). Bourdieu goes on to expand upon how the educational system is misrecognized as meritocratic, arguing that:

[Educational institutions perpetuate] the preexisting social order, that is, the gap between pupils endowed with unequal amounts of cultural capital. More precisely, by a series of selection operations, the system separates holders of inherited cultural capital from those who lack it. Differences of aptitude being inseparable from social differences according to inherited capital, the system thus tends to maintain preexisting social differences. (Bourdieu 1998:20)

Bourdieu, referencing Weber, notes that those in power need “a theoretical justification of the fact that they are privileged” (Bourdieu 2010:119). In discussing modern economics, neoliberalism, and what he believes to be the “myth” of globalization, Bourdieu identifies some of the theories and ideas that justify modern power and domination; he is particularly critical of the field of economics for providing justification for “policies that are scientifically unjustifiable and politically unjustified” (Bourdieu 2010:176). Bourdieu asserts that the West promotes an “imperialism of the universal” where it spreads its policies (such as free-market capitalism) around the world, acting as if it has a “monopoly of reason” (Bourdieu 2010:100); Bourdieu argues that this is nothing more than “abuses of power which are armed or justified by reason (economic, scientific, or any other)” (Bourdieu 2010:101). Those in power justify a significant amount of destruction and oppression, according to Bourdieu, by legitimizing

their actions “from academic qualifications and from the authority of science, especially economics” (Bourdieu 2010:104). Bourdieu asserts that the economics profession, for the most part, is “a profession in which very few are concerned with social reality or indeed with reality at all” (Bourdieu 2010:149). Bourdieu argues that economists are using mathematics to justify all sorts of policies and actions, asserting that “the work of rationalization—giving reasons to justify things that are often unjustifiable—has now found a very powerful instrument in mathematical economics” (Bourdieu 2010:129).

Bourdieu posits that the modern conservative movement “calls itself neoliberal, thereby giving itself a scientific air, and the capacity to act as theory” (Bourdieu 2010:128). He argues that, in modern times, the state nobility “preaches the withering away of the state and the undivided reign of the market” (Bourdieu 2010:105). One primary goal of neoliberalism, according to Bourdieu, is to destroy the social welfare functions of the state, “the ‘left hand’ of the state, which, as can easily be shown, safeguards the interests of the dominated, the culturally and economically dispossessed, women, stigmatized ethnic groups, etc.” (Bourdieu 2010:197). Using the word “utopia” in reference to neoliberal economics (a word that is so often negatively associated with people attempting to promote the interests of the social), Bourdieu describes neoliberalism as a “utopia of unlimited exploitation” that “is pure mathematical fiction” (Bourdieu 2010:160). He notes that neoliberal proponents (or “ideologues,” as he calls them) try to mislead the public into believing that “the economic and social world is structured by equations” (Bourdieu 2010:113). Bourdieu describes neoliberal economic theory as ideology rather than science, ideology “which dresses up simply conservative thought in the guise of pure reason” (Bourdieu 2010:129). In his view,

neoliberal ideology “is a very smart and very modern repackaging of the oldest ideas of the oldest capitalists” (Bourdieu 2010:112). Proponents of this ideology argue that we have arrived at the end of ideology and history, since the “natural” laws of the economy and society have been discovered and nothing is logically left for us to do but obviously to adhere to them. In contemporary Western societies, such as the U.S., neoliberalism has “succeeded as presenting itself as self-evident” and “dresses up the most classic presuppositions of conservative thought of all times and all countries in economic rationalizations” (Bourdieu 2010:108). The supposed “experts” who espouse this ideology and heavily influence the public mind “utter a fatalistic discourse which consists of transforming economic tendencies into destiny” (Bourdieu 2010:129). Neoliberalism has gradually been inculcated in the public mind in Western societies like the U.S., Britain, and France, through the work of intellectuals, journalists, businessmen, and politicians, to the point where its assumptions are taken-for-granted (Bourdieu 2010:108-109). The new mindset being inculcated in these societies “ratifies and glorifies the reign of what are called the financial markets, in other words the return of a kind of radical capitalism, with no other law than that of maximum profit, an unfettered capitalism without any disguise” (Bourdieu 2010:113).

Bourdieu argues that the term “globalization” is a simultaneously a myth and a powerful discourse, which is merely “the imposition on the entire world of the neoliberal tyranny of the market and the undisputed rule of the economy and of economic powers, within which the United States occupies a dominant position” (Bourdieu 2010:173). Bourdieu argues that the discourse of globalization is “the main weapon in the battles against the gains of the welfare state” (Bourdieu 2010:112). It is a discourse that helps

capitalists implement policies that they have always dreamed of, including: nightwork, weekend work, irregular work hours, and less-secure jobs (Bourdieu 2010:112,153). Bourdieu argues that the conservative “revolution” that occurred under the likes of Thatcher and Reagan was not a revolution but a restoration of powerful groups in society in their quest to return to unrestrained capitalism. The supposed “natural” and “necessary” negative consequences of globalization (which capitalists justify through globalization discourse and “legitimate” economic theories) resulted due to opportunities of modernity (technological advances, for instance) that have allowed capitalists to pit workers against each other on a global scale. Globalization and the race-to-the-bottom with wages is not inevitable; it has always been the dream of capitalists, with the implementation being realized through technological advances.

Like many of the theorists and scholars that I discuss, Bourdieu is critical of mass media institutions. The field of journalism, according to Bourdieu, tries to present itself as objective and apart from society, but he maintains that it is influenced by the social order like every other social institution. Journalists are “dependent on external forces” and are “subject to the decrees of the market and the opinion poll” (Bourdieu 1998b:53) as they “suffer under the pressure to make concessions to the market” (Bourdieu 1998b:73). Those involved in the field of journalism fall victim to “the seduction of economic and political powers, at the expense of those intent on defending the principles and the values of their professions” (Bourdieu 1998b:70). Once the public and other news organizations deem a story newsworthy, conformity ensues as countless media outlets attempt to gain their share of the economic market.

Journalists are also beholden to their bosses, and journalists censor themselves and present a particular view of the world according to what they deem acceptable to those in power; Bourdieu notes that, “Consciously or unconsciously, people censor themselves—they don’t need to be called into line” (1998b:15). Journalists are wise enough to realize, without direct decree from their bosses, what the boundaries are of acceptable journalism (in terms of which stories to report, how to frame those stories, what acceptable frames of interpretation are, etc.); they are wise enough because of self-preservation, or the desire to keep one’s job. The narrow range of acceptable positions presented in the media hardly represent every possible alternative, but represent the range that is acceptable to those in power (and this very narrow range is falsely celebrated as a free debate of ideas).

Bourdieu notes that, “Television enjoys a de facto monopoly on what goes into the heads of a significant part of the population and what they think” (Bourdieu 1998b:18), and that the field of journalism “produces and imposes on the public a very particular vision of the political field” (Bourdieu 2010:4). Journalists help to project “onto the public their own inclinations and their own views” (Bourdieu 2010:5). Like Chomsky’s view that ideas are presented through the media within a certain spectrum of thinkable thought, Bourdieu argues that major media institutions decide what is news and the bounds within which different news items are to be talked about and thought about; he writes that, “This sort of game of mirrors reflecting one another produces a formidable effect of mental closure” (Bourdieu 1998b:24).

## **Noam Chomsky**

Noam Chomsky's work is very helpful when attempting to understand the role of different institutions (such as government, the media, the educational system, etc.) in influencing discourse and ideologies, as well as in the maintenance of inequality and domination. Through a complex process that Chomsky explores at great length, myriad institutions shape the messages we receive and the things that we think, leading to a "highly indoctrinated society where elementary truths are easily buried" (Chomsky 1987:128). Powerful interests do not need to tell people what to think when so many institutions socialize citizens from a very early age to adopt ideas that legitimize those in power; Chomsky notes that, "Most oppression succeeds because its legitimacy is internalized" (Barsamian and Chomsky 2001:165). "I'm sure that overwhelmingly people who are supportive of atrocious acts of power and privilege," Chomsky argues, "do believe and convince themselves that it was the right thing to do, which is extremely easy" (Barsamian and Chomsky 2001:167). Chomsky asserts that those in power have won a "tremendous achievement" by inculcating "their assumptions as the perspective from which you look at the world. Sometimes it's done extremely consciously, like the public relations industry. Sometimes it's just kind of routine, the way you live" (Barsamian and Chomsky 2001:166). Chomsky argues that business interests in the U.S. control the dominant ideology, and have been very successful through propaganda and indoctrination in "depriving people of any awareness of their own rights and history" (Chomsky 1994b:41).

Chomsky notes that, "The more 'free and popular' a government, the more it becomes necessary to rely on control of opinion to ensure submission to the rulers" (Chomsky 1999:44). Chomsky asserts that the powerful classes in all societies exert a

disproportionate and illegitimate amount of control over the population, in democratic and nondemocratic societies alike—the difference is in the methods of control. In modern democratic societies like the U.S., then, what people think must be controlled and manipulated through consent instead of force. Chomsky asserts that in modern democracies, “The general population must be excluded entirely from the economic arena, where what happens in society is largely determined” (Chomsky 1999:44). Whatever limited power the public has in the political arena is overshadowed by their complete submission to the economic decisions and actions of the elites. Chomsky contends that, “When the resources of violence are limited [as is generally the case in the U.S., where consent cannot be won most times by force], the consent of the governed must be obtained by the devices called ‘manufacture of consent’” (Chomsky 1999:45). Chomsky goes on to discuss the work of Edward Bernays:

[Bernays observed that] ‘the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society.’ To carry out this essential task, ‘the intelligent minorities must make use of propaganda continuously and systematically,’ because they alone ‘understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses’ and can ‘pull the wires which control the public mind.’ Therefore, our ‘society has consented to permit free competition to be organized by leadership and propaganda,’ another case of ‘consent without consent.’ Propaganda provides the leadership with a mechanism to ‘mold the mind of the masses’ so that ‘they will throw their newly gained strength in the desired direction.’ The leadership can ‘regiment the public mind every bit as much as an army regiments the bodies of its soldiers.’ This process of ‘engineering consent’ is the very ‘essence of the democratic process,’ Bernays wrote. (Chomsky 1999:53)

Chomsky contends that some systems rule by violence and are more concerned with controlling people’s actions (such as totalitarian systems), and some rule by manufacturing consent and are more concerned with influencing what people think (such as in democratic systems); Chomsky asserts that, “Propaganda is to democracy

what violence is to totalitarianism. The techniques have been honed to a fine art, far beyond anything that Orwell dreamt of” (Chomsky 1987:136). Chomsky explains this notion further:

[In democratic systems those in power must] control not only what people do, but also what they think. Since the state lacks the capacity to ensure obedience by force, thought can lead to action and therefore the threat to order must be excised at the source. It is necessary to establish a framework for possible thought that is constrained within the principles of the state religion. These need not be asserted; it is better that they be presupposed, as the unstated framework for thinkable thought. The critics reinforce this system by tacitly accepting these doctrines, and confining their critique to tactical questions that arise within them. . . It is because of their notable contribution to thought control that the critics are tolerated, indeed honored—that is, those who play by the rules. (Chomsky 1987:132)

This quote concerned the role of the U.S. in international affairs, but the sentiment is one that runs through all of Chomsky’s critiques of ideological institutions. By influencing what we think, those in power prevent the general population “from seeing what we observe, from knowledge and understanding of the world in which we live” (Chomsky 1987:136). He notes that threats must be “excised at the source;” in terms of threats to the economic order, this means shaping what we see as legitimate economic domination (the supposed American meritocracy), so that we never question the resulting economic arrangements. In democratic systems, “brainwashing under freedom” occurs, to which nearly everyone is “subjected and which all too often we serve as willing or unwitting instruments” (Chomsky 1987:136). Chomsky contends that “the ideological system operates within very narrow constraints and those who do not accept them are effectively excluded. Debate is permitted, even encouraged, as long as it adopts the fundamental principles of the ideological system” (Chomsky 1987b:123).

The very narrow range of possibilities is what Chomsky refers to as “the framework for thinkable thought” (Chomsky 1987b:127).

Chomsky is highly critical of modern economics and the academic institutions that perpetuate their ideologies, essentially characterizing economics departments in U.S. colleges and universities as “ideological institutions” (Chomsky 2002i:255). Chomsky refers to modern economics as a “weapon of class warfare,” with the main goal of removing the notion from people’s minds “that they had an automatic ‘right to live’ beyond what they could win for themselves in the labor market” (Chomsky 2002i:252). Chomsky admits that the ideology of modern economics and free markets is very useful to those in power because “it’s a weapon against the general population here, because it’s an argument against social spending, and it’s a weapon against poor people. . . nobody really pays attention to this stuff when it comes to actual planning—and no one ever has” (Chomsky 2002i:256). Modern economics, according to Chomsky, is an ideological weapon developed by those in power to legitimate their authority and justify the oppression of those below them in the social hierarchy. To Chomsky, modern economics is not really a legitimate science or a serious scientific field more than it is a flexible ideology; he notes that “the ‘science’ [of modern Western economics] happens to be a very flexible one: you can change it to do whatever you feel like, it’s that kind of ‘science’” (Chomsky 2002i:253,258). Chomsky notes that, “The real hot-shot economics departments are interested in abstract models of how a pure free-enterprise economy works—you know, generalizations in ten-dimensional space of some nonexistent free-market system” (Chomsky 2002h:241). When discussing economics and free markets, Chomsky contends that “we have to first separate ideology from practice, because to

talk about a free market at this point is something of a joke. Outside of ideologues, the academy and the press, no one thinks that capitalism is a viable system, and nobody has thought that for sixty or seventy years—if ever” (Chomsky 1994:9).

Discussing the vilification of socialism and planned economies, Chomsky rejects the notion that the U.S. is, or ever was, a free market, noting that “there isn’t any true capitalist society in the world, but there are variations” (Chomsky 2002g:210). To Chomsky, all of the talk about free markets is an intellectual game as well as a mask for misrecognized power and domination—these markets have never existed in reality, only in theory. The U.S., according to Chomsky, “is not truly a capitalist society; no such system could long survive, for reasons that have been well understood, most clearly within business circles, for a century” (Chomsky 1987b:114). He argues that the U.S. economy is a mixture of protectionist, interventionist, free market, and liberal measures (Chomsky 1994:10), arguing that, “All the way back to the origins of American society, business has insisted on a powerful, interventionist state to support its interests, and it still does” (Chomsky 1994b:57). Chomsky asserts that:

There are lots of planned economies—the United States is a planned economy, for example. I mean, we talk about ourselves as a ‘free market,’ but that’s baloney. The only parts of the U.S. economy that are internationally competitive are the planned parts, the state-subsidized parts—like capital-intensive agriculture (which has a state-guaranteed market as a cushion in case there are excesses); or high-technology industry (which is dependent on the Pentagon system); or pharmaceuticals (which is massively subsidized by publicly-funded research). Those are the parts of the U.S. economy that are functioning well. (Chomsky 2002f:195)

He asserts that powerful business interests in the U.S. demand state intervention in the economy to protect their interests, both domestically and internationally; only when the state competes with the interests of business does business protest (Chomsky

1987b:114). Chomsky goes on to note that, “Talk about ‘free trade’ is fine in editorials, but nobody actually practices it in reality: in every modern economy, the taxpayers are made to subsidize the private corporations, who keep the profits for themselves” (Chomsky 2002h:240). Business interests in the U.S. have a love-hate relationship with the state, as they desire “a strong state to serve its needs, a state capable of intervening in domestic affairs and the international system; it wants a weak state that will not interfere with private privilege” (Chomsky 1987b:115). Throughout history, Chomsky argues, business interests have either embraced or rejected state intervention based entirely on how that intervention serves the power of business interests at any given moment. He contends that, “Business wants the popular aspects of government, the ones that actually serve the population, beaten down, but it also wants a very powerful state, one that works for it and is removed from public control” (Chomsky 1996:34).

Chomsky relies on extensive analysis of economic history to detail the heavy role of the state in the economic development of such powerful economies as the U.S. Chomsky answers his own question of how most of Europe and those who escaped its control [i.e., the U.S.] succeeded in developing by stating that, “Part of the answer seems clear: by radically violating approved free market doctrine” (Chomsky 1999:30). “Standard economic history,” Chomsky states, “recognizes that state intervention has played a central role in economic growth” (Chomsky 1999:30). In the Western world, societies always attempted to protect themselves from market discipline, and the ones that did had the most success in development (Chomsky 1999:34). The history of economic development in the U.S. would have been much different if not for Native

American genocide, slavery, massive protectionist economic policies and state intervention in the economy, military protection of energy resources abroad, access to resources abroad, and disruption of economic competition and trade abroad (Chomsky 1999:30-36). “If it hadn’t been for massive government interference,” Chomsky argues, “our automobile, steel and semiconductor industries probably wouldn’t even exist today. The aerospace industry is even more thoroughly socialized” (Chomsky 1996:30).

Chomsky contends that, “As far as I can see, the principles of classical economics in effect are still taught: I don’t think what’s taught in the University of Chicago Economics Department today is all that different. . . and it doesn’t have any more validity than it had in the early nineteenth century—in fact, it has even less. . . today those assumptions have no relation to reality” (Chomsky 2002i:253-254). Chomsky goes on to discuss how the assumptions that underpin modern economic theory are completely false, stating that “they’re the opposite of truth. . . nothing in these abstract economic models actually works in the real world. . . the whole enterprise is totally rotten at the core: it has no relation to reality anymore—and furthermore, it never did” (Chomsky 2002i:254-255). Chomsky notes that, “There is not a single case on record in history of any country that has developed successfully through adherence to ‘free market’ principles: none. Certainly not the United States” (Chomsky 2002i:255). Yet, economically marginalized people in the U.S. are led to believe that they must adhere to this system of rules that doesn’t exist for everyone else, certainly not those in power.

Chomsky is highly critical of neoliberalism, which seems to be the dominant strain of economic thought in the U.S. today. “Neoliberal doctrines,” Chomsky asserts,

“undermine education and health, increase inequality, and reduce labor’s share in income, that much is not seriously in doubt” (Chomsky 1999:32). Neoliberal thought, or “The Washington Consensus,” is based on the following general principles: maximum economic growth, a separation of the economic world from the social world, the liberalization of trade and finance, prices set by markets, strict limits on inflation, focus on privatization in as many sectors as possible and as little government intervention in the economy as possible, considerable limitations on the cost and scope of social services, stability of currencies, and balanced budgets (Chomsky 1999:20).

Chomsky notes that architects of this fervent push towards neoliberalism “are the masters of the private economy, mainly huge corporations that control much of the international economy and have the means to dominate policy formation as well as the structuring of thought and opinion” (Chomsky 1999:20). The effects of neoliberalism are uneven: positive in some places, negative in others, and still mixed in others. In some countries where positive results are reported, those results come in the form of per capita income, which often ignores how per capita income is inflated by disproportionate wealth at the top despite horrible and deteriorating conditions at the bottom. Chomsky notes two examples, Brazil and Mexico, where neoliberal reform benefited a few at the very top of society while devastating those at the bottom (Chomsky 1999:26-28). Mexico’s neoliberal reforms led to the collapse of wages and increases in poverty at the same time that the reforms were hailed due to the successes of a handful of billionaires (Chomsky 1999:27-28).

Chomsky notes that while the U.S. eagerly pushes neoliberal policies abroad, it has also been trying to implement a version of this doctrine domestically:

For most of the U.S. population, incomes have stagnated or declined in the fifteen years along with working conditions and job security, continuing through economic recovery, an unprecedented phenomenon. Inequality has reached levels unknown for seventy years, far beyond other industrial countries. The United States has the highest level of child poverty of any industrial society, followed by the rest of the English-speaking world. So the record continues through the familiar list of third world maladies. Meanwhile the business press cannot find adjectives exuberant enough to describe the 'dazzling' and 'stupendous' profit growth, though admittedly the rich face problems too: a headline in Business Week announces 'The Problem Now: What to Do with All That Cash,' as 'surging profits' are 'overflowing the coffers of Corporate America,' and dividends are booming.' (Chomsky 1999:28)

Profits were growing at a staggering rate while payrolls did not keep up much at all.

While these extraordinary profits were being accumulated, workforces were being slashed and full-time work was being converted into more "flexible" part-time work; this work was less secure and came with fewer benefits (Chomsky 1999:28).

Chomsky has written extensive critiques of media institutions, perhaps most notably in the book that he coauthored with Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (2002). Herman and Chomsky argue that, "The media serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them," thus defending and legitimizing the economic, social, and political interests, positions, and agendas of the most powerful in society (Herman and Chomsky 2002:xi). These powerful groups in societies have specific agendas and principles that they want disseminated through media institutions, which is accomplished by "the selection of right-thinking personnel and by the editors' and working journalists' internalization of priorities and definitions of news-worthiness that conform to the institution's policy" (Herman and Chomsky 2002:xi). The authors go on to explain that the interests of those who have ownership and control over the media

matters, as well as the interest of those who fund media (advertisers); media also serves the interests of powerful people in society who have relationships with media institutions and “make the news and have the power to define it and explain what it means” (Herman and Chomsky 2002:xi). Experts are consulted who are able to “confirm the official slant on the news, and to fix the basic principles and ideologies that are taken for granted by media personnel and the elite” (Herman and Chomsky 2002:xi). The authors argue that the same people who control the media also control the basic taken-for-granted principles and dominant ideologies within a given society. The authors admit that the propaganda model does not ensure universally “simple and homogenous results,” with some room for limited dissent and autonomy (Herman and Chomsky 2002:xii); they argue, however, that dissenting viewpoints are kept within a very limited range of debate deemed acceptable by those in power, thus giving the illusion that there is wide debate when in fact a very limited portion of the spectrum of possibilities is being represented (intentionally as a tool of propaganda). The end result of this propaganda is not always in the direction that was intended (and in some cases public opinion varies sharply from elite opinion), but media institutions still have a large role to play in shaping public opinion and often move the debate in ways advantageous to those in power.

Herman and Chomsky argue that a major function of mass media institutions is to inculcate the general public with values and beliefs that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society; the media propagandize and shape the dominant ideologies that justify and legitimate the dominant elite (Herman and Chomsky 2002:1). In the U.S., those with money and power are able to “filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to

get their messages across to the public” (Herman and Chomsky 2002:2). The propaganda model is successful through the use of five “filters,” according to the authors: (1) the size, concentrated ownership, and profit orientation of dominant mass-media institutions, (2) advertising as primary source of funding, (3) reliance on so-called ‘experts’ funded and approved by those in power, and information from the government and the business community, (4) discipline of the media through ‘flak,’ and (5) anti-communism as a national religion and mechanism of control (Herman and Chomsky 2002:2). All of these filters interact with and reinforce each other. News stories must pass through all of these filters, and what remains is what we the general public consume as news. These filters “narrow the range of news that passes through the gates, and even more sharply limit what can become ‘big news”” (Herman and Chomsky 2002:31). Those in power “fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy in the first place, and they explain the basis and operations of what amount to propaganda campaigns” (Herman and Chomsky 2002:2). Journalists and other members of the mass media establishment have internalized these filters so fully that they do not explicitly acknowledge when they are at work. This allows them to believe they are acting independently and objectively, when in fact what they report and how they report it are heavily influenced by the interests of power.

Herman and Chomsky go on to note that, with the fall of the Soviet Union, the “miracle of the market” has become a super-dominant ideological force propagated by media institutions. The push for ever-increasing privatization and the rule of the market has increased, “so that regardless of evidence, markets are assumed to be benevolent and even democratic,” an ideology that is pervasive among the elite (Herman and

Chomsky 2002:xviii). Any non-market mechanisms are vilified, “although exceptions are allowed when private firms need subsidies, bailouts, and government help in doing business abroad” (Herman and Chomsky 2002:xviii).

Within the “Propaganda Model,” Chomsky contends that media institutions in the U.S. “present a picture of the world which defends and inculcates the economic, social, and political agendas of the privileged groups that dominate the domestic economy, and who therefore also largely control the government” (Chomsky 2002b:15). In any given news story, the manner in which that the story is framed (including what is reported, what is left out, how the issues are manipulated, etc.) leaves out a wide-range of alternative explanations in favor of a narrow-range of interpretations that tend to serve power. Contemporary media institutions, according to Chomsky, “present things within a framework that serves the interests of the dominant institutions” in society (Chomsky 2002b:13). Chomsky notes, like many of the other theorists and scholars that I discuss, that imposing belief systems by force is not all that effective in modern societies; Chomsky contends that, “There has been a deepening recognition among elites in the West that as you begin to lose the power to control people by force, you have to start to control what they think,” going on to say that “precisely because the state has lost the power to coerce, elites need to have more effective propaganda to control the public mind” (Chomsky 2002b:16). Chomsky asserts that “there is a complex system of filters in the media and educational institutions which ends up ensuring that dissident perspectives are weeded out, or marginalized in one way or another” (Chomsky 2002b:13). In this way the interests of the elite are served by media institutions, but this fact is generally misrecognized by the population at large.

As a prime example, one manufactured crisis that Chomsky discusses is the “crisis” over what to do about Social Security. This issue is informative in how the debate is structured in favor of the elite, the powerful, and the wealthy, and the role of the media in disseminating the supposed limited number of choices to the public. When Chomsky discusses the recent manufactured crisis over Social Security, he refers to it as “pure ideology” (Barsamian and Chomsky 2001:95). Chomsky contends that powerful opponents of Social Security have been successful in shaping the debate, convincing most Americans that a serious crisis is present when one does not exist; he considers this a major victory “for those who hope to destroy Social Security, revealing once again the effectiveness of a flood of carefully contrived propaganda amplified by the media in a business-run society where institutionalized deceit has been refined to a high art” (Chomsky 2006:248). Chomsky asserts that media institutions have helped propagate this fictional predicament, having “concocted a ‘fiscal crisis’ that is mostly imaginary” (Chomsky 2007:129). Chomsky notes that the real crisis is not whether Social Security, with some minor modifications, can pay promised benefits; the problem is that the total wage income that is taxed to fund the system, which Social Security depends upon, is declining (Barsamian and Chomsky 2001:97). Because of increasing income inequality, and the cap on the amount of earnings that are taxed for Social Security (simultaneously occurring with rapidly exploding healthcare costs), the system is not able to collect adequate funds. Chomsky contends that, “There’s an easy answer for that: raise the cap, or get rid of it” (Barsamian and Chomsky 2001:97). Chomsky also notes that “there are plenty of other answers, like more progressive taxation” (Barsamian and Chomsky 2001:97). Because the “crisis” is manufactured, Chomsky

asserts that Social Security is broken “only on the basis of extremely weird assumptions. If you take any realistic assumption, it’s well under control as far ahead as anybody can see” (Barsamian and Chomsky 2001:97), noting that only “a slightly more progressive tax system could keep Social Security functioning for the indefinite future” (Chomsky 1996:29). Powerful interests have shaped the debate on Social Security and kept this reality from surfacing, however, in effect convincing Americans (falsely) that the choices being discussed are the only ones available; in fact, there are other (better) alternatives. The number of “thinkable thoughts” within the Social Security debate is skewed in the direction of the powerful, so that more often than not the available choices being debated would change Social Security in a manner that benefits powerful interests and the wealthy. This does not mean that Social Security will inevitably be changed at the expense of the middle- and lower-classes, or that there is nothing that can be done to keep the system running in some manner similar to its current form; what it means is that the debate has been limited in such a manner that benefits those in power. Something can be done to benefit all people in a more effective manner, but the powerful in society have a disproportionately loud voice in the debate and therefore are more likely to “win” an outcome suitable for them. “Social Security is of little value to the rich,” Chomsky explains, “but is crucial for survival for working people, the poor, their dependents, and the disabled. For the wealthy, it is an irrelevant pittance” (Chomsky 2006:249). Because Social Security is of little value to the rich and powerful in society, “it is therefore natural that it should be dispatched to the flames” (Chomsky 2006:249).

Media institutions propagate the Social Security crisis myth based on the opinions of the experts and politicians that they depend on for commentary and “expert analysis.” Herman and Chomsky assert that:

The media’s gullibility in accepting the claim of a Social Security system ‘crisis,’ which would require policy action some thirty-seven years ahead if certain conservative guesses were true and a number of easy corrections were ruled out, served the interests of conservative ideologues anxious to weaken a highly successful government program and a security industry eager to benefit from the partial or full privatization of Social Security. (Herman and Chomsky 2002:xlvi)

The very limited debate on this issue, which assumes Social Security is broken and presents one small part of the spectrum of thinkable thoughts on what to do about this ‘crisis,’ serves the interests of the elite, powerful, and wealthy in society. This opinion (that Social Security is broken and needs to be fixed in a very specific manner) is propagated by both experts and media institutions serving and protecting the same elite interests.

Chomsky contends that there exists a “systematic deference of the media towards external power” because the media in the U.S. “represent the same interests that control the state and private economy, and it is therefore not very surprising to discover that they generally act to confine public discussion and understanding to the needs of the powerful and privileged” (Chomsky 1987b:125). Media institutions are major corporations who must please advertisers and investors; to take a subversive role and/or threatening position relative to those in power would be to lose the support of advertisers and investors (Chomsky 1987b:125). Top management tend to be wealthy professionals “who tend naturally to share the perceptions of the privileged and powerful, and who have achieved their position, and maintain it, by having

demonstrated their efficiency in the task of serving the needs of dominant elites” (Chomsky 1987b:125). “By virtue of their associations, class status, aspirations, and so on,” Chomsky argues, “the framework of interpretations, selection of what counts as ‘news,’ permitted opinion, etc.” fall within a range of possibilities acceptable to the interests of the politically and economically powerful in society (Chomsky 1987b:125). Members of media institutions in the U.S., particularly national institutions, “have the choice of conforming or being excluded” (Chomsky 1987b:125). Those that choose to conform internalize the beliefs and attitudes represented in their work.

Chomsky argues that major media institutions are large corporations who sell wealthy and privileged audiences to advertisers. Because of the intended market (advertisers) and the product being sold (wealthy privileged audiences), it is not surprising that “the picture of the world presented reflects the narrow and biased interests and values of the sellers, the buyers and the product” (Chomsky 1986:93). Chomsky argues that the leading figures in major media institutions share class interests and associations with the privileged sectors of society (politicians, big business, etc.). There exists “a regular flow of high-level people among corporations, government and media” (Chomsky 1986:93). Those in power in society have the ability to punish media institutions and/or members that stray too far from orthodoxies that are acceptable to those in power—and so the media are part of “a larger doctrinal system” (Chomsky 1986:94).

This notion of “thinkable thoughts” that I have referred to, that average citizens are socialized to believe that there is a bounded universe of alternatives on any given issue, extends to matters of politics. Chomsky notes that the political spectrum in the

U.S. is very narrow, so that while the left (liberal) and the right (conservative) may appear to be dramatically opposed to each other, the two together represent a very narrow portion of the spectrum of possible political perspectives. Chomsky asserts that, “The political spectrum in the United States, always very narrow, has been reduced to near invisibility” (Chomsky 1999:61). He argues that the U.S. is “unusual in the narrowness of choice afforded within the political system” (Chomsky 1987b:117). “There is no political party based on labor and the poor,” Chomsky argues, so that “to a large degree, the U.S. is a one-party state, where the ruling party has two factions that compete for control of the government” (Chomsky 1987b:117). Media institutions perpetuate this notion that all possible political perspectives are contained within this narrow portion of the true political spectrum. The end result is that political debate and the resulting policies in the U.S. are limited to a small number of possible outcomes. What are labeled as opinions on the left and on the right by the media, according to Chomsky, “represent only a limited debate, which reflects the range of needs of private power—but there’s essentially nothing beyond those ‘acceptable’ positions” (Chomsky 2002b:13). Chomsky explains further:

So what the media do, in effect, is to take the set of assumptions which express the basic ideas of the propaganda system, whether about the Cold War or the economic system or the 'national interest' and so on, and then present a range of debate within that framework—so the debate only enhances the strength of the assumptions, ingraining them in people's minds as the entire possible spectrum of opinion that there is. So you see, in our system what you might call 'state propaganda' isn't expressed as such, as it would be in a totalitarian society—rather it's implicit, it's presupposed, it provides the framework for debate among the people who are admitted into the mainstream discussion. In fact, the nature of Western systems of indoctrination is typically not understood by dictators, they don't understand the utility for propaganda purposes of having 'critical debate' that incorporates the basic assumptions of the official doctrines, and thereby marginalizes and eliminates authentic and rational critical discussion. Under what's sometimes been called 'brainwashing under freedom,' the critics, or at least, the 'responsible critics' make a major contribution to the cause by bounding the debate within certain acceptable limits—that's why they're tolerated, and in fact even honored. (Chomsky 2002b:13)

One of the negative effects of the limited political spectrum in the U.S., and the marginalization of the needs of labor and the poor, is indifference to the political process. "Much of the public is aware of its marginalization and of the essential irrelevance of the political system to its concerns," Chomsky argues, so that "close to half the electorate does not even take the trouble to go to the polls in Presidential elections" (Chomsky 1987b:118). Due to the narrow interests represented by both parties, the poor and unemployed likely "do not consider themselves to be represented within the political system" (Chomsky 1987b:118). Some bemoan the fact that the poor do not go to the polls for elections, and in effect doom themselves to oppressive economic policies; the popular saying goes that if you don't vote, you can't complain about the result. Chomsky's argument is that on any given ballot in the U.S., (more often than not) there does not exist an option that would serve the interests of marginalized groups in society (such as the poor), so that the vote would be

meaningless anyway. Whether the poor show up at the polls or not ignores the fact that both outcomes (voting and not voting) result in the same thing: politicians who care little about the poor and will not change the social order to build a more socially-just society.

Chomsky argues that the terms “left” and “right” in the U.S. have all but lost their meaning, having become “so distorted and irrelevant it’s almost better to throw them out” (Chomsky 1996:120). The propaganda system in the U.S. functions to “deprive terms of meaning. It probably starts at some relatively conscious level and then just gets into your bones. Sometimes it’s done quite deliberately” (Chomsky 1996:121). As an example, Chomsky discusses the disappearance of the word “profits” from much of our economic and political discourse, to be replaced by the word “jobs.” Whenever subsidies to corporations are discussed, or increased Pentagon spending, it is always couched in terms of “jobs for Americans” rather than profits for private industry. Chomsky argues that this is “conscious evacuation of meaning” of which both the right and left are guilty (Chomsky 1996:121-122). On this and countless other issues, there is little difference between the left and right, and the terms all but lose their meaning.

According to Chomsky, when analyzing political discourse, we must look at the dictionary definitions of terms that are used, and then the other meaning—“the doctrinal meaning” (Chomsky 1986:86). To do this one comes to a deeper understanding of our political discourse and how it serves power. One example he uses is the word “democracy.” The dictionary definition of democracy refers to the ability of citizens to participate in affairs that affect them—the doctrinal meaning, however, “refers to a system in which decisions are made by sectors of the business community and related elites. The public are to be only ‘spectators of action,’ not ‘participants’. . . They are

permitted to ratify the decisions of their betters,” and nothing more (Chomsky 1986:87).

Another example Chomsky uses is the term “free enterprise,” which is defined in dictionaries as relating to the practice of very limited government intervention in the economy. In actual practice, however, Chomsky notes that free enterprise refers to “a system of public subsidy and private profit, with massive government intervention in the economy to maintain a welfare state for the rich” (Chomsky 1986:87). Chomsky argues that, “In fact, in acceptable usage, just about any phrase containing the word ‘free’ is likely to mean something like the opposite of its actual meaning” (Chomsky 1986:87).

One final example is “special interests.” Chomsky argues that Republicans often criticize Democrats for excessive influence from special interests such as labor, women, etc. What is conveniently left out of this practical definition, however, are the interests of business and the wealthy (Chomsky 1986:89). These interests are often ignored, never explicitly entering the discourse; if politicians serve the interests of the powerful in society, it is not couched as such, and the fact that they serve those interests is rendered invisible. This is because politicians are “representatives of the owners and managers of the society, who are fighting a bitter class war against the general population” (Chomsky 1986:90). This much is taken-for-granted and out of sight.

Chomsky expands upon this argument further, stating:

To make sense of political discourse, it’s necessary to give a running translation into English, decoding the doublespeak of the media, academic social scientists and the secular priesthood generally. It’s function is not obscure: the effect is to make it impossible to find words to talk about matters of human significance in a coherent way. We can then be sure that little will be understood about how our society works and what is happening in the world. (Chomsky 1986:90-91)

There are multiple forms in which democratic governments and capitalist economies can take, and the two do not necessarily have to go together. In the U.S., that is not always assumed to be the case. Capitalism and democracy are often assumed to go hand-in-hand, and the particular form that the capitalist democracy in the U.S. takes at a given moment is often thought to be the natural and best manifestation (and sometimes given ahistorical character). Americans often think that capitalism can only be organized in one way, the way that it is currently organized in their country (although when you hear the fervent denunciations of China's state-planned capitalism, it is often odd to see this fact ignored). To understand U.S. society, however, we must understand the particular characteristics of how the government and economy work, and why it has taken the particular form that it has.

According to Chomsky, "In a capitalist democracy, the primary concern of everyone must be to ensure that the wealthy are satisfied; all else is secondary" (Chomsky 1987b:116). Chomsky argues that "the range of possibilities is limited in a capitalist democracy in which the public is excluded from participation in the basic decisions concerning production and work" (Chomsky 1987b:123). Decision-making in the domestic economy, domestic politics, international affairs, etc., are not democratically controlled. Chomsky expands upon this argument:

Unless the wants of investors are satisfied, there is no production, no work, no resources available for welfare, in short, no possibility of survival. It is not a matter of 'all or none,' but 'more or less.' Only to the extent that the demands of the wealthy—those who control investment decisions—are satisfied can the population at large hope for a decent existence in their role as servants of private power, who rent themselves to those who own and manage the private economy. This too is a factor of fundamental importance. (Chomsky 1987b:116)

Chomsky argues that by their very nature, capitalist democracies are at their best only a very limited form of democracy (Chomsky 1987b:117).

This project is concerned with the extent to which many of the assumptions of the field of social work are ideological in nature, and Chomsky's "ideological institution" concept is a useful tool in this regard. Chomsky asserts that harmful or undermining revelations about ideological institutions (institutions that are of great use to the powerful in society) will be ignored and/or suppressed (Chomsky 2002b:18), because "no institution is going to help people undermine it" (Chomsky 2002g:205). The media and the educational system in particular operate as "ideological institutions managed by the educated classes" (Chomsky 1987b:118). Systems such as these work and perpetuate themselves and are successful because they are effective in limiting and/or eradicating the things that undermine them and cause them to work in a dysfunctional manner. People actually believe the things that they say and write—it is not that everyone is openly lying—it is that society is a complex system that socializes and inculcates people from an early age to think in a manner that perpetuates the system. This does not work perfectly, and periodically you have moments where the status quo breaks down, power is undermined, and some meaningful social change occurs. Typically, however, in the vast majority of circumstances, society operates in such a way that perpetuates the interests of the powerful. Chomsky notes that, "It's very hard to live with cognitive dissonance: only a real cynic can believe one thing and say another. So whether it's a totalitarian system or a free system, the people who are most useful to the system of power are the ones who actually believe what they say, and they're the ones who will typically make it through" (Chomsky 2002d:112). Chomsky notes that,

“Powerful systems don’t want to be investigated, obviously. Why would they? They don’t want the public to know how they work—maybe the people inside them understand how they work, but they don’t want anybody else to know, because that would threaten and undermine their power. So one should expect institutions to function in such a way as to protect themselves—and some of the ways in which they protect themselves are by various subtle techniques of ideological control” (Chomsky 2002h:242). Following Chomsky’s logic, one might expect social welfare institutions to avoid perpetuating ideologies that would lead to their dysfunction (at least not for very long and/or not on a large scale). To avoid being dysfunctional, it would logically follow that they serve the interests of the state (as well as the elite, powerful, and wealthy). Social welfare policy has explicit and implicit ideologies contained within it. This may be mediated into a different form through the institutional practices and cultures of BSW programs and welfare offices, but we would not expect (according to Chomsky’s logic) them to deviate so completely as to be oppositional. They still serve power, in whatever form this mediated ideology takes.

Chomsky regards academic institutions as ideological institutions which function “to serve power and privilege” (Chomsky 1987:126), contending that intellectuals are “basically commissars [Soviet officials responsible for political indoctrination]—they’re the ideological managers, so they are the ones who feel the most threatened by dissidence” (Chomsky 2002g:206). Chomsky states that “the job of mainstream intellectuals is to serve as a kind of secular priesthood, to ensure that the doctrinal faith is maintained” (Chomsky 2002g:207). Chomsky asserts that the educated classes are “the most profoundly indoctrinated and in a deep sense the most ignorant group, the

victims as well as the purveyors of the doctrines of faith” (Chomsky 1987:126).

Chomsky contends that, “The entire school curriculum, from kindergarten through graduate school, will be tolerated only so long as it continues to perform its institutional role” (Chomsky 2002h:233). One issue for universities pertains to funding: as long as they serve the interests of those who fund them, they will continue to receive funds; once universities stop serving the interests of those who finance them, the funding will disappear (Chomsky 2002h:233). Chomsky asserts that the educational system is complex and certainly not monolithic, but that the “basic institutional role and function of the schools, and why they’re supported, is to provide an ideological service: there’s a real selection for obedience and conformity,” a process that begins as soon as children enter schools in kindergarten to make students “controllable and indoctrinated—and as long as the schools fulfill that role, they’ll be supported” (Chomsky 2002h:236-237).

Chomsky argues that the higher we look in the social hierarchy, the more indoctrinated people become. The poor and marginalized in society understand how power works as well as anyone, but have little control over doing anything about it (this does not mean that they are not victims of ideology and dominant culture, but that it is not as monolithic at the bottom and at least some resistance takes place, even if they still largely submit to many of the dominant explanations for oppression—like individualism). The most indoctrinated individuals in society are those people in positions of power. According to Chomsky, “The educated classes are not only the main targets of the system of indoctrination but also its practitioners; their self-interest dictates that they adopt and believe its doctrines, if they are to be able to fulfill their role as educators, journalists, or ‘responsible intellectuals’ with access to privilege, influence,

and respect” (Chomsky 1987b:119). The assumptions of much of this doctrine makes sense within the experience and/or belief system of the privileged in society, which results in discourse that makes little sense to the middle- and lower-classes, but makes perfect intuitive sense to the ruling classes.

### **David Brady**

David Brady’s “Institutionalized Power Relations Theory” (IPRT) has had a significant influence on the development of this project for many reasons, including the manner in which it (a) incorporates ideology as part of its explanation for the existence of poverty, (b) gives attention to the structural factors that influence poverty, and (c) acknowledges that poverty is ultimately a result of deliberate human decisions and actions. Brady thoroughly details his IPRT in his book (2009), *Rich Democracies, Poor People: How Politics Explain Poverty*. Brady espouses Herbert Gans’s belief that, “The principal subject of poverty research. . . ought to be the forces, processes, agents, institutions, and so on that ‘decide’ that a proportion of the population will end up poor” (Gans 1995:127, in Brady 2009:205). The central question for Brady is: why is poverty so entrenched in some rich democracies, like the U.S., and such a solvable problem<sup>4</sup> in others? He notes that, “Although no other country, perhaps in history, has ascended to the riches of the United States, this country also stands out for having the most poverty among the rich democracies. . . poverty amidst progress continues to be one of the great enigmas of our time” (Brady 2009:165). Brady argues through his extensive empirical research and resulting theory that cross-national and historical variations in poverty are primarily driven by politics. Brady provides strong empirical and theoretical

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<sup>4</sup> Brady explains that, “Many countries have been able to accomplish levels of poverty below 5% of the population, while others struggle with high poverty around 15% of the population” (Brady 2009:165).

support for the notion that poverty and inequality are not natural, unavoidable phenomena but are the result of human decisions and actions and therefore can be changed. Brady makes the case that poverty is not simply an unfortunate outcome of individual failings, labor market conditions, or a society's demographic makeup, but instead:

Societies make collective choices about how to divide their resources. These choices are acted upon in the organizations and states that govern the societies, and then become institutionalized through the welfare state. Where poverty is low, equality has been institutionalized. Where poverty is widespread, as most visibly demonstrated by the United States, there has been a failure to institutionalize equality. . . In sum, institutionalized power relations theory is my answer to this question of the differences in poverty across affluent Western democracies. (Brady 2009:6)

Brady provides empirical support that suggests that his macro-level approach<sup>5</sup> explains poverty better than the dominant individualist approaches utilized in modern social science (particularly the prevalence of the less-explanatory liberal economics across many social science disciplines). Social organization, or the way in which society is organized, explains how resources are distributed. Social organization, such as the nature of resource distribution through markets, can take many forms; some are more equitable than others and many can operate efficiently while still prohibiting considerable levels of inequality.

Brady's IPRT develops from the basic idea that not only does a person's risk of poverty depend upon to whom they are born but where they are born, and the manner in which social organization in that particular national context largely determines their

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<sup>5</sup> Cross-national and historical comparisons at the country level of analysis from 1969-2002 of Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the U.S. (18 total rich democracies—some rich democracies, such as Japan, were excluded because of inadequate data).

poverty risk. By focusing on rich democracies Brady is able to avoid the problematic assumption that, “Rich countries have less poverty, poor countries have more.” All of the countries that he discusses are rich and have the ability to provide a relative level of equality for all; some choose to do so, and some do not. Brady argues that, “We are born into families that predict much of our socioeconomic attainment in life. Yet, even more consequentially, we are born into countries that carry with them a probability of poverty for their citizens” (Brady 2009:3). Not only is there significant variation in poverty rates among rich democracies today, but there is also significant variation in poverty rates within rich democracies historically; countries such as Austria, Denmark, Canada, and the United Kingdom, to name a few, have seen significant changes in poverty rates in just the last few decades alone. Not all of this can be attributed to changing economic conditions, and furthermore, changing economic conditions cannot be separated from a state’s response to such changes (Brady 2009:4).

While personal characteristics are a good predictor of who will be poor in a particular country, there is considerable variation in levels of poverty cross-nationally and historically; simply focusing on personal characteristics does not explain why those characteristics carry such different consequences depending upon where (and when) that individual lives. Brady argues that, “The individualist focus on characteristics neglects why a characteristic is linked to poverty in a social context. Almost no individual characteristic has an unbreakable bond with poverty universally across all affluent Western democracies.” He explains that even single-mother families, often assumed in the U.S. to be naturally and inherently poverty prone, are not disproportionately poor in some affluent democracies; they may be prone to poverty in

the U.S., but that fact should raise more questions about the manner in which resources are distributed in the U.S. than questions about the supposed “nature” of single-mother families. Brady goes on to argue that:

Moreover, the extent to which a characteristic is associated with poverty varies dramatically across countries. . . . If certain characteristics associate with poverty only in some contexts, it tells you at least as much about that context as it does about poverty. . . . Whether and how much an individual characteristic is linked to poverty are questions of politics. (Brady 2009:18)

Brady demonstrated through his empirical analyses that single motherhood is actually not a dominant influence on poverty when utilizing his analytical perspective. Despite this, he finds it “striking how often sociological researchers center their explanations of poverty on the choices of poor mothers and their children” (Brady 2009:168). He finds it quite odd that we spend so much time discussing the choices of groups of people, like single mothers, who have so few choices to pick from. Brady goes on:

If one is realistic about the limited choices these poor mothers and their children actually have, the constraints become more obvious, and more obviously the paramount question. Rather than studying the prevalence of single motherhood, and presuming that single motherhood necessarily must be linked with poverty, we should study why and how welfare states alleviate or fail to alleviate the economic security of single mother families. (Brady 2009:168)

Rather than acknowledging this, poverty research in the U.S. tends to focus on the U.S. only (which is highly problematic) and determine which individual characteristics (such as single motherhood) are associated with relative deprivation in this (unique) national context. If a researcher is not looking at a country as a variable, they will not find it as a cause; instead, the social structure in the U.S. is a normative assumption and is taken-for-granted.

The fact that there is so much more poverty in the U.S. compared to many rich developed nations is not an accident but the result of deliberate human decisions about how society is organized. Brady argues that, rather than focusing on whether or not we should be a capitalist economy, we might ask ourselves why so many other countries can choose to be capitalist while also performing efficiently without the high levels of inequality seen in the U.S. There are many varieties of capitalism that perform well economically while also institutionalizing a much higher level of equality; among rich developed nations, then, the U.S. has made a decision to be “iconically unequal” (Brady 2009:4); Brady explains that, “In every dimension, and for every demographic group, the United States stands out for its distinctively, even iconically, high poverty. . . the United States consistently has about two to three times as much poverty as Western Europe” (Brady 2009:166). Brady notes that:

What is striking about the contemporary world is how much poverty varies across countries. Those born into egalitarian countries are much more likely to be economically secure in their youth, sickness, and old age. . . For the most part, we do not get to choose the probability of poverty we face. . . our societies contextually shape the odds that an individual in a given country will be poor. (Brady 2009:3)

Countries which decide to distribute their resources more equitably might not only be perceived as more socially-just, but also as making conscious decisions to address such poverty- and inequality-related issues such as crime, incarceration rates, suicide, health problems, well-being of children, etc. Brady notes that:

If poverty was lower [in the U.S.], millions more children would have a real chance at the American dream. Conversely, if Europe had poverty levels like the United States, it is not hard to imagine how deeply and irrevocably different life in those countries would be. With this variation in poverty, we are examining some of the most crucial differences between countries that exist in the modern world. (Brady 2009:5)

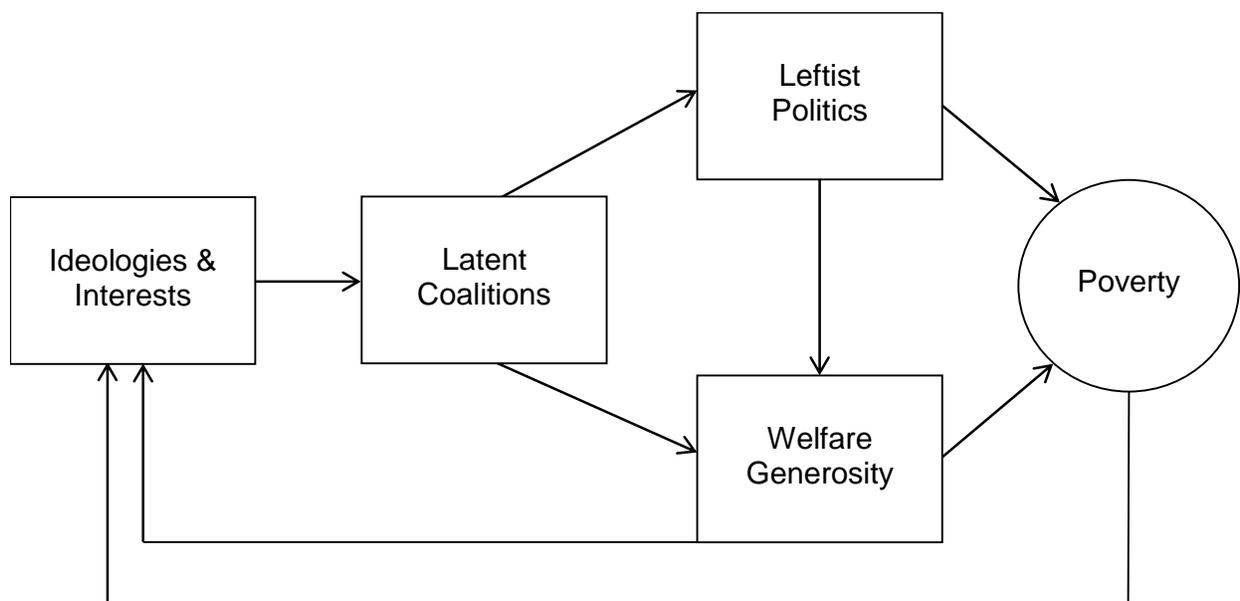
Brady argues that any theory of poverty should be able to explain not only who is at risk of being poor, but why certain levels of poverty exist in the first place regardless of personal characteristics. Theories of poverty should be able to account for the fact that there are considerable variations in levels of poverty and inequality among rich democracies. Instead, the conventional wisdom in poverty research in the U.S. is to only analyze the U.S. and figure out how “different” poor people are from nonpoor people; if we can pinpoint the characteristics which they do not share, the conventional wisdom holds, then we can explain poverty. Brady argues that, “It is not an exaggeration to say that the vast majority of poverty studies explain why one group of people within a country are more likely to be poor, or why some individuals are poor while others are not. Thus, conventional poverty research stops short of confronting the enormous cross-national differences” (Brady 2009:5-6). Brady’s approach to explaining poverty “stands in sharp contrast to prevailing social science explanations of poverty” (Brady 2009:14). The results of his work suggest that his IPRT is a much better predictor of poverty than prevailing theories, such as the widely-utilized liberal economics<sup>6</sup>.

Brady’s IPRT contains four key components: welfare generosity, Leftist collective political actors (LCPAs), latent coalitions for egalitarianism (LCEs), and institutionalized politics (refer to his conceptual model in Figure 2-1 on page 83). He argues that his

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<sup>6</sup> Brady explains that, “After reviewing the classical foundations and contemporary manifestations of liberal economics, I empirically scrutinized how well it explains poverty in affluent democracies since the late 1960s. . . Liberal economics does not provide nearly as effective an explanation of poverty as institutionalized power relations theory. Although economic growth and unemployment do influence poverty, the welfare state is far more influential” (Brady 2009:141). Brady was also able to empirically dispel the notion that increases in welfare spending can ever increase poverty, a common assumption of political conservatives. He says there is “no evidence that higher levels of welfare generosity are counterproductive or even have diminishing returns” (Brady 2009:142). He goes on to note that, “While liberal economics may remain helpful for comparing developing versus developed countries or to understand long-term historical change, the model simply fails to explain poverty in contemporary affluent democracies. Scholars need to move beyond the reliance upon the liberal economic explanation” (Brady 2009:144).

Figure 2-1. David Brady's Conceptual Model for Institutionalized Power Relations Theory



Source: Brady 2009:14

empirical analysis reveals that poverty rates are lower and equality is greater where there is a generous welfare state, the presence of both LCPAs and LCEs in positions of power and influence, and where all of the previously mentioned characteristics have been institutionalized in the formal political arena (Brady 2009:6). Brady explains:

Ideologies and interests manifest in latent coalitions for egalitarianism. These latent coalitions influence Leftist collective political actors and welfare generosity, which itself is partly driven by Leftist politics. Leftist politics and welfare generosity shape poverty. Finally, the levels of poverty and welfare generosity feed back into ideologies and interests. Variations in the power of latent coalitions for egalitarianism, the Leftist politics that are manifestations of these coalitions, and what they are able to enact via the welfare state shape the amount of poverty in society. (Brady 2009:14)

Where levels of poverty and inequality are low, equality is institutionalized; by contrast,

“Where poverty is widespread, as epitomized by the United States, poverty is

institutionalized” (Brady 2009:167). Brady goes on to explain:

When poverty is understood as an individual failing rather than a social or public or national problem, equality is not institutionalized. Where high levels of poverty are perceived by the public and policy makers as normal, unavoidable, or inevitable, equality is not institutionalized. In a political environment, where collective political actors never seek to challenge high levels of poverty and fear they lack support in pushing for generous social policies, poverty is institutionalized. To the extent that high poverty is not even questioned as a major social problem and is perceived as a natural feature of all economies, there has been a failure to politicize poverty. Where Leftist politics are too weak to push for a substantial reduction of poverty or where welfare programs are insufficient to address high poverty, inequality has been institutionalized. In sum, how societies collectively define and understand poverty and equality is an apt reflection of the process characterized by institutionalized power relations theory. (Brady 2009:167)

The central element of the four listed above, the element that is the primary influence on levels of poverty in a particular country, is welfare state generosity. Brady finds that there is a “strong linear negative relationship between welfare generosity and poverty” and that the influence of the welfare state on poverty “is unmatched by any other cause” (Brady 2009:166); therefore, according to these findings, “The generosity of the welfare state is the dominant cause of how much poverty exists in affluent Western democracies” (Brady 2009:166). The welfare state is “the complex of social policies and programs that distribute economic resources disproportionately to a nation’s vulnerable populations” (Brady 2009:7). The general purpose of the welfare state is to assure that people have a fundamental right to some level of economic security and do not have to solely rely on private markets for important resources. This can be done through progressive taxation, cash and near-cash assistance, publicly-funded services, public programs that guarantee some level of economic security, government actions that ensure some level of social inclusion and economic capability, etc. (Brady 2009:7). Countries where equality has become institutionalized in the

welfare state see lower levels of poverty and inequality; Brady argues that these welfare states “are caused by and cause collective expectations that widespread poverty is not politically or socially acceptable” (Brady 2009:8).

Welfare states attack poverty in three crucial ways. First, they manage risk (such as that of growing old, becoming a parent, facing a disability, losing a job, etc.) by providing social insurance through publicly mandate and subsidized programs. Second, they organize the manner in which economic resources are distributed in an egalitarian direction (and do not rely solely on private markets and instead in many cases interfere in those markets in some manner). Brady cautions against calling this redistribution, as, “States do not simply follow what markets have initiated; states constitute markets” (Brady 2009:7). Successful welfare states do not simply redistribute resources after the fact, but attempt to manage/organize the initial distribution of resources (as efficiently as possible) in a socially-just manner. Third, welfare states attempt to perpetuate equality over time by institutionalizing egalitarianism. Brady argues that, “Welfare states are both a cause and an effect of a society’s ideologies about equality” (Brady 2009:8). Whether a society accepts state actions and interventions as appropriate and acceptable depend, at least to some degree, upon the culture in which one is raised; we act upon existing policy based upon our needs and desires, but our needs and desires are also shaped by what we have come to believe as “normal” and socially-just<sup>7</sup>. Thus, social equality can be said to have resulted “from the reciprocal relationships among welfare states, ideologies, and interests” (Brady 2009:8).

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<sup>7</sup> This seems to explain why one particular participant, Jana (whom I will discuss later in this dissertation), had such vastly different ideas about poverty, inequality, and the role of the state; she was raised in a European country with both (a) a vastly-different welfare state than the U.S. and (b) a culture that justified this larger welfare state.

The next two key elements are the presence of LCPAs and LCEs. Organizations and institutions committed to a more equal distribution of important resources (LCPAs) are important for assuring equality; where Leftist politics have been strong historically, there tends to be more a generous welfare state (such political actors tend to push for a stronger welfare state) and lower levels of poverty and inequality. Brady argues that, “Together, the welfare state and Leftist politics form a coherent and complementary set of social forces” (Brady 2009:166). These LCPAs matter a great deal, because, “Only collective actors have the resources to leverage power over other actors in the national electoral arena” (Brady 2009:9). These LCPAs, according to Brady, are a “fundamental cause<sup>8</sup>” of poverty (Brady 2009:9). Leftist politics is the manifestation of LCEs, which are diffuse, unanticipated, and many times accidental<sup>9</sup> groups of diverse people who come together in support of social equality (and welfare state measures that ensure such equality) (Brady 2009:10). These LCEs hold ideologies that consider poverty alleviation and social equality as normative expectations. Many of the actors involved in LCEs do not have interests that are heavily invested in welfare state generosity (they may even be in the upper-class) but are ideologically invested in such normative expectations.

The fourth and final key factor in Brady’s theory is institutionalized politics. Brady argues that politics matters most for the issue of poverty when it occurs in the formal

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<sup>8</sup> Brady argues that a fundamental cause such as LCPAs should get more attention than proximate causes because even if proximate causes fail, the fundamental cause will find a new way to affect the outcome.

<sup>9</sup> The author cites different groups that opposed attempts by George W. Bush to privatize Social Security as examples of LCEs. Some of these groups were ideologically invested in the cause while others had direct interests that motivated them. Many of these groups had little in common (and on other social or political issues may have opposed each other) but came together in this cause.

political arena. While there may be nostalgia for “dissensus politics” among many political liberals/progressives, the greatest impact on poverty and inequality comes through actions in the formal political arena that institutionalize equality on a large scale.

Brady explains:

Formal organizations solve the coordination of groups, multiply the power of otherwise disconnected individuals, have the necessary resources to make a difference, and carry greater legitimacy in the national political arena where welfare policy gets decided. . . Regarding poverty especially, it is the formal organizations in the formal political arena that end up doing this slow and hard work. (Brady 2009:11)

While individuals and dissensus politics can have some impact, Brady argues that institutionalized politics simply have a greater and longer-lasting impact when it comes to poverty and inequality (equality is not fleeting but institutionalized). There is no power greater than that of the state (with its sole power to tax) to organize and manage the distribution of resources in a more socially-just manner than might otherwise occur. After all, Brady jokes, Willie Sutton robbed banks, “Because that’s where the money is” (Brady 2009:11). The greatest effect comes from the place where the greatest power lies, and this is why poverty and inequality are lowest where these conditions exist.

Brady argues that his much more structurally-oriented approach to the study of poverty with IPRT is a vast improvement over the individually-oriented approach that pervades modern social science (particularly liberal economics); he believes that individualistic explanations of poverty are severely limited and thus “the study of poverty needs a theory that contrasts explicitly with individualism” (Brady 2009:19). Reflecting on the current state of poverty scholarship, Brady laments that, “Instead of devoting much attention to collective politics and states, the study of poverty is driven implicitly and explicitly by individualism” (Brady 2009:14). Brady argues that individualism is a

taken-for-granted perspective that dominates modern studies of poverty and inequality; scholars tend to use individual-level data to compare the poor to the nonpoor, producing research that confidentially assumes that all causal explanations of poverty are at the individual level (and many scholars argue that they are largely caused by individual choices). Brady believes that this individually-focused research is valuable insofar as it helps identify who is at risk of being poor and thus how society might be organized to reduce the risk attached to such individual characteristics; it is valuable in helping to decide how to distribute resources more effectively, not for explaining poverty.

Studies have consistently shown that “Americans are extremely individualistic in their beliefs about poverty, especially compared to other countries” (Brady 2009:16). There are of course major empirical problems with the individualism perspective: not all poverty causes can be reduced to micro-level explanations, individualistic perspectives neglect relations and context<sup>10</sup>, and individualist explanations of poverty are not empirically satisfactory relative to other approaches<sup>11</sup>. So why is individualism so popular in the U.S.? Brady believes it is the confluence of American cultural assumptions about poverty and inequality and the preeminence given to liberal economics in the academy. Americans tend to espouse individual-level explanations of poverty and inequality (poor choices, genetically-inherited intellectual deficiencies, poor work ethic, etc.). These beliefs are bolstered by the most prominent social science of all,

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<sup>10</sup> The single-mother example he provides is excellent.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, if you follow the extreme individualist assumptions utilized in Herrnstein and Murray’s (1996) *The Bell Curve*, one might surmise that there are more “dumb people” in the U.S. than in Sweden (Brady 2009:19). Brady argues that, “If an analysis of individuals cannot yield an effective model for predicting macro-level patterns of poverty, an individualistic perspective is not sufficient as a scientific theory of poverty. After all, explaining and predicting phenomena are the fundamental purpose of scientific inquiry. Furthermore, if scientific explanations cannot predict macro-level phenomena, they are severely limited for public policy. Policies are implemented and expected to have effects at the macro level, not simply on an individual level” (Brady 2009:19).

economics, which is given the most authority in the public mind to explain poverty and inequality (and liberal economics is thus adopted by other social sciences as well). This authority given to liberal economics (and its individual-level focus) then feeds back on our cultural explanations of poverty and inequality, further strengthening the popularity and normative nature of individualism.

Brady argues that, “In the United States. . . there has been an unbalanced devotion to liberal economics. Policy debates about poverty have been too loyal to liberal economic concerns with economic growth, free markets, unemployment, and productivity” (Brady 2009:168). Brady finds it hard to imagine why this is the case since his empirical analyses find that liberal economics do not explain poverty as well as structural theory, which does not explain poverty as well as institutionalized poverty relations theory; in short, liberal economics is not even the next best alternative to IPRT in terms of explanatory power. He notes that there is a “striking disconnect between the devotion to liberal economics within the U.S. poverty policy and debates, and the paucity of evidence for this approach” (Brady 2009:169). He argues that liberal economics does not deserve the centrality in policy and debates that it has received given that alternative approaches better explain poverty.

Brady’s answer to poverty in the U.S. is to stop focusing so much attention on welfare incentives and disincentives and focus more on developing and bolstering broad-based social security programs. He argues that policies should emphasize the management of risk, the organization of a more egalitarian distribution of resources, and the institutionalization of equality. Brady argues that, “The point is to get antipoverty policy debates away from the infatuation with the disincentives for poor individuals and

get them focused on broad-based programs that guarantee economic security for the entire citizenry” (Brady 2009:177). Many of the answers he proposes are already effective in the U.S. or in other countries and simply need to be adopted; he argues that, “We need political wherewithal more than we need originality” (Brady 2009:178). Rather than believing that we need some different and revolutionary antipoverty ideas, he argues that, “We do not need novel ideas for tackling poverty. We need to follow the model set forth by the Western European countries that have all been more successful in alleviating poverty and institutionalizing equality” (Brady 2009:180).

First, Brady advocates better unemployment benefits coupled with more universal access to health insurance. He says that, “The vast majority of unemployed need no additional incentive to find work; the real problem is the absence of well-paid secure jobs” (Brady 2009:178). Second, he advocates more progressive taxation for the nonpoor (as well as negative income taxation for the poor) for (a) a more equitable distribution of resources and (b) a slow-down of the escalation and reproduction of wealth to the elites. Third, he supports providing family assistance to all families with children in all social classes, not just the poor. Fourth, he supports massive investments in public goods for things such as transportation, communication, education, childcare, and elder care, among others. This would not only benefit all social classes but make public many of the private goods which poor families are excluded from. Fifth, he argues that there needs to be a more invigorated Leftist politics in the U.S., particularly the unhindered ability to organize in unions. Such politics might also increase voter turnout, inculcating in the working class and the poor a legitimate belief that a political party is

sincerely invested in their interests (he even suggests making voting day a holiday like many countries have in order to increase such turnout).

Brady ends his book with the following concluding thoughts:

At the end of the day, poverty is the consequence of a society's failure to collectively take responsibility for ensuring the economic security of its citizens. To accomplish low poverty, it is essential that the welfare state manage risk, organize the distribution of economic resources in an egalitarian way, and institutionalize equality. It is far less important for governments to provide incentives for work, private savings, delayed parenthood, or marriage. The focus on individualism in poverty research has impoverished our understanding of this persistent social problem. As long as debates about poverty are more about the poor than about the state and society, poverty will continue to haunt the economic progress of affluent Western democracies. Poverty is truly a political problem. (Brady 2009:181)

## **Summary**

At the beginning of this project I developed a list of questions to help make sense of my theoretical toolbox, questions derived from this toolbox that could meaningfully contribute to my project. These questions framed the development of this project, suggesting important avenues that I needed to investigate. While this was only a starting point and would certainly not determine the inductive data that would follow, it allowed me to narrow my focus concerning what I needed to investigate. The social world can be investigated in countless ways; one must determine a broad outline of what to look for or they will see nothing. These theoretical contributions helped me to formulate my initial research questions and determine the general initial direction of the study.

The theoretical toolbox that I utilized helped me to develop a successful project that examined the correct issues and asked the right questions. What are the dominant American cultural assumptions about the causes of poverty and inequality? Are these

assumptions popular among the BSW students? If not, how do they explain poverty and inequality? What range of debate exists? Are there ideological inconsistencies? Are there logical inconsistencies? Are there coherent systems of logic that explain poverty and inequality? Which complex assumptions are contained in each general supposition? Are the students aware of the suppositions contained in their discourse? Are students aware that they are using ideological assumptions?

Whose interests are served by dominant culture? Are there signs that dominant thoughts are disproportionately influenced by the elite/wealthy/powerful through moral, political, and/or intellectual leadership?

Is MAU an ideological institution as some theorists have suggested, that perpetuates dominant culture and reinforces the status quo? In what ways have ideologies become institutionalized or given a material existence? In what ways might MAU reinforce notions of meritocracy, individualism, etc.? How might MAU consecrate social differences?

What other ideological institutions can be identified (families, churches, mass media, etc.) and what influence do they have? What impact does childhood socialization have on the worldviews of the BSW students?

In what ways are poverty and inequality knowledge (a) subjective/socially-constructed and/or (b) class biased? Does the students' logic and/or bias benefit them? Are they privileged? What role does dominant Western economic logic play in their worldviews?

In what ways do ideological assumptions exist before these actors and impact them?

Is power misrecognized or made seem disinterested? Are social forces rendered invisible? In what ways do students reinforce the notion of “free” individuals disconnected from the social structure?

Are hierarchies symbolically reproduced or challenged? How do they function/make life easier/help people interpret the world? In what ways are they needed? In what ways are natural reality transformed into symbolic reality? What happens in this process? What about the social order is taken-for-granted (and power and domination misrecognized) as natural, inevitable, justifiable, desirable, etc.? How is it seen as disinterested? How is immersion in American culture an influence? What is “common sense” about poverty and inequality?

How might students resist dominant thought? Change it? Alter it? Mediate it through some filter?

Do BSW students feel that they are working within the system, outside the system, and what are the implications of this? What approach do they believe is best? Does their BSW program question itself? In what ways are reinforcements of the status quo misrecognized as resistance?

Do social work students see the social order and existing inequality as legitimate and/or desirable?

In what ways might what is observed here contribute to the notion that poverty is something that exists symbolically in our minds?

## Literature Review

Social welfare policy in the U.S. has always been highly ideological. This is particularly true when examining policies directed towards the poor, whose development and implementation are typically heavily laden with cultural assumptions about the poor and poverty. A strong example of this was the welfare reform movement, debate, and subsequent legislation in the 1990s. Developed under a Republican-led U.S. Congress and Democratic President William Jefferson Clinton, this legislation (among other things) created Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) to replace Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Politicians responsible for the reform movement, echoing the concerns of the general population, believed welfare recipients lacked acceptable work ethic, were largely unwilling to work, were overly fertile, and disproportionately addicted to drugs, and let these beliefs heavily influence the debate and resulting policy (Secombe 2011:11). This reform movement helped to redefine poverty in political and intellectual circles as an “individual pathology” rather than a result of structural forces (O’Connor 2001:291). O’Connor argues that at the time the PRWORA legislation passed, “All of the experts agreed that the legislation was a triumph of politics over scientific knowledge and as such a devastating blow to the poor” (O’Connor 2001:286). When the debate became particularly heated, politicians blamed welfare for poverty and compared welfare recipients to wild animals (Secombe 2011:11). O’Connor notes that “the rhetoric had sunk so low by the 1990s as to introduce new variations on old subhuman analogies to congressional debate” (O’Connor 2001:291).

The resulting policy was highly ideological, built on a foundation of many negative class, gender, and racial stereotypes (such as laziness, dependence, promiscuity and uncontrolled fertility, illegitimacy, addiction, criminality, etc.), influenced by a “powerfully orchestrated mobilization of political, ideological, and rhetorical forces against welfare mothers” (O’Connor 2001:291). Many of the concepts and assumptions contained in the debate and resulting policy were “merely prejudice” (Mills 1996:391), based on highly negative assessments of the poor in the U.S. Labels such as “dependence” and “illegitimacy” were used as “political tools” to “build public support for restrictive and punitive reform measures” (Mills 1996:394). The ideology and rhetoric was “couched in the language of scientific objectivity,” yet many observers were aware it was a deeply political and ideological act (O’Connor 2001:291). Behind this rhetoric, Congress was able to enact strict spending reductions and behavioral restrictions while shifting much of the responsibility for welfare to the states (O’Connor 2001:286). Welfare discourse, both historically and during this time of reform, had “been reduced to a clash of moral symbols” (Harvard Law Review 1994:2016). The legislation explicitly identified marriage promotion and two-parent families, moving people from welfare to work, ending dependency, and preventing out-of-wedlock pregnancies as its core goals. The new legislation that created TANF enacted new five year time-limits, work requirements, and required identification of the fathers of children, among other changes. The legislation was based on the assumption that welfare recipients do not want to work and must be forced to do so and stop relying on the government for aid. It also assumes that there is little wrong with the structure of low-wage labor in the U.S., only the motivations and choices of low-wage laborers (Seccombe 2011:11-13).

The PRWORA of 1996 was intended to drastically change the nature of welfare in the U.S., as its creators had promised to “end welfare as we know it.” As O’Connor (2001) notes, the poverty experts who helped design Clinton’s welfare proposal “had come to accept and accommodate the conservative rhetoric of small government, individual responsibility, market benevolence, and of targeting welfare and welfare recipients rather than the economy and the opportunity structure for reform” (O’Connor 2001:284). Some of Clinton’s top poverty experts, such as Mary Jo Bane, Wendell Primus, and Marion Wright Edelman would resign in protest over the legislation that eventually passed, legislation that Senator Moynihan dubbed welfare “repeal” (O’Connor 2001:285).

In this section I will review some of the ideological elements of welfare discourse and policy, most notably related to the notions of individualism, work ethic, dependency, gender, deservedness, and the root cause of poverty in the U.S.

### **“Deserving” and “Undeserving”**

Many scholars argue that the vilification of the poor and the welfare system is rooted “primarily in the American cultural ethic’s inability to accept the ‘undeserving’ poor” (Harvard Law Review 1994:2013). The distinction between the poor who deserve help and those who do not dominates our public discourse, politics, and social policy formation. Even supposedly “value neutral” academic scholarship is not immune, as “poverty research continues to concentrate overwhelmingly on the behavior and characteristics of the poor” (O’Connor 2001:292), helping to differentiate between “deserving” behavior and “undeserving” behavior. This focus on the undeserving actions and characteristics of those who lose out at the economic game is an extension of individualistically-oriented American cultural logic that endless opportunities exist for all;

social scientists choose to study and problematize the personal attributes of those who do not grasp them based on this logic.

Michael Katz opens his book, *The Undeserving Poor*, with the following statement:

The vocabulary of poverty impoverishes political imagination. For two centuries of American history, considerations of productivity, cost, and eligibility have channeled discourse about need, entitlement, and [social] justice within narrow limits bounded by the market. In every era, a few people have counterposed dignity, community, and equality as standards for policy. But they have remained outsiders, unable to divert the powerful currents constraining the possibilities for social thought and public action. . . . These historical preoccupations have shaped and confined ideas about poor people and distributive justice in recent American history. (Katz 1989:3)

Tracing the history of poverty discourse and policy from the poor laws in England and the U.S. in the 1800s to the “underclass” debates in the U.S. in the 1980s, Katz asserts that the history of poverty knowledge and policy in the U.S. is a “recurring dialectic of reform and reaction” (Katz 1989:4). Katz argues that the fundamental failure of anti-poverty policy has been that it has ignored the root causes of poverty, mainly employment, income distribution, discrimination, and the consequences of public policy. Highlighting the ideological nature of poverty discourse, research, and politics, Katz argues that, “How we think and speak about poverty and what we do (or don’t do) about it emerges as much from a mix of ideology and politics as from the structure of the problem itself” (Katz 1989:5). He argues that the social construction of difference, particularly the manner in which we classify the poor as “undeserving” and “deserving,” are distinctions that we use without thinking. They have become unexamined components of our public discourse, and people come to “assume that verbal distinctions reflect natural or inherent qualities of people” (Katz 1989:5). This discourse

that labels people and creates difference helps to convince people that socially-constructed differences actually represent objective reality, sorting people, objects, events, and situations into categories that people treat as real when they are not (Katz 1989:6). These categories isolate and divide one group of people from the rest, and stigmatize that group that has been singled out (Katz 1989:10). Katz argues that, “By mistaking socially constructed categories for natural distinctions, we reinforce inequality and stigmatize even those we set out to help” (Katz 1989:6). Instead of representing objective differences, these socially-created divisions reflect convenience, moral judgment, and most of all power.

Mainstream poverty discourse, both left and right, has largely ignored the role of politics and power. Katz argues that those in power in society have a disproportionate impact on the categories that are created and the people who are sorted into those categories, and in this process the perspectives of the powerless are largely ignored. Thus, existing social and economic arrangements and inequalities are reified as natural and socially just. Despite the cultural and social-scientific focus on the individual, Katz argues that poverty “is about distribution; it results because some people receive a great deal less than others.” He argues that cultural and social-scientific descriptions of behaviors and values cannot explain “patterned inequalities” that have existed throughout American history as a result of “styles of dominance, the way power is exercised, and the politics of distribution” (Katz 1989:7).

Katz explains that he titled his book *The Undeserving Poor* because Americans have always treated the poor as strangers and outsiders that are truly different and unlike middle-class Americans in their essential nature. They are personally and solely

responsible for their poverty, and the solution to their economic deprivation is for them to change their choices, actions, and individual natures. The label of the “undeserving poor” reflects our never-ending American desire to judge people solely by perceived merit, and politicians’ desires to figure out how to distribute scarce resources. Despite many studies that suggest this individual view is only partially accurate, Katz argues that the “supply-side” view of poverty has dominated public discourse, social thought, and policy formation for centuries, and “pervades American history” (Katz 1989:7). The poor are truly undeserving because for one reason or another they have not chosen to join mainstream American society, choosing instead to remain outsiders. Politicians and editorial writers frequently use the “underserving” versus “deserving” distinction, as do social scientists who attempt to subtly hide this distinction using what is perceived to be “neutral” language (such as subcultural explanations) (Katz 1989:10).

Government resources are finite, and because of this commonly-held societal distinctions between “deserving” and “undeserving” poor people help to legitimize decision over the distribution of finite resources (Katz 1989). The PRWORA legislation of 1996 was designed in large part to target the “undeserving” poor. O’Connor (2001) notes that one perspective that strongly influenced the development of that legislation at the time was “widespread, deep-seated, and bipartisan opposition to spending more money, particularly on the undeserving poor” (O’Connor 2001:288). Another informative example is the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which was “targeted to the working, or deserving, poor” (O’Connor 2001:287).

## **Work Ethic**

The TANF legislation of 1996 imposed new work requirements not previously contained in AFDC. Once the state determines that a recipient is able to work they must join the paid labor force, and once the recipient reaches 24 months of aid they must work regardless of ability. Recipients must work a minimum of 30 hours per week, and postsecondary education is no longer allowed while receiving aid (Seccombe 2011:13).

Seccombe (2011) found that most of her participants were not long-term welfare users. Most of them wanted to work, were deeply concerned and/or depressed about their economic circumstances, and were not satisfied with having to rely on government assistance. Seccombe found in her interviews that economic concerns, labor market conditions, lack of human capital, and the need to care for small children made welfare a “rational choice” over the alternative of going to work in the paid labor force (Seccombe 2011:188). While welfare may not be desirable to many people, in many cases it is more desirable for some poor families relative to the abysmal conditions present in the low-wage labor market.

Despite claims by conservative welfare reformers, some scholars argue that there are simply not enough good jobs for all welfare recipients who need them (Seccombe 2011:189). Of the jobs that are available, many of them do not provide sufficient wages to eliminate the need for welfare assistance (Seccombe 2011:189). Seccombe found that despite the popular imagery of the welfare queen, most of her respondents wanted to be finished with the welfare system altogether (Seccombe 2011:193). They seek security in their lives, security that cannot be provided by unstable, often temporary jobs with difficult and changing hours, low wages, and few benefits (if any). These jobs are insecure and may be gone in a moment’s notice if an

employer wishes to downsize (and looks to the most vulnerable, low-tier positions to downsize first) (Seccombe 2011:193).

The fact that some welfare recipients may make the “rational choice” to rely on welfare rather than the incredibly insufficient low-wage labor market in the U.S. may tell us more about low-wage work in the U.S. than welfare recipients. Karen Seccombe explains this notion:

The ‘problem with welfare’ does not really lie within the welfare system. The real problem lies with the structure of low-wage work in the United States. Indeed, the welfare system actually works well compared to low-wage work. It offers the security that is sought by vulnerable families and provides for their basic needs with food, shelter, clothing, and medical care, even if only at a minimal level. However, poorly paid work within the lower tiers of the service sector does not necessarily provide a basic floor for any of these necessities. Welfare works pretty well, and that is the problem to many critics. It is a government program that provides families the protection that low-wage work does not provide. The real way to eliminate the welfare problem is to restructure or enhance jobs in the lowest tiers of our labor market, rather than trying to force people off a system that, even with its faults, is a recipient’s logical refuge. (Seccombe 2011:194)

If poor individuals turn to and depend upon such a degrading, minimally-supportive system, that should tell middle- and upper-class policymakers a great deal about the nature of the alternative, low-wage work. Instead the assumption is that turning to welfare is inherently wrong in almost all cases and people who turn to welfare must have problematic personal characteristics.

What is the justification for attaching such low wages, low benefit levels, and insecurity to vital jobs in society, such as farmworkers, textile workers, food preparation workers, building and grounds cleaning and maintenance workers, childcare workers, manual laborers, etc.? Seccombe points out that, “Our society could not do without these services,” which are “vital” and that workers in these occupations “should be paid

wages and provided the health insurance benefits that allow the workers to continue in them” (Seccombe 2007:194). She goes on to question how the wealthiest nation in the world cannot afford to pay living wages to all of its workers (Seccombe 2011:195). Emphasizing the structural nature of poverty, Seccombe notes that free-market capitalism (despite its elevation to an almost divine status by proponents) cannot always provide good work for all who need it, and the government may need to fulfill this role (Seccombe 2011:195). According to the empirical data, replacing current low-wage work with secure, decent paying work with benefits (such as health insurance and childcare) would motivate most current welfare recipients to “flock” from the welfare system to that new system of socially-just work (Seccombe 2011:195).

The ideological emphasis on individualism in welfare policy assumes that there are enough good jobs for everyone if they simply try hard enough (endless opportunities), ignoring significant structural limitations suggested by empirical research. It should come as no surprise then that welfare reform only “succeeded” in cutting welfare rolls, but not addressing the issue of poverty. While the strong economy of the 1990s masked some of the failures of welfare reform, the 2000s saw increased poverty levels and unemployment rates, while individuals leaving TANF did not leave poverty in large numbers. Average wages for people leaving welfare are at-or-near minimum wage, lack benefits such as health insurance, and are often unstable (Seccombe 2011:193). Between 50 to 75 percent of families remain poor after leaving welfare, even two-to-three years after leaving the system (Blank 2002, cited in Seccombe 2007:130). In one state-level study, approximately 90 percent of former recipients lived below the 185 percent poverty threshold (Acs and Loprest 2004, cited in Seccombe 2007:130).

Another state-level study found that former welfare recipients had lower incomes during the year they left the system relative to their incomes prior to leaving (Cancian et. al. 2003, cited in Seccombe 2007:130). Yet another state-level study found that, of women leaving welfare, only a quarter found “good jobs;” to make this statistic even more troubling is the fact that a “good job” was defined as one offering either \$7 with health insurance or \$8.50 without it (Pavetti and Acs 2001, cited in Seccombe 2007:130). Seccombe (2011) asks, “Families leaving welfare have trouble paying their bills, keeping roofs over their heads, and keeping food on their tables. How then can policymakers call welfare reform a resounding success?” (Seccombe 2011:193). What these studies suggest is that the individualistic nature of welfare reform ignores the structural limitations that must be addressed if welfare is to work, most notably creating enough truly good jobs for all.

Welfare policy assumes that poor people do not and will not work unless coerced and/or properly motivated. This ignores that fact that most poor people do in fact belong to “working poor” families (Levitan, Gallo, and Shapiro 1993; Mishel, Bernstein, and Schmitt 2000/2001; Quigley 2003; Stanczyk 2009). One way this fact may be obscured is because poor individuals who seek welfare are only but a subsection of the poor population. The TANF program, for instance, only serves less than half of the eligible poor population (between 45-50 percent) (Fremstad 2003 and Fremstad 2004, cited in Seccombe 2007:134). So while a majority of poor families are considered “working poor,” only the poorest of the poor (and the most highly excluded from labor markets)

may be seeking out welfare assistance<sup>12</sup>. This may help perpetuate the myths and stereotypes about poverty and work, while reinforcing the individualism framework and ignoring alternative structural explanations for the lack of work.

### **Women, Poverty, and Welfare**

Another way in which ideological cultural assumptions have pervaded anti-poverty policy in the U.S. is the vilification and suspicion of poor women. One such manifestation of this is the belief in the need to control the perceived “problem” of the fertility of poor women. Almost half (21) of U.S. states have imposed a “family cap” policy, policies which prohibit or restrict additional benefits to families for any children born while a mother receives welfare assistance (despite the fact that family caps were not required by the federal legislation). While this of course punishes the mother and deprives children of much-needed assistance, the intent is to discourage poor mothers from having children while receiving government aid. Vicky Lens (1998) provides a thorough examination of this phenomenon, highlighting the fact that these measures are designed counter to empirical data. Lens notes that contemporary welfare policies, such as the landmark 1996 PRWORA, are “less concerned with helping the poor” than they are “concerned with controlling the poor’s behavior” (Lens 1998:20), considering poverty a “moral disease” (Lens 1998:26). Lens goes on to note that, “Underlying the family cap is the assumption that welfare mothers are acting irresponsibly and immorally by having children they cannot afford to raise” (Lens 1998:21).

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<sup>12</sup> Most poor individuals cannot work either because of age (too young or old), disability (mental or physical), or illness (mental or physical). A majority of poor families have at least one parent working full-time (Stanczyk 2009).

Mills notes that, “The terms ‘out-of-wedlock birth’ and ‘illegitimacy’ are used specifically to stigmatize unmarried women who give birth and their children” (Mills 1996:392). Conservative commentators lamented the perceived promiscuity of poor mothers during the 1990s welfare debate, despite a lack of empirical evidence to support their claims (Mills 1996:392). One commentator went as far as to characterize poor women as “on the whole. . . slovenly, incompetent, and sexually promiscuous” (Mills 1996:392). Attempting to control poor women’s fertility is nothing new and has been a core component of anti-poverty policy in the U.S. for some time. Lens asserts that, “The reproductive choices of poor women have always attracted the attention of the larger society, usually in the form of coercive attempts to limit the number of children born to the poor” (Lens 1998:21).

The list of government policies aimed at curtailing the fertility of poor women is long. Mother’s pension programs in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century provided benefits to “morally fit” mothers who abstained from sexual intercourse outside of marriage. Forced- and/or coerced-sterilization policies in the 1920s were a proposed practice considered by many states as an effective method of eliminating “undesirable traits or characteristics in the population (Lens 1998:22, citing Radford 1991). When AFDC was instituted in the 1930s, the legislation contained provisions that would deny benefits to women who were deemed to have “unsuitable homes” (Piven and Cloward 1993, cited in Lens 1998:23). Black women were disproportionately singled out by these provisions; in 1959, for instance, of the 7,000 families denied benefits under this provision because of illegitimacy or because the mother’s sexual behavior was deemed immoral by the welfare worker, 91% were African-American (Pivan and Cloward 1993, cited in Lens

1998:23). In the 1940s and 1950s, many states enforced “man in the house” rules, which allowed welfare workers to visit recipients (unannounced if they wished) in an attempt to “catch” them in the act of living with a man (Mills 1996:392). The goal of this policy was supposedly to regulate the home environment and the sexuality of mothers. The list of policies similar to these is long and my discussion of them is short, but the point of much of welfare policy historically has been to control the fertility of poor women, which has typically been viewed as problematic.

Fast-forward to the past few decades and the trend persists. Welfare policy in the 1980s saw a continued shift in governmental policy towards and public perception of the poor. The term “underclass” was now used to describe welfare mothers, a negative term associated with deviant behaviors, morals, values, and subcultures (Lens 1998:25). Welfare was also being reframed during this time as the cause rather than the answer to these problems (Jenks 1992, cited in Lens 1998:25). This view is epitomized by the work of Charles Murray, who argues that the “mere existence of the welfare system will create, for poor women, an economic incentive to have children” (Murray 1983:162, in Lens 1998:26). Lens asserts that, “With behavior rather than defects in the economic system as the preferred explanation for poverty, attention was again turned toward the lifestyle and reproductive choices of welfare mothers” (Lens 1998:25). Poor female welfare recipients, particularly African-American recipients, “were branded as deviant and promiscuous ‘welfare queens,’ whose behavior needed altering” (Lens 1998:25). Ronald Reagan, who helped popularize the term “welfare queen” in his 1976 gubernatorial campaign in California, also carried these concerns about welfare mothers with him to the national stage in the 1980s. Reagan referenced the fictitious welfare

fraud time and again, who supposedly had “80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards and is collecting veterans benefits on four nonexistent deceased husbands,” to go along with her food stamps and Medicaid, earning a welfare-funded income of over \$150,000 (NY Times 1976). This concern carried over and intensified in the early 1990s, and resulted in many of the provisions targeting poor women in the PRWORA legislation.

Part of the focus on women’s fertility in welfare policy is the assumption that not only do poor women have uncontrolled fertility, but that welfare policy encourages this and in many cases makes it worse. Yet many studies suggest little-to-no connection between welfare and fertility rates (Cutright 1973; Winegarden 1974; Presser and Salsberg 1975; Moore and Caldwell 1977; Vining 1983; Bane and Ellwood 1985; Rank 1989; Plotnick 1990). Mills asserts that, “There is no evidence that the availability of welfare is a significant motivation to have children” (Mills 1996:393), despite the assertion in one passage in the *Contract with America* that, “It’s time to change the incentives and make responsible parenthood the norm and not the exception” (Gingrich et. al. 1994:75, cited in Mills 1996:392). O’Connor offers a similar argument, stating that the ideas behind family caps defied “reams of empirical studies showing little connection between welfare and higher single-parent birthrates” (O’Connor 2001:290). From 1972 to 1986, benefits fell by over 20% while out-of-wedlock births rose, which raises an important question: “How on Earth can AFDC be the cause of the growth of children in single-parent families when fewer and fewer children are getting benefits?” (Ellwood 1988:58, cited in Lens 1998:27). Bane and Ellwood (1985) found that there was a weak-to-nonexistent relationship between states with higher welfare benefits and out-of-

wedlock births (cited in Lens 1998:27). Moore and Caldwell (1977) reported a negative correlation between higher AFDC benefits and out-of-wedlock births (cited in Lens 1998:28). Placek and Hendershot (1972) found that women on welfare were more likely to use birth control and less likely to want to have a child (cited in Lens 1998:28). Rank (1989) found fertility rates of welfare recipients to be lower than the rest of the population, and that these rates decreased the longer one received benefits (cited in Lens 1998:28). Prior to the passage of TANF, the average number of children in families on AFDC was 1.9, well below the national average (Nahata 2009:384). When the New Jersey Department of Human Services conducted a five-year study of 8,500 welfare mothers, the researchers found no difference between the fertility rates of those who received additional benefits upon the birth of a child and those who did not (Lens 1998:30). Furthermore, this same New Jersey study found that 70% of children born while their mothers were in the welfare system had been conceived prior to the family entering the system (Harvard Law Review 1994:2026). Mills contends that, "Empirical studies have shown that higher welfare grants are not correlated with any increase in fertility" (Mills 1996:393).

"In sum," Lens concludes, "no evidence exists that the family cap will reduce out-of-wedlock births" (Lens 1998:30). Family caps are a current example of a long line of welfare policies that are not based on sound empirical data, but subjective moral judgments; in short, it is based on ideology (Lens 1998:33-34). Lens goes further:

The family cap is based on the deeply flawed premise that welfare mothers will respond to economic incentives and refrain from having children if their public assistance is eliminated or reduced. This assumption has been proven wrong by numerous studies throughout this century. Such studies demonstrate that the welfare system itself is not the cause of either single-parent families or the increase in out-of-wedlock births. The family cap is based not only on a flawed theory, but also on a dangerous one. Although directed at the behavior of welfare mothers, its ultimate target is the child who is unfortunate enough to be born while his or her mother is on welfare. . . In sum, the family cap is a misguided attempt to mold behavior based on faulty stereotypes of welfare mothers. (Lens 1998:33)

Giving a similar “vote of no confidence” to family caps, the *Harvard Law Review* summarizes this position on the policy in the following manner:

Family caps will not effectively reduce rising teenage birth rates, nor will they break the cycle of poverty. Moreover, these policies reinforce stereotypes about women, minorities, and poor people. If one weighs the benefits against the harms, one finds that little is gained and that women and children in poverty are punished. (Harvard Law Review 1994:2027)

With so little empirical and theoretical support for this policy, it is difficult to render it anything other than an extension of the widespread, ideologically-driven condemnation of poor women’s fertility and sexuality inherent in our politics, policy, and public discourse.

Welfare policy has been gendered for as long as it has existed. Seccombe (2011) notes that, “Women who receive welfare have a longstanding history of being suspect or discredited as unworthy of assistance” (Seccombe 2011:186). In a decidedly sexist manner, the push to get women to work ignores the fact that taking care of children is work. It also ignores the difficulties that a single mother depending on a minimum-wage salary has affording to work during the day and pay for childcare. Seccombe notes that, “A significant number of women on welfare face tremendous

personal hardships that they often did not choose and that are, in an important sense, beyond their control” (Seccombe 2011:189).

Access and quality issues plague poor women as they make decisions concerning childcare. Relatives and/or friends cannot always be relied on to watch children, leaving many poor women to choose from low-quality childcare alternatives. Poor women face many childcare challenges: having to leave their children in high-crime areas, depending upon unqualified strangers, over-crowded and dirty conditions, scarcity of government-subsidized childcare, and high-costs (Seccombe 2007:134-135). Seccombe’s research revealed that the primary concern for poor mothers was the quality of childcare, followed by high-costs which are “beyond the reach of most poor and low-income families” (Seccombe 2007:135). Providing high-quality, subsidized childcare choices for poor women increases the likelihood that they will be able to participate fully in the paid labor force and depend less on the welfare system (Danziger Ananat, and Browning 2004, Fuller et. al. 2002, and Scott, London, and Hurst 2005, cited in Seccombe 2007:135), yet subsidized positions continue to be scarce and of very low quality (Seccombe 2007:135). Less than fifteen percent of children who are eligible for subsidized childcare actually receive it (Children’s Defense Fund 2005, cited in Seccombe 2007:135), with as many as 23 states cutting back eligibility even further due to budgetary concerns (Seccombe 2007:135).

Historically, white Americans have been suspicious of the values of the African-American community, and this suspicion manifests itself rather cruelly in the welfare discourse concerning single black mothers. Black women are often assumed to hold deviant values, such as shunning marriage and choosing to have children out of

wedlock. While it is true that black women have lower rates of marriage and higher rates of out-of-wedlock births than their white counterparts, deviant values are likely not the best explanation. Based on empirical research, Seccombe (2011) reports that unemployment, underemployment, low-wages, and the mismatch of black women to black men in the marriage market (a product of the disproportionate incarceration and death rates black men face) play a far more significant role in the black community in terms of decisions on whether or not to marry (Seccombe 2011:53-54). In terms of out-of-wedlock births, Seccombe (2011) reports that part of this discrepancy can be explained by educational and socioeconomic inequalities (Seccombe 2011:54).

### **The Social Construction of “Dependency”**

One of the major conservative critiques of anti-poverty welfare policy is that it breeds dependence on government assistance. In the welfare reform movement of the 1990s, dependency concerns were largely behind the new TANF requirement that states limit recipients' welfare usage to a maximum of five years. In fact, the issue of dependency took center stage in the debate, ignoring structural labor market constraints (O'Connor 2001:286). This time-limit was the federal government's maximum time allowance—states were allowed to reduce this limit (for example, Arkansas reduced it to two years). Some states also limited the amount of consecutive months of TANF that a family could receive—Nevada, for instance, stipulates that every two-year spell in the TANF system must be followed by one year off. What was the basis for this new stipulation? It was hardly based on empirical evidence, as two-thirds of AFDC spells lasted less than two years (Harvard Law Review 1994:2022). Is it possible that it was based on negative stereotypes of poor individuals unwilling to work, while ignoring structural causes of unemployment and low-wages? Mills suggests that, “The concept

of dependence has been used by advocates of restrictive welfare policies to refer to moral and psychological deficiencies” (Mills 1996:392). Seccombe notes that, “The stereotype of recipients as freeloaders is so strong that we assume the system must be made punitive for them to leave,” leading reformers to create a “system that is far more punitive than helpful in nature” (Seccombe 2011:192). The newest round of welfare reform in the 1990s was much more concerned with ending perceived dependency and reducing the government’s spending commitment to the poor than actually lowering poverty rates (O’Connor 2001:287).

The concept of “dependency” assumes that the poor are unwilling to grasp available opportunities, and that decent jobs, wages, and benefits await them if they are willing to try. This is a common theme in the popular discourse, but has pervaded the academy as well. When Kenneth J. Neubeck and Noel A. Cazenave were seeking funding for their research that resulted in their book *Welfare Racism* (2001), they found that their research agenda did not fit into the frame which foundation grant officers wished welfare research to utilize. Rejecting their request for research funding on racism and welfare in the U.S., one grant officer informed them that the foundation’s preference was to fund research “that would help develop ‘self-sufficiency’ among recipients” (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001:vi). The popular, policy, and academic focus on flawed dependency rhetoric ignores many of the structural issues influencing poor individuals, and gives primacy to the individualism framework. Seccombe challenges this notion, asserting that, “Reducing welfare reliance sounds wonderful, but we should be aware of the consequences of eliminating a valuable safety net without enhancing the structure and pay of the jobs that recipients are likely to hold” (Seccombe

2011:200). It is akin to lecturing the losing players in a game of musical chairs that if they were just to try harder, more chairs would magically appear (an example discussed later). Without addressing massive structural limitations to eliminating poverty and thus the need for welfare (such as the lack of good jobs), this policy seems dishonest.

### **The Triumph of Individualism**

One important lesson of the welfare reform debate, movement, and legislation of the 1990s was that individual causes of poverty are much more popular with the general public and politicians than structural explanations. Seccombe (2011) asserts that, “A review of recent welfare reform legislation shows that we still see poverty as largely a personal problem rather than a structural one,” with the reforms of the 1990s based almost entirely on this belief (Seccombe 2007:135). The U.S. public feels strongly that individuals are responsible for their economic position, with most blaming “personal laziness” for poverty (Seccombe 2011:197). In the U.S., values and beliefs related to “financial independence and hard work are usually at the heart of welfare hostilities” (Seccombe 2011:11, citing Browning 2008, Hancock 2004, and Seccombe 2007). Rank, Yoon, and Hirschl (2003) explain this further:

Within the United States, the dominant perspective has been that of poverty as an individual failing. From Ben Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanac* to the recent welfare reform changes, poverty has been conceptualized primarily as a consequence of individual failings and deficiencies. Indeed, social surveys asking about the causes of poverty have consistently found that Americans tend to rank individual reasons (such as laziness, lack of effort, and low ability) as the most important factors related to poverty, while structural reasons such as unemployment or discrimination are viewed as significantly less important. (Rank, Yoon, and Hirschl 2003:4)

The authors argue that this view is reinforced by social scientists who study poverty, with the structure-agency tension tilted towards individualism (Rank, Yoon, and Hirschl

2003:5). Admittedly, some scholars still do very good work exploring the structural nature of poverty; Rank and his colleagues highlight the work of Ryan (1971), Katz (1989), Gans (1995), Massey (1996), and Feagin (2000) in particular. The trend in the social sciences in general (in such disciplines as economics and to a somewhat lesser extent sociology), however, is to determine which individual attributes are correlated with economic deprivation, an approach which assumes that everyone can be economically successful if they just have the right combination of human capital characteristics (educational credentials, specific skills and demonstrable work experience, etc.). This ignores the available opportunities and the social forces that influence who will be able to grasp the best opportunities.

Rank, Yoon, and Hirschl (2003) use three lines of evidence to refute the individual-only poverty perspective and support their “structural vulnerability framework”. The first line of evidence is the inability of the U.S. labor market to provide enough decent paying jobs for all families to avoid poverty or near poverty. By utilizing Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) data, the authors found that between 9.4, 15.3, and 22.0 percent of full-time jobs do not pay above poverty-wages (depending upon which poverty threshold one uses, the 100, 125, or 150 percent threshold), and between 14.9, 21.4, and 28.0 percent of part-time workers are in jobs that do not pay above poverty-wages (depending on the poverty threshold used) (Rank, Yoon, and Hirschl 2003:12).

The second line of evidence Rank and his colleagues use is the ineffectiveness of the U.S. social safety net to reduce poverty, particularly in comparison to other developed nations (a point I discuss later). The third line of evidence is the systemic

nature of U.S. poverty, highlighted by the empirical evidence that shows that the majority of the U.S. population will experience poverty during their adult lifetimes (between 58.5, 68.0, and 76.0 percent, whether one uses the 100, 125, or 150 percent threshold) (Rank, Yoon, and Hirschl 2003:20). The authors use these three lines of evidence to argue that, while human capital characteristics may explain who experiences poverty, it does not explain why poverty exists.

The popularity of the idea that poverty is an individual failing, not a structural failing, helps to explain how anti-poverty policy is shaped. This view has long been an important part of our “common sense” cultural knowledge. The discourse surrounding welfare “obscures the debate so that welfare, not poverty, is the demon that policymakers need to exorcise. Instead of confronting the multi-faceted problem of poverty, American policymakers have substituted welfare policy for poverty policy” (Harvard Law Review 1994:2013). Mills notes that the welfare reform movement of the 1990s was rooted in neoconservative critiques of welfare “centered around recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) rather than focused on economic structural reform” (Mills 1996:391). Mills argues that:

The neoconservative critique of welfare argues that welfare is too liberal rather than that wages are too low, that subsidized child care is an unjust transfer of resources rather than that affordable day care is too scarce, and that medical assistance is a crutch rather than that access to health care in the open market is too restricted and expensive. (Mills 1996:394)

Mills goes on to assert that welfare reform legislation, along with the Republicans’ *Contract with America*, both “assume that defects in AFDC mothers, not the welfare state or the structure of the U.S. economy, are to blame for the expansion of the AFDC rolls and the growing number of people living below the poverty line” (Mills 1996:391).

Mills goes on to quote the *Contract with America*, which explicitly highlights this individual-centered poverty perspective:

Isn't it time for the government to encourage work rather than rewarding dependency? The Great Society has had the unintended consequence of snaring millions of Americans into the welfare trap. Government programs designed to give a helping hand to the neediest of Americans have instead bred illegitimacy, crime, illiteracy, and more poverty. Our *Contract with America* will change this destructive social behavior by requiring welfare recipients to take personal responsibility for the decisions they make. (Gingrich et. al. 1994:65, cited in Mills 1996:391)

In the U.S. capitalism has become somewhat of a religion, and any shortcomings are often either ignored or downplayed. One such problem is the problem of producing enough jobs for all who need them, and livable wages for all who need them. It is often assumed that individuals are responsible for either (a) not being able to find a job, or (b) not being able to secure a job with a livable wage. Ignored in this perspective is the possibility that capitalism cannot provide enough well-paying jobs for everyone who needs them. It is often assumed that poor people do not "possess the same work ethic as those who are more materially successful, and the rest of society assigns them a low societal value" (Harvard Law Review 1994:2015). After all, if it is assumed that our economic system has an endless supply of good jobs at a decent wage, a logical extension of this line of reasoning would find fault with individuals who fail to capitalize on these opportunities.

Rank, Yoon, and Hirschl (2003) lament the sole focus on individuals in poverty scholarship, asserting that:

By focusing upon individual attributes as the cause of poverty, social scientists have largely missed the underlying dynamic of American impoverishment. Poverty researchers have in effect focused on who loses out at the economic game, rather than addressing the fact that the game produces losers in the first place. (Rank, Yoon, and Hirschl 2003:5)

This structural vulnerability perspective posits that we must address the scarcity of jobs, and of the jobs that are available, determine whether or not they offer a livable wage. Only then can we begin to pretend that individuals alone are responsible for their actions (although availability is only one component, we would also need to address the social forces that condition people's abilities to occupy those positions). The authors use the example of a game of musical chairs (Rank, Yoon, and Hirschl 2003:22): in this game, there are fewer chairs than there are participants. It could logically be argued that the fastest, most athletic, and most cunning individuals will be more likely win in this game. We may even be able to empirically support (quite strongly perhaps) that those who tried the hardest and had the highest skill level won the game and secured a chair. This only explains how individuals get filtered into rewarding positions, however, and nothing about what might have happened if all of the participants had a high level of skill. There would still be a shortage of chairs every time regardless of the personal characteristics of the individuals involved in the game, and thus our statistically significant study would fall short because it did not acknowledge the rigid structural constraints inherent in the game.

The example used by Rank and his colleagues is a good one. Wright and Rogers (2011) offer an example that takes the musical chairs concept one step further. In the game of musical chairs mentioned earlier, the participants know going into the game and while playing the game that there is a shortage of chairs. Furthermore, they know the actual number of missing chairs. In real life, however, we do not always know the existence, and certainly not the exact nature, of the mismatch between people and jobs; of these jobs, we also do not know the percentage of available jobs that pay a livable

wage. This fact further complicates the structural nature of poverty. Wright and Rogers note that, "Explaining why particular people are poor is not the same as explaining the level of poverty itself" (Wright and Rogers 2011:223). They use an example of a professor who decides to use a grading curve to calculate final grades. The students are graded not on some absolute scale that measures how much they have learned, but simply how they have performed relative to each other. Before the class begins, the professor decides how many A's, B's, C's, D's, and F's that he/she is going to give. So if the professor decided that, say, only ten A's will be given out at the end of the term, the top ten students will be given those A's. It does not matter whether they did "A work", or how many students did that level of work for that matter; it simply matters that they were the top ten students relative to the rest of the class (example in Wright and Rogers 2011:223). Wright and Rogers contend that, "The fact that low skills and limited education result in poverty still depends upon the rule of the game through which jobs are created and income is distributed. Under alternative rules of the game. . . jobs could begin to deal with the many important needs that are not adequately met through the market economy" (Wright and Rogers 2011:224). The authors go on to assert that, "Poverty in a rich society does not simply reflect a failure of equal opportunity to acquire a good education; it reflects a social failure in the creation of sufficient jobs to provide an adequate standard of living for all people regardless of their education or levels of skills" (Wright and Rogers 2011:224).

In response to what in his view has been the dominant focus on individualism throughout American history in poverty discourse, academic scholarship, politics, and social policy, Katz argues that all of these arenas of debate have focused almost

exclusively on poor people's personalities, behaviors, and human capital levels (Katz 1989:236). Katz argues that we must see poverty as a social product that is the result of political economy (Katz 1989:7). An important part of this is that as societies have developed the ability to generate surpluses, poverty then becomes an issue of how to distribute those surpluses. He believes individualism has dominated American history because (a) the culture of capitalism measures people by their wealth and condemns those without it, and (b) the language of politics in America has made it difficult to accurately articulate the causes and solutions to the problem of poverty, redefining or misrecognizing issues of power and distribution as personal, cultural, and moral rather than structural (Katz 1989:7-8). The manner in which we talk about and address poverty is thus no surprise, but an "expected outcome of the way American political discussion has ignored, deflected, or framed issues of political economy for a very long time" (Katz 1989:8). Classifying poor people in ways that serve the interests of the powerful in U.S. society provides people with a familiar target for displacing their anger, fears, and frustrations, and legitimizes divisions in capitalist societies by demonstrating "the link between virtue and success that legitimates capitalist political economy" (Katz 1989:10).

Social science, an arena that might traditionally be thought of as "value-neutral" and immune from the values, beliefs, and ideologies of public discourse, reinforces the individual perspective. Katz (1989) argues that social scientists in the U.S. mystify the origins of poverty and obscure the politics of poverty (Katz 1989:237). Katz argues that the impulse to transform the cause of poverty from being rooted in politics and economics into a personal problem is a "peculiarly American tendency" (Katz 1989:237-238). Poverty research in the U.S. "lacks theories that accord economic resources and

political power a central role,” and instead almost exclusively focus on individual-level characteristics like motivation to work (Katz 1989:238).

### **Ideology in Action: Welfare Stigma**

The class, gender, and racial ideologies that demonize the poor and welfare recipients combine to create a palpable stigma of which virtually all Americans are aware. In fact, it would be difficult to find an American not aware of negative jokes about the poor and welfare recipients, the nature of which many Americans would likely agree. Many welfare recipients report feeling ashamed and stigmatized by the fact that they must turn to welfare (Rank 1994, Jarrett 1996, Deparle 2004, Hays 2003, and Seccombe and Hoffman 2007, cited in Seccombe 2011:49), a fact that keeps many families from even applying for aid (Roe 2009 and Yaniv 1997, cited in Seccombe 2011:51). The stigma of being a welfare recipient is “deep and widespread” (Seccombe 2011:51) and is based on deeply-rooted cultural assumptions about our economic system and the notion that we live in a meritocracy. If a person does not succeed economically our cultural assumptions tell us that they are largely to blame. It is of course no surprise that the general public views welfare recipients negatively given our cultural beliefs about meritocracy. In Seccombe’s research, the theme of perceived laziness emerged again and again in her interviews, highlighting the strength of the individualism perspective in the public consciousness (Seccombe 2011:50).

Recipients reported being looked down upon in everyday settings, being judged from everything from their parenting to unfairly receiving hard-earned tax dollars of others to sitting around all day “milking” the system (Seccombe 2011:50). Most middle- and upper-class Americans likely feel secure in the fact that they can go to the grocery store or the doctor’s office without being openly criticized. This is not because the

middle- and upper-classes do not receive government subsidies in one form or another, but because (a) their government aid is not openly on display in public settings and (b) it is not a form of government aid that is discredited and despised by the population at large. When CEOs of large corporations go to the grocery store, they are not likely to be accused of “buying steaks with taxpayer money,” despite the fact that corporate welfare and wealthfare spending outpaces anti-poverty spending by a ratio of roughly 4-to-1. This is not a discredited and despised form of government aid, at least not on the level of welfare for the poor, and it is not publicly on display in countless everyday public settings. The spending habits of corporate welfare and wealthfare recipients, for the most part, are not available for regular middle- and upper-class citizens to monitor and evaluate in everyday settings.

Our cultural beliefs about meritocracy are strong. Because of this, it should be no surprise that institutions, which are made up of people, can collectively hold negative views of welfare recipients. After all, people who make up institutions have been socialized in our culture and accept dominant cultural beliefs to some extent. In this sense, institutions that are widely reported to hold negative views of welfare recipients, such as the mass media and welfare institutions in particular, are simply reflecting the views of the people who constitute these institutions and the culture they are embedded within. Seccombe asserts that, “Our hostility toward welfare recipients is widespread and is deeply rooted in class divisions in our society” (Seccombe 2011:191).

The largely negative images of welfare recipients are held by average citizens and perpetuated by the mass media, images that depict lazy, unmotivated, dependent welfare recipients. Seccombe notes that the stereotype of the welfare recipient—one

with a large family, who is dependent on government aid for many years, who lives in an urban setting, and who has deviant values—is actually the exception, not the norm (Seccombe 2011:49). Yet this exception is what becomes salient in the popular imagination, becomes the dominant welfare family stereotype. What is myth and what is reality when talking about “typical” welfare recipients? While the welfare reform movement of the 1990s sought to punish poor adults, the real victims may have been the children; most welfare recipients (2/3) are children under the age of 18 (Seccombe 2011:15). Despite the myth that welfare is a “black problem,” African-Americans consist of 37% of welfare recipients (38% white, 20% Hispanic/Latino). Out-of-control fertility is of course a subjective concept, but 50% of welfare families have one child, 27% have two children, 13% have three, and only 8% have four or more (Seccombe 2011:15). Furthermore, Rank (1989) has found empirical evidence that welfare recipients’ fertility rates are lower than the rest of the population, and that these rates decrease the longer one receives benefits. In 1994, prior to the PRWORA Act of 1996, the median spell on welfare was 22.8 months, a number that had been falling since the 1980s (Seccombe 2011:16-17).

One unfortunate function of mass media is that it helps to perpetuate negative stereotypes of the poor and welfare recipients. Nahata (2009) asserts that, “With few exceptions, the mainstream media have portrayed the issue of welfare in terms and images not too far removed from Ronald Reagan’s ‘welfare queens’” (Nahata 2009:384). Despite the fact that claims about the fertility of poor women are often problematic, ideological, and only loosely-based on empirical evidence (if rooted in evidence at all), mass media institutions have helped perpetuate negative stereotypes

of welfare recipients by “offering up a parade of mothers, unwed, unrepentant and most often black” (Nahata 2009:384). Rather than addressing structural issues such as the supply of jobs, wage levels, access and quality of childcare, and racial discrimination, media often examine poverty and welfare “through the narrow lens of individual responsibility and moral double standards” (Nahata 2009:384).

In his social work college textbook, which is used by colleges and universities to introduce aspiring social workers to their field, Zastrow makes the claim that most social workers believe in the institutional view of social welfare and “reject the views of rugged individualism and Social Darwinism” (Zastrow 2010:103). The institutional view of social welfare posits that: social welfare programs are proper and legitimate facets of modern society, recipients are entitled to the assistance and should not be stigmatized, and that their difficulties are rooted in the social structure, not the individual, mostly due to causes outside of their control (Zastrow 2010:6-7). The focus here is improving the social structure, not fixing or demeaning the individual. The opposing view, the residual view, is largely rejected by social workers (according to Zastrow). The residual view contends that self-sufficiency is available to all individuals except when their own actions prevent it, and that the free market can provide for everybody willing to work for their own success (Zastrow 2010:6); the individual is largely to blame for their own failure to achieve success in a society that has virtually endless opportunities for those who are willing to grasp them. As Zastrow states, the residual view holds that, “The causes of clients’ difficulties are rooted in their own malfunctioning—that is, clients are to blame for their predicaments because of personal inadequacies, ill-advised activities, or sins” (Zastrow 2010:6).

Zastrow's claims (that social workers tend to hold the institutional view) seem to contradict some qualitative studies where many welfare recipients report being stigmatized, frustrated, and demoralized by social workers and social welfare institutions (Seccombe 2011; Handler and Hasenfeld 2007)—the very workers and institutions that Zastrow claims do not believe in an ideology that would reinforce such a stigma; in fact, qualitative accounts of recipients' experiences with social workers and the system indicate that many of the workers employed the residual view that Zastrow claims they reject. In her book, *So You Think I Drive a Cadillac?*, Karen Seccombe details the results of interviews (conducted in 1995 as well as from 2002-2003) with 684 females from Florida and Oregon who were either currently receiving welfare assistance or had recently left the welfare system. Seccombe notes that recipients routinely felt degraded and stigmatized by social workers, and that the welfare office was a "common context in which negative comments were routinely heard" (Seccombe 2011:56); "Rather than being viewed as a place for help," many respondents reported, "the welfare office was viewed with disdain" (Seccombe 2011:56). Many respondents reported that social workers had contempt for their clients and demeaned recipients, saying hurtful things and attempting to make recipients feel bad about themselves for needing assistance. Respondents reported being talked down to, being treated as problems, receiving little respect, and having to be ultra-sensitive to the needs, beliefs, and moods of social workers in order not to anger them and risk losing their aid. Amy, one of Seccombe's respondents, reported the following:

It's a very humiliating experience—being on welfare and being involved in the system. You are treated as though you are the scum of the earth. A stupid, lazy, nasty person. How dare you take this money? It's a very unpleasant experience. I'd avoid it at all costs. (Seccombe 2011:57)

What accounts for this discrepancy? Could it be that the beliefs of the field as a whole do not translate to every social welfare institution? Possibly. There also may be a difference in ideology between social workers who study social work at a university and those who do not. There also may be a burn-out factor, where lived experience in the field erodes idealistic notions about poverty. It is also highly likely that a discrepancy exists between the ideals that social workers espouse and what they do in practice. Social workers do not exist outside of society, they are socialized within our culture and are at least somewhat beholden to its assumptions. While the norms and values of social work programs and welfare offices may mediate cultural assumptions, it is likely, given the evidence, that many of the negative assumptions about the poor remain in the minds of these workers.

### **The Racialization of Welfare**

The presence in the U.S. of negative perceptions and distrust of African-Americans in economic need has been well documented (Gilens 1999, Wilson 1996 and Hancock 2004, cited in Seccombe 2011:53). One important reason “is that it [welfare] is associated with use primarily by blacks” (Seccombe 2011:51). Some scholars argue that negative perceptions and stereotypes about African-Americans have caused the word “welfare” to become racially coded; to be racially coded means that when people hear the word “welfare” certain negative racial images are invoked because negative perceptions of welfare have become entangled with negative perceptions of African-Americans. The intersection of these images causes people to have a negative, visceral reaction to the word that brings all of these images to the forefront. If a hypothetical person believes that (a) African-Americans by nature have problematic personal and/or

subcultural characteristics relative to other Americans, (b) that welfare is largely a “black problem,” and (c) that welfare in general only goes to lazy, unmotivated people, then the intersection of these beliefs creates a powerful racially-coded word in “welfare” that conjures a mixture of these loaded presuppositions (which together may have an exponentially negative effect—there are not a whole lot of words in the U.S. that can generate such visceral, vitriolic responses from people as the word “welfare”). In fact, it might be argued that “the words welfare mothers evoke one of the most powerful racialized cultural icons in contemporary U.S. society” (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001:3). Neubeck and Cazenave explore this issue in *Welfare Racism* (2001):

For decades now, we—along with millions of other people in the United States—have been exposed to racist comments and images about those who receive welfare. The racialization of welfare has reached the point where politicians can now exploit racial animus to promote their political ambitions and goals simply by speaking the word welfare. . . The ease with which political elites abolished the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program—the primary safety net protecting poverty-stricken mothers and children—would have been impossible had not many politicians, along with policy analysts and the mass media, spent decades framing and morphing welfare into a supposed ‘black problem.’ Political elites relied upon often subtle racist stereotypes about welfare and its recipients to escalate antipathy toward public assistance. (v, vii)

There is a persistent welfare stereotype in the U.S. that associates poverty and welfare-use with the African American population, despite the fact that African-Americans comprise less than a quarter of the poor population and about a third of welfare recipients (U.S. Census 2009; Seccombe 2011:51). African-Americans, as a group, are disproportionately represented among the poor; the reasons for this are complex, related to historical and institutionalized racism and the manner in which economic and social resources are distributed in society. In a country where the individualism framework holds such sway in the court of public opinion, the historical

and structural forces that have led to such disproportionate economic marginalization in the African-American community are misrecognized as individual and subcultural failings. Seccombe asserts that, "Poverty and welfare use are racialized by many white Americans because they are increasingly weary of social programs, they believe that racism has declined, and they see blacks as failing to expend the effort needed to improve their financial standing" (Seccombe 2011:55).

Neubeck and Cazenave argue that the 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S. political landscape is littered with figures who have forged, obscured, and exploited the link between the African-American community, poverty, and welfare; the list of politicians include such men as Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Newt Gingrich, and Bill Clinton, to name a few prominent politicians. The authors note that, "Terms like welfare queens, welfare chiselers, generations of welfare dependency, and children having children were commonplace in 1990s discussions of the need for welfare reform," the authors note, and go on to assert that, "When white politicians talk about welfare they know what part of their constituency they are appealing to and how" (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001:4, 7). The authors argue that the political influence on racial ideologies has been aided and abetted by social science research, much of which has heralded the end of racism in the U.S. As examples they note William Julius Wilson's shift in focus from race to class, Dinesh D'Souza's emphasis on the dysfunctional and pathological culture of the African-American community, and the explanation put forth in Hernstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve* regarding the (supposed) genetically-inherited cognitive deficiencies of African-Americans. The work of politicians and academics has played a substantial part in the result that African-American mothers are being blamed for many social problems

and have been constructed as a threat to the fabric of American society. Americans' views about welfare recipients vary depending on the race of the recipient and are much more negative when the recipient is black, and the cultural conflation of race with poverty and welfare has meant that all welfare recipients now receive the negative judgments once reserved for black recipients. Rather than viewing poverty as an inherent feature of our social, political, and economic organization as a society exacerbated by both historical and institutionalized racism, it is viewed by many as a "black problem" (Neubeck and Cazenave 2001).

Neubeck and Cazenave argue that beyond the political and academic influence on racial attitudes in the U.S., we must look to the larger society to truly understand welfare racism. The racial attitudes of politicians and academics in the U.S. have been a reflection of the larger society's racial attitudes, which should be of little surprise as they belong to the same culture and share many of the same cultural assumptions. Rather than drawing a causal arrow from politicians and academics to the public's attitudes, the arrow might go in both directions (culture influences the perspectives of politicians, who then feed back into that culture and exacerbate its assumptions). Americans are not generally opposed to welfare, they are opposed to welfare for African-Americans, and this reflects historical and contemporary racist attitudes and the institutionalization of those attitudes. The authors argue that, "White-on-black oppression has historically been the basis for racial classification and for white racial hegemony in the United States, and it has endured in this nation for more than four hundred years" (2001:13). A history of racial discrimination, racial exclusion, and racist stereotyping by white Americans not only had a heavy influence on the popular discourse about African-

Americans but on the development of social policies directed towards the poor. White hegemony and racial stratification in the U.S. is inextricably embedded in our culture, influencing all social institutions, including academic institutions (both in education and research) and the government.

Martin Gilens argues that white Americans who are hostile towards welfare tend to hold stereotypical beliefs about African-Americans, particularly concerning their work ethic. He shares similar sentiments to Neubeck and Cazenave, arguing that Americans strongly support the welfare state, noting that, “The American public consistently expresses a desire for more government effort, and higher levels of spending, for almost every aspect of the welfare state. Year after year, surveys show that most Americans think the government is not doing enough (or not spending enough) for education, health care, child care, the elderly, the homeless, and the poor” (Gilens 1999:2). Gilens argues that individualism is a strong ideology in the U.S., but that Americans consistently believe in most aspects of the welfare state as a fail-safe when individual efforts fail. Americans believe that welfare is necessary and desirable, but only as long as it goes to those who are truly deserving. Because many white Americans (a) believe that welfare is largely going to African-Americans, and (b) believe that African-Americans as a group deviate from mainstream society in important ways (such as work ethic), they negatively view the welfare system as it is currently constituted despite agreeing with its major principles. Gilens argues that, “White Americans’ attitudes toward welfare can only be understood in connection with their beliefs about blacks—especially their judgments about the causes of racial inequality and the extent to which blacks’ problems stem from their own lack of effort,” going on to

note that, “The centuries-old stereotype of blacks as lazy remains credible for large numbers of white Americans” (Gilens 1999:3).

Gilens argues that the main culprit in explaining Americans’ welfare attitudes is the racial ideologies of whites, and that these ideologies are exacerbated by mass media overrepresentations of blacks in stories about poverty. Like many scholars, Gilens argues that social institutions, and the people who inhabit them, are subject to the cultural assumptions of society at large. Because of this, it should be of little surprise that members of mass media institutions are subject to the racial ideologies of the culture in which they were born, raised, socialized, and currently live and interact within. He argues that, “The overly racialized images of poverty and the association of blacks with the least sympathetic subgroups of the poor reflect news professionals’ own racial stereotypes, which operate as an unconscious influence on the content of the news they produce” (Gilens 1999:6). While counter-hegemonic ideas exist in our society, it would be naïve to assume that most people in most institutions operate outside of their own culture. Members of the mass media grapple with the same cultural assumptions and logic as other Americans, despite self-selection of political liberals into the profession.

Gilens minimizes the impact of individualism on welfare attitudes, citing racial attitudes as the main culprit, while I interpret his data slightly differently. I believe that Americans’ racial ideologies combine with their individualist ideologies to explain their stance on welfare. While Americans may favor the principles of the welfare state, their belief that economic success or failure is largely the result of effort may help explain their beliefs about African-Americans, coupled with negative racial attitudes that exist. Americans can simultaneously support the welfare state for individuals who fail while

still believing it is individuals and not systems that fail. My understanding of American culture is that it is based on the idea that we “get what we deserve” in economic life; Americans, in my view, support the welfare state in spite of their belief in meritocracy because they believe in the social safety net for moral and compassionate reasons. While it is true that Americans favor a safety net, that does not indicate that they believe poverty is the result of structural imbalances; one can hold an individual-level view of poverty while still being morally opposed to the government standing by while people suffer. One popular response on surveys is that the government should “help those that cannot help themselves.” This statement says nothing about structural imbalance, it simply affirms the government’s responsibility to help people at the bottom regardless of how they got there (and in fact, “those who cannot help themselves” can be a highly-individualistic judgment of the plight of a poor person). In a country where people believe economic standing is largely a result of individual effort, it is not difficult to see why the continued disproportionate representation of African-Americans among the poor would be seen as an individual or subcultural failing by many Americans; coupled with already negative attitudes towards African-Americans as a group and the overrepresentation of blacks in poverty-related stories in the media, negative views of the welfare system are a logical (although highly problematic) result. In relying on the deserving/undeserving poor rhetoric to base their attitudes, we see how Americans fail to identify the structural forces at play in a supposedly undeserving poor person’s life. The ideology of individualism combines with racial ideologies resulting in vitriolic welfare rhetoric and opposition. Gilens argues that, “Individualism does not lead to a principled rejection of government support for the poor, but rather to a strong demand that welfare

recipients, like everyone else, share a commitment to individual effort and responsibility” (Gilens 1999:5). I would argue that most Americans misrecognize structural disadvantage as a lack of personal responsibility, and in doing so, strongly support the individualist ideology. A lack of human capital might be seen as an unwillingness to seek education, rather than structured inequality in society and its institutions, including schools. A lack of employment may be seen as a lack of work ethic, rather than a lack of jobs. Gilens downplays the role of individualism in promoting his racial ideology explanation, but I think this is a mistake. I believe that the individualist ideology itself makes it difficult for Americans to identify structural constraints, and that we must combine this misrecognition with negative racial ideologies to truly understand Americans’ support for the welfare state but opposition to welfare. Americans believe in social welfare where individual effort fails, but largely fail to see where this is the case, and fail to see the strong social forces at play that both limit a poor individual’s ability to rise economically and limit the impact of their individual effort. If white Americans have a negative view of African-Americans, this is at least partly due to the disproportionate representation of African-Americans in poverty and how this intersects with the American belief that most people in poverty are there because of something that they did.

### **Common Poverty Perspectives**

Karen Seccombe suggests that there are generally four perspectives employed to understand what causes poverty: individualism, Culture of Poverty, social structuralism, and fatalism (Seccombe 2007:88). In this study of social work students, I explored individualism, Culture of Poverty, and social structuralism (although I will discuss all four).

Individualism focuses on the responsibility of each person for their own socioeconomic status based upon their own personal characteristics, choices/actions, motivations, hard work, and effort/merit (Seccombe 2007:88-94). Seccombe argues that, “The argument behind Individualism is that we need to change the individual and increase her or his motivation and level of human capital to be competitive for jobs” (Seccombe 2007:93). Seccombe maintains that this has been the dominant U.S. response to poverty throughout its history (Seccombe 2007:89); it is also a very popular explanation for poverty among the public, with approximately half of the public believing that the biggest cause of poverty is the poor themselves (Seccombe 2007:91). Seccombe notes that, “Most Americans are relatively unconcerned about poverty and do not see increasing inequality as a problem for the country” (Seccombe 2007:91). This framework asserts that opportunities for advancement and social mobility are open to anyone who is willing to work hard to obtain it. This perspective is promoted by the conservative think-tank the Heritage Foundation, which asserts that:

Rather than being materially poor, America’s ‘poor’ suffer from the effects of behavioral poverty, meaning the breakdown in the values and conduct that leads to the formation of healthy families, stable personalities, and self-sufficiency. This includes eroded work ethic and dependency, lack of educational aspirations and achievement, inability or unwillingness to control one’s children, increased single parenthood and illegitimacy, criminal activity, and drug and alcohol abuse. (Seccombe 2007:89)

Supporters of the individualistic explanation of poverty cite deficiencies in the proper values, work ethic, and aspirations of the poor as the primary cause of their plight (Seccombe 2007:89). Adults with these deficiencies become poor parents, thus passing on their impoverishment to their children (Seccombe 2007:89).

Social structuralism is concerned with the role and influence of social institutions, organizations, groups, statuses, roles, values, and norms in determining the opportunities available to people in our culture (Seccombe 2007:94-98). Proponents of social structuralism argue that social organization and the manner in which social institutions are structured largely determine resource distribution. This perspective “assumes that poverty is a result of economic or social imbalances within our social structure that restrict opportunity for some people” (Seccombe 2007:94). Labor markets, the economy, federal labor regulations, and the social safety net all play a role in influencing who experiences poverty and what that experience will look like.

Culture of Poverty arguments hinge on the belief that the poor respond to restricted opportunity by developing a unique subculture of attitudes, values, and beliefs (Seccombe 2007:98-102). These beliefs do not necessarily cause poverty (but can) but certainly reproduce it from generation to generation. Proponents of this perspective argue that “regardless of what originally caused patterns of inequality and poverty to exist in society. . . once established, life in poverty tends to produce cultural ideas that promote behaviors and outlooks that perpetuate poverty” (Johnson 1995:68-69). The Culture of Poverty argument can be defined as the manner in which “the poor create distinctive patterns of behavior and belief, notably fatalistic acceptance of being poor and an inability to do anything that might help lift themselves out of poverty” (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 2006:93). Seccombe posits that, “The Culture of Poverty perspective blends features of [individualism and social structuralism]. It suggests that a subcultural set of values, traits, and expectations have developed as a direct result of the structural constraints associated with living in isolated pockets of poverty. People in

poverty are said to live in a subculture with a weak family structure and present-time orientation, and they display a helplessness and resignation toward work” (Seccombe 2007:98). The supposed flawed values displayed by impoverished adults are then transmitted to children, perpetuating a cycle of poverty across multiple generations.

Oscar Lewis, who developed the idea of the Culture of Poverty, asserted that:

Once it [the Culture of Poverty] comes into existence it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effect on the children. By the time slum children are age six or seven they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime. (Lewis 1966:xlili-xlv)

Some view Lewis’ work as blaming the poor for their plight due to their deviant values, while others assert that Lewis’ work can be interpreted as a critique of capitalism (Seccombe 2007:101); the latter view posits that a subculture of values does indeed develop, but only as a means “to ease the pain associated with being a part of the reserve and discarded labor force that is an inherent byproduct of capitalism” (Seccombe 2007:101) The subculture of poverty is then “a positive social construction—the result of a process by which the poor pragmatically winnow what works from what does not, and pass it on to their children” (Harvey and Reed 1996:482, in Seccombe 2007:101).

Seccombe notes that the fatalism framework “attributes the causes of wealth and poverty to quirks of birth, chance, luck, human nature, illness, or other forces over which people have no control” (Seccombe 2007:102). Poverty is not any individual’s fault but rather a result of random events outside of our control (Seccombe 2007:102). In *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, Herrnstein and Murray

argue that intellectual inferiority is genetic, causes poverty, and is passed down intergenerationally (Herrnstein and Murray 1994), an example of the fatalist perspective. Bad luck and poor health are further examples of fatalistic causes of poverty (Secombe 2007:103).

### **What are Ideologies/Worldviews?**

Considering the frequent use of the terms in this study, it is helpful to define what I mean by the terms “ideology” and “worldview”; I tend to use ideology more often because that is how it is most frequently used in the theoretical scholarship I have cited, but I do use both. Ideology has been conceptualized from many different theoretical perspectives, many of which are contradictory; to make matters worse, there is a colloquial meaning of ideology which strips it of any truly meaningful analytical purpose. I will briefly discuss some common conceptualizations while attempting to provide a working definition for this study. Throughout this project I loosely refer to both ideology and worldview; this is not a deductive study, so I am using these two terms interchangeably in one general definition as a sensitizing concept rather than a strictly-defined variable to be tested. These concepts were used in the development of the project to provide a general framework for understanding and direction for the project.

In his book, *Ideology: An Introduction* (2007), Terry Eagleton asks, “Why is it that in a world racked by ideological conflict, the very notion of ideology has evaporated without a trace from the writings of postmodernism and post-structuralism?” (Eagleton 2007:xx). Eagleton argues that, “What persuades men and women to mistake each other from time to time for gods or vermin is ideology,” and it is these ideologies that influence many of our actions and beliefs, the way we live, the meaning we give to the social world, and what people sometimes will die for (Eagleton 2007:xxii). The problem

is that a variety of theorists have conceptualized ideology is a variety of ways; even some of the theorists that I have mentioned in this proposal have contradictory definitions. Here I will attempt to synthesize the many definitions that exist into a practical definition to utilize in this study. In constructing my own practical definition, I will minimize and/or eliminate aspects of existing theoretical definitions that I deem problematic, while emphasizing aspects that I deem useful.

By identifying poverty causation frameworks/perspectives as ideologies, I am not assuming that objective truth exists about the true cause of poverty in the U.S. One substantial criticism of the concept of ideology is that by labeling something an ideology the researcher is therefore assuming that a “true” explanation exists, the researcher knows this “truth,” and that the person being “ideological” believes in a false explanation. The definition of ideology used in this project does not assume that any one ideology fully explains poverty, and doesn’t make any judgment about how true or untrue any one ideology may be. In fact, there may be partial truths in all of the ideologies espoused by respondents (or complete truth, or no truth whatsoever—that judgment will not be made in this project, if it could be made at all). The degree and/or existence of truth is not under investigation here, only which particular ideology the participants in this study espouse and why. I am not identifying what I believe to be adherence to or deviation from truth, only whose version of the truth is being given primacy. By identifying which ideology a particular participant espouses, we can then identify (a) whose interests are served by that ideology, (b) the effect that the belief in that ideology has on the person espousing it, as well as people which that person may influence, and (c) the overall effect of widespread acceptance of particular ideologies by

groups of people, particularly people in positions of power in the institution in question and society at large. There does not need to be complete societal acceptance of individualism/meritocracy for this individual-blaming ideology to affect poor people; when poor people begin to suffer is when people in positions of power believe this ideology.

The ideology of individualism is one that finds the root of cause of poverty almost exclusively in the personal characteristics, choices, and/or actions of poor people. As stated above, this study makes no judgment about whether or not the individualistic ideology is correct or not, only whose interests it serves. It is clear that the individualistic ideology does not serve the interests of the poor, but of those people in positions of power, authority, and wealth. The study of ideology, according to Eagleton, “is among other things an inquiry into the ways in which people may come to invest in their own unhappiness” (Eagleton 2007:xxii). If poor people and the people working to help them (social workers) espouse individualistic and/or subcultural explanations for poverty while rejecting structural explanations, they are at least partially “investing in their own unhappiness” by adopting beliefs that reinforce and justify their domination. Eagleton notes that, “The most efficient oppressor is the one who persuades his underlings to love, desire and identify with his power” (Eagleton 2007:xxii).

There are many different definitions of ideology. The following is my practical definition of ideology (with the help of the work of Terry Eagleton 2007):

Ideologies are sets of ideas which are the result of the process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life which help social actors interpret and give meaning to their world and are the basis for much of an individual's action. Ideology is a 'socially determined way of seeing' (Eagleton 2007:138) which can operate to distort our perceptions and/or communication. Ideologies may be specific to one group in society or may be accepted by many groups in society. Ideologies can reflect a person's social position, although this is not always the case. Ideologies give symbolic meaning to physical relationships, and then are often perceived as or are converted back into natural reality. This symbolic meaning is the basis from which individuals live out their relationship to the social hierarchy. Ideologies typically contribute to social cohesion, but can also contribute to group conflict. Dominant ideologies typically legitimate the status quo.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODS

### **Research Questions**

Generally speaking, there are three poverty frameworks in the existing scholarly literature: individualism, culture of poverty, and social structuralism. Some studies rely heavily on one perspective to explain poverty, while others use some combination of the three perspectives. While many sociologists seem to acknowledge the social structural framework more than many other social science disciplines, the individualistic framework is still heavily utilized even within our discipline. The persistence of poverty in the U.S. is a fiercely contested and ongoing debate; all three perspectives seem to have varying degrees of empirical support, and all three have strengths and weaknesses. Outside of the academy, however, certain perspectives dominate the public discourse and take a much more prominent place in the public mind than social structuralism. Individualism is the most prominent perspective both in public discourse and in public policy debates and approaches (Seccombe 2007:90), while the Culture of Poverty perspective is also popular (and both perspectives are more popular than social structuralism in popular discourse and policy formation). Regardless of the empirical support (or lack thereof) for these two perspectives, their popularity is persistent. Throughout U.S. history, the individualistic perspective in particular has informed much of public discourse and government action (Seccombe 2007:90).

Most U.S. citizens are socialized in a culture that accepts these individualistic and Culture of Poverty perspectives as part of our collective “common sense” understandings of the world. People are socialized first in families and local communities, so these common sense understandings influence their worldviews long

before they enter university social work programs and/or social welfare institutions. This collective worldview may then be subject to influence by the institutional cultures and experiences of studying at the university and working in social welfare institutions. If these institutional cultures rejected the individualistic and Culture of Poverty explanations, one might expect social workers' worldviews to change, even if only slightly, to incorporate more structurally-oriented explanations. What some studies suggest, however, is that the institutional cultures of these academic and social welfare institutions may actually reinforce and do very little to challenge the individualistic and Culture of Poverty explanations of poverty (Seccombe 2011). This study sought to determine the dominant ideological perspective (pertaining to poverty and inequality) among the students in MAU's social work program, and the factors that contributed to the dominance of this perspective.

The following research questions guided this project:

1. What is (if any) the dominant ideological perspective in the MAU social work program pertaining to the root cause of poverty and inequality in the U.S.?
  - a. If counter-hegemonic ideologies exist, what are they?
    - i. How marginalized are they?
    - ii. How many different perspectives are there?
  - b. Is dominant culture reinforced, challenged, or mediated in some manner?
  - c. If there is a dominant ideology how strong is it?
    - i. What components, arguments, justifications, etc., make up this ideology?
  - d. In what ways, if any, is the dominant ideology institutionalized in the program?
  - e. What ideologies do individual students espouse, and do they feel their perspectives "fit in" in this program?
    - i. If not, how do they know they are a minority voice?
    - ii. Are they stigmatized, reprimanded, mocked, etc.?
  - f. Are there differences between students' "real" and "ideal" beliefs about poverty and inequality?
2. Where do these ideologies come from/what factors seem to contribute to how BSW students conceptualize poverty, inequality, and welfare?
  - a. How do the students justify their particular ideologies?

- i. Is it empirical research and theory utilized in their program?
  - ii. American cultural explanations?
  - iii. Some other factor or factors?
3. Does the dominant culture in this program promote the institutional view of social welfare, as some social work scholars claim, or the residual view?
  - a. Do the students feel that the current era of welfare reform addresses poverty more realistically and effectively, or has it made it more difficult to do their work?

### **The Ethnographic Method**

I employed the ethnographic method to help answer the research questions posed in this study. The ethnographic method tends to include some combination of the following elements, all of which were components of this study (adapted from Esterberg 2002:60 and Berg 2009:190-194): a researcher immersed in the research setting for an extended period of time; possible participation in the daily activities under scrutiny; direct, firsthand observation of the interactions in the research setting; description and interpretation of social expressions between people and groups; attempting to see the world from participants' perspectives and recognizing the presence of multiple realities and perspectives; attention to extensive, detailed field notes; formal and informal interviews with participants; data analysis based on field notes, interview transcripts, and gathered documents; and a written report that includes stories and extended narratives. The ethnographic method can be described as "the science of cultural description" (Berg 2009:191), with the main goal of gaining "insight into cultural and social behavior as well as the cultural understandings and underlying thought processes that produce behavior" (Murchison 2010:15). The participants in an ethnographic study "possess the knowledge and information that the ethnographer seeks to acquire and to record," making ethnography a collective endeavor informed by researchers and

participants; participants are often said to perform the role of teacher and the ethnographer the role of student (Murchison 2010:16).

### **Why Ethnography?**

The ethnographic method was chosen for a variety of reasons. This method helps researchers examine research questions that are best answered by studying people in action and attaining information that can only be gathered through firsthand research. It also helps to explore research questions that are hard to answer using experiments or statistical data (Murchison 2010:4). The ideological culture of a social work program is such a research question. Observing the participants in action is important, because I am not simply interested in what they think, which may be garnered from large scale data sets, but the influence of what they think on social interaction, and the context-specific cultures of individual programs. Large-scale data sets may tell us what the average social work student thinks, but it cannot tell us how that may change depending on the particular program and people involved, differences between ideal beliefs and actual action (“ideal” versus “real” culture), as well as the nuances of firsthand experience that are not captured by statistics. Large-scale statistical data, and statistical data in general, cannot explore the research questions that I posed in this manner. By interviewing these students, observing some of their classes and lectures as well as formal and informal discussions, and analyzing the materials they are exposed to in their courses (textbooks, articles, handouts, etc.), a much more nuanced and complex narrative emerged than would have been available by other methods (qualitative methods were particularly more useful than quantitative methods due to the significant ways in which students’ “real” explanations of poverty differed from their “ideal” rankings of poverty perspectives).

For similar reasons, surveys were rejected as a research instrument in favor of ethnography. The reason is that I wanted to both hear what the social work students say is their poverty ideology, and then see how that ideology influenced their interactions. As Murchison notes, ethnography allows researchers “to observe and to experience events, behaviors, interactions, and conversations that are the manifestations of society and culture in action” (Murchison 2010:12). The poverty perspective that BSW students reported believing was an ideal, one that they did not adhere to in practice. According to Murchison, “Ethnography allows the researcher to examine how people’s actions compare to what they say about their actions in ideal situations” (Murchison 2010:13). When developing a qualitative project one often asks: are there discrepancies between what the participants say in interviews and what they say and do in everyday life? This was a concern in this study that proved to be prescient. I was also concerned that the students’ perspectives would sometimes be “messy” and not always fit into “neat” categories, which also proved correct. One major strength of ethnography, and a significant reason for its use in this study, is its ability to uncover these nuances. It also offered me the ability to explore classroom interactions, and see the influence of dominant poverty frameworks on lectures, course material, class discussions, etc.

The ethnographic method can help illuminate discrepancies between macro-level statistical claims and actual micro-level actions. Cultures and societies are “complex, variable, and contested” (Murchison 2010:17). The average beliefs of social work students as whole do not tell us about regional or institutional variation, or the existence of both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideologies within these institutions. The fact that, on average, social work students may feel one way tells us very little about local

variations and counter-hegemonic perspectives. Mid-Atlantic University, for instance, is located in and draws students from one of the richest regions in the nation, an important program-specific characteristic. Ethnography is a useful tool when first-hand experience will answer the research question better than any other research method (Esterberg 2002:59), and is particularly useful when quantitative approaches are inadequate in providing this level of nuance and understanding.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected in three ways: formal and informal interviews with MAU BSW students currently enrolled in the program, direct observation/fieldwork (mostly in classes and informal non-classroom activities such as hanging out at the student center), and document analysis of selected academic materials used in classes (such as textbooks, journal articles, handouts, etc.).

### **Object of study/unit of analysis**

The object of study/unit of analysis was the undergraduate social work (BSW) program at Mid-Atlantic University (fictional name given to real institution) located on the East Coast of the United States. I was granted access by the undergraduate coordinator of the MAU BSW program and this study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) of both the University of Florida and Mid-Atlantic University.

### **Access and recruitment**

In an ethnographic study, accessibility “is probably the single most important practical concern” for the researcher (Murchison 2010:29). The “gatekeeper” for this study was the undergraduate coordinator in the BSW program at MAU, who granted me full access to the program; this person allowed me to approach any student and seek their permission for an interview, as well as approach any professor and ask to recruit

interview participants and/or perform fieldwork in their classes. No professor or student was bound to participate in the study, I was only given permission to ask them to voluntarily participate. There was no extra credit or other form of reward given and the undergraduate coordinator made it clear to everyone involved that their participation was completely voluntary and based on their own personal decisions. All students involved in formal or informal interviews gave their consent by signing an IRB-approved informed consent document.

### **Observations/fieldwork**

The fieldwork took place from July 2012 until February 2013. All possible necessary interactions were observed, focusing mainly on classroom interactions and informal interactions (such as when more than one BSW student would hang out at the student center together to discuss the program). The main source of data from fieldwork came from attending classes and listening to what professors and students said about poverty and inequality in these classes.

Detailed and descriptive fieldnotes were taken during observations as well as after I left the field. I always kept a bound notebook with me while in the field, writing down any observations in the moment that I thought were important. I wrote down anything that struck me as even marginally important, always remembering this guideline: "When in doubt, you should write it down" (Murchison 2010:70). Ethnographic information is fleeting, and comes and goes in an instant. Writing it down in the moment assures that you are able to catch something that may last for a very short period of time but is important to the project (and the importance may not become apparent until long after you have left the field, which highlights the critical importance of catching it when it occurs). There were many times towards the end of this project, in the more

intensive data analysis phase, that I made an empirical or theoretical connection that was not apparent to me while I was in the field; without detailed data, these connections would not have been possible and the project would have suffered considerably. Writing observations down in the moment sometimes seemed odd to participants at first, but they typically became accustomed to my use of field notes while in the field and seemed to have noticed it less the longer I was in the field (and I became much better at being less obvious). I tried to collect data as unobtrusively and quietly as possible, as not to disturb the participants, alter their behavior, or make them feel under inspection. I acknowledge that in qualitative research the researcher affects the environment and it is therefore not entirely “natural,” but I believe that in these somewhat large undergraduate classrooms this problem was minimized to some extent as I sort of “blended in” in the back of the class. The professors typically acknowledged that I was there the first couple of classes, but after a period of a few classes they stopped and the students were less aware that I was there (they still knew I was there, but it became “old news” and seemed to affect them less over time).

Completion of observation notes was not always possible while in the field each day, and because of this I needed to make additional notes once I left the field and went home. When this was necessary, the notes were completed as soon as possible to minimize difficulty in recall and accuracy; “Human memory is a tricky and complicated phenomenon, and it can complicate the record unnecessarily,” and immediate note-taking can help to present “less opportunity for distortion or gaps in the record” (Murchison 2010:70-71). Because everything could not be written down in the moment and there was not always time to write down all of the details while in the moment,

writing fieldnotes once I left the field for the day was critical. This was done immediately after exiting the field, because “the most important thing is to make notes and to create the ethnographic record as soon as possible” (Murchison 2010:71). With this in mind, every day spent in the field had sufficient additional time planned afterwards for additional fieldnote construction.

Strict attention was paid to being as descriptive and detailed as possible with fieldnotes. The research process is long, and many sets of notes had to be revisited long after the memories of the observations they detailed had faded. It is essential that when you revisit notes of an observation you hardly remember witnessing, that these notes should give sufficient detail and description so that your analysis is as accurate as possible. Keeping this in mind helped to convey the results in a meaningful and engaging way and drive home the central arguments of the analysis. Murchison notes that, “Details assist in narrative storytelling by placing the reader in the position of the researcher or participant as nearly as possible and in documenting the complexity of human lives. Details are the components of society and culture in action” (Murchison 2010:71). Being sufficiently detailed helped to ensure that I was documenting the entire record, not just collecting data of too narrow a focus that may have missed important emergent issues not previously considered or nuances not previously known. Ethnography is a journey, and plenty of room was given for the data to emerge and present itself to me, rather than thinking that I was simply “finding” the data. To do this, I needed to write down as much as possible even if something did not strike me as critical in the moment.

One important aspect of participant observation is the manner in which it both explores existing research questions while also suggesting others. One of the best ways to begin the research process is to simply get out into the field and start observing. Once the researcher is in the research setting, all sorts of new information is confronted, helping to answer the research questions that are guiding the project while suggesting new directions and questions that can enhance the project. Murchison notes the once in the field, the researcher quickly becomes aware of things they were not before, and identifies things they need to learn (Murchison 2010:41). This project was guided in significant ways by emergent data that suggested new directions, and I am glad I let the project “steer itself” at times.

The fieldwork portion of this project relied upon weekly visits to the campus and classroom, and I attempted to conduct an on-campus observation at least once a week during the fieldwork phase (sometimes more, sometimes less). Throughout the research process, the fieldwork was not conducted passively and did not simply consist of “hanging out;” this portion of the project was a critical element, and observations were planned and purposeful, observing anything and everything that may have helped to explain the ideological culture of this program (Murchison 2010:42). Through careful planning and focused execution, the fieldwork helped me develop an analytical picture of this cultural space (Murchison 2010:42). The long period of fieldwork helped me to paint a complex picture of this cultural space.

The ethnographic process is a difficult and subjective one, with many choices to be made about what one should actually document. In the field I paid close attention to any situation or conversation that had the potential to reveal value judgments by the

students and professors that suggested the ideologies they use to interpret poverty and inequality (such as individualistic, subcultural, or structural ideologies/frameworks). I also paid close attention to make sure that I was not simply affirming whatever biases I had going into the project. I looked to document the entire ethnographic picture, including evidence that (a) complicated the analysis, (b) disproved previously held assumptions or hypotheses, (c) moved the project in different directions than anticipated, etc. I was simultaneously focused on the initial research questions guiding the project as well as the possibility of new, emergent research questions and directions (Murchison 2010:76-77). Researchers should “write down anything that seems directly related to [their] research question” as well as “anything that stands out as particularly interesting at the time, even if it does not seem directly related to [their] research topic” (Murchison 2010:77). This research project was guided by both the original research design as well as emergent research questions that resulted from immersion in the field.

## **Interviews**

The interview portion of this project proved to provide the most valuable and most informative data. The formal and informal interviews were an opportunity to gain insider knowledge, learn what students and professors thought about poverty and poor people, explore “real” versus “ideal” cultural explanations, and examine their opinions of the institutional culture of the MAU BSW program. I focused heavily on being an “engaged conversationalist” (Murchison 2010:100) throughout the research process; in fact, the line between conversing, interviewing, and observing was not always clear, as the research process proved to be messy and interactions and conversations often presented themselves rapidly and unexpectedly. Informal conversations and brief

“chats” certainly garnered insights, but formal interviews were necessary and proved to provide the bulk of the analysis in this project.

As is customary with ethnographies, the definition of what constitutes an “interview” is loose and encompasses both formal interviews in a neutral setting as well as informal interviews and conversations with people whenever possible while in the field. Informal and formal interviews were both critical components of this ethnographic project. Informal interviews and conversations were conducted on-site when necessary and/or appropriate, while formal interviews were conducted in a private location where no other students or professors were present and where the answers were between me, the student, and the audio recorder. The goal of these interviews was to gain an honest account of the ideological culture of the BSW program at MAU, which would have been difficult if participants knew that their answers were being judged by other students, persons of authority, etc. It is preferable to conduct the interview in a private location free of distractions that is comfortable for both the ethnographer and the participant. These interviews were mostly conducted in private group study rooms in one of the multiple libraries at MAU, but were sometimes conducted at off-campus private locations; one such interview even took place at the kitchen table of one participant.

Informal interviews and conversations were an opportunity to gain a more realistic depiction of the culture in question. Formal interviews provided much-needed information, but sometimes contained idealized versions of what the participants really felt. Murchison notes that depending solely on formal interviews can sometimes lead the ethnographer “to construct a picture of ‘ideal’ culture or society, but [they] will not be able to confidently assert that [their] information accurately reflects ‘real’ culture or

society—that is, society and culture in action—which we all know can often differ significantly from the ideal visions of it” (Murchison 2010:104). Using multiple sources of data, such as formal interviews, informal interviews, and participant observation, “can provide a counterpoint to these idealized versions, and the comparison can often produce interesting questions as the ethnographer attempts to account for and explain discrepancies,” leading to “a more rounded ethnographic picture” (Murchison 2010:104). Even though the presence of the researcher always carries the risk of influencing what happens, and participants are never completely unfiltered and constantly frame their responses in desired ways, this multiple-source approach helps the ethnographer as close to “real” culture as possible (Murchison 2010:104). By interviewing students privately but also hearing what they said in class and around other students, a more complete picture emerged.

With the respondents’ written permission on the UF and MAU informed consent forms, the interviews were recorded using a digital recorder. I transcribed these interviews generally word-for-word and then erased them from the digital recorder once transcription was completed (informal interviews did not always present opportunities for recording, at which point manual jottings were used). I sometimes wrote some brief notes during the interviews, noting body language or other aspects of the interview not caught by the digital recorder. Recording the interviews was critical for ensuring the accuracy of the quotes used in the final report; these quotes significantly enhanced the analysis and provided rich, engaging narratives to support my conclusions. The digital recorder was placed as inconspicuously as possible in the room but in recordable range of the discussion, as to appear innocuous, and to not interfere with or alter the

participant's responses. Most times I just set it on the side of the table so it was never really in view of me or the participant but recorded successfully. Combining this tactic with a neutral and nonthreatening interview environment helped the participants to feel comfortable and open during the interviews. In my research plan I allowed for 5-10 hours of transcription time for each hour of interview (Murchison 2010:74), and I transcribed the interviews myself (in reality I needed about 3 hours per interview for transcription). I always transcribed the interviews as soon as possible after the conclusion of each interview so that I could use "recent memories to fill some gaps or interpret some inconclusive parts of the recording" and connect "notes on the environment and body language to the transcript" (Murchison 2010:74).

The formal interviews were semistructured; this interview structure allowed for the initial exploration of issues that were foundational to the project but also allowed for new areas of inquiry to emerge and previously unconsidered information to surface. While I knew the general framework of the project when it began, there were important details within that framework that needed to be directed by the emergent data (one example is the important ways in which personal experience shaped the ideologies of the BSW students, something I did not know before the project began and focused more heavily on during interviews once the project gained steam). This interview structure allowed participants some freedom to direct the conversation and to express themselves in an open, uninhibited, and unconstrained manner. It also allowed them to speak in their own words and not be forced into preconceived categories or thought processes. Most interviews were 50-70 minutes in length, with some lasting up to 90 minutes. During the initial interview, participants were asked for their contact information

and permission to conduct follow-up interviews. I hoped to obtain sufficient data in the first interview, but in a few cases this did not happen and a follow-up interview was required (this was particularly true for the first participants, some of whom I had to go back and talk to in order to address emergent questions that were not apparent to me to ask when we first spoke in the beginning of the project).

Both formal and informal interviews were conducted in a loose, conversational manner. I did not present myself as a person of authority, but as a fellow participant in the research process who was enthusiastic about the insights of the various participants. It is often stated that participants in ethnographic studies are as much or more so the “teachers” than the ethnographers; we are not so much “discovering facts” as we are letting data and themes emerge organically in the settings we observe and constructing the ethnographic record with this emergent data. This loose, personal, and collective approach lent itself to more comfort on the part of the participants and I believe more honest responses as a consequence.

### **Interview sample and sampling method**

The interview sample consisted of MAU undergraduate social work students still enrolled in the program. I initially sought 30 interviews under the assumption that I would exhaust the emergent codes and themes at that point. I planned to conduct more interviews if codes and themes were still emerging once I arrived at 30, or less if I exhausted the codes and themes before reaching 30 interviews. Once I reached 20 interviews it was clear that no new codes were emerging from the data. I continued just to be certain and when I reached 25 interviews I did not seek any more interviews as I felt comfortable that no new codes or themes were emerging.

I utilized convenience sampling with students choosing to join the project once they became aware of it. Students were initially recruited during classes; multiple professors allowed me to speak in their classes to describe my project and encourage students to participate. Students mostly joined the project through this method, but I also gained some participants through word-of-mouth (they heard from a friend or colleague about my presentation and wished to join).

### **Interview schedule**

The interview schedule contained a list of questions related to the research questions, and these questions were as open-ended as possible so that the data was less reflective of my research agenda or bias and more reflective of the honest perspectives of the participants. These were semi-structured interviews, designed to always strive to strike a balance between appropriately addressing research questions while not closing off unforeseen directions; I wanted to address all topics of interest while being careful not to “close the door to potential research avenues that emerge during the course of research” (Murchison 2010:107). The interview schedule was structured in a conversational manner, helping the participants to feel comfortable and allowing their responses to come easily. Interview questions were designed so that they would provoke interesting stories, rich narratives, and lengthy explanations (Murchison 2010:107). I made myself sufficiently familiar with the interview guide so that it was less of a script that I had to consult constantly, but a guide that I could look at occasionally to make sure the interview was progressing sufficiently; again, the goal was to stimulate a friendly conversation, not a stiff, impersonal interview. With each interview I became more and more familiar with the interview schedule so that by the end of the project I

barely needed to refer to it except at the end of the interview to make sure I had touched on every question.

The interviews started with easy questions as well as questions that allowed the participants to talk about themselves. One such question was, “What brought you to the study of social work?” The “easy” beginning questions were intended to make the participants feel comfortable and make it easy for them to begin talking openly. The questions that allow participants to talk about themselves were based on the premise that people like to talk about themselves, and often go into great detail when asked to do so; because the beginning of the interview can often dictate the entire course of the interview, eliciting easy, long responses from the very beginning can set the tone for rich, detailed narratives to flow later on in the interview when tougher questions are posed (Murchison 2010:109). Murchison notes that, “You want to establish a pattern for the interview from the outset, and that pattern should include room for the interviewee to provide lengthy explanations and interpretations if at all possible. Asking questions that encourage the interviewee to tell a story can be a great way to establish this sort of pattern and to create a congenial interview environment” (Murchison 2010:109). What was interesting, suggesting the importance of the emergent nature of qualitative research design, is that the questions about their lives actually became highly important in the final analysis.

Some of the following tips (from Murchison 2010:109-110) were considered when developing this interview schedule: ask as many open-ended questions as possible to allow for rich emergent data, avoid simple questions, avoid leading questions that suggest an answer to avoid influencing answers and to gain the most honest

perspective of the participant (even if that perspective is out of the ordinary or unforeseen), ask follow-up questions to further expand upon important points, double-check or clarify answers (especially concerning critical topics), and pose some hypothetical questions to explore thought processes and/or see if certain thoughts or behaviors might apply in different circumstances.

With all of these tips and guidelines in mind, I constructed the following interview schedule:

- Demographic questions:
  - Age, gender, race/ethnicity, marital status, children, religiosity.
    - Ask about family, too.
  - Where do you live?
    - Have you always lived there? Explain motivation for moves.
  - Total household income now.
    - Perceived social class over time, family SES history.
- Political philosophy? Party affiliation? Your family?
- What brought you to the study of social work?
- What year are you in the program?
- Which population or populations would you like to work with?
  - Where do you want to work when you graduate?
- Have any of your life experiences shaped your desire to pursue social work?
  - What about your family's influence? Other influences?
- Can you tell me a little bit about your internships and other social work related experiences?
  - What lessons have you learned from them?
- Do you follow the news?
  - Where do you get your news?
  - Other non-news sources which inform your views on poverty/inequality?
- Why do you think poverty and inequality exist in the U.S.?
  - Where does this opinion come from?
- Rank the Individualism, Culture of Poverty, and Structuralism perspectives from 1 to 3 (1 is most agree with – make sure to thoroughly explain each perspective)
- What can do the most good in reducing and/or “curing” poverty?
- Do most social work students agree with your poverty/inequality answers?
  - Your professors? Your course materials?
  - Most MAU students? Most Americans?
- Do you agree philosophically with welfare?
- Would you ever turn to welfare in a time of substantial need?
  - Would it hurt your pride? Would you be aware of any possible stigma?
- Have you ever been to a welfare office?

- Policies: do you support or not support each, and explain your answer:
  - Drug testing
    - Also ask about testing for non-poverty-targeted welfare.
  - Fertility-limiting policies (such as family caps)
  - Work requirements
- Do you believe the U.S. is a meritocracy? Please explain your reasoning (give them a thorough explanation of what meritocracy means).

## **Data Analysis**

Even though I will now discuss data analysis separately from data collection, the data analysis and data collection stages of the project were not two completely separate phases, as data analysis commenced while data collection was still ongoing. Qualitative studies in general produce a large amount of data, and ethnography is no exception. Starting the data analysis during the data collection phase helped to establish preliminary themes and findings, while also organizing the data and keeping it manageable. Analyzing along the way allowed for a more flexible research plan; emergent data presented previously unforeseen research questions and avenues, and analyzing along the way allowed the project to be altered to address these issues. Initial data analysis also helped to tweak and revise the original research questions and the original research design, and brought a sharper focus to the succeeding direction of the project. If I had waited to analyze data until the very end, I would have missed these kinds of opportunities; this would have lead to a weaker project and weaker/incomplete findings that did not properly address the original research questions (Murchison 2010:116-120) and did not explain the research topic as well and as thoroughly as I might have been able to. Murchison notes that, “Analyzing the information that you have collected in a continual fashion as the project proceeds will allow you to begin to see connections, test analytical ideas, and identify gaps in the ethnographic record that you are producing” (Murchison 2010:116). Throughout the research process I stopped

periodically to be sure that the research questions matched the project direction at that moment, considered if changes needed to be made to the fieldwork/interview balance, evaluated possible perspectives that were missing from the project, and generally assessed whether the overall research plan was sound and achieving the desired goals of the project. It was not until after a few interviews that I discovered the heavily influential ways in which life experiences had shaped the BSW students worldviews and paths to social work, and I paid closer attention to that in future interviews (and also went back to previous participants to expand upon this influence). I also noticed after a short period of time that the interviews were providing the most crucial data while the fieldwork was not producing very valuable data, and altered my focus accordingly. There were also a few different points in the research process where I reached out for suggestions from my dissertation chair and from participants to help guide the project forward (Murchison 2010:121-122).

### **Themes, categories, and codes**

The data analysis process moves the researcher from raw field observations and interview transcripts to identifying “threads that can be woven together to tell a story (or a number of stories) about the observed social world,” producing a “coherent, focused analysis of some aspect of the social life that has been observed and recorded” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:142). The first step is to read and reread the field notes and transcripts, focusing on elaborating and refining earlier insights. As themes, categories, patterns, new questions, and key moments emerge, the next step is to inductively code the ethnographic record using these emergent concepts (not existing theoretical propositions or pre-established categories). In the data analysis process I considered all data (interview transcripts, field observations, documents) as one single

ethnographic record, and used the same emergent themes, categories, and codes (discovered during open coding) to code this record sentence by sentence (during focused coding).

The initial stage of open coding is a time for intensive line-by-line reading of the record, and constructing corresponding codes and themes that seem appropriate. “The secret of coding,” according to Emerson and his colleagues, is to develop “a word or short phrase that captures and signals what is going on in a piece of data in a way that links it to some more general analytical issue” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:146). When a sufficient amount of the ethnographic record had been read to the point where no new codes were being generated, I proceeded to the next stage of focused coding. During focused coding, the ethnographer “uses a smaller set of promising ideas and categories to provide the major topic and themes for the final ethnography” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:143). Memos were used throughout this process to elucidate and link broader themes, categories, arguments, and key moments across the ethnographic record. This is similar to the constant comparative method used in grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006), which emphasizes connections across the entire ethnographic record. The final step was developing the “big picture,” developing the emergent theoretical implications, linking this to the existing literature, considering the overall implications of the findings, and writing the final report.

During the coding process, I asked some of the following questions (from Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:146). What are people doing and/or what are they trying to accomplish? How do they do this and what specific strategies do they employ? How do these participants discuss and understand what is happening? What do

participants see as significant? What assumptions do they reveal in their responses? Why did I include specific information and events in the fieldnotes? These questions helped to uncover processes, focus on what was happening, and helped to assure that the codes were analytically sharp and were connected as closely and accurately as possible to the data (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:147).

Although I kept copies of each set of fieldnotes and transcripts in their original forms in a (digital) folder on my laptop, I also started pulling fieldnotes and transcripts apart (in new files) to match different pieces of data with preliminary themes and categories. One method that I really liked employing and helped me stay organized was to copy and paste important quotes and information from different participants under categorical and thematic umbrellas to which they match in files specifically created for those categories/themes. This was the very beginning of what would eventually be the final report, and helped me to develop some early drafts while still collecting data. Compiling quotes from multiple interviews that reflect recurring themes and emergent categories laid the groundwork for the more focused analysis later in the project. I was able to develop whole polished sections of the dissertation in separate files in this manner, and slowly patched these files together into one coherent final report.

Writing during the research process is particularly useful when you want to remember key events and moments and record them accurately and in great detail. Important events and interviews, as well as unexpected occurrences, are critical parts of the ethnographic record and should be documented fully and accurately (Murchison 2010:124). To assure that this happened, writing early drafts, or just the portions that pertained to these important events, went a long way towards producing a more

valuable final report; they strengthened the analysis, bolstered my main arguments, and hopefully made reading the final report more enjoyable for the audience.

Preliminary development of categories and themes led to much more focused analysis and coding as the data collection process concluded. At this point I began a more rigorous process of “organizing, sorting, and analyzing the ethnographic record” with emphasis on “the big-picture analysis and the final ethnographic project” (Murchison 2010:174). At this point key questions, themes, categories, moments, and events had been identified and a more concrete analytical framework began to emerge (Murchison 2010:174). This was always an inductive process, with all findings, analyses, and emergent theoretical implications rooted in the data (Murchison 2010:175). It started to become clear which codes were most useful, and which major themes and categories were most important and should be the focus of the final analysis. Themes and categories that had a substantial amount of supporting data, showed consistent patterns in the record, were critical to the foundation of the analysis, and/or were particularly meaningful for participants were given emphasis. Themes and categories were also important if they were connected in important and insightful ways to other emergent themes and categories (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:157-158).

Throughout the advanced data analysis process I continually revisited lists of previously developed categories, themes, and codes, assessed them for their continual relevance, and made revisions and additions. Murchison notes that, “Your goal should be to produce a final list of themes that you can use to organize, search, and analyze the ethnographic record” (Murchison 2010:176). At this point it also started to become apparent which themes and categories would become good dissertation sections and

chapters (Murchison 2010:176). As the analytical framework developed, I paid close attention not only to themes and categories but also to the connections between them and the larger implications of the research findings.

With the final list of themes, categories, and codes that emerged inductively during open coding, I conducted focused coding on the complete ethnographic record of interview transcripts and fieldnotes. This was done by rereading the ethnographic record and highlighting each piece of information that represented a theme, category, or code. I would then cut and paste pieces of data that matched categories and themes into their appropriate files (while maintaining the original data untouched). Occasionally I would share some of the coding decisions I was making with my dissertation chair to make sure I was being appropriately “careful and systematic in the coding process” (Murchison 2010:181). My dissertation chair gave me some helpful feedback concerning whether the codes made analytical sense and if they accurately reflected what we believed was happening. This helped bolster the validity and reliability of the analysis and helped strengthen the (inherently constructed) findings. Ethnography is inherently subjective, but that does not mean that just any interpretation is most valuable. This “check” with a fresh eye at various points in the research process helped me remain focused and analytically sharp.

Not all information gleaned from the raw data matched the codes developed. Researchers undoubtedly “can expect to find ideas, experiences, and pieces of information that seem to be contradictory” (Murchison 2010:181). Contradictions can be random or reflect idiosyncrasies, while they can also suggest multiple perspectives, conflict and debate, and context-specific variation (Murchison 2010:181). The same

people may act differently in different settings, and while this might appear to be a contradiction, it may actually suggest an important context-specific process that produces variation. Participants may act differently “depending on whom they are interacting with and who is present,” contradictions that may give valuable insight to the project (Murchison 2010:181). There were many contradictions and perspectives in the data, and I made sure to document and attempt to explain this in my final analysis.

### **From data to theory**

As the analytical framework developed I began tying categories and themes to existing literature and sociological theory. As discussed previously, this project was not designed to test theory or represent a single theoretical paradigm. This project was developed using a “toolbox approach,” asserting that multiple theoretical concepts from various social theorists contribute to our understanding of this phenomenon. I constantly compared my findings to existing scholarship, however, to note commonalities and differences; I was both making sure that I was not imposing an existing interpretive lens on the data as well as making sure that I had an explanation for why the findings reflected and/or rejected existing sociological assumptions. It is not inherently right or wrong to confirm or reject existing assumptions, but it is the obligation of the scholar to explain how these findings fit into the existing scholarship.

The data analysis phase “is at once inductive and deductive” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:144). The design and implementation of the research project was informed by existing empirical studies and sociological theory, but the findings emerged inductively from the data. The deductive approach was at the forefront during the design stage. What to look for and why are necessarily informed by the large amount of previous research and theorizing. Once data collection and data analysis commenced,

the process became absolutely inductive, letting the data speak to me and direct the construction of the ethnographic record. The finished product should always work from the data to theory, not the reverse, and at that point it can be situated in the existing literature (Murchison 2010:190).

### **Writing the Final Report**

The goal of the final written product was to present the findings, provide rich participant and research narratives that highlighted and supported those findings, discuss their meaning and importance, and situate them in the existing field.

Ethnographers aim to “weave together detailed ethnographic storytelling with compelling analysis that addresses key research questions as well as practical and theoretical issues” (Murchison 2010:189). The ethnographic record both bolsters the validity of the analysis and engages the reader.

The hourglass model was loosely followed when writing the final report. The opening and closing sections covered a broad area of questions and topics, while the middle of the report narrowly focused on the most important themes and categories. In the opening section, the project was introduced, the existing literature was discussed, and the project was situated in existing empirical and theoretical work. In the middle of the report, the focus became very narrow and emphasized the most significant themes and categories that resulted from this project. Analytically supportive, rich, and entertaining narratives were woven around these central topics to provide the core thrust of the findings. In the closing section the focus widened again, discussing big picture implications, emergent theoretical implications, and links to the larger field.

The final report is a thematic narrative containing chapters based on the handful of core themes that were developed during the data analysis process. Within these

chapters, these themes are discussed and significant portions of the ethnographic record are presented to bolster and illustrate the analysis (including field observations and a significant number of quotes from interviews). Another function of presenting portions of the ethnographic record is so that the final product reads more like a “narrative tale” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:170) rather than a stiff journal article or quantitative paper. A major strength of the ethnographic method is that it often produces vibrant, rich, and entertaining accounts of field experiences, while remaining analytically rigorous. The final story that is produced is “constructed out of a series of thematically organized units of fieldnote excerpts and analytic commentary” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:170). This involves “writing out initial statements of analytic themes, then selecting, explicating, sequencing, and editing fieldnote excerpts in order to build up a series of thematically organized units of excerpt and analytic commentary” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:170). Hopefully the large number of quotes that I used provided substantial support for my main arguments, gave key insights into the minds and thought processes of the BSW students at MAU, and engaged the reader; that was certainly the intent.

The final report was written for an academic audience with an assumed sociological background. This is important because this is a dissertation project intended to fulfill the remaining requirements for my sociology Ph.D at the University of Florida and satisfy the academic and departmental standards of the committee members. Many ethnographic projects are undertaken with the intention of eventually adapting the manuscript into book form. I do intend to adapt this project into a book or multiple journal articles once I have successfully defended it in front of my committee, at

which point some of the language and organization may change in order to be more accessible to non-academics (spending less time on explaining methods, for instance, is appropriate in a manuscript intended for public consumption, but problematic in a dissertation). The final report for my dissertation committee, however, was constructed according to departmental and committee-specific standards, and is academic in tone and focus.

### **Role of the Ethnographer**

The ethnographic method places the researcher into the very settings they are observing and utilizes them as a primary research instrument (Murchison 2010:13). Rather than collecting evidence through surveys or large-scale statistical aggregation, the ethnographer is literally using their own five senses as the primary means of collecting information (Murchison 2010:13). The researcher observes interactions, events, and behaviors, listens to people talk and conducts interviews, observes and analyzes social settings, all the while selectively seeing and recording what they interpret to be important information (Murchison 2010:14). The researcher is continuously interpreting their surroundings, determining what is important from everything they are seeing, what is actually happening in front of them, and what all of that means; this is an inherently interpretive and subjective process. While I could not see everything in the field, I attempted to document everything so that later in the process I would not close off possible important analytical avenues. At multiple points in the data analysis process I discovered things once I left the field that were important to the project; I would never have had this data if I had chosen to ignore it because I did not deem it important at the time.

## Objectivity

As mentioned previously, one important method in attempting to reduce researcher bias and selectivity is to record as much about an observation as possible, constructing extensive and descriptive notes in and out of the field. As I have stated before, ethnography is an inherently selective and subjective process, and because of this bias, subjectivity, and selectivity are difficult to eliminate from the process. Many qualitative researchers argue that this is an inherent problem in all scientific research, and the goal should be to faithfully represent the perspectives that you are studying rather than make any sort of truth-claims. In order to help reduce these potentially problematic aspects of the ethnographic method as much as possible, I recorded everything that I possibly could, even details that may have seemed mundane or nonessential to the research question at first. The personal histories of the BSW students seemed, quite frankly, to be a bit boring to listen to at first; what I really wanted to talk about was poverty and inequality! Boy was I seriously mistaken; this ended up being one of the most vital parts of the final analysis, not simply a conversation starter for the interviews. I am glad that I took notes vigorously in the field, as well as after leaving the field for the day. After leaving the field and reading and rereading my notes (and applying intense analysis to the large volume of data), insights emerged that were not previously considered. In this way I was able to catch things that I may have missed had I been too selective in looking for something too specific in the field. Murchison points out that, "In many cases, the ethnographer cannot determine which pieces of information will be most valuable until well after they have been recorded" (Murchison 2010:15). This is why it was so important to record as much as possible, as present-time bias and selectivity sometimes make it very difficult to recall important overlooked

details later. For instance, a project may take unforeseen turns, but previously collected data was constructed in such a narrow manner as to eliminate the possibility of analyzing these newly important research questions and insights. This attention to extensive and descriptive note taking of all possible data helped explain things in a way I did not always anticipate, and uncovered new research directions and questions not known at the beginning of the project. I did my best to faithfully represent the social reality that I observed and the perspectives of the participants, while acknowledging that all social scientific research is an interpretive, constructed process.

Throughout the research process I attempted to be as reflexive as possible in identifying how personal prejudices and my own worldview influenced the research process. Whenever possible, data was shared with my dissertation chair (without any identifying information) in order to verify that observations were being interpreted as objectively as possible. While qualitative methodology was used and it is generally assumed that the qualitative researcher plays a critical role in interpreting what is being observed, I was constantly vigilant in attempting to remove as much of my personal bias as possible. The objective of this was not to arrive at truth-claims; I simply attempted to minimize (as much as possible) the preconceived categories and assumptions that the observed reality was filtered through in the research process, while acknowledging the inherent nature of qualitative methods.

### **Validity and Replicability**

As the research process moved along, I was constantly comparing what I was finding back to the established literature in the field. In this manner, I compared what I was finding to what other researchers had found in similar studies. Was I finding something similar or different? The idea was not to set out with the specific goal of

trying to find exactly what had been found before, nor to find something completely different, but to identify why similarities and/or differences existed between my project results and the existing literature. If there was a discrepancy between what I was finding and what previous researchers found, that would present important questions that could enhance the project and inform the results and analysis. Discrepancies can be a bad thing, signaling that your research design is flawed and needs strengthening.

Discrepancies can also be a very good thing, meaning that something new has emerged or an alternate explanation has been uncovered, or deeper nuance has been provided to previous findings. Comparing the findings during and after the research was finished helped to strengthen the research, focusing on where the research had been in the past and where it needed to go in the future. It was also important to conduct this comparison as soon as possible during the research process, to both focus and direct the research appropriately.

Another method of checking for validity was to share my research results with my dissertation committee (both during and after completion of data collection, throughout the entire research process). Murchison notes that ethnographers often “try to present the raw ethnographic data that they have collected for others to study and analyze” to strengthen the analysis (Murchison 2010:15). My dissertation committee has multiple skilled and accomplished qualitative researchers well-versed in the methodology that was utilized. Sharing the findings at various points in the research process with my dissertation chair allowed a new set of eyes to analyze the data in ways that me as the “immersed researcher” may have been unable to do effectively. My committee chair would often ask me specific questions such as: Have you considered this? Why did you

make this analytical decision here? I noticed you overlooked this detail, could that have been important? As the principal researcher I was so close to the process and immersed in such a large amount of data, and because of this having a new set of eyes brought a fresh perspective to the analysis. The considerable talents of my dissertation committee were too valuable to go unutilized throughout the research process and helped strengthen the validity of the analysis.

I realize as a qualitative researcher that my interpretive and constructivist role in both collecting (constructing) and analyzing data make replicability and validity difficult. I generally consider these concepts to belong to the realm of quantitative research, and find that they are even problematic in that realm in many ways. My concern was not to produce a study that could be replicated because my analytic approach and unique observations cannot be replicated. My goal was to interpret and construct the observed reality and perspectives as faithfully and critically as possible, while doing all that I could to avoid imposing preconceived categories and notions on the data collection and data analysis processes. Replicability in this context is largely impossible and not a stated goal. Validity in this context was not used in the same manner as quantitative research, and simply refers to the process of mitigating my own influence as a researcher on the data.

### **Ethics and Confidentiality**

An ethnographer's first and primary ethical responsibility is to their participants (Murchison 2010:32). Even though 100% confidentiality is hard to guarantee, all possible precautions should be taken to strive for maximum confidentiality. Participants interviewed were given informed consent forms consistent with the IRB policies of both UF and MAU, and their anonymity and confidentiality were strictly guarded by the

principal researcher. All data from observations, interviews, and document analysis was compiled on the principal researcher's personal computer as well as on a backup hard drive in Microsoft Word format. Both the personal computer and backup hard drive were stored in a secure location to which only the principal investigator had access.

Identifying information was only available to the principle researcher during the study on one master list of respondents (with their real name matched to the fictional name used in the study). After completion of data collection and writing, that master list was erased, and now identifying information for all participants from MAU no longer exists in any form. This will hopefully make it very, very difficult for anyone reading the final report in the future to identify people, places, and institutions. I changed the name of anything that could possibly identify participants, including the school name (which I simply state is located on the East Coast of the U.S.). Confidentiality of illicit or illegal behavior was not a problem, as all of the data was either (a) an observation of legal, public interactions, or (b) discussions of completely legal topics, events, memories, etc.

Before the project commenced I attempted to determine all of the ways in which this project could possibly impact the participants in a negative manner. The one potential negative impact that I identified was the perception of the social work field in general. If it was determined that social work programs are demeaning to poor people, this could reflect poorly on the field and its members. The goal of this research was not to demonize or chastise the field of social work. The intention of this project was to present an honest assessment of the ideological culture of a social work program, and to suggest the possible positive and negative consequences of this culture for knowledge production and the treatment and perceptions of poor people (through the

worldviews and actions of future social workers). Throughout the entire process and in the final report, utmost attention was paid to representing all participants honestly and with dignity, and simply to have the report serve as a means for deeper understanding of this particular culture and advocating for the dignified treatment of all people. The implications of my findings are about the impact of individualistically-oriented American culture in general, and any possible negative impacts should not be felt by the social work field (and certainly will not be felt by the participants who cannot be identified).

The structural, institutional focus of this project is intended to help understand how institutions can be improved, and is not focused on any one individual. I attempted to provide an honest, accurate, nonjudgmental account of what I observed. Any data produced in this project was subject to my interpretation, and it was my duty to be as honest as possible. In general, ethnographers “do not want to create an ethnographic record that can be used against the people that were generous enough to serve as [their] teachers and participants in [their] research” (Murchison 2010:79). This can of course be difficult, especially since it was found that social work students hold some particularly negative and judgmental views of the poor in this country. The goal of this research was not to rebuke anyone, but help us understand the consequences of deeply held worldviews in the social work field, for the benefit of employees and clients alike. The implications, like I mentioned previously, are really concerned with the impact of the larger U.S. culture in general on all people in all fields, and how even people in such a “liberal” field as social work can help reproduce social hierarchies.

Deception and misinformation were not used at any point in the research process. A brief and clear summary of the project was developed beforehand in the

instance that students and/or professors wished to know why I was there. While I kept this description somewhat vague as not to prime the respondents to answer questions in specific ways or alter their behavior, I did not misrepresent my project or purpose (Murchison 2010:93). If anything, I always remained somewhat vague so that they understood the core principles and goals of my research but were not influenced to answer in any particular direction (or try to “please” me or society with their answers).

### **Research Dates**

I completed most of the work on my dissertation proposal during the summer and fall of 2011 and successfully defended the proposal on March 30, 2012. It was after the proposal defense that I was given permission to begin my study. I gained access to the MAU social work program through my gatekeeper (the BSW undergraduate coordinator at MAU) in late spring 2012. I began initial data collection in July 2012. While continuing data collection I began preliminary data analysis in August 2012. The project began winding down as I began writing dissertation chapter drafts in January 2013. I completely exited the field in February 2013. In early spring 2013 I began providing chapter drafts to my committee for revision. After the revision process concluded I was given permission by my committee chair to proceed to the final defense. I successfully defended my final dissertation on July 15, 2013. This was the final step in the completion of the sociology Ph.D. program at the University of Florida and I graduated at the end of the summer 2013 term.

## CHAPTER 4

### “I AM GOING TO HEAL MYSELF”: SOCIAL WORK AS A PERSONAL PROFESSION

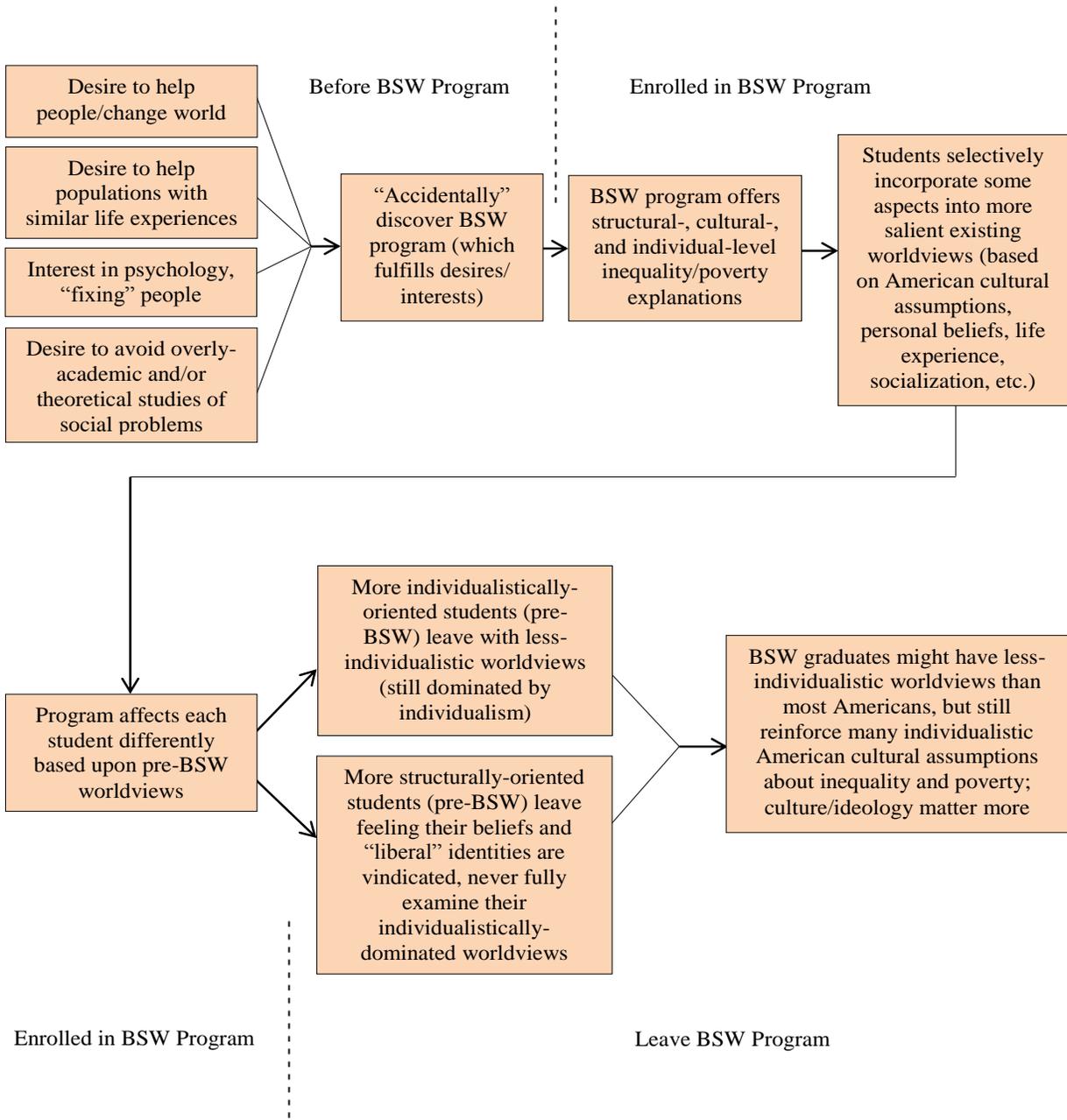
The social work students in this study feel very strongly that social work is a personal profession, a career path which people pursue for deeply personal reasons. It became very clear early in this study that the reasons behind these participants' entrance into the field of social work had less to do with their ideas about economic issues or social problems and much more to do with something that they needed to satisfy within themselves. The data in the ethnographic record (field observations, formal and informal interviews, and document analysis) suggests that the worldviews that BSW students bring with them into the program largely persist, although they are altered somewhat, throughout their college years. The students reported that childhood socialization and experiences heavily influenced their worldviews and decisions to pursue social work. An overwhelming majority of participants had at least one or two salient experiences from their early lives that heavily shaped their current beliefs and social work educational path. Strong patterns in the ethnographic record suggest the following conclusions: personal beliefs, childhood socialization, and childhood experiences led students to social work, the type of personal experience they had influenced which population they wanted to work with, and whether they held structural, culture of poverty, or individualistic poverty and inequality worldviews was associated more significantly with their pre-BSW program worldviews than their college studies.

The graphic representation in Figure 4-1 (on page 177) represents the dominant patterns across the ethnographic record. Students' path to social work started long before they ever chose social work as their major. Most of the students had either all or some combination of the following desires/interests before choosing social work: a

desire to change the world, a desire to help people who had experienced similar (typically traumatic) life events to themselves, an interest in psychology and/or “fixing” people, and a desire to major in a discipline that did not require a substantial amount of empirical research and/or study of academic theories. Most of the students, in their pursuit of a college degree, eventually found the BSW program “accidentally” (they were not looking to become a social worker but at some point discovered the BSW program and how it fulfilled their individual desires and interests). While individual-level, culture of poverty, and structural-level explanations of poverty and inequality were discussed in their program, there was not a significant theoretical element to the program; this allowed students to rely more heavily on their pre-BSW poverty and inequality explanations while selectively incorporating some elements of what they learned into these worldviews (thus helping to maintain many of their individualistically-oriented explanations of poverty and inequality). Therefore, the worldviews that they left the program with seemed to be largely the worldviews that they arrived with, altered somewhat to include their selectively incorporated program elements.

Students who entered the program more individualistically-oriented tended to leave the program with more structurally-oriented worldviews but still dominated by individualism; it was this group of students who changed the most and seemed to critically analyze their firmly held assumptions most seriously. Students who entered the program more structurally-oriented (but still dominated by individualism) tended to leave the program feeling that their “liberal/progressive” identities were validated, never truly critically analyzing their individualistic beliefs; thus they selectively incorporated certain program elements while leaving much of their worldviews unexamined. The end result

Figure 4-1. Flowchart Representing Participants' Typical Path To/Through BSW Program and Resulting Impact on Poverty/Inequality Worldviews



seemed to be that while eventual BSW graduates may have less-individualistic poverty and inequality worldviews than the average American, their worldviews were still dominated by individualism. This suggests that, at least for these students, the following seem to matter more than their college studies: personal beliefs, childhood socialization, childhood experiences, American cultural assumptions, and pre-existing worldviews. While it might be suggested that a heavier focus on research and theory might create more self-reflection, the data here suggests that many of the students would not have self-selected into the BSW program had this been the case. For the students who still would have pursued the program nonetheless, it is unclear how this would have affected them.

Karen talked about coming to social work as a way for a person to “make their own way” and “invent” or make a profession in their own image and interests. She explained that, “For people like me who are indecisive about what they want to major in it is kind of a nice made-up field. That’s what drew me into it.” Through my conversations with Karen, it became clear that she did not think social work required any particular framework of understanding social problems or background in research or theory, it was simply a place for people to go if they wanted to help people.

Marena provided an example of why people might come to social work to deal with their own past rather than have a deep understanding of social problems:

I think a lot of social work students go into social work because they've had similar experiences [to the populations they will serve] and I think a lot of people who want to work with homelessness have had some kind of event in their life where they have been homeless or know somebody who's going through homelessness.

Marena's analysis was the dominant pattern in this research: people chose social work because they were in some way dealing with things that had happened to them in their own lives. The typical path to social work for my participants was one in which they sought to deal with and/or resolve something that had happened to them in their lives; their views about social problems were a much smaller piece of this puzzle and, as I will discuss in the next chapter, these views largely reinforced many American cultural assumptions about individualism and poverty.

Jana commented on this notion and the fact that because the field is so diverse, people with vastly different backgrounds and reasons for entering social work can find a home in the discipline. For Jana, social work is a "personal profession" where people come to deal with their own "needs and wants":

Social work is so diverse. You can work in homeless populations or you can work in a closed psychiatric ward. So you can do anything, you know? There are always the people that want to help the kids, people who think, 'This is the calling of my life, I want to save the children and take them out of homes or just help them become successful adults.' Then there are the ones who want to help the poor black community, or all these systematically marginalized communities, help them. Then there is the other part, which I probably fall more in, that just wants to do more at the clinical side of social work, work with mental illness, mental or physical disabilities, and things like that. So I think there are two camps. And there is a third one that does more social change, wants to be in advocacy programs, things like that. . . and there are the people that have had personal experience who are deeply moved by this and want to fix the system to help those children or help the domestic violence or the poverty issues. I think social work is a very personal profession, it needs a lot from a person because you have to give up a lot of yourself. It depends so much on the person in the social work field. What their background is, and what their needs and wants are, where their interests are, and their needs and what they want with their own lives.

Jana's comments were echoed in the ethnographic record. These experiences and the beliefs that students brought with them into the program were very influential in how

they interpreted social problems; in fact, they were much more influential than what they learned in college. Most of the students actually reported that they explicitly and actively chose social work to avoid having to deal in any great detail with the theoretical and empirical foundations of the study of social problems. Because of this, most of my participants relied on personal opinions rather than their studies, and these opinions reflected American cultural assumptions about individuals and how they relate to the social structure.

There was no clear indication that, overall, students had internalized much of the structurally- and systems-oriented instruction that they had received in their BSW studies. Instead, it seemed that the incredible diversity in background and experience explained students' opinions about economic issues much more than their studies. Social scientists have long been aware of the importance of childhood socialization and experiences in heavily influencing who we will be as adults, and this seemed clearly on display in this study. Some of the students, like Jennifer, seemed aware of this notion:

We are all so different in our program, we come from a million different backgrounds, cultures, just everything is completely different. Also, the program is probably 90% female and like 10% male. Being in these classes, especially my two policy classes, we have had so many different areas that we were able to choose topics from for like papers or projects or policy briefings. It is interesting because everybody picks different things. There are not too many that pick the same topic, so everybody has different beliefs and opinions about everything.

While there is no discernible pattern, according to Jennifer, about what people will be interested in and what their beliefs and opinions will be about social problems, there were certainly patterns that emerged in the data: students brought their beliefs with them into the BSW program, those beliefs seemed to trump the teachings of the BSW

program, and individualistic American culture seemed to have a strong influence on these beliefs.

On the surface this is not a remarkable observation; we all have specific instances in our past that we can point to as influencing our present beliefs and circumstances. What was remarkable was how this impacted them currently. Personal experience seemed to matter more than any other factor in how they viewed economic issues. Rather than their studies being a socialization agent that drastically altered students' perspectives in one way or another, students seemed only to incorporate particular, self-selected aspects of what they learned in the BSW program into their existing worldview. The overwhelming impression I gained from the data was that existing worldviews were more important than their socialization in the BSW program, and that what they learned either enhanced or slightly altered their existing worldview; but their existing worldview remained largely intact with some slight modifications. What they learned in the program was incorporated into their existing worldview, but for the vast majority of students it did not drastically change their worldview, just altered it somewhat. American cultural assumptions and personal experience combined to shape beliefs more than any other factor. For the more individualistic-minded students this meant that most of them remained pretty individualistically-oriented and rejected much of what they learned, but did incorporate it somewhat into their existing worldview. For the more structurally-oriented students this often meant that they felt that their beliefs were validated in some vague form, as most could not articulate clearly just what the theoretical or empirical assumptions were of the courses that they had taken. The more politically liberal and/or structurally-oriented students tended to use self-selected pieces

of what they had learned in the program as support for their existing worldview without much theoretical or empirical foundation. It should be noted that despite students being either politically conservative or liberal, the overwhelming majority espoused individualistic economic views of some kind. Because most of the participants were either born in the U.S. or had been in the U.S. long enough to reflect American cultural assumptions in their own thinking, participants who had been in the U.S. for a significant amount of time tended to repeat many popular American economic narratives more than international students. International students tended to have very much more structurally-oriented economic beliefs based upon their different cultural backgrounds and experiences (although some international students held structural beliefs about their own country while accepting the individualistic narratives about the U.S.).

There was also an incredible amount of self-selection. For instance, one participant had family experience with military-related PTSD. Because of this she pursued social work and only wanted to work with military personnel and their families. Many students reported this self-selection: pursuing social work as a means to deal with a narrow issue that they were interested in while showing little-to-no interest for other populations. This seemed to help explain why so many of the students seemed to have noticeably underdeveloped ideas about economic issues such as inequality and poverty. It seemed that because of this they would fall back on cultural/personal beliefs and experiences to explain such things. Many of the students who reported self-selection seemed to be picking-and-choosing which courses and internships they would take that matched their interests and virtually ignoring the rest. This does not mean that they could completely avoid discussions of inequality and poverty altogether, as this

was still a part of required coursework (particularly in their introductory courses). For the most part, however, they were able to largely avoid it and deal with it in a very limited manner when needed (such as memorizing what is needed for a test). For many students this meant not internalizing this material to the level of belief and changing their worldview, but learning for a test and leaving their worldview largely intact.

When I asked the social work students why they wanted to go into social work, their responses largely fell into two categories (and respondents typically gave both reasons in their responses): wanting to change the world from a young age, and wanting to help people based upon their own life experiences.

Amanda and Jennifer's experiences provide great examples. Amanda grew up in a family that was very financially comfortable and this led her to believe that everybody was as comfortable as her. It was only when she started working in the thrift stores that her father owned that she realized that there were many people in the world who did not enjoy such comforts:

I grew up in an upper-middle-class white family, and when I was young I was sheltered from a lot of things. My father took a job as the manager of a few thrift stores. They do a lot of community service type work with food pantries and thrift stores and homeless shelters and all sorts of things like that. So he took that job, and through that I got my first job, working at the thrift stores with him. So I think that is what kind of led me in this direction. Working there, my sheltered world was kind of shattered—I thought everybody was as comfortable as I was. But working in those stores, and seeing people that could barely afford five-dollar pants, that was a real wake-up call for me, thinking that these people were not getting the help that they need. I think that is kind of where me going into social work stems from.

Amanda reported not being particularly interested in the theoretical or empirical implications of the issues facing the populations that social workers served; for her, it was more her shock that people led lives that were so different from hers and her desire

to lend a helping hand. This is not to say that there is anything inherently “wrong” with Amanda’s motivations—but it certainly helps to explain why she might have an underdeveloped understanding of the scholarly tradition behind many of the social problems that she will be dealing with. Jennifer also showed very little interest or knowledge of the scholarship behind the social problems she faced, and instead was focused on working with children. Her experiences babysitting and working as a counselor at a summer camp when she was younger had a strong impact on her desire to go into a helping profession and work with children:

I have always enjoyed working with children, playing games with them, working with them. I feel like I can connect with kids for some reason. Sometimes I feel like I can connect with children more than adults. I started babysitting when I was ten-years-old, and I went to a summer camp in my hometown from when I was in preschool. I was a counselor-in-training when I was younger and I have been a counselor there for the past seven years. I go home during breaks and during the summer and I work there.

In both of these instances there is nothing inherently “wrong” with their motivations and nothing that ensures that they will not be fantastic social workers. But because neither Amanda nor Jennifer show much knowledge of or interest in the possible reasons behind social problems, they rely more on personal belief and past life experiences than their BSW studies to interpret and explain the world in which they live. This helps to understand their individualistically-oriented explanations of economic issues as well as the stories of so many other social work students, stories that reveal the heavy influence of individualistic American culture on belief and practice.

There is a critical piece missing, it seems, in the path to social work. An overwhelming majority of the students have always wanted to help people since they were young and have an emotional attachment to something that happened in their

lives that solidified their desire to go into social work. The “missing link” seems to be that once they get to the BSW program, they do not internalize much of what they learn there in terms of the complex causes of social problems. This does not seem to be completely as result of an institutional failing of their BSW program—they are provided with a basic foundation to help them better understand the complexity of these issues through their coursework. This foundation is very basic, however, and any complex understanding of social problems seems to depend upon the students individually taking the initiative to learn more in some manner. Those who do not rely more heavily on their own worldviews.

In an odd twist, most of the students actually seem to understand the complexities of their own particular hardships and people experiencing similar hardships, while simplifying other social problems. Instead of internalizing the complex nature of the social problems that they learn in their program they seem to pick and choose bits and pieces of what they learn to integrate into their worldview and/or justify existing beliefs, but still rely mostly on their already-formed attitudes and beliefs which in large part reflect American cultural assumptions about individualism, meritocracy, and the relationship between individuals and the social structure (in the next chapter, when I discuss the impact of the program, this becomes even clearer when the students use their personal beliefs to interpret their internship experiences).

## Personal Experience and Social Work

### Natalia's Adoption

Natalia was born in an eastern European country along with her brother. When she was three-years-old, for reasons unbeknownst to her, she was placed in an orphanage with her brother (an infant at the time). They remained in the orphanage until Natalia was five-years-old, at which point her and her brother were adopted by a white, strict-Catholic-conservative U.S. family and brought to the U.S. Natalia has struggled with the meaning of her adoption for her whole life, something she grapples with on a daily basis today. Because of her own experience with adoption, Natalia feels a very strong urge to help people through the kinds of crises that she faced growing up:

A lot of what shaped me and who I am is my adoption. There are a lot of aspects that I can look upon and say okay this is why I want to do this, this is why I want to be a social worker, this is why I want to help people. I never ever really told this story of my adoption to people until I got older. Part of that is to protect myself, and just to let myself heal before I reopen the wound I guess. You know, I want to close the wound a little bit before trying to talk to somebody else about it. But my adoption kind of made me realize that there are probably people out there that have either similar stories or worse stories than I do. And I just kind of want to give back I guess.

Another reason that Natalia feels that she struggles with her own past is because her adoptive parents have been so reluctant to talk about the adoption when she was younger; this reluctance on their part and unresolved pain on Natalia's part led to many years of sadness and confusion for Natalia. She says that despite her inner desires, her parents never really explored the option of talking about the adoption with her, forcing her to internalize a lot of the pain and confusion that she felt. Natalia feels like if she had been able to deal with her pain when she was younger, it would not have stuck with her so long. Now that she is older and that pain still exists, she feels like she has to deal

with it on her own. She feels like part of what might help her will be helping other people who faced the same things she faced, leading her to want to work with children. Natalia revealed that, "If I graduated today, I would choose to work with adopted kids."

As if the shock of her adoption was not enough to cause problems for Natalia, her adoptive family held values significantly different than her own. Her new family was very politically and socially conservative as well as strongly Catholic; Natalia does not consider herself conservative or religious, let alone Catholic. Despite this, her adoptive family felt strongly about raising her Catholic and desired for her to become as attached to the faith as they were; they had Natalia and her brother baptized as soon as they arrived in the U.S. This desire on her adoptive family's part and the resistance on Natalia's part created a lot of friction between her and her adoptive parents (who she considers her parents), particularly her mother. Natalia chafed at the Catholic belief that she had to be submissive to her parents and strictly follow their rules, particularly since she did not believe that her adoptive parents were the best models to give such ultimate authority to. She said that because she was so "fragile" due to her adoption, she let her adoptive parents push her around and force their beliefs onto her for much of her childhood. When she grew older she resented being taken advantage of in such a fragile state and resisted this imposition of values she rejected. Once she started pushing back, her and her adoptive mother started "butting heads." Natalia believes this is because she rejected values that were so important to her mother:

I guess I denounced myself when I was 18, just because I don't believe in many of the things that they believe. When I denounced myself, I definitely let it be known [laughter]. I told them how I felt and they gave me the option of once I was 18 to be free to make decisions as far as what I believe, yet when I told them they were very controlling and hesitant to let me denounce myself. It was a little tense. I told my [adoptive] mom first, and I thought she took it pretty well, but I guess she didn't afterwards. My mom and I don't have a good relationship, so I figured I would go to her first about it. She then told my dad, I didn't really say anything to my dad. They were very disappointed.

She describes her relationship with her mother as “rocky” for as long as she can remember, and believes that her strained relationship with both of her adoptive parents was impacted by her adoption:

I never felt a very strong bond with my parents, like a loving bond. And part of that was my adoption. Since I already had a loss of attachment I didn't want to attach to my adoptive parents. So I never had a strong attachment at all. Once I grew up, I guess I could be considered the wild child. I wasn't that wild, but to my conservative parents I was wild. And I was the eldest so of course I got blamed with everything. The biggest issue was that I always felt that because of my adoption and how I took my adoption, it was very hard for me to adapt. Looking back on it, it took me a long time to get the anger out, all the anger didn't really hit me until I was in the eighth grade. So it took a long time. A lot of it was the adoption, the situation, rather than my parents. A lot of stuff that I didn't hash out and I wished I had hashed out when I was five.

### **Sarah's Domestic Violence Experiences**

Sarah was born into a middle-class family in an Asian country. Her father was an accountant for the local fishermen in the countryside where she lived and her mother worked in the home raising the children and maintaining the home. Her father was consistently physically abusive towards her mother as well as unfaithful. Her mother, father, four older sisters, and older brother all remained in their home country when she left for the U.S. and remain there today. On why she left home, Sarah said, “I was born in [Asia] and I came here when I was 25 to study in America, of course, that's why we

come. And I always wanted to live someplace different than my country.” While she claims that she came here to study, it was clear that she had some significant issues with her parents that both drove her to the U.S. and impacted her decision to pursue social work. She said she always felt like an outsider because she did not agree with Confucianism, particularly how it made children subservient, bemoaning the fact that, “You have to always obey to adults, no matter what opinion you have.” Sarah left her home for the U.S. when she was 25 and lived with a friend until she met the man she would soon marry. That marriage lasted only a year, and she married again less than a year after she divorced her first husband. It was clear from her answers that her experiences in her home country heavily impacted her desire to leave, make a new life as quickly as possible in the U.S., and to pursue social work. She had been a self-described “wild child” in her home country and the U.S., partying and drinking, until she was pregnant with her first child. At that point she became very religious (converted to Christianity) and stopped partying and drinking.

Like so many of my participants, she pursued social work because of her own experiences. Her cultural heritage and difficult home life were the two biggest influences that she cited. Because of her life experiences in her home country she wants to work with people from her country in her social work career, saying, “I will probably work with my own people, like Asian people. . . probably family issues. . . because that was one of my biggest problems growing up.” These problems were largely in the form of domestic abuse. Living in her home country she not only observed gender inequality and abuse in her culture, but in her own home. Seeing this abuse in her own family, neighborhood families, and the larger society seems to only emphasize her resentment towards her

subservient position to elders; it was these elders who she was supposedly supposed to respect and obey who she believed were severely hypocritical in terms of the religious convictions that they espoused and their real life actions:

I've seen so many women and people going through life without a lot of support from family, in dysfunctional relationships. I always felt bad for those people and in the back of my mind I said, 'One day if I have a choice, if I go back to school, I might go study social work and help those people out.' That was the main reason I chose this field. Growing up in my household, my Dad wasn't an ideal husband. He used to beat my mother, and not in a sense that when—to me, when you are beating your wife as an Asian man, their level of a beating is a little bit different. My dad wasn't a crazy person. He was very good man and he was very intelligent. It's just how he was brought up. It's okay for you to beat your wife. It's kind of a social norm. I think it was a cultural thing, and on top of his temperament—he had a really hot temper. My mom always worked because he didn't bring a lot of money to support the family. So naturally there was a lot of tension going on raising six kids, not easy. On top of that, he was fooling around with a lot of women. It was a mess growing up. My parents are still married and my mother always tell me, 'Oh, I should have left him a long time ago, but I couldn't because looking after all you guys.'

Despite claims to the contrary, it seemed that there were many more reasons for Sarah to leave her country than simply to go to an American college. She was clearly struggling to deal with her stressful home environment where domestic violence and infidelity were routine. Sarah described one particularly troublesome incident with her mother that she and her siblings witnessed:

I still remember one of this incident my mom took out these pills, have all the six kids in front of her, and said, 'Oh, I'm going to die. Let's take all these pills. Let's just die, because I can't take this anymore. Your Daddy's not helping me enough.' He wasn't beating her on a consistent basis, just when he got upset, but it would be really bad when it happened. He would drink too, it was bad. It was just pots flying, rice cookers flying everywhere. It was so weird, but it was so normal. You could hear our neighbor next door beating his wife. When I was growing up in late '70s, early '80s, it was kind of normal. As a child, I just always wanted to be so independent. That's probably why I've always felt that I don't like how adults, how elder people, are telling you what to do, always felt resentment inside. Always my mom was making excuse when Daddy was yelling. I know there was a fine line when my dad was yelling at my mom. She was always making excuses. I could see she was tiptoeing around the house to make sure that he doesn't get upset, so upset that there was no physical stuff. I always had this resentment, 'Okay, if I'm married, I'm going to tell my husband to shut up. I'm not going to marry a man who yells.' Stuff like that. I hated it, I really hated it. So I wanted to get out of my house so bad. As soon as I was done with my high school, I just left. And I think because my mom, I want to help women, too.

Sarah said that a further influence on her decision to pursue social work was that her sister followed the same path as her mother in terms of marrying an abusive man (twice):

That was my turning point [her sister's abusive marriages], really the biggest influence on wanting to study social work. I said, 'Oh my God, I need to help these women. They need to cut that legacy. My sister went through an abusive marriage once, and then she got divorced, and then second husband was as bad as the first one. My family has impacted me a great deal. Because that's who I am, that's my path. And the path makes me who I am, and I can't change that.

Like so many participants, Sarah seemed to view social work as a means to heal the wounds of her past:

I did some work with anger management for physical offenders [abusers]. Somehow I thought, 'I am going to heal myself by looking at these people.' I thought, maybe this will help me heal the past. And when I started volunteering there, looking at all those people, I was like, 'I don't think I'm ready for this.' It was too similar.

Sarah believes that these experiences from her past, however, painful, have led her to social work and will help her to be a better social worker than somebody who has not had similar experiences:

I can be a good social worker because I know from my experience, I think I overcame a lot of issues. Seeing my mom as a woman and what she went through, I know I can help those people out. I've seen many friends, they've gone through really difficult times. I can bring a lot of help and love to those people.

### **Allison's Lonely Childhood**

Allison was born in the U.S. to a single-mother, originally from Central America. She never lived or had any contact with her biological father. Her mother was in love with her father when they were together, but felt like he never reciprocated that love in any substantial manner. He showed interest at first, then led her on. Once he found out she was pregnant, he left for another woman:

Not having my biological father was a major issue. I think that always bothered me. What bothered me the most is that I felt like he didn't care about me enough to be there. He was raising another woman's daughter that was my age, and I thought it was messed up that he didn't raise his own daughter. I guess I kind of resented my mom, too, in a way for my dad not being in my life. He had owed a lot of back child support. He tried to contact me a couple of times, well I mean not really—he'd call the house every once in a while for my mom and if I was there he'd kind of try to talk to me. Most of the time I wasn't there but I wouldn't talk to him anyway. I think he called like maybe five times between ages 16 and 18. I never really felt like he had a place in my life.

She was raised by her mother for most of her life, except when she lived with her mother and stepfather (at the time) from ages 6 to 15. Before the marriage to her stepfather, her mother was teetering between the working class and poverty, having to move herself and her children in with her sister and her husband. She was a lonely child, and her loneliness was made worse by the fact that she could not have any substantial interactions with her brother who was much older, had mental disabilities,

and was hearing impaired. She also had problems making friends, particularly when she was uprooted by moving to another state after the divorce of her mother and stepfather her freshman year in high school. Allison wants to go into social work because of these experiences she had in her childhood. She wants to help people in a way that she felt she wasn't helped as a child and help with the issues she faced in her own family:

I think I always liked the idea of having a profession where you help people. I've had interactions with social workers, and they were actually negative. So I feel like I could try to be somebody that would help somebody. I felt like in my case, they could have done a lot more and been more helpful. When I was moving and I was going through a lot of stuff at that time, I needed somebody to help, and I would like to help people who are in the position I was in. I guess everything—just my childhood in itself. Right now at my agency, they work a lot with mothers—well, not all of them are single mothers, but some of them are single mothers and they come from low-income backgrounds. I see a lot of similarities between how I grew up and how some people are growing up. So I guess that in itself makes me want to help.

Allison describes herself as a “troubled adolescent.” Moving to different neighborhoods, schools, and states, and the issues with her mother all really took a toll on her. She did not attend high school very frequently and her grades suffered considerably. She spent a lot of time on her own taking care of herself and her brother while her mother worked. Every once in a while her troubles would get to be too much for her and she would run away:

I had a lot of freedom and at that point I didn't really have too many rules and I was acting out a lot. My mother would try to get help from social workers. She was trying to get help. There were times where I just would not come home and I'd go stay with a friend. One time I ran away for three days. There were some issues there between my mom and me. I guess I felt like she didn't stand up for my brother and I, as much as she should have. Even after she left my stepfather I still felt resentment towards her, it sort of spilled over.

Her mother sought help for her from social workers, but her experience was largely negative. She felt that they were insensitive and stereotyped her as just another “troubled teen” rather than treating her family issues as a unique event that demanded context-specific analysis and action:

I feel like they weren't really looking at things from my point of view, they were just thinking I'm a troubled teen, and I'm running away, things like that. Stereotyping me. I didn't want to continue going. I guess a couple sessions, I really broke down. They weren't really helping me or—I don't know. I felt like they weren't going to help. And then they really didn't try to figure out what they did wrong, or—because I feel like most of it was if they would have approached me differently, or talked to me differently, I could have actually benefitted a lot from their help, now that I look at it. At that time, I knew I didn't want them around. I didn't like how they talked to me or, I don't know. They were just treating me like any other troubled child, rather than looking at my specific issues.

Allison's lonely childhood, frequent moves, and family issues all influenced her desire to help people in similar situations to her own. In social work she sees a profession that not only can aid this population, but do so in a manner much more helpful than the ineffective aid she received when she was a child.

Continuing in our conversation about her childhood, Allison discussed how she feels that she contributed to the divorce between her mother and stepfather:

We [her and her stepfather] kind of never really had a good relationship, and I would say I was kind of the cause of the divorce, partly. I have a brother who is 35, he is 12 years older than me. He has a mental disability and he's hearing impaired. I felt like my stepfather really didn't care about us, and I know for a fact that he cheated on my mom. There were just a lot of issues. She kind of, I guess, she was kind of distancing herself from him, but at the same time there was a lot of conflicts between me and him. I felt like he didn't treat my brother right, so I stood up for him. You know, issues like that. So them divorcing, it was a lot to do with me because I was not getting along with him, but I feel like she was going to do it eventually. I think I just sped up the process. I told her about the cheating, I mean it was real obvious. There was proof.

Allison already considered herself somewhat “damaged” when her mother met her stepfather, and her problems with him only exacerbated her childhood issues. This would be made worse later by their divorce and a move to a different state and high school.

Many of the participants revealed ways in which their personal experiences shaped their beliefs and career choices. Some of them were shaped in predictable ways, others unpredictable. For Allison, her childhood experiences with a single mother and the associated difficulties her family faced led her to reject the idea of the U.S. as a meritocracy; in fact, she was one of the few participants to reject the meritocratic narrative, despite so many of the participants having similar childhood struggles:

I’ve seen a lot of people that work hard and they still don’t have the same status as some people. Like my mom, a single mom. I’ve seen a lot of people that work hard, or I’ve known those people who work two or three jobs, and some people do try to go to school, but it is not as easy as it seems, they don’t have as much time as other people, or they have families and things like that.

### **Terra’s Family**

When Terra was four-years-old her parents divorced, sending her mother and her into poverty. As a child Terra dealt not only with this economic insecurity, but also her mother’s issues with alcoholism. It was these childhood experiences that ultimately led her to social work in the first place:

As far as I can remember my mom's always been an alcoholic, but her disease got much worse over time. She would drink heavily and then at some point it changed to drug use. I finally said 'I'm done with you' and stopped living with her. Because of her my grandmother had me to speak to a licensed clinical social worker she knew through a lawyer friend. It was when I was 15 or 16 and I was very inspired by her. My mother was using [drugs] and drinking very, very heavily. So I decided to live with just my dad. And my grandmother wanted to mend ties but I was very mad, I didn't want to. I didn't want to go see this lady. I was thinking she was going to be this horrible psychologist and I didn't want to go. I went and I started to really like her, and she was a social worker. I really was inspired by her, and as I got to learn more about the actual different fields you could go into, I liked it even more. That was my junior or senior year in high school and that was it, I was set on social work.

Terra remembers being terrified as a child, something that still haunts her to this day.

She was so scared and cognizant of the threat of removal from her home that she would literally hide in fear that the authorities were going to come to take her away:

I mean I was very scared many times. When I was younger, I think there was domestic violence with a boyfriend along with the drugs and alcohol. I mean what if she had gotten hurt? I was scared that I was going to be taken away, and at that age, I guess I hid. I didn't want to be taken away or whatever, so I hid.

On top of her strained relationship with her mom, Terra describes her father as an "absentee dad." She says he is not a bad father in her opinion, but it is clear that there is some significant lingering pain:

Our relationship now is kind of like, it's kind of broken—it's not broken, but it's not a strong relationship. Not a strong relationship. We don't talk. We talk like maybe once every month, which is pretty bad.

Terra felt that children needed better advocates to deal with the kinds of situations that she dealt with as a child, fueling her desire to be such an advocate and pursue social work:

I've seen many family members suffer and because of it I felt like children need advocates. Otherwise who is going to look out for them? And I think that's why—because I kind of would hope that someone had helped me when I was younger, so hopefully I can be of help to children who are suffering.

Terra went on to reflect upon her past and its influence on her today:

I either want to work with substance abuse, children, foster care or adoption, something working with families and children. I think my passion really is substance abuse and working with families and children of substance abuse. So I'd really like to go into that. I'm very interested in addiction and treatment and recovery, even more than working with children. I think you should want to do something you're very passionate about and interested in, and I definitely am.

Terra had an interesting reflection on why she chose to go into social work. She clearly identified that her past played a huge role in her wanting to pursue social work, but she wasn't sure that this pattern—social workers wanting to help people who had similar circumstances to their own—was necessarily a great thing:

Sometimes it's kind of a bad thing when people who dealt with these things or with social workers want to go into social work, because of—they have to really get through all of the experiences they had in their life so that they don't transfer that to their clients.

### **Noreen: Child of the 1960s**

Noreen grew up in a working-class household. She calls her parents “uneducated”—her father was a truck driver and her mother was a secretary. Her father and his social network had significantly racist views towards African-Americans in particular; this environment of racism had a big impact on Noreen, who developed an oppositional worldview in response. As an adult she has moved from the working-class to the upper-middle-class. Her husband works for a foreign embassy and they are financially comfortable enough for her, now in her 50s, to go back to college to study social work. Her husband's work has taken them all over the globe—most recently they

spent three years in Africa where she participated in international relief work. Noreen is a white woman of European descent who was born in the U.S. While she was in college she converted to Islam—she showed up for our formal interview in traditional Muslim female headwear and an Obama/Biden campaign t-shirt. She talked a bit about her early life and her path to social work:

I'm a child of the '60s. I was coming of age at the time of all the social revolutions and the hippies and the revolutionaries and the civil rights movement and the women's rights movement, all that stuff. I was in my mid-teens, so that had a huge impact on me. In addition to that, my parents were from a very different generation. And my father, in particular, was an absolute racist, and we used to butt heads since I can remember, since I was little. Boy, it was ugly. I'm from a small town and I think there might have been like one black family or something. And so I was butting heads with my father and everyone in our little social world. And my mom, on the other hand, although she was part of that generation and in many ways, she didn't always agree with my dad, but she didn't have whatever she needed to stand up against it. But she would not let us, you know, how she disapproved. For example, the N-word, okay. My father used it just routinely and every other derogatory term for every other kind of person that exists on Earth. But if I were to repeat it my mom would be like, 'No, no, no.' My dad wouldn't correct me, but my mom would be very against it, but she wouldn't stand up to him. And everybody in our little world, in their network of friends, they all thought the same and were from the same generation. And so that, okay, in conjunction with the whole social thing that happened when I was a teenager. I can recall earlier than that like when I was in elementary school having this sense that what essentially it boils down to my ancestors did to the native people when they arrived here was just wrong. Before I knew anything about oppression and prejudice and racism, I knew right from wrong and I applied that just on my own somehow. I don't know where it came from. I can't say, 'Oh, yeah, I saw a movie or I read a book.' It just somehow got to my consciousness, okay? So when you say how'd you get here? Well, maybe, it was just knowing at a very young age somehow the sort of right and wrong kind of thing, but it may have just been that confluence of experiences growing up that I just found myself passionate about social justice.

Noreen's relationship with her father, as she noted, was very contentious. This led her to have a "love/hate" relationship with her mother based upon how her mother responded (or failed to respond) to Noreen's father's bigotry:

My relationship with my mom was much more complicated and much more of that sort of love-hate, okay, because I saw her as weak. I saw her as weak and I hated her for it and I resented it and it really. But at the same time she was kind and gentle and supportive. It is complicated like I said. It wasn't until I became a mom and I got older and at that point in my life that I was able to look back and go wow, she was in fact the most powerful, strongest person I have ever known for her to be able to sort of endure what she endured, you know, and hold our family together, you know? She was definitely stronger than I ever gave her credit for, you know.

To make matters at home worse, Noreen face significant bullying at school. She remembers, "I was bullied mercilessly throughout school to the point where I actually quit school in ninth grade." This combined with her sense of social justice to shape her worldview in powerful way.

This sense of justice originally led Noreen to law enforcement, but it didn't take her long to sense that even law enforcement had problematic social justice issues:

Actually, at one point in my life, in my 20s, I actually thought I would go into law enforcement. I did a correspondence course. I became friendly, if you could say that, with police officers. At the time, they were policemen. And, again, found a system that I had no choice but to reject. You know what I mean? I mean, you know, we all love the police, because they're out there to protect and serve. But I didn't like what I was seeing. When you go beneath that veneer of, you know, we're the good guys, some of them do start out and they try to be, but the system, the structure, the whole absolute power breeds absolute corruption kind of thing. You know what I mean? It wasn't something that I could really feel good about. And so I said, okay, well, that's no option at all.

When I asked her about these experiences and how they might have influenced her path to social work, she identified some further experiences that she believes played a big role. The first was a YWCA where she helped victims of domestic abuse. She would

operate a hotline for victims of rape and abuse, and these experiences helped her to confirm her desire to work in a helping profession. Working at the YWCA gave her a “sense of these kinds of helping professions” and “a sense of contributing to helping people improve their circumstances,” something that social work fulfilled. This experience had a significant impact on her desire to work in a helping profession, but another experience working as a caseworker in a private social service agency that led her directly to the BSW program. She remembers an experience with one particular client that really changed her life and career trajectory. Although she was deliberately vague with me about what actually happened to the client (she did not seem comfortable giving me too many details and I respected this and did not push any further), she revealed that she worked for three years with this client to achieve some sort of important goal related to a crisis the client had faced. After three years of hard work to achieve the goal of helping this woman and her family, she ran into significant problems with the state agency that they were working in conjunction with:

So part of the who deal was going up against the [state agency]. As far as I'm concerned, from my point of view, and I will shout it from the rooftops, they intentionally prolonged this woman's suffering and prevented her from restoring her dignity. I thought they were there to help people, but based on my experience, I would have to say they were there to find ways to deny services. Their mandate was no longer, 'We want to help you,' it was, 'We want to see if we can find a way to deny you.' I don't know if it was money or who knows why, but that resentment and that frustration and that sense of injustice, I said, 'No, no, no, no.' And to this day I haven't gotten an answer to that, why [this agency] was so intent on just working against the interests of this person who was absolutely, positively needy.

Like so many of the participants, Noreen's personal experiences and sense of social justice seemed to interact with what she saw as institutional failings of institutions designed to help people. She desired to be an agent of change, somebody with the

correct motivations and an eye for where improvements were needed. For Noreen and many other participants, this created an obvious path to social work.

Noreen went on to talk about personal experience she had had with welfare stigma. Noreen had personal experience with the welfare system from when she was younger and was able to see firsthand the public judgment that often comes along with welfare use:

When I was first married, we were students. So in terms of income and stuff, we just had a scholarship. So I got WIC. I went to the grocery store and you give her the coupon. I don't know if they still do it that way. But she made some kind of comment about welfare. And I said, 'Well, it's not exactly welfare, you know? I mean, this is a nutritional program for low-income people.' And so she tried to embarrass me, the cashier. In just her attitude and just the fact that she even brought it up, she definitely tried to degrade me and make me feel like I was somehow taking welfare like I was garbage. But I didn't buy it.

Noreen's ideas about social justice are strong, shaped in large part by her upbringing in a bigoted household and the perceived failed response to that bigotry by people close to her, such as her mother. She brought that sense of social justice and failed response with her into adulthood, only to find disappointment with our societal response to many social problems and injustices. This link between beliefs and experiences in both childhood and adulthood was clear and unmistakably a salient part of Noreen's identity and current motivations.

## Peter's Long Road

Peter's path to social work and his worldview were influenced by his childhood in Asia and journey to the U.S. through being adopted. Peter experienced some pretty drastic changes in social class along the way:

I was born and grew up in [Asia], so I started off in a low, low class, like poor. Like stereotypical, work on a farm kind of thing, no electricity. When I was four I stopped living with my grandparents on the countryside, went to live in the city with my aunt and uncle and moved up in class a bit. And that was pretty much lower-middle class. And then I got adopted, so I came to the U.S. Then we went from middle class to upper-middle class.

Peter's journey is a long and eventful one, filled with multiple changes in geography, social class, households, and family members. Peter's account of his adoption in particular is filled with devastating twists and turns:

My original adopted parents and me, we didn't quite work out. When they gave me up I had to go from group homes to teen shelters. . . all different facilities. So I was finally placed in foster care after age twelve and was there until eighteen with two different families. I don't talk to them [original adoptive parents] anymore because I don't know where they are. But their extended family, my adopted aunt and uncles and grandparents, I still keep in contact with them. I was with the first foster family for about four or five years. I was pretty happy at first. But I had like seven brothers, and I was the oldest. So it's kind of like, 'Well, you're the oldest, you should be able to fend for yourself.' But it would be nice to have had some support, some interaction. I mean I still want to have that interaction. They had a lot of kids and my social worker thought that it would benefit me a little better, because of the conflict of being abandoned by my adopted parents, to move into a different household with not as many children so I can get the attention I need. And then the second one, that's when I became of age [eighteen]. And I still keep in contact, I consider them my immediate family. I go see my mom [from second foster family] every week, I consider her my mom.

His most recent foster experience seemed to be the happiest time in Peter's life, so much so that he considers the woman who watched after him his mother:

I call her [his most recent foster mother] mom, I feel like she is my mother. She's a social worker, so she plays the mother role, the social worker role, and the therapist role. I guess because I'm used to dealing with social workers, it's really easy to talk to her. Like whenever I have a lot of conflicts in my mind, we sit down and we bounce ideas back and forth. It really helps because she can take that, she can be the motherly role but then she can also do the other roles.

Peter hinted that his original adoptive mother and father might have been dealing with infertility issues and turned to adoption as an alternative—only to eventually get pregnant once the process had begun, thus losing interest in Peter at some point. He was vague in his answer, likely due to the discomfort of conveying such a story to me<sup>13</sup>:

It's kind of weird. I mean, my [adoptive] mom was emotionally unstable. I really don't know what the reason is, but I just know that when I came over and they came to get me, she was pregnant with one. So I have always speculated it was that they wanted a kid but couldn't get one, but then decided to adopt and then had one.

I asked him whether he was happy in his initial adoptive household. He claimed he was not unhappy, but he could not have given a more emotionless or unconvincing response when describing his adoptive family:

I wouldn't say unhappy. I mean, I had a place to sleep and I had clothes on my back, food in my stomach. But I guess the emotional support, I didn't really get a lot of that.

Peter's experiences growing up had a huge impact on his outlook on life and why he chose social work as a career. In one of our conversations, he recounted this particularly heartbreaking story:

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<sup>13</sup> In both my informal interviews in the field and my semi-structured formal interviews with my participants I tried to probe further where appropriate. I did not push too hard, however, when the participant asked me not to or when the participant was visibly uncomfortable discussing something deeply personal. In these situations I attempted to paint the most detailed ethnographic picture while also respecting the rights and humanity of my participants.

When my [adoptive] parents gave me up, it was a big ordeal. They hired a lawyer and everything. They finally decided, 'We just don't want you.' I never figured out why, but I was old enough to comprehend the concept of, 'No, we don't want you. You're not allowed in this house.' At that point in court they're like, 'You should work it out, you can't just abandon this child. You should go through therapy.' Of course they didn't want to. So I got placed in a lot of, like I said, group homes and shelters. And those places, they're not. . . I mean it's not like a juvenile detention center, it is supposed to help children. So one of the things they had was that on the weekends if you behave, you get to go home for the weekend and spend time with your family. I never got that. And at the age where I could comprehend the situation, it got really rough. Because people got letters from home, people got to go home, and I didn't have that. And I knew exactly why. It wasn't like, 'Oh, maybe they just forgot.' My social workers went above and beyond what I expected as a social worker. There were times where they would just come by the shelter and they were like, 'Well, you don't have any appointments, you don't have any court dates, we should go hang out at the mall for an hour.' Or, 'Come on, I'm going to take you out to lunch.' And that had a huge impact on me. I was able to be comfortable enough to build a relationship. Half the time we would walk around the mall and I would vent. I think that was really helpful for me, because from that point I became very aware of how my feelings and my thoughts work. I feel that if I didn't have that option to vent, and I would go through foster care and so on, I wouldn't turn out the way I would have. I might have had suppressed negativity and emotions.

Although he originally wanted to be a teacher, his childhood and teenage experiences and the influence of his mom, a social worker, led him to the BSW program:

I originally wanted to be a teacher, but after everything I went through I wanted to have a bigger impact than just one year. I talked to my mom about social work, I was like, 'Well, it's not teaching, but it's still helping people.' At that point I thought of my social workers. If they had the standard, you know, this-is-just-a-job attitude, you know, I'm here from eight to five, where would I be? So I chose social work. I think part of it is I want to give back what was given to me. I personally feel that if it got to the situation where I had to have that heart-to-heart with a child, I can say, 'I know you're stuck in the group home, it's probably the same group home that I was stuck in.' I think it holds more merit when you tell someone you've been in their situation and you actually have. So the empathy is more real than for the sake of just saying, 'I know what you feel.'

Peter still clearly feels the pain of his experience, and his disappointment with his original adoptive family is shared by the relatives of that family:

Sometimes on holidays or whatever I go visit my adoptive family's relatives in [New England], not the family but the extended family. They care about me and still stay in contact with me because they are so shocked at what my adoptive family did. They're like, 'You know, you just don't abandon a child, especially when you bring them from another country.' I try not to look too deep into it. Even the extended family, though, it's always on the back of my mind, 'When this whole thing happened, why didn't one of you guys step up and take me in?' Sometimes I think about it, sometimes I try not to think about it.

I asked Peter to talk to me a little bit about the impact that the BSW program had on his worldview, but he was clear in his response that his worldview was developed long before college and was impacted little by his studies. Peter said that, "I don't know that it [the BSW program] has changed my views that much," explaining that his life experiences and time in the military are really the influences that shape his current worldview. The notion that his life had more of an impact on his worldview than his studies was underscored dramatically when he discussed what he perceived to be the root cause of poverty:

Everyone says there's no jobs right now, right? But there are jobs, there's just not jobs that you like or that pay enough according to you. Everyone wants that one job that pays more than enough to live off of so they don't have to work multiple jobs. But the bottom line is, if you have a job at McDonalds, yes, it doesn't pay that well. Yes, it's not a prestigious job, but that's a job and a job is better than no job. When I was growing up in [Asia], if you converted the currency, people could make \$2.50 an hour and live happily because they don't need a big-screen TV. Most of them don't even have cars. I remember growing up, we didn't have a fridge. We went to the local market every day, morning, evening, and we bought food and we cooked it fresh. We had no centralized heating. I remember as a kid my job was to go downstairs and pick up pieces of coal. I think people take the concept of like the 'land of opportunity,' you know, you should get the best. I think people take that a little too far. I guess in the social work sense people say, 'Oh, this guy lives in a rundown house, this and that.' But the thing is, he has a home. And I'm not saying that we shouldn't strive for better, but I think people take what they have for granted. They don't appreciate what they have, but they always want more. Also I personally think, what keeps the perpetual cycle of poverty, it's like that book from when you were a kid, *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. People can't just – you give someone one thing and they can't be content with it. They have to have more.

Peter's life story is one of heartache and long periods of isolation. The solace and comfort that he eventually found came from his second adoptive mother who cared enough to change his life. Rather than instilling a more collective mentality in Peter, however, his upbringing seemed to ingrain in him the idea that we are all on our own (because for much of his life he felt like he was). This is of course understandable: isolation was a large part of Peter's life experience. A possible alternative outcome, however, might have been that Peter realized the importance of support outside of oneself (such as the support his adoptive mother provided); this realization could have cultivated a sense of the importance of the collective, and a rejection of individual-centered beliefs. Instead, Peter was highly individualistically-oriented in most of what he said during our conversations:

Not to toot my own horn, but ever since I turned 18, I've been on my own. I've tried to do things and be proficient on my own. I usually don't rely on my parents at all. I moved out when I started community college and had my own apartment. I worked three jobs to try to pay for everything and that didn't work out. I went into the [U.S. Armed Forces] so I could pay for school. And it's kind of like a lot of people say, 'I want to help people, I want to help the unfortunate people in the world.' Well great, it's a great dream. But realistically you can't, you can't get to everyone. The way I think about it is more objective than other students. I think that's because of my military training. And sometimes I hear people talk about stuff in class and it sounds like it's out of a movie. You know, 'I want to help people do this, I want to help people do that.' Or they'll ask questions like, 'Why doesn't he have a job?' And I don't think they look at it from a realistic, objective point of view. And I think that's just a lack of experience in life in general. There are certain things I do agree on. We have to take care of children. Single mothers with children are always going to have harder times than a single male. But as far as I guess views on the overall aspect of welfare, social work, I personally don't think a lot of people have had enough experience to deal with that. I ran away from group homes all the time and I was homeless. I've eaten out of dumpsters, and when you have been through those things, like working in a company, you were the lowest of the low and then you go through the ranks, you get promoted, by the time you reach management position, you are the best at everything because you've been through every stage.

The last thing that we talked about in terms of life experience was how this impacted the population that Peter desired to work with. Originally from Asia and a veteran of the U.S. Armed Forces, Peter (like many BSW students who want to work with populations similar to themselves) wants to work with similar populations of people when he graduates:

I want to work with children and veterans, because I'm a veteran. Also I want to work with Asian populations because I think there's a lot of stigma about the culture. I think having that understanding, and not to sound racist, but if we're both social workers, even if we both speak English, if you were to go over to [an Asian] household, they wouldn't tell you nearly as much as they would tell me.

Peter's story is just another in a significant pattern in the ethnographic record, one of personal heartache that led him to a profession that he believes deals with that experience in a useful manner.

### **Ashley's Mental Health Experiences**

Ashley is from a politically-conservative religious family and says she shares her family's values. Her family is very religious, always dating and marrying people who are share similar religious and political values, worldviews, and beliefs:

I definitely look for somebody who is [the same religion] and shares my beliefs in dating and marriage. I typically meet boyfriends through church activities. It is important to me and my family. I think my family trusts my judgment now to date the right people. Along the way [growing up] they gave me hints and made it pretty clear that is what they wanted.

Ashley and her family are very religious and very involved in the church. They attend a weekly three-hour church service as well as weekly meetings and bible study. She notes that, "Personally I would say four to five hours a week are spent outside of service at church." They attend a variety of groups, such as scripture study groups and other activity groups.

Ashley's family was in the lower-class when she was born but was quickly upwardly-mobile into the upper-class. Because of her family's upward mobility she believes everyone can be wealthy and successful if they try as hard as her family.

Ashley initially came to social work because of her own mental health issues—she was diagnosed with anorexia and major depressive disorder when she was eleven-years-old. She says she chose social work because she wanted to help people dealing with similar issues. Discussing her personal battles with her mental health, Ashley says, "I guess you would consider it a serious mental health illness." Her parents noticed obvious and considerable weight-loss and were really alarmed. Ashley's pediatrician

encouraged her parents to seek treatment for the anorexia, and in treatment they were surprised by the major depressive disorder diagnosis. Her experiences with mental health professionals were mixed. She has been hospitalized a total of four times, and she notes that, “The main professionals that I have worked with in outpatient have been amazing. They have changed my life and I owe a lot to them.” It was the inpatient care in the hospitals, however, that really troubled her and led her to believe that the system needed changing. Ashley conveyed to me through our conversations that it was her personal struggles and the failure of the mental health system to respond effectively to these struggles that both pushed her to social work and gave her the particular focus (mental health) that she chose. She remembers these experiences with the hospitals well:

Those experiences in the hospitals have been alarming. Especially one time when I was out in [the hospital] the professionals were very rude, and they didn’t care to understand. I would try to explain things to them and they would just say, ‘No, you are just stubborn, you are just this, you are just that.’ It really had an impact on me, and threw me into a deeper depression after that. My desire to get into mental health is definitely connected to that, to provide empathy. There are so many problems with the system. I went into social work as a way to address some of these things with the mental health population.

A short period of time after Ashley went off to a religious college (far away from her family) her mental health issues surfaced again, at which point she transferred to secular MAU to be closer to home:

I went [to the other college] when I was 18 and had some problems there—not academic or religious but mental health issues. So I came home to receive treatment and after that I decided I wanted to stick closer to home. It was a long way from home.

Ashley is very cognizant of how her both her mental health issues and the negative experiences she had in mental health facilities impacted her path to social work. She also has an aunt who is a social worker, a contributing factor to her career decision:

The biggest thing that led me to social work I think is my experience with mental health. I have spent over a decade of my life in mental health treatment, from when I was eleven to when I was twenty. It was pretty intense and I realized how important it is to have caring and empathetic people out there. I realized how often people go misunderstood because there isn't an educated or empathetic worker out there. Another influence is my aunt, she is a social worker who works in the foster care system. Getting to know her and her background has really influenced me wanting to be a social worker.

Ashley states that her mental health issues and experiences determined why she wanted to go into social work, and her aunt showed her exactly how she could help that population:

I think the biggest factor was definitely the mental health institutions. But I think that once I realized that mental health has its holes, at least the treatment providers, I think I realized that my aunt's job was kind of a dream job, and so I kind of looked into that and realized that was where I wanted to go. My experience helped me decide who I wanted to help, but seeing her kinda showed me how I can help.

### **Jana's European Cultural Heritage**

Jana is originally from a European country with vastly different cultural ideas about economic issues and the role of government in addressing these issues. She argued that her views were different from a lot of Americans and even fellow BSW students because of her upbringing in a very different culture with vastly different views about social welfare, inequality, and poverty. Jana was the most structurally-oriented student that I spoke to, and she was genuinely shocked about American individualistically-oriented views towards social welfare and economic issues. She believes many of her views are different not only because her home country has a more

expansive social welfare system, but she grew up in a family where her father was a member of a socialist political party. Structurally-oriented explanations for economic issues seemed “normal” to her, to the point where they were not even questioned in her home country. She said the same thing about their more expansive social welfare system, something that was not questioned and was considered something of a necessity in her country. Jana was very aware of how this upbringing gave her a very different and much more structurally-oriented view on economic issues than many Americans. Jana was unique in this study for her structurally-dominated views, one of the only students who did not espouse individualistically-dominated views. She argues that social workers are trained not to look at individuals by themselves, but individuals within social structures:

As a social worker I am not just looking at the person, I am looking at the person because that person is in like a spider web, right? It is like the center of the spider web and it touches all these different things within his or her environment. Which, if you have an issue you cannot just fix the person you actually have to fix all of the threads that connect that person. My family and I are doing very well, we are upper-middle-class. My kids are doing very well because of this benefit of being in this socioeconomic strata. I am doing well in life. I want for everybody to do well in life. So I think in social work you can really kind of give back and help out.

It is interesting that Jana frames social work in this manner, because her perception is different than so many other students that I spoke with. While I was interviewing Jana I kept asking myself, “How can her experience be so different from other students in the same program at the same time?” It was at this point in the project where I really started to realize how the knowledge gained in the social work program was highly dependent on what students selectively incorporated into their existing worldviews.

I asked Jana if she was always interested in helping people, even when she was a child, and she immediately cited her upbringing in Europe:

I am from Europe, and my father is a big socialist. He is a party leader in the Socialist party and so we were always pro-union, pro-social-welfare, and I think it is so sad in the United States that people here think that poor people don't deserve social welfare. I think these are the people that we need to take the most care of. The rich people can take care of themselves, it is really the poor people who cannot without our help. I just don't understand this meanness against poor people. It is not like they want to be poor. And so I think that is another big push for me, I just think that this country really needs as many voices for the poor people as possible. Not voices from the poor, they need to be voices from people who are not poor. This sounds really kind of bourgeois, sometimes my voice is heard more than somebody who is poor who is asking for it. But me saying, 'Hey we need to give that person something,' in some circles that carries more weight. And I am more than happy to do it. I mean, this whole healthcare thing, I don't get what the problem is. You want people not to go to the emergency room to rack up emergency room bills right, but you don't want to help them out in any way to avoid that. I am shocked. It has a lot to do with my upbringing and seeing it from a different perspective, too. Coming from a country that has a huge social welfare network.

Growing up in Europe gave her a completely different perspective on socialism as well.

Rather than being the “bogeyman” that it appears to be in many cases in contemporary American political and popular rhetoric, she thinks of “socialist” policies and the social welfare system as simply a socially-just way to take care of structural failings:

A lot of people here [in the U.S.] don't know what the word socialism means. I think they just see something that benefits all, and automatically they call it communism even though that would be more socialism. It's even more profound for me. I am a military spouse, we have Tricare [Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Uniform Services]. It is the military's healthcare system. . . it is universal healthcare for us. We don't ever have to pay a dime for anything. . . so I know what it feels like to have that peace of mind, to just know that if I am sick I can just go to the doctor. So for some people, especially military people to say, 'Oh this is communism,' or, 'What do these poor people want?' We enjoy what everybody deserves to have. Everybody should be able to take a sick kid to the doctor and have the doctor make the kid better without being called an abuser of the system or a freeloader or whatever. I just get very irate with people. In my country, they don't call themselves socialists, they call themselves social democrats. It is not the socialist thing that we think of when we think of Russia. I think it is a democracy built on social welfare and social well-being. The U.S. has some of the same things to some extent, some to a lesser extent, it is just different.

Jana's perspective gave her a particularly interesting take on the 2012 U.S. Presidential campaign between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, as she states that, "It strikes me as odd, this whole 'Maker versus Taker' thing that Romney and Ryan talk about." She argued that we all use the social welfare system, but are only vitriolic towards people we view as undeserving; of all the people that use some form of social welfare, we pick and choose which ones to "excuse" for their welfare-use and which ones to vilify based upon our own positive or negative views of those people and the reason they need welfare in the first place. She got excited and animated when she steered the conversation towards the rhetoric of the presidential campaign, saying:

How dare they tell other people that they're freeloaders. It is never a choice to be poor and be a freeloader. I'm pretty sure if you ask any person who is poor and on public assistance, if you ask them if they would rather have a job or stand in line at the food bank, they would say the job. I hear people always saying, 'Oh those Europeans they have it so nice, they have five weeks of vacation.' But they forget that we give up a lot to have these five weeks of vacation. We are paying 47% in taxes, but we have the universal healthcare, we have the excellent school systems, we have all of these things but we don't have four cars per family, we don't have 4,000 square-foot McMansions that we can't afford to cool in the summer. With our healthcare system, that system has worked since the Second World War and nobody complains, it is just understood that that is part of your expenses, you pay for healthcare. Here in the U.S., when somebody tries to raise the idea that you have to do something, they come out with the whole, 'Don't tread on me.' You see what happened to Obama when he just talks about changing healthcare.

After arriving in the U.S. to go to college, Jana met her husband, a member of the U.S. Armed Forces. Because of his job they have lived all of the U.S. and overseas, and these experiences have shaped the populations that she would like to serve. She notes that, "With my background as a military spouse I would like to help military families, dealing with deployment, PTSD, those areas." In the different cities that she and her family have lived in she has done a lot of volunteer work, which has only fueled her desire to give back to people in need.

### **Olivia's Awakening**

Olivia grew up in a politically-conservative family with a father who was a history teacher. She says that some of the biggest influences in her life are her father's profession and her family's political and religious beliefs. She notes that, "My family is VERY republican!" She frequently encounters aspects of her BSW studies that she does not agree with, stating that, "Being a social worker I see some things from a liberal standpoint, but then there are some things I just can't be okay with, conservatively." Olivia considers herself and her family deeply religious and states that her religion is

very important to her and has a significant influence on her worldview. Olivia and her family attend church services weekly (by herself when she is at school and with her family when she is not at school). Her mom is a worship leader, helping to lead service and prayers, and her dad works in the church treasury as the financial manager. Her brother is a worship leader as well, and her grandparents attend church with them every week as well as watch religious services on television. When Olivia is away from home and on-campus at MAU she is involved with weekly campus-based church activities (young-life activities and bible study, among other activities). She also does daily devotions and keeps a daily prayer journal.

Olivia's desire to work in a helping field seems most influenced by her faith, her parents' professions, and her experiences in high school. The population she wanted to work with was influenced by a project she did in high school. She notes that, "I want to work with refugees. Maybe things like the International Justice Mission, the United Nations, I am also interested in some Christian organizations." The high school project in question was on the topic of the Holocaust, and it really awakened a sense of social justice in her as it related to genocide and refugees. She said that after the Holocaust people vowed to never let something of that nature happen again, yet she realized that it indeed does happen today in different parts of the world. She talked about her influences:

I am interested in refugees and the elderly. As a child I always loved history. The U.S. Civil War and World War II were like my two favorite topics. I was also constantly reading about the Holocaust. Then in high school I ended up doing a paper on Darfur and it was like this huge wake-up call for me, I didn't realize we were still basically letting genocides happen. So that is kind of where my passion for refugees comes from. I live in an environment where I can't even fathom such things. On election day, I was like, 'Oh my gosh, I stand in line here waiting and I am not worried that on my way out somebody will shoot me if I voted the wrong way.' So, I just feel like it is my responsibility to give that safety to other people. I think it is awful that governments are out there killing their people. So I want to work with refugees from genocidal situations. As far as my interest in the elderly, my mom is a caregiver for the elderly. I am actually doing a research project on this right now. I know that it is not the general trend across all boards, but my mom's experience has been that there is this mindset that once you put them in a nursing home you are done. I have seen how that has affected a lot of her elderly, they have really great stories. My mom worked with somebody who knew Grace Kelly in New York. That's such a cool story and nobody really appreciates that, we all have this idea that the elderly are incompetent, and everybody gets so mad when they drive behind an elderly person. You know, like they drive so slow. I went to [Asia] this summer and did a research project on the elderly in [a particular Asian country], and they are so revered there. So that is kind of why I am interested in that population. I think they are very underappreciated.

Olivia reflected on her parents' influence and the particular instances that pushed her into social work. She says that she knew she wanted to help people from a very young age, saying, "I think my parents have kind of tried to instill that in me since I was growing up to always stand up for people." It was not until high school, however, that she realized she could personally make a difference. She was particularly influenced by a study abroad trip, saying, "That was kind of where I was like, 'I love cultures.'" Her father's profession enhanced this interest in history and cultures:

My junior year of high school I had world history. I was like, 'Oh my gosh.' That is where I learned that I love cultures. My parents have also been very involved in shaping all of this. My dad is a history teacher, so I am sure that is where my love of history came from. I was an odd child, too. They fostered it, I showed interest in it, and then they fostered it. We would go to Gettysburg and all of those places when I was younger. I just loved history. I was convinced that I was going to be an Egyptologist. I loved it, and my parents just kind of like, 'If this is what she is interested in, go for it.' They would encourage it by taking me to places like Antietam and Gettysburg and Williamsburg.

Olivia also did a lot of volunteer work with her church when she was growing up, particularly in the summers where she volunteered at youth camps. This further enhanced her desire to help people with faith as the foundation

### **Nancy's Firsthand Experience with Children**

Nancy's path to social work was largely influenced by her desire from an early age to help people, her love of working with children, and the family problems that she observes with her boyfriend's family. She says that, "I have always had this desire to help people my entire life. I've always been very into volunteering and giving back." She says she has always been good with children and wanted to find a major that would include working with people. She has been babysitting since middle school, and says, "I just love kids and that was a big factor in becoming a social worker." The foundation for pursuing a helping profession was laid at a young age, but it wasn't until she started dating her boyfriend and was troubled by what she saw with his family that things started to really take shape for her:

I guess it solidified last summer when I started dating my boyfriend. He comes from a very dysfunctional family. His older brother is 30 and lives at home with his two sons. He [the older brother] is very emotionally abusive towards them—they were taken away from their mother, who is a cocaine addict and currently in prison. The father had some substance abuse problems too, it is just a messy situation. I feel so bad for the boys—the oldest one has PTSD and ADHD and is having so many problems. His father is very distant towards him and favors his younger brother. Seeing how this poor child is going to have difficulty the rest of his life because he got unlucky and got some really crappy parents, that was kind of like the motivator I guess to change majors to social work.

Because of what she has seen with her boyfriend's family, Nancy has become more involved helping with military personnel and their families.

I do a lot now with deployed soldiers—I am part of an organization where we send them care packages and letters and stuff. Service has always been a huge part of my life. Wanting to help people as a career really was solidified around what I've seen with my boyfriend's brother and his family, it really solidified my desire to work with children. I originally wanted to do nonprofit stuff, so social work just seemed like the closest thing to that. I feel really good about my decision now.

Nancy brought her desire to work with kids with her to college, and this desire was only strengthened by what she learned about early childhood development:

I mean going into college I thought a lot of the same things I do now and really cared about and wanted to work with children, college has just strengthened that. I guess, especially recently taking all of these psychology and social work classes and the emphasis they put on the first five years of your life and how important those are. I mean the first five years of your life are really going to determine how the rest your life is going to work out. If you don't get the care that you need and the interaction and nurturing that you need then you are going to have developmental problems, social problems, emotional problems. It is just so important, those first five years, especially to just get them on the right track. I mean they cannot do it for themselves, they're pretty helpless.

Nancy told me a particularly touching story about working at a grocery store when she was younger and trying her best to help a woman using food stamps:

I used to work at a grocery store and I would have to ring up people with food stamps and WIC and that was always tough. I had one woman who came through my line and she could not afford her groceries and she started crying. I felt so bad because she had to put like half of her stuff back. She didn't have money or the stamps to pay for it. She kept saying, 'All I want is to save six dollars to buy my mom some chicken for dinner.' She was crying, she was mortified, I felt horrible, so bad for her. Luckily it wasn't that busy so there weren't a lot of customers, it was just me and my coworkers. We all tried to help her out. We told her not to worry about putting the other groceries back, we would take care of it. We helped her get her stuff into the cart and we helped her get it to the car. I guess we were just trying to end the situation as quickly as possible because it was uncomfortable for everybody. She was obviously really upset. It was really, really awkward.

Nancy had another awkward experience with welfare—this time watching some college friends openly ridicule welfare recipients while a friend of hers who had experience with welfare sat silently by:

I remember I had a friend in college whose family was on food stamps and one night we just got into this big political discussion—a couple of people and me. Some people were really vicious in their views about welfare. They didn't know his family was on food stamps. He kind of quietly said to me, 'I am on welfare, my family is on welfare.' I think I was only one that heard him. He felt like shit. There were his friends totally bashing his family, not knowing that he is sitting right there feeling this way, his family in this situation. He was just quiet, he did not get visibly upset but you could tell it was not fun for him to hear and he was upset.

Nancy's life experiences both pushed her towards social welfare and shaped the population that she wanted to work with once she was there. Like so many of the students that I spoke with, pursuing social welfare does not guarantee any particular worldview; what these students shared was a desire to help people based upon their own personal experiences, but how they helped them and the theoretical underpinnings of that help were separate issues.

## **Marena's Domestic Violence Experiences**

Marena experienced domestic violence on many occasions during her childhood and teenage years. It began when Marena was young and her father would physically abuse her mother. In high school after her parents' divorce, Marena's stepfather started to physically abuse her mother. Because of this Marena had to deal with a social worker, an experience that left a positive lasting impression on her. She did not know it before she met the social worker in high school, but ever since that experience she decided she would go into social work herself:

I had a personal experience in high school where a social worker helped our family with domestic violence between my mom and my stepfather. I loved the social worker, I thought she was amazing and she really helped us a lot. I think I was 16 and then ever since I have wanted to be a social worker. I had no idea I wanted to go into social work before, but this changed all that. I wanted to be a nurse when I was in middle school and stuff and then I switched to wanting to be a social worker after that whole abusive thing happened. Pretty much from then on, all throughout high school, I knew I wanted to be a social worker.

Marena cites this domestic abuse as the single greatest factor influencing her path to social work. She felt that she was somewhat "damaged" from her domestic violence experiences and would like to help people in similar situations. She believes this help is critical, especially since she felt there was not somebody there for her in times that she needed somebody most:

The domestic abuse in my own family was the biggest thing [that led me to social work]. My parents would fight and go at it a lot, we had a lot of family problems. So I felt like it really damaged me for a while and that is why I wanted to help kids mostly. I wish there would have been somebody there for me to help me through my problems and everything. So I guess those personal experiences really shaped me wanting to go into social work. I mean the volunteer stuff was important, but the biggest influence was the domestic violence in my own family. That started when I was born with my parents and then my mom and her ex-husband. And when I was 16 my experience with the social worker, I really, really admired her. I remember she helped my mom and I a lot. I remember I started crying during one of the court hearings and she took me and she was so kind to me and really helped me through it. It really helped me put why I was there into perspective and what I needed to do there. The social worker was just really sweet I feel like throughout the whole thing my mom was really stressed and everything was really stressful, and it was just good to have that one person who was talking you through it and telling you what was going on. Just her patience was amazing to me.

Marena, like so many BSW students, always had a desire to help people. Her personal experiences with domestic abuse were what led her to want to help children and people in similar situations; knowing she wanted to help people and who she wanted to help, her experience with one particular social worker showed her the avenue to achieve these goals:

Ever since I was a little kid I've wanted to help people and I think that definitely led into my decision to go into social work. I remember my mom always telling me when I was little, because my dad was a diplomat [abroad], and my mother would go and do like a lot of charity work and stuff wherever he was stationed. She did a lot of volunteering in [a Central American country] and stuff like that I thought it was really fascinating I just wanted to help people. The stories she would tell of how she helps people building homes and stuff like that. My mother pretty much volunteered for anything and for anybody that needed help.

Marena's story is a familiar one in this study, coming to social work due to a desire to help people and a particularly memorable personal experience. To underscore this even further, Marena tells me that before she knew she wanted to go into social work she

wanted to pursue autism therapy because her cousin is autistic. This is just one of many stories of self-selection that fill the ethnographic record.

### **Isabel's Immigrant Story**

Isabel's path to social work is largely informed by her experiences as an immigrant, seeing firsthand the struggles that immigrants face, and her experiences dealing with and helping fellow immigrants. She has always wanted to help people as a profession, and these experiences shaped how she would achieve that goal:

I have always been open to helping anyone, I know that is something that social work students say, that they want to help people. But it is true, I have always been helpful to others, very considerate to help other people in need. I have always been there for everyone that I know. When I was back in [her home country in South America] think I always wanted to work with people but not until I came here to the US did I do something about it. I think because I was an immigrant, being an immigrant is very difficult. You don't have resources, you need a lot of help from others, especially with English. I think that is probably why I chose social work. I saw firsthand how this population was affected. I think that has had a pretty strong influence on me, definitely.

Isabel's worldview is complex—she both wants to help immigrants because of the struggles they face, but also wants to see some behavior, which she perceives to be troubling, addressed. During our discussion of welfare fertility policies, such as family caps, she explained where her opinions came from:

I would have to agree with them [family caps]. Maybe because I have been exposed to many of my friends back home when I was younger who had children when they were very young and they were receiving welfare assistance. But also this has to be with the cultural aspect of it. This one immigrant woman I know, she lives in a two bedroom apartment with ten other people and she is planning to have more kids while she is struggling. Kids are very demanding. Even myself, I think right now I am not ready to have kids because I want to be more financially stable. Definitely I would agree with that [family caps]. In general I would agree with those policies. I think it would be good for most programs, not just TANF but food stamps and other programs. In general this is a good policy.

What was interesting about this conversation about family caps was that not once did Isabel mention anything about the structural limitations that immigrants face, why this family had to live with ten other people, etc. Instead, the conversation focused solely on the fertility decisions of the mother. Isabel's personal experience not only shaped why she came to social work and who she wanted to work with, but how she viewed their problems as well. Never once did she mention her studies and how they might theorize why these social problems exist; social work for her is a very personal profession, both in terms of motivation to pursue social work and the lens through which she interprets her experiences there.

### **Karen's Story**

Karen comes from a military family, and while an overwhelming majority of social work students self-select into social work and areas of social work that relate to their lives, Karen's focus was particularly narrow. We discussed what she wants to do when she graduates:

I want to go on to get my master's degree from MAU in clinical social work. Ideally I want to work with veterans. That's all I have on my mind right now. I just want to get my MSW, work with vets, and that's about it for now.

Karen was very direct and to the point that she had very little interest beyond working with veterans. I explored this a little bit further with her, interested in why she was so hyper-focused:

Pretty much my brother's military experience made me want to do that. I just recently found out he has PTSD. I wanted to be in social work, and seeing what my brother has gone through motivated me to choose vets. I am from a military family. My brother was in Iraq for several tours, and he was in the Air Force. He got pretty bad PTSD. Through him and my father and my other brother, they were all military as well—my father was in the Navy, I think he was in the Gulf War. . . I feel like there are a lot of problems in the military that the average citizen doesn't know about. So I kind of want to go in and help those problems because I feel like there isn't enough appreciation for those problems.

As I mentioned before, most of the BSW students self-selected like Karen. Her case was particularly exemplary because of its extremely narrow focus. I asked Karen to really push herself and think of any other populations that she could possibly consider working with, but she said her mind was "blank." Karen, like so many others, has personalized her profession in a substantial manner.

While it is clear that having so many military personnel in her family had a substantial influence on her career path, there were other life experiences that shaped her desire to help people. I asked her if any other life experiences shaped her journey, and while she had to dig deep, she did reflect on some other experiences:

I was always kind of bothered by—now I am not saying my mom is a horrible person, but she never really donated a dollar to people, like little stuff like a dollar here or there to cancer research or whatever. When I was little I was like, 'Oh it's only a dollar, come on'. . . I just kind of saw that my parents didn't really help those in need. I always just kind of felt like if we have the means to help other people by donating two dollars we should do it. And that was just something I kind of felt throughout my childhood and still do. I saw other people who were struggling but they were able to help other people by donating to charity or volunteering or whatever. So I saw that and I was just like, 'Well, why can't we do that?' So I have kind of done it myself. I always felt like we are doing okay and so we should give back a little bit. But I wasn't in charge of the money so I couldn't make that decision. But that is kind of why I want to dedicate my career to helping people.

Most of my participants came from privileged middle-, upper-middle-, and upper-class backgrounds, and this influenced all of their experiences and beliefs in some manner. For some it led to a more individualistically-oriented worldview (we got ours, why can't you get yours?), and for people like Karen it led to a more collectively-oriented worldview.

### **“Accidental Social Workers” and Intellectual Curiosity**

Most of the BSW students that I spoke with reported finding social work later. The pattern that emerged was that they had some vague ideas about wanting to help people and to “change the world,” but didn't really realize how they could accomplish this until they “accidentally” discovered social work<sup>14</sup>. Through my observations and interviews it became clear that most of these students latched onto social work for these reasons and their own personal experience, not because of the theoretical or empirical foundation, which most of them didn't internalize to any great extent. Another important and strong pattern was that most students avoided other majors, such as sociology of psychology, because they perceived the focus to be too heavily on research and theory, which did not interested many of them (explaining why so many of them had such underdeveloped ideas about why social problems occurred).

Corinne knew she wanted to help people, but it took her a long time to figure it out, saying, “I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I changed my major every semester. I had no clue.” She said she did not choose many other majors because of the emphasis

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<sup>14</sup> By “accidentally” discovering social work I mean multiple things. First, the students had no clear idea about what social work was or any desire to study it before choosing it. Second, the students typically found it either in college after testing out other majors or before college by dealing with somebody in the profession. Finally, students typically had a bit of an “awakening” when they accidentally discovered social work and realized how it fulfilled their needs and desires. All of these students seemed to be searching for something, some career to fulfill these needs and desires, and eventually they found social work.

on research and theory, and that social work was more about “hands-on” experience and helping people (the avoidance of research and theory was a strong pattern among my participants). Melanie says, “I have this incessant need to give back to people and the community, it just took me until my 30s to realize where I belonged.” What eventually led her to social work was an online quiz that matched her interests with a career. She believes that the government has no place in social welfare, but rather that the responsibility for helping people should be at the local- and individual-level, an interesting revelation about her individual-oriented beliefs. Noreen went into social work largely because a friend of hers was going back to school much later in life, and the idea and major sounded interesting to her, saying, “Her [Noreen’s friend] daughter was doing her Ph.D. in social work and she said, ‘I decided to go back.’ I said, ‘Oh, really? Well, I’ll go with you!’” Peter originally wanted to be an electrical engineer, then a teacher, and then opted to go into the military. It was only after spending some time in the military that he eventually ended up in social work. Jenny Phan, Jennifer Reynolds, Karen Moore, and Isabel Cervera all had similar paths to Peter LeBlanc. Jenny explains her path:

I didn't choose social work to begin with, I actually wanted to be an art major in high school. Then I decided to change to biology, and then I changed to bioengineering, and then one day I was in my physics lab and I was like, ‘I don't want to do this for the rest of my life.’ So the college had stuff on careers and I flipped through a few things and I chose social work because I really like working with people and I want to change the world and that is why I chose social work.

Jennifer explains a similar path:

You're going to have fun listening to this. I started out undeclared and then went into accounting. I love numbers and I love the business and all of that, but I just was not getting the concepts and definitions. I took my first accounting course and I was just not doing very well. I was already into my first semester of junior year and at that point I and I could either continue and possibly fail and end up probably having to stay five or six years or just change my major. And so accounting was not working out for me and so I kind of went through different majors that I would be interested in—I know it sounds horrible. Social work was one of the only majors where I could graduate in five years so I decided on social work. Anything else that I was somewhat interested in would have taken six years—hence the reason why I have been completely undecided on grad school.

Karen's similar journey:

I sort of informally went through a number of different majors. First I started with English, then philosophy, then communications, and at one point psychology. I always kind of had an interest in psychology and psychiatry, but I was like 18 and 19 and I thought, 'Well all I can do with a psychology degree is counseling, and I don't just want to sit in a chair and talk to people.' So I heard about social work—actually my mom was watching some cat show on this animal network and it was talking about this woman who was a social worker and she used cats in her counseling. So I heard the word social work from that show and I was like, 'Social work, that sounds like something I really want to do.' I felt it was like a combination of psychiatry and hands-on experience and helping people and it sounds like a diverse field and so that is what drew me into it. But I knew I always wanted to help people, and to do it from a psychological perspective, I just didn't know what job it was where I could do that, so social work was the answer to that.

Isabel on her similar journey to Peter, Jenny, Jennifer, and Karen:

I always want to be involved in the health field. First I wanted to become a dentist, and then a dental assistant, and then a doctor, and then a nurse. After trying to apply to become a registered nurse I was not able to pass two exams that are required and I only had one chance. So then I was doing more research about other careers to study and I found social work. So I went to [BSW] orientation and I really loved the idea. I think I have always have been interested in working with, you know to make changes in people, working with people. I have never seen myself working at a desk or working on a computer. I just like to be more involved with people and work with people.

Olivia originally wanted to be a government major, but the focus on research and policy scared her away. She was not interested as much in the minutia of why social problems happened or policy designed to fix them, but in getting to work with people one-on-one. She explained that, "I volunteer at church camp every summer and I happened to be at camp one day when the lifeguard at the time was talking about being a social worker major. So I ended up asking her, 'What is social work?' She kind of explained it to me." Once she was back in the school in the fall she switched her major to social work. Laila had a similar distaste for learning about the cause of social problems, explaining that she was more interested in helping people:

I was initially a sociology major, but the more courses I took the more I realized that it was all very theoretical. I realized that if I was going to be out there on the job market I wanted some more practical skills and social work seemed to offer that. So I changed majors to social work. I was basically trying to match my interests with what I was good at and what I was interested in. I thought I would be better at interacting with people in a kind of one-on-one basis and it seemed like a good fit for that reason.

Tom reported that he was too concerned about making money and that is why he chose to go into the business world for the first 15 years of his career. It was only after a long internal struggle over his desire to help people that he eventually ended up in social work. For as long as Natalia can remember she wanted to be a nurse, and she too found the journey to social work an "accidental" one:

After I finished high school I went to community college for nursing and the nursing program denied me two times, so I said, 'Well, no more to nursing!' So I started looking at other professions that were similar to nursing, in terms of helping people, and social work popped up. I guess it looked like the closest thing I could do to accomplish what I always wanted to do.

Eventually all of these students "accidentally" discovered social work in one way or another, matching their personal interests with a major and avoiding having to deal with

too much research or theory. Corinne, when talking about how she came to social work, reported a similar story:

Actually my Associates Degree is in sociology, but then once I really started looking at sociology, I'm like, 'I really don't want to do research.' That's not what—I don't think that's what God has for me. And I think it's important for lots of people to do, but it's not what he's gifted me with. So I think that's pretty much why I chose social work.

Amanda also wanted to avoid too much research and theory:

I started out as a psychology major, I took that in community college. . . . Eventually I switched to sociology and realized that wasn't really what I was looking for either, because that was more theory.

An interesting finding in this study was that most of the students had little-to-no interest in following the news or current events. I did not ask these students about their news-gathering habits to find out about their intellectual curiosity; this particular interview question was actually initially designed to gauge where they were getting information about social problems and how this might impact their worldviews. This question proved pretty useless in this regard since most of the students had very little interest in the news, but it did reveal something about their intellectual curiosity. On the surface this is not a profound finding, and lack of interest in the news is not by itself a sign of lacking intellectual curiosity. When combined with the overall lack of interest in the empirical and theoretical basis for social problems, however, it became an interesting piece of this study. These students, overall, tended to reveal a lack of intellectual curiosity on many fronts, instead picking and choosing different causes and conducting little self-reflection on their own views about social problems. It is within this context, the overall lack of participant knowledge or interest in the complex explanations of social problems, that the apathy towards the news became noteworthy.

There were exceptions, of course, to this pattern or disinterest in current events. Sarah, for instance, regularly watches the news each day, reporting that, “I watch the news—I just go to local news first, and then I go to national news, like The Today Show. I cook and prepare breakfast and I can watch it on the TV.” Noreen voraciously consumed news, stating that, “I watch the news every single day. I watch local news, I watch MSNBC, and my local news is now on 24 hours on two channels.” Overall, however, there was a strong apathy towards current events. Melanie said that she never really watched the news, and that, “If I need something I can get news alerts on my phone.” When I asked Amanda and Natalia if they watched the news, Amanda said, “I don’t pay attention to the news that much,” while Natalia responded, “Not really. I should, but I really don’t.” Jennifer and Isabel rely on family members if they ever want to find out about something, which is rare. Jennifer revealed that, “I honestly don’t listen to the news very often at all, less than once a month probably. I don’t really enjoy listening to the news. If I did need to find out about something about the news, I would probably ask my father.” When asked if she follows the news, Isabel stated that, “Not really. Usually I have two sources, one is my husband and one is... actually I would say mostly my husband.”

In response to my questions about what their program taught them about poverty and inequality, my respondents both explicitly and implicitly acknowledged that their program did not have a strong focus in that area. This left me with the impression that they were leaving the BSW program without a solid background in some of the macro-level issues that they would be dealing with. In talking to the BSW students I found that most of them had their most important exposure to poverty course material in their

introductory social work course. When I conducted document analyses to determine what exactly they were learning in that course, I found that poverty was in fact addressed but not from a strong theoretical or empirical perspective. Their course material only vaguely touched on theories of poverty and inequality. This helped to explain why the students had such underdeveloped ideas about why poverty and inequality exist, and why they rely so heavily on their own personal beliefs to explain these social problems. Karen, for instance, is a junior and could not recall if the program even teaches poverty. I asked her if there is a poverty-focused course, and she responded:

I am sure there is. At the senior level probably, maybe even the masters or the upper-graduate-level classes, they probably do. I haven't taken anything like that.

This was a similar response to many of her colleagues; when I asked where and when they learned about poverty and inequality, they had real difficulty formulating answers. Natalia is a social work major, has taken many classes in the program, but when it comes to poverty she says, "I haven't really thought about this question a lot. It does pop up in class sometimes." I was a bit taken-aback by this answer, given the major role poverty will play in many of the populations that social workers will deal with. Of poverty, she says, "I don't feel like I have researched it at all. . . I never really thought about or never really spent a lot of time with these questions. This is probably the most time I have ever spent talking about this stuff."

Upon examination of the course materials in the introductory course, it appears at first glance to be heavily focused on poverty; in fact, of the two books they use, one deals solely with poverty. At MAU they strive for consistency in course content and

experience across the introductory sections with different instructors, so they all use the same two books: *An Introduction to the Profession of Social Work* by Segal, Gerdes, and Steiner (2012), and *A People's History of Poverty in America* by Stephen Pimpare (2011). The social work textbook devotes an entire 26-page chapter to poverty, while Pimpare's book devotes all 336 pages to the subject. To understand why the BSW students might have undeveloped theoretical foundations it is worth looking into how these books handle and attempt to explain the problem of poverty.

In *An Introduction to the Profession of Social Work* the authors cover the topic of poverty in chapter three, titled "Poverty and Economic Disparity" (pp. 69-94). Despite being a social work textbook, this book actually had the weakest explanations of poverty between the two books. The chapter begins by discussing the strengths and weaknesses of absolute and relative poverty thresholds. The authors then give the reader a few examples of federal poverty thresholds (for the 48 contiguous states and D.C.) based upon family size. The authors then discuss arguments for the overestimation of poverty as well as arguments for the underestimation of poverty. They then discuss the numbers and percentages of Americans in poverty and the demographics of poverty, including the "juvenilization of poverty" and the "feminization of poverty." The authors then move to the causes of poverty.

The authors open the "Causes of Poverty" section arguing that there is little consensus about poverty causation among poverty scholars, therefore making it difficult to cite one standard theory or cause of poverty. They briefly discuss the "Culture of Poverty" theory, but only for a total of two sentences. In those sentences they do not explain what the theory is and only give one weak criticism of the theory (how does this

theory explain how people escape poverty?) instead of the many main criticisms of the theory. They then discuss, without naming a specific theory, perspectives that argue that poverty is necessary for the functioning of a capitalist economy. Then they begin discussing how discussions of poverty in the U.S. have focused on “blaming the victim,” arguing that in these explanations, “The responsibility for poverty is placed on the individual, and society does not have to change economic conditions” (2012:74) to address poverty; the authors discuss William Ryan’s arguments in *Blaming the Victim* (2012) as an example:

If poverty is the fault of each poor person, then others do not need to examine the way income is earned or consider whether all people have the opportunity to acquire wealth. All efforts at fighting poverty are aimed at the individual rather than at changing the economic structure. The system’s role never gets addressed, and systemic inequality continues generation after generation. In addition, social stigma and blame enter deeply into the personal being of people who are poor. Poor people internalize this blame from a very young age, and this factor can be a challenge for social workers who try to help people move out of poverty. The challenge is how to address internalized blame. (2012:74)

This is the extent of the “formal” theory that is dealt with in this chapter, (a) a two-sentence discussion of “Culture of Poverty” with no explanation of the theory itself and only a mention of one possible (weak) criticism of that theory, (b) a brief discussion of an unnamed theory that argues that poverty is critical to the functioning of a capitalist economy, and (c) a brief discussion of William Ryan’s *Blame the Victim*, a useful tool in understanding poverty but not a poverty theory in the scholarly sense (and the useful aspects of this work are not discussed in any length in the chapter). The authors never mention the wide variety of possible poverty theories or give any decent summary of the theories that they do mention. They also remain almost completely neutral about individualism versus structuralism, saying, “Whether poverty is the cause of personal

problems or personal deficiencies lead to poverty, there is a relationship between the two” (2012:80).

Next the authors entered into a discussion about the mismatch between the total number and adequacy of available jobs and all who need them. In this discussion the authors explain both underemployment and the working poor. They then discuss the unequal distribution of income in the U.S. and how this inequality has increased over time. The authors then move on to discuss racial income inequality, prejudice, and discrimination. They then move on to a very vague discussion of the negative impact that poverty can have on educational resources and attainment, self-esteem, neighborhood crime, physical and mental health, and drug use. They do not mention the type of or extent of this impact, just that poverty has a negative impact on these things. They then turn to a lengthier discussion of homelessness, including the increase in homelessness since the 1980s, the geography of homelessness (urban, suburban, rural), and gentrification and its impact on the availability of low-income housing. In this discussion they do mention that homelessness is only the extreme consequence of poverty, which I found interesting, since so many of my participants equated poverty in general with homelessness. The authors then move on to a discussion of different social welfare programs: SSI, TANF (including significant criticisms of TANF), and SNAP. They end the chapter by discussing ways that social workers can intervene to help poor people. Despite doing very little in terms of a theoretical foundation for understanding the individual-, cultural-, and structural-causes of poverty, the authors end the chapter suggesting that structure plays a critical role:

Poverty is firmly entrenched in the economic system. Even after the longest economic expansion in modern history, millions of adults and children lived with incomes well below the poverty line. Current social programs provide a modicum of assistance, just enough to cover the most essential needs. Society is reluctant to do more. Without changes in the social and economic structures, there are not enough opportunities for everyone. . . Creating such opportunities is a major challenge for society and for social workers. (2012:87-88)

The social work textbook addresses many of the key structural elements of poverty, and with a firm theoretical foundation the students might be able to properly contextualize the information that they are reading. Without this theoretical foundation, however, there is room for considerable variation in how students perceive and interpret poverty causation. For instance, students may read the section on the expansion of homelessness in the U.S. and be able to articulate and make connections to the structural factors that contribute to this expansion. Upon reviewing their course materials, however, there is nothing that guarantees this outcome; this may explain why so many of the participants framed homelessness as a moral outrage while still situating it within an individualistically-oriented framework. Without that theoretical foundation, students are left to make the connections themselves.

In *A People's History of Poverty in America*, Stephen Pimpare explores poverty not in a typical "privileged researcher examines marginalized population" fashion, but from the perspectives of poor Americans throughout history. His book focuses on poverty and state responses to poverty (welfare) from the colonial-era to present-day U.S. He believes his book is important, coming from the perspective of marginalized people, because, ""There is a general ignorance about the lives led by poor Americans, an ignorance, whether real or feigned, that shapes public discourse about poverty and welfare, and policy itself" (Pimpare 2011:5). The author opens the book with a story

about the wealthy female members of the 19<sup>th</sup> century New York City “Children’s Potted Plant Society.” Pimpare explains that these women give potted plants to poor children as charity. It was the winter of 1893 and New York City was experiencing economic depression, rising unemployment, increased poverty, etc. The wealthy women in question felt that it was their duty, as privileged members of society, to give back to those in need in the form of potted plants (to brighten the spirits of the poor). To their horror, the wealthy women found that the poor children were not impressed by their charity; instead, many of the children stole multiple plants from the women to sell themselves for profit. Reviewer Alice O’Connor notes how Pimpare uses this example as what should be a powerful lesson for the BSW students:

However well intentioned, and whatever its source, a great deal of what passes for social assistance in the United States has historically been disconnected from any real understanding of poor people’s lives, let alone their needs and wants. What the potted plant episode reveals about private charity can just as well be extended to any number of government-sponsored social welfare programs, designed and implemented as they principally have been by a socially distant elite. Indeed, viewed from the standpoint of the people who have needed it, and through the voices and experiences Pimpare features here, American public welfare can be understood as the product of a vastly impoverished social imagination. This very imagination, he reminds the reader, undergirds the familiar popularized mythology of who is poor and why. (O’Connor 2010:515)

Social welfare has long been about charity in the U.S., giving to the poor as moral obligation and as a means to make the privileged feel better about themselves rather than fixing structural problems that create social problems in the first place; a typical response would be to supplement the wages of low-income workers, rather than a structural fix of reorganizing work so that everyone has a job at a living wage. This was the model espoused by most of the BSW students: they were giving back to people

because they felt bad for them, never truly critically analyzing why these people might justly deserve such aid due to the unjust organization of society.

Pimpare provided many crucial lessons that could spur important realizations if internalized by the reader. Throughout the history of poverty and welfare in the U.S., Pimpare argues that: Americans, especially when compared to citizens of other developed countries, have been unsympathetic and patronizing towards the poor, welfare has been intentionally designed throughout American history to be minimal, welfare is not designed as an entitlement as the poor are largely undeserving of such an entitlement (since it is not based on the idea of structural but individual failings—if it were a structural issue you would always allow for some to be poor), and welfare itself breeds immorality (laziness, promiscuity, dependency, etc.). Throughout the book the reader is treated to narratives of poor people whose main concern is the right to steady work at a living wage. Welfare in the U.S. has largely assumed that those two things exist for all who seek them, and because of that the poor are always inherently suspect.

Although the book was not highly theoretical, instead largely depending on the narratives of the marginalized to make its points, it does provide important lessons to those who are paying attention. The author is also highly critical of individualistic and Culture of Poverty arguments about poverty. Pimpare cites many structurally-oriented scholars in support of his arguments, including Richard Cloward, Barbara Ehrenreich, Michael Harrington, Jonathan Kozol, Frances Fox Piven, Katherine Newman, Carol Stack, etc. He is critical of scholars who espouse viewpoints that fail to take into account the views of the poor and structurally-oriented perspectives, scholars such as Charles Murray and Robert Rector. He even devotes a chapter to Culture of Poverty

arguments, both strengths and weaknesses. Despite all of this, as I mentioned, the book is heavy on narrative and might lead some students to simply feel bad for the plight of the poor rather than critically examine the conditions that led to their poverty. If combined with a strong foundation of theoretical material and lectures to supplement it, however, this book might have helped change many of the BSW students' individualistically-dominated views about poverty inequality. Unfortunately, in their other course materials they did not receive a strong foundation in theory and research, leading to many underdeveloped understandings of these problems.

### **I Want to Change the World**

As the “accidental social workers” revealed in their answers, many of the participants reported always feeling the need to help people and make a positive change in the world from an early age. For most of the participants this informed their decision to pursue social work and also informed their desire to pursue hands-on versus research- and theory-based studies. Allison, talking about her childhood and teenage years, said, “I think I always liked the idea of having a profession where you help people.” Corinne said she “always felt compelled to help others who were in need, or if I saw a need, I would try to fill that need.” This combined with her faith to influence her career path, saying that she felt God was giving her specific life experiences to lead her to social work and assuring her that it was what she was destined for. She explained that, “I think in many ways God was showing me, ‘This is what I have for you.’” Melanie asserts that, “I have this incessant need to give back to people and the community,” and after experiencing a little bit of the world as an adult came to the conclusion, “Wow, this world’s really messed up. I should do something about it.” Noreen reported a constant desire for social justice since elementary school:

I can recall earlier. . . when I was in elementary school having this sense that it essentially boils down to knowing that what my ancestors did to the native people when they arrived here was just wrong. Before I knew anything about oppression and prejudice and racism, I knew right from wrong and I applied that just on my own somehow. I don't know where it came from. I can't say, 'Oh, yeah, I saw a movie or I read a book.' It just somehow got to my consciousness, okay? So when you say how'd you get here? Well, maybe, it was just knowing at a very young age somehow the sort of right and wrong kind of thing, but it may have just been that confluence of experiences growing up that I just found myself passionate about social justice.

Ever since she was a child, Ashley remembers that she “always liked helping people, volunteering and helping the community.” Jana, who grew up in a European country with a substantial social welfare network and in a family with strong socialist sentiments, reported that her reasons for pursuing social work have “a lot to do with my upbringing and seeing it from a different perspective, too. Coming from a country that has a huge social welfare network.” Jenny remembers wanting to help people as a child, saying, “I have always felt that I want to change the world, from when I was really young, probably five or six.” Tom remembers himself and his sister always being oriented towards helping people by nature, explaining, “It has always been part of my nature and part of my sister's nature that we are just helping people so it was sort of natural to go into a helping profession. . . I always knew I wanted to be in a helping profession.” Natalia remembers wanting to help people like herself, due in large part to the help she never received, saying, “When I was younger, ever since I was a kid I always wanted to help people, that was my biggest thing. I want to help people however I can. . . I think a part of it was my adoption . . . I just kind of want to give back I guess.” Olivia always felt the need to help, a need that was further cultivated by her parents, explaining that this desire to help “goes back all the way to when I was young. I think my parents have kind

of tried to instill that in me when I was growing up.” Laila revealed that, “For me social problems were always something I was interested in. . . My culture is very much family-centered, you are supposed to be helping people, and my family was the same way.”

Marena talked about her desire to help people from a young age, explaining that:

Ever since I was a little kid I've wanted to help people and I think that definitely led into my decision to go into social work. . . I think I have always have been interested in. . . [making] changes in people, working with people.

Karen remembers being a depressed teenager and wanting to change what she perceived to be a “nasty” world:

To be honest I was a pretty depressed teenager. I felt like the world and people were pretty nasty to each other and it bothered me that that was the way of the world or at least how I perceived it. So I always wanted to make a difference, I wanted to be a light of hope, I wanted to be the opposite of what I perceive the world to be. Even before that as a kid I always wanted to help people. Even then I just felt like that is just what you do as a human you have an obligation to help other people however you can. And I am not saying everyone ought to dedicate their lives to helping other people but that is something I knew that I wanted to do.

Isabel talked about her lifelong desire to help people:

I have always been open to helping anyone, I know that is something that social work students say, that they want to help people, but it is true, I have always been helpful to others, very considerate to help other people in need. . . I have always been there for everyone that I know.

For most of the participants in this study, they were able to identify in their childhoods the roots of wanting to help people and change the world. As they grew older, they each had experiences that solidified the populations that they wanted to work with and the avenue (social work) that they would pursue to help these populations.

## The Influence of Privilege

Through their answers it became clear that the largely middle-, upper-middle-, and upper-class upbringings of my participants had a substantial impact on their largely individualistic economic worldviews. This was impacted heavily by their family and social networks growing up as children. I developed a strong sense that, even though their family and friends did not always come out and explicitly say it, the family and friends of the participants did not approve of social work because of negative judgments of the populations that people would be dealing with. I think this involves both American cultural evaluations of specific populations of people (such as the poor) as well as the typical privileged class position of these families.

Nancy's family and friends explicitly and implicitly send her strong messages about the salaries of social workers, the stress of the job, the notion that social work is "charity" rather than a correction of structural imbalances, and the nature of the people in the populations she will serve:

My family kinda thought that somebody would like pull a gun on me [in social work]. . . After that they started worrying about the money issue because we do not make very much money. Sometimes they will flat out say things. I remember at Christmas last year when I was changing my major my mom, dad, and grandmother had like a mini-intervention with me. They said, 'Are you sure you want to do this? This is going to be really hard and we are really worried about you.' My dad will send me emails with articles about how social work is one of the lowest-paying jobs, how everybody ends up in poverty. They are really blunt about it. I think they are coming around to it hopefully. My friends don't understand what it is to be a social worker. I feel like that is the plight of a social worker. They don't understand what exactly it is that we do. They're just like, 'Oh my God that is so admirable! Oh my God you are such a good person for doing this!' And it is just like... I don't think they really understand. They don't know exactly what we do, they just know that our job is very hard emotionally and physically.

Olivia and I were discussing whether she would ever feel comfortable using welfare, and her long response highlighted her belief that her family had done things the right way and have never received assistance. As hard as it was to believe that her family, like every other family, had received some substantial help from somebody along the way, her response reflected her privileged class position and an important part of her individualistic identity:

Regardless of why they are poor, people should get welfare as long as they're making a change in behavior. I am from a middle-class family. My family did not receive any government assistance. My parents did not receive any assistance on my FAFSA, they pay for everything out-of-state for me. I am graduating without any college debt and I really appreciate my parents for doing that. It is amazing. I think it is unfair to ask people to give up money that they have earned. Why do I have to give that to everybody else? I agree that is unfair especially if that person is not making an effort to change. . . You're going to have setbacks, you're going to make some poor decisions along the way, but as long as it is proven in the long run that you're making that change. After so many times though, I hate to say that, but if you are not making an effort to change do you really deserve to receive this assistance? Because you don't seem to be appreciating or using it and really feeling like it is helping you. So I agree philosophically as long as it is structured the right way and people are making changes in their lives.

This not only revealed an important part of her and her family's identity, self-sufficiency, but also her belief that welfare is about changing the individual, not fixing structural imbalances. Cash and in-kind assistance were in effect taking away money that other people had earned, according to Olivia; this framework for understanding welfare eliminates the possibility that at least part of that money was earned at the expense of other people due to unjust structural imbalances. Terra and I were having a discussion of her privileged upbringing and how this would impact her own sense of pride if she were to have to use welfare; on whether she would be prideful, she reported:

Of course. I think I'd be very embarrassed, but what else can you do? I never grew up with having to do that, so it would be embarrassing. . . I would—I'm not going to lie. I'd be embarrassed because I guess it's—we're a little bit snobby.

Melanie admitted that her comfortable upbringing not only allowed her to avoid experiencing the difficult circumstances that she sees in the social work field, but also allowed her the privilege of ignoring social problems for much of her life:

I absolutely did not think about this stuff [social problems] before college. I was a little selfish until about my mid-20s, and I was like, 'Oh right, there's a whole world out there.' Before college, I would say I just wouldn't think about poor people or anything like that. It was just kinda something I didn't wanna think about, you know, poor people, it was just not something I needed to worry about.

Melanie hinted at the luxury of being able to ignore structural imbalances when you are the beneficiary of such an arrangement. Noreen grew up in a comfortable environment that impacted the economic and racial ideologies to which she was exposed in her economically and racially homogenous small town:

My parents were from a very different generation. And my father, in particular, was an absolute racist, and we used to butt heads since I can remember, since I was little. Boy, it was ugly. I'm from a small town and I think there might have been like one black family or something. And so I was butting heads with my father and everyone in our little social world. . . And everybody in our little world, in their network of friends, they all thought the same and were from the same generation.

Ashley grew up in a privilege environment where her mother had the choice about whether to stay home with her children or work in the paid labor force outside of the home. Despite knowing this, she uses her privileged perspective to analyze the decisions of poor mothers:

From my experience I have seen that the office for children provides free or reduced childcare. I know that regular childcare can be as much as college tuition. And so I think that is the way to go. I know there are people that say mothers should be able to spend time with their children, I think at the same time sacrifices have to come instead of just handing things to people and saying, 'Okay we'll pay you to stay at home with your kids.'

For Ashley, poor women should make sacrifices just like every other social class; what is excluded in this analysis is the possibility that poor women might be forced to make sacrifices that other social classes do not have to make, that those sacrifices might be qualitatively different and unevenly distributed, and that many of those sacrifices are the result of social organization. Karen grew up in a privileged household and was always bothered by the fact that her parents did not do more to help those less fortunate, saying, "I just kind of saw that my parents didn't really help those in need. . . I always just kind of felt like if we have the means to help other people by donating two dollars we should do it." She said she always observed "other people who were struggling but they were able to help other people by donating to charity or volunteering or whatever. So I saw that and I was just like, 'Well, why can't we do that?'" Tom and I were having a discussion one day about welfare and whether he would ever use it himself. He had an interesting response: he would not feel comfortable because he always considered himself the person on the other side of the desk (the social worker giving the assistance). He said:

I would like to say yes [that he would use welfare], but I know my ego would be hard-pressed to say yes, to seek these services out. . . My ego would certainly play a huge role in it. I don't know if I could bring myself to go into an office, where I was not that poor person before, I was on the other side of it. And now I am on the other side needing help.

As I will discuss in the next chapter, Tom firmly believes in the American cultural narrative about the connection between hard work and economic success. His pride

would be negatively impacted because he was always the one being compassionate and giving back to these people that had failed in some manner.

The relatively privileged backgrounds (and current privileged class positions) of the students in this study are a possible explanation for their individualistically-oriented worldviews. Many of these students believe strongly in individualistic explanations for social position, and these explanations reflect positively on them and their families; their families succeeded economically, and cultural logic assures them that it is because of meritocratic and moral reasons.

### **Wanting to “Fix” People**

A typical response to questions about why students chose social work included an interest in psychology and in “fixing” individuals. Virtually all of the students had at least vague notions about wanting to pursue the field of psychology either before entering college or before declaring a major. A substantial majority of students also reported an interest in “fixing” perceived deficiencies in the people in the populations that they would go on to work with. When I explored this phenomenon with the students, the pattern that emerged was that the students knew that there was something “wrong” with individuals that, if fixed, could remove the primary obstacle to their success. This was consistent with the poverty and welfare ideologies that the students expressed about social problems: a focus on fixing the individual rather than the structure contributing to the problem.

Terra went into social work despite her previous interest in psychology because she did not want to go all the way through the doctoral program in psychology, which she thought was necessary if she wanted to have a career in psychology:

When I started at community college I knew I wanted to do social work. I used to like psychology a lot, I've always really liked psychology. But I think it's [social work] a lot more realistic than psychology where I'd have to go all the way up through a Ph.D. program. I'd say that for me, it's [social work] a branch off of being interested in psychology. I originally wanted to be a licensed social worker because it's almost like you are a psychologist.

In talking to Terra, it became clear that her fix-the-individual approach and worldview never really changed, just the career that she chose. It also became clear from our conversation that her impression of the field of social work was that she did not need to change her fix-the-individual approach, that she felt both fields were individual-focused. I asked Terra about this individual-level focus, and whether her fellow students had a similar focus:

I think more [BSW students] would lean toward individualism because I think that from a social work perspective, you'd—if you're from a social work perspective, you'd probably pick individualism. Just because we practice self-determination meaning you get out of life what you give. . . we learn a lot about self-determination, like I said. And we are taught to think more like—not to—we think people first, we don't think poverty. We just think about the people first versus—I think its way more optimistic. So sort of helping individuals fix their problems, do for themselves.

After spending time in the BSW program and its focus on the nuts-and-bolts of social work, it is easy to see why students might focus more on the individual. After all, their jobs call for them to help individuals any way that they can (within the parameters of social work) to escape from difficult situations, despite the circumstances. They are not in charge of designing policies and allocating federal and state resources; they must help individuals make the most of their situations no matter how unjust they might be. The unfortunate byproduct of this focus is that some students go through the entire BSW program never feeling the need to examine their own individualistically-oriented

worldviews, helping to perpetuate a culture in the U.S. (and within crucial institutions designed to alleviate social problems) that is highly individualistic.

Corinne wanted to study psychology, but chose social work instead, saying about social work:

I guess you get to get in there and get your hands dirty with the participants, or whoever you're working with, but then you're also formulating a plan with them to help them better themselves. I guess that's what I see from social work. Psychology is great, but in the day-to-day, you're not really involved in these people's lives.

Melanie really enjoyed sociology and psychology, but could not decide on how that interest would translate into a career. She kept coming back to her interest in both subjects, particularly psychology, until she eventually took an online quiz that suggested she pursue social work. Ashley started in psychology, but realized that a career in psychology would require her to invest too much time, money, and energy into her education, so she chose what she considers a more "versatile" career in social work:

I started off in psychology and I thought that was where I wanted to go. . . . But I started to realize that psychology would take a lot more time and a lot more energy than social work. Then when I had my internship as a psychology student in a social work field I realized that social work is a lot more versatile.

Jana also expressed a reluctance to pursue psychology when a degree in social work would take less time:

I was doing psychology and then through classes I found out that the social worker actually can do just as much with clients as a Ph.D. in psychology. You can do group work, you can do client therapy, you can do all of this without having to do a Ph.D.

Amanda, like many of my participants, talked a lot about wanting to "fix" people and address certain "deficiencies" in the populations that she was going to serve. It made sense to her to initially pursue psychology to acquire the tools to fix a person so that

they no longer needed help from the welfare state. Amanda also mentions that she sort of “shopped around” until she found a field that matched her beliefs and attitudes about people and their behaviors. Nancy reported an interest in psychology because of her focus on the first five years of a child’s life and how this impacts the rest of their lives, saying, “Recently taking all of these psychology and social work classes and the emphasis they put on the first five years of your life and how important those are. I mean the first five years of your life are really going to determine how the rest your life is going to work out.” She then went on to discuss all of the individual-level issues that might develop due to growing up in an underprivileged environment, leaving out any discussion of the role of the social structure in this process. When Laila was younger she thought she would study psychology, and it was not until a negative experience with a psychologist that she changed her mind:

I initially thought maybe psychology would be a good choice—you know it is one-on-one and it is helping and all of that. I had to go to a psychologist when I was in elementary school, and my interaction wasn’t all that great. You are sitting there sort of spilling out all of your guts and feelings and they are just sitting there taking notes—it rubbed me the wrong way and changed my notion of what psychology would be.

Karen tossed around different disciplines in her head before choosing social work, with a particular interest in psychology:

I sort of informally went through a number of different majors. First I started with English, then philosophy, then communications, and at one point psychology. I always kind of had an interest in psychology and psychiatry.

When Karen eventually settled on social work she felt that she had picked a field that incorporated her interest in psychology:

I felt like it [social work] was like a combination of psychiatry and hands-on experience and helping people and it sounds like a diverse field and so that is what drew me into it. But I knew I always wanted to help people, and to do it from a psychological perspective, I just didn't know what job it was where I could do that, so social work was the answer to that.

I asked Karen what the connection between social work and psychology is, and she explained what a nice “made-up” field she believed social work was, incorporating many different interests and perspectives:

I think social work is a combination of different fields, like criminology, psychology, and sociology. For people like me who are indecisive about what they want to major in it is kind of a nice made-up field. That's what drew me into it, too, is that it is hands-on. You are working with the people and you are more involved with people than with other professions.

Tom initially wanted to study psychology but had an issue with the patients that he would be dealing with and his disdain for the fact that they could not take care of their problems themselves:

I always knew I wanted to be in a helping profession. When I was younger it was more psychology and psychiatry, that sort of thing. But I had a personal issue with psychology and psychiatry, like, ‘Well if you need help, if you can't resolve an issue on your own—I would never go seek help because you should be able to resolve an issue on your own.’ So I thought to myself, ‘Well I don't want to go into a career that does that, and I don't want to sit and listen to people's problems all day’. . . I kind of knew it all along [that he wanted to be in a helping profession], but I worked against myself to get into the field—any field, whether it is psychology, psychiatry, or social work.

Tom told me that after he graduates he wants to go into an area of social work that can help him be secure financially and possibly give him the sort of stand-alone practice that a psychologist or psychiatrist might have, saying:

I guess my years in business have led me to think about what is sort of a niche market, you know, an area I can do well in financially. I am not going to lie I have expectations for my life [income, living standards]. . . My end goal is to do work in mental health and eventually have my own practice where people are coming to see me—similar to what a psychologist or psychiatrist would do.

This significant interest in psychology and “fixing” people among the participants in this study helps explain their individualistically-oriented worldviews. Most of the students held these worldviews long before they ever stepped foot into a BSW classroom, and self-selected social work as a field that allowed them to address their particular desires and interests. Social work did not, at least in their minds, heavily conflict with their worldviews and seemed to be similar enough for them to feel comfortable in the program. It also allowed them to avoid much of the research and theory that might have led them to reevaluate their firmly held assumptions.

### **Program Influence<sup>15</sup>**

The participants in this study revealed that the strongest influences on their poverty and inequality worldviews were clearly non-program factors: their upbringing, their childhood and teenage experiences, personal and American cultural assumptions, etc. (refer to Figure 4-1 on page 177). This of course does not mean that their experiences in the BSW program did not impact their worldviews. Many students reported growing and changing in college. What the ethnographic record seemed to suggest is that the students who came into the program slightly more structurally-oriented also tended to have strong politically-liberal identities and felt that the program validated those leftist beliefs. These students seemed to do the least self-reflection,

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<sup>15</sup> In the previous subsection I discussed the introductory course materials. This document analysis could also be considered part of the “Program Influence” subsection. Rather than duplicate that subsection here, I will discuss other aspects of program influence.

failing to examine the highly-individualistic worldviews that they held about poverty and poor individuals. They selectively chose certain aspects of what they learned to incorporate into their existing worldviews, but did little reflection on why they were so individualistically-oriented. In fact, most of the students who identified as politically-liberal did not realize the significant role that individualism played in their worldviews, even when they made statements confirming this notion. These students seemed to find solace in the fact that since they did not perceive themselves to be overly judgmental or negative towards the poor, this somehow differentiated their worldviews from their politically-conservative and/or more individualistically-oriented counterparts. In truth there did not seem to be major differences in their worldviews, just the manner in which they expressed their worldviews; the conservative students were highly critical of poor individuals from an individualistically-oriented worldview, while the more liberal students expressed more compassion for poor individuals, but still from a largely individualistic-worldviews. This seemed to suggest that the more liberal students left college feeling that their beliefs were validated while failing to fully examine the fundamental assumptions of these beliefs. The more conservative students seemed to leave the program slightly less individualistically-oriented, incorporating more structurally-oriented notions in their worldviews. Both sets of students, however, seemed to leave the program still holding poverty and inequality worldviews dominated by individualism. In this section I will discuss how the students expressed some of the ways in which the program impacted them<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that when the students discussed how the program impacted them they mostly delivered “ideal culture” answers. Many of them talked about their perceived “progressive” and “liberal” identities and how this differentiates them from the (perceived) less-compassionate and less-knowledgeable American public. Where they actually directly discussed poverty in my fieldnotes and

Allison talked about how her internship opened her eyes to the difficulties that low-income families faced, difficulties that she says were much worse than she imagined:

I've learned a lot about low-income families, very personal things. Just from filling out certain sheets you learn because they get pretty detailed about their conditions. I know most families there were coming from low-income backgrounds, but I didn't know how bad things actually were for them. I learned a lot about that and about the programs that they offer. It has been a really positive experience.

Terra hinted at how her college courses impacted her worldview, helping her to understand some of the limitations of a strictly-individualistic worldview:

I think when I was younger I used to really think it [the cause of poverty] was individualism. You know, you get what you give—like if you have the biggest work ethic you succeed. But it was not as realistic. More like 'you can be anything you want' mentality. It's not exactly realistic. I guess getting—going to college and actually seeing how hard it is in science and things like that, like growing up and—if I was younger, I probably would have chosen individualism when you asked me.

Corinne interned at a social services agency, and realized how little empathy there was for the adult recipients; "I was really disappointed in that experience," Corinne says, because the social workers were burnt out and "had very little compassion or empathy for the people they were serving." Corinne says there was a little bit more empathy for the children, but virtually none for the adults. Corinne did not reflect any further, but this seemed to suggest that she might be more empathetic towards the adults because of her internship experiences. Melanie worked at an agency that deals with people dealing with mental health issues and reported that it taught her firsthand how devastating this can be for people in their everyday lives:

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interview transcripts, however, the students would reveal much more individualistically-oriented attitudes, examples of "real" culture.

What have I learned? Well, I guess for the mentally ill I have learned that for them it's really, really difficult for them economically. Not being able to work. I guess there's support out there for them, but there's just such long waiting lists that their lives just continue to go badly. I guess their economic status continues to diminish as they're on these waiting lists for housing, for benefits, for health. There's just such a struggle overall just to live in society. I certainly wasn't aware of the severity of all of it before I worked there. It has made me a lot more aware.

Melanie, like many students, revealed just how valuable the internship experiences are for giving the students tangible, firsthand evidence of what they learn in their studies.

Melanie told me that before she went to college to study social work she “absolutely did not think about this stuff [social problems such as poverty].” She said that before college she “just wouldn't think about poor people or anything like that,” that poverty was “just kinda something I didn't wanna think about. . . just not something I needed to worry about.” Her BSW program and internship experiences help change this for her. Later in our conversation Melanie and I talked about how BSW students might differ from the average Americans on attitudes towards poverty and inequality, and she again highlighted the impact of her studies:

I would say the majority of them [Americans] are probably as ignorant, as intentionally ignorant as I was before I studied social work. I think a lot of people just kind of put it out of sight, out of mind. Most people I know would say it's the individual's fault and they can totally get out of it themselves.

Noreen picked her internship because of convenience—she could walk to it from her house. Despite this, she reports that the experience changed her life:

I knew less than nothing about Alzheimer's, okay? To me, Alzheimer's, I just figured old people lose their memory, that's it, what are we talking about? But it was so much more than that at so many levels. I think probably one of the biggest things that hit me unexpectedly was it sort of brought to the fore my own sense of mortality. I mean, at my age, I suppose, you know? Gee, you know, some of these people weren't all that much older than me and some of them were even younger than me actually. It really put me in an environment among a population where my eyes were opened. What made it worse was that I would see qualities in people that would remind me of my parents. In fact there was a woman that was basically my mom. I mean it was my mom in every way. It was very emotional, just wicked emotional. I would cry, it was that intense. And it was profound. And I loved it. I also couldn't wait for it to be over. I blew through it, I was finished by Thanksgiving or something. It was very intense and it was wonderful. It was really a very profound experience, I would say in many ways even life changing, you know?

Peter rejected structural explanations of poverty as strongly as probably any student that I observed or spoke with. Despite this, even his almost entirely-individualistic worldview was shaken by his internship experience in a homeless-family shelter:

I deal a lot with minorities. I've come to the realization that due to the limitations of language, education, and then conflicts of the culture clash that a lot of things we take for granted. It's really hard for them. Like one of the families, it's a single mother and she's from a Middle-Eastern country and she can't speak English very well. For us, we take a lot of things for granted. Like we take working retail, it's not the lowest of the low, but it's pretty low. Anyone can do retail. And she's trying to get a job in retail but she can't because there's the culture thing and the language. And we're trying to find her the resources. Because the shelter, what it's meant to do is to find you permanent housing and make it so you can be stabilized to be independent. . . Trying to get them back on their feet, but they can't do this or that, or they have a Master's Degree from their country of origin, but they can't speak English so they can't apply it. Sometimes it's really frustrating. And we try to tell them, 'You've got to strive for the best.' But sometimes we end up having to find them a job doing deliveries, because the only thing they can do right now is drive. So I guess the harshness of reality, that's what I've realized. A lot of things, like, I can go to the mall, I can probably put in applications for any one of the stores and I can get it. But for someone who doesn't have the basic language comprehension, it's really hard.

Peter says he does not think the BSW program has changed or has the ability to change his individualistic-attitudes very much, but does appreciate having a better understanding of “the reason behind actions and events.” Ashley completed an internship at a homeless shelter and through this experience became much more knowledgeable about the complexities of homelessness beyond simple individual-centered explanations:

I think I realize now that I learned a lot while I was there [at the homeless shelter] and I have definitely become a lot more educated about homelessness. Now that I have seen that, I wish people would understand that the stigmas and the stereotypes aren't always correct. I definitely came into the situation feeling that homeless people were there through matters of their own doing, that they were drug addicts, that they didn't want to work, etc. . . I think there is of course a broad spectrum of attitudes and feelings that individuals who are homeless have and experience and show, but for the most part they don't spend their money on drugs and alcohol, at least the people who come to seek help before they can get into the homeless shelter. Of course there are the anomalies, but I definitely left feeling that there needs to be more affordable housing and there needs to be more education to the public as far as what homelessness is. It is not just some vagrant transient on the side of the road asking for money, it comes in a lot of shapes and sizes. I guess that is the point of the internship, to open your eyes. . . The homeless shelter internship changed my perspective, changed a lot of the attitudes and stereotypes I believed before working there. It changed a lot of my opinions.

Ashley's second internship was at a residential treatment facility for substance abuse.

She believes this experience helped her understand addiction as more than simply the result of personal choices:

I think my eyes have really been opened [by the internship] as to the complexity behind addiction. Nobody gets into drugs and alcohol and says, 'Oh I want to become an addict,' or, 'I want to go into the criminal justice system.' I think there is a lot to be said about the person and their environment, nothing happens in a vacuum. There are a lot of people who have broken homes or come from really distressing circumstances, and drugs and alcohol is introduced to them by their family when they are young, or they get into it by themselves when they are young or older and it becomes something that is unmanageable in their lives.

Despite opening up about how the program has expanded her worldview, Ashley still feels very strongly about her individualistic orientation. She laments that “the professors and students that I associate with are very liberal. I feel a lot of cognitive dissonance.” She says that, “I don't want to say we are brainwashed,” but that “liberal” and structurally-oriented viewpoints are being disproportionately represented in the curriculum, and this of course bothers her a great deal. Ashley described a class discussion on TANF as one particular example. She says, “To say that we need to spend more money and throw money at people irks me.” She believes part of the problem with poverty and welfare in the first place is giving “handouts” and “throwing money” at people instead of truly changing the people in question. She was particularly exasperated when a professor instructed one student to take welfare even if she did not want it; the student described being in a tough spot as a single mother but not wanting to turn to welfare, and the professor encouraged her to use programs that she was qualified for. On the surface, based on Ashley's description, it seemed as if the professor might be attempting to suggest that you should rise above your ego and get help that you need and deserve; if you qualify for aid you likely need it, even if your ego or inaccurate perception of your finances is an obstacle to receiving that aid. Ashley

hates welfare and has a particularly negative view of the poor, however, so she believed that this was terrible advice. She said:

If you simply qualify for it but don't need it, that really irks me. The professor started talking about the WIC program and a student asked her, 'Well I qualified for the program when I was pregnant with my third child but I decided I didn't want it anymore. I was working and I can contribute to society.' The professor said, 'Well you should take it. You qualified for it.' I did not say anything. It really bothered me.

Ashley also believes that, because she perceives the social work professors to be "liberal," they use liberally-biased research in their courses:

Recently I had an impromptu debate in my class about whether we should drug test welfare recipients. I feel strongly that the research is biased. . . the research is very liberally biased, slanted, whatever you want to say. It is biased to say that it hasn't worked. . . I do disagree with course materials a whole lot, stuff we read and study. . . There have definitely been times when I read textbooks or articles that are assigned to us and I think, what are they teaching us?

Despite incorporating many structural arguments into her existing pre-BSW politically-conservative and individualistically-oriented worldview, it was clear that Ashley was only willing to change so much. She still felt very strongly about the merits of individualism.

Jana came into the BSW program very structurally-oriented and believes that what she learns in the program is in line with her own beliefs. Students like Jana made me wonder if, because the program does not have a strong theoretical component, students interpreted the program as individualistically-oriented, structurally-oriented, politically-liberal, and/or politically-conservative based upon their own interpretive lens. I developed the impression from talking to these students that the lessons of the program were different for each student, dependent on which worldview they were being interpreted through. Jana says:

I think they [her fellow BSW students] would mostly agree [with her structural point of view] because that is what we are pretty much taught. . . In social work programs what we are learning is the whole systems perspective. . . We are not even allowed to say 'problem.' It is something that is happening in their lives right now. And I think if you are a caseworker and you are not trained in that perspective or have never heard of that perspective, you want to fix the person's problem but that doesn't really fix the person. It is a situational fix. . . So I think, to answer your question, it is the education [in the BSW program] that plays the biggest part.

Jana intimated that the program did indeed teach about poverty, but that the teachings were not grounded in theory and were confined to introductory courses:

I can't remember very well. I am trying to think back, I mean poverty is sometimes discussed as a separate issue from gender, race, disability, prison, and whatever. I think it is just a part of the whole spectrum.

Jenny discussed her time interning at a homeless shelter and how her experience challenged many American stereotypes about homelessness and poverty; this experience was punctuated by a story about a person at the shelter who had contracted AIDS through their nursing job and could not find work:

I really want to work with the homeless population. This population has always really interested me. I am interested in how much they are ignored by mainstream culture. Most people think that everyone who is homeless are lazy or crazy or something like that—I hear that a lot—when really some people just fell on hard times and need help getting back up. I hear my friends and people on television talk about how lazy they are, how they could get a job if they really wanted to if they weren't so lazy, and it just makes me feel like they should get more educated about it. I hear that a lot, maybe not among social work students, but among my peers that are not in social work. You don't know how they live until you see how they live and walk through their shoes. . . When I did my first internship I met a nurse who had contracted AIDS while working but he had not realized it. And he could not get another job because of his illness. So that was one of the main things that opened my eyes to how unfair it was. I mean I always felt that these people were being treated unfairly, but this experience just strengthened that. It made me realize what I was thinking was actually true.

I asked Jenny if her firsthand experience with the homeless population confirmed any of the structurally-oriented ideas she had about homelessness and/or poverty, and she replied, “Yes it does. . . Poor families, I would say most of them are working pretty hard to get out of homelessness in one way or another.”

Amanda noted that her internship helped her understand how the welfare system was unwelcoming to people:

One of the clients that I had at my internship, I remember taking her to the dentist. I remember there was such a small time frame that she was allowed to go with her kids and if she didn't make it. Then she was not allowed to go for an extended period of time after that. This was at some government building, I don't remember which one. I just remember it being so stressful and so difficult to make it to this appointment. If people had to deal with that for every type of situation, for like medication, food, and all of that stuff, I mean I just couldn't imagine how hard that would be. I have heard that same thing from other clients from that same internship, about how they get bounced around a lot. You know they call one person and they are told that that is not the person that they need to talk to so they call another person and they have to come in at a certain time. They just get hassled and have to deal with all of this stuff until they can actually get the service that they need.

Nancy talked about her studies and how they confirmed the ideas that she had going into the program, saying “going into college I thought a lot of the same things I do now.” She always wanted to work with children and “college has just strengthened that.” She was particularly influenced by the focus in the curriculum on the impact of the first five years of a person's life on their life chances, and this focus has only further inspired her to work with children. Nancy says that “the first five years of your life are really going to determine how the rest your life is going to work out,” and that if children are not raised in healthy environments they will “have developmental problems, social problems, emotional problems. It is just so important.” She also talked about her internship at an emergency shelter for large families, and how it has taught her about

some of the ineffectiveness of social welfare programs. At this particular shelter the families are given 30 days to find employment, housing, and start a savings account. Nancy believes that the families are required to save approximately 30% of the money that they earn. She reflected on these substantial goals considering the 30-day window:

I think the program is really difficult for people to meet, I think the expectations are a little high. I mean we get some families—for example this woman was traveling with her five children under the age of five with her boyfriend or husband... well he was the father of all five children and he abandoned her in a shopping center. We picked her up and she had literally nothing, she was totally abandoned. So the people at the program were like, 'Oh, okay you have to get a job, housing, and all of other stuff in 30 days.' It was just pretty much impossible. Starting from scratch and having enough money to support five kids? I mean housing costs would increase obviously because she needs more room. I think if we slow down a little bit it could be more effective.

This experience in her internship, along with her studies in the BSW program, have taught her a lot about the complexities and difficulties of poverty and welfare:

Taking all these classes and stuff and learning about all of these hoops that you have to jump through, all of these limitations on people, and the statistics about how very hard it is to change your socioeconomic status. Usually the social class you're born into is where you will stay. There are extreme cases of rags-to-riches but for the majority of people that seems to be how it ends up working out. So my own idealism and what I have learned in college have really shaped my ideas and my opinions.

Nancy gave a specific example of how her experiences in the BSW program have impacted her worldview when discussing drug tests:

Most people that I have interacted with in my short time at my internship, I don't think any of them are on drugs. To just test people for no reason without cause, no. Emphatically no. I think society has skewed views of people in need and in the welfare system, assuming most of them are using—you know, back to the whole 'poor morals' thing.

Marena believes that her BSW studies have challenged many of the individualistically-oriented beliefs that she brought with her into college. She went to high school in what

she calls one of (if not the) wealthiest areas in the U.S., and living there she was exposed to a significant number of classist and racist ideologies:

It was a lot of wealthy people and they would make a lot of racist jokes and stuff like that. I guess along the way I assumed things were about race and people got help because they were lazy and stuff like that.

She believes the BSW program has taught her about the complexities of poverty and welfare and gave her a much deeper understanding of welfare requirements:

I think people have that concept of the welfare mother that sits at home and doesn't do anything and just gets food stamps, stuff like that. I think that's what a lot of people think, that's definitely what I thought about before I started taking social work classes. You know, these people just get help for nothing and they just sit at home. You hear all these things and then you realize there's a lot of requirements to get things like that. It's not just these people are sitting at home doing nothing, they are really in need of programs. . . I took intro to social work and they started describing all of the requirements and stuff. It is amazing, you would never even know how many there are and it made me feel so ignorant about it because nobody knew, nobody even bothered to look into it, nobody knew the requirements. I feel like if you don't have that class to teach you otherwise you are never going to know. I mean, I don't know how it is in other majors. I think it would be really hard for people to unlearn their biases and they're thinking unless they experience a class like that. I mean you can go through your entire college career and not be exposed to that depending upon your major.

Marena's senior internship was at a multicultural human services agency:

They provide case management therapy to low-income immigrant populations and also survivors of trauma and torture. . . I work with undocumented and documented immigrants. . . It is very hard. Not many available resources, their way of thinking is different. . . The people that I dealt with are not educated. I am not saying it is a bad thing to be uneducated but their way of thinking is completely different than mine so sometimes I have conflicts on values, ethical dilemmas, all of that.

One of the major dilemmas she was talking about was a client with a husband and two children, all of which were undocumented. The client and her three other family members were living in a two-bedroom apartment with ten other people not related to

them. What bothered Isabel most about this situation was not the structural factors that might have helped create this situation, but her client's desire to have another child, saying, "I just couldn't believe it!" Rather than focus on the structural explanations, Marena instead talked about how this experience confirmed her belief that some people in poverty are victims of their own culture. Because the BSW program does not have a strong theoretical component, students like Marena are forced to interpret their experiences with the tools that they have: their own personal beliefs. Despite this, Marena does believe that her program has given her a better understanding of poverty:

A few years ago I would've said [lack of] motivation [was the cause of poverty]. I always thought that sometimes people are lazy, if you want to be poor it is because you want to be poor. Especially living in this country we have so many opportunities. That was me two years ago, three years ago, four years ago. So if you don't take advantage of the opportunities this country has to give to you then you are going to have a mediocre life. The opportunities are there, you need to take advantage of them. I reject that now [because of her studies]. Not everyone can take those opportunities. Not everyone can take advantage of these opportunities because everyone's life is different. Me as an immigrant I can relate to other immigrants but still my life is completely different from other people and other people's lives can be different from mine. I mean mine can be better. I have seen the different perspectives of people and the problems that they face through my experiences.

I asked Marena what has had the biggest impact on her changing worldview, and she revealed that she believes it was the internship experiences:

My internships have had a huge influence. My studies also, reading articles. Maybe not the first two years of school, but definitely the last two years. I think the firsthand experience has had the biggest influence, more than school. The internships. I think if I had just been reading articles or going to class it would not have made any impact. Actually seeing it up close firsthand was huge.

Laila also believed, despite many indications that she has internalized some deeply individualistic assumptions about poverty and inequality, that the program has led her to a better understanding of social problems like poverty:

Lack of education and lack of knowledge about these social structures is a huge disadvantage. I am pretty sure early in college, around that time, I believe I was introduced to that notion that it is not just the person, it's their environment as well. If you are not introduced to it, I can see how it might not be intuitive to think about it that way.

Tom espoused a similar viewpoint, saying that in the BSW program “you’re looking at larger systems, you’re looking at larger aspects of what is affecting this individual.” He said that BSW students are not just looking at individuals but “also trying to affect change on a larger scale.” This conflicted with many of the individualistic answers that Tom gave about social problems, but his identity was clearly rooted in this notion that people like him were interested in fixing “the system.” He explained:

So you may not directly impact person X or Y but if you can fix the system that's around person X and Y hopefully they will benefit from that. . . I want to help the individual because I want that person to do well and live a fulfilling life but I want to fix everything that is messed up [around them] so that you know the three people that are behind them also can benefit from that.

He believes that in the U.S. “the overwhelming view is that if you are poor you are lazy and you are not doing enough to fix your situation.” Through his studies he believes he has come to a better understanding of the “many other factors that go into it. . . It is not just that they are not trying, it could be that that is just the situation.”

Olivia’s family is deeply religious and politically conservative. She considers herself very religious but a slightly more moderate conservative than her family. She says she mostly votes for Republican candidates in elections and faces conflicts with her conservative upbringing and beliefs and the “liberal” field of social work, saying,

“Being a social worker I see some things from a liberal standpoint, but then there are some things I just can’t be okay with, conservatively. I definitely tend to be mostly republican.” It was interesting that she broke the issue down to a matter of political categories rather than theoretical or empirical schools of thought, a reflection on both her and the program. Despite her deeply held beliefs and representation of the academic world as a political dichotomy, she believes her experiences in the BSW program (particularly her internship) have given her a more nuanced understanding of many issues. Here she talks about her internship working with people dealing with mental health issues:

I never really realized how much they can put themselves down for the mental disability they have. I knew that they had the same dreams and aspirations as a lot of other people. My biggest lesson has been not to take the fact that I can wake up every morning, keep my room clean, keep myself groomed, without having to forcefully make myself do that and push away something else. I don't have to worry about having a cashier job and hearing voices while I am trying to work. I also didn't realize how aware they are and how even though they know they're making a certain decision they are aware of it and how much they put themselves down for it. Because of the internship I definitely feel like my worldview has changed. . . There is one client for instance who wants to have a music career, and I have never heard him but apparently he is very talented. He also struggles with a mental illness. He wants to get a job but the jobs that are available to him are like janitorial jobs. Why is that the only job that is available to those with a mental illness? But I feel like we are in this fast-paced world of ‘we want efficiency’ and we don't want to have to spend five minutes at a cashier because that person just does things a little bit slower than everybody else and has to focus is little more. And maybe they can't always have the perfect people skills. I definitely feel a sense of frustration for them that that is the jobs that are available to them.

Amanda believes that her colleagues are too focused on individual explanations of poverty instead of structural explanations, and says she believes that this individual-level focus dissipates somewhat as students spend more time in the program:

I think a lot of people in my program think people are in poverty because of choices that they have made, and they feel that that is a huge part of it, and I don't. I mean to an extent that is true, but not as much as other people believe. I am not really sure why I feel that way, it is more of a combination of discussions we have had and the attitudes of my colleagues that I have picked up in various classes. I feel like a lot of people are very focused on the individual and they don't necessarily take the perspective of considering the environment. That actually might be normal for first-year social work students. I just think they focus too much on what is going on with the individual rather than the circumstances surrounding them, the environment around them.

I explored this notion with her that the program changed people's minds about more individual-centered explanations to more structural explanations, asking her if the program did in fact have this effect:

Yes. I feel like it is a very different attitude in the program. I took psychology too. Within the social science department the perspectives of the social work department are not similar to anything else. It takes time to adjust to that. People have the intention that they want to help people and they know this is the route to get there, but still people have their biases. In society we tend to blame the individual for everything that happens to them. In our program we learn to think otherwise. You have to learn that everything affects everything, it's not just the individual person who makes the world. I mean they don't create their world.

## CHAPTER 5

### “YOU GET OUT OF LIFE WHAT YOU GIVE”: BAD CHOICES AND DEVIANT VALUES

In chapter four I discussed the paths that the BSW students took to the study of social work and how these journeys may have impacted their worldviews<sup>17</sup>. In this chapter, I will discuss the specific explanations that the study participants gave for the existence of poverty and inequality in the U.S. I analyzed all of the arguments that students made during our interviews and categorized them as belonging to the individualism perspective, Culture of Poverty perspective, and/or social structuralism perspective. To determine the overall orientation of their worldview, I located individual answers where they were specifically explaining the root causes of poverty and inequality and identified which perspective (if any) was dominant. Of the worldviews that had a clearly dominant perspective, individualism was by far the most-common perspective and Culture of Poverty was the second most-common perspective; there was only one student who espoused a perspective that was clearly structurally-oriented. Of the minority of students who espoused a worldview without a dominant perspective, all contained significant individualistic elements.

I asked students a variety of questions related to poverty and inequality in the U.S. For one question, I described three broad explanations of poverty: individualism, Culture of Poverty, and social structuralism; I then had them rank the perspectives in

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<sup>17</sup> It should be noted I have used the same quotations in multiple chapters, and sometimes multiple times within a chapter. When I analyzed the ethnographic record, many lines of data produced multiple codes. For instance, if a participant told me that their politically-conservative and strongly-religious upbringing helped them understand the importance of self-reliance, more than one code was appropriate: the impact of personal experience on their worldview and the ideological concept of self-reliance. I then might use the same quotation in multiple chapters dealing with those issues separately. Sometimes data produced two codes used in the same chapter; for instance, if a participant supported drug tests because they believe people should make responsible choices, I might use this in the drug-testing subsection as well as the subsection discussing students' perception that individuals are ultimately free from social forces. While duplication of quotes makes for lengthy chapters and some redundancy, I believe it is absolutely crucial for the overall analysis.

order from one (most agree with) to three (least agree with). In another question, I asked them why poverty exists in the U.S. In another question I asked them to tell me what they believed (if anything) could be done to either eradicate or substantially reduce poverty in the U.S. (either by government or non-governmental means). I then asked them whether they agree philosophically with the idea of welfare assistance, and whether they would personally turn to welfare assistance in a time of considerable personal and/or family need. I also asked them whether they would support three different welfare policies (work requirements, fertility policies, and drug tests) and to explain their reasoning. I finished by asking them whether or not the U.S. is a meritocracy. All of these questions were designed in varying degrees to deeply explore their “ideal” cultural answers to these questions (answers that relate to their identity and/or the image that they wish to project and that they would ideally like to believe they adhere to) versus their “real” cultural answers to these questions (answers that reveal the perspectives that they truly utilize in everyday life to interpret the social world). For most students there were significant differences between their ideal and real perspectives, and many students utilized multiple perspectives at different points in the interview depending upon the question (many of the students had “messy” and contradictory worldviews).

The question asking them to rank poverty perspectives in terms of their personal agreement was designed specifically to gauge their ideal cultural answers (please see Table 5-1 on the next page, page 268). Going into this project I expected the students to answer this question based upon what they believe to be the best parts of their individual identities; for many students this meant being structurally-oriented, political-

liberal/progressive, more compassionate towards and more knowledgeable about marginalized populations than the general public, etc. Not only did I expect students to answer this question based on how it reflected on these firmly-held and cherished components of their identity, but also based upon the image that they would like to project to me and the world about who they were as people and as social workers. It was no surprise that (a) most students claimed to believe in social structuralism the most, (b) most students claimed to reject individualism as the least agreeable option, and (c) that their answers to the other poverty-related questions would contradict these answers and reveal conflicting/multiple perspectives on economic issues such as poverty and inequality. In this chapter I will explore the variety of perspectives utilized by the study participants as well as their “messy” worldviews.

Table 5-1. Responses to the Interview Question Asking Students to Rank Three Major Poverty Perspectives in Terms of Highest- and Lowest-Level of Agreement.

	Most Agree		Least Agree
Social Structuralism	15/25 (60%)	5/25 (20%)	5/25 (20%)
Culture of Poverty	7/25 (28%)	12/25 (48%)	6/25 (24%)
Individualism	3/25 (12%)	8/25 (32%)	14/25 (56%)

Despite the wide-spread use of structurally-oriented perspectives by many students in at least some of their answers, and the clear preference for that perspective when asked to rank the three perspectives, the overall pattern when analyzing the entire ethnographic record for each student tended to reflect more individualistically-oriented perspectives. Most of the worldviews I analyzed had a clearly-dominant perspective, with individualism being the most popular. Culture of Poverty was the second most-

popular perspective, with social structuralism as a distant third (in fact students with “messy” worldviews utilizing multiple perspectives were more numerous than structurally-oriented perspectives). Of the minority of worldviews that were not individualistically-oriented, individualism was a major component in a majority of those worldviews. It was clear that these students were grappling with a whole host of issues when giving their answers, from their experiential knowledge from their own lives to American cultural beliefs to what was being imparted to them in their undergraduate social work program.

In the first subsection I will give examples of the overwhelming number of worldviews dominated by the individualism and Culture of Poverty perspectives. In the second subsection I will discuss the minority but significant number of worldviews that were “messy,” meaning they (a) utilized multiple perspectives, (b) had no clear overarching guiding perspective, and (c) still contained substantial individualistic and in many cases Culture of Poverty assumptions. In the third and final subsection I will discuss the one (out of 25) student who clearly espoused a structurally-oriented perspective.

### **The Role Of Bad Choices And Deviant Values**

Ashley Cohen was one of the most fiercely-individualistic students that I spoke with. Her worldview is almost entirely dependent on the individualism perspective, with some hints of Culture of Poverty and social structuralism arguments in some limited cases. Her privileged class position seems to have a strong influence on her justifications for her family’s success and her criticism of those who do not succeed financially. She strongly believes that because her family was upwardly mobile from poverty to the upper-class that everyone else can make that climb if they choose:

[The U.S.] is absolutely a meritocracy. I see my father and his life as a perfect example. I think all of my family gets very frustrated when people say that you can never rise out of poverty. Seeing my dad really work from the bottom up I know it is possible. We went from poverty to the upper-class in one generation. I think there is a lot to be said about working hard and being able to achieve success.

Ashley believes that no person has a right to complain about his or her social position since it can be changed by the choices that the individual makes. I asked Ashley to rank poverty causes, and she said individualism was emphatically her first choice and the perspective she almost entirely agrees with, then chose Culture of Poverty as her second choice. She believes social work students and professors are “too liberal” and stopped just short of saying that the program was trying to “brainwash” her with their overly-liberal and overly-structural lessons, saying, “I do disagree with course materials a whole lot, stuff we read and study. . . there have definitely been times when I read textbooks or articles that are assigned to us and I think, what are they teaching us?” Ashley made a lengthy argument that her professors were intentionally choosing articles that were based on bad science and liberally-biased. Discussing articles that they read concerning the efficacy of welfare drug-testing, she said, “The research is very liberally biased, slanted, whatever you want to say.” Having so many lessons and course materials that are not sufficiently focused on her individualistic-beliefs causes her to “feel a lot of cognitive dissonance.” When we moved on to talk about whether she would ever turn to welfare if she needed it she was quite hesitant (understandably given her beliefs), saying, “I would feel very much like I was a burden to society.” If she absolutely had to use welfare she argued that:

I think the key difference [between her and other welfare recipients] is I would not depend upon it in a long-term situation. I would say, 'This is just going to be a few months, maybe even a year.' My goal in the beginning of receiving welfare would be to get off of it, not depend on it forever.

Ashley believes that there are limitless opportunities and all people can succeed if they so decide, so short-term welfare-use is fundamentally important to her beliefs concerning welfare. Her strong belief in individualism leads her to be “scared” about the role of the government in helping to address social problems:

There are a lot of opportunities for people to depend upon the government right now, I think it is so freaking scary. I saw this in my internship—I think it is very scary to have someone not willing to work because of unemployment. If unemployment is offered to you for 18 months and it is greater than the amount you can get at a part-time job or a full-time job, why not take the unemployment? And it will last you longer and offer more security in that way. But of course it doesn't take you above the poverty line. I mean it will help you be somewhat self-sufficient but not adequately enough. I think long-term I think there's always going to be poverty, there's never going to be enough for everybody.

I was amazed by Ashley's answer because despite her individualism, her answer had the seeds of a structurally-oriented point of view if you analyze it more deeply. She says that people will take government benefits such as unemployment if it is greater in cash value and provides more security than what the low-wage labor market can provide. She then argues that government benefits will not raise an individual above the poverty line. She goes one step further and argues that, presumably due to structural limitations, there is “never going to be enough for everybody” (contradicting her belief in limitless opportunities). In this answer, she implicitly makes the argument that (a) some people will be forced to take low-wage jobs and (b) that the low-wage labor market provides insufficient income, benefits, and security. This is a very structurally-oriented answer if she were inclined to interpret it that way. One might construe her argument in

favor of accepting welfare assistance, given the abysmal state of the low-wage labor market. Instead, she is okay with this situation, the competition that it ensures for limited resources, and the consequences that it has for those whose lose in that competition. When discussing how to address poverty, Ashley focused mostly on homelessness, equating poverty with homelessness (and presumably casting doubt about the accuracy of federal poverty thresholds). She implicitly argued that education will prevent children from developing individual-level problems later in life:

I would make sure that no matter where children lived they would have equal opportunities to education. So in the inner city it is not going to be, 'Well the rich kids get to go to the charter schools and the private schools.' Education would be an equal playing field for all. As much as people want to end homelessness I don't know that there is an opportunity to really do that in a short amount of time without a lot of money. But looking at preventing homelessness within the next decade or century or whatever. I think with education you can prevent a lot of problems that come down the line with people as they become adults.

Her answer assumes equality of opportunity is more desirable than equality of outcome, and that competition over scarce resources is a desirable social situation (she later argues that there will never be enough resources for everybody in society). She also espouses an empirically unsupported belief that (a) charter and private schools offer better educations and fight poverty and inequality more effectively, and (b) that within-school factors are responsible for the majority of educational inequality. Despite discussing at length how her internship helped her to understand the complexities of addiction, she framed drug-use as a personal choice in her support of welfare drug-testing. In drug testing welfare recipients she argues, "We could bring this to their eyes and help them realize that they can't receive things because they are dealing with something that is feeding into their poverty." She strongly disagrees with people who

criticize drug tests as a moral condemnation of the poor, saying, “I don’t think we can play the victim card. . . I don’t think they can say that we are being blamed, you know, playing the victim.” Her discussion of the “victim” card made no mention of the justification for singling out the poor for regulations on morality. In agreeing with work requirements she believes that everybody can work despite their situation, and a job is waiting for them, saying, “I feel that working is something that, no matter what your situation, it should happen. Especially if it is full-time work.” She believes poor mothers with young children should work, arguing, “Sacrifices have to come instead of just handing things to people and saying, ‘Okay we’ll pay you to stay at home with your kids.’” For Ashley, government welfare aid is a way of paying people for undeserving behavior rather than a correction of possible structural imbalances. Her politically-conservative and strong religious views shape her beliefs:

My religious views of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, they go hand-in-hand. We believe very strongly that you should be self-sufficient, that you need to depend upon yourself and don’t go looking for somebody else to bail you out.

This idea of self-sufficiency is deeply individualistic, assuming that (a) successful individuals achieve completely on their own, and that (b) unsuccessful individuals have themselves to blame for their social position and must look to others to bail them out. Later in the interview she argues that society is structured in such a manner where there is always a lack of resources for all who need them, despite her belief that everyone can be self-sufficient if they so choose.

Despite her strong individualistically-oriented beliefs, she did reveal some acknowledgement of structural influences. Her internship in a homeless shelter helped her realize “that the stigmas and the stereotypes [about homeless individuals] aren’t

always correct.” She said, “The homeless shelter internship changed my perspective, changed a lot of the attitudes and stereotypes I believed before working there. It changed a lot of my opinions.” The internship did not, however, seem to change her mind completely about the homeless, and did little to impact her views towards the housed poor. The two biggest myths about homeless individuals that were debunked by her experience, Ashley explained, were the assumptions of rampant alcohol- and drug-use. She also believes her internship helped her understand how an individual can become homeless through causes beyond their own personal choices. She argued that her internship opened her eyes to the need for more affordable housing to combat homelessness in the U.S. Another internship experience at a residential treatment facility for substance abuse had a major impact on her:

I think my eyes have really been opened as to the complexity behind addiction. Nobody gets into drugs and alcohol and says, ‘Oh I want to become an addict,’ or, ‘I want to go into the criminal justice system.’ I think there is a lot to be said about the person and their environment, nothing happens in a vacuum.

Beyond the homeless and people with conditions that could be medically explained, Ashley had little acknowledgement of structural factors that might play a role in the poverty of the rest of the poor in the U.S.

Jennifer Reynolds utilized individualism and Culture of Poverty perspectives when analyzing poverty and inequality. Jennifer believes individuals are responsible for their own success or failure because of presumably endless opportunities in the U.S.:

They all kind of make sense for the most part [individualism, Culture of Poverty, and social structuralism]. I would say individualism is what I most agree with, although I believe in the Culture of Poverty one also. There are so many opportunities, its America, I mean come on.

Jennifer also believes in many Culture of Poverty arguments, explaining to me that she believes a major problem for poor people is that they are not knowledgeable enough to rise out of poverty:

I think poor people aren't knowledgeable enough about, well about really anything. Like people are stupid in the fact that they do drugs and drink alcohol. People are stupid and don't know how to find jobs if they need to. They don't know how to control their money spending. It is lack of knowledge, just basically stupidity actually. It can be their fault and it can also be that they haven't been taught very well, so it can go either way. There are poor and homeless people who are poor and homeless because they choose to be so as well, and that is also stupidity in my opinion. I saw it all the time at the homeless internship I did. A lot of those people, they were all homeless and whatever, they had families, and didn't have money and couldn't afford their own homes. So they would get on this list to get a home and so now they have this home because it was their time. But instead of trying to make their lives better, like trying to go to school or trying to get a job or saving their money and only buying necessities, they just didn't care. They thought, 'Well, okay now I have this home, the government is helping us, they're giving us money, they're giving us all of these free things, and so I don't have to worry about that anymore. So I am just going to rely on them instead of trying to get on my own feet.' We were trying to get them on their feet and have them do the work to stay there, but they got really comfortable. It was really, really frustrating. No matter how many times a case manager would talk to them and say, 'Hey, you need to do this or that,' they just didn't.

In Jennifer's opinion, poor people are not knowledgeable about "really anything," and therefore cannot help themselves. She also frames alcohol and drug use as (a) disproportionately a problem for poor people, and (b) a solely individual-level behavior. She believes that poor people do not spend their money wisely and are not smart enough to be able to find (presumably plentiful) jobs. She was also significantly focused on people "getting on their own feet," an answer that includes the notion that individuals are solely responsible for their plight and excludes the possibility that there are structural factors at work.

When I asked Jennifer if she would ever turn to welfare assistance in a time of considerable need, she eventually said that she would; she was very hesitant, however, because she believes that turning to welfare means, “Admitting things like that, you know, I am wrong.” For Jennifer, welfare is a sign of personal failing and that a person has done something wrong. She went on to say that, “For me, it takes some time to admit that I am wrong, and that I need help, it is my ego. . . I wouldn’t want to admit that I failed in some way.” She reassured me that she would not be like other welfare recipients and would “try anything that I could think of to get out of it. I would figure it out and make it better.” She said that if people found out about her welfare use she would be embarrassed and that, “It would be worse if it happened like in my hometown where everybody knew me than somewhere else.” We moved on to talk about welfare work requirements, and Jennifer’s answer in support seemed to signal that she viewed welfare as a transfer of money from those who earned it to those who had not, rather than a method of addressing structural imbalances. Of work requirements, she says, “I think that people should be working in order to get welfare. It shouldn’t just be free, like just anyone can be like, ‘Oh, I’m not working I’m not even looking for a job but I need money.’” Her answer excludes the possibility of structural limitations to the availability of well-paying jobs or any possible justification for becoming a discouraged worker. She supported fertility-limiting policies for the poor as well, again excluding the possibility that the social structure plays a role in fertility decisions or creating a class of people forbidden to procreate. Of family caps, she says, “People shouldn’t be having kids that they can’t afford. If these people are already in poverty then having another kid would just put them in a worse situation.” She is also highly critical of what she believes is a

prevalent practice in poor communities of having children to receive more welfare benefits, saying, “People shouldn’t have babies just to get more money, I have heard of that before, I have seen it in different areas. . . Having babies to get more money just isn’t fair. I think those policies would discourage that.” Jennifer emphatically supported welfare drug tests, injecting a strong “Yes, most definitely” before I could even finish the question. She says that if she were in charge welfare recipients would be tested for all drugs to keep people from (a) spending government money unwisely and (b) engaging in what she believes is morally unacceptable behavior. She says, “If you need food, I will be happy to get you food. I am completely against drugs, so morally I think it is wrong. . . I am very big on rules and stuff like that.”

Sarah Kim utilized both individualism and social structuralism perspectives in her answers, but her beliefs about the root causes of poverty and inequality are clearly individualistically-oriented. Sarah believes the root causes of poverty are low wages and people’s inability to help themselves. She believes strongly in the individualism perspective and the idea that the U.S. is a meritocracy. When discussing fertility policies, she spoke exclusively about individual decisions rather than any structural conditions that might (a) limit opportunity and therefore bar certain people from ever having children if it is simply an economic decision, and (b) how social conditions might influence the “decision” of childbirth. She framed drug-use in the same manner, as a personal choice disconnected from the social structure whose causes and consequences were based on the individual. Sarah supported drug tests for poverty-targeted welfare but not for other forms of welfare. She speculates that poverty and the inability to help oneself might be genetically determined. She explains:

Wages [are] too low versus their cost of living. Yeah, that's the main issue. Also, I think some people just don't know—have not had an opportunity to learn to help themselves. They don't have the education, like probably family background. That's probably second biggest issue. It could be their genetically they're not—can I say they're not smart enough to make the right choice. Probably if they genetically they exposed in that way, probably they don't know—probably they can't help themselves. They don't know any other avenues to influence themselves to get better. Other reason is that they just not motivated, as a family, no matter how hard they work, and if they're underpaid. It's like, 'Oh, my life will be this way. So what is the point of getting education?'

She believes the answer to addressing poverty is enhanced education funding to help people help themselves. She says that, "Not everybody wants to come get help themselves. To help them—to create programs to motivate self-determination." Sarah believes that no matter what conditions a person is born into or what obstacles they face, everyone has the opportunity to build a basic quality of life for themselves. She also believes that the U.S. federal poverty thresholds are too high. She believes that to be poor means that you have absolutely nothing, and that many people who are counted as poor in the U.S. are not actually poor:

Just because to me, I believe that poverty's a very strong word. Poverty says you have nothing there. You might not be rich, or middle-class, but if you work hard, and if you make the right choices, you can actually—no matter how society throws at you, you can actually live minimum.

Despite citing wages as a strong determinant of poverty, Sarah criticizes her colleagues for focusing too heavily on structural causes of poverty. I asked her whether her classmates would agree with her views on poverty, and she responded:

No, not on economic or poverty issues. I've seen classmates talk strongly about structuralism, how society put different people in one area, how society distributes wages and stuff like that. So I've heard of those opinions, don't agree.

Sarah was not alone in holding conflicting ideologies. Many of the students I spoke with utilized different perspectives at different points in our interview. Sarah switched back and forth between structurally-oriented and individually-oriented perspectives (and even highlighted some Culture of Poverty arguments) even when discussing the same topic. For instance, she believes anybody who truly wants to escape poverty can do so by individual effort. Then when discussing another topic, welfare work requirements, she cites structural limitations on the number of well-paying jobs available to people:

I don't know about you have to work full-time. Because you might not find a job that you can work full-time. It's not fair that you have to work full-time. That's not really. . . and I would make an exception for mothers unless there is childcare. If there's no childcare support systems, then they can't really work anyways.

Despite utilizing structurally-oriented perspectives selectively at points in our conversation, it was clear from her answers that she believes pretty strongly in individualism; this is due to her belief that everyone can earn a decent living despite their circumstances. They may not be rich, but that does not mean that they have to be poor.

When I asked Terra Whitley to rank three examples of poverty perspectives, she said she agreed with structurally-oriented poverty explanations more than Culture of Poverty or individualism. When I analyzed her answers in their entirety, however, she seemed to prefer explanations based in individualism and Culture of Poverty. Like so many students that I spoke with, (a) claiming a structural-orientation seemed to be an important part of the identity that she wanted to project, and (b) her claims about her worldview did not always match up with the perspectives she actually utilized when analyzing social problems. Like many students she went back-and-forth between

perspectives. Here she projects the structurally-oriented identity that is so important to many social work students:

I think when I was younger I used to really think it [the cause of poverty] was individualism. You know, you get what you give—like if you have the biggest work ethic you succeed. But it was not as realistic. More like you can be anything you want mentality. It's not exactly realistic. I guess getting—going to college and actually seeing how hard it is in science and things like that, like growing up and—if I was younger, I probably would have chosen individualism when you asked me.

When we discussed poverty in more depth, however, she signaled that subcultural- and individual-level explanations were an important part of her worldview. This is likely influenced at least in part by her privileged upbringing, an influence she hinted at when we discussed if she would be embarrassed using welfare; of this embarrassment, she said:

I would—I'm not going to lie. I'd be embarrassed because I guess it's—we're [her and her family] a little bit snobby. . . . I think I'd be very embarrassed, but what else can you do? I never grew up with having to do that, so it would be embarrassing.

Here she explains why poverty exists in the U.S.:

I would say immigrants, they come here and they don't have much of anything and they want to have a better future. Also substance abuse—you can have a lot of money and then lose everything, you'll be homeless. I think a lot of the reason why we have homelessness is a lot of substance abuse. Also mental illness, untreated mental illnesses. The main cause? I guess mental illness and substance abuse, I would lump them together. People face some sort of crisis and then lose everything.

Rather than immigrants interacting with a social structure that influences their unequal social standing, Terra instead cites their individual characteristics as the cause. She equates poverty with homelessness and cites another individual-level factor, mental illness, as another primary cause of poverty. Terra believes the poverty is less of a structural problem in the contemporary U.S. than in previous eras because of the types

of social welfare programs available to people today. Because of this, she believes poverty in the modern U.S. is mostly the fault of individuals. She explains her reasoning:

I think it's better now though [being able to avoid poverty], because with financial aid, if you want to go to college you can. So it's more like, 'Are you lazy and you just don't want to?' With financial aid, if you want to go to school, you can. You can get grants, so there's no excuse. So it's more like, 'Do you want to go to college or not?' I don't think there's any excuse—if you want to go, you can go now.

Terra, in a previous answer, had actually chided her fellow colleagues for being too individualistically-oriented. Her answer excluded any notion that the availability of college does not ensure the college-level academic ability of people. Terra believes the best way to address poverty is through encouraging people to work through the welfare system. When I asked her how to address poverty, she replied, "I think welfare with a really good employment incentive. . . there needs to be some incentive to work." Terra agreed with welfare work requirements, welfare drug-testing, and welfare fertility policies limiting the fertility of poor women. Terra believes the field of social work is based on an individualistically-oriented philosophical foundation. She discussed self-determination and explains that people get out of life what they give, and this is the philosophy behind social work:

I think more [social workers] would lean toward individualism [as an explanation for poverty] because I think that from a social work perspective, you'd—if you're from a social work perspective, you'd probably pick individualism. Just because we practice self-determination meaning you get out of life what you give. So, and it's more optimistic. I think individualism is more optimistic. . . we learn a lot about self-determination, like I said. And we are taught to think more like—not to—we think people first, we don't think poverty. . . So sort of helping individuals fix their problems, do for themselves.

When we discussed drug testing for welfare recipients, Terra responded that she supported drug tests. She believes that without them the government is only enabling

drug-prone individuals, and allowing poor people to spend money on drugs rather than food for their families. She believes that a positive drug test for an adult recipient should come with the penalty of removal of any children present in the home, saying, “If they’re testing positive for anything above marijuana then they should—the children should be removed, and then if they can’t apply again for about six months or a year.” She said that the children could be placed with family or into the foster care system. She believes poverty and drug-use go hand-in-hand, and it is the government’s job to break the “vicious cycle” of poverty, drug use, and children acquiring the bad habits of their parents. She said, “So if you can break that cycle and intervene, then perhaps they won’t be on welfare.” For Terra, one of the first things that came to her mind when we discussed poverty was drug-use. Drug-use, like many other (perceived) individual-level behaviors, causes poverty much more than any structural factors.

Corinne Ramsey’s answers were mostly dominated by Culture of Poverty assumptions, but also had a strong individualism component. At times she mentioned structural concerns, but this did not seem to be a major component of her worldview. Like many students, being politically-liberal is an important part of the identity that she projects, saying, “The social issues are why I’m a Democrat. I grew up Democrat. My Dad was in a union and we used to go to Democratic parties all the time and everything. So that’s in my head early.” She feels some conflict due to her strong religious views, but identifies this as an important part of her identity and worldview. Corinne sees social work as a profession where social workers work together with poor people “formulating a plan with them to help them better themselves.” On which poverty perspective she believes is the best explanation of the root causes of poverty, she explains:

I would definitely say Culture of Poverty for sure, that is a clear-cut number one. It's hard because yes, your choices determine who you are as a person, but if you don't have the basis to make good choices, so I would say the least—that's really hard, because I think they all totally tie together, but Culture of Poverty for sure number one.

This answer revealed both Culture of Poverty (being in an environment that inculcates good decision-making in individuals) and individualism ("choices determine who you are as a person") perspectives. Corinne was one of the few students where, after I analyzed all of her responses to poverty-related questions, her poverty ranking matched with her substantive responses about poverty. Most students were largely unaware of the perspectives that they actually used ("real" culture) and how they contradicted with the perspectives that they identified with ("ideal" culture); most students were also largely unaware of how many conflicting views they held about economic issues such as poverty and inequality. Discussing her Culture of Poverty beliefs, she explained how the children of the poor "don't know any different" due to being stuck in a poverty subculture:

It's like a catch-22. Basically, like at least with my experience with the homeless population, like, the father is homeless, has very little education and is homeless, and therefore his children have become homeless, and they have children. So they are sort of just stuck in this cycle. They don't know any different. A lot of it is they just don't know.

She says she supports welfare work requirements, saying, "I think that you need to be contributing to society's success and to your own success. . . and you need to be always trying to better yourself. So, I mean, yes, I agree." She supports welfare drug tests because she equates poverty mostly with homelessness and believes the homeless are largely mentally-ill individuals who "self-medicate." She supports policies aimed at restricting the fertility of poor women as long as they know in advance before

they receive benefits; she believes this because poor families should not be “growing,” excluding (a) the possibility that fertility is influenced by social conditions and not simply a matter of choice, (b) the possibility that poverty is a structural problem, and (c) that her policy would prohibit women from having children unless they escape poverty. She says this about welfare recipients and fertility:

I have a problem with the whole, ‘The more children, the more money you get’ thing. I think at some point, I mean, you can’t just keep having kids to get more money. You have to be responsible.

She believes it is the job of social workers to work with poor families stuck in a “cycle” of poverty to “help them better their lives” and individually pull themselves out of poverty. I asked her how poor families can be helped to escape poverty, and she again cited this need to change the culture of poverty that keeps them in poverty:

I think educating the family, because I think you can do all you want to with children, but if they go home every night and are in this situation, they’re going—I mean, that’s—most of the time, that’s where we’re going to—that’s where we’re pulled. I mean, there are exceptions, of course, and that’s great when there are, but if you’re not working with the parents, just like the foster care thing, if you’re not mentoring them and helping them to realize that there is more out there for them, and they don’t have to live like this. Poverty doesn’t have to be the way that they live their lives. I think that would be where we would need to start. . . education is a way out.

At one point in our conversation Corinne and I were talking about her experiences interning in a social service agency. She described being “disgusted” by the demeaning way that “burnt out” social workers talked about and viewed their clients. I listened closely to which perspective she would utilize in response to this event, and found it interesting that she utilized a non-structural perspective, saying, “They [the burnt-out social workers] would talk about just their living conditions, and how it’s so disgusting. But not just like, how can we fix this, or what can we do to help them [be] better?” In

response to the perceived flawed framework for understanding these peoples' problems that she identified in the social workers at the agency, Corinne still chose to utilize a perspective that was non-structural; for Corinne, it was still the responsibility of the individual people to better themselves (whether through making better choices or rejecting the subcultural values of poverty, this was not clear from this answer). The only thing that seemed to differentiate Corinne from her colleagues at the internship was not the perspective that she utilized, but that she perceived herself to have a more compassionate individualistic and/or Culture of Poverty perspective.

Later in our conversation she cited more structurally-oriented beliefs, lamenting what she perceives to be insufficient school funding. She explains that, "Schools and teachers are being cut all the time, and we pay our athletes and movie stars millions of dollars, and that really bothers me." She believes that the work that is being done in schools by teachers is much more valuable than that of wealthy athletes, and their salaries should reflect this importance. She made it clear to me that these structurally-oriented concerns were secondary to her strong Culture of Poverty beliefs. It is possible to imagine her identification of improving schools as either a structurally-oriented response or as a means of combating the subculture of poverty, but she did not explicitly make this clear.

Melanie Caldwell believes that she holds structurally-oriented beliefs, largely because she cites the educational system as a major cause of poverty in the U.S. At first glance one might agree with her conclusions and see at least surface-level logical consistency. When I explored Melanie's beliefs further, however, it was clear that (unbeknownst to her) Melanie's worldview was dominated by Culture of Poverty and

individualistic assumptions; she cited the educational system, for instance, as a means of “fixing” flawed subcultures. Melanie’s Culture of Poverty beliefs center around what she perceives to be a lack of knowledge among the poor population and society’s responsibility to educate individuals as a means to help them escape poverty:

There’s so many things. I wanna say education is a part of it, and it’s education of those who can help and education of those who need help. So I think a lot of it is education. If those who need help really understood fully what they were capable of, what kind of opportunities there were out there for improving their lives, then I think they would do better. . . So I think the people who are in charge of the resources have to educate those people.

Melanie’s answer is highly based in Culture of Poverty arguments due to her belief that poor people need to be educated about how to succeed. Her answer is also individualistic in nature, because it assumes that plenty of opportunities exist and are accessible to poor people if they only learn how to grasp them. Melanie believes that in an ideal world the government has little-to-no role in the social welfare system, saying, “I have this really high belief that in order for a community to be at its best, the people have to be the ones to make it run, not the government, not the organizations, it’s gotta be the individuals.” She signaled an inner belief that there is something wrong with welfare use when discussing her own welfare use as a young parent, saying, “I think I was too young to really understand that maybe that it wasn’t normal. It was normal to me.” She suggests that while welfare seemed “normal” to her, she should have realized that there was something wrong with turning to it for support. After informing me that she had personally used welfare she quickly assured me that she was not like other welfare recipients who abused the system and used welfare assistance on non-essentials, saying, “I needed to get them [her children] in diapers, so, that’s really all I

used it for was diapers and formula, so it wasn't like I was using it for stuff for myself." She also criticized her experience in the welfare system, saying, "There was no like trying to get me off the programs," hinting at the individualistically-oriented belief that welfare breeds dependency in an otherwise opportunity-filled world. When I asked her if she agreed philosophically with the U.S. welfare system and if she would turn to it again, she again highlighted her belief that opportunities exist for most people and we should be vigilant about welfare dependency. She said, "I would use it if I had to for a short period of time, yes. I believe that it is there to help people get off of their feet so that they can support themselves on their own either again or for the first time." She then referred back to her own welfare use, talking about the guilt associated with it and her belief that (a) healthy people are inherently undeserving in a world of ample opportunities and (b) failure to earn a middle-class income was a personal failure:

I didn't feel comfortable being on it long-term when I was married to a healthy person and I was a healthy person, and I could eventually support myself. I wasn't on it long. I just wouldn't have felt comfortable being on it any longer than I had to—I think I would feel guilt. . . . For me, if I had to be on it long, I'd say it would probably be a pride thing. Just like feeling guilty that I couldn't provide for my kids, or like that I had been able to—like if I could do it once, then I could do it again.

When we discussed welfare drug testing, Melanie responded that she felt very comfortable with the idea because government money should not be spent on non-necessities. I asked her to use that same logic on government money that goes to individuals in the middle- and upper-classes, but she did not support drug testing for them; like the other students who made the same class-based distinction between people receiving government money, she seemed to signal that there was something inherently suspicious about poor people.

Melanie's answers on poverty-related questions signaled a belief in Culture of Poverty and individualistic explanations. This did not stop her from acknowledge the influence of the social structure in some of her answers. For instance, here she talks about what she learned from her internship:

What have I learned? Well, I guess for the mentally ill I have learned that for them it's really, really difficult for them economically. Not being able to work. I guess there's support out there for them, but there's just such long waiting lists that their lives just continue to go badly. I guess their economic status continues to diminish as they're on these waiting lists for housing, for benefits, for health. There's just such a struggle overall just to live in society. I certainly wasn't aware of the severity of all of it before I worked there. It has made me a lot more aware.

Despite being concerned about welfare dependency and arguing that ample opportunities exist for people in many of her answers, Melanie utilized a structural perspective when talking about her non-support for welfare work requirements (one of the few students not to support these requirements):

I'm gonna say no I don't support it. Because not everyone can work, not everyone can work for full-time because of either disability or having children. I was never a stay at home mom, but there's people who really value staying with their children for a certain amount of time. But no, I think there's a lot of people who just absolutely can't work because of either physical disability, mental disability, children, transportation issues, it's just not black and white.

Peter LeBlanc was strongly individualistically-oriented, but also utilized Culture of Poverty and structurally-oriented perspectives at different points in our conversations. Peter said, "My personal belief is that whatever you get [in life] is what you put into it." Peter focused a lot on choosing social work as a means of "fixing" individual deficiencies. He believes strongly that the U.S. is a land of limitless opportunities, and that structural factors did little to either (a) limit these opportunities or (b) determine who

might receive these opportunities. When discussing work requirements for welfare, Peter implicitly revealed his “limitless opportunities” belief:

You should give the recipient not a lot of time, but a brief period of time to be inducted into the program, get the benefits and stabilize their life before having the requirement. Give them like three months. Say, ‘Hey, you’ve got three months, and after three months, if you still want to use this program, you need to have a job.’

For Peter, there were no structural factors affecting numbers and quality of jobs: the jobs exist, the trick is getting the poor individual “stabilized” and able to fill one of them. He made a similar argument about drug testing: individuals should be given a one-time opportunity for rehabilitation but be cut off from welfare benefits if they ever use drugs again; this ignored the ongoing influence that addiction, previous life experiences, and current social conditions have on these behaviors. When I asked Peter how to cure poverty in the U.S., he described a rather detailed system where corporations would work hand-in-hand with colleges and universities to make sure that people were being trained to fill jobs that were available at the moment (which seemed like an odd answer given that college is but a dream for many poor individuals). Peter is highly critical of his social work colleagues for ignoring the role of the individual in success and failure. His highly-individualistic views seem to come from his background feeling alone and isolated for most of his life bouncing around from Asia to a U.S. adoptive family to living in shelters to multiple foster homes; Peter proclaims proudly, “Not to toot my own horn, but ever since I turned 18, I’ve been on my own,” and this has assured him that (a) life is about the choices that you make and (b) everyone can succeed if they make the right choices. He believes his experiences have given him a truly objective view of the world, unlike his BSW colleagues’ subjective and “movie-like” perspectives:

The way I think about it [the world and social issues] is more objective than other students. I think that's because of my military training. And sometimes I hear people talk about stuff in class and it sounds like it's out of a movie. You know, 'I want to help people do this, I want to help people do that'. . . I don't think they look at it from a realistic, objective point of view. And I think that's just a lack of experience in life in general.

He explained his life experiences and how these have led him to see the world "for what it really is" like that of a worker rising in a company from the lowest- to the highest-level, explaining:

I ran away from group homes all the time and I was homeless. I've eaten out of dumpsters, and when you have been through those things, it's kind of like if you work for a company. If you start from the ground up, you were the lowest of the low and then you go through the ranks, you get promoted, by the time you reach management position, you are the best at everything because you've been through every stage.

When Peter says "the best at everything," he is referring to what he believes is his superior worldview relative to his colleagues in the BSW program, colleagues who depend too much on perspectives other than individualism. When discussing poverty, Peter told me a story about a personal experience that he remembers and how important it was in shaping his views (and confirming his Culture of Poverty beliefs). He says that before this experience he held stereotypical views towards the Hispanic/Latino population in the U.S., views centered around perceived laziness and poor work-ethic. He says, "I used to speculate on illegal immigration and people who stand outside Wal-Mart looking for under-the-table construction jobs. I'd just think, 'You know, the stereotype that Hispanic people are lazy, this and that.'" He said that an experience that he had visiting Hispanic/Latino friends and their families gave him firsthand knowledge about this population, confirming his stereotypical beliefs. He said, "Compared to my mom's house, their house is messy. But then I realize it's part of the culture." When I

probed further into Peter's beliefs about the root causes of poverty, he utilized a blend of individualistically- and structurally-oriented arguments to explain why American culture causes people to expect too much out of life:

Everyone says there's no jobs right now, right? But there are jobs, there's just not jobs that you like or pays enough according to you. Everyone wants that one job that pays more than enough to live off of so they don't have to work multiple jobs. But the bottom line is, if you have a job at McDonalds, yes, it doesn't pay that well. Yes, it's not a prestigious job. But that's a job and a job is better than no job. When I was growing up in [Asia], if you converted the currency, people could make \$2.50 an hour and live happily because they don't need a big-screen TV. Most of them don't even have cars. I remember growing up, we didn't have a fridge. We went to the local market every day, morning, evening, and we bought food and we cooked it fresh. We had no centralized heating. I remember as a kid my job was to go downstairs and pick up pieces of coal. I think people take the concept of like the 'land of opportunity,' you know, you should get the best. I think people take that a little too far. I guess in the social work sense people say, 'Oh, this guy lives in a rundown house, this and that.' But the thing is, he has a home. And I'm not saying that we shouldn't strive for better, but I think people what they have for granted. They don't appreciate what they have, but they always want more. Also I personally think, what keeps the perpetual cycle of poverty, it's like that book from when you were a kid, *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. People can't just—you give someone one thing and they can't be content with it. They have to have more.

What was so striking to me about Peter's answer was that it in no way addressed any possible structural-causes of inequality. Peter's answer would not have been shocking had it been a part of a larger analysis of poverty in the U.S.; but this was his only analysis of the problem of poverty in the U.S., the most salient matter that came to his mind when asked about this enormous social issue. For him, the problem of poverty and inequality was that people were expecting too much out of life; he believes ample opportunities exist for everyone, he is hardly concerned with impediments to grasping these opportunities, and he believes we would all be better off with a bit of an attitude adjustment concerning our social positions. Nowhere in this discussion was there any

acknowledgement that there may be structural elements that contribute to inequality, or even an acknowledgement that poverty existed at all outside of people's unrealistic expectations. From Peter's answer one might assume that all Americans have a sufficient standard of living, there are no unjust consequences of social organization, and the only matter needing attention is American's outsized expectations.

When discussing the experiences of immigrants in the U.S., Peter said, "I deal a lot with minorities. I've come to the realization that due to the limitations of language, education, and then conflicts of the culture clash that a lot of things we take for granted. It's really hard for them." At this point he became much more structurally-oriented in his analysis. He told me about one family that he worked with in an internship where the adult wage-earners had difficulties learning English, making it very difficult for them on the job market despite considerable education and skills acquired in their home country. He explained:

Like we take working retail [for granted in the U.S.], it's not the lowest of the low, but it's pretty low. Anyone can do retail. And she's [female adult member of family] trying to get a job in retail but she can't because there's the culture thing and the language. . . they have a Master's Degree from their country of origin, but they can't speak English so they can't apply it. Sometimes it's really frustrating. And we try to tell them, 'You've got to strive for the best. But sometimes we end up having to find them a job doing deliveries, because the only thing they can do right now is drive. So I guess the harshness of reality, that's what I've realized. A lot of things, like, I can go to the mall, I can probably put in applications for any one of the stores and I can get it. But for someone who doesn't have the basic language comprehension, it's really hard.

Karen Moore espoused individual-level explanations for poverty and inequality, but her individualism was unique and did not come in the typical form that other students expressed. For Karen, poverty was an individual-level problem stemming from the competitive nature in all human beings and the inability of anybody to design a

society that affords opportunities to everyone; for Karen, this competition was unavoidable and impossible to address. Karen believes poverty exists because (a) it is part of human beings' genetically-inherited "nature," particularly their tendency to be competitive, and (b) because throughout history there has always been poverty, proof for her that it is just the natural order of things. Of poverty, Karen says:

I think it's just the nature of mankind. It stems from competition, logically it makes sense that there will always be somebody at the bottom. If you look at history there have always been poor people.

For Karen, she went into social work because she believes the world is a "nasty" place; it seemed clear from her answer that she views social work as a way to soften this nastiness, but she never quite identified how social organization might contribute to these circumstances. For Karen, it was people's nature to be nasty to one another and compete for scarce resources, and she never identified how society might be organized to mitigate these circumstances. Without ever really identifying the role of the social structure, Karen sees charity as the logical answer. She believes people like her, the few nice and compassionate people in a nasty world, can help a bit by giving charity; she lamented that her parents did not give to charity when she was a child. For Karen charity was a form of moral superiority in the person giving charity, not an unfortunate need due to the consequences of structural imbalances, saying, "I always felt like we are doing okay we should give back a little bit." Karen believed that people who gave to charity were simply being good people, never placing this need for charity in any structural context.

When we talked about the possibility of Karen having to turn to welfare, she said:

I would not be dependent upon it personally. I would feel a little ashamed getting it not because it is welfare but because it is somebody else's help. I was raised to be very self-sufficient so I would want to get off of it. I know I would not be ashamed because I would do everything I can to get off of it.

Like many students, Karen used our discussion of welfare as an opportunity to not only discuss my question, but to assure me that she would use welfare the “right” way, unlike other welfare recipients. She is concerned about dependency and strongly believes in self-sufficiency, two concepts that reveal the individualistic underpinnings of portions of her worldview. When she spoke about her non-support for fertility-limiting welfare policies, she rejected such policies but on mostly individualistic grounds, saying, “Somebody could not be using protection when they have sex and end up pregnant, somebody could be raped, somebody could just be irresponsible, or somebody could just not have access to birth control.” Nowhere in our discussion did she raise the possibility that it might be simply unjust to dictate poor women’s fertility, or that it might be unjust to forbid people from having children because they were the victim of structural forces that guaranteed there would be a group of poor and childless people.

There were seeds of structuralism in Karen’s answers, but she never made the connections herself. She would discuss a topic and highlight many structural factors that contributed to the particular problem, but never make any possible causal connections. When I asked Karen how we might spend government money to address poverty, she answered:

I would like to give it all our military veterans, but I might put it towards children in poverty and helping kids because that has a lifelong effect, not just on the kids but on the society as well. I think that might be the best way to do it if I had to spend the money.

She identifies the substantial negative impact that poverty has on children, but never quite makes any complex connections beyond that basic fact. At one point she talked about how she rejected the idea that the U.S. is a meritocracy:

The people who are really in charge and in power could not have gotten there without help either financial help or connections or whatever. I feel like you can work as hard as you want to or as you can but that does not necessarily mean that you were going to be at the top. When I was at McDonald's, there were people working three or four jobs there. If we were going to measure people's position in society by merit or hard work those people would be at the top.

She expanded on this notion and also discussed what she believes to be the flawed notion of individualism in American culture:

Our society is heavily based in individualism, I have heard it from my parents, you hear it all over television. You know, work hard and you can get what you deserve. It's the premise of the American Dream. I have worked hard—I worked at McDonald's for four years and never received a promotion. And the people there worked their asses off. I also worked at Five Guys for a little bit, too. Those people work harder than people who make lots of money and they don't get nearly the same income or recognition. Sorry, this is a rant. I just don't think our society cares to look into things that they don't understand. I think we live in a really judgmental society, and I think Americans see somebody who is in a totally different situation from them and they don't give them the benefit of the doubt or try to understand where they're coming from. . . [For] most Americans it is all about the individual in terms of how your social class is determined I guess.

This is an incredibly insightful answer if Karen realized the structural implications of what she said about the disconnect between the hard work of some people and economic success. She never fully comprehended the complexity of her answer, ignored any possible role for social organization in the world that she described, and continued to cite human beings' competitive nature as the cause. I was initially inclined to label Karen's worldview as "messy" due to the seeds of both individualism and social structuralism in her answers; I settled on individualistically-oriented, however, because

(a) she kept returning to the notion of individual-level human nature in her explanations of poverty and inequality, and (b) she never incorporated the structural elements of her answers to some questions into her logic when explaining the root causes of poverty and inequality in other questions. For Karen, social structuralism was never a salient perspective during these interview questions.

When I discussed why poverty exists with Jenny Phan, she utilized Culture of Poverty and individualism explanations in her answers. In terms of her Culture of Poverty explanations, Jenny explained that she believed that a “cycle” of poverty exists that traps individuals in poverty across generations where children “learn” to be poor from their parents:

I guess some people are stuck in a cycle that their parents were poor and then they are poor and then their children will learn to be poor. . . Poor people don't know any better and they don't see any way out. Like you were in my social determinants of health class and we are learning how the children are stuck there because they learned it from their parents that this is the only route you can take and those other routes aren't for you because your parents did not do it. If they didn't, why should I do it? So that is why I think some people are just stuck in poverty and that is why we have poverty. It is hard for me to explain since English is not my first language it is just a cycle. My dad went to college so I have to go to college, you know? For someone else their parents maybe dropped out of high school in tenth grade and started working because that is instant money and instant gratification. The kids learn the same things, like, 'Oh I don't need to go to high school because my parents made money by just quitting high school. I mean money right away getting a lot of things that I want right now.' So instant gratification instead of waiting and going to college and getting more money in the end. They don't see the point of going to high school. Sort of passing down values from one generation to another.

Jenny's answer is also based in individualistic beliefs, taking the social structure for granted and assuming that there is a “right” way for people to think and act. Jenny says, “I don't think you can ever really cure poverty,” citing her religion as the basis for this

belief. Jenny says that, based on her Buddhist religious beliefs, “I think it ties into my religion. . . that there is always going to be someone lower than us and always someone higher than us.” Despite not believing poverty can be significantly reduced, she believes that educating the poor, helping them develop job skills, and educating them to “help themselves” may help reduce poverty in some ways. She also believes increased subsidies for childcare would make a difference.

Jenny also utilized individualism explanations in her answers. Jenny does not believe that the U.S. is a meritocracy, but for a different reason than other students: because she has seen many people working hard but in the wrong manner, saying, “If you put effort into working at a fast food restaurant in order to make money instead of going to school at the same time to pursue higher education and get a degree—that is putting effort into the wrong place.” For Jenny, it is clear that she does not see (a) how somebody might be forced to take a low-paying job, (b) how acquiring a higher-paying job or the means to be competitive for such a job (such as college) might be structurally-influenced, or (c) how a society could exist that would ensure a job for everyone and ensure that working at that job would deliver a living wage, regardless of the particular job or the person’s social standing. On work requirements, Jenny signals her belief that welfare is not a system of addressing structural imbalances. She believes that the money that people receive in the form of welfare assistance is somebody else’s money, and that working is a means of “repaying” that money. Explaining her support for work requirements, she says, “You know, you are taking all of that money, and somehow it has to be repaid, so if somebody else like you needs that money then we will have money to give them.” She struck a similar tone in her support for drug tests:

If you are taking money from the public you should abide by the laws. People should be receiving that money to improve their lives. It is public money and I think if you are applying for welfare and you have a drug addiction there should be a program that you can go to get clean and receive that welfare.

For Jenny, like a few of her colleagues, treatment for drug addiction is a one-time “fix” not tied to the forces of current social conditions or the accumulation of years of subjection to difficult social conditions. Once “clean,” individuals can choose to walk a different path in the future, regardless of their past or present conditions (and in qualifying for welfare they are likely still facing difficult circumstances). Jenny speculated that a “punishment board” might be appropriate in the welfare system for people who are not “doing what they're supposed to be doing” and “abusing” the system (such as using drugs), saying, “I guess I would make a board and see who should be punished see who should receive punishment or not.” Jenny, like many of the students in this study, utilized her privileged social class position to assume that (a) making “legitimate” and “correct” decisions was easy for poor individuals, and (b) that those decision were inherently legitimate and correct instead of socially constructed.

Jenny seemed to espouse a charitable view about social work without the structural foundation; in other words, social welfare was not a means of correcting structural imbalances, but helping people based on the morality of those providing aid. I asked Jenny if she would ever turn to welfare as a means of avoiding a really difficult situation like homelessness, and she replied, “I hate this. Even though I know that it is wrong to go on welfare, I probably would go on welfare than be on the streets.” I asked Jenny why it is wrong to use welfare, and she answered that it is not intended for people who can help themselves. This was an interesting response, revealing a lot about her

philosophy of welfare: it is for individuals based upon their individual characteristics, not their situation. For Jenny, poor people are poor because they cannot help themselves. Some students believed that welfare is there for those who need it financially; for Jenny, welfare recipients are deserving based upon their individual characteristics, not their current financial situation. She has clearly internalized some deep cultural beliefs about welfare, saying that it is “wrong to go on welfare.”

When discussing poverty and inequality, Isabel Cervera utilized both Culture of Poverty and individualism explanations. She believes that “for the most part” the U.S. is a meritocracy, saying that, “If you have determination you succeed for the most part.” She believes that the U.S. “is a country known by the opportunities given to every person” and that having motivation and willpower at the individual-level will help people grasp these opportunities. When I asked her why she chose social work as a profession, she says she likes to work with people and help them “change” as individuals to escape their particular situations; she support policies such as work requirements, for instance, because she hates the idea that poor people will receive welfare benefits but not “change their behavior.” She said, “I have seen some people who just keep receiving the benefits and there is no change in their behavior,” and that good welfare policy will create “more willingness [on the part of welfare recipients] for them to change things or to change their situation.” Here she describes poverty and welfare-use as a “circle” and a “chain” that perpetuates poverty and welfare-use across generations:

Sometimes I think it [poverty and welfare] is just a circle. There is no beginning or end. It becomes like a circle for people. . . Sometimes I think there is no improvement for those people. They just keep getting the same benefits or the same assistance. . . [For] the people that I have seen it is just like a chain. My family got this, your family will get this, and your kids will get this.

From her perspective, poverty and welfare are rooted in individual- and family-level causes. She used a story about her internship experience at a multicultural human services agency, which provides case management therapy to low-income immigrant populations and survivors of trauma and torture, to further explain her belief in Culture of Poverty arguments:

It is kind of hard especially with immigrant populations. I work with undocumented and documented immigrants, so that makes it even harder. It is very hard. . . Their way of thinking, the people that I dealt with are not educated. I am not saying it is a bad thing to be uneducated but their way of thinking is completely different than mine so sometimes I have conflicts on values, ethical dilemmas, all of that.

She went on to describe working with an undocumented family with two children living in very poor and overcrowded accommodations. The situation is further complicated by the threat of deportation for the husband. They already have two children, and the woman told Isabel, "I am thinking of having a girl so I can have a boy and a girl in my family. My husband likes the idea, too." This really bothers Isabel, and she reported thinking to herself:

I was like, 'How can you do that, you are having those issues, you're not stable, your husband can be deported anytime soon, and you plan to have another baby? I wouldn't do that!' I just couldn't believe it. Those are the things that I think I have some issues with.

Isabel explains that her culture values family very highly, and it is these cultural beliefs that are helping to keep this family poor. She says she supports fertility-limiting policies for welfare recipients because of stories like this one. Never once in this discussion did

Isabel mention any structural imbalances that might unjustly affect the living conditions and fertility decisions of families like this; Isabel was totally focused on the family's individual decisions. In many ways this is understandable: social work as a field must attempt to help people from within the system and help them make the best of their circumstances, however those circumstances were created. What is interesting though is that this is the first thing that Isabel thought of when I asked her about the causes of poverty. We were not "in the field" forced to do our best for clients despite structural constraints; we were far away in the "ivory tower," free to talk theoretically. This was a time when Isabel could address macro-level issues if she so chose, not handcuffed by the realities on the ground in the field of social work. In this setting where all levels of analysis were possible, individual-level decisions and subcultural values were the first and most important thing that came to her mind. Part of the explanation for her views might be that she says, "I think the firsthand experience has had the biggest influence [on her worldview and explanation for inequality and poverty], more than school." She openly acknowledges that experiential knowledge impacts her worldview more than her schooling. In a program where there is already a weak theoretical foundation, this leaves open the possibility for considerable variation in worldview and interpretation based on the individual beliefs of BSW students. For students like Isabel, this may lead to confirmation bias based on existing beliefs in the absence of a more complex toolbox to work from.

When not responding to questions that specifically asked her to cite the causes of poverty, Isabel did mention some structural factors. She believes strongly that education is the answer to escaping poverty, and believes that there are obstacles

preventing some people from obtaining education. In a country like the U.S. with (what she perceives to be) so many opportunities for families to thrive, it bothers Isabel that these obstacles exist for certain people, such as the immigrant population:

Not everyone can take advantage of these opportunities because everyone's life is different. Me as an immigrant I can relate to other immigrants but still my life is completely different from other people and other people's lives can be different from mine. I mean mine can be better. I have seen the different perspectives of people and the problems that they face through my experiences.

Isabel is very comfortable identifying a few structural factors that she believes are important in influencing people's life changes; when asked specifically about the cause of poverty and inequality, however, she stuck with her individualism and Culture of Poverty explanations.

Natalia Huber is strongly individualistically-oriented, but also utilized Culture of Poverty and social structuralism perspectives in a limited manner. It was surprising how little she had thought about poverty and inequality before our interview, saying, "[I have] never really thought about or never really spent a lot of time with these questions. This is probably the most time I have ever spent talking about this stuff [poverty and inequality]. She believes the U.S. is a meritocracy, and that "opportunities are present, it is our responsibility to grab them." At one point in our discussion Natalia argued that she believed in the individualism explanation, and she said that many Americans "would agree with me and say it is individualistic." She says resorting to welfare-use would make her feel "weak," child-like, and "helpless," and said, "I would feel more degraded in terms of how I felt about myself, my own judgment." She went on to talk about how this would hurt her pride:

I would not feel comfortable [using welfare]. To me I feel that I am too proud to accept welfare. It would have to be a very, very, very, very last resort. I would probably go to the streets for a little bit before even thinking about welfare. . . I think a part of me would hate myself if I didn't try everything even if I had to choose welfare and it was the absolutely last resort a part of me would still say no. You are going to fight it. A part of me, I don't want to put myself down or take a step down from how I feel about my pride. The biggest thing is I just don't think that I could bring myself to go onto welfare. I would feel like I am weak, helpless. And I have felt helpless and I don't want to revisit that. So I don't want to relive my past. I don't want to bring it up and have to think again, 'Great, here I am again.' I have done this once, and I don't want to do this another time. I have been in that helpless child phase where I, even when I was put in with a family I still felt helpless, I felt out of control, I didn't feel like I had control of my life. There is a part of me that would hate myself because I have already been helpless.

Natalia's answer seemed in many ways directed at me as the interviewer, assuring me that she would try everything to avoid welfare and would only use welfare as a "very, very, very, very last resort." She believes that poor people naturally become dependent on welfare (fulfilling their individual desires rather than addressing structural imbalances), and that welfare should be minimal and designed to "push people off" before they become dependent. She supports welfare work requirements because she believes that such a policy helps the government inculcate a (presumably missing) sense of personal responsibility and motivation in recipients, helping them to stop being complacent and "push themselves" to escape poverty. She said, "I think welfare should kind of get them on their feet, provide them with enough resources, and then kind of push them off. Because I also feel that a lot of people get dependent on it." She explicitly states that welfare-use is an individual-level failing and that a one-time infusion of resources will blunt the power of social forces, and that, "If you really want to get off welfare, then you will make yourself get off welfare." She said that being too generous

with welfare causes her and other social workers providing aid “to get angry with ourselves, asking why are there all of these people on welfare?” Her answer is that by being too generous they are “feeding into the system.” Natalia believes that opportunities exist for all who want them, and we must encourage people not to turn to welfare which is unnecessary if people have the proper motivation. She framed fertility as both (a) a solely individual-level decision, and (b) not the right of poor women, who are (presumably) to blame for their financial situation and therefore should not make that situation worse. Of family caps she said:

If there is a set limit of income that you get, and you know that, I think that falls on you. If you know ahead of time, that falls on you. If you want to have another child, that is your prerogative, but I don't think the government is responsible for that, to give you more money for that choice.

For Natalia fertility is entirely a choice, and her answer excludes the possibility that it is unjust to restrict the fertility of a large group of people who are victims of structural constraints outside of their control. She framed drug-use as an individual choice as well, and supported welfare drug tests because she was concerned about drug users abusing the system and “pooling their money” to buy drugs. This answer also excludes structural concerns, instead (a) ignoring the role of the social structure in influencing who turns to drugs, (b) the role of addiction in keeping people in drug-use, and (c) assuming that welfare-recipients are disproportionately using drugs and labeling an entire group of people (who may be victims of structural economic constraints) as suspect because of their social class. Since her main complaint seemed to be the use of government money on drugs, I asked her if she would logically extend her argument to other recipients of government money (middle- and upper-class tax credits, farm

subsidies, student loans, private sports subsidies, etc.). She immediately said no to student loans but that she could possibly think of a situation where this would apply (she said this hesitantly), but failed to identify one after a long pause.

Natalia argues that poverty is a result of individuals' need for "instant gratification." For Natalia, this is both an individual-level and structural-level explanation. At the individual-level, she believes that people do not think about the future, and (presumably) this leads to poor decision-making and causes some people to fall into poverty. At the structural-level, however, Natalia believes this need for instant gratification is uniquely American and influenced by macro-level culture. She believes Americans simply expect too much from life:

I get the feeling that a lot of Americans have the big dreams, they want the big house, the big cars, and I think a lot of people want whatever they want here and now. They don't always think of, well what if something happens? I don't think that they think ahead. I am also one of those people, but again I think especially as people get older I think a lot of it is people's mindsets around finances. Like, instant gratification. I think it is an American thing, like uniquely American.

It was unclear how this applied to poverty specifically or why this was her primary focus when explaining poverty, but she left her explanation undeveloped and we moved on in our discussion. When I asked Natalia how to best address poverty in our country, she equated poverty with homelessness and gave an answer based on all three poverty perspectives:

I guess I would say housing. Build more housing for the homeless I guess. Maybe not use all of the money but use some of it to build the houses and then from there maybe set up programs as how to get them back on their feet. I feel like a lot of people, there are a lot of homeless people because of mental illness. They can't support themselves, or financial issues, or they have always been in poverty. So it is the cycle of their life. Especially for those people who have never had a good life, to get them started, especially with housing, it is not that there is not enough, because I don't know that there isn't, but if we could at least get the people in a secure location then we can then go from there. So that would be my main thing.

On the surface her answer seems structural: she believes that we should expand low-income housing. She falls back in to individual-level and Culture of Poverty explanations later in her answer, however, explaining that (a) poverty (equated with homelessness) is influenced heavily by mental illness, (b) poverty is the “cycle” of these people’s lives, (c) she is not sure there is actually a housing shortage, undercutting her structural argument.

Marena Delgado believes that the U.S. is a meritocracy, saying, “For most people yes, America is a meritocracy.” She believes that there are plenty of resources available to people to escape poverty, but it is a matter of (a) those in positions of (earned) privilege helping those in need (out of a sense of duty), and (b) those born into poverty rising above their social conditions by grasping available resources:

I feel like people who are born into poor families or somehow become poor they don't really have the resources to get back and go up the social ladder. There's definitely resources available, I mean I am a social work major so I know there are resources available. People really look down on poverty in this society so they are not really there to help people who are below them, it's more try to get yourself up higher. So I think it is resources and people with resources not helping people without resources.

Marena says she wants to work in an area of social work with the goal of “protecting families and protecting the nuclear family.” This answer suggests that (a) the nuclear family is normative and desirable, (b) that the nuclear family is an individual-level

answer to economic failures, and (c) makes no mention of whether society should be structured so that all family types can succeed. Marena agrees with work requirements because instead of a means of addressing structural imbalances, she views welfare assistance as a transfer of money from earners to recipients. She also believes that work requirements help people get themselves out of poverty, an answer that excludes the notion that unemployment might be a structural consequence:

I think if you are staying home and getting help from the government it's not really helping your case. I think that you should definitely be working for something because you are never going to get out of your situation if you are not working for what you are trying to get. You don't get free food, that's not how it should be. I think even mothers with really young children should be in the workforce. . . There really should not be any exceptions.

Marena frames fertility as an individual choice and her answer excludes the possibility that limiting the fertility of poor women might be unjust due to the structural nature of their economic position:

If you are in a situation where you need enough help for your family from the government you should not be having any more children. That is not going to help anybody. You shouldn't get more benefits for having more children. I think these policies would make you realize that adding on to your family isn't going to add-on to your resources and discourage people from making these decisions. It would make you realize that you are already trying to help your family that you have right now, how much better is it going to be for you if you add another life that you need to take care of?

Marena frames drug addiction as an individual choice and believes it is okay to drug test welfare recipients because they should not be allowed to use government money to buy drugs. Her answer fails to address why this would only be a consideration for poor people, why it is assumed that welfare recipients are drug users, and if it is socially-just to intentionally lower the living standards of people (and if it is, this suggests that a basic standard of living should not be an entitlement).

Olivia Pace began our discussion of poverty in strictly structural terms, leading me to believe that she strongly believed in this perspective. When discussing why poverty exists Olivia begins with a strictly structural answer, arguing that the manner in which society is organized demands that people stay on the “right track” (structurally-determined) their entire lives; if people make a mistake in their lives, even one costly mistake, they might have to pay for it dearly. She said, “I think the main reasons [for poverty] are that in our society if someone screws up there is no way for them to fix that mistake. . . It's like even if you mess up once you are derailed and it is extremely hard to get back on, not impossible but more difficult than most people can handle.” She also believes the family upbringing plays a role:

Another reason is that you come from a position of poverty. . . I know my parents, my family has consistently had people who are middle income. What they have helps perpetuate being middle-class. You know the money my parents are going to leave me is going to be really helpful, and middle-class people are left with things as opposed to children who are left with their parents debt or things like that. Their parents did everything they could just to get by and to maintain but the children have to figure out how to pay for college on their own. And different things like that.

Her answer could be construed as either structural or individualistic. I construed it as structural, considering her previous answer; if she believes that society is “set up” to guarantee that only those who play by the (structurally-determined) rules succeed, it would seem logical that inherited resources are unjustifiably rewarded by the social structure (from her perspective).

As I previously stated, the interview began in strictly structural terms. As our conversation progressed, it became clear not only that Olivia was not as structurally-oriented as it first seemed, but that in reality she was strongly individualistically-oriented; our conversation felt a bit like a road trip that had been following one set of directions for

a time, only to take a drastically different course halfway through the trip. Olivia is very politically-conservative and religious and comes from a family with the same values. Through our discussion it became clear to me that her interests in helping people are mostly internationally-centered, and that she does not give social problems in the U.S. the degree of seriousness that she gives to other countries. Like other conservative students I spoke with, she seemed to view social problems as somewhat of a settled issue in the U.S. due to what she believes is a superior way of life. She considers herself “altruistic” and this altruism seems to center around helping people in different countries who do not have it as “good” as Americans. Later in our conversation Olivia said she believes that policies should be aimed at preventing personal and familial instability, a clearly individualistic answer:

The best way to attack poverty is the preventative and not the once it happens. . . I am all about the preventative measures. I am involved in Habitat for Humanity. And what I know is how much someone having a home can affect all other aspects of their lives. So that is something that I feel confident in saying I know enough about this, people need homes. They need a stable environment. They need homes that they pay off, it shouldn't just be a giveaway. It shouldn't be, 'Here's a free home.' It needs to be something that they work for, and it needs to be something they can manage working for. Because they need to feel responsibility for their home and feel proud and it, that is a pride thing. I was able to pay off and on my own home. But children need a stable environment to grow up in. That would be the major preventative thing that I would look at.

Her answer does not address why society cannot be organized for all family types to succeed, or why she demands that poor people “work” for their assistance (unless she believes lack of work is crucial to their economic problems). Olivia said that she agrees with the social structuralism perspective, but only to a point:

I also agree with individualism a lot, the individualism viewpoint. I understand the system has been very unfair to you. . . The system has been unfair, it has put you in this place, but you are still a person. There is still the personal responsibility factor. And while all these things maybe are against you, if you give into the system it is your choice. . . Somebody very close to me, his dad is a cabdriver and his mom has a similar low-income job. But they are putting him through college. I am a firm believer that it is about the decisions that you make and I think sometimes that is where I differ from other social work majors. I see a lot of my social work friends are very much like, 'Well it wasn't their fault.' And I agree it is not their fault, I agree the system needs to be changed. I also agree that giving in to the system is a personal decision. I think that sometimes we need to be a little bit harsher. . . I think sometimes I am a little bit more like, 'That was their personal decision.'

Olivia believes that all individuals can rise above social conditions, and in fact it is the personal responsibility of poor people not to "give in" to poverty.

Olivia agrees with giving welfare assistance to poor individuals as long as they are willing to "change" their personal characteristics/actions that are keeping them in poverty. She believes very strongly that her middle-class family "did not receive any government assistance" at any time, an assumption that (a) is likely false and (b) ignores the role of non-individual, non-governmental assistance that shapes the success/failure of all people. She does not view welfare assistance as a means of balancing structural imbalances but as a transfer of money from earners to recipients, saying, "I think it is unfair to ask people to give up money that they have earned. Why do I have to give that to everybody else?" She says that welfare recipients taking other people's hard-earned money is especially egregious, saying it is unfair "especially if that person is not making an effort to change." Of her welfare support she says:

[She supports it] as long as it is proven in the long run that you're making that change. After so many times though, I hate to say that, but if you are not making an effort to change do you really deserve to receive this assistance? Because you don't seem to be appreciating or using it and really feeling like it is helping you. So I agree philosophically as long as it is structured the right way and people are making changes in their lives.

For Olivia, people failing to escape poverty is (a) proof that they are not willing to change defective aspects of their personality/behavior, (b) staying in poverty is the result of individual failings, not structural forces, and (c) failing to rise out of poverty is proof that an individual does not appreciate government aid. Olivia's pride would be hurt if she had to use welfare, "Especially because I am a very driven person, so that would also come with the sense that I had failed in some way." Olivia believes that, unlike poor people and welfare recipients, she has the individual characteristics of a successful person; turning to welfare would make her doubt this notion. She believes turning to welfare means people are not "doing enough" to help themselves, and assured me of her deservingness, saying, "I would be doing everything in my power to get off of that welfare." She apparently does not believe that stigmatizing stereotypes of the poor are unjust, and believes that the burden is on the poor to change these stereotypes. She says of her support for welfare drug testing:

I think it is a good way of proving to people and removing that stereotype that people are receiving welfare benefits without making a change. I understand that having these tests can waste a lot of money, we were just talking about that in class the other day. But I think it is important to change the stereotype and the stigma attached to welfare. It helps the image of all welfare recipients, it is something that you can tangibly prove.

She supports fertility-limiting welfare policies because having children "goes back to an individual decision," and that people have a right to have children but that, "I don't think that child should be a drain on everyone else." She went on to say that, "I think that is

very selfish to have another child out of the desire to have a child. I think the responsibility that comes along with having a child is having the environment to raise that child in.” For Olivia fertility is a completely individual-level issue and punishing a group of people who are poor is justified (assuming she does not wish to punish the poor for punishment’s sake, I assume her answer excludes the possibility that we are punishing people who are victims to forces larger than themselves).

### **“Messy” Worldviews**

It was not clear from her answers that Allison Cruz relied on one particular perspective to explain poverty and inequality; she utilized all three perspectives at different points in our conversation. It also seemed that she had contradictory beliefs about these issues, utilizing different perspectives about the same topic (in different answers) that did not seem to be able to logically coexist. Allison utilized an individualistic perspective when talking about social work, explaining how she wanted to work with children to “fix” their problems before they arose. She utilizes both individual-level and structural-level explanations while discussing poverty in the U.S.:

There are always people that need to fill certain jobs where they’re probably not going to get paid enough to do them. And opportunities, not everybody has the same opportunities. So I feel like what background you come from has a lot to do with that. I don’t know. I guess the system makes sure of things. I think we could help people with more programs that actually train people for skills. . . you have to find ways to break that cycle.

This idea of “breaking the cycle” is clearly not structural and seems to be rooted in Culture of Poverty assumptions. She does not support fertility policies that cap welfare benefits because she believes (a) it hurts children and (b) some people do not know any better. In her discussion of fertility policies she utilized both an individualism and Culture of Poverty perspective:

At the end of the day, they might still have children, and the child is going to be the one affected. But I do think they should—we should help them understand—I know sometimes just because they are living in poverty, they're like being told how many children they can have, but I think it's good to work with them and let them realize that in their condition, it's not the best idea to keep having children.

I characterize this answer as partially belonging to Culture of Poverty because she says poor people need help realizing it is not smart to have children in poverty. This answer is also very individualistic, because it at least implicitly assumes that poverty is an individual-level affliction; otherwise it would not logically follow that we would punish people with welfare restrictions for simply being the victims of forces larger than themselves. Allison rejects the idea that the U.S. is a meritocracy because of how hard her mother worked as a single-mother just to make ends meet. She said, "I've seen a lot of people that work hard and they still don't have the same status as some people. Like my mom, a single mom." She said she knows people who have worked multiple jobs just to break even, saying, "I've seen a lot of people that work hard. . . it is not as easy as it seems."

Noreen Ahmed espoused individualistic beliefs at some points in our interview, and structural beliefs at other times. Noreen's utilization of multiple perspectives depending upon the interview question highlighted the incredible flexibility of the worldviews of the students I interviewed. Noreen was very structurally-oriented and one of the most politically-liberal students I interviewed, yet held deeply individualistic views on many topics. She was at times deeply analytical and at other times amazingly contradictory. Most times I was amazed by her analytic ability; when she was discussing drug tests, for instance she said that you might be able to affect rates of drug-use in some manner but "you're not gonna eradicate social problems. People are still gonna

be on welfare.” This was an impressive insight into the difference between causes and symptoms/consequences of social problems. She went on to argue that social policy needs to address not just the consequences of social forces but “the problem of why there are people in need of social services in the first place.” This was one of many insightful answers that highlighted her belief in and understanding of the strong role of the social structure in so many social problems (I will discuss her ideological contradictions in a moment). From a structurally-oriented perspective she feels strongly that there are not enough opportunities for all who need them, and that we need to pay attention to the number and quality of these opportunities (well-paying jobs, education, etc.); she explained at length some research experience that she had with the U.S. minimum wage, and how it failed to adequately support a typical family. This is a large part of her rejection of work requirements, she says, because, “You can’t say, ‘Well, we’re gonna put you off of welfare if you’re not working,’ and then make them get a job that can’t support them. That’s just not fair.” Noreen rejects the idea that the U.S. is a meritocracy:

It doesn’t have anything to do with merit. I mean, I’ve met too many people in my life that are bright, that are capable, that are ambitious, that have all the qualities you would think would lead to success, but there’s all kinds of obstacles and blocks that are really beyond their, you know, just simply ability to get past, you know?

Noreen’s formative years were heavily impacted by the Civil Rights and Women’s Rights movements in the U.S., and has long felt a need to fight against social injustices. She says, “Before I knew anything about oppression and prejudice and racism, I knew right from wrong and I applied that just on my own somehow.” She has seen in her personal experiences with social service agencies that there are structural impediments

to the goals of the populations that they serve; in one such experience she claimed the agency “intentionally prolonged this woman’s suffering and prevented her from, like, restoring her dignity.” Noreen spent a considerable amount of time discussing her belief that the distribution of opportunities in the U.S. is racist and sexist. Here we discussed what she believed to be the root causes of poverty:

The very, very first thing that comes to my mind [when discussing poverty causation] is racism and sexism. Women on one hand and then minorities on the other hand have very different paths to poverty. But I think it comes down to opportunity, just opportunity, both economic opportunity and educational opportunity. The availability and quality of those opportunities. I think it comes from our social values. To this day, mostly, the power structure here is white, Christian, heterosexual males. The farther away you get from that core, the less respected, the less opportunity, the less you are seen as normal. So that creates this sort of social dynamic that, again, the farther away you get from that core. . . I mean if you’re a woman and you’re lucky enough to be married to a socially acceptable man, you’re good, okay? That’s changed a little bit obviously. But even still this whole equal pay for equal work thing in 2012, what a crazy idea! It’s like, ‘Oh, well, we don’t need to go there, you know.’ So there’s still very much left. Somebody asked me earlier today if I think that racism has anything to do with what’s going on currently [with the Obama campaign and current events]. I think it’s the elephant in the room that nobody wants to actually talk about, because nobody wants to be accused of playing the race card, you know? Racism is still very much alive in every single thing that goes on around us, you know? And I think when you look at poverty, it’s inescapable. Every group has a different path when it comes to that kind of thing whether it’s say an immigrant community, you know their path to success. And when I say immigrants, I’m talking about new immigrants. They haven’t yet established their opportunities I suppose, if they’ve come here as refugees versus students. So I don’t know.

That last line of an overwhelmingly structural response, “They haven’t yet established their opportunities,” foreshadowed another perspective (aside from social structuralism, which she identified with strongly) that was important to Noreen: individualism. Noreen, in my estimation, had the one of the strongest self-identifications as a liberal/progressive of the students that I spoke with; she showed up at our meeting

wearing an Obama/Biden campaign shirt and spoke strongly, forcefully, and many times polemically about Republicans and political conservatism. Noreen considered herself somewhat of a leftist radical, seeing the world from what she believed to be a more accurate perspective than even her politically-liberal friends and colleagues. Despite this, it was clear from Noreen's answers that she believes individuals are responsible for their own success or failure if they have been provided with what she perceives to be sufficient opportunities; it was not always clear what the definition of "sufficient" was or if Noreen would acknowledge the many other social forces that influence people's lives beyond the ones that she identified. As our conversation continued, she moved away from the social structuralism perspective to her individualistically-oriented beliefs. Here she discusses the implementation of equal educational standards for all-Americans; in her answer, she assumes that equal educational access will solve the problem of poverty, ignoring how this will address non-educational factors impacting both people's educational ability and people's lives outside of schools:

Everybody is to some extent responsible for their own personal success. Let me put it to you this way. . . if every single person has the same access to the same quality education, if the science classes in the schools in the inner-city are the exact same science classes with the exact same equipment and textbooks and teacher qualifications, you know, as we have here in the suburbs where there is a bunch of money, when that's all equal, then you're on your own. We are responsible for making our own way. If you're having family troubles because your dad was an alcoholic. . . There are services available. There are ways to sort of help you through whatever. But if you have the same essential foundation, you know what I mean, the essential foundation, which I think is education honestly. I think that would go a long, long, long way to alleviate overall poverty.

Noreen's answer excludes the possibility that society could be built to entitle individuals to a certain standard of living; she welcomes a competitive social structure. Her answer suggests that society should not guarantee equality, just provide equal opportunity to

attain it. As I said previously, her answer also ignores the significant body of research that suggests that most educational inequality is due to non-school factors, and how school equality alone would address that; Noreen's answer would leave the majority of educational inequality unaddressed, telling children "you're on your own." I then asked Noreen how she would attempt to "cure" poverty in the U.S., which she replied:

I absolutely believe it's education, absolutely. I mean, because everything comes from that if you don't have a solid foundation. I can extend that into my experience in [Africa]. I mean, because of the nature of their history. You know, the problems, not all of them, but a significant number of the problems resulted from the fact that education was for a certain group historically under colonialism. So what evolved was a whole group, mostly an ethnic group that just didn't have the skills to participate. And if you don't have the basic ability to contribute in civil society, in politics and business, whatever, you get left behind. And it just keeps growing, I guess, over generations. And the next thing you know, there is this conflict, because now there's a real injustice. People say, 'Oh, those people are good, because they're whatever and these people are not.'

For Noreen, like so many students that cited education as a critical factor contributing to poverty, she excluded equality of outcome as an answer, only discussing equality of opportunity. Education, for Noreen, was something that made individuals competitive, and this competition was taken as a given for Noreen; her answers assumed that life should be a competition and the social structure should nurture this rather than assuring some level of equality of outcome. There is of course nothing inherently wrong with this subjective assertion, but is critical when analyzing these perspectives to identify both what they include as well as what they exclude. Noreen supports policies aimed at limiting the fertility of poor women, going so far as to say that removing their children from their home might be an acceptable consequence for being poor and having children:

I absolutely see the argument. . . If you're not, for whatever reason, in a position to even maintain yourself and what you have then you have no business having more children. . . if you are not mentally ill, you shouldn't be doing this with the expectation that you're not gonna be held accountable, that there's no accountability on your part. I definitely understand that and I do support that. . . We could say, you know, at least consider that the agreement would be that if you have more children then some other arrangement needs to be made. In other words, foster care or something. There has to be a consequence to you for making this and for not being responsible enough to know your own situation and not think that somebody is gonna come in and bail you out, basically, you know? There has to be some kind of a consequence to the parents. . . that has to be part of this whole thing, that you should have to agree with some kind of consequence. Hold the parents accountable. Because the kids get hurt, okay? If the mom is in poverty because she just embraced some sort of irresponsible life choices, you know, she's still gonna get hers. She's still gonna go out partying. She's still gonna be doing whatever she's doing that put her in the situation, but her kids aren't gonna be getting clothes. Her kids aren't gonna be getting food. Her kids aren't gonna be getting what they need.

From Noreen's perspective in this answer it can be assumed that poor women should not have children while they are poor; this of course begs the question: if she believes so strongly in structural causes of poverty, why would she penalize families who are the victims of these structural imbalances? If structure plays such a critical role, as Noreen argues strongly, why would she support a policy that would mean the long-term poor would be essentially barred from ever having children (or at least children that the government would allow them to keep)? Like the example provided by sociologist Mark R. Rank (2003), Noreen's beliefs are akin to severely punishing the losers in a game of musical chairs despite the absolute impossibility that everyone could have been a winner; after all, musical chairs is a game rigged to guarantee an inadequate number of chairs. Her answer not only contains those assumptions but also the assumptions that (a) poverty is a personal failing, (b) fertility is a personal decision and largely untouched

by social forces, and that (c) consequences, such as the removal of your children, are just due to poor choices of poor individuals.

Tom Rowe incorporated all three perspectives into his answers about poverty and inequality. Tom has a truly “messy” worldview with many contradictions: he rejects the idea that the U.S. is a meritocracy, for instance, based on evidence of racial discrimination, but then signaled to me in our interviews that he also has a deep-seated belief that ultimately individual people are responsible for their own financial success or failure. Along with these structural- and individual-level explanations he also utilized Culture of Poverty arguments at times. In terms of his individual-level views, he has always had an interest in being able to “fix” problems that people have (and views lower social class as one such “problem”), and has always had an interest in individual-focused psychology and psychiatry. He did not ultimately go into psychology and psychiatry because he did not want to “listen to people’s problems all day.” The primary reason he did not want to deal with their problems, he says, is because he believes most problems that afflict people can be solved by making the right choices. Because of this he would feel uncomfortable seeking help himself, saying, “If you need help, if you can’t resolve an issue on your own—I would never go seek help because you should be able to resolve an issue on your own.” When discussing whether he would ever turn to welfare, he explained how his ego would be crushed:

Pulling out food stamps and an EBT card at the grocery store in front of other people, my ego would just be shot. I feel like a reasonably intelligent individual, so if I got to that place I am sure I would be really depressed. Depressed to an extreme, and just embarrassed and disappointed.

He says his “ego would be hard-pressed to say yes” to accepting welfare assistance, that his “ego would certainly play a huge role in it.” He says he has always considered

himself as the person “on the other side of” the welfare desk giving help, not receiving it. The primary source of disappointment for Tom is his belief that he is an intelligent human being who, like anybody else, should be able to solve his own problems if he puts his mind to it. His answer framed social problems such as a poverty as simply a riddle that poor people needed to figure out in order to overcome their problems, rather than structurally-determined.

When we discussed fertility-limiting policies for welfare recipients, Tom framed poverty and fertility as personal choices: fertility because it is a choice rather than influenced by social conditions, and poverty because the social structure does not ultimately decide who is poor, people do. He said he would support fertility policies as long as people were aware of them ahead of time, ignoring these structural concerns. He is hesitant, because he does not want to see children hurt, but he clearly objects to the “irresponsibility” of poor women having children. He explained, “I object to the idea of continuing to foster a method of no responsibility but also do not want that refusal to result in something far worse like the death of a child.”

Tom is very cognizant of structural factors that contribute to social problems, but (a) had trouble incorporating them into non-individual explanations of poverty, and (b) seemed to be conflicted about his knowledge of these factors and his strong belief that people are ultimately the ones responsible for helping themselves. He says social workers, unlike students in other disciplines, are “focusing on theory, you’re looking at larger systems, you’re looking at larger aspects of what is affecting this individual.” He believes that social workers learn to look beyond the individual to see other factors that shape their experiences and outcomes, saying social workers “are also trying to affect

change on a larger scale. So you may not directly impact person X or Y but if you can fix the system that's around person X and Y hopefully they will benefit from that." He went on to explain that, "I think the overwhelming view [of most Americans] is that if you are poor you are lazy and you are not doing enough to fix your situation. But what I study and learn is that there are so many other factors that go into it. . . It is not just that they are not trying, it could be that that is just the situation." While Tom discussed structural factors and recognized their impact, he never seemed to make solid connections. He believes that the primary cause of poverty is family, an individual-centered variable; from his perspective it may not be a person's fault that they are born into a certain family, but the cause is still individual-level (the members of the family and their ineffective methods of raising children) rather than structural.

When citing family as the primary cause of poverty, he delved into some of his Culture of Poverty beliefs along with his individualistically- and structurally-oriented beliefs:

One answer that comes to mind immediately as the root cause is family. The family unit, having support, drawing support from your family. . . There are so many reasons why families are working and not working. Before I talked about the cycle of poverty a bit, so if a family member can see outside themselves and their current situation they have the opportunity to change the dynamic of the family situation. It would be challenging for sure due to the other factors which come into play, such as institutionalized racism, economic and educational opportunities.

Tom believes that the best way to address poverty is through education. He says, "Education is the equalizer. You know what I mean? If we can provide quality education across the board then children have the opportunity to lift themselves out of poverty as opposed to just bad programs in the schools and they just get stuck in this situation." He believes that fixing the educational system will ensure that everyone has

the skills to succeed in society. Within his worldview, this makes sense given that he shows little concern over whether there are enough opportunities for everybody; his main concern is not that opportunities do not exist or that there is not enough for everybody, but removing obstacles that marginalized groups face in grasping these opportunities and resources.

Nancy Washington utilized all three perspectives when discussing poverty. She is very interested in the negative influence that parenting can have on life chances, particularly salient for her because of life experience. The brother of Nancy's boyfriend's is raising two children and she says he is a "crappy" parent; explaining the problems of one of the children, Nancy explains, "Seeing how this poor child is going to have difficulty the rest of his life because he got unlucky and got some really crappy parents, that was kind of like the motivator I guess to change majors to social work." Her views on the critical role of a child's upbringing in their success as an adult used mostly individualistically-oriented explanations, but also some structurally-oriented ones as well. Nancy has long had an interest in how early-childhood affects people's life chances, an interest that has been strengthened by her college studies. She said, "Especially recently taking all of these psychology and social work classes and the emphasis they put on the first five years of your life and how important those are. I mean the first five years of your life are really going to determine how the rest your life is going to work out." Nancy believes that a person's upbringing is the critical determinant in their economic success as an adult, saying, "I think a lot of it has to do with your upbringing. If you grow up in a poor family, there is no way to get the education that you need, get the tools that you need to improve your situation." This seems to be both

structurally- and individualistically-oriented, focusing on both parenting and the availability of educational resources. She went on to argue that, “Usually the social class you're born into is where you will stay. There are extreme cases of rags-to-riches but for the majority of people that seems to be how it ends up working out.” Her explanation is in large part focused on the individual-level (not the fault of the poor individual but the individual(s) who raised them), but she also sees it as a structural failing. She goes on to say that, “I also think that the system has beaten people down to the point where they lose hope and eventually lose the motivation. They realize, ‘Okay this is how it is going to be, nobody out there is going to help me’. . . I think it is more of a system failure.”

When talking about work requirements Nancy framed work as an individual-level issue. Of welfare work requirements she says she supports them because, “That is how you are going to get yourself out of the situation.” The assumption implicit in this response is the finding a job at a decent wage is largely and individual-level issue. She does not support fertility-limiting policies, but this rejection is not based on structural but individual-level concerns. She said, “What if it was an accident? I feel like that is how most people get into these situations, having unplanned kids. It is not fair to punish the child.” For Nancy, the possibility that individuals did not make smart decisions based on their financial status is the key concern, not structural causes of poverty and/or the injustice of punishing victims of those structural factors. When I asked Nancy to tell me the biggest lesson she learned from her internship, she cited welfare abuse. Nancy could have picked any lesson at all, positive or negative, but she focused on welfare abuse, saying, “I have learned that welfare recipients can be very manipulative.” When I

asked her whether she would ever turn to welfare, she said yes but was somewhat defensive in her answer, saying, “I think it would be my absolute last resort.” Many students answered similarly to this question, quickly reassuring me that they would be “good” welfare users.

Along with explanations rooted in the individualism and social structuralism perspectives, Nancy also utilized Culture of Poverty arguments to explain poverty. She believes in education as preparing people for the (seemingly inherent and unchangeable from her perspective) competition in the job market. She believes that poor children have difficulty “loving learning” as well as difficulty visualizing their own success and seeing past their current social conditions, a sort of fatalistic acceptance of poverty:

You don't know what else is out there, the possibilities that you have unless you learn about it. If you are not educated you're stuck in this little bubble and if it is a bubble in a poor neighborhood that is all you know. That is all you see, you don't know your potential I guess.

When Laila Nasr and I discussed why poverty exists, she utilized all three perspectives when explaining poverty. She believed that she was structurally-oriented, saying, “I don't associate struggle and poverty and that sort of thing with failure. I feel like this is just your situation now. . . I don't ascribe characteristics to who you are as a person because of your financial situation.” Despite feeling that she was structurally-oriented, she cited Culture of Poverty explanations along with individual-level (family upbringing) and structural explanations (educational opportunities, healthcare access, and economic opportunities could be construed individualistically or structurally in her vague answer):

There are a number of reasons why people are poor, but I really think it starts at the beginning. Are you getting the right healthcare that you need, the right education, what are your economic opportunities? If you are living in an area like the South Bronx and this is your life and this is your world and you can't find any work in that area—how will you be making money? When you are in an environment where there are not other people in that neighborhood who are successful, you don't have that model. Education, healthcare, economic opportunities, there are many reasons. I think it is families also. I don't like to say that families perpetuate it because the whole Culture of Poverty thing, I don't really understand it quite yet, I don't know if there is enough data. I think it may have an influence though. I am not saying they are bad because they are being influenced by others, I think they are human beings and of course they are being influenced by others like all of us. Just as I am influenced by my father for being a successful orthopedic surgeon, you know what I mean? I have him as a model. I am just using that as an example. I think it is natural to be influenced. Everyone around you is destitute and not doing well. How does that make you feel about your life and the outcome of your life?

Laila believes her more structurally-oriented beliefs have been encouraged by her studies. She said of her studies, "I am pretty sure early in college, around that time, I believe I was introduced to that notion that it is not just the person, it's their environment as well. If you are not introduced to it, I can see how it might not be intuitive to think about it that way." She believes education is the answer to poverty, a method to disrupt the "cradle-to-prison pipeline." She says that some people are "sort of set up from the beginning to fail," but is not clear on what she means by this. She said of education, "[It] is a way to ensure that you will have a decent quality of life." She makes no mention of how structural constraints might not guarantee enough resources for all educated people, or any mention of a right to a certain standard of living beyond what one can get from the educational competition. She said, "I think that giving people quality education across the board, even if you have nothing, no money at all, there needs to be an equal playing field for people to make something of themselves." Laila believes the educational system is where poverty is truly rooted:

Our educational system is not doing the job at all. There are studies to suggest that funding doesn't entirely matter but I think that it does. I think having equal educational funding would make a difference. Having quality teachers makes a difference. . . Funding the schools, making sure there are good safe buildings, a competent staff, seeing if they know how to deal with groups of kids who don't have that much and may have a lot going on at home.

Laila's answers excluded the possibility that a "level playing field" would go beyond equal educational access alone. She also fails to identify how fixing the school system, which empirical research suggests is not the primary cause of poverty, would fix the social problem of poverty itself.

Amanda Rodgers' answers to poverty- and inequality-related questions were a bit vague, and could be interpreted as structural and/or individualistic. I tended to interpret her answers as individualistic, but not completely. Amanda believes that the U.S. is a meritocracy where people occupy certain social positions based upon their hard work, saying, "Yeah, I would say the U.S. is a meritocracy. It is mostly a meritocracy, for most people." Amanda cited the "cycle of wealth," or her belief that families pass resources and opportunities throughout the generations to ensure success or failure. This answer could be construed as structural or individualistic, depending upon why she believes this influences social position:

I would say the 'cycle of wealth' [causes poverty]. . . In the sense, for me at least, I was born into a family that was very comfortable and I was very taken care of. A lot of people are born into families where they don't have a lot of money, and their opportunities are not extensive as say my opportunities or somebody else's opportunities. So I would say wealth trickling down throughout families.

Amanda believes that the answer to addressing poverty is through education. She believes welfare assistance "focuses a lot on how to temporarily solve the issue instead of prevention," whereas educationally-focused solutions "would be better, more

preventative.” This answer could be construed as an individual-level answer, given that she is suggesting we prevent the financial consequences that people who lose out in the economic game suffer; her answer makes no mention of fixing that game to ensure more winners. She believes education “is the biggest thing that gives people an advantage over others” and wants to provide an “adequate education for everybody.” She says “equal access to education” will cure poverty, further promoting the idea of a competitive society and excluding other factors that prevent a level playing-field.

### **The Rare Structurally-Oriented Worldview**

The majority of student worldviews were individualistically-oriented, while the rest were either dominated by Culture of Poverty assumptions or had no clear dominant perspective. Out of the 25 students that I spoke with, there was one student who had a worldview clearly dominated by the social structuralism perspective.

In our discussions of poverty, Jana Tanner firmly believes that, “It is never a choice to be poor,” and is ardently structurally-oriented (in my estimation she had the most thoroughly structural-worldview of the participants in this study). She comes from a European country that has a more extensive social safety net than the U.S. and whose cultural assumptions about social problems justify the need for such an expansive social welfare system; in addition to this cultural influence, she was raised by parents who seemed to be even more leftist and structurally-oriented than much of the population of her homeland. She said of her upbringing, “I am from Europe, and my father is a big socialist. He is a party leader in the Socialist party and so we were always pro-union, pro-social-welfare.” Of Americans’ more individualistic worldviews relative to people from her culture, she says she is “shocked” by what she sees and hears in the U.S.:

I think it is so sad in the United States that people here think that poor people don't deserve social welfare. . . I just don't understand this meanness against poor people. It is not like they want to be poor. And so I think that is another big push for me, I just think that this country really needs as many voices for the poor people as possible. . . It has a lot to do with my upbringing and seeing it from a different perspective, too. Coming from a country that has a huge social welfare network.

She says that in her country in Europe, there is little stigma attached to the word “socialism,” and the benefits that are available are perceived as socially just due to structural limitations. She says the expansive social welfare state “is not the socialist thing that we think of when we think of Russia. I think it is a democracy built on social welfare and social well-being.” Jana was very aware of her worldview, and says she chose social work because of the perceived similarity between her worldview and the theoretical orientation of the field:

This [social work] actually suits me better [than other fields] because it is a more inclusive profession because we are looking at all of the systems. . . You know in social work programs what we are learning is the whole systems perspective. . . I am not just looking at the person, I am looking at the person because that person is like a spider web, right? It is like the center of the spider web and it touches all these different things within his or her environment. Which, if you have an issue you cannot just fix the person you actually have to fix all of the threads that connect that person. . . [If] you are not trained in that perspective [systems/structural] or have never heard of that perspective, you want to fix the person's problem but that doesn't really fix the person. It is a situational fix.

More on Jana's belief that structural imbalances cause poverty and inequality:

I think the main problem is inequality. That can be anything from racial inequality to gender inequality. I think if you look at the power structure of who is not poor you will notice it is white males from a Christian background. Then you look at the people who are most likely to be poor, which is a colored women, and that explains the whole thing. The way we have our pay structure, the way we have our childcare structure. I think that's inequalities, the main reason. It is built-into society. . . A lot of the problems we deal with in social work are related to poverty in some way. It is either the cause or it is the reason or the symptom of it, you know.

When I asked Jana to tell me the best way to address the problem of poverty, she cited reforming welfare rather than the bigger structural issues that she cited so many times in our conversation. She believes that the U.S. welfare system is the ultimate answer to addressing poverty and that it is currently structured rather well, arguing, "I think the system is set up well." On how best to address poverty, she responded, "I think streamlining. Streamline welfare." She said she would reduce the number of forms that people have to fill out and "just get rid of a lot of useless people within the [social welfare] bureaucracy." This was a bit of an underdeveloped part of her worldview, I felt, considering how strongly she felt about macro-level issues such as gender and racial inequalities. She did argue the need for a higher quantity of affordable housing units for the poor, saying, "There is a huge need for low-income section-eight housing." Jana believes that policy-makers should calculate the number of individuals who need lower-priced units and an appropriate number of "housing units in the city should have to be set aside for low-income people."

## CHAPTER 6 SYMBOLIC STRUGGLES

In chapter five I discussed the overarching explanations that the study participants utilized to help explain the existence of poverty and inequality in the U.S. In that discussion, I explained how (a) individualistically-oriented worldviews were the most common worldview, and how (b) individualism was a major part of the remaining worldviews. In this chapter, I will discuss more narrowly-focused themes from within these worldviews that emerged from the data. These themes cover a wide variety of poverty- and welfare-related topics and help to further support and understand the students' worldviews. Because individualism was so dominant, this chapter focuses mostly on the themes/justifications that support the dominant perspective of individualism, as well as other themes that emerged from the data.

### **The U.S. is a Meritocracy**

Most of the students I spoke with believed that the U.S. was a meritocracy. I asked all of the students the following question:

Do you believe the U.S. is a meritocracy, where income, wealth, and social class position are mostly determined by individual characteristics such as how hard we work and whether or not we make smart choices? Do you believe this to be true or false for most Americans?

Of the 25 students that I spoke with, 14 (56%) said "yes/true" to this question, eight (32%) said "no/false," and three (12%) said "both yes/true and no/false." The belief that the U.S. is a meritocracy, where individual characteristics determine our social class position, was the dominant sentiment among the students that I spoke with, and helped to explain the dominance of individualistic-orientations (discussed in chapter 5). There were of course a significant number of students (32%) who disagreed with the notion of the U.S. as a meritocracy. Noreen provided a typical "no/false" response, saying:

I disagree. I mean the institutional and systemic racism, sexism, poverty, etc. All of the things that I have talked about. It doesn't have anything to do with merit. I mean, I've met too many people in my life that are bright, that are capable, that are ambitious, that have all the qualities you would think would lead to success, but there's all kinds of obstacles and blocks that are really beyond their, you know, just simply ability to get past, you know? And it gets very discouraging.

Despite this minority viewpoint, the dominant pattern in the data supported the notion of the U.S. as a meritocracy.

Peter's support for a meritocracy comes from his strong individualistically-oriented beliefs, saying, "My personal belief is that whatever you get is what you put into it. . . You have to achieve your own success and there's more than one way. . . I would say it's [the U.S. as a meritocracy] true." Ashley said the U.S. "is absolutely a meritocracy," and believes that her family's financial success and upward mobility are solid proof. For Ashley, the fact that upward mobility is possible for some is proof it is possible for all:

I see my father and his life as a perfect example. I think all of my family gets very frustrated when people say that you can never rise out of poverty. Seeing my dad really work from the bottom up, I know it is possible. We went from poverty to the upper-class in one generation. I think there is a lot to be said about working hard and being able to achieve success.

Isabel also used her experience and relative success as proof of a meritocracy, saying, "Me being an immigrant and coming here with nothing pretty much, I mean I am not successful yet, I still have a ways to go [but believes she will succeed]. But if you have determination you succeed for the most part." She believes that individuals who are motivated inevitably succeed, and the (perceived) unlimited opportunities present in the U.S. ensure that hard work will be rewarded. In support of this belief she explained, "America is a country known by the opportunities given to every person." Like Isabel,

Natalia also believes that the U.S. has unlimited opportunities, saying, “Opportunities are present, it is our responsibility to grab them.” Jennifer echoed Isabel and Natalia in her belief in unlimited opportunities, saying, “There are so many opportunities, its America, I mean come on.” Amanda said, “Yeah, I would say the U.S. is a meritocracy. It is mostly a meritocracy, for most people.” Sarah believes that the U.S. is a meritocracy, but is somewhat hesitant, saying, “I would say yes. . . But according to my husband, he told me that nobody outside of our state, our area, they don’t live like this. They don’t make as much money as here and some people are so poor.” Sarah lives in a very wealthy area, one of the wealthiest in the nation, and her awareness of her privilege seemed to lead her to question her beliefs on some level during our interview. She struggled to find an explanation for the inequality she hears about elsewhere but in the end stuck to her belief in a meritocracy. Jenny said she does not support the idea that the U.S. is a meritocracy, but it is clear that believes in half of the premise of my question (she rejected the idea that our social class position is based on hard work, but does believe that social position is the result of smart choices). Jenny explained:

I understand that people do work hard and no matter how hard they work they can't get out of their set level because they are putting their effort in the wrong things. . . If you put effort into working at a fast food restaurant in order to make money instead of going to school at the same time to pursue higher education and get a degree—that is putting effort into the wrong place.

### **The “Freedom” to Choose**

A particularly strong theme in the ethnographic record was the belief among BSW students that all individuals are completely free to make the “right” choices and change their lives. One of the reasons that so many students were more interested in the plight of children than the plight of adults is because they felt sorry that the children

are caught in situations that they did not choose, unlike adults. Children are victims of circumstances while adults are free to make the “right” decisions at any time and make a better life for themselves. There was a strong sentiment that in the U.S. our level of legal freedom translated into freedom from social forces and any possible constraints of the social structure. This was not always the case in all of the interviews, as there were a few exceptions. Jana, for instance, rejects this logic:

In social work programs what we are learning is the whole systems perspective. . . If you are a caseworker and you are not trained in that perspective or have never heard of that perspective, you want to fix the person’s problem but that doesn’t really fix the person. It is a situational fix. And that is probably why there is more burnout, because if you fix the broken car, you haven’t actually fixed anything for that person. I am not just looking at the person, I am looking at the person because that person is like a spider web, right? It is like the center of the spider web and it touches all these different things within his or her environment. Which, if you have an issue you cannot just fix the person you actually have to fix all of the threads that connect that person.

While Jana is clearly an example of the fact that not every BSW student ignored the role of social forces in the lives of both children and adults, Jana was in the minority.

My conversations with Olivia provide some of the best examples of this perceived notion that people can overcome almost anything by making the right choices. In this particular conversation she was discussing some of the root causes of poverty in the U.S.:

I believe we attach these stigmas and that is very structural, but I also agree with individualism a lot, the individualism viewpoint. I understand the system has been very unfair to you, I agree with that and that is why I agree with structuralism the most. The system has been unfair, it has put you in this place, but you are still a person. There is still the personal responsibility factor. And while all these things maybe are against you, if you give into the system it is your choice. I understand that I have never been in that position, so it is a lot easier said than done. Somebody very close to me, his dad is a cabdriver and his mom has a similar low-income job. But they are putting him through college. I am a firm believer that it is about the decisions that you make. . . giving in to the system is a personal decision.

Olivia acknowledges that poverty and welfare need may be the result of bad luck, being dealt difficult circumstances, and/or being the victim of structural forces beyond one's control. Despite recognizing how structural conditions may contribute to people's life chances, she goes on to say that if you fail it is still your fault; it is up to you to make the right decisions and not to "give in" to your situation. Olivia went on to talk about supporting welfare as long as people change their behavior, and the belief of her and her family that they were never given anything:

People should get welfare as long as they're making a change in behavior. I am from a middle-class family. My family did not receive any government assistance. My parents did not receive any assistance on my FAFSA, they pay for everything out-of-state for me. I am graduating without any college debt and I really appreciate my parents for doing that. It is amazing. I think it is unfair to ask people to give up money that they have earned. Why do I have to give that to everybody else? I agree that is unfair especially if that person is not making an effort to change. I also think a lot of times there is a misconception that people are not making an effort to change when they are. . . as long as it is proven in the long run that you're making that change. After so many times though, I hate to say that, but if you are not making an effort to change do you really deserve to receive this assistance? Because you don't seem to be appreciating or using it and really feeling like it is helping you. So I agree philosophically as long as it is structured the right way and people are making changes in their lives.

Olivia and her family strongly believe that they are individuals unaided by the social structure, surviving and thriving in the world because of the individual-level decisions

that they have made; given this and given their upward mobility, they do not see any reason why everyone else cannot simply follow their lead. When I asked Olivia about possibly having to use welfare at some point in her life, she reported that it would hurt her pride deeply:

Yes [it would hurt my pride], because I have never had to before. I think it would hurt my pride for me to have to go into an office and say I need the government to do this for me. Especially because I am a very driven person, so that would also come with the sense that I had failed in some way. So I think it would really hurt my pride. Me receiving that help from somebody else instead of my parents would be a reminder that I wasn't doing enough. Because I would be doing everything in my power to get off of that welfare.

Olivia believes she has remarkable drive and self-determination, so if she somehow failed and had to turn to welfare, it would be an indictment of this notion. She also firmly believes that if she ever had to turn to welfare, she would be a “moral” welfare user and do everything in her power to leave welfare behind as quickly as possible.

When talking about why poverty exists, Sarah said that “if you work hard, and if you make the right choices, you can actually—no matter how society throws at you, you can actually live minimum” and have a decent standard of living. Sarah believes that certain people are just not smart enough to make the right choices, ignoring how the effectiveness of choices and availability of particular choices might both be constrained by structural conditions:

I think some people just don't know—have not had an opportunity to learn to help themselves. They don't have the education, like probably family background. That's probably second biggest issue. It could be their genetically they're not—can I say they're not smart enough to make the right choice. Probably if they genetically they exposed in that way, probably they don't know—probably they can't help themselves. They don't know any other avenues to influence themselves to get better. Other reason is that they just not motivated.

She believes that outreach into the community is the best way to solve poverty because people will not help themselves. She suggested programs could be created “to motivate self-determination.” When talking about fertility policies, she also focused on how children were a choice and the fact that poor women should not (a) make the choice to be in poverty or (b) make the choice to have children while in poverty, stating, “You want people to be more responsible. If they can't support more children, they shouldn't.”

Allison was talking to me one day about how using welfare would hurt her pride because, “I'd feel bad that I was in that situation, I mean I'd want to be able to do things for myself, and I'm not able to at the moment.” To Allison, turning to welfare meant you were helpless. Allison did not seem to be using this criticism on other people, instead revealing a deeply internalized belief that people who are not economically successful have failed in some way to help themselves.

Terra believes that social workers should teach welfare recipients to help themselves. She believes social work is an individual-oriented field because:

We practice self-determination meaning you get out of life what you give. .  
. We are taught to think more like—not to—we think people first, we don't think poverty. . . Sort of helping individuals fix their problems, do for themselves.

Terra believes that contemporary Americans have it a lot easier than in the past, and because of this, there should not be as many excuses for not achieving educational and economic success:

I think it's better now though [being able to avoid poverty], because with financial aid, if you want to go to college you can. So it's more like, 'Are you lazy and you just don't want to?' With financial aid, if you want to go to school, you can. You can get grants, so there's no excuse. So it's more like, 'Do you want to go to college or not?' I don't think there's any excuse—if you want to go, you can go now.

For Terra, economic capital was all that mattered, ignoring the critical roles of cultural and social capital, as well as in the influence of the intergenerational transmission of such capitals. Terra supports drug tests for welfare recipients to “break the cycle” of poverty, firmly focusing on pathological patterns of poverty in families rather than any structural considerations:

I would say yes for drug testing. . . I think if they're testing positive for anything above marijuana then they should—the children should be removed, and then if they can't apply again for about six months or a year. . . They could be helped and then we have a vicious cycle of then those children are going to see their parent's use and then perhaps be alcoholic addicts, so if you can break that cycle and intervene, then perhaps they won't be on welfare.

Corinne talked about her path to social work and how she was motivated in part by wanting to help people formulate plans to fix individual deficiencies, saying, “I guess you get to get in there [in social work] and get your hands dirty with the participants, or whoever you're working with, but then you're also formulating a plan with them to help them better themselves.” When talking about her internship experiences Corinne revealed how social workers in the field also focus on individuals, while also reinforcing her own focus on individuals:

I decided to do my internship [with a social services agency], and I was really disappointed in that experience. So many of the social workers were just burnt out, and they were just—they had very little compassion or empathy for the people they were serving. The children a little but mostly the parents. It was very much like, 'I'm the person of power, and you are lower than me.' And that really made me sad. And I got that impression a lot, or they would talk about just their living conditions, and how it's so disgusting. But not just like, how can we fix this, or what can we do to help them [be] better?

A particularly interesting part of that quote was when she said that the social workers had very little empathy for the people they were serving, the adults in particular. This was a common thread in the ethnographic record, this notion that while children were victims of social forces, adults were not. In ignoring the strong role that social forces play in the lives of adults both as adults and also their entire lives up to that point, it helped to explain why so many of my participants were individualistically-oriented. In another conversation about poverty, Corinne (while equating poverty with homelessness) suggested that the "cycle of poverty" was a problem with families, not social structures:

At least with my experience with the homeless population, like, the father is homeless, has very little education and is homeless, and therefore his children have become homeless, and they have children. So they are sort of just stuck in this cycle. They don't know any different. A lot of it is they just don't know.

She went further to talk about how to address poverty:

I think educating the family, because I think you can do all you want to with children, but if they go home every night and are in this situation, they're going—I mean, that's—most of the time, that's where we're going to—that's where we're pulled. I mean, there are exceptions, of course, and that's great when there are, but if you're not working with the parents, just like the foster care thing, if you're not mentoring them and helping them to realize that there is more out there for them, and they don't have to live like this. Poverty doesn't have to be the way that they live their lives. I think that would be where we would need to start.

Given her previous explanations of poverty, it was not much of a surprise that the Culture of Poverty perspective was particularly attractive to her:

I would definitely say Culture of Poverty [explains poverty] for sure, that is a clear-cut number one. It's hard because yes, your choices determine who you are as a person, but if you don't have the basis to make good choices, so I would say the least—that's really hard, because I think they all totally tie together, but Culture of Poverty for sure number one.

When discussing family caps Corinne believed that (a) having children is always a choice, and (b) poor women should not have such a choice. She supported family caps “as long as it is up front and people have birth control access.” If poor women cannot escape poverty, then they should not have children; the only logical explanation is birth control.

Melanie and I had a discussion about welfare and whether she agreed with the basic arguments in support of welfare. She agreed, and in agreeing, revealed her thoughts on poverty:

Yes [she agrees philosophically]. I would use it if I had to for a short period of time. I believe that it is there to help people get off of their feet so that they can support themselves on their own either again or for the first time. I was a teenage mom, so I've actually used like WIC for some support for diapers and food and stuff. I didn't feel comfortable being on it long-term when I was married to a healthy person and I was a healthy person, and I could eventually support myself. I wasn't on it long. I just wouldn't have felt comfortable being on it any longer than I had to—I think I would feel guilt that somebody else probably needed it more than I did.

Melanie believes that there is something inherently wrong with welfare-use, especially long-term welfare-use, because it signals that you are failing to help yourself. I asked her if she felt any stigma when she had to use welfare as a teenage mother:

No I don't think so. I think I was too young to really understand that maybe that it wasn't normal. It was normal to me. I was a young mother who couldn't feed her kids, who needed to feed her kids. You know? I needed to get them in diapers, so, that's really all I used it for was diapers and formula, so it wasn't like I was using it for stuff for myself.

Her answer revealed her feelings that welfare is not normal (and that somehow poverty is not a normal structural failing) and that she was a "moral" welfare recipient, using it only on necessities. In talking to her I felt this was both defensiveness against perceived criticism she might receive for using welfare as well as her own belief that she was not like the other "immoral" welfare users.

Noreen and I had a long discussion about what she believes the answer is in terms of addressing poverty. She believes that everybody should receive equal access to education and that educational funding should be equalized. Once that happens, she believes, there is no need to focus on social forces anymore that might contribute to inequality; education is all you need to address, and after that, we are all on our own. She also ignores how equal access to education might not address social forces that fail to prepare everybody equally for that education:

God, this is gonna sound so socialist and I'm not a socialist, but a more equal distribution of education funds [is the key]. Everybody is to some extent responsible for their own personal success. Let me put it to you this way: education being equal, if every single person has the same access to the same quality education, if the science classes in the schools in the inner-city are the exact same science classes with the exact same equipment and textbooks and teacher qualifications, you know, as we have here in the suburbs where there is a bunch of money, when that's all equal, then you're on your own. We are responsible for making our own way.

Being politically-liberal, supporting Barack Obama (she was wearing a "loud" Obama/Biden campaign shirt during our interview), having had more (perceived) life experience as a student significantly older than her colleagues, and being "in-tune" with

the complex explanations for social problems were all influential, salient parts of Noreen's personal identity. Yet in her answers about poverty and inequality, she revealed a rather underdeveloped theoretical and empirical understanding of the many explanations for social differences.

Noreen supported family caps because to her children are a choice and poor women should not make that choice, saying, "I see the argument. If you're not, for whatever reason, in a position to even maintain yourself and what you have then you have no business having more children." She believes that it is irresponsible and that the answer for poor women is birth control. She went so far as to suggest putting the children born into poverty into foster care until the parents had more economic success, saying, "There has to be some kind of a consequence to the parents. . . Hold the parents accountable [by taking their children away]."

Peter believes a big explanation for poverty is in the motivations that individuals have to be successful. He explained the stereotypes that he used to believe about the Hispanic/Latino population in the U.S., and how these stereotypes were reinforced by personal experience with Hispanic/Latino friends:

I used to live in a place with a big Hispanic population and I used to speculate on illegal immigration and people who stand outside Wal-Mart looking for under-the-table construction jobs. I'd just think, 'You know, the stereotype that Hispanic people are lazy, this and that.' Then I would go visit my Hispanic friends and their family, and compared to my mom's house, their house is messy. But then I realize it's part of the culture. And being in the shelter and being a social worker and having all these perspectives and theories brought to light, it has changed my views on a lot of things. I used to walk around [the city], and you see all the homeless people and they're asking for dollars, asking for change. I remember when I was a kid I was like, 'You're gross, leave me alone.' Then I got to, 'Okay, I'm going to give you a dollar. Are you going to go buy drugs or alcohol?' And then now it's kind of like, 'Besides the dollar, what can you do more?' So to know more, it's enlightened me in regards to the plight of people in need.

Peter is individualistically-oriented to a significant extent. He remembers always having such a worldview, shaped by his life experiences, and does not believe the BSW program can change that. Peter explains that, "I don't know that it [the MAU BSW program] has changed my views that much. A lot of the views I have are from being in the military." Not only does he believe that the BSW program can do little to change his perspective, but he is highly critical of his fellow BSW colleagues for being "too liberal" and not being "objective" enough to see the world for what it truly is (a world based on individualism):

Not to toot my own horn, but ever since I turned 18, I've been on my own. I've tried to do things and be proficient on my own. I usually don't rely on my parents at all. I moved out when I started community college and had my own apartment. I worked three jobs to try to pay for everything and that didn't work out. I went into the [U.S. Armed Forces] so I could pay for school. And it's kind of like a lot of people say, 'I want to help people, I want to help the unfortunate people in the world.' Well great, it's a great dream. But realistically you can't, you can't get to everyone. The way I think about it is more objective than other students. I think that's because of my military training. And sometimes I hear people talk about stuff in class and it sounds like it's out of a movie. You know, 'I want to help people do this, I want to help people do that.' Or they'll ask questions like, 'Why doesn't he have a job?' And I don't think they look at it from a realistic, objective point of view. And I think that's just a lack of experience in life in general. . . I personally don't think a lot of people [BSW students] have had enough experience to deal with that [social problems]. . . I've eaten out of dumpsters, and when you have been through those things, it's kind of like if you work for a company. If you start from the ground up, you were the lowest of the low and then you go through the ranks, you get promoted, by the time you reach management position, you are the best at everything because you've been through every stage.

When discussing poverty, he stated that people are poor not because opportunities do not exist, but because people's expectations are too high and poor people fail to take advantage of realistic opportunities that do exist. He said that people overlook the jobs that are available at places like McDonald's because they do not pay wages that they prefer, those jobs do not pay "enough according to you." He explains:

Everyone wants that one job that pays more than enough to live off of so they don't have to work multiple jobs. But the bottom line is, if you have a job at McDonalds, yes, it doesn't pay that well. Yes, it's not a prestigious job. But that's a job and a job is better than no job.

Peter focuses on the individual's responsibility to cobble together multiple jobs to make a living wage, rather than any possible unjust distribution of this burden. He used his experiences as a child in Asia to drive home this point:

When I was growing up in [Asia], if you converted the currency, people could make \$2.50 an hour and live happily because they don't need a big-screen TV. Most of them don't even have cars. I remember growing up, we didn't have a fridge. We went to the local market every day, morning, evening, and we bought food and we cooked it fresh. We had no centralized heating. I remember as a kid my job was to go downstairs and pick up pieces of coal. I think people take the concept of like the 'land of opportunity,' you know, you should get the best. I think people take that a little too far. I guess in the social work sense people say, 'Oh, this guy lives in a rundown house, this and that.' But the thing is, he has a home. And I'm not saying that we shouldn't strive for better, but I think people what they have for granted. They don't appreciate what they have, but they always want more. Also I personally think, what keeps the perpetual cycle of poverty, it's like that book from when you were a kid, *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. People can't just – you give someone one thing and they can't be content with it. They have to have more.

Peter believes that the availability of a minimum standard of living to many people in the U.S. (a minimum standard that is enviable in many parts of the world) is proof that society is organized in a socially just manner, failing to address the possible unjust distribution of positions in the social hierarchy. Peter assumes that everybody is responsible for their own success or failure; and in assuming this, he considers it a great privilege to live in a country that affords this standard of living to people that may not have earned it.

Peter believes the answer to poverty is to have educational institutions work hand-in-hand with private corporations so that people train specifically for the skills needed for jobs available at the moment. Peter believes that welfare has too many loopholes and should not be a handout, saying, "I mean, who wouldn't want to get stuff for free?" He points to his foster father and Peter's belief that he became dependent on unemployment benefits. Peter believes opportunities exist for all who want them, and those who rely on welfare for too long do so out of an individual rather than structural

failing. Discussing people who use welfare for an extended period of time, Peter says, “That complacency, that’s what I don’t agree with.”

Ashley discussed her internship experience and how it opened her ideas to some of the non-individual-level explanations of poverty. What was interesting about this is that this happened only because she saw middle-class people experiencing poverty due to the most recent economic downturn (and made me question whether her eyes would have been opened had it been the “typical” poor that she was dealing with):

Now that I have seen that [her internship experiences], I wish people would understand that the stigmas and the stereotypes aren’t always correct. I definitely came into the situation feeling that homeless people were there through matters of their own doing, that they were drug addicts, that they didn’t want to work, etc. But especially in the community outreach, you find, especially in this economy, that a lot of people were making six figures and it all fell apart. Especially this one family I was working with. Both the husband and the wife together were making a wonderful amount of money, upper-middle-class, if not upper-class. They both lost their jobs, and it was a lot of self-determination and hard work that got them to where they ended up being, which is employed again.

Her answer did not address her feelings about the people who were poor and/or homeless and not recently middle-class. Her answer also revealed how she was sort of reverent towards these people because their “self-determination and hard work” helped them escape their circumstances, speaking to the strong belief in individualism and self-reliance in Ashley’s personal and family identity:

I think if you look at my religious views of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, they go hand-in-hand [with her beliefs about poverty and inequality]. We believe very strongly that you should be self-sufficient, that you need to depend upon yourself and don’t go looking for somebody else to bail you out.

Ashley and her family are such strong believers in self-sufficiency, hard work, and the idea that life is a meritocracy because of their own upward mobility:

It [the U.S.] is absolutely a meritocracy. I see my father and his life as a perfect example. I think all of my family gets very frustrated when people say that you can never rise out of poverty. Seeing my dad really work from the bottom up I know it is possible. We went from poverty to the upper-class in one generation. I think there is a lot to be said about working hard and being able to achieve success.

Ashley believes that education is the key to addressing poverty because it can help individuals be self-sufficient, the primary problem with the poor, saying, “I think with education you can prevent a lot of problems that come down the line with people as they become adults.” Like Peter, Ashley believes opportunities exist for everyone who wants to grab them, so long-term welfare use is a sign of personal failing to her. She explained:

I have friends that have been in situations where they have sought welfare. But I think the key difference is [if she were to use welfare] I would not depend upon it in a long-term situation. I would say, ‘This is just going to be a few months, maybe even a year.’ My goal in the beginning of receiving welfare would be to get off of it, not depend on it forever.

She said that she would be ashamed to use welfare in the affluent area where she lives, but not in more rural areas, stating that in those areas “people are depending upon it and it is not even questioned” so she would not be ashamed. She would be ashamed of using welfare because she “would feel very much like I was a burden to society” due to her beliefs that much of welfare-use is largely unjustified.

Jenny does not believe that economic success can come to everybody by effort alone. Her parents believe this strongly, however, and attempted to impart this worldview to her. Jenny’s parents were poor when they came to the U.S. and experienced rapid, significant upward mobility in a very short period of time. On the surface, it appears (at least anecdotally) that their ideas about hard work and economic success are true. What is interesting, however, is that the Phans (her parents) arrived in

the U.S. with little money but many other important resources. While they did not have much economic capital, they had cultural capital (highly educated in Asia), social capital (socially important in Asia and immediately “plugged into” a vast same-culture social network upon arriving), and all of the informal knowledge that comes along with having been wealthy and prestigious in Asia. In feeling that hard work is always rewarded, Jenny’s parents have clearly overlooked many of the contributing factors, along with hard work, that likely helped them achieve success in the U.S. Jenny notes that:

My parents believe that poor people can just get up, get out, and get a job. Because that is how they got their jobs and how they got their success. But I know that you can put as much effort and as much hard work into it and things might not work out well. I think most Americans would agree with my parents. I think most people that disagree with me disagree because their ideas about laziness and lack of motivation among the poor. I mean sometimes it is true and sometimes it isn’t. Some of them are indeed lazy.

An interesting aspect of Jenny’s answer is that while she does reject the idea that success comes through hard work alone, she does believe that was the case for her parents. She says that poverty is solved by getting a job, like her parents, and ignores any possible non-merit resources or events that might have contributed along the way for the Phans.

Tom rejected psychology and psychiatry as college majors because he did not want to hear people complaining about problems that they should be able to solve themselves, saying:

I had a personal issue with psychology and psychiatry, like, ‘Well if you need help, if you can’t resolve an issue on your own—I would never go seek help because you should be able to resolve an issue on your own.’

Not only does Tom believe that people can solve problems largely on their own, but he believes this for himself as well. Tom is from a privileged background so it is no doubt

true that he likely has many opportunities and resources to solve many problems that arise in his life without much direct assistance, but this discussion of his own privilege never happened. In a later conversation Tom and I discussed poverty, and Tom immediately cited the family as the cause of problem, ignoring any possible relationship between families and social structures:

One answer that comes to mind immediately as the root cause is family. . . . Before I talked about the cycle of poverty a bit, so if a family member can see outside themselves and their current situation they have the opportunity to change the dynamic of the family situation.

Tom believes that if only family members in poor families could “see outside of themselves” then they could be successful. Tom and I moved on to talk about welfare and if it would hurt his sense of pride to use it, which he responded:

Like pulling out food stamps and an EBT card at the grocery store in front of other people, my ego would just be shot. I feel like a reasonably intelligent individual, so if I got to that place I am sure I would be really depressed. Depressed to an extreme, and just embarrassed and disappointed. And so all of that would factor in to my ability to function, and let alone try to take care of myself. That’s just what I could see happening.

Tom believes that people are responsible for their own success or failure, so it makes sense that he would talk about embarrassment and depression given that self-sufficiency is such a big part of his personal identity and economic worldview.

When I asked Natalia why she believes poverty exists, she surprisingly said that she has never really thought about the topic much, and that it is only addressed infrequently in her classes. For Natalia, poverty is caused by individuals’ need for instant gratification:

I haven't really thought about this question a lot. It does pop up in class sometimes but not so much in my free time. . . I get the feeling that a lot of Americans have the big dreams, they want the big house, the big cars, and I think a lot of people want whatever they want here and now. They don't always think of, well what if something happens? I don't think that they think ahead. I am also one of those people, but again I think especially as people get older I think a lot of it is people's mindsets around finances. Like, instant gratification. I think it is an American thing, like uniquely American.

For Natalia, her own sense of pride would only allow her to turn to welfare as a last resort, even saying that she would have to spend some time in homelessness first:

I would not feel comfortable. To me I feel that I am too proud to accept welfare. It would have to be a very, very, very, very last resort. I would probably go to the streets for a little bit before even thinking about welfare.

She said that she would hate herself for turning to welfare and not trying everything that she could think of first before seeking assistance. She said, "Even if I had to choose welfare and it was the absolutely last resort a part of me would still say no. . . A part of me, I don't want to put myself down or take a step down from how I feel about my pride." She went on to explain:

The biggest thing is I just don't think that I could bring myself to go onto welfare. I would feel like I am weak, helpless. And I have felt helpless and I don't want to revisit that. So I don't want to relive my past. . . I have done this once, and I don't want to do this another time. I have been in that helpless child phase where I, even when I was put in with a family I still felt helpless, I felt out of control, I didn't feel like I had control of my life. There is a part of me that would hate myself because I have already been helpless.

For Natalia, having to resort to welfare makes her feel like a helpless child. My conversations with Natalia were interesting, and the imagery that she used to talk about her own identity and sense of pride were very colorful. It was no surprise that, given her beliefs about being a "helpless child" resorting to welfare, that she rejected many of the structural arguments concerning welfare need:

I think welfare should kind of get them on their feet, provide them with enough resources, and then kind of push them off. Because I also feel that a lot of people get dependent on it. If you really want to get off welfare, then you will make yourself get off welfare. If you let somebody continue to be on welfare and then say, 'Okay, well you are okay, stay on it a little longer, you're okay, we'll give you more money, we'll give you more resources, and then we take a step back.' And then we get angry with ourselves, asking why are there all of these people on welfare. Well, we're feeding into the system. Let the people go on welfare, but if somebody abuses it, then have repercussions. If there is a mom who is on welfare, and starves her kids but buys a car or nice things, go talk to her. Go make an example of her. I am not trying to be mean about it, but I just think that that would be the more fair way of doing it.

Natalia clearly believed that poverty was the result of bad luck and temporarily-difficult circumstances, but any long-term poverty and welfare need was a sign of individual failing and dependency.

### **Deserving Children, Undeserving Adults**

There was a significant pattern in the ethnographic record of BSW students believing that choices alone could overcome social forces and structural constraints. Because of this belief, many of the respondents either explicitly or implicitly signaled that they cared more about and/or sympathized to a greater extent with poor children than adults; this is because the participants did not frame children's poverty as the result of their choices, while adults were responsible for their poverty<sup>18</sup>. There was little discussion of (a) the adults that these poor children would become, (b) the way that childhood experiences stick with us and influence us throughout our lives, or (c) the continuing influence of social forces throughout our lives. On multiple occasions I overheard some variation of, "I feel bad for the children but not for the adults, they

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<sup>18</sup> Adults were either responsible for their poverty because (a) they made choices which initially resulted in their poverty or (b) were "free" to make choices to escape from poverty even though that poverty might not have initially been their fault. The participants tended to believe that poverty could be overcome, even if not initially the fault of the individual, by individual choices alone. In this way the participants believed that individuals are free from social forces.

should know better,” in my field observations. The logic used by many of the participants assumed individuals were largely free from current and past social forces once they reached adulthood<sup>19</sup>.

Many of the BSW students singled out children in particular for their concern and sympathy and either explicitly or implicitly excluded adults. Allison originally wanted to work with children and now wants to work with either children or teenagers. She does not explicitly say it, but I sensed that she wanted to work with children because she believed she could make changes in children more than adults:

I used to think I'd want to work with children, but probably adolescents. I think because you can have such an influence, and I feel like that's a critical point in their lives. You can have a big impact on them. . . working with them so that if there's any problems, to try to resolve them.

Peter originally wanted to be a teacher before finding social work. During his senior year of high school he worked in a daycare center and his positive experiences confirmed teaching as his desired profession. He said, “I like working with children. So I went that route.” After serving some time in the military, however, he reevaluated his decision to be a teacher:

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<sup>19</sup> The claims that I make in the “Deserving Children, Undeserving Adults” subsection are inferences that I made based upon the intersection of field observations and implicit messages contained in the interviews. I truly believe that many of the respondents thought that adults were “free” from social forces. Unfortunately, I did not make this connection in my analysis until after I had left the field and never had the chance to develop a formal interview question to explore this in greater detail. Because of this, I am left to speculate about this connection here and I am left to make claims for which I wish I had stronger support.

After coming out of the military I thought about the teaching thing. And what I realized was that as a teacher, you get to see the students for the duration of the school day. But ultimately you have only one year. You have one year to make some kind of impact. And then it's kind of like, 'Well, I did the best I could. You're going to go off to your next grade. I hope I did something for you.' I wanted to leave a bigger impact than that.

The bigger impact that Peter is referring to is to be able to fix deficiencies in people, a task he does not believe can be achieved in only one year. He believes professionals that spend more time with people, such as social workers, are better able to "fix" people and/or problems, saying that, without social workers, "a lot of the problems would never disappear or never get fixed." Ashley wants to work with neglected children and children from underprivileged backgrounds, saying that providing therapy to such children would be a "dream job." She said, "I have always loved children and I have always really enjoyed working with them and felt very strongly about their rights." Jennifer loves working with children, saying, "I have always enjoyed working with children, playing games with them, working with them. Still to this day I love running around and playing fort, I really enjoy it." Jennifer feels that she is able to make connections with children that are more difficult to make with adults. She remembers babysitting when she was younger and has worked for many years at a summer camp in her hometown. Nancy, unlike many of the participants in this study, wants to pursue a career in Child Protective Services (CPS), saying, "I would like to work with children, like in Child Protective Services. I guess I want to do case management and work with the families, set them all up with the services that they need." She has always liked the idea of working in a field where she can help people and thought about going into the nonprofit sector. Her personal experiences pushed her towards social work, however, with a focus on children, saying:

I've always loved kids, I am really good with them for some reason. . . I have been babysitting ever since I was probably way too young to be babysitting, like sixth- and seventh-grade. I just love kids and that was a big factor in becoming a social worker, too.

Nancy has a big interest in the first few years of children's lives, and believes this is where she can make the biggest impact to ensure that they grow to be successful adults. She said, "I mean the first five years of your life are really going to determine how the rest your life is going to work out. . . I mean they cannot do it for themselves, they're pretty helpless." For Nancy, working with adults is a little bit "too late" in life to affect serious change.

### **Competition over Equality**

One of the strongest themes in the ethnographic record was the notion that the BSW students took the social structure for granted. When discussing social problems, it was largely assumed that the general rules of social organization in the U.S. were desirable and/or unchangeable, such as: the organization of a capitalist economy, the organization of work, the manner in which resources are distributed, etc. Social problems were largely discussed within the context of the current social structure, discussing ways to address social problems after they happen rather than organizing society in a manner that prevents social problems in the first place. One of the strongest examples of this was the attention that students gave to education. For most of the BSW students that I spoke with, education is the primary method for addressing poverty. The students largely felt that education is a way to prevent individual-level deficiencies from persisting into adulthood; if we can only "fix" or "correct" the problems within students when they are young, then we can assure that they will not be poor and/or contribute to societal problems when they are older. This of course assumes that

the “deficiencies” that lead to poverty and inequality occur at the individual level, and makes no mention of whether we can change the social structure and if such changes might be a socially-just method of attacking these social problems. There was nothing inherently wrong with this individual-level and competition-centered approach, but most of the discussions left out the role that the social structure plays in the first place. Why are these personal characteristics of marginalized people considered deficient? Why do these “deficiencies” matter in who “wins” and “loses” at the economic game? If it is truly an individual-level problem, how do we explain the significant unequal distribution of poverty and inequality across racial lines? What is justifiable about the rewards attached to certain personal characteristics? Why is it assumed that we must operate within the current social structure?<sup>20</sup> Who determines who “wins” and “loses” in the educational and economic competitions, and how do we know that the rules of these competitions are socially just? Most of the students who spoke about boosting the skills of poor children made no mention of why society is organized in such a manner that the “losers” in the educational competition are forced to live with the consequences: low-wages, little-to-no benefits, insecurity, etc. These answers took institutionalized competition for granted; students assumed that this competition was desirable and that society either could not or should not entitle all citizens to a decent quality of life despite their personal characteristics. This assumption seemed to be why so many students focused on education as the answer to poverty. In giving these educationally-centered answers,

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<sup>20</sup> I was particularly puzzled that students had such a hard time thinking outside of the current social structure in our interviews. It is somewhat understandable once these students become social workers in the field that they will look to fix problems from *within* the current social structure; after all, the real power that they will have in the field will be in empowering individuals to navigate the real world as best as possible, not in making major changes to macro-level structures. But in our interviews they were free to think as “big” and unconventionally as they pleased, yet most still chose to talk about society as is rather than as they thought it ought to be.

students also ignored non-educationally-centered social forces that play a significant role in people's lives.

I asked all of the students that I interviewed (a) what they believed the root causes of poverty are and (b) how they might address them through either governmental or non-governmental means. A common theme in their responses about poverty solutions was enhancing competition rather than ensuring equitable distribution of resources: competition over equality. There was a strong belief that if we simply increase the credentials of all people (through education, job training, etc.), then poverty and inequality would disappear. There was very little discussion of ensuring that the social structure ensured some level of equality, but mostly a focus on giving everybody their "fair shot" through increasing their various capitals. While most people would probably value the idea that everybody should be as educated as possible, it does leave one wondering whether that alone would cure poverty and inequality.

Sarah believes that education is a way to mitigate the impact of genetic flaws in individuals on their life chances and also a means of battling the deviant poverty subculture. She says that poor people, "Have not had an opportunity to learn to help themselves. They don't have the education." She believes that personal deficiencies might be genetically transferred across generations, and that education might be a way to correct the fact that poor people are not "smart enough to make the right choice." She believes that enhancing educational funding will "motivate self-determination" because not everybody wants to "help themselves." A prime example of "taking the social structure for granted," Sarah fails to discuss why poor people's "bad decisions" carry certain consequences in the first place.

Corinne believes educating the entire family is a way to battle the deviant subcultural values of the poor and a way to help poor people understand how to make the “right” decisions. She said, “I think you can do all you want to with children, but if they go home every night and are in this situation. . . If you’re not mentoring them and helping them to realize that there is more out there for them, and they don’t have to live like this. Poverty doesn’t have to be the way that they live their lives.” She believes the education is a “way out” for people so that they make the “correct” decisions that lead to financial success.

Melanie believes that it is the moral obligation of those with resources (the middle- and upper-classes) to help those without resources. She also believes that those who are successful should educate the less-successful in how to make decisions that will lead to financial security. She said, “It’s [the answer to addressing poverty] education of those who can help and education of those who need help.” She goes on to say that, “If those who need help really understood fully what they were capable of, what kind of opportunities there were out there for improving their lives, then I think they would do better.” She believes that there are unlimited resources and opportunities for people if we could only prepare the poor for the competition. She believes in the “teach a person how to fish” mentality: educating poor people when they are young will prevent their poverty in the future. She said education is “something that’s gonna help long-term, something that we put money into now that may not put food in people’s mouths, but down the line it would put food in a lot of people’s mouths.”

Ashley and Noreen both believe that education is the best way to address poverty and both assume that equality of educational opportunity would ensure less

poverty and inequality. Ashley said, "I would make sure that no matter where children lived they would have equal opportunities to education. . . Education would be an equal playing field for all. I think with education you can prevent a lot of problems that come down the line with people as they become adults." I asked Noreen what the best method of combating poverty is, and she said, "I absolutely believe it's education, absolutely. I mean, because everything comes from that." She believes that without education, certain groups of people will not have the skills to join the middle- and/or upper-class(es). She said, "If you don't have the basic ability to contribute in civil society, in politics and business, whatever, you get left behind." She believes that, "Everybody is to some extent responsible for their own personal success," and that if educational opportunities were to be equalized then there would be no excuse for those who failed financially. Noreen explained this notion further:

Let me put it to you this way. Education being equal, if every single person has the same access to the same quality education, if the science classes in the schools in the inner-city are the exact same science classes with the exact same equipment and textbooks and teacher qualifications, you know, as we have here in the suburbs where there is a bunch of money, when that's all equal, then you're on your own. We are responsible for making our own way.

In both Ashley and Noreen's answers the social structure and resulting competition for resources and social positions are taken for granted; it is assumed that in order to fix social problems, people have to be fixed, not structures and institutions. Ashley and Noreen believe that (a) everybody is ultimately responsible for their own success or failure, (b) competition is desirable and inequality is a justifiable outcome of competition, (c) equality of educational opportunity assures that all other social forces (social conditions, school readiness, the logic of capitalism, etc.) will not affect people's

success or failure, and (d) education prevents people from harming themselves, financially or otherwise, as adults.

Peter believes that competition is desirable and that education is the key to combating poverty. He takes the social structure for granted to such an extent that he believes people should only be educated to match the exact needs of businesses in the economy at the moment. There was no discussion of (a) whether this was socially just, (b) whether businesses should be given this power, (c) whether this was short-sighted, or (d) all of the social forces that might prevent people from participating in his college-based system<sup>21</sup>. He explained his answer to addressing poverty:

I think having those [education-business partnership] programs where you work with companies and I guess you kind of cater the curriculum of those programs to where you're catering to the need of the company. Like a manufacturing company that needs workers. So that way the client has to commit to the program. But by committing, your chances of getting that job is substantially higher than giving you a generalized program where you take it and then you have to go apply for a job. And I just think the criteria in which you admit people into those programs will be stricter. But the thing is the turnaround rate, in my opinion, would be higher because you're working hand-in-hand with the people who actually want the jobs. You're catering the criteria and the curriculum of these programs to what the company needs. So it's all checking a box. It's almost more businesslike. You can almost guarantee this company that these people in these programs, we have them catered to what you needs. So as soon as they're done if you need them, they're there.

Amanda said that education "is the biggest thing that gives people an advantage over others," and advocates education as the answer to poverty. Amanda explicitly acknowledges that success in the social structure is the result of competition and the

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<sup>21</sup> When analyzing the data after I left the field I was struck by how many students believed that access to college (affordability of tuition, student loans, etc.) meant students could go to college. This assumption ignored whether students were ready for college academically or intellectually. Had I discovered this while still in the field, I certainly would have explicitly addressed this notion in the formal interviews. Peter's answer to how to cure poverty centered on those ready for and enrolled in college. How this would combat poverty for the poor who are likely not as successful in getting into college and in doing well once they are there relative to the middle- and upper-class was left unaddressed.

fact that some people have an advantage over others; rather than addressing this social advantage in a manner that ensures more-equitable outcomes, she suggests keeping the competitive aspects of society through educational reform. She said, “We should make sure everybody gets adequate education, and then further education into college should be available to people even if they cannot afford it. You know, equal access to education basically.” Her answer ignores the problematic aspects of this competition and the problem of school readiness in addressing people’s ability to succeed in college once they have the financial means to attend.

Nancy believes that growing up in a poor family prevents people from acquiring the educational resources that they need. Excluded from her answer was the possibility that resources might be delivered in a manner other than educational attainment. She says education is the “key,” especially in early childhood to prevent individual-level problems in poor children as adults. She laments that, “You cannot get a decent paying job without some education,” but does not address how (a) society might be organized differently to change this and/or (b) why she focuses specifically on the labor market as a means for resource distribution; she instead reinforces this notion of educational and economic competition. She said, “If you are not educated you're stuck in this little bubble and if it is a bubble in a poor neighborhood that is all you know. That is all you see, you don't know your potential I guess.” Her answer assumes limitless possibilities and again reinforces the notion that people’s “potential” is governed by already-existing structural constraints. She gave a similar answer to a question about work requirements, saying that work “is how you are going to get yourself out of the situation,” ignoring the role of the low-wage labor market in this competition.

Isabel supports the DREAM Act as a means to combat poverty, lamenting the dearth of opportunities available to many immigrant children after high school. Her answer does not frame this lack of opportunities as problematic, only the personal characteristics of those unable to grasp these opportunities. Discussing poor immigrants, she said, “They are growing up in these families and they don't have opportunities after they graduate from school. I think it is just creating more poverty and creating a circle.” In her internship experience working with low-income immigrants, she said that improving their situations was difficult because “their way of thinking is different.” She cites this as a cause of their lack of education, failing to identify how society might mitigate the effects of unequal educational credentials. Framing poverty as a social problem that has to be addressed within the current structural framework, she said, “When you don't get education you won't be able to find a decent job or a more stable job, better job opportunities I guess.”

Laila sees education as a means of disrupting the “cradle-to-prison-pipeline,” and believes that education is a way to “ensure that you will have a decent quality of life.” She said, “There needs to be an equal playing field for people to make something of themselves.” She cites deficiencies in educational funding as the primary cause of poverty and inequality, ignoring the substantial amount of empirical evidence to the contrary (research that she actually seems to be aware of). She said of these studies, “There are studies to suggest that funding doesn't entirely matter but I think that it does.” Laila believes educational professions need to know “how to deal with groups of kids who don't have that much and may have a lot going on at home.” This is a within the current social structure answer aimed at preparing children to encounter the world

as it is rather than adjusting the social structure to respond to the needs of the population as they are.

Like so many of the participants, Tom believes that “education is the equalizer.” He believes that providing “quality education across the board” will provide children with the “opportunity to lift themselves out of poverty.” This answer excluded the significant amount of research suggesting many children may not be ready to succeed in schools even if presented with equal educational opportunities, or the possibility of decoupling financial success from educational credentials. He also relies on the school funding argument, saying, “You know with funding, based on your zip code that tells you a lot about how many tax dollars are being spent on your education, I think equalizing that would make a big difference.”

Karen, Jenny, and Allison signaled that they believed competition and the inequality that results is inevitable. Karen believes that all human beings are genetically predisposed to be competitive, and does not believe that society can do much to address the consequences of this competition. She believes that it is the moral obligation of those with resources to help those with little resources, but suggests that most inequality is just a natural, inevitable result of competition. Of poverty and inequality, Karen said:

I think it's just the nature of mankind. It stems from competition, logically it makes sense that there will always be somebody at the bottom. If you look at history there have always been poor people.

Karen never identified any possible ways in which society might be organized to mitigate the negative effects of this competition, suggesting that it is simply “logically” how the world works. Jenny said, “I don’t think you can ever really cure poverty,” and

used her religious views as support for this assertion. Jenny said that, based on her Buddhist religious beliefs, “I think it ties into my religion. . . that there is always going to be someone lower than us and always someone higher than us.” For Jenny, inequality is “always” destined to happen and is outside of the control of human beings. Allison supported this belief in the “inevitability of competition and inequality” by saying, “There are always people that need to fill certain jobs where they’re probably not going to get paid enough to do them.” Why these jobs have to carry such low rewards was left unaddressed.

### **Setting Themselves Apart**

A strong pattern in the ethnographic record was the BSW students “setting themselves apart” in terms of their political and social beliefs as well as their (perceived) nuanced knowledge of social problems compared to the rest of American society. For most of the students that I spoke with, they found it important to tell me how they differed from most Americans in terms of their political ideology, awareness and knowledge of social problems, compassion for populations in need of assistance, and overall worldview. Most of the students explained multiple times in the interview how they were politically “to the left” of most of the U.S. population and this was an important part of their identities as people and as social workers. They also tended to explain in multiple answers how they were more aware of social problems and had more accurate knowledge about these social problems than their fellow citizens. Most of the students that I spoke with explained at length how they were more compassionate about populations in need than the average American, something that led them to the study of social work (and it was this perceived moral superiority that drove much of their willingness to help instead of a nuanced academic understanding of social problems,

leading to a sort of “moral and/or compassionate individualism”). This differentiation that was taking place in most of the interviews was never starker than when the students explicitly talked about what they believed to be flawed American knowledge of and cultural beliefs/values related to social problems.

Allison gave a typical explanation of American culture, saying that most Americans believe that poor people want to “rely on other people’s money.” She went on to explain further:

I think Americans tend to think of poverty as something that is more of an issue with individualism. People—the country that values hard work a lot, see the results. If you work—in a lot of cases, you see people driving nice cars and this and that, because they put in a lot of hard work, went through all that student debt and all that. Maybe they might not agree with me as much.

Melanie identifies with what she perceives to be an “ignorant” view of social issues among most Americans because she says she had similarly undeveloped ideas about social problems before college:

I would say the majority of them [Americans] are probably as ignorant, as intentionally ignorant as I was before I studied social work. I think a lot of people just kind of put it out of sight, out of mind. Most people I know would say it’s [poverty] the individual’s fault and they can totally get out of it themselves.

Noreen says Americans tend to see the circumstances that poor people find themselves in and “fault them personally.” She says a typical American response to poor people is, “Oh, well, they’re just lazy or whatever.” She says contemporary American politics focus too much on poor people and personal accountability and that “our policies certainly reflect that.”

Jana, who comes from a democratic-socialist family and a much more structurally-oriented European culture with an expansive social welfare state, says of American culture:

I think it is so sad in the United States that people here think that poor people don't deserve social welfare. . . I just don't understand this meanness against poor people. It is not like they want to be poor. And so I think that is another big push for me, I just think that this country really needs as many voices for the poor people as possible. . . I am shocked. It has a lot to do with my upbringing and seeing it from a different perspective, too.

Jana says Americans use the word “socialism” without knowing its true meaning, and believes that every human being is entitled to a decent standard of living. Of universal healthcare, she says, “Everybody should be able to take a sick kid to the doctor and have the doctor make the kid better without being called an abuser of the system or a freeloader or whatever. I just get very irate with people.” Commenting on the 2012 U.S. Presidential campaign and the popular rhetoric used at the time by some that framed government aid as a transfer of meritocratically-earned money from the rightful earners to undeserving recipients rather than a means of addressing structural imbalances, she says:

It strikes me as odd, this whole ‘maker versus taker’ thing that Romney and Ryan talk about. . . I just think how dare you tell other people that they're freeloaders. . . It is never a choice to be poor and be a freeloader. I'm pretty sure if you ask any person who is poor and on public assistance, if you ask them if they would rather have a job or stand in line at the food bank. . . It is sickening.

Tom said that, among American citizens, “the overwhelming view is that if you are poor you are lazy and you are not doing enough to fix your situation.” He says his studies have helped him to understand the flaws in this view and gain a more nuanced understanding of social problems like poverty. He says, “What I study and learn is that

there are so many other factors that go into it. . . It is not just that they are not trying, it could be that that is just the situation. Maybe it is institutionalized racism, maybe you know its whatever it is.” When I asked him specifically if he differs from the average American in terms of how he views problems like poverty and inequality, he said, “I would say yeah, most likely I would differ from most people, from the average Joe.” Like so many of his colleagues, it was critically important that he differentiate himself from the rest of the population in the identity that he wanted to project to me. For most of the students I spoke with, this was an important part of their identities as people and as social workers.

Jenny believes she has a more accurate and more compassionate view of social problems than most Americans, saying:

I don't think most Americans would agree with me [emphatic, laughing]. My parents wouldn't even agree with me. My parents believe that poor people can just get up, get out, and get a job. Because that is how they got their jobs and how they got their success. But I know that you can put as much effort and as much hard work into it and things might not work out well. I think most Americans would agree with my parents. I think most people that disagree with me disagree because their ideas about laziness and lack of motivation among the poor. I mean sometimes it is true and sometimes it isn't. Some of them are indeed lazy.

Jenny's answer gave good insight into not only the individualistic nature of American culture, but also the manner in which this is inculcated into our worldviews through socialization in families.

When I asked Amanda if the average American citizen would agree with her thoughts on poverty and inequality, she abruptly answered while laughing, “Oh, completely disagree.” She said that a critical theme in American culture is the “American Dream,” which contains the notion that any individual can attain any level of financial

success as long as they work hard. She said that “a lot of people blame those in poverty for the lives that they have been dealt” because of these cultural beliefs, which she disagrees with.

Nancy said that most Americans would disagree with her views because “most people think that poor people have poor values, poor morals, make bad decisions, etc., it is all their own fault, they have gotten what is coming to them.” She said that if she had to turn to welfare she believes it should not hurt her pride based on her beliefs but that it probably would because of the judgment of her fellow citizens based on their cultural logic concerning poverty. She said, “Welfare shouldn't be something shameful, but still society's view on welfare is negative. It would not hurt my pride or my sense of self, but the judgment from other people would be hurtful. . . I would definitely be aware of people judging me, looking down on me.” She believes social policy should not be based on negative cultural judgments of the poor, and rejects welfare drug tests because it feeds into negative stereotypes about the decisions and “poor morals” of the poor.

Marena commented not only on the problematic nature of American individualism, but believes that it plays a critical role in the existence of poverty in the first place. She said, “I think a lot of people [in the U.S.] think it is just your decision to be poor and it's your responsibility to make something of yourself. That's what I think most Americans would believe.” She believes it is the moral obligation of those with sufficient resources to help those without them, and that the main reason that there is poverty in the U.S. is because Americans are too individualistic and fail to fulfill this moral obligation. She said, “People really look down on poverty in this society so they

are not really there to help people who are below them, it's more try to get yourself up higher." Marena talked about negative stereotypes of welfare mothers in particular, stereotypes that she used to believe before studying social work and changing her views, saying, "That's definitely what I thought about before I started taking social work classes."

Isabel was bothered both by American cultural narratives about poverty as well as negative attitudes and stereotypes about immigrants. She said, "It definitely bothers me when politicians ridicule immigrants, talk badly about immigration. I mean I can see both sides, but then also I see the good side because I am on the good side of immigration." She said that her fellow (non-BSW) students at MAU "think differently" than social work students:

They [non-BSW college students] think differently. For example, I have spoken to other people that are either electrical engineers, accountants, other fields. They think like me a few years ago, that people do not take advantage of opportunities and that is why they are poor. Most MAU students would disagree with me. They fault laziness, individual problems, lack of effort, etc.

Isabel's answer highlights how powerful American culture can be in shaping our worldviews and the role that she believes her experience in college has played in helping to change those views.

Laila believes that there is a significant amount of negativity towards poor people in the U.S., although she believes it is not universal and depends on the person and place:

If I was talking to a Democrat in a different place, actually this happened recently, now they are a Democrat also, and we are talking about poverty and we are talking specifically about African-Americans who are poor and they will ascribe their poverty to, 'Oh, they are just black, so they are going to be poor. That is just how it is.' The example this person actually gave me was they had seen poor people in these lines for the soup kitchen instead of looking for work. And it was so much different than the other Democrat that I talked to previously. And then Republicans [laughter], well, that's a whole other story [laughter]. I don't think they get it quite as much.

For Laila it is not only important to differentiate her views from those of other Americans, but to project an identity that is thoroughly politically-liberal/progressive; this emphasis on her political identification, in her mind, seems to signal to the intended audience that she truly "gets it" in terms of the nature of social problems.

Karen believes that "social work is pretty liberal as a field" and that social workers "advocate for the people who society traditionally steps on and thinks poorly of." She says negative views about these populations are commonplace, saying:

America is mostly conservative so you have a mostly-conservative country and a pretty liberal field. I think that means that most people in this country would disagree with a lot of the ideas that we have. Our society is heavily based in individualism, I have heard it from my parents, you hear it all over television. You know, work hard and you can get what you deserve. It's the premise of the American Dream. . . I just don't think our society cares to look into things that they don't understand. I think we live in a really judgmental society, and I think Americans see somebody who is in a totally different situation from them and they don't give them the benefit of the doubt or try to understand where they're coming from. . . Most Americans, it is all about the individual in terms of how your social class is determined I guess.

Karen believes that, unlike most Americans who fail to investigate social problems below the surface, social workers deserve credit for taking the time to truly understand social problems. The liberal and compassionate nature of social workers is a positive way in which she believes they are differentiated from the more politically-conservative

and less-compassionate American public. She believes that welfare policies based on these negative judgments and stereotypes of the poor, such as drug tests, are “offensive.”

Olivia believes that American cultural assumptions about the poor perpetuate stereotypes and stigmatize poor people:

The American Dream kind of perpetuates the stigma that you [poor people] are not doing enough [to escape poverty]. And in some cases it could be true, I am sure we don't come up with that theory out of nowhere. Stereotypes come from some truth. But at the same time a stereotype does not fit everybody.

Olivia criticized the strong role that certain capitalist principles, such as efficiency and market forces, play in American economic cultural values. She laments the fact that these beliefs about how the economy should work are allowed to prevent deserving individuals from earning the living that they deserve. Olivia used a story about her internship experience to highlight this concern:

There is one client for instance who wants to have a music career, and I have never heard him but apparently he is very talented. He also struggles with a mental illness. He wants to get a job but the jobs that are available to him are like janitorial jobs. Why is that the only job that is available to those with a mental illness? But I feel like we are in this fast-paced world of we want efficiency and we don't want to have to spend five minutes at a cashier because that person just does things a little bit slower than everybody else and has to focus is little more. And maybe they can't always have the perfect people skills. I definitely feel a sense of frustration for them that that is the jobs that are available to them.

### **The Stigma of Welfare**

Despite the significant role of individualism in the students' worldviews, they were very aware of the stigma of poverty and welfare use in American culture, and were also highly critical of it. I asked the students if they were aware of welfare stigma, particularly

when recipients are forced to reveal their welfare-need in public (such as at the grocery store), and what they thought of welfare stigma.

Noreen and Nancy both shared vivid firsthand experiences with me concerning welfare stigma that they either experienced or witnessed. Noreen used WIC as a young mother and experienced negative treatment related to her welfare-use at a grocery store; she explained the stigma that she felt and how she rejected the assumptions that the negative treatment was based upon, saying, “She [the cashier] definitely tried to denigrate me and make me feel like I was somehow taking welfare like I was garbage. But I didn’t buy it.” Nancy observed a particularly heartbreaking example of the stigma and pain that can result from the public revelation that a person is a welfare recipient. Nancy worked at a grocery store when she was younger and remembered a situation where a customer could not afford her groceries, having to put most of them back. Nancy described the situation, saying, “She was crying, she was mortified, I felt horrible. I felt so bad for her. . . She was obviously really upset. It was really, really awkward.” Nancy and her colleagues did their best to make the situation better for the women, but she remembers how the situation crushed the spirit of the customer. Nancy also remembers an informal, impromptu group conversation about welfare she was a part of in college where many of the students were being “really vicious in their views about welfare.” Unfortunately, nobody but Nancy knew that a friend sitting next to her sat silently in horror knowing his family depended on welfare to make ends meet. Nancy remembers both the grocery store and welfare discussion experiences to be very uncomfortable, and believes that “welfare shouldn't be something shameful, but still society's view on welfare is negative.” Knowing what she knows about how many

people view welfare and how poorly they treat welfare recipients, she said that welfare use “would not hurt my pride or my sense of self, but the judgment from other people would be hurtful. I mean if I was using something like food stamps in the grocery store I would definitely be aware of people judging me, looking down on me.”

Corinne and Peter both discussed the negativity that sometimes results from the public use of welfare. Corinne has seen the negative treatment of welfare recipients at the grocery store, saying, “I’ve seen it before. People pulling it [food stamps] out, or people judging what other people have in their carts.” Peter said he would be aware of the stigma if he had to use welfare in public, especially the way in which welfare (such as food stamps and WIC) restricts what you can purchase. Peter explained how he disliked that aspect of welfare as well as the scrutiny that non-welfare-recipients give to the decision-making of welfare-recipients during public welfare use (such as analyzing what you have placed on the belt at checkout).

Laila discussed how welfare-use in public would not bother her unless she was shopping in the wealthy area surrounding MAU, and how if she experienced negative judgments she would reject their foundational assumptions; Laila said, “I wouldn’t have that stigma unless I was shopping here [in the wealthy area around MAU]. I also wouldn’t feel the stigma because the stigma that is attached to it I don’t believe in. . . I don’t associate struggle and poverty and that sort of thing with failure. I feel like this is just your situation now.”

## **Regulating The Poor**

I asked the study participants whether or not they supported three different broadly-defined welfare policies: work requirements, drug testing, and fertility-limiting policies (such as family caps). Once the participant reported whether or not they supported each of these policies, I then asked them to provide the reasoning behind their answers. These questions were designed not only to gauge their support or nonsupport for these policies, but also as a means to get them talking about much larger themes related to poverty and poor people. There was strong support for each of these policies (in some cases overwhelming support), with a majority of students supporting all three policies. The students' answers revealed a lot about their overall worldviews and assumptions about welfare, poverty, and the poor.

### **Work Requirements**

The study participants were overwhelmingly in favor (84% support) of policies that require welfare recipients to work in the paid labor force in order to receive welfare benefits. Most of the students who voiced their support for work requirements (a) framed work as something that is available to all who want it and (b) framed unemployment as a personal failing.

Many of the students thought that, without the proper motivation (such as work requirements), welfare recipients would have little incentive to grasp the (endless) opportunities available in the U.S. labor market. Terra suggested that without such a work policy welfare recipients would have no motivation to work, arguing, "I do agree there needs to be some incentive to work." For Corinne, work requirements are a means of motivating recipients to keep "bettering" themselves:

I feel like you need to be contributing to your own success, and you need to be always trying to better yourself. So, I mean, yes, I agree. . . I think that you need to be contributing to society's success and to your own success, and you're receiving the benefits.

Tom also thought that welfare recipients need motivation that they are otherwise lacking:

As an over-arching policy I think the intent is a good one. It would encourage an individual to meet the requirements and therefore create or impose a motivation when there may not be one.

Peter attempted to strike a compassionate tone but still reinforced his individualistically-oriented notions concerning poverty. He was compassionate in wanting to give people time to find a job, but suggested that too much time out of work is not a function of a bad economy or restricted opportunities, but a personal failing, saying:

I would say yes [to work requirements] but I would like to say that it should be delayed. . . and I think if you were to use those programs, you should give the recipient not a lot of time, but a brief period of time to be inducted into the program, get the benefits and stabilize their life before having the requirement. Give them like three months. Say, 'Hey, you've got three months, and after three months, if you still want to use this program, you need to have a job.'

Ashley believes that no matter what situation people find themselves in, they should be working. Her response did not address situations where people might not be able to work or find work, instead assuming that people are not working by choice when they should be:

I feel that working is something that, no matter what your situation, it should happen. Especially if it is full-time work. I know, for example, when I worked at my internship it was really important for people to either be working as hard as they could or to be volunteering, because there is something to be said about whether it is working for money or just working to help yourself realize that hard work needs to be involved with receiving things. And so that would be my answer.

Ashley and I went further into our discussion of work requirements to talk about mothers with young children; Ashley believes that they should be in the paid workforce as well:

I know there are people that say mothers should be able to spend time with their children, I think at the same time sacrifices have to come instead of just handing things to people and saying, 'Okay we'll pay you to stay at home with your kids.'

Nancy also believes that unemployment is a sign that people are not trying to help themselves, and that only the recipients can pull themselves out of their circumstances, saying, "I think that [work requirements are] reasonable unless there is a disability or something like that. That is how you are going to get yourself out of the situation."

For Natalia, unemployment is a sign that recipients are abusing the system; people who cannot find jobs are making a choice and refusing to help themselves:

I think that they should have to work. If they are not full-time at least start looking for a job, because like I said I don't think that they should abuse the system. If they were somewhere and then fell into welfare, or needed it, yet they need to get out, then they need to push themselves to get out.

Jenny views working as a way to repay the money that was "given" to welfare recipients, saying:

I think in order to seek [welfare] funds you need to be looking for work, you have to look for work. Because, you know, you are taking all of that money, and somehow it has to be repaid, so if somebody else like you needs that money then we will have money to give them. So I think they should be working or trying to get work.

Jennifer was also concerned with this notion that people were being given money for nothing, focusing on individual failings rather than possible structural explanations:

I think that people should be working in order to get welfare. It shouldn't just be free, like just anyone can be like, 'Oh, I'm not working I'm not even looking for a job but I need money.' I don't know if I would necessarily say they have to have a full-time job, but maybe part-time or at least be looking. But not if they have been looking for an extremely long time and they aren't necessarily looking.

Marena was concerned both that welfare should not be "something for nothing" and that the lack of a job was a sign of an individual failing:

Yes I agree with welfare work requirements. I think if you are staying home and getting help from the government it's not really helping your case. I think that you should definitely be working for something because you are never going to get out of your situation if you are not working for what you are trying to get. You don't get free food, that's not how it should be. I think even mothers with really young children should be in the workforce. I mean it's just like a dad if he was going into the workforce it should be equal for women and for men. There really should not be any exceptions.

Isabel believes that work requirements are a good policy, one of many that might help "fix" poor people's bad behavior:

I think it is a good idea, a good policy. Because I have seen some people who just keep receiving the benefits and there is no change in their behavior. I think if there is more employment, there will be more willingness for them to change things or to change their situation.

### **Regulating Poor Women's Fertility**

Like work requirements, policies aimed at limiting poor women's fertility and punishing them for having children while receiving welfare (such as family caps, policies which forbid families from collecting additional benefits for children born while a family is receiving welfare assistance) were very popular among the participants (68% support for family caps). There were of course some students who objected; Allison, for instance, was bothered by these policies because she believes they unfairly target poor children:

No [she does not support such policies], because I feel like at the end of the day, they might still have children, and the child is going to be the one affected. But I do think they should—we should help them understand—I know sometimes just because they are living in poverty, they're like being told how many children they can have, but I think it's good to work with them and let them realize that in their condition, it's not the best idea to keep having children. But no, just because the children would be affected. Children would probably still be born, and they'd still be affected. They would benefit from that increase.

Allison clearly rejects these policies based upon her reasoning; even in Allison's answer, however, we find assumptions that were a part of most of the participants' responses supporting fertility-limiting policies. She believes the policies are unfair because they target children, but largely ignores whether it is unfair to regulate the fertility of people simply because they find themselves at the bottom of a social hierarchy with many structural constraints keeping them there. Nowhere in this answer was there ever a hint that society might be a game that is rigged to produce "losers" in the first place; limitless opportunities were largely assumed, and it was largely assumed that it is permissible to regulate the fertility of poor people since they got themselves into poverty in the first place. If I were to set up a game of musical chairs (Rank 2003) in a kindergarten classroom and force all the children in the classroom to participate, most people would likely find it particularly cruel if I had some harsh punishment for the losers. After all, they were forced to play, and the game guarantees a certain number of losers regardless of the effort of the people in the game. A game full of talented musical chairs players produces the same amount of winners and losers as a game full of musical chairs players with no musical chairs talent; merit does not affect the number of winners and losers. This notion was lost on my participants, who assumed that we are all willing participants in a game that has no such restrictions, and if you happen to be

losing at the moment, the government has the right to interfere in your life and family decisions.

Twice as many students supported fertility-limiting policies as rejected the policies. I asked the students the following question:

Do you support welfare policies that attempt to limit the fertility of poor women? Do you believe the government should develop policies to attempt to regulate how many children welfare recipients have? One example is a family cap, where a state prohibits a poor family from collecting additional welfare benefits for a child born while that family is receiving welfare assistance. Please explain why you do or do not support such a policy.

Common beliefs among the study participants were that (a) having children is mostly a choice, (b) a decision to have children should be based on family economics, and (c) one should not choose to bring a child into poverty. Many of the answers that students gave were based on the individualistically-oriented logic that poverty was not structurally-determined, and that a poor family should never have children if they never escaped poverty (because being there was a result of their choices/actions); this logic means that the long-term poor should not have the right to ever have children. There were also a surprising number of participants who worried that too many welfare recipients were having children to receive more welfare benefits.

Sarah and Terra voiced their support for fertility-limiting policies. Sarah said, "Yes I would [support them], definitely, because you want people to be more responsible. If they can't support more children, they shouldn't." Terra had some reservations, but when asked to say yes or no, she responded, "I agree with it. I mean if they are receiving assistance, I don't think it's completely a bad thing. . . if I had to vote yes or no? I guess I agree with family caps. Yeah, I would vote yes."

Corinne completely ignored any possible structural reasons for poverty and responded that poor women's fertility should be controlled, arguing:

Yes, as long as it is up-front and people have birth control access. Yes, I would, as long as we're offering, or these people have access to totally free birth control. Because if we don't want them growing their families, and they can't afford the birth control, then what do we expect is going to happen if they're married? . . . So, yes, I do agree with that, as long as it's made perfectly clear that you shouldn't be adding to your family when you can't afford it, and that they have birth control made available to them. I also have a problem with the whole, 'The more children, the more money you get' thing. I think at some point, I mean, you can't just keep having kids to get more money. You have to be responsible and so there has to be maybe some opportunity for birth control.

For so many participants like Corinne, her answer takes individualism as a given assumption. If you had any notion that the game might be rigged to ensure a certain number of poor people, regulating the actions of the poor would make little sense; poverty is a reality because of the way the game is structured, so we should not penalize and interfere with the lives and aspirations of people facing strong social forces outside of their control. Answers like Corinne's are so revealing because they ignore such a possibility of a rigged game. At the end of Corinne's answer, despite plentiful research to the contrary, she argues that poor women have children to get more money anyway, another strike against the fertility rights of poor women.

Noreen was a bit ambivalent about the policy, but gave a very revealing and somewhat frightening answer:

I absolutely see the argument. If you're not, for whatever reason, in a position to even maintain yourself and what you have then you have no business having more children. I mean, if you have access to contraception, okay, you are a responsible person. You know, you're not in any way mentally impaired where you can't make decisions, you know? If you are mentally ill then you're not accountable for making decisions. Otherwise, if you are not mentally ill, you shouldn't be doing this with the expectation that you're not gonna be held accountable, that there's no accountability on your part. I definitely understand that and I do support that. Again, we could say, you know, at least consider that the agreement would be that if you have more children then some other arrangement needs to be made. In other words, foster care or something. There has to be a consequence to you for making this [decision] and for not being responsible enough to know your own situation and not think that somebody is gonna come in and bail you out, basically, you know? There has to be some kind of a consequence to the parents, not just the mother, and see this falls mostly on the mother. And so, you know, that has to be part of this whole thing, that you should have to agree with some kind of consequence. Hold the parents accountable. Because the kids get hurt, okay? If the mom is in poverty because she just embraced some sort of irresponsible life choices, you know, she's still gonna get hers. She's still gonna go out partying. She's still gonna be doing whatever she's doing that put her in the situation, but her kids aren't gonna be getting clothes. Her kids aren't gonna be getting food. Her kids aren't gonna be getting what they need.

Noreen's argument is filled with assumptions about poverty and poor people. She believes that people who find themselves in poverty have a right to be regulated. She argues that it is inexcusable for poor women not to use contraception, suggesting that they have no right to have children. She believes that it is the role of the state to hold people "accountable" for having children while in poverty. I call her answer "frightening" because she goes so far as to suggest that poor families who have children in poverty deserve to have their children taken away and put into foster care. She also strongly argues that women who have children while in poverty and/or receiving welfare are likely living wild and irresponsible lifestyles while neglecting their children.

Peter and Olivia spoke of abusing the welfare system and personal responsibility, respectively. Peter supports family caps because he believes that children are a means for poor people to game the system to get more welfare benefits:

I would vote yes. I don't think using kids to get more money is a good reason. On principle, you're supposed to be using this program to put yourself back on your feet. And yeah, I would vote just purely on principle.

For Olivia, children are completely a choice, and if you choose to have children in poverty you deserve what is coming to you:

I am okay with family caps, because I think that goes back to an individual decision. Yes you have the right to have a child, but I don't think that child should be a drain on everyone else. I think you need to think about what that child's life would be like, I think that is very selfish to have another child out of the desire to have a child. I think the responsibility that comes along with having a child is having the environment to raise that child in.

Other participants shared sentiments similar to Olivia, ignoring the possible rigged nature of the game and also failing to confront the possibility that if some poor women wait to have children until they are economically stable, they may miss their chance at children altogether.

Natalia and Tom support fertility-limiting policies based on notions of personal responsibility and individualistically-oriented beliefs about the existence of poverty.

Natalia has a problem with government money being given to people making poor decisions and believes childbirth to be completely a choice:

I would support them. Not to deter people from having children, but especially if there is a set limit of income that you get, and you know that, I think that falls on you. If you know ahead of time, that falls on you. If you want to have another child, that is your prerogative, but I don't think the government is responsible for that, to give you more money for that choice.

Tom believes that it is okay to implement such policies as long as people are told ahead of time, saying, "I would be okay with it as long as the policy was clearly discussed ahead of time with the recipient. I object to the idea of continuing to foster a method of no responsibility." He revealed throughout our interactions a strong concern for accountability and personal responsibility, and this came into focus here. He believes that as long as you notify people in advance that they will be punished then the punishment is socially just, eliminating the possibility that the social structure might be unjust in limiting who will be financially successful and therefore who has the right to have children.

Jennifer and Marena voiced concerns similar to Tom's, while also lamenting the (perceived/assumed) fact that poor women have children to receive more welfare benefits. Jennifer supports family caps because she believes you should not bring children into a poor environment and should not use children to gain more welfare benefits:

I feel okay with that. People shouldn't be having kids that they can't afford. If these people are already in poverty then having another kid would just put them in a worse situation. If you can't afford it why would you put another person in that situation? People shouldn't have babies just to get more money, I have heard of that before, I have seen it in different areas, not just that but other things. Having babies to get more money just isn't fair. I think those policies would discourage that.

Marena also expressed concerns about bringing children into poor environments and people using children to get more welfare benefits:

I think if you are in a situation where you need enough help for your family from the government you should not be having any more children. That is not going to help anybody. You shouldn't get more benefits for having more children. I think these policies would make you realize that adding on to your family isn't going to add-on to your resources and discourage people from making these decisions. It would make you realize that you are already trying to help your family that you have right now, how much better is it going to be for you if you add another life that you need to take care of?

Isabel relies on anecdotal evidence to support her belief that people should be aware of their environments (not that we should be aware of the production of such environments):

I would have to agree with them. Maybe because I have been exposed to many of my friends back home when I was younger who had children when they were very young and they were receiving welfare assistance. But also this has to be with the cultural aspect of it. With this person that I am telling you about, she lives in a two bedroom apartment with ten other people and she is planning to have more kids while she is struggling. Kids are very demanding. Even myself, I think right now I am not ready to have kids because I want to be more financially stable. Definitely I would agree with that [fertility policy]. In general I would agree with those policies. I think it would be good for most programs, not just TANF but food stamps and other programs. In general this is a good policy.

Most of the study participants, like Isabel, do not stop to think that maybe children are not entirely an economic decision for many people, that most people hope they will not be in poverty forever and want to grow their family with that hope in mind, and that such aspirations might be justly deserved for all despite their position in the social hierarchy.

Karen objects to family caps but only on the grounds that she does not want to punish people for having kids by mistake, not because of any desire to justly distribute rights and aspirations to all people in what might be a rigged game:

I would say no to something like that, it has so many problems, so many things can go wrong. Somebody could not be using protection when they have sex and end up pregnant, somebody could be raped, somebody could just be irresponsible, or somebody could just not have access to birth control.

For Karen, it is not the regulation of poor women or the structural contribution to poverty that is unjust, only the regulation of behavior of people who have children “by accident.” She attempts to sound compassionate by saying she does not want to punish somebody for being “irresponsible” enough to have children while in poverty, but in doing so reveals a great deal about her inner beliefs about poor people’s personal responsibility for their plight.

### **Drug Testing the Poor**

While the number of participants supporting welfare drug testing was smaller than the overwhelming support for work requirements and the significant support for fertility policies, a strong majority (60%) of students supported welfare drug testing. Students were concerned about (a) welfare recipients using government money for drugs instead of basic necessities, (b) welfare recipients committing what they considered immoral acts, and (c) the government enabling drug use. There were also many students who explicitly or implicitly assumed that a disproportionate number of poor people were using drugs, and that poor people were inherently morally suspect.

Most of the students did not stop to think about social conditions that lead people to drug use in the first place, or what kind of message it sends to the majority of non-drug-users that they need to be tested (particularly if the main issue is the “rigged” game or structural causes of poverty). If there are structural causes of poverty beyond the control of individuals and certain levels of poverty are inherent in the system, it seems unjust preaching morality to the losers of this rigged game. For most of the

students, however, this was not a concern, and drug use was assumed to be prevalent and a personal choice. Most of them believed it was the state's right to institute morality among a suspect population. As I mentioned, there was less consensus than the other policies we talked about, and some students had a more nuanced understanding of the issues. Noreen, for instance, was ambivalent about drug testing, based upon her inner struggle to understand the social forces behind social problems and drug use:

I'm not sure. We can increase our 'War on Drugs' and really make a difference after 30 years or whatever, okay, and just eradicate drugs. But you're not gonna eradicate social problems, people are still gonna be on welfare. I'm not sure that it actually addresses the problem of why there are people in need of social services in the first place. Is it just because they're on drugs? On the other hand, I do get that this is taxpayer money. People will take money that should be going toward legitimate things and buy drugs with them. You know, that absolutely happens. But what are the unintended consequences to that? Are you depriving them or their kids? Are there other things going on there? And a third thing is that addiction is addiction. Once it becomes an addiction, it's not necessarily as simple as your choice.

Noreen was one of the few students that thought about this issue beyond individual choices and thought about the cause of the social problem of poverty with drug use being a consequence rather than a cause. Very few students thought about the basic issue of why we were testing poor people for drug use: because we have negative assumptions about them in the first place. Karen was one of the few students who identified this key point:

It [drug tests] is kind of offensive to people who are on welfare. They're struggling enough with their own problems and the stigma of being on welfare and then you have the government coming in and saying, 'Oh, you are probably on drugs because you are poor.' That would be really offensive. I would say no.

Sarah's support for welfare drug testing comes from her concern that government money should not be used to buy drugs:

Yes I would [support drug tests]. Because they don't know—if their test is positive, drug positive, they might use them for buying drugs, and probably everybody would say the same thing. They might say, 'Oh that's private invasion, that's not fair, it's political issues,' and stuff. I don't think it's much more big of a deal if we provide those cash assistance to those people who might be a positive to those drugs substances use, then that's not ethical either. So we want to make sure that those money will be used in the right way.

When students voiced support for drug tests based on the idea that government money should not be used to buy drugs, I often pushed them further to think about other government money: student loans, subsidies to private sports teams, middle-class tax breaks, etc. Would they also support drug tests for college students receiving federal loans, or wealthy owners of sports teams receiving hundreds of millions of dollars in public subsidies to build stadiums? Sarah wasn't so sure, saying, "Oh, that's a tough question. I don't know about student loans. I don't know. I would have to think about that for a while." Sarah's answer was similar to many students who supported drug tests; when pressed to extend her logic to other people in similar situations to welfare recipients (receiving taxpayer money), they were all of the sudden unsure, realizing that logically they could say yes but knowing that deep down their objection was not based solely on it being taxpayer money. It seemed that they knew they had some deeper objection that was related to poor people themselves, but either could not articulate that or were uncomfortable acknowledging that deeper objection.

Terra supported drug testing for the sake of poor children, while Corinne was concerned with homelessness and mental illness. Terra did not want the government to enable drug users, and was also concerned about children growing up in environments where drugs were prevalent:

I would say yes for drug testing. The government would be enabling those individuals, and they could be using that money for drugs as opposed to feeding their families, so I completely agree with drug testing. Maybe get CPS involved if they do not pass. I'd investigate further the abuse. If it's—I think if they're testing positive for anything above marijuana then they should—the children should be removed, and then they can't apply again for about six months or a year. I'd say you would just basically get CPS involved and not remove—if you can find—I mean, that's grounds for—that they should be temporary kinship care or foster care. There's a lot of—they could be helped and then we have a vicious cycle of then those children are going to see their parent's use and then perhaps be alcoholic addicts, so if you can break that cycle and intervene, then perhaps they won't be on welfare.

Corinne supported drug tests because she equated poverty with homelessness, assuming that if you are poor it means you are homeless, and she did not want homeless individuals with a mental illness to self-medicate with drugs:

Yes, of course. I'm not a psychologist, but working with the homeless population, one thing that I noticed, probably 75 percent of the time it seemed like there was a huge amount of undiagnosed mental illness. And so, you know, they're homeless and they tend to self-medicate because they don't have a primary care physician and they can't afford insurance. So they take drugs to help deal with the stuff that's going on in their head. So, I mean, if that is addressed, and something can be done for that it would be great. I mean, if it's just like, 'Yeah, I'm smoking pot,' or whatever, there's no mental illness that's been diagnosed or anything, then I agree with that. But if there is mental illness, and they need to have the healthcare and they need everything else—there's so many things. There's so much on top of it, because if you're homeless, and you're getting these drugs, and people are going to pay you to give them the drugs, then you have a roof over your head for the night, whatever. You know, it kind of—anyway. I would vote yes, but in the case of mental illness, you know, its different.

Melanie's primary concern was that if you can afford to purchase drugs, you can afford to purchase food. Why everyone would need to be drug tested was left unresolved. She was fine with welfare drug testing because of the negative assumptions she had about drug users, but did not stop to think what message you are

sending to the poor and how socially just it might be to test an entire population simply because they are poor:

Yeah I think I would be fine with that. I actually have read articles about drug testing, so I have I've thought about it, and yeah I think they would be fine. I mean drugs aren't free. So I mean, if you can afford drugs, then you can afford food or whatever else you need.

I asked Melanie if she supported drug testing for things such as student loans, farm subsidies, private sports subsidies, etc. Even though we talked about more than just student loans, it was that particular example that bothered her and pushed her to reject my proposal:

I dunno, that's a tough one. Only because, you know, food stamps are maybe like forty dollars, fifty dollars, maybe one hundred dollars here and there. Student loans, though, that's not a small amount of money. I'm gonna say no, because it's not like student loans just go away. It's not like it's free money, student loans. I know you talked about more than just student loans, but all of the other things I can think of are just free money. So like student loans, it's not free, you pay those back. Then there's like disability, you know, in order to get disability you had to have paid in to it to get money back.

For Melanie, welfare assistance is "free money," excluding the possibility that welfare is a socially-just redress of structural injustices. I tried to push Melanie further to extend her logic to all government money, asking her, "What about money that doesn't have to be paid back? What about money given to professional sports teams to build private stadiums? Would you drug test the owners?" Her answer was a short "no" to drug testing sports owners.

Peter supported welfare drug tests once rehabilitation had occurred for the initial drug problem, ignoring how social conditions and a history of addiction might influence future drug use, whether it is socially just to drug test people because they are poor,

and whether people have a right to minimal government support despite personal actions:

Addiction is a hard thing. They might have been personal choices in the beginning, to do drugs, but they're kind of in that perpetual cycle. They can't get out of it. And for us to say no because they made one mistake, and they might be trying to correct themselves, I don't think that's a good reason to say no. If they're doing drugs, they should be able to get on a rehabilitation program. But you make stringent requirements. You have to complete this program to get clean. Once you're clean, you have to do a drug test to maintain benefits.

Ashley supports welfare drug testing because she does not want taxpayers to enable addiction and thinks it is the government's job to teach poor people moral behavior. She ignores any discussion of whether poor people deserve to be drug tested simply because they are poor. Ashley not only supports drug tests, but believes that research that questions the efficacy of welfare drug tests is pseudo-science and liberally biased:

I would vote yes for drug testing. I feel that that would be important because I don't want to have to, as a taxpaying person or representing the tax payers, to have to feel like taxpayers have to feed an addiction. And I think it would also bring additional awareness to their problem and the way that it affects their children. For example TANF, it only goes to families that have dependent children. And so if we are helping people pay for something where they could get out of their addiction, if we could bring this to their eyes and help them realize that they can't receive things because they are dealing with something that is feeding into their poverty. I think it would have a long-term beneficial effect. And I don't think we can play the victim card and say, 'Oh, you don't trust me?' Or say, 'You are blaming me?' Because we have all had a drug test in our lives, whether it was for employment or medical issues. I don't think they can say that we are being blamed, you know, playing the victim. Recently I had an impromptu debate in my class about whether we should drug test welfare recipients. I feel strongly that the research is biased. I know this policy has been established in states such as Florida to determine who is 'worthy' of welfare payments when there really isn't enough money to pay everybody. So I said there is a need to decide who is the most worthy, as horrible as that sounds we have to decide who deserves the money more than others, because there isn't enough money to go around. But the research is very liberally biased, slanted, whatever you want to say. It is biased to say that it hasn't worked.

Ashley believes that because we have all been drug tested in our lives for our jobs (which I noted to myself privately during the interview that I actually could not remember having been drug tested in my lifetime), it is okay to drug test welfare recipients. She of course ignored the very obvious and documented reasons for drug testing welfare recipients (see the political rhetoric/debates surrounding these policies), a policy largely based on negative judgments of the poor (such as assumed immorality).

For Olivia, drug testing seemed like an excellent way for poor people to prove that they are not immoral, a charge she believes rests on the poor to disprove:

Yes. I think it is a good way of proving to people and removing that stereotype that people are receiving welfare benefits without making a change. I understand that having these tests can waste a lot of money, we were just talking about that in class the other day. But I think it is important to change the stereotype and the stigma attached to welfare. It helps the image of all welfare recipients.

Olivia did not question whether the stereotypes and stigma attached to welfare use might be unjust, but instead thought that it was the burden of welfare recipients to prove them wrong. Olivia believes it is the responsibility of the accused to prove the accusations incorrect, not the other way around.

Natalia's support for drug tests is based on her disdain for people who abuse the system, focusing on drug users rather than the larger issue of testing people simply because they are poor:

I would say yes welfare recipients should have initial and routine drug tests. I think it kind of goes back to the person on welfare to not abuse the system, that is kind of where that comes from. If you are a routine drug addict, if what you want—let's say you are a full-out heroin addict—don't go into the system so you can pool the money you have to buy drugs.

When I pushed Natalia further to consider student loans, farm subsidies, and private sports subsidies, she was less sure of her answer, saying, "Maybe not for student loans, but I think again, certain situations and contexts. I probably wouldn't say student loans."

Jenny's support for welfare also focused on the minority of drug users, not the larger population being tested because they are poor:

I agree that you need to pass a drug test to receive welfare benefits. I don't think you should be doing any of those sorts of things while you are on welfare. If you are taking money from the public you should abide by the laws. People should be receiving that money to improve their lives. It is public money and I think if you are applying for welfare and you have a drug addiction there should be a program that you can go to get clean and receive that welfare.

It was unclear why it was assumed that a person seeking welfare assistance was automatically suspect of "doing any of those sorts of things." It was also unclear why poor people needed to be strictly regulated to abide by middle- and upper-class morality

simply because they received government money, considering that all people in all social classes receive government assistance in one form or another.

Jennifer was rankled by the perceived immorality of drug use as well as the thought of taxpayer money being spent on drugs instead of basic necessities. She paid little attention to why it is the morality of poor people that we are so interested in in the first place. She voiced her support for welfare drug testing emphatically before I could even finish the interview question:

Yes, most definitely. If I were in charge, anybody applying for any government money or benefits would have to be drug tested, and I mean all drugs. If people are getting money for food, I don't want to think that they could possibly be spending that money on drugs. If you need food, I will be happy to get you food. I am completely against drugs, so morally I think it is wrong. The biggest thing is government money should not be spent on that, if it is for food it should be spent on food. I am very big on rules and stuff like that.

Marena's support for drug testing was based solely on the problem of taxpayer money being spent on drugs instead of basic necessities:

I think that it would be good just because if you have any enough money to be buying drugs then you definitely have enough money to be filling your closets with food. My main objection is that they should not be using government money for something else like drugs.

### **Welfare Morality**

Many of the students that I spoke with revealed that there is a "right way" and "wrong way" to use welfare; while most students did not espouse all of the themes in the "welfare morality" subsection, most students did espouse some beliefs about welfare morality (and typically more than one). Many of the students took great pains to convince me that if they had to turn to welfare themselves, they would be "deserving" because they would use welfare the right way (unlike other welfare recipients). The students who participated in this study were highly critical of what they deemed to be

the immorality of many welfare recipients, and reveal a sort of code of conduct or belief in moral welfare use. Providing one of the best examples of this concern over the immorality of welfare recipients was Olivia's discussion of the need for welfare recipients to change their ways. Discussing recipients who fail to correct the personal deficiencies that made them poor in the first place, she said, "If you are not making an effort to change do you really deserve to receive this assistance? Because you don't seem to be appreciating or using it and really feeling like it is helping you." For so many of the participants that I spoke to, welfare recipients had a moral obligation to appreciate what the middle- and upper-class were "doing for them" by providing welfare assistance to them; a part of this obligation and appreciation was acting in a "deserving" and "moral" manner. I will now discuss some of the most popular themes that emerged from the data concerning welfare morality.

### **Welfare is Wrong**

One strong theme in the ethnographic record was the notion that it is inherently "wrong" to use welfare. Many of the students believed that there was something inherently immoral about welfare-use. Jenny, for instance, begrudgingly identified a situation where she might turn to welfare, "Even though I know that it is wrong to go on welfare."

Melanie and Jennifer both signal that welfare is "wrong" and "abnormal" in their responses. Melanie had to use welfare when she was a young mother, but lamented that she was too young and naïve to know that welfare was not "normal." Jennifer, when discussing her hypothetical welfare use, said, "I hate admitting things like that, you know, like I am wrong, I need help." For Jennifer, a person has done something "wrong" in order to need welfare, and she would hate admitting to herself that she was one of

those people. She said, “It takes some time to admit that I am wrong, and that I need help, it is my ego. . . I wouldn’t want to admit that I failed in some way.”

### **Welfare Dependency**

Many of the students spoke about their concerns about welfare dependency. This concern highlighted their individualistically-oriented beliefs that limitless opportunities exist, and if you turn to welfare it must be because you need to depend upon other people’s money. The first thing Melanie said in her answer of whether she would use welfare herself was, “I would use it if I had to for a short period of time, yes. I believe that it is there to help people get off of their feet so that they can support themselves on their own.” She went on that say:

I just wouldn’t have felt comfortable being on it any longer than I had to. . . I’d say it would probably be a pride thing. Just like feeling guilty that I couldn’t provide for my kids, or like that I had been able to. . . Like if I could do it once [be self-sufficient], then I could do it again.

Dependency was the absolute first thing Melanie thought of when discussing welfare, and her beliefs frame dependency as an entirely individual-level issue; for Melanie, the fact that she could not provide for her children who be an indictment of her as an individual.

Karen believes her family raised her “properly” and that her personal characteristics and belief in self-sufficiency would lead her to use welfare the “right way” (temporarily and while working hard). She said, “Of course there are people who abuse it but I would not abuse it, I would not be dependent upon it personally.” She says she would never become dependent on “somebody else’s help” and would do everything she could to exit the welfare system and escape poverty.

When Peter discussed welfare, he highlighted his concerns that (a) poor people were “getting stuff for free,” and (b) the notion that welfare use breeds dependency. Discussing an example of a person in his family “depending” on unemployment benefits for what he deemed to be an unacceptably-long period of time, he said, “That complacency, that’s what I don’t agree with.” Peter assured me he would never become dependent on welfare, saying, “I would never use it as a long-term solution.” He was very concerned about dependency, and said, “You [welfare programs] should give the recipient not a lot of time, but a brief period of time to be inducted into the program. . . . Give them like three months. Say, ‘Hey, you’ve got three months, and after three months, if you still want to use this program, you need to have a job.’” For Peter, limitless opportunities are available in society, and to allow people to receive welfare benefits for more than three months is proof that they are illegitimately depending on welfare in an opportunity-filled world.

Ashley believes that the current government is encouraging welfare-dependency, saying:

There are a lot of opportunities for people to depend upon the government right now, I think it is so freaking scary. I saw this in my internship—I think it is very scary to have someone not willing to work because of unemployment. If unemployment is offered to you for 18 months and it is greater than the amount you can get at a part-time job or a full-time job, why not take the unemployment? And it will last you longer and offer more security in that way. But of course it doesn't take you above the poverty line. I mean it will help you be somewhat self-sufficient but not adequately enough. I think long-term I think there's always going to be poverty, there's never going to be enough for everybody.

The structural concerns she raised about the scarcity of resources and the inadequacy of the low-wage labor market in terms of income, benefits, and security were lost in Ashley’s overall critique of dependency; Ashley’s answer assumes that people should

choose a non-living-wage, little-to-no benefits, and insecure job over welfare. Ashley went on to say, “I think the key difference [between her if she had to turn to welfare and other welfare recipients] is I would not depend upon it in a long-term situation. . . My goal in the beginning of receiving welfare would be to get off of it, not depend on it forever.” Ashley believes that welfare is in many ways an illegitimate transfer of money from those who earn it to those who did not, and said if she had to turn to welfare, “I would feel very much like I was a burden to society.”

Natalia was also concerned with welfare dependency, saying, “I think welfare should kind of get them on their feet, provide them with enough resources, and then kind of push them off. Because I also feel that a lot of people get dependent on it.” She says if a poor person receiving welfare really wanted to get off of welfare then they would “make themselves” get off of welfare. She says giving people welfare for any extended period of time is “feeding into the system” and a culture of dependency, encouraging people to depend upon something that they would not otherwise need in a world of limitless opportunities.

Jennifer took our discussion of her internship as an opportunity to discuss what she perceived to be rampant welfare dependency:

I saw it [the stupidity of poor people] all the time at the homeless internship I did. A lot of those people, they were all homeless and whatever, they had families, and didn't have money and couldn't afford their own homes. So they would get on this list to get a home and so now they have this home because it was their time. But instead of trying to make their lives better, like trying to go to school or trying to get a job or saving their money and only buying necessities, they just didn't care. They thought, 'Well, okay now I have this home, the government is helping us, they're giving us money, they're giving us all of these free things, and so I don't have to worry about that anymore. So I am just going to rely on them instead of trying to get on my own feet.' We were trying to get them on their feet and have them do the work to stay there, but they got really comfortable. It was really, really frustrating. No matter how many times a case manager would talk to them and say, 'Hey, you need to do this or that,' they just didn't.

For Jennifer, there is an appropriate amount of time to rely on welfare assistance, and if you cannot "get on your feet" after that period of time you are unjustifiably "dependent."

There was no mention of how structural forces in the low-wage labor market might make this "dependency" necessary.

Isabel believes that the U.S. welfare system is more expansive than most other countries, saying "our welfare system has so many resources compared to other countries. . . you don't see this [amount of welfare assistance] in other countries." She says welfare is "like a chain" and believes the primary problem with welfare is dependency, saying, "Sometimes I think there is no improvement for those people. They just keep getting the same benefits or the same assistance. . . My family got this, your family will get this, and your kids will get this." She went on to describe the (perceived) generational transmission of poverty and welfare-use as a "circle," saying, "There is no beginning or end. It becomes like a circle for people." She believes that welfare not only breeds dependency but also a culture of poverty and welfare-use across generations.

Terra lumped poverty and drug-use together, and assumed that the intersection of both created a “vicious cycle” for poor people who then depended on welfare. She believes it is the government’s job to break the cycle of poverty, drug use, and children acquiring the bad habits of their parents. She said, “So if you can break that cycle and intervene, then perhaps they won’t be on welfare.”

Olivia believes she is a highly-driven and motivated person, and that she would not fall into the dependency trap that welfare recipients often find themselves in. She believes turning to welfare means people are not “doing enough” to help themselves, and assured me of her deservingness, saying, “I would be doing everything in my power to get off of that welfare.” She would not become dependent, and believes that people who do become dependent need to try harder.

### **Personal Responsibility and Self-Sufficiency**

One of the study participants, Ashley, believes that poor people and welfare recipients need to be educated about the value of hard work, saying that poor people need to “realize that hard work needs to be involved with receiving things.” This was a common theme in the data: the lack of “personal responsibility” and the need for “self-sufficiency” among the poor. These (loaded) concepts frame poverty and welfare use as a solely personal issue with no connection to the social structure; those who fail to earn a living wage are irresponsible people who have failed themselves and their families. Students who used these terms assume that poverty is a personal failure to grasp limitless opportunities that exist for anybody willing to seek them. These assumptions posit that people who fall into poverty and/or need welfare have personal characteristics that prevent them from being self-sufficient, and failing to be self-sufficient is typically framed in moral terms.

Ashley cited her religious views when discussing her beliefs about poverty, saying, “I think if you look at my religious views of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, they go hand-in-hand. We believe very strongly that you should be self-sufficient, that you need to depend upon yourself and don’t go looking for somebody else to bail you out.” She believes that the U.S. is a meritocracy and her family is proof. She said her family “gets very frustrated when people say that you can never rise out of poverty,” because their self-sufficiency and upward mobility is proof that we can all be successful if we try hard enough. Implicit in her answers is the notion that the only explanation for economic deprivation is people unwilling to provide for themselves. Ashley said, “I think there is a lot to be said about working hard and being able to achieve success.”

Tom explained his belief that it is a person’s personal responsibility to be self-sufficient by saying that, “If you need help, if you can’t resolve an issue on your own—I would never go seek help because you should be able to resolve an issue on your own.” When discussing his tenuous support for fertility policies aimed at the poor, Tom said, “I object to the idea of continuing to foster a method of no responsibility but also do not want that refusal to result in something far worse like the death of a child.” He frames fertility as a personal choice and poor families deciding to have children as irresponsible. He explicitly states that a poor woman’s decision to have a child is her “refusal” to be a responsible person.

Olivia believes that the “system” (meaning society) may be unfair to some poor people, but failure to overcome that unfairness is solely the responsibility of individuals. She said, “There is still the personal responsibility factor. And while all these things maybe are against you, if you give into the system it is your choice. . . Giving in to the

system is a personal decision.” She believes that succumbing to social forces and constraints outside of one’s control is a personal choice and a personal failing. Of poverty, she said, “I am a firm believer that it is about the decisions that you make.” Olivia supported family caps, saying, “I am okay with family caps, because I think that goes back to an individual decision.” She believes that fertility is an entirely personal decision, and that the decision to have a child while you are poor is a personal failing and “a drain on everyone else.” These answers assume that poverty is a personal failing, and that individuals who are poor and make “bad” decisions while poor (such as having children) are personally irresponsible. She said, “I think the responsibility that comes along with having a child is having the environment to raise that child in,” ignoring any possible structural explanations for poverty. Olivia assured me that if she had to use welfare, “I would do everything in my power to get off of that welfare.”

Karen believes that her personal characteristics make her self-sufficient, and if she had to turn to welfare these characteristics would help her to escape poverty and exit welfare quickly. She said she would never abuse the system, saying, “I would feel a little ashamed getting it not because it is welfare but because it is somebody else’s help. I was raised to be very self-sufficient so I would want to get off of it. I know I would not be ashamed because I would do everything I can to get off of it.”

Terra believes that the field of social work is based on a foundation of individualistically-oriented assumptions. She says most social workers would “lean toward individualism” in their worldviews, “because we practice self-determination meaning you get out of life what you give.” She says that a social worker’s responsibility

is to help welfare recipients become self-sufficient, help them “fix their problems, do for themselves.”

Nancy, Isabel, and Corinne believe that individuals are responsible for “getting on their own two feet,” becoming self-sufficient, and escaping poverty. Nancy framed work as an individual-level issue when discussing welfare work requirements, saying, “That is how you are going to get yourself out of the situation.” Isabel believes that the U.S. “is a country known by the opportunities given to every person,” implicitly suggesting that opportunities exist for most people who want to grasp them. She believes that anybody who wants to be self-sufficient can through motivation, saying, “If you have determination you succeed for the most part.” Corinne believes that welfare recipients “need to be contributing” to their own financial success, and that work requirements would be a good way of teaching recipients personal responsibility and self-sufficiency. She said, “I think that you need to be contributing to society’s success and to your own success.”

Natalia believes that welfare use would mean she is “weak,” “helpless,” and not self-sufficient, much like a child; she would “hate” herself for returning to the “helpless child phase.” She said she is “too proud to accept welfare” and said, “I just don’t think that I could bring myself to go onto welfare. I would feel like I am weak, helpless. And I have felt helpless and I don’t want to revisit that.” She believes that she is self-sufficient now, and if she ever had to turn to welfare she would rely on that belief that she is self-sufficient to help her avoid accepting assistance. Further supporting the notion that the self-sufficient succeed in a world of endless opportunities, she said, “Opportunities are present, it is our responsibility to grab them.” She believes that the government may

need to “push” people to be self-sufficient and get out of poverty if they will not do it themselves. She supported fertility-limiting policies based on the assumption that poverty is an individual-level problem and that responsible and self-sufficient people do not bring children into poverty, and if they do, the consequences “fall on them” individually.

Noreen supports fertility-limiting policies for female welfare recipients because she believes it is their responsibility to be self-sufficient before having children. She said, “If you’re not, for whatever reason, in a position to even maintain yourself and what you have then you have no business having more children.” She believes that women who have children while they are poor need to be “held accountable” by the welfare system. She even goes so far as to suggest that failing to establish yourself as self-sufficient is grounds for removal of children (who were born while in poverty) from the home by the government. Noreen goes on to explain that, “There has to be a consequence to you for making this and for not being responsible enough to know your own situation and not think that somebody is gonna come in and bail you out, basically, you know? There has to be some kind of a consequence to the parents.” Despite the fact that Noreen holds some very structurally-oriented views, she also believes that “everybody is to some extent responsible for their own personal success” and that self-sufficiency is in large part the responsibility of the poor; if they fail to take care of themselves financially without somebody else “bailing them out,” then the government has a right to punish them.

Peter and Jennifer both believe that the self-sufficient succeed in a land of plenty. Peter believes that the U.S. is a meritocracy and that people who are self-sufficient

succeed and those who do not fail. He said, “My personal belief is that whatever you get is what you put into it. . . You have to achieve your own success.” Peter’s beliefs are based on the assumption that success is available to everyone, and those who are truly self-sufficient will put the necessary work into life and succeed. Jennifer struck a similar tone, saying, “There are so many opportunities, its America, I mean come on.”

For many of the students personal responsibility was particularly salient when lamenting the birth of children to poor women. Sarah supports fertility-limiting welfare policies “because you want people to be more responsible. If they can’t support more children, they shouldn’t.” Corinne believes that poor people should not be adding to their families if they are poor, calling poor parents irresponsible for considering such a thing. Like many students, Sarah and Corinne framed people’s poverty and the choices that they make while in poverty as solely occurring at the individual-level and proof of the irresponsibility of poor people.

### **Why Would I Need Welfare?**

When I asked the students if they would ever turn to welfare, many of them answered that they could not see themselves ever needing it; for these students, they believed that they had the characteristics of a successful person, could not possibly ever need welfare, and would not feel deserving if they needed it given their (positive) personal characteristics. When I asked Jenny if she would ever turn to welfare, she could not envision a situation where she would need it, saying, “I think that with my skills and what I know that I could support myself without receiving welfare and leaving it for people that truly do need it.” Rather than conceiving of poverty and welfare need as something that could happen to anybody, she could not fathom ever being in such a situation. She said using welfare is “wrong” because, “I have skills that I can use to earn

money and I have an education that can get me a job. So I think it is wrong for me to go on welfare when I don't actually need it for the intended use for what it is for." For Jenny, it seemed from her answer that this "intended" use is for people who do not have the personal characteristics to be successful; welfare is not something people are entitled to simply because they need it to survive.

Olivia revealed that her pride would be hurt if she had to use welfare, "Especially because I am a very driven person, so that would also come with the sense that I had failed in some way." Olivia believes that, unlike poor people and welfare recipients, she has the individual characteristics of a successful person; turning to welfare would make her doubt this notion. It is difficult for Olivia to envision a situation where she would need welfare given the "successful" personal characteristics that she has.

Jennifer said of her hypothetical welfare-use, "I would try anything that I could think of to get out of it. I would figure it out and make it better." She assured me that she would not be complacent in her welfare-use and would use her skills to escape poverty and welfare need. She said "I would figure it out," framing poverty as an individual-level social problem that can be overcome by people with her personal characteristics.

Natalia believes that her life and adoption journey from eastern Europe to the U.S. has made her a very strong person, and it is very difficult for her to imagine how a person as strong as her would need to turn to welfare. She says that she is "too proud" to accept welfare, because, "I think a part of me would hate myself if I didn't try everything [to avoid welfare]." For Natalia, turning to welfare would be a signal that she did not really try everything in her power to succeed financially. She also believes that turning to welfare would contradict her belief that her personal strength would help her

avoid ever needing welfare. Natalia said that turning to welfare would mean she was “weak, helpless,” and that she has felt helpless before and does not ever want to feel that way again. She said, “I have been in that helpless child phase where I, even when I was put in with a family I still felt helpless, I felt out of control, I didn’t feel like I had control of my life.” She said part of her would “hate” herself for becoming a “helpless child” again. She conceded, however, that despite being “weak,” “helpless,” and “out of control” for needing welfare, she could see herself turning to it in a situation of dire need.

Tom describes himself as a “reasonably intelligent individual” who is proud that he is on “this side of the desk” (providing instead of receiving aid). He said of using welfare, especially in public, that, “My ego would just be shot.” The reason he provides is that he considers himself to have the personal characteristics of a successful person, and strongly believes that success or failure is ultimately the result of the decisions that we make. Because of this he said that, “If I got to that place [of needing welfare assistance] I am sure I would be really depressed. Depressed to an extreme, and just embarrassed and disappointed.” He went on to say that he could even envision a situation where he would become depressed to the point where he would not have the ability to function or take care of himself, saying, “That’s just what I could see happening.”

### **Welfare as Last Resort**

When discussing whether they would turn to welfare, many students revealed to me that they believe that recipients are only truly deserving if they are either almost homeless or homeless; people who turn to welfare before they have lost everything are undeserving. Jennifer said she would only turn to welfare, “If I was so poor that I did not

have anywhere to live anymore, like something big like that.” Jennifer said that she would turn to welfare only before “living on the streets.” She said she would have to establish some sort of debt threshold over which she might consider turning to welfare. She said, “I definitely would [turn to welfare] before living on the streets. I think to myself, ‘How far in debt would I have to be?’ I would have to think about it.” Nancy struck a similar tone, becoming defensive when I asked her if she would ever use welfare, saying, “It would be my absolute last resort.” Many students answered similarly to this question, framing their answers in such a manner as to assure me that they would use welfare the “right” way and only if they truly had no resources and/or possessions left.

Natalia, discussing whether she would use welfare, said:

I would not feel comfortable. To me I feel that I am too proud to accept welfare. It would have to be a very, very, very, very last resort. I would probably go to the streets for a little bit before even thinking about welfare. I think a part of me would hate myself if I didn't try everything even if I had to choose welfare and it was the absolutely last resort a part of me would still say no. You are going to fight it. . . The rational part of me would still realize that I have to survive. So as much as I would hate myself for again having to feel that helplessness and not being in control of anything in my life, the rational part of me would say, ‘You have to survive. This is what you are going to have to do, deal with it. Suck it up, and go on welfare.’

For Natalia, welfare is reserved for people who are either on the brink of homelessness or who have been homeless; it might be assumed from her answer that people above that threshold are suspect for accepting welfare assistance.

### **Government Waste and Stealing Middle-Class Money**

There was significant concern among the students about the perceived tendency for welfare programs to (a) use government money unwisely and waste taxpayer money, and (b) transfer money from hardworking people to undeserving people. Karen,

for instance, framed welfare as a transfer of hard-earned money from earners to non-earners, saying that if she had to turn to welfare, “I would feel a little ashamed getting it not because it is welfare but because it is somebody else's help. I was raised to be very self-sufficient.” Olivia struck a similar tone and said of welfare assistance, “I think it is unfair to ask people to give up money that they have earned. Why do I have to give that to everybody else?” She believes it is the duty of welfare recipients to prove to those providing aid that they are changing, otherwise, “do you really deserve to receive this assistance? Because you don't seem to be appreciating or using it and really feeling like it is helping you.” She laments the (perceived) fact that people have children while on welfare to receive more benefits, and said that people have a right to have children but that, “I don't think that child should be a drain on everyone else.”

Marena agrees with work requirements because she views welfare assistance as a transfer of money from earners to non-earning recipients (instead of a means of addressing structural imbalances). She said, “I think if you are staying home and getting help from the government it's not really helping your case. . . You don't get free food, that's not how it should be.” Marena supports drug tests because she believes without them money would be wasted on drugs. She said, “I think that it [drug tests] would be good just because if you have any enough money to be buying drugs then you definitely have enough money to be filling your closets with food. My main objection is that they should not be using government money for something else like drugs.”

Ashley lamented government waste on social welfare programs, saying, “To say that we need to spend more money and throw money at people, throw more money at people, irks me.” She believes that poverty is an individual-level problem that can be

overcome by people's decisions as well as social welfare institutions spending money more wisely; sufficient resources are there, Ashley believes, if people would choose to address the problem of poverty using smarter methods. Ashley supports drug tests because she believes that giving money to poor individuals with drug problems is wasting taxpayer money. She said, "I feel that that would be important [welfare drug tests] because I don't want to have to, as a taxpaying person or representing the taxpayers, to have to feel like taxpayers have to feed an addiction."

Jenny believes that welfare recipients, in taking taxpayer money, have an obligation to live by middle-class moral standards. When discussing her support for drug tests, she said:

I agree that you need to pass a drug test to receive welfare benefits. I don't think you should be doing any of those sorts of things while you are on welfare. If you are taking money from the public you should abide by the laws.

There was no discussion of (a) if it is unjust to assume poor people are drug-users, (b) the validity of middle-class and upper-class morality, or (c) the contribution that structural forces make to drug use in poor communities and the difficulties dealing with the intersections of these social forces with race, social class, addiction, etc. When discussing work requirements, Jenny said she believes that the money that people receive in the form of welfare assistance is somebody else's money, and that working is a means of "repaying" that money. Explaining her support for work requirements, she said, "You know, you are taking all of that money, and somehow it has to be repaid, so if somebody else like you needs that money then we will have money to give them."

Sarah, Melanie, and Natalia were concerned with the government wasting money for immoral purposes. Sarah supported drug testing, for instance, because she was

worried that poor people would waste their money on drugs. She said that buying drugs while on welfare was “unethical” and wanted money used “the right way.” Melanie said, “I mean drugs aren’t free. So I mean, if you can afford drugs, then you can afford food or whatever else you need” (Melanie, like so many students who supported drug testing, did not extend her government waste argument to the non-poor who receive government money). Natalia discussed how we should prevent drug-users from “pooling their money” to buy drugs with welfare assistance. She said, “I think it kind of goes back to the person on welfare to not abuse the system. . . Don’t go into the system so you can pool the money you have to buy drugs.” She was very concerned about people abusing the welfare system, but her concern was only with poor people. When I pushed Natalia further in our discussion of drug tests to consider drug testing for other forms of welfare (student loans, farm subsidies, middle- and upper-class tax credits, private sports subsidies, etc.) she was less certain of her answer, saying, “Maybe not for student loans, but I think again, certain situations and contexts. I probably wouldn’t say student loans.” She was concerned about people using other people’s money for illegitimate purposes, but only expressed this concern for poverty-targeted welfare.

Jennifer said that, “If I were in charge, anybody applying for any government money or benefits would have to be drug tested, and I mean all drugs.” She believes that it is the government’s responsibility to police the spending habits of poor people and make sure that they are spending taxpayer money wisely:

If people are getting money for food, I don’t want to think that they could possibly be spending that money on drugs. If you need food, I will be happy to get you food. . . The biggest thing is government money should not be spent on that, if it is for food it should be spent on food.

She also believes that poor people should live according to her moral code, saying, “I am completely against drugs, so morally I think it is wrong. . . I am very big on rules and stuff like that.” Jennifer was also very concerned about poor people having children in order to boost their monthly welfare benefits; discussing her support for family caps, she said, “People shouldn’t have babies just to get more money, I have heard of that before, I have seen it in different areas, not just that but other things. Having babies to get more money just isn’t fair. I think those policies would discourage that.” Her support for work requirements was based on similar concerns about using government money unwisely, saying, “It [welfare assistance] shouldn’t just be free.”

### **“Abusing the System”**

There was a strong concern among the participants with broadly-defined “abuse of the system.” For many of the students this was the first concern they raised about welfare, the minority of people who abuse the system, rather than the problems that face the majority of welfare recipients. It was a bit shocking to see how many students focused on the smaller problem of welfare abuse, focusing on their notions of welfare morality rather than the good of the larger population of recipients. Jenny, for instance, spent a considerable amount of time talking about welfare abuse and what she would do about it if she were in charge. She said, “I know people do abuse welfare and they should be punished for that.” Her answer was to institute a board of people who can determine when abuse has occurred and exact punishment on those people, saying, “I would make a board and see who should be punished, see who should receive punishment or not.” I never asked Jenny any questions about abuse or about punishing undeserving welfare recipients; this significant focus on abuse and punishment in the

interview was completely participant-directed and revealed a lot about her underlying assumptions and concerns.

I asked students to tell me the biggest lessons that they took from their internship experiences. Of all of the possible positive or negative lessons she could have reported, Nancy chose welfare abuse (which she admits is a problem in a minority of welfare cases). This attention to a problem for a minority of recipients revealed a lot about her personal assumptions about poverty and welfare. Of her internship experience, she said:

I guess I have learned that welfare recipients can be very manipulative. Stuff like, 'We ran out of food, we need you to give us money for food.' And then you go to their apartment and they are stocked full of food. We had this one family come in and they were cycling through the different shelters. They have been in our shelter alone three times. They showed up with no clothes or anything and. . . just the circumstances, it was definitely kind of fishy. I mean what happened to those clothes? We were not sure if they had left them somewhere else or if they literally had no clothes. They were like, 'Oh we need a whole new wardrobe, blah blah blah.' It was really fishy. It was a really negative experience. I am really idealistic, I like to believe that people are in it for the right reasons. I want to believe that they're not trying to abuse the system, but seeing that shocked me. I mean, I knew it happens but I actually witnessed it and that was kind of tough. It wasn't the majority of people but it was pretty significant, maybe 30%.

### **No Handouts!**

Many respondents were concerned that welfare recipients "wanted something for free" and believed welfare to be a "handout." Ashley believes that the government "throws money at people" without a promise that those people will change, explaining, "To say that we need to spend more money and throw money at people, throw more money at people, irks me." She believes that welfare recipients need to change to prove that they deserve assistance, and that "hard work needs to be involved with receiving things." She believes that young single mothers need to make sacrifices and work

“instead of [the government] just handing things to people and saying, ‘Okay we’ll pay you to stay at home with your kids.’” Marena believes that proving that you are working hard is a part of receiving welfare assistance, and that being unemployed and receiving welfare is “not really helping your case.” She went on to explain that, “You don’t get free food, that’s not how it should be.” Olivia believes that people should not be “given” homes if they are poor, saying, “It shouldn’t just be a giveaway. It shouldn’t be here’s a free home. It needs to be something that they work for, and it needs to be something they can manage working for.” Jennifer saw “proof” that welfare recipients were looking for handouts at her internship. She said a common theme for the poor that she saw there was that they thought, “The government is helping us, they’re giving us money, they’re giving us all of these free things, and so I don’t have to worry about that anymore.” She said of welfare, “It shouldn’t just be free, like just anyone can be like, ‘Oh, I’m not working I’m not even looking for a job but I need money.’”

### **“I Would Use Welfare Correctly”**

Some of the students focused on how they would not abuse the welfare system, and unlike other welfare recipients, they would be “good” welfare users. Melanie, talking about her own welfare use when she was a young mother, said, “I think I was too young to really understand that maybe that it wasn’t normal.” She framed welfare recipients as different, as outside of the norm in society. She made considerable effort in her answer to convince me that she was a “deserving” recipient, spending welfare money on necessities for her young daughter, saying, “It wasn’t like I was using it for stuff for myself.” Allison said she would turn to welfare under certain conditions, saying, “I feel like, as long as I’m not taking advantage of the system as much—because I know some

people, it's kind of hard to distinguish that line, like if they're really just taking advantage of it or not.”

### **Poverty = Homelessness**

There were a significant number (but a minority) of students who seemed to equate poverty with homelessness. In most areas of the U.S. the federal poverty threshold is high enough to include housing costs. For these students, however, their answers explicitly and/or implicitly questioned these thresholds, as they equated poverty with having almost no resources whatsoever. It was unclear to me if these students simply had an inaccurate perception of where the federal poverty thresholds are set or if their perception was accurate and they simply disagreed with them; whatever the case may be, the students clearly personally associated poverty with a standard of living much lower (homelessness) than the federal government's thresholds would suggest.

Sarah explained this perspective:

To me, I believe that poverty's a very strong word. Poverty says you have nothing there. You might not be rich, middle class, but if you work hard, and if you make the right choices, you can actually—no matter how society throws at you, you can actually live minimum.

When I asked Terra why poverty exists in the U.S., her mind immediately went to homelessness. She believes that the main causes of poverty (poverty = homelessness) are mental illness and substance abuse:

You can have a lot of money and then lose everything, you'll be homeless. I think a lot of the reason why we have homelessness is a lot of substance abuse. Also mental illness, untreated mental illnesses. The main cause? I guess mental illness and substance abuse, I would lump them together.

Natalia, on the best way to address poverty in the U.S., said, “I guess I would say housing. Build more housing for the homeless I guess.” She says housing is the “main thing” and also cited mental illness in connection with homelessness, saying, “I feel like

a lot of people, there are a lot of homeless people because of mental illness. They can't support themselves, or financial issues, or they have always been in poverty. So it is the cycle of their life.” Corinne supported drug tests because she equated poverty with homelessness, and in this assumption, was concerned about how drug-use caused poverty/homelessness. Her support for welfare drug testing was based on her desire to prevent homeless individuals with mental illnesses from self-medicating. One of the first things she associated with poverty was homelessness, and said, “Working with the homeless population, one thing that I noticed, probably 75 percent of the time it seemed like there was a huge amount of undiagnosed mental illness.” This mental illness caused them to be homeless, poor, and trapped them in poverty because they needed drugs to self-medicate. She said that because of their illnesses, “They take drugs to help deal with the stuff that’s going on in their head.”

## CHAPTER 7 FURTHER DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study developed out of my interest in the way in which culture contributes to the existence and nature of poverty and inequality in the U.S. I wanted to explore a group of people involved in some manner with issues related to these social problems (preferably in a helping profession directly related to these issues) and how they struggled with American cultural values. I chose social workers because I was looking for a helping profession that might have been in a position to resist dominant American cultural values of individualism due to their interest in helping marginalized populations; I thought that their interest in helping these populations would make their struggle with individualistically-oriented American values particularly unique and noteworthy. Which of these values did they internalize, and which ones did they reject? How were their worldviews the same or different compared to dominant American culture? Did they reinforce the status quo, or challenge it? What does this say about the strength of these values and the power of socialization to perpetuate (or undermine) certain forms of social organization and hierarchy? How might their worldviews play a role in either perpetuating our current poverty knowledge or helping develop a new understanding of these social problems?

Society and social institutions exist in a certain form, it can be assumed, because most people (at some at least minimal level) give such social organization legitimacy. Social workers must grant some legitimacy to ideological assumptions of their profession and the policies that govern it, otherwise it might be assumed that they would conflict with authority figures in their field rather quickly and find themselves looking for a different line of work. A doctor in a hospital in the U.S. who disagrees with the major

foundations of Western medicine will not likely last very long in their chosen profession; likewise, I assumed that social workers must agree on some level with the individualistically-oriented foundations of welfare policy, even if they wish to reform such policies. This study was designed to gauge their level of agreement with such assumptions, and what the implications of this level of agreement might be for poverty knowledge as well as welfare policy and practice moving forward.

The results of this study suggest that most of the social work students in the program that I analyzed, despite making great efforts to express their beliefs in a compassionate manner, believed very strongly in many of the tenets of American individualism; I call their brand of American individualism “compassionate individualism.” This worldview largely supports many of the individualistic assumptions about poverty, inequality, and welfare in the U.S. While this brand of individualism may be a bit more structural than dominant American beliefs, the real difference between the two belief systems seems to be the manner in which the BSW students sympathize with and care about helping the poor; the underlying assumptions about the causes of poverty and inequality are remarkably similar despite the “compassionate” manner in which they are expressed.

The answers that the students gave during our interviews were revealing in many ways, both for what they explicitly and implicitly included and excluded; what the students chose to include in their answers and what they chose to exclude from their answers revealed their beliefs about how the world does and should work, as well as how the world does not and should not work<sup>22</sup>. The first major finding is that it is clear

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<sup>22</sup> The way in which most students both explicitly and implicitly took the principles of the American economy for granted is a prime example. In doing so they (a) gave a particular version of how they

that individualism is the most popular perspective among the BSW students for analyzing social problems such as poverty and inequality (despite many students having inconsistent and contradictory beliefs, this was the overall trend). Most students did not know how individualistically-oriented they were and often mistook individual-level explanations for structural-level explanations<sup>23</sup> (and often used similar arguments to ones they claimed they rejected and mistook them because they were framed slightly differently<sup>24</sup>). Most students who self-identified as structurally-oriented were not. For the minority of students who did not espouse individualistically-oriented worldviews, both individualism and Culture of Poverty<sup>25</sup> explanations were still significant parts of their worldviews. Only one student had a worldview that was clearly structurally-oriented.

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believed this economy works, (b) revealed whether they believed this was the way the world *should* work, and (c) revealed the ways in which the world *does not* and *should not* work. If a student discussed healthcare access as something that is inherently and normatively tied to people's incomes and job benefits without calling such social organization into question, they reveal their perception of how the world does and should work; in excluding a discussion of alternatives that may be desirable to them, they reveal that the world does not and should not work according to socialist principles of universal healthcare regardless of income or job benefits.

<sup>23</sup> Some students believed that they were structurally-oriented because they cited poverty causes that were not the "fault" of the poor individual. One student, for instance, believed that they were structurally-oriented for citing family upbringing as the cause of poverty (and certain parenting practices as inherently problematic). Such an answer is of course individualistically-oriented, because it places the cause of poverty at the individual-level (the parents' parenting practices) rather than the structural level (how society rewards and punishes certain parenting practices).

<sup>24</sup> For example, in one interview a student rejected that idea that poor people were "lazy" but also believed that without work requirements, welfare recipients were inherently likely to become "dependent" due to a lack of proper motivation.

<sup>25</sup> Components of these Culture of Poverty beliefs included the beliefs that: success and failure are learned and the "blueprint" for success or failure is intergenerationally transmitted, poor people inherently make bad choices and do not know where opportunities are and how to grasp them, poor people have not been taught how to help themselves, poor people do not "know any better" and do not know how to live any other way than by their deviant cultural norms/values/beliefs/habits, poor people lack motivation and have low expectations, middle-class standards/beliefs/values/habits lead to success inherently in their nature, living in poverty "traps" people in a vicious cycle of poverty perpetuated by their deviant subculture, and poor people inherently waste money and need instant gratification rather than planning for long term financial success.

I determined the orientation of a participant's poverty/inequality worldview based on their "real" cultural explanations of these social problems; these were answers to questions that explored the perspectives that students utilized in their everyday lives (questions about how they would solve poverty, what they thought of welfare, etc.). These "real" cultural answers differed significantly from their "ideal" cultural answers (when I asked them to rank social structuralism, Culture of Poverty, and individualism as perspectives from "most agree" to "least agree"). When I asked them to rank the three perspectives, students seemed to use their answers as a means of projecting their desired personal identity as well as their desired professional identity as a compassionate and knowledgeable social worker. This was the "ideal" perspective that they aspired to and that they believed matched the ideals of social work. It was obviously important, based on their answers, for most of the students to assure me that they were "properly" politically-liberal, structurally-oriented, compassionate, and knowledgeable about social problems<sup>26</sup>. This professed belief in social structuralism contradicted their reliance on individualistically-oriented explanations when I asked them to analyze poverty, inequality, and welfare and offer possible (often hypothetical) solutions. More often than not poverty and inequality were discussed as personal characteristics (often discussed as "passed down" from parents creating a "vicious cycle"). While acknowledging some structural constraints and admitting that the social structure may be unfair to some people, most participants believed anybody could

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<sup>26</sup> I say "properly" because there was a strong sense among the participants that social workers were (a) disproportionately politically-liberal, structurally-oriented, compassionate, and knowledgeable of social issues, and (b) that this reality reflected the matching ideals of the field of social work.

succeed if they really put their mind to it. It was the job of social workers, it was argued, to motivate people to develop self-determination to “better” themselves.

Only one student seemed to actually analyze American social problems from truly “outside” of American cultural assumptions (Jana). This was likely due to being socialized and spending most of her life in a culture much different than that found in the U.S. The rest of the students desired to be “objective” and many believed they were, but it was most often the case that their perceived “structural” beliefs were just a repackaging of the major tenets of individualism. A student who said that family upbringing influenced a student’s lack of motivation and thus led to poverty, for instance, was a more “compassionate” way of talking about the much more mean-spirited idea of “laziness”; both ideas, however, cited an individual’s lack of motivation as the cause of their poverty.

Beyond the dominance of individualism, one of the most interesting aspects of this project was how salient particular assumptions and cultural explanations were for students. Most people likely have worldviews which contain multiple, often contradictory explanations for poverty and inequality which they utilize at different times, situations, contexts, etc. One perspective may be dominant, but most of us are not ideologically consistent at all times. With this in mind, it was not surprising when students harbored extremely individualistically-oriented assumptions. In one interview a student went as far as to argue that poverty was passed from parents to children genetically; this was not a totally unexpected response as I would suspect that we all have at least some deeply-individualistic aspects of our worldviews despite our particular overall orientations. What was so interesting to me was noting that the ideas expressed in each of the interview

answers were the first ideas that students thought of when hearing my questions. Their responses were likely the most salient and most important beliefs and assumptions that they held on the subject in question despite likely having multiple beliefs and assumptions; the answer a student gave represented the first and fastest ideas to materialize in a student's consciousness. So when a student muses that poverty may be passed down genetically through the generations, it is not shocking that this was part of their worldview, one explanation among many; what was shocking was that this was the first and most important thing that came to mind, and the student ended their answer without broadening the scope of their analysis. Most of the really negative judgments of the poor that are contained in the ethnographic record were not just part of the students' worldviews, but the foundations of their worldviews.

### **Compassionate Individualism**

What differentiated the poverty/inequality worldviews of social work students from dominant American individualistically-oriented poverty/inequality assumptions was not the cause of these social problems; both dominant American cultural assumptions and the worldviews of BSW students are individualistically-oriented<sup>27</sup>. What differentiated the two was that BSW students tended to frame their views in more compassionate and less-demeaning ways while still accepting the foundational assumptions. Students who entered the BSW program more structurally-oriented and politically-liberal tended to

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<sup>27</sup> One of my biggest regrets concerning my study design was not asking more questions related to the racialized and gendered distribution of poverty, inequality, and welfare need, as well as other social problems in the U.S. A major implicit assumption contained in students' heavy focus on individualism and Culture of Poverty is what this says about racial minority groups and single mothers who find themselves disproportionately poor. I wish I had explicitly asked the following question to individualistically-oriented students: in framing poverty as a personal failing and/or a consequence of deviant subcultural values, what implications does this have for racialized and feminized poverty? Do individual failings and deviant values *really* offer the best or most complete explanation of the disproportionate poverty of African-Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, single mothers, etc.? If so, what does this say about them as individuals and about their particular subcultures?

leave the program feeling that these beliefs were validated, never truly analyzing the problematic aspects of these worldviews; despite being more structurally-oriented than their colleagues, most still held overall worldviews that were based on individualism. Students who entered the BSW program more individualistically-oriented and politically-conservative tended to leave the program with slightly more structural views, but like the politically-liberal students they still tended to leave the program with an individualistically-oriented worldview. American cultural assumptions about poverty and inequality seemed to play a significant role, although they were mediated through the students' sense of altruism and feelings of moral obligation to help people; once American cultural assumptions passed through this filter, it became what I call "compassionate individualism": a feeling of sympathy towards and desire to help people who cannot "help themselves" (because of personal issues) based upon the same individualistic foundational assumptions about why these people cannot help themselves in the first place. It should be noted that it did not seem like students were pretending or explicitly cloaking these individualistic assumptions in compassion as a means of manipulating their outward projected identities to appear more understanding. The ethnographic data suggests that they had internalized a deeply-held belief that this compassion and moral certitude truly set them apart and that their beliefs truly were different; they had simply failed to thoroughly analyze how closely their foundational assumptions matched those of dominant American culture and whether this was empirically and/or theoretically problematic.

## **The Importance Given to Individuals' Choices**

Although most times the BSW students were not aware of the logical implications of what they were saying, their worldviews and explanations of social problems largely reinforced the idea that economic success and failure can be analyzed in terms of personal-responsibility, self-determination, hard work, proper motivation, smart choices, etc. In fact, the idea that the social hierarchy in the U.S. is a meritocracy was supported by a majority of the participants. It was largely assumed that limitless opportunities exist for all who want them, and the only problem was figuring out how to motivate marginalized populations to seize these opportunities. The BSW students assumed that adults are largely free from social forces; this notion suggested that people will always eventually come out ahead if they are determined enough and make the correct decisions despite any possible structural constraints. One constant struggle in my field of sociology is determining how much credit to give to the role of the social structure versus individual agency and how deterministic social forces are in the outcomes of our lives; in this study, most students assumed that individuals could always overcome structural constraints (if they even acknowledged the structural constraints in the first place). Students espoused the non-sociological assumption that legal freedom assures freedom from social forces, and therefore a high level of legal freedom in the U.S. must mean freedom from social forces (some students even suggested that because the U.S. was the “freest” that social forces simply did not constrain the life chances of Americans in any substantial manner). This helps explain why so many students had more compassion for children than adults: from their perspective children are the victims of social forces beyond their control, while adults can make their own destiny if they so choose. This of course begs the question: do these underprivileged children grow up to

become adults? When they do, is the impact of socialization in an underprivileged environment wiped clear when they turn 18? What about cumulative disadvantage, the ways in which social forces interact and create exponentially worse outcomes later in life? What about the continued influence of social forces despite age? This belief that poor adults ultimately control their own destiny ignores the very powerful role that social forces can play throughout our lives. Living in decades of poverty during childhood can have a lifelong effect on a person's life, such as their intellectual ability and health. Even if such a person were to move out of poverty as an adult, research suggests that their childhood experiences continue to influence them throughout adulthood. This of course makes no mention of the social forces that an adult continues to face in adulthood which interact with the previously mentioned impacts. Assuming that a person can simply choose to live according to middle-class standards ignores the strong influence that current and past social forces play in constraining the choices and opportunities available to many poor people. While it is certainly not safe to sociologically assume that no poor person can escape poverty, it is equally unsafe to assume that every poor person can escape poverty despite social constraints. The latter conceptualization of universally available upward mobility was a dominant assumption in the ethnographic record.

There were many popular components of the compassionate brand of individualism utilized by many students. Many students told me, in one form or another, that "nobody helped me and my family." This of course ignored the very real and important ways we all depend on other people's help to succeed throughout our lives, and how the government aids all social classes and many organizations and

corporations. Students widely assumed that there is no shortage of opportunities in the U.S. and that proper motivation and smart choices would surely reward those who want to grasp them (this helps explain the significant concern about welfare dependency, something perceived as inherently problematic in a world of endless opportunities). These endless opportunities prove that those who fail are not self-sufficient or personally responsible; everybody has a duty to be independent in a land of plenty. Students tended to use anecdotal evidence (from observations of their own family or other people's families) to support the notion that because some people experience significant and often rapid upward mobility in the U.S., all people can experience such success. Some of the students compared the quality of living in the U.S. to other countries, and assumed that because this quality of living was higher (and the bottom of the social hierarchy was often higher than the bottom in other countries as well), all people in the U.S. should be content; this belief that "our poor are not that poor and should therefore quit complaining" focused no attention on whether an unjust distribution of social positions in any social hierarchy is problematic<sup>28</sup>. I garnered from some students' answers that because the U.S. has a relatively high quality of life, social problems are considered to be largely solved here. Another assumption was that the "smart" decisions that lead to economic success are assumed to be inherently correct

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<sup>28</sup> As a metaphor, I would use the hypothetical example of a person claiming that American slavery was "not that bad" because of the (highly problematic) belief that American slave owners treated their slaves relatively well compared to slave owners in other societies. Such a discussion ignores the socially-unjust and involuntary nature of slavery; one cannot easily justify forcing people to live according to certain standards simply because the person in a position of power believes those standards to be appropriate. I make the same argument for cross-cultural analyses of American poverty. Of course there will be poor people that experience a more brutal standard of living than the American poor; in what way does this address the highly-determining ways in which social organization can contribute to who loses out at the economic game involuntarily? How do we justify involuntary subordination? How can you downplay somebody's low standard of living if it is due to forces outside of their control?

and social forces that constrain an individual's ability to make such decisions were overlooked<sup>29</sup>.

There was a strong sentiment among the students that if the social structure does impact people's lives it does so by creating difficult circumstances that can be overcome if somebody really, honestly tries hard enough. Implicit (and often times explicit) in much of the data was the notion that, even when participants did acknowledge the role of the social structure, they downplayed its influence; yes some people face circumstances that others do not, but all circumstances can be overcome by hard work and motivation. This of course ignores the significant impact that social forces can play in people's lives. It also ignores what might be considered a significantly unjust situation where some people are forced to overcome almost impossible odds to join the middle-class, while others are simply born there. Just because upward mobility is possible for many people ignores how hard work is unequally rewarded based on social position and how far some people have to climb just to enjoy the quality of life that most MAU students inherited and take for granted; these students were born into middle- and upper-class privilege, yet demand that the poor make sacrifices they will never have to make, work harder than they will likely ever have to work, and take on burdens they likely could never imagine to reach the same point in the social hierarchy that most of these students occupied the day they were born.

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<sup>29</sup> Such as assuming that because marriage tends to lead to more financial stability that marriage should be promoted. This does not address (a) why marriage is normative, (b) why social organization has to punish certain family forms, and (c) how the choice to marry and stay married is constrained by strong social forces in poor communities. Because marriage can be a strategic decision to avoid poverty does not make it socially-just to assume that people who do not marry are being irresponsible or all that all people can and should marry and stay married.

Many of the students spoke about what a “burden to society” they would be if they ever needed welfare. This seemed to suggest that they believe welfare is not a method of addressing structural imbalances after they happen; rather, welfare in this context is money taken from people who earned it meritocratically and given to people who did not. Rather than viewing welfare as wages that people should have been making in the first place and are therefore being returned to them (whether through subjection to low-wages or exclusion from the paid labor force), it was viewed by many of the students as a portion of wages taken from a hard working person’s bank account. Welfare is the middle-class “bailing out” the poor. From this perspective, it is easy to see why students spoke of being burdens to society, because this perspective assumes that poor people are not doing enough to help themselves and must depend on other people’s hard-earned money to survive.

Many of the students in this study pursued the field of social work because they wanted to help people who they believed could not help themselves. After analyzing their answers it seemed that there were two distinct groups of people who were helpless: one group that was deserving of unconditional help, and one that was deserving of conditional help. The people that were more likely to receive sympathy and framed as deserving of unconditional help were often people whose poverty could be medically explained: people battling mental illness, disabled individuals, the elderly, etc. The students believed that people whose poverty could not be medically explained were “free” to make the correct decisions and escape poverty; any help given to these people must be conditional (regulated, punitive, etc.) because no legitimate explanation was available to explain why they were poor beyond personal deficiencies. The BSW

students were very understanding of the social forces that contributed to the poverty of people whose plight could be medically explained. For the other group, it was assumed that while social forces may have created unfair conditions, anybody that truly wishes to overcome these conditions can and should.

### **Fixing Individual Deficiencies**

Most students in this study expressed an interest in “fixing” the deficiencies within individuals that kept them from being successful. This helps explain why most students were interested in psychology at some point before arriving at the study of social work. It also helps explain why so many students saw education as a means of fixing poor children before they became problematic adults. Rather than examining why undesirable positions exist in the social hierarchy in the first place, most of the students took social organization for granted and were instead interested fixing whatever deficiency existed within an individual that kept them from occupying one of the many (presumably unlimited) desirable positions that exist in society. The overwhelming interest in psychology that many of the students had before finding social work seemed to support this notion that deep down they were focused on how to fix individuals, not social structures; where social structures were discussed, they were discussed as a means of contributing to individual-level solutions rather than guaranteeing some level of equality regardless of personal characteristics. Organizing society in such a manner so that we all can succeed despite our personal characteristics did not seem to be desirable to the BSW students. They took it for granted that economic success should be tied to normative middle-class standards, and because these standards were inherently and objectively right and desirable it was the duty of the poor to “change” themselves to match these standards.

Many of the students reported being concerned that government money should not be “wasted,” or spent on poor people without a corresponding change in their behavior and characteristics; suggesting that if poor people want the hard-earned money of the middle-class, they need to live by the moral code of the middle-class. Money given to welfare recipients who changed their behavior was framed as deserved aid, while money given to a recipient who refused to change their behavior was a “handout.” This suggested that they could not justify welfare as a method of entitling people to a certain standard of living regardless of personal characteristics. For many students, spending money on poor people who failed or refused to then “appreciate” this money and conform to middle-class standards was “wasted money.” Some students even suggested that this money that was given to welfare recipients altruistically could be repaid someday as a sign of appreciation.

### **The Invisible, Normative Social Structure**

In this study it seemed that social work as a field tended to treat social problems as issues that need to be resolved within the context of the current social structure. This is understandable given that social workers, once they are in the field, will be forced to do their best for their clients with the resources they are allowed and within the externally-imposed state and federal regulations. After all, most social workers do not write policy and their job description demands that they follow the rules and logic of their profession (or choose another profession). A football player, for example, may wish certain rules of the game to be different in some form or another, but this does not stop him/her from following such rules or face the consequences. It is understandable that social work students would focus on the practical, individual-centered strategies that will be most-useful to them in the field within the constraints of their profession: helping a

person find a job, preaching self-determination even in the face of long odds, etc. This focus on within-systems solutions helps explain why these students talked about social problems at the individual-level rather than the structural level. It was overwhelmingly the case that the causes and solutions that the students expressed were always closer to the individual-level. Students took many elements of the current social order for granted, and it could be understood from their answers that for the most part social organization was just fine as it is, we just need to help people to better participate in society. The capitalist principles of the American economy, for instance, were not a subject of inquiry; the focus was mostly on how individuals can better equip themselves to play by these rules<sup>30</sup>. I was a bit surprised that students could not think more structurally, more abstractly, and from more of a macro-level perspective when sitting down with me for an interview; after all, we were safely protected within the walls of the “ivory tower” miles away from the field where anything and everything was possible. This within-systems perspective was an important part of their analytical toolbox, however, and tended to persist and frame their most basic logic related to social problems.

Students took for granted that certain personal characteristics and individual actions (being a single-mother, having little education, etc.) led to a less-desirable social position (and among other problematic consequences of this logic ignored the racialized and gendered implications of this individual-centered logic). When discussing such characteristics they spoke about trying to fix these deficiencies (the single mother

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<sup>30</sup> The principles of the American economy were largely invisible and taken-for-granted. Nancy, for instance, lamented her nephew’s future, saying, “This poor child is going to have difficulty the rest of his life because he got unlucky and got some really crappy parents.” Nancy was solely interested on how our social environments affected us as people, focusing on the characteristics of who loses out at the economic game rather than why there are losers in the first place (in reference to Rank 2003).

should get married, the uneducated should get educated) rather than asking themselves: why does this particular personal characteristic or action have to carry with it a lower social position? Why are some normative personal characteristics and/or family forms (such as the traditional family) given a privileged position and assumed to be inherently natural and desirable? Is it really impossible for society to be organized in such a manner as to reward all personal characteristics and family forms? For instance, is there a way to organize society so that single-mothers are not solely dependent on the labor market for income, healthcare, etc.? Why do we demand people get married to succeed financially? After all, if we assume that the labor market is an imperfect way of meeting the needs of an entire population, it might be assumed that a single-mother deserves some support beyond what she might be able to procure in the labor market. Rather than asking these sorts of questions, it was taken-for-granted that certain personal characteristics were problematic. Understandings of the relationships between individuals and social institutions were considerably underdeveloped. The answer for most students was to give these individuals a chance to fix themselves according to middle-class standards, instead of fixing society so that these characteristics do not carry such punitive consequences. Even if it was assumed that it is objectively true that personal characteristics cause inequality (a problematic assertion in itself), it does not have to be assumed that we have to allow this inequality to happen. Social organization is a choice made by people, and the negative aspects of such organization are the fault of people, not fate. Nature has not ordained that a few bad decisions have to doom people to the bottom of the social hierarchy for the rest of their lives, and we should not feel shackled by this false inevitability.

One of the most popular beliefs in this vein was the belief that life is inherently a competition; not only did the students believe that this was a natural part of life, but that it should be that way and that we should just be concerned with making it a fair competition. Fair competition was much more popular than assured equality. There was little support for altering the social structure in such a manner as to reduce or eliminate this competition for resources, quality of living, life chances, etc. There was little support for the notion that society should not be an endless race where everybody must be constantly “bettering” themselves. The participants in this study, like many Americans, did not desire a society where people were entitled to a decent quality of life regardless of personal characteristics or actions; they only wanted people to be entitled to certain opportunities (such as education, one opportunity which the students selectively assumed would trump other important opportunities and lead to a meritocracy and whose rules students assumed were inherently socially-just). Students supported the notion that (a) we all should compete meritocratically for educational credentials, (b) the labor market should reward educational credentials, (c) the meritocratic distribution of income, wealth, health, life chances, etc. based on education was socially-just, (d) the inequality that results is justifiable if there is a socially-defined level playing field, (e) we should not be concerned about building society in such a manner as to entitle all people to a certain quality of living, and (f) educational equality would ensure that there were enough resources for everybody (and that people with desirable personal characteristics would never be poor). The students believed that meritocratically-derived inequality was socially-just, and framed meritocratic inequality almost solely in terms of

educational access (ignoring other highly constraining and/or determining social forces and institutions).

Students focused heavily on educational and economic capital while downplaying (and in many cases ignoring) other forms of capital, such as social capital and cultural capital, that influence inequality. In focusing on educational access (access to equal education for all social classes) as the culprit in social problems such as poverty and inequality, the students tended to ignore the substantial body of research that suggests that (a) most educational inequality is caused by non-school factors, and (b) access to education does not guarantee the ability to perform well academically or the freedom to take a “time-out” from a life on the edge to go to school. College would make little practical sense in the real lives of many poor families, but students assumed that they should still be forced to live according to these middle-class expectations. Research suggests that even with equal educational experiences within schools students start kindergarten with substantial inequalities in academic performance. Schools are part of the answer, but not the whole answer or even the majority of the answer, contrary to what the BSW students argue. Leveling the educational playing field does not address the many other social forces that play a role in creating and perpetuating social inequality, and educational and economic capital are not the only capitals that produce inequality.

Students were well aware that people who fail in the educational competition do not have the resources and skills to participate in the middle-class. What was largely missing from this analysis was the manner in which the evaluation of these skills was socially-constructed. None of the participants acknowledge the fact that there is nothing

inherently desirable about the way that the educational system is constructed: it is a choice that has been made by people. There was never any talk of designing society in such a manner that failing to meet these socially constructed middle-class educational standards would not doom an individual to the low-wage labor market (or worse). There was also no discussion of whether failing in schools designed according to middle-class standards was actually meritocratic or simply another form of stratification.

The participants often discussed welfare programs as a means to give poor people the (temporary) income necessary to live according to middle-class standards; once they “stabilized” themselves, this level of income would continue based on their effort. This heavy focus on income ignored many things, including (a) the role of wealth and not just income on people’s (and intergenerational) success, and (b) the roles of social and cultural capital of keeping people in the middle-class once they get there. One of my participants, Ashley, spoke fondly of a middle-class couple she knew from her internship who had fallen onto hard times. At one point in their lives they were living very comfortably, but the recent economic downturn forced them to lose many of their possessions and plunge into poverty. Ashley assured me that through their hard work and motivation this couple was able to escape poverty, proving to her that individuals really can overcome any obstacles if they so choose. What Ashley ignored, of course, was the substantial role that other forms of capital, specifically social capital and cultural capital, play in our success and failure. Her focus was almost totally on economic resources, a common theme in the data. That middle-class family likely had formal and informal knowledge as well as social network ties that many poor individuals do not.

What examples such as Ashley's also reveal is that students were very focused on finding anecdotes that contradicted American stereotypes, but in the process they often unknowingly reinforced those stereotypes. Ashley, for instance, rejects the notion that all poor people are lazy based upon her example of the once comfortable middle-class family who beat poverty to rejoin the middle-class. In "proving" this stereotype false through evidence, Ashley believes she is being more "compassionate" towards the poor and coming to a deeper understanding of the complexities of social problems. In using this example to "prove" that not all poor people are lazy and not all poor people are locked into poverty, however, Ashley actually reinforces the notion that the rest of the poor (most of the poor) are lazy and locked into poverty. Ashley's example, like so many anecdotal examples given by the participants, does not address the structural and/or socially-unjust social forces and constraints facing a typical poor family. Despite her belief that she has proved the stereotype wrong, examples such as Ashley's only seem to strengthen them; the rest of the poor who (a) were never in the middle-class and/or (b) failed to have similar success in escaping poverty were suspect and had themselves to blame for failing to work as hard as the middle-class family. This example proved to Ashley that hard work can save anyone, so what is wrong with the rest of the poor? Whether the anecdotal evidence was a person battling mental illness or a person who was having difficulty in the labor market because of contracting AIDS in their medical profession, these anecdotes only strengthened the notion that the rest of the poor were poor because of personal failings; if a BSW student cannot observably "see" social forces that keep somebody poor in the same way that they can "see" somebody is mentally ill or has AIDS, it is difficult for them to analyze their plight beyond the

individual-level. Through their compassion students actually often reinforced the same stereotypes that they were so critical of.

I noticed in the ethnographic record that there was hardly any acknowledgement that the labor market does not have to be the only method of distributing resources: food, housing, healthcare access (and the resulting health of an individual), etc. It was largely taken-for-granted that success or failure in the educational system and in the labor market would determine such critical things as one's health. The students took it for granted that the labor market is a competition, and if an individual failed in this competition, they could experience a standard of living drastically below what any of these students would deem acceptable. The students assumed that the correlation between educational success and labor market success was natural and desirable.

Cultural assumptions and scientific knowledge were other structural components that were taken-for-granted by the BSW students. Despite widely criticizing American individualism, individualism was the most popular poverty/inequality perspective and the cultural assumptions contained within this perspective were rendered invisible in their normativity. Scientific knowledge was also assumed to be inherently objective and accurate by all but a few of the most politically-conservative students (who mostly rejected it because it was assumed to be liberally-biased and did not mesh with their politically-conservative beliefs). Research that examines welfare dependency, poor women's fertility, poverty and drug-use, poor people's participation in the labor force, etc., contains highly subjective assumptions rendered invisible by the perceived objectivity and authority of science; many of the students spoke of the independent and dependent variables contained in these studies as objective knowledge rather than

carefully- and socially-constructed variables that reflected the choices of social scientists. Some students, for example, spoke about research concerning welfare dependency and how dependency itself was inherently a problem. The perceived objectivity and authority given to science may lead some students to take this assumption as a given, and take the perceived problematic nature of welfare dependency as a starting point. Studies that frame welfare dependency as inherently problematic, however, exclude the possibility that it is the inadequacy of the low-wage labor market that is problematic, and that turning to long-term government aid in the face of such inadequacy might be a rational and/or positive decision for these families. It is not an inherently irrational argument to say that, if given the choice, one might choose the security, higher income, and/or greater benefits of welfare over an abysmal low-wage labor market (where benefits such as healthcare coverage are often nonexistent). A study of welfare dependency might use the problematic nature of such a labor market as it's starting point, framing welfare dependency as but a consequence of market conditions. Deciding whether to frame either welfare dependency or the low-wage labor market as problematic are choices that are made by social scientists, inherently subjective decisions that contain many assumptions and biases; all social science comes from a particular point of view. The concept of "welfare dependency" has no meaning beyond what is included and what is excluded by the social scientist who constructs such a variable; a variable is not some inanimate object that we find in the wilderness but a symbolic structure that we create and to which we give meaning. This subjective and socially-constructed nature of knowledge was lost on most of the BSW

students who took the authority of this science for granted and in the process perpetuated many American cultural assumptions about poverty and inequality.

### **Questioning Welfare**

Many students assumed that income was inherently meritocratic and that welfare was essentially the non-poor “bailing out” the poor. From this viewpoint, both the CEO and the farmworker in an agricultural company, for instance, both deserved the unequal incomes that they received based on the unequal contributions that they made to the company. Likewise, an unemployed person who cannot find work in this agricultural company is not unemployed because they lack relative bargaining power in the labor market but because they have personally failed to participate in a market of endless opportunities. This assumption excluded the possibility that income is an imperfect indicator of our hard work and merit. An alternative viewpoint is that income is a measure of our relative bargaining power in a company and/or the labor market. If one were to assume that income is an imperfect indicator of merit, then welfare might seem like a socially-just redress of the unjust consequences of imperfect social organization; the CEO is able to use their bargaining position to procure more of the collectively produced profit, therefore redistribution of economic resources is a socially-just answer; likewise, the unemployed person has been crowded out of the labor market by those with more relative bargaining power, and this socially-unjust reality also deserves to be addressed. If one takes an oppositional point of view and assumes that the distribution of resources is socially-just on the front end (in the form of wages), however, welfare seems like a socially-unjust redistribution of people’s hard earned money on the back end. This latter conceptualization of income and welfare, made particular famous (or infamous) in the 2012 U.S. Presidential campaign as the “makers versus the takers,” is

what students mostly relied upon (unknowingly). It was largely assumed that, at least in terms of economic resources, “deserving” wage earners were having their meritocratically-earned economic resources redistributed to people who did not earn them. From this viewpoint income is something that is meritocratically-earned in a world where social organization provides desirable incomes to all who deserve them. Welfare and charity are then seen as altruistic gestures signaling the moral superiority of those who had earned their privileged positions instead of a socially-just method of addressing structural imbalances; because welfare was viewed as people choosing to give away their meritocratically-earned resources, many students thought welfare recipients should “appreciate” this altruism. This appreciation was often framed in terms of changing their behavior, otherwise the money “given” to them would simply become a “handout.”

When I asked the BSW students if they would ever consider turning to welfare, many said they would feel bad taking welfare away from people who truly needed it. What they seemed to mean by this was that, while they may fall into poverty briefly at some point in their lives, they know they have the tools to escape successfully. This notion that welfare is for people without these successful personal characteristics suggests that welfare is not an entitlement available to make sure that no family falls below a certain standard of living. Instead, welfare was framed in these answers as a program that should only go to people that fall below a certain standard of living and lack the successful personal characteristics to escape. People should not be entitled to a minimum standard of living, it was argued, unless they changed these characteristics.

Many students equated poverty with homelessness. This suggested that the students either had an inaccurate perception of the federal poverty thresholds or

disagreed with them; my educated guess based upon my analysis is that they had little knowledge of these thresholds. This belief that the definition of poverty is when a person is on the brink of survival was reinforced by the students responses concerning whether they would ever use welfare. Students assured me that they would only use welfare as a “last resort,” and some even suggested that they would rather live “on the streets” before turning to welfare. This was both a judgment of the definition of true poverty and a sign that students had internalized American cultural assumptions about the shame of turning to welfare.

### **The Considerable Influence of Privilege**

Most of the students at MAU are either from the same geographic region as the university, one of the wealthiest regions in the country, or other similarly wealthy regions. Despite feeling that advocating for the poor meant they understood them, it was clear that the privileged positions of the MAU students made it difficult (if not impossible) for them to truly understand the constraints and difficulties of poverty<sup>31</sup>. The privileged position of the BSW students in this study seemed to play a rather critical role in their worldviews; this was lost on almost all of the students however, with little discussion about how their position in the social hierarchy influenced their beliefs and assumptions about the poor. Many of the students felt that they were “objectively” analyzing social problems simply because they were in college and studying scientific

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<sup>31</sup> Despite (a) being largely unable to see the perspectives of the poor from their privileged social positions and (b) seemingly wanting to avoid the empirical research and theory that might help them understand their perspectives, the participants had no trouble preaching morality to the poor and assuming they understood their plight. Most students were rather certain in their individualistically-oriented beliefs despite never having experienced poverty themselves and having significant deficiencies in their knowledge of poverty research and theory. As an example, most students I spoke with had never heard of the “Culture of Poverty” perspective. This is not inherently problematic in itself, but does call into question the efficacy of their program as well as lead one to question their certainty about the causes of poverty.

research, failing to realize the subjectivity of all perspectives based on our social position as well as the socially-constructed nature of that research. Most students came from middle-, upper-middle, or upper-class backgrounds and never had to deal with the difficulties of poverty. Many of the students came from very successful and privileged families and their beliefs tended to justify their families' success and privileged positions. It was no surprise that the students' analyses were filtered through a privileged lens. It was very hard for most students to imagine themselves being poor and/or needing welfare at any point in the future, because they have always thought of themselves as possessing the characteristics of a successful person; they had difficulty identifying how social organization both contributed to their privileged status and might someday contribute to their own poverty, however briefly. Many students said they would refuse welfare because they had successful personal characteristics, unlike the "real" poor. Students relied on many negative judgments of the poor because they were analyzing their characteristics and actions according to the norms and rules of middle-class life. It was often times difficult for me to hide my discomfort when students spoke of poor people "not doing enough" to succeed, knowing that most of these BSW students have never experienced such adversity or faced a situation where they had struggled mightily only to fail to reach the privileged social positions inherited by most MAU students. The students demanded that the poor make the same choices and "sacrifices" as everybody else, despite the fact that (a) the poor likely make many more sacrifices than these students could imagine and (b) one cannot equate the choices, opportunities, and constraints present in the middle-class to those found in poverty. The poor live in a world that bears little resemblance to the privilege surrounding MAU

students at school and at home, instead facing a world where the same amount of effort is not met with the same amount of rewards; the students largely ignored this and assumed we were all playing by the same rules on the same playing field.

Few students could ever envision themselves needing welfare at any point in their lives. When I pushed them to contemplate this hypothetical situation anyway, many students revealed how embarrassed they would be and how they would feel like they had personally failed in life. Most students claimed to believe that poverty and inequality were structurally-determined, yet I had a hard time meshing this claim with their feelings of embarrassment and failure. If these students truly believed that poverty was the result of structural failings, it was hard for me to understand why they would take their own poverty so personally. It seemed likely to me that, like most Americans, these students have internalized American cultural assumptions about poverty and welfare, and would judge themselves by those standards if they ever found themselves truly in need.

In talking about hard work, self-determination, and the unshakeable will that it takes to succeed financially, students had little sympathy for people who could not “see beyond their situation” or had simply given up. Discouraged workers, for instance, might find themselves reasonably beaten down by the experience of constant rejection and little hope. Students of privilege largely assumed that everybody could keep their spirits up based on the expectation that they would succeed. This was understandable from the students’ points of view given that their lives had largely been a string of relative successes. Having not been in the position where a situation or social structure may remove every last bit of hope in an individual, it was difficult for these students to

identify with this situation or sympathize with it. These students argued that every individual should be expected to keep their spirits up and keep trying regardless of the obstacles they face. It was difficult to understand this point of view given that most of the students at MAU did not have to expend that level of effort to remain in their inherited privileged class position. Regardless, this belief in the duty of individuals to be perpetually hopeful made sense to most students from their privileged positions.

### **Welfare Morality<sup>32</sup> and Regulating the Poor**

If one believes in compassionate individualism, where life chances result from individual choices and the social structure is taken for granted, then regulating the poor might be seen as a logical extension of this perspective. There was a strong belief among the participants that it was the government's right (and in some sense duty) to regulate welfare recipients through behavioral incentives and/or punishments. This belief was based on ideas of endless opportunities and the notion that those who behave correctly/morally are almost always rewarded with a middle-class existence by the social structure; if only the poor and welfare recipients would behave correctly (and use welfare the "right" way) and would live according to middle-class morality they would succeed. If they refuse to do so, the middle-class should impose that morality and fix their behavior through welfare policy. Welfare was framed similarly to a "contract" between welfare recipients and the middle-class, a contract that stipulates that the poor will agree to change their behavior in exchange for hard-earned middle-class money. Students seemed to be deeply concerned that welfare recipients are inherently inclined

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<sup>32</sup> Welfare morality, or the assumed (middle-class) moral code that poor people needed to live by to succeed, was the way in which these students differentiated "deserving" welfare recipients from "undeserving" welfare recipients.

to “abuse the system,” with many suggesting that the majority of welfare users should be punished for the sins of the minority. Despite the fact that the amount of money spent on corporate welfare and middle- and upper-class welfare is much greater in the U.S. than poverty-targeted welfare, it was only the recipients of poverty-targeted welfare that were typically framed as needing moral guidance. Welfare-use was framed as inherently wrong and abnormal (ignoring whether poverty was a “normal” and/or regular feature of our economy) based upon individualistically-oriented beliefs, and poverty and welfare need were framed as signs that people are not doing enough to help themselves. Students ignored the cumulative disadvantage of years of living in poverty and assumed that a middle-class existence could be chosen at any time and maintained indefinitely. There was strong support for welfare policies such as drug testing, family caps, and work requirements, and a majority of students espoused at least portions of the “welfare morality” that I discuss. Many of the students assured me that if they ever had to turn to welfare in their own lives they would use it morally and would depend upon their successful personal characteristics to escape poverty.

There were many components of welfare morality. Participants had a difficult time differentiating between the causes of poverty and the consequences of poverty, and welfare morality was one area where almost every perceived negative aspect of poverty was assumed to be a cause rather than consequence; in some cases it was argued that welfare itself encouraged immortality. Students who supported these welfare policies framed welfare as a non-entitlement: poor people do not have a right to a minimum standard of living unless they agree to live according to the morality imposed upon them. Students echoed many of the negative assumptions about the

poor that informed the development of these policies in the first place, and signaled their belief in these negative assumptions by suggesting that only recipients of poverty-targeted welfare have morality imposed on them (despite all social classes and much of private industry receiving welfare, too). The poor, it was implicitly and explicitly suggested, are inherently suspect.

### **Utopia of endless opportunities**

Participants implicitly and explicitly espoused beliefs in endless opportunities (desirable social positions being available to all who want them), beliefs which influenced many of their assumptions and assertions about welfare morality. Welfare dependency, for instance, was a concern for the BSW students because long-term welfare-use meant to them that a poor person was personally irresponsible in failing to adhere to middle-class norms and grasping one of many opportunities available to them. Failure to grasp these opportunities also meant that people failed to be self-sufficient like the rest of society (despite the realities that nobody is truly self-sufficient, nobody is disconnected from the social structure, and we all receive help from other people to succeed, including the government). Despite giving considerable lip-service to structurally-oriented concerns, most students signaled to me through their answers that poor people could overcome poverty if they really tried; while life may be unfair for some, it is not impossible for anybody (and if life is unfair to you it is your responsibility to carry the burden of the additional work needed to escape such conditions). Most students assured me that if they ever needed welfare in their personal lives, they would not “abuse” it and would only use it for a short period of time.

The manner in which students framed their support for work requirements reinforced the notion of the availability of endless opportunities for all. Poor people were

assumed to be unmotivated to grasp these opportunities and would only oblige if “pushed” by strict welfare regulations. Students spoke of the failure to secure a job as a personal failing, and often showed little regard for the types of jobs available (assuming there are good jobs for all who want them); it was often assumed that any job was desirable to welfare recipients, ignoring how welfare can sometimes be a preferable alternative to the insecurity, insufficient income, and little-to-no benefits provided by the low-wage labor market (it was somehow assumed that the low-wage labor market would “save” people from poverty). Even students who acknowledged the abysmal state of the low-wage labor market seemed to suggest that it is better to be “dignified” off of welfare than undignified on welfare even if your standard of living suffered. The longer a person was out of work the more negative the judgment they received in these interviews; long-term unemployment was even stronger proof of a person’s failure to be self-sufficient. There was little regard for the notion that raising children is work, and students mostly desired for all welfare recipients (including young mothers) to be in the paid labor force (although many students did support government-subsidized childcare); students framed work in the paid labor force as the primary way that people “contributed to society.” There was significant concern about poor people being given “free” money, ignoring the structural causes of unemployment and reinforcing the notion of welfare as transfer of hard earned money from earners to non-earners (rather than redress of structural imbalances that created unequal incomes). There was an implicit and explicit theme the poor people needed to “appreciate” what was being “done” for them by the middle-class in the form of welfare; poor people need to “own” their success (and in a world of endless opportunities anybody can own their success).

## **Do poor women deserve to have children?**

Fertility-limiting policies aimed at poor women made sense to a strong majority of participants because choosing to bring children into poverty when they could just as easily bring them into a middle-class environment (if they were motivated enough to provide such an environment) was considered immoral. Because a person's social position was discussed in such an individualistically-oriented manner, it did not make much sense to the students why somebody would choose to bring a child into a poor environment since that poor environment was largely a choice. There was a strong sentiment that poor families should be held "accountable" for the immoral act of having children in poverty, with some students even suggesting that the children should be taken away from their families. Beliefs in the legitimacy of family caps were dependent on many assumptions, including the notions that (a) if a family never escapes poverty they should never have children (meaning the poor do not have a right to procreate), (b) it is socially-just to regulate such a family decision based upon middle-class judgments of poor people's lives, (c) fertility is a choice, should be based on financial considerations, and it is not influenced by social conditions, (d) poor women need to be taught to be responsible, and (e) it is socially-just and practical to expect poor families to live according to the same rules/standards and dissimilar constraints of middle-class life. Many students believed that if a poor family knew about these individualistically-oriented policies ahead of time (before receiving benefits), then the policies were socially-just. Even students who disagreed with family caps did so for individual-level reasons: they were worried about the impact of the children, worried about punishing unplanned pregnancies, etc. These students still believed the individualistically-oriented tenets of fertility-limiting policies despite not supporting the policies for "compassionate"

reasons: they may not have supported the policy, but they still believed poor women should not intentionally have children. There was also a prevalent (and empirically unsupported) belief that many welfare recipients have children to receive more benefits. Many students suggested that children born to welfare recipients were a “drain on society,” reinforcing the views supporting family caps discussed previously and the notion that welfare is an illegitimate transfer of money from earners to non-earners. It was almost completely lost on many students what a luxury and privilege it is to be able to decide when to have a family, how many children you can choose to have, not expecting to be judged for making what seems like a mundane middle-class decision, etc.

### **The assumption of immorality and drug-use**

The significant support for welfare drug testing was based on many ideas, including the strong sentiment that drug use is inherently wrong/immoral. Drug use was largely assumed to cause poverty rather than result from it. Drug use and addiction were assumed to be mostly a choice not connected to social conditions. Students assumed that the poor were largely suspect, it is socially-just to test an entire population of people because of their poverty, and that the burden was on the poor to prove they were not using drugs. Students, even when pushed to consider such a policy, did not support drug testing for non-poor recipients of government money; their concern focused only on the poor using government money immorally on non-necessities. Welfare was again framed as a non-entitlement in this discussion of drug testing: students believed people’s livelihood could be taken away for failing to live up to this imposed morality. Rarely was the ideological nature of the debates that created these policies in the first place discussed. Some students even attempted to thwart perceived

criticism of the ideological nature of their answers before it was leveled, saying that poor people should not play the “victim” and that we all have to take drug tests; in likening these drug tests to any other drug test, this was an obvious, blatant, and willful dismissal of the documented negative and ideological reasons why drug tests were instituted for welfare recipients. A shocking number of students assumed that addiction could be “solved” quickly and in a single instance, and that welfare recipients should be punished if they struggle with this addiction after being “cured.” Overall, it seemed that the support for drug testing was connected to a deeply held, almost visceral belief that the morals and motivations of the poor are inherently suspect.

### **Logical Inconsistencies**

Significant portions of the arguments that students used when discussing the poor and welfare recipients were logically inconsistent upon further examination. For instance, many students were concerned that people who receive government money should not break the law and should therefore be drug tested. The main component of this concern was that it was other people’s money and should be used respectfully/morally. I asked a follow-up question to many students who reported supporting drug tests for this reason: if you believe people who receive government money should be drug tested, does that mean that the myriad forms of government assistance that go to all social classes as well as corporations should come with drug tests as well? What about middle-class tax breaks, farm subsidies, subsidies to private sports owners, college student loans, corporate welfare, etc.? Most students who supported drug testing the poor did not support drug testing for non-poor welfare recipients. This signaled to me that their main complaint was not that it was government money, but that there was something inherently suspect about poor people receiving

government money; these people deserved to be regulated and monitored by virtue of being poor. This was also part of a larger trend in the ethnographic record where students ignored the ways in which all people and corporations receive some assistance from both other people and the government. To the BSW students, help from others was something that only the poor demanded.

### **Explaining the Prevalence of Compassionate Individualism**

My analysis of the ethnographic record suggests that students largely reinforced American cultural assumptions about poverty, inequality, and welfare because of their socialization within American culture and the ways in which these internalized cultural assumptions interacted with their desire to help people by “fixing” their individual deficiencies. The particular form that these individualistically-oriented American assumptions took in the students’ worldviews seemed to depend on how they interacted with students’ personal beliefs, life experiences<sup>33</sup>, particular family environments, etc.; most worldviews still reflected American individualism in a slightly altered and more “compassionate” form. The BSW students tended to choose social work as a means to accomplish their goals because it provided them the opportunity to help/fix people who had similar life experiences to their own<sup>34</sup> while also allowing the students to avoid

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<sup>33</sup> Students tended to have more complex and nuanced understandings of a particular marginalized population if they themselves were a part of that population. For other populations where they had no experiential knowledge, they relied more heavily on ideology, generalizations, stereotypes, etc. If a person had battled mental illness, for instance, they tended to express opinions on mental health issues that were much more nuanced and complex than their opinions about other populations that were foreign to them (such as the poor).

<sup>34</sup> Social work is a very diverse field and students can choose to work with a wide variety of populations, many of which have little connection to each other. Some students described social work as a field you can “make-up” and mold to match your own beliefs, interests, and/or desires, and provides the ability to work with one specific population while avoiding others altogether. The one truly consistent characteristic of the program seemed to be that people wanted to help other people, not that they would follow any particular framework for understanding these people’s problems. One student wanted to focus solely on military veterans, for instance, while another wanted to work solely with recent immigrants. The issues

having to focus too heavily on empirical research and theory. Once they “accidentally” discovered how social work met these goals they felt motivated to pursue it as a career.

The results of this study seem to suggest that poverty and inequality exist, at least in part, because of the symbolic distinctions that we make in our minds, distinctions which we inherit from the larger culture. While we may alter and change such distinctions for our own personal use, they exist in a certain form before we arrive in the world and important foundational components tend to remain after personalization. If we are to design social institutions and structures which will combat poverty and inequality and allow people to be truly free, we have to have the ability not only to imagine such institutions and structures, but justify them and give them legitimacy. Until our poverty and inequality knowledge justifies and legitimates the existence of such institutional and social forms, and our cultural assumptions reflect these changes, it is unlikely that we will construct and perpetuate such truly free social conditions.

A strong body of empirical and theoretical work in the social sciences suggests that childhood socialization within a particular culture has a major impact on how we interpret the world, providing us with a particular (flexible but still culture-specific) framework that helps us give meaning to the world around us. While the ideological framework that we are given to work with may be similar to a spectrum with a range of possible gradationally-different forms, it is not the entire possible ideological spectrum.

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that face these populations are very different in very important ways, and the tools necessary to be a good social worker and effectively help these populations are different as well. BSW students already show little interest in empirical research and theory; when combined with the fact that many were narrowly-focused on one very small and specific “sliver” of the social work field it helps explain why many may come away from the BSW program with considerably underdeveloped understandings of social problems unrelated to their narrow area of interest. Some students may study poverty and inequality for only a portion of one semester and may only study it seriously enough to pass an exam.

Social work students certainly seem to be located farther to the left on that American ideological spectrum than most Americans in terms of their political affiliations and somewhat more structurally-oriented beliefs; what this seemed to suggest was that American cultural beliefs were not rejected but mediated through individuals' experiences, personal beliefs, etc., leading them to espouse simply a different form of American individualism (compassionate individualism) rather than a different perspective altogether. The widespread taken-for-granted nature of the capitalist principles of the American economy, for instance, cannot honestly be considered the full range of ideological possibilities concerning economic issues; the beliefs of BSW students differed on the slightly different ways in which that economy should be organized (which type of capitalism they preferred) while reinforcing a general capitalist framework. Like many other assumptions, the assumption in the superiority of capitalism was mediated through a particular student's interpretive lens rather than rejected. The one student in this study who did not reproduce major components of American cultural assumptions about poverty, inequality, and welfare was socialized in a culture and society vastly different than the U.S.

Whether or not the BSW program could have had a major impact on the reproduction of American cultural assumptions is questionable but not clear. While the BSW program seemed to provide a somewhat weak theoretical foundation to help explain poverty and inequality<sup>35</sup>, this did not seem to be the major influence on the students' worldviews. Students arrived in the BSW program with the major foundations

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<sup>35</sup> This weak foundation meant students were sort of "on their own" to decide whether or not to take the initiative to come to a deeply-nuanced understanding of social problems. Whether a student chose to do so was based on the motivations of that individual, with most BSW students instead relying on personal beliefs to interpret such issues.

of their worldviews largely in place and somewhat crystallized, and it did not seem likely that the program could have made major foundational shifts in their worldviews had it been structured differently. The major influence seems to be socialization in American culture. Social work students in this study tended to choose social work as a profession for deeply personal reasons<sup>36</sup> related to seminal experiences from their formative years. Pursuing social work seemed to be a means for these students to satisfy a need within themselves to “heal themselves” or to help populations who had similar experiences to their own as catharsis for the students’ own life experiences. An overwhelming majority of students identified at least one (and in many cases two) seminal experiences from their childhoods and/or teenage years that motivated them to (a) want to help people who had gone through similar experiences and (b) want to help people and/or change the world (in some cases these experiences seemed to create the desire to help people/change the world, but in most cases these experiences seemed to interact with their preexisting desire to help people/change the world). This may help to explain why students did so little self-reflection and experienced such little change in their worldviews once they left the social work program: learning about social problems was not their primary motivation for studying social work in the first place. In fact, most students reported wanting to avoid fields that focused too heavily on research and theory. The ethnographic record suggests that childhood socialization, previous life

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<sup>36</sup> BSW students seemed to study social work as a means to satisfy something within themselves, not necessarily solely as a means to help others. There was no guarantee that a student was studying social work as a means to come to a deeply-nuanced understanding of social problems. Having the *motivation* to help particular populations did not guarantee a student had the theoretical *tools* to help that population. Feeling a sense of sadness, compassion, and/or pity for somebody is no guarantee that you *understand* the causes of their plight. Feeling bad for a homeless person and giving them spare change, for instance, does not guarantee an understanding between a homeless individual and social institutions and structures.

experiences, and American cultural assumptions were the most dominant influence on their beliefs. While their college studies did influence their views, there seemed to be a considerable amount of confirmation bias: students “collecting” the bits and pieces of what they learned in their studies that confirmed what they already believed. How the program would have combated the strong influence of American culture and tendency to confirm these existing cultural biases is unclear (I will discuss some possible suggestions in a moment).

Nowhere was this confirmation bias more apparent than their discussions of their internship experiences. Students often “proved” their individualistically-oriented beliefs by giving examples of what they had “observed” poor people doing in their internships. They collected different pieces of evidence and interpreted them through this individualistic lens, acknowledging evidence that supported their worldview and either (a) ignoring contradictory evidence or (b) interpreting this evidence in an alternative manner that provided further support. This was somewhat understandable: we “see” individual actions and the individual actors “responsible,” but it is hard to actually “see” social forces. I can actually see a person sitting in a welfare office during typical American business hours rather than participating in the paid labor force. Because I see this action (sitting idle instead of working) but cannot easily observe the social forces that might have contributed (labor market conditions, cumulative disadvantage, etc.) it is much easier to blame the actions that I see than the ones that I cannot; even when social forces were taken into account they were typically treated as suspect and hard to prove, whereas students seemed to feel that they could easily prove when a person is sitting in a welfare office when they “should” be working. Because their internship

experiences gave the students tangible, observable proof that allowed them to confirm their biases, they tended to report that these experiences taught them more than their studies about poverty and inequality. The BSW students' college studies seemed to be the least influential factor shaping their worldviews (behind childhood socialization, past life experiences, and American cultural assumptions), and internship experiences seemed to trump "classroom learning" when their college studies did play a role in their worldviews.

Most of the students reported studying social work at least in part as a way to avoid fields that focused too heavily on research and theory<sup>37</sup>. Their social work program did focus somewhat on research related to social problems, but the theoretical component related to poverty and inequality was weak. Overall, student displayed very underdeveloped empirical and theoretical understandings of poverty, inequality, welfare, and other social problems in the U.S.; this was not simply a program failing, as many students spoke of wanting to avoid research and theory in college. Many of the students, even when confronted with research that contradicted their beliefs, either assumed that the research was flawed or simply disregarded the research altogether. Some students spoke of school funding as a major cause of poverty, for instance, despite research to the contrary (in fact one student acknowledged that she knew what the research said and disregarded it). Other students spoke about educational access while not showing any signs of being aware of school readiness research. Most students believed in the problematic assumption that educational equality would solve

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<sup>37</sup> Most students had little-to-no interest in the news either. This was not inherently problematic in itself, but combined with their lack of interest in research and theory contributed to the notion that there was not a significant amount of intellectual curiosity.

poverty, and some believed that public schools were to blame and that the answer was private and charter schools. All of these assumptions ignore significant research that suggests their beliefs are flawed and in many cases completely contrary to the empirical evidence.

Students framed their personal experiences as the starting point and helping people who had gone through similar life experiences as the end goal. There did not seem to be very much interest in everything in the middle (the intricate details contained in the empirical research related to and theoretical explanations of social problems). Students explicitly stated that they chose social work as a means of avoiding having to focus too much on empirical research and theory related to social problems; because of this, and because of their desire to reach their end goal without focusing too much on the academic aspects of the study of their field, students tended to rely mostly on the worldviews that they brought with them into the program. These worldviews were heavily dependent on American cultural values mediated through their childhood socialization, life experiences, family environment, etc. This helps explain why these students depended so heavily on cultural and individual-level explanations of poverty and inequality rather than academic and more structurally-oriented explanations.

### **Implications**

The major findings in this study reinforce the notion that socialization within a particular culture has a powerful influence on how people interpret the world. American culture clearly has a strong influence on how BSW students interpret issues related to poverty, inequality, and welfare. The BSW students were overwhelmingly politically-liberal and had chosen a relatively modest-income career (by American standards) of helping marginalized populations; going into this study, the characteristics of this

profession suggested to me that these students would not necessarily favor the individualism perspective. Despite this, they largely accepted American cultural assumptions that reinforced the individualistic explanations of these issues. What this suggests is that changing our poverty, inequality, and welfare knowledge to be more inclusive of different perspectives and levels of analysis could be a long and gradual process. Cultural change is a large and daunting task.

To help with this task, BSW programs that resemble the one in this study might place a greater emphasis on empirical research and theory. The ability to “see” social forces is learned, and college students need help developing this skill. In sociology we call this the “sociological imagination,” and simply being a sociologist does not guarantee this skill; developing the ability to see the complex social forces that shape our lives is a difficult process. Students should not be allowed to focus too narrowly on one population leading to ignorance of other important populations, and all students should be able to understand the social forces that contribute to such foundational social problems as poverty and inequality. The findings of this study suggest that many of the students would self-select a different field in order to avoid such an emphasis, which could (a) create a dearth of social workers in a profession that is always in need of people, and/or (b) improve the empirical and theoretical understandings of social problems for the students that do choose to study social work anyway. Alongside a greater emphasis on empirical research and theory, it seems critical that BSW programs place the internship experiences within a theoretical context. Too often in this study it seemed like students were using their firsthand internship experiences to simply confirm whatever preexisting ideological biases they had about poverty, inequality, and welfare.

Students do not always “see” what may seem like intangible social forces when they are in the field, and if left unaddressed these social forces are rendered invisible. Social forces that are rendered invisible lead to social problems that are difficult to solve. Contextualizing these experiences within a strong empirical and theoretical framework seems critical to combat confirmation bias and the perpetuation of preexisting cultural assumptions.

With all of the emphasis placed on the inclusion of more empirical research and theory in BSW programs, it should be noted that this is not enough and cannot take place without better poverty and inequality scholarship. As sociologist Mark R. Rank (2003) and historian Alice O’Connor (2002) have so thoroughly and eloquently researched, recent poverty and inequality scholarship has transformed the “poverty problem” from one of individuals and social institutions to simply one of individuals; this transformation reflects culturally-informed choices made by social scientists. The leading scholarship in the study of such social problems is dominated by scholars who have focused too narrowly on the individual characteristics that put people at risk for poverty without fully considering the relationship between these individual characteristics and the social structure. Society is something that is constructed by human beings; we have the power to influence the strength or weakness of the correlation between certain personal characteristics (such as education, marital status, etc.) and life chances. Until poverty and inequality research firmly places individuals back into a social context and examines their relationships to social institutions and structures, it is hard to imagine that the inclusion of more individualistically-oriented research will change the outcomes that I observed in this particular BSW program.

If poverty and inequality scholarship does become more inclusive of structural concerns, it is likely that American cultural assumptions would also have to change to truly make a difference. It is socialization within American culture that seems to have impacted the opinions of BSW students the most, so these cultural assumptions would also have to be more structurally inclusive. It is not simply enough that research and theory reflect these changes because the students made it clear that they had largely “settled” many of these issues long before they arrived in college. More inclusive scholarship is the first step in a larger cultural change to help people understand the power of social forces in our lives. Changing knowledge and culture is critical if we are to change what is contained in our minds. We cannot create what we cannot first imagine.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Like many qualitative studies it is difficult to generalize the findings in this study for a variety of reasons. Most important among those reasons seems to be the number of participants and the characteristics of the student population at MAU. While this study was ethnographic in nature and included fieldnotes observing many students in multiple classes, the heart of this study was the deeper analysis conducted on the 25 interview transcripts. While saturation was reached for this particular population, this is not enough to generalize about an entire field and more programs would need to be included in a larger study to make more generalizable claims. In including more programs it would also be critical to include colleges and universities with more socioeconomic diversity. While there was a great deal of racial and ethnic diversity at MAU, the students came from mostly privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. A larger

and more comprehensive study might examine how students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds conceptualize issues such as poverty, inequality, and welfare-need.

My future research agenda moving forward addresses many of my suggestions for future research. I believe it is critical to include many more programs with greater socioeconomic diversity to paint a much larger and more comprehensive picture of BSW programs in the U.S. After having my own personal experience teaching at an historically-black college, where many students revealed vivid firsthand knowledge of the intersection of race and poverty in American communities, I believe the inclusion of programs at such socioeconomically-diverse institutions in a larger future study would provide much-needed voices to the data.

I would like to track the worldviews of social workers over time as well as examine other helping professions. First, I believe it would be informative to develop a longitudinal version of this study tracking the worldviews of BSW students from their college studies through their first few years in the field. Such a study could examine the worldviews of social workers at multiple points in their academic and professional trajectory: as they enter a BSW program, as they graduate, their initial impressions after their first few months in the field, and then at a point in time when they have “settled in” to the field (1-2 years possibly). It would be informative to see how and why their worldviews changed, the difference between what they perceived the field to be like pre- and post-entry, as well as gaining the perspectives of people truly “in the field.” Secondly, I believe it would be informative to conduct a study of workers in other helping professions (non-profits, charities, etc.) to see how they conceptualize different social problems, what influences their worldviews, and the implications those findings.

I would also like to examine other academic disciplines and compare their poverty, inequality, and welfare knowledge to social work students. It would be interesting to examine fields such as sociology, economics, anthropology, etc., to see why particular students choose these fields, ideological consistencies and inconsistencies, the influence of different programs on students' worldviews, etc. A much larger study could compare the disciplines and gain even greater and more complex understanding of the power of cultural socialization.

APPENDIX A  
IRB FORMS/INFORMED CONSENT FORMS

Note: The following IRB and informed consent forms have been edited to remove identifying information. No substantive changes have been made; I have just blacked-out information that would violate the participants' confidentiality.



PO Box 112250  
Gainesville, FL 32611-2250  
352-392-0433 (Phone)  
352-392-9234 (Fax)  
irb2@ufl.edu

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DATE: April 11, 2012

TO: Lawrence M. Eppard  


FROM: Ira S. Fischler, PhD; Chair *ISF*  
University of Florida  
Institutional Review Board 02

SUBJECT: **Approval of UFIRB # 2012-U-0320**  
*Social Welfare in the U.S. in the Twenty-First Century*

SPONSOR: None

I am pleased to advise you that the University of Florida Institutional Review Board has recommended approval of this protocol. Based on its review, the UFIRB determined that this research presents no more than minimal risk to participants. Your protocol was approved as an expedited study under category 7: *Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.*

Given this status, it is essential that you obtain signed documentation of informed consent from each participant. Enclosed is the dated, IRB-approved informed consent to be used when recruiting participants for the research. If you wish to make any changes to this protocol, *including the need to increase the number of participants authorized*, you must disclose your plans before you implement them so that the Board can assess their impact on your protocol. In addition, you must report to the Board any unexpected complications that affect your participants.

It is essential that each of your participants sign a copy of your approved informed consent that bears the IRB approval stamp and expiration date.

Your approval is valid through **March 14, 2013**. If you have not completed the protocol by this date, please telephone our office (392-0433), and we will discuss the renewal process with you. Additionally, should you complete the study before the expiration date, please submit the study closure report to our office. The form can be located at [http://irb.ufl.edu/irb02/Continuing\\_Review.html](http://irb.ufl.edu/irb02/Continuing_Review.html). It is important that you keep your Department Chair informed about the status of this research protocol.

ISF:dl

### Informed Consent

**Protocol Title:** "Social Welfare in the U.S. in the Twenty-First Century"  
**Principal Investigator:** Lawrence Eppard [REDACTED]

**\*\*Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study\*\***

My name is Lawrence Eppard [REDACTED]. I am a graduate student in the sociology Ph.D. program at the University of Florida. My faculty advisor is Dr. Constance Shehan [REDACTED]. I am conducting a research project as part of my dissertation. With your permission, I would like to interview you as a part of this project and hear about your experiences as an undergraduate social work student at [REDACTED]. I will be conducting the interviews in this project.

[REDACTED] I am not affiliated with [REDACTED] or your BSW program in any manner. I have received permission by the program director [REDACTED] to approach the students here and invite them to participate in this study, but you are in no way required to participate. You will not miss any class time to participate, and participation or non-participation in this study will not affect your status in the program in any manner whatsoever. You will not receive any academic benefit (such as grades or extra credit) for participating or academic penalty for not participating. This project is in no way a part of the BSW program.

#### **Purpose of this research study:**

The purpose of this study is to identify the perspectives of undergraduate social work students like yourself as they prepare in the very near future to enter the social work field. This study seeks to explore your worldview about the issues that you will face in your profession, including the issues facing the people you will serve (such as children, the poor, etc.).

#### **What you will be asked to do in this study if you choose to participate:**

You are being asked to participate in a 30-90 minute audio-taped interview with the principal investigator at a time of your convenience to discuss your experiences as a BSW student at [REDACTED]. At your convenience this interview can take place in-person on the [REDACTED] campus or over the telephone. Participation in this project is completely voluntary at all times. At any time during the interview, you do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer, and you may leave the project at any time without penalty or consequences.

#### **Time required:**

30-90 minutes per interview. I only intend to conduct one interview. At the conclusion of this initial interview, I will ask you if I have your permission to contact you for a follow-up interview (if needed). If you answer no, I will not contact you again. If you answer yes, I will ask you for contact information. Participation in the first interview does not mean you have to participate in a second interview, even if you say you will. Participation is always voluntary, and you may leave this study at any time that you choose without penalty or consequences.

#### **Anticipated Risks and Benefits:**

There are not any anticipated risks or discomforts that accompany your participation in this project. As principal investigator, I do not anticipate any physical, economic, social, and/or psychological harm to you as a result of participation in this study.

This project is intended to benefit our sociological knowledge of future social workers and the social welfare system. There are no anticipated benefits for you individually.

**Compensation:**

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You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

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Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Only the principal investigator will have access to research materials, which will be kept in a private, secure location at all times. The principal investigator will have an audio tape of your interview that only they will have access to. The principal investigator will transcribe this tape into a document that only they will have access to. In this document, they will change your name and the name of any other identifying information (including but not limited to place names) in the transcripts, and keep a master list linking your fake name to your real name. Once the final report (the dissertation) is written, the master list, audio tapes, and all transcripts will be destroyed. This will be done to remove all perceived links between you and the final report. Your name will never be used, and identifying information will never be used in any report.

**Your participation is *always* voluntary:**

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At all times, participation in this project is completely voluntary. You may enter and leave the project at any time with absolutely no penalty or consequences.

**You *always* have the right to withdraw from the study:**

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You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or consequences.

**Study results:**

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The results of this study will be developed into a dissertation that will fulfill the requirements for the completion of the principal investigator's Ph.D. The principal investigator will then seek to publish this dissertation as an article (or series of articles) in an academic journal or in book form. You may request a copy of the project once it is complete. Remember that no identifying information will ever be contained in any report.

**Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:**

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If you have any questions at all about this study, feel free to contact me at [REDACTED]

My University of Florida campus address [REDACTED]

My email is [REDACTED]

**Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:**

---

Any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant can be directed to the University of Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB):

University of Florida IRB02 Office  
P.O. Box 112250  
University of Florida  
Gainesville, FL  
32611-2250  
phone (352) 392-0433.

Approved by  
University of Florida  
Institutional Review Board 02  
Protocol # 2012-U-0320  
For Use Through 03-14-2013

**Thank You!**

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Thank you for taking the time to consider participating in this study. If you choose to participate, I look forward to speaking with you further! If not, I am sincerely grateful that you took the time to consider my project. Thank you!

**Agreement:**

---

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and I have received a copy of this description.

Approved by  
University of Florida  
Institutional Review Board 02  
Protocol # 2012-U-0320  
For Use Through 03-14-2013

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone Consent Script**

UFIRB #2012-U-320, "Social Welfare in the U.S. in the Twenty-First Century"

Hello, my name is Lawrence Eppard. I am a graduate student in the sociology Ph.D. program at the University of Florida. I am conducting a research project as part of my dissertation. The purpose of this study is to identify the perspectives of undergraduate social work students like yourself as you prepare in the very near future to enter the social work field. With your permission, I would like to interview you as a part of this project and hear about your experiences as an undergraduate social work student at [REDACTED]. I will be conducting the interviews in this project, which is titled, "Social Welfare in the U.S. in the Twenty-First Century." The interviews will last between 60-90 minutes and will be conducted on-campus at [REDACTED]. They will be audio taped, and your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law – all identifying information, including names of people and places, will be changed to protect your privacy. I will ask you at the end of the interview if you give me permission to contact you for a follow-up interview.

[REDACTED] I am not affiliated with [REDACTED] or your BSW program in any manner. I have received permission by the program director [REDACTED] to approach the students here and invite them to participate in this study, but you are in no way required to participate. You will not miss any class time to participate, and participation or non-participation in this study will not affect your status in the program in any manner whatsoever. You will not receive any academic benefit (such as grades or extra credit) for participating or academic penalty for not participating. This project is in no way a part of the BSW program. You will also not receive any other form of compensation for participating, such as money.

Participation in this project is completely voluntary at all times. At any time during the interview, you do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer, and you may leave the project at any time without penalty or consequences. There are not any anticipated risks or discomforts that accompany your participation in this project – I do not anticipate any physical, economic, social, and/or psychological harm to you as a result of participation in this study. There are no anticipated benefits for you individually, either.

If you choose to participate in this study, I will need you to read, review, and sign the informed consent document. It contains much of the information that I just discussed and more in much greater detail, as well as my contact information and my advisor's contact information. You will also find the contact information for the UF Institutional Review Board, which is always here to protect your rights as a research participant.

Thank you for taking the time to consider participating in this study. If you choose to participate, I look forward to speaking with you further! If not, I am sincerely grateful that you took the time to consider my project. Do you wish to participate?

Approved by  
University of Florida  
Institutional Review Board 02  
Protocol # 2012-U-0320  
For Use Through 03-14-2013

The following forms are my IRB approval  
and informed consent forms from  
"Mid-Atlantic University"

TO:

FROM:

TITLE: Social Welfare in the U.S. in the Twenty-First Century

DATE: June 12, 2012

CC: Lawrence Eppard,

this project was determined to be exempt by

Category 1, research conducted in an educational setting that will assess the effectiveness of educational materials and practices and Exempt Category 2, research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior.

A copy of the final approved consent document is attached. Please use this stamped copy for your research.

You may proceed with data collection. **Please note that any modification in your protocol must be submitted to the [REDACTED] for review and approval prior to implementation.** Any unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others, including problems regarding data confidentiality must be reported to the [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] is bound by the ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects in research contained in [REDACTED]. Even though your data collection procedures are exempt from further review by the [REDACTED] expects you to conduct your research according to the professional standards in your discipline and the ethical guidelines mandated by federal regulations.

Thank you for cooperating with the University by submitting this protocol for review. Please call me at [REDACTED] if you have any questions.

**Recruitment Script**

██████████ "Social Welfare in the U.S. in the Twenty-First Century"

Hello, my name is Lawrence Eppard. I am a graduate student in the sociology Ph.D. program at the University of Florida. I am conducting a research project as part of my dissertation. I am co-investigator, and ██████████

██████████ is the principal investigator. The purpose of this study is to identify the perspectives of undergraduate social work students like yourself as you prepare in the very near future to enter the social work field. With your permission, I would like to interview you as a part of this project and hear about your experiences as an undergraduate social work student at ██████████. I will be conducting the interviews in this project, which is titled, "Social Welfare in the U.S. in the Twenty-First Century." The interviews will last between 60-90 minutes and will be conducted either on-campus at ██████████ or over the telephone. They will be audio taped, and your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law – all identifying information, including names of people and places, will be changed to protect your privacy. I will ask you at the end of the interview if you give me permission to contact you for a rare follow-up interview to clarify any important points that you made in the first interview.

██████████ I am not affiliated with ██████████ or your BSW program in any manner. I have received permission by the BSW program director ██████████ to approach the students here and invite them to participate in this study, but you are in no way required to participate. You will not miss any class time to participate, and participation or non-participation in this study will not affect your status in the program in any manner whatsoever. You will not receive any academic benefit (such as grades or extra credit) for participating or academic penalty for not participating. This project is in no way a part of the BSW program. You will also not receive any other form of compensation for participating, such as money.

Participation in this project is completely voluntary at all times. At any time during the interview, you do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer, and you may leave the project at any time without penalty or consequences. There are not any anticipated risks or discomforts that accompany your participation in this project – I do not anticipate any physical, economic, social, psychological, or any other form of harm to you as a result of participation in this study. There are no anticipated benefits for you individually, either. The benefits are purely academic in nature.

If you choose to participate in this study, I will need you to read, review, and sign the informed consent document. It contains much of the information that I just discussed and more, as well as key contact information for the investigators and the IRB institutions at ██████████ and UF that protect you as a research participant.

Thank you for taking the time to consider participating in this study. If you choose to participate, I look forward to speaking with you further! If not, I am sincerely grateful that you took the time to consider my project. Do you wish to participate, and if so, be audio-taped? Please remember that you must be at least 18 years old to participate in this study.

**APPROVED**

██████████

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## Informed Consent

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**Protocol Title:** "Social Welfare in the U.S. in the Twenty-First Century"

**Principal Investigator:** [REDACTED]

**Co-Investigator:** Lawrence Eppard, Graduate Assistant, University of Florida [REDACTED]

**\*\*Please read this consent document carefully before you decide whether or not to participate in this study\*\***

We are conducting a research project as part of Lawrence's doctoral dissertation research project at the University of Florida. With your permission, we would like to interview you as a part of this project and hear about your experiences as an undergraduate social work student (BSW) at [REDACTED]. You will not miss any class time to participate, and participation or non-participation in this study will not affect your status in the program in any manner whatsoever. You will not receive any academic benefit (such as grades or extra credit) for participating or academic penalty for not participating. This project is in no way a part of the BSW program.

### **Research Procedures**

This research is being conducted to identify the perspectives of undergraduate social work students like yourself as they prepare in the very near future to enter the social work field. This study seeks to explore your worldview about the issues that you will face in your profession, including the issues facing the people you will serve (such as children, the poor, etc.).

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in a 30-90 minute audio-taped interview at a time of your convenience to discuss your experiences as a BSW student at [REDACTED]. At your convenience this interview can take place in-person on the [REDACTED] campus or over the telephone. We only intend to conduct one interview, but may ask for a follow-up to clarify any important points you made. At the conclusion of this initial interview, we will ask you if we have your permission to contact you for a follow-up interview (if needed). If you answer no, we will not contact you again. If you answer yes, we will ask you for contact information. Participation in the first interview does not mean you have to participate in a second interview, even if you say you will.

Participation in this project is completely voluntary at all times. At any time during the interview or your participation in general, you do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer, and you may leave the project at any time without penalty or consequences.

### **Anticipated Risks and Benefits**

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research, it poses no more than minimal risk. We do not anticipate any physical, economic, social, psychological, or any other harm to you as a result of participation in this study.

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to help us further research on social welfare. This project is intended to benefit our sociological knowledge of future social workers and the social welfare system. There are no anticipated benefits for you individually.

### **Participation**

You must be at least 18 years old to participate. Your participation is always voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason without penalty or negative consequence. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.

### **Compensation**

You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

### **Confidentiality**

The data in this study will *always* be confidential, and your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Only the investigators will have access to research materials, which will be kept in a private, secure location at all times. The investigators will have an audio tape of your interview that only they will have access to. The investigators will transcribe this tape into a document that only they will have access to. In this document, they will change your name and the name of any other identifying information (including but not limited to place names) in the transcripts, and keep a master list linking your fake name to your real name. Once the final report (the dissertation) is written, the master list, audio tapes, and all transcripts will be destroyed. This will be done to remove all links between you and the final report. Your real name will never be used, and identifying information will never be used in any report.

**Study Results**

The results of this study will be developed into a dissertation that will fulfill the requirements for the completion of the co-investigator’s Ph.D. The co-investigator will then seek to publish this dissertation as an article (or series of articles) in an academic journal or in book form. You may request a copy of the project once it is complete. Remember that no identifying information will ever be contained in any final report.

**Whom to contact if you have questions about the study or your rights as research participant:**

This research is being conducted by [redacted] and Lawrence Eppard from the University of Florida Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law.

This research has been reviewed according to [redacted] and University of Florida procedures governing your participation in this research.

For questions or to report a research-related problem, you may contact the following people:

- [redacted]
- Lawrence Eppard, co-investigator: [redacted]
- Dr. Constance Shehan, Lawrence’s Ph.D. advisor at UF: [redacted]

In participating in this study, your rights are protected by both the [redacted] and the University of Florida IRB02 Office. Please feel free to contact them if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

- [redacted]
- University of Florida IRB02 Office: (352) 392-0433.

**Thank You!**

Thank you for taking the time to consider participating in this study. If you choose to participate, we look forward to speaking with you further! If not, we are sincerely grateful that you took the time to consider this project. Thank you!

**Agreement:**

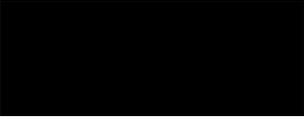
*Participant:* I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and I have received a copy of this description. I certify that I am at least 18 years old.

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to audio-taping.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree to audio-taping.

APPROVED



APPENDIX B  
INTERVIEW GUIDE/SCHEDULE

- Demographic questions:
  - Age, gender, race/ethnicity, marital status, children, religiosity.
    - Ask about family, too.
  - Where do you live?
    - Have you always lived there? Explain motivation for moves.
  - Total household income now.
    - Perceived social class over time, family SES history.
- Political philosophy? Party affiliation? Your family?
- What brought you to the study of social work?
- What year are you in the program?
- Which population or populations would you like to work with?
  - Where do you want to work when you graduate?
- Have any of your life experiences shaped your desire to pursue social work?
  - What about your family's influence? Other influences?
- Can you tell me a little bit about your internships and other social work related experiences?
  - What lessons have you learned from them?
- Do you follow the news?
  - Where do you get your news?
  - Other non-news sources which inform your views on poverty/inequality?
- Why do you think poverty and inequality exist in the U.S.?
  - Where does this opinion come from?
- Rank the Individualism, Culture of Poverty, and Structuralism perspectives from 1 to 3 (1 is most agree with – make sure to thoroughly explain each perspective)
- What can do the most good in reducing and/or “curing” poverty?
- Do most social work students agree with your poverty/inequality answers?
  - Your professors? Your course materials?
  - Most MAU students? Most Americans?
- Do you agree philosophically with welfare?
- Would you ever turn to welfare in a time of substantial need?
  - Would it hurt your pride? Would you be aware of any possible stigma?
- Have you ever been to a welfare office?
- Policies: do you support or not support each, and explain your answer:
  - Drug testing
    - Also ask about testing for non-poverty-targeted welfare.
  - Fertility-limiting policies (such as family caps)
  - Work requirements
- Do you believe the U.S. is a meritocracy? Please explain your reasoning (give them a thorough explanation of what meritocracy means).

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Lawrence Eppard received his Ph.D. in sociology from the Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law at the University of Florida in 2013; his primary doctoral concentration was social stratification and inequality and his secondary doctoral concentration was families, gender, and sexualities. He received a B.A. in history with a sociology minor from George Mason University in 2006. He received a M.S. in sociology from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in 2008. Within the general area of social stratification and inequality, Lawrence's research focuses specifically on the intersections of race/class/gender, poverty, and social welfare, as well as the contribution of American culture to the perpetuation of poverty and inequality in the U.S. Lawrence is currently teaching sociology in the Department of Sociology at Radford University in Radford, Virginia.