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Mind Playing Tricks: Individualism, Upward Mobility, and the Commitment to Self-Determination Among the Urban Poor

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MIND PLAYING TRICKS:
INDIVIDUALISM, UPWARD MOBILITY, AND THE COMMITMENT TO SELF-
DETERMINATION AMONG THE URBAN POOR

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Sociology

by

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Abstract.....	x
Introduction.....	1
“A Dirty Deal”	1
Divergent Paradigms, Unanimous Dysfunction.....	8
Individualism and Upward Mobility.....	11
Social Isolation and The Individual.....	16
Ascertaining Individualism: Why and How?.....	21
Ethnography ... Texanized.....	25
Synopsis and Chapter Outline.....	43
References.....	50
Coming Up or Coming to Grips? Perspectives on Upward Mobility, the American Dream, and Meritocratic Individualism from Young Residents of Houston’s Fifth Ward.....	56
Abstract.....	56
Introduction.....	56
The Culture of Poverty: Deficient, Defeated, and Resistant.....	58
Social Isolation and New Takes on Culture.....	59
The American Dream Ethos.....	61
Research Methods.....	63
Findings	70
Discussion.....	83
Notes.....	86
References.....	87
Just Working: Status, Stigma, and Self-Determination Among Job-holders in a High-poverty Urban Neighborhood	91
Abstract.....	91
Introduction.....	91
Working in Non-working Places.....	94
What Work (Really) Brings.....	96
Research Methodology.....	99
Findings.....	104
Discussion.....	118
References.....	122
That “Every Man for Himself” Thing: The Rationales of Individualism Among the Urban Poor.....	126
Abstract.....	126
Introduction.....	126
For Better or For (Having Done) Worse: Individualism and Poverty.....	128

“Being broke is so un-American:” Rationales of Individualism.....	130
Community Context, Participants, and Fieldwork.....	133
Analysis.....	137
Discussion.....	151
Notes.....	154
References.....	154
Concluding Considerations on Urban Poverty and Self-Determination.....	158
References.....	170
Appendix: IRB Approval Form.....	172
Vita.....	173

Abstract

The ethos of the American Dream offers a popular and straightforward prescription for success: Work hard, rely on yourself before others, avoid bad choices, and prosperity will follow. It is a decidedly optimistic, largely undefined, and intensely individualistic promise with serious implications for Americans' views on achievement and upward mobility. For all of these reasons, the validity of this ethos has come under attack. Philosophically, it is seen as illusory, ambiguous, and unrealistically demanding of individual exceptionalism. Sociologically, it is admonished for being too dismissive of structural constraints, systemic inequalities, and the value of relationships, social embeddedness, and mutual dependence.

For the urban poor - facing down long histories of marginalization, reputations for cultural backwardness, and the harmful effects of concentrated poverty – the individualistic character of the American Dream poses an intriguing question: Does adherence to this ethos signify an assertive, “no excuses,” agency-affirming commitment to self-determination, or does it signify a seductive but quixotic pipe dream that allays feelings of failure, stagnation, and a lack of exposure to broader social contexts?

This dissertation examines the concept of individualism among residents of a low-income, long disadvantaged urban community. Using participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork, I explore not just the meaning(s) of individualism but also its logical utility, or *rationale* as I call it, for explaining why and how so many residents insist that their efforts and good character will pay off - despite the abundance of evidence and public discourse that seem to suggest the contrary. On topics such as work ethic, employment, status, life chances, and social mobility, I observed residents of diverse backgrounds and social standings discussing their confrontations with community pitfalls, their aversions to contribute or succumb to surrounding

misfortunes, and their visions of self-actualization in which their prospects were not seen as determined, shaped, or even limited by their experiences in the community. I deliberate upon these discussions to submit a view of individualism that is more heterogeneous than in the contemporary literature and that more accurately attests to the agency, aspirations, and rationality of a too often discredited population.

Introduction

“A Dirty Deal”

“It’s all for show,” Tito Tatum declaratively intercedes, bringing finality to my observations about the commotion in the downstairs lobby where the grand opening for a café was being held. His body leaned-up against the couch with his legs resting horizontally on the cushions, he surveys the seat of his electric wheelchair which, in times like these, doubles as an alternate coffee table. Locating an ad from yesterday’s mail with a headline of “Tired of Paying Rent?”, he asks me if “Yall got anything to do with that?” – *yall* meaning the Fifth Ward Community Redevelopment Corporation, my workplace, and *that* being a new suburban-style subdivision in far northeast Houston. I – happy to have found the right apartment to kill time at for the half-hour before my meeting on that rainy and foggy afternoon – told him that I didn’t know much about the organization’s real estate development but knew that they do not build entire subdivisions, especially that far out from the Fifth Ward. Before I finish, Tito shifts his eyes from the TV screen, where *The Last Dragon* (1985) was playing on one of his movie channels. Our conversation up to that point had been about the whereabouts and health problems of Vanity, the frontwoman of the Prince-assembled Vanity 6 act, who co-starred in the film and contributed to its soundtrack. I had no idea she was in the film; Tito had no idea she was so attractive. He professed his affinity for light-skinned women, which emerged in boyhood from his attraction to “creole ladies” and then crystalized during his posts in Puerto Rico and Panama in the ‘60’s with the Army. As he gazed past me out through the window, I knew exactly what was on his mind.

“Bed bugs all through this place, man.” Of his many gripes about the apartment complex, this is the one that most stirs his blood. Throughout the past year, he has lamented the

lack of security (“They need police or real armed guards. Those guys are just uniforms – no one respects them.”), power outages, the unreliability of the elevator, the presence of “drugged up” people in and around the complex, the complacency of its residents (“These handouts just mess people up.”), and its reputation in the community (“The boys on the corner call this place a whore house.”). The bed bugs, however, are his most recurring and penetrating complaint as they signify both a threat to his health and the neglect of community leadership – a problem he has observed throughout much of his adult life. Seeing blood after he stepped on one of the bugs, he implored management to exterminate not just his apartment but the whole building, asserting that the pests transmit HIV – a claim that despite its seriousness he was proud to bring forth: “I bet you didn’t know that, either,” he told me. “(The developer of this place; Tito called him by name) is a CEO. He gets investors to come in and set-up the pharmacy or that café, but he gets his cut from all that. He wants to be seen as a leader – as working for the people. But he can’t do that. He’s not in charge of this place; it’s managed by a private firm.” Reiterating that the café is an exercise in impression management and public relations, he points out the hypocrisy of promoting the café on grounds of fellowship and community: “That’s the same damn lobby they tell the residents not to congregate!”

Born in 1932 – though his Veterans ID still says 1931, as he advanced his age one year to enter the service – and a Fifth Ward Houstonian since 1945 (he was born in New Orleans and spent much of his childhood in Brooklyn), Tito is not an angry, bitter, or defiant old man. There is nothing about his demeanor, lifestyle, or relationships to imply this. He lives alone in a one-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment with a spacious, modernly furnished living room but takes phone calls from family members – he has 10 children and more grandchildren than he can remember - at least once every hour. Visits from his home healthcare provider are a part of a

daily routine, while visits from children, nieces, nephews, friends, and myself pop up at various times throughout the day. With a monthly income of nearly \$3,000 between his union pension from 27-years of driving a truck at the docks of the Port of Houston and his social security benefits, Tito possesses some disposable income that he often uses to treat family members and buy food for those in need around the apartment. From a budgeting standpoint, he speaks favorably about the complex: “I do pretty good when you think that only (under \$600-a-month) comes out.” Though he keeps a ’99 Mustang in the front parking lot, his ambulation depends on his electric wheelchair, which he puts to good use on his jaunts up and down Lyons and Lockwood – for food, drinks, fresh air, or socializing. Connected with the “young boys on the corner” and the “old folks at the senior homes,” his best advice to me through the first two years of our relationship was, “If you want to know, the streets will tell you. They’ll tell you some bullsh*t too, but they gon’ tell you.” He’ll begin to speak fast when he becomes bothered or impassioned - like when he talks about undue police scrutiny (which he continues to experience) or, yes, bed bugs – but Tito’s style is all about casual observation and discourse. It’s as though he pulls nuggets of information from a bag of consciousness filled with recollections of past events, his opinions, or mere hearsay and just sets them on the table, without necessarily expecting assent, a retort, or any reaction whatsoever.

Tito’s confidence, trust, and sense of ease in “the streets” are only remarkable in consideration of his age and health condition. Otherwise, these streets – Gregg, Green, Bayou, Grove, Market, Jensen, Pannell, Waco. Bringhurst – have, quite literally, contoured the past 50-plus years of his life. He is, by own pronouncement, “true Fifth Ward, Texas.” These words mean something, or, for those not sure what they mean or put off by the imperious tone, they are intended to convey something. They say something about authenticity and honesty, about valor

and veracity, about pride through pain. There are surely other places in the city – even other poor, minority-populated places – that boast more notable natives, a more evolved community history, or more peppy, synergistic views of itself than the Fifth Ward. Many locals here uphold a near-religious avowal to “give you the real” and “tell it as it is.” Knowingly or not, the statements that follow from this kind of discursive fidelity usually reveal highly subjective, many times personalized accounts of what was and what is likely to be; they reveal more than just *as it is*. Within these accounts, the popular reputation of the Fifth Ward - as undervalued, underserved, and under siege – emerges. It may be reasserted, it may be rejected, or it might be qualified, but it’s always there, never far from the forefront of awareness.

To be true Fifth Ward is to ideologically espouse inclusion and decry segregation while understanding, pragmatically, that rivalry and defending one’s own are a big deal. Tito recalls Wheatley’s battles with Yates (these are the public high schools of the Fifth and Third Wards, respectively), the intimidation and fighting that went into keeping the “Frenchies” - light-skinned creole men from Frenchtown - away from black girls south of Liberty Rd. (and vice versa), and the significance of the train tracks parallel to Shotwell St. – which marked the (eroding) line of demarcation between the black Fifth Ward and Tejano / Mexican Denver Harbor. To be true Fifth Ward is to have to come down somewhere between bad luck and oppression in explaining tragedy and misfortune; Tito is skeptical of claims that the fatal plane crash of Mickey Leland, the Fifth Ward’s passionate and unwavering U.S. Congressman throughout the ‘80’s, was orchestrated to incapacitate his advocacy (and mobilization) of the poor, but he knows that police concocted evidence and coaxed witnesses to land his youngest son a twenty-year prison sentence in a set-plea murder trial. To be true Fifth Ward is to sense the inevitability of change while recognizing its tradeoffs; on gentrification, Tito wonders what the fuss is about: “All that was

here – all the black-owned business up and down Lyons – has been gone for 30 years anyway. They’ve always wanted this neighborhood. This is the only part of the city that does not flood.” To be true Fifth Ward is to have a clue what being true Fifth Ward entails – hell if anyone else knows or cares.

Tito is also – this too by his own pronouncement – a “true, staunch American.” Again, this is supposed to mean something. At 18 he was at war in Korea, a defining event in his life as it gave him identity, purpose, lifelong friends, and a chance to see the world from Italy to Alaska and Central America to Germany. He came away with a Distinguished Service Cross (for killing 6 enemy riflemen and moving a fallen squad member to safety behind a rock during a resisted advance in 1951) and COPD – the result of napalm fumes and the reason for his atrophied muscles, hence the wheelchair. He continues to speak reverentially of the armed forces and insists that despite recent concerns about overextension and the general public’s shrinking appetite for war, the world looks to America for leadership: “Whenever there is a problem in the world, America is the first to help ...and we help the most too!” He is suspicious of politicians but fascinated by politics. Though he struggles to think of a Republican he could cast a vote for – and he is fiercely critical of Rick Perry and Bobby Jindal – he does not describe himself as a Democrat. “I believe in the Constitution,” he says, quite often, “...Freedom of religion and equality under the law, that’s what I believe in.” He also believes that America is a place where anyone can succeed, even black or brown people who grow up, like him, poor and in the projects. His belief is not the jejune, “Believe it and Achieve it!” type that is socialized to young children and commonly broadcast in popular media (think *American Idol*, *Shark Tank*, or the endless advertisements for sports products), but rather the hardened, experience-based, “I’m going to tell it as it is” type that Fifth Warders are known for. America may be ultra-competitive

(“Everyone wants the same things, and there is always someone in the way.”) and not well-designed to improve to the condition of the poor and minorities (“If you can’t stuff anyone’s pocket then really you’re just not a priority.”) but with desire, great effort, a willingness to sacrifice some pleasure for stability, education, and firm parental support – and Tito insists that all 5 must be present – anyone in America enjoy a successful life. When he thinks about his fellow residents at the apartment complex, he delivers a classic, historically honored axiom on American stratification and social mobility: “Poor people hurt themselves more than anything else.”

Being “true Fifth Ward” and a “true, staunch American,” aside from all of their connotations, are about situating oneself within broader contexts. Sociologists would speak of identity construction, the self-concept, class consciousness, and status negotiation; the streets would probably just call it “finding your way” or G.I.F.I., standing for “Get in where you fit in.” Seeing the self as a part of a larger context involves developing orientations to the context itself – the types of relationships, institutional engagements, and life chances that the context is likely present, all of which are linked to what sociologists call *structure* – as well as a perspective on independent action and the capacity to exercise control over one’s fate, which is often described as *agency*. Structure and agency are conceptual properties; they grant license (and livelihood) to social theorists, they offer explanations for continuity and change, and they can be argued to interact differently despite being conceptually codependent and mutually constructive of one another (Giddens 1984; Coleman 1986; Unger 1987; Bourdieu 1990). Both structure and agency are pivotal to sociological theory but for Tito and the people of the Fifth Ward, neither structure nor agency have much to say. They do not say what, if anything, could have been done to help his son. They do not explain why, after decorated military service and a gainful, productive

career, he ended up broke and facing evictions due to crack cocaine, alcohol, and a surly temperament that triggered more than a few lets-just-say “altercations.” They do not begin to scratch the surface of why he thinks most of the Fifth Ward’s problems are the result of lacking initiative from residents, or why he feels like no one will bother him in the immediate area but finds it necessary to keep – and urge me to keep – a .38 caliber pistol when he goes to where I live in the multi-ethnic, transient, *banlieue*-esque neighborhoods of southwest Houston.

Structure and agency do not instruct anything here: They do not indict; they do not make demands; they do not bite, sting, or nibble away at one’s morale. There is something else that does that. The belief that one not only has control over its fate but is the foremost and perhaps even the sole agent behind realizing it - and that there are responsibilities incumbent upon preserving, protecting, and preparing the self in order to fulfill its potential – this is what stirs anxieties and compels reaction. This is what brings about insecurity, resignation, defensiveness, urgency, or perhaps optimism at the prospect of reversing an ill fortune. This, as I will elaborate in the sections to come, is where *individualism* comes in.

Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that “Anyone living in the United States learns from birth that he must rely upon himself to combat the ills and the obstacles of life; he looks across at the authority of society with mistrust and anxiety, calling upon such authority only when he cannot do without it” (1835: 219). Tocqueville was not concerned with urban poverty; it did not exist yet, not in its current, post-industrial, racialized form. His observations, however, are as applicable within this context as ever before. Amid rising inequality, constrained pathways into the middle class, and (re)emerging discord surrounding race relations and institutional racism, reconciling what it means to be “true Fifth Ward” and a “true, staunch American” is a timely enterprise. What does it really mean – for one’s outlook, for appraising one’s future prospects,

for one's status and social standing before others - to rely on the self to combat the ills and the obstacles of a disadvantaged social location while believing in the promise and openness of "the American Dream?"

Blues singer and Fifth Ward native Juke Boy Bonner, in a song from the '60's, sang "I'm smiling like I'm happy but you don't know how I feel / I feel life is a cheater, and it gave me a dirty deal" (Bonner 1993). Many have suggested that individualism is either a dirty deal in itself – in that it is mythical, untenable, and a vital ingredient in victim-blaming and atomistic Social Darwinism – or a response to the dirty deal of poverty, inequality, and segregation – in that it promotes defiance, alienation, competitiveness, and mistrust as defenses against a trying environment. For these reasons, urban research often treats individualism as a dirty word, and attributes it without definition, inspection, or analysis to other, seemingly more consequential social problems. Before I call for an alternative interpretation, I will discuss the theoretical currents and cultural conditions behind how this came to be.

Divergent Paradigms, Unanimous Dysfunction

For all the attention and scrutiny that is applied to the cultural context of poor, minority-populated urban communities, two paradigms continue to govern the discourse regarding these communities' heightened state of disadvantage and perceived cultural inversion. One, the structural inequality paradigm, holds that systemic, institutionally-reinforced barriers to participation in the broader society – e.g., the labor force and institutions of higher education – impose daunting constraints on achievement and upward mobility. These constraints, aside from their economic impacts on joblessness and long-term earning potential, manifest culturally through lowered expectations about the future, oppositionality to the conventions and institutions

widely seen to confer middle class status, and the acceptance of behaviors and attitudes that exacerbate social marginalization (e.g., early childbearing, school dropout, and violence-prone dispositions) (Clark 1965; Wilson 1987; 1996). The second paradigm, cultural deficiency, holds that systemic barriers to achievement are not insurmountable and that urban dislocations persist due to lagging initiative and accountability – within both individuals and communities at large. Under this paradigm, flawed conceptions of social obligation and responsibility (Mead 1985), as well as the purported disincentives toward work and traditional family arrangements brought on by government welfare programs (Gilder 1981; Murray 1984), have undermined the work ethic and sacrifices that are essential to attain class mobility.

With strict focus on culture - which may be defined for consistency with extant literature as shared outlooks, norms, and modes of behavior within a community (Wilson 1996; Harding 2010; Sampson 2012) – both paradigms essentially take different routes to the same destination. While the deficiency paradigm sees cultural attributes as a cause of persistent disadvantage and the structural paradigm regards these attributes as a mere consequence of it, the cultural attributes of interest are one and the same: low aspirations, cynical and defeatist outlooks toward achievement, excuse-making and inclinations to victimhood, and the pursuit of immediate gratification. Recent scholarship has (thankfully) begun to showcase greater heterogeneity of cultural models (Harding 2010) as well as diverse developmental pathways into adulthood (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2014) among younger members of the urban poor, but the resonance of the cultural deficiency and structural inequality frameworks has proven powerful and enduring. Hence, even after decades of declining inner-city crime, teen pregnancy, school dropout, and the notion of an increasingly egalitarian, “post-racial” society that reached a crescendo upon the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, the cultural context of

marginalized urban communities remains associated with dysfunction and backwardness (Kelley 1997; Young 2004) – perhaps even more so at present time with examples of minority class mobility more abundantly observable than ever before and the persistent dislocations of urban poverty thus rendered less excusable.

The community and cultural dysfunction narrative spawned by cultural deficiency and structural inequality frameworks justifies a broad array of responses and remedies, each of which can be defended according to one framework's basic tenets while critiqued by the other's. Structural inequality proponents often argue in favor of community-level interventions against joblessness, disinvestment, and segregation while cultural deficiency proponents – believing that the investments needed to support such interventions will be squandered unless the urban poor adopt the values and lifestyles that are conducive to success in “mainstream” America – instead call for incentives to work, get married, and escape dependency. As polarizing and debate-inspiring as the two perspectives can be, both perceive a vast and complicated web of dysfunction affecting the life chances and mobility trajectories of urban-residing minorities in low-income neighborhoods. Whether the *culture* is askew and transmitting self-harming values or the *community* is vulnerable to a multiplicity of economic, social, and health-related risks, the two dominant paradigms of urban poverty converge on the point that what is wrong with poor urban neighborhoods now adversely impacts the achievement and social mobility of these neighborhoods' residents in the future.

At the same time that examinations into “neighborhood effects” and contextual / environmental impacts on culture pervade urban research, an eclectic body of literature has emerged demonstrating that residents of marginalized urban communities often conceive the dislocations and disadvantages associated with urban poverty in highly personalized and

individualistic terms. Taking interest in a wide variety of social locations, this literature advances the claim that black adult males (Young 2004), job-seekers (Smith 2007), Latino drug dealers (Bourgois 1995), and working and lower class parents (Kusserow 2004) view their positions in life as determined by personal choices and that their futures can be shaped – constructively - by their own agency through noble efforts, virtues, and persistence. Since they do not dismiss or deny the challenges of their environment, however, researchers have sought to explain the origins of this faith in one’s self-determination amid restricted opportunities and bountiful examples of stifled attempts at mobility. These explanations generally attest to the demands upon self-sufficiency and identity construction in a neoliberal, capitalistic normative order (Bourgois 1995; Newman 1999; Black 2009) and the sheer naivety of socially isolated individuals, who may lack the cultural exposures and extra-local reference points to fully grasp how ill-equipped they are for a climb up America’s social mobility ladder (Hochschild 1995; Young 2004). Sustained by hope but often stymied by harsh realities, how do residents of long-disadvantaged neighborhoods reconcile the entrenched reputation of community and cultural dysfunction with the belief in the self-determination of the individual - that hard work and earnest living will pay off to produce an improved future?

Individualism and Upward Mobility

Work hard, eschew dependence on others, make smart decisions, and prosperity will follow. Such is the promise of the American Dream, a prescriptive ethos of achievement and social mobility that places success as the direct outcome of individual qualities and commitments. It is an ambiguous concept, with the definition and indicators of success in perpetual fluctuation and the gainfulness of individuals’ efforts toward success under

considerable dispute – particularly amid growing inequality and constricted intergenerational class advancement. Success can be understood in absolute terms via thresholds of status and well-being; in relative terms respective to a certain point of comparison; in competitive terms as an end pursued against others; or in libertarian terms as a mark of personal liberation from externally-imposed restraints. Despite, or perhaps because of, the amorphous and negotiable nature of these prescriptions, the American Dream ethos remains fundamental to the concept of America exceptionalism and is widely influential in Americans’ beliefs about achievement and social mobility (Hochschild 1995; Meacham 2012).

Individualism – the belief in the inherent dignity, sanctity, and agentic-capacity of the human person – is a concept rooted in numerous cultural, religious, and political traditions that comprises the language by which Americans tend to think about their lives, their social standing, and their prospects for the future (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton 2008; Barlow 2013). It is a concept with a diverse range of connotations that is both lauded and mocked for what it implies toward the prevailing order of social and economic relationships and the notion of meritocracy. Accordingly, individualism can provoke disparate reactions and varying interpretations based upon cultural background (Barlow 2013), national origin (Lukes 1973), social class (Kusserow 2004), and occupational / employment status (Smith 2007). Political theorist Steven Lukes (1973) attempts to reduce these nuances and interpretive disparities to “basic ideas” of an American strand of individualism. In doing so, he puts forth the following five elements: (1) the dignity of man (emanating from the Bible and the importance of the individual’s relationship with God as well as a reaction to monarchies and aristocracies of the Middle Ages), (2) autonomy - the idea that one’s actions and thoughts are of the individual’s own volition, (3) privacy - the idea that not all of the individual’s affairs are of concern to the

public and cannot be intruded or infringed upon, (4) self-development - the pursuit and attempted actualization of the individual's chosen ideals and aspirations, and (5) abstractness - individuals are conceived abstractly through interests, purposes, needs, and wants that shape the individual's behavior. Bellah et al. (2008) declare that "individualism lies at the very core of American culture" (p. 142) and demands, above all else, independence and self-reliance – both as a means to success and as virtues in and of themselves.

While individualism can thus be understood as an essential, and perhaps the preeminent, mechanism and value set underlying achievement and the realization of success, individualism can also be considered a source of immense division, distrust, and confusion. The first observations of individualism in America, from Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, were characterized by caution and fears of eventual isolation, indifference to inequality, and perpetual self-regard. Tocqueville saw individualism – "a reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him and to withdraw to one side with his family and friends" – as a product of American democracy that "proceeds from an erroneous judgment rather than a depraved sentiment." The "erroneous judgment" is the belief that one is best served by retreating to his / her family and friends, and individualism is said to evolve into selfishness and potentially a "soft despotism" that can go unnoticed as it stifles social integration. Almost 170 years after Tocqueville's visit to America in the 1830's, political scientist Robert Putnam (2000) presented evidence of a decades-long decline in organization memberships, trust, and informal neighborly exchange, with scholars and the general public widely concurring that the trend toward private interests and pastimes had given way to community decline and social malaise (1835). In 2012, two contrasting visions of individualism literally took center stage in the Presidential Election as the Republican Party adopted a slogan of "We Built It" that was

displayed on convention's main stage and on the placards of its attendees. The slogan was a response to a comment from President Obama at a campaign rally:

If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you've got a business, you didn't build that!

To the Republican National Committee and its constituents, the President's words marked a threat to a cherished American virtue: the right to "make oneself" on one's own accord and initiative without incursion (or redistribution) from external forces.

For all the concern over the manifestations of individualism at large, the topic takes on all the more salience and intrigue when applied to the urban poor. If hard work and self-reliance indeed pay off as the American Dream instructs, then perhaps, as many have declared, there is a profound lack of these attributes in America's ghettos. Perhaps, as others have suggested, reasonable aspirations of achievement and the acceptance of values that are commonly seen as conducive to upward mobility have not been met with sufficient opportunities for skill development, workforce participation, and capital accumulation. Cultural deficiency and structural inequality paradigms respectively lean upon each of these explanations, but neither have managed to thoroughly account for the origins, rationale, and durability of individualistic, meritocratic views of upward mobility within historically poor communities. Such views – that an improved future is possible through diligent effort and smart decision-making, regardless of one's background and the barriers ahead of them – can seem counter-intuitive and ill-informed under each line of thought. As such, they are commonly attributed to social isolation (Young 2006), defensiveness and self-justification (Smith 2007), and sheer lip service to a set of values that are so prevalent and predominant within the cultural fabric – and the economic demands – of American life (Hochschild 1995).

In any study on individualism, there is a tendency to discount or overlook the ways in which peer groups, institutions, and community conditions shape the values and outlooks that have come to be interpreted as “individualistic” (Kusserow 2004). When low-income, “socially isolated” people talk about hard work, toughness, perseverance, and depending on only themselves, this can easily be taken as an expression of a self-directed, individualistic orientation to achievement and upward mobility – even when these values come to be seen as desirable through decidedly social processes and even when one’s endorsement of these values occurs via conformity to contextually-inscribed cues. This is not the approach that this dissertation subscribes to. My fieldwork and analysis are not concerned with locating a “true” or “authentic” individualism, or finding the essential, primordial self that can be known only by somehow suspending – or sequestering one’s self from – the complex and overpowering effects of social influences and demands (Gergen 1991). Rather, I am primarily focused on the manners in which residents of a traditionally-marginalized community with seemingly unpropitious prospects for mobility draw upon, assess, and invoke narratives of individualism in order to carry out their efforts and aspirations towards an improved future. Barlow (2013) astutely submits:

The irony of individualism arises from the fact that the concept exists only within cultural contexts. An absolutist individualist would have no need of language or of distinction – and could not exist, not as a human being, at least, for all of us humans are dependent upon others. Individualism arises only as an aspect of community, as an aspect of society’s vision of its individual parts (p. 19).

By asking questions that aim to discern the utility, resilience, and practicality of the belief that hard work and earnest living are necessary and sufficient toward achieving prosperity, I do not spurn reflections upon community and cultural contexts in favor drawing further reference to private convictions or ambitions. Contrarily, I attempt to showcase that this outlook is informed and rendered justifiable by residents’ experiences with community conditions.

Social Isolation and The Individual

Social isolation theory incorporates elements of both the cultural deficiency and structural inequality paradigms. As the authoritative and most encompassing account of urban poverty and disadvantage since the latter decades of the 1900's, social isolation theory holds that urban communities with restricted opportunities and a multiplicity of socioeconomic disadvantages develop a separate subculture characterized by non-mainstream attitudes. With limited access to the institutions that produce upward mobility among the middle and upper classes (or with access to institutions that are weak and ineffective), residents of such communities are prone to adopt "oppositional" or "ghetto-specific" behavioral norms and value systems (Wilson 1987; Anderson 1990). These norms and value systems thus play out to produce an austere public environment and exacerbate residents' social and economic marginality (through early childbirth, single mother households, school dropout, and the proclivity toward violence).

Social isolation theory incorporates cultural deficiency perspectives by acknowledging that the lived experiences of poverty have implications upon poor communities' cultural contexts. For a considerable period of time (the '70's through the mid-'80's, generally speaking), such a claim was largely untenable. In the wake of Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's (1965) stigmatizing report on black family structure and reticent to accept the self-perpetuating, intergenerational value transmission claim at the heart of the "culture of poverty" thesis (Lewis 1959; 1968), poverty scholars of this era approached research involving behaviors or values with caution, fearing that it might serve to fuel harmful stereotypes or overshadow overriding, structuralist claims. Where social isolation departs from the cultural deficiency framework and turns in favor of structural inequality, however, is in its scope of analysis and

causal inferences. Heavily influenced by Chicago School traditions of neighborhood ecology and social organization, social isolation posits that the neighborhood – not the individual or family unit – is the breeding ground for the transmission of subcultural traits. The individual, therefore, is susceptible to the influences of these traits not solely on account of being poor but rather because the forces of social organization have eroded (e.g., quality schools, connectedness to the formal economy, child care networks, etc.). Since this erosion of social organization occurs at the community level, residents of poor urban communities are left without access to effectual, stabilizing, mobility-producing institutions (hence social “isolation”) and experience the effects of such disadvantage alongside other residents who lack dependable avenues out of poverty. The cumulative effects of this sort of concentrated poverty are known as “concentration effects” and manifest in restricted access to jobs and job information networks, a shortage of “marriageable” partners for women, and a lack of “conventional role models,” who attest to the value of work, education, and traditional family arrangements (Sampson and Wilson 1995: 42).

While social isolation theory succeeds in illuminating the convergence (as well as the contrasts) of the structural inequality and cultural deficiency paradigms, it is ultimately addressed to the same narrative of community and cultural dysfunction; that is, it seeks to explain what is different about black and Hispanic urban communities that makes them so comparatively disadvantaged and socially immobile compared to the rest of “middle class,” “mainstream” America. Much of the research conducted in the social isolation framework has thus taken to examining particular dislocations – e.g., heightened crime, early childbearing, welfare participation, gangs and drug trafficking – and presenting their origins and continuity as a product of exclusion from mobility-engendering institutions. With this inclination toward structural inequality explanations in tow, urban scholarship – and urban ethnographic research in

particular – have dealt with values, norms, behaviors, and all the contents of the cultural landscape of urban poverty only to the extent they can be described to emanate from systemic and institutionally-reinforced barriers to upward mobility. Wacquant (2002) alleges that this inclination gives rise to the *argumentum ad populum* fallacy within ethnographic research on the urban poor; Concerned for the image and discourse that surround the poor, while playing to the moral orientations and sensibilities of a predominantly middle-upper class and center-Left audience, researchers endeavor to demonstrate the urban poor’s honesty, decency, and frugality in order to resonate with popular conceptions of moral worth. To Wacquant, this sort of “sanitization” of the poor’s condition causes urban ethnography to maintain “stubborn disregard for the deep and multisided involvement of the state” (p. 1450) and a wholly unnecessary preoccupation with moral values (as opposed to structural locations or political subjugation). To others, who are less critical of the ethnographic method’s contemporary application, the social isolation framework has nonetheless been shown to have limited explanatory capacity when applied to the heterogeneity of cultural models within poor, isolated neighborhoods (Harding 2010) and the increasing inter-class, -racial, and -neighborhood connectedness of major cities (Venkatesh 2013).

Social isolation theory is referenced and evaluated throughout this dissertation, not only for its authority on cultural orientations within poor urban communities, but for its relevance toward individuals’ assessments of their capacity for agency and an improved, self-determined future. The impact of social isolation upon individuals’ beliefs and conduct is most commonly discussed in terms of the afore mentioned “oppositional” and “ghetto-specific” values - the penchant for interpersonal violence and aggression, a suspect outlook upon workforce participation, and lax attitudes about drug use, promiscuity, and the means toward immediate

gratification in general (Wilson 1987; Anderson 1990). Beyond these seedier, sexier, and more politically-galvanizing topics, social isolation theory offers a perspective on self-efficacy and attitudes about personal achievement that is pertinent to my focus on individualism. This perspective, I will argue, is misinformed and paradoxical: It relies upon individuals' conscious recognition of their standing relative to the rest of society in order to explain their supposedly oppositional values, yet simultaneously relies on their ignorance of this standing in order to explain their supposedly unrealistic aspirations and conceptions of success.

Social isolation theory's perspective of the agentic, self-determining capacity of the individual is based on the concept of concentration effects (also referred to as "neighborhood effects," particularly when not specifically addressed to the effects of concentrated poverty) (Wilson 1987; Massey and Eggers 1990; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002; Sampson 2012; Sharkey 2013). Though such effects are borne of macro-level processes involving neighborhood ecology and mechanisms of social organization, they function to bog down the life chances of individuals by imparting detrimental consequences upon educational attainment, the quality of public services received, health, interpersonal trust, and exposures to (or participation in) crime / violence (Sampson 2012; Sharkey 2013). The oppositional and ghetto-specific values that have become central concerns of the social isolation framework thus emerge as a recognition – or a coming to grips, of sorts – with the grim and unpromising prospects ghetto life. Ethnographic research on the marginalization of the underclass – a term for those residing in segregated, isolated urban communities with inadequate means to class mobility – details how "oppositional," "fatalistic," and "resistant" subcultures emanate from the acceptance and frustrated negotiation of an impoverished and disrespected social standing (Liebow 1967; Hannerz 1969; Anderson 1990; and Bourgois 1995). Gans (1991) directly links

subcultural values and stifled attempts at mobility: “Many poor people in our society are also fatalists, not because they are unable to conceive of alternatives, but because they have been frustrated in the realization of those alternatives” (1991: 305). Like the rest of the afore cited ethnographic research, Gans is careful to note the presence of “regulars,” “decent people,” and “mainstreamers” within the ghettos inhabited by the underclass – the point being that no one is born a fatalist or with oppositional values, and that this sense of frustration and confinement is reinforced by the social environment and fomented by individuals’ experiences within it (Engbersen, Schuyt, Timmer, and Waarden 1993).

With the sense of fatalism and the recognition of compromised prospects thus representing key contributions to social isolation’s claim of subcultural value systems, it appears paradoxical, then, that social isolation’s account of account of agentic, non-fatalistic aspirations is based upon claims of naivety and obliviousness. Hochschild (1995), for instance, attributes the strong endorsement of the American Dream ethos among poor blacks to the plausible, if not correct, calculation that the odds of living a happy life are more enhanced by following the tenets of the dream than by placing one’s hopes in any other available option (e.g., career advancement, educational attainment, marriage, etc.) (p. 217). Young (2004) argues that high degrees of social isolation leave black men with insufficient points of reference (beyond their high-poverty communities) to apprehend the magnitude of the barriers to social mobility. Individualistic and meritocratic conceptions of personal uplift, under this application of social isolation theory, are essentially pipe dreams more so than pathways. In the next chapter (“Coming Up or Coming to Grips?”), I expound upon contradicting evidence to show that such conceptions are not baseless or naïve but are drawn from cognizant identification with disadvantaged status and a rational

calculation of what is likely to propel social mobility – even if motivated by first- or secondhand experiences with what inhibits it.

Ascertaining Individualism: Why and How?

If isolation from the means to mobility and the effects of concentrated poverty are known to impose significant barriers against improving one's station in life, what exactly does the agentic, self-actualizing capacity of the individual matter in discussions of urban poverty and its cultural precepts? If the proverbial mobility ladder is broken or altogether absent from poor urban communities, should anyone care that many residents of such communities believe that they can make the climb anyway? Hope and aspiration have been known to deceive – for the cubicle-bound corporate employee eyeing the corner office just as much as the 12-year-old gazing skyward at downtown Houston from the Kelly Village projects – and neither represents a remedy to inequality or inter-generational poverty. Bruce Springsteen sang that “I had some victory that was just failure in deceit” (1992) and Jay-Z, perhaps the most recognizable and true-to-life pop culture parallel to the Horatio Alger-style rise to wealth from the urban slum, raps, “Foolish pride is what held me together through the years” (2003).

If individualism is about the self-reliance, autonomy, and pursuit of one's own happiness that are so unassailably engrained within the American cultural conscience, and then concurrently about the lies that we perhaps tell ourselves to preserve a little hope or just sleep a little easier, my research is then helplessly tasked with taking on the full spectrum of these meanings. Barlow (2013) submits that individualism in America has evolved into nothing more than a myth. Individualism, as articulated by the likes of John Locke, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson, was once seen as the basis for an ideal-type social contract; The individual,

who exists prior to society, can best realize its self-interest through voluntary cooperation with others in determining the objectives and purposes of social institutions. This vision, which Barlow deems to be in perpetual dispute between secular-liberal and “Borderer,” Scottish-Irish cultural traditions, has (d)evolved - among the latter cultural tradition in particular - into a “pugilistic stance” wherein “one imagines that one has gained what little one has on one’s own and that everyone else is trying to get it, especially those even lower on the scale” (p. 188). Bellah et al. (2008) concur that individualism is illusory insofar as it promotes finding wealth and fulfillment by separating oneself from one’s family history and community, but find that middle class Americans by and large pursue both private fulfillment and public involvement with respect for community identification (i.e., not forgetting one’s past and championing their former “stomping grounds”) and traditions.

Though mindful of the breadth and ambiguity that comes with assessing individualism’s meaning in these historical and cross-cultural contexts, this dissertation focuses on the meaning of individualism among the urban poor, and why – despite the plethora of statistics, public discourse, and lived anecdotes attesting to the likelihood of prolonged poverty and marginalization – the belief that prosperity will come from working hard and doing the right things remains largely intact (Goodwin 1972; Hochschild 1995; Newman 1999; Young 2004; Smith 2007; Nunnally and Carter 2011). Taking on these questions at this time, I contend, has both theoretical and utilitarian value. While prevailing accounts of prolonged disadvantage in urban communities are now dually infused with elements of cultural deficiency and structural inequality frameworks, I have shown to this point that the assumption of community and cultural dysfunction – and the urge for scholars and pundits to account for its dislocations from middle class or mainstream America – have gone un-rebuked. Many of the claims, from the cultural

side, have not fundamentally changed; the Right still laments “a tailspin of culture in our inner cities” (Blow 2014) where men do not work, women bear children out-of-wedlock at young ages, and welfare – though more contingent upon workforce participation than ever before (Edsall 2014) – still dis-incentivizes initiative for too many (Bradley and Rector 2010). Among moderates and the center-Left, a consensus more or less exists around the premise that job creation, skill development, and expanding opportunities for success go hand-in-hand with personal responsibility and frugal living in the alleviation of poverty (Ketchum 2012). What is novel to this discussion, however, is the emerging line of thought – formalized in the social isolation and concentration effects literature – that poor residents of troubled urban communities do not grasp their relative social standing or location and thus cannot realistically ascertain their encumbered prospects or plot a reliable pathway forward. Agency-affirming beliefs and assertions of individualism and self-determination are, under this thinking, attributable to the “myth” of individualism, the costs of social isolation, and the illusory dimensions of the American Dream. In this way, the time-honored concern over “illegitimate” children, “illegitimate” income, and “illegitimate” conceptions of obligation now sit alongside claims of illegitimate aspirations and worldviews.

The chapters that follow explore and, in several ways, debunk these attributions. To chalk up meritocratic or optimistic views of the future to limited cultural exposures and failure to recognize barriers may mark a modification within the social isolation framework, but its implications for policy and public discourse surrounding urban poverty have been witnessed before. At stake, once again, is the continuation of a popular and exculpatory notion that the problems of poor, minority-populated urban communities emanate not from chronic underinvestment or policies that promote containment and segregation, but from the people that

live there. Cultural deficiency revisited, one could claim, although this time it is impressions of achievement and personal uplift prompting the scrutiny most commonly applied to attitudes of fatalism, defeatism, and oppositionality. Are there conceptions of upward mobility and making a better life for oneself in the Fifth Ward that hint of selfishness, exploitation, and irrationality given one's social location? My evidence suggests that indeed there are. My evidence also suggests that such conceptions are rooted in a longing to attain or at least project a series of "self hyphens" – self-reliance, self-defense, and self-respect – that prove crucial toward maintaining a sense of control and individual agency amid highly vulnerable circumstances. In other, less destabilized circumstances – whether it is young adults dissociating from peers' mistakes and holding them up as examples of what not to do, or negotiations of stigmatized status in so-called "low-skill" work – individuals regularly insist that they are the masters of their own fates and that their own efforts and sound decision-making can surmount the constraints of their environment. Discounting these views as ill informed or unrealistic not only misses the mark for how community conditions justify and sustain these views, but also dissuades investments and policies intended to strengthen public and institutional supports that would assist in bringing such ambitions to form.

In putting forth these claims that are intrinsically linked to individuals' personal histories, aspirations, value systems, and assessments of norms, I do not claim to have an exclusively intimate or privileged relationship with anyone's true, inner-most, or essential self; my observations occur within – and are contingent upon – social contexts. Neither can I claim to possess an insider or nativist orientation to black, Hispanic, or local community culture; I am not black or Hispanic nor am I a native of the Fifth Ward. There is an extensive debate about how accurately aspects of culture can be ascertained from ethnographic research conducted by those

who are not native to the setting. Some of this debate has centered on racial mistrust, dissimilar experiences between whites and minorities involving inequality, and the difficulty overcoming tensions between describing “the street” and applying theoretical explanations (a task that usually demands reconciling two disparate groups) (Zinn 1979; Blauner and Wellman 1998).

Another dimension of this debate – more specific to urban ethnography – originates from concerns that a time-honored but narrow fascination with observing behaviors and attitudes gives way to an incomplete understanding of culture. To this point, scholars have offered various theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches to account for apparent inconsistencies between that which is “acted” or observable – i.e., behaviors and attitudes – and that which is abstract and expressive – i.e., aspirations, values, and beliefs (Rodman 1963; Lewis 1963; Valentine 1968; Hannerz 1969; Rainwater 1970; Gans 1991; Bourgois 1995; Young 2004). Though I refer to and make use of these recommendations where appropriate, I am more interested in how Fifth Ward residents perceive and make sense of these inconsistencies. In research pertaining to meanings of individualism and conceptions of upward mobility amid disadvantaged backgrounds, I do not find inconsistencies to be avoidable - whether between behavior (or the values that drive it) and beliefs or aspirations or between the racial / ethnic / class background of subjects and the researcher. Ambiguity, inconsistency, and fending off doubt, as I have attempted to show, are inherent to unfulfilled pursuits and unrealized potential, and they lie at the basis of this research.

Ethnography ...Texanized

To consider individualism is to consider culture, which is of course associated with outlooks and norms but also related to the mythology and folklore of place. It is hard to conjure

a region or place, much less a single state, more associated with the bold, bellicose, “rugged” brand of individualism – and all of its attendant myths, folklore, and propaganda – than Texas. The *Lone Star* State, where maverick spirit and cowboy courage are said to have surmounted a barren landscape, Native American raids, Mexican occupation, and extreme heat and droughts, offers a creatively crude (i.e., creative in that it deliberately misconstrues much of the state’s economic and cultural history) ideology of individualism: the individual exists in atomistic solitude within tumultuous terrain, sustaining or failing via his own self-preservation and determination.

This lionized vision of hardscrabble, man-versus-nature and ultimately man-versus-man individualism (Parker 2014: 52) consumes America’s collective conscience on its largest mainland - and second-most populous - state. It is readily accessible through such pop culture artifacts as *Friday Night Lights*, *Giant*, *Dallas*, and *Storage Wars Texas* and is strategically channeled (and broadcast to the nation) in the truculent defiance of Ted Cruz and Louie Gohmert. When I first commenced upon this research, the weight and pervasiveness of this vision loomed in the back of my mind: if individualistic conceptions of achievement and social mobility are indeed myths and cultural tropes, what does it mean to engage with a population that is, at the very least, disproportionately socialized around this vision or, even more, sympathetic champions of its precepts? To explain my experiences with - and orientations toward - this brand of Texan individualism, I should provide some background about the Fifth Ward, Houston, and the circumstances that led to my placement there.

Houston

I arrived in Houston on May 15, 2013 after three years of graduate school at Louisiana State University (LSU) in Baton Rouge. While doing interviews for my master’s paper I came

into contact with Kathy Payton, a Fifth Ward native and the longstanding President of the Fifth Ward Community Redevelopment Corporation (FWCRC), who told me about the need for FWCRC and other community development outfits to communicate their work in a more humanized light. More than improving physical infrastructure and acting as an impetus for outside investment and gentrification, Payton believed that community development fosters upward mobility and new forms of community attachment. The upwardly mobile may not remain in the community, but this in itself attests to the role of community development in improving residents' life chances and, over time, ensuring a better opportunity structure for the residents that remain in place or come behind those who vacated. This was the case FWCRC was looking to make and, with my interest in the neoliberal origins of community development and its premium upon the values of sustainability and "self-sufficiency," I jumped at Ms. Payton's inquiry about coming onboard.

It was a leap of faith. I was content with my graduate program at LSU; I had a few close friends in the program that I felt bad about saying goodbye to; my graduate committee gave me a healthy mix of support, freedom, and professional advice; and Baton Rouge, despite always feeling a bit small for a self-professed "city dude," offers a comfortable lifestyle with some of my favorite places to eat in America (shout-out to TJ Ribs, Copeland's, Frankie Marcello's, and Louie's in particular – PoBoy Express as well!). At the same time, however, I needed to make a move – not necessarily of the geographic, inter-state, "pack-up-and-go" variety, but I had completed my master's paper and comprehensive exam and I was about to finish my coursework, meaning that it was time to either start my dissertation research or waste time thinking about it while likely teaching an introductory class or two. Teaching did not scare me but living on a graduate stipend and not making significant progress toward completing the Ph.D.

did. My pay from working part-time with FWCRC (about 25-30 hours a week throughout my first nine months there) was comparable to that from LSU and thus had no bearing on my decision to move. I took the westward excursion on I-10 because the work with FWCRC promised to place me in the heart of a community of interest to my work on urban poverty. Beyond mere placement in the setting, I figured it would grant me a research agenda pursuant to both the organization's objectives and my own selection of a dissertation topic, and that it would permit access to a wide array of local and extra-local contacts all with a stake in the community's affairs. Furthermore, I was intrigued and excited at the prospect of living in Houston.

Over lunch at Chicago's famed Lou Malnati's Pizza with Larry Dixon, the project manager at Lawndale Christian Development Corporation on the city's west side where I was volunteering one summer, we were talking about my impressions of the South (this was after my first year of graduate school). Larry remarked, "I was born and raised in Chicago and don't see myself leaving, but if there was any other city I could see myself living in, it would be Houston, Texas." I found this comment surprising and it stuck with me for a while; Chicago is compared with New York quite frequently ("the *second* city," a term that many Chicagoans cringe at) as well as Philadelphia, Boston, and other northern, so called "ethnic" cities. (Since Houston is almost never included in this list, I often wonder if it is just a matter of maturation – with Houston's most pronounced growth occurring almost a full century after that of the aforementioned northern cities – or if the traditions of Anglo, African American, Tejano, Mexican, Jewish, southeast and east Asian, central American, south American, Caribbean, Louisiana Cajun, and African migration and settlement in "H-Town" are somehow not "ethnic" enough.) Houston, to me, was but a mystery. I knew it was large in both population and land area –

· By many measures, Houston is America's most ethnically diverse city and metropolitan area (see "Houston Region Grows..." 2012 and Kim 2014).

“fourth largest city,” “sprawl,” and “expansive” have a way of creeping in to seemingly every generic description of the city – and that it was widely regarded as the international capital of the oil and gas industry. I had heard that it was intolerably humid. I knew also that it was the home of NASA and related aerospace engineering firms; that it contained Joel Osteen’s Lakewood Church and several other mega-churches; and that its slow, codeine-infused, bass-and-scratch-heavy *chopped-and-screwed* style of rap had become a commanding force throughout multiple genres of music – its trademark sound being incorporated by not only non-Texan rappers like Jay-Z, Drake, and OutKast, but also by pop acts such as Gwen Stefani and Beyoncé, a native of the city. Beyond these vague and impersonal impressions, I knew nothing about Houston prior to my first visit in 2010.

Writing of the city’s growth in *U.S. News and World Report*, journalist Paul Recer submitted that “Houston is not a city. It’s a phenomenon; an explosive, churning, roaring urban juggernaut that’s shattering tradition as it expands outward and upward with an energy that stuns even its residents” (1978: 47). Rice University sociologist Stephen Klineberg, speaking of the city’s demographic foreshadowing of America’s upcoming decades, affirms, “More than any other American metropolis, Houston will be the most iconic city of the 21st century” (Thomson 2010). For whatever projections or grandiose descriptions are laid upon this city, my first perceptions of life here were defined by the similarities to the neighborhoods where I grew up in the northwest suburbs of Chicago. Oak trees and strip malls dominate the cityscape; a plurality of the population is Hispanic; and time is structured around the schedules of people who typically work in offices, hospitals, and schools. Just like Chicago, there is a friendly but passionate rivalry between the north and south side of the city, with the north side’s railway lines, factories, and loading docks evoking a more “industrial” character than the universities,

museums, and the towering, gleaming medical facilities that suffuse the economically, architecturally, and culturally eclectic south side.

Where Houston stands apart from Chicago (as well as the other places I have lived in – south Louisiana and Washington, D.C.) is in the mixture - not just the segregated presence - of people, social groups, and cultures. Whereas the Dallas-Fort Worth “metroplex” is more fittingly located – and far more unabashed in its affinity – for brandishing the vestiges of its Old West-meets-Great Plains frontierism, Houston marks the conjoining point for four distinct regional-cultural traditions: Tejano south Texas, Deep South east Texas, Anglo-rancher central Texas, and the maritime activities of Galveston, its bay, and the Houston Ship Channel – home of the United States’ busiest foreign cargo port (the Port of Houston) and the second largest petrochemical complex in the world (Collier 2013). The confluence of these regional-cultural traditions, coupled with rapid migration from both international (about one in four residents of the metro are foreign born, see Fulton 2014) and domestic locales, supplies variety and contrast to the popular-albeit-antiquated perception of Texas as predominantly white and rural. While “diversity” can, for any city or place, be espoused as an empty and thus harmless Chamber of Commerce selling point - or mark a mere statistical property with little bearing upon residents’ lives if integration and inter-group trust are low – Houstonians are not so much proud of their city’s multicultural character as they are unaffectedly immersed in it. At numerous restaurants and concerts, my mental surmising that “This place would be about 95% white or 95% black in Chicago or Louisiana” is brought on by taking notice of the ethnic ambiguity that commonly goes expected and unstated among locals. Even the Houston Rodeo (formally The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo), a three-week event in March that draws upwards of two million attendees, has transcended its cowboys-and-country music origins and is now a celebration of

eccentricity and the city's position as a powerful, enterprising global city. Popular culinary creations at this spectacle include deep fried everything (Oreos, Pop Tarts, Cheesecake, and so forth) and Pulled Pork Sundaes (I'm a traditionalist, I guess, as my personal favorite is the Brisket Baked Potato) and nightly headlining musical acts have included Robin Thicke, John Legend, Blake Shelton, Mary J. Blige, Tim McGraw, Pitbull, Ariana Grande, and Fall Out Boy in recent years. As displayed at this annual event, Houston does not eschew or apologize for any aspects of its regional and cultural identity, nor does it exclude or dismiss any elements which may serve to modify it. The trademark and triumph of Houston is that anyone and anything can be Houstonian; the city has a way of wrapping itself around people – and most likely trying to claim them – as a testament to its inclusiveness, progress, and kindhearted spirit.

The Fifth Ward, and Me In It

It is tempting to speak of the Fifth Ward in superlatives. The skyscrapers of downtown are visible from virtually all places within the community. As a backdrop, they provide visual evidence of side-by-side prosperity and poverty that can be marshaled in support of “city of contrasts” narratives that, realistically, can be applied to any major American city post-deindustrialization. Throughout the ‘90’s, photographs of this sort became commonplace for stories about Houston’s growth, inequality, and / or urban neglect. Journalist Gregory Curtis captured the essence of such photos in a *Texas Monthly* article: “In the foreground there are miserable row houses, so peeling and dilapidated that they practically crumble before your eyes; in the background the gleaming, majestic skyscrapers of downtown loom over the pathetic houses and glisten against a clear sky” (1998). In comparison to the wealth, diversity, and city-of-the-21st-century optimism that are associated with the city at large, the Fifth Ward can be cast

as an obstinate and intractable figure – as if to personify resistance to the rapid demographic change and gentrification that have affected many of its fellow inner-loop (i.e., the loop created by the circular 610 freeway) communities. Richard West, also writing in *Texas Monthly*, deemed the Fifth Ward “larger than life” in his three-month *journography* of the neighborhood in the late-‘70’s. With passion that bordered on eroticism, he described “the most vicious quarter of Texas, a brutal, alcohol-sodden, desperately poor jungle where killing is done with no compunction, rape with no seduction, and a man’s pocket is picked seconds before he swings into eternity” (West 1979). In the same spirit, it was said to represent “the toughest, meanest, baddest ghetto in Texas” (“When we exposed...” 1980) and was seen as “poorer and tougher” than Houston’s other historically black neighborhoods (Broyles 1976).

The immutable badass with its feet too submerged in its own backwardness to harness the winds of change – such is the legacy of the Fifth Ward, also known as the Bloody Fifth or the Bloody Nick (short for nickel; nickel representing 5, for Fifth Ward), within Houston lore. It was this legacy – and really nothing other than this legacy – that had defined my impressions of the community before coming to Houston. Some time early in high school, my English teacher responded to a student’s wisecrack about needing to carry a gun for protection by saying, “I suppose if we were in the Bronx, south central L.A., or the Fifth Ward in Houston, maybe I could understand, but come on.” I believe that was the first I had ever heard of the place (although for some reason I knew that Houston was divided into wards, which today exist only for namesake and have had no political significance since 1905). Around that same time, as my interest in rap intensified and I began acclimating myself to artists’ catalogs retroactively, I discovered The Geto Boys, 5th Ward Boyz, and The Geto Boys’ offshoot-slash-parody group Too Much Trouble, who often invoked the mantra *Fifth Ward Hard* as an ad-lib in hooks and

verse backgrounds. “The Fifth Ward don’t produce no mothaf*ckin’ nerds,” I recall, was an ad-lib in a Willie D song about the neighborhood (the song was simply titled “5th Ward”). I always thought it sounded a bit out-of-place but it took becoming a Houstonian and Fifth Ward enthusiast to recognize its implicit taunt toward the Third Ward, a Jewish-turned-African American community post World War II that would quickly become the artistic and intellectual hub of black Houston. The brute reputation of this neighborhood and the bravado it seemed to inspire played an undeniably formative role in shaping my initial orientations to the neighborhood and in cultivating my interest in studying conceptions of individualism within it.

Though my views on this particular community were once upon a time a product of hearsay and rap music, the fieldwork was hardly my first foray into a high-poverty, ill-reputed urban neighborhood; while I harbored some misconceptions about the Fifth Ward based on my experiences in other similar communities, I knew that I would not be living out a rap video. In every year since my junior year of college, I’ve had some form of official responsibility or obligation in “the ‘hood.” My work in social services as a counselor for individuals with mental illness frequently placed me on the west and south sides of Chicago and I had previously served as a volunteer with various homeless shelters and homelessness prevention organizations throughout Chicago and in Washington, D.C. In Baton Rouge, I got my workouts playing pick-up basketball with local teens on Myrtle Ave., on a court underneath I-10 in a low-income black neighborhood. As a social services counselor, I befriended a client who came to Chicago from Heidelberg, MS in 1965 in what historians now refer to as “second wave” south-to-north, rural-to-urban black migration. With an afflicted mind, pancreas, and kidney but a heart guarded by Jesus himself, Margaree taught – and still teaches – me about the black Southern Baptist Church, soul food (not just *southern* food), Chicago’s west side housing projects, and much of what I

know about the blues and funk. I have spent every Christmas Day since 2009 with Margaree at her sister Lorine's house and countless other days in her nursing home, in hospitals, at movies, restaurants, or just driving around the south side, talking and listening to music. Had I not grown so close to her, I probably would have focused my graduate studies on substance abuse or political sociology and not urban poverty.

Though I come from a solidly middle class white family - my brother and I were raised in a two-parent household with an accountant father and a clerical assistant mother in a one-story, three-bedroom, two-bathroom home – several characteristics of my background and upbringing placed me, in some respects, in a position more analogous to my research participants in the Fifth Ward than to professional researchers in academic settings. Having grown up around alcoholism and alcohol abuse, I was familiar with the hardships of addiction, recovery, sobriety, and the attendant family disruption – issues that affect all communities but tend to be conceived in less private and moralistic fashions (and more likely to be acknowledged as community-wide problems) in low-income communities of color like the Fifth Ward (Kolbe 1986; Freeman 1993; Freeman 2001). Additionally, while I always had good grades in school, I never attended any elite or highly selective institutions. Working hard, treating others respectfully, and having faith in God were instilled in me as being more instrumental to success than specific institutional affiliations or educational credentials. I attended a community college after high school and despite a piercing and unceasing fascination with politics, public affairs, and culture, I have never thought of myself as “an academic” or even academically gifted. My dad, who obtained his accounting degree via night school after working in a factory and in food service, taught me to appreciate sports and good food. My mom, who did not attend college and (rightfully) finds her work in Alcoholics Anonymous to be more of a calling than her job as an office assistant,

taught me to appreciate music and stylish clothes. To this day, I listen to FM radio in the car and could not tell you how to find NPR. Moreover, I prefer concerts over coffee houses; I regularly attend church (not exactly a common commitment among academics) – and an AME church in the Fifth Ward at that; a majority of my friends and social contacts since adolescence have been racial and ethnic minorities; and I am rarely attracted to and generally do not look to date white women.

What exactly this all means, beyond providing a glimpse of my own orientations to minority-populated low-income urban neighborhoods, is difficult for me to discern. I am often bemused by discussions of *entre'* in ethnographic research on urban poverty that go to great lengths making the point that the marginalized communities where the fieldwork occurred are not *that* bad and are inhabited by regular people with more or less ordinary daily routines. Many of these discussions include a description of the process or realization wherein the researcher comes to see him / her self as comfortable or safe. While I recognize that these discussions may contribute to theoretical framing (particularly if the researcher's analysis rejects claims about cultural deficiency or some aspect of moral or social separateness) as well as establishing a sense of sympathy among readers for an underserved and misrepresented community, I find the assurances of comfort and safety to be rather irrelevant to the aims and purposes of ethnographic research. While minimizing the potential risks and ensuring confidentiality *among participants* rightfully assumes high priority, the comfort and safety of the researcher – though of course desirable – are not requisite elements for producing sound research.

Beyond this, qualitative researchers generally assume that their research settings are not homogenous, fixed, or all-encompassing social contexts, so to declare the setting to be free of danger or less volatile than publicized seems, to me, to superimpose a characterization that might

be refuted or qualified by those with other experiences or frames of reference. In retrospect, I could not have been treated any better than I was treated by the people of the Fifth Ward; I was not subjected to any harassment, violence, or threats thereof. At the same time, however, I was male, not yet 30, not married, with no children, and I did not live in the community, which meant that I could decide to come or go and leave or stay pretty much whenever I wanted. As a result, I can expect that the fights, the brandished guns, the snorted lines of coke, the prostitutes strolling Liberty Rd., and the inebriation that I witnessed, even if only occasionally, could be interpreted as a greater indication of peril (and source of fear) by those occupying different social locations or in different stages of life than myself.

Another point to be raised about non-native researchers' orientations to the setting involves the social dissimilarity between the researcher and subjects. No matter what my previous experiences in poor, minority-populated neighborhoods consisted of, and no matter what my upbringing looked like or what my musical or lifestyle tastes were or how comfortable I may have felt, I was still a suburban-raised white guy interacting with – and at times interrogating – black and Hispanic people about topics that could have easily eluded, affronted, or humiliated their status as a resident of the poorest neighborhood in Houston (“Median Household Income: City of Houston by Super Neighborhoods” 2013). Discussions about what makes one successful or why the Fifth Ward has remained disadvantaged relative to other communities, for instance, are not exactly mild or innocuous points of conversation among individuals of disparate backgrounds. Of course, these kinds of conversations did not take place until after I had established considerable rapport with participants but even the act of introducing

· I draw attention to my status as a male here because I was largely insulated from sexual harassment, an issue that several female participants and one intern at a local nonprofit organization expressed varying degrees of victimization and anguish with.

a research project, soliciting participation, and eventually seeking informed consent can be a cause for reticence or suspicion on the part of community members. Beyond the obvious questions of “Who is this guy?”, “What does he want?”, and “Is he really going to do what he says he is?”, the fact that I had time to visit the projects, barber shops, record stores, and bus stops in the name of “research” - in a community where most adults earn a living through day labor, construction, and low-wage service industry work (see the chapter titled “Just Working”) - likely drew greater attention to our dissimilarities in occupation and social class.

My first, my most instinctive, and probably my best recourse against this dissimilarity was just to “be there” – and be there a lot – to offer the chance for residents to get to know me. In my first week with the CDC, I was sent to a Houston Housing Authority event celebrating the demolition of the final standing building of the Kelly Court Housing Projects; just north of what used to be the Kelly Court site sits Kelly Village, a renovated edition of its predecessor that, with 333-units and 36 buildings, is the second largest Housing Authority development, trailing only Cuney Homes in the Third Ward. Mayor Annise Parker spoke about making Houston’s economic growth and sweeping residential development beneficial for the city’s most vulnerable residents and Housing Authority officials outlined plans to install new playground equipment, exercise stations, and walking trails on the soon-to-be vacant land (As of March, 2015 none of these amenities were in place yet). I stood – a little sweaty from the 100-plus heat index – beside a black woman fanning herself down and becoming increasingly fidgety throughout the speeches. “Heard they were going to knock this thing down,” she said. Not certain whether she was telling me, asking me, or even talking to me at all, I responded, “That’s why everyone’s here, I believe.” After a little small talk – about the heat, the media presence, and the hilarity of city officials sporting hardhats to apparently protect themselves from unscrupulous reporters and

hazardous camera equipment – I told her that I had just started working with FWCRC and that I was looking to get to know local residents. I began telling her about premise of what I was seeking to do but Stacy was the one better primed for talking; “I’ve got a story, you better believe that! Most everybody out here has one, but you’ve got to talk to ‘em,.” She gave me her phone number, which I entered into my phone, and told me to come by. Two days later, I found myself in what would become a familiar position: in the apartment of a Fifth Ward resident with the intention of conducting an interview but instead drawn in as an active participant in conversation, contemplations, and decisions ranging from what to watch on TV to how to put up with a thankless job and how to handle neighbors and relatives that seem to take more than they give. These “visits,” as I came to call them, occurred on at least a bi-weekly basis (or more frequently for some participants), were often unannounced (or precipitated by a “Hey, I’m in the area” phone call only minutes before my arrival), and frequently involved food (either I would bring PoBoys, donuts, chicken, or fish or participants would cook for me).

Almost all of the participants who came to be involved in this project were connected, in one form or another, to at least one of the following four networks and / or settings. (1) Kelly Village, the Houston Housing Authority site referenced above, was my first point of entry for gaining access to Fifth Ward residents. Stacy introduced me to two other lease-holding adults at this sprawling, visually-redundant complex tucked in the pocket created by I-10 and US-59 but, as anyone familiar with *the ‘jects* can corroborate, no one ever truly lives in solitude or anonymity. The density of the apartments and the resulting physical proximity, material needs that demand reciprocity among residents, service needs that often demand collaborative coordination of transportation schedules (e.g., groceries, doctor appointments, social security matters), and the high volume of people who end up “staying at” the apartments intermittently –

whose names are not on a lease nor a list of residents covered by the lease – all mean that my fieldwork with just three official lease-holders yielded over 20 individuals for whom I kept notes on (because they were either frequently present or a regular topic of discussion).

Aside from the contacts afforded by Stacy, I grew acquainted with additional Kelly Village residents via food drives from the CDC and the young adult after-school program (see below). (2) A privately-owned, low-income housing complex for seniors (55 and older) supplied not only some of my most eager participants, but also some of the most deeply-rooted and historically-knowledgeable; with only a couple exceptions (a Hurricane Katrina evacuee and a New Jersey transplant), my contacts in this facility had grown up in the Fifth Ward or elsewhere in northeast Houston. I came to know the property manager from a contact at the CDC and I was permitted to come, go, and hang around as I pleased. (3) An after-school, dual-objective (ministry and scholastic achievement) program for local middle and high school students: Here, I served as a counselor throughout the '13-'14 academic year and remained tied to the program, though just as a visitor and not in any formal capacity, over the summer of 2014 and the following school year. The “Research Methods” section in the chapter titled “Coming Up or Coming to Grips?” offers a more detailed account of this program’s attendees and my interactions with them. (4) The CDC placed me in contact with a number of stakeholders and private citizens who contributed to this research by talking to me about the topic, agreeing to be interviewed, or – most typically – by putting me in touch with the kinds of people I was looking for at the time. These stakeholders included ministers, a teacher, and numerous nonprofit

· Though I have long since given up on achieving any sort of statistical representativeness, I endeavored throughout my fieldwork to maximize the range of individuals subsumed under the broad category of “Fifth Ward resident.” I sought to incorporate individuals of diverse social locations and (presumably) contrasting outlooks and, at a time when many of my contacts were

service providers – one of whom, a partner at a staffing agency, introduced me to three Hispanic teens on juvenile probation and enrolled in a case management program to teach job skills and enhance their employability. Participant observation with these teens, usually at their work sites, became every bit as fun for me as it was valuable to my fieldwork.

I would love to attribute the access I was able to achieve under this “being there” approach to sheer charm, charisma, and good will, but a number of factors beyond personal attributes and motivations facilitated my data collection. For one, I was working alone and had no prior relationships or contacts within the community. True to the popularized notion of individualism as an exercise in intrepid isolation, I had no collaborators in this project and no emotional, economic, or career-related investment other than my own. Though residents such as Stacy, ministry leaders and service providers, and my coworkers at FWCRC would eventually point me in the direction of other potential participants, my repeated presence in the community was for months my sole source of access. Secondly, the staff at FWCRC was understanding of my research interests and granted me much appreciated discretion over my use of time. They found it worthwhile for me to acclimate myself to the community and thus my frequent departures from the office went unquestioned and unimpeded.

Lastly, I introduced an IRB-approved project description and informed consent form to all participants that displayed - quite prominently - my affiliations with both Louisiana State University and FWCRC. Not everyone had heard of both, but most everyone was familiar with at least one. FWCRC had undertaken measures to improve its visibility in recent years and was riding a bit of a hot streak on the heels of its SplashPad (an outdoor, open access, mini

black women, I spoke openly about my desire to access greater numbers of males, young people, and Hispanics.

waterpark), 5th Ward Jam (a public art and performance area), and the Lyons Avenue Renaissance Festival (now an annual event). LSU, which I would venture to call the more recognizable of the two, was popular due to not only football but also the longstanding tradition of creole culture and in-migration from Louisiana in the Fifth Ward. Sparsely settled by Irish Catholics and Eastern European Jews, the first wave of substantial migration to the Fifth Ward occurred from African Americans, mainly from east Texas and western Louisiana, in the wake of the Civil War. Migration from southern Louisiana increased in the early 1900's and peaked following the Great Flood of 1927, when an estimated 10,000 black Louisianans moved westward to Houston, with the Fifth Ward as the most common destination (Pruitt 2013). A section of Fifth Ward settled largely by light-skinned African Americans of French ancestry became known as *Frenchtown* and present day institutions such as Our Mother of Mercy Catholic Church, Frenchey's Chicken, and Burt's Meat Market and Cajun Foods (on the edge of Fifth Ward, officially in neighboring Denver Harbor) reflect the community's history of – and affinity for – transplanted Louisiana residents and culture¹. In all, the summary and consent form supplied much needed legitimacy and institutional backing to what could have been perceived as one man's lonely, ill-conceived, lost-ball-in-tall-grass expedition. As a handyman replied when I gave him the form after telling him about the project: “Oh, so this is like a real, official type thing, I see.”

The informed consent form was signed by all participants who agreed to answer questions from me while being recorded, either via an audio-recording device or my cell phone.

· The area once known as Frenchtown is now highly blighted and has lost its creole identity, thanks in no small part to the construction of the Eastex Freeway in the '50's.

· ¹ The community became home for a small number of displaced New Orleans residents after Hurricane Katrina, though not as many or as controversy-inducing as in southwest Houston or the Greenspoint community in far north Houston (see Henneberger 2008).

Since these semi-structured interviews were but one component of my fieldwork, I frequently confronted ethical questions relating to transparency and the full disclosure of my research intentions. While talking in people's homes and attending parties, barbecues, and community events are great ways to observe behavior and hear opinions (and do so in a wide variety of settings and circumstances), engaging in such activities does not necessarily give the impression of research or data collection before those with whom I am interacting. Even when I introduced myself (or was introduced by someone else) as someone doing research on the Fifth Ward and residents' perspectives on upward mobility and individualism, the ambiguity of the topic and / or the indifference of the listener – or just the sheer passage of time – had an attenuating effect on the staying power of the introduction. For many, including the juvenile probationers whom I visited with at their worksites, I simply became “Will, the guy who works in the office at Lyons and Waco and comes by a lot” – the description of me given by Hector, one of the probationers, to his case manager when she came to the worksite.

Residents would occasionally ask what my research was about and I would of course give them the rundown. If circumstances allowed, I would show them the project description and / or consent form. Discussing the topic of the research prompted some memorable and informative conversations but the forms, when presented, almost invariably dulled the atmosphere of the scene and the flow of conversation, especially among younger individuals. The academic and legalistic language and the blanks for signatures and dates looked like something that, despite my efforts to avoid this in drafting the forms, could be held against someone – perhaps not legally, though surely this could have been a concern for some, but for not upholding the terms of participation. Even the shorter, more direct, and less formal child assent form, issued to all

participants under 18, seemed to give the impression of a homework assignment or school project.

The issue of implicit consent, wherein participants endorse (or express no objections to) the presence of a researcher and are observed in regular, un-manipulated, and independently-initiated discourse / behavior (Herrera 1999; Hammersley and Traianou 2012), might have represented a solution to this conundrum had I not been put off by the covert character the fieldwork would have then assumed. Just as a signed consent form does not signify trust, an endorsed or accepted presence in a social setting does not signify approval for inclusion in academic research. For this reason, I made sure to apprise everyone who is referenced in the following chapters of my fieldwork and desire to complete a doctoral dissertation. Though only those who participated in recorded interviews were asked to give signed consent (to be recorded), everyone I solicited information from was presented with at least the project description and agreed to talk under the promise of confidentiality (which only a handful of people expressed concern about). This practice was abandoned only large public gatherings when (1) behavior / discourse was carried out not in confidence to me but before numerous others, (2) it would not be necessary to disclose individuals' identifying information in written reports, and (3) the dissemination of project descriptions or the initiation of conversations about my research would have violated the norms of the setting.

Synopsis and Chapter Outline

The prospects for upward mobility and the attainment of the American Dream have come into question for all Americans in recent years. Economic inequality, fiscal imbalance, political intransigence, and high unemployment affect all strata of society and threaten to undermine the

conviction that working hard and playing by the rules will bring forth a more prosperous and comfortable future (Meacham 2012). Some insist that the ethos of the American Dream and its prescriptions for mobility are deceptive regardless of sociopolitical climate: it discounts structural constraints and institutional inequalities in favor of a highly individualistic course to success; it de-emphasizes the importance of relationships and mutual dependence upon others; and it obscures the reality that not everyone can simultaneously achieve desirable outcomes – winners cannot exist without losers and the top of a status hierarchy cannot be such without a bottom or a middle (Hochschild 1995; Bellah et al. 2008; Barlow 2013).

For the urban poor, the validity of this ethos is all the more dubious. Historical patterns of low achievement, allegations of cultural backwardness, structural inequality, and the cumulative effects of social isolation and concentrated poverty have all been cited as detrimental forces in overcoming a disadvantaged background. Additionally, a lack of exposure to the world beyond the ghetto and difficulty appreciating the magnitude of one's disadvantage have been said to render the upwardly mobile aspirations of these individuals ill-conceived and uninformed. Yet and still, as exemplified in numerous poverty studies (Goodwin 1972; Hochschild 1995; Newman 1999; Young 2004; Smith 2007; Nunnally and Carter 2011) and witnessed in my own relationships in the Fifth Ward, poor residents in poor communities often believe that their own hard work and their own good character – and these attributes alone – are the keys to harnessing a better lot in life.

The content of this dissertation centers upon the ideas of individualism and upward mobility. More precisely, it is an investigation into how individuals occupying compromised socioeconomic positions in a historically impoverished neighborhood understand and pursue upward mobility under the impression that one's efforts can surmount trying circumstances, all

the while incurring several (and severe) disaffirmations of this outlook. Is this an outlook held together by only foolish pride and a lack of experience beyond the ghetto? Is this outlook validated or discouraged within institutions widely regarded to propel mobility and confer middle class status (e.g., the workforce)? For residents struggling to latch on to the proverbial mobility ladder – outside of the labor force or with minimal prospects for financial security or self-sufficiency – how is the ethos of individualism expressed to account for their relatively vulnerable and unpromising position? This dissertation submits that this moral commitment to the individualistic realization of the American Dream is not an impractical reach for the stars nor a faint grasp at some conscience-soothing hope. Rather, the individualism espoused by many of these residents is reflective of alertness to – and persistent confrontations with – the perils and pitfalls of their community. Unwilling to contribute to or become “caught up” in the narrative of community and cultural dysfunction, residents invoke their individuality as both a means to future prosperity and a differentiating, identity-shaping defense from a maligned public environment.

The title of this dissertation comes from the 1991 song “Mind Playing Tricks on Me” by the Geto Boys and is a nod to the community and city in which this project is based. Arguably the most formative song and act from Houston’s storied rap scene, paranoia and confusion – driven by an inability to discern what is real from what is imagined – reek throughout. Dubbed “a classic of cracked ghetto armor” by *Rolling Stone* in proclaiming it the fifth greatest hip-hop song of all time (2012), the song features Scarface and Fifth Ward natives Willie D and Bushwick Bill agonizing brushes with death, violence, and alienation in a string of unrelated circumstances. Though each comes to realize that their fears are illusions, the imminence of the ill fates that consume their consciousness is nonetheless hard to shake because of their

proclivities for self-destructive behavior and emotional evasiveness. They are always on the run from something and, in each of the four verses, it turns out to be their own thoughts – and more specifically, their orientations to their particular circumstances. In this research, I take on the illusory and deceptive qualities of individualism in the pursuit of upward mobility. As referenced in the sub-title, I wanted to know how the various interpretations and rationales of individualism structure the belief in the self-determination of status, as purported in the ethos of the American Dream and its ideology of achievement. Does the pursuit of upward mobility from an impoverished background require some tricks of the mind, such as assuming an inviolable, protective stance against prevailing misfortune and / or tuning out voices of doubt or evidence of an unequal playing field? The following chapters are united by my efforts to better inform these inquiries and, together, they apply far greater detail and theoretical underpinning to the concept of individualism than other prominent works of urban poverty scholarship.

The first chapter, “Coming Up or Coming to Grips?”, grants further attention to the cultural deficiency paradigm and illustrates its continued resonance in discussions of the cultural contexts of the urban poor. Here, with young Fifth Warders from a wide variety of personal backgrounds, I present views on what is necessary to achieve success and how to avoid or overcome the setbacks commonly on display among their Fifth Ward peers. Hard work, higher education, and staying out of trouble are each championed as crucial toward realizing a better future, but the young adults conceive these means to success in individualistic terms – with some going as far to suggest that the assistance (or lack thereof) of parents, family members, teachers, and elders cannot much affect life outcomes; effort, making good choices, and perseverance are what it all boils down to. As a result, many internalize their experiences with failure and insist that they must work even harder and smarter to avoid recurrences of the same fate. The chapter

does not lend much support to the excuse-making and warped sense of obligation and personal responsibility as put forth by the cultural deficiency paradigm, but calls for a new approach to aspired social mobility that looks further than naïve hopefulness in accounting for these declarations of self-determination.

The second chapter, “Just Working,” looks at an older group of Fifth Warders who are all in the workforce in low paying, low prestige jobs. Whereas the first chapter features individuals with much of their lives still before them and conventional means to mobility to still largely accessible, the workers in this second chapter face intensified familial and financial pressures while also confronting the stigma of “low-skilled” work and the likelihood that their standing in life is settled. Despite the power that is given to workforce participation as a remedy for concentrated poverty (for communities) and stifled mobility (for individuals), the workers in this chapter frequently voice hopes for a more financially secure and personally fulfilling future that are not sustained by their places in the workforce or the anticipated gains of their jobs, which many feel are undependable and not conducive to garnering others’ respect. Their affirmations of individualism – by not depending on anyone, persevering through troubled pasts, and finding little intrinsic value in the tasks of their work – are in many ways protective against financial instability and a conflicted social standing within the local community. Rather than resorting to bitterness, defiance, or mistrust, however, many workers appraise this social standing with modesty and self-consciousness, as if to acknowledge the significance of structurally-inscribed disadvantages (e.g., low pay and poor benefits) while maintaining firm beliefs in their own self-determination – even if all they have to show for this is an upright value system and the ability to set positive examples to others.

The final chapter, “That ‘Every Man For Himself’ Thing,” brings into focus the rationality of the belief in self-determination that surfaces throughout the first two chapters. Less concerned with specific populations, roles, or social locations than the first two chapters, this chapter asks why so many Fifth Ward natives hinge their futures on sheer gumption – particularly when the outlets to harness it may be inadequate, the examples of its limitations are plentiful, and when it appears so conducive to disappointment and perceptions of failure. I consider the conception of individualism over decades of urban poverty scholarship and also, in anecdotal terms, in popular culture. Then, drawing from my fieldwork, I introduce three rationales for individualism as a way to showcase its plurality and depth beyond the protective rationale which predominates the extant literature. Though *protective* individualism is not a mirage and indeed carries explanatory power in relation to such social problems as gun violence and overly competitive, isolated self-concepts that breed volatile relationships, it is not a comprehensive or complete conception of how Fifth Ward residents understand the dignity, propensities, and agency of the human person. The rationales (and manifestations) of *expressive* individualism offer a glimpse into why Fifth Warders find it important to open-up the self to acquire attributes and experiences that prepare one for success and transcend the vestiges of community and cultural dysfunction. *Meritocratic* individualism, first introduced in “Coming Up or Coming to Grips?”, is then described as a source of recognition and sense-making – as a way to locate and explain one’s position in a highly stratified society and strategize for the future in light of inequality and past hardships.

The dissertation closes with a section adventurously titled “Concluding Considerations on Urban Poverty and Self-Determination,” where I review key findings and consider their implications in light of contemporary developments that seem to be re-heating the community

and cultural dysfunction ascribed to low-income, minority urban neighborhoods. In thinking about the relevance of this research in the years to come, I discuss the heightened awareness of racial inequality (as a result of high-profile cases involving deadly force from police officers) and the contested status of America's soon-to-be majority group, Hispanics. Both issues, I believe, cast ominous clouds over the viability of social mobility for residents of urban communities and threaten the exercise of our – meaning all Americans' – better virtues on individualism and meritocratic achievement.

Taken together, I concur with many before me that individualism hedges against poverty, bad fortune, and uncertainty to permit the pursuit and participation in the ethos of the American Dream – no matter how illusory or deceptive this dream may be. I do not concur, however, that this pursuit and participation is sustained, among the urban poor, via ignorant or warped understandings of the self in relation to its social location. Such a view is supported under the framework of social isolation and comes to rise in discussions about narrow cultural repertoires and ghetto survivalism (Kusserow 2004; Jones 2010), but I find it untenable; not simply because it belies my experiences with Fifth Ward residents who had no choice but to weigh constraint alongside aspiration, but because it submits a one-dimensional and ultimately dehumanizing portrait of the individualism – and thus the humanity – of people and communities too hastily, and hazardously, written off as wayward, as problems, and as dysfunctional. By appreciating the manners by which individuals assess themselves, their circumstances, and their prospects for improvement – beyond their short-term, knee-jerk defenses against hardship – we move closer to unfastening the assumptions and ascriptions that preclude meaningful action in the realms of poverty, culture, and inequality.

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Coming Up or Coming to Grips? Perspectives on Upward Mobility, the American Dream, and Meritocratic Individualism from Young Residents of Houston's Fifth Ward

Abstract

The ethos of the American Dream is such that an individual's efforts, abilities, and responsible living can spur a more prosperous economic future. For the urban poor, this ethos can assume a precarious tenor. If rejected, it may vindicate the defeatism and fatalism alleged by cultural deficiency frameworks. If accepted, it may corroborate claims that social isolation leaves the poor naïve to the extent of their disadvantage and the weight of the barriers to mobility. Through participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork with young residents of a high-poverty urban community, I probe the participants' assessments of the ambiguities and contradictions of the American Dream. Results indicate that faith in meritocratic individualism is sustained in prescriptive terms related to future success as well as in remedial terms that offer redemption from self-blame and internalized failure. I interpret these results in light of prevailing frameworks on the cultural contexts of urban poverty.

Introduction

In February of 2014, President Barack Obama outlined his administration's "My Brother's Keeper" initiative aimed at improving the prospects of young minorities through reforms in criminal justice, school discipline, promoting parental engagement, and early-childhood development. His speech invoked the promise of the American Dream alongside a directive for diligence and self-reliance among those who have thus far found it elusive. If America stands for anything, the President declared, it stands for "the idea of opportunity for everybody. The notion that no matter who you are or where you came from, or the

circumstances into which you are born, if you work hard, if you take responsibility, then you can make it in this country” (“Remarks by the President on ‘My Brother’s Keeper’ Initiative” 2014).

Though dismissed as pandering and “government-sponsored discrimination” by the far Right (Clegg 2014), the speech championed the long-held conservative principle that culture drives economic outcomes; the “culture of poverty” - marked by low aspirations, immediate gratification, defeatism, and excuse-making – hinders upward mobility and undermines investments in the economic well-being of traditionally-disadvantaged groups and communities. The President, extolling responsibility eight different times in the speech, urged for “no excuses” and called on young men of color to set goals, strive tenaciously to achieve them, and “reject the cynicism that says the circumstances of your birth or society's lingering injustices necessarily define you and your future” (“Remarks by The President...” 2014).

In this article, I address how a diverse group of young residents in Houston’s long-marginalized, multi-ethnic (mainly black and Hispanic) Fifth Ward community interpret the American Dream ethos. Social isolation theory instructs that the cultural context of poor urban communities is framed by restricted access to mobility-producing institutions (Bourgois 1995; Wilson 1996; Anderson 1999; Young 2004). Amid such constraints, is the belief in meritocratic individualism (i.e., upward mobility can be achieved through one’s hard work, skill, and responsible living) a matter of quixotic hopefulness for those with little else to hinge their fates on? Is this belief neutralized, as the “culture of poverty” suggests, by confrontations with disadvantaged community conditions and impeded pursuits of mobility? Drawing from participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork with 36 local teens and young adults, I present findings from an ongoing study suggesting that views of mobility and plans to “come up” among economically disadvantaged young people should be understood not via defeatist cultural

adaptations or naïve hopefulness, but rather through a “doubled down” commitment to meritocratic individualism. Such a commitment – which involves calculated prescriptions for future success as well as reconciliations of pressing self-blame and internalized failure – serves to mediate the ambiguity and contradictions of the American Dream ethos.

The Culture of Poverty: Deficient, Defeated, and Resistant

Critiquing the ideas behind the “culture of poverty” is hardly a new enterprise for social science. Nonetheless, the topic of culture has acquired renewed salience within discourse about urban poverty (Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010; Cohen 2010). In contemporary discussions of the “taker class,” aversions to work among the jobless, and the prevalence and possible abuse of food stamps, notions of cultural deficiency holding that the values and lifestyles of the poor are different from those of the broader society (and play a causative role in economic marginalization) continue to resonate despite the profusion of counter-claims and qualifications from urban research (Hannerz 1969; MacLeod 1987; Wilson 1996; Newman 2006).

The cultural deficiency framework originates from what anthropologist Oscar Lewis termed the “culture of poverty” (1959). Though Lewis saw the rigid class stratification of capitalist economies – not value systems or moral orientations - as poverty’s principal cause, his analytic framework was concerned much more with social psychology and the cultivation of personality than with the historical, political, and economic contexts that framed the adaptations of the Latin American families he observed (Valentine 1968; Hannerz 1969). As a result, the most enduring contribution of Lewis’ work was the idea that poverty engenders future poverty by way of the inter-generational transmission of cultural traits (e.g., immediate gratification, low

future aspirations, and indifference toward dependence) that emerge from constrained opportunities for upward mobility.

Throughout the remainder of the twentieth century, amid growing concern over joblessness, crime, and welfare dependence in minority communities, cultural deficiency persisted as an explanation for entrenched urban poverty. Political scientist Lawrence Mead argued that the urban underclass had been permitted to live without the social obligation of regular work (1985). As such, the give-and-take demands of citizenship had been decidedly offset in favor of “taking” – a sentiment echoed, now infamously, by Mitt Romney in the 2012 campaign for President. Defeatism and resistance, Mead asserted (1992), were common dispositions in the subculture of the underclass, as work was understood as being too demanding (in comparison to receiving public aid) and too undignified. Charles Murray (1984), in his assessment of anti-poverty policy and the outcomes of The Great Society programs, claims that these programs encouraged, and in many cases made profitable, the detrimental behaviors and values of the urban poor. Affirming that “the culture of the ghetto has its own validity” because of its “rational appreciation of the rules of the game” (pp. 220-222), Murray advocates for meritocracy, wherein all Americans are held to play by the same rules and are compelled to take responsibility over their station in life. This American “ideal” of making it as far as one can on one’s merit, Murray contends, has lapsed among the urban poor as social institutions have undermined the worth, power, and efficacy of the individual (p. 233).

Social Isolation and New Takes on Culture

The extensive body of literature that challenges the cultural deficiency paradigm does so by demonstrating a structural (read as “non-cultural”) root for persisting class immobility and,

more recently, by conceiving culture as a means for weighing possible actions (rather than an all-determining motive) (Lamont and Small 2008; Young 2004; Small 2004). The theoretical framework suggesting a structural root for the cultural context of poor urban communities centers upon the concept of social isolation. Described as the lack of contact or sustained interaction with institutions and individuals representing “mainstream” society (Wilson 1987: 60), social isolation is understood to foster “ghetto-specific” (Wilson 1987: 137) and “oppositional” (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Anderson 1999) values, which exacerbate economic marginalization and depress already compromised prospects for upward mobility. In ethnographic research on topics of drugs and violence (Bourgois 1995; Black 2009), the underground economy (Venkatesh 2006), and the sexual mores of poor minority youths (Anderson 1989; LeBlanc 2004), social isolation is shown to represent a barrier in the way of finding employment, entering advantageous social networks, and organizing daily routines and interpersonal relationships.

While the social isolation framework attests vividly to the structural dimensions of culture through its focus on spatial inequality and depleted social networks, its insight toward individuals’ assessments of their agency, their prospects for the future, and their capacity for realizing aspirations is less explicit. Given the framework’s emphasis on subcultural value systems and social distance from mainstream society, several scholars have cautioned that social isolation can be applied to deduce values and aspirations from observed behavior, assuming that each is the product of a dominant deviant subculture as in the cultural deficiency paradigm (Gans 1991; Wacquant 2002; Small 2004; Harding 2010). This concern, in conjunction with the difficulties of distinguishing structure from culture (Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010) and the possibility that aspirations and expectations are shaped by messages that transcend local,

supposedly culturally-isolated contexts (e.g., through education, exposure to media, work force experiences, etc.) (MacLeod 1987; Newman 1999; Harding 2010), has given way to new considerations about culture within the social isolation framework. Taking cue from prominent cultural sociologists such as Paul DiMaggio, Ann Swidler, and Jason Kaufman, it is now increasingly common for urban poverty researchers to conceive culture as a tool or resource for making sense of a given social location – not as a set of fixed, unanimously endorsed, and internally consistent values that are specific to it (Dohan 2003; Hays 2003; Small 2004; Young 2004; Harding 2010). With this article’s interest in probing what young Fifth Ward residents deem possible from their respective social locations and how they assess their capacity to realize these possibilities, I now discuss the American Dream ethos and meritocratic individualism in reference to some of these considerations.

The American Dream Ethos

The American Dream ethos can be seen as an encapsulation of the tenet that *if you work hard and play by the rules, you will succeed as far as your abilities will allow* (Hochschild 1995). Connoting values of industriousness, honesty and adherence to law, and just rewards for noble and pragmatic efforts, this ethos remains central to discussions of upward mobility in America and has been recognized as such by scholars of diverse ideological persuasions (Brooks 2003; Smith 2007; Murray 2012). Polling data from recent years indicates that while Americans are increasingly perturbed by economic inequality and feel that “getting ahead” will be more difficult than ever before, “hard work” and “responsibility” remain cherished values seen as integral to success – so much so that a lack or decline of these values are reported as a leading threat to the future of the American Dream (“Executive Summary of Results – 2011 American

Dream Survey” 2011; Lightman 2014). While this ethos should not be seen as a representation or substitute for any prevailing, predominant, or persisting cultural ethos of the middle class or non-marginalized groups, it resonates with notions of Protestant work ethic, American exceptionalism, and meritocratic individualism (Meacham 2012). For all of these reasons, the ethos of the American Dream constitutes a values-specific, prescriptive model for upward mobility that carries utility for analyzing aspirations and expectations for future achievement.

Despite evidence that young residents of poor neighborhoods accept these meritocratic, “success from hard work” precepts (Hochschild 1995; Newman 1999; Hays 2003; Black 2009), questions linger as to the meaning and significance of this acceptance. Hochschild (1995), citing survey data to confirm poor African Americans’ belief in (and favorable orientations toward) the American Dream, concedes that this belief can be one of acquiescence or “half-hearted endorsement” (p. 174). The incentives for buying in to the American Dream – which include the promise of success in environments otherwise replete with examples of failure and the neutralization (even if only psychological) of stark inequality and disadvantage – influence aspirations (which tend to be high as whites’) but do not heighten occupational expectations or provide practical instructions for how to pursue success (Hochschild 1995). Horowitz’s (1983) fieldwork in a Mexican-American community in Chicago illustrates that high regard for the American Dream ethos does not replace or supersede the desire for maintaining Chicano cultural identity; the two are not incompatible but the very meaning of the American Dream is cultivated in perpetual negotiation with cultural experiences. Alford Young (2004), in a study on social isolation and the outlooks of low-income black males, argues that restricted contact with mobility-producing institutions, job networks, and role models engenders limited self-awareness and naïve or misinformed beliefs about upward mobility. Together, these works remind that

acceptance or acquiescence to the American Dream ethos should be viewed with consideration for the cultural identities, incentives, and structural locations that may render it appealing.

The analysis presented in this article is thereby an attempt to situate the ethos of the American Dream within the purview of social isolation theory, the cultural deficiency paradigm, and the views of young Fifth Ward residents on what is frequently called “the come up.” In street parlance, “the come up” denotes a process of improving one’s standing above that of an impoverished, disadvantaged, and subservient background, often through gradual and assiduous meansⁱ. “The come up,” when pursued or achieved, is much akin to the ethos of the American Dream. Not only does each offer a prescriptive albeit vague conception of upward mobility, but each is exceedingly individualistic in character, as the individual’s effort, virtue, and ability are seen as instrumental to success, independent of external hardships or constraints. Accordingly, when the President pleads for hard work, responsibility, and the rejection of excuses, is this an empty prescription for individuals who have seldom witnessed the remunerative substantiation of these values? When endorsed, is the American Dream’s promise of prosperity so enticing that the commitment to its values signifies not a renunciation of cultural deficiency so much as a faint hope that present circumstances might one day improve? In deliberating upon these questions, I intend to provide insight as to how young residents of a high-poverty community make sense of seemingly contradictory experiences regarding upward mobility and how these experiences validate or discourage the belief in meritocratic individualism.

Research Methods

Setting and Participants

My analysis is drawn from an ongoing ethnographic study on upward mobility and individualism in the greater Fifth Ward community of Houston, TX. Located just northeast of downtown Houston, the Fifth Ward is a proud but much maligned community that struggles with a reputation as the “most vicious corner of Texas” (West 1979) and, more popularly, the “Bloody Fifth.” Poverty rates approach or exceed 50% in each of the community’s census tracts and the community’s median household income of \$20,326 is the lowest of all 88 Super Neighborhoodsⁱⁱ (“Median Household Income: City of Houston by Super Neighborhoods” 2013). Historically an African American community, the Fifth Ward’s racial/ethnic demographic profile is now almost evenly split; blacks, as of 2012, comprise 52% of the community’s nearly 20,000 residents while Hispanics comprise 44% (“Race/Ethnicity: City of Houston by Super Neighborhoods” 2012).

Within this community, I acquired access to this study’s participants in three ways: (1) participant observation as a counselor in a three-nights-a-week after-school program affiliated with a Baptist church, (2) fieldwork with three 16-year-old (when I first met them) Hispanic male acquaintances under the supervision of the juvenile justice system for offenses ranging from theft to assault, and (3) a judgmental sample of 7 young people who were each facing decisions about work, school, and family commitments while not receiving formal messages about achievement, responsibility, and self-reliance like the other participants. In total, the data analyzed in this article involves 36 participants (ages 11 to 26; with 21 males and 15 females; 27 blacks and 9 Hispanics, two of which also identified as black) over a period of 14 months of fieldwork (beginning in June of 2013) and 9 months of participant observation at the after-school program throughout the ’13-’14 academic year.

The after-school program where I was a counselor afforded access to 26 of the 36 participants. Held in the conferencing room of a Baptist church, the program met three nights a week with no admissions criteria and non-mandatory attendance. On any given night, the program played host to individuals with juvenile conviction records, young children, and who were teetering with dropout alongside those who were enrolled in pre-AP courses, had part-time jobs, and were beginning to visit colleges. Patterns of attendance varied considerably, as some attendees were present at almost every meeting, some only stopped in between one and five times all year, and some alternated between spells of extended absence and relatively consistent attendance. Attendees ranged in age from 11 to 18 but a large majority were seventh-to-tenth graders (13-16 years old). The program kept no official record of race and ethnicity but participants were predominantly African American; of the 26 in this studyⁱⁱⁱ, 5 reported Hispanic ethnicity in conversations or interviews. The attendees came to be involved in the program often through friends in the neighborhood (about one-fourth were from a nearby public housing complex) and were overwhelmingly from female-headed households. Parental/guardian occupations included restaurant cooks, nursing assistants, and airport security officials, among many others. Several attendees, though a minority, acknowledged having a household-head that was out of the workforce.

The stated mission of the program was that of *producing Christian, college-bound leaders*. The program's director described his goal for the program as "getting the kids to understand that with a relationship with God, hard work, planning, and making good choices, they can do whatever they set out to. I want to eliminate the doubt about all of this that surrounds so many of them." Two nights per week were devoted to scholastic development (e.g., tutoring, group projects, and performing and visual arts) and one emphasized spiritual

development (e.g., Bible lessons, prayer groups, and Christian-living discussions). A couple of the attendees justified their involvement in the program for its benefit to their college and job applications; others said that they attended to “chill,” “get away from my Mom,” or be served dinner. Due to the program’s mission and formal (and favorable) messages about scholastic achievement and college attendance, attendees in this program received direct exposure to the “achievement ideology” - the idea that social status is attained and not inherited or overdetermined by structural constraints (MacLeod 1987) - underlying the meritocratic character of the American Dream. As these participants absorbed, discussed, questioned, and invested in this ideology, I became privy to the logic that was invoked to reconcile the American Dream’s prescriptions and promises with their modest socioeconomic standings.

For the 10 participants not affiliated with the after-school program, exposure to the achievement ideology and the American Dream ethos was less coordinated. The 3 juvenile offenders (each age 16, 2 Salvadoran Americans and 1 Mexican American) met in a workforce development initiative of their case management agency, but the objective of this program was to provide marketable, service-industry work experience. Their participation in this initiative was in the role of workers performing landscaping, gardening, and community beautification services under the supervisions of a site manager (who I thank for the access). I built relationships with these participants by visiting their work sites, going for walks, having lunch, and relaying messages to and from the site manager (who, according to the boys, trusted me more than them).

The other seven participants were accessed via adult contacts in two low-income housing complexes and the referral of a youth director of a local Methodist church. Each of these individuals - ages 16 (female), 17 (female), 17 (female), 19 (male), 22 (male), 24 (male), and 26 (male) - were first met at various points over the summer of 2013 and are included in this

analysis for their negotiations with work, school, and family commitments that occurred largely in isolation from programmatic or institutional messages about achievement and upward mobility. The 16-year-old female (Kaleena) was determined to go to a four-year university but unsure where to go or how to pay for it; one of the 17-year old females (Arabella) had a one-year-old son, was doubtful about her prospects for finishing high school, and was considering moving to Mexico to be closer to the support of her extended family; the other 17-year-old female (Michelle) had just began her first job. The 19, 22, 24, and 26-year-old male participants consist of a struggling college student (Earvin); a car wash employee enrolled part-time in community college trying to divest himself of prior affiliations with a local gang (Eddie); a retail associate with a young daughter (Wendell); and an unemployed father (Taquan), respectively. Together, these 10 individuals, though hardly insulated from command of the American Dream and its regard for meritocratic individualism, had endured circumstances that could be assumed to foster disillusionment with this ethos and were in many ways living out the complex contemplations of its relevance and validity to their own futures.

Fieldwork, Interviews, and Analysis

With approval from my university to conduct research involving human subjects, I apprised all eventual participants that I was conducting research about the Fifth Ward and residents' perspectives on achievement and upward mobility. Upon receiving consent / assent, data were recorded in the form of field notes and interview transcripts. I kept a running log of notes on all 36 participants - using pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality - that spanned no less than 4 and no more than 14 months, depending on when we were first introduced. These notes were taken both during and immediately after (usually in my office or apartment) fieldwork and

contained descriptions of activities and events (e.g., group discussions in the after-school program, home visits or walks with participants, etc.), paraphrases and direct quotes from field interviews, and inserts intended to remind me of what to follow-up on or bring greater clarity to in future interactions.

Audio-recorded interviews were conducted with 11 participants who I recruited for their distinct experiences and social locations relative to the achievement ideology. These interviewees consisted of 3 after-school program attendees, 1 of the juvenile probationers, and all 7 from judgmental sample described in the previous section. Among those from the after-school program, Eva, a black female high school senior from a low-income apartment complex, was keeping a 3.8 GPA and deciding on a college and major all the while weighing her considerable financial aid needs; Graziél, a black, Honduran-born female freshman was earning A's and B's in school but, with interests in radio and event planning and "getting out of Houston," was rather circumspect about what she called "the usual, boring path" in life; Torren, a high school freshman from a housing project, struggled academically and frequently cut classes and yet exhibited great confidence in his ability to improve his seemingly dwindling prospects. Arturo, from the juvenile probation work program, had accumulated a lengthy and complicated record of arrests, suspensions, and gang affiliations in California prior to moving to Houston two years earlier at age 14.

The audio-recorded interviews, much like the field interviews, focused on participants' accounts of their backgrounds, aspirations, abilities and support sources, and constraining factors – either internal (i.e., personal) or external (structural or situational). Unlike in field interviews, however, the recorded interviews featured direct questions pertaining to the American Dream, the achievement ideology, and meritocracy. The two most frequently asked questions were: "If

you work hard, stay out of trouble, and treat others the right way, how possible is it that you will be successful^{iv}?” and “Why do you think individuals from the Fifth Ward struggle to avoid or escape poverty more so than individuals in other communities^v?” Interviews took place at the participants’ homes / apartments, a meeting room at a nearby community center, restaurants / carry out joints, public parks, and a multi-purpose room at a local church. Parental consent was sought and obtained for all participants under 18 who assented to audio-recorded interviews.

I suspect that my status as a white, middle class, college-educated male shaped my interactions by prompting heightened suspicion (or at least intrigue) as to my trustworthiness, dependability, and ability to sympathize and relate with participants, especially in the early stages of fieldwork. I also suspect that this status was mediated over time by several factors. For one, I was in the Fifth Ward at least 6 days a week due to my work at a local community development corporation, my volunteer and church-related commitments, and my personal relationships with community members. Hector, one of the three 16-year-olds on juvenile probation, once said of my frequent sightings on a principal thoroughfare: “I just swore you lived around here man, because I’ve seen you out around here a bunch of times.” Additionally, my occupational background in settings of urban poverty, my familiarity with such cultural reference points as music, movies, and clothing, and – perhaps most of all - my relationships with parents, siblings, and significant others of many participants all contributed substantially to building trust and rapport.

In analysis, I re-read field notes and transcripts and grew particularly attentive to participants’ descriptions of their backgrounds; their projections of the future and what they saw themselves doing; their language concerning discipline and work ethic; and their orientations to risk and reward, and volition and constraint. I initially coded the texts along each of these

categories – a task that was helpful in organizing the data but contributed little toward informing the driving interest of this research: young Fifth Warders’ beliefs, aspirations, and expectations amid seemingly contradictory messages and experiences involving upward mobility. Likewise, I draw upon narrative analysis to apprehend the negotiation (and awareness) of contradiction within participants’ accounts of their views and experiences (Riessman 1993; Miller 2001). Holding that these accounts are not a participant’s uninhibited, self-determined “answer” to research questions so much as a deliberated and strategic refraction of cultural experiences and sensibilities, narrative analysis can be employed to help elucidate projections of coherent and situationally-acceptable views amid the incoherence that emanates from the “breach between ideal and real, self and society” (Riessman 1993: 3; Miller 2001; Gubrium and Holstein 2001). Applied toward young people attempting to plot out their futures and make sense of a popular, promising, and yet unproven conception of upward mobility, this form of analysis becomes theoretically and empirically instructive.

Findings

The young Fifth Ward residents that I observed appraise and negotiate their prospects for mobility via firm affirmations of their own capacity to create a better future. The qualities that underlie this capacity – persistent effort and smart decisions, most prominently – are not strictly espoused in prescriptive terms as a recipe or guide for future success, but also as a remedy for perceived failure and firsthand encounters with structural constraints. The following subsections outline distinct dimensions of this two-pronged adherence to the American Dream ethos. Together, they show how confidence in meritocratic individualism among young members of a

high-poverty community is sustained by awareness of adverse community conditions and is not as naïve and implausible as previously alleged.

“Getting On”: Asserting individualism in prescriptive terms

Asked why he wanted to attend a particular out-of-state university, Torren responded, “...To get out of the hood. My mom didn’t do it, so I gotta get her out.” A 15-year-old ninth-grader who resides in one of the city’s largest and most infamous housing projects with his mother and stepsister, Torren seldom attended the after-school program more than once or twice a month. His mother receives disability and has not worked in over ten years and his older brother is incarcerated. Though passing all of his classes, he later admitted that he often skips school and that his grades are less than exemplary. His attraction to the out-of-state university is predicated on the school’s successful football team; he does not enjoy, thrive, or even feel comfortable in a school setting (“Everybody is close together all the time – like you’re always being watched,” he confided). College, however, remains Torren’s goal as it signifies to him a level of achievement that has eluded each of his family members and friends. When I asked if he was considering work, technical training, the military, or any other options following high school, he shrugged off the possibility, declaring, “But I will go (to college). That other stuff (i.e., working, technical training, the military), what is that? See, I aint just going to be hanging out, sitting around, broke and doing nothing. I have to get it. I have to get on.”

To “get on” carries several meanings related to success and status elevation. In some contexts, “getting on” is synonymous with advancing to what is supposed to be next in life (e.g., getting a job, going to college, or moving into one’s own place). A high school girl in the after-school program defined the phrase as “being set up in the right way, having what you need to do

well for yourself” while Graziél, a gregarious, 15-year-old, Honduran American expressed her desire to “get on” in regards to being “done with Fifth Ward.” Enervated by her mother’s rigid rules and her classmates’ gossip and immature conduct, Graziél spoke of finishing high school, going to college, and “being free (and) getting to live like I choose to.”

While the quests for stability, autonomy, and personal advancement are hardly unexpected coming from individuals nearing (or in early stages of) adulthood with much of their lives still before them, discussions about “getting on” did not arise solely in projective or aspirational terms relating to the future. Many participants linked “getting on” with pressing, here-and-now priorities that were not always associated with a long-term objective. Torren’s account, after all, was driven by the urgency of avoiding idleness and stagnation (i.e., “hanging out, sitting around, broke and doing nothing”). While his affinity for attending college was rather abstract and negative (i.e., expressed in reference to what he wants to avoid), his endorsement of diligent work ethic and personal initiative was precise, prescriptive, and contextually-inscribed: (from a group discussion in the after-school program) “You have to try and do something for yourself – and go after it with hard work all the time. So many of these people around here must love being broke (laughs). They don’t work; (they’re) lazy as hell - don’t do nothing.” Rudy, a 14-year-old who lives in the same housing project as Torren and attends an alternative school due to past behavioral problems, acknowledged his unpropitious educational prospects but insisted that his efforts will not fail him: “When I’m hungry and put my mind to something, I’m straight.” Kaleena, a high school sophomore not affiliated with the after-school program who lives with her mother and sisters and attends a diverse magnet school in an affluent neighborhood, remarked that although “hard work just has to be there, always,”

discipline and ambition matter as well: “You have to have self-control and envision a better life for yourself. I mean, you could work hard and still work at McDonald’s.”

Language about work ethic, self-control, and shunning laziness resonates with the American Dream ethos that casts success as an outcome of hard work and responsibility. Because many Americans conceive economic success and social mobility as functions of individual choices, they are prone to discuss these topics in relation to individual choices as well. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (2008) argue that individualism marks the “first language” of the American “moral vocabulary” and can conceal the relevance and richness of Americans’ attachments to public, community-based life (p. 20). While these young Fifth Warders exalt hard work and offer agency-affirming, individualistic prescriptions for success, the question of how practical and well-informed these views are remains open, especially since many are only prescriptive in nature and are seldom evidenced by accomplishments or improvements in status, wealth, education, and career that could grant a more tangible and descriptive basis for these views. A central idea behind the cultural deficiency framework is that as the conditions of poverty become normalized and the prospects for upward mobility become seen as increasingly remote, aspirations and expectations dwindle and outlooks of defeatism and fatalism set in (Harrington 1962; Gilder 1981; Mead 1992). Perhaps, one could argue, if these adolescents and young adults begin to experience frustrated potential and a “come up” stalled, the language of individualism serves as a conduit for the expression of widely endorsed cultural tropes that mask or allay feelings of vulnerability.

While experiences with barriers to success and interactions with structural constraints are topics reserved for the following sections, the individualistic prescriptions about work ethic, ambition, and self-discipline can be shown here to discredit the defeatist and fatalistic claims of

cultural deviciency. Though often used interchangeably in the literature, to hold a defeatist outlook is to maintain that one's efforts will not yield adequate rewards (Gilder 1981; Mead 1992) while fatalism involves feeling powerless over one's fate and doubting that improved conditions can be realized (Gans 1991). Both dispositions undermine the meritocratic quality of the American ethos on achievement and social mobility, and both were stridently rejected in my interactions with the young men and women. Rudy ("When I'm hungry and put my mind to something, I'm straight.") would like to join the military when he turns 17. He has not written off high school as a lost cause but his description of the military as "a real job that can be an actual career; I think I'll be good at *that*" suggests that his view for the future, though influenced by factors that led him to alternative school, does not preclude the possibility of improvement. Kaleena, with brighter educational prospects but a more anxious personality than Rudy, was adamant that "values," "mentality," and "envisioning a better future" are essential toward being successful in addition to hard work ("Just as much hard work goes into selling drugs as into school. I don't believe in that but you still have to have a certain work ethic (for it). It is about what you believe and what your values are"). Nervous about her upcoming college decision and her ability to support herself once enrolled, she reasons that her own work ethic and values might protect her against forthcoming hardships: "Coming from a lower class neighborhood, there are a lot of things that you have to sacrifice. We didn't have the newest pair of shoes or the newest clothes and stuff like that, so we were taught certain values. We were taught to appreciate things more and never quit." Kaleena's regard for perseverance and sacrifice not only defies notions of defeatism, fatalism, and immediate gratification, but it was explained as being fostered by – not discouraged by – a disadvantaged background.

The most fatalistic sentiment came from Hector, a 16-year-old Salvadoran American on juvenile probation for theft, who stated that “No matter what you do, or think, or want, God is always in control. All the things that happen are a part of his plan, and he has a plan for everyone even if we don’t understand it.” Hector’s religious fatalism supported optimism about the future and - as witnessed in his insistence that “I just need to stay focused; I put myself around too much bullsh*t” - allowed for an accountable, agentic view of his own behavior.

Staying Away: The role of decision-making and dissociation in overcoming barriers to success

There was a delicate balance to be reached on the part of the participants when discussing the reputation of the Fifth Ward – a neighborhood whose tales of poverty and violence are so entrenched in Houston lore that they impart a demureness to the inequality, callousness, and neglect that they inhere. The participants were aware of this reputation; they refer to housing projects, apartment complexes, corner stores, and street intersections in slang terms and know that referencing the neighborhood’s austere reputation can convey a sense of unaffected toughness about them. This austere reputation also supports a “hard knocks” view of achievement assuming everything acquired has been toiled for and reified in t-shirts (usually from song lyrics) that read “All Grind, No Luck,” “Respect the Hustle,” “Started From The Bottom,” and “Back then, (they) didn’t want me, now I’m hot, they all on me.” To denounce or deny the exacting aspects of the community is to “act bougie” or forget where one came from, but to rely on them for one’s identity is to be “ghetto,” “ratchet,” small-minded, and ill-equipped for the world beyond the confines of the neighborhood.

The manner in which the participants invoked perceptions of the community (perceptions at large as well as their own) into narratives on mobility made evident their exposure to

heterogeneous messages about perceived community dysfunction and disadvantaged structural location. Eddie, a 22-year-old giving school a second chance at community college and working part-time at a car wash, advised that his community offers “learning opportunities” via “taking heed to others’ mistakes, like certain elders and certain family members.” Eddie’s father is a convicted felon and Eddie himself is attempting to put his gang affiliations behind him. Asked what led to his desire to change course, he simply offered: “Man, I don’t know. You just kind of see things ‘round here that tell you what not to do.” In the after-school program, 15-year-old Corvann recalled his experience from a ministry-centered summer camp; a group of high school- and undergraduate-aged volunteers were bused-in from a middle-upper class suburb and when a female volunteer thought it was “so cool” that his Dad was usually home with him while hers was often busy or traveling on business, Corvann interceded, “My Dad is a felon. He can’t work. Of course he is going to be home!” An 18-year-old female “graduate” of the after-school program, who had worked three jobs in the past year (one in retail and two in fast food) in order to purchase a car, remarked that she probably would not have to work so much if she was from a wealthier family. This moment of circumstantial class consciousness was brought on by an attendee’s story about his cousin in California, who had been given a car for his 17th birthday.

As young Fifth Warders receive these messages about the hazards and disadvantages of their environment, many are forced to contemplate – and conciliate – their own capacities for evading such misfortunes. A sentiment that reverberated among all three groups of sampled individuals was that while negative outcomes were abundantly on display, they could be avoided by simply choosing to not partake or participate. When their friends, relatives, or acquaintances were arrested or beaten up, it was lamented that these individuals had become “caught up,” in that they had entered relationships or activities known to have harmful outcomes and could not

extricate themselves before reaping the consequences. Responding to a friend's question about whether her brother was back at home after he had been charged with residential burglary the previous week, 16-year-old Rowena laughed off her friend's concern and held up her brother's stupidity as the cause of his most recent travail. She then questioned the equity of parental supervision in her household: "And my Mom makes *me* come in by 8 (laughs)? He's the one who's always messing up. You could let me go off and do whatever I wanted to - watch and see if I mess up. I stay away from all them stupid folks."

By attributing others' setbacks and struggles to erroneous choices and maintaining that one's own constitution renders him or her less prone to commit similar errors, one can dissociate one self from the failures witnessed around them and carry on in the belief that hard work and responsible living will produce a better future. Dissociation, with its premium on sound decision-making and sheer will power, enables adherence to a script of meritocracy and self-determination; it also assists in downplaying the impact of barriers to success that might be attributed to one's community, family, or upbringing. When I asked Torren if he thought that his family members' limited educational attainment made it difficult for him to get help with homework and improve his grades and attendance, he gave serious consideration to the suggestion, beginning his response with "Well..." and then carrying out an extended pause that was interrupted by phrases such as "It's like...", "You know...", and "I guess." The phrases never gave way to a sentence or any sort of declarative statement. Though he did not reject the not-so-veiled insinuation of the question he eventually gathered his thoughts and concluded, "Really, it's on me – no one else. If my Mom or my Auntie had graduated from college, would they really help me? And even if they did, I'd still have to get it right for myself, you know?"

In view of social isolation theory, dissociations from the impediments of social mobility are not – certainly at face value – a manifestation of oppositional or ghetto-specific subcultural adaptations. The staunch faith in the surmounting power of such personal qualities as effort, ability, and judgment could, however, be understood as a consequence of limited contact with individuals of dissimilar social locations and worldviews. In interview-based research with African American males in Chicago, Young (2004) argues that high degrees of social isolation narrow the cultural repertoires available to black men and thereby stunt their capacities to interpret the world beyond their particular station in life. Declaring that social isolation “involves more than geographic and social distance from institutions and formal organizations” (p. 32), Young suggests that limited familiarity with employers and workplace decision-makers leave the men poorly suited to interpret the processes and structures contributing to their joblessness and class immobility (pp. 32, 194-196).

Though Young’s work presents a compelling case for expanding social isolation theory’s understanding of culture beyond that of a fixed set of motivating or fate-sealing values, it is the discussion of social isolation – not culture – that contains shortcomings for explaining conceptions of upward mobility and achievement. In research on neighborhood effects and youth violence in poor black and Hispanic Boston communities, Harding (2010) articulates how social isolation does not account for the transmission of cultural messages beyond (either to or from) local contexts and that the framework effectively discounts the heterogeneity of both “mainstream” and “alternative” cultural models that are prevalent within neighborhoods. Beyond the circumstantial revelations that may ensue from visiting suburban ministry groups or learning of the material comforts of more privileged relatives, young people are constantly prodded to weigh the options that are (or might be) available to them and to make assessments

about how they desire their lives to play out. Eddie's experiences as a youth in the community showed him "what not to do," but such a testimony would not be necessary if his gang and past drug dealing were such commanding influences that they negated the impression of a choice. Witnessing his younger sister's success in high school, becoming linked to a man he considers a mentor through church, and "seeing other guys I grew up with happy and doing fine without breaking the law or shootin' each other up" have invigorated his renewed commitment to school and work, he states. Michelle, a 17-year-old from an unstable household^{vi} whose enthusiasm about her first part-time job had dissipated considerably upon realizing that the pay was not bringing the improved purchasing power that she had hoped for, said in an interview^{vii}:

...I know what my situation looks like – black girl, (in) the ghetto, on welfare, parents going through some things. But there is so much money out there right? On TV, definitely, but even regular folks, too, are havin' things. If I just work, stay solid, and not get distracted – just keep goin' hard – I'll make something happen.

It is quite possible, as Young (2004) might observe, that both Eddie and Michelle lack the experience in the workforce (and in independent adulthood, more generally) that is sufficient to inspire awareness of the limitations of "goin' hard." It is evident, nonetheless, that their dispositions and expectations toward their mobility prospects reflect simultaneous calculations of what Mario Small (2004) calls the relationship of "constraint and possibility" (p. 89). This relationship not only frames the lens through which their social locations are viewed – by bringing to light the common pitfalls and austere reputation of the community – but permits young people to make sense of these locations by revealing the range of behaviors, possibilities, and likelihoods that can be expected from the particular location. In weighing potential outcomes, these young Fifth Warders simultaneously interpret the prescriptions for mobility and the sense of community hazard, disadvantage, and dysfunction as placing immense demands upon individual agency. The calculations of constraint and possibility that underlie this

interpretation subvert social isolation theory's claims of limited frames of reference and narrowed cultural repertoires by reflecting awareness of a compromised structural location.

Getting On ...Anyway: Re-asserting individualism amid structural constraints and personal disappointments

While the democratic spirit of the American Dream ensures that everyone can pursue success, no one is guaranteed that the dream will be fulfilled. Hochschild (1995) explicates that “the distinction between the right to dream and the right to succeed is psychologically hard to maintain and politically always blurred... When people recognize that chances for success are slim or getting slimmer, the whole tenor of the American dream changes for the worse” (p. 27). Dissociations can be applied with little logical inconsistency to topics understood to involve personal choices (e.g., drug use / sales, gangs, or school dropout), but one cannot dissociate oneself from commitments they have willingly taken on. Invested in the ethos of honest rewards for honest effort, observations of widespread social immobility and chronic encounters with frustration threaten to dismantle confidence in the American Dream – both on its merits and in one's ability to achieve it.

Though stifled “come ups” and experiences with the ensuing disappointment indeed provoke uneasy ruminations about one's abilities and capacity to succeed, several participants in the midst of setbacks made clear that they had not been let down by the prescriptions and promises of the American Dream. Quite the opposite, they believed they needed to step up – to work even harder, to make better decisions, and to have stronger faith in their abilities. “You always have to believe in yourself, even when the world tells you that you probably shouldn't,” said Earvin, a 19-year-old college freshman responding to my question about whether he saw himself finishing college (his grades were poor and he was failing at least one of his general

requirements). Arturo, a 16-year-old Salvadoran American who been beaten into a gang, shot in the hip, and acquired a lengthy rap sheet by age 14 (when he moved to the Fifth Ward from California), affirmed that “less stupidity” was his goal for the upcoming school year:

Arturo: I’ve been a lot better here (than in California) but the negative influences are starting to creep up. Psychiatric units, locked up, or in fights, that’s where I would usually be. I fight a lot; I’m not going to lie. But that is stupid, and I need less stupidity now.

Me: You’re always mentioning your mistakes and bad habits or whatever and calling them stupid. So many of your problems started when you were so young though. You joined (the gang) at 11 and you said that all of your male family members were members too. Just from knowing you like I do, you don’t strike me as “stupid” at all.

Arturo: Yeah but the thing is, when you mess up like I do, you hurt yourself but you bring down everyone else around you too. It took me a long time to learn that. And plus, all that “it was all around me” or “it was so hard to escape” sh*t does nothing for me. It means nothing. I have to do better; that’s up to me.

Arturo’s dismissal of his family background bears familiarity to Torren, who disregards his family’s low educational attainment as an explanation for his own struggles in school. In both cases, the boys do not deny the presence of adversity or disadvantage but exclaim that dwelling upon it - or allowing it to discourage their efforts to do better – serves no purpose. Much like Michelle, the boys believed they could rectify their circumstances by “staying solid” and “just going hard.” Such affirmations of strict personal responsibility and self-determination while refusing to seriously acknowledge disadvantage call to mind the “hard protective individualism” (p. 57) that Adrie Kusserow (2004) finds foundational to the socialization of lower and working class youths. Parents and schools in the upper class community where she conducted fieldwork emphasized empathy, articulating nuanced sentiments and ideas, and appreciating the individual’s uniqueness. Lower and working class youths, meanwhile, were taught that complaints and crying “do not help anything;” feelings of vulnerability should be contained (a mark of resilience) and not encouraged or empathized with (p. 127).

The value that is placed upon “going hard” despite one’s circumstances or setbacks is further illustrated in my relationship with Taquan, a 26-year-old father without a job. While playing a video game in his grandmother’s apartment, which is where he lives, he told me that he envisions himself as a millionaire within “five to six years” because of his new concert and event promotion business. Despite no post-high school education or technical training, an employment history of brief stints driving trucks and working in warehouses, an unsettled living situation, and a list self-admitted “screw ups” in his past, he feels optimistic about the future and his new plan: “That’s something we aint going to let die because we want it so bad... When you set a goal, you do whatever it takes to get to it.”

Inconsistent and naïve as it may seem, the disconnect between Taquan’s past, present, and future becomes more comprehensible by considering the ways that responsibility and initiative are constructed by both Taquan and others occupying disadvantaged locations. Ethnographic research on the illicit drug economy illustrates that in such a masculine, capitalistic, and retaliatory institution, to not accept responsibility over one’s fate or to bemoan the gravity of external forces is to compromise one’s autonomy and worthiness of respect from others (who are likely to have endured similar externally-imposed disadvantages) (Bourgois 1995; Venkatesh 2006; Black 2009). Fox (2001) shows how disempowered, incarcerated individuals can project responsibility discursively by decontextualizing their behaviors and omitting references to all causal agents other than the self. Taquan, likewise, recalls his entry into a crew of drug dealers in particularly individualistic terms, chiding himself for “wanting to fit in” and “wanting to be flashy.” When alluding to his past shortcomings, which include losing a football scholarship at a community college and his inability to hold down a job, Taquan frequently concludes or summarizes his accounts with the statement “Everything was on me,” as

if to state that his misfortunes are of his own doing and, had he acted differently, a better outcome would have awaited him.

In response to my question about why he saw himself as “dumb” for selling marijuana for a few years in his teens, Taquan said that he “was never a broke kid and had everything (he) needed.” He did not discuss the implications of his father’s incarceration throughout his childhood, the shrinking employment base of his east Texas hometown (or its history of police corruption, racial discrimination, and poverty rate – one of the highest in the state), or his aunt’s disability that kept her from working while raising him. The assertions that his position is “all on him” and that he had all he needed to succeed (or at least avoid legal trouble) reflect how he has internalized immobility and how he holds his own initiative and responsibility as the mechanisms to overcome it. Just like Michelle’s vow to “go hard,” Taquan’s internalized disappointments contain vestiges of self-blame as well as attempts at self-encouragement. Earvin’s, Arturo’s, Taquan’s and Michelle’s thwarted pursuits of upward mobility do not call into question the merit of individual agency as much as they demand more fervent exercise of it.

Discussion

The American Dream ethos can be deceptive throughout all strata of society. Its vague vision of success can lead to money and power becoming the foremost indicators of a successful life; its reliance on personal attributes can obscure stark inequalities and structurally-imposed disadvantages; and it can function to simultaneously lure, taunt, and condemn those who have found its promises difficult to achieve (Hochschild 1995; Meacham 2012). For young residents of a poor community like Houston’s Fifth Ward, the American Dream is often described as being all the more illusive as it is purportedly too remote, too individualistic, and too much akin to

pipedreams to offer an instructive and reliable model of upward mobility. In this article, based on participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork with young Fifth Ward residents of diverse backgrounds and circumstances, I examined orientations to the American Dream ethos and the meritocratic individualism that it implies. I presented evidence that the endorsement of individualism – via hard work, sound decision-making, and reliance on personal attributes and abilities – serves as both a prescription for what will be necessary for future success as well as a buffer against disappointment, structural marginalization, and the ambiguity (and evasiveness) of success in the present.

The redoubling of individual agency in the face of disappointment, inadequacy, and uncertainty should prompt reflection upon the cognitive adaptations of disadvantaged young people and the cultural contexts in which they take form. For much of the previous century, “culture” was understood to inhere certain sets of values that are accepted and acted upon by different subcultural groups. For the urban poor, low regard for work ethic, education, and marriage, along with shiftlessness and immediate gratification, were seen as both adaptations to, and causes of (via intergenerational transmission) impoverished conditions (Lewis 1968; Gilder 1981). Under social isolation theory, culture was absolved of its causative function in reproducing poverty but was nonetheless seen as an adaptation to a structural location and compromised prospects for social mobility. Because this adaptation occurs in isolation from mobility-producing institutions, an individual’s knowledge, experiences, and expectations regarding what is necessary for mobility often goes underdeveloped, thus giving way to views about one’s structural location (and how to improve it) that may be callow, hollow, and guided more by hope than reality (Hochschild 1996; Young 2004; Black 2009). My findings about the value that the young Fifth Warders assign to their own individual agency, their insistence that it

can eventually spur upward mobility, and their falling back on it even after witnessing its limitations undercuts elements of each perspective. On one hand, these views are indeed an adaptation to specific locations and circumstances; the participants sensed that they must work hard in order to “come up,” work harder than those with greater advantages, and work hard some more when their efforts did not induce desired outcomes. On the other hand, this outlook is sustained by calculations of constraint and possibility – calculations that place a heavy burden on the individual to sidestep the community’s pitfalls - that reaffirm commitment to the achievement ideology of the American Dream and yet reveal one’s structural location in ways that social isolation theory struggles to account for.

While this article described the role of meritocratic individualism in reconciling conflicting and at times discouraging messages about achieving upward mobility from a disadvantaged background, further research will be needed to address questions regarding this study’s implications. For instance, investing in the American Dream ethos and touting work ethic, responsible decision-making, and education as means to success belie the defeatist and fatalistic outlooks assumed by the cultural deficiency framework, but they do not preclude the existence or prominence of subcultural messages about achievement and success. If or when popular conceptions of individualism fail to resonate and subcultural frames become appealing (or vice versa) is an empirical question that my data is not currently adequate to inform.

Additionally, more extended observations with participants will be needed to discern subtleties, variations, and long-term consequences of their individualistic views of achievement. While “doubling down” on meritocratic individualism appears to evince a hardened and protective form of individualism wherein resilience and self-reliance are held up as a shield against poverty, vulnerability, or misfortune (Kusserow 2004), the evidence presented in this

article is not sufficient to support claims of a strictly class-based conception of individualism. It remains possible that commitment to the individualistic and meritocratic spirit of the American Dream can accommodate an expressive view of the individual (i.e., one that is concerned with cultivating and “discovering” the self and values individuality and uniqueness) as well as an appreciation for its social embeddedness – both of which can be regarded as common, innocuous, and largely middle class views of the individual in America (Bellah et al. 2008). Questions about how (or if) these views are sustained – or whether they are invalidated or overwhelmed by the defensiveness and the “sense of distance, distrust, and constraint” that emerge from institutionalized inequality and immobility (Lareau 2003: 3; Smith 2007) – shall command further investigation.

Notes

ⁱ In addition to being synonymous with upward mobility and improving one’s standing over time, the phrase “come up” can refer to activities that produce economic gain or the act of finding something of value. In this sense, washing cars or winning a bet would be examples “come ups,” while one may “come up on” a \$20 bill left behind on a bus. In my interactions with participants, the connotations were discernible within context, with the upward mobility connotation much more prevalent than the connotation of situational economic gains.

ⁱⁱ A “Super Neighborhood” is a small, contiguous community sharing common physical characteristics, identity, or infrastructure, as defined by Houston’s Planning & Development Department.

ⁱⁱⁱ Not all of the after-school program’s attendees were included as participants in this study. Only the 26 with whom I maintained consistent interaction with; that I grew familiar with their

background and interests outside of the program; and that were made aware of (and consented to) my observation for the purpose of research were included.

^{iv} The phrase “treat others the right way” is used in this question to account for honesty and a sense of virtue. Without this phrase, reckless or exploitive pursuits of success – so long as one is not caught – could warrant an affirmative response.

^v I did not say “other communities.” I instead inserted recognizable Houston neighborhoods and suburbs to exemplify middle or upper class communities.

^{vi} Michelle’s apartment was subjected to at least two drug-related police searches (targeted at her mother and her mother’s boyfriend) in the month that I first met her.

^{vii} My question here followed a long account from Michelle about her childhood and concerned what she could realistically expect the future to show her.

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Just Working: Status, Stigma, and Self-Determination Among Job-holders in a High-poverty Urban Neighborhood

Abstract

Workforce participation is widely promoted as a buffer against the effects of concentrated poverty for communities and a means toward upward mobility for individuals. The work that is held by residents of high-poverty neighborhoods, however, is often characterized by low pay, stigma, and restricted opportunities for career advancement. Through ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, I examine how job-holding status in this context shapes workers' orientations to their prospects for upward mobility. With attentiveness to workers' impressions of the surrounding community, their perceived social standing within it, and their narratives regarding the possibility (or elusiveness) of mobility, I show how workers balance modest self-consciousness with agency-affirming self-determination to negotiate the demands of low-income job-holding status. I discuss the implications of this balance in light of prevailing theoretical conceptions of work and the urban poor, as well as the role of individual agency in discerning structural constraints.

Introduction

Sensing a good time just two spaces over from where my car was parked, I approached the three middle-aged gentlemen and asked, "What do y'all have going on?" in a way that was intended to greet more than inquire. Tremaine – like the others wearing dark-colored uniforms, sitting in steel folding chairs in a shaded area behind the back bumper, putting the car stereo and a couple six-packs to full use – responded, "We're chillin' man, and you?" It was an affable reply even though he seemed to be sizing me up with a disquieted look, perhaps suspecting that I was there to remove them from the private parking lot, which serves a church and senior

residential facility across the street. “I saw you out here and heard the music playing – good stuff.” The music was by Mel Waiters, a Texas soul / blues singer whose songs - “(I had the best time y’all) at the Hole in the Wall,” “Got My Whiskey,” and “Friday Night Fish Fry,” to name a few – have steadily gained local popularity in recent years behind a decidedly blue-collar sound and message that seem decades past their shelf life. Tremaine, more at ease but determined to validate his right to the parking lot, told me, “We work in all these buildings around here. We do the plumbing. We’re neighborhood guys, man, all from the Fifth Ward – workers!” I explained that I am a counselor with a youth group on weeknights, that I work with a nonprofit organization just down the street, and that I did not care about their use of the parking lot (nor did I have the capacity to do anything even if I did). We all shook hands and introduced ourselves and, in short order, we were talking about the NCAA tournament and some still-touring ‘70’s and ‘80’s soul bands. They invited me to stop by and kick it at any time; Tremaine lived in the apartments behind the lot and the three men would be going inside shortly to watch the Rockets, who were on the west coast and about to begin a late game. Attempting to gauge their interest in participating, I brought up my research and how it involved talking to Fifth Ward residents about such topics as wealth, poverty, class, and achievement. Extracting their final indulgences from their beers and a warm, breezy spring evening, the men – clearly not enthusiastic about the idea but weary of rejecting it in front of me – shrugged their shoulders and Tremaine replied, “We’ll see, maybe we can talk. We’re just working guys though – just regular, working guys.”

Despite Tremaine’s diffident disposition, the status of “regular, working” adults in high-poverty, high-joblessness communities such as Houston’s Fifth Ward is not one that is dismissed or disparaged in discourses about urban poverty. Aside from providing income and perhaps a

source of dignity and self-respect to job-holders, employment is promoted – and enforced – via public policy as the most effective means toward escaping poverty. As my first encounter with Tremaine & Friends illustrates, however, the social standing of workers within such communities can be a conflicted one. On one hand, employed residents are in many ways a sign of hope: They have largely evaded the temptations and pitfalls well-documented of urban poverty; their labor – often performed outside of the neighborhood – constitutes one of the community's greatest exports and thus one of its few sources of economic vitality; and they bring the ties to the workforce and access to the world beyond the ghetto that are cited as lacking in the inner-city (Murray 1984; Mead 1992; Wilson 1996; Young 2004). On the other hand, these workers seldom occupy prestigious positions, may not have much to show for their labor, and work at the margins of industries characterized by low wages and high turnover.

This article presents my ethnographic fieldwork with low-income workers in the Fifth Ward in attendance to questions about status, stigma, and the pursuit of upward mobility. I probe if and how holding an honest, wage-earning job within a context of concentrated poverty justifies claims of improved life chances and elevated community standing. I also consider the weight of the stigma associated these jobs and its role in discouraging – or reinvigorating – the workers' confidence in the dignity and self-reliance that work is widely purported to engender. As workers face challenges in raising children, relating to peers, and justifying their loyalty to the community, I show how financial insecurity, recognition of low workplace autonomy and prestige, and fears of being deemed judgmental, insensitive, or intrusive compel workers to assess their standing in the community with modesty and self-consciousness. Despite these challenges, many workers affirm that a better future – for themselves, their families, and the community – is attainable and that they are setting examples to their children and the community

at large for how to attain it. These examples attest not to the financially empowering or morally-sanitizing value of work but rather to the self-determination that is held as a defense against precarious and unfulfilling attachments to the workforce.

Working in Non-working Places

Since the latter decades of the twentieth century, the scarcity of jobs and working residents has stood as the centerpiece in the web of dysfunction affecting poor urban communities (Gilder 1981; Mead 1992; Wilson 1996). Owing in large part to the legacy of William Julius Wilson's work on the bifurcated class structure of African Americans (1978) and the social isolation of "the truly disadvantaged" within declining inner-city communities (1987), persistent joblessness has been shown to have a disorganizing effect that leaves already marginalized communities vulnerable to scholastic failure, violence, drug use, single parent households, and a host of other social ills (Jargowsky 1997; Sharkey 2013). In the face of these impediments toward upward mobility, and with restricted access to the institution that most reliably produces it (i.e., the workforce), the social isolation framework posits that residents of such communities may adapt to their bleak prospects with behaviors and attitudes that exacerbate their economic marginality (e.g., a disinclination toward work and academic achievement and permissiveness toward early childbearing) (Wilson 1996: 52; Anderson 1999).

A central concern of the social isolation framework involves concentration effects, or the effects of economic marginalization in the midst of similarly disadvantaged individuals. Disconnected from the resources that can propel class mobility – jobs and quality schools most notably, with "marriageable" partners and "conventional role models" also cited as being reduced to scarce proportions (Sampson and Wilson 1995: 42) – individuals residing in

communities of highly concentrated poverty encounter stark obstacles toward achieving employment, educational attainment, and traditional family arrangements. With the institution of work so firmly ingrained in the American conscience as a means toward both livelihood and moral standing, communities lacking workers, according to this logic, lose out on income, tax revenue, and also models of diligence, responsibility, self-sufficiency, and stable adulthood.

While the social isolation framework and its interest in concentration effects contribute a well-established, structurally-based account of the cultural contexts of poor urban neighborhoods, it has struggled to explain the heterogeneity of statuses, roles, and cultural models that emerge within such neighborhoods (Small 2004; Harding 2010). For workers, social isolation can thus attest to the difficulties of finding stable, well-paying employment (Smith 2007; Newman 1999) as well as their spatial separation from centers of obtainable jobs (leading to higher commute times, transportation and child care costs, etc.) (Kain 1968; Raphael & Stoll 2006), but the framework offers little toward understanding how workers negotiate a simultaneously promoted and maligned status and how they appraise their prospects for an improved financial. Committing oneself to a job, after all, is hardly a trademark of the “ghetto-specific” (Wilson 1987: 137) or “oppositional” (Anderson 1999: 288) value systems that are alleged to imbue socially isolated communities. Occupying positions that are seen to require minimal skill and provide limited opportunities for career advancement, low-income job-holders must confront a stigma that their work is unfulfilling and obligated by a lack of options, perhaps brought on by low educational attainment, early parenthood, limited English proficiency, and / or a lack of motivation to pursue other work. Hence, amid the stigma associated with low-income work and the status degradation and depreciative perceptions that may ensue from peers

as a result of it (Newman 1999), these workers are perhaps not the role models that are essential to undo the “tangle of pathology” (Clark 1965) so much as they are merely entwined within it.

What Work (Really) Brings

Stigma and all, job-holders in high-poverty neighborhoods are active agents within America’s principal anti-poverty mechanism: participation in the workforce. Whereas public assistance has historically come in the form of cash payments to poor families, a series of legislative initiatives – spearheaded by Temporary Assistance To Needy Families (the 1996 program broadly referred to as “welfare reform”) and complemented by expanded tax credits for earned income and child care costs – have transformed the American safety net so that incentives and rewards for workforce participation now command a majority of government transfers to the poor (Edsall 2014). The spirit and message of the transformations in anti-poverty policy are encapsulated in an essay by Ron Haskins and Lawrence Mead (2011), both intellectual architects of the ‘90’s welfare overhaul: “Nonworking adults must be expected to work, not only offered better chances to do so. Social policy must seek points of leverage where work can be made an obligation that the jobless have to discharge, on some pain of sanction” (p. 3).

While much research in the wake of the “welfare-to-work” movement of the 1990’s logically focused on the livelihood strategies and the economic vulnerability of the working poor (Edin and Lein 1997; Newman 1999; Dohan 2003; Hays 2003; Marchevisky and Theoharis 2006), it is worth noting the extra-economic significance of work in the construction of personal identity and aspirations. Dignity, independence, and self-reliance are indeed politically expedient buzzwords that can be manipulated to justify inadequate wages and benefits, but these values are also foundational to “the American Dream” and the ethos of achievement and mobility

as a result of hard work and playing by the rules (Hochschild 1995). Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (2008), in their work on contrasting visions of public good and the neocapitalist vision that has dominated since the Reagan era, contend that work – more so than community – is the institution which fosters common interests, experiences, and identities; community is merely an association of neighbors that can be voluntarily partaken in or retreated from while work is obligatory and ubiquitous.

Participation in the workforce, therefore, may supply workers with the social contacts and sense of upstanding identity that function to insulate them from discouraging community conditions. This is evidenced in Katherine Newman's (1999) ethnographic work at a Harlem "Burger Barn," where fast food jobs with low pay, high turnover, and mandated deference to customers nonetheless underwrite dignity among employees and justify claims of personal progress and advancement. Newman observes that "the further Burger Barn workers sink into their jobs, the more they pull away from the negative elements of their environment and distinguish themselves in every respect from the friends and acquaintances who have taken a wrong turn in life" (p. 109). While the workers acknowledge that the jobs offer little satisfaction or prestige, Newman finds that work at Burger Barn permits entry into a community of fellow workers that often marks a source of friendship, belonging, and identity (p. 120). Daniel Dohan's (2003) fieldwork with Hispanics in East L.A. and San Jose similarly demonstrates how workforce experiences shape orientations to (and affinities for) self-reliance, outlining:

Day to day, barrio residents constructed the meaning of reliance through their talk about and behavior toward family, neighbors, and local institutions. ...Residents applauded or condemned local institutions such as churches, job centers, local aid programs, and community leaders depending on their assessment of whether they helped or hindered residents in their efforts to stand on their own two feet (p. 205).

In a relative sense, one's status as a worker within a disadvantaged community may give rise to pride and a sense of decency when considering the perceived immobility or wayward life trajectories of peers. At large, however, several scholars have noted how low-wage, stigmatized work is seen as denigrating, unpropitious (i.e., the jobs are viewed as "dead ends" with little chance of career or social advancement), and an affront to the autonomy and respect that enhance one's social status (see Anderson 1990; Bourgois 1995; Black 2009). Perceptions of these individuals as "chumps" who relinquish their independence and self-respect for little guaranteed payback (even if peers privately covet or would like to try their hands at a similar job) could undermine these workers' role as a model of stability and responsible living – a model regarded as important but largely absent within the social isolation framework. Anderson (1999), likewise, explains how members of "decent" black working class families within neighborhoods of concentrated poverty must at times be willing to project aggression, a defensive attitude, and threats of violence to ensure their respect and security. Short of demonstrating aggression or threatening violence, job-holders in this context might have to overlook or "put up with" unpleasant attitudes or behaviors in order to peacefully coexist with neighbors.

Amid these contrasting views of what low-wage work affords residents in terms of status and identity, I take on the question of how job-holders – socially located in low-paying jobs and in a high-poverty, high-joblessness neighborhood – negotiate status and preserve rational hope for upward mobility. While upward mobility has historically been understood through measures of income and levels of attainment in education and occupation, individuals' orientations to upward mobility (and their experiences in pursuing it) are often predicated less upon their conceptions of social class and economic standing than their narratives of personal progress, accomplishment and setback, and hope and despair with respect to how one aspires to live and be

perceived (Walkerdine 2003). With work now held as the primary mechanism against community dysfunction and the means by which individuals find identity, belonging, dignity, and self-sufficiency, such narratives from low-income workers can offer insight into the role that holding a job plays in sustaining or discouraging attempts at a more prosperous future. Moreover, the analysis of these narratives stands to inform one of the most enduring and still confounding topics in urban poverty research – the role of agency and individual orientations in confrontation with structural constraints – from the vantage point of the urban-residing working poor. As job-holding status within a high-poverty and high-joblessness neighborhood may entail modifications, consolations, and / or resolute affirmations of one’s capacity for enhanced financial security and, ultimately, social mobility, this article explores workers’ appraisals of opportunity structures and life chances under the stigma and constraints of low-wage labor.

Research Methodology

My analysis draws on data from an ongoing ethnographic study on upward mobility and thoughts about wealth, poverty, and class in the greater Fifth Ward community of Houston, TX. The research procedures underlying this analysis are motivated by my interests in informing questions about how working residents of a high-poverty, traditionally-disadvantaged neighborhood weigh their prospects for an improved future. This section thereby outlines my methods for collecting and analyzing data in attendance to these interests.

The Place and The Participants

The Fifth Ward is located immediately northeast of downtown Houston, separated only by the city’s principal waterway, Buffalo Bayou. Poverty rates in this community approach or

exceed 50% in each of its census tracts and the median household income (\$20,326) is the lowest of all 88 recognized Houston neighborhoods (“Median Household Income: City of Houston by Super Neighborhoods” 2013). The community fits the description of the term “inner city” both geographically – being located near the city’s spatial center – and figuratively: Much of its professional class migrated outward in the ‘60’s and ‘70’s; commercial corridors have been vacated save for liquor stores, check cashers / payday lenders, and corner stores; it is crosscut by two major freeways and an industrial railway line; and it is interspersed with public housing complexes and low-rent homes and apartments. Regarded as the “grass-roots heart” of black Houston (Broyles 1976) but bordered to the west and east by predominantly Hispanic communities, the Fifth Ward is 52% black and 44% Hispanic (“Race/Ethnicity: City of Houston by Super Neighborhoods” 2012). A majority of the adult population is not in the work force. Of the 42% that is, men are primarily employed in maintenance, construction, and transportation while women are most commonly employed in service occupations (“Occupation for the Male Population 16 Years and over: City of Houston Super Neighborhoods” 2013; “Occupation for the Female Population 16 Years and over: City of Houston Super Neighborhoods” 2013).

While the operationalization of class has marked a contested topic within sociology (Blau and Duncan 1967; Collins 2004; DiMaggio 2012) and has prompted further inspection for its application to communities of color (Wilson 1978; Landry 1987; Vallejo 2012), the workers I accessed in the Fifth Ward share a number of characteristics that support an ascription of “working class” status. Their annual incomes do not exceed \$30,000; they do not have college degrees; they do not own their places of residence; they do not have much authority or independence within their respective occupations. Exceptions to these characteristics on the part of participants are noted within my analysis as they arise.

The participants in this study are all job-holders who reside in the Fifth Ward. I use the word “participants” to describe those who consented to my asking questions, taking notes, or merely observing for the purpose of academic research. While my notes contained records of 61 individuals who were engaged in some form of non-illicit occupational activity for pay, I was quickly reminded that the title of “job-holder” describes a rather heterogeneous group. I encountered part-time workers, full-time workers, “off the books” workers who provide services for remuneration but are not on a payroll, workers who were not the primary earner in his / her household, and a paroled male whose pay was deducted toward restitution and rent. For the sake of enhancing the cohesiveness of the participants, I analyzed data from only those who were working full-time (or at least 30 hours a week) and were the primary earner in their household. I excluded data collected from job-holders with less than two years of work experience and who were not residents of the Fifth Ward. Altogether, I analyzed data from 23 participants ranging in age from 24 to 57 (median = 37), with 13 females and 10 males, 17 blacks and 6 Hispanics.

Data Collection and Analysis

Ethnographic fieldwork throughout my time doing research in the Fifth Ward (beginning in May of 2013 and still ongoing) and working with a nonprofit organization in the community produced a lion’s share of the data used in this study. I engaged in conversations with Fifth Ward workers on their jobs, in their homes, at bus stops, in church and Bible study, at a record store, in corner stores, and at several of my dearly beloved chicken and fish spots. These conversations and observations were recorded in fieldnotes, usually taken upon my return to the office or my apartment. Eight participants with particularly distinct experiences or perspectives agreed to audio-recorded interviews, which took place in the participants’ residences and in

meeting rooms in a local nonprofit organization (the same one where I was working), church, and community center; examples of these participants include a self-employed exterminator who described his work as “nothing special” but viewed it as redemption for past transgressions and a single mother who was proud to have secured a stable and reputable job but fretted intensely about financial strain. Among the other 15 participants, interviews were conducted informally through workplace conversations, frequent visits (i.e., I would visit their residences or they would visit me in the office), and over lunch / dinner. All interviews – whether recorded in fieldnotes or .mp3s - lasted between 40 and 120 minutes and a majority of participants (15) were interviewed at least twice.

The content of my fieldnotes and interview transcripts focused upon workers’ dialogues and discourses about their jobs, future plans and expectations, relationships with other community members, and feelings about work ethic and success. In interviews, I often asked the following questions: Talk about what your job means to you – what are the benefits and the drawbacks? ...How do you think you are perceived by others – among your family members, friends, and people in the neighborhood? ...If you work hard, stay out of trouble, and treat others the right way, how possible is it that you will be successful? ...Have you ever been ridiculed or looked down upon because you work at a job that doesn’t pay a lot? ...Do you think you could be seen as a role model or a positive example for younger people in this community – why or why not?

As a white, middle class, college-educated male I was compelled to consider how my dissimilar status introduced biases in participants’ behavior and dialogue – and to track, to the best of my ability, my own presuppositions. It should go without saying that I was not subjected to any ill treatment, danger, or ostracism while in the community. Quite the opposite, I was

frequently invited to barbecues and church functions and I genuinely believe that my ethnic dissimilarity abetted my data collection efforts; I was a statistical rarity simply on account of my race and education, and at 5'9" and a bit-closer to 100-than-200 pounds I may have come across as an interesting, low risk, and, at the very least, atypical person to talk to. Additionally, I was well acclimated to settings of urban poverty due to my occupational background and I shared an affinity for much of the music, food, and entertainment that are widely enjoyed in the Fifth Ward. Despite all of this, I was still a young, Caucasian, university-affiliated researcher talking about upward mobility and community standing with individuals who usually possessed not one of these same attributes. I feared that having these conversations would either remind participants of their social immobility or, in some cases, cause them to overlook it in order to come across as affable, upbeat, and un-discouraged. I consulted an older, African American professional with qualitative research experience in the community who advised that participants might be likely to view me as a "sounding board" for sentiments that are deeply felt but not always desirable among one's peer group. I took this advice to be encouraging but remained mindful of my non-native and non-insider status. As a result, regard for participants' social locations (as well as my own), expressions of reflexive self-assessment, and the contextual influences upon dialogue - i.e., setting, audience, topical trajectory, and the push for clarity amid the give-and-take nature of conversation and interaction (Gubrium and Holstein 2009) – was an objective throughout my analysis.

My analysis of the data began by reading fieldnotes and transcripts after several months in the field. I also, at this time, added relevant text messages, voice messages, and jottings involving the participants to the notes. Upon reading the fieldnotes and transcripts, I reached out to several participants to address ambiguities in my notes and get updates on previously

unresolved circumstances (e.g., family conflicts, health troubles, decisions to apply for another job, etc.). I then coded the data along categories that included occupational characteristics and duties, work sensibilities (e.g., likes, dislikes, anxieties, workplace attachment and feelings of estrangement), “future” discourse (e.g., projections, aspirations, expectations), and interpersonal relationships. The coded segments of text were then re-read to identify common themes and sentiments within (and across) the categories. Consistent with my interest in workers’ orientations to progress, achievement, and mobility in the midst of stigma and stagnation, I was especially attentive to the participants’ recognition (and reconciliation) of apparent contradictions between future plans or aspirations and current social locations. Lastly, I applied highlights to notes that seemed to disconfirm or diverge from prevalent discourses.

Findings

Working in a high-poverty, high-joblessness community entails managing the conditions of an often-exacting public environment while having to uphold relationships, responsibilities, and respectable social standing within it. The following sub-sections present my analysis of how these negotiations are carried out and what they mean for workers’ life chances and pursuits of upward mobility. Taken together, the findings lend insight to the contrasting dimensions of job-holders’ community standing, the importance of modesty in negotiating it, and the role of self-determination in constructing resilient visions of upward mobility that are not defeated by – or dependent upon – the meager rewards and respect for low-paid work.

“I just look and shake my head sometimes.” Worker experiences with community conditions

Though she does not view the Fifth Ward as inherently dangerous and has never been the victim of a serious crime, Ella, a 34-year-old single mother of three, has several fears for what the Fifth Ward could show her children. Her eldest son, age 11, comes home from school before she returns from her job as an administrative assistant at a public high school. She insists that he immediately go inside the house and lock the door upon his return – and then send her a text when he has done so. She talks about “scary things” in the community and, when asked to elaborate or give examples, pinpoints winos, smokers (people who are high), gamblers, and incessant “tough talk” characterized by threats of violence and other macho behaviors. She is more comfortable than she once was, but she still does not look forward to shopping or getting gas in the neighborhood: “All the men are soliciting – gawking at you like, ‘That’s a piece of meat’ and ‘Hey miss, how you doin’.’”

More than these behaviors causing direct harm to her or her children, Ella worries about the message that her kids might receive from them. “I hope they see that and get irritated and not want to be like them... That is not a man! Men go to work and treat women respectfully.” Having grown up in and around the Fifth Ward, she has lived in several apartments throughout the area and worked a long list of low-wage jobs in the retail and food service industries. She recently purchased her first single-family home (through a low-income homebuyer assistance program) and crosses her fingers and knocks on wood when she says that she is currently more stable than at any point in her past. Yet and still, she has her misgivings about the surrounding community:

You can’t run from it. Every time I go to the grocery store somebody tries to talk to me. They’re getting a disability check or they don’t want to work. They’re soliciting every time I’m in the store. You go to Family Dollar and it’s dirty; they don’t sweep out front. You go to McDonald’s and kids are playing with the

(drink machine). The neighbors sit out there and drink their beers. Like, come on guys, do something different. Read a book; people don't read books anymore. I don't know, I feel like I'm growing out of the Fifth Ward.

Ella's frustration over the community's negative influences on children and the prevailing sense of incivility echoed the sentiment of other workers, who found the community to be less than accommodating of worker's schedules and family-centered lifestyles. While complaints about littering, loitering, noise, drunks, and inadequate local shopping options were commonplace, anxieties about child rearing revealed far and away the most indicting sentiments about the worker's experiences in the community. Ricky, a 24-year-old employed at a grocery store on the other side of the city, said that although he became a father at 22, he now sees "people having kids at 14, 15, and 16-years-old, and then having one or two more" in the same housing project where he grew up. Aside from expressing doubt about the new mothers' employability and chances for a better financial future, he voiced reservations about the generation – and the community – his son was born into. "Most people are lazy," he declared. Asked to elaborate, he stated:

The opportunities to improve themselves – like going to school or just getting a regular job – those opportunities were not taken or even started upon. I don't feel sorry for them. If that is what they want to do then they can go ahead and do it. But me, I just look and shake my head sometimes.

Several contemporary studies on the urban working poor have granted attention to the kind of disconnection and disapproval that Ricky and Ella articulate regarding the behaviors and lifestyles of some of their fellow community members. Ethnographic evidence from Hays (2003), Dohan (2003), and Newman (2006; 1999) points to issues of identity construction; workers with negligible material or status-related comforts relative to those outside of the workforce find it important to distinguish themselves on account of their work ethic and commitment to a better future. While workers may privately acknowledge the narrow

opportunity structure of their particular occupation, as I'll discuss in a later section, such distinctions are valuable toward asserting moral and economic separation from the "culture" of welfare, shiftlessness, and dependence.

My fieldwork does not contradict this evidence but it also presents instances of workers constructing identities by not merely drawing contrasts or expressing aggravation with their non-working peers, but through community attachment and longstanding identification with the community. Rosalie, a 40-year-old clerical worker at a hospital, spoke of a desire to obtain the not yet EPA-approved "ghetto repellent," mainly for the apartment units across from her home where men congregate, play loud music, and use foul language well after midnight – and where passersby frequently flash a (gang) sign to express approval or solidarity. She said over lunch that certain coworkers are surprised or "interested" as to why she lives in the Fifth Ward – a question she asks herself on occasion: "I grew up around here and it's the most affordable place. We pretty much – no matter who you are or what you may be into – look after each other. But I can't get down like that (i.e., like those at the apartments) and there are times when I think I can do better and leave." Unmarried, with no children (though she contributed substantially in the upbringing of her brother's two children, agreeing to take them on several occasions between 2004 and 2010), and with a stable-if-not-lucrative salary from the hospital, Rosalie almost certainly could "do better," especially if this is taken to mean finding another residence and putting the less inviting elements of the neighborhood behind her. Rosalie's vision of "doing better," however, was not contingent upon a new home, a quieter neighborhood, or even a salary increase but rather upon the sense of personal progress and social mobility that would mark a reward for her honest living. "I never got into trouble..." she told me, "I stayed in school and then, after high school, worked. I think I did what you're supposed to do, and I'm where I'm

supposed to be. You always want more money and fancier things – to feel like you made it, you know - but I shouldn't have to leave for that to happen.”

At low-income levels or with educational backgrounds that may hinder the likelihood of career advancement, the question of whether to remain in the community is a superficial and inconsequential one. As job-holders in the Fifth Ward contend with the effects of concentrated poverty intimately and interpersonally - as evidenced most acutely in child rearing but also in planning routine activities and managing relations with peers – a more pressing question involves locating opportunities for social mobility that are present and attainable from one's current station in life. Ella perceived one such opportunity with regard to her son's forthcoming high school decision. If he elects to attend the local public school over a charter, Ella said he would have a better chance of “jumping out above everyone else. He could make valedictorian. ...My coworker says, ‘You don't want him to be around people that aren't going to challenge him.’ I get it, but we've given him good advantages, and I want him to stand out above the rest.” Even Ricky, who expressed growing disappointment and bemusement with the residents who remain at the housing project, dismissed my suggestion that a difference in values was perhaps at the root of his success relative to those he grew up with. He reminded me that these peers do not treat him differently and that he does not look upon them with any sense of inferiority. Ricky was equally dismissive of my insinuation that having grown up in the projects might have cost him experiences or exposures that could have benefited his career; when I asked if he felt as though he had missed out on anything because of his circumstances, he responded, “Nah, I can't say so. Choices matter above everything else, and I've had a lot of good people in my life that have kept me grounded and kept me from negative things.” Here, much like Rosalie and Ella, Ricky's identity as an upright and honest citizen is formed not solely by positioning himself at a

distance from the shortcomings and challenges of his community, but by drawing reference to his embeddedness within it. Interestingly, he then remarked that he should not be regarded as a beacon of outstanding achievement because he lives with his mother, splits custody of his son with his girlfriend, and makes around \$22,000-a-year. This kind of modesty and reflexive self-consciousness plays an important role in shaping workers' orientations to upward mobility and managing relationships with other community members, which I will now address.

“...Still driving an old raggedy truck:” Job-holders' appraisals of their community standing

Elijah Anderson (1999), outlining the moral and cultural orientations of “decent” and “street” families in north Philadelphia, states that decent families share the “middle class values” of the “wider society” (p. 36) in regard to personal conduct, discipline, and family arrangements. The congruence of values, Anderson suggests, can be explained by social isolation; decent residents, by virtue of their experiences in the workforce and exposures to cultural models beyond the “code of the street,” are less alienated from the middle class and feel less defenseless against an austere public environment and grim prospects for upward mobility.

Due to racial segregation and persistent neighborhood inequality throughout American cities, the contested cultural context that Anderson describes – even if more nuanced than his dichotomy suggests - plays out within relatively narrow spatial confines (Pattillo 1999). As such, concentrated poverty imparts consequences upon daily life that residents cannot wholly avoid or turn a blind eye to. For some, these consequences are stapled into one's past, as marked by a stint in prison or time spent in a gang or involved with drugs. For others, lives on the straight-and-narrow nonetheless feature prominent cameos from addicts, felons, and individuals that require extra monitoring or assistance – either as family members, close friends, exes, or

fathers / mothers of children. While drunk uncles, unruly neighbors, and deadbeat exes are surely not exclusive to neighborhoods like the Fifth Ward, the spatial concentration of these kinds of relationships, interactions, and exposures means that peaceably getting along and staying in favorable social graces requires interpersonal compromise and flexibility. In criminological theory, the concept of *negotiated coexistence* holds that offenders are simultaneously regulated by, and benefit from, neighborhood social organization as they achieve integration into mainstream, law-abiding social networks (Browning, Feinberg, and Dietz 2004: 509). For job-holders, “decent” folks, and “mainstreamers,” this intermeshing of networks and proximity to “the street” intersects with low occupational prestige and financial instability to prompt considerable modesty and self-consciousness in negotiating these relationships with other community members

Reminiscent of Tremaine’s disclaimer about being “just regular, working guys” upon hearing about my interest in research participation, many workers endeavored to downplay the significance of their work. Three different women, for example, laughed off a question about how they could be seen as a role model or a positive example for younger people. Though two eventually referenced their earnest lifestyles, their care for older family members, and various sacrifices that have been made for their children, the women all alluded to their outstretched budgets and feelings of financial vulnerability. One, a 45-year-old hair stylist, remarked, “I feel like I’m the one that should be looking up to others, to be honest.” Another, a 39-year-old transportation employee of the public school district, could not deliver a response as she struggled to fathom that younger people would look up to a bus driver.

In interactions with me, such modesty and downplaying of one’s significance might be attributable to workers’ perceptions of dissimilarities in race / ethnicity, class, and age, as well as

their apprehension for projecting superiority over their peers or coming across as arrogant or self-absorbed (especially in interviews or in instances where they could see I was taking notes). Based on workers' accounts of their status and standing in relation to other community members, however, I began to see that interactions with me were hardly the only interactions affected by self-consciousness. Rashard was 30-years-old when I first met him and, though he did not have a paid position, he hardly fit the description of "low prestige." Raised in the Fifth Ward by a professional mother and an alcoholic father, he earned two bachelor's degrees from the University of Houston and then a Master of Divinity. He lives with a senior minister and is attempting to grow the membership of his self-established church while completing a second graduate degree. Though he presents the confidence, style, and diction of an aspiring leader, he at times senses that his background and status are not in sync with the younger generation and that this may hinder his ability to extend his ministry to younger community members on a less auspicious life course than his own. "I give them what I know," Rashard explains, "I give them the godly perspective. I give them the educational perspective... They want to know the street perspective. For those things - that I'm lacking in - I refer them to someone." Rashard's referral is typically to the senior minister with whom he lives. With a long and troubled history of exploits in the street – which include cocaine trafficking, prison time, and contracting AIDS – this minister told me that younger, particularly "at risk" males, struggle to reconcile their environment and their views of success with Rashard's current position:

When the young men are coming up, they see this (i.e., the street economy). They see the tattoos. They see the money, and it's hard to talk to them (about anything else) because they see the money. They see the Cadillacs. They see the Escalades. They see all that and then they see Rashard. Rashard is still driving an old raggedy truck - and he's got two degrees and this and that.

The raggedy truck stands in contrast to the material markers of social and economic mobility that should accompany - to the younger males that Rashard and the minister attempt to guide, anyway - the credentials that Rashard has accumulated. Rashard was not downcast about his financial future, a disposition likely warranted by his age, educational credentials, and skills. While Rashard and workers of less impressive credentials can entertain the notion that the future will be less trying and more financially stable than the present, their standing before other community members is not exempt from the stigma of perceived immobility and not having secured adequate gains for their sacrifices. Fifth Ward native son Willie D famously raps on a Geto Boys track titled “Aint With Being Broke” about his mother “Bustin’ ass for other folks, getting nowhere fast / While the hoe on the corner makin’ more money selling ass” (1991). Most Fifth Ward residents are familiar with the song and job-holders encounter the sentiment. Caught between doing what American adults are expected to do while not receiving much payment or admiration for it, their status as “just regular, working” people is both reputation-strategic and contextually-bound. To maintain a modest view of their status confers less authority to the raggedy truck and what it represents for undermining an upwardly mobile identity; it also acknowledges that one is structurally-situated through work and that the demoralized sentiments of Willie D must be contended with from this particular social location.

Rashard’s occupation demands that he undertake efforts to engage the most disadvantaged and disconnected members of the community. Other Fifth Ward workers, with lesser incentives for seeking or tolerating individuals who might see them in the same vein as Willie D, appraise their statuses modestly as well, often because of the premium that is placed upon personal liberty and not being seen as judgmental. Tyson, a 41-year old with two adult children, works maintenance at an office building but previously ran a drug organization and

spent time in prison. He feels it is important for him to tell young hustlers in the community to stay in school and that drug money is “not a forever thing” as it will be spent – among the most successful dealers – on lawyer fees and court costs. The hustlers, he said, are only interested in “war stories” from the street and not his work as a maintenance man. A nonjudgmental approach, therefore, is needed to augment the credibility of his message:

They’ve seen me in the street so they know that I know what I’m talking about. I can’t tell you what to do because you’re going to do it anyway. All I can do is give you some advice. ...People respect me because I don’t judge them. If you have never been in the streets like that and you’re looking down on people that are in the streets, of course they’re not going to respect you.

For other workers, being nonjudgmental means steering clear of meddling in others’ affairs. In some instances, this boils down to safety and fears of unknown outcomes (“You got some desperate people out here; who knows how they’ll react?” said a 29-year-old female clerical worker about dice games outside her apartment) but oftentimes workers are reluctant to presuppose others’ needs. This was the case for a chef at senior living facility in a similarly disadvantaged community in another area of the city. Residents’ family members and grandchildren come to the facility and residents will ask that meals be sent to their rooms instead of eating in the dining area. The chef, a black woman in her forties, says that the family members are taking advantage of the facility and, in some cases, taking food out of their elder family member’s mouth (only one meal can be served to each room, though some residents purchase their own food). She declines to intervene, however, as she does not know the severity of the relatives’ circumstances and does not want to deprive a child of what might be his / her only meal of the day.

“...Because of where I came from:” Making a difference when the job does not

Job-holders in the Fifth Ward may appraise their social standing with modesty and self-consciousness, as they may feel that they have little to show for their work and sense that their jobs do not garner much authority or admiration in relationships with community members. They may also approach interventions against public nuisances and neighbors’ hardships cautiously, out of fears of coming across as judgmental, insensitive, or intrusive. Neither propensity, however, signifies a passive acceptance of a relegated or helpless status. In conversations and observations about personal histories and efforts toward upward mobility, narratives of aspiration and personal and familial uplift emerged that speak to how job-holders surmount the tenuous and discouraging aspects of work and champion their dedication and resolve as examples that these qualities do indeed pay off.

Though having a job provides income, structures one’s schedule, affords supportive contacts, and lends credence to claims of upstanding-ness and relative mobility, low-wage workers’ discussions of upward mobility were not intrinsically linked to their work or their job titles. Contrarily, some spoke of their work as having a stifling effect on their pursuit of mobility. Massiel, a Hispanic mother of two young children, told me at a bus stop (it was day time - she was wearing her work uniform for a popular fast food chain while I was in casual clothes with a briefcase – and I remarked that we were both off to our afternoon shifts) that her work at the cashier is “all the same” and does not allow for any adjustments to the usual routine. Since she needs the additional pay, she would like to become the assistant manager. She was approaching two years on the job and when I asked if that much time was sufficient for the promotion, she talked about high turnover and the number of employees that are fired or quit. Her hard work – not cancelling any of her shifts and covering for other employees – is good for

the restaurant, she exclaimed, but she also noted how being an unreliable worker helps the restaurant in the sense that it gives warrant to fire the workers. “They can’t be paying everyone, so if they get you to give up or get you fired, they can get some(body) else back where you started,” she reasoned. Massiel has no immediate plan to give up, and hopes that her work ethic has been proven to the point where her employer cannot see value in her leaving.

Ella, the high school administrative assistant and mother of three who had recently bought her first home when I met her, states that her job is not highly gratifying and expresses anxiety over her job security, either due to a layoff or a transfer to a school further from her home. In an interview about how her neighbors and fellow community members perceive her, Ella voiced a conflicted consciousness about the gainfulness of her work and her current position in light of her past:

Me: ...So in many ways, you seem to have a very stable, middle class life.

Would you agree with that or not?

Ella: I don’t know. I feel poor everyday. I think, from my standpoint, I make money and I have to live kind of...How can I put it? I feel like I can easily be at this level but get too comfortable and fall. I’m just so close to that bottom. I’m nowhere near high; I’m so close to the bottom. People think I have money but, whatever I have, I bargain shop for. I live paycheck-to-paycheck; my paycheck gets split between mortgage and bills. If I lose my job, where will my income come from? I’d be losing this (i.e., the house). But I love my life. I try so hard to do so well because of where I came from. One time I was evicted and I learned from that. You know what I do now? I pay my rent like a month in advance. You’re not going to get me!

Ella told the story of being removed from the apartment by police officers, going to her mother’s house with her belongings, and crying for hours in front of her children. Nearly ten years after that eviction, she listed a number of advantages that her children will have. Though she spoke again of her financial anxieties, one of these advantages was described as “a close, tight-knit family that they’ve seen go through a lot and get back up. Everyone falls off a little bit – I did – but good manners and discipline and organization, they all go a long way.”

For both Ella and Massiel, the means to upward mobility and an improved future are not found within their relatively menial jobs or insecure employment statuses. Weber observed that one of the most distinctive cultural orientations of the Protestant work ethic was that which conceived work as a calling – a virtue in and of itself (i.e., *living to work*) – rather than as a means toward meeting basic consumption needs (i.e., *working to live*) (2001). Ella, Massiel, and other Fifth Ward workers sensing the financial and emotional constraints of their employment exemplify the Protestant ethic by offering their labor as constitutive of virtue; covering for co-workers' missed shifts becomes an expression of loyalty and diligence while recovering from past hardship becomes a way to demonstrate discipline and resilience to children. The compulsion to prove one's moral worthiness, which Weber identified as the motivating force behind the capital accumulation and reinvestment that defined the spirit of capitalism, drives one to work for the satisfaction of spiritual – rather than purely material – needs. The work itself, however, retains little intrinsic value for these workers, who quite literally are *working to live* as in the traditionalist, pre-Protestant Ethic model.

This duality of objectives within the institution of work places substantial demands upon the individual agency of workers, who are tasked with making ends meet as well as making moral sense of their difficulties to do so. Amid insufficient wages, nagging feelings of vulnerability, and rational doubts about the equity of their employment, personal undertakings and moral commitments become critical toward sustaining hopes for what might be possible in the future. When accounting for troubled or disadvantaged backgrounds – either individually or within the community at large - these personal undertakings serve as badges of triumph and perseverance that workers invoke as examples of progress, self-improvement, and the keys to self-sufficiency. Manny, a single father of a 6-year-old daughter, discussed his work – that of a

self-employed exterminator with an income of just over \$20,000 – as an unlikely but mobility-affirming conquest over his past, which includes a decade-long cocaine addiction and two-year jail stint:

I'm telling you, I believe that I am experiencing the American Dream. I really didn't think – in the beginning – that I would; I thought that was the end of it. It wasn't the end, and I'm really grateful and enjoying life right now in a way that I've never enjoyed it before. Being able to be a real father – a hands-on father – I would have never thought that 20 years ago or 10 years ago.

The example that Manny sets for other community members may not be a neatly-trimmed pathway to wealth, but it is a model of self-determination and perseverance that, for many, easily defeats the alternatives. A barber in his late-forties, Dale, reflected on 15 years of observing clients and stated that although “the environment is one thing – we have some things that are not readily available (in this) community that should be available,” no one is compelled to make harmful choices. “The most striking thing,” he said of watching several male clients grow up, “has been realizing the power and influence of friendships on the decisions that a lot of people make... The people that are around them are really, really influential on the path that they take.” Attempting to influence their paths in his own subtle way, the barber keeps his college degree on the wall of the shop. He does so because “young minorities see cars and jewelry and they probably see rap and basketball as the only means to get it.” He then elaborated, “It's not that I need people to know that I graduated or that (the alma mater) is so illustrious; it just says that ‘He went to college. He got the degree. He has the barber shop.’ It gives a see-able, tangible outcome for higher education.”

Discussion

High rates of joblessness within minority-populated, urban communities have been linked to a profusion of harmful outcomes and have prompted a new wave of anti-poverty initiatives aimed at promoting workforce participation. The overriding assumption is that communities with high concentrations of poverty and long histories of joblessness will function better if inhabited by working residents who, under this logic, bring income, a structured lifestyle, and models of self-reliance and responsibility. Such benefits of workforce participation are thus seen to counteract the effects of concentrated poverty and grant legitimacy to the realization of upward mobility among residents of disadvantaged communities (Wilson 1996; Haskins and Mead 2013; Edsall 2014).

In this article, I presented evidence that job-holding status within a high-poverty neighborhood indeed affects workers' framing of their life chances and mobility prospects, but not strictly on account of the purported economic or moral benefits of work. In order to retain faith in the "achievement from hard work" ethos of the American Dream, job-holders must wade through financial vulnerability, stigmatized labor, and the emotional and interpersonal implications of low-prestige work, which often manifest in an inclination to downplay one's capacity to influence others and a fear of being seen as judgmental, intrusive, or insensitive. These experiences give rise to a social standing characterized by modesty and self-consciousness - which workers speak openly about in direct reference to the constraints of low-wage work – but also a commitment to self-determination and setting examples of perseverance.

The implications of this balance between constraint-imposed self-consciousness and agentic visions of self-determination are fascinating and manifold, and merit further discussion and some instructions for future research. To temporarily adopt a broad – even if reductionist –

lens: Low-income workers retain confidence in their abilities to overcome a disadvantaged background but remain guarded in their assessments of the institution widely assumed to be the backbone of economic mobility (i.e., the workforce). Despite the possible temptation to explain this via “culture of poverty” or “cultural deficiency” arguments holding that subcultural value systems within poor urban communities oppose, resist, or perceive no obligation to the institution of work (Gilder 1981; Murray 1984; Mead 1985), the narratives of the job-holders I encountered in the Fifth Ward do not bear this out. For one, each of these individuals had already obtained and committed one’s self to a job at the time that I first met them. Though workers expressed varying sentiments about whether they saw themselves remaining with their current employer (which cannot be regarded as an indication of discouragement anyway, as upward mobility can demand leaving one job and taking a better one), none of the participants were working under compulsion or against their own volition. This, combined with the overhaul of government assistance against the provision of strictly need-based transfers to the poor, weakens the appeal of arguments that work has been dis-incentivized and is not seen as obligatory within poor neighborhoods. Furthermore, the job-holders commitments to working life and its many demands are sustained not by compulsion, resistance, or defeatist attitudes, but rather by aspiration; the workers believe that they can – and in many cases *will* – forge a future that is more profitable, fulfilling, and less strained than the present.

It is not the case that these job-holders have lost all hope in the economic, social, or moral value of work; for many, status as a job-holder is vital toward justifying claims of relative mobility and upstanding-ness while permitting some optimism about the future. It is the case, from my observations, that work – and certainly that of the low-paid and low-prestige variety - is not held as the principal mechanism for bringing these aspirations to fruition. As Massiel, the

fast food worker, stated: “The job cannot be counted on – no, no. I think I always have to be ready to try something different, and do something for myself.” Massiel, recall, was fully cognizant of the high turnover and replaceability that characterizes her occupation and it is possible that this awareness, along with stagnant wages and poor benefits and limited opportunities for promotion, has begun to erode the puritanical, moralistic devotion to work. Concurrently, confidence in work ethic and the self-determination of one’s standing in life appear well intact. Workers’ endorsements of individual agency in this way resonate with the cultural imperative to be self-reliant and to view one’s social status as a function of personal choices, and workers do in fact *live to work*, in the Weberian sense, because of the negligible rewards of work apart from the virtues which it inheres. It is thus striking to note how these virtues - self-determination, discipline, and foregoing immediate gratification in favor of long-term stability - are articulated and endorsed within a context of powerful institutional (i.e., the workforce) constraints. The vow to “do something for one’s self” and “count on no one” evinces an assertion of individual agency wherein the individual’s toughness, independence, perseverance, and pride represent a means to negotiate statuses not achieved solely by individual undertakings, but structurally-defined by positions in the workforce and community.

Though research to bring greater discernment to these considerations is of course invited, future research could also be well served to take interest in this article’s limitations. Data collection for this study occurred within an extended ethnographic project based in a single community and was contingent upon personal contacts, happenstance encounters, and resident referrals. Job-holders were but one of several groups that I set out to study and, as is the case in ethnographic research, my “sample” is bound by the access I could achieve. Though pleased with the vividness and intricacy of the data (for which I am grateful to the participants), I openly

admit that my data could not sufficiently capture gendered and ethnic dimensions of employment that I presume bear implications upon one's assessments of upward mobility and community standing. Given that industrial restructuring and trends in metropolitan employment have imposed austere consequences for males of low educational and technical credentials, along with persisting concern over the assimilation and mobility trajectories of Hispanics residing in disadvantaged urban communities (Telles and Ortiz 2008; Vallejo 2012), the roles of gender and ethnicity warrant much further investigation. Research on the mobility trajectories of Hispanics residing not in barrios or traditional immigrant gateways, but in poor, multi-ethnic communities such as the Fifth Ward would mark a valuable contribution to the literature as well.

Another limitation comes not from the collection of data but from the ambiguities of interpretation. I analyzed my data to inform how job-holding status in a neighborhood with elevated rates of poverty and joblessness shapes workers' orientations to upward mobility, stigma, and community standing - an endeavor motivated by theoretical and political interest in the constructive value of work within poor communities. Job-holders are surely not alone in their concern for these topics, however, and my constricted analytical focus may not support interpretations that extend beyond job-holders or the role that job-holding plays in shaping social standing and outlooks of mobility. Also, future research should look beyond the mere status of holding a job, as analyzed in this article, and consider how workers' relationship with their work perhaps modifies or mediates the findings I have presented. Just as Dale, the barber with a college degree, expressed a civic and extra-economic function for his work, factors such as workplace autonomy, benefits and job security, accommodating shift schedules, and the degree of social integration in one's work may provide valuable points of leverage for workers – even at low-incomes – to chart their courses to more fulfilling and prosperous careers. Further

investigating these workers' relationships to (and the conditions within) their work appears to represent a logical next step for these inquiries into job-holders' agency and mobility prospects amid structurally-imposed disadvantage.

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That “Every Man For Himself” Thing: The Rationales of Individualism Among the Urban Poor

Abstract

Individualism is a frequently referenced but seldom inspected topic within urban poverty literature. Residents of low-income communities may internalize their social immobility and perceive status to be determined by personal choices, behaviors, and psychological or moral shortcomings, but scholars generally depict such individualistic outlooks as only a byproduct of more predominant community dysfunctions. As a result, individualism – an ambiguous and confounding concept at all social strata – can assume an especially disapproving tenor when applied to the urban poor, often connoting qualities of defensiveness, ignorance, and quixotic hope. In this article, I draw from ethnographic fieldwork in Houston’s Fifth Ward community to investigate how individualism is asserted and why it is valued within a context of compromised prospects for positive self-determination. I explain how defensiveness against vulnerability, violence, and volatile relationships is just one rationale for individualism that is exercised alongside other, still structurally-framed rationales on the viability of social mobility.

Introduction

Despite the adage that “it takes a village to raise a child” and increased awareness of the contextual determinants of poverty, many residents of poor urban communities conceive their economic misfortune in particularly individualistic terms (Anderson 1999; Newman 1999; Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Edler, and Sameroff 1999; Smith 2007). Individual attributes of work ethic, ability, and perseverance are widely held as the ingredients for future prosperity (MacLeod 1987; Hochschild 1995; Hays 2003; Young 2004) and when the limitations and insufficiency of these qualities become apparent, self-blame, defensiveness, and internalized

failure can set in (Bourgois 1995; Black 2009; Nunnally and Carter 2012). As structurally-disaffirming and paradoxical as these individualistic conceptions of status and mobility may seem, few works of scholarship have endeavored to understand the logic, utility, and resonance of individualism within a context of constrained outlets for positive self-determination.

The topic of individualism is not an uncharted territory in urban poverty literature; it is typically cast, however, as a mere consequence of community dysfunction. Accordingly, individualism is referenced as a byproduct of such maladies as ineffective public institutions (Wacquant 1998; Furstenberg et al. 1999); pervasive violence and distrust of law enforcement (Anderson 1999); the difficult entryway, stigmatization, and feeble rewards of the “low-skilled” workforce (Smith 2007; Newman 1999); the volatility of close interpersonal relationships (spurred by joblessness and financial vulnerability) (Liebow 1967; Anderson 1989; Wilson 1996); and isolation from the institutions and individuals that can expose the barriers in the way of mobility (Young 2004). Owing to this narrative of community dysfunction, poverty research often depicts the agency-affirming outlooks and individualistic commitments of the urban poor as essentially a myth – one that defends the ego in the face of an exacting environment and reflects the deceptive allure of the American Dream and its individualistic “achievement ideology” (MacLeod 1987; Hochschild 1995). How, after all, could faith in individual self-determination be justified when the resources needed to realize it are so inadequate, the examples of its limitations so abundant, and the propensity for disappointment and internalized failure so imminent?

This article probes the value, meaning(s), and logic of individualism among residents of a high-poverty, traditionally disadvantaged urban community. Drawing from 18 months of fieldwork in Houston’s Fifth Ward with groups of low-wage workers, high school students,

juvenile probationers, and “old heads,” I present an ethnographic account of neighborhood residents appraising their capacities to determine their fates and realize more auspicious futures in the face of complex, often conflicting - and at times downright discouraging - messages about achievement and upward mobility. After discussing the interpretations of individualism within urban poverty research and its purported rationale among those occupying marginalized social locations, I submit that individualism is not solely a response to hardship, vulnerability, and community dysfunction that protects an image of self-reliance, self-respect, and self-defense (the “self hyphens,” as I have come to term them); it is also a device for consciously negotiating (and confronting) diverse messages about what the individual is capable of becoming in the world. These more expressive and meritocratic rationales for individualism call into question previous theoretical conceptions of protective individualism and ultimately implore a new regard for individual agency that is neither astructural nor attributed to isolation, ignorance, or desperation.

For Better or For (Having Done) Worse: Individualism and Poverty

Broadly defined as the belief in the inherent dignity, sanctity, and agentic-capacity of the human person, individualism has been said to stand at the core of American culture and yet it generates perpetual suspicion and disagreement (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton 2008: 142). In some social circles, individualism is but a myth – a dirty little lie instructing that the pursuit of success is every man for himself; one’s wealth, accomplishments, and status have been earned; everyone else has not worked as hard and likely covets the fruit of others’ labor. Under this view, individualism connotes a protective, defensive, and even pugilistic stance against inclusiveness and redistribution (Barlow 2013: 188). Even for those with less dismissive or pessimistic orientations, the concept remains fraught with ambiguity over the proper

distinction between the community and the individual, the public and the private, the structure and the agent. The earliest discussions of American individualism, from Tocqueville in the 1830's, were marked by premonitions of "soft despotism" whereby Americans "imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands" and grow isolated from civic engagement and the belief in shared responsibility (1835). In contemporary times, the "individualistic" and "communitarian" orientations of Americans continue to command heavy scrutiny (Selznick 1992; Ehrenhalt 1995; Putnam 2000) and our dominant political parties differ profoundly on the capacity of the individual to "make oneself" (Recall the "You didn't build that!" versus "We built it!" exchange between President Obama and the Republican National Committee throughout the 2012 presidential campaign).

Viewed with respect to the urban poor, individualism and the capacity to make oneself invite these same questions and disagreements but also collide with prevailing narratives about class, race and ethnicity, culture, and upward mobility. America's achievement ideology is such that social statuses are earned and not inherited, ascribed, or accidental; unequal outcomes are thus traceable to unequal demonstrations of ability, effort, and ambition. While such an ethos is indeed a source of promise and optimism, it also functions to condemn and blame those who have struggled to establish footing on America's mobility ladder. A prominent explanation of persisting poverty in many (usually minority-populated) urban communities holds that lowered aspirations and defeatist, fatalistic views of one's agency impede the attainment of upward mobility. Under this view, commonly referred to as "cultural deficiency" or "the culture of poverty," the subcultural adaptation to marginalized status among the urban poor represents a distinctive - and rather disempowered - view of the individual that becomes a driving force perpetuating social immobility (Lewis 1968; Gilder 1981; Mead 1992). In the more "structural"

accounts of urban poverty, individuals are nonetheless said to misapprehend their agentic ability (and its limitations) due to isolation from mobility-engendering institutions (Wilson 1987; 1996), socialization into the ethos of equal opportunity (MacLeod 1987), and frustration in bringing the content of their (un-lowered) aspirations to fruition (Gans 1991). Hence, just as the individualistic prescriptions of the American achievement ideology can be cited to inspire initiative and optimism, they also support ascriptions of culpability and inadequacy for having failed to secure one's sizeably portioned piece of the pie.

“Being broke is so un-American:” Rationales of Individualism

This lyric from Nipsey Hussle – rapper, entrepreneur, Rollin' 60's Crip, and men's clothing designer (not to mention esteemed scholar and exemplar of American social mobility) – reminds that despite supporting ascriptions of shiftlessness and cultural deficiency, individualism can be invoked as a motivational, wealth-producing, and even patriotic ethos on status and mobility. Icons from Gary Cooper and James Dean to John Rambo (Sly Stallone) and Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) all conjure notions of the “rugged” individualist who find indomitable – even if alienating – power and worth through surmounting or disregarding their respective social locations and the structural constraints that frame them. The charge that individualism is merely an ideologically convenient mask over inequality, discrimination, and the value of social embeddedness is hereby not inaccurate, but misses the mark; to pursue prosperity (either in the form of wealth, love, justice, or redemption) often entails charging ahead and perhaps “going it alone” in order to evade poverty, squandered potential, and / or social malaise. In this sense, the axioms of Benjamin Franklin in *Poor Richard's Almanack* – “Plow deep, while sluggards sleep, and you shall have corn to sell and to keep” – are quite similar in

spirit to those of Nipsey Hussle: “Before you ball, gotta grind first / ‘Cause the Palazzo is a far cry from Brynhurst (i.e., his native street in Los Angeles’ Hyde Park neighborhood)” (Franklin 1990; Nipsey Hussle 2009; Bellah et. al 2008).

But do these axioms really instruct anything about social mobility? Beyond reaffirming already prevalent messages of self-reliance and work ethic, do these individualistic prescriptions for prosperity offer any guidance or comfort to legitimately propel economic success? Because of the spatial concentration of poverty and disadvantage within select neighborhoods of American cities, and because of the historical and newly emerging barriers to class mobility (e.g., declines in real wages, jobless growth, increasingly corporatized and class-segregating schools, etc.), the commitment to individualism among the urban, minority poor requires confidence not only in one’s own abilities, but also in the possibility of ascendance above the fates and outcomes that are common within one’s local context. Such “come ups” as they are often called, or “turnaround narratives” (Harding 2010), involve reconciling one’s perceived credentials or preparedness for social mobility with the availability (or accessibility) of means to achieve it. Here, in these reconciliations, endorsements of the achievement ideology and its individualistic conception of mobility come under scrutiny in the literature.

Classic ethnographies on black urban poverty from Kenneth Clark (1965), Ulf Hannerz (1969), and Lee Rainwater (1970) demonstrate how recurrent experiences with structural constraints give rise to feelings of inadequacy and disappointment, leading to tempered views of one’s self-efficacy. In recent decades, scholars have encountered and attempted to explain a different manifestation of self-efficacy: declarations of self-determination and personal autonomy. Among unemployed job-seekers, Sandra Susan Smith (2007) attributes individualism (i.e., shunning assistance from others and pursuing employment independently) to the desire to

protect one's reputation and maintain a self-reliant, ambitious image. In an ethnography of Puerto Rican adult brothers with different ties to the drug trade, Timothy Black (2009) recounts when one brother challenged his associates to recognize how racism, the criminal justice system, and limited opportunities had shaped their circumstances; he was laughed at, deemed "uppity," and his toughness and loyalty to the group were called into question. Frank Furstenburg and colleagues (1999) link individualistic parenting styles (i.e., not trusting neighbors and attempting to insulate adolescents from community influences) in a low-income Philadelphia neighborhood to insufficient public services and weak institutional infrastructure.

In each of these accounts, individualistic outlooks of social status and mobility are presented as derivatives of varying dimensions of community dysfunction. The endorsement of the dominant American achievement ideology and its individualistic precepts is traced to "the paucity of extant ideological alternatives (that) is reinforced by the lack of money, organizational connections, and emotional space to develop an alternative on one's own" (Hochschild 1995: 217) and adherence to "public scripts" due to having "little else to rely on besides the conventional understandings of how mobility unfolds" (Young 2004:181-2). Without thoroughly exploring individualism or considering its full range of meanings and ambiguities, it is nonetheless assumed to spawn narrow, unrefined, and unchecked self-concepts incapable of revealing one's capacities, limitations, and standing relative to others. In the sections that follow, I grant greater focus to the meaning and utility of individualism within a high-poverty community. After an overview of the setting and participants, I show that assertions of individual agency – more than just face-saving, dysfunction-induced scripts that project autonomy, mask uncertainty, or channel desperation – include expressive and meritocratic rationales for negotiating diverse messages about status, achievement, and mobility.

Community Context, Participants, and Fieldwork

In May of 2013, I began an ethnographic study addressed to understandings of upward mobility and thoughts about wealth, poverty, and class among residents of Houston's Fifth Ward. With poverty rates that approach or exceed 50% in each of its census tracts, the Fifth Ward is the lowest-income community (median household income: \$20,326) of Houston's 88 recognized Super Neighborhoodsⁱ ("Median Household Income: City of Houston by Super Neighborhoods" 2013). Despite extensive poverty and abundant evidence of neglect, there is a prevailing sense, both within and outside of the community, that conditions are improving or at least different than in the past. In its heyday of infamy, the community was described as "the most vicious quarter of Texas" (West 1979); "the toughest, meanest, baddest ghetto in Texas" ("When we exposed..." 1980); "a brutal, alcohol-sodden, desperately poor jungle where killing is done with no compunction, rape with no seduction" (West 1979); and "a poorer and tougher place (relative to Houston's other historically black neighborhoods)" (Broyles 1976). Today, many Fifth Warders cite stray dogs as the greatest threat to personal safety (Lomax 2014); from late 2012 through June of '14, not one homicide was recorded in the community.

While incipient gentrification has provoked claims that Fifth Ward's "days are numbered" (Lomax 2014), the transitions that appear underway – and the community's identity at large – remain largely indeterminate. Widely seen as the historical heart of black Houston (Broyles 1976), the demographic profile is split almost evenly between blacks (52%) and Hispanics (44%) ("Race/Ethnicity: City of Houston by Super Neighborhoods" 2012) and is quickly trending toward a Hispanic majority. While the street economy has "dried up" according to several older drug dealers that I spoke with – with the tide shifting from "selling" (e.g., drugs) to "taking" (e.g., robberies, burglaries, identity theft) – cocaine and crack, prostitution, and illegal

gambling remain readily accessible and their attendant “hustles” govern the social order of numerous blocks, corner stores, and the physical spaces between them (e.g., alleyways and rear parking lots). Lyons Avenue, the Fifth Ward’s principal east-west thoroughfare, has been the benefactor of strategic beautification and redevelopment efforts and now boasts mixed-income housing developments, a public art exhibit and performance stage, a miniature water park, and a renovated performing arts theater. Meanwhile, Jensen Drive and Lockwood Drive, the two primary north-south thoroughfares, are in heavy decay, lined with dilapidated structures, liquor stores, and a few small barber shops and beauty salons. The community is situated within minutes from Downtown, four major expressways, the Port of Houston, as well as the vibrant and commercially-viable Houston Heights and EaDo neighborhoods, yet only 42% of all Fifth Ward residents ages 16 and older are in the labor force (“Employment Status for the Population 16 Years and Over: City of Houston by Super Neighborhoods 2014). Though I did not choose to do research in this community for any of these reasons, I often thought that the blatant contrasts between concerted investment and conceded inefficiency, promise and disillusionment, indignity and redemption all marked a unique and fitting backdrop for my inquiries about reversing fortunes and realizing potential.

Throughout my time in the community – which has by no means come to an end – I assisted a community development corporation with outreach and research; served as a counselor at an open admission after-school program; maintained contact with 23 employed, primary-household-earner adults (ages 24 to 57, median = 37) who live in the Fifth Ward; tracked the experiences of three Hispanic 16-year-olds (2 Salvadoran Americans, 1 Mexican American) on juvenile probationⁱⁱ; met regularly with three pastors and two youth ministers from local congregations; grew acquainted with several residents at two low-income housing complexes (a

multifamily, Houston Housing Authority property and a privately-owned senior housing complex); “chopped it up” at a record store specializing in Houston and Fifth Ward hip-hop, and spent countless hours in my favorite po’boy, fish, and chicken spots. My frequent walks in the community, waits at bus stops, and attendance at barbecues, church, Bible study, and community events also contributed significantly to my socializing – or “data collection.”

The most profitable fieldwork sites for this study were the after-school program and the housing complexes. The after-school program meets three-nights-a-week throughout the academic year and emphasizes scholastic and spiritual enrichment for middle and high school students. It is held in the conference room of a Baptist church and, with no admissions criteria or attendance requirements, the program plays host on any given night to dropouts, honor students with AP-loaded schedules, teenage mothers, and teens just looking to “get away from my Mom” or be served dinner. Due to the program’s mission (“producing college-bound, Christian leaders”) and formal messages about scholastic achievement and college attendance, the youths in this program received direct exposure to the achievement ideology underlying the individualistic character of the American Dream. In small group discussions, lessons (i.e., 15-20 minute lectures about such topics as accountability, humility, and self-worth), and tutoring sessions, I acquired access to the insights and considerations that these young people entertained in order to reconcile their plans and hopes for achievement with their modest socioeconomic standings.

My contacts in the housing complexes would likely be considered “old heads” by the participants in the after-school program. Though some are only in their early forties, harsh experiences and illness have a way of aging a person such that the violent deaths of children and long bouts with drugs – not to mention AIDS, PTSD, and acute respiratory failure – prompted

some of the most reflective and harrowing conversations from my time in the field. With individuals ranging in age from 42 to 84, my interviews and conversations with these individuals took place in their residences, apartment courtyards, and restaurants and centered upon their triumphs, regrets, community recollections, and concerns for younger generations.

Since I am a white male, residents often inquired as to why I was there and thus all participants were made aware of my research and the possibility of publication. I did not encounter any complications regarding mistrust or a perceived “outsider” status; workers and older community members were not only highly receptive to conversations about the community and their life stories, but they frequently (and graciously) invited me to cookouts and church functions. Even in the housing project and with individuals of tenuous legal standing, I was only twice suspected as police and was asked if I “had a plug” on (i.e., a way of procuring) weed at least once-a-week. My occupational background in settings of urban poverty, my familiarity with such cultural reference points as music, movies, and clothing, and – perhaps most of all - my relationships with parents, siblings, and significant others of many participants all contributed substantially to building trust and rapport.

My observations and conversations were recorded in field notes, usually taken upon my return to the office or my apartment if not recorded onsite via notepad or cell phone. Field notes contained running logs of over 80 individuals ranging in age from 11 to 84 - all of whom reside in the Fifth Ward and consented to my taking notes or asking questions for the purpose of research (with the assurance of confidentiality, although a majority never inquired). Given the abstractness of the topic and the exploratory nature of the research, I sought participants to “sample for range” (Weiss 1994) – in occupational background, age, and life experiences – more so than representativeness. I thus concede that the design of this study renders it inadequate for

extrapolating the forthcoming analysis to specific groups or populations; my aim, rather, was to ascertain the breadth and variation of a concept that is widely discussed in uniform and derivative terms with respect to cultural contexts and urban poverty. As such, I asked questions and engaged in conversations about what it means to be successful, what impedes (or has impeded) the pursuit of such success, what must be done to realize a more comfortable and/or fulfilling future, and why Fifth Ward residents struggle to avoid poverty more than residents in other communities? Over the course of this research I also interviewed four ministers (3 Methodists, 1 Baptist), two local business owners (a barbershop and staffing agency), a juvenile probation officer, and the president of a community development corporation.

Analysis

The following sections describe the various rationales of individualism that were observed in my fieldwork. I discuss three rationales – protective, expressive, and meritocratic – not for the purpose of distinguishing or reducing their relevant attributes as in a typology (McKinney 1969) but rather to showcase the breadth and plurality of individualism as a structural form. I begin with a discussion of protective individualism, which has emerged as the predominant construct of the self within urban poverty literature under such designations as “defensive” (Smith 2007), “narrow” (Wacquant 1998), “survivor” (Jones 2010), and “isolated” (Furstenberg et al. 1999) individualism. The subsequent discussions of the expressive and meritocratic rationales present accounts of Fifth Ward residents rebuking, perceiving limitations, and considering alternatives to protective individualism’s inherent atomism and isolation. Together, these sections provide evidence of individualism’s diverse meanings, even when the

outlets for self-determination are understood as constrained, as well its value for coming to terms with inequality and disadvantage.

‘Round Here: Where Protective Individualism Comes From

After a lesson on stewardship and making a constructive impact on one’s peers, participants at the after-school program broke into small groups to address a series of discussion questions, one of which asked, “Who is a role model that has set positive examples for you? What have you learned from this person?” Rasaul, a black, 17-year-old, second generation Cuban American, told his group members:

I don’t really have any role models. I just try to do me. People can let you down, and why would you look to someone else for how to live your own life? I guess I admire people who are independent – providing for their families and making it on their own.

The sentiment that peers and fellow community members are prone to let one down and should not be trusted features prominently in the discussion of individualism in urban poverty literature. Within the framework of community dysfunction – bolstered by accounts of contested and unsafe public space and weak institutions of social control (Anderson 1999; Wilson 1996; Furstenberg et al. 1999), volatile intimate and peer relationships (Liebow 1967; Anderson 1989), and reticence toward assisting or vouching for individuals who seem prone to ominous outcomes (Smith 2007; Newman 1999) – the “people can let you down” narrative finds resonance. Kusserow (2004) references this narrative specifically in her ethnographic work in Queens, NY and deems it “hard protective individualism” – protecting the self against the violence and hardships of the local environment (p. 27). Smith (2007) articulates “defensive individualism” similarly in the context of job-searching and Jones (2010), in research addressed to black female violence, speaks of “a disturbing sense of individualism” that manifests in a “survivor mentality”

marked by “a lack of interest in collective survival and an almost obsessive concern with one’s own“ (p. 161).

In the Fifth Ward, evidence of this “hard,” “defensive,” and “survivor” individualism is prolifically on display. Young males wear t-shirts with the tropes (often popularized in rap songs) “Self-Made,” “Can’t Knock The Hustle,” “All Grind, No Luck,” and “Don’t Hate Me Cuz You Aint Me.” The fixation with hate and “haters” is particularly evincing of a defensive and protective stance, as it presupposes that there are others who not only stand in the way of one’s success but who fundamentally oppose it. A 21-year-old female who frequently visits her mother at the housing project (her mother often watches her young daughter) once explained, “Haters are like blockers, man. They block you from what you’re trying to get at. They may act like they care but they don’t; they’re out for themselves ...and they’ll f*ck you up in the process, believe that!”

Illicit activities and exposures to violence, quite predictably, entail protective measures that serve to neutralize contextual threats. Young males involved in drug sales often attribute their entry into the drug game to “stupidity,” “negative influences,” and “not thinking right” but justify their continued participation via appeals to competition and personal initiative; a 26-year-old marijuana dealer remarked that “the hustle is always out there” and that if he were to stop dealing the only certain outcome would be more money in the pockets of other dealers. Another, a 21-year-old on probation, said that “hunger” was the key to success – in terms of both making profits and staying out of jail – because laziness makes “an easier job for police.” On the topic of guns – a staple in the tradition of American, protective individualism (Barlow 2013) – carriers affirm that they’ll never “get caught slippin’” (i.e., a rival or criminal opportunist will not encounter them without a gun) and that, as the popular saying goes, they would “rather be caught

with it (i.e., and face consequences under the law) than without it.” Stacy, a 46-year-old woman in a wheelchair (she was shot in the back in the early ‘90’s) barred from possessing a firearm under the terms of her residency in a public housing complex, keeps a .9 mm pistol under her sofa cushion and in her purse, mainly for when she comes home from the bus stop at night. Asked if she has ever needed to use it, she replied, “Nah, but I feel safe with it – and that’s the best feeling in the world: to feel safe. Sometimes I kind of wish someone would come try to bother, but ‘round here they just ain’t got the balls.”

Every one of these statements, attitudes, and tropes can be (and have been) traced to the demands upon maintaining much lauded “self hyphens” - self-reliance, self-respect, and self-defense – within an impoverished and tumultuous neighborhood context (Bourgois 1995; Wilson 1996; Anderson 1999; Jones 2009). Indeed, dismissing “haters” as greedy and egocentric opportunists, satisfying economic exigencies in a ubiquitous hustle where everyone is out to extract a quick buck anyway, and questioning the temerity of potential robbers or thieves evoke the entrepreneurship and courage endorsed by the likes of Nipsey Hussle or even Nick Grindel (who delivered the famous “This town ain’t big enough for the both of us” line in *The Western Code*). They also evoke a sense of atomistic individualism, wherein the individual is seen as the sole indivisible unit of the social order, with all outcomes, events, and processes thus contingent upon the actions and interests of individuals. It is from these expressions of defensiveness, blinkered bravado, and volitional isolationism (i.e., when competition and distrust characterize relationships) that poverty scholars broach individualism with a disapproving tenor and invoke the community dysfunction framework to explain it.

As described above, this protective, self hyphen-defending posture against all that is external to the individual is not overstated or without empirical basis. The community

dysfunction framework, moreover, showcases the structural origins and practical uses of protective individualism, but it does not – as the following section will address – represent a complete, structurally-accountable characterization of how Fifth Ward residents appraise and exert their capacities for resisting (and surmounting) contextual constraints.

Becoming Who You Want: Weighing mobility and structural disadvantage via expressive individualism

One of the ironies of protective individualism is that for all of the renunciations of depending on anyone but the self, and despite the heavy onus that is placed upon personal initiative and ability, it can be precariously fate-sealing. Beyond legitimating distrust and noncooperation toward authority figures (Anderson 1999), compromising collective efficacy (Morenoff, Sampson, and Raudenbush 2001), and encouraging isolative child-rearing practices (Furstenberg et al. 1999), defensive responses to marginalized status may not project the cultural capital and “well-roundedness” that Americans commonly associate with social mobility. These responses can also undermine humility, trust, and a good reputation, which Tito observed after lending money to a young man who congregates with friends on the corner down the street from his senior housing complex. A recipient of a Distinguished Service Medal from the U.S. Army for his service in Korea, Tito advised me in his apartment: “Everyone wants to be top dog out here – you’d think there were a million of ‘em. But then when people think you have power and they come to you for help, they realize you’re broke and can’t do sh*t for ‘em. Your image is crushed then.”

Like Tito, many Fifth Ward parents and young adults decipher that resilience, independence, and regard for the afore mentioned self-hyphens are as much (or more) about image as a mobility strategy. Accordingly, and many recognize that sheer grit and perseverance

are not sufficient for realizing an improved economic future. For parents and “old heads,” experiences involving frequent layoffs, prolonged financial vulnerability, and arbitrary misfortune (illnesses, house fires, the financial strain of caring for the child of a deceased, incarcerated, or overburdened relative’s child, etc.) have revelatory value for apprehending the various impediments in the way of “making” one’s self strictly on effort and volition. Ella, a 34-year-old single mother of three employed as an administrative assistant at a public high school, distinguished between “making it through” and “making it.” Her determination and work ethic, as well as her mother’s support, were cited as reasons for making it through an eviction and layoffs from several low-wage jobs in retail and fast food. She had not made it, she explained, because she still feels poor and could be an accident or layoff away from “losing everything.” In order to make it, one has to “have advantages,” which Ella identified as “wealthy parents,” “good schools,” and “scholarships and ways to pay for school.”

For younger people, projecting what will be necessary to “make it” and be successful can entail facing up to some popular, but not always consistent, messages on status attainment. In a small group discussion at the after-school program about living with passion and purpose, two high-achieving high school seniors felt obliged to expound upon the prevailing sentiment of their group members that working hard and “applying oneself” are “really important to becoming who you want to be.” Both students – a black male and female from different low-income housing complexes – stated that consistent hard work leads to “higher expectations” that perhaps cannot be satisfied strictly through one’s own effort. The female forewarned: “I might breakdown or need more help, or just need to get better and faster at doing everything.” At an outdoor barbecue, when the emcee took the mic and declared, “This next joint is for everyone grindin’ and having that money. N*ggas see all this and want in but sit around on their broke ass. I work

hard for my money and I know some of y'all do too," a male attendee with a long beard, likely no older than 30 – in an unabashed mockery of the defensive egoism on display – yelled back, "Yeah! For real! You and everyone else, right playa?" to the laughter of some of the crowd members.

In each of these instances, the atomistic conception of the individual – that which pursues his / her interests independent of external assistance or infringement – comes into question. Despite the atomistic and methodological individualism (i.e., attributing causality to the actions of individuals) of the achievement ideology and the American Dream – and all of the credos that make it appealing and believable ("You can do anything you want if you put your mind to it!") – the importance of social capital, embeddedness, and support do not go unappreciated. For a high school senior cognizant that her household members can no longer provide help with homework, a parent who must concede that her children are relatively disadvantaged, or merely a barbecue-goer who calls out the egoism and feigned tenacity of protective individualism, achieving mobility entails more conscious calculations of structural barriers other than assuming an unrelenting, atomistic defense footing.

One of the ways that Fifth Ward residents eschew such callow and isolationist affirmations of the self while still acknowledging the austerity of their environment and the sacrifices needed to "make it through" is through self-projections of the future. While these projections can be either aspirational (preferences and desires not highly affected by social status and constraints) or expectational (projections that account for status and constraints) (MacLeod 1987), each type is united by the interest in expressing, actualizing, and distinguishing the individual. In the midst of all that seems to validate notions of community dysfunction – from personal experiences with poverty and bad luck to the belief that few others have any money and

thus must want some from those that do to – what is most significant to this discussion of individualism is not that Fifth Ward residents nonetheless carry on in their beliefs in an auspicious future, but that they make decisions and forecasts about the future based upon what is deemed right *for them*. Like the students at the after-school program vying to “become what (they) want,” self-actualization and establishing an identity in accordance with one’s abilities and interests arose in numerous discussions about social mobility. Ricky, a 24-year-old who works at a grocery store across town and has a two-year-old daughter, assessed his current situation (I asked in an interview how he felt about his position in life) by saying:

Well, you see, I’ve done a lot better than the people I grew up with (in the projects). I graduated (high school), went to college for a little bit (but did not finish), I work, and I take care of my daughter. But I am a hard worker and I believe in a better future. I’m good with money – not just ‘I like having money and spending it’ and all that – but I’m good with understanding how to save and budget and plan. Finance, or just planning or strategizing for business, is something that I really want to look into.”

Raquel, an 18-year-old high school senior, responded to my surprise at her admission that she plays on the volleyball team by telling me that although she once had no interest in playing, her mother wanted her to do something after school and gave her a talk about “being more well-rounded.” Weeks later, she gave an in-class presentation about how playing volleyball helped her “put aside my anger and focus on the important tasks at hand. By trying new things and broadening my horizons, I help myself reach my full potential.”

Even Rasual’s comments about having no role models and not looking to up to anyone else for guidance on how to live, I later came to understand, were as much related to distinguishing his identity among peers than to any vestiges of mistrust or defensiveness. Not only an ethnic anomaly (i.e., a black Cuban in a group of African Americans and mainly Tejano, Mexican, or central American Hispanics), he does not attend school in the neighborhood like a large majority of the after-school program’s attendees; he attends a moderately selective charter

school and yet maintains ties to what he describes as “a rough crowd” – a crew of older males from his neighborhood who frequently run into trouble with the law and “are usually strapped” (i.e., in possession of a firearm). In a group of local public school students with little knowledge of him – his background, his school, or his affiliations – having no role models and espousing “independence” emerges as a situational claim of identity, likely more an assertion of individuality (or *individuation*, as psychologists would claim) than any particular brand or philosophy of individualism.

Within structurally-patterned community conditions (e.g., concentrated poverty) or interactions (e.g., a group discussion in an after-school program or an in-class presentations), contextual exigencies grant merit and legitimacy to certain individual responses such as these (Kusserow 2004; Young 2004; Bourdieu 1990). Responses that function to protect the self from the assaults of chronic poverty, threats of violence, and bleak economic prospects are but one manifestation of individualistic action. Responses that seek to express or cultivate the self so as to achieve favorable identity and fulfill potential constitute another. This much less pontificated, expressive rationale for individualism apprehends structural barriers to mobility by positioning the self not at the mercy of community dysfunction (even though it may have been at certain times in the past) but as an evolving and adaptable agent capable of transcending it.

Coming Up and Facing Up: Making sense of “every man for himself” via meritocratic individualism

When a local Baptist pastor whom I had known for at least a year asked me, “So what exactly is your research about anyway?” I told him that I was looking into Fifth Ward residents’ conceptions of upward mobility and all the attributes, credentials, and pathways that are seen as conducive to it. When I began to speak about individualism and my interest in assertions of self-

determination from those would have good reason to laugh it off or dismiss it, the pastor interjected, “This sounds like that whole Republican thing – every man for himself. I’d love to hear how the community can undergo gentrification and promote the upward mobility of its residents.”

The pastor’s observation was not off base. Conservatives have long championed “bootstrap mobility” and the role of work ethic and character in driving economic outcomes, and such emphasis upon the individual’s constitution can surely obscure or mitigate the role of community institutions, collective action, and social embeddedness. As discussed above, individualism has value for recognizing one’s potential and transcending the hardships of one’s surroundings; it also has value for downplaying (or neutralizing) hardships and protecting the view of the self as an efficacious agent of self-determination. Neither of these rationales, however, offers much insight into how individualistic views of mobility can make sense of a disadvantaged structural location (without downplaying or dismissing it) or how they may encourage the use of (of just an appreciation for) community supports to shape mobility trajectories. Bellah et al. eloquently submit that one of the central limitations of the American tradition of individualistic achievement is that it “leaves the individual suspended in glorious, but terrifying, isolation” (2008: p. 6). As such, Americans are prone to think about and describe their lives in ways that are more isolated and autonomous than an outsider might observe them to be. With these thoughts in mind, I now present some reflections about if and how Fifth Ward residents invoke individualism to acknowledge the role that community and external forces play in framing the capacity for self-determination.

One source of confidence in “come ups,” “turnaround narratives,” and the possibility of triumph over a troubled past – beyond sheer effort and ability - is the church and religious

ministry. While many of the Fifth Ward residents that I kept contact with (especially at low-income levels and in public housing) were not members of a specific church and adhered to attendance patterns that could be described as irregular or infrequent, the message of the gospel and the evangelicalism from the plethora of local Protestant churches reverberated in numerous testaments of resilience and reclamation. Three separate recovering crack addicts in their forties and fifties attributed their sobriety to either God's plan or God's mercy; one, a 58-year-old male beset by seizures and strokes who lives with his sister, confided that he perceived no distinct preference between living and dying until he accepted Jesus as his savior, at which point his life assumed "new meaning, and a seriousness in terms of everything that I do." Among younger residents saddled by the burdens of criminal convictions, absentee fathers, and joblessness, the redemptive and fortune-reversing spirit of the gospel grants potency to aspirations for an improved future. "All things are possible with God," said Amaya, a 26-year-old single mother of two in financial distress due to delinquent loans and an irregular work (and wage) schedule, "and that's why I believe I will be okay. His blessings don't always just show up, you have to make them real with your own effort."

On one hand, faith in God's providence and protection enable agentic, even if somewhat hollow, affirmations of the self in response to seemingly daunting prospects for mobility. The volunteer coordinator of a children's ministry attested to this when he described the goal of his ministry: "I try to teach the youth that they can be and do anything they want to be or do, regardless of what the world or anyone tells them. They have to apply themselves and know how to surround themselves with the right people and friends." On the other hand, faith in a higher power may require acceptance that one is not in full control of his / her life. In contrast to the "bootstrap mobility" ethos and volitional isolationism of atomistic individualism, one of the

most lauded functions of urban (primarily black Protestant) churches over the past half century has been the focus upon coalition-building in attendance to community conditions that supersede the efficacy of individuals and individual congregations (Foley, McCarthy, and Chaves 2001). Anthony, a 52-year old pastor and youth minister who counsels several gang members and convicted felons (Anthony himself spent years in prison for drug trafficking and came back to the church after being diagnosed with AIDS and suffering a major stroke in the '90's), dispelled the notion of an autonomous, solitary roadway to redemption:

I always teach my children that the stop where I got off the bus at is the exact same stop where I got back on. Whenever you get back to Christ, you're going to get back to him in the same place – with the same circumstances, the same obstacles, the same pressures.

...You can Google any zip code in Houston and you will see exactly what this city expects from you: That child will probably not be anything, that child will probably not be successful, that child will be a part of the criminal element. It has the nerve to tell you that! So the expectations for the black male sitting here are not that good to start off with.

There is always that percentage that goes on straight through (and achieves success) and ignores what is going on around them. But if there is not a belief in something higher than yourself, I don't see you making it. You cannot self-make yourself. There has to be someone or something supporting you.

Similarly, another pastor noted that a challenge to his ministry is that people think “much too highly of themselves and give themselves all this power and credit for things that they really do not control.” He told me, “I know this might be a cliché but I try to remind people to do their best, but trust God with the rest.”

While pastors and ministry personnel caution against the brazenness and exaggerated independence that can emerge from the more protective assertions of individualism, another influence upon appraisals of self-determination in light of external forces is seen in the explanations and sentiments surrounding social standing and inequality. Here, references to personal choices, abilities, and lifestyle preferences evince a meritocratic rationale for

individualism suggesting that success is realized by the best and brightest, who make the smartest decisions and deserve the rewards and prestige that their status confers. When a Mercedes Benz sped past two 16-year-old juvenile probationers and I while walking on Lyons Ave., Hector's "Whoa" prompted Arturo to remark, "I know where that guy works; he owns some apartments and a few stores. (He) never comes out of that office – works all the time. Let him drive like a d*ck." When I told Keon, a 17-year-old former housing project resident now living with his mother and siblings in a Section 8-subsidized home, that my class that day had been about life chances and opportunities based on one's placement in the stratification system, he wondered aloud, "I think I have chances for middle class placement. It'll depend on my job and my higher education, I think. I'd be more well-off now but the choices of my parents – financial choices, really – have affected that."

Such recognition of disadvantages in one's background and inequality within (and beyond) one's community can undoubtedly support internalized views of immobility that, in contexts of vulnerability and volatility and potential violence, can manifest in protective and isolationist outlooks. This recognition also, however, calls for practical considerations about priming one's self for personal advancement. In meritocratic rationales of individualism, the pursuit of wealth and social mobility are conceived as competitive enterprises that beget winners and losers, but rather than shielding the self from opportunists, the untrustworthy, and potential victimhood as in protective individualism, the meritocratic rationale seeks to favorably position oneself to assume the credentials, temperament, work ethic, and reputation that one deems propitious for success. Motivated by pragmatism rather than defensiveness, Fifth Warders may utilize the meritocratic rationale in order to "face up" to their experiences with disadvantage and inequality.

During one of my frequent visits to Stacy's apartment (Stacy was quoted earlier in regards to her decision to carry a pistol), Stacy's 7-year-old granddaughter, who often stays with Stacy when not with her mother in another high-poverty neighborhood on the city's south side, replied that she wanted to "be on TV – to sing and dance" when I asked what she wanted to be when she grew up. "Like Beyonce'", Stacy remarked, "She's in her Beyonce' phase right now." Though my attempts to cajole the granddaughter to either sing or dance were met with only elongated and near-hysterical laughter (from the granddaughter), Stacy turned noticeably pensive as she began to speak to no one in particular - not myself, the granddaughter, or her boyfriend – about how her granddaughter was "real good with words" and writes better than many of her classmates. She opined: "I'd like to see her work in a university – be a professor or something. But we're just... (Motions her arm around the apartment), we're poor. She'd have to latch on to someone like you for that to happen, I think." Stacy was not certain how or even if her granddaughter could one day work as a university professor, but she was cognizant that her granddaughter's prospects has already been circumscribed in a way that such an achievement would likely depend upon substantial external intervention. Having witnessed both of her daughter's undergo travails that include teenage motherhood, supervision under the criminal justice system, unemployment, and low-wage work, Stacy later issued a qualified endorsement of my idea to title one of my articles "Comin' Up": "Yeah! That's it right there! We definitely comin' up; it's slow and it aint easy but we're doing it!"

What and how much Fifth Warders like Stacy can actually do is contingent upon factors that are seldom manipulated by individual actions. Granted, financial resources and social support, health, and ability are not entirely ascribed or structurally-imposed characteristics, but they cannot be manipulated or improved in any short order by atomistic individual agency either.

Small (2002), in research on participation in community activities in a mainly Puerto Rican housing project in Boston, shows that while structural disadvantages (e.g., poverty, low income and educational attainment) imposed limits on how high participation could potentially be, actual levels of participation were best predicted by motivational factors associated with residents' perceptions of the neighborhood. This relationship of "constraint-and-possibility" rather than "cause-and-effect" (p. 43) highlights – and parallels – the calculations of structural limitation and agentic capacity that Stacy, Keon, and others undertake in expressing meritocratic rationales of individualism. Sheer gumption and personal abilities indeed provide a foundation for projections or hopes of "come ups" and "turnaround narratives," but even hopes – much less projections or expectations – lose credibility without appreciation of one's circumstance and limitations. In some instances, such appreciation can be cited to empower, rather than negate, agentic capacity. In a small group discussion at the after-school program, a 15-year-old girl declared, "With me being an African American, being a girl, from Fifth Ward, on food stamps with a single mom, it could open more possibilities for me. It all makes me want to push harder and not be a product of my environment." Insofar as sound decision-making, work ethic, and reputation are viewed as instrumental to success, encounters with racial, class, and neighborhood inequality can redouble the commitment to meritocratic individualism rather than discourage it.

Discussion

The concept of individualism can confuse, confound, and condemn members of all social strata. At best, it is an inspiring and democratic cultural tradition – one that ensures the worth, ability, and potential of every individual and grants leverage to these qualities against circumstances or authorities that threaten to overwhelm them. At worst, it is an illusion – one

that ignores outcome-defining inequalities, lends itself to selfishness (and fixation with every “self hyphen” one can devise; think self-esteem, self-help, self-actualization, and self-fulfillment, among numerous others), and discounts our interconnectedness within groups and communities to mark an institutionalized subversion of shared responsibility and equitable governance. Because urban poverty is commonly conceived (among academic audiences, anyway) in relation to structural dysfunction, outlooks from residents of poor urban communities that affirm the agency of the individual as the key to social mobility, above and beyond the power of structural determinants, can be easily written off as a guise over vulnerability, a consequence of social isolation, and / or a misrecognition of class status and relative social standing. Yet and still, individualism rears its head in many of the most seminal works on contemporary urban poverty (Bourgois 1995; Wilson 1996; Anderson 1999; Newman 1999; Young 2004) and, though attributed to cultural tropes and defensiveness, its continued (re)emergence suggests that it may serve a critical and under-examined role in apprehending, absorbing, and navigating the structural barriers that imbue the lives of residents in high-poverty, long-disadvantaged neighborhoods.

In this article, I attempted to convey how individualism is asserted, what it means, and why it makes sense for low-income residents of Houston’s Fifth Ward. In doing so, I marshaled evidence that individualism involves broad arrays of experiences, aspirations, and outlooks that extend much further than the hardened, defensive, isolationist, “me against the world, back against the wall, trust no one” individualism that is portrayed in the literature as an internalized adaptation to bleak economic prospects and a litany of other community dysfunctions (Smith 2007; Young 2004; Furstenberg et al. 1999; Wacquant 1998). Though this assertion is not falsely reported and indeed defends against distrust, potential victimhood, and the judgment or

condemnation that accompanies illegal activities and questionable lifestyles, the rationale underlying such protective individualism loses its luster in less exigent and spirit-deflating contexts, and is even mocked and rejected when its empty bravado becomes apparent. Kusserow (2004) critiques the homogenization of American individualism to argue that conceptions of individual agency and the projection of the self are cultivated in distinct socialization methods that vary by class. Her evidence is compelling, her analysis is astute, and I echo her call for greater awareness of the nuances and diverse meanings of individualism. I guard against, however, her designation of “class-based individualisms” (p. 173) that, for the urban poor, come to bear in a hardened, protective stance undergirded by resentment, violence, disappointing relationships, and the strife of “surviving in a tough world” (p. 57). For the Fifth Ward residents I observed, the demands of “making it through” and the logic of protective individualism are often negotiated side-by-side with expressive and meritocratic rationales for “making it” – negotiations characterized by conscious calculations of possibility and constraint more so than reactions or adaptations to marginalized status.

Exactly how these rationales originate (be it in socialization, the transfusion of subcultural and dominant cultural perspectives on achievement and mobility, and / or structurally prescribed dispositions of the self), how durable they are over the evolving life course (after dissimilar mobility outcomes are realized), and how they are mediated by gender (I suspect they are), are empirical questions for subsequent research. MacLeod’s (1987) view on the political and economic expedience of a level and class-less playing field, as well as the work of Bourdieu and his acolytes on the *habitus* and Harding’s (2010) more recent accounts of cultural heterogeneity in urban neighborhoods may offer instructive, albeit inharmonious, starting points. Before we can explore these or other questions, however, it is necessary to ascertain what

individualism means and how it is asserted in a context where opportunities for positive self-determination are known to be slight. It is also essential to understand how the structural constraints that might seem to invalidate – or embitter – the individual’s agentic propensities are apprehended. Toward these inquiries, it is my hope that this article has contributed some valuable building blocks and insights.

Notes

ⁱ A “Super Neighborhood” is a small, contiguous community sharing common physical characteristics, identity, or infrastructure, as defined by Houston’s Planning & Development Department.

ⁱⁱ These three individuals were acquainted through a service of their case management program intended to provide entry-level work experience to youths with criminal records. They were doing gardening and landscaping along Lyons Ave. and I met them through the site manager, who is a personal friend.

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Concluding Considerations on Urban Poverty and Self-Determination

Manifestations of protective, self-interested, “ghetto” individualism have been well exposed in recent years. In politics, incidents of racial profiling and police brutality, along with issues ranging from the minimum wage and food stamp receipt to criminal justice reform and marijuana legalization have infused renewed interest and passion into discussions about culture and the urban poor. In pop culture, the spread of *Trap Rap* or *Trap Music* beyond a regional delicacy of the American South has transmitted the ethos of relentless, around the clock (“25-8”), no excuses and no apologies hustling to a mainstream audience, with the likes of Lady Gaga and Katy Perry now borrowing its preeminent producers and central themes. Athletes sport tattoos reading “Me Against the World,” “Only God Can Judge Me,” and “Death Before Dishonor” and similar mantras like “They hate me ‘cause they ain’t me” and “Can’t stop my grind” have become firmly infixed in the cultural lexicon. Reality shows on E!, VH1, Bravo, Lifetime, Oxygen, and several other networks feature casts of predominantly racial and ethnic minorities acting as – or aspiring to be – entrepreneurs (or “Bosses” or “Divas”) all the while surmounting, rejecting, or ignoring (on what is broadcast, anyways) the disadvantages inherent to their social location and the competition and entry-barriers within their respective industries. In academics, the most publicized work of urban scholarship in recent memory, Alice Goffman’s *On The Run* (2014), depicts young male lives characterized by pervasive and stability-impeding distrust and evasiveness – towards not only law enforcement but also family members, employers, girlfriends, and even medical facilities – as a result of mass imprisonment and judicial supervision. In each of the above, the crude spirit of protective individualism reveals itself: If you want to survive, much less succeed, you must look after yourself; everyone else - who is

either in direct competition with you, not interested in you, or not capable of understanding you - cannot be trusted to look after you.

The prevailing theories on urban poverty and its cultural dimensions conceive this sort of individualism as essentially a side effect of various community and cultural dysfunctions. With individualism connoting qualities of egoism, selfishness, an abnegation of social embeddedness, and political conservatism, many scholars acknowledge it only in passing reference to more recognizable and more structurally-determined social problems. Accordingly, the threat of violence, weak public institutions, jobs that are in short supply to begin with and low-paying, stigmatizing, and not conducive to career advancement when obtained, and isolation from institutions and individuals that can spur (or provide a realistic understanding of) social mobility have all been offered as explanations for the steadfast and defensive adherence to the individualistic achievement ideology encountered by numerous (usually qualitative) scholars of poverty and inequality. The aim of this dissertation was to explore the meanings and rationales of individualism among diverse residents of the Fifth Ward, and to do so with attention to their beliefs about mobility, achievement, and status - not independent of the afore mentioned community conditions but not presuming these conditions as a deterministic, orientation-shaping force. What emerges, as analyzed in the preceding chapters, are accounts about the self, its agency, and its location relative to barriers and opportunities that are of course varied and evolving, but consistently cognizant, conjectural, and contextually-informed. They are cognizant of social locations demarcated by financial vulnerability, neighborhood affiliation, and race and ethnicity; they are conjectural by way of the aspirations and projections that mark the base of expressive individualism (i.e., becoming what one wants to be; conveying an knowledgeable, seasoned, and adaptable self) as well as the negotiation, often simultaneously, of possibility and

constraint; and they are contextually-informed in that the sense of atomistic alienation and competition characteristic of the protective form of individualism not only erodes, but becomes perceived as unsophisticated and narrow-minded, once threats to personal safety, financial well-being, and identity dissipate or are neutralized (recall the distinction between *making it through* and *making it*). Hence, if acceptance of the achievement ideology and confidence in the validity of the American Dream entail some “mind playing tricks,” then they are tricks of calculation more than deception or illusion. Fifth Ward residents, regardless of how disadvantaged or retarded¹ in their capacities to harness the instruments of social mobility, are not sequestered from nor kept ignorant about the rules, stakes, and strategies of the game. Rather, they make calculations about how to play based on their experiences and their understandings – not just about the world or their surroundings, but about themselves.

It is reasonable to ask, as some advisors and colleagues have, what this means going forward and why it is significant to the condition of poor urban neighborhoods and the people who live in them. Individualism is, as I have acknowledged throughout, an abstract and rather notional concept. Even when all of its connotations are sorted out, when clearly defined, or when deconstructed to understand its multiple uses and forms, it still will not enhance people’s paychecks, provide better benefits or job security, rectify substandard schools, or stem the tide of rising housing costs. What, then, do these varied rationales about individualism and self-determination, and these calculations about what is possible from one’s social location, mean for those residing in the Fifth Ward and those concerned about their life chances and well-being?

¹ I use the word retarded here in the literal sense, meaning delayed, underdeveloped, or occurring at a later than ideal time. I do not want my use of this word to be mistaken for the derogatory usage relating to cognitive impairments and / or intellectual disabilities.

My answer to this question is rooted in the prevailing – and currently intensifying – narrative of community and cultural dysfunction that has served as the backdrop of this dissertation. The Right, leaning on cultural deficiency arguments, sees the self-conceptions of the poor as not nearly as relevant or explanatory as the plentiful evidence of destructive behavior, moral shortcomings, and immediate gratification on display in impoverished neighborhoods. The Left, more or less united in its acceptance of the structural inequality paradigm on poverty, finds the self-conceptions of the poor to be misguided, fickle, and under-informed – the result of a spatially and culturally isolated location that denies individuals the capacity to make sense of the world and their place within it (Hochschild 1995; Wilson 1996; Young 2004). Both perspectives cast culture and community as marred by, products of, and responses to marginalization. Both leave little agentic leeway for individuals to chart the barriers and opportunities of one's social landscape and navigate the life course accordingly. To take interest in the individualism of a population is to ultimately take interest its individuals – where they see themselves, where they believe they are headed, where they would like to go, and how well equipped they are to make it there. In taking on this research, I hope that I am contributing in some small way to these inquiries, which I believe are critical toward developing a refined appreciation for not only cultural heterogeneity, but for the cultural humanity of a population too long and too easily presumed to be wrought with dysfunction.

There are two emergent issues of collective – and in one case, national – cultural identity that bear implications upon individualism and the larger questions about mobility prospects and self-determination. Neither became principal topics of focus in my fieldwork, although questions and conversations about the topics surely came about, but both issues are intertwined with this research due to historical overlap (i.e., taking place at the same time) and conceptual

relevance. The heightened alertness to racial inequality in light of high-profile incidents involving deadly force from police officers, along with and the contested assimilation of America's growing Hispanic population into the rights and institutions known to beget class mobility, both carry weighty and long-term ramifications for how individuals conceive their station in life and what can realistically be achieved from it. In the aftermath of the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in greater St. Louis, I was asked on more than a few occasions – from colleagues at the CDC, from friends that I had made in and around the Fifth Ward, and research participants – what I thought about the protests and impassioned responses (on all sides of the controversy). Aside from my own views, many were curious as to how the youths from the after-school program, the students in my classes, and my contacts throughout the community were responding to the events.

My initial interpretation, from about 800 miles away and with a less-than-perspicacious connection to the developing events, was that class and economic disadvantage were driving the anger, restlessness, and destructiveness that broke out in those mid-August nights of Ferguson, MO in 2014. In a mainly black, lower-to-working class suburb on the wrong side of a hyper-segregated and deindustrialized metro area, with a central city whose depopulation, job loss, and declining vitality spans eight successive decades, a police officer's shooting of an unarmed, recently-graduated 18-year-old provided a jarring, sudden, and visceral reminder of just how unfair and unfulfilling life can be. While we can only ponder what the victim, Brown, would have or could have done in the remaining years of a life taken too soon, the circumstances surrounding his death revealed a grim range of possibilities. At the moment of the fateful convenient store dispute over cigarillos two weeks after graduating from an alternative school, Brown's post-secondary prospects, whether in school or the workforce, were tarred by poor

grades and low-income. Tenuous as they were, these prospects represented the preferable alternative to taking six shots from the .40 caliber pistol of an officer who believed such force was necessary to preserve his own life.

Over time, after listening to the testimonies and sensing the concern of individuals with more intimate encounters with racial profiling and police misconduct than myself, I began to see that class and economic standing – which I had thought, or hoped (given my left-leaning, populist political orientations), were motivating the outrage in Ferguson – do not wholly account for individuals’ responses to inequality and injustice. Merely being black or brown – and perhaps this characteristic in and of itself – may impart constraints upon the both positive agency of the individual to actualize his or her aspirations and the negative agency to disentranch oneself from seemingly soul-crushing and potentially fate-sealing inequalities incumbent upon one’s structural location. Conversations of this sort flourished amid the Brown shooting and the deaths of black males at the hands of police in Staten Island and Cleveland. Though *Black Lives Matter* quickly became a trending topic and a mantra for protest and reform, prominent pundits and intellectuals expressed doubt and bewilderment over whether they actually do and what, if anything, blacks can do to prove it true. New York Times journalist Charles Blow wrote of his son, who is black, being held at gunpoint by Yale University police because he was mistaken for a burglary suspect: “I am reminded of what I have always known, but what some would choose to deny: that there is no way to work your way out – earn your way out – of this sort of crisis. In these moments, what you’ve done matters less than how you look” (2015). Media critic Joshua

· I use the term “negative agency” here in a manner consistent with Unger’s understanding of *negative capability* (1987), in which individuals do not identify actual social conditions with those that are necessary or permanent and thus evade the “compulsive reenactment” (p. 291) of institutional structures. This occurs via open participation within these structures, ultimately producing reformations within - and subjective triumphs against – their constraints.

Alston argued it was important that Brown was planning to go to college (because some pundits had found this either irrelevant or offensive, as if to suggest that blacks must display certain attributes in order to “earn their right to live”) but conceded that holding firm in the belief that blacks have control over their fates demands reconciling the troubling realization that such lives can “be taken away on a whim” (2014). Beyond undermining confidence in the expressive and meritocratic dimensions of individualism and reintroducing the contextual preconditions for survivalist, protective conceptions of the self, the institutionally-sanctioned violence, imprisonment, and surveillance of black and brown Americans threatens the premise of egalitarianism at the foundation of the American Dream, its achievement ideology, and, at large, democratic governance.

The other topic of pressing interest to social mobility and self-determination within the context of urban poverty concerns the status of Hispanic Americans – on matters of citizenship and immigration, most certainly, but more generally in terms of education, voting, and discrimination. To the criticism of some journal reviewers of the preceding chapters, I was unable (and unwilling) to delineate or constrict my analysis to one particular racial or ethnic category. While my analysis is by no means exhaustive or irrefutable and should be augmented by further, more specific inquiries into the ethnic, religious, and gendered interpretations of individualism, any fieldwork based in the Fifth Ward would be grossly remiss to ignore the evolving, multi-ethnic demographic composition of the community. Like many other central city communities in the West and Southwest, and like an increasing number of communities in the East and industrial Midwest, the Fifth Ward is populated – in near equal shares – by blacks and Hispanics (a demographic duality rendered less instructive by the Fifth Ward’s newfound role as the settlement destination for much of Houston’s Afro-Latino population – spearheaded by

Garifunas from the Honduran coast as well as black Cubans and Colombians). “Urban poverty,” consequently, can no longer serve as a euphemism for the condition of central city-residing blacks. The multi-ethnic character of the community is not superficial - with blacks and Hispanics occupying separate, clearly demarcated places that all happen to exist within the boundaries of the Fifth Ward. On city blocks, in apartment complexes, in schools, public places, and even some Protestant churches (where Hispanic outreach has assumed high priority) African Americans and Hispanics of diverse hues, countries of origin, and immigration statuses live side by side, maintaining cultural identities but united by shared experiences with low-income, un- or under –employment, and, above all, a desire to achieve a more stable and prosperous life, usually envisioned outside of the Fifth Ward. As a Guatemalan mother who lives immediately across the street from a housing project – in an outwardly blighted but inwardly immaculate bungalow – told me: “A lot of blacks right there (i.e., in the projects).” Although it was just her and I in her home on an unforgivingly hot summer afternoon, she lowered her voice – perhaps to indicate that she was not proud of what she was about to say – and continued, “(Do) you know that they shoot guns at night? They get government checks too. I don’t know. I don’t understand. But everybody does what they need to, you know? It’s like we all want to get out!”

The Fifth Ward is in many ways a fascinating but hardly unique case study here: As the longstanding centerpiece of the black population within a historically biracial (white and black) city, the community’s – and the city’s – future will be defined by the capacity to forge auspicious mobility trajectories for its soon-to-be-majority group. Despite Texas’ longstanding Tejano history and the contributions of Hispanics in clearing the swampland around Buffalo Bayou, dredging the Houston Ship Channel, and expanding national railways throughout the city, Houston has not historically been associated with Hispanic culture, tradition, and migration in

the same fashion as San Antonio, El Paso, Los Angeles, and, later, Miami (Kreneck 2012; Klineberg, Wu, Douds, and Ramirez 2014). In 1950, Hispanics accounted for just over 5% of the city's then population of 800,000. The migration of Hispanics to Houston, mainly from south Texas and Mexico, escalated following World War II and was a product, much like the migration of African Americans to the city, of growing industrial prominence. Demands for labor in rail transit, petrochemical production, steel foundries, and shipbuilding led migrants to settle in communities with an existing Hispanic presence – e.g., Second Ward (*Segundo Barrio*), Magnolia Park, and Denver Harbor – or where white flight was imminent – e.g, Near Northside and Pecan Park (of these 5 communities, only Magnolia Park and Pecan Park do not share a boundary with the Fifth Ward) (Kreneck 2012; Pruitt 2013). In the '90's and 00's, the de-concentration and dispersal of blacks throughout metro Houston had a pronounced effect on the Fifth Ward by creating affordable housing in close proximity to Hispanic population centers, inducing a new wave of predominantly Mexican and Central American migrants. These migrants typically came to America with low levels of educational attainment and found work in low-paying manual labor (Klineberg et al. 2014). By 2012, the share of Hispanics in the Fifth Ward (44%) was virtually identical to that of Hispanics citywide (43.6%). Across the metro, Hispanics account for about 37% of the population, making metro Houston's 2.1 million-plus Hispanic community the third largest of all U.S. metro areas ("Hispanic Population in Select U.S. Metropolitan Areas, 2011").

My attention to the Fifth Ward's Hispanic-fueled demographic transition is relevant to this concluding discussion on the viability of the American Dream and social mobility for the

· The black population of the Fifth Ward has declined in every census since 1980, though blacks retain hold of an ever slight majority at 52% of the population ("Race/Ethnicity: City of Houston by Super Neighborhoods" 2012).

urban poor because of this group's uncertain and contested status in relation to America's most reliable mobility-producing institutions. In education, while Hispanics will comprise over 80% of the Houston Independent School District within the next 10 -15 years (Downing 2013), only half of Houston's Hispanics over age 25 have a high school diploma and just 10% have attended college (Struthers 2012). For those currently enrolled, the challenges of limited English proficiency, crowded schools, and parental inexperience with navigating educational norms and procedures hinder the prospects of developing the skills necessary to succeed in an increasingly knowledge-, creativity-, and communication-based economy. In government, inactivity and outright opposition toward curtailing the cost of college education, permitting undocumented residents to attend public universities at in-state tuition rates (currently allowed in Texas but in serious jeopardy of being overturned), and protecting basic voting rights (a 2011 law mandating prospective voters to show State-issued photo ID was shown to have a highly disproportionate impact on minorities, see Stohr 2014) all place impediments in the way of accessing the institutional resources that catalyze entry into the middle class.

In one of my classes at a southwest Houston campus with a large immigrant, Central American (predominantly Salvadoran and Honduran) student body, I had students do an in-class exercise about the presentation of the self and the self-concept, as theorized by the likes of Mead, Cooley, and Goffman. The students were asked to speculate about how they were perceived by both significant and generalized others, to which one slender, brown-skinned, not-exactly-imposing male student responded that he sometimes gets the impression that he "scares" people, surmising "I guess I look illegal or something – or that I can't speak English." This statement about one's dubious conception of identity and belonging resonates with the results of a 20-year longitudinal survey of Houston Hispanics from Rice University's Kinder Institute. Among

Hispanics not born in America, those who remained in the country were found to make more money the longer they stayed, become more fluent in English, begin to think of themselves primarily as Americans (as opposed to primarily Hispanic or equally Hispanic and American), and enter more ethnically diverse social networks. By the third generation, however, much of this progress stalled. The American-born Hispanics were not obtaining substantially more education, not securing better jobs, and not earning higher incomes than those in the second generation, leading the researchers to conclude that U.S.-born Houston Hispanics remained far behind the socioeconomic status of their Anglo counterparts and slightly behind that of African Americans (Klineberg et al., 2014: 22).

While the researchers cite many of the institutional factors highlighted above to account for this obstructed mobility, I suspect – and fear – that the cultural dimensions of the ongoing, often simmering debate about immigration and citizenship will not just stall, but reverse, the progress that has been made toward Hispanic assimilation and upward mobility. Beyond the implementation of voting restrictions and the accelerating movement to forbid in-state tuition for undocumented students, the ultra-conservative Texas Legislature has acted upon the xenophobia of the era to slash funds for bilingual education, enact changes to social studies curricula that de-emphasize the roles of Latino historic figures, and vehemently oppose the financial restructuring of the state’s underfunded, overcrowded, and understaffed public education system (because with Hispanics now the majority group in public schools, teachers’ unions are no longer the only “special interest” to benefit from investing in public education). Aside from the acts of legislation - which do not command widespread public attention and can be guised under the language of “cost-cutting,” “accountability,” and, in the case of the curricula changes, “balance” – more affecting and dehumanizing assaults are presented in mass media, wherein stories

involving immigrants are customarily framed along lines of national security (e.g., the invasive threat of immigrants and the possibility of terrorist infiltration), the spread of infectious diseases, and fraud (e.g., benefit-seeking and bogus claims of refugee-ism) (Esses, Medianu, and Lawson 2013; Branton and Dunaway 2009). Even when no such *framing* or *slant* is evident, over-the-top comments from the likes of U.S. Congressman Steve King – who suggested that immigrants have “calves the size of cantaloupes because they’re hauling 75 pounds of marijuana across the desert” – or conservative firebrand Ann Coulter – who likened Texas to a “roach motel” to discredit George W. Bush’s advocacy for comprehensive immigration reform – garner headlines for their sheer outlandishness but nonetheless appeal to specific constituencies and become etched in the public consciousness of everyone else.

To be sure, these quotes, these stories, and much of this conversation at large are technically addressed to the topic of immigration and not the broad collective of those who can be considered Hispanic. As the student’s statement attests, however, the two often *look* the same – not merely as in the appearance of the people, but also in the policies, attitudes, and sensibilities that come to form around these hotly contentious issues. At stake is more than who is permitted to become naturalized and pursue citizenship and more than what America’s demographic composition will be in x-number of years; at stake is the American legacy of immigrant assimilation that is integral to our historical appreciation for equality of opportunity, our understanding of the American Dream, and our confidence in meritocratic achievement. To preserve this legacy would be to harness the industriousness, resilience, and belief in self-determination that are espoused – throughout these chapters – as central to the uplift from an impoverished background. To deny this legacy would be to endorse and ensure a disenfranchised, legally and economically unprotected, unaccounted and largely unwelcomed

immigrant class confined to the lowest rungs of the unsteady service economy. The Fifth Ward, and other long-marginalized communities in cities across the nation, would bear the brunt of this neglect.

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Appendix: IRB Approval Form

ACTION ON PROTOCOL CONTINUATION REQUEST



Institutional Review Board
Dr. Dennis Landin, Chair
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TO: Frederick Weil
Sociology

FROM: Dennis Landin
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: July 16, 2014

RE: IRB# 3400

TITLE: Orientations of Individualism, Responsibility, and Achievement in Disadvantaged Urban Settings

New Protocol/Modification/Continuation: Continuation

Review type: Full ☐ Expedited ☒ **Review date:** 7/16/2014

Risk Factor: Minimal ☒ Uncertain ☐ Greater Than Minimal ☐

Approved ☒ **Disapproved** ☐

Approval Date: 7/16/2014 **Approval Expiration Date:** 7/15/2015

Re-review frequency: (annual unless otherwise stated)

Number of subjects approved: 25-100

LSU Proposal Number (if applicable): _____

Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal: (if applicable) _____

By: Dennis Landin, Chairman 

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –
Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. SPECIAL NOTE:

**All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/irb>*

Vita

Will Bryerton was born in 1986 in Chicago, IL. He is a graduate of Palatine High School, William Rainey Harper College, and Concordia University Chicago, which conferred him a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science (summa cum laude) in 2008. He began graduate study at Louisiana State University in 2010. Under the supervision of Dr. Frederick Weil, he completed his M.A. in 2013 and soon after relocated to Houston, TX, where he conducted fieldwork for his dissertation. His research primarily concerns poverty in urban communities, with particular emphasis upon culture and identity, stratification, and qualitative methods. Bryerton has worked in social service counseling and community development, and he serves in various capacities with several youth tutoring / mentoring, ministry, and community development outfits in Houston. He currently teaches at Lone Star College – North Harris and has begun participant observation for his next project, studying neighborhood identification and the construction of place in an emergently disadvantaged, racially heterogeneous community.