"Keeping Our Heads above Water"
Rethinking Need and Participation in Public Anti-poverty Programs

by

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"I don't want more than what I'm supposed to get. I just want to keep above. I just want to keep my head above water so I'm not drowning. That's it." (Hannah)

To Chris & Malcolm,

without whom this work – and my life – would surely be incomplete.

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ABSTRACT

U.S. policy addresses poverty through more than a dozen independent programs, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), yet research has long noted that many eligible households do not claim benefits. This study explores how people make choices regarding participation in public anti-poverty programs.

Drawing on previous life experiences, future expectations, and comparisons to others, people construct their own "interpretations of need" -- complex narratives, describing not only the material resources necessary for survival but also less tangible resources (time, relationships, etc.) that enable people to think of themselves as good parents, community members, and contributors to society. Yet while distinctly individual, nearly all of these interpretations ultimately conform to the U.S.'s hegemonic poverty discourse, which connects poverty to concepts of personal responsibility, hard work, and a patriarchal moral code. People also recognize that accepting the help of programs requires the acceptance of stigma, which, while symbolic, produces real consequences for daily life (poor treatment by public program administrators and society at large, the need to consciously "manage" or hide one's participation in programs, and changes in self-perception).

This study proposes a new approach to measuring participation through the use of "participation profiles." This approach characterizes program use over time using the following five choice categories: using programs 1) as a regular source of income; 2) in a crisis; 3) as a long-term supplement to earned income; 4) for the benefit of children; and 5) as transitional support. Conceptualizing participation through profiles enables us to create new measures – both qualitative and quantitative – for future research.

The research presented here is based on in-depth interviews with 75 heads of low-income households who represent diversity in terms of race/ethnicity, education level, income (ranging from less than $250 to more than $3,000 per month), and engagement with public anti-poverty programs. Initial respondents were recruited through Head Start programs in four distinct communities in southeast Michigan, with additional respondents who were not using Head Start accessed through snowball sampling. Each individual was interviewed twice, and analysis was conducted using interpretive methodologies.

CHAPTER ONE:
Introduction

On a day in early June that feels more like the dead of summer - heavy with heat - I leave my air conditioned car to join Tamara on the front steps of her mother's modest home. The windows of the house next door are covered with plywood, and across the street, two men stand on the sidewalk smoking cigarettes and laughing loudly. We are just a few houses in from the corner, where Tamara's street meets a major artery, and the sounds of traffic rumble and honk their way past. Three small children play in the yard, and Tamara is quick to point out that only one of them – a three-year-old girl – is hers and that she and her daughter are only living here temporarily, "because of finances."

Tamara is quiet but polite; she answers questions sparingly, rarely making eye contact with me as she explains how she has gotten to this point in her life, making less than $500 a month at a part-time job and somehow managing to provide for herself and her daughter on that income. Back in September, Tamara saw an ad on t.v. for a local Head Start program and called to enroll her daughter, who had just turned three. At the time, Tamara was working full-time, making closer to $1,000 a month, and living in a small apartment across town. The Head Start program only had openings in their half-day program, and Tamara was unable to arrange transportation and additional childcare that would allow her to maintain her current work schedule and get her daughter back and forth to the program. Still, she viewed Head Start as providing "preparation for kindergarten, like pre-school," and wanted her daughter to participate, so she made a difficult choice: she cut her hours back to part-time "for [her daughter] to go to school."

With her monthly income cut in half, Tamara could no longer afford the rent on her apartment, so she and her daughter moved in with Tamara's mother. The Head Start program has recently told her that there is an opening available in their full-day program starting in the fall, and Tamara is looking forward to getting back to full-time work and moving out of her mother's house. For now, she tells me, she gives her mother "some money for rent, and she helps me out with some things if I really need it, but not on a regular basis." For the most part, Tamara feels like she is able to meet basic needs and views her situation as temporary. "I know that it won't last forever," she says. "I'm looking for a second job and trying to get better hours at my job now."

Based on her income and family size, Tamara qualifies for assistance from several public anti-poverty programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP – commonly known as "food stamps"), the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and Medicaid. She could also potentially receive a Section 8 voucher to pay for an apartment for herself and her daughter, although lengthy waiting lists would likely keep her from getting this help right away.[1] When I ask Tamara about getting this kind of assistance, she says, "I'm eligible for everything, I think, but I'd rather work to support my child the best way I can. I don't want government help."

Tamara is 24-years-old, and an objective look at her life reveals experiences and choices that are not in line with the values espoused by what I will refer to as the U.S.'s hegemonic

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[1] According to the website of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), "Since the demand for housing assistance often exceeds the limited resources available to HUD and the local housing agencies, long waiting periods are common. In fact, a PHA may close its waiting list when it has more families on the list than can be assisted in the near future." At the time of this writing, the Section 8 waiting lists in Detroit and all of the surrounding cities/towns in which my respondents lived were closed indefinitely, with websites posting notices that read, for example, "DHC's Wait Lists are currently CLOSED. DHC is not accepting applications for housing assistance at this time…We do not anticipate re-opening any Wait Lists in the near future." (Detroit Housing Commission, www.dhcmi.org).

poverty discourse. She had a baby, without a husband or long-term partner, when she was twenty. She finished high school but left college after only one year. She was raised by a single mother who struggled financially, and Tamara has likewise struggled, particularly since the birth of her daughter. When she was pregnant, Tamara got help from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), SNAP, and Medicaid, which might indicate, to some, that she was "living off the government" and thereby failing to abide by traditional American values of individual responsibility and self-sufficiency.

Listening to Tamara's own narrative, however, it becomes apparent that her choices are the results of complex circumstances, thoughts about need that arise out of life experiences and future expectations, and perceptions of the kind of help different programs have to offer – all of which have changed over time, as Tamara's life situation itself has changed. Growing up, she says, "my mom always kept a job. She's a nurse, and she always worked. I always remember her working. She did everything herself." After graduating from high school, Tamara moved out on her own and worked while attending her first year of college. She lost her job soon after discovering that she was pregnant and, without any source of income, left school and moved back to mother's house. About the choice she made at that time to apply for assistance from public anti-poverty programs, Tamara says, "[My mother] didn't want me to get it. It was my decision."

Tamara stayed on "government help" for four months. She describes the experience as "degrading. People look at you down. Not people out here, but the people who work for the places, who work for the government…The workers are just rude." While she does say that she had one caseworker who helped her find a job ("[she] actually sat down with me and went step by step on bettering myself, what I needed to do for interviews and jobs"), overall she says that

she "wanted to get off things as quickly as possible," because her experiences were overwhelmingly negative.

Of her daughter's Head Start program – which might also be considered a public anti-poverty program – however, Tamara has only positive things to say. She remembers having to bring in "a lot of paperworks" when she first enrolled her daughter in the program but describes the staff as "very helpful" during that process. Her daughter's teachers have also been "very good. They are very helpful in any way they can be, giving me resources, like financial and medical help."

Understanding the choices that Tamara makes (and has made) in order to provide the life she wants for her daughter requires looking at more than her objective circumstances (i.e. how much money she makes, where she lives, and which programs – both governmental and nongovernmental – she is using). If we only knew these aspects of her life – the ones that could be measured with closed-ended survey questions - we would likely make assumptions that do not match up with Tamara's own interpretation of her experiences and choices. Such assumptions, particularly when made about large numbers of people based on limited information, might lead us to design and implement public anti-poverty programs in ways that meet objective needs and attempt to improve people's lives (based on policy makers' and service providers' perspectives of what makes a "good life") while at the same time failing to provide families living in or near poverty with what *they* think they need.

Not everyone in Tamara's situation (or in situations that look very much like Tamara's from an outside perspective) makes the same choices when it comes to participating in public anti-poverty programs. Some use almost every program for which they are eligible; others choose to participate in some programs but not others; still others try to avoid public assistance

programs at all costs. Even among those who do use programs, many use them only temporarily, during some points in their lives but not others, and many use them in conjunction with full-time or part-time employment, seeking to supplement wages that are inadequate to meet their families' needs. People's choices are different – even when their situations might appear to be the same – because they think differently about need and about what various public anti-poverty programs offer to meet need. What it is to "need help" means something different to one person than it does to another, and a program that one person thinks will provide the help she needs can look like a waste of time and energy to another. If we want to understand how well the anti-poverty policies we have in place are functioning (and what that means), we need to start by gaining a better understanding of how those who are eligible (or near eligible) to receive help through these policies perceive them and how they make choices regarding whether or not to use public anti-poverty programs (*all* programs or *any* programs).

The idea that not everyone who is eligible for assistance from public anti-poverty programs actually receives it is not a new one. Social science and social policy research has long noted a discrepancy between the number of Americans eligible for participation in these programs and the number that participates, such that millions of individuals who are income eligible for assistance do not receive it (Burman & Kobes, 2003; Cunnyngham & Castner, 2009; Dubay et al, 2007; Kenney & Cook, 2007; Maynard & Dollins, 2002; Parrott & Sherman, 2006; Scholz, 1994; Wolkwitz, 2008). Depending on the program considered and the estimation procedures used, participation rates vary from as low as 29% to as high as 88% of eligible individuals and families (Kenney & Cook, 2007; Maynard & Dollins, 2002). Scholars have examined this phenomenon from a variety of angles, considering the relationship between

participation and individual or household level characteristics, such as race, education level, or the number and ages of children in the home; the impact of particular program features, such as benefit levels or application and recertification requirements, on participation; and the possibility that some individuals may avoid participation because of the social stigma associated with receiving assistance. While research into these factors has provided valuable insight into possible reasons for participation and nonparticipation, significant gaps in our understanding of this topic remain.

Relationship to the current literature

The bulk of existing research on participation and nonparticipation in public anti-poverty programs relies on data from large national surveys to assess reasons for nonparticipation in particular programs. Using dichotomous, point-in-time, and program-specific measures of participation, these studies tend to focus on individual factors in the participation decision. In other words, they ask whether or not a person is participating in a specific program (SNAP, for example) at one point in time (at the time of the survey, in the past month, etc.) and, if not, what role one particular variable (race/ethnicity, knowledge of eligibility, or awareness of stigma, to name but a few) plays in that reality. The result of such research is that we have some insight into isolated factors affecting participation but little understanding of how such factors relate to one another or how (rather than simply *whether*) they impact the choices people make. These studies do give us a starting point for understanding such choices, however, and it is thus important to highlight their findings, described here in five major categories: 1) household characteristics, 2) knowledge of programs and eligibility, 3) policy design, 4) policy implementation, and 5) stigma.

Household characteristics

Researchers have considered two types of household characteristics in relation to participation in public anti-poverty programs: 1) "static" characteristics such as the race and gender of the household head and 2) characteristics that may change over time, including age, marital status, the number and ages of children in the household, the health status of various household members, the educational background and employment status of the household head, and household income. Because they generally consider participation at only one point in time, however, even studies exploring these more dynamic characteristics tend to do so in a static way.

The vast majority of studies in this area demonstrate the ways in which different household characteristics correlate with participation but leave causal mechanisms undetermined, providing information about which subpopulations are more or less likely to participate but failing to draw conclusions about why this is. For example, Scholz (1994) and Caputo (2006) present evidence that individual characteristics such as age, education, and gender are correlated with participation in the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), with younger people, those with less education, and women being more likely to participate. Similarly, studies by Heckman and Smith (2004) and Gowan and Nassar-McMillan (2001) have found that demographic factors such as race, age, and education are related to participation in job training and placement programs, with African Americans, younger people, and those with between ten and fifteen years of education being more likely to participate. Other studies have concluded that demographic characteristics, including race, age, education, employment status, the number and age of children in a household, and the health status of household members, impact participation in a range of anti-poverty programs, including SNAP, TANF, and Medicaid (for examples, see Avruch et al, 1998; Bartlett, Burstein & Hamilton, 2004; Blank & Ruggles, 1996; Burstein et al, 2009; Coe, 1983; Davidoff et al, 2000; Dubay, Kenney & Haley 2002; Fuller-Thomson & Redmond, 2008;

Kincheloe, Frates & Brown, 2007; Zedlewski, 2002). The specific results of these studies have varied depending on the program explored and the data and methods employed, but almost none have explained (or attempted to explain) the reasons behind their findings.

While my goal here is not to determine the specific causal mechanisms involved in the relationship between particular household characteristics and participation, exploring participation choices in more depth, from the perspective of the people making those choices, allows for a much more nuanced understanding of these relationships. For example, studies of Medicaid/SCHIP, SNAP, and TANF have all found that eligible households with more income and working parents are less likely than their counterparts to participate (Avruch, 1998; Bartlett, Burstein & Hamilton, 2004; Burstein et al, 2009; Cody et al, 2008; Coe, 1983; Davidoff et al, 2000; Farrell et al, 2003; George et al, 2004; Ponza et al, 1999; Rank & Hirschl, 1993; Teitler, Reichman, & Nepomnyaschy, 2007; Zedlewski, 2002), but very few have attempted to determine why this is the case. Listening to the narratives used by my respondents, it becomes apparent that how people think about their families' need and about what programs like Medicaid, SNAP, and TANF offer to meet that need is related not only to their current income and employment status but also to past experiences, future expectations, and comparisons to others, all of which interact in the context of a societal discourse that values hard work and self-sufficiency to the utmost degree. Understanding how individuals balance their own efforts to live by such values against the needs of their families might help us to make sense of these findings regarding program participation and employment/income.

Knowledge of programs and eligibility

In addition to demographic characteristics, a number of studies have found that lack of information or misperceptions about programs and, more specifically, their eligibility

requirements have a negative impact on participation. Coe (1983), for example, concluded that "poor information concerning eligibility status is the prime reason for non-participation" (1051) in the Food Stamp Program (now SNAP). More recent studies have come to similar conclusions regarding this program (Bartlett, Burstein & Hamilton 2004), as well as other programs such as Medicaid and SCHIP (Dubay, Kenney & Haley 2002; Holahan, Dubay & Kenney 2003; Kenney, Haley & Dubay 2001; Perry et al, 2000), the EITC (Blumenthal et al, 2005), school vouchers (Campbell, 2005), and Work Opportunity and Welfare-to-Work Tax Credits (Hamersma, 2003). Additional research has connected such lack of information to the amount and type of outreach conducted by particular programs (Aizer, 2003; Kenney, Haley & Dubay, 2001; Thompson & Gais, 2000) and to the personal networks of eligible individuals, which may enable or discourage learning about programs (Coe, 1983; Osterman, 1991; Parisi et al, 2003).[2]

Research in this area appears to demonstrate a relationship between an individual's knowledge about programs and eligibility requirements and his/her level of participation. Because of my research design (described in detail below), my respondents all had at least a minimal amount of knowledge about public programs, but how much knowledge they had and from what sources they had received it varied. For some, knowledge about programs and eligibility requirements did seem to play a role in participation choices, although it was rarely (if ever) a deciding factor.

Policy design

Features of anti-poverty programs themselves, including the level of benefits available for a particular individual or household, various application and participation requirements, and

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[2] Interestingly, Nam, Cancian, and Meyer (2009) present evidence that individuals who report that informal personal networks are helpful in providing program information are actually less knowledgeable about the programs in question than are individuals who report that their personal networks are *not* helpful, possibly indicating that informal personal networks may hinder rather than encourage participation.

the existence of work requirements and/or time limits on benefit receipt have also been shown to impact participation. For example, several studies have found that lower benefit levels for TANF recipients led to a decrease in participation in both TANF and the Food Stamp Program (Grogger, 2003; Ratcliffe, McKernan & Finegold, 2008; Zedlewski, 2002), and others have concluded that being eligible for a smaller EITC amount leads to a lower likelihood of participation (Blumenthal, Erard, & Ho, 2005; Currie & Grogger, 2001; Grogger, 2003; Ratcliffe, McKernan & Finegold, 2008).

The design of application and recertification procedures for specific programs has also been shown to impact participation. Documentation and reporting requirements, such as fingerprinting and frequent recertification, appear to decrease the likelihood of participation in a variety of anti-poverty programs (Burstein et al, 2009; Currie & Grogger, 2001; Hanratty, 2006; Kabbani & Wilde, 2003; Ratcliffe, McKernan & Finegold, 2008). Frequent recertification, particularly when it requires in-person submission of documents, appears to have an especially negative impact on the participation of single parent households, presumably because it is more difficult for them to complete the frequent recertification process while managing other responsibilities (Currie & Grogger, 2001). Finally, several studies have concluded that the availability of electronic means of applying for and participating in programs affects participation. For example, Kopczuk and Pop-Eleches (2007) found that the implementation of an electronic filing option increased participation in the EITC, while other studies have found that the replacement of paper food stamps with Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards increased participation in the Food Stamp Program, at least among certain populations (Danielson & Klerman; 2006; Kabbani & Wilde, 2003; Ponza et al, 1999; Ratcliffe, McKernan, & Finegold, 2008).

Additional policy features that may impact participation include work requirements and time limits, such as those implemented through the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996. Both Zedlewski and Nelson (2003) and Whiting and colleagues (2005) found evidence that stricter work requirements led to some potential benefit recipients electing not to participate in TANF, either because they preferred to further their education or find employment on their own or because the work placement opportunities available to them did not provide meaningful work that would lead to future employment. Lifetime limits on benefit receipt, such as those established through PRWORA, have also been shown to decrease participation, not only in the time-limited program itself (in most cases, TANF) but also in other programs such Medicaid and the Food Stamp Program.

While it seems clear that specific design features of anti-poverty policies and programs can affect participation, the relative weight of these remains to be determined. The stories my respondents share about their experiences with and expectations of programs provide unique insight into how policy design features play out differently depending on the program in question and the particular life circumstances of each individual.

Policy implementation

The features of policies and programs discussed above, which are written into relevant laws and regulations, tend to leave many implementation decisions to the discretion of local service providers. Beginning with Michael Lipsky's (1980) classic work on street-level bureaucrats, a number of scholars have attempted to understand the role that such providers play in public programs. Defined by Lipsky (1980) as "public service workers who interact with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work" (3), street-level bureaucrats are said to not only deliver services but "actualize policy"

(Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000, 341). While legislators and higher level bureaucrats may design the policies that shape public anti-poverty programs, it is these frontline workers who socialize citizens to program rules and expectations, make decisions about eligibility, and generally determine the treatment provided to those who seek assistance from such programs (Lipsky, 1980; see also Soss, 2000 on how interactions with program workers influence participants' perceptions of government). How exactly these frontline workers or street-level bureaucrats impact participation in public anti-poverty programs has mainly been explored in terms of the practices and procedures of local welfare offices.

At least as early as the implementation of quality control monitoring in the AFDC program (1973), scholars have considered the issue of welfare workers' goal conflict as a factor in program participation. According to Lipsky (1980), street-level bureaucrats experience two major types of goal conflict that might impact potential participants. The first is that between client-centered goals and social-engineering goals. For example, Gabor and Botsko (2001) found that, with the establishment of TANF work requirements, the social-engineering goal of putting welfare recipients to work conflicted with the client-centered goal of increasing food security, as local office workers reported that their emphasis on job search requirements created obstacles for those seeking food stamp benefits, often leading these applicants to believe that they were required to participate in job search or referral programs that were not technically required of them. Similarly, a GAO survey of food stamp directors in 49 states and the District of Columbia (1999) found that the push to send TANF recipients to work resulted in frontline workers' inappropriately denying food stamp benefits to applicants.

The second type of goal conflict described by Lipsky (1980) is that between client-centered goals and organizational goals, such as efficiency and maximization of resources. As

Brodkin (1986) points out in her work on Massachusetts quality control reforms of the late 1970's, the increased focus of local offices on minimizing overpayment rates "involved an unacknowledged tradeoff between objectives of cost containment and the provision of benefits to those entitled to assistance" (45). In order to cope with this type of goal conflict, street-level bureaucrats often establish routines and procedures to simplify discretionary decision-making, and these routines in turn impact participation by passing transaction costs on to potential clients (Lipsky, 1980).

Other discretionary practices of local offices and frontline workers that may affect participation include the number of visits required to apply or recertify for a particular program (Gabor & Botsko, 2001; Perry, Stark & Valdez 1998); the type of verification required in relation to application documents, such as repeated telephone calls to landlords and employers (Brodkin, 1986; Gabor & Botsko, 2001); and the hours of operation of local offices (Bartlett, Burstein and Hamilton, 2004; Perry et al 2000; Perry, Stark & Valdez 1998).

It has also been theorized that the attitudes and beliefs of street-level bureaucrats, as well as more general public attitudes, may influence their discretionary practices, which may in turn affect the choices made by potential program participants (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000). For example, Gilliom (2001) argues that attitudes about the moral status of TANF recipients have led to "programs of scrutiny [that] are designed to augment the hassle, intimidation, and humiliation of applicants with an eye toward the policy goal of deterring all but the most desperate from seeking aid" (40). "Programs of scrutiny" include "inquiries into such sensitive topics as client's substance abuse or alcoholism, or whether clients are being abused by spouses or boyfriends" (Lens, 2005, 26) and are justified by street-level bureaucrats as being related to a client's capacity to fulfill work requirements. This level of scrutiny, scholars argue, is a result of

dominant attitudes about the undeservingness of the poor (Hasenfeld, 2000). While these arguments are insufficient to establish an explicit connection between attitudes and participation, they provide some indication that attitudes affect program implementation, which, as the literature on street-level bureaucrats reviewed above indicated, may affect the choices made by eligible individuals.

My respondents' reflections on their use of public anti-poverty programs highlight the significant role that interactions with direct service workers or street-level bureaucrats play in shaping these experiences. Whether a respondent felt respected or cared about by a particular worker often helped to determine that respondents' future choices about program participation, and even for respondents who used a number of programs, one experience with a worker (either positive or negative) could come to represent what it meant to be a program participant. Understanding the role of workers and what my respondents repeatedly refer to as the "hassle" involved in program participation (i.e. application and reporting procedures and requirements) opens doors to changes in policy implementation that could have a broad impact on participation, both in terms of whether individuals choose to participate at all and in terms of which programs they choose to use and which they avoid.

Stigma

A final question that has been considered by previous participation research is whether the stigma associated with "welfare" in the United States is enough to prevent some eligible individuals from using public anti-poverty programs. Beginning with the work of Moffitt in the 1980s, which found that stigma (defined as all non-pecuniary costs associated with welfare participation) impacted participation in the U.S.'s traditional cash assistance program (Moffitt, 1981 & 1983), a number of studies have attempted to assess the role of stigma in participation

choices. Using a variety of measures, including general attitudes about welfare, open-ended descriptions of one's reasons for nonparticipation, and stigma proxies such as labor-force attachment (assumed to heighten awareness of stigma) and relationships with other program participants (assumed to combat stigma), these studies have consistently discerned a relationship between stigma and participation choices (Bartlett, Burstein & Hamilton, 2004; Burstein et al, 2009; Perry et al, 2000; Ranney & Kushman, 1987; Stuber & Kronebusch, 2004; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006; Zedlewski, 2002). Such findings are complicated, however, by the many ways in which this complex phenomenon has been operationalized, making it difficult to compare across studies or to gain a more thorough understanding of not only whether but how stigma manifests itself in the choices people make regarding participation in general and, more specifically, participation in particular programs.

The stories my respondents share about their participation experiences and interactions with programs provide a fuller picture of what "welfare stigma" is and how it operates in people's day-to-day lives. Listening to these stories – and drawing on previous empirical and theoretical literature – I develop a new approach to understanding this much-studied concept.

The research that has been done to date, investigating many potential factors impacting participation and nonparticipation in public anti-poverty programs, provides a breadth of information about the relationships between individual factors and eligible households' point-in-time use of particular programs. Knowing what the important factors are is a significant first step toward understanding participation choices, but this type of research – and the findings it produces - cannot provide the depth of information needed to build both a practical and

theoretical knowledge of how eligible households make participation choices and what that means for public anti-poverty program design, implementation, and research.

An interpretive approach

Guided by an interpretive research methodology, I conducted in-depth interviews with 75 individuals (including Tamara) who identified themselves as going through "financial hardship." Interpretive research, broadly defined, is research that is "closely, even intimately, empirical and concerned with problems of meaning, conceived of and analyzed hermeneutically or otherwise, *that bear on action as well as understanding*" (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006, xii, emphasis in the original). As such, it is research that is interested in not only what people think (or what meaning they make of particular experiences or situations) but how they go about developing and articulating those thoughts. In this particular case, my primary research question (how do low-income households make choices about participation in public anti-poverty programs?) is asked out of my interest in not simply *why* people might not participate in programs for which they are eligible but *how* their lived experiences and the context in which these occur shape what it means to be a "participant" and thus when and how they choose to locate themselves in that role.

My particular interviewing methods draw on Holstein and Gubrium's (1995) active interview approach, which is consistent with interpretive research design's grounding in a constructionist ontology and an interpretive epistemology. This approach holds that "all participants in an interview are inevitably implicated in making meaning" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, 18). As such, my role as interviewer was not to gain unbiased knowledge of the respondents' reasons for participating (or not participating) in particular programs but to "strategically convey the topic areas to be explored and the positions from which the exploration

might embark" (76) and then to encourage the respondent to conduct this exploration from a variety of perspectives. In this way my respondents and I worked together to bring to light a number of possible connections between their life experiences, the broader context (social, political, economic, etc.) in which they lived, and the participation choices they made throughout their lives. It is not the goal of active interviewing in general, or of the proposed research in particular, to discover an objective answer to the questions at hand but rather to "reveal how the respondent structures experiential meaning" (59) in relation to the subject of those questions.

Holstein and Gubrium (1995) do not prescribe strict methods for conducting active interviews, because, in keeping with a pragmatist epistemology, the particular context of each interview shapes the direction of the interview and the construction of knowledge that takes place within that context (Baert, 2005; Weinberg, 2008). This does not mean that I approached my interviews with no plan or guide but rather that the "guide [was] advisory, more of a conversational agenda than a procedural directive" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, 77). With this in mind, I used a variety of techniques, including survey, life history, and conceptual prompts, in order to explore "the various ways that [my respondents] attach meaning to the phenomena under investigation" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

Survey questions were used to gather information about respondents' basic demographic and household characteristics, including household income and the number and ages of individuals residing in the household, both of which are used to determine eligibility for a variety of public anti-poverty programs. At the time of the interviews, each of my respondents was eligible for at least one of the array of public anti-poverty programs considered, and most were eligible for multiple programs. The interviews also revealed that respondents' eligibility status

was not a constant, as changes in circumstances and in the eligibility standards of particular programs caused shifts in eligibility throughout each respondent's lifetime.

A life history approach was applied in seeking to understand how life experiences relate to participation choices. According to Cole and Knowles (2001), "life history inquiry is about gaining insights into the broader human condition by coming to know and understand the experiences of other humans… It is about comprehending the complexities of a person's day-to-day decision making and the ultimate consequences that play out in that life so that insights into the broader, collective experience may be achieved" (11). Giving my respondents the space and time to explore their life experiences, particularly those related to living in or near poverty and participating in public anti-poverty programs, and listening to the many ways in which they describe those experiences, provides insight not only into the relationship between experiences and participation choices but also into "the broader, collective experience" of participation in public programs.

Questions designed to encourage respondents to explore their own life history from multiple perspectives promoted what Holstein and Gubrium (1995) refer to as multivocality: "Asking the respondent to address a topic from one point of view, then another, is a way of activating the respondent's stock of knowledge…The contradictions and complexities that may emerge from positional shifts are rethought to signal alternative horizons and linkages" (77). As such, not all of the questions in my interview guide were asked (or asked in the same order) in every interview, since, as Atkinson (1998) points out, "if you come with pat questions and follow them precisely in the interview, the answers will very likely be pat and only skim the surface. You should know when to depart from what you had planned and enter into a free-flowing conversation that will capture even more of what the person wants to tell you" (32).

Finally, my interviews also employed Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) technique of conceptual prompts, which "explore the meaning and the conceptual dimensions of central terms, as well as their positions and links within a conceptual network" (151). The conceptual network in question is what I call the U.S.'s hegemonic poverty discourse (described below), and conceptual questions were asked in relation to ideas about need, deservingness, and rights, as well as other concepts central to the discourse. As noted by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), "doing conceptual interviews can serve to uncover respondents'… taken-for-granted assumptions about what is typical, normal, or appropriate, and can favorably be conducted in concert with questions that ask for concrete descriptions, which sometimes give interesting points of contrast" (151). In keeping with this idea, my interviews sought to reveal respondents' relationships to the hegemonic poverty discourse and the connection between these relationships and participation choices.

Because of the breadth and depth of material covered and my interest in developing enough of a relationship with each respondent for her to feel comfortable exploring personal issues such as childhood experiences, financial circumstances, and opinions about government, poverty, and public anti-poverty programs, I conducted two interviews with each respondent, generally separated by about a week. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and three hours each, with the initial interview including basic demographic questions as well as life history questions and the second interview employing a combination of survey and conceptual questions regarding topics related to the hegemonic poverty discourse.

Recruitment & Context

I began recruitment for my interviews through four Head Start programs in southeastern Michigan, all of which are run by Starfish Family Services.[3] Because Head Start programs are required to serve low-income families (with the exception of 10% of their annual enrollment), its participants are likely to be eligible for multiple public anti-poverty programs. According to previous research, as well as administrative data from targeted programs, however, families with children enrolled in Head Start are not necessarily participating in all of the programs for which they are eligible (Aikens et al, 2010; Tarullo et al, 2008). Nationally, it has been estimated that approximately 20% of Head Start families receive TANF, 55-60% receive WIC, and approximately 50% receive SNAP (Aikens et al, 2010; Tarullo et al, 2008). These participation rates are actually slightly *lower* than national participation rate estimates for all eligible families (Burt & Nightingale, 2010; Cunnyngham & Castner, 2009; Jacknowitz & Tiehen, 2010; Parrott & Sherman, 2006), although one earlier study did indicate that Head Start families tend to participate in other public anti-poverty programs at higher rates than eligible families whose children are not enrolled in Head Start (D'Elio et al, 2001).

In addition to Head Start families' likelihood of participating in other public anti-poverty programs, it is important to consider the fact that Head Start itself *is* such a program. As my respondents' narratives will demonstrate (see chapter five), however, and as D'Elio and colleagues' 2001 study of both participants and nonparticipants in Head Start indicates, parents tend to think of Head Start simply as preschool or child care and to choose whether or not to participate based on accessibility rather than the program's public nature, implying that families

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[3] Starfish Family Services is a private, nonprofit agency providing early childhood development and parenting programs, children's mental health services, after school programs, and an emergency shelter for teens and youth in crisis. It has more than a dozen programs at service sites throughout metropolitan Detroit and serves more than 9,000 at-risk children and families each year.

participating in Head Start are not categorically different from eligible nonparticipants in terms of their views of public programs.

Starfish Family Services operates six Head Start sites in four distinct communities in southeastern Michigan – Inkster, Dearborn Heights, Livonia, and Plymouth/Canton. Like the city of Detroit itself, many (although not all) of these communities have struggled economically for decades, with particular challenges arising over the past few years as the nation faced recession and a slow recovery, the local automotive industry declined, and rates of unemployment and poverty soared. Racial and class divisions within and among the communities in Wayne County, Michigan – which encompasses Detroit and the communities where my respondents lived at the time of our interviews – have contributed to these challenges in unique ways.

While Detroit may once have been known "as a city where blue-collar workers of all racial and ethnic backgrounds could prosper, largely by working at tough, but high-paying, jobs in auto plants" (Farley, Danziger, & Holzer, 2000), racial and class segregation have long been an integral part of its history. A combination of red-lining practices, "white flight," and industrial decline – particularly within the automotive industry - has contributed to Detroit's population decline from nearly 1.85 million in the 1950s to just over 700,000 as of 2012 (Padnani, 2013). As Sugrue (2013) reports:

> "Between 2000 and 2010 alone, Detroit lost a remarkable 25 percent of its population, as massive long-term disinvestment, the collapse of the public infrastructure, and the near-death of the American auto industry devastated the city. Today, more than 40 of the city's 139 square miles are empty; at least 90,000 houses stand abandoned; and neighborhood shopping districts are scarce."

Racial segregation in the area has also increased as the city's white population fell from more than 1.5 million in 1950 to less than 56,000 in 2000. African Americans now make up more than 80% of the population within the city but only 40% in Wayne County as a whole (Farley,

Danziger, & Holzer, 2000; Sugrue, 2013). This racial segregation is compounded by a history of class segregation – both within and between racial and ethnic groups. While affluent suburbs register median household incomes of more than $100,000 per year (see, for example, census data for Grosse Pointe, Michigan http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/26/2635480.html), the median income in Detroit itself is less than $27,000 (http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/26/2622000.html) and in Wayne County overall is just over $41,000. Even within Detroit's African American population, class segregation grew throughout the twentieth century, as members of the "black elite and steadily employed working class blacks" moved toward the outer edges of the city, leaving the poorest African Americans at its center (Sugrue, 1996, 191).

While the vast majority of my sample was recruited from outside the borders of Detroit itself, this history of racial and class segregation is relevant to many of their experiences in Detroit's suburbs. Both black and white members of my sample have personal and family ties to the city of Detroit and tend to view themselves as having, in some sense, "escaped" the city's decline, despite the fact that they continue to struggle financially and the reality that the "suburban" areas to which they have moved are not necessarily in better condition than the city. Inkster, for example, one of the four communities from which I recruited, has a median household income of just over $28,000 and a poverty rate of 35% (http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/26/2640680.html). Its population is about 70% African American.

The other communities from which I recruited include 1) Dearborn Heights, a suburb with 58,000 residents (86% of whom are white[4]), a median household income of $44,000, and a

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[4] Dearborn Heights is home to a sizeable Arab American population, but because the U.S. census classifies people of Arabic descent as white it is difficult to locate an accurate estimate of the size of this population.

poverty rate of 16%; 2) Livonia, a suburb of 95,000 (92% white), a median household income of $69,000, and a poverty rate of 6%; and 3) Canton, an exurb of approximately 90,000 (70% white) with a median income of $80,000 and a poverty rate of just under 8%. While some of these communities are obviously much more affluent than Detroit itself, the community members I interviewed were generally among the poorest (see sample details below). Feeling that they had "escaped" the city, therefore, often coincided with recognition that those around them had significantly more resources at their disposal, particularly for those who had moved as far as Canton and the neighboring town of Plymouth.

In an effort to establish a diverse sample, I recruited respondents from one Head Start site in each of the four communities described above. Recruitment plans differed slightly by site, but for the most part included attending parent meetings to introduce myself and my research, handing out flyers and gathering contact information from interested individuals at times when children were being dropped off at or picked up from their programs, and placing notices in newsletters and information packets that programs sent home to parents. Recruitment flyers asked parents (or grandparents or other guardians) to share their stories, indicating that I was interested in learning about how families cope with financial hardship. Interested individuals either contacted me (via email or telephone) or provided me with their contact information. In either case, I spoke with each individual on the phone to answer any questions they might have about the interviews and set up a time and place for the first meeting.

As a means of validating my interview findings with respondents who did not have children enrolled in Head Start, I asked each of the Head Start respondents if s/he could refer me to a family member or friend who had children and was in a similar economic situation but was not participating in Head Start. In total, I interviewed 75 individuals, 40 of whom had children

currently enrolled in one of the four Head Start programs and 35 of whom were referrals but lived in the same communities as Head Start parents. Of the referrals, 22 had sent a child to Head Start at an earlier point, such that 62 of the 75 respondents had direct experience with a Head Start program (although for some this experience was more than a decade old).

The majority of my interviews were conducted in respondents' homes, although some respondents preferred to meet at their child's Head Start site (each of which provided a private room for interviews) or in a public location such as a coffee shop or fast food restaurant convenient to their home or workplace. All interviews took place between April 2012 and April 2013.

Sample

Designed to include respondents who varied by race/ethnicity, income, and level of participation, my final sample consisted of 75 individuals, 71 of whom were female and four male. Because more women than men live in poverty in the United States and because female-headed households make up the largest family type in poverty (U.S. Census, 2012), it is not particularly surprising that my sample would include more women than men. It is also possible that recruitment methods (through Head Start programs and referrals) and my own gender contributed to more women – whether single or married – being willing to share their stories with me. In any case, the limited number of men in the sample makes it difficult to draw inferences about gender differences in participation choices or other topics explored. Assumptions about gender that are prevalent in U.S. discourse about poverty are, however, highlighted in my findings.

Similar to the population of Wayne County as a whole, my sample was approximately evenly split between white (32) and African American (33) respondents.[5] My sample also included two individuals who identified as Hispanic/Latina, two as Arab American,[6] and six as bi-racial/ethnic (three white and Hispanic/Latina, one African American and Hispanic/Latina, and two white and African American). Nine respondents said that they spoke a language other than English at home (either Spanish or Arabic) but all said that this was only "sometimes" or "a little." While my respondents were somewhat reflective of the racial/ethnic make-up of the county overall, in comparison to the towns from which I recruited them,[7] they were significantly more diverse. From Inkster, where the population is 70% African American, I recruited 10 white respondents, six African American respondents, and four respondents who identified as bi-racial (three white and Hispanic/Latina and one white and African American). From Dearborn Heights, an 86% white suburb, I recruited four white, eight African American, and two Arab American respondents. From Livonia, which is more than 90% white, I recruited 13 white respondents, 10 black respondents, one Hispanic respondent, and one respondent who reported her racial/ethnic identity as black and Hispanic. Finally, from Canton, the community most distant from Detroit and with a 70% white population (the remainder of the population is made up of Indian/Asian, African American, and Hispanic individuals), I recruited six white respondents, eight African American respondents, and one bi-racial (African American and white) respondent.

The ages of my respondents ranged from 21 to 62 years, with a median of 32, and the number of children in households ranged from one to seven, with a median of two. When asked

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[5] Wayne County's population is approximately 40% black and 54% white, while my sample is 44% black and 43% white.

[6] Three white respondents had Arab American spouses. Their children were therefore bi-ethnic, and the families spoke some Arabic at home.

[7] While some respondents did not live in the town in which their Head Start program (or the program used by the individual who referred them) was located, I classify them by the site through which I met them (rather than the town in which they live) in order to maintain anonymity.

about their marital status, 38 respondents (including three men) described themselves as single, 19 as married, three as engaged, seven (including one man) as separated, and eight as divorced.

My respondents' levels of education and employment were surprisingly high, with 51 respondents reporting that they had attended at least some college. The highest degree for eight of these was an associate's; ten had bachelor's degrees, and three had master's degrees. Thirteen respondents reported that their highest level of education was a high school diploma or GED, and the remaining 11 had less than a high school education. In addition, 12 respondents were enrolled in school either full- or part-time at the time of our interviews. Forty-eight of my respondents lived in a household in which at least one adult was employed, meaning that they were either single and employed or married and at least one partner was employed. Of those who were not working (27), five were enrolled in school, four were receiving some type of disability payment, and four were receiving unemployment insurance.

Finally, my respondents' incomes ranged from less than $250 to more than $3,000 per month. Rather than providing me with an exact income for the previous month, respondents were asked to indicate one of nine ranges into which their income fell and to estimate whether or not that amount was typical for most months.[8] Reported incomes did not include benefits received from most public anti-poverty programs (TANF, SNAP, etc.) so that these incomes might be used to estimate eligibility in such programs.[9] Thirteen respondents reported a monthly income of less than $250, 22 between $250 and $999, 20 between $1,000 and $1,999, 13 between $2,000 and $2,999, and six over $3,000.[10] Based on the monthly income that respondents reported, as

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[8] Income ranges were: a. < $250, b. $250-499, c. $500-749, d. $750-999, e. $1,000-1,499, f. $1,500-1,999, g. $2,000-2,499, g. $2,500-2,999, e. $3,000+.
[9] Reported incomes *did* include benefits from Social Security programs or Unemployment Insurance, since these are generally taken into account when determining eligibility for other programs.
[10] One respondent declined to report monthly income saying only that the family was getting by on money made from "odd jobs."

well as their family size and composition, 48 of 75 households were living below 100% of the relevant 2013 federal poverty threshold, 60 were living below 150% FPL, and 72 were living below 200% FPL. Only two respondents – both grandmothers raising their grandchildren – had incomes above 200% FPL, and both of these women had had much lower incomes earlier in their lives and therefore had significant experience with public anti-poverty programs. Twenty six respondents lived in households with income below 50% FPL.

As with their racial/ethnic make-up, my respondents' incomes were not necessarily reflective of the communities from which they were recruited. In fact, the average income of respondents recruited through Inkster (the poorest of the four communities) was higher than the average for any of the other three communities, meaning that even though they lived in a much less affluent community, some of those recruited through the Inkster Head Start site had more financial resources than many of their neighbors, whereas those recruited through other sites were comparatively much worse off financially than other members of their communities.

In the chapters that follow, I attempt to highlight the relationships between individual respondents and the communities in which they live by referring to respondents' monthly incomes as well as their communities' general level of affluence (i.e. "middle class," "upper middle class," etc.). I also point out the race/ethnicity of respondents, although my analysis did not lead to any firm distinctions between racial/ethnic groups in terms of their interpretations of need, interpretations of public anti-poverty programs, or level of participation in such programs. I also discuss the relationship between my particular sample and my findings in the concluding chapter.

Analysis/Interpretation

In keeping with the interpretive design of the project, I approached analysis of my interviews from a hermeneutic perspective, taking into account both the narratives of my respondents and their broader context (Crotty, 1998; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Mantzoukas, 2004). Rather than predetermining a particular coding mechanism, I allowed the analysis to "[take] place and [unfold] as an integral part of the interview process" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

All of the interviews were audio-recorded (with the permission of respondents) and transcribed by a professional transcription service. Immediately following each interview, I wrote a brief memo, recording initial impressions of the respondent, the location of the interview, and our interactions. I made note of how the experience felt to me as the interviewer, reflecting on my own role in structuring the conversation as well as on any biases I might have felt toward or against the respondent. With some respondents, I was able to develop a rapport almost immediately, leading to comfortable and open interactions, while with others, this took longer or even failed to develop entirely. As I approached analysis, reflecting on these different scenarios and what may have created or caused them helped me to be more aware of my role as a co-constructor of knowledge and to be conscious of the ways in which my varying levels of empathy with respondents might impact my interpretation of their narratives. Interpretive research – like all research – can never be entirely objective, as it requires us to make decisions – even judgments – about the information we have gathered in order to form conclusions, but "when good researchers confront their own bias with honesty and matter-of-factness, rather than with fear and denial, they push forth knowledge in the understanding that all knowledge is imperfect" (Lin, 2000, 194).

With this in mind, my initial round of analysis involved reading through each transcript, highlighting quotes that struck me as particularly interesting. Some of these were stories respondents told about their own experiences; others were opinions they expressed about "the system," the government, or people with whom they interacted; still others were examples of the kinds of choices they were making in order to make it through their day-to-day lives and provide for their families. I had no specific coding system or particular topics of interest in mind at this point but was simply noting the discourse my respondents used on a variety of subjects. On some level, I was, of course, guided by my larger research question, and this most certainly impacted the quotes I selected, although I was not consciously looking for answers to any particular questions.

After reading through all of my transcripts, I created a document for each respondent, saving all of these in a folder titled "Initial Thoughts." I then read through all of these documents, noting commonly addressed topics as well as unique perspectives, and used these to create a new document titled "Potential Themes." While exploring these potential themes, I also read transcripts for evidence of how respondents made choices regarding participation in public anti-poverty programs, creating a list of factors that appeared to play a role in these choices. My list included ways that respondents talked about making the decision to seek help, when and under what circumstances they made that decision for particular programs, and ways in which they distinguished between participating in some programs but not others. The factors on this list, along with the items on my list of potential themes all became the initial codes I used once I imported my transcripts into NVIVO software and began an additional round of reading and coding. I continued to add to these as new themes arose during later readings of transcripts.

By the time I began writing in earnest, I had read through each of my 75 transcripts multiple times – some more than others, as the overall shape of my theory developed and certain stories came to exemplify the major concepts involved. There were stories – like Tamara's – that stuck out to me from the beginning as representing particular points of view, and there were others that I only "discovered" on a fourth or fifth reading, when some phrase or experience suddenly clarified or highlighted a lingering question. To the best of my ability, I tried to listen to the voices of my respondents as they came through their narratives, honoring each as a life deserving of dignity and recognition. There were certainly respondents – and particular stories – that I held as "favorites," but more than anything, I hope that I have been fair to each individual who generously shared her or his story with me. The narratives they offered have an enormous amount to tell us about how those living in or near poverty make choices for their lives – particularly choices regarding participation in public anti-poverty programs.

Making choices: A developing theory

When policy makers and researchers consider participation (and nonparticipation) in public anti-poverty programs, they tend to do so in ways that are at once overly concrete and overly abstract. They are overly concrete, because they think about both what program recipients need and what programs provide in objective terms, defining need through strict eligibility criteria (including household income and composition but also other information depending on the particular program in question) and offering assistance in very precise forms (a specific amount of money on an EBT card, for example, determined by an objective formula). At the same time, these ways of considering participation are also overly abstract in that they do not account for the particularities of any given life. It is assumed – both by those who have designed the programs and, as is apparent from the review of literature above, by the vast majority of

those who have studied participation in them – that meeting certain objective financial standards

equates with needing a very specific form of assistance.

As I hope will become more and more clear in the coming pages, however, real people's

lived experiences do not fulfill such assumptions. Each person has her/his own interpretation of

what it means to be "in need," and these may or may not match up with the eligibility

requirements of particular programs. Each person also has her/his own interpretation of what

public anti-poverty programs offer to meet need, ranging from genuine help from a

compassionate source to disrespectful (or "degrading," as Tamara puts it) treatment at the hands

of workers who view benefit recipients as numbers instead of as human beings. Together, these

interpretations of need and of programs shape the choices that people living in or near poverty

make regarding participation in public programs.

People do not make choices or develop interpretations in a vacuum, though, so while it is

critical that we examine participation and nonparticipation from the perspective of low-income

individuals themselves, we must also account for the broader context in which these individuals

live. In the United States, that context is structured by what I will refer to throughout as our

society's hegemonic poverty discourse.

Defining the hegemonic poverty discourse

Numerous scholars have documented this discourse in efforts to define American

attitudes about poverty and public anti-poverty programs, connecting these attitudes to what are

considered to be fundamental American values, such as a strong belief in the autonomy of the

individual, the so-called Protestant work ethic, and a commitment to the patriarchal model of the

family (Ellwood, 1988; Tropman, 1989). These values, it is argued, lead Americans to place

primary (though perhaps not sole) responsibility for poverty on poor individuals themselves

(Gans, 2009; Gilens, 1999; Hunt, 2004; Lens, 2002) – with particular disdain saved for poor women who have not abided by patriarchal definitions of morality (Abramovitz, 2000; Gordon, 1994); to emphasize hard work as the ideal remedy for poverty (Handler & Hasenfeld, 1997; Shipler, 2004); and to reject notions of citizenship that include rights to economic or social equality while at the same time supporting civil and political equality (Bussiere, 1997; Fraser & Gordon, 1992; Gainous, Craig, & Martinez, 2008; Hochschild, 1981; Katz, 2001; Marshall, 1950; Nelson, 1984; Somers, 2008).

While U.S. poverty discourse, like other discourses, includes "a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies" (Foucault, 1978, 100), certain elements, including the values and attitudes described here, can be considered to constitute a hegemonic discourse. As described by Susan Silbey (2005), "hegemony is produced and reproduced in everyday transactions, in which what is experienced as given is often unnoticed, uncontested, and seemingly not open to negotiation…Although moments of resistance may be documented, in general subjects do not notice, question, or make claims against hegemony" (331, 333). The U.S.'s long history of treating poverty as an individual problem and creating public anti-poverty programs that are residual at best, provides ample evidence that these (and related) discursive elements have become hegemonic, preventing alternative views of poverty from taking hold (although such views do, of course, exist).

For example, beginning with the earliest "poor laws" in colonial America, Katz (1986) demonstrates the ways in which certain "myths" (or discursive elements) have dominated U.S. anti-poverty policy. Katz summarizes these myths as follows: "most of those on relief do not need help; what they do need is an incentive to work; those truly in need of assistance can be helped best by private charity" (36). These myths are evident in the establishment of poor houses

in colonial America, which provided such abysmal conditions as "to deter the working class from asking for poor relief" (Katz, 1986, 3); in the New Deal distinction between social insurance, which was "superior both in payments and in reputation," and means-tested "welfare" programs, which were "not just comparatively second-rate but deeply stigmatized" (Gordon, 1994, 5; see also Abramovitz, 2000); and, more recently, in debates surrounding the 1996 welfare reform legislation, wherein both liberals and conservatives seemed to focus more on reducing the dependency of program participants on government aid than on the concrete needs of those participants (Lens, 2002; Somers & Block, 2005; Weaver, 2000). In all of these cases, there may have been voices arguing for alternative views of poverty and anti-poverty programs, but these voices were effectively silenced by the establishment of policies supported by the hegemonic discourse.

The hegemonic discourse described above has been perpetuated in the U.S. through the rhetoric used by government officials, prominent scholars and commentators, and the media's coverage of poverty and anti-poverty programs. In his work on the role of language in perpetuating beliefs or attitudes, Edelman (1975) describes the theoretical process by which "linguistic cues evoke prestructured beliefs regarding the nature and the causes of public problems. Because these beliefs are based upon social cues, rather than rigorous analysis, they are likely to be simplistic and distorted, i.e. myths that help us cope with widely shared anxieties, but typically fail to analyze problems adequately and rarely solve them" (14). Whether or not attitudes are based in reality, they have the ability to profoundly impact public problems, such as poverty, and the programs designed to solve them. This is because discourse "not only naturalizes and materializes its reality by giving it an essential nature but also erases and effaces the possibility of alternative natures that reality might have" (Schram, 2006, 13). Again, our

national emphasis on the values described above results in a hegemonic discourse about poverty that "erases and effaces" other possible views of the reality of poverty.

Given the hegemonic nature of a poverty discourse emphasizing the individual irresponsibility, lack of hard work, and immoral values and behavior in the lives of the poor, it is difficult to imagine that those living in or near poverty could escape recognizing and even using this discourse themselves. In fact, both public opinion survey research and ethnographic studies involving poor individuals (particularly recipients of TANF/AFDC) have demonstrated that those living in poverty tend to share a commitment to the values espoused by the hegemonic discourse (Davis & Hagen, 1996; Epstein, 2004; Newman, 2006; Rank, 1994; Schneider & Jacoby, 2004; Seccombe, 2011).

As a collection of beliefs or values that shapes individual attitudes as well as public policies, programs, and interactions, the hegemonic poverty discourse serves as a *structure* in U.S. society, a pattern of relations, in Sewell's (1992) terms, which is "reproduced, even when actors engaging in the relations are not aware of the patterns or do not desire their reproduction" (3). In keeping with Sewell's notion of structure, I argue here that the U.S.'s hegemonic poverty discourse – and the individual discursive elements of which it is constructed – influences my respondents' interpretations of both need and programs, even when my respondents try to avoid such influence. This does not mean that my respondents are not making their own choices about participation in public anti-poverty programs – choices that are shaped by their interpretations of need and programs – but that their ability (or "agency," to use Sewell's term) to do so is constrained, not only by the discourse itself but also by the position of my respondents as individuals who lack the resources to change that discourse.

None of this is to say that the narratives shared by my respondents are not "true" or that the choices they make are not genuine. It is only to remind us of the power that our hegemonic poverty discourse holds and of why it may be that our public anti-poverty policies are more reflective of this discourse than they are of the needs and interpretations of those they are designed to serve.

Overview

In what follows, I use my respondents' narratives to develop a theory of how people living in or near poverty make choices regarding participation in public anti-poverty programs. This theory begins with an exploration of how my respondents interpret need – what the word means to them, who they think needs help and who does not, and how they perceive their own levels of need (chapter 2). I then look more deeply at respondents' life histories and descriptions of their current circumstances and future expectations in an effort to understand how they have developed (and are continuously developing) these interpretations (chapter 3). In chapters 4 and 5, I turn to respondents' interpretations of what public anti-poverty programs provide, looking first at how respondents use the concept of "rights" (i.e. do people in the U.S. have a right to public assistance?) (chapter 4) and then more specifically at what they think they will receive or have received from programs (chapter 5). Chapter 6 brings together my respondents' interpretations of need and of programs to demonstrate the ways in which they make choices about participation and the ways in which previous measures of participation are limited both methodologically and theoretically. Finally, I conclude with a look at implications for public anti-poverty policy design, implementation, and research.

CHAPTER TWO:
"Everybody Have a Different Situation"
Rethinking Need from the Perspective of the Poor

Amari, a thirty year old single African American woman, lives with her seven year old

daughter in a subsidized apartment complex in a predominantly white, middle class suburb of

Detroit. Older model cars covered with dents and rust occupy the parking lots and potholes litter

the roads. Her apartment is tidy but sparsely furnished with few decorations, and she invites me

to sit in one of two chairs at a rickety kitchen table while we talk. Amari's household income,

which comes from a part-time job, is less than $250 a month, placing her within the income

eligibility standards of programs like TANF, SNAP, and Medicaid.

Keesha, thirty five and single, lives with her eleven year old daughter in the second floor

apartment of a two-story brick house in Detroit with the abandoned shells of similar homes on

either side. Crumbling, unlived-in houses with overgrown yards outnumber the occupied homes

on the street. When I arrive for our first interview, Keesha sits at a cluttered dining room table,

surrounded by a fan, multiple breathing apparatuses for her asthma and COPD, several bottles of

prescription medication, a box of tissues, and a television that remains on throughout our

conversation. Her household income is also less than $250 a month, and she has been unable to

work for nearly four years due to chronic health issues. Like Amari, Keesha is income eligible

for a number of public anti-poverty programs.

When I ask her how she feels about her current financial situation, Amari tells me:

> I really can't complain too much, because it's people out there that's worse than
> what I am and don't have shelter and things that I'm fortunate to have. I would
> like it to be better than what it is, but I mean, I can't really complain. I am

working - because it was a point in time when I wasn't working at all - so I'm just grateful and thankful for what I have today, so pretty satisfied.

Keesha, on the other hand, says, "It's a struggle. It's, it's hard, it's very hard. I hate it, I, I do, I don't like it at all."

Amari says that while she has family members she could turn to in an emergency, "if I don't really need it, need it, then I don't ask for help or look out or reach to anyone. I just wait until I get paid, and if I can get it out of that, then I'll get it out of that." She knows that her situation could be better than it is - and in fact, it has been better in the past when she was able to find full-time work – but she does not consider her need to be more than she can handle. She does receive help from SNAP and Medicaid, but as long as she has a job, she does not think she needs cash assistance.

Keesha has worked in the past, making enough money that she said she "didn't need nobody. Like I didn't need no assistance nowhere, you know?" Since her health began to decline, however, she has found it more and more difficult to work and has received assistance from TANF, SNAP, and Medicaid for herself and her daughter.

Objectively, using the income eligibility standards of U.S. public anti-poverty programs, Amari and Keesha are both "in need" of assistance. Both are well below the federal poverty line, making less than $3,000 per year, with few assets (each has a car but no savings) and little prospect of improvement in the near future. In their own interpretations, however, Amari and Keesha are at very different levels of need, with Keesha using words like "struggle," "anxiety," and "scared" to describe her financial situation and the feelings it engenders while Amari says she is "grateful," "thankful," and "fortunate."

How can two people whom anti-poverty policies define as almost identical in their financial circumstances feel so differently about their level of need? People like Amari, Keesha,

and the 73 other individuals who shared their experiences with me do not think about need as purely a matter of income. Need is not a fixed and measurable concept that can be captured by the questions on an assistance application but an interpretation of one's life situation that is shaped by the U.S.'s hegemonic poverty discourse as well as by personal experiences and reflections on those experiences. As Keesha herself explains, "You can't write down everything you want to explain to them. Your situation is not a booklet, you know? Everybody have a different situation… Everyone is different. Every case is different."

Over the course of nearly a year, as I spent time in conversation with families living in or near poverty, I heard the word "need" used over and over again in a variety of contexts. People talked about their own level of need and that of others; about who they thought needed help from public anti-poverty programs and who did not; about what counts as a need (vs. a "want" or an "extra"); and about how need is not simply a matter of money but of one's entire life situation, including physical and mental health and the ability to provide for one's children. At some points, people used the word "need" to explain or justify their own participation (or nonparticipation) in public anti-poverty programs, such as when Amy, a married mother of two whose husband was unemployed at the time of our interviews, told me that her family needed help from SNAP to provide adequate food but did not need other assistance: "We are not completely broke," she said. "We can afford our own place. We can afford our cable bill and all that stuff. Only thing we need help with is food. I don't want to take help if I don't need it." At other points, they used the word "need" in a way similar to scholars use of the term "deserve," distinguishing between people who use public anti-poverty programs "appropriately" (i.e. those

who "need" or "deserve" help from these programs) and those who "abuse the system" or "take advantage" of benefits (i.e. do not really "need" or "deserve" the help they receive).

Perhaps more than any other word, "need" came to capture the essence of my interviews: what it is, what it means to people in the context of their own lives and the lives of others around them, and perhaps most importantly, how people's interpretations of need differ from the definitions of the programs designed to assist them, and what this means for the choices households make regarding participation in public anti-poverty programs. In all of these cases – including their personal interpretations of their own need – respondents drew on the hegemonic poverty discourse, using it as a standard against which to measure their own situations and those of others and as a way of legitimating their own need for assistance.

What is need?

On a basic level, my respondents define "need" not as living below a certain income level but as the inability to provide life's essentials for their families. What they mean by essentials varies slightly, but in general it includes a place to live (with electricity and heat), water, food, and clothing. When they talk about their priorities – which bills get paid first when they are not sure they have enough money to cover everything – respondents repeatedly mention these same basic necessities:

> "First always make sure that the mortgage and the light and gas bill is paid…After that it's pretty much we'll see what we got, we just play it by ear, as long as the necessary things is taken care of." (Diana, married mother of two, monthly income $1,500-1,999)

> "I gotta keep the lights on, and we don't have cable, we don't have computer, we don't have any extras, you know? I got my cell phone, [utilities], and rent - those are my bills." (Hannah, single mother of one, monthly income $250-499)

> "You know, as long as [my kids] have - in this order - a roof over their head, food in their belly, clothes on their back, shoes on their feet, that's all I'm worried

about, and that's how I pay my bills: rent, food, clothes, shoes, diapers, necessities." (Tiffany, single mother of three, monthly income $1,500-1,999)

Other items that are sometimes added to this list include transportation costs (car insurance, gas, and maintenance), health care, and basic household supplies like "laundry detergent or toilet paper - I mean the things that you really need" (Caroline, single mother of two, monthly income $250-499).

Respondents often contrast these basic necessities with "wants" or "extras" - things they would like to have or to provide for their children but that do not fall into the category of "need." When Keesha stopped working due to her worsening health, for example, she says that she finally learned "the difference between wants and needs…I was forced to find out what really meant want and what really meant need. So pretty much we have our needs met. Wants is totally different." Others, at various income levels, echoed this feeling of having enough income to meet basic needs but not to cover wants:

> "Want is anybody's, you know, that's, 'I want this, I want this.' 'No, guys, we can't.' But, it's just the way it is. But we've never gone without anything that's necessary." (Karen, single mother of two, monthly income $750-999)

> "We have just enough to pay the bills and just buy little things like shampoo, toilet paper, that little stuff, and then that's it. We don't get any extra." (Dee Dee, single mother of two, monthly income $1,000-1,499)

> "We definitely have all our needs met, I'd say. I just don't have anything, a lot for extra or a lot for, uh, to save." (Danielle, single mother of one, monthly income $2,000-2,499)

> "I do my best to get what they need, not necessarily want unfortunately, but they get what they need." (Pam, divorced mother of two, monthly income $3,000+)

> "The necessities, yes. The wants, no…I remember reading something about your needs, every person's basic needs: food, shelter, something else, and so I can't remember which order it go in, but those, I'm content if we are, if I'm able to keep a roof over their heads, keep them going to the pediatrician. They're able to go to school and have lunch, they're able to have food. I have a refrigerator full of

food…Their wants will come." (Georgia, single mother of four, monthly income $750-999)

A household's level of need is thus, on the most basic level, defined by the ability to maintain adequate shelter (including heat, electricity, and water), food, and clothing. This definition, which my respondents tend to use as a baseline or starting point when assessing who is in need and who is not – and when describing their own level of need – is clearly a limited one and one that echoes the hegemonic poverty discourse in declaring only certain needs – those required for basic human survival – as legitimate (see Fraser, 1989). In fact, even though the ability to maintain material necessities is generally the first consideration respondents mention, it is rarely the deciding factor in determining who is in need (and who is not). For this, the majority of my respondents turn again to the hegemonic poverty discourse, emphasizing fundamental American values such as personal responsibility, individualism, hard work, and moral virtue. This is true both when talking about themselves and when talking about others. Thus, while they much more frequently categorize others as not really needing help, my respondents' interpretations of their own situations are structured by the same discourse, a discourse in which many find themselves trapped even as they struggle to define their own need on different terms.

Who needs help

For the majority of my respondents, a household needs help from an outside source when – and only when – it has exhausted all alternative means of providing for its members' basic necessities. Barbara, a single grandmother raising her granddaughter, while also providing help to her adult children, all on a monthly income of $2,000-2,499, exemplifies this, saying, "When a person comes in with a plight, and it can be verified that this is truly a plight, that this person really, really needs help, they've exhausted all means for help, then the state or the federal government should step in and help them." Barbara does not say that the decision to help ought

to be made based on an individual's income but rather on her ability to prove that she has tried all other options before turning to the government.

In line with the hegemonic discourse's emphasis on work as the solution to poverty, having "exhausted all means for help" often appears to mean either that an individual is unable to work through no fault of her own or that the individual is working but is still unable to meet basic needs. "I do feel like [public assistance] should be there for people that really need it," says Antoinette, a married mother of six whose family was living on less than $250 per month when I spoke with her. "If you really need it, you should be able to get it, and it should be given to those that have gone through a, you know, a hardship time. Not just any and everybody should get it, I don't think, you know? I think if you're able, you can work." Antoinette was herself dealing with health problems that prevented her from working, having been in a debilitating car accident and then recently diagnosed with lupus after several years of undiagnosed pain. Her husband was also out of work and was having trouble finding a new job due to a previous felony conviction. They clearly view themselves as being in need of assistance, mainly because paid employment is not a resource currently available to them: "I haven't worked in five years due to the accident, and after the accident I got diagnosed with lupus, you know, auto immune disease, and I'm constantly in a lot of pain and stay swollen…[We're trying to] get some financial help, because it's like, what do I do when I can't work?"

Other respondents who *were* working at the time of our interviews describe people who are unable to work due to physical or mental illness as being in need. Denise, a married mother of two who, between her job and her husband's, brings home just over $2,500 per month, says, "People that need help should get help, absolutely. Somebody like mentally ill or physically challenged or, you know, that can't do a standard across the board like anybody else, yeah,

maybe they should get some help, you know? I mean, everybody's not created equal, that's for sure." Similarly, Daria, a single mother of two who makes $1,000-1,499 per month from her job but also receives assistance from the state because she adopted her daughter through the foster care system, talked about people she saw when she went to the Department of Human Services (DHS)[11] office to apply for her daughter's benefits: "You could obviously see people, you know, with mental problems. It's like, okay, they need some help. Um, sick people, senior citizens." If people are unable to work, then, (and can prove that this is the case) they are considered "in need" of help.

Likewise, if people *are* able to work and are doing all that they can to help themselves but still cannot cover all of their family's basic necessities, they need assistance. Melanie, a single mother of one who works at a grocery store making $750-999 per month, considers herself to be in this category: "Like, you know, if you're working and you're still not making ends meet, you need help, right? Why should I be ashamed that I need help? I'm doing everything I can." Sue, a separated mother of five who makes $1,500-1,999 per month at her job in a group home, agrees: "I feel that the people who work should get more help than they do, because we're out here doing something."

Highlighting the distance between the standards of need defined by policies and individuals' more nuanced perceptions of need, some respondents talk about people who are clearly making an effort to help themselves but still struggling because they are not judged by program guidelines to be in need. Becca, a divorced mother of one whose income (including child support) is more than $3,000 per month and who does not consider herself to be in need, says:

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[11] In the state of Michigan, DHS offices administer a variety of public anti-poverty programs, including TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, and child care subsidies. These offices are thus what might be known more broadly as "welfare offices."

"Some people who really do need the help, they can't even get it, you know? They're working, they're actively out there working. They might have two jobs at two fast-food restaurants, and they still can't make ends meet. And then they go and they try to get help for their kids - to get food or whatever or, you know, like daycare expenses - and they can't get it. And then what ends up happening to them? They end up having to quit their job, and they end up just staying on that cycle…And it's just unfortunate, because the people that are just over that line, if they had a little bit of extra help, they might be able to live a middle class lifestyle, and they might not need to depend on the government."

The connection that all of these respondents make between work and need maps directly onto the hegemonic discourse's historic distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. My respondents use the word need – rather than "deserve" - to describe the relationship between those who are working or otherwise trying to improve their own lives and the assistance offered by public anti-poverty programs, but the way that they conceptualize this idea sounds very much like the oft-utilized concept of deservingness, which is intricately tied to American ideas of individualism and the value of work (Ellwood, 1988; Tropman, 1989).

As early as the colonial period, policies to address poverty placed primary responsibility for the provision of life's necessities on the individual and family and used this as a means of distinguishing between the deserving and undeserving poor. Those who were viewed as being poor through no fault of their own, including widows and their children, were offered "outdoor relief" or assistance that allowed them to stay in their own homes, while those viewed as undeserving (i.e. individuals who "should" have been able to provide for themselves but were not doing so) were only provided relief under the degrading conditions of workhouses or houses of correction (Katz, 1986). U.S. anti-poverty policy, and the hegemonic discourse that supports it, has continued in this vein, dividing assistance programs into those, like Social Security benefits, that aid the deserving poor (individuals who cannot be held responsible for their condition) and those, like TANF (and its predecessor AFDC), that provide assistance for the

undeserving poor (those who ought to bear individual responsibility). Based on analysis of

national survey data from a variety of sources and time periods, Gilens (1999) describes this

trend thus:

> "Americans' individualistic ideology, rather than resulting in a principled
> rejection of welfare as such, provides a basis for judging the moral worthiness of
> welfare recipients. Americans support government aid for those who are trying –
> but nevertheless failing – to make it on their own. But the 'undeserving poor,'
> who choose to rely on welfare when they could be supporting themselves, receive
> little sympathy" (63).

Linked to the focus on individual responsibility is the widely espoused belief that hard

work is (or ought to be) a sufficient remedy for the problems of the poor. This belief has

contributed to the view that many, if not most, of those living in poverty are in such situations

out of laziness or unwillingness to live up to the standards of the Protestant work ethic. Again,

the roots of this belief can be found in early colonial practices, borrowed from the even earlier

English poor laws, which put those unable to provide for themselves to work through

apprenticeships or in institutions (Abramovitz, 1996; Katz, 1986; Somers & Block, 2005). The

emphasis on work requirements for welfare recipients in current anti-poverty policies, as well as

the prevalence – even among the poor themselves - of the view that work is a responsibility and a

virtue, demonstrates our society's continued reliance on this belief. As summarized by Shipler

(2004) in his interview study of the working poor: "If a person's diligent work leads to

prosperity, if work is a moral virtue, and if anyone in the society can attain prosperity through

work, then the failure to do so is a fall from righteousness" (5). This is particularly true, my

respondents say, if you are *choosing* not to work when you are fully capable of doing so.

When my respondents talk about who needs help, focusing on work as the primary

criteria for making this determination, they are, either implicitly or explicitly, defining who does

not need help. In fact, my respondents talk much more frequently about who does *not* need help

than who does, often in an effort to separate themselves from people they know (or assume) are using public anti-poverty programs that they do not really need. This is in keeping with what Katz (1986) refers to as one of the three myths (or discursive elements) that have dominated U.S. discourse about poverty and anti-poverty policies: the belief that "most of those on relief do not need help" (36). Even those considered in need by public anti-poverty policies appear to accept the truth of this myth, indicating the depth to which it is ingrained in American poverty discourse.

Who does not need help

Patty lives with her husband and four children in her childhood home in a middle class suburb of Detroit. Her parents transferred ownership of the house to Patty and her husband when they were unable to sell it for "what needed to be owed." Patty's husband works fulltime, bringing home $1,000-1,499 per month, and Patty stays home with her children, two of whom are not yet old enough for school. They get help from SNAP and WIC for food, but because Patty's husband was able to work a significant amount of overtime to help pay off overdue bills in the past year, they are considered over-income for the Head Start program. When she talks about her family's financial situation, Patty's voice breaks: "'Cause the kids know, that's why," she explains.

> "I never ever imagined being in the situation that we're in. We never wanted to
> get in this situation. I was going to school - I was almost done with school. [My
> husband] was going to finish school after I finished. Um, but your life plays you a
> deck of, you know, you have a deck of cards, and sometimes it's not the way you
> want it played, but we just never anticipated this."

Patty says that she and her husband tried hard to avoid using public anti-poverty programs, but after several months of trying to buy food for a family of six with $70 a week, they decided that they needed help. She has since visited the DHS office several times to apply

and recertify for SNAP, and every time she goes there, she is struck by the number of people she sees who "don't need" the help they are getting:

> "It just doesn't make sense to me how they can afford the things they do, like luxuries in life, in my opinion. I think nails, hair, shopping, clothes, cars you drive, are luxuries, so I don't understand how they can afford that, but they still need assistance. I mean, I guess maybe they have family helping them and stuff, but if the family was helping them to pay for things like that, why aren't they helping them to pay for food? I think food is more important, or maybe even like school supplies or things the kids need. I see a lot of people that don't need it, and a lot of it has been when I've been at a DHS office. It just doesn't make sense."

Patty is not alone in thinking that many of the people getting help from public anti-poverty programs "don't need it." In fact, nearly all of my respondents describe people they know or have seen who are getting help they do not need, and these people, in my respondents' interpretations, fall into three (not necessarily mutually exclusive) categories: 1) people who are lazy (i.e. not working) and could be providing for themselves without assistance if they tried; 2) people who hide (or lie about) resources in order to qualify for benefits; and 3) people who are misusing their benefits, thereby demonstrating that they do not really need them for their intended purpose. In describing the people they view as falling into these categories, my respondents seem less willing to look at the particular circumstances that may impact levels of need (as they do for themselves) and more apt to rely exclusively on the hegemonic poverty discourse and the objective, measurable terms by which policies and programs assess need.

The lazy

Just as many respondents focus on hard work as a criterion for needing help, many express the view that people who are not working – but are perceived to be capable of working – do not truly need help from public anti-poverty programs. "It's people who are qualified to go out and get a job and get good paying jobs, but they're too lazy to do it," says Andrea, a single mother of one who is receiving cash assistance from TANF while completing her bachelor's

degree in nursing. Others expressed similar views, particularly when asked what they thought

policies and programs ought to consider when deciding who needs help and who does not:

> "Well, they should look at the person's job history first off, you know? If you're not working, but you're coming here asking us for help, if you're not trying to help yourself, you can't be expected to be helped." (Tiffany, single mother of three, monthly income $1,500-1,999).

> "It would be ideal if someone was to say, 'Okay, so why aren't you working again?'" (Amanda, separated mother of two, monthly income $2,000-2,499)

> "They should look at, you know: Are they working? Could they have a better job? Are they purposely not working? Are they, do they only work 20 hours and there's a full time job posted? Are they keeping themselves down just to get the assistance? I mean, of course nobody wants to work, you know? I mean, if you can sit at home and still pay your rent, yeah, you're going to choose that over getting up at two in the morning, but they should look at why is it this way or why do you need the help." (Alyson, separated mother of one, monthly income $1,500-1,999)

> Daria, who adopted her six-year-old daughter through the foster care system and has a

22-year-old son who also lives with her, talked on a more personal level about the effect she sees

this "culture of laziness" having on her son:

> "I really hate it with our young men. You know, you decide, 'I can't find a job, so I'm just going to go down and get some help. I'm going to go down and get me a card, you know, for food.' No, you work, you find you a job. Because people would tell my son, 'Why don't you go down there and get your card?' [I tell him], 'You're going to find a job,' you know? 'You're going to find a job.' 'They said I could get…' 'No, I don't teach you that. You're not going to get in your mind that life - you are a strong healthy young man - that you can just go down there and get you a card and be okay. Then, then what? You're just going to be lazy? No.'"

People who are perceived as getting help even though they could be providing for themselves are

thus viewed as doing more than just taking resources they do not need; they are seen as creating,

or at least perpetuating, a culture of acceptance, in which people who do not need assistance

from public anti-poverty programs are encouraged to participate in them rather than living up to

a long-held American standard of self-sufficiency and independence. Again, this echoes the

discourse of deservingness, which considers those who are not working to be undeserving of assistance (Abramovitz, 1996; Katz, 1986; Somers & Block, 2005).

The liars

My respondents describe a second category of people as not needing the assistance they receive: those who hide, misrepresent, or simply lie about the resources they have available to them, making it appear on an application that they need assistance when they really do not. "If you need it, you need it. You have kids to take care of," says Amina, who has no income but whose parents are providing for her and her two children while she goes through the process of divorcing her husband after years of interpersonal violence in their relationship. "But if you're lying, then you should be ashamed of yourself, you know?" For Amina, people's lies are made evident by their material possessions:

> "They're driving a Range Rover, my God. Like they're literally, and they have so much jewelry on, and then the guys, those guys have like big diamonds. You can tell like, you know, the way they're dressed, like everything's from top to bottom, and they're sitting there [in the DHS office] filling out the application. Like, 'Really? Unless you stole those, you can buy your food.' It's just, there's so many things wrong with it. You know what I mean? It's wrong."

Likewise, Tiffany says, "I understand everybody falls on hard times, but if you're driving a 2013 Escalade, you can afford to feed your children. If you're walking around in brand name shoes, brand name clothes - I go to the Salvation Army and get my clothes, get my kids clothes."

Others describe people they know personally who have used a variety of strategies to hide income and other resources. Stephanie, who stays home raising her twin sons while her husband works, making just over $3,000 per month, tells me about people she knew when she worked as waitress. "Working in the restaurant industry," she says, "it's easy for people to not claim the amount of tips that they make, so they can report to the government and say, 'Oh, I only make $200 dollars a month,' and they're really making a thousand dollars a month."

Because her husband is from Egypt, Stephanie also knows several couples who have immigrated

to the U.S. in recent years, some of whom she perceives as not being honest about their

household resources:

> "I've seen people from other countries that weren't married here in America, and they, um, they come here - and they're married, and they're actually living together and both working - but the wife applies that she's a single mom here and becoming an American citizen, and she gets all this money, and her husband actually is probably making more than my husband makes, you know?"

Michele, a white single mother of one who makes $750-999 per month and receives help

from SNAP and Medicaid, in addition to a child care subsidy from the state, describes similar

situations among her acquaintances:

> "A lot of my friends use the programs, but I feel like they don't really need the programs. I feel like a lot of people take advantage of it. Like, you know, if you're not married, then you can like do something separately. So say the wife or the mom applies for help, and, to DHS, it's like, 'Oh, that's a single mom for her kids, so she gets a certain amount.' But then it's like, little do they know the husband has a - or you know the father - has a fulltime job. So I know a lot of people that just, they don't need it, and they're still just using it."

James, a father of three who provides some financial assistance for each of his daughters

but does not live with any of them, talks about more explicit instances of lying:

> "I know people who are working and making $15 to $16 an hour, and I'm not really sure how, but they can get it under the table, go down to the [DHS] office, tell them, 'Hey, I'm not working,' or 'I only make this amount,' or 'I still need help,' and they're getting $700, $800 in food stamps, you know? Like, 'Wow, you're not paying for food, and you're making $17 an hour? You're, you're doing okay.'"

It is possible in all of these cases that my respondents are not aware of the details of their

friends' situations, but they *interpret* these people as misrepresenting their need for assistance.

Whether or not these friends or acquaintances fulfill the eligibility requirements of particular

programs (most often SNAP in my respondents stories) is not necessarily my respondents'

concern; their frustration and confusion appear to arise instead from a sense that these people do

not really need the help they are getting and that their acceptance of this help negatively affects those who do need it. As Jaymie, a married mother of one with a household income of $500-749 per month says, "A lot of people make it difficult for the people that need it. Like um, they cheat the state, they cheat the government, and it makes it harder for other people to get what they need."

The abusers

In addition to people perceived as not being in need because they are lazy or lying, my respondents also talk about people who use the benefits they get from public anti-poverty programs in ways that demonstrate their lack of genuine need. This comes up most frequently in relation to SNAP, as people talk about others who "sell" their benefits by allowing other people to use their electronic benefit cards in exchange for cash. Hannah, a single mother of one who is working part time and going to school while receiving assistance from several public anti-poverty programs, tells me this story:

> "There was a guy the other day, I can't remember where me and [my daughter] were - at the dollar store - and he was walking around the store asking people, 'Oh, if you got food in your cart, I'll pay for it for you, and then you can just give me the cash.' 'Cause he was gonna use his card, and then they just give him the cash for the food, which I guess you gotta do what you gotta do, but you know he's not doing anything good with that money. You know no good is coming of that…I mean it's dire circumstances that lead to that behavior, so I guess they think they can't get ahead so they're gonna sell their food money and take the cash for it. But they're not helping their family, they're not feeding their kids, and they're taking it away from somebody else that actually just wants the food money."

Several other respondents share similar experiences and sentiments:

> "Even if you go to any liquor store - you see a lot of people going into liquor stores and stuff like that just to get anything - and they don't even have the kids with them. Like they have the food stamps to get anything for them, but they don't have the kids with them, you know?...So they get [help] for the babies, and then they will just take advantage or they'll sell it out or something. I've seen that a lot, a lot." (Alma, single mother of three, monthly income $250-499)

"I feel like, 'How do you get your stamps and you go sell them?' You know what I'm saying? So evidently you didn't need them. I be around people every day that sell they stamps or, or get cash and give it away, and I feel like, 'That's for you and your child, so why would you sell your stamps?'" (Nicki, single mother of two, monthly income $1-249)

"There was this one gas station that would accept food cards for gas. I don't know how they got away with that, but I actually witnessed someone do it, one of my friends, and I'm just like, 'That stinks!' Especially when I actually needed the help, and I needed food, like I needed it! And then just to know that some people just take advantage of it." (Michele, single mother of one, monthly income $750-999)

"I mean it hurts me when I go to the grocery store, somebody's outside, they want to sell their bridge card, you know? Things of that sort. Like I said, you know, whatever program you do, you always have those that want to take advantage of it." (Diana, married mother of two, monthly income $1,500-1,999)

Cathy, a married mother of four who works as a manager at a pharmacy, expressed equal frustration about witnessing what she perceives to be abuse related to Medicaid:

"I mean, working at the drug store, I see so many pharmacy things come in that, you know they're not working, you know their Medicaid's paying for it, and you know they're selling it on the street - the drugs that they're getting. It's a given, the ones that they're doing, and it just burns me that, you know, there's people that really need the help and they're not getting the help, because they don't investigate."

Again, the perception is that this abuse of public anti-poverty programs by those who do not need the help is negatively impacting those who do need it.

The fact that so many of my respondents believe that a large number of people receiving assistance do not really need it reflects the findings of previous research that people who use public anti-poverty programs often attempt to distance themselves from the stigma induced by the hegemonic poverty discourse by using that very discourse to describe others (Davis & Hagen, 1996; Newman, 2006; Rank, 1994; Seccombe, 2011). In her ethnographic study of low-wage workers, for example, Katherine Newman (2006) notes that "even those individuals who

received public assistance said they were disgusted with those (other) people who stayed on welfare for years and scammed the system" (212). Experiences with the welfare system, Newman says, do not appear to "shake deeply rooted American attitudes about welfare and work" (220), including ideas about deservingness and need. If this is the case – as my respondents' comments seem to imply – those who design and implement public anti-poverty policies are not alone in assessing need using objective measures of resources. Even those who are willing to assess their own need based on more personal aspects of their life circumstances (albeit still within the framework established by the hegemonic poverty discourse) appear to judge others based solely outside perceptions of available resources.

While the idea of the deserving and undeserving poor is not new, the way in which my respondents connect this idea with the notion of need sheds a unique light on the relationship between these two concepts. In writing about need and societies' obligations to the needs of their people, political theorists and philosophers have traditionally distinguished between what people *deserve* and what they *need*, considering need to be the stronger claim and one that is an integral part of the social contract. For example, in his book on the political philosophy of need, Ignatieff (1984) writes, "The claim of need has nothing to do with deserving; it rests on people's necessity, not on their merit, on their poor common humanity, not on their capacity to evoke pathos" (Ignatieff, 1984, 34). Likewise, Walzer's work on justice (1983) states that "desert does not have the urgency of need, and it does not involve having (owning or consuming) in the same way" (24). For these scholars and others, need is tied to concepts of obligation and contract, such that members of a particular society tacitly agree to meet one another's needs as part of their common citizenship. Deservingness, on the other hand, is considered to be a question of merit -

one that, while important, does not carry the same weight or imply the same responsibility as does need.

My respondents, however, talk about need as a concept that is bound up with – if not indistinguishable from – that of deservingness, reminding us that social contracts are at once political *and* moral. Citizenship, particularly in the American context, is defined not only in terms of rights and obligations but also in terms of merit (Fraser & Gordon, 1992; Somers, 2008). Interpretations of need are thus wrapped up in thoughts about what people need as human beings but also – and perhaps more so – about what they need (or "deserve") as members of a particular social and political context. In defining who needs help and who does not, my respondents demonstrate not only the fundamental role that the concept of deservingness plays in the U.S. context but also the way in which this concept shapes ideas about need. Need is not simply a measure of one's ability to provide the necessities of survival for oneself and one's household (which is the definition implied by policies and programs that use objective standards of eligibility) but also an assessment of one's moral and political status in society.

Counter-hegemonic interpretations of need

While the vast majority of my respondents use the hegemonic discourse of poverty and deservingness in expressing their interpretations of need, a small number acknowledge the existence of this discourse but refuse to incorporate it into their own talk about need, using what might be termed a counter-hegemonic discourse of need in its place. These individuals recognize that the dominant discourse about poverty in the U.S. interprets those who use public anti-poverty programs as lazy, liars, or abusers of public goods. They are well aware that by applying for and receiving benefits from public anti-poverty programs, assistance recipients are positioning themselves as members of a stigmatized group. They do not, however, use this

discourse themselves when explaining who they think needs help. Instead, they say that if people

are going to participate in public anti-poverty programs, knowing the stigma that comes along

with such participation, they are obviously in need.

Amari, the single mother of one described at the beginning of this chapter, is a prime

example of this counter-hegemonic attitude. She recognizes that many people in the U.S. assume

that people who use public anti-poverty programs "don't need it, they need to get off of it and go

find a job," but when asked what *she* thinks about people who use such programs, she says,

"Obviously you need it, because you wouldn't be trying to get it if you didn't need it." For

Amari, then, judgments about need are indeed distinct from judgments about deservingness. In

fact, the question of deservingness does not even enter her discourse.

Karen, a divorced mother of two who has been pursuing her bachelor's degree while

collecting unemployment benefits ($750-999 per month) since she was laid off from her job 18

months ago, says similarly that "a lot of people believe that a lot of people kinda suck off the

government and are on [assistance] too long or take advantage." In her opinion, however, "if you

are going to take advantage of those - well take advantage of them in a good way - of those

programs, you need it. Those programs are set up for people who need it, and if you're going to

take the time - because it's not an easy process to go through - to go through it, then you're in

need, you know?"

Both of these women, along with a handful of other respondents, refuse, through their

interpretations of need, to buy into the hegemonic discourse describing public assistance

recipients as lazy, lying abusers of government programs. Having used these programs at certain

points in their own lives, they are well aware of the treatment that assistance recipients receive

and the opinions that many in society hold about them, but rather than employing the hegemonic discourse themselves, they fight against it, defining anyone who seeks help as being in need.

Individual perceptions of need

Whether or not they use the hegemonic discourse when they talk about what need is, who needs help, and who does not, my respondents all have perceptions of their own level of need, and these perceptions do not necessarily correlate with the income eligibility guidelines of public anti-poverty programs. Like Amari and Keesha, whose interpretations are described at the beginning of this chapter, individuals in objectively similar financial situations sometimes have very different interpretations of their need, and individuals in very different financial situations at times perceive themselves to be at similar levels of need.

Amy and Mindy, for example, each make $750-999 per month – Amy for a family of four and Mindy for a family of eight – and both say that they consider their financial situations to be "comfortable." Elsa, who also makes $750-999 per month for a family of four (herself and three children) describes herself as "stuck." "I don't like it. I don't like it," she says. "I feel like I'm stuck in between, you know? I don't like my job, it don't pay that much, but it pays more than what state aid would give me. And then I have to work afternoons, so I'm really not spending time with my kids that much, so I don't really like it." Likewise, Michele, who is in the same income range but has only one child, tells me that her financial situation "stinks":

> "I have to save up to buy my daughter a winter jacket. It's not something that I can just be like, 'Oh, let me take $50 out of my check.' It's like, no, I have to think like, checks before, like, 'I need to take $10 out of this check and $10 out of the next check and the next check so that I can afford that.' It's hard, it's really hard, and then, I mean, she has all the necessities that she needs, but there are a lot of things that I wish I could give her, but I just can't. So it sucks."

Families at much higher levels of income (although still below 200% FPL) are similarly heterogeneous in their interpretations of need. Mariah and Liz, each of whom makes $2,000-

2,499 per month – Mariah for a family of three and Liz for a family of four – both use the word "insecure" to describe their financial situations, and both have sought help from SNAP and Medicaid at various points. Keandra, on the other hand, has approximately the same income, but says that she is "fine. I don't have any struggles."

Multiple respondents describe their households as living "paycheck to paycheck," but the objective monthly incomes of these households range from less than $250 for a family of two to more than $3,000 for a family of the same size. Eleanor, a 59-year-old divorced woman who is raising her granddaughter on her income from a full-time job ($3,000+ per month), tells me that she "lives from paycheck to paycheck" and wishes that her situation could be better. Amari, who places her monthly income from a part-time job in the $1-249 range, sounds very similar when she says, "I'm basically living paycheck to paycheck just to make sure that my bills are paid."

Overall, my respondents' descriptions of their financial situations and level of need range from "comfortable" to "crisis" and include words like "broke," "struggling," and "stressful," along with phrase like "pretty good" and "it could be worse." From the objective, measurable, and fixed perspective of program eligibility standards, these descriptors make little sense, coming as they do from people at very different levels of income. It is only when we view need from the perspective of individuals themselves that we can begin to understand the heterogeneity of interpretations.

Interpretation is personal, occurring in an individual's own mind as she perceives the world around her. At the same time, interpretation is profoundly influenced by societal discourse, particularly when that discourse is as embedded and hegemonic as U.S. discourse about poverty and public anti-poverty programs. As individuals living in or near poverty talk about their own

needs, they describe interpretations that are holistic, drawing on broad life experiences rather than simple measures of income and resources. At the same time, they use the hegemonic discourse's categories of "deserving" and "undeserving" as standards against which to measure themselves, pointing out the ways in which aspects of their personal situation place them in the "deserving" group. When talking about others, these same individuals often rely solely on the hegemonic poverty discourse, seemingly failing to recognize aspects of other people's situations that might also make them "deserving" of assistance. What this highlights is how trapped people are by the hegemonic poverty discourse and how challenging this makes it to understand need from another person's perspective, even if you appear to be in similar circumstances yourself.

For those living in or near poverty, as for those who design, implement, and conduct research about public anti-poverty policies, relying on the hegemonic discourse of deservingness (even if the word "deserving" is replaced by the word "need") results in assumptions about need that differ dramatically from individuals' own interpretations of their lives and financial situations. If our public anti-poverty policies are intended to meet need, they must therefore look more closely at how individuals interpret their own need and how they develop these interpretations over the course of their lives.

CHAPTER THREE:
"It Will Change"
Constructing Narratives of Need Interpretation

Amanda, along with her three siblings, was raised by her mother and step-father in what she describes as "horrible" circumstances. "We struggled all the time," she says. "I remember times where we didn't have electricity, we didn't have gas, we didn't have water even." In Amanda's view, this was not the result of a poor economy, lack of opportunity, or other structural factors that prevented her parents from succeeding financially. It was, rather, a direct result of their choices: "My mom had four kids. She didn't work. She just stayed at home. Welfare, you know? She didn't have to [work]; they encouraged her to stay home…My step-father, he worked, but he did drugs, and he didn't always bring the money home, so my mom, all she had was her welfare and food stamps, and that's how us kids survived."

Even at a young age, Amanda – now 30 - remembers questioning her parents' lifestyle and decisions. Talking to me in a conference room at her daughter's Head Start program in a low-income suburb of Detroit, she says, "I always knew that it was wrong. I never understood, and I used to always say, 'I'm never gonna live like this.' I remember even when I was a kid: 'I'm never gonna live like this. This is never gonna be me.' And it never was." Despite getting pregnant at the age of 15, Amanda believes that she has made much better life choices than either her parents or her siblings. When she found out she was pregnant, she and her boyfriend got married and worked to become self-sufficient. "He had a job. He was making I think like $7.50 an hour, and we moved in with his parents for a little while. We saved money, and then we moved into a house in Detroit by ourselves, and we've always been on our own. We've always

took care of our bills…And I'm proud of that, and it feels good." Her sister and brothers, on the other hand, "are comfortable with welfare. They're comfortable with just, you know, not even working, just living off the state."

Today, Amanda views herself as "struggling" and "in the middle of a financial crisis." She has recently separated from her husband and is providing for her two children (ages 3 and 14) on her monthly salary of just over $2,000. While she is objectively much better off financially than her parents were during her childhood, she still considers herself to be in need. In fact, she interprets her level of need as being greater now than it was in childhood, not because she has less income or fewer resources, but because she views her need as being *in spite* of rather than *because of* her life choices. "I've always worked," she says. "I've gone to school. I worked in the day, and at night I went to class. So, it's like, I did what I needed to do to support my child and still get my education." Amanda perceives her commitments to being a good mother and a hard worker as *evidence* that she is truly in need: "For me I just feel like it's because I want to do better, and I want to show my kids something better."

Amanda contrasts this with her sister who, like their mother, receives assistance from a number of public anti-poverty programs, including TANF, SNAP, and Section 8. "She's not trying to work," Amanda tells me. "She's not trying to make things better for herself." When she talks about what it means to be poor, Amanda says that she does not consider her sister to be living in poverty, even though her income is well below the federal poverty line:

> "I don't feel like my sister would be considered living in poverty. I don't think that's true, because she's getting all this assistance, and she's living just as good as someone who's working…I feel like poverty is someone who is, you know, trying, who's working part time, looking for another job, maybe working two part time jobs, making minimum wage on both. I feel like that's poverty…I feel like I'm living in poverty."

Despite the fact that her sister is in much worse objective circumstances than Amanda, Amanda's belief that effort ought to be counted in determining need – a belief that arises out of the hegemonic poverty discourse - leads her to interpret herself as being the one in greater need.

Amanda's interpretation of need is complicated, however, by the feeling that she is, in part, responsible for her situation, particularly when it comes to the amount of debt she faces. During their nearly fifteen year marriage, Amanda and her husband made the mutual decision to use only her name for major purchases in order to avoid the consequences of his poor credit rating. Now that she is on her own, Amanda is upset with her husband for not helping her to support their children but even more upset with herself for what she views as her own culpability in creating her current situation. "We have this house, we have all these bills, we have all of these things, and none of it is in his name," she tells me, sighing with frustration. "It's all in my name, because we couldn't establish anything in his name. So he just basically walked away, and I'm stuck with everything." Within five minutes of meeting Amanda, I hear about her plans to deal with her debt – meeting with a debt counseling organization and talking to an attorney about the possibility and consequences of declaring bankruptcy – and throughout our conversations, she repeatedly makes clear that she is accepting responsibility for this situation and working hard to escape it. Again, it is not her objective circumstances (i.e. the amount of debt she owes or the amount of income she earns) but her efforts to change them that drive Amanda's interpretation of her own need.

Need has often been discussed, both theoretically and in the practice of establishing standards for policy design and implementation, as a universal or objective concept. In this view, human beings have certain "natural" needs (food, shelter, etc.), and if societies are to survive and

thrive, these needs must be met.[12] While it may be true that human beings have objective needs, my respondents' discourse provides evidence that need is a much more complex phenomenon than can be captured in universal terms; in Michael Walzer's oft-quoted words, "People don't just have needs, they have ideas about their needs; they have priorities, they have degrees of need; and these priorities and degrees are related not only to their human nature but also to their history and culture" (1983, 66). For my respondents, that history and culture includes both personal experiences and exposure to the U.S.'s hegemonic poverty discourse, shaping interpretations of need in ways that – like Amanda's – do not necessarily correspond with objective measures.

Need interpretation

What Walzer calls people's "ideas about their needs," including their thoughts about priorities and degrees of need, corresponds, in part, with what I refer to as individuals' interpretations of need. I use the word "interpretation," rather than "idea" or "perception," in order to emphasize the active and ongoing nature of this phenomenon. My respondents do not simply have "ideas about their needs;" they have ideas about need itself, and these are made up of retrospective, prospective, and comparative views of their lives as they recall past experiences, encounter new situations, and describe their circumstances in all of their complexities. Interpretation is a process through which my respondents not only define or describe but *make meaning* of their experiences. This occurs both explicitly and implicitly, as they draw on every-day events as well as on "taken-for-granted assumptions" that stem from the U.S.'s hegemonic poverty discourse (Schwartz-Shea, 2006, 92).

Interpretations of need, in particular, are not just about defining what counts as a need and how great that need is (i.e. priorities and degrees) but also about what role need plays in

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[12] For summary discussions of this view of human need, see Hamilton, 2004 and Robertson, 1998.

defining the relationships that individuals within a given society have to one another. Particularly in light of the connection my respondents draw between need and deservingness, their interpretations of need are not only material but political, which, in the context of the hegemonic poverty discourse, makes them also inherently moral.

In order to understand my respondents' interpretations of need and what shapes these interpretations, we must first acknowledge that need – at least in this context - is an "inherently practical [problem] that [requires] contextual evaluative and ultimately coercive 'resolution' within specified structures of authority and participation" (Hamilton, 2004, 9). In other words, need is not universal or abstract, nor is it a-political. It is defined by concrete lives, lived in a particular political and social context, and the struggle to interpret need is one of power and politics. As Nancy Fraser points out, the U.S.'s public anti-poverty policies (which she refers to as "the U.S. welfare system") "[impose] monological, administrative definitions of situation and need and so [preempt] dialogically achieved self-definition and self-determination. [The welfare system] positions its subjects as passive client or consumer recipients and not as active co-participants involved in shaping their life-conditions" (Fraser, 1987, 115). The gap between my respondents' interpretations of need and the assumptions made by policies and programs demonstrates the reality of this view and reminds us of the importance of attending to the interpretations of those whose lives are most affected (or ignored) by these policies. Because such individuals – my respondents included – have historically been excluded from "the political conversations in which [their] needs are contested and defined" (White, 1990, 49), we cannot hope to understand their interpretations of need or the role that need interpretation plays in the choices they make without adequately exploring the narratives they use to describe these interpretations. It is through these narratives that my respondents position themselves in relation

to the hegemonic poverty discourse, using the very particular contexts of their lives to present themselves as "deserving" members of society.

Narratives of need interpretation

My respondents' interpretations of need are both multidimensional and contextual. By "multidimensional," I mean that these interpretations are not only about current financial circumstances but are embedded in respondents' broader interpretations of their lives. Like most of us, people living in or near poverty do not compartmentalize different aspects or dimensions of their lives (finances, family, work, etc.) but think of them holistically, considering not only what they need in order to provide food for their children, for example, but, more broadly, what they need to be good parents, to get and keep jobs that provide them with a sense of stability and dignity, and to contribute meaningfully to their communities and to society at large. When Amanda talks about her sense of need, she draws on her desire to support her children and show them "something better," her strong work ethic, and her commitment to being self-sufficient and responsible for her life choices. Her interpretation of need does not arise out of a simple calculation of financial resources and expenses but is woven out of the many dimensions of her life: motherhood, marriage (and its dissolution), employment, and personal responsibility.

At the same time, respondents' interpretations of need (including Amanda's) are contextual, meaning that they are embedded in their past, present, and future experiences and expectations as well as in how they compare themselves to others. People do not develop interpretations of need in a vacuum; they draw on what they know and what they believe. In Amanda's case, interpreting need has meant comparing her current situation to her previous life circumstances and to the lives of her mother and her sister. She considers herself to be "struggling," because her household income has gone from "about four grand a month, and we

were, you know, living okay," to less than half of that; she is not receiving any child support or other assistance from her husband; and her separation has left her with a significant amount of debt. Compared to her life before the separation, Amanda says, "Now I feel like I'm just sinking."

In addition, Amanda compares herself to her mother and her sister, both of whom she considers to be unnecessarily dependent on the government:

> "My sister gets Section 8. On top of that she gets cash assistance. On top of that she gets food stamps. So why would she work? Why would she work? They're paying her rent, they're feeding her, and they're giving her spending money. That's like, you know, a rich mom and dad taking care of you saying, 'Here, go do whatever you want. You don't have to work. It's fine.' That's what I feel like. I feel like it's not fair."

Because her sister (like their mother before her) gets all of this assistance, Amanda does not consider her to be in need. By comparison, she interprets her own level of need to be greater because of her work ethic and commitment to self-sufficiency. Without attending to the ways in which Amanda contextualizes her situation – both in light of her previous experiences and in comparison to members of her family - it would be very difficult to understand why she feels the way she does about her level of need.

Multidimensional Interpretations of Need

Basic Finances

The first, and most obvious, life dimension on which my respondents draw in interpreting need is their basic financial situation. As was seen in the previous chapter, the ability to provide the physical necessities (shelter, food, clothing, etc.) for one's children is a primary measure of need for my respondents. For example, Michele, a white single mother of one who makes $750-999 per month at her job in a nursing home, says, "The most important thing to me was that my daughter always had food." Likewise, Priscilla, a recently separated African American mother of

one who receives assistance from SSDI, tells me, "I have to keep a roof over my son's head…We can't be on the street, I'm not going to be on the street." Finally, Danielle, a married African American mother of one whose monthly household income is just over $2,000, says, "Anything that's major, anything in the car, household, any kind of utilities or rent or schooling for [my son] - those are like things that come first and foremost, because they're directly related to him, and I'll provide for him."

For all of these mothers – and the seventy two other parents with whom I spoke - making sure that their children have their basic material needs met comes first. Their ability to meet these needs financially is not, however, the only dimension they consider in interpreting need.

Parenthood/Motherhood

Sitting in a crowded strip mall coffee shop across from Daria, an African American mother of two (ages 6 and 19) who has recently returned to work after taking fourteen months off to recover from a back injury, I listen as she describes her decision to leave her job as a hair dresser, knowing that she would have few resources to support her family:

> "This was the hardest time of my career, you know? But again, you have to make decisions for not just yourself: your life, your family, you know what I'm saying? I have a six year old. What good am I going to be to her in my state? I was just in so much pain all the time; it's like you either take off or don't get to play and run around with your child, you know? One day I was sitting outside, I had got off work, and I was just hurting so bad, and my daughter wanted to go outside. So she was playing, and I looked over, and she was playing with the little [neighbor] girl. The little girl was playing with her mom, so then her mom went in the house and got some bubbles…So imagine this: your [child] is out playing with somebody else's mother and just running around and playing and just having so much fun, and you're sitting in a chair. You can't even hardly move, and your child is out there having fun. That's what you should be doing with your child. So that was the straw that broke the camel's back; it's like, 'No. You need to do something. You have to come off [work], because if this is what you're going to be doing - sitting in this chair while she's out playing - what's going to be next? Somebody else going to be raising her while you're sitting in this chair.' So that's kind of where that came from. It was like, 'You do this. Money doesn't matter.'"

For Daria, thinking about need – what she needed (and continues to need) to provide for her family – is about much more than finances. Her role as a mother to her six-year-old daughter is primary, and while she is clearly concerned with providing for her daughters' material needs, seeing her child play with another child's mother while she sat by and watched highlighted her need to mother her child in ways that could not be compensated for with income alone.

Parenthood – more specifically, given my sample, motherhood - was the most common life dimension on which I heard respondents speak, and it consistently overlapped with other dimensions such as health, employment, and general household finances. This is not surprising given the emphasis the U.S.'s hegemonic poverty discourse places on "traditional" family and gender norms (Abramovitz, 2000; Gordon, 1994; Hays, 2003; Piven & Cloward, 1971). Since the inception of the U.S.'s earliest social welfare policies, there has existed a gendered conception of "welfare," particularly in relation to cash assistance programs but also other programs such as food stamps and housing assistance. This has been especially true since the advent of the Social Security Act in 1935:

> "The Social Security Act [1935] created the contemporary meaning of 'welfare' by setting up a stratified system of provision in which the social insurance programs were superior both in payments and in reputation, while public assistance was inferior – not just comparatively second-rate but deeply stigmatized...The superior programs are disproportionately white and male and they were designed to be so, because that was the dominant image of citizenship in 1935" (Gordon, 1994).

Ideas about motherhood – what it entails and who best represents its ideals – are embedded in this conception. While the specific ideas about motherhood have shifted – from the Victorian image of the (white) mother in need of support and protection as she cared for her children (Hancock, 2004) to the contemporary standard of a wage-earning citizen who fulfills her own work responsibilities while also providing for the material and psychological needs of her

children (Morgen, Acker & Weigt, 2010; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011) – public anti-poverty programs have long shaped and been shaped by society's image of the good mother.

This is not lost on those mothers who have received assistance from social welfare programs. Over and over again researchers have reported that "welfare mothers" are committed to fulfilling the role of "good mother" despite their financial circumstances (DeParle, 2004; Hays, 2003; Morgen, Acker & Weigt, 2010; Rank, 1994). My respondents are no different in this respect, although they represent a broader cross-section of parents: some are "welfare mothers;" some have been "welfare mothers" in the past; some have never used traditional welfare programs (TANF, SNAP, etc.); and some are not mothers at all, but fathers.

From my poorest respondents, like Amari and Keesha, who were surviving on incomes of less than $250 a month, to those whose monthly incomes were more than ten times that amount, thinking about need meant thinking about what it means to be a good parent. Need interpretation was not just about what these respondents needed to provide for their children's material well-being (food, shelter, medical care, etc.) – although this was certainly a part of their interpretation and something about which they were greatly concerned - but also about what they needed to be the kinds of mothers and fathers they desperately wanted to be. This dimension of their lives interacted with other dimensions in a variety of ways in shaping respondents' interpretations of need.

For Caroline, for example, a white single mother of two, living on an income of $250-499 per month while she pursues her education has been a challenge, but she does not view herself as being in desperate need, because she feels good about who she is as a mother to her children (ages 3 and 4). "I'm pretty fulfilled and happy in my life," she tells me as we sit on preschool-sized chairs in a corner of her children's Head Start classroom. "I want my kids to know that we

don't need brand new, and we don't, you know? We don't have video games, and we still have a big tube TV. We don't need nothing fancy, we don't."

Elsa, on the other hand, who is raising three children on an income of $750-999 per month, seems to feel more in need than Caroline despite having a steady job and more money. As quoted in chapter two, she says, "I feel like I'm stuck in between you know? I don't like my job, it don't pay that much, but it pays more than what state aid would give me, you know what I'm saying? And then I have to work afternoons, so I'm really not like spending time with my kids that much, so I don't really like it." The fact that bringing in enough money to provide for her family means sacrificing time with her children leads Elsa to interpret her need much differently than Caroline, who has less money but says that she spends "all of [her] time with [her] children." It is clearly important to Elsa that she is able to provide for her children's material needs - putting food on the table, buying them clothes and school supplies, and keeping up with the monthly rent on their three-bedroom apartment – but this is not her only consideration in interpreting her family's need. She views less time with her children as a necessary trade-off but not one that makes her feel less in need.

Other respondents who interpret need through the lens of parenthood express similar considerations:

> "Right now life is not about materialistic items, it's not about vacations, it's not about toys…My life with my boys is awesome. I have an opportunity, you could look at it like the glass is half full or the glass is half empty. My glass is half full. I have an opportunity as a single parent to be so proactive in my kids' lives, and I wake up to my kids every morning. It's good." (Charles, single father of two, monthly income "unsteady")

> "I think [our financial situation is] okay. I have nothing to complain about. To be honest with you, being laid off is probably the best thing that ever happened to me (laughter). When, when you work a job - again I worked at GM for ten years - I was there working the ten, twelve hours, bringing stuff home and on the weekends. I can say I'm more at peace now. Of course I had the pay reduction, but

you can't put a price on family." (Diana, married mother of two, monthly income $1,500-1,999)

"You want to know that your kids are okay. You want to be able to work, you want to be able to provide, you know, make sure you're maintaining everything, but you want to make sure your kids are safe, too." (Dominique, single mother of two, monthly income $1,000-1,499)

"I mean, if it was just me, I don't care; I'll eat peanut butter and jelly for the rest of my life, you know? It's just me. But when you're responsible for another person, it's hard, you know? Because you're like, 'I'm like failing as a mom.'" (Alyson, single mother of one, monthly income $1,500-1,999)

In all of these cases, how respondents feel about themselves as parents impacts how they interpret their level of need. Because they are able to spend more time with their children, Charles and Diana interpret themselves as being in less need, even though they have each recently lost a job and are in much worse financial circumstances than earlier in their lives. Similarly, Dominique, who has made the decision to move from two jobs to one despite a significant cut in pay, expresses the desire to balance financial well-being with other aspects of parenthood. In other portions of our conversations, Dominique talked about herself as feeling less in need now than she has in the past (when she had more money but less interaction with her children), simply because she is confident that she is making decisions that are good for her children and providing them with what they need, both materially and emotionally. Finally, Alyson, who expresses feeling *more* in need than she has in the past, says that this is not just a financial matter but rather a result of her feelings about herself as a mother. None of these parents would deny that their ability to provide for their children's material well-being contributes greatly to their interpretation of need, but they would also all agree that other factors weigh heavily in this interpretation.

Personal Responsibility

While parenthood is a key aspect in respondents' interpretations of need, it is also apparent from the comments of respondents like Daria and Elsa that - like objective financial status - how individuals think of themselves as parents is not the sole determinant of these interpretations. How well respondents perceive themselves to fulfill the U.S.'s ideal of "personal responsibility" and comply with society's dominant work ethic interacts with their role as parents in critical ways.

The day before my scheduled interview with Beverly, a single African American mother of three, she calls to ask if we can change the location of our meeting from her home to a local hospital. Seven months pregnant with twin boys, she had been admitted that morning for monitoring and to prepare for induced labor. I offer to reschedule or cancel our interviews, but Beverly insists that she wants to do them.

Arriving in her hospital room the following day, I find Beverly sitting up in her bed, attached to various monitors and IV tubes. A nurse is adjusting heart-rate monitors for the babies, and Beverly's three daughters (ages 9, 14, and 16) sit around a small table on the other side of the room, chatting quietly over their school work. When I ask Beverly about her family's financial circumstances, her response is:

> "Part of me is like 'Okay, I'm blessed to have these boys,' because I didn't have any boys, so I always wanted boys. But it's kind of a headache, because I can't work, and when you can't work, you can't take care of your family the way you want to. So it's a little bit of stress, and I think that's why, that's how I ended up in the hospital because it, yeah, it's hard."

Beverly describes herself as a hard worker, dedicated to providing for her family on her own. While she has received assistance from public programs in the past, when she started her current job, she moved quickly up the ladder: "I went from a second assistant all the way to store manager within a year, so they had told me I was making too much money to get food stamps,

which didn't bother me. It made me feel good." While working, she did not think of herself as being in need, but when she was forced (by health concerns related to her pregnancy) to go on unpaid maternity leave much earlier than she had anticipated, her interpretation changed. Being unable to work – even though she has found ways to get by with the help of family, non-profit, and government assistance – leads her to feel like she is not being the mother she wants to be to her children. More than her lack of financial resources, it is her inability to work for those resources herself that drives her interpretation of need.

While Beverly's *lack* of work increases her sense of need, a similar dedication to self-sufficiency drives other respondents, like Amanda, to perceive their work itself as *evidence* that they are truly in need. Using the discourse of deservingness, they emphasize their past and present work experiences to demonstrate that they are doing all that they can to provide for themselves. "[My siblings] are comfortable with welfare," Amanda tells me. "I'm not comfortable with that. I want to know that when I get that paycheck, I'm proud that I've worked for this money that I've received." This sense of pride in her work ethic is intricately connected to Amanda's perception of herself as a mother, as she says that she strives "to do better" because she wants to show her children a better way of life. Likewise, Tiffany, who describes herself as "working diligently, faithfully, 40 hours plus a week to be able to make ends meet," says, "I try to tell my kids, 'You have to work for things that you want, you know? It doesn't come just easy; it doesn't just get handed to you.'" For Tiffany, Amanda, and Beverly (along with many other respondents), interpretations of need arise out of who they perceive themselves to be as both parents and workers; they work in order to provide for their children's material well-being but also in order to set an example for them of what it means to be responsible for your own life, thereby living up to the standards set by the hegemonic poverty discourse.

Other examples of the personal responsibility ethos include respondents' descriptions of their efforts to attain higher education, which they view as a means of achieving long-term, sustainable self-sufficiency. Caroline, who interprets her need based on the time she is able to spend with her children, as well as her objective financial situation, also considers her commitment to obtaining her degree as a critical factor in this interpretation. "A degree will just make me more money," she says. "Two degrees will make me even more. Then I will be self-sufficient, and then I'll be paying all the government back. That's the way I look at it." Dave, a white single father of one, also describes his education as a means of taking responsibility for his circumstances: "I'm in school full-time to get out of [my current situation], so obviously, I mean, I always say I'm not happy with where I am right now, but I mean, I made the decision not to go to school when I was supposed to go, so [I'm] just trying to play catch up right now to get out of it." Emphasizing their commitment to the fundamental American value of personal responsibility, Caroline and Dave join many other respondents in highlighting their efforts to "follow the rules of mainstream American culture" (Gans, 2009, 81), again using the hegemonic poverty discourse as a tool to structure their interpretations of need.

Contextual Interpretations of Need

Just as my respondents' interpretations of need encompass the many *dimensions* of their lives, they are also firmly embedded in the *context* of their lives – past, present, and future. As I spoke with individual after individual, learning about their current situations, their experiences in childhood and earlier adulthood, and their relationships with family, friends, and acquaintances, it became apparent that the narratives they use to describe their interpretations of need nearly always draw on life experiences and expectations as well as on comparisons with others. Again, it is these contextual factors (and the very fact that my respondents feel it important to include

them in their narratives) that allow individuals who are – at least to some extent – trapped by the hegemonic poverty discourse to construct themselves as "deserving."

Retrospective Interpretations

For some of my respondents, thinking about their previous experiences leads them to interpret their current situation in a more positive light, explaining, at least in part, why some individuals who appear to be in difficult, if not desperate, circumstances, do not interpret themselves as being in need. In the sparsely furnished living room of the apartment she shares with her three daughters (ages 6, 3, and one month), with family photographs covering the walls around us, Shelly tells me that, despite having been recently cut off from her cash assistance and having no income other than small amounts of assistance from family, "things are going okay." As I struggle to understand how someone with no income could interpret herself as not having much need, I ask Shelly, who describes herself as white and Latina and lives in a subsidized apartment complex in a predominantly white, working class suburb of Detroit, if she has been through more difficult times in the past. "Oh yeah," she says. "There's been a few times where I've had pretty much nothing but myself and my kids…but I've always learned to do what needs to be done, and things will get better." Compared to her own childhood, which she describes as "not good at all," and to earlier times when she considered herself truly poor, her current situation, which includes a stable place to live and food assistance from SNAP and WIC, strikes her as "okay."

Other respondents, at varying levels of income, make similar comparisons in interpreting their level of need. Leslie, for example, says that she and her boyfriend and their two sons are "comfortable" living in a middle class suburb on her boyfriend's income of $1,000-1,499 each month. She goes on to say, "[When] I got pregnant with my first son, we lived in my dad's

basement, and neither of us were working, so that was pretty bad…We lived off my dad pretty much…[When I *was* working], it was always like minimum wage kinda things, so we like, we got evicted like twice, because we couldn't make rent." Now that they are living on their own, still making only slightly more than minimum wage, Leslie feels much better about their situation. Similarly, Karen, who provides for her two children (ages 6 and 4) on unemployment insurance benefits ($2,000-2,499 per month) while she pursues her education, tells me that when she and her husband first separated, "he literally dropped us at my mother's house, $100 in my pocket and two kids and no car and no job. So, that was rough…I couldn't find a job, so for six months we lived on $600 a month [that my husband gave me], and that paid for our car, car insurance, my phone and our food." Having been through a more difficult situation – like Leslie, living with family rather than in her own home – Karen now considers herself to be doing pretty well even though she still struggles to pay all of her bills.

On the flip side, other respondents remembered better times in their past, leading them to interpret their current situation as one of more need. Just as Amanda compares her present circumstances to what life was like before her divorce, Dawn remembers what her situation was like when she and her two children lived with her parents rather than on their own: "We were pushed into living on our own [when my parents moved out of state], so we've had to like struggle to make it work, you know, with bills and stuff. So, I liked it better before 'cause I didn't have to pay a bunch of stuff." While she and her children's father both work, bringing home a combined $1,000-1,499 each month, the added expenses they face living on their own make her feel much more in need than she did as a single mother living with her parents. Likewise, Melissa, whose husband has been unable to work since a car accident left him

physically and mentally disabled, says, "This is the worst. This is the worst it's ever been, 'cause we've always maintained, always, always, always. And it's not like that anymore."

How one's current situation compares to one's past can clearly alter current interpretations of need, leading two people in objectively similar circumstances to feel very differently about their need. Karen, whose more difficult past makes her feel less in need now, is raising two children on $2,000-2,499 per month, just like Amanda, whose more secure situation before her separation makes her feel very much in need. Dawn, who felt better about her situation when she lived with her parents, is in objectively similar circumstances to Leslie, who feels more comfortable now that she is on her own. Understanding how people interpret their own life experiences allows us to see, in a new light, why interpretations of need are so varied.

Prospective Interpretations

The past is not the only relevant context for people's interpretations of need. Many respondents also look to their future – what they expect, what they hope for, or what they fear – in developing such interpretations.

Sitting at the dining room table in her parent's suburban home, where she pays $300 a month for the bedroom she shares with her four-year-old daughter, Janet, a 27-year-old African American woman, tells me that her financial situation right now is "stressful" and "sometimes sad," particularly when she is unable to afford the "extras" that she would like to provide for her daughter. She makes $250-500 a month working part-time as a hairdresser while also going to school full-time to become a nurse. Despite this situation, she does not consider herself to be in great need, in large part because she is only a few months away from graduating with a bachelor's degree in nursing and anticipates getting a good job and moving out of her parent's house in the very near future: "I think, right now, some of the choices that I'm making are

making it so that my future is going to be better," she says, And so I realize that sometimes people have to struggle to get to where they're going, and I just think of it as like, I'm in that struggle, so when I do get that apartment next year, I'm more appreciative than the person who just, their parents paid for them." Her conviction that life is going to improve for herself and her daughter and her pride in having worked her way out of difficult circumstances lead her to feel that her current situation is not as bad as it might otherwise seem: "I know a lot of people look at people who are low-income: Is it stressful? Is it more stressful? Yes. I can see how some people fold and get stressed out, but I'm not depressed at all, maybe because there's a light very close to the end of my tunnel."

Melanie, a 23-year-old white woman who also has a four-year-old daughter and makes $750-999 each month at her job at a local grocery store, tells me, "I struggle to pay my bills. I struggle for gas. You know all that fun stuff," but at the same time, she is confident that her situation is going to get better. She has been at her current job for three years and says:

> "Next year I start getting nice raises, and I top out at quite a bit of money at my fifth year being there, which, doubled with my benefits through my insurance and the fact that it is union…it's a pretty decent job…I mean I wish that they paid me more, but with the benefits that I do have and knowing that in the near future what I will be making, makes it worth it."

She keeps this in mind when interpreting her current level of need, reminding herself that if she can "just stick it out for a couple more years," her life will improve, and, more importantly, she will be able to provide the life she wants for her daughter.

Likewise, Jamila, twenty four and African American, who is also in school while her husband earns $1,500-2,000 per month for their family of five, says:

> "It sucks, but it's okay for now…When I finish school hopefully it will change. It's pretty much, you have to do something to create a difference in whatever you want to do, you know? Whether it be finances or whatever. And we're pretty

much doing all we can… I mean it's hard for now, but it's temporary…We might not have everything right now, but in the long run we'll be fine."

All of these women are struggling to make ends meet, but they do not consider themselves to be in a tremendous amount of need, mainly because they view their situations as temporary. It is interesting to note the emphasis they all place on hard work as the basis for their anticipated success. Again, their interpretations of need, while drawing on the specific contexts of their individual lives, also rely heavily on their broader cultural context – a cultural context that considers hard work to be the ultimate (if not only) solution to poverty and need.

Comparative Interpretations

While my respondents interpret need in the context of their own life experiences – past, present, and future – the contextual factor that appears even more frequently in their narratives of need interpretation is how they view themselves in comparison to others, most often to those they consider to be in *more* need than themselves.

Dave, the 29-year-old single father quoted above, is temporarily living with his own parents until he can save enough money to rent an apartment. He works 38 ½ hours each week at a job that pays "a quarter more than minimum wage" and pays his parents $100 per week for "room and board" for himself and his son, leaving him with a couple hundred dollars a month for other expenses. When I ask him whether he has turned to any programs for assistance, he says: "I would assume that I would be eligible for [assistance], but right now I have a lot of help from my mom. And, you know, I'm very lucky with that, so I'd rather not get on too much assistance from the government when somebody else could be, you know, somebody else could have it. Yeah, other people might need it." The fact that he has family resources on which to draw to support himself and his son (and, as noted above, is pursuing his education to improve his

employment prospects) makes Dave feel much less in need than he otherwise might, particularly

when he thinks about other people who do not have similar resources.

Other respondents express similar sentiments as they develop and describe their

interpretations of need:

> "I'm thankful for what I have, because it's always someone out there doing a lot
> worse than you…I can say I know for sure my kids eat, they have clean clothes
> on, clean diapers, they are not wanting for anything, they get the basic haircuts,
> my van start up every day…The next person could be doing a lot worse." (Jackie,
> married mother of three, monthly income $1,500-1,999)

> "But then I think about other people, and sometimes I'm just like, 'You know,
> what am I whining about? At least I have a coat, you know? Some people don't
> have a roof over their heads…So yeah, I don't have the stuff I want, but I do have
> something." (Tonia, single mother of two, monthly income $2,500-2,999)

> "I really wouldn't define myself as poor, because I'm not on a street struggling for
> money. My eyes aren't crusty every day, I have a rag to wash my face, I have a
> toothbrush to brush my teeth, I don't have to lay on the ground with dirt and bugs
> crawling over me and make that a bed, you know? So I definitely wouldn't define
> myself as poor." (Andrea, single mother of one, monthly income < $250)

> "I don't know if that's something to brag about, but, I mean, I know there's people
> who have it worse, who have less, so I'm happy for what I have." (Leslie, single
> with two children, monthly income $1,000-1,499)

For some respondents, though, comparisons to others work in the opposite direction, as

they contrast their own situations with those who appear to be in *less* need. In the dining room of

her modest suburban home, with the noise of the television and three of her four children's

voices streaming in from the living room, Patty tells me about the challenge of sending her

children to a public school where most of the children come from much more affluent families.

> "At first I didn't really realize it, until I started getting to know a lot of the parents
> [at my children's school], and it's like, almost every single parent I know, both
> husband and wife are college graduates, and they've all had like, you know, some
> type of good job…I mean I get along with everyone, I have a lot of friends, and
> my kids have friends, but we live differently. They don't know, but we live
> different big time…And when it comes to, just football alone, there's a lot of extra

things that people do and want you to put money into, and it's like, 'Oh my God. I don't want to tell them I can't do it."

Perhaps if Patty's children went to school with others from similarly resourced families (her husband makes $1,000-1,499 per month), and there was not the expectation that families could afford to pay for extracurricular activities, she would feel differently about her own family's need, but, as it stands, interacting with the parents of her children's classmates and friends in their middle class suburb increases her own sense of need.

Liz, a single mother of three, who makes $2,000-2,499 per month, describes similar experiences interacting with her co-workers:

"There's times when they're like, 'Let's go here for lunch,' or 'Let's do this.' I can't do that. Twenty dollars for me is gas in my car. Twenty dollars to me is groceries for half of a week. Twenty dollars to me is not like I can just go out to lunch and spend twenty dollars. There's just no way. I don't think a lot of them can even fathom what it's like to budget the last twenty dollars or not know how you're gonna get groceries in a couple of days. They just, they don't even get it. They will never get it. They're not from the same place."

The fact that her co-workers cannot even imagine living in a situation like hers plays a role in Liz's interpretation of need. While she has always considered herself to be "struggling," she generally considers this to be just a part of life, but interactions with co-workers highlight her level of need. Like Patty, the reminders that others are living at much higher incomes and providing themselves and their children with a lifestyle she cannot afford helps to shape her interpretation of her own circumstances.

Interpretations of need and participation choices

Because people draw on various dimensions of their lives and on the contexts in which those lives are lived in narrating interpretations of need, these interpretations are unlikely to be static. While my interviews provide me with narratives told at a particular point in my respondents' lives, it is easy to see how the same individual might interpret her/himself to be

more or less in need at other times, depending on the dimension of life considered or the comparisons drawn. Amanda, for example, talks about how much better her situation is now than during her childhood but also how much worse her situation is now than it was before her separation. She draws heavily on the hegemonic poverty discourse, emphasizing her work ethic and sense of personal responsibility, while also highlighting her *husband's* irresponsibility (and thus her lack of control over her circumstances) as a factor in her situation.

Over the course of our conversations, respondents' comments demonstrate "changing roles, shifts in narrative positions that, in turn, signal stocks of knowledge pertinent to the point of view being taken or the complexities of telling" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, 34). At one point in time, a respondent talks from her perspective as a mother, expressing a particular point of view, while later this same respondent expresses a seemingly different, even contradictory, point of view as she speaks from her perspective as a child growing up in a poor household. Recognizing these different roles and narrative positions adds a layer of complexity – and, some might say, lack of reliability - to respondents' interpretations of need, as they seem to change not only over the course of the respondent's lifetime but even over the course of a single interview. Rather than making interpretations meaningless, however, these shifts provide us with the opportunity to understand "the various ways that the respondent attaches meaning to the phenomena under investigation" (77), i.e. need. It is this complexity, and the narrative resources upon which respondents draw in creating it, that sheds new light on the relationship between interpretations of need and participation choices.

As my respondents talk about their situations, they switch into and out of narratives, shifting their interpretations as they consider the different dimensions of their lives. Depending on the questions I ask or the context in which they perceive those questions (i.e. as parents, as

employees, as "welfare" recipients, etc.), people draw on different narrative resources. Sometimes these resources are rooted in the hegemonic poverty discourse; sometimes they stem from stories told and retold or lessons learned and relearned throughout childhood and adulthood. Respondents draw on these resources to help them make choices but also to help them make *sense* of choices they have already made. Each time they draw on a particular resource, they reinforce that narrative and those choices in their own minds, constructing themselves in relation to the hegemonic poverty discourse and to others whose contexts and narratives are viewed in less personal terms and whose choices are thus viewed as less justifiable.

Interpretations of need are not, in and of themselves, predictive of the choices people make about participation in public anti-poverty programs. We cannot draw a direct line from an individual's interpretation of need to the choices he or she has made or will make. What we can do, however, is seek to understand how these interpretations are described, what narrative resources are at their roots, and how they interact with a second set of interpretations: interpretations of the very programs that are purportedly designed to meet need. These latter interpretations are *filtered through* interpretations of need, sometimes drawing on the same narrative resources (the hegemonic poverty discourse, life experiences, etc.), and helping to shape (while also at times *being shaped by*) individuals' participation choices.

CHAPTER FOUR:
"The Best Country in the World"
How People Interpret the Right to Assistance

> "I think that's the purpose of a government: to help those who are not in the best position to always help themselves…Because if I'm in this country - the best country in the world - I believe I do have a right to be able to say, 'Can you help me? I'm a citizen of this country. I want to do better in my life. Can you help me?' I believe so…I believe it's a right." (Georgia, single mother of four, monthly income $750-999)

The choices people make about participation in public anti-poverty programs are not just about whether or not they think they need help (and what that means to them); they are also about what they think they will get if they apply for and receive assistance *from the government*. The first step toward understanding my respondents' interpretations of what public anti-poverty programs offer is understanding how they think about the relationship between the U.S. (and state and local) government and its people. What does it mean to my respondents to be a member of a society, and of *this particular* society, especially when they find themselves struggling to make ends meet on their own? For Georgia, it means that she has the *right* to ask for help and that the government has some obligation to respond.

On my first visit to Georgia's home in a subsidized apartment complex, I have trouble finding her apartment and end up talking to a neighbor who seems very concerned about my well-being as I walk through the complex. He warns me several times to "be careful" and watches me through his window until Georgia greets me at her door. Her apartment has very little furniture - a table with four unsteady chairs in the dining area and a couch and television in

the living room - and no decorations. Georgia explains that she lives here with her four daughters, the oldest of whom is eight years old and is currently in a wheelchair recovering from orthopedic surgery to correct a disability in her legs that she has had since birth. They receive assistance from SSI ("I was deemed a disabled child. I'm deemed a disabled adult. Mental and emotional. It stems from being abused from the age of three," Georgia tells me), TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, and WIC in addition to their subsidized apartment. Georgia has worked as a nursing assistant in the past, but because she cannot afford a car, she has few options for childcare for her younger daughters (ages five and one) - the nearest Head Start program does not provide bus transportation - and her oldest daughter is now being homeschooled until her physical therapist approves her to return to school. Georgia misses working and looks forward to returning to work when her girls are all in school: "I felt better just being a woman, being a person, when I was able to work and take better care of my family." For now, though, she considers herself to be in need of help and to have a right to ask for that help from the government. This is *not* a common view among my respondents.

In fact, Georgia was one of only eleven respondents who considered receiving help from public anti-poverty programs to be an unqualified right in the United States. A few, like Georgia, connected this right explicitly to their role as citizens, while others talked about it as a basic human right:

> "Yeah, I think that [getting assistance from the government] should be a right, that everyone basically has something. There shouldn't be homeless people outside or there shouldn't be, you know, someone who doesn't have basically nothing to eat." (Tyra, single mother of two, monthly income $750-999)

> "I think that the basic necessities in America should be met for all people. You should always be able to feed your kids, be able to provide a roof over your head, and running water and lights and gas… I don't feel like no kid or no person should be going to bed hungry, and no one should be homeless. I just don't feel

like that should be the case in America." (Danielle, married mother of one, monthly income $2,000-2,499)

"[People have a right to assistance], because people have to live…I don't think there should be anybody that's on this earth that's poor." (Jenna, engaged mother of one, monthly income $500-749)

When asked who they thought was responsible for providing this type of assistance, all of these respondents said, "the government," indicating that the right to have basic needs met creates an obligation on the part of society, and particularly the government, to meet those needs.

Even among this group, however, not a single respondent brought up the idea of rights – either in general or, more specifically, a right to public assistance – until I explicitly raised it. Like the subjects of previous research on legal or rights consciousness (see Bumiller, 1987; Engle & Munger, 1996; Gilliom, 2001), my respondents demonstrated "rights reticence" in their discourse and narratives about poverty and public anti-poverty programs. What John Gilliom (2001) says about the welfare recipients he interviewed seems equally true of my respondents: "The women who are at the center of this book said very little about the idea of rights, or of privacy, or of other potentially protective or emancipatory legal claims…Our conversations returned again and again to what was clearly, for these women, the 'business at hand' – getting their families through another day" (5-6).

Gilliom argues that this rights reticence on the part of his respondents (all of whom were receiving AFDC at the time of his study) is the result of ignorance (of the rules and procedures available to help and protect them), fear (of retaliation or losing benefits), and need (i.e. these women needed their benefits so much that they could not risk losing them by challenging caseworkers or the welfare system more broadly). What he does not argue – and what becomes even more relevant in my sample, which includes not only recipients of cash assistance (now TANF) but low-income parents receiving various levels and types of assistance from public anti-

poverty programs – is that there is very little reason for those living in or near poverty in the U.S. to think that public assistance *is* a right, let alone to claim that right on their own behalf. Two key – and related - concepts can help us to understand why this is: first, that of positive versus negative rights and, second, that of social (as distinct from civil or political) rights.

Positive vs. negative rights

Legal scholars and practitioners have long espoused the view that the U.S. Constitution "is a charter of negative rather than positive liberties" (Jackson v. City of Joliet, 1983), meaning that it focuses on "negative rights, which require the government to refrain from certain conduct, as opposed to positive rights, which impose affirmative duties on the government to take actions or expend resources to meet the needs of certain citizens" (Gerhardt, 1990, 410). While counter-arguments have been raised (see, for examples, Currie, 1986; Shue, 1996), the traditional view of positive versus negative rights holds that the emphasis of the U.S. Constitution – and specifically the Bill of Rights – is on protecting individual liberties from interference by the government rather than on providing individuals with government resources.

From the perspective of this view, the reluctance of Americans to consider social welfare programs and their benefits as "entitlements" or "rights" of citizenship makes perfect sense. If liberty means that an individual is "left to do or be what [s/he] is able to do or be, without interference by other persons" (Berlin, 1969, 121), then the rights that protect this liberty are those that prevent "other persons" – or the government – from interfering: rights to free speech, religion, and assembly, for example. Rights to *pursue* liberty, and the assistance of government supports or services to make that possible, are secondary at best.[13]

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[13] The distinction between negative and positive rights is similar to, but not precisely the same as, Berlin's distinction between negative and positive liberties (see Zackin, 2013).

A more recent conception of positive versus negative rights, provided by Emily Zackin (2013), distinguishes between two dimensions of positive and negative rights, asserting that rights differ in terms of both the amount of government intervention they entail (with negative rights forbidding government intervention and positive rights requiring it) and the source of that intervention (with negative rights protecting against intervention by the government itself while positive rights protect against intervention by other parties). The rights that can most clearly be classified as "positive" on both of these dimensions are those that demand government intervention in order to protect the individual from forces other than the government itself, including, for example, the impact of economic or free market structures on an individual's material well-being. The right to receive assistance from the government when one is struggling financially clearly falls into this category, meeting the definition of a positive right on both of Zackin's (2013) dimensions.

While Zackin (2013) argues that certain positive rights do indeed exist in the U.S., she locates them in state – rather than the federal – constitutions and demonstrates a discourse about these rights (education, in particular) that differs significantly from the individually and morally focused discourse about poverty and welfare. In fact, in the case of public education, Zackin (2013) claims that while the discourse around education has emphasized its role in preparing the individual for active citizenship, it has also been talked about as a means of "protecting the republic itself," focusing on "the social value of school systems, rather than (or in addition to) the individual's claim on society" (74). This is quite distinct from the hegemonic poverty discourse, which again emphasizes the role of the individual in both causing and alleviating poverty and subsequently fails to recognize any social value in government intervention to aid the poor.

Positive rights, then, are not nonexistent in the U.S., but Americans do tend to distinguish between what they consider "legitimate" positive rights, such as education, and forms of government intervention that are not viewed as rights at all, such as public anti-poverty programs. I will return to this distinction in chapter five when I discuss the differences between my respondents' interpretations of the Head Start program and their interpretations of most other public anti-poverty programs.

Social rights/citizenship in the U.S.

Similar to the tendency of Americans to acknowledge negative over positive rights, it has long been recognized that, while touting a commitment to civil and political rights, U.S. society tends to reject claims to social rights. As defined by Marshall (1950), social rights include "the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in society" (11).[14] Research by such scholars as Hochschild (1981) and Bussiere (1997) has demonstrated that Americans tend to vigorously support civil and political rights, based on what Hochschild (1981) refers to as a principle of equality, while rejecting claims to social rights, which might lead to efforts at economic redistribution. Bussiere's (1997) analysis of poverty-related decisions made by the Supreme Court under Chief Justice Earl Warren demonstrates how this separation between civil and political equality on the one hand and economic and social equality on the other hand is not only the dominant American attitude about rights but also the legal norm. Her review of Warren Court decisions in the 1960s and 1970s highlights the distinction the justices made between supporting the civil and political rights of the poor and relegating decisions about economic and social rights to elected officials, "who are

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[14] Zackin (2013) posits that there is significant overlap between the concepts of social rights and positive rights. While I agree that this overlap exists, I separate the two concepts here to highlight the ways in which the particular features of the academic discourse about each are apparent in my respondents' discussions of rights.

accountable to the public [and] are responsible for hammering out distributive arrangements"

(91). The Court's failure to conclude that economic subsistence is a constitutional right, Bussiere

argues, served to reinforce the American tradition of individual responsibility and to solidify the

denial of social rights.

As Fraser and Gordon (1992) and Somers (2008) have argued, the U.S.'s emphasis on

civil rights (particularly contract rights) has historically – and even more so in recent decades –

led to the "contractualization of citizenship" (Somers, 2008). Rather than "shared fate among

equals," citizenship has come to be viewed as a "conditional privilege," granted only to those

with "the ability to exchange something of equal value" (Somers, 2008, 2-3). As such, contract

has become the dominant image in U.S. discourse about civil society and civil rights, and people

have been viewed more and more as individuals "existing prior to their relationships" (Fraser &

Gordon, 1992, 52), rather than as members of a political and social community of related equals

with obligations to one another. Individuals "existing prior to their relationships" can enter into

contracts with one another if they choose but do not *owe* one another anything, negating the

presence of social rights, which are based on ideas of inclusion and shared fate.

Without a discourse of social rights on which to draw, it is difficult for those who are

socially excluded (see Levitas, 1996; Sen, 1999; Somers, 2008) to view themselves as members

of a community that bears any responsibility for their well-being. Those living in or near poverty

are prominent among this group, as they are generally not in a position to participate in the

"market exchange" that a contractual relationship entails (Somers, 2008, 68). "By formal law

they may be citizens," Somers explains, "but today's socially excluded are no longer rights-

bearing citizens" (137). Without the *social* rights to provide for their basic needs, poor and low-

income individuals find that their civil and political rights hold much less meaning or power. As Marshall (1950) wrote of the nineteenth century English poor:

> "A property right is not a right to possess property, but a right to acquire it, if you can, and to protect it, if you can get it. But, if you use these arguments to explain to a pauper that his property rights are the same as those of a millionaire, he will probably accuse you of quibbling. Similarly, the right to freedom of speech has little real substance if, from lack of education, you have nothing to say that is worth saying, and no means of making yourself heard if you say it. But these blatant inequalities are not due to defects in civil rights, but to lack of social rights" (35).

When we account for U.S. discourse's focus on negative – rather than positive – rights and on political and civil – but not social - rights, it becomes evident that the poor – my respondents included – have little reason to be anything *but* rights reticent and, more fundamentally, to view themselves as citizens with what Hannah Arendt (1948) refers to as "the right to have rights."

Margaret Somers (2008), who specifically applies Arendt's idea of the right to have rights to U.S. poverty, defines the concept as *both* "membership in a political community" *and* "social inclusion" or "recognition by others as a moral equal treated by the same standards and values and due the same level of respect and dignity as all other members" (6). This, she argues, is what citizenship entails. This is not, however, the view of citizenship that dominates U.S. discourse, and because of this, it should not be surprising that those who are talked about and treated as morally *un*equal – the poor in general but especially those who receive means-tested government assistance – would come to view themselves as not bearing rights or being in a position to claim a government or societal obligation on their behalf.

With this in mind, it is easier to understand why so few of my respondents view the receipt of benefits from public anti-poverty programs as a right. It is not simply that they do not

know their rights or the rules and procedures for protecting them or that they fear losing much-needed government benefits should they press claims on behalf of those rights; it is, in fact, a much more fundamentally American idea that keeps them from thinking of or talking about public anti-poverty programs as rights: the idea that rights are not something automatically acquired as a member of society but something earned. Just as they equate need with deservingness, so my respondents equate rights with merit, believing that only certain members of society are owed the benefits of citizenship. Thus even as they construct themselves as "deserving" through their interpretations of need, they construct themselves as citizens through their ideas about rights.

Need, rights, and obligations

Aside from the eleven who believed assistance from public anti-poverty programs to be a right, my respondents either felt that the government had *no* obligation to help people who were struggling financially (and therefore that such people had no right to assistance) or that assistance from the government was due only to those who had earned it - either by contributing to society through taxes on paid labor or, more commonly, by virtue of their need. Like their interpretations of need, respondents' thoughts about rights are not, on their own, causally connected to the choices they make about participation in public anti-poverty programs but are instead filtered through other interpretations (of need and of other aspects of the programs themselves), drawing on similar narrative resources and playing an important role in the decision-making process.

A privilege but not a right

When asked whether they thought that receiving assistance from public anti-poverty programs was a right people had in the U.S., several respondents answered firmly in the negative. These individuals – like the vast majority of my respondents and in keeping with the

dominant American conception of citizenship - tended to identify negative rights like freedoms

of speech and religion or political rights like voting when asked what came to mind when they

thought about rights, but when asked specifically whether assistance for people who were

struggling financially should be thought of as a right, they were quick to reply and even appeared

shocked at such a suggestion. As Charles, a single father providing for his two young sons on

whatever income he could bring in from "odd jobs," said:

> "That's not a right. Why would that be a right? I think it's a privilege. I think it's like, 'Wow! Thank goodness I live in a country that, for the first time in my life money has become a problem for me, and thank goodness I can get someone that signs me up and says, "This guy has an emergency," and I get a little plastic card that I get groceries for me and my kids and that my kids get hospitalization.' I think that's huge. I don't think it's a right. I think it's great. I think it's a, um, I think it's a privilege."

Others echo Charles's use of the term "privilege" as well as his belief that Americans can claim

no right or entitlement to public assistance:

> "I think it's a benefit of living in this country…A right? I think of it more of a privilege than a right." (Erin, divorced grandmother of three, monthly income $750-999)

> "I know it's a privilege. They take it away real quick…It's a privilege, and if I screw up, I lose it." (Melanie, single mother of one, monthly income $750-999)

> "People who are having a tough time, I believe should be able to get help, but they're not entitled to it. I don't feel like I'm entitled." (Amanda, separated mother of two, monthly income $2,000-2,499)

> "You're not entitled to anything by being old, having kids, being black, being white; you're not entitled to anything." (Sarah, married mother of two, monthly income $3,000+)

Not surprisingly, the respondents who felt the most strongly that receiving help from

public anti-poverty programs is *not* a right tended to be those who express the greatest

commitment to the hegemonic discourse of personal responsibility and work. This does not mean

that they do not consider themselves in need of help or are not grateful for any help that they do

receive, but, rather, that they view this help as a privilege they deserve or have earned rather than as an unqualified right of citizenship.

Riley, a 21-year-old mother of one who makes about $1,000 each month as a pizza delivery driver, considers herself to be living in poverty and says of her financial situation, "It could be better, but we're living." She tells me about people she knows who are receiving assistance but "don't really go out and look for jobs" and repeatedly stresses her commitment to working to provide for herself and her son. In broad terms, she considers herself to be in some need, but when it comes to public anti-poverty programs, she says, "I don't think that they're rights. I just think that they are privileges that we get. I don't think that they have to be there or they should be there; they're just there to help us, so it's not a right."

Similarly, Michele, who describes her financial situation as "hard" and says that she has definitely thought of herself as "poor" and in need of help, highlights her efforts to pick up extra hours at her job in a nursing home and find "side jobs" such as cleaning houses when she needs more money to pay her bills. When asked why she thinks it is that some people do better than others financially, her response is:

> "Hard work, schooling, ambition. People, you know, you have to go for what you want. I mean of course there are like those certain sob stories that, like, certain situations have happened in people's lives where they literally can't go for a good paying job, or, I don't know, something like that. But usually if you set yourself up to do something and you put the work into it, it'll happen. So I think each person chooses pretty much, each person chooses how and where they end up in life."

Michele is clearly committed to the idea that, barring extreme circumstances (which she not particularly sympathetically labels "sob stories"), individuals are responsible for their own fate. She does receive some assistance from public anti-poverty programs (SNAP, Medicaid for her daughter, and a child care subsidy), but while she considers herself to be in need of help and is

grateful that it allows her to take better care of her daughter, she does not view it as a right. "I don't think I have a right to get that help," she tells me. "I feel very thankful that I get that help."

Like Michele, most of those who view government assistance as a privilege - and not a right - are receiving some help from public anti-poverty programs. Their refusal to name this assistance as a right is not equated with a belief that such assistance should not exist but rather an extension of their commitment to the hegemonic discourse's view that individuals are responsible for their own financial well-being. As Jackie, a married mother of three who earns $1,500-1,999 each month working two jobs, explains, "It's a great thing that [the government helps], but no, it's not that they're obligated, not at all…When you were brought in this world, your parents raised you to grow up to do whatever, and now you need to provide for yourself." Such views are consistent with the U.S.'s historical and legal tendency to reject claims to positive rights – particularly in the economic realm.

A right if you deserve it

When prompted to think about whether government assistance is a right belonging to Americans, by far the largest group of respondents said that such assistance is indeed a right but *only for those who have earned it*, either by paying taxes on income earned through the mainstream labor market or by demonstrating a legitimate need.

In keeping with Somers's (2008) description of the contractual view of citizenship as a privilege due to those with "the ability to exchange something of equal value" (Somers, 2008, 3), many respondents believed that people needed to contribute financially to the government in order to earn the right to receive assistance:

> "I think that if you've worked and you've paid taxes, I think that it should be a right." (Becca, divorced mother of one, monthly income $3,000+)

"I do believe I have the right to [assistance]. Only because I've paid into it, and I think we should pay it forward, and I think we should give back. What's given, you should give back." (Melissa, married mother of four, monthly income $500-749)

"There are people who work, pay taxes, and then, you know, lay-offs, their business closing, whatever. They've paid taxes all this time, and, yeah, they have a right to it, but when you got people who never worked a day in their life…and haven't done nothing, not a thing to deserve it…" (Carol, married mother of two and grandmother of one, monthly income $1,000-1,499)

Interestingly, the people who expressed this view were not all working themselves at the time of their interviews, some having chosen to receive assistance in order to stay home with their children or further their education, but they had all worked at some point in their adult lives. They used the hegemonic discourse's emphasis on work less consistently and with less force than those who denied that assistance is *ever* a right, but their views were still clearly shaped by the dominant American understanding of rights – particularly positive, social rights - as earned privileges rather than as "the noncontractual reciprocal ties of membership and shared fate embodied in the ethos of citizenship" (Somers, 2008, 67).

Even more frequently than people mentioned taxes, though, they talked about *need* as the criteria for meriting the right to government assistance. As we saw in chapter two, my respondents use the word need not simply to indicate a lack of income or resources but also to highlight an individual's status as deserving or undeserving of help.

Sitting in the kitchen of Hillary's clean, well-furnished home in a suburban neighborhood, it would be easy to assume that the family living here is doing perfectly well financially. It is only when Hillary describes her recent divorce and the struggles she has been through to hold onto this home that I begin to get a picture of what life is like for this mother of three who relies on $1,000-1,500 a month in child support to provide for her family. She hopes to

go back to work but has been out of the workforce for so long, raising her children while her husband worked full-time, that it has been difficult for her to adjust to the idea of adding a full-time job to her already busy schedule.

Since her divorce, Hillary has tried to avoid asking her parents for help and has sought instead to find resources on her own through local nonprofits and the government. "If I tell Mom and Dad I don't have money for milk," she says, "they're going to freak out and think, 'Oh, my grandkids don't have anything to drink,' or 'My grandkids this,' or 'My daughter struggles,' and they feel bad. If I can avoid that, I do, at all ends, and I try and find help on my own, numbers to call. I look on line and things like that." Despite receiving some assistance herself, Hillary does not believe that this is an unqualified right she (or anyone else) has. Instead, she believes that only those who are truly in need – or who are deserving of assistance - bear this right:

> "I guess in a way, it's a right, *if you're in that deserving category*…I mean if you're a lowlife not doing anything for yourself or to provide for your family or to have a place to live, I mean, that's a choice that they're making. So I don't think it should just automatically be a right…But I mean if you're, if you're really trying, I think it should, I think it should be a right." (emphasis added)

When Hillary talks about those who are "really trying," she echoes the interpretation of need that many of my respondents expressed: being in need of help is the equivalent of *deserving* help; this is not simply a matter of income but also a moral and political category.

Hillary is not alone in saying that only those who really need (or deserve) help have a right to it, again distinguishing between those who have rights because they have somehow merited them and those who are undeserving of such rights as socially excluded citizens:

> "If they, I think they have a right if they absolutely need it, but if they're abusing the system, no." (Denise, married mother of three, monthly income $2,500-2,999)

> "I feel like yeah, they have a right, but there should be, you know, like a *certain* right, if they need it. Just, but if you can get out here and work, then you don't

need all that. You know what I mean?" (Sue, separated mother of four and grandmother of two, monthly income $1,500-1,999)

"If they need it, I think that they should have a right to get it, I do." (Jean, single mother of one and grandmother of one, monthly income $2500-2,999)

"I think it's a right, I think that it's a right to get it when someone is going through a hardship…I do feel like that money should be there for people that really need it you know. If you really need it, we should be able to get it." (Antoinette, married mother of six, monthly income < $250)

A right but not an obligation

Finally, a small number of respondents expressed a view of rights that distinguishes between basic human rights (or "natural rights") and rights to make specific claims on the government. These respondents may be said to believe in every person's natural rights to have his/her basic needs met but not in a related obligation by the government to be the source of meeting those needs (Ignatieff, 1984). The clearest example of this view comes from my conversation with Janet, the single mother described in chapter three who is living with her parents while she attends nursing school and works part time to support herself and her daughter. When I asked Janet if she thought of the assistance people got from programs like SNAP and Medicaid as rights, she explained:

> "I just don't think that they're rights. I think they're benefits. I don't think they're rights. I think you're entitled to things such as free speech that have to do individually with each person, but um, I think you have your right to plant your own garden if you want to, but I don't think you have the right to community money or community, anything that's community money, I don't think you have a right to…Having access to healthcare is a right - so I think it's a right that when I go into the emergency room I get seen - but [pounding on the table with each word] *having Medicaid is not a right*…It's not a right to get free healthcare, but it's a right to get healthcare."

When Janet first thinks about rights, she (like many of my respondents) thinks of individual liberties – negative rights. She thinks of people's rights to choose what to say ("free speech") and what to do on their own property ("plant your own garden"), without interference

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from the government, but not of people's rights to receive resources or support from the government or the community. Janet thinks of basic human rights, like not being denied access to health care, but she does not connect this with any obligation on the part of government or society to provide these things. People have natural rights, and they have negative rights, but they do not, according to Janet, have positive, social rights.

Rights and choices

Like Gilliom's (2001) "welfare mothers," few of my respondents think of assistance from public anti-poverty programs as rights they bear as Americans. In fact, none of them even mentioned the word rights until I brought it up toward the very end of our second interview. When I did ask about rights ("What comes to mind when you think about the rights you have as someone living in the U.S.?"), the most common response was to talk about freedoms – personal liberties or negative rights that are generally associated with life in the United States. Respondents spoke of freedoms of speech and religion, freedom to move about the country, the right to vote, and the right to bear arms. They talked about how much more freedom people – especially women - have in the U.S. than in other parts of the world:

> "You get to um, you know, choose what you want to do with your life. I mean you're not, we don't do the arranged marriage and stuff like that. We get to make our own choices for anything really. I mean we can either do the right thing or the wrong thing. We get that option, whereas a lot of countries don't, you know?" (Alyson, separated mother of one, monthly income $1,500-1,999)

> "I do know that we have it a lot better [than people in other places]. When it comes to rights, we are able to make more decisions for ourselves than certain other places. As a woman, too, I know um, not only as a woman, but just as an American period, we are able to make more decisions for ourselves rather than just to be regulated." (Tyra, single mother of two, $750-999)

> "Women have more rights in this country than they do in a lot of countries. We get to be in more, we have more decisions to make and can have more opinions and do more than women in other countries that have like arranged marriages and you know have to stay home and cook and clean and that's it instead of go out

there and get an education and go into the work force and take care of what's yours, so yeah we do have a lot more rights." (Caroline, single mother of two, $250-499)

In general, then – without touching on the topic of public assistance - my respondents seem content with the rights they are afforded in the U.S., focusing on civil and political rights but also on their rights to make the choices they want to make for their lives without interference from the government (i.e. negative rights).

Choice (or decision) is an interesting word for them to use, however, as many of these respondents talked about their own life choices as being extremely limited by their financial situations and by their receipt (or lack of receipt) of assistance from the government. For example, when asked about her rights as an American, Becca, a divorced, African American mother of one, says, "I have the right to make choices, that I can, you know, do what I want to do." In the same conversation, however, Becca tells me that low-income people are often forced into choices they do not want to make:

> "[If] you're making basically a little bit over minimum wage, and you can't afford $180 a week to put your infant in daycare, it's either not have a job or, I don't know, like find another way, find somebody to watch your kid that might not be a safe place. So it kind of puts you at a, you know, 'Should I work or should I not work?…I want to work, but I can't work, because I can't afford to pay childcare.' So it kind of puts people I think in a dilemma."

Other respondents spoke similarly about feeling as if they lack the capability to make choices, or at least desirable choices, for their own lives:

> "To get more help, as a parent or an adult, you have to decide, 'Do I want to eat, or do I want to pay the bills, 'cause I can't do both with my check. So if I stop working maybe I'll be able to [get food stamps and] eat.' So these are the decisions that a lot of people that are on assistance are faced with, 'cause they're not going to help you unless you're at rock bottom." (Priscilla, single mother of one, monthly income $1,500-1,999)

> "I started working two jobs. I didn't want to. I had to. I had three kids at home - one in high school, and I had these two. I didn't have a choice. I said, 'I got to get

this formula. He's in diapers. I need help. I'll just work a second job.' I got off one, I went straight to the next one, and when I got off from there, I came home, cooked, cleaned, did laundry, got maybe two or three hours of sleep, got ready to go back to the next job. I did that for I want to say three years straight until I couldn't take it no more. I ended up in the hospital." (Dominique, single mother of three, monthly income $1,000-1,499)

"I had no choice. I had to get up and work, because welfare wasn't bringing in enough money… And when I went out there and started working, I had to leave my kids with the babysitter…[but] you never know who you're leaving your children with. You never know, so you don't want to live with that." (Carol, married mother of two and grandmother of one, monthly income $1,000-1,499)

"There were times in the past where I was contemplating whether or not I should be working or just sit home on welfare, because it was, you know, my income was going just so I could have a job…So I said, 'If I didn't work, I wouldn't have to have a car, my rent will go down to zero [because of my Section 8 voucher], I wouldn't have to have clothes for work…I wouldn't have to do any of those things. I'd get food stamps to pay for my food, and my expenses would drop down tremendously'…But then I looked at the flip side of not having the growth, sitting at home all day, you know? I'm like, 'I can't just do that. I can't sit home all day. I've been working too long.' I knew too much about what I was doing, and I knew I would miss it." (Tonia, single mother of two, monthly income $2,500-2,999)

For all of these women, financial circumstances - and, at times, the very programs that they have turned to to alleviate those circumstances - leave them feeling as if the choices they have are negative on all sides. On the one hand, they can choose to work so much that they spend little, if any, time with their children and, in some cases, cause damage to their physical or mental health. On the other hand, they can stop working, rely on public anti-poverty programs to provide for their children, and face the feelings of inadequacy and shame that they assume (or know from past experience) will come with this decision.

Yet despite this constrained ability to make the choices they would like to make for their own lives, when asked about their rights, these respondents speak optimistically about the freedom Americans possess to choose their own paths in life. How do they reconcile these two views?

The answer, it seems, is that they do not. Again, over the course of our conversations, my respondents are speaking from a number of different "narrative positions" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), drawing on different resources depending on the point of view they are taking. In this case, respondents are speaking, on the one hand, from the perspective of their own concrete experiences as parents, wanting to make choices that are best for their families in terms of their household income and their children's well-being, and, on the other hand, from the much more abstract perspective of individuals living in the United States, expressing a view of rights that is solidly grounded in this society's dominant discourse of citizenship but that does not take into account the realities and complexities of their own lives. It may be that rights are simply not a very salient subject for my respondents, which is evident in their lack of mention of rights until I explicitly asked about them and supports previous research findings on the rights reticence of those living in poverty (Gilliom, 2001).

It makes sense, then, that, lacking their own well-developed interpretation of rights, my respondents would draw on a much-used discourse of citizenship rather than on their own experiences. A similar phenomenon has been found by Sandra Levitsky (2008) among individuals caring for family members with chronic diseases. Without an existing discourse of rights on which to draw, these caregivers fall back on a rhetoric of familial obligation – what Levitsky (2008) terms "legitimating frames," as they serve to "reflect and reinforce the status quo; they have a taken-for-granted quality, an inevitability or naturalness that leads to acceptance" (556). Levitsky finds that, like the majority of my respondents, the caregivers who use these legitimating frames find it difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of themselves as bearing rights to government resources or support, in large part because they think of rights in negative – rather than positive – and in civil and political - rather than social - terms.

For many of my respondents, then, their general view of rights, as the freedom to make their own choices and live their lives without government interference, is disconnected from their interpretation of what public anti-poverty programs offer them. The very idea of having an unqualified right to assistance – one that is not based on moral character and the fulfillment of the ethic of personal responsibility – is foreign to them. My respondents' interpretations of what public anti-poverty programs offer them in response to their need draws much more heavily on their life experiences and the hegemonic poverty discourse than on any conception of rights. In fact, even those few respondents who did express a belief in the right to assistance rely more on these narrative resources than on a discourse of citizenship or rights – as is evident, again, from their failure to mention rights until I raised the subject. This is further evidence of the hegemonic nature of the U.S.'s poverty discourse and of the stigma with which it marks those living in or near poverty. Regardless of their views of rights, my respondents recognize this stigma, and this recognition plays a large role in their interpretations of need and programs and in the choices they ultimately make about participation in public anti-poverty programs.

CHAPTER FIVE:
"I'm so Grateful that It's There, but It's Also Like a Slap in the Face"
Interpreting What Programs Offer to Meet Need

When I ask Liz, a 40-year-old single mother of three, what she thinks people can expect

when they seek help from public anti-poverty programs, she says:

> "I think you can expect to have to fight the system tooth and nail all the way. I
> think that if you're not good at paperwork, and you don't have a lot of
> organizational skills, you're going to get kicked off the system a lot of times, and
> it's very difficult to get back on. I think that you can expect that people are not
> going to answer your calls, and people are going to treat you like you're less than
> them or anyone else. You're just a number in the system, and nobody cares.
> You're not a person anymore."

Like many, although certainly not all, of my respondents, Liz speaks from experience.

She has received benefits from SNAP, along with Medicaid coverage for her three sons (now

ages 23, 19, and 6), for all but one of the past twenty years. Aside from a five month period

immediately following the birth of her second child, Liz has never received cash assistance, but

she did use both Head Start and WIC when her children were younger, and she benefits from the

EITC every year. Liz does not deny that she has been helped tremendously by these programs.

They have provided her with material resources, the ability to be a better parent for her children,

and even – in the cases of Head Start and WIC – what she considers to be genuinely

compassionate assistance. At the same time, however, they have contributed a great deal of stress

and hassle to her life and have made her feel like she is "not a person anymore" – a significant

price to pay for what she has received.

When I talk with Liz in the kitchen of her modest suburban home, where we meet in the early evening after she gets home from work, she describes her current financial situation as "insecure, very insecure, unsteady, uneasy, uncomfortable," despite having worked steadily for the vast majority of her adult life. She describes herself as "generational poor," having grown up the only child of a single mother who "worked under the table jobs, cleaning" and received cash assistance and food stamps. "You always were picked on because you had the crappy shoes and, yeah, it sucked," she says of her childhood. "I think the area that we lived in was bad, so people didn't even talk about, 'You can go to college. You can do this.' I don't even think that you were expected to graduate [high school]. I don't remember anybody even talking about that."

Despite having two children by the age of nineteen, Liz has worked consistently, gone to college (after learning about financial aid from a neighbor in her public housing complex when she was 20 years old), and supported her family, with the help of public anti-poverty programs. When her middle child was born, she did receive cash assistance for a few months, because she could not afford child care and was unaware that subsidies were available: "As soon as I found out [I could get help with daycare]," she says, "I went back to work again and got the daycare assistance, and then I've worked ever since."

Liz has worked a combination of full-time and part-time jobs throughout her adult life but has always relied on SNAP and Medicaid for additional resources. She describes only one year when she did not receive any assistance from public programs:

> "I did have a good job in my twenties for one year, and we didn't have [assistance] then, but I was working like 56 hours a week, and my kids were eight and twelve, and my twelve-year-old started getting into trouble, and I thought to myself, 'You know what? You can only raise your kids once, and you can find another job eventually,' so I went part-time at that point and got them back on track, and I'm glad I did, because they're awesome."

From this experience, Liz is well aware that the benefits she has received provide her with the material support she needs to be a better parent, even though the $200 a month she has from SNAP has never felt like enough: "I have two grown kids that eat a lot," she says. "No way, no way."

Of the programs she has used, Liz considers two of them – Head Start and WIC – to have provided help in a way that expressed real concern for the well-being of her family. Of her youngest son's Head Start program, in particular, she says:

> "[Head Start is] like a godsend…They just have so many resources. Not only is it good for your child, and truly gives them a head start when it comes to education and socialization and just so many different things from that aspect, but they have so many resources to help you make it, whether it be food or clothes or work or car or housing, daycare. I mean, they're just like a plethora of information. You just have to ask."

Through Head Start, Liz was connected with a down-payment assistance program that helped her buy her first (and current) home. She has referred several friends to this Head Start program and continues to be involved with the organization that runs it, even though her youngest child is now in kindergarten.

Of WIC – particularly when compared to other programs like SNAP and Medicaid - Liz tells me:

> "They treated you more, I don't want to say 'humanely,' but, really, they did. Like they seemed genuinely concerned about the growth of your child, and I think that for people that don't know a lot, they were very informative…If you grew up eating whatever and didn't have a balance, how would you know that you were supposed to do that? So they would like talk with you about what a balanced diet is and just good choices. And they didn't make you feel bad for doing the things you did. They just were like, 'We're here to educate you.'"

Whereas other programs made Liz feel like she was "just a number in the system," WIC made her feel human. The workers, from Liz's perspective, wanted her to be a good mother and provided her with the resources and knowledge necessary to make that possible.

This stands in very stark contrast to Liz's descriptions of her experiences with and expectations of the DHS office, which administers SNAP and Medicaid benefits (i.e. the "welfare office"). When I ask her about her experiences getting help from this office, she tells me about a time when she was one day late turning in recertification paperwork to her caseworker and subsequently lost her benefits for three months. While she takes responsibility for having been late in meeting her requirements, she also says:

> "It took me writing and calling and calling and calling and calling the supervisor, and the voice mails are full, and you can't even leave a message. I wrote certified letters, and it wasn't until I finally contacted somebody in [the state capital], after talking to a thousand people about what to do, that I finally got some action. That was three months with no food money. It was miserable. It was to the point where you're like telling your kids, 'Can you go over to your friend's house and hang out at dinnertime?' because we didn't have any food."

She describes similar treatment from employees at the Section 8 office, from which she received housing vouchers for several years (after having been on a waiting list for ten years):

> "My youngest son was premature, and my water broke at 24 weeks along, so he was very, very early, so I was in the hospital for a month and a half on bed rest…While I was in the hospital, I called my Section 8 worker repeatedly: 'I'm in the hospital. I have zero income right now. I don't know when I'm coming out. It could be long-term.' She didn't do anything, didn't do anything, didn't do anything. And then finally, when I got out of the hospital and was able to get a hold of her, the response was, 'I don't know why you people don't know that you have to put it in writing.' Well, one, I thought the 'you people' comment was really crafty. Two, I'm in a hospital. You couldn't return my call and say, 'Put that in writing, and fax it to me'? I mean just common decency."

Liz's conclusion is that workers in these offices "all think we're the same… Losers, drug addicts, people that don't care, people that don't want to work, people that don't take care of their kids." She admits that she has had similar thoughts about some of the people she has seen in the office when she goes to recertify for SNAP and Medicaid, but she also finds it unfair – and dehumanizing – to be treated as "a number in the system" rather than as an individual with particular life circumstances and needs.

About a month before our first interview, Liz accepted a full-time position at her current place of employment. She had been working part-time, both because she wanted to spend more time with her children and because she considered it to be a better and more fulfilling job than she would be able to get elsewhere. Her newly increased income will likely make her ineligible for SNAP and Medicaid, which contributes to the insecurity she feels. While she will be making more money, she will also have more expenses, which makes her feel like "there is no great light at the end of the tunnel. Even having just got into full-time and making a decent hourly wage, I'm still not seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, because now my struggles have just flip-flopped, that's all." She has reported her employment and income changes to her caseworker and is anxiously waiting to be cut off from her benefits – in her mind, another example of how little concern these programs have for her family's well-being; instead of being provided with some (minimal) support as she transitions to her new circumstances, she feels like she has been "set up to try and step out on [her] own and fall on [her] face."

Like the respondents quoted in the previous chapter, Liz feels that her choices have been constrained by the very programs that presumably exist to help her. Working more means less assistance and less time with her family, but the alternative is being treated like she is "not a person anymore." Neither is a choice she wants to make.

Liz's interpretation of the policies the U.S. has designed to assist those living in or near poverty is only one example from among my respondents, but it is one that highlights the multiple layers of interpretation these individuals have of what public anti-poverty programs offer in response to need. For the vast majority of my respondents – like Liz - what they think

programs will provide is based on experience – their own or that of others – as well as on their awareness of the stigma created by the U.S.'s hegemonic poverty discourse and perpetuated by programs and the public alike. While they are not all currently participating in programs, every one of my respondents has participated in at least one public anti-poverty program at some point in her/his life. For example, while only eight of my respondents were receiving cash assistance (TANF) at the time of our interviews, more than half (42 respondents) have received it at one time – many for only a few months during pregnancy or immediately after having a baby – and thus draw on these experiences when they consider what this program offers.

Like Liz, many of my respondents have had experiences with programs that provided them with assistance in a way they considered to be compassionate and genuinely helpful. These tend to be experiences with Head Start and WIC, as well as some non-governmental programs. Most respondents interpret public anti-poverty programs, particularly those administered through the "welfare office," as offering some combination of material resources (health insurance, food assistance, cash, etc.) and stigma. Even those who have not used programs like TANF or SNAP describe the stigma and related treatment that come with participating, indicating that interpretations of these programs rely not only on personal experience but also on shared stories and the hegemonic poverty discourse's assessment of this type of assistance.

Genuine help

After talking to my respondents about their history of participation (or nonparticipation) in a variety of public anti-poverty programs, I asked them to tell me about the best and worst experiences they had ever had with any program. The program most frequently mentioned in "best experiences" was WIC, which was consistently described as being very different from programs administered by DHS (TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, etc.). "They were helpful," Jean says,

remembering her participation in WIC, "They treated you like you were a person there, and it

was about those babies and making sure that those babies were healthy." The focus on children's

well-being and the more humane treatment they received from workers in WIC offices, were

common themes:

> "I felt that those people actually cared about us, and that was a good feeling."
> (Stephanie, married mother of two, monthly income $3,000+)

> "When you go in [to the WIC office], it's not like FIA.[15] They're not judging
> you. They're welcoming you with open arms. They want to help you. They want
> to make sure your kids get what they need." (Casey, single mother of one,
> monthly income $2,000-2,499)

> "WIC was a lot better. WIC, they treated you with respect. They were just a lot
> nicer. They actually cared about the kids. They weren't rude there as much."
> (Lindsey, single mother of one, monthly income $500-750)

> Tiffany, a single mother of three who works full-time (midnight shifts) as a direct care

worker in patients' homes, told a particularly moving story about an experience with her oldest

son that contributed significantly to the positive expectations she had for what WIC would offer

when her younger sons were born:

> "When [my oldest son] – I will never forget this – the last month he was eligible
> for WIC, when he turned five, and the lady from the WIC office, she gave him
> five dollars, and then she took us - because we walked; we didn't have a car - and
> after we were done, she took us to McDonald's and bought [my son] lunch. It's
> stuff like that. You don't even have to, you know? I'm not asking you to spend
> money on my kid, because I could get him a dollar burger from McDonalds and
> let him play. That's no big deal. It's just your time, the fact that you actually show
> compassion, that you show that I'm somebody. You treat me like a person, not
> just a number. I'm not a number. I'm a person. And I like that about them."

Having had this experience, Tiffany did not hesitate to apply for WIC when she was pregnant

with her younger sons. She had developed an expectation that they would provide her with much

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[15] Upon the creation of TANF with the 1996 passage of PRWORA, the state of Michigan renamed its cash assistance program the Family Independence Program. Offices administering this program (along with SNAP, Medicaid, and other forms of assistance) were labeled Family Independence Agencies (FIA). While they are now officially called DHS offices, many respondents still refer to them as FIA.

needed resources *and* the respect and dignity that allowed her to feel "like a person, not just a number." In contrast to the treatment people received at the DHS office, the workers at WIC offices did not reinforce the stigma respondents felt about receiving assistance. This does not mean that the stigma ceased to exist (see below), but it was not highlighted or exacerbated by the experience of seeking help – something that was almost unanimously untrue when it came to DHS programs.

People also expressed positive interpretations of Head Start. More than three quarters of my respondents had used a Head Start program for their children at one time, and about half had a child currently enrolled. As with WIC, people focused on what Head Start provided for their children but also on the resources and opportunities it offered them as parents. For Head Start in particular, respondents also talked about the lack of stigma they felt about using this program.

Georgia, whose story was highlighted in the previous chapter, describes Head Start as "an enrichment program":

> "They learn discipline, they learn everything they're supposed to learn to prepare
> them for the next stage of school…[My daughters' Head Start program] had
> resource programs for people in financial situations like myself. They bought
> them coats, they got us Christmas gifts. It was just like a wonderful all around
> enrichment program for the whole family."

Likewise, Kate, a married 34-year-old who – along with her husband – is providing for her own two children (ages 14 and 8), her stepson (age 19), his girlfriend (age 17), and their two children (ages 2 years and 7 months) on her husband's income of $1,500-1,999 per month, recalls her experiences with Head Start in very positive terms, both for her children and herself:

> "When my 14 year old was in the Head Start, the social worker…was awesome,
> because back then I wasn't aware of any of the other programs, and she's the one
> who really started teaching me how to look for the help when you need it and, you
> know, that there's assistance out there…She was just an awesome lady; she was
> just really good. And she was, not only did she teach me about a lot of those
> things; she was always there as willing to listen if you were having a problem or

anything like that. She was always right there to try and help you to figure out a way you could solve it."

Finally, Dominique, a single mother of three who makes $10 an hour, with no benefits, at her full-time job as a supervisor in a group home, tells me how difficult it was to find daycare that was affordable and also felt like a comfortable and safe place for her to leave her youngest son, who has had some emotional and behavioral difficulties:

> "[Head Start has] helped my family a lot. They paid attention to [my son]. They were able to teach him things, get to know him, got to see that he was having some problems, and they noticed it right off the bat. And I like the fact that they didn't have a problem with helping me with it and helping me to get the help that I needed to help him."

For all of these women, Head Start has been interpreted as more than a free place to leave their children when they go to work or school themselves. It has been a source of education for their children but also of support and information that has allowed them to feel better about themselves as parents. The positive experiences they have had have led them to expect Head Start to offer them similar assistance in the future, as they look forward to their younger children (and grandchildren) entering programs in years to come.

What is particularly interesting about parents' interpretations of Head Start as a genuinely helpful and supportive program is that most of my respondents view Head Start as being in a different category from other public anti-poverty programs, both in terms of public perception and in the sense that parents do not think of it primarily as a government program. While a small number of respondents said that they were embarrassed to tell people their child(ren) attended Head Start (rather than a private preschool or daycare), the vast majority believed that the public perception of Head Start was overwhelmingly positive. As Danielle, a married mother of one, says, "I think most people look at [Head Start] like public school, versus you going somewhere with your hand out asking for something." "I would think people would feel differently about

[Head Start]," echoes Diana, a married mother of two, "because you see the direct impact, and you know that it's 100% for the kids."

The perception that most people have positive feelings about Head Start may also be linked to the fact that very few respondents think of Head Start primarily as a government program. When asked how they would describe Head Start to someone who had never heard of it, most of my respondents simply call it "pre-school" or "daycare," sometimes mentioning that it is for low-income children but rarely that it is government funded. In fact, only three out of my 75 respondents used the words "government" or "federally funded" to describe Head Start, and those who referred to Head Start as a "public" program used this term to compare it to public *schools*, not to other public assistance programs. As was mentioned in chapter four, the education offered by public schools is one of the few positive rights recognized by most Americans, in part because of the benefits it is viewed as having for society as a whole (Zackin, 2013). In my respondents' interpretations of what public anti-poverty programs offer them, then, it is perhaps not surprising that Head Start – like WIC – stands apart, as a program that offers true assistance unaccompanied by inhumane or otherwise negative treatment.

Material resources

Like Liz, my respondents who have received or are receiving assistance from one or more public anti-poverty programs are well aware of the material resources these programs provide. Despite the challenges they have faced in applying for assistance and the negative discourse they hear about people who receive help from many of these programs, my respondents appreciate that the government does offer help with things like utility bills, health coverage, and food. "I wouldn't be able to pay my rent and my bills [without the help public programs provide]," Georgia tells me. Stephanie, a married mother of three-year-old twins

whose husband now makes more than $3,000 each month, recalls the relief she felt when she learned she was eligible for Medicaid during her pregnancy (when her husband earned far less money): "I was scared," she says, "because I knew my insurance from the restaurant [where I worked] would not have covered much of the pregnancy, and I felt like, 'Wow, like that's really good [that I can get Medicaid], because I'm pregnant, and this child or children are gonna be able to come safely.'" Of the assistance she receives from SNAP, Melanie says, "It puts food in my stomach and in my daughter's stomach, and that's what counts."

For all three of these women, and many others with whom I spoke, the assistance offered by public anti-poverty programs means that they are able to feel confident that their children will have life's basic necessities – shelter, medical care, and food.

> "The system has really helped, you know? In food, car, and we have the Medicaid…When you got [utility] shut off notices and take it down there, and they were able to help. Other than that, I wouldn't have had the money to do that." (Daria, single mother of two, monthly income $1,000-1,499)

> "I had independent insurance [when I got pregnant], and when I went into my, just my regular scheduled prenatal appointments, I was literally paying over $300 cash every appointment with independent healthcare. And I started crying at the third appointment. I said, 'I've spent over a $1,000 to come in here and have you guys weigh me.' I said, 'I'm not gonna come back.' And she's like, 'Why don't you apply for Medicaid? If you can't afford this, I'm sure that you can qualify.' So I had my second child on Medicaid, because I was paying like $460 a month for nothing, nothing." (Sarah, married mother of two, monthly income $3,000+)

> "I mean, getting the Medicaid - 'cause you got to look at it, too, if I ain't have no Medicaid, I'm getting a bill, you know? So, so that come in handy, too." (Nicki, single mother of two, monthly income < $250)

> "Groceries are expensive, and if I didn't get food stamps, I swear to God, we would probably eat bologna every day. 'Cause it's really expensive, especially for the number of people I have." (Melissa, married mother of four, monthly income $500-749)

At the same time, however, my respondents do not always think that these programs offer *enough* material resources to keep them out of need. "They say they factor in our family size,"

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says Melissa when I ask about the assistance she receives, "[but] when you factor in diapers, you factor in wipes, you factor in whatever small things the kids may need - they need underwear, or they need new shoes because their feet have grown, or they need this for this specific class, and you don't have it just laying around - it's not a lot. And then you factor in all our bills on top of that. It's nothing." This does not mean that Melissa in ungrateful for the help her family receives – only that her interpretation of what programs offer does not match her interpretation of what her family needs.

The one program that stands out in respondents' perceptions as a material resource that helps them meet needs without the additional costs associated with "welfare stigma" (see below) is the EITC. While many respondents expressed confusion about the EITC – mainly because they regularly used a paid tax preparation service to file their taxes and were therefore uncertain about the specifics of their return – those who knew that they had received the tax credit spoke very positively about its impact on their household's financial well-being. Karen, for example, who is providing for her two young children with her unemployment insurance payments while she pursues her bachelor's degree, described the money she received from the EITC last year as "two and a half months of income for me…That's a lot of money, you know? That allowed me to pay a chunk [of what I owe] to my grandmother [for the house she helped me buy]. It allowed me to - I think I had $200 on a credit card still that kinda lingered - I took care of that. It gave us some room, I guess, got the kids some new school clothes. It's helpful." Karen, like many other respondents, expressed concern about using some public anti-poverty programs - describing her fear that people would think she was "taking the easy road" - but these concerns did not seem to apply to her receipt of the EITC.

Because my respondents did not talk a great deal about their use of the EITC (which may itself be indicative of the perceived difference between this program and others, as particular experiences did not readily come to mind), it is difficult to speak definitively about their interpretations of this program. It does seem, however, that the hegemonic poverty discourse has not influenced these interpretations to the same extent that it has influenced interpretations of other public anti-poverty programs. This may be because the EITC – unlike other programs – is a part of what Suzanne Mettler (2011) calls the submerged state, "a conglomeration of federal policies that function by providing incentives, subsidies, or payments to private organizations or households to encourage or reimburse them for conducting activities deemed to serve a public purpose" (4). Most of these policies, including tax expenditures like the Home Mortgage Interest Deduction and the exclusion from taxes of employer-provided retirement savings, benefit wealthier members of society, but because of its explicit link to the dominant work ethic – a key element in the hegemonic poverty discourse – and its location within the tax system, the EITC often falls within this category, and its participants are therefore able to avoid some of the most significant consequences of "welfare stigma."[16]

Stigma

As Liz's quote at the beginning of this chapter demonstrates, what came through most clearly in my respondents' interpretations of what public anti-poverty programs offer is the sense that whatever material resources or other help one receives pales in comparison to the stigma one bears for receiving it. The idea that those living in poverty - and particularly those who seek help from public anti-poverty programs - face negative attitudes from and poor treatment by others is

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[16] As is described below, this does not mean that there is no stigma associated with the EITC – only that the consequences of this stigma, such as poor treatment by program administrators and/or members of the public, are less frequently encountered. This is directly related to the fact that the EITC is a "hidden" program rather than one accompanied by "stigma symbols" (Goffman, 1963) like the Electronic Benefits Transfer card used to purchase food through SNAP.

not new. Countless articles and books have documented the existence of "welfare stigma," tracing its existence back at least as far as the sixteenth century English Poor Laws and connecting it to the dominant ideas expressed in the U.S.'s hegemonic poverty discourse (see, for examples, Abramovitz, 2000; Gordon, 1994; Handler & Hasenfeld, 1991; Jarrett, 1996; Katz, 1986; Piven & Cloward, 1971; Rank, 1994; Seccombe, 2011). Despite its frequent use, however, the idea of welfare stigma has been under-theorized and inconsistently defined and measured, resulting in a breadth, but not a depth, of knowledge on the role stigma plays in the lives of the poor and near poor and particularly in the choices they make about participation in public anti-poverty programs. In what follows, I draw on my respondents' discourse, as well as on existing theoretical and empirical works about stigma, to develop a theory of welfare stigma that is grounded in the lived experiences of low-income individuals.

What is stigma?

In his classic work on the subject, Erving Goffman (1963) defines stigma as "bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier" (1). In keeping with this definition – and with the discourse used by my respondents - I distinguish between the stigma with which participants in public anti-poverty programs are marked (i.e. the "bodily sign") and the *consequences* of that stigma.[17] In the U.S. (and in other societies that trace their social policy roots back to England's Poor Laws), the poor – and particularly those poor who seek assistance from public programs – have long born a sign exposing moral characteristics such as laziness, weakness, and, for poor women in particular, promiscuity or the failure to comply with the patriarchal model of the family (Abramovitz, 2000; Gordon, 1994; Katz, 1996;

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[17] Other scholars define stigma in ways that conflate its existence with its consequences. For example, Rainwater (1982) defines stigma as "the possible negative social-psychological consequences for recipients produced by income-tested government transfer programs" (19). Based on the discourse used by my respondents, I propose that these are two obviously related, but distinct, phenomena.

Shipler, 2004). This sign may or may not accurately reflect genuine characteristics of the

individual who bears it; the important point is that the stigma publicly marks an individual as

having these characteristics.

In talking about how U.S. society perceives those who receive help from public anti-

poverty programs,[18] my respondents confirm that this stigma does indeed exist and that all those

who seek assistance are marked with it, regardless of their actual characteristics or life

circumstances:

> "People automatically assume that when somebody got to run to the government
> and get help, they're automatically bums. They're automatically degenerates.
> We're good for nothing." (Casey, single mother of one, monthly income $2,000-
> 2,499)

> "People do look down on people that get assistance, because they think that
> people that do get it are just trying to be lazy and not trying to better themselves."
> (Lindsey, single mother of one, monthly income $500-749)

> "Oh, it's horribly looked down upon. I mean, you are, you know, not a good
> person, and you're, it's looked poorly on you, you know, that you're doing
> something wrong." (Alyson, separated mother of one, monthly income $1,500-
> 1,999)

> "I understand that there's like a stereotype that people put on people that collect
> public assistance, that you're uneducated, you're ignorant, you don't know how to
> read, write, spell." (Melissa, married mother of four, monthly income $500-749)

> "It's a sign of weakness." (Amina, separated mother of two, monthly income <
> $250)

Of my 75 respondents, not a single one fails to recognize the existence of this stigma; they are all

aware that it exists and that people are marked with it simply by asking for help. While they all

recognize the stigma itself, however, how they respond to its consequences varies considerably,

depending on both context and self-perception.

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[18] After discussing a variety of public anti-poverty programs, respondents were asked: "What do you think most people in the U.S. think about people who receive help from these programs?"

As Goffman (1963) suggests, it is possible for an individual who bears a stigma to hide it from others and thereby avoid any negative treatment that might proceed from its recognition. Goffman (1963) refers to this as being *discreditable* rather than *discredited*. Depending on the people with whom they interact and the contexts in which they find themselves, stigmatized individuals are "likely to have experience with both situations"; they are *discredited* – in a particular context - if their "differentness is known about already or is evident on the spot" but are merely *discreditable* if "it is neither known about by those present nor immediately perceivable by them" (Goffman, 1963, 4). In other words, the stigma exists in either case, but the treatment that follows from it may be avoided if the stigmatized individual is able to hide the stigma from those with whom they interact.

For those seeking or receiving assistance from public anti-poverty programs, then, it is possible to remain merely *discreditable* in certain contexts by hiding receipt of assistance or simply avoiding mentioning it to others. In other contexts, however – the most obvious being the application or recertification process – it is impossible to hide the stigma.

There are also contexts in which "stigma symbols," which Goffman (1963) defines as "signs which are especially effective in drawing attention to a debasing identity discrepancy" (43), make it difficult, if not impossible, to hide the stigma of program participation. For my respondents, such stigma symbols include SNAP's EBT card and the Medicaid card they must show as proof of insurance at a doctor's office or hospital. When they are seen using these cards, their stigma is revealed, and they go from being *discreditable* to being *discredited*.

Regardless of other people's awareness, as long as the stigmatized individual her- or himself knows of the stigma's existence, it can result in "changes in self-concept" (Horan & Austin, 1974) or what previous research has referred to as "internalized stigma" (see, for

example, Manzo, 2004). While comments made by respondents confirm that being marked by stigma can impact one's self-perception, I hesitate to use the term "internalized stigma" to describe this phenomenon. To begin with, I consider stigma to be, by definition, an *outward* mark that is placed on an individual by society – not one that an individual places on herself. While an individual can, in some sense, internalize beliefs about herself that stem from being marked with a particular stigma (and from being treated in particular ways as a result), she cannot mark herself with that stigma in the first place. To imply that she can (by naming the phenomenon "internalized stigma") also implies that she has the power to "unmark" herself or remove the stigma, a power (and a burden) that is hardly possible in the face of a hegemonic discourse that continues to mark her as "less than" (in the words of many of my respondents). As Ainlay and colleagues (1986) point out, "stigma is a social construct – a reflection of culture itself, not a property of individuals" (4).

In interpreting what public anti-poverty programs offer them, then, my respondents are thinking not only about the *existence* of welfare stigma but about several identifiable *consequences* of this stigma: first, the treatment that they will face as discredited individuals when they engage in the application and recertification procedures for public anti-poverty programs; second, the "management" of their stigma that they will need to undertake in day-to-day life in order to maintain their status as discreditable (rather than discredited) individuals; third, the treatment that they will face in day-to-day life should their stigma be revealed to others, particularly through the visibility of "stigma symbols"; and finally, the impact that all of this will have on their own sense of self. All of these aspects of interpretation play a role in the choices my respondents ultimately make regarding participation in public anti-poverty programs.

Treatment by programs

Drawing on their experiences interacting with employees in the offices of public anti-poverty programs, my respondents talk about what might be categorized as three different (although not mutually exclusive) consequences of facing these experiences as a discredited individual: 1) the attitudes (or my respondents' perceptions of the attitudes) of program employees; 2) the hassle of fulfilling program requirements; and 3) the loss of privacy around the choices my respondents make for their lives. None of these constitutes stigma in and of itself, but all are experienced *because* stigma exists, and each plays a role in respondents' overall interpretations of what programs offer.

Perceptions of program employees' attitudes

As noted above, my respondents' experiences with and expectations for assistance vary based on the particular program or office with which they are dealing. Most respondents describe positive experiences and expectations in relation to WIC, Head Start, and a few local non-governmental organizations that provide assistance in emergency situations (food, utility assistance, diapers, etc.), but the overwhelming majority report very different experiences with programs run through the Department of Human Services. These include TANF, SNAP, and Medicaid, as well as subsidies to assist with childcare payments and emergency assistance with utility bills. Like recipients of TANF/AFDC and other programs who have been the subjects of previous studies (see, for examples, Jarrett, 1996; Morgen et al, 2010; Rank, 2004; Seccombe, 2011), my respondents describe their experiences with DHS programs as demeaning, embarrassing, and humiliating – words that correlate with the treatment a stigmatized individual might anticipate in contexts in which her stigma is readily apparent.

When asked to describe their experiences applying for assistance from public anti-poverty programs, my respondents do not hesitate to offer candid assessments of the treatment they have received:

> "They make you feel like you're less than a person. They do. That's just how they treat you there." (Jean, single mother of one and grandmother of one, monthly income $2,500-2,999)

> "The way that I feel is like they think that they're better than us, because we're there, and because they're on the opposite side of the desk. But I want to ask them, 'If the roles were reversed, how would you feel?'" (Tiffany, single mother of three, monthly income $1,500-1,999)

> "They're kind of rude there, (short laugh) they're not very nice. Because you are low income, so they think that they can talk down to you and that they're higher than everybody else. And that's not, it's not right." (Amy, married mother of two, monthly income $750-999)

> "I'm so grateful that it's there, but it's also like a slap in the face the way that they treat when you go down there, and they treat everyone, they stereotype anyone who walks through their doors and I can't, that's not, that's not okay." (Janet, single mother of one, monthly income $250-499)

> "The employees treat you like crap. They want you to believe that they're so much better than you. And what's wrong with you that you have to be here. They belittle you. They talk down to you. Um, they act like you're stupid, you know? You don't have any education and that's why you're there. Or you're lazy, and you don't want to work, and that's why you're there. And they make no qualms about being that way. They don't try and sugar coat it; they don't try and hide it." (Pam, divorced mother of two, monthly income $3,000+)

For these respondents, and most others, the treatment they have received when seeking assistance is a clear reminder of the stigma that public anti-poverty programs carry – a mark that indicates their status as "less than," lazy, and morally inferior. The employees in the welfare office have not created this stigma, nor have they single-handedly marked recipients with it – this has already been accomplished by the hegemonic poverty discourse – but they are perceived to be reinforcing it through their attitudes and actions.

Because it is impossible to hide the stigma when one is actively seeking assistance, those visiting the welfare office must figure out their own ways to cope with being discredited. For some, like Patty, this means reasserting, in their own minds, that they do not fit the profile of a stigmatized person:

> "They talk to you like you're a nobody, and it gets me mad, because…my husband's a hard worker, we both have college behind us - like we might not have graduated, but we come from good families, you know? We were raised on high morals and values."

For others, like Jean, it means struggling, internally, to cope with feelings of degradation and humiliation:

> "I [had a worker who] sat across the table from me and actually said to me, "You're a good looking woman. You don't have to come down here and get this. You could do something else to turn a buck." I was mortified. I was literally in tears…I still can feel that feeling now, how I felt sitting across the table from that man telling me that, and I was just, it was unbelievable to me, unbelievable."

For still others, like Tiffany, it means fighting back, in whatever way they are able:

> "You get the ones in [DHS] that call you in there, back to their desk, and they cross their legs…and I'm telling them, 'Look, I'm going to let you know right now: I'm not the one. I'm not going to sit here and let you talk to me like I'm a child. I'm an adult, you're an adult, we need to have an adult conversation. I'm here for help. You're here to help me. You don't want to help me, I'll find somebody who will.'"

In all of these cases, my respondents are working to "manage" the stigma that they bear in a context in which it is impossible to hide.

Hassle

In addition to the treatment they receive from program employees, my respondents talk about dealing with the "hassle" of public program participation. Some of this my respondents blame on "the process," by which they mean the lengthy application procedure, including completing the initial application booklet, waiting up to two months to hear whether or not they

are approved for benefits, and returning to the office periodically for recertification. These requirements are built into the system and are – for the most part – not a matter of employee discretion. If these are viewed as a consequence of welfare stigma, then, it is not individual employees but the designers of policies and programs who are using the stigma to justify such treatment of benefit recipients. As Rianna, a single, African American mother of two who earns $2,000-2,499 per month with a master's degree, tells me, "The programs are set up to make it as annoying as possible…It's just barriers to jump through." She – like many others - does not simply blame the employees but the programs themselves (as they are "set up" by policy makers) for the hassle involved in program participation.

This is viewed as being especially true of the cash assistance program, the requirements for which many respondents feel are holding them back rather than helping them move forward. Melissa, for example, received cash assistance for a short time after an accident resulted in her husband's inability to work:

> "They have a program that you have to go through if you want to get cash assistance…Basically I sat there and learned how to do an interview (which I already knew how to do), how to do a resume (I already knew how to do that), and how to fill out an application, none of which was useful tools that I could use. And you just sat there day after day…I understood if you want [the benefits], you have to do that, but it got to the point where I can't afford to drive here every day and pick this kid up and this kid up and drop this one off. We have one car to our house, so even if my husband did drop me off, then come back and get me at the end of the day, it's still costing us $20 a day."

Caroline, a single mother of two living on $250-499 per month, expresses similar frustrations:

> "I went to the supervisor at the [TANF work] program, and I was like, 'I'm a full-time student,' and they're just like, 'Quit. You need to get a job.' And so I just gave up on cash assistance…I quit it, 'cause I just thought they were ridiculous, because they wanted me to quit school to go get any job. That's what they push towards: any job, whether it's minimum wage. You can't live on minimum wage. I know I couldn't. Not at all. So they shouldn't push you to go get a low paying job, and they should be more supportive if you are going to school."

Both of these women felt that the requirements of TANF's work program were set up with welfare stigma in mind, assuming that participants in this program had little to no experience with applying for or maintaining employment (Melissa) and that they did not "deserve" (or were incapable of acquiring) more than a minimum wage job (Caroline). While they were frustrated with the treatment they received from the employees running these programs, they were even more discouraged by the strict requirements of the program, which seemed to be not just implemented but *designed* to reflect and highlight welfare stigma.

In other instances, however, it was in the *implementation* of programs that respondents experienced a level of hassle that, for some, was more than they were willing to endure. This was often the case when respondents told stories about their benefits being "cut off" unexpectedly and was, in the eyes of my respondents, another result of the stigma they so obviously bore in the welfare office. While many respondents told me about times when their food stamps or Medicaid coverage had been stopped by program employees, only to be restarted when the employees realized that it was their own mistake and not that of the benefit recipient that application or recertification information was missing, Hannah's story is perhaps the most egregious.

When she gave birth to her only daughter at the age of 38, Hannah, who had worked full-time her entire adult life and was recently divorced, decided to stay home with her baby and live off of savings she had accrued over the past twenty years. When her money ran out, she went back to work, sending her daughter to Head Start until she was old enough to enter public school. After losing her job a year ago, Hannah returned to school and started working part time. In order to make ends meet, she turned to DHS for assistance. She was told that she qualified for SNAP, Medicaid, and a small amount of cash assistance, all of which she began receiving. That September, however, only a few months after she began receiving her benefits, Hannah received

a letter saying that her cash and food stamp benefits had been terminated. She brought all of the

relevant paperwork into her caseworker and was told that her case had been sent to another

office. After visiting that office and delivering all of her paperwork to a new caseworker, she

waited a month with no results. Despite multiple calls and visits, Hannah was still not receiving

her benefits four months later, so she decided to file for a hearing:[19]

> "You go in this little room. The caseworker guy is there. The supervisor's there,
> me, the judge on the little teleconference thing, and we go through all this
> swearing in and all this stuff…I'm thinking, 'Oh my God, this is gonna fall
> through, and I'm gonna get screwed again 'cause of some judge that doesn't know
> me, that I'm talking to through some speaker phone. They can't see me. They
> don't know my personality. They don't know who I am. They know nothing
> about me.'…So we go through the whole hearing judge thing, and then I don't
> know what, if it was my saving grace day or whatever, but the judge was like,
> 'Well, reinstate all her stuff.'

This sounds like good news when Hannah tells me, but then she continues, "And that was in

January, and so now it's April, and still nothing's happened."

Seven months after her benefits were cut off - and three months after a judge ordered

them to be reinstated - Hannah is still without her food stamps and cash assistance. Surprisingly,

her Medicaid coverage has continued, for which she is extremely grateful, particularly since her

now-nine-year-old daughter recently fell while riding her scooter, breaking her nose and

damaging two front teeth. Of her experiences with DHS, Hannah says, "I hate it. It's

embarrassing, it's humiliating, and those women in there, I'd love to give them some special

training not to be rude to people." Hannah blames the hassle and poor treatment she has received

on the view of welfare office employees that people applying for assistance are lazy and lying –

in other words that they possess the very characteristics that welfare stigma indicates.

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[19] The 1970 Supreme Court case Goldberg v. Kelly gave "welfare" recipients the right to appeal the termination of their benefits in a procedure that has come to be known simply as "a hearing."

Not surprisingly, Hannah wants desperately to finish school, get a job, and stop using public anti-poverty programs. This is, in part, due to the hassle she describes experiencing at the hands of welfare office employees, but it is also because she, like many other respondents, is tired of feeling as if her life choices are being both constrained and interrogated by the very programs she thought were designed to help her.

Loss of privacy

On a recent visit to the welfare office, Hannah says that her caseworker asked her how she pays for gas to get back and forth to school if she is not working (in Hannah's mind, implying that Hannah is working under the table or has resources that she is not disclosing):

> "I can't stand this. I can't stand everybody in my business asking me questions…
> I said, 'Sometimes I get rides to school, because that's what I have to do, because
> I don't have gas money. Sometimes I have to, you know, hock stuff to get by.'
> I'm like, 'What do you care? Like what do you care what I do? What do you care
> what I do?'"

Hannah is not alone in wishing that employees of the welfare office would stop asking her questions. Cash assistance programs in particular, but other public anti-poverty programs as well, have long been known as invasive, seeking information about benefit recipients that they often feel is unnecessary and restricting their life choices in subtle and not so subtle ways (see Gilliom, 2001; Hasenfeld, 2000; Lens, 2005). John Gilliom (2001) refers to these as "programs of scrutiny:

> "[They] are designed to augment the hassle, intimidation, and humiliation of
> applicants with an eye toward the policy goal of deterring all but the most
> desperate from seeking aid. Specific tactics within programs – the poorhouses, the
> uniforms, the surprise home visits, the invasive questions – align with a broader
> cultural shaming of the poor in the mass media to create barriers to anyone asking
> for help" (40).

In other words, the surveillance (as Gilliom calls it) employed by these programs is a direct result of the stigma placed on those who seek assistance from public anti-poverty programs.

Feelings that programs invade – or even eradicate – their privacy and freedom to make choices for their own lives are particularly apparent among women reluctant to provide the welfare office with information about the father(s) of their child(ren). For Alma, a single mother of three who has no contact with their father, being asked to provide such information was the equivalent of being asked to relinquish her power to make what she felt to be the best choices for her children's lives:

> "They ask me for the father and, I mean I know who the father is…[but] I tell them I don't know, because I don't want to get him involved in anything, because if I involve him with the girls, then he's going to want them, and I don't want them away from me, you know? So, it's just like, I can't say too much about him, because I don't want him to give child support or anything like that, because I don't want my kids to be involved with him, you know?"

Alma was uncomfortable with the thought of her children's father being involved in their lives and felt that this was a choice she ought to be allowed to make as their primary caregiver. Having "the system" interrogate this choice was, in Alma's mind, more than surveillance or information gathering; it was the welfare office trying to tell her how to be a good mother, removing from her the capacity to make her own choices about what that meant.

Melita feels similarly about the welfare office's demand that she provide information about her son's father, but her rationale for not sharing this information is different. "They wanted me to report my son's father for child support," she tells me. "But I didn't feel it was right to put him in child support, because he was active in helping with our son." Unlike Alma, Melita was happy to have her son's father involved in his life, but she did not want someone else ("child support") defining the terms of that involvement. Again, this was a choice she felt that she should be able to make without the interference of the welfare office.

It is not surprising, given the history of moral judgment surrounding single motherhood in the U.S., that issues related to paternity and the role of fathers as the "appropriate" providers

for families would draw particular scrutiny from employees of the welfare office. Promiscuity, or the failure to abide by the patriarchal model of the family, has long been recognized as one of the primary characteristics indicated by the mark of welfare stigma (Abramovitz, 2000; Fraser & Gordon, 1992; Gordon, 1994). My respondents were certainly not blind to this fact, clearly recognizing the invasive quality of their relationship with public anti-poverty programs. Like the AFDC recipients with whom Gilliom (2001) spoke, however, my respondents did not couch their concerns about privacy and life choices in a language of rights but in one of need - most specifically, what they needed to be good mothers. As Joe Soss (2000) has written, "People who are eligible for welfare benefits tend to be acutely aware that program participation will carry them into an unusually direct and personal relationship with government" (30); for many of my respondents, this is viewed as a necessary relationship, even if it means being continuously reminded of the stigma they bear as the heads of households living in or near poverty in the U.S.

Managing stigma in day-to-day life

How my respondents experience and interpret the consequences of stigma in their interactions with welfare employees is, of course, only one part of how they deal with these consequences in their lives as a whole. While often memorable, my respondents' interactions with welfare employees are not nearly as frequent as other life experiences, like visiting the grocery store, taking their children to doctor's appointments, and interacting with family members, friends, and neighbors. In all of these situations, the stigma my respondents bear is less apparent than it is in the welfare office, and, for many, maintaining their position as discreditable (rather than discredited) individuals requires daily – if not constant – effort. Again, these efforts remind us that the stigma exists even when it is not immediately resulting in poor treatment or negative self-concept.

While some of my respondents deny that they have ever tried to hide or avoid talking about their participation in public anti-poverty programs, many share stories or examples of their efforts to do just that, particularly in public settings but also sometimes among family members, neighbors, and friends:

> "I always would look over my shoulder to see, you know, is somebody going to watch me check out at the store or, you know, hopefully not see what card I'm using, when we got food assistance." (Pam, divorced mother of two, monthly income, $3,000+)

> "I think a lot of people think I'm ghetto or uneducated or stereotype anyone who pulls out [an EBT] card, so that does make me, I'll sometimes go like self-check or especially like if one of my clients from work see it, stuff like that." (Janet, single mother of one, monthly income $250-499)

> "I was really embarrassed and like I would hide it in my wallet, 'cause I didn't want to be the person to open their wallet and like the card would fall out." (Emily, single mother of two, $2,500-2,999)

> "I was in a grocery store one time. I was getting ready to pay for my stuff, and there was my neighbor, and I pulled out cash and paid for it, and it was like, it was an embarrassing situation. For me, it was an embarrassing situation, very embarrassing." (Carol, married mother of two and grandmother of one, monthly income $1,000-1,499)

> "We really just don't talk about it. Our close friends know that we do WIC,[20] because when we come home from the grocery store, we'll have like four gallons of milk in the fridge. But, um, yeah I wouldn't even say, um, probably my father knows. I just don't talk about it. It's kind of embarrassing." (Sarah, married mother of two, monthly income $3,000+)

> "I guess it's not a thing that I would advertise, you know, like…'Girl, I got me a card! Girl, you know I got me some Medicaid!' You know what I'm saying? How that sound, you know? It's like, who's advertising?" (Daria, single mother of two, monthly income $1,000-1,499)

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[20] While many of my respondents expressed positive feelings about and experiences with WIC, they are also well aware that WIC participants bear the same stigma in society as participants in other public anti-poverty programs. This emphasizes the idea that stigma exists independent of the treatment that results from it and that there are multiple aspects to stigma that individuals must consider in interpreting what programs offer. The treatment one receives from program employees is one consequence of bearing stigma, but others include the treatment one receives (or fears receiving) from other members of society and the impact stigma has on one's own self-concept.

It is interesting to note that while some research has shown that the implementation of the EBT card – which replaced paper food stamps with a card similar in appearance to a credit or debit card – lessened the stigma of using SNAP (Danielson & Klerman; 2006; Kabbani & Wilde, 2003; Ponza et al, 1999; Ratcliffe, McKernan, & Finegold, 2008), many of my respondents made efforts to hide this card, implying that it continues to serve as a stigma symbol (Goffman, 1963).

Also of note is the contextual nature of some respondents' comments about hiding their use of public anti-poverty programs. For example, while Jamila, a married mother of three, says that she does not care what other people think of her, she admits that "the only time it might bother me a little bit more is if I might go into a neighborhood where nobody use food stamps, and I come and use food stamps." In that case, she says, she would feel differently and possibly try to hide her use of SNAP. Similarly, Tyra, a single mother of two, explains:

> "It just depends on what community you're in, because sometimes the community you're in, they're in the same situation as you, so you don't really have to worry about judgment. But if you are in another situation or another community, where everyone kind of doesn't, you know, need any assistance - they're doing everything on their own - then you might feel like a little lower than everyone else."

Denise, a married mother of two, who has friends who are significantly wealthier than she and her husband are, tells me, with characteristically dry humor:

> "If I'm on the other side, like, um, my friend's house, who lives in a $400,000 house, gated community, and her friends are over, and I pull out my WIC stamps, I'm not going to, or WIC coupons, whatever, I wasn't going to do that. Like, 'Hey, look, I'm on WIC! How are you guys? Oh, you got platinum cards. Oh cool."

Stigma – particularly whether and how one attempts to hide it from others – is thus not the same in all circumstances but is, rather, "dependent on the immediate social context and the meaning of that context for the stigmatized person" (Crocker, 1999, 90). When surrounded by others in similar circumstances, efforts to hide stigma feel unnecessary to many of my respondents. When

they are interacting with people from different backgrounds or who are less accustomed to the use of public programs, however, remaining discreditable – and not discredited – becomes more important. Goffman (1963) refers to this as a way of "sheltering" oneself from the poor treatment that results from being discredited or having a known stigma. When such sheltering becomes impossible and one's stigma is revealed – either by the visibility of a stigma symbol or by one's own disclosure of its existence – a new aspect of stigma must be considered: coping with the treatment one receives in day-to-day life as a discredited individual.

Consequences of stigma in day-to-day life

While a few respondents talk about family members, friends, and neighbors who treated them differently after finding out that they were receiving help from a public anti-poverty program, the most talked about location (outside of the welfare office itself) in which respondents describe dealing with the consequences of stigma is the grocery store. It is here that respondents are most frequently forced to reveal their stigma, simply by taking an EBT card out of their wallet. "You'd get looks," Alyson says to me, describing her trips to the grocery store to buy food for herself and her son with her SNAP benefits. "When you check out and you have to use your card, and the cashier never runs it right, to where you have to do it, slow up the line. It's always embarrassing, and then, you know, they look at you like, 'How dare you?'"

Whether or not the cashier (or other customers in line) were actually thinking this, Alyson's perception was that they not only recognized her stigma but agreed with it, labeling her as someone who did not deserve (or, to use my respondents' language, *need*) the help they were receiving. Alyson felt this most acutely when she shopped after work, still wearing the scrubs that she dressed in for her job as a home health aide:

> "It's hard for me, because I'll be in my scrubs and stuff, and people have this horrible thing, like if you're in scrubs, you're a nurse. No I'm not. I wipe butts for

a living, you know? I'm not a nurse. But they think that, and then I'm using this card, so then they're like, 'You're making twenty-some dollars an hour.' 'No, I'm not,' you know? And it's almost like you want to wear a sign on your back that says, 'You know what? I need help for my son. Don't make faces, and don't, you know, and just let me do this.'"

It is particularly interesting that Alyson's response to the mark she is forced to bear is to desire another mark – a physical sign – that tells people they are wrong; they see one stigma, and she wishes for another, wanting to be marked as someone who *needs* help rather than as someone who is receiving help she does not need.

While one could hear Alyson talk about her grocery store experiences and conclude that she is imagining the assumptions other people are making about her, it is harder to draw that conclusion in other cases, when respondents share stories of the very vocal ways in which people express their opinions about public anti-poverty programs and the people who participate in them. Tiffany, the single mother who works midnight shifts as a direct care worker to support her three sons, tells me about one such instance:

 "Last month, when I was at the grocery store, and I pulled out my [EBT] Card, and [the man in line behind me] looked, and he looked at his wife and said, 'That's a damn shame.' And his wife said, 'What?' He said, 'She just pulled up in what looks to be a newer car, and she's pulling out [an EBT] card.'"

Not being particularly shy or reserved, Tiffany responded in kind:

"I cut him off right there. And I looked back at him, and I politely said, 'Excuse me sir, but you don't know my situation. I just used my tax money to buy that car, because my car broke down. I need a car to go back and forth to work. I pay taxes. I work, yes, but I don't make enough to cover the food and everything that we do need. I make eight dollars an hour.' And he goes, 'That's your business. I just feel like you're taking advantage.'"

Despite her explanation of her circumstances, the man in the grocery store line judged Tiffany not on her words but on the stigma she bore. It is not difficult to imagine, based on stories like

this, how the treatment that results from stigma might impact a person's own sense of who they are and what they need or deserve.

Self-concept & counter-hegemonic discourse

The most common reaction that my respondents have to bearing stigma is a feeling of shame. Again, I refer to this as a *consequence* of stigma and not as "internalized stigma," because it is a reaction that my respondents have to a mark they have been forced to bear; they are not internalizing the mark itself but are rather responding to assumptions that have been made about them and the treatment they have received as a result of that mark. Such feelings of shame are often exacerbated by encounters like Tiffany's or by interactions with welfare employees, but even without such experiences, my respondents describe thinking differently about themselves simply because they need help and are aware of the stigma this carries. When Pam describes the first time she went to apply for assistance for herself and her two children, following her divorce, she tells me, "I felt so bad about it. I thought, you know, 'What's wrong with me? Why can't I support [my kids]?...I just, I felt so wrong. It takes a lot of your dignity away." Others, particularly those whose families had never used assistance before, expressed similar feelings of self-doubt and shame:

> "I do feel ashamed sometimes, like when I, like my dad, I don't talk to him about it, just because he worked so hard to prevent his family from having to get anything…[It's] definitely a pride thing. For the longest time I didn't want to be on it and didn't want to admit that we probably qualified for it." (Patty, married mother of four, $1,000-1,499)

> "When you're in the category of being an adult, you should be able to handle your own life, and if you're not doing that, well then it's…it's just a little bit embarrassing." (Sarah, married mother of two, $3,000+)

> "I set my pride aside, and I went down there, and I applied. I mean, and it was just awful, awful to me, 'cause we - like I said - we'd never been on it [when I was growing up]. My father, he had ten kids, and he was never on it, and here I only

had two, and I got to step up and stand in line for something." (Jean, single mother of two and grandmother of one, $2,500-2,999)

In a society that values independence, self-sufficiency, and personal responsibility – and consistently highlights this in its discourse – those who bear the stigma of asking for help rarely avoid feeling about themselves the way they imagine (or know from experience) that others feel about them. "The stigmatized individual tends to hold the same beliefs about identity that we [the non-stigmatized] do," writes Goffman (1963). "The standards he has incorporated from the wider society equip him to be intimately alive to what others see as his failing, inevitably causing him, if only for moments, to agree that he does indeed fall short of what he really ought to be. Shame becomes a central possibility" (7). This is true of nearly all of my respondents, although a small number do appear to have developed what I have called a counter-hegemonic discourse – one that allows them to maintain a sense of dignity and self-respect in the face of their stigma.

Danielle, for example, shares her experiences with receiving assistance when her only son was an infant. She lost her job while pregnant and was unable to find employment for several months. While she did get help from public anti-poverty programs (WIC, SNAP, and Medicaid) during this period, she refused to be ashamed of her need or to let other people treat her as if she *ought* to be ashamed. Describing a visit to the welfare office, she tells me:

> "I got a lady who was very nasty and derogatory in a lot of ways, that I felt like I was being judged more or less, like she, it was almost as if to say that because I was getting this assistance then I must be less than. But I knew that I wasn't, and I had to explain to her that my circumstances are just that - circumstances - and it is not an indication of the person I am."

Danielle, like others who expressed similar views, used this type of counter-hegemonic discourse throughout our interviews. She is one of the few respondents who believes that receiving assistance is an unqualified right in the U.S. and who did not talk about (other) assistance recipients in negative terms. This does not mean, however, that she *denies* the existence of

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stigma (see Seccombe, 2011) - only that she refuses to respond to it in the way that so many others do: with shame or judgment. The fact that even those who employ a counter-hegemonic poverty discourse acknowledge the existence of stigma reminds us once again that stigma cannot be controlled or avoided by those who bear it. Individuals can refuse to accept certain *consequences* of stigma, but they cannot erase the stigma itself.

A new approach

In attempting to assess the relationship between stigma and participation in public anti-poverty programs, scholars have operationalized the concept of stigma in a variety of ways. While they have found, fairly consistently, that stigma plays a role in participation choices, understanding the specifics of this role has proved challenging – particularly since the many definitions and measures of stigma used make it difficult to draw conclusions across studies.

In his classic work on the subject, Moffit (1981, 1983) concluded that the decision about whether or not to participate in Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) could not be explained by utility maximization alone, unless non-pecuniary costs (which he labels "stigma") were included in the model. While both of Moffitt's studies demonstrate that there is something more than a simple financial cost-benefit analysis at play in the participation decision, his definition of stigma in both cases included all non-pecuniary costs. Because he does not distinguish between the mark of stigma itself, its consequences (which may include everything from poor treatment to self-doubt and shame), and other potential factors in the participation decision (such as awareness of programs, physical access to application and recertification procedures, and other transaction costs involved in participation), understanding how stigma operates and comparing Moffitt's findings to those of other researchers become nearly impossible.

More recent studies of the impact of stigma on participation have attempted to be more precise in their definition of stigma but have varied in their measurement of the concept. Using other variables as proxies for stigma, for example, Ranney and Kushman (1987) concluded that increased perceptions of stigma made participation in the Food Stamp Program (now SNAP) less likely. They based this conclusion on the fact that home ownership and labor force attachment are both negatively related to participation, while having friends or relatives who receive food stamps is positively related. There may indeed be some relationship between these measures and certain aspects of stigma – particularly the extent to which an individual attempts to manage her/his stigma by "passing" (Goffman, 1963) or hiding her/his stigma from the view of others - but it is also possible that home ownership and labor force attachment signal eligibility for lower benefit amounts or that having friends or relatives who receive food stamps may increase one's level of information about or access to the program, both of which have been shown to impact participation choices.

Other studies have attempted to measure stigma using questions about individuals' attitudes toward "welfare" or those who use public anti-poverty programs. For example, Zedlewski (2002) asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed that "welfare makes people work less than they would if there wasn't a welfare system" and concluded that stigma (i.e. agreeing with this statement) reduced the likelihood of participation in TANF. Similarly, Stuber and colleagues (Stuber & Kronebusch, 2004; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006) explored the effect of stigma on TANF and Medicaid participation using questions about people on welfare and general attitudes toward welfare receipt. Such measures can determine whether or not individuals agree that the characteristics exposed by stigma are actually possessed by welfare recipients (i.e. welfare recipients are lazy, weak, and/or immoral) and whether or not this

agreement (or disagreement) is correlated with their own participation in public anti-poverty programs. What they cannot do is tell us how concerns about the *consequences* of stigma (regardless of one's own *agreement* with it) impact participation. For example, even my respondents who disagree that "welfare makes people work less than they would if there wasn't a welfare system" are aware that program participants are publicly marked with this characteristic (laziness or dependency). How they think about this in making participation choices varies and is more subtle and complex than a simple "agree" or "disagree" can measure.

Stuber and Kronebusch (2004) attempted to account for some of this subtlety by distinguishing between two types of stigma: identity stigma, which is defined as "concerns about being labeled with negative stereotypes associated with recipients of means-tested programs" (Stuber & Kronebusch, 2004, 511), and treatment stigma, or concerns about being "treated poorly while participating in public assistance" (512). Based on the theory of stigma that arises out of my respondents' discourse, these two "concerns" or "types of stigma" are actually two responses to the *consequences* of stigma. In any case, though, whether we consider these to be two different types of stigma or two different responses to the same stigma, measuring them with forced-response survey questions does not allow us to fully explore the role that they play in the very complex process of making choices about participation in public anti-poverty programs.

Finally, an additional means of measuring stigma has been to ask respondents directly why they do not participate in particular public anti-poverty programs. Studies employing this technique have interpreted certain responses, including not wanting to accept charity or government assistance, be seen using food stamps, or go to the "welfare office" to apply for benefits, as indicating a perception of stigma (Bartlett, Burstein & Hamilton, 2004; Burstein et al 2009; Perry et al, 2000). All of these responses have been correlated with a decreased

likelihood of participation. Because they allow individuals to explain their own choices in their own words, studies using such measures of stigma may provide more accurate assessments of the relationship between stigma and participation, but they still do not delve deeply enough into respondents' interpretations or opinions to help us to understand why some individuals' choices seem to be affected by stigma while others are not. As my respondents demonstrate, people living in or near poverty are generally well aware of the stigma associated with public anti-poverty programs. Why is it, then, that only some of these people name stigma (or its consequences) as a reason for not participating in such programs? To understand this, we must look not only at what people have to say about stigma but also at what else they expect public anti-poverty programs to offer them and at how this interacts with their interpretations of need.

CHAPTER SIX:
"The Program Doesn't Define Who I Am"
What Participation Profiles Can Tell Us

Think again about Amari and Keesha (chapter two). These two women, each a single mother of one child, have monthly incomes of less than $250, placing them well below the federal poverty threshold for a family of two ($16,057 per year – or just over $1,300 per month - in 2013). Objectively, Amari and Keesha look very much alike, in terms of both their level of need and their participation choices: at the time of our interviews, both women were receiving benefits from SNAP, Medicaid, and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), and neither was using TANF or Section 8, despite being income eligible for these programs. As we saw in their interpretations of need, however, Amari and Keesha think of their situations very differently. They also think of the choices they make very differently, even though the results may appear to be the same.

Amari wishes that her financial situation were better than it is, but she also says that she is "pretty satisfied" with her circumstances, particularly when she compares them to other times in her life when she was unable to find work or to other people whose situations she views as being worse than her own. Of the help she gets from public anti-poverty programs, Amari says: "I guess just like anything else, [there are] ups and downs and trials and tribulations, and of course, I wish I didn't have to be on it…[but] I mean, it's okay. I appreciate it." These programs are, it seems, a necessary evil in Amari's life, supplementing what little income she brings in from work and helping her to avoid seeking help from family, friends, or other sources. She

views herself as being self-sufficient *because* (rather than in spite) of the assistance she receives from SNAP, Medicaid, and NSLP.

TANF and Section 8, however, are a different story entirely. The very fact that Amari considers working for less than $250 each month to be a better option than receiving assistance from TANF demonstrates the divide between how she thinks of this program and how she thinks of SNAP and the other programs from which she receives assistance. She has used TANF once in her life – for "maybe two months, maybe three" – and, as far as she knows, would be eligible to receive it again if she were not working. It is impossible to discern whether Amari's preference for gainful employment ("I want to work") is the result of her experiences with the program (which she describes as "a headache") or simply a reflection of the hegemonic poverty discourse (or both), but in either case, she says that she would have to be in a severe crisis before she sought help from TANF a second time. She gives a similar explanation for not applying for Section 8 housing assistance.

For Amari, then, the choice to use some programs (SNAP, Medicaid, and NSLP) but not others (TANF and Section 8) has to do with both her view that her financial situation is satisfactory and her perception that the help she does receive enables her to maintain a sense of self-sufficiency. She does not *want* to be using *any* public anti-poverty programs, but, at least for now, she does not see herself as having much choice: "I wish I could find a job to where I don't have to use the assistance," she tells me. "I would hurry up and get off of it…but unfortunately the economy nowadays, you know, forces you to be on it." Where she does feel like she has a choice – in deciding whether or not to use programs like TANF and Section 8 – Amari chooses work and only wishes that she did not "have to go through so much to get a job with good, decent benefits." As restricted as she may perceive her choices to be, Amari does have particular

interpretations of need and programs that lead her to make different choices depending on her life circumstances and the program in question.

Keesha – who, again, has the same income and family size and uses the same programs as Amari – describes her situation and her choices quite differently. Interpreting her circumstances as "very hard," particularly since the onset of chronic respiratory problems four years before our interviews, Keesha talks about the choice to receive SNAP, Medicaid, and NSLP as a response to her health crisis. While the chronic nature of her illness has led to prolonged use of these programs, Keesha continues to describe them as emergency assistance rather than as a permanent – or even long-term – solution to her problems, and while Amari is actively avoiding help from TANF, Keesha is seeking it out, attempting to have her benefits reinstated despite having reached the state's four year time limit.

Of the first time she visited the DHS office to apply for help, Keesha says, "I didn't like it. It wasn't a place I wanted to go…I don't want to be on assistance. I could assist myself. But then, you know, what I had to do was like swallow that pride and know it's not about what I don't *want* to do; it's about what I *have* to do for my family." Finding herself in a crisis situation, unable to work to provide for herself and her daughter, Keesha decided it was necessary to get help from public anti-poverty programs. Keesha has tried to apply for disability-related programs (SSI and SSDI), which she interprets as a more appropriate form of assistance for someone with a permanent barrier to employment, but she has thus far been denied. "If I can't work, I can't work," Keesha says to me. "My doctor [says] it's a lifetime, I'm gonna be like this for a lifetime, you know? But I've applied, denied, applied, denied, applied, denied again. I'm applying again and so just wait and see." In the meantime, she will continue to rely on what she interprets as emergency programs like TANF and SNAP, considering herself to be in a crisis situation until

she is able to find some more permanent source of income. Because Keesha has been unable to gain access to programs that she interprets as meeting her long-term needs, her objective situation (i.e. the programs in which she would be considered a "participant") does not accurately reflect the choices she is making or wants to make.

Amari and Keesha look, objectively, as if they have made the same choices regarding participation in public anti-poverty programs, and, in some sense, they have: both are using SNAP, Medicaid, and NSLP, and neither is using TANF or other forms of assistance for which they may be eligible. *How* they have made their choices, however, is not the same. Each of these women has a distinct *participation profile*, made up of the participation choices she has made throughout her life and the narratives she uses to explain these choices. How each woman interprets – and *has interpreted* - need and what public anti-poverty programs offer in response to need shapes her participation profile. If we truly want to understand participation choices, then, we need to look beyond the current research's focus on dichotomous, program-specific, and point-in-time measures (all of which would tell us that the choices Amari and Keesha have made are identical) and explore individual participation profiles in more depth.

As has been noted (chapter one), the bulk of the literature addressing issues of participation and nonparticipation in public anti-poverty programs conceptualizes participation as a dichotomous, program-specific, and point-in-time phenomenon. While a few studies have explored households' participation (and nonparticipation) in more than one program at a time (Blank & Ruggles, 1996; Caputo, 2009; Currie, 2004; Currie & Grogger, 2001; Danielson & Klerman, 2006; Grogger, 2003; Kim & Mergoupis, 1997; Lee, et al, 2003; Mikelson & Lermann, 2004; Stuber & Kronebush, 2004; Stuber & Schlesinger, 2006; Thompson & Gais, 2000;

Tschoepe & Hindera, 2001; Winicki, 2003; Zedlewski & Brauner, 1999; Zedlewski & Radar, 2005), virtually none has looked at participation in all of the programs for which a household is eligible, and even those that look at two or more programs measure participation at a particular point in time rather than across an individual's or household's lifetime. Only one study (Blank & Ruggles, 1996) has been located that uses a longitudinal approach to participation, looking specifically at a single program (AFDC). Even the very few qualitative studies relating to participation focus on single points in time, asking interview and focus group respondents to discuss the reasons for their nonparticipation *at the time of the study* rather than their participation over time (Perry, Stark, & Valdez, 1998; Whiting, et al, 2005; Zedlewski & Nelson, 2003). The result of this is that, while we know that many individuals and households do not participate in all of the programs for which they are eligible (Stoker & Wilson, 2006; Winicki, 2003) and do not participate during all of their "eligibility spells" (Blank & Ruggles, 1996; Ponza et al, 1999), our efforts to understand nonparticipation fail to account for these realities.

My respondents' experiences and narratives highlight the need for a broader conception of participation. Of my 75 respondents, every one has participated in at least one public anti-poverty program in her/his life, and none has participated in every program for which s/he has been income eligible. Participation choices are different not only from one person to another but for the same person at different points in her/his life or when considering different programs. For example, while only eight of my respondents were using TANF at the time of our interviews, more than half (42) had used TANF (or its predecessor, AFDC) at some point in their lives. In addition, when I spoke with them, approximately half of my respondents were using some but not all of the programs for which they were income eligible. Some of this variation in participation choices has to do with changes in eligibility status, as factors like income and

household composition shift over time, but it is also a reflection of the ways in which respondents' choices change depending on their interpretations of need and of what programs offer to meet need. Understanding choices thus requires reconceptualizing participation to account for the lived experiences and interpretations of those involved – what I refer to as people's participation profiles.

Participation profiles

Because each participation profile is made up of the choices an individual has made over the course of her/his life and is therefore dependent on the context(s) of that life, there are, in reality, as many participation profiles as there are individuals eligible (or near eligible) for public anti-poverty programs. My respondents' narratives do indicate, however, that participation choices fall into five major categories, allowing us to explore *types* of participation profiles rather than an endless number of individual profiles.[21] These choice categories, which appear in different combinations across profiles, are: choosing to use programs (or one particular program) 1) as a regular and ongoing source of income; 2) because of a crisis or emergency situation; 3) as long-term supplements to other income; 4) for the benefit of one's children (this applies only to particular programs, usually Head Start and WIC); and 5) temporarily, as one goes through a life transition.

Each participation choice an individual makes fits into one of these categories, but it is important to keep in mind that the categories themselves are not mutually exclusive. The same individual may – and, indeed, is likely to – make multiple choices, each of which falls into a different category, depending on her/his particular life circumstances at the time the choice is made and/or the particular program(s) in question. It is, of course, possible that one individual

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[21] I am using the word "type" in keeping with Weber's (1978) use of the terms "types" and "ideal types" as theoretical classifications that assist us with understanding and explaining complex phenomena.

might make the same choice about multiple programs, if, for example, that person interprets all of the programs for which she is eligible as crisis programs and interprets her current need to be at a crisis level. When her interpretation of her need changes (i.e. she no longer views herself as being in crisis), she would then be likely to stop using all programs simultaneously. In this case, all of her choices fall into the same category. It appears to be more common among my respondents, however, for the same individual to interpret different programs in different ways and therefore make multiple choices, which fall into multiple categories, at the same time.

In either case, an individual's participation profile is made up of the categories of choices s/he makes, not only at a particular point in time but across her/his life. Each profile is thus a combination of choices, each of which reflects the individual's interpretations of need and what individual programs offer to meet need. After reviewing the five different categories of choices, based on my respondents' narratives, I will explore the ways in which these categories come together in particular participation profiles and, finally, describe how future research might go about developing a typology of participation profiles.

Choosing to use programs as income

Despite the hegemonic poverty discourse's emphasis on dependency as a consequence of public anti-poverty program use (see Fraser & Gordon, 1994), very few of my respondents explain their choice to use programs (or any particular program) as a choice to make those programs their sole, or even primary, source of long-term income. Those who do express this view do so only when speaking of disability-related programs, particularly SSI, which is, according to the Social Security Administration's website, designed for just this purpose: "to help aged, blind, and disabled people, who have little or no income." In other words, the only

people who see themselves as being truly dependent on a public anti-poverty program are those who fall into what has often been considered a "deserving" category of the poor or near poor.

Melissa, for example, whose husband receives SSI benefits after having been in a car accident that left him physically and mentally unable to work (he suffered a back injury and head trauma), tells me, "Nobody has a job at my house. My husband collects SSI." She reports their SSI payment as their primary source of income and later adds that they use several other programs (TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, Head Start, and NSLP) to supplement this. While her reliance on a public anti-poverty program for monthly household income might lead us to classify Melissa as "dependent," it is difficult to refer to her as such, at least in the hegemonic discourse's sense.

Fraser and Gordon (1994) contend that dependency, as an element of the hegemonic poverty (or "welfare") discourse, "refers to the condition of poor women with children who maintain their families with neither a male breadwinner nor an adequate wage and who rely for economic support on a stingy and politically unpopular government program called Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)" (311), which has since been replaced by TANF. Melissa is not a single mother, although, since her husband's accident, the two have been maintaining their family "with neither a male breadwinner nor an adequate wage." Melissa does receive assistance from TANF, but this is not the program that she interprets as her primary source of income; SSI is – a program for which only people with diagnosed disabilities are eligible. It is an interesting question whether SSI has, in the wake of TANF's implementation of lifetime benefit limits, taken on the discursive role of a "stingy and politically unpopular government program" rather than a program for the deserving poor (see Jacoby & Karzis, 2013; Schmidt, 2012), but in any case, Melissa's dependency on this program causes her considerable

shame – a feeling not often associated with "welfare dependency," as welfare dependent women are generally assumed to be so morally and psychologically distinct from mainstream culture as to not be aware of the stigma they bear (Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Gordon, 1994; Hancock, 2004). When I ask Melissa how she feels about her family's financial situation, she is clearly aware of this stigma:

> "[I feel] embarrassed, like a loser, seriously. 'Cause I feel stuck, like I can't go this way, I can't go this way. I'm trying to move forward and move past it, but the minute you take two or three steps forward, it's like you take a million backwards, because something always happens, an unexpected expense. It's just, that's how it is."

Melissa does not want to be dependent on SSI, but, like so many other respondents, she feels that her choices are constrained by circumstances beyond her control. Her choice to receive assistance from SSI – and several other programs – is not one that we can understand by simply classifying her as a participant; it is a complex choice, shaped by her interpretations of her situation, which she describes as "the worst it's ever been" and her options, which she views as limited by broader issues with the local and national economy: "It's really easy to get a job; it's really hard to keep one…People hire you, and then they're like, they look at what their budget is now, and then it's, 'We no longer can afford to have you as an employee.'" Only by reflecting on how she describes these interpretations can we make sense of the choices she has made.

Choosing to use programs in a crisis

While very few of my respondents describe their choice to use public anti-poverty programs (or one particular program) in terms of the need for a sole or primary source of income, many describe this choice as a response to a crisis or emergency situation. Making the choice to participate in a program, for these individuals, requires that they interpret their need as absolute and that they interpret at least one program as offering the material resources to meet that need –

even if it also offers stigma and all of its consequences. A few respondents seem to consider participation in *any* public anti-poverty program to fall into this category, but many others view the choice to use *particular* programs as being related to a life crisis or emergency situation.

The program that is most commonly viewed in these terms is TANF, which tends to be interpreted as the most stigmatizing, and therefore invasive, of all public anti-poverty programs. Jamila, for example, has used a number of programs over the course of her life but speaks differently of TANF than of all other programs:

> "I used [TANF] for like one month. And that was one of the months that we had a job loss, I mean we didn't have no job…So yeah, I've had it, I don't like it, I would not recommend it 'cause they make you…go in, and you have to do like classes, and you have to fill out papers showing how many jobs you looked for that day - like check-ins - and they make you do stuff to encourage you to either find a job or get off it. So I wouldn't do that if I'm not down to the point where, 'Okay, now what am I going to do?' I wouldn't do it. Not at all."

Jamila and her husband have both worked throughout their teenage and adult years, having been on their own since Jamila was sixteen (and an emancipated minor). The only time they turned to TANF was when neither of them had a job and they considered their need to be at a crisis level. Even then, they only received benefits for one month and stopped as soon as they found employment. The discourse Jamila uses to explain this choice highlights the hassle that many of my respondents – and respondents in many other studies (see Gilliom, 2001; Hasenfeld, 2000; Lens, 2005) – describe in relation to cash assistance programs. For many, it takes an extreme crisis – a time when no other options are available – to make dealing with this hassle worth the material resources offered.

Quite often, the "crisis" that has led my respondents to use TANF is related to pregnancy or the birth of a child. Feeling (or being told by a physician) that they were unable to work, many

of these women received cash assistance once in their lives, for only a few months, before

returning to work and self-sufficiency:

> "[I used TANF] when I was pregnant with my daughter, for, um, I don't know, three to six months. I had a high-risk pregnancy." (Jenna, engaged mother of one, monthly income $500-749)

> "[When I was pregnant], I got put on bed rest…Since I was self-employed [as a hair dresser], I couldn't get any kind of [paid] maternity leave…[I used TANF] only for the time - I went on maternity leave in December, and I had my baby in January, and I went back six weeks after - January 24th - literally on the six weeks." (Janet, single mother of one, monthly income $250-499)

> "[I used TANF] when I found out that I was pregnant, and I figured I needed to make sure I can eat and everything like that, so I had to, you know? When I really need it is when I look for help…[I stopped using it as soon as I could go back to work], because more people need it more than I do, you know what I mean?" (Riley, single mother of one, monthly income $1,000-1,499)

None of these women (including Jamila) was using TANF at the time of our interviews, and

therefore all would be counted as "nonparticipants" by commonly used measures. Understanding

the choices they have made and continue to make, however, requires examining their complete

participation profiles, paying attention to the narratives they use to describe the brief time

periods when they did indeed receive cash assistance.

The choice to use other programs, including SNAP, Medicaid, and even SSI and SSDI,

are also sometimes thought of as choices made in response to a crisis. Talking about SNAP

(which she has used briefly in the past and for which she continues to be income eligible),

Dominique says:

> "If it got to the point where I felt like I really couldn't feed my kids, and I know I got to go down and ask for help, yes, I would ask [DHS] for help…I don't like asking people for help, but if I had to go down there and ask them, yes, I would…[But] if I can sacrifice and just pay a partial bill and go get groceries, I'd rather do that. I'd rather do that and just keep budgeting."

Likewise, Cathy, who was told that she could qualify for SNAP if she made $26 less each month (and had the option to reduce her work hours in order to do so), tells me:

> "It's like, 'Do I not go to work three hours, or do I just not get the extra hundred bucks?' I mean, you got to weigh it. They can keep it…I'd rather go to work. I'm not gonna, yeah, because then I'm becoming what they want me to become: somebody that sits at home to collect food stamps and cash."

In Cathy's interpretation, her family's level of need was not great enough to make the changes required to receive help from SNAP; if it had been, she may have been willing to bear the stigma of "becoming what they want me to become," but as things stood at the time, she did not consider herself to be in a crisis.

Dave, the single father of one who lives with his parents and his son while working a minimum wage job and going to school full-time, speaks similarly of Medicaid. While he was willing to apply for and receive Medicaid benefits for his son, he does not view himself as being in enough of a crisis to need that help (even though he assumes that he is eligible for it):

> "I'm pretty healthy, and the only place I'm probably going to get hurt is at work, in which case they would pay for it, so I think I can wait until I graduate school and get a good job with good benefits…I don't think I'm in need right now."

Even some recipients of (or individuals who are eligible for but not receiving) disability benefits from programs like SSI and SSDI interpret the choice to use these programs as one made only in an emergency or crisis. Kristin, a married mother of two teenage girls whose family is currently getting by on her part-time income of $500-749 each month while her husband looks for work, tells me that her husband was receiving help from SSI when they first met and could be still if he so chose:

> "He was only on it for probably about a year, and then he wanted to start working, 'cause he does have a leg injury problem, but he, you know, being on SSI you're only making six, seven hundred tops. It's not enough to pay the bills. So he said, 'I'm going to just deal with the foot injury thing and go back to work,' and that's what he's been doing, and, yeah, it hurts his leg more, it's putting more damage

on his leg…but he would rather work, because he's bringing in more money and then eventually he could get the surgery [he needs] with his insurance when he gets, picks the right time, so he'd rather do it that way."

Even though he is currently out of work, Kristin's husband (and Kristin herself) does not interpret their situation as a crisis – at least not enough of one to warrant using SSI when he is hopeful that he can find another job in the near future.

Making participation choices as a response to crises represents a category of choice-making that most often applies to *particular* programs, especially TANF. Very few respondents (and none of those quoted here) view all participation choices as ones made because of crises; instead, their participation profiles reflect a mix of choices made at different times, about different programs, and explained by different narratives.

Choosing to use programs to supplement income

Like many of the respondents quoted above, Elsa has chosen to use TANF only once in her life, viewing this as a choice made in response to a life crisis: homeless and pregnant, she applied for TANF in order to acquire enough money to pay for a place to live. Soon after her daughter was born, she returned to work and has not received cash assistance again. She describes having received that help as "just like a failure to me, you know? I just think it's best for me to be self-sufficient." What it means to Elsa to be self-sufficient, however, includes receiving help from SNAP, Medicaid, WIC, Head Start, Section 8, NSLP, and the EITC. These programs enable her to provide for her children, and she envisions her participation in them as long-term, using her benefits to supplement the income ($750-999 per month) she earns from her full-time job. "Just because you get food stamps or any type of assistance from the state, that don't make you lazy," Elsa tells me. She – like Amari, whose choices were described above -

does not view participation in public anti-poverty programs (with the exception of TANF) as a sign of dependency but, quite the opposite, as a means of maintaining *independence*.

This view is quite common among my participants, particularly regarding their choices to use programs like SNAP and Medicaid. While some, like Dominique and Dave quoted above, see these as programs to be used only in crisis situations, many consider them to be long-term income supplements that allow them to provide for their families despite the insufficient wages they earn from jobs. Because of their awareness of the stigma associated with these programs, respondents do not *like* being long-term participants, but they are willing to do so because they view the programs as fulfilling a need that they cannot fulfill on their own.

Michele, for example, who works full-time at a nursing home, says that, in addition to her regular earnings, she is "always trying to pick up extra shifts or go clean houses" to make extra money. "Just to make ends meet, I can never call in sick," she explains, "because then I'm behind eight hours, which is what? Seventy-some dollars after they take out taxes. So, I mean, I just try to work as much as I can." After her daughter was born, Michele says that she felt like all of her money was going towards food for her daughter. "I really didn't have much food at home for myself," she says, "so I would have like whatever the residents at the nursing home ate for breakfast and lunch, and that would sadly be like what I ate all day." When all of her efforts to work extra hours were not enough to pull her out of this situation, she made the decision to apply for SNAP, a choice that she views as potentially long-term, as she does not foresee herself being able to make more money than she already does.

Similarly, Dawn, who lives with her boyfriend and their two children (ages 1 and 3) on an income of $1,000-1,499 per month, says that she feels okay about their current financial situation, "'cause I get help with food through the state. Definitely I need that." She and her

boyfriend both work, but they still consider themselves to be in enough need that they

supplement their income with help from SNAP. Like Elsa, it is the assistance they receive from

public anti-poverty programs that allows Dawn and her boyfriend to feel comfortable with their

circumstances.

Finally, Tyra, a 25-year-old single mother of two who describes her current use of TANF

as a necessary choice until she feels that her baby (two months old at the time of our interviews)

is old enough for her to return to work, considers her choice to use SNAP as a more long-term

supplement to income from employment. When she first applied for assistance, she says:

> "I was really stubborn because I felt like, you know, if you're on that, you're just
> like the lowest of the low or whatever…[My mom and my sister] had to convince
> me that sometimes it's okay, you know? Some people do take advantage of the
> system, but they're like, 'You know your situation is different. You need help, so
> just apply.'"

Now, three years later, she describes her SNAP benefits as assistance she receives as a taxpayer,

whether or not she is currently working: "I've paid taxes," she tells me. "I've worked, so it's not

like I'm just getting a handout. Some of this is my tax money" – money Tyra chooses to accept

as a supplement to other sources of income.

Choosing to use programs for children

Considering the distinction that many of my respondents make between what they receive

from Head Start (and sometimes WIC) and what they receive from most other public anti-

poverty programs, it is perhaps not surprising that Tyra – along with many other respondents -

interprets her choice to send her older son to Head Start as being in an entirely different category

from her choices regarding participation in either TANF or SNAP. While the choice to use other

programs is often described as one made *on behalf* of one's children (in order to provide them

with adequate resources and protect their well-being), the choice to use Head Start stands out as

one that is made *for the benefit* of the child (or children). Parents sometimes mention other

resources that Head Start gives them (time to work or attend school themselves, information

about other non-profit and public programs, etc.), but these are usually described as extra

benefits they have received rather than as factors influencing the choice to participate in the

program in the first place. Tyra says that she knew, even before her son was born, that she

wanted to send him to Head Start, because she "wanted to give him a good start in school and

make sure he learned a lot of things and prepare him." It was not a crisis that led her to make this

choice, nor does she view it as a choice made to supplement her income (although she certainly

appreciates that it is free); she interprets it as a choice she made for her child, and she is not

alone in this interpretation:

> "When they called me and told me [my twins] were approved [for Head Start], I
> started crying, because I believe it's a good place…I think preschool is very, very
> important." (Stephanie, married mother of two, monthly income $3,000+)

> "[I sent my daughter to Head Start] because the experience that I had with [my
> brothers] coming so happy from here and then coming saying that they learned a
> lot of things, the ABC or you know. I was like, 'Well, you know, it's a good
> program for her to learn.'" (Alma, single mother of three, monthly income $250-
> 499)

> "All of my kids went through Head Start except for the baby. He's not ready yet.
> But I think it's good, and I think education is very important. I think the earlier
> that you introduce education to a child, the more successful they will be in their
> adulthood." (Melissa, married mother of four, monthly income $500-749)

> "Children that go to Head Start and Early Head Start, they have such an
> advantage in life, and I, I think they do. My son can write his name at four, and I
> just, yeah, I just think they're getting so smart by coming here. And they love
> coming to school." (Caroline, single mother of two, monthly income $250-499)

The distinction people make between Head Start and most other programs is particularly

evident in the fact that respondents who interpret all other programs as being for people in crisis

situations and who are not using any of those programs themselves still choose to send their

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children to Head Start. Dave, for example, who has chosen not to seek help from programs for which he is eligible, including SNAP and Medicaid (for himself – although his son is enrolled), made the choice to send his son to Head Start, because "Head Start is just, is just a preschool, and I knew he needed to go to preschool." Dave – like many of the other parents quoted here - interprets participating in Head Start (and Medicaid for his son) as a choice he has made to provide for his son's well-being, separate from any benefits he might receive (or be eligible to receive) for himself.

Because it is a time-limited program that provides formula and other nutrition assistance specifically for children, the choice to use WIC is also often viewed as separate from choices made regarding other public anti-poverty programs. This is particularly evident in cases in which respondents choose to stop using WIC as soon as their child (or children) transition from formula to regular milk; once their children are eating the same food as the rest of the family, they no longer consider themselves to be in need of this program, which they view as being a program specifically for children of a certain age:

> "I had WIC when they were babies, but I stopped when they were off formula...The milk we can get ourselves, so we just needed help with the formula and the baby food." (Amy, married mother of two, monthly income $750-999)

> "I had WIC when [my daughter] was first born, but I think we stopped using it at a year old or something, like when she was done with formula, we stopped." (Melanie, single mother of one, monthly income $750-999)

> "[WIC] was a huge help. And I still had to buy I think it was like two cans [of formula] a month, because he ate more than they supplied, but I couldn't imagine if I had to pay all of that. I couldn't do it." (Alyson, single mother of one, monthly income $1,500-1,999)

The choice to use programs like Head Start and WIC, while still based on respondents' interpretations of need and of what programs offer to meet need, falls into its own category, because respondents place it there. The explanations they give for choosing to participate in

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these programs focus not on what they need as parents or as the heads of households, nor on what Head Start or WIC offer to them as material resources, but on their desire to provide for the well-being of their children. It is also likely that my respondents' views of Head Start and WIC as programs that provide genuine assistance and mark participants with less stigma than other public anti-poverty programs influence (and are influenced by) their choices to participate. In other words, their interpretation of these programs as offering less stigma than others might contribute to their choice to participate, but it might also be true that people justify their participation – and thereby attempt to avoid the impact stigma has on their self-perception – by describing these programs in more positive terms than others.

Choosing to use programs in transition

Georgia, the African American single mother we met in chapter four, uses almost every public anti-poverty program for which she is eligible: TANF, SNAP, SSI, Section 8, Medicaid, WIC, and NSLP. The only program she does not use is Head Start, because she does not have transportation to get her four-year-old daughter back and forth to the local program every day. Georgia is clearly a "participant." Many would look at her current situation and see a woman who is rightly marked with the stigma of dependency and undeservingness. She does not work, she is an unmarried mother of four, and she relies on public programs for everything from housing to food to medical care. How did Georgia come to be in this position? How has she made the choices to apply for and use so many public anti-poverty programs?

As has been noted, Georgia was "deemed a disabled child [and now] a disabled adult" as the result of "being abused from the age of three." She grew up in a family that she describes as "okay financially." "[My father] was a good provider," she says. "We always had food, we always had nice clothes, we always had a car…He was just an abuser." Throughout her

childhood, Georgia faced abuse – both physical and emotional – from her father and bore witness to her mother's abuse as well. Sadly, Georgia's situation did not improve after reaching adulthood and leaving her parents' home.

Despite her efforts to recover from childhood trauma and become a self-sufficient adult, Georgia has continued to struggle emotionally and financially. With the help of a public program designed to assist recipients of disability benefits with gaining and maintaining employment, Georgia attended school to become a certified nursing assistant (CNA):

> "They understand that even though you're having difficulties, emotionally and mentally, you still want to thrive as a person and that those kind of things help you, and so they pay for everything and got me the job and bus tickets, and it was just a really helpful program, and so your disability [benefits] stop while you become financially independent."

For several years, Georgia worked in nursing homes as a CNA, until another abusive relationship – this time with the father of two of her children – forced her to literally walk away from her home and job. She was pregnant with her second child at the time. "I didn't know where I was going to go," she tells me. "I just know he was being violent, and I was scared, and I walked away from my house. I walked. And the police, I called the police after I walked out of the house with my daughter, and they said, 'Well, we going to come and pick you up.'" The police took Georgia and her daughter to a shelter for victims of interpersonal violence. Six days later, while she was still in the shelter, Georgia contacted a former neighbor who told her that her abuser had returned to the house they shared and set it on fire. "And so I then had nothing, nothing."

Georgia stayed in the shelter with her oldest daughter until they were able to secure housing assistance (Section 8) and move out on their own. The trauma of these events left Georgia unable to work, and she went back to receiving disability benefits as well as assistance

from SNAP and TANF to provide for her children. While she has been using these forms of

assistance for more than three years now, she views her decision to do so as temporary –

supporting her through a transition as she moves toward returning to work and self-sufficiency:

> "I wish I could really just start over, you know?...I felt better just being a woman,
> being a person, when I was able to work and take better care of my
> family…[These programs] help you just to make ends meet, but I want to become
> independent of that and try to get back to where I was financially. I would feel a
> lot better, so that's my goal."

It was initially a crisis that led Georgia to seek help from public anti-poverty programs.

Her level of need increased dramatically when she left her home and job, and while she felt

"embarrassed" and "humbled" to visit the DHS office, she also believed that it was her right to

receive help when she needed it. Georgia is well aware of the stigma she bears as a participant in

public anti-poverty programs, but she considers her level of need (temporary as it may be) to be

great enough that she is willing to bear that stigma in order to obtain the material resources

necessary to take care of her family, and she truly believes that she – and everyone else - has a

basic human right to this assistance:

> "It's not always easy to talk about. It's not like a happy thing, like, 'Oh, I get food
> stamps!' I say that I'm thankful for the help, to be able to feed my children every
> day, so they'll be healthy, but nobody's proud to be getting it. This makes me
> emotional. You want to be looked at for what kind of person you are, not by
> whether you ask for help…I don't think people should look at people in a
> judgmental way…If you are in a position to help, big or small, I think you should.
> As a community, as a people, we have a responsibility. I have nothing, but I try to
> help. Somebody else needs some food, or you need to borrow a couple of dollars,
> or you need me to give you some numbers of some organizations that I know
> about, I want to help, 'cause I have more than a whole lot of women do with their
> kids. It's going to make me cry. I think you have a responsibility. It's being a
> human. You should help."

Like so many of my respondents, Georgia does not view herself as inappropriately relying on the

assistance of the government but as being in need of help – during a time of transition in her life

– and as bearing a stigma that she does not deserve. Her choices do not make her happy, but she does believe that they are necessary and right.

While some respondents interpret their choices regarding participation in different programs in different ways, those who view their program choices as temporary (although sometimes fairly long-term) tend to interpret their participation in *all* public anti-poverty programs in this same light. They describe their choice to use programs, regardless of which or how many programs, as necessary – based on their interpretations of need and of what the programs offer to meet that need – and transitional, as they move through a particular period in their lives. Like Georgia, some of these respondents initially faced a crisis that led them to seek assistance, but the narratives they use to describe their choices demonstrate that, over time, their interpretations have shifted from thinking of their choices as responses to crises to thinking of them as conscious choices made in order to get them from where they are to where they want to be.

Caroline, who first applied for assistance when she lost her job while pregnant with her first child, now receives help from SNAP, Medicaid, WIC, Head Start, SSI, and Section 8. She has been using most of these programs for about three years while she attends school full-time to earn her bachelor's degree. "I don't want to be poor forever," she tells me. "I don't know how some people do it…I can't stand living off the state. We don't have enough money for nothing. Nothing…I need to make money, and I need to get a good job. I need to, you know?" While she had the option to continue using TANF, Caroline chose to stop receiving cash assistance after only a few months, because the program wanted her to quit school to get a job, "any job":

> "They frown upon education, which makes no sense to me, because, because they push you to get a low paying job, so you're going to go get a job at Wal-Mart, you're going to make eight dollars an hour, and they're still going to give you seven hundred dollars a month in food stamps. Why not push you to get an

education, help you get a good paying job, that way you don't have to be on any assistance at all?"

This is the choice that Caroline has made – to use assistance while she gets an education, with the hope and expectation that she will land a good-paying job with benefits and no longer need to participate in any programs, once she works through this transition period.

Andrea's story is similar, although she has chosen to continue receiving help from TANF while she completes the requirements for her nursing degree. She also uses SNAP, Medicaid, WIC, Head Start, and Section 8. "I don't like my current situation," she tells me. "But I know two years from now, once I graduate, I will be able to look back and say, 'I came from this, but now I have this.'" Andrea, like all of my respondents, is aware of the stigma she bears for receiving help from public anti-poverty programs, but she has made the choice to be a participant for as long as it takes to achieve her goal of graduating and finding stable employment with which to provide for herself and her son.

For all of these women, choosing to participate in public anti-poverty programs has been a conscious decision, made with particular life goals in mind. While they would rightly be counted as "participants" by most researchers, listening to how they interpret this role and the choices that have led them to assume it allows us to more fully understand not only *why* they are participating in programs but also how they make sense of this participation through their own narratives.

Categories in context

As defined above, an individual's participation profile is made up of the choices s/he has made regarding participation in public anti-poverty programs across her/his lifetime and of the narratives s/he uses to describe those choices. For some of my respondents, participation profiles reflect only a single category of choice, meaning that they interpret all of their participation

choices in the same way and make use of the same narrative elements to describe those choices. Andrea, for example, thinks of all of her participation choices, regardless of the program, as transitional, describing them as a way to support herself and her son as she works toward her degree and a self-sufficient future. For others (and this is much more common), participation profiles include choices that fall into more than one of the categories described above. The differences in choice categories are sometimes the result of changes in life circumstances (i.e. an individual thinks about her/his choices differently at different times) and sometimes a reflection of differing views of programs (i.e. an individual interprets one program as offering something different from another).

The following examples illuminate the ways in which choice categories form participation profiles while also demonstrating how the choices themselves are consistently made up of people's interpretations of need and of what programs offer to meet need. Returning to narratives highlighted in previous chapters provides us with the opportunity to put these individuals' participation choices in the broader context of their lives and of the theoretical framework built over the past four chapters and to recognize the depth of information this framework provides when compared with other means of studying participation and nonparticipation in public anti-poverty programs.

Amanda

You may recall from chapter three that Amanda grew up in a household that relied on public anti-poverty programs to meet basic needs. Her mother used just about every program you can name (and still uses what she can), and all three of her siblings are now "living off the state." Amanda knows what programs are available, she knows the eligibility requirements, and she knows what it takes to apply for and receive benefits. When I met her, Amanda was using SNAP,

Head Start, NSLP, SCHIP, and WIC. If this were all we knew about her, we would probably assume that she, like her siblings, is following in her mother's footsteps. We would interpret Amanda's program participation choices as a reflection of the hegemonic poverty discourse's claims that public anti-poverty programs cause intergenerational dependency on the part of recipients (Hancock, 2004). Based on limited data, such an interpretation might make sense, but when we look more closely at how Amanda has made her participation choices and at the participation profile she has created over the course of her lifetime, we see that these choices have been made in a very different interpretive context.

Having worked her entire adult life (beginning at age 15, when her first child was born), Amanda has never applied for or used cash assistance and only participated in Medicaid when she was pregnant (she has otherwise been without health insurance). Like many of my respondents, she sends her daughter to Head Start because she believes it is providing her with a good education - certainly better than what she was receiving earlier in her life when she stayed home with Amanda's own mother who Amanda describes as "angry all the time" and where people were "smokin' weed in the house." Amanda does not necessarily think of Head Start as a public anti-poverty program but as public education – a program specifically for the benefit of children. She views her participation in WIC, SCHIP, and NSLP (for her 14-year-old son) similarly.

When I ask Amanda about her participation in SNAP, she returns to her description of her current situation: recently separated from her husband, providing for her family on half the household income she had previously, and "struggling" to make ends meet. She is "in the middle of a financial crisis," she tells me, and this – and only this – is what leads her to apply for food stamps. In the past fifteen years, she has used SNAP only one other time, when her work hours

were cut from full-time to part-time, and she and her husband were "struggling financially." This lasted for a few months, after which they stopped receiving assistance. Now, as she works to pay the rent and provide for her children on her own, she describes food stamps as "a little crutch for me right now until I can get [my husband] to court and have money taken out of his check for the kids." Her choice is a response to a financial crisis, which she views as a temporary situation.

Far from being an example of the dependency caused by public assistance, Amanda's participation profile demonstrates how an individual's interpretation of need and her interpretation of public anti-poverty programs come together to shape participation choices. Right now, because of the very particular circumstances in which she finds herself, Amanda interprets herself as being in need. This interpretation is complicated by her commitment to the hegemonic poverty discourse, as she interprets public anti-poverty programs – particularly programs like SNAP and TANF - as offering emergency resources accompanied by a stigma that she believes is justified. In fact, she thinks that this stigma reveals precisely those characteristics that define dependency: laziness, lack of a work ethic, and immoral life choices (Abramovitz, 2000; Gordon, 1994; Katz, 1996; Shipler, 2004). In talking about her sister in particular, Amanda says, ""Why would she work? They're paying her rent, they're feeding her, and they're giving her spending money. That's like, you know, a rich mom and dad taking care of you, saying, 'Here, go do whatever you want, you don't have to work, it's fine.'" Because she holds so firmly to this view of program use as *rightly* stigmatizing, Amanda has consistently done whatever is in her power to avoid participation in programs like SNAP and TANF, and it is only in times of absolute crisis that she makes the decision to seek such help.

Amanda's participation profile is thus made up of a combination of two choice categories, as she uses Head Start, WIC, SCHIP, and NSLP (all of which are restricted to

children of certain ages) specifically for the benefit of her children and SNAP as a necessary evil in a time of crisis.

Daria

Unlike the majority of my respondents, the first thing Daria tells me about her participation in public anti-poverty programs is not how difficult it has been or how bad it makes her feel but that it "has really helped…It has helped tremendously." You may recall from chapter three that Daria made the decision to leave her job as a hair dresser for more than a year in order to recover from health problems that she felt were negatively impacting her ability to be a good mother. Her interpretation of herself as "in need" has more to do with what she needs as a parent than with her financial situation. For this reason, Daria also views her choices about using public anti-poverty programs in light of the capacity of particular programs to support her role as a parent and not simply the material resources they offer.

Because she adopted her daughter through the foster care system, Daria is eligible to receive an adoption subsidy as well as Medicaid for her daughter and assistance to pay for childcare. Daria describes her choice to use all of these programs as a choice she made to provide for her daughter's well-being. When it comes to her choice to apply for and receive SNAP benefits after leaving her job, however, Daria uses a slightly different narrative, highlighting her need for additional material resources, not only as a means of providing for her daughter but also as a *transitional* means of providing for herself – both of which she interprets as enabling her to be a better mother while she makes the decision to take a break from work. While she is conscious of the stigma she bears as a SNAP participant, she describes herself as being in great enough need to deal with that stigma during this transitional period:

> "Sometimes I felt like I had to push past feeling shame, like, um, I don't know, somehow shouldn't somebody need it more than me? I just kinda had to push past

that… It's like, the program doesn't define who I am, you know what I'm saying? Regardless if I need the help yesterday, today, tomorrow. I just had to realize that it's not something, it's not a place where I'm going to stay."

Describing her SNAP participation choice as one made during a time of transition – using help temporarily to meet her family's needs until she can return to work – Daria positions this choice as being of a different sort than her choice to use programs directly related to her daughter's care. This distinction is important in that – like Amanda - the one program Daria uses that might be considered a cause of dependency (SNAP) is one that she is determined to use for a relatively short time and one that she views as meeting her need to be a good mother rather than as a source of income or material support for herself.

While Daria's situation appears similar to Amanda's in that both are using some programs for their children and others as a temporary source of support, Daria does not describe her situation or her choice to use SNAP as a crisis. She made a conscious decision to leave her job and get help temporarily, unlike Amanda who clearly depicts herself as being in a crisis situation that is, at least in most ways, beyond her control. Daria's participation profile is also made up of a combination of two choice categories, but at least one of those categories and the narrative she uses to describe it is different from Amanda's. Daria's profile combines a choice to use programs for her daughter (adoption subsidy, Medicaid, and child care subsidy) with a choice to use SNAP as a transitional program during one, brief period in her life.

Tiffany

Like a number of my respondents, Tiffany chooses to use some, but not all, of the programs for which her household is eligible. Looking at participation in one program at a time – as most research tends to do – Tiffany would be counted as a participant in SNAP, Medicaid (for her children only), WIC, NSLP, and the EITC. She would be considered an eligible

nonparticipant in Head Start and ineligible for TANF because of her income from full-time employment. The different choices she makes (and has made throughout her life), however, can be better understood by examining her complete participation profile.

Tiffany's choice to use SNAP and the way she feels about this choice are clearly exemplified in the narrative she tells of her interaction with a man in line at the grocery store. As described in chapter five, Tiffany reacted to this man's negative comments about her use of SNAP by explaining to him, "I pay taxes. I work, yes, but I don't make enough to cover the food and everything that we do need. I make eight dollars an hour." Tiffany understands her choice to participate in SNAP as a way of supplementing the income she has from work and foresees continuing to participate, because she doubts she will ever find a job that pays better than the one she has now. "I don't depend on the state," she says, fighting against the hegemonic poverty discourse's assumption that SNAP participants suffer from dependency, "but I do. I don't fully depend on the state, but I do depend every month on my food stamps. I do."

About her choices regarding other programs, however, Tiffany speaks differently. Her choice to use WIC, for example, is one she feels much less negatively about, as is evident in her description of the help she receives from this program and the people who provide that help: "Those people [at WIC], I love them. I love them, because they know. They're regular, normal people. They don't feel like they're above anybody. They go out of their way to help people." Tiffany explains her choice to use WIC as one that she has made for the well-being of her children, particularly during the earliest months of their lives when she has used WIC to obtain formula and baby food.

Unlike many other respondents, however, Tiffany does not interpret Head Start in this same way and has therefore made the choice to leave her children in the care of her cousin when

she goes to work rather than sending them to Head Start or Early Head Start programs. Her description of this choice highlights her strong preference for family care and her perception of Head Start as a program she would only use in a crisis situation (i.e. if she had no other options for child care) even though her children would certainly be eligible. "I don't trust outside facilities with my kids," she explains. "You can't trust anybody these days. It's scary." For Tiffany, Head Start is just another daycare option – one that she chooses to avoid unless she is in crisis.

Similarly, Tiffany thinks of TANF as a crisis program and has consistently made the choice to work rather than seeking cash assistance. The one time she did choose to participate in TANF was when her oldest son was about two years old, she lost her job, and she and her son were living with a friend because she couldn't afford rent on her own: "I used it for not even a year. Got a job and did what I had to do."

Looking simply at Tiffany's current status as a participant (and nonparticipant) in public anti-poverty programs, we would miss many of the important factors involved in the choices she has made. Because most research would (correctly) consider her ineligible for TANF and therefore not include her in a sample designed to analyze participation and nonparticipation among eligible individuals, it would fail to acknowledge that she is making a conscious choice to avoid using this program as long as she is not in a crisis situation (i.e. lacking earned income). Likewise, counting Tiffany as a participant in both SNAP and WIC, most research would implicitly assume that she has made these choices on a similar basis, overlooking the very different narratives she uses to describe them. The variety of ways in which Tiffany describes her participation choices have much to tell us about how and why she makes the decisions she does, forming a participation profile that combines choosing to use (or not use) programs to

supplement earned income, for her children, and in times of crisis. Much of Tiffany's profile (and therefore our ability to understand her choices) would be lost were we to rely on traditional dichotomous, point-in-time measures of participation.

Hannah

Hannah, whose experience of losing her benefits and having to request a hearing to have them reinstated was highlighted in chapter five, is another example of an individual whose participation choices would likely be misinterpreted using common conceptions of participation and nonparticipation. At the time of our interviews, Hannah was receiving benefits from Medicaid, NSLP, and Section 8 but reported herself as not using TANF and SNAP. Over the course of the five hours we spent in conversation, however, she revealed that she would be (and should be) receiving assistance from these latter two programs had her caseworker not terminated her benefits based on a misunderstanding about income she received from a work study position. Without having spent the time uncovering the details of Hannah's situation, I could easily have classified her as an eligible nonparticipant in TANF and SNAP, thereby missing a great deal of the complexity in her participation profile.

Hannah describes all of the assistance she receives as transitional, explaining her choices as temporary solutions to being out of work, while she seeks to improve her situation by pursuing her bachelor's degree. "I don't like having to ask for help," she tells me. "I don't like not being able to do stuff on my own and be self-sufficient like I was before…I just want a little bit of help for this little bit of time so that I can get ahead, I can be done with school, and then you'll never see me ever again."

For most of her life, Hannah worked full-time, making enough money to provide for herself without asking for any assistance from public anti-poverty programs. Even after her

divorce and the birth of her daughter, Hannah maintained her self-sufficient status, living off of savings she had accumulated over several years until her daughter was old enough for Hannah to feel comfortable sending her to Head Start and returning to work. It has only been very recently that Hannah has sought help, choosing to do so in order to make it possible to return to school and still spend the time she wants (and feels it necessary) to spend with her daughter. Her transitional view of this choice encompasses all of the programs in which she has enrolled – even those in which she currently reports not participating. She clearly interprets herself as being in need and interprets a variety of programs as offering the resources to meet that need, even though she also recognizes the stigma she bears as a program participant. Much of Hannah's story – the choices she has made, the narratives she uses to explain those choices, and the hopes she has for her future – would be lost if we measured her participation based on the "yes" and "no" answers she initially gave to questions about program use.

What participation profiles contribute

While the four profiles highlighted here offer only a few examples of the variety of participation profiles my respondents' narratives exhibit, they demonstrate the limitations of previous conceptions of participation (on the part of both research and policy design) and the contributions of this alternative approach to understanding participation in public anti-poverty programs.

First, dichotomous conceptions of participation cannot capture the many ways in which people interpret what it means to be a participant (or nonparticipant, partial participant, temporary participant, etc.). Amanda, for example, thinks of her participation in SNAP as a temporary response to a crisis in her life, while Tiffany thinks of the same participation as a long-term supplement to her income. Hannah initially describes herself as a nonparticipant in

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SNAP, but later reveals that this is only because of an error by program administrators and that she should be participating again as soon as this is corrected. Research using a dichotomous measure of participation would fail to recognize the distinctions in not only how these three women understand their own situations but also how they interact with programs. Policies relying on such measures might assume that Amanda and Tiffany are having the same needs met by SNAP, when in reality they are using it in very different ways, and that Hannah is making the choice not to use SNAP, when in reality the program itself is preventing her from doing so.

Point-in-time measures of participation are equally problematic. Hannah's case makes this particularly clear, since she would likely tell a researcher that she is not currently using TANF or SNAP, even though she was previously using both and plans to use both again as soon as administrative issues are resolved. Likewise, Daria would report herself as a SNAP participant today, but her interpretation of this as a transitional program means that she would have given a different answer before health issues led her to leave her job and might very well give a different answer in the near future as she returns to work and a stable income. Again, both research and policy would misunderstand these women's situations if they depended on point-in-time measures.

The same is true of conceptions of participation that look at only one program at a time. All four of these women describe themselves as using multiple public anti-poverty programs, but how they view their use of individual programs varies significantly. The problem is not just that dichotomous measures fail to capture how different people interpret programs differently but also that program-specific measures fail to capture how the *same* person interprets one program differently from another. Amanda, Daria, and Tiffany all view some of the programs they use as being specifically (and in some cases exclusively) for the benefit of their children while they

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interpret other programs (like SNAP) in very different ways. This is particularly relevant for researchers and policy designers, because the ways in which people interpret different programs has implications for the choices they make. Labeling Tiffany as a participant because she uses SNAP, for example, might lead researchers or policy designers to view her as "dependent" when, in reality, she is working full-time and has made a conscious decision to *not* use TANF except during one period of crisis. Similarly, without understanding the differences in the choices Tiffany has made regarding these two programs, a case worker might try to find ways to dissuade Tiffany from using SNAP, assuming that she had become inappropriately "dependent" on it, thereby placing Tiffany in a crisis situation that might drive her to leave her job and rely solely on public assistance (TANF, SNAP, etc.) in order to provide for her children.

This also highlights another limitation of commonly employed conceptions of participation: as noted above, the fact that Tiffany is working, making $1,500-1,999 each month, would lead researchers and policy designers to classify her as "ineligible" for TANF, which would, in turn, lead them to exclude her from participation rate calculations. If a program's participation rate is defined as the percentage of *eligible* individuals (or households) that are using the program, those who are viewed as ineligible are left out of the calculation. Using these calculations, efforts to understand why people are not participating fail to account for people like Tiffany who are making conscious choices to be *ineligible* for certain programs.[22]

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[22] There is obviously a limit to who we might count as making "conscious choices" to be ineligible. I would not, for example, consider a single mother of one with a master's degree who earns $100,000 a year at a stable job with excellent benefits to be making a choice to be ineligible for TANF (even though it is theoretically true that she could suddenly choose to quit her job, spend all of her savings, and apply for cash assistance). It would be unreasonable (and unproductive) to consider such a woman when trying to understand why some people choose not to use TANF. I would not think it unreasonable or unproductive, however, to include households below 200% or even 300% FPL whose household heads work in jobs without benefits and have little, if any, savings, particularly if they have previous experience with public anti-poverty programs.

Using participation profiles, rather than dichotomous, point-in-time, program-specific measures of participation, allows us to account for these limitations and to see, in a more complex and nuanced way, how people's participation choices are not made in isolation but as part of the larger picture of their lives. Tiffany is not simply choosing to use particular programs and not use others; she is also choosing to work full-time on a night shift, to be home with her children during the day, and to provide her family with the best life she can. Hannah is choosing to return to school to give herself and her daughter a better chance at a stable life. Amanda is choosing to take responsibility for the debt she and her husband accrued while married and to maintain her full-time job while raising two children on her own. Daria is choosing to take care of her health so that she can be a better mother to the daughter she adopted after raising her own son to adulthood.

None of my respondents is making participation choices in a vacuum. They do not interpret need in a vacuum. They do not interpret programs in a vacuum. All of these are interconnected. We cannot hope to understand their choices or to design and implement policies that meet their needs without attending to the narratives that describe the depth and complexity of their lives and the context in which those lives are lived.

Developing a typology of participation profiles

Now that we have a sense for how participation profiles are created and what elements are involved, it seems possible to develop a typology of such profiles, enabling us to classify people based on the type of profile they exhibit and perhaps to make predictions about people's profiles with less detailed information than this study has collected. Such a typology would be useful not only for research purposes but also for those designing and implementing policies, as

they would be able to create policies more catered to particular profiles and to match eligible households with the programs they would be most likely to find helpful.

The major challenge with developing a typology of participation profiles is that – as my respondents' cases demonstrate - the range of possibilities is vast. Because each individual is likely to think of each program differently and thus to make choices that fall into different categories, and because U.S. public anti-poverty policy is implemented through more than a dozen different programs, there are many more possible profile types than can be adequately analyzed using only 75 cases. Such analysis would require conducting similarly in-depth interviews with more individuals, preferably from different geographical locations, in order to: first, determine whether the five choice categories described here constitute an exhaustive list; second, acknowledge the breadth of possible profile types; and third, have a sufficient number of fully developed profiles in each type to enable pattern discernment.

The theory developed here is certainly ripe for this sort of research, and the interviews I have conducted thus far are a significant step in this direction, providing me with the information necessary to design and implement future work.

CHAPTER SEVEN:
"Keeping Our Heads above Water"
Where (and How) Do We Go from Here?

Choices, as we have seen throughout the previous six chapters, are complicated beasts. Even when faced with similar circumstances, different people make different choices, and the same person makes various – sometimes seemingly contradictory - choices across her lifetime, depending on the particular context in which she finds herself. It is no wonder, then, that we have yet to come up with a comprehensive explanation of how those living in or near poverty make choices regarding participation in public anti-poverty programs.

Other scholars have developed – or applied - theories to try to explain the types of choices we are dealing with here, but even very promising ideas fall short when examined in the light of real people's lives. More than thirty years ago, Barbara J. Nelson (1980) laid out a framework for understanding "who arrives at the agency door" (i.e. who makes the choice to seek public benefits). Arguing that the process of making this choice consists of three stages - problem definition, strategy generation, and the act of help-seeking - she presented a neatly diagramed theory to explain individual decisions – perhaps the only one to try to do so on this topic.

Nelson's (1980) explanation of "problem definition" is similar to what I call "need interpretation" in that she highlights the distinction between objective conditions and one's personal perceptions of or conclusions about those conditions (181-182), recognizing "that the same set of negative conditions is likely to be interpreted differently by different individuals" (182). She does not, however, account for this same distinction when it comes to what programs

offer. For Nelson, deciding where to turn for help (what she calls "strategy generation") is simply a matter of determining which particular government program responds to the defined problem and whether or not one is eligible to participate in that program. As my respondents make clear, knowing that programs exist and understanding their eligibility requirements, however, do not make up the whole story. People also consider what exactly they are going to receive from the program in question – genuine assistance, material resources, and/or the many consequences of stigma – and how they interpret this varies not only by individual but also by program. While Nelson's theory of problem definition takes individual interpretation seriously, then, her framework assumes that people think completely objectively about the programs themselves – an assumption that my respondents tell us is not at all true in reality.

A second theory – although not one as specifically tailored to the question of public anti-poverty program participation – was developed by Felstiner and colleagues (1980) and has been applied to a number of choice-making scenarios, including some related to welfare receipt (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Lens, 2007; Levitsky, 2008; Nielsen, 2000; Sarat, 1990; Soss, 2000). In seeking to explain "where disputes come from and how they develop" (633) – with a particular focus on legal disputes – Felstiner and colleagues (1980) argue that individuals dealing with an "injurious experience" go through three transformations on the way to a dispute. First, they must recognize that the experience has been injurious or "name" the experience as such – this is similar to Nelson's "problem definition" and to my "need interpretation" in that it involves interpreting one's own situation and determining whether or not a "problem" or "need" actually exists. Where Felstiner and colleagues fall short, however, is in assuming that "naming" is a dichotomous phenomenon – yes, this is an injurious experience or no, it is not. My respondents' complex interpretations of need show us that choosing whether or not to seek help requires more

than deciding whether or not one is "in need" but also what that means in their particular situation.

Next, Felstiner and colleagues argue that individuals must assign blame for their injurious experience, which involves determining who is responsible for the experience and therefore who should be held accountable for remedying it. This might be viewed as analogous to individuals' interpretations of programs, although, as we have seen from my respondents' thoughts about rights and societal obligations, many of them do not consider the government or public programs to be responsible for remedying their situations even as they seek help from these very sources.

Finally, individuals who have named an injurious experience and blamed a particular party for that experience make a claim or voice their grievance "to the person or entity believed to be responsible" (Felstiner, et al., 1980, 635). Here, then, is the choice about whether or not to use public anti-poverty programs (or one particular program). According to this theory, individuals are unlikely to make a claim if they have not first named their experience or situation as a problem and identified an accountable "person or entity." Again, however, my respondents' narratives demonstrate that making a claim (i.e. choosing to participate) does not necessarily require "blaming" the government or the public for one's situation – particularly in the U.S. context in which those living in or near poverty are encouraged to blame themselves. Their choices are not so much about who is to blame or who should be held accountable as they are about who (or what program) is capable of meeting their needs.

Both of these theories (Nelson, 1980; Felstiner, et al., 1980) acknowledge the importance of attending to individual people's interpretations as we attempt to understand the choices they

make, but neither goes far enough in recognizing the true complexity of those interpretations.[23] What my respondents tell us – through their participation profiles and the narratives they use to describe them – is that their choices are not so neatly diagramed or categorized but that they *are* understandable when viewed in context – a context that includes both individual lived experiences and our society's hegemonic poverty discourse.

The theory developed here – out of the narratives of 75 individuals with distinct participation profiles – argues that people's choices are shaped by their interpretations of need *and* their interpretations of what public programs offer to meet need. Neither of these provides a causal link to participation choices on its own; it is in the interaction between the two that we find our explanation, and even there, we must be careful to account for the dynamic nature of these choices – they are always open to change, because the interpretations that shape them are based on individual lives, which are always changing.

If the theory we now have provides us with such an unstable picture, then, what good is it? What have we gained?

New directions for participation research

First, we have recognized the limitations of relying on previous participation research to understand individual choices. Large-scale survey research can help us to understand many things about many people, but if it relies on dichotomous, point-in-time, program-specific measures of participation and limited estimates of eligibility, the insight it gives us into participation choices will continue to be insufficient to guide policy design and implementation. It is possible, however, that by asking different questions, quantitative measures could provide us

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[23] It is important to note, of course, that Felstiner and colleagues did not set out to explain this particular choice, although others have gone on to apply their theory to low-income people's choices regarding welfare and other programs (see Lens, 2007; Sarat, 1990;Soss, 2000).

with more accurate and actionable information in instances when more interpretive processes are impossible or unwieldy.

To begin with, we could combine objective measures of need and eligibility (income, household size, assets, etc.) with questions that shed some light on people's own interpretations of their need. These might include questions as simple as "Do you feel that you are able to meet your household's basic needs with your current income?" or a more complex scale similar to that used by the Current Population Survey (CPS) to assess food security. Asking respondents about the frequency with which they struggle to pay basic household bills (rent, utilities, etc.), the number of times in the past year they have had to make choices about which expenses to meet and which to forgo, and/or their anticipated likelihood of such struggles in the future could give us a clearer picture of how people think about their own need – which, we have seen, can vary quite a bit from objective measures. While questions like these are already being asked on national surveys, they do not tend to be used in research related to participation and nonparticipation in public anti-poverty programs, as we continue to rely on fairly objective measures of need and eligibility. Expanding such measures would provide us with new ways of including both eligible and near eligible households in studies of participation.

Rethinking how we measure people's interpretations of programs would also be an important step in improving quantitative studies of participation. There are currently very few measures that assess what potential participants think public anti-poverty programs offer, and these are limited to questions about stigma (see discussion below) and the extent of factual information people have about program eligibility and benefits. Additional questions that could help us gauge people's interpretations of programs might include asking respondents to estimate the monetary benefits they receive (or would expect to receive) from particular programs or to

rate on a scale how helpful they believe the assistance provided by particular programs is (or would be) in meeting their household's needs. This is an area in which program-specific measures would be preferable, as my respondents' narratives demonstrate the very distinct ways in which the same person can think about different programs.

Stigma is perhaps the concept most in need of advancement in terms of its operationalization in quantitative measures. As I argue in chapter five, studies that use only one (or even two or three) closed-ended questions to assess the role of stigma in individuals' participation choices are severely limited in their ability to capture this amorphous concept. While listening to the ways people talk about stigma in their own narratives is the only way to come close to understanding the depth and significance it carries, better quantitative measures could certainly be designed. These would need to include separate measures of an individual's awareness of stigma and of the possible consequences this stigma carries.

Questions assessing awareness of stigma might be similar to previously used stigma measures but worded to capture respondents' *recognition* that stigma exists rather than their *agreement* with it. For example, instead of asking respondents whether or not they agree that "welfare makes people work less than they would if there wasn't a welfare system" (as the National Survey of American Families has asked), we could ask whether or not they agree that "many people *think* that welfare makes people work less" or to estimate – using a scale – how many people in the U.S. think this ("most people, some people, a few people, or not very many people"). This type of question would allow us to estimate the proportion of respondents who are aware of the stigma with which participation in public anti-poverty programs marks people.

We could then use separate measures to assess what respondents think the *consequences* are of bearing this stigma, asking them, for example, about the treatment experienced in

application and recertification interactions, the hassle associated with particular programs, and the changes in self-perception wrought by one's awareness of stigma. Such questions might be similar to those used by Stuber and Kronebusch (2004) to discretely measure what they termed "identity stigma" and "treatment stigma," but could also include more specific questions such as: "Do you (or would you) ever try to hide your use of an EBT card in the grocery store?";[24] "Do you (or would you) talk to family members, friends, etc. about your use of [program name]?"; "Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statement: '[Program name] was designed to make it as easy as possible to access benefits.'?"; and/or "Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statement: 'I feel worse about myself when I am using [program name] than when I am not.'?" Each of these questions could be asked in a general fashion or regarding a particular program, although the latter would be more useful in terms of helping us to discern which programs are the most (and least) associated with stigma.

Overall, distinguishing between respondents' awareness of stigma and their particular concerns about its consequences (especially in relation to specific programs) would provide us with much more actionable knowledge than we have had previously in terms of why, how, and when stigma seems to matter to potential program participants.

Lastly, the choice categories laid out in chapter six call for the creation of quantitative measures that consider not only the length of time people spend using programs (i.e. is their participation long-term, temporary, etc.?) but also the ways in which they combine different programs in relation to particular life circumstances. A first step here would be to ask respondents about their use of programs over multiple years rather than at a specific point in

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[24] A similar question was asked in the National Food Stamp Program Survey in 1996 and 1997 (see Ponza et al, 1999).

time, but additional information would also be needed to understand the choices people have made over their lifetime. This might include information about what else was happening in their lives at the time of their participation in particular programs as well as expectations they have for future program use. For example, knowing that a respondent used TANF for a brief period while pregnant or immediately after the birth of a child tells us much more about how she thinks about participation in that program than simply knowing that she received cash assistance once for four months. Likewise, being aware that a respondent anticipates using TANF and SNAP every time she is between temporary jobs provides us with an understanding of her participation that is much closer to a full participation profile than knowing that she has used each of these programs on and off in the past.

The knowledge gained by asking all of these types of questions, which are rooted in real people's lived experiences and interpretations rather than in the "objective" assumptions of policies, also has important implications for how we design and implement public anti-poverty programs.

Rethinking implementation

The developing theory laid out in the previous chapters gives us new insight into how potential participants in public anti-poverty programs perceive and experience each of these programs differently – insight that could be used to make changes in the implementation of some programs, in order to improve participant experiences, without completely overhauling our web of anti-poverty policies.

The clearest example of this stems from the very different ways in which my respondents interpret WIC and other (mainly DHS-administered) programs. As discussed in chapter five, my respondents spoke much more positively about their experiences with WIC than about their

experiences with SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, and other public anti-poverty programs. This was true not only of how they perceived interactions with workers in these programs but also of how they described the physical environment in which benefits were provided. While there were certainly complaints about long waits at WIC offices, in general my respondents seemed to mind these less than the (even longer) waits they experienced in DHS offices. Unlike DHS offices, which respondents described as "loud," "crazy," and "stressful" places where no food was allowed and children had to sit in waiting areas with their parents for hours on end, WIC offices were viewed as more "family friendly." As Karen told me, "They had a little room for the kids; they got to color and play." Workers were also viewed as more helpful and willing to work with families according to their needs, as exemplified by stories Georgia and Priscilla told me:

> "I couldn't get to WIC last week because all three of [my daughters] had strep throat. My daughter came home [from school] with it, gave it to her other little sister, and then gave it to her…[The worker at WIC] said, 'If you can't get here, that's okay. I know your kids are sick. I'll put your benefits on.' She went on the computer and put our benefits on our WIC [card]. She said, 'Now you just come on the nineteenth.' She did that for me." (Georgia)

> "The last snow day - the other day last week - was actually our WIC appointment, and I'm sick, and I end up going to the doctor, and [my son] didn't go to school. I think the school was closed; it was a snow day for real. So I called and said, 'Look, we're not going to be able to make it.' [The worker] was like, 'Oh, that's okay. You can either come in another time or do it online.' I do it online, so I quickly did that, and that's that." (Priscilla)

These stories stand in stark contrast to respondents' experiences with DHS programs at which workers rarely answered the phone and would simply cancel benefits if a person missed an appointment.

While there may be a number of reasons for the differences in implementation of WIC and other programs (WIC offices are administering a single program for a single population, for example, whereas DHS offices are serving many different populations with more varied needs) –

and while my respondents' experiences may be distinct to the geographic region in which they live (see discussion of sample below) – finding ways to implement a program like SNAP in a fashion more similar to WIC has the potential to substantially alter the participation experience for families. One possibility would be to increase the number of case workers in order to make it more likely that workers would have the time to speak with clients over the phone and make adjustments to cases and appointments without forcing clients to go without assistance if they are unable to make it to the office on a given day. This would obviously increase the cost of administering programs but might also reduce the need to process (and re-process) individual applications multiple times, allowing case workers to better allocate their time to meet the needs of those seeking assistance. Additionally, DHS offices could designate waiting areas for families with children that would allow for more activity rather than attempting to corral people into a single room. Again, this would require increased resources – this time in the form of space – but might improve the experiences of both clients and workers to the extent that programs could be run more efficiently with fewer interruptions in benefits.

More research is needed in order to fully understand the very different experiences people describe with WIC and other programs. Observational and interview studies including both program participants and workers, for example, could enable us to better assess the differences between programs and determine whether changes could be made without adding significantly to program costs.

Public anti-poverty policies from the ground up

On a larger scale, the choice categories described in chapter six provide us with a framework for more fundamentally rethinking the design of our public anti-poverty policies. If we were to map our program options onto these categories – thereby thinking about need and

programs from the perspective of potential participants – we would end up with policies that were grouped to meet the needs of people in particular life circumstances rather than set up in silos determined by when they were created and how they are funded, as our current programs are.

Designing programs from the perspective of potential participants would, of course, require approaching poverty itself in a new way, transforming our discourse from one of mistrust (see Levine, 2013) to one in which those living in or near poverty are talked about as legitimate members of society – citizens in the fullest sense of the word (Somers, 2008). Rather than independent programs for housing, food, health care, education, and cash assistance – each of which is structured to restrict participation and minimize participants' ability to make choices for their own lives – public anti-poverty policies designed from the ground up (i.e. policies that trust participants to make such choices) might look more like what follows.

Crisis response

Knowing that people are likely to face unexpected crises, regardless of how secure their lives may seem at any one point in time, maintaining a program that is particularly designed for those in emergency situations is critical. Those who are employed in low-income jobs and/or who lack networks of family and friends who can provide assistance in times of crisis are particularly vulnerable to sudden life changes such as health crises, disabling accidents, or unanticipated job losses, but - as is evident in the stories of some of my respondents – such changes are not limited to the lives of the long-term poor. Hillary, for example, was living a fairly comfortable middle class life with her husband and three children prior to her divorce. When her husband left, however, she found herself unable to meet household expenses and spent months trying to track down assistance – using websites, the United Way's 211 hotline, and

word-of-mouth (which was of limited use, since she did not know other people who participated in public anti-poverty programs) – before she finally got help from SNAP and Head Start. The longer she went without help, the harder it became for her to pay bills and stay out of debt. Had there been a program designed to help her for a short time in the immediate aftermath of her divorce, she may have been able to get through that period more quickly and moved on with a self-sufficient life.

In crisis situations like Hillary's, individuals and their families often need a variety of supports on short notice, and such supports could be provided by a true "safety net" program – a program designed to offer assistance with food, medical coverage, child care, and possibly employment resources for those whose emergencies could be documented and verified. Emergency case managers – knowledgeable about the needs of families in crisis and prepared to assist such families in establishing short- and long-term crisis recovery plans – could be dedicated to this program, allowing families to move through emergency situations more swiftly and with less unnecessary stress. This would reduce the likelihood of these families needing long-term help from public anti-poverty programs.

In some ways, a crisis response program would be similar to TANF diversion programs implemented in the years following the 1996 welfare reform legislation (and, even more, after the 2005 Deficit Reduction Act), particularly those programs offering lump sum payments or temporary support (for an overview of state diversion programs, see Rosenberg et al, 2008). The goal of these programs is to "divert families from ongoing assistance by providing an alternative to ongoing cash assistance for families experiencing a financial crisis that could be solved through a one-time receipt of cash" (Rosenberg et al, 2008, xiii) or, in the case of temporary support programs, by providing "up to four months of assistance while [families] resolve any

immediate crisis or, if they are ready to work, find employment" (xv). The major difference between these programs and the type of crisis response program I am advocating is that the former continue to rely on the hegemonic poverty discourse, assuming that policy makers know best what low-income families need and that employment is the primary solution to poverty.[25] The type of program I am suggesting would instead depend on case managers who were trained to assess families' needs from the families' own perspectives, which, again, requires a discourse of trust and rights rather than one of mistrust and privilege. This is not to say that those in crisis situations should receive boundless amounts of assistance for whatever they deem necessary but simply that what they deem necessary must be taken seriously by case managers rather than dismissed as lies told by people trying to access assistance they do not "deserve."

Maternity/family leave

Based on the number of my respondents who viewed TANF as a crisis program and used it only when they were pregnant or had newborn children, it seems clear that establishing a comprehensive maternity and family leave policy could provide many families with a more appropriate form of support during this life transition. Women like Beverly – who was employed full-time in a relatively stable retail position but found herself unable to work for several months due to a complicated pregnancy – ought to have a better option than seeking help from TANF – a program designed to help needy families achieve self-sufficiency. Women who are placed on bed rest by a physician or need to take care of a newborn infant until s/he is old enough to enter childcare are not in the same situation, nor do they have the same needs, as women who are unable to find work or need help developing job skills. Beverly knew what it took to be self-sufficient and was willing to work hard to meet her family's needs. She simply had a brief period

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[25] For example, lump sum programs are generally restricted to people who are employed or have a job offer, and temporary support programs tend to either require "work-related activities" or be targeted towards the "hard-to-employ."

when it was impossible for her to do so, and she is not alone (see Waldfogel, 2006; Ybarra, 2013).

While some states have implemented Paid Family Leave (PFL) policies in recent years, these rarely include job protection and often provide support for fewer weeks than women need (Ybarra, 2013). An overhaul of U.S. policies related to maternity/family leave would be necessary to truly provide the assistance women feel they need, and this would again require a radical change in U.S. discourse about rights and citizenship.

Supplemental programs for working families

Families headed by working adults whose jobs do not pay enough to provide for basic needs like adequate nutrition and healthcare are likewise in need of distinct supports. Women like Michele – who works a full-time job at a nursing home, earns extra money cleaning houses during her off hours, and says that she can never call in sick if she wants to be able to pay her bills – could benefit from a program designed to provide supplemental assistance to working families (or, of course, from higher wage rates). Respondents told me time and time again that they were committed to working, not only to meet their children's material needs but also to serve as role models for them. Previous research has demonstrated that families with employed heads of household are often the families who face the biggest challenges in accessing public anti-poverty programs, as they struggle to balance their jobs, school, and families with finding time to visit the welfare office and keep up with recertification requirements (see, for example, Currie & Grogger, 2001). Establishing a program to meet the particular needs of those who are employed but still unable to make ends meet on a long-term basis – perhaps one with unique office hours or increased online or phone accessibility – might encourage working parents to

maintain employment while also allowing them to more adequately meet the needs of their families.

Like the programs described above, programs providing supplemental assistance would need to be based in a new poverty discourse – one that assumes that participants are making genuine efforts to provide for their families rather than trying to "abuse the system." Case workers would need specific training in the very real consequences "welfare stigma" has for their clients' lives and in how to approach the provision of resources in ways that combat those consequences. Rather than focusing on clients' shortcomings (i.e. their failure to meet the standards of the hegemonic poverty discourse) through penalties or "sanctions," supplemental programs would highlight clients' efforts and provide incentives for their continuation. While a new discourse that avoids marking the poor and near poor with the stigma of laziness and immorality is the ideal solution, finding ways to counter that discourse through policy implementation is not an insignificant step.

In some ways, of course, the EITC already provides supplemental support for working families, but because of the ways in which families tend to use this support, it does not serve the same purpose as the type of program described here. As Tach and Halpern-Meekin (2013) – among others – have noted, many recipients of the EITC are aware that they receive an increased tax refund because of their income level but do not fully understand the structure of the tax credit itself. As such, they may fail to realize that they could opt to withhold the amount of their credit from their regular paychecks rather than waiting for a lump sum refund after filing taxes. The descriptions my respondents give of their use of the EITC (to pay off overdue bills, buy a costly but needed household appliance or piece of furniture, or purchase a new vehicle to replace an

unreliable one, for example) are similar to those provided by respondents in other studies and highlight the perception of the EITC as a one-time infusion of funds rather than an ongoing source of support like that provided by SNAP or other programs (Mendenhall et al, 2012). It is possible that providing tax preparers with more information or incentives to educate EITC recipients about their options could help to change this perception, although the idea of the one-time tax refund appears to be quite ingrained in the minds (and behaviors) of low-income workers.

Early childhood programs

One of the clearest messages from my respondents is that people think differently about programs designed specifically for children than they do about all other public anti-poverty programs. They consider the programs to be less stigmatizing, the workers less demeaning, and the benefits more fulfilling in terms of meeting real, concrete needs for their children. This message, particularly when combined with the enormous body of research demonstrating the benefits of early childhood health and education programs (see, for examples, Heckman et al, 2010; Kitzman et al, 1997; Olds et al, 2010; Schweinhart et al, 2005), points to the need for a comprehensive public approach to supporting early childhood. Rather than requiring families to apply for and meet the ongoing requirements of multiple programs (Head Start, WIC, Medicaid/SCHIP, etc.), establishing a comprehensive program for families with very young children – managed out of a single location - would benefit not only those living in or near poverty but society as a whole.

One example of a program that takes us closer to this approach is Nurse-Family Partnership, a home visitation program that provides support and education for first-time mothers/families. Combining a program like this, which has been shown to result in better

health, education, and life course outcomes for parents and children alike, with structured early childhood education like that offered by Head Start (and Early Head Start in limited locations), has the potential to benefit children, families, and society at large (see Kitzman et al, 1997; Olds et al, 2010).

Transitional support

Finally, a number of my respondents viewed their choice to participate in multiple public anti-poverty programs as a temporary or transitional choice. Believing that they could build more secure lives for themselves and their families if they pursued higher education and thereby gained access to better-paying and more stable jobs, many of these respondents were cobbling together assistance from a variety of programs to get themselves through a brief and bounded period of time. Again, establishing a single program to provide the multiple forms of support needed during this transition – perhaps requiring that participants to be enrolled in school or otherwise working to gain new skills or improve their employment prospects - could enable these families to move more quickly through such transitional periods, as they would know that their children would receive adequate nutrition, health care, and education while they sought to achieve the goal of long-term self-sufficiency.

While many of our current programs are designed to provide temporary assistance, my respondents' narratives demonstrate that, in reality, people use these programs in a variety of ways. By providing more focused assistance to those with specific and measurable goals (e.g. earning a bachelor's degree), a program designated for this purpose would be better able to account for participants' particular needs as they work toward those goals. Like all of the programs I have suggested, this type of transitional support would ideally be situated in a context

that was not grounded in the hegemonic poverty discourse and that presented such support as a "legitimate" right of citizenship.

Creating the kinds of programs suggested here would require a thorough re-creation of our public anti-poverty policies, one that would approach such policies from the ground up, thinking about need and programs as potential participants think about them rather than as policy makers and researchers think about them. While the likelihood of this is slim, particularly in the context of a hegemonic poverty discourse that assumes the poor to be lazy, weak, and immoral – and therefore inappropriate sources of ideas for policy re-design – the theory I have outlined in the previous chapters supports this type of rethinking if we are to find ways of better meeting the needs of those living in or near poverty in the U.S. It is also possible, of course, that if "new policies create new politics" (Schattschneider, 1960), designing new programs may be exactly what we need in order to change our discourse.

What this research has done (and what it hasn't)

As was mentioned in both the previous chapter and the introduction, the interpretive nature of the research described here provides us with excellent "data" – in the form of respondents' narratives - for understanding how people living in or near poverty make meaning of their situations and what this means for the choices they make about participation in public anti-poverty programs. Using this data, I have developed a theory of how such choices are made. This theory has arisen out of the narratives of my respondents, a process that has involved interpretation on both my respondents' part and my own as we have worked to co-construct knowledge over the course of interviews and analysis (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

The depth of information my respondents have shared is immense, allowing for the development of a theory that highlights the limitations of the larger scale survey data used in previous participation research and contributes both conceptually and empirically to our knowledge of how the poor and near poor interact with the public policies designed to assist them. There are also, of course, limitations to what interpretive research - using a relatively small sample from a particular geographic region - can contribute, particularly in terms of breadth and variation.

While my sample does reflect a significant amount of diversity (racial/ethnic as well as diversity of income, education level, and participation experience), there are some aspects of this diversity that could be analyzed more fully, perhaps resulting in a more nuanced theory than the one developed here. For example, the analysis conducted thus far has not revealed any major distinctions between racial/ethnic groups in terms of their interpretations of need and programs or their resulting participation choices. It is possible, however, that further readings of transcripts could bring such distinctions to light, particularly if they focused not only on the race/ethnicity of individual respondents but also on the racial/ethnic make-up of their surrounding community and the intersection between race/ethnicity, income, and education. This could prove to be especially interesting given the history of racial and class segregation in Detroit and its suburbs (Sugrue, 2013).

Other sources of variation that could potentially provide further insight include respondents' residence in urban, suburban, and ex-urban communities as well as their financial history (those whose families have lived in or near poverty for multiple generations versus those whose financial struggles have developed more recently). Some of the latter variation comes to light in respondents' life history narratives, as they combine retrospective, prospective, and

comparative interpretations of need, but a more systematic analysis of these histories may be possible based on the amount of information respondents have provided.

There are other aspects of diversity and variation that simply do not exist in this sample but that may bear relevance for the theory developed here. As has been mentioned previously, the gender make-up of my sample (71 women and four men) does not allow for comparisons between male and female heads of household. Although some of my female respondents were married and thus not sole heads of their households, the fact that I only interviewed the wife/mother means that it is her narrative and thus her interpretations that I have captured. It is possible that men and women respond differently to the hegemonic poverty discourse – particularly its focus on the patriarchal model of the family – and that this may lead to differences in both the choice process (i.e. how they think about need and programs) and the participation choices that result, but this is impossible to assess using the current sample.

The small number of Hispanic and Arab American respondents in my sample also makes it impossible to draw any conclusions about the role that membership in these groups might play in people's interpretations. There may, for instance, be particular cultural beliefs about how the individual, the extended family, and the broader society interact in providing for people's well-being that impact interpretations of need and how programs meet (or ought to meet) that need. More respondents from these ethnic groups would be necessary to test this hypothesis.

A related issue involves immigration status. While a few of my respondents had either immigrated to the U.S. themselves or married someone who had done so, none of them were actively dealing with legal issues related to immigration at the time of our interviews. In addition to cultural beliefs such as those mentioned above, individuals who are dealing with such issues (recent and/or undocumented immigrants or those who have family members in these categories)

may also have unique views of government and public assistance that have been shaped by their particular experiences.

Finally, though my respondents' life histories, current circumstances, and experiences with public anti-poverty programs vary considerably, all of these exist within the context of southeast Michigan. This is important not only because of the Detroit area's unique history but also because my respondents have likely interacted with a relatively small number of assistance offices and encountered similar community resources and barriers. The only way to know how significant these factors are in the theory developed here is to conduct similar interviews in other geographic areas, broadening the sample to encompass respondents in more rural communities as well as cities and suburbs with different historical and social realities. Such an expansion of the sample would also allow for further development of a typology of participation profiles, as discussed in chapter six. Having an established typology would, in turn, allow for further theory testing and the introduction of changes in program design and implementation that could increase the reach and success of U.S. policies in combatting poverty.

The importance of listening

On a final note, the research approach used here and the window it has given us into the experiences and interpretations of those living in or near poverty serve as both a reminder and a call for researchers, policy makers, and service providers alike:

A reminder that, whether or not they are participating in public anti-poverty programs (or any particular program), low-income families are not trying to "game the system," "abuse the system," or "cheat the system" for their own gain but are simply trying to keep their heads above water. As Kate said of her family, "You can get your nose above the water, but your lips are still underneath. We've got to figure out ways to make ends meet every single month," and

participating in public anti-poverty programs is just one part of their efforts to keep from sinking

all the way under – nose and all.

And *a call* to conduct research and design and implement policy that listens to the voices

of those we seek to help. It is a more complicated way to do things, but it honors their efforts and

their lives – messy and unpredictable as they may be. I only hope that I have done my part.

APPENDIX:
Interview Guide

Interview Session 1

Head Start experience

I'd like to start by hearing a little bit about your family and your experiences with the Head Start Program.

1. You have a child (or children) currently enrolled at [site] Head Start, correct?
   a. Yes
   b. No

2. Besides [your child in Head Start], can you tell me about who else lives here with you? (relationships, ages, etc.)
   a. Do you have any other family members for whom you are financially responsible who do not live with you?

3. How would you describe the Head Start program to someone who wasn't familiar with it?

4. Can you tell me how you learned about the Head Start program and how you decided to send your son/daughter there?

5. What was it like to enroll your child(ren) in Head Start? What did you have to do?
   a. How did you feel about that process?

6. How involved would you say you have been in your child's Head Start program? Can you describe what you mean by that – what kinds of things do you do, etc.?

7. What do you like best about your son/daughter's Head Start program?

8. What do you like least?

Financial information

Now I'd like to talk some about your family's current financial situation.

9. I have a card here with some different income ranges on it. Can you identify on here how much your household earned from jobs, including and businesses or self-employment, last month?
   a. $1-249
   b. $250-499
   c. $500-749
   d. $750-999
   e. $1,000-1,499

      f. $1,500-1,999

      g. $2,000-2,499

      h. $2,500-$2,999

      i. $3,000+

10. Do you ever get or give financial help from any family members or friends?
    a. Did this happen last month?
    b. If so, how much did you receive? How much did you give?

11. Can you tell me if your household had any other income last month from other sources? How much was that?
    a. Would you mind telling me what those sources were?

12. Would you say that your income has been about the same in most months in the past year, or was this last month very different from others?

13. How would you say you feel about your family's financial situation?
    a. Do you feel like your family has enough money to buy the things you need?
    b. What is one thing you would really like to buy or do that your income does not allow you to buy or do?

14. Would you say that your family has been through times when things have been worse than they are now in terms of money? Can you tell me a little bit about that time?

15. When things are really tight – either now or in the past when things were worse – what do (or did) you do to make ends meet?
    a. Are there any people or programs that you turn to for help?
    b. Do you tend to go to the same people or programs for help whenever money is tight, or do you look for help in different places at different times? Why?
    c. How have you made decisions about what to do? Can you describe the steps you've taken or your thought process in figuring out what to do when money is tight?

16. Now I'd like you to think a little further back, to your own childhood. How would you describe your family's lifestyle or financial situation then?

17. If your family ever went through difficult financial times when you were a child, do you know what was done to make ends meet? (probe for specific programs)
    a. Who made these decisions?
    b. How did you feel about the decisions your parent(s) or family made? Do you think they made good decisions? Do you think you would have made the same decisions if it had been up to you? Why or why not?

Public program participation

Now, I'd like to talk some about some particular programs that are designed to help people.

18. Can you tell me if you've ever applied for or used any of the following programs? (If yes, ask when.)
    a. The Family Independence Program (FIP) [or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)]

b. The Bridge card, food stamps, or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
c. Medicaid, Healthy Kids, or the MOMS program (Maternity Outpatient Medical Services)
d. MIChild or the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP)
e. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)
f. Free or Reduced School Lunch for your child(ren)
g. Early Head Start

19. Were there any programs in that list that you had never heard of before?

20. In general, thinking about [list programs they said they've applied for or used], what would you say your experience was like (applying for the programs, getting benefits, recertifying, interacting with caseworkers, etc.)?

21. Now, can you tell me if you've ever applied for or used any of these programs? (If yes, ask when.)
    a. WIC or the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children
    b. Child Development & Care Program (CDC) subsidy for childcare expenses
    c. Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
    d. Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI)
    e. Housing assistance
        i. Section 8
        ii. Public housing
        iii. Transitional housing
    f. Unemployment Insurance
    g. Federal Educational Loans (Stafford, Perkins, etc.)

22. Were there any programs in that list that you had never heard of before?

23. In general, thinking about [list programs they said they've applied for or used], what would you say your experience was like (applying for the programs, getting benefits, recertifying, interacting with caseworkers, etc.)?

24. There were some programs I listed that you are not using right now. Do you know if you are eligible for any of those programs? (Repeat list)
    a. (For each program for which respondent says s/he is not eligible) Do you know why you are not eligible?
    b. (For programs for which respondent says s/he is or might be eligible) Is there any particular reason you are not using [program]?
    c. Do you know anyone else who uses any of the programs that you are NOT using? Who?

25. Now, thinking about all of the programs you've applied for or used, what would you say was your best experience in any of these programs? (repeat their program list as needed)

26. What would you say was your worst experience in any of these programs? (repeat their program list as needed)

27. Were your benefits ever reduced or cut off when you were using any of these programs?
    a. Can you tell me about that? (What happened? How were you notified? What did you have to do? How did you feel?)

28. Right now, then, you're using [name programs]. Is that correct?

29. Do you know other people (family, friends, neighbors, etc.) who are using some of these same programs? Who?

30. Do you currently receive assistance from any other programs that I didn't mention?

Demographic information

We're almost done with this interview. I just have a few basic questions to finish up.

31. Can you tell me how old you are?

32. Your gender?

33. Would you mind telling me what your marital status is?
    a. Married
    b. Single
    c. Divorced
    d. Widowed
    e. Other _____

34. How do you describe your race?
    a. African American
    b. White
    c. Asian American
    d. American Indian or Alaska Native
    e. Multiracial _____
    f. Other _____

35. Are you Hispanic or Latino?
    a. Yes
    b. No

36. Do you speak a language other than English at home?
    a. Yes _____
    b. No

37. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

Conclusion

38. Finally, is there anything else that you would like to tell me about in relation to the subjects we've discussed today?

Date/Time/Location for Second Interview

Interview Session 2

In our last interview, we talked about your family's experiences with Head Start, your financial situation, and the programs you've used.

1. Since we last met, have you had any thoughts about our conversation that you'd like to share with me?

Today I'd like to spend some time talking more about your thoughts and opinions. Some of the questions will give you specific choices for your answers, and others will be more open-ended, as I really want to hear about what you think in your own words.

Poverty, deservingness, and stigma

For these first few questions, I'd like you to just answer based on the choices I give you. Then, once we've gone through these, I'll ask you to tell me more about what you think.

I'm going to start with a series of questions (from ANES) about WHY you think it is, that in America today, some people have BETTER JOBS and HIGHER INCOMES than others do. I'm going to read you some possible explanations, and I want you to tell me how IMPORTANT you think each is.

2. The first is: 'Because some people are born with more ability to learn.' (Would you say that this is VERY important, SOMEWHAT important, or NOT IMPORTANT AT ALL as an explanation for why some people have better jobs and higher incomes than others do?)
   ----
   1. Very important
   3. Somewhat important
   5. Not important at all
   7. Statement isn't true {VOL}

   D. Don't Know
   R. Refused
   N.

3. Next: 'Because discrimination holds some people back.' (Would you say that this is VERY important, SOMEWHAT important, or NOT IMPORTANT AT ALL as an explanation for why some people have better jobs and higher incomes than others do?)
   ----
   1. Very important
   3. Somewhat important
   5. Not important at all
   7. Statement isn't true {VOL}

   D. Don't Know
   R. Refused
   N.

4. Next: 'Because some people just don't work as hard.' (Would you say that this is VERY important, SOMEWHAT important, or NOT IMPORTANT AT ALL as an explanation for why some people have better jobs and higher incomes than others do?)
   ----

1. Very important
3. Somewhat important
5. Not important at all
7. Statement isn't true {VOL}

D. Don't Know
R. Refused
N.

5. Next: 'Because some people don't get a chance to get a good education.' (Would you say that this is VERY important, SOMEWHAT important, or NOT IMPORTANT AT ALL as an explanation for why some people have better jobs and higher incomes than others do?)
----
1. Very important
3. Somewhat important
5. Not important at all
7. Statement isn't true {VOL}

D. Don't Know
R. Refused
N.

6. Next: 'Because some people just choose low-paying jobs.' (Would you say that this is VERY important, SOMEWHAT important, or NOT IMPORTANT AT ALL as an explanation for why some people have better jobs and higher incomes than others do?)
----
1. Very important
3. Somewhat important
5. Not important at all
7. Statement isn't true {VOL}

D. Don't Know
R. Refused
N.

7. Next: 'Because government policies have helped high-income workers more.' (Would you say that this is VERY important, SOMEWHAT important, or NOT IMPORTANT AT ALL as an explanation for why some people have better jobs and higher incomes than others do?)
----
1. Very important
3. Somewhat important
5. Not important at all
7. Statement isn't true {VOL}

D. Don't Know
R. Refused
N.

8. Next: 'Because God made people different from one another.' (Would you say that this is VERY important, SOMEWHAT important, or NOT IMPORTANT AT ALL as an explanation for why some people have better jobs and higher incomes than others do ?)

----
1. Very important
3. Somewhat important
5. Not important at all
7. Statement isn't true {VOL}

D. Don't Know
R. Refused
N.

9. Now, if you had to give your own explanation of why it is that some people have better jobs and higher incomes than others do, what would you say? (You can give as many reasons as you want.)
   a. Do you think some people *deserve* to have better jobs and higher incomes than others do? Who/why?
   b. Do you think some people *deserve* to have worse jobs and lower incomes than others do? Who/why?

10. When people go through hard times and money is tight, what do you think they should expect in terms of help?
    a. Do you think the government should be responsible for helping people when money is tight? Why or why not?
    b. Do you think other groups (churches, nonprofit organizations, etc.) should help? Why or why not?

11. Can you say a little bit more about what you think the government ought to do (if anything) to help people when money is tight? (What kinds of programs should the government offer? Should the government give people money, other kinds of help, etc.?)

12. How do you think the government should decide who to help (if it should help at all)?
    a. What aspects of people's lives should the government consider? (should the government consider how much trouble people are in; what their family situation is like – how many children, married or not, etc.; whether they are working, looking for work, willing to work, etc.)?

13. Do you think certain people deserve help more than others? If so, who and why?

14. How do you think most people in the U.S. feel about helping people when money is tight?
    a. Do you think most people would agree with you that the government should/shouldn't help people? What makes you think this?

15. When you think about people who receive benefits from programs like [programs respondent is NOT using], what comes to mind?
    a. Do you think most people would agree with you? Why or why not?

16. Are you ever concerned about what other people think about you because you use [programs respondent is using]? Why or why not?
    a. What do you think most people think about people who use programs like [programs respondent is using]?

17. What do you think most people in the U.S. think about the Head Start program?
    a. What do you think most people think about families who send their children to Head Start programs?

Please just answer yes or no to the next three questions (from the National Food Stamp Program Survey):

18. Have you ever hidden the fact that you participate in [programs]?

19. Have you ever avoided telling people that you participate in [programs]?

20. Have you ever been or perceived that you would be treated disrespectfully if people found out that you were participating in [program]?

(From NSAF):
21. "Here are some opinions that people have expressed about welfare and about working. For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree.
    a. Welfare makes people work less than they would if there wasn't a welfare system. (Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree?)
    b. Welfare helps people get on their feet when facing difficult situations such as unemployment, a divorce, or a death in the family. (Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree?)
    c. Welfare encourages young women to have babies before marriage. (Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree?)

22. If someone asked you to explain what the word "poverty" means, what would you say?

23. How about the word "poor"? What would you say that means?

24. When you think of people who are poor, what comes to mind? (Just tell me whatever you think.)
    a. Do you think of yourself and your family as being in this category? Why or why not?

25. What do you think causes poverty?
    a. How do people end up poor?
    b. Who do you think is responsible for poverty?

Perceptions of government

Now I want to talk some about government.

26. When you think about "the government," what comes to mind? Just tell me whatever you think.

For these next few questions, I just want you to answer based on the choices I give you. [From ANES]

27. "People have different ideas about the government in Washington. These ideas don't refer to democrats or republicans in particular, but just to government in general. [I] want to see how you feel about these ideas.
    a. "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right-- just about always, most of the time or only some of the time?"
    b. "Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?"

      c.   "Do you think that people in the government waste a lot of money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste very much of it?"

      d.   "Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked?"

28. Do you have any more thoughts about those four questions that you'd like to share? (repeat 2a-d as needed)

29. Do you think the government does a good job trying to help people? Why do you say that?

30. Would you say that the government has helped you? Why (in what ways) or why not?

31. When you think about politicians, what comes to mind?
      e.   Do you trust politicians to do the right thing? Why or why not?

32. Do you think of yourself as being closer to any particular political group or party than to others? If so, which one and why?

33. How would you describe your political views?

34. Would you say that you pay attention to political news? Why or why not?

Rights consciousness

Finally, I'd like to talk a little bit about "rights."

35. What rights do you think you have as someone living in the United States?

36. When people say that all Americans have "equal rights," what do you think this means?
      f.   What kinds of rights come to mind?

37. Do you think of the benefits people get from programs like FIP, food stamps, Medicaid, etc. as a right? In other words, do you think people have a right to government assistance when money is tight? Why or why not?
      g.   Do you think most people in the U.S. would agree with you?

38. Do you think of your child's getting a good education as a right? Why or why not?
      h.   Again, do you think most people in the U.S. would agree with you?

39. Do you think having enough money to pay for life's necessities (a place to live, food, health care, etc.) *should* be considered a right in the U.S.? Why or why not?

Conclusion

40. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about in relation to the subjects we've discussed today?

41. Did this interview (including our previous interview) raise any concerns for you?

42. I'd really like to talk to others who are coping with tough economic situations. Since I'm already talking to people with kids in Head Start, it would be great to meet people who also have kids but

don't use Head Start. Do you know anyone, maybe family members or friends, who you think fits that description and might be interested in talking to me? (pause to discuss)

If you're comfortable giving me their name and phone number, I'll contact them. Or if you'd rather contact them first to ask if it's ok, I can get back in touch with you in a week or two to follow up. What would you prefer?

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