

**The Social Construction of Poverty and The Meaning of Deprivation: An  
Ethnographic Exploration of Mobile Home Park Residents**

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(ABSTRACT)

Poverty is an important socio-economic problem with serious negative consequences for consumers worldwide. Currently, there are approximately 57 million Americans considered as the 'marginal poor' and 37 million Americans categorized as the 'extreme poor' (Newman and Chen 2007). The nuances between these two different forms of impoverishment as well as other forms of poverty (e.g., the urban poor, the rural poor, the immigrant poor) highlight the multi-dimensional and dynamic nature of poverty with economic, social, cultural, motivational, and even political aspects (Chakravarti 2006). Despite the importance of this research domain, little research in marketing has examined multiple faces of poverty and the ways impoverished consumers socially construct the meaning of deprivation. This research offers the first in-depth ethnographic investigation exploring different social constructions of poverty and multiple social identities adopted by the poor within the same geographically bounded setting. While much of the current conceptualization of poverty in the consumer research literature explore poverty from a structural perspective and assume that the poor share a collective social identity, I suggest an alternate conceptualization of poverty that includes the poor consumer's coping strategies and resources, perceptions of various forms of deprivation, and agency construction through five distinct social identities.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

We are skinny...we are deprived and pale...we are above the dead and below the living. – An informant from Ethiopia (Narayan et al. 2000, p. 33)

A normal person has to have some self-esteem, to take a holiday, read a book. While now, you work here and there all day in order to have something to eat, and at night you can't even exchange a couple of words like normal persons, you drop off asleep as if you were dead. It's as if you were dead while you were still alive. - An informant from Bulgaria (Narayan et al. 2000, p. 92)

You grow in an environment full of diseases, violence, and drugs... You don't have the right to education, work, or leisure, and you are forced to eat in the hands of the government...so you are an easy prey for the rulers. You have to accept whatever they give you. - An informant from Brazil (Narayan et al. 2008, p. 139)

Poverty is a pressing social problem affecting consumers worldwide; it is estimated that almost half of the world's population live on less than \$2.50 a day (The World Bank 2008). In addition, 1.4 billion people are currently living in extreme poverty and this figure represents more than one-quarter of the population of developing countries (The World Bank 2008). The 1990s and particularly the first part of the 2000s have seen an increasing concern about the growth of poverty and social disadvantage worldwide. In the United States, this has been associated with the income gap and wealth gap between the rich and the poor. The gap between the poor and the affluent is wider in the United States than in any other industrialized Western countries (Rank 2004). Just as the income gap between the rich and the poor has been expanding, so too has the wealth gap. For example, in 1976, while only the top 1% of families in the U.S. held 19% of the country's wealth, this figure has increased to roughly 40% by 2000 (Heiner 2002). The income and wealth inequality particularly affects women and children in the United States. Currently, it is estimated that roughly 57 million Americans, including 21% of the



country's children, are classified as the 'invisible poor' or the "missing class" (Newman and Chen 2007, p. 3).<sup>1</sup> This figure is likely to rise in the current socio-economic milieu.

Such alarming figures perhaps can represent a significant challenge to the dominant American discourse of the "American Dream." This dream is a socially constructed set of beliefs that emphasize the notion of America as being the land of opportunity. The popular ideology of the American Dream is such a powerful construction and is so much part of the American culture that it is difficult to refute it. As Heiner (2002) put it, "to challenge the validity of the American Dream is to challenge both our collective and individual identities." (p. 45). Yet, the very existence of extreme poverty and such alarming figures as discussed in the previous paragraph challenges the popular myth of the American Dream. Perhaps most contradictory to the notion of the American Dream is the relatively lower class mobility rates among the poor in the States than in some other Western nations.<sup>2</sup> As American sociologist Harold Kerbo (1991) writes, "The United States has the reputation of being the land of opportunity among many people in the world. The data, however, indicate that the United States is only about average with respect to its rate of circulation mobility, or the equality of opportunity in general." (p. 355).

Despite these alarming facts and the significant number of consumers who live deprived and impoverished lives in the U.S<sup>3</sup>, marketing researchers have paid limited attention to the study of the poor. With a few notable exceptions (see, for example, Ronald Hill's body of

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<sup>1</sup> This missing class is composed of households earning approximately between \$20,000 and \$24,000 for a family of four (Newman and Chen 2007).

<sup>2</sup> The rate of 'escape' from poverty significantly varies between the U.S. and other developed countries. For example, in the Netherlands and Sweden, approximately 40% of those living in poverty are able to escape in a year. In France, Ireland, and Germany, this rate is roughly 30% while in the United States, only about 14% of those who live in poverty are able to escape in a year (Mishel, Bernstein, and Schmitt 1999).

<sup>3</sup> In 2007, it was estimated that thirty-seven million Americans lived below the poverty line (i.e., the extreme poor) and fifty-seven million Americans were considered to be 'working poor' (i.e., the marginal poor) [Newman and Chen 2007].

research on poverty; Andreasen 1975; Alwitt 1995; Alwitt and Donley 1997; Viswanathan, Rosa and Harris 2005; Viswanathan and Gau 2005; Chakravarti 2006), consumer researchers have mainly focused on the affluent consumers possessing significant economic, cultural, and symbolic capital. The poor, however, are worthy of academic attention as the material and social lives of the impoverished individuals are different from the affluent consumer groups most often explored in consumer research. For example, there are different subpoverty populations (e.g., the homeless, the working poor, urban poor, rural poor, and welfare poor) with multiple different realities (Hill 2001). Far from being a homogenous population, poor consumer segments represent a wide range of economic, social, and cultural dynamics with different consumption needs and expectations. While, for the homeless, access to shelter and food is of urgent necessity (Hill 1991), the working poor are struggling to make ends meet working minimum wage jobs most often without access to benefits. As such, even though they have secured shelter and food, the working poor are in critical need for affordable housing and healthcare (Ehrenreich 2001).

The nuances among different forms of poverty are also evident in the distinction made by the World Bank (1990) between the “extreme poor” and the “marginal poor.” The extreme poor represent a poverty group that is barely surviving with a critical shortage of resources necessary to secure their most basic needs. This form of poverty represents an *absolute* form of poverty, defined as the inability to afford basic necessities for a humane way of living (Lister 2004). The marginal poor, on the other hand, might have access to most basic needs such as food and some income, but their limited economic and cultural capital prevents them from expanding their opportunities. They live on the margins of “a dependable stream of income and the uncertainties of existing on the edges of poverty” (Santos and Lacznia 2009, p. 4). The marginal poverty is more in line with a *relative* notion of impoverishment, which is characterized as the inability to

afford what is considered to be normal and socially necessary in any given society (Townsend 1979). Consequently, remedies for alleviating the problem of poverty vary based on these differences. For example, while governmental assistance and social programs might provide a remedy for the extreme poor (Kotler, Roberto, and Leisner 2006), micro-credit opportunities such as the programs offered by the Grameen Bank might offer the marginal poor the means for a more secure and stable life (Bornstein 2005).

The nuances among different impoverished segments also highlight the multiple faces of poverty (Chakravarti 2006). There are many different conceptualizations of poverty, equating poverty with such terms as material, social, and bodily ill-being (Narayan et al. 2000), capability deprivation (Sen 1999), social exclusion (Room 1999), and relational disadvantage (Waxman 1983). Regardless of the variations among all these different definitions of poverty, one commonality exists: that is, poverty is a multidimensional, experiential, and dynamic phenomenon that encompasses multiple facets. The multi-dimensionalized nature of poverty is perhaps best captured and documented in the three-volume ethnographic study of the World Bank, called "*The Voices of the Poor: Crying Out for Change*." Utilizing qualitative and participatory methodologies, this study includes voices of more than 60,000 poor women and men from fieldwork conducted in 60 countries in 1999. As the verbatim quotes from this study suggest, there are many different dimensions of poverty (see the beginning of this chapter). For some poor, poverty means material and absolute deprivation while for others it is more of a social, cultural, and relative disadvantage leading to feelings of loss, shame, and hopelessness. There are physical, material, social, cultural, motivational, and even political dimensions of poverty (The World Bank 2000).

Therefore, while poverty is clearly an important economic, social, and cultural problem, it is also an ideal context to explore some interesting theoretical issues. What is poverty really? What are the many faces of poverty? Do the poor suffer mainly from economic deprivation or are they also affected by social, cultural, psychological, and motivational disadvantages and inequalities? How is the meaning of poverty shaped and socially constructed by the impoverished consumers themselves? How do the poor cope with multiple forms of deprivations in the marketplace? How do the poor interact with the non-poor and the marketplace and how does this interaction shape their constructions of poverty? These are pressing questions that need to be addressed in order to better understand the meaning of impoverishment.

The goal of this dissertation is to conduct an ethnographic study of a poverty subgroup, namely the marginal poor, who live in an affordable yet largely stigmatized form of housing community (i.e., mobile home park). A fundamental focus of this research is to explore various meanings of impoverishment from the point of view of the poor consumers. The limited research in the area of poverty within consumer research highlights the relevance of a deep ethnographic study in order to build conceptual categorizations and theory.

The remainder of this dissertation is organized into ten chapters. Chapter Two provides a review of the relevant literature on poverty, exploring different conceptualizations and frameworks. This literature review is followed by selected research from the academic fields of coping and resistance in order to delineate various strategies used to manage and fight against poverty and its consequences. This chapter ends with a brief overview of relevant marketing research on poverty, signaling the gaps in the literature. Chapter Three discusses the ethnographic methodology utilized in this study. In Chapter Four, the socio-cultural context of the study is explained in detail and a brief review of mobile home literature is provided. Chapter

Five through Nine explore five different clusters of mobile home park residents: The Aspirers, The Strangers, The Civics, The Survivors, and The Hedonic Dependents. These five groups differ on their perceptions of their trailer home, the park community, disadvantages, and resources. From these emic themes, broader macro themes arise such as different social constructions of poverty, stigmatization, and agency. Thus, Chapter Ten includes an interpretation of the key findings in light of the poverty and social stigma literatures. Finally, in Chapter Eleven, the dissertation concludes with a discussion of the conceptual contributions, public policy implications, limitations, and future research opportunities.

## Chapter Two

### Literature Review

#### **Defining and Measuring Poverty**

Absolute vs. Relative Approaches. Poverty is an urgent social problem that negatively affects consumers worldwide. Currently, billions of consumers survive on less than \$2 per day (The World Bank 2008). Poverty is also a complex domain of study with political, historical, social, cultural, and economic roots and implications. From both an academic and public policy standpoint, the discourse on poverty has been highly contested with heated debates over the meaning of poverty, how to measure it, as well as the causes and consequences of it (Ropers 1991; Lister 2004).

Within the social sciences, conceptualizations of poverty fall into two camps, namely the ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’ approaches ( Jones and Novak 1999; Lister 2004). Although the distinction between absolute and relative poverty was the focus of post-war debates, it is still at the center of academic theorizations and measurements of poverty. As the most traditional approach to poverty, the absolute perspective has its roots in the early writings of Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree, the “two pioneers of modern poverty research” (Lister 2004, p. 20). The absolute view treats poverty as solely an economic problem; the poor suffer from financial deprivation and they are poor because they lack sufficient economic capital to meet basic needs such as shelter and nutrition. As such, poverty level is determined based on a minimum threshold that includes necessities such as shelter, nutrition, and clothing yet excludes other socially necessary items such as child care, transportation, and recreation. Therefore, the absolute perspective has been criticized as a one-dimensional deprivation that is primarily physical and material and isolated from social, cultural, and psychological dimensions (Rank 2004). However,

while simple and one-sided, one key benefit of this approach is that it focuses on basic issues of survival that are at the roots of various forms of deprivation.

The alternative approach, namely the ‘relative’ poverty, originated in the seminal work on *Poverty in the United Kingdom* by British scholar Peter Townsend (1979) and other researchers have built upon this research (Jordan 1996; O’Connor 2001). This research stream examines poverty within a broader social, cultural, and historical context. ‘Relative deprivation’ is a condition in which consumers do not have access to the taken-for-granted items and experiences that characterize contemporary consumption (e.g., in the United States, this would include a car, recreation, and a phone). Researchers argue that, when consumers lack basic social necessities, this deprivation also precludes integration into the society and fulfillment of the expected roles such as participation into the civic life and taking advantage of the psychological and social resources (i.e., education, job opportunities) that are accessible to middle-class consumers (Townsend 1993). As such, relative conceptualization of poverty constitutes not only material but also socio-cultural and psychological deprivations experienced by impoverished consumers.

However, the relativist approach has critics. For example, Lister (2004) suggests that relative deprivation may be misleading when applied to a society whereby the majority of the population has insufficient resources to participate in a humane way of life (e.g., Bangladesh, India). So in a society with widespread deprivation, a relativist might only count those at the very bottom of the socio-economic ladder as poor. Similarly, since relative deprivation refers to the “lack of socially perceived necessities,” in a wealthy society those people at the very bottom may live quite well when compared broadly to other global populations, leading to the misclassification of them as poor (Bradshaw and Finch 2003, p. 515). Furthermore, what might

be considered as “ordinary social customs, activities, and relationships” in any given society is very subjective and, as such, relative deprivation can have different meanings across multiple contexts (Townsend 1987, p. 127). For example, take the case of a cell phone that is regarded as an indispensable possession by most American teenagers. Does our understanding of abject poverty lose its hard edge when we call an American teenager deprived because they lack a cell phone?

Poverty as Capability Deprivation. Human needs are physical and material as much as they are social and psychological (Lister 2004). As such, the absolute and relative poverty do not represent two distinct types of deprivation, but rather complementary constructions of poverty that are focused on different human needs and deprivations. For instance, while an absolute version of poverty focuses on income as the determinant of poverty, those differences in income and wealth often lead to other forms of deprivations (i.e., relative poverty).

Therefore, moving beyond the absolute vs. relative dichotomy and examining poverty from both perspectives might lead to a richer understanding of the phenomenon. One helpful framework to integrate these two perspectives is Amartya Sen’s work. In his theorization of poverty, Sen (1992) distinguishes between ‘functionings’ and ‘capabilities.’ ‘Functionings’ refers to what a person manages to *do* or to *be*. These functionings range from satisfying basic needs (e.g., shelter, food) to fulfilling more sophisticated needs and expectations (e.g., taking part in the life of the community, achieving self-esteem). ‘Capabilities,’ include the real alternatives and choices that are available to a person; that is, capabilities are what a person *can* do or be. It is the “alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve” (Sen 1999, p. 75). As such, capabilities also reflect a certain degree of freedom since they denote a person’s freedom to choose among alternatives. Therefore, while a person’s functionings



reflect his/her actual achievements, capabilities represent “the freedom to achieve well-being” (Sen 1992, p. 49). In his work on economic development and freedom, Sen (1999) lists five distinct yet interconnected types of instrumental freedoms that improve the functionings and capabilities of a person: 1) political freedoms, 2) economic facilities, 3) social opportunities, 4) transparency guarantees (i.e., the freedom to interact with one another under guarantees of lucidity and disclosure), and 5) protective security. A person faces capability deprivation when he/she is deprived from the means to achieve these freedoms.

Through his conceptualization of ‘functionings’ and ‘capabilities,’ Sen (1999) argues that impoverishment must be seen as a “capability deprivation, rather than merely as lowness of incomes” (p. 87). This approach is similar to relative deprivation but Sen goes further and suggests that “income poverty” and “capability poverty” are not conceptually distinct since income is an important means to achieve capabilities even though capabilities involve some degree of freedom of choice. This view suggests that income is a means to an end rather than an end in itself, thus challenging the income-based measurements of poverty. Furthermore, Sen (1992, p. 115) notes that being impoverished in a wealthy society is a “capability handicap” and “relative deprivation in the space of incomes can yield absolute deprivation in the space of capabilities.” In other words, in a country that is generally rich, more income is needed to buy enough goods and commodities to achieve the same social functionings to preserve one’s dignity and avoid public shame (Sen 1983). A key point emphasized by Sen throughout his work on poverty is the wider economic, social, and political system that constrains people.

Poverty as Social Exclusion. Similar to Sen’s view of poverty as capability deprivation, the notion of social exclusion involves a multi-dimensional approach to poverty whereby experiential and social realities of the poor are explored (Narayan et al. 2000). The notion of

‘social exclusion’ has dominated the poverty discourse over the last couple decades, particularly in Europe (Room 1999; Richardson and Le Grand 1999). Although social exclusion’s theoretical roots are grounded in the work of sociologist Max Weber, its modern usage is political and ideological (Lister 2004). Social exclusion in its modern sense originated in France in the 1970s within the welfare circles and it was broadly defined as “rupture of social bonds” (O’Brien et al. 2009, p. 3). For example, Richardson and Le Grand (2002) explore social exclusion as a multi-faceted deprivation that can occur within four domains: consumption, production, political engagement, and social interaction. According to their framework, consumers would feel socially excluded if 1) they do not have enough income to consume socially necessary items, 2) they are not employed, 3) they are not part of a community organization and lack voice in the political arena, and 4) they do not have access to social networks to seek support. In addition, Richardson and Le Grand (2002) argue that social exclusion happening in one of these four domains can lead to social exclusion in another domain(s).

After its inception, the concept has dominated the discourse on poverty and generated questions such as ‘is the concept of social exclusion merely a new label for poverty’ (O’Brien et al. 2009), or ‘does the concept of social exclusion contribute to our understanding of the nature and causes of poverty that may be otherwise neglected?’ (Sen 2000). In the last decade, however, social exclusion has been viewed as complementary and illuminating paradigm to the concept of poverty, contributing to a multi-dimensional nature of poverty (e.g., psycho-social and relational aspects of deprivation) and to the importance of participation and agency (Lister 2000). In this sense, social exclusion is not an alternative and competing approach to impoverishment, but rather provides a broader lens through which a richer understanding of poverty can be realized.

This view is also adopted by Sen (2000) who examines social exclusion as a direct part of capability poverty. According to Sen, being excluded from the wider social and cultural networks can lead to other deprivations and thereby causing ‘poor living.’ For instance, being excluded from employment opportunities might lead to economic impoverishment that in turn might result in other deprivations such as lack of balanced nutrition and shelter. In his conceptualization of social exclusion, Sen (2000) also distinguishes between “constitutive relevance of social exclusion” vs. “instrumental relevance of social exclusion” (p. 13). Social exclusion is constitutively relevant if it represents a loss on its own that directly impoverishes consumers’ lives in addition to the other indirect deprivations it might cause (e.g., lack of access to health care). On the other hand, there are cases for instrumentally relevant forms of social exclusion whereby relational forms of deprivations can only indirectly lead to further deprivations such as lack of access to the credit market leading to ‘income poverty.’

There is also a developing yet promising research tradition that specifically investigates social exclusion within the realm of consumption. This approach is exemplified in the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s (2005) work entitled, *Work, Consumerism, and the New Poor*. Arguing that there has been a shift from a production-oriented to a consumption-focused society, Bauman theorizes that poor consumers feel socially excluded and stigmatized in the realm of consumption. Labeled as “blemished, defective, faulty, and deficient-in other words, inadequate consumer manquees or flawed consumers,” the poor are stigmatized since they cannot consume like middle-class consumers do (Bauman 2005, 38)<sup>4</sup>. In a consumer society such as the United

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<sup>4</sup> The following quote from Bauman (2005, p. 1) is quite illuminating in this regard: “The poor will be always with us, but what it means to be poor depends on the kind of ‘us’ they are with...It is one thing to be poor in a society of producers and universal employment; it is quite a different thing to be poor in a society of consumers, in which life-projects are built around consumer choice rather than work, professional skills, or jobs. If ‘being poor’ once derived its meaning from the condition of being unemployed, today it draws its meaning primarily from the plight of a flawed consumer.”

States, 'normal life' is characterized as a life that is structured around consumption and instant gratification through consumption-related identity projects. The "bonds of consumption" are perhaps ties that unifies people; good consumers are respected, hard-working, and aspiring members of the contemporary consumer society (Bauman 2000). Like Bauman, in her study on five rural communities in England, Williams (2002) illustrates that impoverished consumers feel excluded from the mainstream society since they consume in different ways. Even having to purchase second-hand clothing through 'informal outlets' such as garage sales and social networks leads to feelings of alienation and detachment from the contemporary consumption society that consume in 'normal' ways. Of course, amid the recent dramatic economic downturn, new trends are emerging as being frugal is becoming socially valued.

## **Explanations of Poverty**

Although many explanations have been offered for the existence of poverty, two major approaches exist that implicate either the individual or structural explanations (Wright 1993). This section will review the theories that represent this individual/structural dichotomy.

Individual (or Cultural) Perspectives ('Blaming the Victim'). Also referred to as 'blaming the victim' approaches, these frameworks originate in genetic, moral, and cultural explanations (Jennings 1999). Regardless of their origins, these perspectives hold that individuals are personally responsible for being poor, they behave in deviant and socially unacceptable ways, and for the most part they cannot escape poverty because they adopt a different set of values.

First, there are explanations that focus on the genetic factors for blame attribution. Taking a Social Darwinist perspective, neoconservative scholars like Charles Murray and Lewis Turman suggest that genetic inferiority and biological factors cause poverty. These allegedly 'bad genes'

that are responsible for poor people's situation range from low intelligence, lack of ability, and even to the size of their brain cavity and skull (Gould 1981). For example, Black people are assumed to have genetically lower intelligence levels, and as such, end up in poverty at higher rates than 'genetically superior whites' (Ropers 1991). These controversial and largely discredited theorizations are called 'processes of evasion' that overlooks socio-cultural and economic causes of poverty, in addition to highlighting an inhuman and racist biological determinism (Ryan 1971). Perhaps the stronger attack on these perspectives is the genetic work that has discovered just how much in common we actually have.

Secondly, explanations that are grounded on moral and cultural factors mainly draw on American anthropologist Oscar Lewis' (1959, 1970) 'culture of poverty' thesis. Also named as 'welfare culture,' the culture of poverty is defined as a generational and dysfunctional subculture with its own structure and rationale. From this tradition, poverty is seen as the consequence of the poor's behavior rather than its cause. The culture of poverty is a culture of "self-perpetuating syndrome of deviancy and failure" (Gilliat 2001, p. 37). The characteristics of people who live in a culture of poverty include "strong feelings of marginality, helplessness, dependence, and inferiority...weak ego structure, confusion of sexual identification, a lack of impulse control,...and a high tolerance for psychological pathology of all sorts" (Lewis 1970, p. 73). The culture of poverty thesis is consistent with the moralistic, underclass discourse (MUD) that is highly criticized in the social exclusion paradigm (Levitas 1998). Like the culture of poverty, MUD emphasizes individual behaviors and ways of life in explaining poverty and portrays the poor as having no morals. In addition, it perpetuates social stigmas and categorization of the poor as living in a 'dependency culture' or 'underclass.' Some other euphemisms developed to describe the poor are 'rednecks', 'hillbillies', 'crackers', and 'sand hillers' (Flynt 2004).

In advocating for his thesis, Lewis highlights that not all impoverished citizens live pathological lives and not all poor communities across nations share the subcultural traits of the culture of poverty (Lewis 1959). In fact, Lewis agrees that in a society such as the U.S. characterized by traditional ideologies of upward social mobility, participatory democracy, and a sense of identification with larger groups, the culture of poverty is relatively uncommon as opposed to societies that are less advanced. Hence, the importance of participatory approaches, community building programs, and organization beyond the level of nuclear family and bonding social networks are all important factors in overcoming culture of poverty. Furthermore, in addition to being a defiant and dysfunctional subculture, the culture of poverty is also viewed as a way to cope with deprivation (Hill and Gaines 2007). It represents “an effort to cope with feelings of hopelessness and despair” to find “local solutions for problems not met by existing social institutions and agencies” (Lewis 1970, p. 69). The incapable and deviant poor develop fatalistic and socially ineffective skills and attitudes to cope with their situation rather than learning other constructive skills and behaviors that might help them to move away from their generational heritage (Harrington 1962). For example, in his ethnography of working-class youths, Willis (1977) depicts the politics of counter-school culture of lads. Engaging in disruptive and subversive behaviors such as smoking and drinking, lagging, avoiding homework, and subverting authority, the lads resist the conventional notions of morality and schooling. This culture of resistance practiced in school translates to the workplace (e.g., the construction site) and help working-class lads adapt and exist within the new system. In their workplace, the lads would employ what they had learned through socialization in their schooling culture (e.g., avoiding work, subverting surveillance) to deal with authority and supervision.

Nevertheless, Lewis's notion of the culture of poverty has been challenged by critics highlighting conceptual and methodological flaws in his approach. Valentine (1968) draws attention to the negative prejudice inherent in the concept of the culture of poverty and argues that such bias might lead to public policies that perpetuate the estrangement of the poor from the non-poor. Valentine also points to the methodological weaknesses in Lewis's work and argues that Lewis fails to clarify the relationships among his main units of analysis (e.g., the individual, the family, the community, the nation). Likewise, Willie (1971) argues that Lewis's culture of poverty stresses the weaknesses and disadvantages and overlooks the strengths of the poor. As a counter-argument to Lewis's hypothesis, Willie refers to the case of the black poor in the U.S. many of whom have survived and transcended the barriers generating material and social deprivation.

Structural Perspectives ('Blaming the System'). In contrast to the individual (cultural) perspectives, the other side of the dichotomy consists of explanations that seek to understand poverty from a multitude of structural dynamics. Refusing to explain poverty as a consequence of individual deficiencies and failings, researchers following this tradition have recently adopted the concept of 'structural vulnerability' as a critical way of understanding and overcoming American poverty (see, for example, Rank 2004; Newman and Chen 2007).

From a social exclusion perspective, these structural approaches are grounded in two main academic discourses. First, according to the redistributive egalitarian discourse (RED), poverty and the resultant multiple deprivations are on the rise due to the lack of sufficient income and denial of basic social rights. Here, social exclusion takes on a 'social justice' angle (Levitas 1998; Williams 2002). Second, the social integrationist discourse (SID) argues that the poor have no access to employment opportunities and, as a result, stay poor (Lister 2000).

These ‘blaming the system’ perspectives implicate many other structural factors that perpetuate multiple deprivations and various forms of inequality. The focus is shifted away from the personal characteristics of individuals and groups and concentrates on external factors in accounting for poverty. For example, lack of employment and low wages (e.g., Shipler 2004), macroeconomic and demographic problems that lead to inner city crisis (Newman 2007), racial discrimination and segregation (e.g., Hermon 1999), inadequacy of the health care system and lack of affordable housing (e.g., Ehrenreich 2001), and lack of political empowerment (Jennings 1999) are among the structural factors that perpetuate poverty. Compared with the individual frameworks, structural perspectives take a more humanistic angle and focuses on multiple domains such as employment, education, health, and civic life rather than limiting the analysis to the personal and economic spheres. As such, the structural explanations of poverty naturally treat poverty as capability deprivation and social exclusion.

### **Coping with Poverty**

Within the social sciences, particularly sociology and psychology literatures, a variety of coping strategies employed by the poor have been documented. The impoverished individuals’ coping behaviors have been explored within multiple contexts such as the daily marketplace encounters (Gilliat 2001; Gilliom 2001) and other socio-cultural and civic spheres (Pope 1999; Dunziger and Lin 2000). These coping strategies primarily emphasize psycho-social and economic mechanisms in dealing with emotional and financial hardships. Through their acts of coping, the poor demonstrate different levels of agency and interaction with the broader socio-economic structures and institutions (Lister 2004). This section will examine these multiple types of coping behaviors in detail.



Acts of survival ('getting by'). Grounded mostly in economics and psychology literatures, individual acts of survival comprise *getting-by* strategies of at-risk populations (e.g., the poor, elderly, low-educated). As “an active process of juggling, piecing together and going without,” getting-by enables consumers facing deprivation to survive in the marketplace (Lister 2004, p. 133). Getting-by strategies are mainly viewed as “struggle for material subsistence” since they help impoverished consumers to adjust and live with adverse situations threatening economic survival (Gilliom 2001, p. 104). These strategies are also defined as “problem-focused” coping since they are geared towards solving concrete problems. In his study of the adaptation strategies of the poor to a capitalist marketplace, Stephen Gilliat (2001) discusses two types of economic getting-by strategies used by the poor: minimizing expenditures (e.g., budgeting, cutting back) and augmenting existing resources (e.g., self-provisioning, borrowing, reliance on social capital). The idea of having to survive through getting-by coping tactics in an oppressive marketplace is also explored in Sturdivant’s (1969) seminal work on *The Ghetto Marketplace*. Sturdivant argues that low-income consumers are taken advantage of through “shady sales practices” (p. 137). They cope by avoiding luxuries and buying only necessities, consuming second-hand goods, and relying on home production (e.g., growing vegetables and DIY home repairs).

The acts of survival utilized by the poor to survive poverty are not limited to managing material resources. There are other psycho-social tactics for dealing with stress, emotional challenges, and stigmatization that arise from deprivation. The poor seek solace through ‘sin products’ such as alcohol and smoking (Gilliat 2001), rely on their social networks for mutual support (Hicks-Bartlett 2000), and engage in emotion-focused coping such as avoidance, denial, and fantasizing (Miller and Kaiser 2001). Similarly, Caplovitz’s (1963) work on consumer

practices of low-income families illustrate many psychological coping tactics employed by the poor in an exploitative marketplace. For example, consumers cope through apathy (inaction) and, at times, seek help from volunteer organizations when faced with financial and emotional stress.

Hence, consumers meet their basic needs through an active daily struggle to make “space or creating room for maneuver within constraints” (Gilliat 2001, p. 139). Although acts of survival are geared towards solving economic and emotional problems and they are mostly reactive, some of these acts still involve significant degrees of agency (e.g., long-term fiscal planning). In the next section, more proactive and ideological acts are discussed.

Acts of defiance (‘getting back at’). In contrast, acts of defiance involve disruptive and subversive everyday practices of the poor, expressing their desire to get back at an unfair system and marketplace. Many of these acts are proactive and some are generated as a direct consequence of viewing the marketplace as emphasizing economic, social, and cultural inequalities (not all defiant acts have this ideological content though). Although this research stream receives significant attention in sociology (Wagner 1993; Lister 2004) and political science (Scott 1985, 1990; Gilliom 2001), it is perhaps the least examined form of consumer coping in marketing research. Yet this stream of research offers considerable potential in untangling multiple social constructions of poverty and agency. Therefore, it is useful to briefly overview the main theoretical roots underlying this research stream.

Acts of defiance are theoretically grounded in the literature on resistance, particularly poststructuralist Foucauldian view of power, resistance, and agency. Foucault regards power as a complex, processual, relational, productive, and non-coercive network that permeates all social relations. As he proposes, “power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared...power is exercised from innumerable points” (Foucault 1978, p. 94). This position moves beyond the

Marxist conceptions of power as a wholly top-down, oppressive, negative, and censoring force. Instead, Foucauldian power represents “a multiple and mobile field of force relations, wherein far-reaching, but never completely stable effects of domination are produced” (Foucault 1978, p. 102). For instance, a low-income Appalachian welfare recipient faces a multiplicity of power relations and dynamics arising through the discourse on welfare system (Gilliom 2001). On one hand, she is facing the authoritarian and degrading welfare bureaucracy that invades her privacy and digs into her whole life and background (i.e., state or system power). On the other hand, she may find herself having to deal with the power tactics of the welfare worker who treats her poorly and even of the receptionist who looks at her as if she was not a human being. These various power mechanisms may push the welfare recipient to employ different tactics to cope with the situation and even to fight against it.

In a Foucauldian world, power and knowledge are intertwined and interdependent on each other and it is only through discourses that this relationship becomes manifest. Discourses produce knowledge through language and social practices and knowledge created in this way is then used to exercise power (Storey 2006). Modern power, which Foucault terms as *disciplinary power*, works in complex and subtle ways through the process of normalization imposed by discursive practices. Multiple discursive realms such as education, medicine, family, and the marketplace develop and institutionalize what is normal and socio-culturally appropriate (Foucault 1977). As a result, individuals internalize mass-produced ideals and regimes to which they are subject. In Foucault’s vocabulary, this is coined as *panopticon*<sup>5</sup>, serving the function of

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<sup>5</sup> Foucault (1977) borrows the notion of *panopticon* from the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham who designed panopticon in 1785. This was an architectural layout for a prison with individual cells surrounding a central tower where a warden could observe the actions of the inmates without himself being detected by the inmates. It was a tool for easy creation and perpetuation of power; the inmates knew that at any given moment it was possible that they were being observed by an authority figure and thus must control their behavior. Because this authority figure was completely invisible to the inmates, they must assume that they were always under observation, which then led to an internalized state of self-consciousness. In this way, the exercising of power was reduced to its most economical

an internalized disciplinary gaze and surveillance in contemporary society. For instance, the third generation of poor migrant consumers living in a Turkish squatter community surrounding the capital city appropriates the Batici lifestyle<sup>6</sup> during their acculturation process. Resisting their mothers' authentic villager squatter identity, the daughters view the Batici discourse as a transformative and assimilative identity project that can be engaged in to be liberated from other dominant discourses and representations such as "culturally inferior Other" and "threatening Other" (Ustuner and Holt 2007, p. 47). The Batici discourse acts as an internalized panopticon by gently imposing disciplinary and normalizing practices (e.g., dressing like a modern Batici woman) that keep consumers along pre-defined and 'normal' consumption paths, forcing the limits of their economic means.

The most significant novelty in Foucault's thinking is the dispersed and productive nature of power and its close relationship with acts of defiance. Not being monopolized and exercised by a specific centre such as the State or the Church, power relations are found in every site of social life from private (e.g., family) to more cultural (e.g., the marketplace), and political spheres (e.g., the government). Foucault coins this proliferation and fragmentation as *microphysics* of power, highlighting the many mechanisms, contexts, and tactics through which power circulates. This dispersed and fragmented version of power also means that power is a positive force producing different dynamics encompassing not only subtle domination and surveillance but also multiple forms of agency and coping.

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form, while simultaneously ensuring that those over which the power was held also performed and conformed at their highest level.

<sup>6</sup> Ustuner and Holt (2007, p. 46) define the Batici lifestyle as "an unspoken alliance forged among the Turkish media, corporations, and elite consumers, who have selectively culled and reinterpreted media, tastes, fashions, and ideas circulated from Europe and the United States to work in the local context."

Contemporarily, the Foucauldian view of agency is best exemplified by political scientists (e.g., Scott 1985, 1990), sociologists (e.g., Goffman 1961), and poststructuralist feminists (Rand 1995; Bordo 1997). Across these different research streams, there are two different articulations of individual acts of defiance in everyday practices. First, getting-back at acts are *subtle, informal, symbolic, uncoordinated, and routine practices* that resemble emotional coping and survival tactics (Gilliom 2001). This type of behavior is usually referred to as “micropolitics” (Best and Kellner 1991, p. 55). Defined as popular tactics and everyday strategies to counter the mechanisms of normalization, discipline, and authority, micropolitics are the direct outcome of various microphysics of power that operates through every level of society. Within the context of poverty, for political scientist James Scott, these practices represent “everyday forms of resistance” of Malay peasants, that is, “the ordinary weapons of powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth” (Scott 1985, p. 36). Another example is the sociological ethnographic work of Goffman (1961) on mental institutions and the everyday life of inmates. Using symbolic techniques such as situational withdrawal, acting out to fit the ideal inmate role, and subtly refusing to cooperate with the staff, Goffman’s inmates are able to subvert the institutional regime of power. Finally, organizational studies also offer rich accounts of symbolic and unobtrusive acts of defiance (see, for example, Mumby 2005, Putnam et al. 2005).

These practices are therapeutic because they reflect “a form of individual self-help” that avoids direct confrontation with marketplace norms yet still signals defiance (Scott 1985, p. 29). Even though these acts might look like isolated and self-helping tactics, they reflect the nuanced micropolitics of consumers. These disruptive and subversive practices symbolize subtle, informal, and mundane defiance against the marketplace and what it represents through

normalized and enforced discourses. For example, a low literate consumer's use of flirtation and deception is not only a survival tactic but also a subtle way of fighting the social stigma of illiteracy (Adkins and Ozanne 2005). Similarly, a welfare mother lying to her caseworker and denying the presence of her live-in spouse is a survival tactic to maximize food stamps and medical benefits for her child, but it might also be a way to resist what she perceives to be an unreasonable welfare system and panopticon-like surveillance. Using Scott's (1990, p. 199) terminology, these everyday acts of resistance become "infrapolitics;" that is, "the sort of politics that busy, threatened, and otherwise disempowered groups can, and do, use" (Gilliom 2001, p. 100). Other examples of symbolic and informal defiant practices of the poor to the dominant marketplace discourses include holding out for skilled jobs when unemployed, preferring to work during the day rather than on night shifts to feel like a 'normal' employee, and refusing to wait on rude customers (Paules 1991; Wagner 1993). The working poor undertake such practices to reject 'othering', degradation, and the negative representation of the poor in public discourses. At a more radically defiant and socially unacceptable level, theft engaged in by house cleaners is another form of disruptive yet overtly political and proactive way of resisting the unfair treatment by employers (Ehrenreich 2001). Likewise, engaging in proactive and overtly political everyday practices, Shipler's (2004) working poor pay for fake immigration documents and social security cards to secure jobs and "shop" by eating off the supermarket shelves.

However, these are not organized, collective, and systematic forms of opposition that are concerned with traditional forms of political action. Nonetheless, these forms of symbolic and subtle defiance may act as "the silent partner of a loud form of public resistance" (Scott 1990, p. 199) such as in the case of Living Wage Movement and class-action suits filed against Wal-Mart

by employees (Shipler 2004). Scott (1990) demonstrates that various forms of oral discourse (e.g., rumor and folktales) among the Malay peasants can act as the surreptitious equivalent of open and public gestures of contempt and labor strikes.

Second, individual acts of defiance can be more *direct, overtly political, proactive, and consumption-related practices*, such as Muslim consumers rejecting Western goods symbolizing globalized capitalism (Ger and Belk 1996) and reflexively defiant consumers questioning the status quo and inequalities (Ozanne and Murray 1995). Here, consumers are active citizens fighting for their rights. Once again, these actions are not collectively organized revolts directly challenging the socio-economic order but rather personal and localized micro-political acts of everyday life. In consumer research, these acts are termed as “micro-imaginings,” referring to concrete localized activities of daily lives (Murray and Ozanne 2006, p. 53). Similar insights have emerged from Dobscha and Ozanne’s (2001) study on environmentally-conscious consumers. Drawing from ecofeminist theories to explore ‘green’ consumers’ worldviews, Dobscha and Ozanne cast consumers as skeptical agents who engage in a diverse range of mobilization tactics (e.g., buying secondhand goods, avoiding the consumption of particular products, and substituting alternatives). Green consumers care about the earth and ‘earth-others’ by protecting all living things. Thus, taking an anti-bureaucratic and anti-industrial stance, these consumers reject the blocking of cultural imagination by the marketplace and avoid much consumption.

In this tradition, many of poststructuralist-feminist scholars’ ideas share a Foucauldian spirit (Rand 1995; Collins 2000). Drawing on poststructuralist notions of discourses as systems of representations, Rand (1995) describes acts of defiance as relational, contextual, and cultural acts signaling subversion through counter-discourses or reverse-discourses. Reverse discourses

subvert dominant discourses and enable the production of creative and resilient practices. A notable example of these reverse discourse micropolitics can be found in the work of Collins (2000). In her study of African-American women's consciousness and empowerment, Collins argues that the dominant cultural discourses classify and stereotype African American women around four main distorted systems of representation: mummies, matriarchs, jezebels, and welfare mothers<sup>7</sup>. In their struggle against these controlling and degrading discourses and images, Black women can leverage various positive sites as resources of resistance: family, church, the Blues music tradition, Black feminist literary criticism, and intragender relations. These potential sites are safe spaces that function to illustrate how distorted characterizations of Black women in dominant cultural discourses provide the ideological justification for objectification and oppression. Raising critical consciousness and educating Black women, these sites help create reverse discourses portraying Black women as hard-working, competent, moral, and beautiful individuals, each with their own agency.

Organized community action. On a more collective and organized level, individuals cope with and resist poverty through community action (Dunziger and Lin 2000; O'Connor 2001). This research tradition is grounded in the contemporary critical theory and new social movements (NSM) literatures (Habermas 1981, 1989; Kellner 1989; Touraine 1981). These critical theorists attempt to explicate the dynamics of the marketplace in terms of not only ideological suppression and domination but also cultural disenchantment and consumer rebellion. For instance, Habermas (1981) distinguishes between 'system world' and 'lifeworld'

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<sup>7</sup> The mammy image portrays Black women as "faithful, obedient, domestic servant" (Collins 2000, 72), bringing forth the long-standing image of Black women as loving and caring slaves for the White men's children. The image of the matriarch represents the working Black woman who spends too much time away from their kids and home (i.e., bad mothers). The welfare mother image goes parallel to the degrading representation of the poor in general as lazy, incapable, and unwilling consumers who want to abuse the welfare system. Finally, the jezebel image symbolizes a deviant female sexuality by depicting Black women as sexually aggressive and thus justifying sexual harassment and assaults of White men.



in his critique of modernity. According to Habermas, the system world consists of the state and bureaucratic organizations whereas the lifeworld refers to more private spheres of everyday life such as family and community. Lifeworlds are strengthened through solidarity, democratic dialogue, and public debates. Habermas claims that the lifeworld is becoming increasingly dominated and repressed by the processes of commodification and bureaucratization by corporations. Habermas calls this the “colonization of the lifeworld” and argues that emancipation is possible via democratic debates about crucial social, cultural, and political issues dominating the marketplace. For example, consumer information networks and advocacy groups such as *Consumer Union* and *Public Citizen*<sup>8</sup> provide democratic forums for consumers to be informed about goods and services and to resist poorly made or harmful ones, albeit these suggestions rarely move beyond the options that already exist in the marketplace.

As a key figure in this NSM literature, Touraine (1988, p. 68) defines these movements as “the action, both culturally oriented and socially conflictual, of a social class defined by its position of domination or dependency.” In other words, NSM act as pressure groups oriented around critiques of ideology and attacks of problems in the quality of life, individual and collective self-realization, and human rights. NSM theorists generally take a unified position on ideology and conceptualize it as “all systematically distorted accounts of reality that both conceal and legitimate social asymmetries and injustices” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 139). In this tradition, ideological critique moves beyond pure class relations and encompasses all aspects of everyday

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<sup>8</sup> Founded in 1936, *Consumer Union* serves as a non-profit organization with the mission of informing, educating, and protecting consumers in the marketplace. Testing goods and services in such domains as health care, food safety, home appliances, and baby products, *Consumer Union* periodically publishes *Consumer Reports*, which has become a key reference for many consumers. *Public Citizen* was established in 1971 by Ralph Nader. It seeks to protect and represent consumers’ legal rights and interests at the political and state level about issues such as health, safety, sustainable energy sources, and environmental protection (Goodman and Cohen 2004).

life. Here, collective and organized community action are goal-directed toward institutional, social, or political change and are guided by coordinated action.

This approach to organized community action is best exemplified in Kozinets and Handelman's (2004) study of three different consumer activist movements (e.g., Adbusters --the anti-advertising group that protests advertising, anti-Nike activism, and anti-genetically engineered food activism). Taking a critical perspective, Kozinets and Handelman (2004) draw from NSM theories and highlight the long standing debate on agency (individual freedom) versus structure (broader social, economic, and cultural forces). For instance, activists encourage skepticism toward advertising to help consumers become more conscious and critical of the dominant consumer culture and, hopefully, encourage them to vote in the marketplace with their dollars.

In the realm of poverty and deprivation, many working poor populations are actively involved in organized and strategic forms of community action. One historical example of this type of public resistance is the case of the Appalachian coal miners protesting poor working conditions and going on strikes (Gaventa 1980). Here, some individuals act as 'organic intellectuals,' the thinking and organizing force of the working class poor. Organic intellectuals motivate the masses to critically challenge the ideological and intellectual social order (Gramsci 1995). Likewise, the Civil Rights and Living Wage movements are both well-known examples of the organized community action approach within the poor communities.

### **Marketing Research on Poverty**

Research on poverty generally falls within the domain of consumer welfare in marketing. Consumer researchers have focused on several at-risk populations such as consumers with

physical disabilities (Baker, Stephens, and Hill 2001), low-literate consumers (Adkins and Ozanne 2005), the homeless (Hill and Stamey 1990), and the impoverished (Hill 2001). Research on poverty has recently examined poverty as a multi-dimensional deprivation with a focus on cultural, social, and psychological aspects of poverty rather than merely economic consequences (Chakravarti 2006; Hill and Gaines 2007).

Much of consumer research on poverty tends to take a structural approach by focusing on the unfair market conditions and its impact on the lives of impoverished consumers (Andreasen 1975; Alwitt 1995; Alwitt and Donley 1997). From this perspective, it is argued that poor consumers are at a disadvantage in many market exchanges and they suffer from fewer product offerings, higher prices, and unjust sales techniques. Andreasen (1993, 1997) suggests that several conditions exist that cause this unfair situation, including lack of transportation, lack of access to product information, and financial barriers (e.g., lack of access to credit cards and bank accounts) among others. Within marketing, some of the most recent research on the idea of an oppressive marketplace faced by the poor emphasizes topics such as the integrative justice models for engaging poor consumers (Santos and Laczniak 2009), advocacy for decentralization policies and welfare programs (Bertrand, Mullainathan and Shafir 2006), constructive stakeholder engagement through macromarketing (Shultz 2007), and advocacy for participatory approaches adopted from World Bank to help the poor take part in social and civic domains (Talukdar, Gulyani and Salmen 2005). This recent shift points out a transformative turn in consumer research on poverty whereby poverty is treated as a complex and relational phenomenon that can be alleviated through multi-stakeholder engagement and civic empowerment.

Nevertheless, marketing research on poverty is still limited in scope and deserves further theoretical rigor. For example, from a coping and defiance perspective, the poor are largely ignored in consumer research. With a few notable exceptions (see, for example, Hill 2001, 2002; Holt 2002; Crockett and Wallendorf 2004; Ustuner and Holt 2007), studies on acts of defiance focus on consumers with significant economic, social, and cultural resources. Living at the edge of poverty, however, the poor are likely to engage in creative and unexpected consumption practices and even organized community action as they struggle with financial, emotional, and psychological deprivations and social stigmas (see the earlier discussion on coping with poverty). However, much of earlier marketing research on poverty explores resource-constrained consumers as victims who barely get by and who lack the desire and capacity to aspire and appropriate the marketplace. This lower level agency is consistent with cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's (2004) view of the poor as "neither simple dupes nor secret revolutionaries, but survivors" (p. 65). Moreover, although studies that focus on structural vulnerabilities offer a better understanding of consumer disadvantage in light of harsh marketplace realities, they mainly underline behavioral and emotional coping strategies (Hill and Stephens 1997). Despite the growing marketing research on the poor, an implicit assumption exists that the poor are less enthusiastic, less resilient, and more disempowered than the middle-class consumers. Thus, the poor are traditionally depicted as mainly interested in daily survival rather than engaging in different forms of agency and aspirations. In addition, the inadequacy of the poor's cultural capital (i.e., education, money management and financial planning skills acquired in the family) is viewed as the primary determinant of the working poor's disempowerment and lack of self-esteem (Henry 2005). In stark contrast with young professionals at their age, these low-income consumers are depicted as "impotent reactors" unable and unwilling to plan for and explore

financial opportunities. Holt (1995) takes this focus on cultural capital further and argues that low-income consumers even lack the skills to creatively subvert mass-market boundaries by mixing genres and appropriating different consumption objects.

Thus, much consumer research on poverty tend to focus on the struggle for daily necessities (Alwitt and Donley 1996) while overlooking other forms of coping (e.g., acts of defiance) and different forms of consumption that might reveal interesting dynamics towards multiple social constructions of poverty. A few exceptions exist, such as Hill and Stamey (1990), Hill (1991), and Hill (2001). In their ethnographic account of homeless people, Hill and Stamey (1990) challenges homeless myths and Lewis's culture of poverty and highlight the creative and resilient aspects of homeless consumers' behaviors. In another study, Hill (1991) reports the fantasies of homeless women as they ponder about their dreams for future lives. Like more affluent consumers, Hill's informants cherish certain possessions and fantasize about particular goods and consumption experiences that may be considered luxury items (e.g., house built colonial style, pictures to put on the walls) as they socially construct their economic and emotional deprivations. This view clearly goes beyond the mere material coping perspective ascribed to the poor and it is quite similar to Holt's (2002) work. In contrast with his earlier work on cultural capital (Holt 1995), here Holt's poor consumers act as "cultural producers" as they develop creative and micro-emancipatory ways to resist information dictated by the marketplace (p. 72). One example of this creative consumption is to use media channels to create and advance their own local knowledge about goods and services. Holt's (2002) consumers follow Ozanne and Murray's (1995) reflexively defiant recipe and undertake more assertive practices to impede marketing's influence (e.g., avoiding certain brands and skeptically evaluating information offered by the marketers).

Another noteworthy research on the poor within consumer research is Crockett and Wallendorf's (2004) study on everyday provisioning of impoverished African-American consumers. Crockett and Wallendorf's informants proactively respond to unjust market conditions (e.g., uneven store distribution, higher prices, smaller selection of goods and services) by relying on a repertoire of defiant practices and stigma management techniques. Motivated to offset the stereotyping and oppressive discourses on poverty, these practices include outshopping, migrating to neighborhoods offering better resources (outmigration), and supporting Black entrepreneurship. Consumers' normative political ideology (e.g., Black liberalism vs. Black nationalism) reflects on what without deeper examination would appear to be apolitical everyday provisioning behavior. Likewise, in Ustuner and Holt's (2007) ethnography, first generation poor Turkish migrant women pursue multiple subversive practices such as indigenization of modern technologies and adopting modern Islam and its consumption trajectory as an ideological and political identity project. Finally, Ger and Belk (1996) describe how poor Romanian and Turkish consumers reject certain products symbolizing Western world such as jeans, sneakers, and particular brands of soft drinks (political intent) and collectively use goods that were designed for individual consumers (i.e., ideological intent to conform to the collectivist nature of their own cultures).

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

#### **Overview**

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the methodological approach employed in this dissertation. The objectives of this research were to: 1) explore relationships that exist among low-income consumers and the marketplace; 2) untangle various coping practices employed by these consumers; and 3) investigate different forms of social exclusion and deprivation experienced by the poor to arrive at a more thorough understanding of poverty. Given these goals, an evolving and flexible methodology was used.

More specifically, three reasons necessitated the use of a qualitative methodology. First, marketplace experiences and consumption strategies of the poor, particularly of such stigmatized population as mobile home park residents, is a relatively new domain of study in consumer research. Thus, it was necessary to adopt a flexible methodology that evolved throughout the research process (Prasad 2005).

Second, since my main methodological goal was to generate rich consumer narratives that would capture multiple subjectivities, a qualitative perspective was suitable (Geertz 1973). Rooted in various research disciplines and deriving from a variety of methodological practices, qualitative research seeks a deeper understanding of cultural and social categories, domains, and assumptions (Denzin and Lincoln 2003). Qualitative methodologies emphasize understanding and interpreting processes and meanings rather than relationships among variables and predictions; thus, a context-bound understanding of the phenomenon through holistic interpretations is sought. Accordingly, this dissertation was focused on untangling socio-cultural

and economic dynamics surrounding the poor by deeply exploring the categories and assumptions shaping their lifeworlds.

Third, poverty and low rates of literacy are often correlated, which makes the use of traditional methods such as surveys and experiments more problematic (Adkins and Ozanne 2005). As my primary data collection method, in-depth interviewing allowed my informants to leverage their verbal and interpersonal skills. In addition, in-depth interviews with relevant stakeholders and participation observation done at the site supplemented the consumer narratives I gathered. Using different qualitative techniques such as in-depth interviewing and participant observation allowed me to arrive at a multidimensional understanding of this often invisible culture.

This chapter reviews the methodology in greater detail. First, an overview of the interpretivist and ethnographic approach is provided. Then, key methodological domains are explained: the research setting, the sampling, the data gathering techniques, and the data analysis. In addition, special attention is paid to key methodological issues that are relevant to researching sensitive topics and unique populations.

## **Research Approach**

### **Interpretivism and Ethnographic Inquiry**

Within qualitative research, interpretivism emerges as a paradigm that takes subjective meanings and human interpretation as the starting point of sense making about a particular phenomenon (Hirschman 1986; Hudson and Ozanne 1988). For interpretivist researchers, the primary goal of research is to uncover subjectively and socially constructed multiple realities, which is often referred to as the principle of *verstehen* (Weber 1949). Interpretivists take a non-



deterministic approach to the world as a riddle and seek to derive holistic understandings through a flexible and evolving methodology.

Of all the interpretive traditions (i.e., hermeneutics, ethnomethodology, ethnography, symbolic interactionism, and dramaturgy), ethnography rises as one of the most widely known approaches to developing deep cultural understanding of phenomena within a particular context (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983). Since the overarching goal in this study is to understand the relationships that exist between low-income consumers and the marketplace, I started out by exploring coping strategies employed by the poor in their everyday lives. These micro practices were juxtaposed within the wider structural forces and marketplace dynamics such as different forms of deprivation and social exclusion experienced by the poor (Murray and Ozanne 2006). The dialectical interplay between micro practices and macro arenas deeply engrained in consumers' daily lives calls first for a thorough understanding of multiple individual life worlds. Consequently, this logic of inquiry necessitates an ethnographic approach that allows studying consumers in multiple situations that unfold in everyday practice (Prasad 2005; Penaloza and Cayla 2006). In this study, these everyday practices employed by the poor in many domains of their lives were explored. For example, while I explored the poor's everyday shopping behaviors, I also investigated their stigma management strategies in various contexts (e.g., the workplace, school, and the welfare office).

Furthermore, ethnography as the study of everyday cultural practices seeks to make visible multiple perspectives, subjectivities, identities, and social relations that are often invisible or hidden by dominant cultural categories (Burawoy 1991; Green, Dixon, and Zaharlick 2005). As such, ethnographic accounts call attention to and help legitimize subaltern or subjugated positions (i.e., the invisible working poor, the mobile home owner, the homeless). Hence, the

goals of the ethnographic inquiry is to explain how social phenomena work given their complexities or how identities and boundaries are created and maintained by a particular group of people within a culture or subculture (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983).

### **Research Setting**

Mobile home parks, also referred to as trailer parks, were chosen as the research setting for this dissertation for a number of reasons. First, my primary criterion was to identify poor consumers who were surviving within severe income restrictions (i.e., the marginal poor). That is, I did not seek to understand the extremely poor (e.g., the homeless) but rather to understand consumers who struggled to make ends meet (i.e., the working poor, the poor who are on a limited fixed income and receive disability or other forms of government assistance). At the beginning of my study, I was mainly interested in exploring the working poor culture; that is, people who actually hold jobs but struggle to make ends meet (Shipler 2004). However, as my study progressed, I found out that poverty was a stage of dynamic flux. Due to many structural reasons, such as poor health, lack of a balanced diet, and harsh working conditions, the near poor can easily fall below the ranks of poverty and become disabled and receive welfare assistance. In fact, since my study started, I have had a few informants who lost their jobs, became disabled, and fell into poorer categories. Thus, I kept my sampling open and I included not only the working poor but also other low-income consumers who slipped from working poor back into deeper levels of poverty. Mobile home parks was a viable site for reaching these different low-income consumer populations.

Second, mobile homes have a controversial history that makes them an interesting site to investigate multiple co-existing stigmas and vulnerabilities. Mobiles homes were once a low-cost opportunity for blue-collar workers and returning veterans to realize the middle-class American

dream of home ownership and upward social mobility. However, since the 1960s, they have turned into degraded forms of housing. Their unusual appearance and potential mobility represent a threat to conventional American housing ideals and norms (Wallis 1991; Hart, Rhodes and Morgan 2002). Particularly in the last four decades, mobile homes have turned into “sites of violent confrontation” due to the tensions between park managements and residents as well as between residents and general population (Hurley 2001, p. 17) [see Chapter Four for a more detailed overview of mobile home park literature]. Consequently, existing research suggests that mobile home park residents may be stigmatized and may employ a range of coping and stigma management strategies to either manage or transform these negative cultural representations (Berube and Berube 1997).

Third, a mobile home park is a geographically-bounded site. By limiting my study to a specific mobile home park, I was able to explore differing notions of community that were constructed by these low-income consumers (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983). In addition, I was able to recruit some informants through word-of-mouth and to engage in participant observation at community events (e.g., picnics, tutoring sessions, parenting classes). Limiting the research to one mobile home park allowed for deeper immersion and better connections with the park residents than doing multi-sited ethnography.

I chose Lakeside Park<sup>9</sup> as the site of the dissertation research. Many of the park residents live on fixed income (i.e., social assistance) while others are ‘working poor’.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The park’s real name has been changed in order to preserve confidentiality. The names of the park, its residents, and the gatekeepers are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

<sup>10</sup> Debates over how to define poverty and the working poor have been going on for many years and multiple conceptualizations exist. My definition of working poor borrows from well-cited studies on the working poor (Shipler 2004; Newman 2007). Specifically, the working poor are those individuals 18 years-old and over, holding low-wage or minimum wage jobs, with or without benefits (e.g., health care, paid vacation). These low-wage jobs are mostly found in manufacturing, service, and trade industries (Luce 2004).

## **Data Collection and Methodological Procedures**

### **Phase One: Getting Access and Early Fieldwork**

Gaining access to a research site and informants is a vital step in ethnographic research. This research step can be particularly challenging when it involves difficult-to-reach groups such as mobile home park residents (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983; Berg 2004). As such, it is crucial to identify gatekeepers who are willing to help the researcher gain access to initial informants. In addition to facilitating the entry to the site, interviewing the gatekeepers allows the researcher learn about the research context, identify important issues of concern particular to the setting, and understand socially-appropriate ways to interact with the members of the community (Wolcott 2005). Thus, I first interviewed key gatekeepers who were the members of a community outreach group that has been doing volunteer work in the trailer park for several years, In addition to these volunteers, I interviewed members of the park management. Specifically, I interviewed five members of the community outreach group, including volunteers who provide tutoring to the children and young adults of the community, organizers of community social events such as picnics, and a minister. In addition, I interviewed one member of the park management (see Appendix A for a listing of the gatekeepers and their affiliation).

The first phase of data collection provided me with valuable information about the park and its residents. I learned about the park and its history. I also learned about dynamics in the park such as conflicts among some residents, conflicts between the residents and the management, and the so-called “drug culture” within the park. During this phase, I gained insights into how outsiders, namely the park management and members of the volunteer group, perceive the park community:

They are poor. It's a culture, it's generational. They have no education, no money, no resources; it's very generational. You know, their grandmother did it, their mother did it and now they are doing it. There is no structure for the kids. They just make poor choices....Junk food and

cigarettes, they just make poor choices...It is very difficult for these kids to find success and when you give them the opportunity, they don't know what to do with it...It's like a poor soap opera here, you don't need to watch reality TV (Crystal, April 4, 2008).

I was able to establish good relationships with these gatekeepers, which then facilitated my entry into the site. Gatekeepers provided me with referrals for potential informants and even personally introduced me to my first few informants. In addition, this first phase of data collection gave me the opportunity to attend several community events as an observer<sup>11</sup>. For example, I attended and observed tutoring sessions with the community children. During these sessions, I learned about issues and problems surrounding community childrens' lives and had the opportunity to observe how children of the park and their parents interact with the 'outsiders' (i.e., the tutors).

### **Phase Two: Prolonged Immersion in the Field**

Sampling of Informants. My sampling strategy was a nonprobability snowball sampling, or network sampling. This sampling technique is particularly suitable for studying sensitive topics and members of stigmatized populations. Gatekeepers are able to "vouch for the researcher's *bona fides*" and this type of sampling represents a useful way to gather a sample among a suspicious and reserved population (Lee 1993, p. 66). After interviewing my first few informants that I met through the gatekeepers, I asked these informants for referrals of other park residents who might be interested in helping me with my project. I also used the potential informant list provided by the park manager (see Appendices B through F for a listing of informants).

Even though my strategy was snowball sampling, in order to maximize sample variability and theoretical utility, I sought diversity among my informants on specific criteria. For instance,

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<sup>11</sup> This was my first contact with trailer parks in general. Prior to this study, I had not even entered a trailer park and this domain was a foreign world to me. Therefore, these initial observations made me familiar with the site, eased my anxiety, and sparked my theoretical curiosity.

I sought diversity across economic status and income (e.g., working poor, poor on welfare or collecting disability benefits, female-headed households, families vs. couples), housing situation (e.g., owners vs. renters), and attitudes towards the park management (e.g., compliant vs. non-compliant resident). Moreover, I made an attempt to seek both active and passive residents<sup>12</sup>, illuminating theoretical nuances between passive coping and stigma management strategies and more active and assertive marketplace behaviors. When they arose, I sought to explore negative (contradictory) cases to challenge my emergent findings and continuously shape my theoretical framework. For instance, Emily (an informant) has been making and selling pocketbooks since she had become disabled. During our third interview, she offered me a free pocketbook that she normally sells for twenty dollars. She suggested I carry the purse around the campus to generate sales and even gave me a few business cards to give to interested students. I delved into Emily's assertive entrepreneurial approach which stood in contrast to many of the park residents' more passive approaches to making money.

Researcher Reflexivity. Reflexivity involves the self-conscious reflection by the researcher regarding his or her social location, biases, and interests that might influence the social construction of knowledge. All researchers work from a specific social location and “objective, value-free, aperspectival knowledge” does not exist (Bettie 2003, p. 23). Therefore, it is an illusion to believe that any researcher can completely abandon his or her biases and assumptions upon entering the field. However, researchers who emotionally distance themselves from their informants and settings may risk missing potential insights. Following Burawoy (1991), I adopted a position of immersed dialogue rather than total immersion (living in the park)

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<sup>12</sup> For example, I was able to identify a key informant who has been living in the park for the last 30 years. This informant fought back against the town's rezoning regulations, attended the town council meetings, and tried to increase awareness within the park community so they could keep their affordable housing. He also served as the head of a liaison group between the residents and the park management and worked actively with the management in community revitalization projects. On the other hand, some of my other informants were clearly less active.

or distance (short visits to the park and interrupted fieldwork). Open dialogue with my informants helped me discover my biases so I could modify my research questions and interview protocol. The interviews were positioned as ‘immersed dialogue’ rather than short trips to the site since most interviews lasted between one to two hours and each informant was interviewed at least once.

As part of this reflexive process, I kept a journal to record my ‘informal’ observations and perceptions of the park community. I started the journal by describing my own personal encounters with impoverished individuals. These autobiographical encounters suggested both potential sources of strengths (e.g., I have compassion and have bought food for homeless people I met on the streets) and weaknesses (e.g., I was raised in a culture that has somewhat fatalistic and simplistic notions regarding the poor). I continued making journal entries for the first three months of the fieldwork and wrote down my feelings towards the community, my perception of the poor in general, and my potential biases that might influence the analysis.

Ethnographic Interviewing. The primary method of data collection was semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the park residents. I developed an initial interview protocol with general domains and broad research questions to make sure to interview every informant on the important theoretical domains as suggested by the literature (see Appendix H for the interview protocol). However, consistent with the ethnographic logic of inquiry, I encouraged my informants to elaborate on any topics or domains that they might feel important, tell their own stories, and determine the course of the interview dialogue in a way to stimulate rich consumer narratives (Czarniawska 2004).

In total, 25 park residents representing 20 households were interviewed, resulting in 40 interviews. With the exception of a few informants, every informant was interviewed twice. Four

informants were interviewed three times. One of these informants served as a key informant and the other three informants volunteered to speak again to share their stories in great detail. I used the first interviews to establish rapport and trust and asked informants broad questions or ‘grand tour’ questions, representing general domains as identified by the initial interview protocol (McCracken 1988). After the first interviews, I listened to the tapes and reviewed my fieldnotes to identify areas and topics to probe more deeply because the initial data was important, confusing, or contradictory. During the second interviews, I probed on these domains and focused on my theoretical questions of interest.

Except for one interview<sup>13</sup>, all interviews were conducted in the informants’ homes. I chose the home as the site for the interviews for three reasons. First, homes are sites where significant consumption occurs and where informants can be interviewed regarding their possessions, family, and the park community. Second, interviewing people in their homes was very convenient for many of my informants who did not have transportation. Third, it is often easier to establish initial rapport and ensure informants’ comfort when they are in a familiar zone such as their home. While I was initially concerned that the informants would not want an outsider within their private domicile, to my surprise, however, I was welcome in most cases<sup>14</sup> and some informants were even very hospitable and offered me drinks or food.

Ethnography is a “dynamic, interactive-responsive approach to research,” involving a co-created process to fieldwork between the researcher and members of the culture being studied (Green, Dixon and Zaharlick 2005, p. 213). Through this highly-involving and reflexive process, new domains and topics often arise as interviews unfold, existing questions are revised, new

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<sup>13</sup> This informant worked for the park management and was a resident of the park. He felt it was more convenient to have the interview at the management office because he was referred by the manager and he did not want to be perceived as taking time away from his working schedule.

<sup>14</sup> One informant wanted to have the interview conducted on her porch. She said her boyfriend was sleeping inside and her house was a “mess.”



questions are generated, and the research approach is modified to be responsive to the local context. Similarly, as my fieldwork progressed, a few unanticipated domains emerged and I made a number of changes in the interview protocol. For many park residents, home, community, and social networks emerged as an important part of their social identity. Therefore, I adjusted the interview questions to explore these domains more deeply. In addition, I discovered that many of my informants were managing significant health challenges. So, I added new questions that would explore health issues and any coping strategies. Finally, I found out that some of the activities taking place at the park (i.e., drug dealing and theft issues) were of concern to the informants. Therefore, I included a few questions to untangle perceptions of risk and safety within the community. Other research domains proved unnecessary to bring up. For example, I stopped directly probing on the retail stores avoided by informants and their perceptions of government politics. Instead, these topics evolved naturally during the interview when they were important and relevant to the informants.

On average, interviews with park residents lasted between 1 to 1.5 hours, with the shortest interview being 25 minutes and longest about 2.5 hours. Park informants were offered \$20 per interview for their participation in the study. Gatekeepers were not offered any incentive for the interviews. All interviews were recorded using a digital tape recorder and transcribed by a professional transcriber.

Researcher Positionality. According to Briggs (1986, p. 2), an interview is a conversation consisting of “examples of metacommunication, statements that report, describe, interpret, and evaluate communicative acts and processes.” There are different kinds of conversations that might take place during the interview process and what the interviewer will get out of the interview depends on what the informant thinks of the particular conversation taking place. This

means that the informant's perception of the conversation depends on the social role of the interviewer, which is co-created between the informant and the interviewer. My social role during the interviews was that of a Virginia Tech student in need of help for her research and this proved useful in gaining informants' trust and support. Again, to my surprise, my foreign accent and Turkish identity did not present any problem to my knowledge. In fact, I believe my role as a foreign student facilitated the fieldwork<sup>15</sup>. For example, informants perceived me as a poor student who struggled to get by just like they did.

A well-balanced and socially-appropriate positionality also requires being reflexive and sensitive throughout the data gathering process. During the interviews, I tried to adopt a "shared referential frame" (Briggs 1986, p. 15); that is, I sought to adapt to the informants' language and relevant categories instead of relying on my own. For example, I was using the term 'mobile home park' during the first few interviews so I would not offend the informants by using a term like 'trailer'. I believed that the term 'trailer' was loaded with negative connotations, which is an example of what Briggs (1986) calls an "invalid presupposition;" that is, this was a good example of the researcher's predetermined academic or cultural set of categories and assumptions. However, as the interviews progressed, I discovered that the term 'trailer' did not trigger negative associations and informants generally referred to their homes as 'trailer.' Thus, I

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<sup>15</sup> Almost all of my informants asked me where I was from and how I ended up at Virginia Tech. Some informants even inquired more pointedly and asked me whether I was paying tuition. I told them I was on assistantship and I was working for the department in exchange for my graduate tuition. This revelation clearly facilitated my acceptance as a student-researcher and as a result, I was generally perceived as a foreign student eager to learn about their lives. Other informants viewed me as a potential advocate against the town, the park management, or the general society that perceives them as 'low-life.' For instance, a couple of informants wondered whether my study would be presented to the town council or whether there was any possibility for it to be published in local newspapers. Other informants started complaining to me as soon as I called them to schedule a follow-up interview. These complaints were about the park management, the welfare system that "messed up their checks," or the healthcare clinic that could not deliver their medication on time.

modified home-related questions and started using the term ‘trailer’ in order to reflect informants’ categories.

In addition to adopting my informants’ language, I had to learn, understand, and respect a whole new set of cultural dynamics, ranging from different notions of time, social manners, and more subtle interpersonal politics. For instance, several informants failed to show up for their interviews or notify me in advance. Other informants ceremoniously presented me with small gifts during the interviews, which I accepted since it would be very rude to refuse these acts of kindness (e.g., a lamp, religious figurines, self-made refrigerator magnets, pictures of family members).

Ethnographic Observation. A vital part of ethnographic research involves deep and prolonged immersion in the field and comprehensive fieldwork including different forms of data collection (Wolcott 2005). For example, ethnographic work almost always involves formal and informal interviews and observations. During the second phase of my fieldwork when I was studying trailer part residents, I made two types of ethnographic observation. First, I most often took the role of ‘observer-as-participant’ and I observed informants in their everyday lives and activities (Burawoy 2001). From this perspective, every interview was an observation opportunity for me as I conducted my interviews in informants’ homes. Doing a bounded ethnography within this selected locale also gave me other opportunities for observation. Frequently, I took long walks in the park, observed new and old trailers, and the daily activities of the residents (e.g., washing cars, fixing trailers, taking walks, interacting with neighbors and management, cooking out, and sitting on their porch). When I went to the park to conduct an interview, I made it a habit to park my car in front of the management office so I could walk to the informants’ homes and interact with the management on an ongoing basis. These ‘informal’

observations provided insight into the park's changes as a result of community revitalization projects undertaken by the new management (e.g., the addition of new trailers and street lights, removal of trash dumpsters and park map from the entrance, and the establishment of water meter systems).

Another opportunity for ethnographic observation was assuming the role of 'participant-as-observer' and volunteering at community events. I attended two community picnics organized by the outreach group; I cooked and provided dessert for the picnic. During these events, I had opportunities to meet new informants, catch up with my informants, and observe the participants interact with each other and the outreach group. In addition, I helped volunteers set up the table and serve the food for two adult parenting classes that took place at the management's office. I was not allowed to sit in these classes, however, due to the sensitive nature of the class and the organizational policies of the group who were offering it. The stereotypical biases of some of the community volunteer group members were evident during these observations.

I was introduced to this woman at the community picnic today. She says "Oh I heard so much about you, Jean [a member of the community volunteer group] said a lot of nice things and I have been wanting to meet you." I first thought she was a resident of the park so I asked her if she lived at the park. She replied with, "no but I have been active here at the park for some time" and I sensed a little bit of puzzling look on her face. Later on, I realized why she was puzzled to see me think she could live there. She was biased against trailer park residents, which became evident when I told her about my study and how I interviewed people in their trailers:

Volunteer: it's an honor that they have you in their homes.

Researcher: What makes you think that way?

Volunteer: Because it's a mess, they don't want you see that! (Field Notes, September 2, 2008)

Ethnographic Fieldnotes. Writing up and analyzing field notes is a crucial part of any ethnographic inquiry. Field notes serve multiple functions in making sense of the data. First, they act as the repository of both important and unimportant data (Bailey 2007). For instance, at the

beginning of my fieldwork, I was taking extensive fieldnotes to describe people and trailers in terms of physical appearance and olfactory details:

This is the first trailer I got in (other than Fun #184). Although it was only a little after 5:00 pm and it was sunny and bright outside, inside of the trailer was somewhat darkish. The blinds were all down even though the entrance door was open. As soon as I walked in, I could smell and feel the smoke coming off a cigarette. Along with the cigarette smell, there was this “trailer smell” I felt before at Fun 184. The smell reminds me of old, moldy, and dirty places and objects... Tina [the informant] is sitting at the kitchen table smoking. There is a candle lit on the table to probably take the smell out. Tina looks in her 60s; she has shoulder-length (almost) blonde hair (fake blond I could tell). The hair color is so close to white and her hair is very much died with bleach. There are two kids in the trailer and a young man who looks in his 30s. I think to myself “this young man must be Tina’s son” [later on, I found out he was her boyfriend]. (Field Notes, April 15, 2008)

My heavy focus on visual and olfactory details resulted in not only unnecessary data but also an “evaluative depiction which generalizes” (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995, p. 72). I realized I immediately saw this woman in very stereotyped ways such as describing her hair as “fake blonde” rather than trying to understand who she was trying to be. Therefore, I attempted to write my subsequent interview fieldnotes in more concrete details, avoiding evaluative labels. Moreover, this was my first informant interview so I think it was natural for me to experience ‘culture shock’ that “comes from the sudden immersion in the lifeways of a group different from yourself... You do not know how to interpret the stream of motions and noises that surround you” (Agar 1996, p. 100).

Another function that fieldnotes serves is they help broaden the researcher’s theoretical lenses by challenging the privileged existing framework or by illuminating omitted theories that may help better explain and understand the social phenomenon (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). Consider the following excerpt from my fieldnotes as an example of the use of extended social networks. A couple of informants tried to leverage their social networks through reaching out to me in coping with emotional or economic hardships of everyday lives:

Before we started the follow-up interview, Tina asked me if I could help her with her electric bill. She was wondering if I could put her in touch with the community outreach group so they could

help her make this payment. I suggested she talked to the group when they come for tutoring the following week (Field Notes, May 8, 2008)

At other times, my fieldnotes helped me consider a subtle yet very assertive form of resistance against the authority and the system in general. For example, one potential informant who was once very active in fighting back against the town's rezoning regulations perceived me as part of the 'outside world' and she did not want to pursue an interview with me:

When I asked her the reason, she said "you know, I kept my name out of newspapers for so long and I intend to continue to do that." I had assured her when we first met that I was not a journalist ...So, I kept on trying to assure her that I was not a journalist but a student researcher trying to understand how people get by, juggle multiple jobs, and seek affordable housing. I had even told her about the confidentiality agreement on Monday when we first met. So, I repeated that today on the phone. But she asserted her decision again and I could not insist anymore. (Field Notes, May 16, 2008).

I avoided taking notes during the interviews so I could keep the natural flow of dialogue and make sure the informants were at ease (Bailey 2007). Hence, during my first few interviews, I relied on a very few jottings that served as "mnemonics devices" (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995, p. 31). These notes were a few key words and phrases reminding me of important characteristics of the interaction such as gestures, sensory details, facial expressions, informants' tone, and behavior. As my study progressed and as I began to relax, I started relying on mental notes or I dictated my fieldnotes into my digital recorder while driving home from the site if I encountered unusual or contradictory data.

Visual Ethnography. Taking photographs during fieldwork helps in several ways. Photographs help recalling events, interactions, people, and visual details of the setting and act as "aide-memoires" (Penaloza and Cayla 2006, p. 280). I often complemented my interview and observation fieldnotes with pictures I took at the community events and in informants' trailers<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> I took photographs at 16 homes and during 2 community events. I also took photographs in the park during my 'informal' walks (e.g., photos of new trailers brought in by the management, the condition of the park such as the roads, physical infrastructure, parking situation, entrances). The photos I took during the interviews were of two

The information I captured in these photographs was useful in recalling the small details I might have otherwise forgotten after the interviews (Holbrook 2006). Photographs also helped in complementing consumer narratives with vivid details of park residents' consumption behaviors around their homes.

Another function of photographs is to help shape a more reflexive ethnographic research so the researcher can use opportunities for picture taking as a way to generate rich narratives. For instance, when I was interviewing informants who were more challenging to engage, I used photo taking as an opportunity to get them to talk about their possessions in their homes. Similar to the prompting procedure called 'auto-driving,' I asked the informants to tell me the story behind several household items and decorative items (e.g., cherished possessions, figurines, collections, arts and crafts projects, or other home projects) as I was photographing (Heisley and Levy 1991). The picture-taking activity outside the trailers also proved helpful in getting some informants to express their feelings more naturally about the park management who was perceived to be either doing its job and fixing the trailers or privileging some residents while ignoring others.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Four main issues exist concerning ethics in doing qualitative ethnographic fieldwork: informed consent, confidentiality, right to privacy or anonymity, and protection from harm (Fontana and Frey 2003; Bailey 2007). Within overt research, informed consent seeks to receive the consent of the informants for their participation in the study. At the beginning of each

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kinds: 1) Photos taken from the outside of the trailer depicting its physical features, surroundings, and instances of rule-breaking such as accumulation of trash at the porch, display of kids' toys at the yard; 2) Photos taken inside the trailers portraying furniture, cherished possessions, internal space management behaviors, and inside condition of the trailer.

interview, I explained my study to the interviewees and I made sure they were comfortable with being recorded. Then, I followed IRB rules and regulations and made sure I received signed informed consent from all informants and the gatekeepers I interviewed (see Appendices I and J for the Informed Consent Forms approved by IRB).

Another important ethical issue to consider in qualitative research is confidentiality. Although confidentiality and anonymity are sometimes used synonymously, they have different meanings. Right to privacy, or anonymity, means that the researcher herself does not know the identities of the informants and she cannot identify them in her own study (Berg 2004). Anonymity often exists in self-administered survey questionnaires. However, in qualitative studies, the researcher knows the identities of her informants; this makes promises of anonymity naturally impossible. In a confidential study, the researcher knows the identity of the informants but promises she will not reveal this information (Bailey 2007). In my study, I treated my informants' identity as private as possible but sometimes this was difficult or even impossible as I was using previous informants' referral to snowball new ones. However, I respected my informants' identity as strictly confidential outside of the research setting and I assigned pseudonyms to them before sending the interviews to the transcriber. Within the site, I never shared information among informants who knew one another. I followed the same procedures to protect the privacy about the gatekeepers' identity.

Finally, my study did not present any physical, financial, or emotional harm to the informants. On the contrary, I believe that the compensation I offered for the interviews was a small contribution to their limited household budget. Furthermore, for many informants, emotional benefits were realized. They were happy that finally someone was interested in learning about their lives and the park community. The opportunity to describe their lifeworlds



and experiences provided the informants with a chance to reflect on their own lives, which may have proved to be both a therapeutic and consciousness-raising activity in itself. This benefit clearly exists with a few informants who were eager to do the follow-up interviews and wanted to talk to me in greater detail.

## **Data Analysis**

Analysis of ethnographic data consisted of textual analysis of interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and visual data. There are two purposes of the ethnographic inquiry: understanding and explanation (Burawoy 2001). Understanding is achieved by observation and ethnographic interviewing. Explanation requires an interpretation and giving voice to the consumers' concerns through an iterative dialectical tackling between the theory and the data. Defined as "the interpretation of textual data through a series of part-to-whole iterations" (Thompson 1997, p. 441) or dialectical tacking (Geertz 1973), the hermeneutical technique allows for analytical categories and themes to emerge, evolve, and expand. This emergent and evolving interpretation proceeded through moving back and forth between the data and the literature to identify themes, categories, and patterns within and across informants' narratives. More specifically, my textual data analysis evolved across three phases.

1) Intra-textual (or intra-case) analysis (narrative framing and categorization). Each interview transcript and related text was read and analyzed in its entirety to develop a narrative for each informant separately. This was possible through understanding the *plot* of the study, which refers to the narrative structure of each informant's case. Thompson (1997) identifies two steps in plot development. Narrative movement refers to the chronological sequence of the story; it is the temporal order of informants' experiences directed towards some destination or goal; it

is the researcher's feelings about where the story is going. Narrative framing, on the other hand, is to select and highlight particular details out of the consumers' experiences and stories.

Methodologically, this intra-textual process unfolded through detailed "coding," defined as "naming, or giving labels to, instances of the phenomenon found in the data" (Spiggle 1994, p. 493). The coding process started from open coding, that is, "unrestricted coding of the data" in an effort to produce concepts and initial categories that fit the data (Strauss 1987, p. 28). After I open-coded the textual data, I moved into more refined and analytical forms of coding, namely axial coding and selective coding. Axial coding is extensively coding the data around the initial categories identified during the open coding stage; thus, it generates several sub-categories around the 'axis' of one category at a time (Strauss 1987). For example, one of the initial categories that I identified during the open coding stage was 'Resources.' Later on during the axial coding stage, I expanded this category into several sub-categories such as 'material resources,' 'intellectual resources,' 'communal resources,' and 'emotional resources.' After I coded each interview transcript separately, I wrote an analytical memo for each informant, creating a separate narrative for each lifeworld.

2) Inter-textual (or inter-case) analysis or comparison. This analytical step included identifying similarities and differences across all consumer narratives in order to either validate or challenge the emergent findings and reach shared meanings across informants (e.g., concentrated vulnerabilities, resources, meaning of home and perception of park). First, I read analytical memos that I created for each informant. Then, I began to take notes on the similar and different categories that arose across these multiple narratives. Finally, I focused on a few key core categories that proved to be relevant in my evolving theoretical framework while taking into consideration other categories that pointed to negative cases or contradictory data so I could

identify new insights and categories. During this stage, I also spent time re-interpreting previously analyzed texts in light of the important insights that I gained via intra-textual movements.

3) Dialectical tacking (building from the themes to form an interpretation). At this stage, I was able to arrive at a holistic understanding of poor consumers' social constructions of poverty and negotiation of social stigmas. More specifically, I derived a broader socio-cultural interpretation from idiographic accounts and individual meanings.

### **Research Rigor**

Rigor in qualitative and ethnographic research is assessed by different criteria than in positivistic research traditions. One such useful and widely-used evaluative criteria framework in qualitative research has been offered by Lincoln and Guba (1985). In their four-point criterion list, the authors emphasize *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*. Comparable with the positivistic notion of internal validity, *credibility* is established through prolonged engagement in the field and triangulation of different data collection techniques. This research fits the credibility criterion for two reasons. First, I explored my theoretical interests in only one setting over a prolonged timeframe (approximately 13 months), ensuring prolonged immersion and persistent observation in the field. Time spent in the field is an important indicator of research quality and rigor in ethnographic inquiries. Despite its potential use in some settings, multi-sited ethnography means less time spent in each setting, thus generating breadth of data at the expense of depth (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983). Second, I relied on different methods (i.e., in-depth interviews and two types of participant observation) and complementary tools (i.e., transcripts, field notes, reflexive journal, visual data). The use of a variety of techniques and tools increased depth and quality of my data.

Replacing the positivistic focus on external validity, *transferability* (or usefulness) refers to the generalizability of the constructs and frameworks into other research settings and contexts (Spiggle 1994). Transferability in qualitative research is substantially different than in positivistic paradigms and is ensured through thick descriptions and purposive sampling (Tobin and Begley 2003). Although I used network sampling, I sought out diversity among the informants to maximize theoretical utility (see the discussion on sampling). Moreover, the sample size was relatively larger in comparison with similar ethnographic studies. Even though the specific substantive findings from the study will not be transferable to other socio-cultural contexts, the ideas and frameworks generated in this research will be helpful in furthering inquiry and the theoretical findings can be extended to other contexts (Wallendorf and Belk 1989).

The third criterion, *dependability*, is comparable with the traditional concept of reliability and it is achieved through reflexivity, a code-recode strategy, and triangulation (Seale 1999). The reflexive journal and detailed fieldnotes that I kept during fieldwork as well as a continuous coding-recoding process helped meet the dependability criterion. In addition, triangulation was sought through the use of different data collection methods.

The issue of *confirmability* deals with objectivity and is concerned with ensuring that the interpretations of the findings derive from the data rather than the researcher's imagination. This is also referred to as "adequacy" in consumer research (Wallendorf and Belk 1989; Spiggle 1994). In Chapters Five through Ten, I demonstrate that the content of this study derives from the data and the interpretations of the findings are based on the analysis of the data collected around conceptual themes.

A fifth criterion, *authenticity* was proposed by Guba and Lincoln in their later work (1989, 1994). Authenticity is reached if the researcher can show a range of multiple realities and subjectivities. In this study, I develop a framework to understand poverty from the perspective of the poor consumers, demonstrating and exploring five different ways to socially construct poverty. Also consistent with Spiggle's (1994) framework of evaluative criteria in consumer research, I achieved "innovation" since the poverty framework I developed provides a new way of looking at social construction of poverty among impoverished consumers.

The issue of authenticity also deals with criticism regarding the problem of anecdotalism, which refers to the lack of analytical depth and rigor in the analysis of findings (Silverman 2001). An example would be a researcher reporting only a few cases of an apparent phenomenon while leaving out negative, contradictory, or less evident cases. The iterative hermeneutical analytical approach I adopted minimized this problem and my key informant (a civic) clearly fit the case of negative data.

## Chapter Four

### The Socio-Cultural Context of the Study

This chapter describes the social, cultural, and economic setting of the study. This study took place in Lakeside Trailer Park<sup>17</sup>, a large mobile home park in the state of Virginia. As noted earlier in Chapter Three, this park was chosen based on the criteria of multiple disadvantages and the interesting history of mobile home parks that has relevance to the theoretical issues of interest.

The organization of this chapter is as follows. First, the historical evolution of mobile home parks is discussed to help understand the socio-cultural context and some of the disadvantages facing the park tenants. These obstacles include internal constraints (i.e., lack of space and privacy), external restrictions (i.e., rules and regulations imposed by the park owners and management), and macro-level issues (i.e., negative stereotypes that permeate a popular degraded image of trailer park residents). Second, I present a general overview of the Lakeside Trailer Park, including its physical infrastructure, socio-economic composition, and recent changes that have come about with the park's new management. Third, taking a contextual approach and drawing on the perceptions of the informants, I briefly review the common disadvantages and vulnerabilities faced by the informants as well as the common perceptions of the community. I also explore the historical context in which some of the first stereotypes of people living in trailers emerged.

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<sup>17</sup> The park's real name has been changed in order to preserve confidentiality. In addition, I have changed small details about the park, that are not relevant to the findings, in order to further mask the identity of the park.

## **The History of Mobile Home Parks**

### **The “American Dream”**

In American culture, home ownership is equated with strongly held cultural values such as individualism, freedom, agency, and community spirit. Homeowners are viewed as successful, responsible, and better citizens and consumers capable of realizing the American dream through hard work, discipline, and sacrifice (Rohe, Quercia, and Van Zndt 2007). A general popular belief is that those who own their homes in the United States are individuals with better work ethics, who deeply care about the society and local community enhancement, and who have stronger familial ties (Rohe and Watson 2007).

Given the significance of private home ownership in American culture, it is not surprising to observe that many renters are vigorously chasing the American dream of homeownership (Vale 2007). In this quest towards the most significant symbol of an American ideal, mobile home occupants face several tensions as they seek to fulfill their sheltering needs through an innovative yet controversial form of housing.

### **The Early Historical Roots of Mobile Homes**

Mobile homes offer affordable alternatives to conventional stick-built houses for many moderate and low-income households (Beamish, Goss, Atilas, and Kim 2001). Also referred to as ‘manufactured homes’ or ‘trailers,’ mobile home living is one of the most common and unsubsidized type of affordable housing in the United States. However, mobile homes have been the subject of a continuous heated debate since they first emerged in the 1930s; they have been treated as a “second-class stepchild since their inception” (Drury 1972, p. 3).

Although the very first trailers were in the form of travel trailers used for vacation and camping trips, the modern historical evolution of mobile homes as a dwelling unit can be divided into three main periods: depression era, during World War II, and after World War II (Wallis 1991). During the Great Depression, trailers were used by transient and immigrant blue-collar workers because they were mobile and inexpensive to maintain when compared to conventionally built homes. During this period, mobile homes started being used as affordable shelter by many American families who lacked resources for private home ownership. Thus, the meaning of trailers shifted from vacation trailers used temporarily during camping expeditions to temporary dwellings particularly for mobile workers who were making their living in transient seasonal jobs. These early units were usually located in poorly maintained trailer camps on the outskirts of towns and in non-residential urban areas (Hart, Rhodes, and Morgan 2002).

This historical era also marks the emergence of first negative popular prejudices of trailer parks as “crowded rookeries of itinerant flophouses” (Hart, Rhodes, and Morgan 2002, p. 9). Many of the assumptions made today about the mobile home residents are based on stereotypes established during this period of trailer-dwelling transient workers. Some of these early stigmatizations include categorizations such as “trailer slum” and “gypsies” (Drury 1972, p. 15). Furthermore, it was argued that mobile home owners did not accomplish their citizenship duties and did not pay for the public services they used. As such, they were blamed as “freeloaders for overburdening hospitals, schools, law enforcement agencies, and other public agencies” (Hurley 2001, p. 254). These criticisms first emerged in the 1930s even though several states at that time charged fees to cover services offered to mobile home parks.

With the onset of World War II, trailers started being more commonly used as affordable temporary housing, particularly for workers in the war effort. In the early 1940s, the United



States government purchased approximately 1,500 trailers to house these workers (Bean 2004). This government-led movement contributed to more widespread use of trailers as a year-round cheap housing option for many families who could not afford better alternatives. In addition, wartime advertising promised social mobility and the achievement of consumerist aspirations through mass-produced goods. The concept of mobile homes as acceptable or even desirable family-style housing was developed with advertising that focused on trailers' coziness and ease of maintenance.

However, it was only after the war that mobile homes gained their popularity among working-class American families as an acceptable form of housing. This popularity was mainly due to the rise of mass production construction technologies as a response to the housing shortage (Hart, Rhodes and Morgan 2002). In addition, the mobile home advertising aggressively promoted a prosperous consumerist life as an aspiration for many low-income working-class families who were struggling and unable to achieve the typical middle class American dream. According to American historian Andrew Hurley, mobile homes, along with diners and bowling alleys, mark the physical and symbolic manifestations of consumer prosperity and "testaments to the perseverance of the American Dream" after World War II (Hurley 2001, p. 275). Mobile homes became what Hurley calls a "transitional institution for working-class Americans... stepping stones to more alien forms of mass consumer culture such as suburban ranch homes" (Hurley 2001, p. 16). As such, mobile home ownership provided a low-cost opportunity for not only transient workers, blue-collar workers, and returning veterans but also for many working-class American families to realize the long-standing middle-class American ideals of private home ownership and upward social mobility.

## **Recent Historical Developments**

The housing shortage after the war and the push by the advertising industry in the post-war era for a consumerist lifestyle<sup>18</sup> led to the growth and social acceptance of the mobile home. In addition, technological innovations in industrialized mobile housing made it possible to create more appealing interior designs and manufacture different sizes of trailers. During the 1960s and particularly the 1970s, an impressive expansion of mobile homes as permanent family residences occurred.<sup>19</sup> After considerable success in the 1970s, growth of the mobile home market dropped in early 1990s when only approximately 170,000 units were being produced each year. From 1991 to 1999, however, sales grew an average of 17 percent (Beamish et al. 2001). By 1993, one out of every sixteen Americans lived in a mobile home. As of 1994, an estimated 15.4 million people (roughly 7% of all Americans) lived in more than seven million manufactured homes. In 2000, 22 million Americans (about 8% of the U.S. population) lived in 10 million manufactured homes (National Commission on Manufactured Housing 1994).

## **Social Stigmas Associated with Trailer Home Living**

While demand has generally grown for mobile homes, greater tensions often exist (Beamish et al. 2001). The early stigmas of ‘trailer slums’ and ‘gypsies’ that disseminated through popular culture and mass media transformed into harsher categorizations and stereotypes by the 1980s and 1990s. Today, mobile homes generate three main social criticisms related to

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<sup>18</sup> In the four years following the war, Americans bought 20 million refrigerators, 21 million cars, and almost 12 million televisions. By the late 1950s, spending on consumer goods was almost \$300 billion a year and by 1956 three out of five city habitants were homeowners (Hurley 2001).

<sup>19</sup> The year 1955 marks the starting point of the mobile home as an affordable permanent non-conventional housing in the United States. Whereas in 1955, approximately 112,000 units were produced, this number reached to 400,000 mobile homes being manufactured by 1970. By 1966, there were more than 22,000 mobile home parks throughout the country (Drury 1972). Likewise, whereas in 1955 approximately 3 million people resided in mobile homes, this number reached to peak levels by the 1970s when one in every four houses built was a mobile home (Bean 2004).

their physical and socio-cultural characteristics: appearance, safety, and community (Wallis 1991). Mobile homes, with their unconventional appearance and factory-built design, are generally shunned as they are perceived to fail to satisfy traditional site-built American housing ideals. Moreover, although they are regulated and mandated by the HUC code<sup>20</sup>, mobile homes are still viewed as unsafe housing forms that are more susceptible to natural disasters than traditional homes. Besides their unusual appearance and safety concerns, mobile homes are also perceived as challenges to the American sense of rootedness and community due to their perceived mobility. As Wallis (1991, p. 21) put it, “how can people who live in houses on wheels honor a commitment to community?” Furthermore, the legal classification and taxation of mobile homes as a vehicle (e.g., vehicular classification through DMV) adds to the negative social perception of mobile homes as threats to conventional housing. Ironically, most mobile homes of today cannot or are not intended to be moved by their occupants. Americans have always been a mobile society due to the geographic spread of the land and the dispersed nature of job opportunities. Yet, it seems as though the mainstream population, with its fascination with the American ideal of a stable traditional brick style and site-built homes, seem to think of themselves as static (Drury 1972).

Furthermore, there are negative popular stereotypes associated with mobile home park residents. First, mobile home tenants are perceived as free riders and welfare abusers who are responsible for ending up in poverty. This is consistent with the ‘blaming the victim’ perspective advocated by some cultural poverty theorists and more conservative policy makers as a way to explain poverty (Ropers 1991). Second, negative popular discourse about trailer living as

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<sup>20</sup> The HUD code that went into effect in 1976 is the code administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to regulate the mobile home design, construction, durability, and transportability. It is the only code mandated to be nationally recognized and this is one of the reasons why mobile homes are affordable. The American housing industry adopted the term ‘manufactured home’ in lieu of ‘trailer’ and ‘mobile home’ with the passing of the HUD code (Manufacturing Housing Institute 2009).

substandard housing threatening community stability, safety, morals, and nearby property values further led to the condemnation of trailer parks as “cancers that needed to be checked” (Hurley 2001, p. 255). Finally, the image of trailer courts residents as undeserving, dangerous, promiscuous, and drug abusing people gave rise to loaded racial and class-based negative categorizations of trailer park residents as ‘white trash’ and ‘trailer trash.’ White trash identity emerged as a “test object to describe class identities” in a culture that always correlated racial status with socio-economic standing (Newitz and Wray 1997, p. 8). Those undeserving, dirty, and lazy whites of trailer parks needed to be separated from the other respectable and honorable whites of the U.S. Hence, mobile homes are being marginalized as ‘white trash icons’ violating American norms of aesthetics, domesticity, morals, and middle-class values (Berube and Berube 1997). The fact that mobile home parks are subject to strict zoning regulations and, as a result, they are largely limited to rural areas implicitly strengthens these negative biases.<sup>21</sup>

All these social and cultural tensions around the mobile homes are coupled with other dynamics. Internal space restrictions (e.g., lack of space and privacy), external constraints imposed by the park owners, and the geographical isolation of mobile home parks from other ideal neighborhoods through zoning regulations further contributes to the social construction of mobile home parks as “sites of violent confrontations” (Hurley 2001, p. 17) and social stigmatization.

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<sup>21</sup> There are various other manufactured housing (mobile home housing) restrictions. A few such examples are the issue of confinement of mobile homes to parks only (e.g., in Michigan, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania); exclusion of manufactured homes from all zoning districts (e.g., in Pennsylvania), and confining manufactured homes to unreasonably small areas of land (e.g., Pennsylvania and Michigan) [American Planning Association 2004].

## **Lakeside Trailer Park**

### **The Background and Demographic Profile of the Park**

Lakeside Trailer Park was opened in the 1960s after the agricultural land it sits on was transformed into residential designated zone. According to the park management, the park is now housing approximately 350-450 people in over 150 units of different sizes (e.g., single-wides and double-wides). Although it can be characterized as a low-income working-class neighborhood, the park is demographically diverse. There are retirees, families with children, single parents with children, single adults, and childless couples living in the park. Many of the park residents are on fixed income (e.g., government assistance) while others are working one or more jobs to make ends meet. Of the people who are holding jobs, the majority work at jobs paying around minimum wage. These jobs are mostly within manufacturing, retail, or service industries offering very little benefits, if any, thus fitting the traditional profile of the ‘working poor’ jobs (Shieler 2004).

The majority of my informants own or are in the process of owning their mobile home but they still have to pay the rent on the lot, which is approximately \$200 a month. The trailer payment varies depending on the size of the unit. The management says it “works with people if they work with them,” indicating that some tolerance exists for those who cannot pay their rental charges on time. Although, from the interviews, it is clear that this discretion depends on the management having good relationships with the tenants.

## **The Park Management and Infrastructure**

Like many parks, Lakeside has experienced changes in owners and managements. Most residents are happy with the current management, which ended a negative period in which many park residents experienced conflict and uncertainty with the prior management of the park. The current management is making many changes, such as improving the physical layout and infrastructure of the park. For example, when I started my fieldwork, few streetlights existed in the park and the roads were in poor condition. The new management installed streetlights, paved some of the roads, and removed the trash dumpsters from the main entrance of the park in order to “beautify it.” In addition, water meter systems were installed, resulting in monthly water usage fee for each unit. This has caused some criticism against the new management since the water is no longer free. The management also eliminated a recreational area that was developed for the park’s children because “it was being vandalized by the kids.”

Although the informants differ on their perceptions of the park and the community, there is one commonality across all five groups. All of the informants are aware of the illegal and dangerous activities taking place within the park. However, they differ on their social construction of it. For example, while some informants perceive the park as a threat to their safety and their families’ well-being, others do not seem to feel threatened by the criminal activities at the park. With the exception of a couple of informants, most informants are satisfied with the management’s strictness and intolerance about the drug activities. These nuances will be analytically discussed in Chapters Five through Nine.

With the new management change, they have attempted to remove “drug dealers” and battle the “drug culture” within the park. The management identifies and evicts those suspicious residents who are believed to be engaged in illegal drug activities. Along these lines, another rule

imposed by the new management is a background check that is required of all new residents. The park management thinks that the background checks and strict rules will improve the quality of life at the park and make it a more desirable place to live.

Since the start of my fieldwork, the management eliminated some of the very old trailers and has brought in many new trailers. In addition, new management is encouraging all existing park tenants to own their trailers. The tenants have been sent new leases and given access to loans through the park owners' brokerage firm so they could get the credit they needed to own their homes. This situation is called a "tie-in" or "rent-to-own" and the park management says it will soon include the newcomers. As stated by the management, this might help "build community" and fight the social stigmas against mobile home parks as occupied by rootless, mobile, and transient people such as drug dealers and criminals.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Socio-Cultural Profile of the Park**

Concentrated Disadvantages. The most common disadvantage among the park residents is their socioeconomic status resulting in economic and material deprivation. Low socioeconomic status is characterized as a psychosocial characteristic that might lead to consumer vulnerability in the marketplace (Baker, Gentry and Rittenberg 2005). Many of my informants are on welfare assistance (e.g., disability income, food stamps, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), some are working minimum wage jobs, and a few are making a little over minimum wage (see Appendices B through F). Most people cite economic constraints as the main reason for living in the park. Even though many informants take pride in their homes and

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<sup>22</sup> The terms of the ownership are unknown at this time but this information will be sought out.

some informants actually aspire to trailer living, living in a trailer park is generally viewed as a necessity since they do not have enough money for better living conditions.

In addition to being financially impoverished, all of my informants face additional disadvantages that make them vulnerable in their everyday life. Among the most common disadvantages are physical and mental health problems (e.g., diabetes, cardiac problems, high blood pressure, bi-polar disorder, depression) and some suffer from addiction (e.g., alcohol and drug abuse). Although most of my informants have some health insurance coverage through the state, their health challenges cause financial problems for most of them who do not have sufficient coverage. Most importantly, health issues lead to severe psychological consequences, such as anxiety and stress, as they try to manage their conditions on a daily basis.

Other concentrated disadvantages will be explored in Chapters Five through Nine as they arise within the five poverty clusters that emerged in this study.

Resources and Coping Strategies. Informants leverage a variety of resources to manage their disadvantages. These resources include social, cultural and symbolic capital as well as other acts of survival and acts of defiance as discussed in Chapter Two (see the Literature Review). This section briefly overviews the most common form of resource employed by the informants, namely social capital. Other forms of resources, survival, and defiant tactics will be delineated in Chapters Five through Nine as there are subtle nuances about the way these resources and skills are acquired and used by the informants across the five clusters.

*Social Capital.* This is the most significant resource for the informants and it demonstrated in two forms. First, the typical notion of social capital treats it as an individual resource that derives from social networks and connections and that can be used as a power form (Bourdieu 1986; Swartz 1997). In Bourdieu's work, social capital is constructed as an individual



good or asset that helps individuals *get by* or cope with challenges through social support. This form of resource represents one of the two faces of social capital and is characterized as *bonding social capital* that refers to “inward looking ties that link individuals or groups with much in common” (Putnam and Feldstein 2003, p. 279). Bonding social capital is important for getting by among disadvantaged groups and it is the most widely utilized form of resource by the low-income individuals in particular (Briggs 2004). As the most prevalent form of social resource, bonding social capital encompass the wide range of close-knit social networks (i.e., family, friends, neighbors, co-workers) utilized by the informants to cope with financial and psychological hardships.

On the other hand, the other face of social capital is *bridging social capital*, characterized as social ties that connect individuals or groups who do not have much in common. This form of social capital is discussed by social theorists alike as a form of collective, outward-looking good used to *get ahead* since it allows different groups to connect and work together to solve common issues (Putnam 2000, 2003). Among the informants, some possess this form of social capital as they try to bring together different social groups and networks for the good of the community (see Chapter Seven).

*Social Stigmatization.* The concept of stigma has traditionally been defined as a mark of disgrace that separates the bearers as abnormal and defective and therefore deserving less valued treatment than ‘normal’ people (Goffman 1963). Since Goffman’s seminal work on stigma, many different variations have been offered in the conceptualization of social stigma as well as stigmatized and stigmatizing identities. Regardless of these various approaches, most work on social stigma share a commonality’ that is, stigma is a relational, dialectical, socially and collectively constructed, and even sometimes institutionalized social identity (Dovidio, Major,

and Crocker 2000; Howarth 2006). For instance, Jones et al. (1984), in a similar vein to Goffman's approach, indicate that the stigmatizing process is relational and "a condition labeled as discrediting or deviant by one person may be viewed as benign and a charming eccentricity by another" (p. 5). Stafford and Scott (1986) argue that stigma represents a relational attribution, a characteristic that stands contrary to the norms established by dominant social groups. Here, norms stand as shared beliefs disseminated through a common worldview adopted by mainstream society and social institutions to justify dominant ideologies and distinguish between like others and unlike others. Likewise, Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998) write that "stigmatized individuals possess (or are believed to possess) some attribute, or characteristic, that conveys a social identity that is devalued *in some particular social context*" (p. 505, emphasis added). The particular social context influences whether a characteristic of an individual or a group will lead to stigmatization or will be refuted as simply eccentric.

As discussed previously, mobile home parks constitute such contexts whereby the residents are stigmatized on many dimensions. Consistent with the previous discussion on the tensions around mobile home parks, all of the informants are aware of the multiple social stigmas associated with trailer living. The social stigma of trailer life is a dominant theme across all five poverty clusters in this study.

They call us trailer park trash. Didn't you know? (Anita)

Trailer park trash. That's a very common terminology used with a lot of people. A lot of people. And even with the people that actually don't condemn them, they still look down upon them because it's still a trailer. Even the people lots of times say they are mobile homes they still would like for something to be there that they can visualize that will be grand, that will be, you know, that will make things look good or this or that, and but that's a common terminology is trailer park trash. Lots of people they are ashamed to say that they live in this park because people, you know, they look down upon you when you do. (John)

Nevertheless, being aware of all these negative social stigmas does not necessarily translate into being passive and accepting the labels. Stigmatizing representations and discourses are not always internalized. In fact, some researchers argue that social stigmas have sometimes a positive function of pushing stigmatized individuals and groups to create possibilities to resist and transform these stigmatizing practices and create reverse-discourses (Campbell and Deacon 2006). As discussed in the next chapters, informants engage in a wide range of stigma management techniques while socially constructing the meaning of poverty.

## **Chapter Five**

### **The Multiple Social Constructions of Poverty**

The most traditional view on poverty treats the problem as a financial and material form of deprivation; impoverished consumers suffer from a shortage of economic resources (i.e., absolute poverty). The informants in this study, however, perceive their impoverishment as not only economic deprivation but also psychological, social, cultural, and political exclusion. Across the mobile home park residents as a whole, the social construction of poverty is rooted in different perceptions, different levels of resilience and agency, as well as multiple social identities adopted in order to cope with impoverishment. Therefore, the meaning of poverty differs for different mobile home park residents.

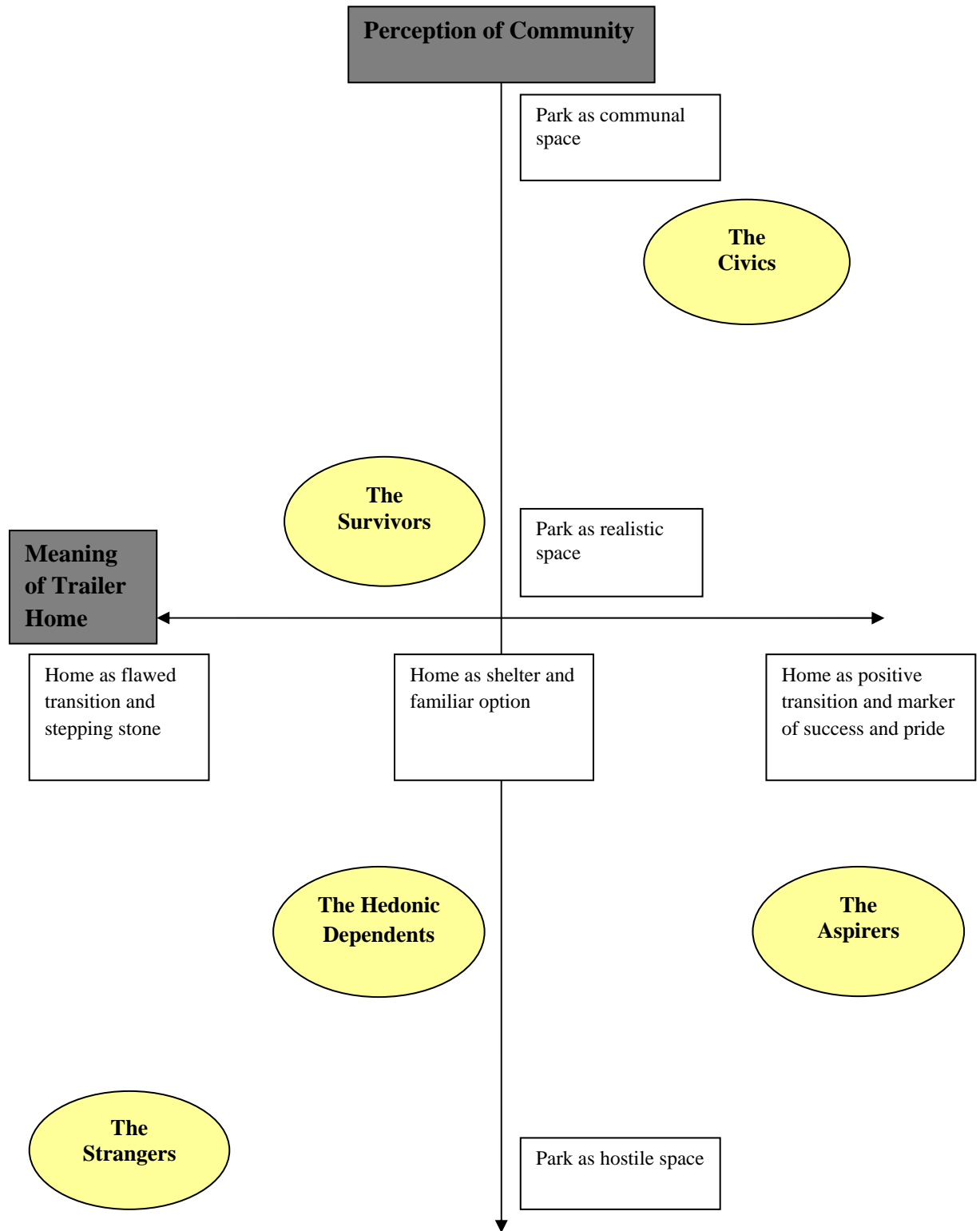
The informants in this study can be organized along two dimensions that capture the differences in their social construction of poverty. The first dimension (i.e., the horizontal axis in the figure below) represents how the poor consumers perceive their home. Across the five clusters, the informants perceive their home differently. For example, some informants view their trailer home as a flawed transition from their prior materially richer lives and a necessity until they can realize their dreams about ideal homes. For others, trailer home is mainly a shelter; it is an affordable and familiar space they have been accustomed to for almost their entire life. Finally, other informants view their home as a positive transition from their previous living arrangements as well as a marker of success, consumerist aspirations, and pride.

The second dimension (i.e., the vertical dimension in the figure below) addresses how the poor construct different relationships with the community as a whole. For some of the informants, the trailer park is a hostile, dangerous, and unsafe place where illegal activities such as drug dealing and theft take place. Other informants perceive the park as a realistic space given

their economic deprivation and perceived loss of power. For more civic-minded and resilient consumers, the trailer park is a communal space whereby they help others in need. Hence, the park becomes a place to enact community spirit through community revitalization projects and advocacy for the park.

Five distinct clusters of impoverished consumers emerge by combining these two dimensions, namely, the meaning of trailer home and perceptions of the community (see Figure 1). In the lower right-hand quadrant, the *Aspirers* (Chapter 5) perceive their trailer home as a positive transition and a symbolic reminder of their integration into a middle-class oriented lifestyle and consumerist goals. However, the park community is largely perceived as a hostile and dangerous space. In the lower left-hand quadrant, the *Strangers* (Chapter 6) view their trailer home as a flawed transition and downgraded move from the better living conditions they had prior to moving in to the park. For some Strangers, the trailer home is a stepping stone until they move to their dream homes and the park is generally constructed as a hostile and unsafe space to move away from. In the top right-hand quadrant, the *Civics* (Chapter 7) are strongly attached to the park community; for all civics, the park is a communal space that needs to be strengthened and defended through community spirit. The trailer home, for the civics, is a marker of pride and success but it is not merely a signifier of individual achievements. Rather, it is perceived as a part of the community. Located in the upper left-hand quadrant, the *Survivors* (Chapter 8) view their home as an affordable and familiar shelter while they see the park as a realistic space, given their perceived deprivation of various forms (i.e., economic, motivational, cultural). Finally, in the lower left-hand quadrant, the *Hedonic Dependents* (Chapter 9) feel alienated and detached from the park community and socially construct their trailer home as a meaningless shelter. These five clusters are explored in more detail in this chapter and the following four chapters.

Figure 1: The Social Construction of Poverty



## The Aspirers

### Overview

*Can't classify me as being poor. To me poverty level is me out walking on the sidewalk standing back watching the guy at the restaurant dump some food in the dumpster so I can eat. That's poverty. We are doing, I think we're doing pretty good. Things are really good. I sleep good at night. We sleep good at night, you know, I can lock the door, we have a nice place, we don't have to worry about it raining because the other place it would rain and you'd have to put a bowl in the floor to catch the rain and all of that. I don't consider myself being poor. I'm blessed. We're really blessed. Poor is when you don't know when you're going to get your next meal, you don't know where you're going to stay tonight. We get public assistance, too, okay, but I guess we live in a way sort of a little bit below, like, poverty level or whatever, but I think we're doing pretty good. I have a different, just a different definition of being poor, you know? We've got cable television, we've got water, we've got, you've got to have one of these [referring to his cell phone]. When you don't have a phone, you're disconnected from everything. (Tim)*

As the above quotation highlights, informants in this cluster do not perceive themselves as poor and they adopt both the absolute and relative notions of poverty. First, poverty has an absolute dimension for them; basic necessities such as food and shelter are discussed. Second, consistent with the relative approach to poverty, impoverishment is seen as the lack of socially valued goods that they possess (e.g., cell phone, cable television) rather than merely lack of economic capital needed to satisfy basic needs (Townsend 1993). In addition, similar to Sen's (1999) view of poverty as capability deprivation, poverty also involves a deficit of 'functionings' and 'capabilities' such as psychological resources (e.g., low agency, poor self-esteem, and a lack of pride) and skills to achieve better lifestyles. Since the aspirers perceive themselves as highly capable individuals who were able to transform often traumatic past lives into currently successful ones, they refuse the label of 'poor.'

For these consumers, the potential stigma of being classified as poor and inadequate consumers is managed through public consumption of socially-sanctioned products (Bauman 2005) or psychological strategies (e.g., taking pride in their trailers and possessions or feeling good about their accomplishments in life). These consumers all had tragic past lives and

experienced concentrated disadvantages prior to moving in the trailer park. Yet, they were able to turn their lives around, build their self-esteem, and, as a result, take pride in their accomplishments. Compared to their prior lives and living arrangements, the trailer life represents a positive transition and upward social mobility. The trailer home is a symbolic reminder of a successful integration, both financially and psychologically, into what was once perceived to be an impossible dream. Therefore, trailer living is something for which they had long aspired, hence the label of “aspirers.”

The following section expands upon the aspirers’ disadvantages, resources, and coping mechanisms. Next, their perceptions of home, community, and marketplace are explored by investigating various dimensions of poverty that they negotiate and socially construct.

### **Concentrated Disadvantages**

These informants have experienced multiple disadvantages that make them vulnerable in several domains of their lives (Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg 2005). The most serious disadvantage they experience is addiction and addiction-related health problems (see Appendix B). Janice, for example, is a middle-aged African American woman who has been living in the park for over a decade. Prior to moving into the park, Janice was addicted to cocaine and she describes her addiction in the following way:

I was staying in places I don't think the devil would stay in. I was on cocaine real bad. It took me down, and I didn't think a drug like that could take you down. And they've [referring to her kids] seen me through my worse. I had to earn their trust back. And stayed gone all the time. All time of night. I left them at home all alone. I like to have wrecked my son twice in the car I was so high. But it didn't stop me. My mom even came and got me from a drug dealer's house. And I still didn't stop. And, you know, she said to me, I have a twin brother, but he's dead, and she said, I don't want to lose another child, I lost one. Didn't stop me. I was doing \$2,000 worth of cocaine a day. I was deep in it. I was so deep I didn't give a crap about nothing, not even my kids. (Janice)



Likewise, Mary was addicted to alcohol and pills for fifteen years but she is now a “reformed alcoholic.” Because of her addiction, she lost all her economic capital and even the custody of her children. For a brief period, she became homeless and lived on the streets doing “odd jobs.” She recalls this painful period as her “lowest point in life.”

However, while many of them still struggle with physical and mental health problems caused by their addiction, most have overcome their addiction. In the past, the aspirers had used drugs and alcohol as a way to cope with impoverishment. But, as they started to aspire to better lives with middle-class values of responsibility, they viewed their addiction as a threat with severe consequences. Thus, addiction, if continued, is now perceived as a serious disadvantage that might prevent them from realizing their dreams and cause further material and psychological deprivation.

It’s hard to be poor and it’s just a way of dealing with it, you know, so you don’t have to think about it and think about what other people think and, you know, how people perceive you because if you’re high you really don’t care. (Velma)

I think about what it was like when I was out there drinking; how sick I got and how much I would have to lose now. Not my family, I don’t have a family to lose now; I think of my friends, I think of my dog, I think of my house, you know, my career most of all. I’m so proud of my career. I did this all by myself.” (Amanda)

Aside from addiction, physical and mental health challenges are another type of disadvantage the aspirers experience. Like their addiction, most aspirers perceive their health problems as obstacles to reaching their goals and aspirations, which reflect middle-class values of acquiring material wealth and more traditional values of spending time with their families. For instance, Tim who suffers from bi-polar disorder, says his disease prevents him from managing the household budget due to his obsessive compulsive spending tendencies. Tim also notes that he cannot attend large family functions and social gatherings because he cannot tolerate crowds.

Similarly, Tina who has emphysema is worried that she would not live enough to see her grandchildren's graduations and weddings.

Furthermore, many informants in this category are emotionally vulnerable because of past abusive and violent relationships. Amanda was sexually molested by her boss at the age of 17 and Mary was sexually abused by a family member when she was a child. Even though most of these unfortunate events occurred a long time ago, many aspirers still suffer severe psychological consequences and are haunted by their painful past. Janice, who is a lesbian, describes how she lost interest in heterosexual relationships after being sexually and physically abused by her father as child.

My dad was molesting me at the age of nine, and he was an alcoholic, and we named him Satan. He was that bad... He used to shoot [a gun] all around us. And he even set the house on fire with us in it... I got married to see if I could be with a guy...I got to the point where I hated sex, I only saw my dad. So I got married to see if I could be with a guy, but I couldn't. Unless I was doing my drugs. My drugs numbed me. I didn't feel anything. So, I guess that's why I stayed as long as I did [within the marriage] because as long as I had my drugs, I didn't care. I didn't care emotionally and something you do and deal with it and move on. That's what I thought of sex. It's something you have to do and you move on. (Janice)

In addition to being traumatic events, abusive relationships are seen as threats to achieving traditional values of trusting and affectionate relationships, caring families, and civilized manners. As discussed in the next section, informants have developed effective coping mechanisms and rely on multiple resources to manage their vulnerabilities.

## **Resources and Coping**

The aspirers are skilled in managing their vulnerabilities and even fighting back. A wide range of coping mechanisms and resources assist these informants in their everyday life. This section discusses the resources leveraged and the coping skills employed.

## Resources.

*Social Capital.* All of the informants in this group possess high *bonding social capital*, even the ones who have broken family relationships (Putnam and Feldstein 2003; Briggs 2004). They have a large network of friends and some rely on their families to cope with material deprivation, as demonstrated by Whitney's quote below. This use of bonding social capital also helps the aspirers realize their dreams of independence and upward social mobility, such as in the case of Janice.

Having a big family. When the smaller ones came along, it was easier. We passed stuff around. Your kid is smaller than mine, could you use this? You know, do you want that? That type of thing. So, you know, having a big family also helps because we pass stuff around. (Whitney)

I didn't know what love was until I met Carol. I still love her like I loved her when I fell in love with her for the first time. And when we moved out, she taught me how to live on my own. I didn't know how to do none of that. I didn't know how to cook, I didn't know how to clean, she taught me everything, and she taught me that it was okay to live by myself. That I could do this. I never thought I could have a place, you know, or and fix it up one room at a time by myself (Janice)

Informants also leverage social support beyond their immediate social circles and extend the limits of their bonding social capital. They utilize a wide range of community resources (e.g., drug and alcohol prevention classes, therapy, resources offered through the community outreach group to the park residents) to manage disadvantages. These social resources are used to reach a better life, one that is free of addiction and involves managing their health problems and economic constraints. In addition, they leverage positive social capital within the park and are happy to participate in the communal life at the park, which is consistent with their goals. For example, Tim and Velma borrow money from the park manager when their budget is tight. Tina, who is in general very suspicious and guarded against the park people, is letting her grandchildren take advantage of tutoring services offered through the community organization.

The daily utilitarian benefits of trailer park living come in handy as they socially-construct the park as a positive transition compared to their previous lives.

You know there is one positive to having drug dealers living in your park and this is what it is, there's always a cop around here, you know? I mean to some degree I feel very safe in this trailer park. I mean I wouldn't go out and just walk around at night. I wouldn't do that in the nicest neighborhood in the world. I just wouldn't do that. You know, but there are cops in and out of here and stuff so to some degrees there's always a cop around when I need them, you know?  
(Velma)

*Cultural Capital.* Throughout their narratives, informants discuss different forms of cultural capital they utilize to affirm their social identity and cope with disadvantages. Consistent with Bourdieu's (1986, 1993) conceptualization, the aspirers possess two types of cultural capital: *institutionalized cultural capital* and *objectified cultural capital*. Bourdieu analyzes cultural capital as a form of power that covers a variety of resources such as educational credentials in the form of schooling and vocational training (i.e., institutionalized capital) and objects such as books and works of art (i.e., objectified cultural capital). In terms of institutionalized version of cultural capital, almost all aspirers have built successful careers (e.g., truck driving, cooking, nursing, army official) even though most had not received much formal school training. They take pride in their jobs and career accomplishments. For example, Janice says of her job in the nursing home: "I don't have a high school diploma. I quit in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade but I got the job. They trusted me enough with what I had to say to give me the job." Whitney is proud of her forthcoming bachelor's degree as a lab technician. Their stable jobs and educational goals not only provide them with a social anchor to affirm their identity and realize their aspirations but also to cope with disadvantages. For instance, Velma works as a kitchen lead at a fast food chain and she describes her career as a significant accomplishment that helps her through her "down days" resulting from withdrawal from her drug addiction.

In Bourdieu's term (1986), objectified cultural capital is demonstrated through creativity in arts and crafts and home projects. The aspirers display these projects and goods in their homes with great pride. However, some make use of this objectified cultural capital as a coping strategy. For instance, Mary copes with her bi-polar disorder through arts and crafts (e.g., making quilts, crochets, Afghans, and refrigerator magnets and also decorating her yard and gardening). The "happy little world" that she has created in her yard contains small objects and figurines she bought or made (e.g., lighthouses, rocks she painted, religious figurines, gazing balls). By keeping herself occupied during her "down times," her happy little world helps Mary cope with her illness. Thus, in addition to symbolizing middle-class aspirations such as creating a 'homey' environment (McCracken 1989), objectified cultural capital in the form of home projects assists the aspirers in coping with disadvantages.

Another type of cultural capital theorized by Bourdieu is *embodied cultural capital*, which denotes "the ensemble of cultivated dispositions that are internalized by the individual through socialization and that constitute schemes of appreciation and understanding" (Swartz 1997, p. 76). Bourdieu (1993) argues that this form of cultural capital is most likely to be acquired during childhood as individuals socialize and start to appreciate cultural goods. It is a form of capital that also requires constant self-improvement through cultivation, which in turn leads to a sophisticated taste for cultural goods. Even though the aspirers did not have fortunate childhoods in the sense described by Bourdieu, they try hard to accumulate this form of cultural capital. Of all the groups within the trailer park, this group, along with the civics, is most likely to engage in continuous self-education through cultural goods. For instance, Tim reads a lot about American politics, "true stories, biographies, and the Bible," while Amanda is into "fiction, paranormal stuff, and after death experiences." For Tim, reading is mainly a way to

accumulate intellectual resources for his pleasure and is a hobby. On the other hand, Amanda uses her literary insights into death as a coping strategy in managing her demanding career as a truck driver.

When I read a book especially something like that, I internalize and I use it in my, in my daily life and something like that it's just that in my line of work anyway you never know if that morning that you get in your truck how it's going to end up, you know, some people, you can blow a front tire and run into a bridge and you're dead, you know? You can blow a front tire and flip the truck over and you're dead, you know, you don't have any control over some things and some things go wrong and that's it. (Amanda)

One noteworthy strategy in this group is the ability to leverage multiple forms of capitals through interconvertibility across different capitals. The concept of “interconvertibility” among various types of capital is analyzed by Bourdieu (1986) in his work of various forms of capital as forms of power. The aspirers are skilled in converting capitals to manage their disadvantages. For example, Tina always looks for social openings that might be leveraged even going so far as asking me for help. As she asked me if I knew of anyone in the volunteer group who might help her with her utility bills, Tina was trying to convert her social capital into economic capital. Likewise, in addition to being acquired in more traditional and formal domains such as the school and the job, cultural capital is gained through extended social networks. Hence, social capital is transformed into cultural capital. For instance, Velma describes how the court-ordered drug prevention classes help her in two ways. First, these classes are emotional coping mechanisms as they make her feel part of a community of similar people. Second, Velma gains significant knowledge about basic health issues as well as physical and behavioral aspects of addiction.

Another example is the case of Mary, who transforms the objectified cultural capital that she gains through creativity and personal home projects into social capital as she designs a monthly bulletin board for her church. Through her church, Mary makes new friends and she

also shares her hard won cultural capital (i.e., health knowledge and skills to cope with addiction) with a church member who is also struggling with addiction.

### Coping.

*Acts of survival (getting by).* In terms of economic coping, the aspirers engage in two forms of acts. First, they are savvy shoppers and they rely on a wide range of economic tactics (e.g., saving money by using coupons, shopping for sales). This is mainly a reactive and tactical approach to economic constraints and is either to maximize existing financial resources or minimize expenditures (Gilliat 2001).

Second, there are smart, creative, and reflexive acts of survival to reach long-term consumerist aspirations. The aspirers take pride in their smart-shopping and cost-conscious skills, which constitutes a significant portion of their aspiring social identity. When they do buy branded products, they seek out retailers who sell these brands at significant price reductions. They hunt bargains, plan for clearances, and talk to family and friends to catch the “deals.” This contradicts the traditional description of acts of survival as merely getting by tactics that do not involve high degrees of agency (Lister 2004).

TJ Max, Rugged Warehouse, that type of stuff. they have stylish clothes, name brand stuff for a lesser price. And waiting right after a season is over because I know I like to get my summer shoes maybe January because they put all the last year's shoes I guess, I mean I've picked up shoes, they were Steve Madden. I think I paid maybe three dollars, I think maybe three to ten dollars for them... (Whitney)

Yet, this consumerist aspiration is not solely centered around accumulation of material possessions to display an aspiring consumerist identity but it also points to an active and reflexive attitude towards the marketplace (Ozanne and Murray 1995).

I mean even when I had money I didn't want to buy some Grey Poupon, you know what I'm saying? You know some people are sold on names and stuff like that, but we, we do well, we do good, and we're practical, you know. When we go to the grocery store, she gets what we need and makes sure Will [referring to his son] has, you know, his things to eat. So, we do well. We don't try to impress or whatever. We impress ourselves. We impress ourselves. (Tim)

These reflexive and long-term acts of survival also include making thoughtful fiscal plans to achieve their long-term goals. For example, Amanda bought her trailer years ago with the settlement money she received due a work-related injury and has no monthly rent or house payment. Similarly, Janice, who lacks a high school degree, built equity by fixing up and selling a trailer for \$14,000, which she reinvested in her current and improved trailer. Sometimes, economic coping strategies are developed as they learn from their financial mistakes, once again demonstrating their critical and active attitude rather than a passive consumerist stance towards the marketplace (Kozinets and Handelman 2004).

No, I don't have a credit card. No, no, no. Because if I had a credit card when I get depressed and upset and down I would go to Wal-Mart or K-Mart or JC Penney's and spend more than I need to be spending. See, I'm a compulsive shopper when I get depressed. I buy on the splurge... Years ago I had a credit card and it was a \$500 limit, and I had it maxed out in three days. Never again will I get a credit card. (Mary)

When it comes to emotional coping, the aspirers employ various psycho-social skills such as making downward social comparison, emphasizing their strengths, and taking pride in their accomplishments. Tina sometimes feels low self-esteem but copes by engaging in self-therapeutic praises: "I must be a pretty good person since I am raising two grandchildren." Likewise, Velma emphasizes her strengths and the psychological advantages of coming from a poor background.

See the way he [referring to her husband] grew up his family was just like the average American family. His parents worked, they paid the bills, they had a bunch of clothes. I grew up going hungry and holes in my shoes, you know, patches on my jeans, but that's okay because it gave me character, you know what I mean? It gave me character, you know. (Velma)

Finally, relying on religion is another coping skill that is heavily used by all informants in this cluster. Particularly, religion is employed as an emotional coping mechanism to manage and overcome addiction. In the past, religion helped the informants fight back against their addiction



not only through praying and but also through acceptance and self-realization, as exemplified in Mary's narrative.

God! God! [giggles]. God straightened me up, he showed me that kind of life was not worth living and I could have a better life and slowly and surely he opened my eyes up and told me that 'hey, you can live a better life.' And I've got a better life now... To me, God's the center of the universe. God, without, if I hadn't found God, then I would probably still be on drugs, I'd probably still be an alcoholic, I'd still be living the wrong kind of life and not be happy, thinking I'm happy, but with God it makes a big difference because like I said without God I wouldn't have what I've got. I wouldn't have a good husband, I wouldn't have good friends because I wouldn't be living here and God has woke me up to things that I've done in the past that needed to be changed. (Mary)

*Acts of defiance (getting back at).* Two types of acts of defiance are engaged in by the aspirers. First, consistent with Scott's (1985) theorization of 'weapons of the weak', there are subtle, informal, and symbolic practices to get back at injustices. The aspirers use these weapons to affirm their identity and self-worth. For instance, one aspirer relies on her usual sense of humor and sarcasm when discussing painful memories. As such, these subtle and informal tactics are not only ways to symbolically get back at an unfair social structure but they also serve as therapeutic practices.

Amanda: They shipped me somewhere else and when I got to my new base, they pinned a medal on me. They gave me an accommodation medal. I got a medal!

Interviewer: For what?

Amanda: Yea, for what? For keeping my mouth shut [about the rape]. But it was for outstanding work in my field. But you know what my field was? Killing bugs [laughing]. Entomologist. I'm an entomologist in the Air Force, which is the study of bugs, which all you do is kill bugs- you're an "Orkin." That's all you do; that's all I did for 4 ½ years is spray for mosquitoes, spray for ants, spray for roaches in Captain's houses and barrettes and stuff like that. So how do you get a medal for that? (laughing) I did!! (laughing). Is that laughable?! That's laughable! That's a waste of taxpayer's money!

Second, the aspirers sometimes utilize more direct, proactive, and overtly ideological acts of defiance to fight against dominant ideologies. Even though they appreciate the marketplace and had worked long and hard to feel like a 'normal' consumer and realize socio-economic mobility, the aspirers resist the marketplace when they encounter strict ideological practices they

perceive as limiting their freedom to aspire. Alternatively, they negotiate and reformulate their own version of an ideal marketplace as they fight against the dominant value systems and existing social arrangements through ideological consumption (Crocket and Wallendorf 2004). Consumers create alternative spaces to the dominant institutions supported by the status quo as they assert their reflexive and critical identity. For example, often, the informants are the followers of traditional organized religion but, like Amanda, they may just as likely create their own religion for ideological reasons. Resisting institutionalized religion, Amanda forges her own customized belief system through a bricolage of paranormal interests, science fiction, and conspiracy theories. Religion, then, is not only a way to cope with addiction for her but it is also an avenue to fight back and resist the dominant social norms. This original and creative use of religion is consistent with Thompson and Haytko's (1997) observation that consumers appropriate and re-appropriate different fashion elements in search for authenticity.

I don't think you have to go to church to go see God. And in fact I got hooked on a book called *Ancient Life* by Dr. John Larma. Have you ever read that book? I love reading paranormal stuff and after death experiences. I don't have to go to church, I don't have to go through all of this rigmarole. I realized I can create my own God because if the one that I have isn't working for me, and he wasn't, I can create my own. My own God is one that doesn't condemn me, you know, for the way that I am because the way that I am a lesbian I should be ex-communicated from the Catholic Church. (Amanda)

Similar to Amanda's case, Janice's story reveals her active creation of an alternative space within the dominant system. Even though gay marriage is not legalized in the state of Virginia, Janice had married her ex-partner years ago when they were still together.

I found a woman preacher that got licenses, everything. It was wonderful. I was happy as a lark. I had my friends and some of her friends and we wrote our own vows, you know, we said them to each other and it was just like any other normal wedding, you know, but it was just two women and a lot of friends and cake. I had on pants. I had on white pants and a vest. She had on blue pants and a vest. (Janice)

Other times, informants move to action when they face inequalities and injustices in their marketplace encounters. As such, they become 'cultural activists' and they confront the system

directly with the intention of changing it by employing a wide range of practices (e.g., direct confrontation, service exits, and complaints) [Kozinets and Handelman 2004]. Whitney had a conflictual encounter with a store manager and the police when she was unjustly accused of changing the price tags on a handbag. She exited the store and never went back. Mary fought back against her doctor who was not helping her by directly confronting him and eventually found another doctor. Amanda confronted her boss after she was harassed by a male coworker. She threatened her boss who did not want to believe her words against the male co-driver's. In criticizing male-dominated workplace and macho ideologies, Amanda reveals:

I said I'm going to tell you one thing right now: if you don't do something about him, I said I'll make sure that another woman never rides with him. And she said 'how are you going to do that?' I said I'll tell everybody exactly what he did. I said if you're not going to stand behind me then I have no other recourse...they always blame it on the women. Then again: What are women doing as truck drivers, right? We got no right. You know? I think we do. I think we do...  
(Amanda)

These various acts of defiance utilized by the aspirers to assert their identity and restore self-esteem challenge the traditional stereotype of the poor as passive and victimized consumers in the marketplace (Bauman 2005; Henry 2005). As the aspirers engage in reflexive acts, they also leverage their relatively significant cultural capital. For instance, Tim and Velma who are an interracial couple, voted for Barack Obama in the presidential elections to fight back against the dominant stereotypes about African Americans. Their following dialogue reflects their cultural capital about politics as well as their agency and aspiring social identity.

Tim: I thought that opponent McCain had a chance, but when I was watching it that night it was like even the people covering said I don't see how McCain is going to win and the thing about it is Obama won so big that he didn't need some states, okay, he didn't need a few states and it was already over. So, it, I can't wait because in January when he gets sworn in, I'm going to record it, you know. He's gotta a lot of, I think he's got a ticket on probably more than most presidents have taken on if not, I mean he has two wars going on, he has the economy, and it's just terrible.

Velma: He can't be any worse than the last president [laughter]. We've got nowhere to go but up, you know. There's nothing he can do to mess us up anymore.

Tim: He has great ideas, and I think it'll, you know, it can't be any worse than the last president, but I'm happy, I'm happy.

Velma: Of course, I voted for him so that one day nobody can look at my son and tell him because he's half Black he can't do this or he can't do that. He would know that he can do whatever he wants, it doesn't matter.

*Managing Social Stigma of Poverty.* One of the two primary stigma management strategies among these informants is out-group social comparison (Miller and Kaiser 2001). This form of comparison is moved upward as informants compare themselves and their communities to “rich” people and “rich neighborhoods.” For example, some aspirers compare their own community (i.e., trailer park) to other communities in town. This form of comparison is particularly useful for the aspirers in managing and negotiating multiple social stigmas associated with trailer park living such as the drug dealing and illegal activities.

One thing that I can say is that [drugs] is everywhere, okay? It is in suburbs, it is in corporate, okay, it is in everything in life. It's not just, and people I think realize that and now some people don't want to accept the fact that this is here in my neighborhood, in the suburbs, it is here, but you know, you can deny it all you want, but it's everywhere. So, I want to make sure you understand that. That it's not just in a mobile home park, it is everywhere. If you know people, okay, you can get things. It's not easier here. This isn't the place to go to do this, okay? It's just everywhere. It's on campus. It's in this big neighborhood and that rich neighborhood, but it might not be as televised as much... People are dressed in ties and driving their cars, they have an image to uphold and this is the same difference, but here you might be able to just pull over and say, hey, man, what's up? So, you know, drugs for that it's everywhere. It's in all your neighborhoods....You better believe it's in those, across the street in those big fine houses, too, okay? It might be a guy that might work at a university that's doing it, it might be a dentist, it might be a doctor, it might be a police officer, it's everywhere. (Tim)

Other informants challenge various social stigmas related to trailer park living such as the dominant perception of mobile homes as a degraded housing form through out-group and upward social comparison (Hurley 2001).

I think a lot is cosmetic, you know? They don't, a mobile home just doesn't fit into the way of life for these people, you know. To them that's trailer trash...I think it's going to get a lot better after this economy. I think a lot more people are going to have trailers and I think it's going to get a lot better. I think that right now people look down on people who live in trailer parks and they think you know, maybe they didn't aim high enough, maybe that's all that they could afford. But I think after this economy and what's happening now- people loosing their house- I think they'll see it's an affordable way to live and maybe perhaps the only way to make it. (Amanda)

Contrary to the dominant view of upward social comparison frequently leading to feelings of inferiority and a degraded-self (Richins 1995), the aspirers re-gain their self-worth and feel better when engaged in this form of social comparison.

A lot of people that are living in \$200,000 homes are starting to look at places like this to live because they are losing their \$200,000 home. Everyday, I watch the news everyday, and I watch it at two thirty in the morning, I watch it at seven o'clock at night, and it's the same thing, people are losing their homes everyday. (Velma)

As discussed in the next section, the aspirers also engage in frequent in-group downward social comparison with like-others who live in the park. Using the park as a site for downward social comparison, the aspirers distinguish themselves from others and maintain, protect, and enhance their perceived better-off moral values. These two types of social comparison strategies (e.g., out-group social comparison and in-group downward social comparison) become significant for the aspirers to preserving their hard fought victories and transition into a better life.

### **Perception of Community**

Feelings toward the park and its residents are mixed, ranging in intensity from satisfaction with the park (“the cleanliness, the quiet... It’s convenient because I just live right around the corner from the grocery store”) to complete detachment from it (“I don’t associate with nobody. I just have nothing to do with none of them”). However, regardless of few mixed reactions, most aspirers perceive the park as a site for downward social comparison so they can distinguish themselves from the others who do not aspire to the same traditional middle-class values of responsibility, respect for neighbors, and caring for their families.

*Trailer Park as a Site for Downward Social Comparison.* The majority of aspirers’ park narratives point to the negative aspects of the park and the community. This move is interesting

as it points to a complete separation between their trailer homes and the park in which homes are located. The aspirers maintain distance from the park community while living within the park and perceiving their home as a permanent and desirable home. First, like all other informants, the aspirers are aware of the park's dangers (e.g., drug dealing, theft) and perceive these dangers as threatening their families' well-being and safety. However, since they perceive the park as their permanent home and a long-aspired dream, their social construction of risk and violence is centered on an ongoing downward social comparison. As such, while they affirm their home (i.e., the trailer) and are strongly attached to it, they disaffirm the park's community through downward social comparison. They view of the park as a space to preserve their status and differentiate themselves from the rest of the community. Hence, they adopt strategies that allow them to "gain status relative to similarly situated peers as fighting against a deviant label that is imposed by outside sources" (Klein and Hill 2008, p. 236). For almost all of the informants in this category, the park's role is to further enhance their privileged and special status through downward comparison; the aspirers perceive the trailer park 'trash' as the diminished and themselves as better.

A few people can go to a drink machine and a knucklehead and try to steal sodas out of it, steal money out of it and then they end up taking the machine out. For people that like, maybe to go and get a cold soda it's like, well, dang. Now I've gotta find a way to the store. So, a few knuckleheads can ruin things for a lot of people. (Tim)

In expressing her feelings about the community, Amanda declares that many park residents live up to the image of "trailer park trash" and they do not take "responsibility." Amanda's passage points to an interesting juxtaposition of trailer park community with the larger societal context.

To them [town council] that's trailer trash and there's some people in here portray that very well. They don't keep their yards up or they put too much crap in it like up there and, you know, come on. All you have to do is plant a couple of trees and flowers and things and just keep it clean. Some people still have their Christmas lights out. Come on. Hello. Trailer trash. [laughter]

You know like they show in the movies. Let's live up to our reputation, okay... there's some in here that they don't want to have a job. They just want to make babies and live all the system and that just disgusts me because people like you and I are supporting them to have babies. Who wouldn't want to do that sit around and just, you know, go through the act of making babies? I would, wouldn't you? Shit. God. [laughter] Get paid for it? Hell, yeah. [laughter] (Amanda)

These park narratives point to their affirmation of very middle class values of responsibility, taking care of the property, and not “living off the system.” As such, the aspirers distance themselves from those people who live up to the trailer park trash image (the one they are trying to escape). The aspirers seem very hierarchically driven both looking at where they have been (i.e., downward social comparison), where they aspire (i.e., upward social desires), and who ruptures these aspirations (e.g., ‘the knuckleheads’ and ‘trailer trash’ who are disrupting their ideal home/neighborhood).

### **Meaning of Home**

The social construction of home arises through a comparison between past homes and current home (i.e., the trailer). The image of past homes points to downward social comparison while the perception of the trailer highlights upward social mobility as they negotiate the meaning and social stigma of poverty.

*Trailer as Signifier of Upward Social Mobility.* Perceived as the most visible and objective proof of upward social mobility, the trailer is the aspirers’ most cherished possession (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Compared with prior living arrangements, the trailer is clearly a positive transition and the most visible symbol of their success. It is a site where they renegotiate the meaning of poverty. This sentiment is summarized in the following quotes where this couple compares their current trailer to the places they lived at prior to moving into the park.

Velma: Two bedrooms, two full baths. Our bathroom has like the French doors and the big garden tub and the separate shower. Compared to where we were living, this is like a mansion to me.

Tim: [referring to the previous trailer] We had one air conditioner in the window and a fan, and it was like ten o'clock at night we were sweating, Will [referring to their son] was burning up and everything. So, now, we've got a heat pump and, I mean, you know, we've got everything so I'm feeling better...

The aspirers' accomplishments are evident when their present homes are compared with past living conditions that date back to even their childhood years. Velma cogently articulates her upward mobility:

My bills are paid and there's plenty of food in my refrigerator. And I grew up extremely poor. I grew up on welfare. My mom raised six kids on welfare, and at one point in my life for a short period of time, I lived in the projects in XXXX. But we grew up on welfare, and I've seen days where I didn't have nothing to eat. Here, we've never had our lights cut off, we've never had our water cut off, we have three televisions...My mom did the best she could. She was uneducated and she had a lot of kids, of course, you shouldn't have so many kids... (Velma)

Similarly, Whitney says, "I love this place way better even with the change in management" when she compares the park to another park she lived at. At the other park, "there was always a problem with Black people" as the park management demonstrated racist attitudes towards them. Like Whitney, Mary favors the park over her past neighborhoods, noting its cleanliness and convenience.

The desire for upward social mobility is also demonstrated in the way these informants consume either as a family or for their children. As discussed previously, the aspirers emphasize both an absolute and relative notion of poverty. For example, below one aspirer talks about a very basic need (i.e., food), pointing to an absolute dimension of poverty (Heiner 2002).

That kid [referring to her son] does not go hungry. He does not know what the word hungry means. He'll say he's starving, and I'll say, Will, children in Africa are starving. You are hungry... (Velma)



As they consume, they not only enhance their perception of upward mobility but also fight the stigma of poverty and being labeled as ‘flawed consumers’ (Bauman 2005). Velma suggests that other people consider her to be poor: “I mean, to be, you know, people consider [us to be] at poverty level, which is what we are; but Will [referring to her son] has a lot.” Thus, she renegotiates a notion of poverty as not being at a certain income level but having products that signify a middle class comfortable life. This endorses a social construction of poverty as a relative deprivation based on inability to consume desirable goods (Lister 2004). Velma also showed me with great pride her \$1000 diamond ring her husband bought for her and gave me a tour of her 4-year-old son’s room in which he has a private bathroom and many toys. The diamond ring, a room full of toys, and three television sets are all symbolic of middle-class life and consumerist aspirations.

Now, we’ve got televisions in all the bedrooms. I’ve got the television back here because I’m folding, I’m putting clothes in the bedroom and then I come in here and I put my son’s on so I’m watching three televisions, and I’ve got music on when I’ve got his cartoons on back here. So I can keep up with the sports, I’ve got that one back there. Now, if she’s in the bathroom, I’m like, honey, I’ve gotta take a shower. She says, we have another shower, and I’m like, you know, I forgot. I went in there and took a shower. If she’s getting ready to go to work and doing her thing, I can get in there and shave and we’ve done that. (Tim)

Sometimes, the symbolic role of consumption in fighting the stigma of poverty goes so far as going on buying splurge at the expense of avoiding other necessary expenses. For example, Tim spent all his tax return money on an \$800 television and recently received a “retroactive check from Uncle Sam” (i.e., the U.S. Army) because of his short-term disability. The money was received when the family had no money to buy food and pay the phone bill. But they still went to the beach for a week and enjoyed their vacation. As they describe in great detail their summer vacation splurge, the couple emphasizes the significant role consumption played in their experience (e.g., eating at seafood buffets, buying lots of dolphin figurines).

Possessions that signify luxury and status help the informants move away from their past poverty and toward the life they desire. Prior to living in the park, Mary was even poorer but her socio-economic status improved after she won her battle against drugs and alcohol, married a church-goer who has his own business, and started to live in the park with her husband who owns their trailer. Mary's possessions are literally her perceived markers for royalty and the epitome of high status:

I've got a pair of shoes in here that I've paid \$80 for. I have a shoe thing. I have a thing for shoes. They look like ostrich skin. And I take after my grandmother. She always had to have shoes and pocketbook to match and that's what I got it from. I always try to get my shoes and my pocketbook to match. My good shoes I wear to church, my pocketbooks that match. Grandma, yeah, she was a very particular person about high heels and pocketbooks and hats that match, outfits that match, gloves. I think she could have been Queen Elizabeth with the gloves and the hat and the pocketbook and the shoes and everything because that's what she would remind me of is royalty when she was, I when I was little growing up. (Mary)

Likewise, Tina speaks very passionately about her doll collection and emphasizes their "authenticity" and material worth. Even though a couple of her dolls have symbolic and sentimental meaning attached to them, their material value stands out as the most important factor. Tina would never collect dolls that do not have a "certificate of authenticity" as the certificate "is important because they're worth a lot of money." Even when I probe her to untangle any possible symbolic meaning, she responds with, "I don't know. She's [referring to the Indian doll] just authenticity too."

In summary, in their path towards better lives, informants in this cluster cherish their trailers and those possessions that mark the acceptance into a more middle class oriented lifestyle.

*Trailer as Signifier of Competency and Capability.* Even though the aspirers view their trailer as a zone for upward social mobility that is demonstrated through consumption, they also

perceive their trailer as a symbolic site: given their painful past, the home is objective evidence of the informants' capabilities, agency, and restored self-esteem (Sen 1992). The home is part of the informants' extended self and affirms their new self and identity (Belk 1988). While they have ideal notions of home, they are content with their trailer since it symbolizes their ability to pull themselves out of their disadvantages (e.g., addiction, abusive relationships, health problems).

If I can someday move out of this trailer into a house that would be great... but if I don't, that's okay, too. I mean look how far I've made it. I never thought I'd make it this far, I never thought I'd be alive. I never thought I'd have what I have now. You know, shoot... I mean look at all of this--this is mine, the roses, the rose bushes...(Amanda)

When I moved in here, I didn't have nothing. I didn't have no furniture. Just clothes. And I did one room at a time... I had to love me enough to learn. That I could do this on my own, with my own two feet, get a job and do it on my own. (Janice)

Similarly, other informants give examples of their ability to pull themselves up from their tragic backgrounds and the trailer is, once more, the most direct reminder of this achievement. For instance, Tina craves attention and affection after a painful past of abusive relationships with men. In addition, her relationship with her daughter who also lives in the park has suffered because of her daughter's drug addiction. Tina took the custody of her granddaughters and has been raising them. When I asked her what her trailer represented for her, she responded with "love. Love and my granddaughters. This [the trailer] goes to them if something happens to me. It's in my will..." Hence, the trailer is her legacy to her grandchildren, which is again more of a middle-class idea that one transfers wealth intergenerationally. In this sense, Tina's "love" for her grandchildren becomes her competency to provide for her loved ones and the trailer is the most direct means to achieve this goal.

The home as a site for competency and capability is also demonstrated through informants' creativity around their trailer. Different home projects, including decorating,

repairing, and maintaining the yard, are among their favorite activities. Given the home is part of their extended self, they work hard to personalize the space. Janice is very creative; she decorates and repairs her trailer. While giving me a tour of her trailer, she says “I love fixing stuff up. You can make something that looks boring and just make it look like something.” Amanda highlights the best part of trailer living as she compares it to the apartments she lived at in the past.

I guess the best thing is it that I come home some nights and I knew winter time if I forget to tell somebody to drip my water then I have to come home and the pipes are frozen or something, I got to get up underneath the porch because I know exactly where it freezes at and I do that myself. Or if my water pipes break I have to fix that myself. But God man, hands down it's tons better. I don't mind having to cut the grass... Yea, it's a constant thing. I'm always remodeling and re-doing something in that bath down the hallway I've got to put a sink in there...(Amanda)

Despite the demands of upkeep, Amanda enjoys the sense of ownership as she repairs and remodels her home.

In contrast with the aspirers, the strangers, discussed in the next chapter, construct a clearly different notion of poverty and trailer living.

## Chapter Six

### The Strangers

#### Overview

*This place to me is, it's our home, but it's not ours. We've got so many neighbors, and we can't do really what we would like to do, you know? We want to have chickens, you know [laughter]. When we lived in the double wide, we had chickens, and we loved that, and I don't know, just be our home. We can do anything we want to do and nobody is going to be there saying no, you can't do that. So, but here you have a lot of restrictions...it's just not a great place for the grandchildren, and I like for them to come by, you know, and enjoy it. I've got toys out in the yard for them, but it's just not the best place to live. They are trying to clean it up though. I do have to give them credit. Alvin [the park manager] is doing a real good job as far as cleaning it up and making it more presentable. So, maybe it'll turn into a nicer place... It just worries me that one day it'll be, you know, someone, a drug deal gone bad and someone starts shooting and it'll come through the wall or like I said hit one of the grandchildren or something, and nah. That's not the way I want my grandchildren to be raised. I want them to be raised in a nicer place. (Emily)*

The strangers are united around one common belief: the trailer park represents a downward move from their previous lifestyle and living arrangements. Even though all of them have lived in trailer parks before, trailer living is still perceived as a necessity and not a choice; it is where you go when you have “nowhere else to go.” The current trailer park and all trailer parks in general are not ideal spaces to live and “desperation” brought them into the park. The strangers all have one common wish to get out of the park to live freely (i.e., away from the park restrictions) and safely (i.e., away from the illegal activities taking place at the park). The trailer and the park are strange and hostile places; hence the label of ‘strangers.’

Despite this common focus in their narratives, the strangers fall into two groups. The first group--the ‘hopeful strangers’--(i.e., Emily, Samantha, and Matt) comprise people who are in the process of saving enough money to move out of the park. These people define themselves as “low income” and consider their current living conditions temporary. Thus, poverty is viewed as an unfortunate yet temporary state that they have slipped into from a better lifestyle they once had. The hopeful strangers leverage their existing resources and take every opportunity to

develop new avenues to realize their goal of leaving the park and securing a better life. Furthermore, they do not own the label of poverty because beyond their economic resources they also stress that they have significant social skills and strengths. Appadurai (2004, p. 70) defines the capacity to aspire as “a horizon of credible hopes... a horizon within which more concrete capabilities can be given meaning, substance, and sustainability...a navigational capacity.” The hopeful strangers are optimistic, resilient, and skilled in building up their “capacity to aspire” to middle-class ideals of housing. Given their goal orientation and upward social aspirations, they exercise significant agency and make sacrifices to pursue their consumer aspirations. Upward social comparison is focused on not only their materially richer past lives but their dreams of middle class consumer lives that they never experienced before. Hence, the park becomes a temporary layover stop on their journey to their own vision of the American Dream and trailer living is perceived as merely an instrumental means to that end.

The second group--the ‘defiant strangers’--(i.e., Irene and Sharon) are worse off financially and they do label themselves as “poor;” however, poverty is perceived as the outcome of structural failings as opposed to individual factors (Rank 2004). Given their worse-off financial situation and multiple disadvantages compared to the hopeful strangers, these informants do not currently have plans to move out of the park. Yet, this does not reflect a passivity or lack of agency; the defiant strangers are still very engaged. They fight against unjust structural dynamics in order to maintain their dignity even though their capacity to aspire remains relatively less developed due to their less fortunate economic conditions. In contrast with hopeful strangers, upward social comparison revolves around past lives more than future-oriented consumption aspirations and hopes. Housing ideals still exist, yet, they are seen as unattainable. With no light at the end of the tunnel, the park becomes an almost unbearable

transition compared to the better living conditions they once had. Consequently, trailer living is perceived as a painful necessity when dreams are perceived as beyond reach.

Even though both the aspirers and the strangers are driven by their consumerist middle class-oriented aspirations, they differ on their social construction of these goals. Unlike the aspirers for whom trailer living represents a middle-class lifestyle, the strangers' version of middle class lifestyle is more traditional and reflects typical American goals (e.g., owning private land and building their own home away from the park).

### **Concentrated Disadvantages**

For the hopeful strangers, health challenges (e.g., bi-polar disorder, physical disability) and temporary economic hardships (e.g., job loss, lack of sufficient income) are the most significant disadvantages. However, they are not victimized by the turn of these events. On the contrary, hopeful strangers focus on the positive side of these challenges and make the best of their situation. For example, Emily used to run a convenience store with her sisters until a few years ago when she was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy, which runs in her family and her sister suffers from it. Emily and her sister are wheelchair bound, yet they perceive that their disability opened up creative avenues.

And like the wheelchairs brought out talents we didn't know we had because she, you know, she would draw a few things here and there, but now she's painting on glass and it looks like stained glass, you know, after she paints a picture, and she's a very, very good artist. But she never realized, you know, until she started doing it that she could actually do that and people would buy her stuff. So, we both learned that. (Emily)

Emily actively manages her emotions by focusing on the bright side of the problem and does not let her disability negatively affect her outlook on life. For her, muscular dystrophy is a daily reality to be faced directly. Even though her disease has serious consequences, Emily stresses the pleasures in life.

...it actually just eats your muscles up to the point where the legs are first to be affected and you can't stand a lot and then the arms will get, you know, and it takes over your body. So, eventually, you know, if I live long enough, it'll be hard for me to do about anything. I'm going to live while I can. I just look at life as take everyday as you get it and enjoy it because you never know, you know, when something bad will happen even to a healthy person. So, I try to enjoy everyday I wake up and can get out of the bed that's a good day... Oh, yeah. I even get up on the dance floor in my wheelchair and dance. [laughter] Honey, it doesn't much stop me from doing what I like to do. (Emily)

The hopeful strangers approach their challenges with patience and resilience. For instance, Samantha is the main breadwinner in a family of five. Her husband, Matt, cannot work due to his bi-polar disorder. Below Samantha describes how her husband's condition affects the family's budget; yet, she does not present herself as vulnerable or a victim because of this economic struggle.

He's an impulsive buyer, you know, like he'll, if he sees something he wants, he has to have it... I mean at one time when we first got together I ended up losing my electricity, my water, my phone, I lost everything, and I forgave him.... Sometimes I forget which bills I've paid and which ones I haven't, but at least I don't have to worry about him going and just spending money. I have to watch how much money I give him. (Samantha)

Defiant strangers, on the other hand, perceive their main vulnerabilities resulting from structural inequalities and system dynamics that oppress the poor. Consistent with the structural explanation of poverty, defiant strangers' perceived disadvantages are caused by structural failings (Newman and Chen 2007). Irene, for example, feels victimized as she tells her story of getting injured at the workplace, becoming disabled, and yet not having been able to qualify for worker's compensation. At her job, she had fallen first, passed out as a result, and broken her shoulder. But she was denied compensation because she could not prove whether her injury was related to her falling and passing out or passing out and then falling. Thus, she is extremely angry at a system that has left her economically and emotionally vulnerable.

My job was terminated in January. From January through March, I paid the bills. I scrimped and scraped and found and looked for and got my payments and kept my payments up through March with no job, hoping that maybe I'd get the shoulder fixed or something would come up. Well,



nothing did. So, since March, I've not been able to pay any bills. I have no job, I have no income, I have no insurance, I have nothing of value to sell. I live with my daughter to have a place to stay and food to eat, you know, her and her husband are giving me that until I can get my shoulder fixed. I've been working public work since I was 14 and get turned down for every program out there. (Irene)

Similarly, Irene's daughter Sharon discusses how her family was denied government assistance, in the form of food stamps, because her husband's income was \$1 above the qualification cutoff. Defiant strangers' anger towards a system that they perceive to be unjust is reflected on their narratives of the system as calcified, rigid, and dehumanizing. As Sharon goes on: "They make up their mind and they send you your letter and you can appeal, but what are you going to appeal? A dollar an hour? I mean are you going to appeal a dollar?" Even though they are mostly defiant and resilient, there are times, like the previous example, whereby they do not demonstrate much agency. They prefer to preserve their energy for more significant causes such as denial of worker's compensation and seeking for one's rights in a degrading and stigmatizing school system.

## **Resources and Coping**

### Resources.

*Cultural Capital.* Regardless of their classification as hopeful or defiant, informants in this cluster value cultural capital, whether it is acquired formally such as through education or job training or more informally through self-improvement. Cultural capital is a means to aspire for better lives so they can get away from the park and it is also a source of pride like in the case of the aspirers. The strangers had relatively secure lives with more fiscal and material resources prior to living in the park. They had good jobs with stable incomes (e.g., nurse, supervisor, retail manager). Despite their perceived vulnerabilities (e.g., disability, denial of government

assistance), they seek to exert control and gain fiscal agency through entrepreneurial opportunities. For instance, Matt trades stocks online and Sharon makes photo albums and recipe cookbooks that she sells. Emily makes and sells pocketbooks and helps people with their paperwork. Below she describes her work ethic even after being physically disabled.

...because before I was in the wheelchair, I worked two full-time jobs. Because I more or less raised the kids kind of on my own...So, this gives me something to do and it makes me feel worthwhile, you know, not really worthwhile, but I'm contributing to something because I always liked to work, I loved to work. If I had a way today, I'd be working, but I don't so I had to think of something to keep my mind occupied. (Emily)

Emily's entrepreneurial spirit was demonstrated when she offered to give me one of her pocketbooks (for no charge) and said "you will be advertising for me, will carry it on the college...I'll also give you some cards."

In addition, some informants had acquired more formal cultural capital (i.e., institutionalized cultural capital) in the form of vocational training (Bourdieu 1986). For example, Matt's wife Samantha was a registered nurse before she became the manager at a local retail chain. Despite the economic and emotional challenges of being unemployed, Irene is attending a community college on a Pell Grant and would like to get a job in medical writing. Even though Irene is angry at the system that left her without worker's compensation and she engages in defiant acts of coping, she is still very engaged as she accumulates cultural capital to manage her disadvantages (i.e., working community college degree with the hope of securing employment and moving out of the park).

The demonstration of acquired cultural capital is also evident as the strangers think ideologically and critically when they face unjust marketplace practices (Ozanne and Murray 1995; Holt 2002). They watch the news, read about the national and international socio-economic problems, and engage in critical thinking as they share their cultural capital about the system. For instance, Matt criticizes the lack of a universal healthcare system in the States and he

gives Canada as a prime example of a “caring government.” Irene blames the politicians for rebuilding other countries at the expense of “taking care of American people.” This information and understanding become a tool and a resource in social interactions particularly for the defiant strangers as they assert their social identity and make sense of their impoverishment. Irene offers a firsthand account of the problems faced by the working poor who lack the support safety nets of the very poor.

We're not responsible for every life on this earth, but we are responsible for the lives in this country and Feed the Children, go to all these foreign countries to feed those children. We've got kids in this country that are under nourished, that are misfed, and you go to apply for assistance, and you make too much money because you make \$6.00 an hour and you've got seven people in your family. You don't qualify for anything. There's no program that's here to help regardless of what you make. It should be a program in this country to help every person here before we go somewhere else and help somebody else. Make sure our kids are took care of, make sure our kids are educated to the best of our abilities, not just to the best of what the government wants them to be educated. Educate the kids according to what they are qualified to do, you know, you can put them all in college, but if they're not all college educated or college qualified, they're not going to accomplish nothing; they're never going to be anything. (Irene)

For the hopeful stranger, acquiring cultural capital extends beyond the work context into everyday life. They share an intellectual hunger that motivates them to pursue a wide range of interests and gain competency in many hobbies. For instance, Matt has been involved with many different hobbies, including photography, hunting, fishing, computer games, and making birdhouses. Emily enjoys country music, watches History and Discovery channels, makes quilts and pocketbooks, and goes on a cruise with her sisters almost every year. She reads and learns about the culture of the country before she takes a cruise: “Once I’ve went on a cruise, just to go on like a regular vacation, is so boring because there’s always something to do on a cruise. They have shows, you get to see the different cultures and places and see how they live...” Defiant strangers, on the other hand, had to give up their hobbies (e.g., playing bingo, collecting suspense books) because “the money don’t come around.” In contrast with the hopeful strangers,

they face more severe challenges and constraints beyond their control (e.g., denial from welfare and government assistance). As a result, they feel like they “hit the bottom with no place left to bounce” and are unable to maneuver their way back to their previous lives (Hill 2001, p. 375). However, they channel these feelings of entrapment and severe deprivation into higher level goals such as a community college degree.

### Coping.

*Acts of survival (getting by).* Like the aspirers, some everyday economic coping strategies include cutting back on expenses, giving up hobbies and luxury consumption, frequenting different stores to catch the best deals, and using coupons. This everyday financial skillfulness evolves into fiscal planning and long-term financial discipline among the hopeful strangers. Sacrifices are made in pursuit of a better lifestyle and dream homes. They “watch every penny” they spend and are willing to “cut back on a lot more if they have to just to get the house done.” A nice elaboration of this goal-oriented fiscal agency is manifested as Matt discusses the economic steps they have taken as a family to buy their land:

We moved here temporarily and I finally bought land in so I am thinking here within the next few months we'll be able to move... It's nice; it's beautiful, I just happen to run into it and it was on \$32,000 for an acre, see that's cheap I mean compared to this town I mean an acre is like \$75,000 – 85,000, I mean it's a lot more. So I got this one for \$32,000 and it's got water & sewer already on it. We are going to do like a double-wide, put a double-wide on it, and then rent this one. I'm actually going to put this one in the front of the lot, and then we're going to take behind that on the back part of the lot and put ours and rent this one and that will pay for my mortgage. So we'll have our mortgage paid. That's how we've planned it all along and it's finally getting to where it's worked out. It took us longer than I thought because when we first moved here, we was going to move here for like a year and then move. And then I got sick for a while and it's been 3 years now. (Matt)

Whereas defiant strangers adopt critical and deeply-engrained ideological views of the marketplace (see the next section), hopeful strangers' consumption habits reflect a more practical and welcoming style. Even though sometimes criticized, the marketplace is still embraced in order to realize long-term goals. For instance, Emily criticizes Wal-Mart for treating its

employees unfairly but she still does some of her grocery shopping there because it is affordable and she is watching every penny as they are saving to move out of the park. Likewise, she softly criticizes the consumerist ideology behind Christmas but does not detach herself from the gift-buying tradition like hopeless strangers would do. Instead, Emily and her immediate and extended family rents a communal space for \$150 a day and they share the rent. They exchange gifts based on name-drawing and everybody gets to buy only one gift. As such, the family still gets to enjoy the traditional Christmas celebration and gift-exchanging while practicing frugality.

*Acts of defiance (getting back at).* Even though all informants criticize the dominant cultural norms and the oppressive social system, defiant strangers express much anger. They are vocal, ideological, and more resistant towards the dominant norms and discourses since they blame the structural dynamics. Samantha and Sharon both explain how their children are treated differently in the town's school system due to their lower socio-economic status. "The professors' kids are treated differently than the kids that live in the trailer park," Irene also comments. One of the biggest complaints about the broader social system in general is the lack of accountability and responsibility in many areas of everyday life, from the welfare and educational system to the political system.

..this man up here don't know what this man is doing and the man under him doesn't know what he's doing and, you know, if everybody had to be accountable for their job all the time rather than just assuming that somebody is doing their job, then the jobs would be better, but they don't. I mean I've worked for different companies and they're all the same. Nobody is accountable for what they do or don't do. Nobody accepts responsibility for it. And then you wonder why there are trailer parks. (Irene)

The defiant strangers' negative views about the existing social arrangements and institutions also emerge in their critique of the bureaucratic and degrading welfare system (Gilliom 2001). As Irene and Sharon jointly comment during our second interview, the Social Services workers have a dehumanizing attitude towards the poor, that is shared by the college

students in the community and the police, who all are part of the stigmatizing and discriminatory system:

- Irene: They look at you like you're asking for their blood.  
Sharon: The people at Social Services think they are above everybody.  
Irene: They truly do... Like you're a bum off the street regardless of whether you're a working person.  
Interviewer: How can you tell that?  
Irene: You know, you can tell when somebody looks at you with disgust.  
Sharon: Remember how [indiscernible] would have some of the college students. They just look at you like what are you doing here?  
Irene: Yeah, that you're not fit to be in the same world with them.  
Sharon: Yeah. Like I mean if you went into a bar down there...College kids come in and live here for whichever semester they come in for and if he [the police] sees two cars, he sees one, the two of them riding down the same street doing the same speed limit, one goes one mile over it doesn't matter which one goes one mile over he'll pull that one car over, but if they are a XXX student or affiliated with XXX university any way, he gives them a warning.

These deep ideological views also reflect in the daily marketplace encounters of the hopeless strangers. Eager to get back at a system that failed them, these informants express their disenchantment with mass consumer culture (Rumbo 2002). Therefore, they undertake more direct, overtly ideological, and proactive consumption-related practices (Crockett and Wallendorf 2004). For example, Sharon refuses to go to certain restaurants in town because “college kids are working at there and they just look at you like what are you doing here? It’s not like you can afford anything.” Other times, this form of active defiance and resistance emerges as defiant strangers reflect on corporate retail practices. Irene’s critical account of self-scan practices in retail environments is one case in point.

I'll walk out of the store if that's all they've got open. I did it at Food Lion. I went in one morning and I had a bagful of stuff I was going to get a buggy full of stuff, and all they had open was the U-scan, I left it sitting right there in the middle of the floor and walked out the door. Because that's taking somebody else's job, but it ain't cutting the prices. And I will not use scan. If all of them go to U-scans, I'll quit shopping any of them. I'll go to the little community store like a 7-11 and buy my stuff before I'll go to a U-scan. I'm not going to pay them full price and then eliminate more people's jobs? No, forget it. And make more money for the company? Forget the company. I'm not a company person. I give up on the companies a long time ago. (Irene)

Unlike the hopeful strangers who approach the marketplace more welcomingly, the defiant strangers exercise strong ideological choices as they consume and sometimes these choices are made even at the expense of their own benefit. For instance, Irene and Sharon resist shopping at low-price Wal-Mart because “they don't do their employees right and they put the little man out of business... by dropping their prices so much that they can afford to because they're such a big organization and then this little man can't compete with them so they have to close their stores.” Similarly, Irene refuses to watch soap operas because it reminds her of “politicians who sleep with women outside of their wives... and that's the way politics has become in this country.” She goes so far in her complete detachment and voluntary social exclusion from the system as she confesses she quit voting a long time ago because politicians “started making decisions their way instead of ours...they are supposed to go with the popular vote.”

In addition, the defiant strangers rely on more subtle yet disruptive techniques to preserve their dignity when faced with structural inequalities and unjust practices. As in the case of the aspirers, these ‘everyday forms of resistance’ (Scott 1985) or ‘micropolitics’ (Best and Kellner 1991) also provide a therapeutic function when individuals feel hopeless yet angry. For example, Irene and Sharon rely on linguistic tricks (e.g., sarcasm, irony, cynicism) when they deal with the bill collectors on the phone.

So, the bill collector called today and wanted to know well didn't I have somewhere else I could get money from? You know, will you loan me the money to pay my bills? That's what I asked him. I don't have, my friends are not rich people....And I mean I asked them, well, will you loan me the money to pay them? I don't have friends that have money. I have nowhere to get money... I ain't borrowing no money. I owe you; that's enough. I just say, look, we can handle it one of two ways. You can either quit harassing me until I get back to work and get you paid or you can call my other bill collectors and you all can start calling each other and what that one don't accept, you can because you all can start paying each other because I don't have any money. You can't pay when you have no money.... (Irene)

Even when they do not resort to these micropolitical weapons, defiant strangers develop alternative coping strategies as they experience regret, betrayal, and anger. As she expresses her anger and frustration towards a degrading and dehumanizing system that denied her compensation after a job-related injury, Irene wishes she had lied.

I couldn't lie. I could have went in and lied to them, you know, lied to the people at workman's comp hearing, lied to them and said this is what happened, and I could have gotten disability, but I didn't know to lie. I was telling the truth. I thought if you told the truth, you know, if you tell the truth, good things are supposed to happen. It's better to lie... And this country evidently runs on lies because look at this, the way, I mean I'm dead serious. Look at this, all this stuff they are saying at this election time. There's not a one of them that's telling the truth and all of this oil gouging, that's all that is price gouging on that oil. Four dollars a gallon for a gallon of gas? You know. How is a regular person going to live in this country without lying about everything?  
(Irene)

Thus, as opposed to hopeful strangers who mostly rely on other forms of resources, defiant strangers employ both these subtle and direct acts of defiance to get back at the system that causes them to keep living the undesirable trailer park life.

*Managing Social Stigma of Poverty.* Like the aspirers, the strangers are aware of the social stigmas attached to trailer park residents and engage in downward social comparison with other park residents to fight these stigmas. On one hand and similar to the aspirers, this comparison highlights the strangers' perceived higher moralities and values compared to most other park residents. As they negotiate and re-construct the stigmatization, they clearly take an 'us' vs. 'them' attitude and even go so far as to advocate for a discriminatory treatment of 'bad people'.

Just because we're low income doesn't mean we're not good people, and we need a place to live just as much as everybody else. I can't go out and pay 600 to \$700 to rent a place because I'm on disability and that's about what I live off a month. So, if they make us move out, I don't know where I'd go and that's a scary thought. Be homeless at my age, you know, and disabled. That's not a fun thought at all... They don't want to hear, and it makes us feel like we're nothing, you know, to the town when there's nothing but trash and they want us out, but not everybody that lives in here is bad people. It's real good people living here. It's a lot of real nice people live here, but that few that isn't so nice gives us all a bad name and that's not right neither, you know. So, they should make the ones that's not got the good name move out and leave the other ones alone,



but that's not the way they see it. They figure if they get rid of the whole trailer park, that's going to get rid of the problems, but it's not, you know. They'll just move in somewhere else and continue their business so getting rid of the trailer park is not the answer. (Emily)

On the other hand, downward social comparison is also used to project and re-affirm a better-off socio-economic status compared with many other park residents (a case that is not so prevalent among the aspirers). The stranger is focused more on asserting his/her better-off socio-economic status than perceived higher moralities. Motivated by their capacity to aspire and long-term planning, most strangers perceive trailer living as a transitional step towards a better life. As such, they resist those stigmatizing discourses that condemn all trailer park residents as individuals who do not have the capacity to accumulate wealth and “get out of the park.”

I think trailer parks in general, they more think of the people as being trashy individual, you know, they can't afford anything, they think that they don't work, they don't try to do anything for their selves. They think everybody that lives in the trailer park lives off welfare and all this crazy stuff, which in the case it's not always true. Granted that some of the people, yeah, are like that, but then there's a lot of them like me and Matt who are trying really hard to get out, you know, try not to get bothered by all the other stuff that comes along with living in the park. (Samantha)

Another stigma management technique for the strangers is blame attribution (Miller and Kaiser 2001). Especially as in the case of defiant strangers, the anger and frustration towards structural defects and disfunctionings manifest as they discuss the stigma associated with trailer parks being the consequence of indifferent park managements.

Yeah, there's a stigma against people living in trailer parks. There still is. There always will be because of the situations that allow to happen in trailer parks. There's several drug dealers in this place. Because you can jump and run. In a trailer park you don't have to set down roots like you do in a house, you know, you can come in here and rent one of these trailers from them and you don't own anything. You don't have to put furniture in the house if you don't choose to. And you can jump around and you can rent a trailer here, you know, rent a little piece of dunlap trailer should have been deposited years ago, they'll rent it for, you know, 400 or \$500 and they're making four or five thousand dollars a day in drugs. So, 400 or \$500 a month, that's nothing. (Irene)

## **Perception of Community**

*Trailer Park as Foreign Space.* For all of the strangers, the park is an unsafe and dangerous domain inhabited by “violent” and “rude” people. Strangers feel alienated and physically and emotionally distance themselves from most of the park residents. They have very few friends at the park. This distancing includes the majority of the park residents as opposed to the aspirers who distance themselves from only those people who are perceived to disrespect communal life. While trailer living represents upward social mobility for the aspirers, it is a flawed transition for the strangers. Moreover, the strangers rely on emotional detachment as a psychological means to deal with less-than-ideal living conditions when compared to their prior lives. However, hopeful strangers do not own the shame of living in a trailer park and being an “inadequate consumer, even within the ghetto of similarly deficient consumers” since they view trailer park living as a temporary transition (Bauman 2005, p. 41). Similarly, defiant strangers do not own the shame of living in a trailer park either because they perceive themselves as capable, reflexively defiant, and resilient consumers who are suffering from an unfair system rather than individual failings.

In addition to illegal drug dealing activities, theft incidents in the park are another concern for the strangers. The need to secure their possessions limits their freedom to use and decorate their yard as they want, which creates an obstacle to living a traditional middle-class life of gardening and home embellishment. Yard decorations get stolen and they “can’t trust anybody.” Despite complaining about the illegal activities, these informants do not like the presence of the police in the park. In contrast with other informants who take pride in their homes and feel safer when police patrol in the park (e.g., the aspirers), strangers feel threatened. The presence of the police serves to remind them and provide evidence that the trailer park is an unsafe and strange neighborhood; ironically, they perceive the police as part of the problem.

Well, they've chased people down through here. I mean honestly like one guy stole my son's four-wheeler, and he was outrunning the law on it all through the trailer park. They were out here going about 60 through the trailer park with all of these kids here...Spotlighting all over the trailer park looking for them. Yeah. Seems like everybody runs to this trailer park. It's okay if they drive through and watch out, you know, but I hate for them to have to come through here chasing people. You just never know because we take a walk. I don't want the cops coming down by us 50, 60 miles per hour chasing somebody else. You just never know when they'll lose control or anything. (Emily)

A significant concern for these informants is the lack of privacy at the park, which is demonstrated in the narrative of Samantha who is now very happy about having moved out of the park. As she compares the neighborhood she currently lives in with the park community, Samantha explains:

They were very gossipy. They love to know, I mean I guess that's like with every park, but I mean like with me and Matt, I'm from a small county so I mean everybody knows everybody, but I mean they're not really going to try to get up in your business and want to know, well, what do you do in your house that I don't do in my house? Or I mean like they want to know how much money you make. How can you afford this? It's just, it was just too much. Me and Matt usually just kept to ourselves, really. I mean, I knew a few people in the park, but not a whole lot... We just like our own quiet time, you know, I deal with the public all day so when I go home it's my quiet time. I don't want to be bothered with anybody and that's what's nice about living down there. Nobody bothers you, they do their thing and we do ours. (Samantha)

When they lived in the park, Samantha also felt her neighbors took advantage of her. Likewise, Sharon states she cannot trust anyone in the park after being “betrayed by a friend” who drove her car without her permission and had an accident.

The stranger status is preserved again through the informants’ social construction of other park residents as people with different ethical values of which they disapprove such as working the system to get financial assistance:

I know a girl that lives in this trailer park. She's got three people on the thing in Social Services, two people, because her and her boyfriend got married, her and her son get about \$1,400 a month in food stamps. Yeah, just the two of them. Because she tells them on that application that he lives there, his kids live there, he's got kids that are older than me... Every food bank in Blacksburg she hits up in a month's time to get more food. And they don't check anything...She told me that she had a drug problem and she was trying to beat it and all of this stuff, but that's all she did was drugs. I mean sometimes she'd come up here and she'd be so loopy should didn't know where she was. So, I know she wasted the food stamps. But she gets almost \$1,400 a

month and she tells them there's like five or six people in their house. (Sharon)

## Meaning of Home

*Trailer and Future Homes as Sites for Social Construction of Control and Safety.* The strangers' construction of the meaning of home arises within the dialectical tension between their present home in the trailer park and the future home that they desire (i.e., log house, trailer moved on private land, apartment living). Home is a "place of security within an insecure world, a familiar place in a strange world" (Dovey 1985, p. 46). Aside from the park community, the larger town itself is viewed as an unsafe and hostile space: the once quiet and friendly college town has turned into a fast-paced city with all the violence and criminal activities.

Really it's not the park; it's all of the town that I want to get away from... This town didn't used to be like this. We never had major drug issues, there was pot around and what not when I was younger, but that's around every town and that's not.... a pot head living next door, that's fine, he's not going to bother you. It's these people who are doing like crack and coke and stuff and it's in this town so bad. It's everywhere in this town... (Matt)

Similarly, a defiant stranger, Sharon expresses her fear as she talks about her ideal home in the woods but even living "in the woods away from all the people" is still not safe because "it's a dangerous world we live in."

Thus, they seek to leave behind the outside dangers and threats caused by the park and town community in general. Future homes are imagined as protected zones for their families' safety and well-being. This idea is particularly evident in the hopeful strangers' narratives of future dream homes. Hopeful strangers' narratives on their ideal homes play out within this dialectical relationship between order (i.e., their future home in a safer setting away from the park and the town) and chaos (i.e., their current trailer within the threatening park and unsafe town). When I asked Emily how she envisioned her future log home, she responded:

Get my house built on land. Just somewhere where the kids can go out and play and I don't have to worry about someone hurting them, someone picking them up, doing drug deals around them, you know, stuff like that. I worry more about the kids than I do me. I'm an adult, but they like to

go outside and sometimes you just can't let them go outside because it's too many people running around the trailer park so. It's just not a great place for the grandchildren, and I like for them to come by, you know, and enjoy it. I've got toys out in the yard for them, but it's just not the best place to live. (Emily)

Similarly, Samantha explains how they are much happier in their same trailer now that they had moved to a private piece of land in another town (by our second interview). Whereas the park was an unprotected and dangerous domain for her children, the community they now live at provides the family with an ideal environment that they have been dreaming about for more than a decade.

And Zach [referring to her son], he got beat up in the park by three teenage boys in the park and three of the adults stood there and watched it happen and was laughing about it... And then there was a lot of drugs going in and out of the park. Just not stuff that needs to be around kids that age period, you know, and I mean a lot of them didn't care how old the kids were. They talked about a lot of things they shouldn't talk about. I mean to me that young they shouldn't know about certain things, and it was just too much of that going on in there. So, I thought it was safer for us to move out of the park and get them in a better environment and into a better school. It worked out really well. The kids are really happy so that's really all that matters. (Samantha)

Hopeful strangers' apparent disconnection from the park and trailer living manifests itself again as they construct their perception of home vs. house. For instance, for Emily, her trailer is not a real 'home' but the log house they are planning to move in a couple of years is their home because it is not subjected to the restrictions they now have at the park. In a similar vein, Samantha speaks about their land in the following way:

We have our freedom to, you know, to do what we want, you know. We can make like a flowerbed. If we don't want to mow our grass one week, well, then we don't have to worry about getting charged \$30 for not mowing the yard. So, and I mean it works out really nice. There's a lot of deer that come on the property and the kids get to see that and get to, they get to feed the birds and we have a creek that runs down behind the house. (Samantha)

As such, for the hopeful strangers, future planned homes are envisioned as places of autonomy, privacy, and control (Watkins and Hosier 2005). This anticipated autonomy and

power nurture feelings of pride and anticipation as hopeful strangers enthusiastically speak about their dream homes.

It's a wooded lot, don't get me wrong, and it's on a hillside, but it's beautiful. You can go up there and sit and all you hear is the birds or the animals or, and you can see for miles. I mean you can actually see the university from our land. it's just so quiet. So peaceful and quiet. We bought it about four years ago. We've got the land paid off. Yeah, took a loan out to get the road put in. So, we've got that far. So, we're hoping in the next couple of years we start building. We just have to do it slow because we don't have a whole lot of money, but we still go up there and sit around and enjoy it. ..We're almost right in the middle of seven acres so you know there's nobody gonna build around you. I love that. I absolutely love that peace and quiet. (Emily)

The future dream home is clearly part of the extended self and signals transition into a better future life (Belk 1988; Mehta and Belk 1991). Future home becomes a space in which to experiment with decorative touches and objectified cultural capital to express one's identity (Bourdieu 1986). Here, objects and signs from the marketplace (e.g., antiques) are borrowed and appropriated to express individuality and make the home an extension of the self and help exercise control and autonomy which they lack at the park.

I would like to get some antique pictures even if I don't know who's in the picture, I would like to have old pictures. I've seen some old furniture I would love to have. It's expensive, but it's really pretty. I guess that's about it right now because the house, I guess, will be a couple more years down the road so, but, yeah, I'd like to make the curtains when we have curtains. I'd like to make most of the stuff. I'd like to make the curtains to match the quilts. I would like to decorate it, you know, the way I want it so. As long as I'm dreaming, I can afford anything. [laughter] I just honestly thought if was going to build a log house that it would look good antique, you know, if we had a modern brick house or something I probably wouldn't go antique, but with a log house I want to go antique. (Emily)

For Emily, transformation of the log house into a real home extends not only to decorating the interior of the future house but also to enjoying the spaciousness, which she does not have in her trailer. Her narrative of future home evolves from an upward comparison and consumer aspiration that iterates back and forth between three separate domains she calls 'home:' her past home (i.e., the double-wide they lived at prior to moving to the park), the current "experienced home" (i.e., the trailer) and "imagined home" (i.e., the log house) [Watkins

and Hosier 2005, p. 205]. In her future log home, space will be more available in terms of displaying their cherished possessions (Emily collects dolphins and her boyfriend collects old bottles). In the trailer, they dedicated the 'junk room' to keep and display the boyfriend's old bottle collection while Emily's dolphins have no particular display area. In order to manage the little space she has available in the trailer, Emily displays her dolphins on an alternating basis (i.e., she keeps them in boxes and only displays some at a time and alternates after a while). She hopes that their future log home will solve the space problem.

*Trailer as a Necessity.* However, for the defiant stranger who feels trapped at the park, at least for some time, trailer is simply an "affordable place to live." Irene bought a trailer in another park years ago just because she could not keep up with the rent of an apartment. In contrast with the hopeful strangers, there are no plans for future housing and no aspirations for better homes due to their less fortunate economic situation caused by perceived structural deficiencies. Hence, trailer living simply serves a basic need (i.e., shelter) without much emotional attachment while blaming the system is always the focus. As Irene says, "you can't afford to live in this country if you don't have something like this." As opposed to hopeful strangers who situate their home within a more immediate and micro context (i.e., the park, the town), defiant strangers' views are on a macro scale as they situate trailer living within the oppressive system.

Unlike most of the park residents, Irene's dream home would be apartment living because there is "no maintenance, no upkeep, and no responsibility. The yard, somebody else takes care of. If you've got a sewage backup, call your landlord." Yet, even when they discuss their dream homes, hopeless strangers do not get carried away by their dreams. The system failed them; they are very angry and project this anger to more ideological angles throughout the interviews rather

than discussing more abstract aspirations such as dream homes and perfect communities. Their perceived economic vulnerability and betrayal by the system infiltrates even their dream homes and perpetuates more anger for the hopeless strangers (Hill and Gaines 2007).

The civics, analyzed in the next chapter, contrast the strangers' social construction of poverty as either temporary material deprivation (i.e., hopeful strangers) or a consequence of structural inequalities (i.e., defiant strangers). For the civics, poverty takes on a broader meaning and encompasses social, cultural, and civic domains.



## Chapter Seven

### The Civics

#### Overview

*A community to me is not necessarily everyone knowing everyone, but just to live together and try to make your surroundings better for, you know, not only yourself, but your neighbors and, you know. For instance, I try not to like mow late at night or real early in the morning or to not play my music loud so it doesn't disturb anyone... I'm going to be one to help my neighbor. I'm not going to kick him when he's down so, you know, and I don't, you know, I don't see black and white, I don't see poor and, you know, rich. I just see people. (John)*

The civics' approach to trailer living is clearly different from the other informants. Unlike the aspirers who perceive trailer life as a marker of a successful integration into a consumerist society and the strangers who view it as a flawed transition, for the civics, trailer living represents community equity. Trailer life must be improved and defended against outside threats (e.g., town's rezoning plans, social stigmatization of trailer parks and their residents). Therefore, trailer park is a site where these informants enact a civic and community spirit. Even though the civics agree that drugs, theft, and vandalizing occur within the park, they do not isolate themselves within the relative safety of their trailer. For the civics, the meaning of home (i.e., the trailer) is situated within the larger community that they care. Thus, the trailer becomes a mediating space in which to take part in the life of the community (Sen 2000), rather than being an isolated marker of individual achievement and aspiration. The desire to contribute to the quality of life at the trailer park is the common thread found across all the civics' narratives.

For the civics, poverty is manifested as a form of social exclusion in which people are denied active participation into the social, cultural, and civic spheres of everyday life (Cornwall and Gaventa 2000). From this perspective, poverty is perceived as a rupture of social bonds and the meaning of poverty shifts from a mere distributional disadvantage (i.e., lack of individual resources) to a more relational deprivation (i.e., lack of meaningful social integration in the

community life and perceived loss of power due to inadequate social participation). Similar to American political scientist Robert Putnam's (2000) theory of social capital generation to promote community development and solve inequalities, the civics' accounts highlight a strong desire to build a close-knit community through "citizen engagement, interpersonal trust, and effective collective action" (Rohe 2004, p. 158).

### **Concentrated Disadvantages**

The most significant disadvantage for the civics is physical health challenges and related disabilities. Financial deprivation and its many forms (e.g., single-headed household, lack of adequate government assistance) is another type of vulnerability affecting the civics economically. Moreover, some civics still experience the psychological impacts of past abusive relationships. However, these disadvantages are socially constructed as the means to develop a stronger civic identity rather than as mere vulnerabilities that need to be managed. For example, John who has been physically disabled and lost his job last year, uses his idle time to engage in community revitalization projects and advocate for the park in town council meetings. Likewise, Jennifer, who has been the victim of domestic violence for many years, wants to dedicate her time and effort to help those women who are in need at the park.

Furthermore, although living in a trailer park is not perceived as a disadvantage, the civics are all aware of the social stigmas and restrictions faced by mobile home park residents. Thus, they view this as a communal disadvantage that could lead to serious consequences (e.g., rezoning plans and degrading treatment) if not fought against and overcome.

## **Resources and Coping**

### Resources.

*Social Capital.* This is the most significant resource for the civics and it demonstrated in two forms. The civics build *bonding social capital* as they help residents in need and try to bring the community together (Putnam 2000). They attempt to create solidarity and raise awareness about issues such as affordable housing and structural dynamics that condemn mobile home parks (Beamish et al. 2001).

On the other hand, one of the most significant and distinctive characteristic of the civics is their skills in seeking and building *bridging social capital* (Putnam and Felstein 2003). This type of social capital is a resource for action and “collective efficacy” as it offers the impoverished communities the bridging connections with larger and disparate social networks (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997). Bridging social capital has also been called “cross-cutting social ties” or “weak ties” (Granovetter 1973). The civics possess this form of bridging social capital as demonstrated in their efforts to leverage and bring together multiple socio-culturally distinct groups for the benefit of the park community (e.g., park residents, park management, town representatives, even outside organizations such as Better Business Bureau). These two types of social capital are discussed in detail in the section on the Perception of Community as they play a significant role in the civics’ perception of the community.

*Cultural Capital.* Most civics have some type of institutionalized cultural capital in the form of formal schooling and job-related training (Bourdieu 1986). The civics continuously seek ways to increase their cultural capital so they can engage in critical thinking, question the dominant status quo, and nurture their civic identity. For instance, Nancy goes to the public library once a week with her daughter to do some reading (“that’s the way to learn”, she says). John reads and educates himself about mobile home park development and the issue of

affordable housing so he could engage in intelligent and well-prepared discussions at the town council meetings. John's agency and cultural capital helps him to "never argue out of ignorance" and skillfully advocate for the park.

The town council or the town council meetings they are public. You can, they allow you X amount of time to speak... I mean you have to be careful with what you say and, you know, you just can't walk up in there and, you know, just say well I don't think this is fair. You have to have a real agenda, too, to speak to them, which I agree with that. That's a lot of what's wrong now that people they don't have, you have to have forethought, thought and after thought in order to make an argument or answer a question. There's no way that you can just have a question and then have an answer and that's it. There's an in between and there's a before and there's an after. So, you know, you follow the papers, you follow what they say from one meeting to the next and then you follow the comprehensive plans on what the town proposed to do in, say in the Year 2012, and all this and that and then you keep up with that and then you just follow the steps and you make your argument, but when you make an argument, when you pick a fight, you've gotta have facts. (John)

Another form of cultural capital accumulated by the civics is the objectified cultural capital in the form of self-made home decorations, other home projects, and arts and crafts (Swartz 1997). All civics have artistic and manual skills that they use to express their creativity. Creativity, in this sense, serves various purposes. First, it helps them cope with the boredom of being idle and having to stay at home due to their physical disabilities as in the case of John and Jennifer. Second, creative skills are at times used as means to provide extra income, which once more highlights their agency and skillfulness.

I went to a yard sale once and I was going to, this lady was looking for a table, and I told her I said, well, I have a table at my house that you can have, and she said, well, do you paint? I said I can paint. She said I saw that dresser you painted. Can you paint it like that and put butterflies on it? I said yes. So, I painted up the table, and I was going to give it to her anyway. She gave me \$150 for that table, plus gave me her old table and I went and turned around and painted that one and put stuff on that one and sold it and made a profit... I took black trash bags and white trash bags and made curtains for tie backs and the newspaper people bought them from me. They gave me a hundred dollars for those trash bags. [laughter]. (Jennifer)

Third, and most importantly, the civics use their artistic and manual talents to help other residents and the park management (as in the case of John) in building a livable and nice community (see the section on the Perception of Community).

### Coping.

*Acts of survival (getting by).* Like all other informants, the civics employ a wide variety of getting by strategies to deal with economic challenges (e.g., coupon usage, shopping on sales, collecting government assistance). However, some civics are clearly more skilled and creative even when it comes to simple tasks such as everyday budgeting. For instance, John has an economic coping tactic he calls “pretend money.” At the end of the month after he pays all the bills, John sets aside some money and pretends that it does not exist so he would not spend it. By making this money symbolically unavailable, he does not spend it in order to put it back for unexpected expenses. Jennifer says she made curtains out of trash bags to cover her windows in her old house and sold them later for \$100. These coping techniques highlight the civics’ creativity and agency when dealing with a variety of things, from money management to self-provisioning to money making opportunities.

Other times, this agency and high involvement is put to in use for civic and communal purposes. Even simple acts of survival such as preserving electricity and water have a sustainable and responsible purpose sometimes.

Now we have water meters in here so we're going to have to start paying for water... I have enough clothes saved up to where I do laundry very minimal...I don't waste water. I'm very conscious of that... I'm very conscious of that even though when I wasn't paying for it I didn't waste it because, you know, it wasn't the responsible thing to do. I didn't leave dripping faucets, you know, or commodes or things of that nature. So, a lot of the responsibility is due to the residents such as any housing development even over here, you know, they have to be responsible for themselves as much as for the community. (John)

*Acts of defiance (getting back at).* The civics are very critical of the economic and socio-cultural status quo. Like the defiant strangers, they actively fight back those practices they

perceive as unjust. They utilize a wide range of subtle, informal, yet defiant practices (i.e., weapons of the weak or micropolitics) such as linguistic tricks (e.g., sarcasm, name calling, talking back, and story-telling) and false compliance (Scott 1985, 1990). Yet, these acts of defiance are almost always supported by their cultural capital. Nancy tells the story of how she defended herself against the degrading attitude of another trailer park's manager. During her encounter with the park management, she relied on her cultural capital that she gained in her prior jobs (e.g., working as a secretary and clerk for a nearby town).

the people in the office, you know, automatically everybody thought they were better than everybody else. They thought people weren't as intelligent as they were...I kind of quoted the laws to one of the girls that worked in the office and made her shut up. I had jogging pants with holes, flannel shirt, hair everywhere...I told her just because I look country and stupid doesn't mean I am and let me tell you actually how those laws work, you know, and started reciting them to her. I've went to college and I've dealt with stuff like this for years, don't stand there and lie to me. I'm not one of these normal people that you can do that to...I was secretary and clerk for the Town of XXX. So, and plus I get bored I pickup a book and read. Always room for improvement. (Nancy)

John calls the town council "good ole boys' club" and, using sarcastic remarks, he expresses his anger towards "wealthy property owners" who do not want trailer parks in town.

This down here vacant field and this across the road a vacant field, and you know, money talks in this town such as it does in any town and all of these wealthy property owners say that the trailer park brings down their property values, which, in fact, technically it does, but they knew the trailer park was here when they built their houses. So, I have no sympathy for them whatsoever. They were either blind when they built their houses, they're not too intelligent because they saw this place here. (John)

Yet, these acts of defiance are not solely used to fight against inequalities but also to realize civic goals. At the background of Nancy's and John's accounts above, there is a common civic value of advocating for trailer parks and affordable housing and protecting the park residents' rights.

Acts of defiance are used in daily marketplace encounters as well and manifest as service exchange exits. In the marketplace, the civic consumers are active citizen-consumers who fight

for their rights (Gabriel and Lang 1995). John's sense of justice and anger about unfair sales practices is shown in his interactions at service encounters. He walked out of a car dealer because he was judged based on his old clothing and appearance although he had \$6000 in his pocket to buy a car. After being treated in a degrading manner, he showed the salesman the bills in his pocket and walked away. As he tells this story, he also criticizes the general society's judging of people based on their appearance and material possessions, which once again is consistent with his civic values.

*Managing Social Stigma of Poverty.* For the civics, stigma management generally involves a more vocal and at times active fight through advocacy for the park, emphasizing a community spirit. Just like they use the park and their trailer home as a signifier of community building, they also use these sites as active means to fight against stigmatization. The use of the trailer park as a domain to resist and fight against social stigmas occurs in two ways. First, like the aspirers, by relying upon out-group (upward) social comparison, the civics defend their park and their community against what they perceive to be negative popular stereotyping of the park as a "royal dump," "eyesore," or "drug-dealing zone." Their strong feelings for the park surface as they resist a social stigma, namely the stigma of crime and deviancy, associated with mobile home park living.

..the lower, an eye sore, and I will admit, you know, this being as affordable as it is, it does draw people that are not, I don't know how to say this, well, it draws people that are troubled such as, you know, they steal things, but as you read in the paper everyday you've got movie stars that didn't pay their taxes so what's the difference? You know, crime is a crime...There's drug dealers all throughout the town. They are in every apartment complex, XXX college football players, I mean the whole nine yards. They want to identify the trailer park, again, as trailer park trash, that we keep nothing but drug dealers and lowlifes in here. That's not necessarily so. You can go right across through all of these fancy apartments over here. They are just more sophisticated, that's all. (John)

But this stigma management technique extends beyond pure talk sometimes and involves mobilizing community action (Parker and Aggleton 2003). John further describes how he actively fights against other stigmas attached to poor people (e.g., the stigma of being uneducated and less smart) while advocating for the existence of the park at the local town level.

Oh, they [referring to the town council members] tried to, lots of the times they would try to pretend as if I were ignorant, and I'm very far from ignorant. I'm not the most intelligent person in the world by far, but I'm not ignorant, and, you know, they would try to make fun of, you know, say the way I talk, I mean I'm just an old country boy and that's all I'll ever be. That doesn't mean I'm stupid. It doesn't mean I'm ignorant. And I would tell them exactly what I meant, you know, and as far as the trailer park up here, the mobile home park, you know, I'd just come straight out and tell them, you know, that they think everybody up here is dumb and that's far from true. And when I would disagree with their comprehensive plan, they actually had a map drawn one time that didn't even include this place in their comprehensive plan being that they were going to do away with it, but yet they are going to help us to live in better places. How can they do that if we can't afford it? And see that was beyond their understanding that I could comprehend that. And I knew what was being done and I just, I just told them. (John)

Nevertheless, their civic and community-oriented values do not prevent some civics from experiencing the stigma of being labeled as poor. In order to fight against it, they forge subtle psycho-social techniques such as mental detachment and passing as 'normal' (Goffman 1963). Nancy, for example, emotionally detaches herself from some residents because "she does not want the drama that house might bring." Likewise, Jennifer does not like the fact that the park management has access to her personal information as this reminds her of her internalized stigma of being low-income.

I mean it's bad enough that I know that I'm low income. I don't want everybody in the trailer park knowing, you know? I don't want them knowing, oh, well, you gotta do this and you're on that and that's why you live here and this is what we can do for you. I don't want people feeling sorry for me.

## **Perception of Community**

*Trailer Park as Citizenship Project.* The key distinguishing factor between the civics and other informants is their strong citizenship values of responsibility, commitment to community,



civic participation, and community building. The civics have strong social ties to the park as they perceive the park as a citizenship project and actively engage to improve the quality of communal life. In doing this, the civics make use of two forms of social capital as discussed in the Resources and Coping section. In terms of *bonding social capital*, community is a place whereby people take care of each other, show respect, share resources, and help “those who are struggling” (Briggs 2004). The civics are proud of being good Samaritans and experience feelings of usefulness and emotional satisfaction when their neighbors express gratitude. For example, John regularly gives away food to his neighbors in need and helps with repair work in their trailers. John even gave away the compensation money from the interview to a needy neighbor. He says: “it’s the right thing to do. I hope that if I live to be that old that someone maybe, you know, will be kind to me if I need help or something so. You just pass it on.” He also puts his manual skills to use and fixes up needy residents’ homes. Similarly, David helps older residents just because he wants to be a “good neighbor.”

From a *bridging social capital* perspective, the civics seek to engage various distinct social groups such as park residents, management, town council, and the general society for the betterment of the communal life in the park. This is the overarching goal that binds all civics together. Thus, as discussed in the Resources and Coping section, the civics move beyond *getting by* through bonding social capital and seek to *get ahead* through bridging social capital (Putnam and Feldstein 2003; Rohe 2004). For instance, Jennifer “offered her services to the management” to develop a clothing bank, food bank, or karaoke nights for the park’s kids. Nancy advocates for “summertime community picnics where everybody can bring a dish and get to know each other,” “movie nights,” and “open auctions” in the community.

John, on the other hand, informally works with the park management in what he describes as “community clean-up projects.” These projects involve fixing the trailers of needy residents, moving their lawns, putting street lights throughout the park, and helping the management abide by the town regulations in terms of the maintenance of the park. In order to bring together the park management and park residents, John founded a community group that served as a liaison between the two parties. This group functioned as a buffer zone to voice concerns and problems of “shy residents” to the management. John created a social space where these two distinct social groups could work together and overcome ongoing conflicts.

The civics leverage a multitude of social networks and connections and believe that if people are given voice, and if different communities can be brought together to solve social and economic problems, impoverishment can be substantially reduced (Vidal 2004). Jennifer relies on various social institutions to seek fairer practices that would benefit everyone at the park. Even though she does not possess adequate reading and writing skills, she called the courthouse and Better Business Bureau with the help of her son because she believes the management “messed up her rent situation” and overcharged her. She also engaged the community outreach group and voiced her opinion about the park management’s unfair hiring practices.

The lady working in the office can get personal information, which is, it's a privacy act. It invades the privacy act. She has no written stuff that she's bonded... And I, you know, me, myself, if you work in an office, I think you should be bonded, and I think you should be hired on directly through the company. Not through somebody because you owe lot rent. That's my feelings on it. (Jennifer)

At a more macro-scale, bridging social capital involves reaching out to larger networks such as the local policy makers (i.e., town council) and the larger town community. The loyalty to the park takes on a more political angle as the informants extend their civic engagement into larger social and political spheres. Here, involvement in the communal life transforms into a

more active and participatory citizenship project as the civics advocate for the park within the larger community (Ozanne, Corus, and Saatcioglu 2009). As mentioned in the Resources and Coping section, John participates in the town council meetings and fights against community rezoning plans to defend the park. He also tries to build awareness within the park community about issues such as affordable housing, the town's rezoning plans and how it might affect the future of the park, as well as the residents' right to keep their home. As such, he acts as the "organic intellectual" of the community, that is, the thinking and organizing force of the working poor class whose function is to *critically* challenge the ideological and intellectual social order and to educate the masses (Gramsci 1995). He agreed to tell the park community's struggles about affordable housing to a local newspaper and "deliberately wanted to be heard on television because [he] wanted everybody to hear what [he] had to say." He even contacted two community outreach groups and convinced one of them to offer manual labor to the park in fixing up old homes.

These informants' civic values and bridging social capital is also evident as they reflect on the larger community's problems. Like some of the strangers, civics complain about the town being turned into a "big city;" however, unlike the strangers, the civics do not perceive the fast-paced life of the town as a threat (e.g., crime, drug issues). Rather, they blame the town officials for allowing too much industrial development to happen instead of engaging in "more sensible things" and civic-minded projects, such as building a soup kitchen for the homeless. The most civic-minded informant, John, is currently involved with a social group to advocate for opening a Free Medical Clinic in the town.

*Trailer Park as Site for Symbolic Capital.* Symbolic capital is "a form of power that is not perceived as power but as legitimate demands for recognition, deference, obedience, or the

services of others” (Swartz 1997, p. 90). Weber calls it ‘charismatic authority’ and it is demonstrated as a form of prestige and desirable social status. The civics reflect back and use their life experiences and wisdom as a form of symbolic power that they hope might help them leverage greater social support in realizing their community development projects. For example, in advocating for the advancement of various community projects, Nancy seeks the park management’s support by subtly implying her experience and background.

I was a battered person at one time to my kids' first dad, their real dad, he used to beat me a lot, and I didn't have anything. I had to start all over when I went through divorce, and I know how some of these people live in here... So, I try to help other people. What I told Alvin [the park manager] I would do I wanted to open up like part of a clothing bank here in the park just people giving people things and taking, rewashing it and handing it back out to somebody that's really in need, the same thing with furniture but he said he didn't have a building spot big enough for me to do that. I even offered my home to do that out of... You know, and it's just to try to help someone that's really in need because I know when I didn't have money and I had my kids how hard it was to get stuff and going to the Salvation Army, you're going to pay 30, 40, \$50 for a couch and somebody gives that to them, why can't you turn around and give it back to them? I mean that's the way I think it should be. Somebody gives you something, you should give somebody else something. Kind of pay it forward, you know? Like the movie, you know. And maybe I'm just in a fantasy, but I think it would be much better if people would help other people instead of stabbing people in the back and cursing and fighting with people... (Jennifer)

Symbolic capital (e.g., higher social status of being known as vocal, active, and effective) is also being used as a way to re-affirm their civic-mindedness in comparison with other residents. Like the aspirers and the strangers, the civics rely on interpersonal downward comparison from those residents perceived as acting in ways of which they do not approve. However, unlike the aspirers and the strangers, this detachment does not merely stay at the level of comparison and consumerist aspirations; the civics offer communal solutions. For instance, Jennifer perceives some of the community’s kids to be disrespectful and violent (e.g., the kids vandalizing the mailboxes, throwing rocks at the vehicles, and using the “n word”) and their parents as irresponsible residents who do not teach their kids the appropriate ways to behave.

Using her communal and civic values, Jennifer wants to solve this problem and prevent the kids from being idle and destructive.

I've offered my services, I told them [the park management] I said I can do karaoke with the kids out in front of my house, I said I did it for the school. A little power, and I'll be glad to furnish that myself. I said I have all of my equipment, everything I need, I'll be glad to furnish the karaoke stuff myself. I'll go outside and I'll be responsible for these kids when they come up here, but with the parent's permission slip. I have to have them sign a permission slip that I can tell them kids to go away if they are tearing up something is all I ask. Don't tear up nothing, behave yourself, and you come join us. I mean I went to the store and bought I don't know how many dozens of cookies and candy bars to give these kids for not tearing up stuff trying to bribe the kids not to tear up. (Jennifer)

Another example of the use of symbolic power (e.g., prestige gained through civic roles) is offered by John who served as the president of the liaison group between the park and the management. John says he learned how to deal with “two-faced people who did not want to be caught” speeding or dumping trash in the park and tried not to take them too seriously. Instead of reporting these people’s alleged problems to the park management as he was supposed to do, John dealt with these problems on his own. Using his symbolic power as the president of the group, he warned those residents who were disrespectful of communal well-being. He says, “that’s just the way some people are. It’s a way of life. You have to deal with that everyday.” His power over those residents proved useful since these conflicts were handled in private rather than being communicated to the management. John perceived these problems rather smaller and not worthy of management’s time and he wanted the management focus on “real issues” such as fixing up the roads.

Also, since two of the civics work for the park management,<sup>23</sup> they feel accentuated social prestige and high status. Like the aspirers and some strangers, they assertively distance themselves from those residents who “cause trouble in the park.” Nancy and David feel that they

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<sup>23</sup> Although Nancy and David are employed by the park management, they are also residents of the park. Both were hired for their civic spirit but their civic values and goals clearly extend beyond their job description.

gain symbolic power through their job because it allows them to “get to have a say on what happens in the community.” However, once again, this emotional distancing does not stay at the level of ‘othering’; the civics are always guided by civic goals. David goes beyond his job descriptions to help the older residents, for example. Or, Nancy relies on her symbolic power to convince the park management to offer further social resources to the park. She describes how she convinced the park management to put together a list of volunteer community services for those residents who might need help in paying their rent.

I've been there so I know all of the community services that are available. I've actually made up a sheet that's got them even down to the food pantries how many times you're allowed to go... Yeah, I told Alvin [the park manager] I've been there. I've been the one on the other side getting those eviction notices... (Nancy)

## **Meaning of Home**

*Trailer as a Signifier for Community Building.* The civics take pride in their homes and work hard to beautify them. Like the aspirers, they engage in creative home projects (e.g., decorating, fixing up, gardening) and they treat their trailer as a place to display their artistic skills. However, unlike the aspirers’ version of trailer as a signifier for upward social mobility and transition into middle-class American norms, the civics’ notion of home reflects community spirit. Even though for some civics, the trailer living is an upward transition from prior living conditions, the trailer does not stand out as a marker of this achievement. Rather, the trailer is part of the community and, thus, creative home projects serve as means to improve the park community. For example, David says he tries to “fix it up the best way and make it look presentable (keeping the yard mowed, leaves raked, and plant flowers).” John makes a similar point as he discusses how he takes care of his home along with the pride he takes into being a homeowner and how this reflects on his notion of the community.

I like to keep everything cut, you know, and it's done the way it should be. I don't like junking up my porch. I keep it clean or try, and you know, do all of that. Even though the vehicle isn't on the road, I still keep it washed and cleaned so it doesn't look like a piece of junk...I wanted to be different. I mean not to, you know, to make anyone else's place look bad or to try to be more...Everything in here [referring to his trailer] has been worked very hard for and is paid for and that's a long struggle, you know, it's like I said I feel very fortunate to have the things I have more so than, you know, than a lot of people and that's not to brag in any manner, shape or form. I feel very fortunate, but I feel proud... Everybody is really proud of, well, I shouldn't say everyone, but most people are really proud of what they have and in every community you're going to find people that just don't care, I don't care. I've gone down over here in this new housing development, and I see things that I wouldn't have in my yard, you know, my lawn is cut neater than a lot of those people's. It's just, it's the person, it's not what you have, it's how you take care of it. (John)

John goes so far as to taking care of the vacant lot next to his trailer so “it would not make his look bad because if there’s trash all over the ground and you’re living beside of it, it reflects on your place.” Once again, his strong communal ethics and affiliation with the park is manifested as he takes responsibility for taking care of the vacant lot. Highlighting her community spirit, Jennifer says the park needs to be beautified and maintained.

I think the Town don't want trailer parks here anymore, they think it's just a royal dump. It is a royal dump unless you fix it up. There should be times of the month or year that you paint your trailer, and if you can't afford it, there should be funds available for people that need it. There should be, the landlord should offer help with pressure washing and things like that of the outside mobile homes if they want the park to look good. I mean if you're willing to do the work that they got pressure washing, bring it down here and let us wash our trailers. Don't tell us we need to cut our yard and then come and cut it and charge us \$25. Give us a chance. I think we can make the trailer park look fine. (Jennifer)

The concept of trailer as a signifier of community building is also expressed as the civics support the American values of rootedness and home ownership (Foley 1980). In this sense, the trailer stands as the most direct and possible way to attain affordable housing. For instance, Nancy supports the management’s decision to get away from the rental situations and provide financing for the residents so they could own their trailers. Thus, the trailer symbolizes a reasonable way for people like her to become a homeowner.

Some of these people could not go to a bank and get financing, you know? They couldn't just straight up and so their dreams of having a home of their own is shattered right there, you know, like me I'd have an issue with getting some financing because of some credit problems, but this way they are going to be a homeowner. (Nancy)

The idea of affordable home ownership as part of community revitalization projects is taken to a more ideological level by John who emphasizes the park residents' realities and socio-economic dynamics.

We don't have the luxury of accountants that, you know, write our bills for us or our lawyers that take care of things when they don't go right. So, we have to suffer with whatever the credit companies deliver upon us. So, we're, it's just an easy place to live... I would bring up [at the town council meetings] things such as median income in this town was not \$50,000 to \$77,000...I would bring up facts as, you know, this place here. This is not a mansion by any means, this is not one of these houses over here, but this is a nice, neat house, you know? And people that live here are good people. They need this place. They can't afford anything else. It would take on the average five to six residents out of this park to dare afford one of those houses [referring to newly-built townhomes beside the trailer park]. (John)

In sum, the civics shift the traditional stereotypical image of the poor from “environmental destroyers” to “environmental activists” who are politically engaged in the well-being of their communities (Broad 1994). The next chapter discusses the survivors who rely on the civics to improve their life at the park.



## Chapter Eight

### The Survivors

#### Overview

*Well, the good thing about this park is, you know, you're around a lot of people that pretty much lives like you do, you know? Of course, everybody is a little different, but the good things are you live around people and they pretty much understand how you live and most of the people are friendly... (Lucie)*

*Just don't nobody boss me around or anything. Well, a lot of them others [referring to other trailer parks he lived before] they tell you, you had to do this, had to do that, you know, and when you had to mow and when you didn't have to mow, all that bunch of stuff. Now this guy [his civic neighbor] he mows for me now, which I used to keep it up myself until he got started on it, and I got to where I couldn't hardly get on a riding lawnmower, and he does that now for me, weed eats and everything and helps me keep the yard cleaned up, brush up and everything. (Robert)*

As a survival zone, the trailer park and community provide two different types of resources. First, as a symbolic resource, the park is socially constructed as a community of affiliation with “like others” who share similar lifestyles, constraints, and disadvantages (Klein and Hill 2008). Both the civics and the survivors perceive the park and its residents as a community of affiliation. However, while civics are guided by altruistic and genuinely communal values, the survivors perceive the park as a symbolic resource that they can use to help manage the social stigma of poverty.

Second, the survivors use the park community as a social resource, more specifically as *bonding social capital* to get by (Putnam 2000; Briggs 2004). They seek social support from their neighbors, civic residents, and park management to cope with economic and emotional disadvantages (e.g., lack of economic capital to fix up their trailers, loss of familial support and care).

For most survivors, poverty is a permanent state of material deprivation and they must struggle to make ends meet. Often at-risk populations, such as the poor and elderly, use coping

strategies just to get by and survive. Those people facing material deprivation survive in the marketplace through a variety of financial and psychological acts of survival (see Chapter Two). Unlike the strangers, the survivors do not possess a strategic plan to escape poverty and do not approach the marketplace reflexively (Murray and Ozanne 1991). However, their consumption sometimes highlights an individual expressive need and aspirations. While the strangers, comparers, and civics demonstrate significant agency and hope, the survivors narratives are noteworthy for their dependency on others. Yet, they are still skilled in securing different levels of bonding social capital and they have developed effective coping mechanisms as discussed in the next sections.

### **Concentrated Disadvantages**

Some of the unique disadvantages facing the survivors are old age, severe physical and mental health challenges, and at times relatively more physically demanding working conditions than others (see Appendix E). Like many other informants, the survivors also experience the emotional negative consequences of tragic life events, but the shame and loss of self-esteem they endure is sometimes more severe than others. Often, they experience feelings of shame, regret, and isolation (Hill and Stephens 1997). For instance, commenting on his 40-year old alcohol addiction, Robert says “shew, I am ashamed of myself.” Similarly, Lucie expresses her disappointment as she explains how she was denied a bus driver job for the local county due to a felony charge.

I have tried so hard all my life. I've made mistakes in my life like everybody has, I don't understand, you know, it seems like to me that I take two steps forward and somebody will push me back three because every time I have a job opportunity something takes it away. I mean, you know, a mistake I made 32 years ago shouldn't have took my job away. (Lucie)

Taking a more fatalistic rather than a fighter attitude towards life, the survivors socially construct their health challenges as inevitable and unfortunate outcomes. Melissa says she cannot do anything about her bi-polar disorder since “it is in her genes and runs in the family.” Internalizing a gene-based victimization, Melissa participates in a constraining medical discourse that argues that she is biologically determined to be ill (Foucault 1978).

## **Resources and Coping**

### Resources.

*Social Capital.* Although concentrated vulnerabilities are also found in other clusters, for the survivors, these challenges are relatively difficult to manage on their own due to their extreme feelings of desperation, hopelessness, and other reasons that are beyond their control (e.g., old age, significant health problems). These informants develop effective survival strategies leveraging their interpersonal skills. Consistent with other research on the poor who mostly survive and get by, *bonding social capital* is the most significant resource for them (Stack 1974; Briggs 1998). Almost all survivors rely on their close-knit social circles such as friends and neighbors both within and outside of the park in dealing with financial constraints, old age, and health challenges. For example, Robert who is 82 years-old, receives help from his neighbor in many home repair projects. Mike and Wanda, who both suffer from health challenges, old age, and lack of personal transportation, get help from their neighbors for weekly trips to the grocery store. In particular, the civics work hard to improve the quality of life at the park by helping survivors. Lucie, on the other hand, reaches out to friends from outside the community to manage her economic deprivation:

...the lady at the bank is not only my banker, but she's a friend. So many times I have went to her, you know, when I've really needed something...and she's loaned me money. (Lucie)

In addition to economic survival and getting by, bonding social capital is leveraged by the survivors to manage emotional disadvantages. Robert, whose family relationships were severely damaged due to his past alcohol addiction, now relies on his neighbors' moral support to make up for his loss of familial love.

All survivors rely on other people to provide bridging social capital (i.e., ability to connect them to disparate social networks and groups). Particularly, they rely on the civics who actively and deliberately seek to develop bridging social capital networks within the park for the good of the community. Therefore, the civics become the provider of bridging social capital whereas the survivors are the recipient. The survivors count on the civics to secure the help of community volunteer organizations in home repairs and financial assistance. In doing this, they neither flirt or play a victimized poor profile, but rather portray themselves as hard-working, responsible people who suffer from unfortunate situations that are beyond their control.

My health isn't as good as it used to be, and working six hours a night now and if I get another job it will probably be working eight hours at the other job. To be honest with you I just don't know how long I can hold up to it. (Lucie)

### Coping.

*Acts of survival (getting by).* Consistent with other studies of low-income consumers, these informants cope through various economic tactics to manage their money on a day-to-day basis, such as frequenting different stores to find sales, purchasing used goods, buying generic or store brands, and selling possessions in yard sales (Alwitt and Donley 1996; Gilliat 2001; Hill 2002). When it comes to managing emotional stress and psychological challenges, though, the survivors engage in two forms of coping. First and mostly, they cope through passive strategies such as seeking comfort through 'sin' products (e.g., smoking) and various other detached coping forms (e.g., denial, withdrawal) [Miller and Kaiser 2001; Gilliat 2001]. Melissa's main

coping mechanisms with her bi-polar disease and depression are smoking and crying. This clearly contradicts the active approach taken by the strangers and the aspirers who would engage in arts and crafts, hobbies, and self-therapy to manage their psychological disease.

Detached or avoidance-based coping mechanisms mainly serve to manage or modify stressful experiences, such as injured pride, low self-esteem, and social stigmatization. Most survivors engage in this form of emotion-focused coping that re-assert their rather passive survival identity. Mike's wife Wanda, who started school at a relatively older age, quit school at third grade when she was 17 years-old because she was "picked on by the kids at the school." Another example is that of Melissa's who stopped going to church because she was judged based on her outlook and clothing.

I used to go to church and the one church I went to they seemed like they were fake, like, they were holy, holy at church and then they'd be at home cussing and drinking and smoking and all of that, and it just didn't seem right to me. You don't go and be all holy at church and act like you're the best thing walking and then when you're not at church, you're one of the worst people, which I mean I smoke cigarettes and I cuss sometimes. A lot of churches around here they judge you. They judge everything you do. (Melissa)

Melissa withdrew from church. This stands in contrast to the aspirer Amanda who reacted to her discomfort with traditionally organized religion by forging her own personal and alternative approach to religion.

Similarly, Lucie has refrained herself from dating after living through a couple of unsuccessful and emotionally abusive relationships.

I didn't trust people because you never know even the people you think are the greatest people in the world you never know what they really are hiding and, uhm, but I dated some, but I never got serious about anybody. I just figured it's easier to do it on my own than deal with that relationship stuff. (Lucie)

However, Lucie states that she used to be a more active and engaged person when she was younger. For example, she sought emotional comfort through counseling and therapy in

copied with regret and feelings of isolation that resulted after her parents' suicide and her felony charges. The shift from a more active stance to a passive and detached attitude seems to be triggered by her increased feelings of desperation and loss of control as Lucie started working three jobs a few years ago and she serves as the main breadwinner of her household.

However, there are a couple of exceptions to this rule; not all survivors act disengaged. Consistent with other survivor-type poor consumers in marketing research, once the survivors have realized they "have hit rock bottom...[they] engage in activities that restore their self-esteem...sometimes this change is the result of anger or rage at their circumstances that entrap them" (Hill 2001). Although a rare case among the survivors, some seek to restore their self with a renewed sense of pride and become more assertive, particularly when they learn to leverage social resources beyond their immediate social circles. Lucie's daughter, Melissa, gets financial and psychological help from various social institutions (e.g., Community Action, Social Services) through her government-assigned program for young, low-income mothers. For instance, during our first interview, Lucie had stated that she could not work around people and had to quit her previous job as a cashier due to her emotional problems. She was portraying more of a victim profile. In our second interview, she struck me with her excitement about her new job at a local fast food chain. After being denied for disability and being told that she needed to get a job if she wanted to continue receiving financial assistance from the welfare services, she got motivated to find a job and secured one with the help of a government-assistance program. Her new job restored her self-efficacy and motivated her to pursue further aspirations.

I went in and showed them I can handle everything. I mean there's a plus to it because they are talking about moving me up to manager already, and I've only been there three months and they give me my hours, like, they give me 35 to 45 hours or 35 to 40 hours, and so and then all the other cashiers they want to complain and be, like, well, you get your hours and you're the newest person here and I don't, well, one, I never call into work. Two, when I come to work, I work. I don't just sit outside in the lobby and not do nothing. (Melissa)

*Managing Social Stigma of Poverty.* The survivors manage social stigmas mainly through a horizontal form of social comparison, namely “connective comparison”, (Locke 2003, p. 620) and bonding social capital (Putnam and Feldstein 2003). As discussed previously, being primarily concerned about day-to-day survival and getting by, the survivors find emotional support and comfort in noticing like-others within the park community who live the same way they do (i.e., mainly other survivors). Connective horizontal social comparison helps them reconstruct the owned stigma of being poor as they sense strong affiliation and belonging with the community. Sometimes, the survivors re-negotiate the meaning of deprivation and loss of power as they seek support from their neighbors, civic-oriented residents, and other community resources (i.e., relying on bonding social capital). Again, they feel socially connected and cared for even when these social networks are not necessarily composed of very similar others (i.e., fellow survivors). The next section untangles these two stigma-management strategies within the survivors’ perception of the park community.

### **Perception of Community**

*Trailer Park as Survival Zone.* The park is a significant resource for these people. Symbolically, the park is a familiar space where the survivors can feel a sense of belonging with most other residents who live similar lives. Within this community of like others, the park becomes a site to subtly fight the social stigma of being impoverished and the feelings of guilt that arise from being unable to fulfill basic needs (Hill and Gaines 2007). Unlike the strangers and the aspirers who fight the social stigma of being poor through downward and upward social comparison (Richins 1995), the survivors manage the stigma through “connective comparison,” defined as comparing oneself with like others perceived to be sharing an aspect in common (Locke 2003). This form of social comparison is horizontal as opposed to being vertical as in the

upward and downward social comparison. Perceiving the park community as a familiar zone, the survivors believe they share various aspects in common with other residents (e.g., material deprivation, a daily struggle to make ends meet).

Socially, the park is an important resource and offers many benefits. As discussed previously in the section on Resources and Coping, the survivors seek help from their social circles within the park for various daily activities such as transportation to the grocery store, home improvement projects, and food provision. Sometimes, seeking of social support is very advanced, such as in the case of Mike who gets privileged treatment from the park management for his home improvement needs. Even though Mike owns his trailer, he is able to get help from the management (the park management is not required to help the residents with repairing and fixing trailers if they are homeowners). Once again, they present their economic deprivation as the result of unfortunate events and circumstances beyond their control (e.g., severe health problems, old age) and play a victim card in securing help from park management. This use of park as significant resource to get by also resembles Hill's (2002) love-as-resource framework that explicates forms of other-centered love and altruistic moves within deprived communities.

I own the trailer, but I tell Alvin [the park manager] and he'll get the stuff. He'll come and check it out. And take care of it because he knows I'm not able to do it... some people don't like them because he wouldn't help them but if I need anything or anything, I'll go over there and tell him and he'd say yeah, I'll get it. (Mike)

Therefore, the park is a survival zone for these informants; it is a site whereby they can seek symbolic, social, and even economic benefits.

Some of these dynamics can be untangled by examining the survivors' social construction of risk and danger. Like strangers, comparers, and some civics, the survivors discuss dangerous activities occurring within the park (e.g., theft, acts of vandalize) and take their own measures to maneuver around these everyday realities (e.g., locking their door, not leaving home decorations



out in the yard, paying their rent in person rather than leaving the rent payment at box outside the management's office.) However, in terms of more violent activities occurring at the park (e.g., drug dealing), they take a rather detached and avoidance-based approach consistent with their usual coping techniques with stressful situations (see the section on Resources and Coping). Mike tells the story of a drug dealer who was caught with \$75 million worth of drugs in his trailer. When I asked him how he had felt about that incident, he responded with laughter and said "it did not bother me none." Similarly, even though Melissa is aware of the drug activities within the park, she claims "cops have nothing better to do" than patrolling through the park every night to catch drug dealers. This detached and almost indifferent approach is in sharp contrast with some of the strangers and aspirers' narratives highlighting worry and even panic when discussing drug problems at the park. Again, this reflects a passive approach because they use escape and avoidance coping strategies, supporting their social identity of survivor and also pointing to their fatalistic attitude. They do not have more sophisticated skills to engage the problem (unlike the civics), they are not able to leave (unlike the strangers), and they do not have much capacity to imagine a better life (unlike the aspirers). Thus, this passivity and indifference to what they cannot escape or change functions as a way to survive amidst uncertainty and fewer resources.

### **Meaning of Home**

*Trailer as Affordable yet Proudful Housing.* Survivors' home narratives portray a different image from the aspirers' for whom home is a signifier of upward social mobility and from the strangers who perceive the trailer as a flawed transition or temporary stage. All survivors have lived in trailer parks for almost their entire lives and the trailer home is familiar and affordable housing, given their severe economic deprivation and relatively lower level of agency. For

instance, Robert chose to live in the park because he could live in his son's trailer rent-free. Like the civics, even though the survivors stress the affordability of trailer home, they do not perceive the trailer as carrying an ideological meaning vis-à-vis dominant housing norms and standards. Rather, the survivors see the trailer as simply an affordable place in which to get by that does not carry ideological connotation: "It's [the trailer] all right. It needs a lot of work." (Melissa). Or, "the bad thing about the park is that mobile homes are made cheap, but it's for people like myself who can't afford no better." (Lucie)

Although they clearly share a practical and utilitarian view of the trailer as a realistic and affordable housing option, survivors still harbor the traditional belief that homeownership marks pride, feelings of accomplishment, and integration into a society that values being a homeowner (Rohe and Watson 2007). As discussed previously, they work hard to secure social support and help in order to beautify their home. They still take pride in their homes even if that pride is not as strong as the aspirers' or civics'.

...you know, and we do the best we can but they are cheaply made and it's something that don't hold up as many years as you need it to at the price you do pay. It's not like they're cheap because I paid like \$32,000 for this one. (Lucie)

All survivors, even the most materially impoverished ones, have sacred or cherished possessions that they proudly display in their home. The trailer home is used as a display zone of valued belongings and a place for self-expression (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Belk 1988). These objects (e.g., photo albums, religious figurines and angels, posters of football players, cartoon books, decorative ornaments) all have special symbolic meanings, are proudly displayed, and enthusiastically discussed during the interviews. For example, Melissa has a display area in her trailer home for sports figurines and signed helmets from college baseball players. Even though Melissa uses her trailer only to sleep at night (she spends most of her time at her mother's trailer with her twin kids) and she does not keep it clean and organized, her

cherished possessions are proudly displayed. The sports collection signifies her survival through her severe depression and bi-polar disorder that prevents her from being around crowds or going out much. It also signifies her restored relationship with her father who left the family when she was a child. When her father re-entered her life a couple of years ago, they went to a college baseball game together. Thus, these cherished possessions mark symbolic values of family love, survival, and re-gained self esteem.

Likewise, Lucie has many angel figurines, which she was given as gifts over the years. The angels symbolize her survival through emotionally abusive past relationships, her resulting detachment from romantic pursuits for over ten years, but also her ongoing romanticism despite her escape.

...this one here the one that is sitting on the moon and the stars. I guess even though I don't date and stuff I'm a big hopeless romantic... fairies and angels are about mystic stuff and love and, you know, stuff like that so that's why I'm so into that stuff and like I said anything unusual...she's a tattoo angel. These are mystic fairies, and I really like the fairies because they're unusual looking, you know, look at the wings here. This looks like dried up leaves and then this mirror ones, you know. (Lucie)

Lucie has an angel that is particularly meaningful to her since it symbolizes her love for her children. Her children, for Lucie, are the most cherished asset given that she raised them by herself.

That is guardian angel and that is angel looking over the children, my children. I love purple. Purple is a color I love, and she's just, it reminds me of going for a walk with the children. You've got your baby with you and you're out and you're dressed up, and you just, you know, all the sparkle and all the shine, and you know, the happiest thing of all is being with your kids so it's just, you know, that's it. You're out with your kids. Isn't it beautiful? (Lucie)

Sometimes, these cherished possessions are displayed with great pride to mark their survival through hardships. Mike's wife, Wanda, showed me all her cartoon books and children books that she tries to read on her own despite being low-literate and quitting school years ago

because she was stigmatized by younger kids. As she was showing me her books and explaining how she would go to different thrift stores to buy them, her excitement was evident. Likewise, her husband, Mike, was very excited as he was walking me through the pocketbooks he was making out of cigarette boxes. The cigarette boxes signify Mike's survival through boredom after being diagnosed with diabetes and lung problems. After the diagnosis, Mike became disabled from his construction job of which he was proud. The couple was so excited to walk me through their cherished possessions that at times they would interrupt each other to get my attention so they could each show me their sacred possessions. They would, for instance, show me all the stuff they bought at yard sales and would tell me with great pride all the bargain hunting they did. They even gave me a small table lamp as a gift. All this demonstrates that although they have little economic means, they still try to beautify their home and acquire possessions that symbolize the values that are important to them.

## Chapter Nine

### The Hedonic Dependents

#### Overview

*That's why we live here because it's cheap. I mean the trailer is crappy, but you know, it's a place to live...I don't mind living in a trailer... I don't know how to explain it. I don't mind living in a trailer at all if they were just bigger... You know, I don't pay any attention to it. I'm just that type of person. I don't let stuff bother me. I just kind of let it roll off and be done with it.*  
(Deborah)

*I look at it as a roof over your head. It's a place to live.* (Anita)

Of all the informant clusters, the hedonic dependents are the most detached from their home and the park community. For these informants, trailer home is mainly a place to live that has little emotional and symbolic meaning. It is also a site where they engage in a hedonistic lifestyle of parties and socializing with like others. Yet, they view their trailers as meaningless shells that serve only the most basic functional benefit of providing shelter. As such, hedonics' perception of their home is also consistent with extremely impoverished and even homeless people's social constructions of skid row homes, flophouses, and single-occupancy hotel rooms (Donohue 1996; Wright and Rubin 2006).

This detached and indifferent attitude also reflects on the hedonic dependents' views of the trailer park. Compared with other informants, these people are the most alienated and isolated from the park community. Rather than engaging in various forms of social comparison (e.g., downward, upward or connective social comparison), they perceive their detachment and lack of affiliation as demonstrative of a different lifestyle and values from most people in the park.

These informants are called 'hedonics' because of their general approach to life that is centered around thrill-seeking and pleasure. They seek enjoyment through multi-sensory and

stimulating consumption experiences, such as heavy alcohol and drug usage, and live life to the fullest and for the moment without thinking much about the consequences (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982). Other times, they enjoy the thrill of engaging in multiple risky behaviors (e.g., strip dancing, seeking promiscuous and dangerous sexual adventures). While engaging in such risky behaviors, they also find satisfaction and a sense of excitement derived from ‘fooling the system,’ if not caught during the process (Willis 1977).

In addition to being ‘hedonics,’ these informants are also ‘dependents’ since they are extremely dependent on like-others for survival. While these people are detached from much of the park community, they create their own smaller social circles within the park with people who share their hedonistic lifestyles. The notion of subcultures with its caveats of solidarity and shared common identity as analyzed in consumer research is applicable to the analysis of hedonic dependents (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001).

The following section examines in detail the diverse disadvantages facing the hedonic dependents and the set of resources and coping strategies they utilize. Next, their social construction of the park community and home are explored.

### **Concentrated Disadvantages**

One key disadvantage facing the hedonics is their consumption of addictive products such as prescription/illicit drugs and alcohol. Like the addicts studied by Hirschman (1992) and the impulsive shoppers studied by Rook (1987), the hedonics are driven by their impulses, seek instant gratification, and often engage in destructive behaviors leading into serious consequences. Emma, for example, was addicted to methamphetamine (referred to as ‘crystal meth’ or ‘meth’ in folk culture) and cocaine for years. She says she used to weigh 82 pounds when she was addicted to meth. Due to her past meth addiction, Emma lost the custody of all of

her five children. Her addiction was so severe that she used to allow a drug dealer to use her kitchen as a meth lab to “cook” the drug in exchange for free meth. Likewise, three other hedonic dependents were addicted to illicit and prescription drugs, all binge drink, and some still experiment with prescription drugs.

The hedonics’ narratives on their past addictions stand in sharp contrast with those of other informants who would describe their past addiction with shame and regret. For example, the aspirers take pride in overcoming their addictions and forged many different personalized coping mechanisms to help them quit. For the hedonic dependents, addiction management is quite different. For instance, when I asked her what made her quit crystal meth, Emma responded: “I don’t know. I guess it’s where I lost my kids.” However, later on, she admitted that she quit crystal meth because she was unable to secure a dealer. She started using cocaine because it was available: “So, I started using coke to conquer meth.” Similarly, Josh was snorting prescription pills for years when he was incarcerated. Rather than a deliberate and conscious effort, these informants ended their addiction due to circumstances beyond their control.

With the exception of one informant in this group, all have had problems with legal authorities and suffered financially and emotionally as a result (see Appendix F). One extreme example is the case of Josh who spent two years in jail due to driving felonies. Despite having suffered many negative financial and psychological consequences for driving illegally (e.g., house arrest, fines), Josh continued to drive without insurance and license and had been caught five times. He says “I got caught with no insurance and just kept driving like a dummy [laughter].” As a result, he was finally incarcerated, was made obligated to meet with a probation officer on a regular basis and he found that he cannot secure employment easily because “as a convicted felon it's hard to get a job.” He still owes \$6000 in order to be able to legally drive.

The hedonic dependents also suffer from psychological traumas that occurred in the past. For instance, Deborah's ex-fiancé committed suicide in her presence and his family blamed her for the death of her ex-fiancé. Emma still suffers the psychological effects of being incarcerated for physically assaulting a police officer on duty. She spent over a month in jail and was physically and emotionally abused by other inmates. Her emotional trauma was so deep that she reports not being able to engage in bowel movement for almost a month and was hospitalized. She blames her father who did not bail her out because "he wanted to teach her a lesson." Emma refused to communicate with her father for several years. Likewise, her relationship with her mother who also lives in the park is seriously damaged due to her past drug addiction and impulsive hedonistic lifestyle. However, this still does not prevent Emma from giving up her hedonic way of life. Thus, the hedonics seek thrills and have little ability to control their impulses (Hoch and Loewenstein 1991).

## **Resources and Coping**

### Resources.

*Social Capital.* The hedonic dependents are the most socially dependent group of all the clusters. But this social dependency does not extend into larger social networks (i.e., bridging social capital); instead it is limited to selected and very few social circles (i.e., bonding social capital) that brings together people who share similar values and lifestyles (Putnam and Feldstein 2003). Particularly within the park, the hedonic dependents are aware of their deviant lifestyle and, as such, feel detached from the community. They rely on their smaller social circle comprised of other hedonics or people who feel sympathetic toward their hedonic lifestyles.



Sometimes, this dependency is so extreme that it even prevents them from looking for a job. Anita, for example, states that she “depends on a lot of other people” to get by financially.

Her sister, Deborah, confirms Anita’s dependency:

it [the time she worked for XXX] was the first time she had worked in ten years. Anita has got to realize that people cannot take care of her. She’s making no effort to get a job whatsoever... You've got to take care of yourself. If you have nobody else to take care of you, you've gotta do it yourself.

In a similar vein, Emma confides her extreme social dependency as she elaborates on what she would change in her life even given the opportunity.

I'd probably want to be a little bit more independent because I've never had to be on my own, you know, and I'm 30 years old and I've never had to be on my own. Because I went from like moving out of my parent's house to, you know, with friends or family and then I was married and he took care of me and then I've been with him and he takes care of me. I wouldn't know what to do, you know, I wouldn't make enough to pay the bills like he does. So, I'd like to be more stable so if something were to ever happen that I would be okay. I wouldn't have to struggle. (Emma)

Yet, Emma does not spend much effort in trying to break through her dependency and become more self-sufficient. She has had a series of short-term jobs but does not hold on to a job for a long time. Emma frequently changes jobs for inconsequential reasons. For example, she quit her job at Burger King because “she didn’t like talking in the microphone [laughter]. It’s crazy but that’s the reason why I quit.”

This let-go attitude coupled with extreme social dependency, perceived loss of control over one’s life, and highly hedonistic attitudes seem to fit at face value the American anthropologist Oscar Lewis’ (1970) ‘culture of poverty’ thesis. Arguing that the culture of poverty is a self-perpetuating, generational, distinctive, and mostly deviant subculture, Lewis (1970) writes that this particular form of culture is characterized by “a lack of impulse control and a strong present time orientation with relatively little ability to defer gratification and to plan for the future, a sense of resignation and fatalism” (p. 73). However, upon deeper analysis, the

data on the hedonic dependents reveal more nuanced dynamics and diverse set of behaviors that contradict the culture of poverty thesis. For example, a hedonic dependent couple plans for the future and is trying to move into a better trailer home within the park. In addition, the generational nature of the culture of poverty framework does not find support among the hedonic dependents who frequently referred to their parents as individuals “who did the best they could when [the hedonic dependents] were growing up.” Anita even went so far as to show me with pride her mother’s “thirty-year service award” that was presented to her mother for her services at the local school. Emma’s daughters are being raised by her mother (an aspirer who was interviewed for this study) who takes care of them despite her terminal illness.

Consistent with some structuralist views, the hedonic dependents’ defiant and hedonic lifestyles are mostly the outcome of their orientation and adaptation to a social world perceived as unjust and to limited structural opportunities (see the next section on Coping). This view is referred to as “habitus” and is defined as a “set of basic, deeply interiorized master-patterns” that are transmitted through socialization (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 130). Individuals assess their chances for success or failure through habitus, internalize these, and then shape their aspirations accordingly. For example, a juvenile delinquent may not aspire to pursue higher education because they might have internalized that the actual chances for someone in their impoverished and deviant community to go to college are fairly small (Ozanne, Hill, and Wright 1999). Through socialization with other hedonics and through interactions within a system viewed as unfair, these informants generate a range of defiant and distinctive “forms of self-defeating behaviors” that, in a way, reinforce enduring constructions of the poor as deviant and dependent (Swartz 1997, p. 104). Bourdieu’s habitus offers a different explanation from the

culturalist perspectives than seek to explain persistence of poverty in the cultural and deviant origins of the poor.

### Coping.

*Acts of Survival (getting by).* Like all other groups, the hedonic dependents manage a wide variety of economic and emotional survival strategies. This range from traditional economic getting by (e.g., coupon usage, bargain hunting, selling possessions at yard sales) to emotional coping acts (e.g., seeking social support from selected networks and acquaintances, escape-avoidance, alcohol and drug usage).

*Acts of Defiance (getting back at).* The hedonic dependents engage in multitude of acts of defiance against the status quo that they perceive to be unfair and degrading (Gilliat 2001; Gilliom 2001). The hedonic dependents' sense of satisfaction and pleasure taken from 'working' a system that failed them, anger at structural inequities, along with instant indulgence into hedonistic and deviant pursuits are all ways of coping with material, social, and psychological deprivation and getting back at the system (Willis 1977, 1990).

Unlike some past addicts aspirers and survivors who committed illegal acts and regretted them later, the hedonists took pleasure in "fooling the system and getting by with it." Although Josh says "I ain't going back [to prison]. That's one thing I've learned. I ain't going to drive no more. That's for sure," as the interview progressed, he confided that he was looking for a used car to drive. Similarly, Emma, who drove with a fake license for 12 years, reflects on her experience in the following way:

I just took her birth certificate, her name was Laura [a friend of Emma's], I took Laura's birth certificate, her Social Security Card, and something with her address on it and went in there acting as if I was her. They put my picture on her license. So, when I get pulled over I just, I've only gotten pulled over one time, and they just wrote me a warning, but it passed with the cop. He didn't know no different that I wasn't Laura...I felt I was doing good there for a while until I got in all this trouble and now it's not so funny anymore [laughter]. I guess I just got by with it for so

long I just kind of let it go at that and didn't see no reason in spending that kind of money on my license when I was getting by with it.

In trying to make sense of their disadvantages, all hedonics perceive the system as unjust, degrading, and abusive; they use words such as “fucked up” and “messed up” to describe the dominant social institutions (e.g., welfare system, legal authorities). For instance, reflecting back on his jail experience of two years, Josh says:

The system sucks. The State XXXX, it's, oh. And you just lose everything. Just because I drove a car. I mean I'd understand if I went out here and done something bad, I mean you know. I've seen people that's had, you know, pounds of marijuana and pounds and cocaine got less time than what I did for driving a car...I mean one guy I was locked up with got nine months because he shot up a girl up and overdosed her and killed her, but he only got nine months. I got 20 months for driving.

However, the hedonics dependents' perception and criticism of the dominant social order is not as ideological and critical as it is with the civics and strangers. For example, the civics engaged in organized resistance (Gaventa 1980), such as speaking at town meetings, and go in great detail in reflecting on the system's deficiencies demonstrating their critical knowledge and reflexivity (Ozanne and Murray 1995). Hedonic dependents focus on their unfair experience of the dominant social institutions and do not offer positive solutions. More importantly, they do not directly fight for their rights as active and involved citizens. Instead, they engage in more subtle individual acts of defiance focused on “working the system.” For instance, Anita claimed that her TANIF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) check was “messed up,” which caused her to fall behind her rent payments. Rather than making an inquiry, she chose to “work the system” by sending her cousin to different food banks to get around the rule that limits visits to once a month. This rather detached and subtle behavior is consistent with the notion of habitus acting as a means for individual assessment of chances of success and failure. Anita probably

perceived her chances of receiving fair treatment from the welfare system to be small, thus, she chose not to actively pursue the situation.

In addition to these subtle defiant acts, the hedonic dependents engage in another form of “weapons of the weak”, namely, false compliance (Scott 1985). False compliance is also used as an act of defiance by the civics but is utilized with communal and civic values in mind. For the hedonic dependent, false compliance is a way to secure individual benefits against an unjustly perceived system. Emma, who gave custody of her children to her mother, explains how she “keeps them quiet” by looking like a compliant citizen.

I don't think it's right that I should have to because I signed away my rights because I couldn't take care of them and I don't feel I should have to pay to take care of kids that I signed away my rights to. Plus, I give them money all the time and mom, it's not mom that wants the child support, it's where she gets the check from the state on the kids called TANIF, and uhm, so it's the state that issued me to pay child support, it's not her, but I think that's not fair... So, I paid like \$20 a week [in child support]. But that equals out to \$100 a month when I'm supposed to be paying \$249. But it keeps them quiet. If you make some kind of attempt to, you know, pay something, they don't seem to mind, you know, they don't send me letters or nothing.

Other acts of defiance against an unfair park management are discussed in the section on the Perception of Community.

*Managing Social Stigma of Poverty.* Of all the five poverty clusters, the hedonic dependents are perhaps the only ones who are not bothered by the social stigma of poverty. They ignore stigmatizing representations through mental detachment and sarcasm.

People just kind of down you when you live in a trailer park. It's just a feeling I have. I don't know. I've never been called trailer park trash or anything, but I don't know...Just well, why do you live in a trailer? Well, hey, it's all I can afford, you know? You know, I don't pay any attention to it. I'm just that type of person. I don't let stuff bother me. I just kind of let it roll off and be done with it. (Deborah)

They call us trailer park trash. Didn't you know? Okay, well, yeah, I've heard people say it before, but, you know I look at it as it's a roof over your head, it's a place to live. And my brother's girlfriend now that's what she calls us because he comes over here and visits us because she's high and mighty. She's got a nice postal job making bookoo's of money she think she's the shit, excuse my language, but. (Anita)

Yet, they do feel stigmatized within the park community because of their deviant lifestyle and distinct moral values as compared with the general park population. However, they manage the stigma of deviancy through their subcultural solidarity and active defiant resistance against the park management (see the next section).

### **Perception of Community**

These informants' unusual lifestyles (e.g., hedonistic tendencies, risky behaviors, and thrill-seeking) guide their social construction of the park and its community. First, they feel socially excluded and alienated from the park community. Second, they hold different views on risk and safety than most other informants.

*Trailer Park as Hostile and Discriminatory Space.* Unlike other informants, the hedonic dependents have very little attachment to the park. Despite having their own small social circles within the community, the park is generally perceived as a hostile place to be tolerated. Due to their hedonistic tendencies and relatively deviant lifestyles, they feel isolated from much of the park community. Most complain about the park inhabitants being “too nosy” and interfering with their lifestyles.

If I had my choice now, I'd be gone. Anywhere but here. Everybody is in your business. Well, yeah, they talk about me all the time. Because I have a lot of company. But, you know, I have family and friends, you know, that come and see me. What's the big deal? Uhm, just that, you know, they think I'm dealing drugs or I'm allowing it to go on here or some stuff like that...What somebody else does in their own house is their business so, you know. (Anita)

In addition to feelings of separation and alienation, the hedonic dependents believe that they are subjected to neglectful and discriminatory treatment from the park management. Their financial situation is similar to the survivors who struggle the most to get by compared with other informants. But, unlike the ‘compliant and moral citizen’ survivors who are successful for

securing bonding social capital and accessing bridging social capital through the civics, the hedonic dependents are perceived as threats to the communal values and moral standards<sup>24</sup>. They also perceive being viewed as unwanted and deviant inhabitants. Deborah says, “it’s just like they ignore you,” when discussing the management’s attitude when she needs help repairing her trailer. Anita also expresses anger at the management who she describes as being “too busy acting like a powerhouse,” and doing unnecessary things around the park instead of taking care of the residents’ needs. In contrast, the majority of other informants view the park management as helpful and cooperative. The social exclusion the hedonics experience may be related to their deviant and unacceptable lifestyles as perceived by the park management.

The hedonics engage in subtle individual acts of defiance to express their anger against the park management. For instance, Anita visibly protests the new rules even though she faces the risk of warning and possible fines.

Like he fusses at us because our, you know, our yards get dirty or we have trash outside. They moved the dumpsters to the bottom of the hill, I guess so it would look better down there, but everybody has dumpsters, don't they? Apartments and parks and stuff... Well, he moved the dumpsters all the way to the bottom of the hill. I'm not carrying trash all the way to the bottom of the hill. So, if it piles up outside, it's just going to pile up. (Anita)

Emma says she attends the organized community picnics to “feed her dog.” During field notes from a community picnic, I observed Emma who distanced herself from participants and only socialized with her mother, daughters, and another hedonic. After feeding her dog a sandwich, she filled her pocketbook with extra sandwiches to take home so “the dog can eat later on.” Unlike the survivors who appreciate these community services, the hedonic dependents perceive these resources as something to selfishly take advantage of and get back at an unfair management.

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<sup>24</sup> A couple of civics expressed negative feelings towards some of the hedonic dependents I interviewed.

*Trailer Park as Safe Space.* Most informants view the park as dangerous and unsafe domain due to the perceived threats at the park (e.g., drugs, thefts, acts of vandalism). The hedonic dependents' narratives rarely highlight the parks' dangers. Although they are aware of the drug dealing activities and the constant police presence at night, Deborah and Anita do not lock their doors because they "feel safe and it don't bother [them]." In contrast with survivors who take an escape-avoidance approach with regard to illegal activities such as drug dealing, the hedonics do not even perceive these operations as worthy of comment. This rather unique social construction of risk and threat is most likely generated by their deviant and thrill-seeking worldviews.

From a liberal ideology perspective, drug dealing activities are discussed in categories, ranging from 'acceptable' to 'unacceptable.' This liberal approach stands in clear opposition with the rather conservative views of the aspirers, strangers, and the civics, who see all drugs as presenting threats to middle-class traditional values of community and responsibility.

It depends. When it comes to drug dealing, I mean it depends on what they're doing... Marijuana to me I think it ought to be legal...I mean it's a wild flower. [laughter] I mean to me, to me the way I feel about it I mean if somebody gets a bottle of pills and they don't take them all and then want to make them a few dollars, I don't really see the big harm in it if they are selling to like one person that's an older person or something like that... You know, cigarettes are legal, beer is legal, and I mean I used to smoke it years ago and I didn't do the crazy stuff that I would do if I'm drinking beer and when I smoke a joint I think it relaxes you... (Josh)

*Trailer Park as a Subcultural Resource.* Despite their perceived alienation and detachment from the park, these informants create their own limited and tightly-knit social networks within the community. The hedonics' similar values and worldviews on social institutions (e.g., the legal system, workplace, welfare system, park management) allow them to develop shared meanings that are often counter to the dominant norms and values. This is consistent with the literature on subcultures of consumption within consumer research (Schouten



and McAlexander 1995; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). In a way, the hedonic dependents develop “subcultural capital” that revolves around consistent distinctiveness of values and moral standards, a strong sense of solidarity with like others and shared social identity, as well as shared rituals and traditions (Thornton 1995; Hodkinson 2002).

As discussed previously, hedonism and risk-taking are further triggered as these informants collectively internalize dominant images of poor individuals perpetuated by the status quo. As such, they frequently experience motivational loss. These shared understandings lead the hedonics to conduct their day-to-day lives differently from those of other informants and create close-knit social circles with other hedonics within the community (Wagner 1993). All of the hedonics in this cluster socialize with each other (a finding not consistent other poverty clusters, a negative case) and they are heavily dependent on their social networks. The only reason Emma chose to live in the park is because she wanted to be close to her friends. Anita financially depends on her sister and her cousin (even to buy her cigarettes) who live in the park and she has many friends she socializes and parties with in the park. Likewise, Deborah and Josh have a few similar-minded friends who they “hang out with” in the park.

### **Meaning of Home**

*Trailer as Meaningless Shelter.* The traditional notion of ‘housing’ comprises much more than physical shelter and encompass diverse factors such as “health, security, privacy, neighborhood and social relations, status, community facilities and services, access to jobs, and control over the environment.” (Foley 1980, p. 457). This view is consistent with the findings about all other informants even though intensity of these factors varies based on the social construction of hominess and housing. Yet, for all hedonics, the trailer’s primary function is to

provide a place to sleep and physical shelter. It provides housing rather than a cozy, warm, or homey experience as is the case with many other informants. While the primary meaning of the trailer for the survivor is affordable shelter, they still take good care of it since it symbolizes their survival journey despite all constraints. The survivors' trailer is also a sacred place to display their most cherished possessions and experience feelings of coziness, comfort, privacy, and "homeyness." (McCracken 1989) The survivors engage in fantasy and daydreaming around their cherished possessions like the homeless women who live in a shelter studied by Hill (1991). However, for hedonic dependents, even their most cherished and private possessions do not carry much symbolic meaning. Anita says she sold her bed because she needed money and she now sleeps on the couch. However, this does not seem to bother her much as she comments with a laid-back, "I don't care." Once again, this particular example challenges the culture of poverty thesis that argues that poor individuals experience despair and hopelessness and feel alienated from the mainstream consumer culture when they cannot fulfill traditional consumption aspirations.

Hence, trailer is less a home and more a house or shelter. This finding parallels another study of homeless people done by Hill and Stamey (1990). In this study, Hill and Stamey explore the consumption practices of a group of homeless people who reject shelters and prefer to live independently. For these 'independent' homeless people, the meaning of the shelter was associated with an unhealthy and unsafe environment representing a less preferred choice over the streets. In a similar vein, hedonics view their trailer as an unwanted and degraded shelter. In their narratives juxtaposing ideal homes with trailer homes, there is an implicit view of the trailer as a less-than-ideal mode of living that lacks privacy.

The hedonics' detachment from their home became evident as I was observing the condition of their trailer. Compared to all the trailers that I visited, their trailers were the most dirty, messy, and neglected ones. They do not take good care of their home or their possessions. Even though some of them initially sought to fulfill their pleasure-seeking needs within their trailer (i.e., Anita has a mini bar and a hot tub installed in her trailer and Emma used to have a tent in her trailer for her daughters to play inside), in time they let go of these hedonistic experiences. This seems to occur as they grew more apart from the park community, felt more alienated, and gave in to the financial and motivational loss and dependency (Hill 2001, 2007).

*Trailer as Flophouse.* The term 'flophouse' originated in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and is associated with cheap and run-down places where idle, transient, unemployed and drug-abusing people spend the night and hang out. 'Flophouse' is used to refer to single-occupancy motel rooms and other forms of cheap urban dwellings in skid rows inhabited by addicts and even homeless people (Berlin and McAllister 1992). For the hedonics, the meaning of trailer is similar to a flophouse; it is a place where they can hang out with friends and party around shared rituals (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Anita's trailer is "the hangout place" for many mutual friends of Anita and Deborah, both within and from outside of the park<sup>25</sup>. As discussed previously, the physical condition of the trailers also reflects their implicit approach to their home as a flophouse. Unlike all other informants, they do not engage in home improvement projects, do not develop hobbies that they can undertake around their trailer, and do not have established roles and agreements with other household members in handling house chores. Complete messiness

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<sup>25</sup> Some of the hedonics would drink and constantly smoke cigarettes during the interview. Three of them also asked me to "party with them the next time" and "hang out", telling me with pride how they party (e.g., all the mixed drinks they know how to make, the "tricks" to get more buzz with alcohol such as adding salt in beer, the card games they know, and the "good music" they listen to).

and chaos coupled with a let-go and laidback attitude contributes to the social construction of the trailer as a flophouse (Donohue 1996).

Perhaps the case of Emma provides a prime example of this construction of a meaningless flophouse. When she lived in her previous trailer within the park (before moving in with her boyfriend in his trailer), Emma was heavily addicted to crystal meth. For months, she let a drug dealer use her trailer as a meth lab in exchange for free meth. In the excerpt below, Emma recalls those days with laughter and even some nostalgia in her voice (she says she misses the drug “because of the energy it gives you”). Then, she explains how she let her trailer being used as a meth lab.

I'd let them use my trailer to cook it and make it and then I'd get some of it. They'd give me meth. Then I was selling it, too, so... You've gotta be real careful because you can smell it and mine was right up there on the bike trail the best trailer to do it. People can smell it. It's dangerous to cook it in the house. I had already lost my kids and my mom had them... So he about blew us up that time and one time he was mixing some stuff in a bottle that you use to make it, I didn't know what all was in it, and his finger slipped off and I had a bikini top on and it flew over and hit my back and put a hole in my, a little hole in the back [indiscernible] poured water to get it off... Yeah, he's doing 15 years in prison. I would have got busted the same time he did if I hadn't left, but I was gone. I was gone two days ahead of him before he got busted. So, luckily I left when I did [laughter]. (Emma)

## **Chapter Ten**

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

#### **Introduction**

The primary goal of this dissertation is to better understand the phenomenon of poverty from the perspective of impoverished consumers and through their diverse relationships with the marketplace. Towards this end, the purpose of this chapter is to provide an interpretation of the data discussed in the previous chapters and explore the key findings in light of the relevant literatures on poverty and stigmatization. This chapter begins with an exploration of the concept of poverty, discusses dominant approaches that explicate the persistence of poverty, and unpacks the multiple ways poverty is socially constructed by the informants as they manage, negotiate, ignore, or fight against multiple social stigmas.

#### **The Concept of Poverty**

Lister (2004) suggests that two conceptualizations and measurements of poverty exist. First, the traditional and simplistic absolute approach to poverty focuses directly on the financial and material deprivation that prevails in the life of the poor. According to this view, poverty is the lack of financial and material resources (e.g., economic capital and its related manifestations of wealth). Economic capital is at the root of all other deprivations and, as such, it is crucial in understanding and measuring poverty (Joseph and Sumption 1979). Implicit in this tradition is a view of the financially deprived poor being focused solely on economic survival and getting by while overlooking their other deprivations and any way to overcome these deficits. However, evidence suggests that even the extremely financially deprived poor can be skilled and creative in challenging social, cultural, and motivational deprivations (Hill and Stamey 1990; Hill 1991).

Alternatively, the relative view and its many derivatives (i.e., poverty as capabilities deprivation, poverty as social exclusion, poverty as ill-being) take a multi-faceted approach (Townsend 1993; Sen 1992; Sen 2000; Narayan et al. 2000). From this perspective, our understanding of poverty shifts from a narrow definition focused on income distribution and economic inequality to a multidimensional notion of disadvantage that encompasses many different realities of the poor. To define poverty in terms of material wealth alone is misleading; people can be poor in terms of health, lifestyles, social and cultural opportunities, and even motivation and spirit. As argued by Coser (1974), to be poor in a wealthy society such as the United States means not only one has less income but also one feels excluded from the social, cultural, and even political arena. Coser describes this alienation in the following way: “one is likely to conceive of oneself as a pawn, an object, of social and political developments rather than a self conscious political subject” (1974, p. 18).

Among the poor in this study, I find multiple disadvantages that these consumers are experiencing beyond mere financial deprivation. There are multiple perceptions of poverty and the informants differ across five clusters in terms of their perspectives on various forms of deprivation, different degrees of agency and aspirations. As previously explained in Chapter Five (see Figure 1), the social construction of poverty emerges in a two-dimensional framework that derives from the informants’ meaning making of their trailer home and their perceptions of the park community. The five distinct poverty clusters analyzed in Chapters Five through Nine point to five different social identities adopted by the trailer park residents in order to manage and/or resist multiple forms of impoverishment. To summarize, the aspirers focus on the key material objects and symbols of middle-class life; since they perceive trailer living as a successful mark and upward transition, they do not view themselves poor in the traditional sense. They had

overcome absolute poverty--they have a home and food, and relative poverty--they possess socially perceived necessities such as cell phone and television. For the strangers, trailer life represents poverty and a flawed, yet mostly temporary move, until they reach their goals towards better housing and safer neighborhoods. Thus, the poverty they are experiencing is only temporary from their perspective. Unlike the hopeful strangers, the defiant strangers view their temporary deprivation as a result of structural failings and inequalities. The civics, however, perceive poverty as a shortage of resources that constrains not only individuals and households but also their local communities. Poverty thus becomes the blocked opportunity to participate in civic and political life, powerlessness, and lack of voice. The survivors' narratives, on the other hand, demonstrate that these informants view poverty as an inescapable condition. For them, poverty is almost a familiar state, the trailer home is merely an affordable shelter, and the park is a realistic space whereby they seek to secure various forms of capital. The survivors experience social dependency, feelings of loss and motivation, at times. Finally, the hedonic dependents experience not only financial but also cultural, social, and motivational deprivation as they feel trapped within a judgmental community and an unjust social structure and as they internalize self-defeating patterns of behavior.

Despite these nuances across five groups, almost all informants highlight the relational disadvantages and stratification that is central to their lives (e.g., alienation, separation, and the perceived lack of social integration due to stigmatization; social inequalities resulting from their socio-economic status). These distributional and relational deprivations cause some informants to experience psychological and motivational loss as in the case of the survivors and hedonic dependents.

Nevertheless, there are many among the informants who aspire and show a great deal of agency and resilience in challenging the limits of impoverishment (i.e., the aspirers, the strangers, and the civics). The informants' agency and continuous effort towards both managing and escaping poverty also manifests through their movement both within the mobile home park limits and outside of the community. For example, since the beginning of the fieldwork, one couple who are classified as strangers has moved their trailer home on a private land for which they had been saving for more than a decade. Another aspiring couple has moved into a better and newer trailer within the park. Likewise, one survivor who was unemployed for months secured a cashier position at a store and even started to look for a car so she would not depend anymore on her mother for transportation. However, there are other informants who slipped further into poverty. One civic lost her job and had to move out of the park and one hedonic dependent was evicted from the park because she could not keep up with her monthly rent.

Hence, the findings illuminate the need to approach the phenomenon of poverty not as a static concept but a more dynamic stage of deprivation characterized by multiple different social constructions and perceptions. Therefore, poverty becomes a repertoire of:

- 1) not only financial but also social, cultural, and motivational deprivations (Chakravarti 2006);
- 2) lack of resources available to the individual, households, and local communities (Townsend 1979);
- 3) relational as well as distributional disadvantage (Room 1999);
- 4) a dynamic stage of disadvantage that moves beyond the description of the poor and extends the analysis into the factors that trigger entry or exit from poverty (Walker 1995).

This more multi-faceted and dynamic conceptualization of poverty also moves beyond the simplistic duality inherent in the individual (or cultural) vs. structural frameworks that attempt to explicate the persistence of poverty. The next section discusses these two opposing



research traditions and supports a third approach in exploring impoverishment as a dialectical and dynamic phenomenon that takes into account the relationships of the poor vis-à-vis the non-poor and the marketplace in general (Waxman 1983; Jones and Novak 1999).

### **Dominant Poverty Theories and the Relational View**

As discussed previously, the existence and persistence of poverty is generally explained through two different frameworks (see Chapter Two). First, there is the individual (also called cultural) perspective that emphasizes genetic, moral, and cultural defects of the poor and argues that these defects constitute the very same reasons why poverty exists. Although the genetic explanations have largely fallen out of favor, the moral and cultural explanations still find many proponents among the academic and social policy circles (Ropers 1991; de Goede 1996). Social theorists and policy makers highlighting the moral and cultural distinctions between the poor and the non-poor are generally referred to as ‘culturalists.’ For the culturalists, the poor or the so-called ‘lower-class’ manifest patterns of behavior and distinctive value systems that are fundamentally different from those of the dominant society and culture (Harrington 1962; Lewis 1970). These unique patterns of behaviors, norms, and values are transmitted generationally through socialization and thus become the subcultural characteristics of the lower class.

According to this view, the poor engage in mostly deviant, negative, and socially unacceptable behaviors that is consistent with their unique value system (Miller 1958; Banfield 1970). In other words, they do not have the same aspirations and values as the dominant society (i.e., the middle and upper-middle classes). Thus, culturalists agree that the poor’s problems derive from internal and cultural sources and the only way to diminish poverty is through teaching the impoverished consumers to adopt the values and behaviors of the non-poor. For example, the job component of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 was designed to offer the poor youth basic education and

marketable skills to secure employment. However, it was based on a rigid cultural perspective stating that the youth had to be removed from their ‘vicious environment’ for the training program to be successful (Waxman 1983).

Across the five clusters, my data challenges this cultural perspective with the diversity of the value systems and perceptions among the poor. My findings point to a dynamic and complex nature of poverty rather than a simplistic approach that treats poverty as a unique and homogenous subculture. Although the hedonic dependents seem to fit the ideological stereotype of the poor as depicted in the cultural perspective, deeper analysis reveals more nuanced dynamics. For example, unlike the cultural perspective that argues that the poor do have a unique and deviant worldview because they are part of a distinctive subculture, the hedonic dependents in this study engage in deviant acts mostly as a way to get back at an unfair system and also as a result of internalized dispositions (i.e., habitus). Likewise, the aspirers and the strangers have very traditional and middle-class oriented values and goals (i.e., better house, safer community, fair treatment within the marketplace), once again challenging the cultural approach. Finally, the virtuous and communal values of the civics certainly constitute a challenge to the allegedly distinctive characteristics of the poor as passive, dependent, deviant, and self-centered hedonistic subculture (O’Connor 2001).

In contrast to the cultural perspective, the structural perspective argues that poverty perpetuates due to many structural inequalities and disadvantages (Jennings 1999; Martin and Giannaros 1990). As my analysis of five poverty clusters shows, there are many structural deprivations faced by these poor consumers. The informants discuss the lack of preventative health care in general, the unjust and dehumanizing welfare system, very limited opportunities for affordable housing, lack of employment opportunities that would provide a decent income to

live on, and a shortage of financial support for community revitalization projects and civic participation.

An interesting caveat of the structural perspective is that although some structuralists agree with the culturalists in perceiving the poor manifesting unique patterns of behavior and values, they do not see these behaviors as personal or subcultural pathologies arising internally. For those structuralists, the poor behave differently and defiantly at times not because they have not internalized dominant values and aspirations but do not have the opportunities to realize these values and goals through the normal socially acceptable avenues (Waxman 1983; Osborne 1990; Singh 1991). The dominant American success ideology is internalized by the poor as well as the non-poor but the gap between the accessibility of commonly accepted success symbols (e.g., employment, education, material and cultural wealth) and the institutionalized means to achieve them becomes wider as one goes down in the socio-economic strata. This conflict between cultural goals (i.e., success and capacity to realize aspirations) and the poor's socio-economic condition leads to anomie, according to the prominent American sociologist Robert Merton. As Merton (1938) puts it, "frustration and thwarted aspiration lead to the search for avenues of escape from a culturally induced intolerable situation; or unrelieved ambition may eventuate in illicit attempts to acquire the dominant values" (p. 680). Thus, the poor's unique behavioral and attitudinal patterns surface because they perceive that they are not offered the same structural opportunities as the middle and upper-middles classes. Across my informants, this structural perspective clearly fits with the hedonic dependents who engage in illegal activities and take pleasure in 'working the system' that has failed them. However, the diversity of the worldviews and perceptions among the poor in my study also challenges the structural perspective, particularly in the case of the aspirers. While the aspirers have internalized some

dominant values and consumerist aspirations, they do not totally subscribe to all of the same middle-class goals and ideals. They appropriate and re-appropriate the marketplace, acquiring and aspiring to those cultural goods and experiences that they perceive as the most important (e.g., television, cell phone, recreation).

Thus, regardless of the merits of these approaches (i.e., the cultural and structural perspectives), neither approach alone accounts for the diversity found among the poor consumers in this study. Rather, the cultural and structural frameworks represent two simplistic and incomplete accounts of poverty. On one hand, we have one group of theorists (i.e., the culturalists) who see the poor as possessing a unique subcultural value system. On the other hand, we have another tradition (i.e., the structuralists) emphasizing that the poor share in the dominant aspirations and value systems but are not given opportunities to realize these. This socio-cultural deprivation and socialization with similar others might lead the impoverished to behave differently, even defiantly, at times. Thus, these two opposing approaches blame either the individual or the social structure for the existence and persistence of poverty. As such, they limit the analysis of poverty to one of the two opposing extremes, overlooking more complex dynamics as found in this study. For instance, neither approach deeply accounts for the dialectical relationships that exist between the subjectively constructed realities of the poor and the existing historical material structure. In addition, neither approach explores the poor's perceptions of the non-poor as they interact in various social domains.

However, most of the informants in this study construct, manage, and negotiate the meaning of deprivation within their interaction with the non-poor. For instance, relying on their ability to leverage bridging social capital, the civics re-negotiate the meaning of poverty by building bridges between diverse communities (e.g., the general town population, town council,

park management, park residents, community organizations) for the benefit of communal life. As such, they overcome feelings of lack of voice and powerlessness, shifting the meaning of deprivation from a mere distributional disadvantage to a relational disadvantage that they perceive needs to be overcome for the prosperity of the park community.

A third perspective, namely ‘relational perspective’ has been coined by Waxman (1983) and developed further by other researchers to explore these deeply engrained dialectical and dynamic relationships (see, for example, Leisering and Walker 1998; Leisering and Leibfried 1999; Narayan et al. 2000). In his conceptualization of the relational perspective, Waxman derives from Goffman’s (1963) stigma theory and argues that a more complete sociological study of the poor should include not only the description of the behavior of the poor but also the nature of the relationship between the poor and the dominant society. Consistent with the relational approach, my findings reveal multiple stigmatizations experienced by poor consumers in both their daily encounters within the marketplace and their interactions at broader social and cultural arenas (e.g., the healthcare system, school system, workplace, welfare system). Despite previous consumer research literature that explores poverty in relation to solely structural and distributional disadvantages (Andreasen 1975; Alwitt 1995; Alwitt and Donley 1996) or uniquely distinctive cultural value systems similar to the notion of culture of poverty (Hill 2007), I found that poverty, as socially constructed by five clusters of poor consumers, to be more nuanced and complex. My analysis reveals elements from both dominant perspectives but does not restrict poverty to a mere culturalist or structuralist issue. Rather, narratives of the poor in my study encompass different perceptions and social constructions of poverty, containing different structural, cultural, and relational dynamics. The next section explores these nuanced experiences in light of the social stigma literature and relevant poverty research.

## **Social Stigma and the Relational Perspective**

Since Goffman's (1963) work on stigma theory, a profusion of research has explored the sources, nature, and consequences of stigma. As discussed in Chapter, recent work building on and expanding Goffman's theorization emphasizes the dynamic, relational, and socially-constructed nature of stigma (Crocker, Major, and Steele 1998; Dovidio, Major and Crocker 2000). Despite the consensus among stigma theorists about the dynamic and contextual nature of stigma, the social stigma literature is diverse, representing three separate research traditions (Campbell and Deacon 2006). First, there are individualistic approaches to social stigmatization. This research tradition mainly draws on relevant research streams in psychology and social psychology and examines psychological characteristics and attributes of the stigmatized or the stigmatizer. Individualistic explanations pay limited attention to the impact of macro level forces and social inequalities in perpetuating stigmas (see, for example, Herek, Capitano, and Widaman 2002; Levin and van Laar 2006).

The alternative approach to stigma tends to focus on the macro-level dynamics in explicating stigmatization (e.g., gender, race, socio-economic status) [Crandall 2000; Parker and Aggleton 2003]. Such analyses suggest that social stigma is not something that some individuals impose on others but rather is a complex social process linked with power, social dominance, and suppression. However, this view overlooks the psychological dimensions of stigma and individual stigma management practices.

The third trend in stigma literature seeks to bring together individual and macro social analyses and highlights the processes through which the individual and social dynamics are intertwined in the social construction of stigma. An example of this approach is provided by Link and Phelan (2001) who explore stigma in four steps. First, people observe and label differences. Then, the dominant socio-cultural values are used to connect the labeled individuals and groups

to undesirable characteristics (i.e., negative stereotypes). The labeled people are then placed in categories that affirm social and cultural boundaries between the stigmatized and stigmatizing individuals. Finally, the stigmatized people may experience discrimination, separation, and status loss as a result of stigma and unjust power situation and actively use available resources to resist the stigma. Hence, stigma can operate both at the personal and larger socio-cultural and institutional levels (Lister 2004).

In the context of poverty, this third research stream in stigma research is in line with the relational perspective that attempts to explicate poverty with an analysis of the relationships between the poor and the dominant culture. As discussed previously, adhering to neither the individual (cultural) nor the structural views, the relational approach suggests that poverty should be examined through the poor's interaction with the non-poor and the dominant society in order to account for multiple faces of stigmatization and deprivation (Fraser 2000, 2003; O'Connor 2001). The most prominent theorist in the relational tradition on poverty, Waxman (1983), favors both the individual and macro social processes through which social stigmas arise, is shaped, and managed. He writes, "just as the reaction of normals to stigma must be understood "within a language of relationships"...so too must the reactions of the stigmatized individuals be understood within the context of culturally derived techniques of adjustment to situations." (p. 93). As noted previously, this relational view takes into account the impact of both individual (e.g., coping strategies with stigma) and macro social inequalities (e.g., stigmatization based on socio-economic status) in the social construction of stigma. An example of this approach would be the case of the legal system that treats crack usage differently from cocaine usage. While crack usage is associated with Black people, cocaine is believed to be mostly used by Whites. This implicit bias has been codified and reified into an objective (material) legal system that has

real impact. The relational view would take into account both the legal system dynamics and the way Blacks cope with this rigid social structure.

Consistent with the relational theories of poverty and the third research tradition on stigma, this study explores the diverse and negotiated relationships that exist between the park residents and multiple social constituents (e.g., park management, government agencies, community volunteer groups, service encounters). Through this deeper analysis, various perceptions and social construction of poverty are revealed. In this study, of particular concern is the case of the civics. Although they sometimes feel stigmatized, the civics are able to leverage their bridging social capital in an effort to bring different poor and non-poor groups together (e.g., the park community, community volunteer organizations, town representatives). A deeper analysis of the civics' narratives clearly suggest a different conceptualization of poverty as powerlessness and a lack of voice and participation into the social and civic domains of life. The civics use their positive bridging social capital to fight against the social stigmas associated with trailer park living. Whereas for the consumption-oriented aspirers, poverty mainly constitutes the lack of socially necessary goods that would clearly lead to feelings of stigmatization.

### **The Stigma of Poverty**

Because stigma is socially and culturally defined, there is significant variation across cultures about what constitutes stigmatizing. This characteristic of stigmatizing instances particularly holds for the stigma of poverty in a generally affluent society such as the United States. The American culture values economic success, upward mobility, and has moved from a mere aspirations society into a full "achievement society" (Huber 1974, p. 5). Also among the fundamental beliefs that characterize traditional American middle-class values is the prominent Weberian notion of Protestant work ethic. This work ethic is a set of beliefs that emphasize the



moral and social value of work and connects hard work to success. This idea is also consistent with the dominant American ideological belief in a just world, in which people are believed to get what they deserve (Lerner 1980). All of these ideological values support the individual (or cultural) perspectives to poverty that attribute the blame to the individuals and poor communities for their economic and social deprivation. The social stigma of poverty generated through these ideological beliefs is used by some of the non-poor to create a separation between themselves and the poor and reproduce the status quo. As such, stigmatization of the poor serves the function of social stratification and separation of ‘us’ from ‘them’ (Rimstead 1997).

The informants in this study, particularly the civics and the defiant strangers, feel this social separation unmistakably. John says, “the rich for the most part only associate with the rich. They don't associate with people like me, you know, poor people, they do separate themselves.” Jennifer, Sharon, and Nancy all spoke of times they strongly felt mistreated during various marketplace encounters (e.g., hospital, school, workplace, restaurants). At other times, informants felt social stigmas attached to them in more subtle ways. For example, Irene felt “degraded” and “ashamed” when she was interacting with the staff at Social Services. Due to their consumption aspirations and perceived integration into a consumer society, the aspirers do not feel much detached from the dominant society. For the survivor and the hedonic dependent, this social distinction between the rich and the poor is felt yet largely ignored and managed through horizontal (connective) social comparison with like others and subcultural capital.

In his discussion of the various types of stigma, Goffman suggested a widely-used typology of stigmatizing conditions: 1) “abominations of the body” (e.g., physical defects); 2) “blemishes of individual character” (e.g., addiction, mental disorder, unemployment); and 3) the tribal stigmas associated with certain groups (e.g., race, religion, nation). This typology parallels

Waxman's (1983) relational view of poverty in that Waxman argues that the social stigma of poverty is often coupled with multiple other stigmas. For example, within the institutionalized and cultural norms, poor people are assigned multiple labels and, as consumers, they are categorized as "flawed, blemished, and defective consumer manquéés" (Bauman 2005, p. 38). Poverty is also seen as "manifestation of moral defect" (Waxman 1983, p. 83); that is, a blemish of individual character since it is assumed that the poor are generally responsible for their social and economic status as indicated earlier (according to the individual/cultural perspectives). Moreover, poor people are stigmatized and categorized as groups or communities, indicating a tribal-like group stigma as advanced by Goffman (1963). The tribal stigma particularly manifests through the dominant social groups' negative stereotyping of mobile home residents as 'white trash' or 'trailer park trash' (see Chapter Four for an overview of mobile home park literature). All informants in this study are conscious of the tribal stigmas associated with trailer parks. They are aware being labeled as "trash," "lowlife," and "ghetto people." Nevertheless, being aware of the social stigmatization does not necessarily lead to a passive stigmatized identity. In the following section, the various stigma management techniques previously identified in Chapters Five through Nine are conceptually organized.

### **Social Construction and Management of Various Stigmas Associated with Poverty**

Passive Management of Stigmas. Stigma theorists identify and explore a variety of coping strategies employed by the stigmatized individuals. In line with the individualistic approaches to stigmatization, some of these individual psychosocial techniques are considered to be 'passive coping' in dealing with social stigmas (Ruggiero and Taylor 1997; Pinel 1999). These passive strategies include "voluntary avoidance" or "disengagement coping" such as various forms of social comparison, denial, physical and social withdrawal, impression

management, passing as 'normal', and wishful thinking (Goffman 1963; Leary and Kowalski 1990; Miller and Major 2000; Oyserman and Swim 2001; Miller and Kaiser 2001). These passive stigma management strategies are generally targeted to be regulating stressful emotions; this form of coping is also referred to as "emotion-focused coping" (Folkman et al. 1986).

In Chapters Five through Nine, some of the data presented highlight this kind of passive management of stigmatization. For example, the aspirers refuse to internalize the stigma of 'trailer park trash' through downward in-group social comparison with other park residents who do not share the same values of responsibility and respect for neighbors as themselves (Richins 1995). In addition, the aspirers compare the park community to other social groups (i.e., middle class and upper class) when defending the park against negative popular labelings such as trailer parks being 'drug zones.' Likewise, the survivors negotiate the meaning of poverty stigma through horizontal social comparison with similar others in the park (Locke 2003; Klein and Hill 2008). The hedonic dependents physically and mentally disengage themselves from the rest of the park community and form solidarity with other stigmatized members (i.e., other hedonic dependents) in order to manage stigma of deviancy. They rely on their extremely close-knit subcultural social networks (Hodkinson 2002). For the strangers, stigma of poverty is not internalized as they exercise upward comparison and compare their mostly temporary situation with their better past lives and with their goals (e.g., dream homes, safer communities). Finally, the civics actively fight against social stigmas attached to mobile home parks through citizenship projects and advocacy for the park.

Other passive individual techniques such as avoidance, escape, and wishful thinking are utilized by the majority of the informants across five clusters to cope with perceived loss of

status and devaluation, emotional stress, and shame from stigmatization. These practices were discussed previously in Chapters Five through Nine.

Active Management of Stigmas. In contrast with passive individual psychosocial coping techniques focused on managing and negotiating of social stigmas, active strategies seek to change and transform the stigmatizing instances and contexts (Miller and Major 2000). Direct confrontation, seeking information, collective action and resistance against stigmatizing social forces, acquiring cultural capital, and seeking positive social support constitute some of these active strategies (Folkman et al. 1986; Compas et al. 2001; Howarth 2006). These more active and direct strategies are also referred to as “problem-focused coping” as they are utilized to alter the situation and refute stigmatization. Many informants in this study engage in direct confrontation when trying to preserve their social identity and fight against stigmas. Of particular interest is the case of the civics and the defiant strangers who talk back and confront those stigmatizing individuals. For instance, John confronted a car salesman who mistreated him due to his poor clothing and he left the store. Likewise, Irene and Sharon (both defiant strangers) recalled several instances in which they confronted their supervisors at the workplace, teachers at their children’s schools, and even the staff at social services when they felt stigmatized for being poor and ‘different.’ On the other hand, the aspirers who possess a high level of cultural capital, actively resist stigmatizing representations and discourses through reliance on cultural capital. The couple, Tim and Velma, actively educated themselves on Barack Obama’s political campaign and voted for him to resist a race-based and socio-economic stigmatization of Blacks as poor and incompetent people. Amanda utilizes her institutionalized cultural capital (e.g., job training) when fighting against a gender-based stigmatization of women as being incompetent for traditional male dominated careers such as truck driving.

Reliance on cultural capital to re-construct the stigmatizing practices and create anti-stigmatizing discourses is also evident among some civics. John and Nancy, who educated themselves on the mobile home market and rezoning regulations, openly resist the social stigmas associated with mobile home park residents. This active resistance goes so far as to engage the park community in a collective action against the town council that condemns trailer parks. Here, the civics' active leveraging of bridging social capital is of particular concern as this form of social capital is used to bring together the poor and the mostly stigmatizing non-poor (e.g., town representatives, general town community, volunteer social groups).

Other active stigma management practices involve display of consumption goods and consumerist aspirations (the aspirers), emphasizing one's pride and accomplishments (the aspirers, strangers, and civics), and securing bonding social capital (the survivors) and subcultural capital (the hedonic dependents).

Stigma Management in Consumer Research. In consumer research, approach to stigma varies between individual psychological (passive) strategies and more active coping with social stigmas. Consumer research on stigma has highlighted a variety of coping mechanisms. Some notable studies are: active and passive personal, situational, and social coping skills of low-literates (Adkins and Ozanne 2005) as well as their confrontative vs. avoidance-based stigma management (Viswanathan, Rosa, and Harris 2005), active participation of the visually-impaired in the marketplace (Baker 2006), more passive stigma management of the elderly coupon users through status denial and selective concealment (Tepper 1994), and the poor's seeking of community support to fight against a deviant label (Hill and Gaines 2007).

A key difference between my findings and other studies on stigma in consumer research is the exploration of multiple social stigmas among the poor. In other marketing studies on

stigma, there is generally a one-sided approach to stigmatization, that is, a tendency to explore stigma primarily within day-to-day marketplace and shopping encounters (see, for exceptions, Hill and Stephens 1997; Hill 2001; Hill and Gaines 2007). However, exploring stigmatization not only through marketplace encounters but also within the consumers' dialectical relationships with the macro-social structure, reveals more nuanced dynamics that can shed light into the more hidden aspects and dimensions of stigmatization. As discussed previously, mobile home park residents are conscious of multiple different stigmas they have been subjected to, emphasizing a multi-dimensional understanding of stigmas rather than treating the stigma as merely an individual problem. From an individualistic perspective, the poor in this study discuss, manage, or fight back against the stigma of being labeled as 'morally defective' individuals who are responsible for ending up in poverty (Gilliom 2001). From a consumerist perspective, they negotiate and socially construct the meaning of stigmatized as 'flawed and defective consumers' who do not share in the same traditional cultural aspirations of the general society (Bauman 2000, 2005). From a citizenship view, the poor are degraded as 'free riders and welfare abusers,' (Fraser 2002) and they demonstrate they do not fit this negative profile. Furthermore, almost all informants signal that they are aware of tribal or group-based stigmas attached to themselves such as living in a culture of poverty and being labeled as 'trailer trash.' All these multiple co-existing social stigmatas motivate them to manage, negotiate, ignore, or actively fight against these social constructions. Perhaps this is the reason why the poor in my study engage in a wider range of stigma coping practices than informants in other studies on social stigma in consumer research.

Drawing from a relational approach to poverty and stigmatization, my findings suggest that the poor are stigmatized on various dimensions, experience different forms of social

devaluation, and develop a wide range of techniques to manage social stigmas. In making sense of impoverishment and deprivation, the informants employ a variety of stigma management strategies to either manage or transform those ideologies and practices that stigmatize. In addition to some common individual psycho-social techniques (e.g., mental detachment, avoidance, acts of defiance, direct confrontation, and service exist) and reliance on cultural capital, there are distinctive strategies that help negotiate social stigma of poverty. The Aspirers reject the stigma of poverty mainly through downward in-group social comparison, out-group social comparison, and consumption aspirations. The Strangers negotiate stigmas with their capacity to aspire (i.e., poverty as a temporary state and trailer as a transition), downward social comparison, and blame attribution. The Civics take a more direct and active stance and fights stigmas through community development ideas and citizenship projects. The Survivors, who own the stigma of poverty, reconstruct it through horizontal social comparison and bonding social capital. Finally, the Hedonic Dependents ignore social stigmas as they find comfort and support within their subcultural world while sometimes subverting negative identity through defiance or the use of a collective “we.”

In the following chapter, the theoretical implications of this research will be discussed along with implications for public policy makers and marketers. Limitations of the study and suggested future directions for research will also be explored.

## **Chapter Eleven**

### **Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Directions**

This dissertation explored the results of an ethnographic study of mobile home park residents who live in marginal poverty. A key goal of this research was to develop an understanding of the various meanings of poverty from the perspective of the impoverished consumers. The data gathered consisted of in-depth interviews with poor consumers, participant observation of various community events at the research site, field notes, and photographs taken at the site. This chapter highlights the conceptual contributions and implications for marketers and public policy makers. Limitations of the research as well as future research opportunities are also discussed.

#### **Conceptual Contributions**

In this study on poverty, I found five clusters of impoverished consumers that constructed the meaning of poverty, deprivation, stigmatization, and agency in their various relationships with both similar others and multiple social constituents (e.g., the non-poor, marketplace, and broad macro-social structure). This research offers two conceptual contributions. First and foremost, this study demonstrates five distinct social constructions of poverty deriving from five different fragmented social identities adopted by the poor consumers. Even within the same geographical and social setting, there exist various meanings and flavors of poverty, challenging the dominant cultural perspectives (Harrington 1962; Lewis 1970). Moreover, the existence of these multiple co-existing identities within the same bounded context also challenges the traditional Marxist views that treats social classes as homogeneous groupings gathered around the same collective social identity and similar worldviews (Kellner 1989). My study shows that



there are very different ways of coping among the poor, different meanings of living in a trailer park community, and different ways to construct and manage identities among the poor. This fragmented nature of poverty also challenges the traditional stereotypes of the poor as merely surviving, victimized individuals who share a common goal of merely getting by. In this study, most poor consumers were found to be more active and resilient challengers than passive victims of their deprivation, questioning the negative popular social constructions and stereotypes of the poor (Wright 1993; Smith 1990).

Second, the data offer evidence for a multi-faceted, complex, dynamic, relational, and socially constructed nature of poverty (Waxman 1983; Chakravarti 2006). Poverty is not only about economic and material shortage but it also involves a lack of socio culturally perceived necessities. However, traditionally, poverty is treated as merely an economic problem; the poor suffer from material deprivation. Implicit in this approach known as the ‘absolute poverty’ is a one-dimensional deprivation in which individuals lack economic capital to meet their primary material and physical needs (Lister 2004). Consistent with this tradition, much consumer research on poverty focuses on the economic aspects of resource-constrained consumers’ lives while overlooking social, cultural, and motivational dynamics (see, for exceptions, Hill and Stamey 1990; Hill 2001; Hill 2002; Chakravarti 2006). Alternatively, a more multidimensional perspective takes into consideration different types of deprivations and stigmatizations experienced by poor consumers. Here, poverty is not primarily economic and material shortage of resources but it also involves a lack of socio-culturally perceived necessities and social exclusion from meaningful interactions and exchanges (Bauman 2000). It is the lack of “consumer adequacy,” defined as “the continuous availability of a bundle of goods and services

that are necessary for survival as well as the attainment of basic human dignity and self-determination” (Hill 2002, p. 20).

In addition to extending conceptualizations of poverty in consumer research, this study has theoretical implications for the understanding of social stigmatization. Although stigma is a well-researched phenomenon in social psychology and sociology, it is relatively a new concept in consumer research. Furthermore, much consumer research on stigma focuses on individual stigma management practices from a psychological perspective, investigating micro level dynamics (see, for example, Tepper 1994; Baker 2006; Argo and Main 2008). In marketing research, fewer studies take into account the deeply embedded multiple socio-cultural stigmas that permeate particular contexts such as mobile home parks. What makes this context unique for stigma theory is that it is a site where multiple socio-cultural stigmas exist that are deeply embedded (i.e., stigma of poverty, stigma of living in a trailer park, stigma of welfare). This research seeks to fill this gap by exploring multiple social stigmas associated with poor consumers and mobile home park residents. Drawing from Link and Phelan’s (2001) conceptualization of stigma, this research approaches social stigma of poverty as a relational and dynamic process whereby individuals with different levels of agency and macro forces come together. This is consistent with the notion of stigma as a co-created process whereby individual and macro-social constituents interact in an intertwined web of power relations (Waxman 1983). Combining individual-psychological and macro-social research traditions on stigma and exploring multiple co-existing social stigmas within the mobile park community, this research extends our understanding of stigma creation and management.

## **Public Policy Implications**

Poverty is at the center of heated controversial debates within public policy circles. The belief that the United States is mostly a middle class society, where most people with strong work ethics and values will realize their aspirations and goals, still persists despite persistent poverty and socioeconomic class-based stratification (Wright 1993; Jones and Novak 1999). The belief in a just-world coupled with cultural perspectives on poverty dominate conservative and liberal political agendas. Negative stereotypes of the poor as lazy, deviant, promiscuous, and irresponsible freeloaders underlie anti-welfare attitudes and fail to contextualize the reality of the structural factors that perpetuate poverty and inequality. In most welfare circles, “the poor is associated with disorder” and are seen as threats to the ideals of autonomy and self-sufficiency (Smith 1990, p. 212). Moreover, popular social constructions of welfare assistance in the United States suggest that the state is too generous in its social support and help for the poor. However, as stated by Kerbo (1991), “of the sixty-three most industrialized nations in the world, only one nation does not have some form of guaranteed income program for all families in need. That one exception is the United States.” (p. 281). The findings of this study endorse Kerbo’s statement, in that, the poor need more stable social assistance. As expressed by a few informants, state assistance was perceived to be sporadic and unstable. For example, one defiant stranger said she was denied assistance because her husband’s income was exceeding the state limits by \$1 and one survivor said he refused to accept food stamps because he was found to qualify for only \$10. These both instances led the informants to feel degraded and dehumanized and stop seeking for state assistance.

In addition, the poor in this study frequently express their distrust in the governmental assistance programs as they find these programs to be too complicated and bureaucratic (Gilliom 2001). Some informants complained about the complexity of the paperwork that needed to be

completed and they needed assistance. However, they could not ask for help from the Social Services staff due to perceived stigmatization during the encounter. There was also the perception that their privacy was invaded due to the close scrutiny and detailed questions asked at the social assistance offices in the presence of other applicants. Public policy makers should focus attention on methods to overcome these obstacles and facilitate the application process by perhaps simplifying the paperwork, offering assistance during the process, and paying close attention to respect the privacy of the applicants.

Perhaps the largest opportunity for public policy makers involves the issue of affordable housing for low-income individuals (Salins 1987; Goetz 2007). As discussed in Chapter Four, there is an ongoing tension between the growing need for affordable housing amidst the financial crisis in the nation and societal and institutional resistance against mobile home parks. Despite assistance from local governments to promote trailer parks as an affordable form of housing, concerns still arise due to the unconventional appearance, safety, and quality of mobile homes. In order to deal with public concerns about mobile home parks, local governments might consider implementing better design standards and offer more assistance for renovation of mobile home parks. Towards this end, local governments might seek the assistance of community volunteer organizations and other support groups to improve and maintain the parks to make them more desirable places to live. Furthermore, other concerns focus on the depreciation of neighboring property values, leading to a syndrome called 'NIMBY' (Not In My Back Yard Syndrome), causing further tensions between the local governments, mobile home park residents, and middle and upper class populations (Beamish et al. 2001; Bean 2004). Informants in this study frequently expressed their concerns about the town's rezoning plans and the uncertainty of the

park's future. Policies should be implemented at the local and federal levels to secure the existence of much needed mobile home parks.

### **Implications for Marketing Managers**

From a managerial perspective, the poor consumers represent a fairly large market segment with distinct needs and expectations. Recently, multinational corporations have shown an increased interest in the low-income consumer segment, mostly defined as “bottom or base-of-the-pyramid market (Prahalad 2005; Simonian 2006). Past misconceptions of the low-income consumer segment being an unprofitable one due to their limited income are currently under attack (Santos and Laczniak 2009). The findings from this study also challenge this misconception, highlighting the many diverse consumerist aspirations of the poor and their various planning processes to reach these goals. Contrary to popular myths of the poor as passive shoppers, the data reveals the active appropriation of the marketplace by the poor who aspire for some consumer goods while avoiding others that are perceived as unnecessary or unimportant. Moreover, the findings emphasize active and reflexive consumption patterns of some of the informants who create alternative spaces in the marketplace and refuse certain products and retail stores for ideological reasons.

The five different poverty clusters identified and explored in this study might also be helpful as a basis for segmentation device for the marketers. There are distinct shopping behaviors, consumption patterns, and marketplace expectations across these five groups. Although the generalizability of this study can be questioned due to small sample size, the nuances across the five groups can be used as a basis for further developing a segmentation typology of low-income consumers.

The primary managerial implications to deal with active individual coping strategies of the poor when encountered unjust treatment at the marketplace (e.g., retail and service exists) might focus on improved employee training to manage effectively the interactions between these consumers and sales representatives. Given that the poor consumers want to be treated as ‘normal,’ and are very alert to perceived stigmatization, employees could be trained to be more sensitive to these issues (Adkins and Ozanne 2005).

Another implication for marketing managers to consider is the need of impoverished consumers for low-cost products and services. Marketers might consider broadening their retail strategies (e.g., frequent discounts, store coupons) to help those communities in poverty. They might also consider partnering up with community social support groups and non-profits to collect and re-sell second-hand goods at a fairly low price. Engaging in low-income consumer segments through fair sale practices and might not only help win the business of low-income consumers but also contribute to the social responsibility mission of poverty alleviation (Lodge and Wilson 2006).

### **Limitations of the Research**

To meet the primary objectives of the research, a deep exploratory ethnographic inquiry was deemed appropriate. As such, the main limitation of this study concerns the issue of generalizability into other contexts due to the relatively smaller sample size (i.e., other mobile home parks and other poverty populations such as the homeless). However, an in-depth geographically bounded study such as this was needed to better understand the meaning of poverty and deprivation.

Another limitation of this study concerns the gender of the informants. While the number of informants interviewed was relatively larger in comparison with similar studies, the

interviewees were largely female. The main reason for this is that most men of the park were acting as the main breadwinners of their households and were unavailable to meet for the interview due to their busy schedules.<sup>26</sup> However, most women I interviewed expressed their concerns in a way to represent their own household and familial deprivations rather than limiting the discussions to merely personal deprivations. Moreover, as discussed before, poverty affects more women and children than men in the United States. Given the larger economic and social threats women in poverty are facing in comparison to men, this limitation is probably not a serious problem.

### **Future Research Directions**

This study has offered several insights into future research avenues. First, it is important to explore the relevance and applicability of the five different social constructions of poverty framework across various populations. Thus, one possible future research path may involve exploring the meaning and perception of poverty among other poverty populations such as the urban poor, immigrant poor, and the homeless. Specifically, how do the urban poor construct the meaning of poverty and what are the multiple deprivations they are facing? Is the meaning and management of poverty the same for the immigrant poor as with the American consumers in this study? How do the homeless cope with poverty; do they aspire like the marginal poor in this study or do they simply survive? It would also be worthy of exploring the applicability of the poverty framework developed through this research across geographical regions, spanning into other mobile home parks.

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<sup>26</sup> Despite this fact, the key informant of this study was a man (a civic) who agreed to be interviewed three times.

Another future study could explore the typology of coping and resistance strategies and the range of resources identified through this research across other vulnerable populations. Such future studies could specifically examine the physically handicapped, the elderly, or other minority groups and examine their passive and active coping practices when managing various vulnerabilities and social stigmas.

Three future studies could be planned among the marginal poor interviewed for this dissertation. First, social construction of health and illness was a frequently emerging disadvantage across the five poverty clusters. One future study might focus on exploring the meaning of health and illness for the impoverished consumers. Second, a participatory action research study could be planned in this community to examine how agency might be increased and leveraged among the poor. Participatory action research is a transformative and democratic approach whereby researchers and informants work together to explore community problems and generate practical knowledge (Ozanne and Saatcioglu 2008). Using creative participatory techniques such as consciousness-raising methods (e.g., Photovoice, diaries to reflect on experiences and meaning-makings) and societal-change methods (e.g., participatory drama), one such study could explore and identify community problems, community assets and resources, and present the findings to multiple stakeholders in order to raise awareness and explore practical solutions (e.g., local town council, park management). Finally, another study could specifically examine the meaning of risk, danger, and threat in relation to personal and communal well-being across the five poverty clusters. Informants in this study differed on their perceptions of illegal activities taking place at the park and it might prove fruitful to pursue this avenue further.



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**APPENDIX A**  
**Gatekeeper Contacts**

<b>Contact</b>	<b>Comments and Leads</b>	<b>Resulting Interviews</b>
Laura Volunteer tutor (educational classes for park's children)	Educated me on the community children's problems and gave information on demographic profile of the park; introduced me to other volunteers; invited me to attend tutoring sessions	3 gatekeeper interviews
Crystal Volunteer tutor (educational classes for park's children)	Educated me on the community's issues and invited me to community picnics; introduced me to other volunteers	1 gatekeeper interview
Bill Volunteer tutor (educational classes for park's children and young adults)	Educated me on the community's issues and invited me to community picnics	
Meredith Volunteer tutor (educational classes for park's children and young adults)	Introduced me to my first two informants and gave me a list of contacts	4 informant interviews
Sean Minister (responsible for educational and religious activities offered to park residents)	Explained the volunteer organization's mission and various services offered; gave me a couple of leads	1 informant interview
Alvin Park manager	Explained the park's background, infrastructure and communal problems; detailed overview of future plans; introduced me to a few informants and gave me a list of possible contacts	5 informant interviews



**APPENDIX B**  
**The Profile of the Aspirers**

	Age	Present/Past Employment	Background in the Park Recent <5 yrs Long term 10-20 yrs	Housing and Marital Status	Overview of Vulnerabilities	Overview of Resources/Capitals	Poverty Profile
Tim	50s	-disability -government job custodial work	5-10 years	-rents -lives with wife Velma and son	-past alcohol addiction -minor physical health problems	-economic (disability assistance, food stamps) -social (family and friends) -cultural (job training, self-education through books)	Aspirer
Velma	30s	-food services -N/A	5-10 years	see above	-major physical and minor mental health problems -prescription drug abuse	-economic (steady income) -social (family and friends, drug therapy classes) -cultural (job training)	Aspirer
Mary	40s	-disability -telemarketing, waitressing, food services, manufacturer line work	Recent	-husband owns the trailer -lives with husband	-mental health problem -past drug and alcohol addiction -sexual abuse as a child	-economic (disability assistance, income from husband) -social (family and friends) -cultural (arts and crafts)	Aspirer
Janice	40s	-nursing & cook -N/A	Long term	-owns (still paying) -single and lives with pet dog	-past cocaine addiction -sexual and physical abuse as a child -lack of trust in men	-economic (steady income, savings) -social (friends, ex partner, coworkers) -cultural (job training, artistic skills)	Aspirer
Amanda	40s	-truck driving -telemarketing, cashier, government job	Long term	-owns -single and lives with her pets	-past alcohol addiction -rejection and lack of love from family due to her gay lifestyle and past addiction -past criminal charges	-economic (steady income, savings) -social (friends at the park, addict groups, therapy) -cultural (job training, self-education through books, manual skills)	Aspirer
Tina	50s	-disability -nursing, owned her own cleaning company	Long term	-owns -single and lives with her two grandchildren whom she has the custody	-major health challenges due to tobacco addiction -perceived loneliness and lack of love from her daughter -physical and sexual abuse as a teenager	-economic (disability assistance, TANIF, food stamps, SSI) -social (grandkids, friends, a few family members, volunteer organizations) -cultural (job training, doll and old coins collection)	Aspirer
Whitney	30s	-not employed -N/A	Recent	-owns (still paying) -lives with boyfriend and her 4 children	-N/A	-economic (food stamps, TANIF, income from boyfriend) -social (family, friends, community organizations) -cultural (lab technician training)	Aspirer

**APPENDIX C**  
**The Profile of the Strangers**

	<b>Age</b>	<b>Present/Past Employment</b>	<b>Background in the Park</b>	<b>Housing and Marital Status</b>	<b>Overview of Vulnerabilities</b>	<b>Overview of Resources/Capitals</b>	<b>Poverty Profile</b>
Emily	50s	-disability yet home-based business (e.g., making pocketbooks and selling them, doing paperwork for people) -	5-10 years	-rents -saving enough money to build a log cabin and move out of the park -lives with boyfriend	-physical disability	-economic (disability assistance, income from home-based business, boyfriend's income) -social (family and friends, people met online and at vacation cruises) -cultural (job training, artistic skills, knowledge of antiques, reading about different cultures and exotic places)	Hopeful Stranger
Matt	30s	-disability -manufacturing, nursing, online stock trading (home-based business), private detector	5-10 years	-rents -saving money to pay their land and move the trailer on it -married to Samantha and they live with their 3 children	-mental health problems (e.g., bi-polar disorder)	-economic (disability assistance, wife's income) -social (family and a couple of neighbors) -cultural (job training, self-education through books, knowledge about national health care and politics, knowledge acquired through variety of hobbies)	Hopeful Stranger
Samantha	30s	-retail store manager -N/A	5-10 years	same as above	-head of household and too many responsibilities -emotional stress	-economic (steady income, food stamps) -social (family mainly) -cultural (job training)	Hopeful Stranger
Irene	50s	-disability -machine operating, dishwashing and cooking	Recent (lives with her daughter Sharon and her family since she has been disabled and jobless)	see left column	-physical disability -extreme financial deprivation since she could not qualify for workers compensation	-economic (Pell Grant for community college education) -social (family and friends) -cultural (ongoing community college education, job training, knowledge about welfare system and workers' rights)	Defiant Stranger
Sharon	30s	-stay-at-home mother -janitorial work	Recent	-rents -married and lives with husband and two kids	-perceived severe economic deprivation	-economic (husband's income as a forklift operator, very beginner level home business making and selling photo albums and recipe cookbooks) -social (family, one friend at the park, community resources for the kids) -cultural (community college training)	Defiant Stranger

**APPENDIX D**  
**The Profile of the Civics**

	Age	Present/Past Employment	Background in the Park	Housing and Marital Status	Overview of Vulnerabilities	Overview of Resources/Capitals	Poverty Profile
Jennifer	40s	-disability -fastfood chain store management, entrepreneurship (arts and crafts business)	Recent	-rents -married and lives with husband and children	-physical health problems (e.g., diabetes) perceived extreme financial deprivation due to husband's inability to work -physically abusive relationship in the past	-economic (disability assistance) -social (family, community resources available to park residents) -cultural (artistic skills)	Civic
Nancy	30s	-works for park management -merchandising (supervisory position), secretarial work	-Recent	-rents -lives with boyfriend and her kids	N/A	-economic (joint income in the household) -social (family, friends, park management) -cultural (some community college training, self-education through books, knowledge of mobile home market)	Civic
David	40s	-works for park management -maintenance positions, manual jobs	-Long term	-owns (still paying) -lives with girlfriend	-N/A	-economic (steady income) -social (girlfriend, family, park management) -cultural (job training)	Civic
John	40s	-disability -food services, store management, entrepreneurship (e.g., bar owner)	Long term	-owns -used to live with his fiancé and her son but now lives alone	-physical health challenges	-economic (disability assistance) -social (family, friends, neighbors, community organizations, other social institutions) -cultural (some community college training, job training, extensive knowledge of mobile home market, town zoning regulations, and community development issues, artistic and manual skills)	Civic

**APPENDIX E**  
**The Profile of the Survivors**

	Age	Present/Past Employment	Background in the Park	Housing and Marital Status	Overview of Vulnerabilities	Overview of Resources/Capitals	Poverty Profile
Wanda	50s	-disability -never worked before	Long term	see above	-physically abusive relationship in the past -stigma of being low literate	-economic (disability assistance) -social (boyfriend, neighbors and park residents, community resources) -cultural (self-training to improve reading and writing skills)	Survivor
Robert	80s	-disability and SSI -manual work such as construction, plumbing	5-10 years	-rents (lives in a trailer that belongs to his son) -lives alone	-physical health challenges -old age -past alcoholism addiction	-economic (disability and SSI assistance) -social (one family member, neighbors) -cultural (job training)	Survivor
Melissa	20s	-cashier position at fast food chain -dishwashing, food services	Long term	-rents -lives with her children	-mental health problems (e.g., bi-polar disorder) -being a mother at a very young age and resulting stress	-economic (welfare assistance) -social (family, friends, community and government resources, counseling) -cultural (job training)	Survivor
Lucie	50s	-two jobs presently: janitorial and day care -various janitorial jobs	long term	-owns (still paying) -single and lives with children	-perceived extreme financial deprivation due to being single head of the household (one son is bi-polar and the other does not make enough money) -mental and physical health problems (e.g., bi-polar disorder and severe depression, high blood pressure) -physically demanding working conditions -haunted by her past felony charges for causing the death of a child while driving	-economic (income) -social (family, community resources available to park residents, counseling) -cultural (job training, decorative angel figurines collection)	Survivor
Mike	60s	-disability -manual work (e.g., construction)	Long term	-owns -lives with girlfriend Wanda	-physical health problems (e.g., diabetes, high blood pressure, had two heart attacks)	-economic (disability assistance) -social (girlfriend, neighbors and park residents, community resources) -cultural (job training, artistic skills)	Survivor

**APPENDIX F**  
**The Profile of the Hedonic Dependents**

	<b>Age</b>	<b>Present/Past Employment</b>	<b>Background in the Park</b>	<b>Housing and Marital Status</b>	<b>Overview of Vulnerabilities</b>	<b>Overview of Resources/Capitals</b>	<b>Poverty Profile</b>
Emma	30s	-cashier position at gas station -a variety of jobs in the past: strip dancing, waitressing, cleaning, cashier jobs at food chains, babysitting	5-10 years	-rents (her boyfriend) -lives with boyfriend and sometimes her children whom her mother has custody	-past illicit drug addiction and current occasional prescription drug abuse -severe financial disadvantages (e.g., owes the state \$10,000 for child support, no health insurance) -criminal background -broken familial relationships and having lost the custody of all her children due to drug addiction	-economic (dual income household) -social (boyfriend, friends, community resources) -cultural (job training)	Hedonic Dependent
Anita	40s	-unemployed -janitorial work, substitute teaching, bus aid	5-10 years	-rents -lives with two sons	-ongoing prescription drug abuse -extreme financial deprivation -mental health problems (e.g., severe depression) -perceived unjust treatment from park management	-economic (government assistance: TANIF, food stamps) -social (family, friends) -cultural (job training)	Hedonic Dependent
Deborah	40s	-cashier job at convenience store -janitorial jobs, retailing	5-10 years	-rents -lives with husband (Josh), her son, son's girlfriend and grandchild	-financial deprivation due to husband's felony charges and incarceration -health problems -haunted by tragic past events (e.g., ex-fiancé committed suicide at home)	-economic (her income and her son's income) -social (boyfriend, family, friends) -cultural (job training)	Hedonic Dependent
Josh	40s	-unemployed -janitorial jobs	Long term	see above	-financial deprivation (e.g., unable to secure jobs with criminal background) -	-economic (wife's income) -social (family, friends) -cultural (job training)	Hedonic Dependent

## APPENDIX G

### Interview Protocol for the Gatekeepers

#### Introduction and rapport building

I am talking to people like yourself who do work at XXX trailer park so I can educate myself about the residents and learn about the trailer park for a study I am doing on living in a mobile home park.

#### Involvement with the Community

Tell me about your work at the XXX trailer park.

*(Probes: How long have you been working there? What is the nature of your work? What do you like the best/least about your work for the XX trailer park? Do you have any memorable stories about your work?)*

Tell me about your relationships with the park residents.

*(Probes: Do you know many people in the park? Have you established close relationships with some of the park residents? Can you share an interesting story?)*

What is the most important thing you have learned while working at the XXX trailer park?

#### Perspectives of the Community

Can you share some general information about the park residents?

*(Probes: Are they mostly owners or renters? Are there mostly families or is it a mix of household type (e.g., retired couples, families, single people, young couples, students)? What type of jobs do they usually hold?)*

Tell me about your perspectives of the community here.

*(Probes: Are there more good feelings or bad feelings about the park? Do people help each other out or more stay to themselves? Do you know of any projects where residents have worked together? Or do you know any issues in which conflicts or disagreements have come up? Can you tell me about this?)*

#### Advice

Is there anyone else that you think I should talk to who might have additional insights about the community?

My plan is to interview resident about their homes and experiences living in the park? Is there anyone who lives in the park that you think I should talk to?

*(Probes: How do park residents view outsiders? Do you have any advice on how I should approach people to encourage participation?)*

Is there anything else you think I should know? THANK YOU!!!

## APPENDIX H

### Interview Protocol for the Informants (Park Residents)

#### Introduction and rapport building

I am talking to people to find out about their life here at (the name of the trailer park) and their relationships with the community and their homes.

I would like to begin by asking you to tell me a little bit about yourself. I will go first. I am from Turkey but I really like living in the United States. I am a student at Virginia Tech and I am hoping to finish my studies within the next two years.

Would you mind telling me a little about yourself?

*(Probes: When you meet someone new, what do you think is important for people to know about you? How would you describe yourself to someone that does not know you?)*

#### Social Capital

Do you live here with your family? Tell me about your family.

Who are the most important people in your life?

*(Probes: If you ever need someone to help you out, who do you turn to? Who turns to you when they need help? Can you tell me about a recent time that you helped someone or they helped you?)*

#### Economic Capital

Can you tell me about where you work?

*(Probes: How long have you worked there? What is it like working there? What do you like best and worst about your job?)*

#### Community

Tell me about XXX trailer park and your life here. What does the park mean to you?

*(Probes: How long have you lived here? What do you like best and least about the park and living here? Who are you close to in the park? Do people help each other out or more stay to themselves? Can you share a recent story? Are there more good feelings or bad feelings in the park?)*

How would you describe your relationship with the park management and the owner?

How do people get along with the manager and the owner?

*(Probes: What are the good rules and what are the bad rules? Have you had any disagreement or conflict? How did you handle that?)*

What would make you move from here? Where would you live instead?

#### Home

Tell me about your home. Do you own or rent? Can you tell me the story of how you came to buy/rent your home?

What does “home” mean to you? How is it like living in a mobile home?

Are you satisfied with your home? Can you compare and contrast your present home with the last place you lived?

*(Probes: What do you like best and least about your home? What would you change or keep the same if you were to do it all over again? Do you have any home projects (inside or outside) that you are working on? Describe to me your ideal home and compare that to your current home.)*

How do you manage and share space with your family around the house? Are there any family rules on sharing the space?

### **Cultural Capital**

Do you have any special skills that you use in taking care of your home? (gardening, fixing, cooking, decorating...)

*(Probes: Tell me about this skill. How did you acquire this skill? Compare yourself to others who do -----. Are you more inventive? Do you have friends who also engage in ----. Do you get together and do -----?)*

### **Coping Behaviors**

Think about the last month; tell me about how you juggle the rent, the food bills, the electricity, and all the other bills that have to get paid?

*(Probes: When you think of the ways you get by, which ones are you most proud of? Which ones aren't working or are making you frustrated? How do you stretch your money to make ends meet? Do you have any tricks you use?)*

What are some of the favorite and least favorite things you have bought recently?

*(Probes: Have you bought anything recently for your home or yard? For family members?)*

What is your favorite/least favorite place to shop?

*(Probes: Tell me about a recent experience shopping at your favorite and least favorite stores. What makes you most happy when you shop? What makes you most angry when you shop?)*

### **Collective Behaviors**

Are you a member of any group that meets regularly, such as a church, parent's group, a social group, or political organization? Is this related to the community here?

*(Probes: When did you get involved? What do you do for this organization? Do you work on any special projects? What have you learned? Compare yourself before and after your involvement with this organization or cause.)*



Is there anything else you would like to add? Do you know of anyone else who you think I can speak with? THANK YOU!!!

## APPENDIX I

### IRB Informed Consent Form for the Gatekeepers

#### Virginia Tech Department of Marketing Informed Consent Form

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#### **Project Title: The Meaning of Home Among Mobile Home Residents**

#### **Background information**

My name is Bige Saatcioglu and I am a student at Virginia Tech. I got your name from \_\_\_\_\_ (the name of the contact) because I want to talk to people who work with people at XXX trailer park. I want to talk to you about your involvement at the XXX trailer park in general and your perspectives of the community.

#### **Procedures for Project**

So let me start by saying thank you so much for agreeing to help me. Before we begin, I want to tell you your rights as a participant in this project. I have some general questions to start out with but I am mostly interested in your thoughts and stories. The interview usually takes less than 30 minutes.

- ◆ You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer.
- ◆ You may stop the interview at any time.
- ◆ I may quote you in my paper, but your name will not appear anywhere in the paper.

I will be taking notes during our conversation so I can remember what was said.

I want to protect people who help me in my study so I have had this project reviewed and approved by the administrators at Virginia Tech.

#### **Your Permission**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, understand that Bige Saatcioglu will use interview data to write her dissertation. While I may be quoted, my identity will be kept confidential. Bige has explained the project to me and has answered my questions. I agree to talk with her and let her take notes during our conversation.

A copy of this form has been given to me to keep. If I have any questions in the future about this project I can contact Dr. Julie Ozanne at 540-953-3994 or at the addresses listed below.

Office: 2021 Pamplin Hall (0236)  
Virginia Tech  
Blacksburg, VA 24061  
jozanne@vt.edu

**Participant's Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

**Researchers' Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX J**

**IRB Informed Consent Form for the Informants (Park Residents)**

**Virginia Tech Department of Marketing  
Informed Consent Form**

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**Project Title: The Meaning of Home Among Mobile Home Residents**

**Background information**

My name is Bige Saatcioglu and I am a graduate student at Virginia Tech. I got your name from \_\_\_\_\_ (the name of the contact from the social change organization) because I want to talk to people who live in this community. I want to talk to you about your life at the \_\_\_\_\_ (the name of the trailer park) in general and your consumption experiences around your home.

**Procedures for Project**

So let me start by saying thank you so much for agreeing to help me. Before we begin, I want to tell you your rights as a participant in this project. I have some general questions to start out with but I am mostly interested in your thoughts and stories. The interview usually takes about 1 hour.

- ◆ You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer.
- ◆ You may stop the interview at any time.
- ◆ I may quote you in my paper, but your name will not appear anywhere in the paper.
- ◆ I want to give you \$20 as a small way of thanking you for your time, which you can use for anything you want. I can also share a final copy of the research report if you are interested. (If you refuse the money, may we make a donation to the cause in your name?)

I will be recording our conversation so I can remember what was said. I will assign you a fake name and keep your quotes separate from any information that might identify you. I will keep the tape until it is transcribed, at which point it will be given to the transcriber, and then given back to me immediately upon completion of the transcribing. The tapes will be secured in my office and I will be the only one with access to them. The tapes will never be used as part of the presentation of data and people reading my research paper will not know your identity.

I want to protect people who help me in my study so I have had this project reviewed and approved by the administrators at Virginia Tech.

**Your Permission**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, understand that Bige Saatcioglu will use interview data to write her dissertation. While I may be quoted, my identity will be kept confidential. Bige has explained the project to me and has answered my questions. I agree to talk with her and let her tape record our conversation.

A copy of this form has been given to me to keep. If I have any questions in the future about this project I can contact Dr. Julie Ozanne at 540-953-3994 or at the addresses listed below.

Office: 2021 Pamplin Hall (0236)  
Virginia Tech  
Blacksburg, VA 24061  
jozanne@vt.edu

**Participant's Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

**Researchers' Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_