Coping with Poverty: The Social Contexts of Neighborhood, Work and Family in the African American Community*

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The disproportionate rate of poverty among African Americans often leads policymakers, researchers, and advocates for the poor to focus on their plight. In 1997, 26.5 percent of all black persons lived below the official poverty line. The comparable figure for whites was 11 percent. In fact, the 1997 rate for African Americans was higher than the 1959 rate for whites. The persistence of poverty is also greater for minorities. That is, once an African American becomes poor, s/he is likely to remain poor for more years than whites (Gottschalk, McLanahan, and Sandefur, 1994); the probability that a poor child will be poor as an adult is also higher for African Americans than for whites (Corcoran, 1995; Corcoran and Chaudry, 1997).

Poverty among African Americans is geographically concentrated in a way that is not true for whites. Between 1970 and 1990, the number of poor persons living in high-poverty census tracts (tracts where at least 40 percent of all persons are poor) increased by 98 percent, even as the total number of poor persons increased by only 37 percent (Jargowsky, 1997). Thus, poor African Americans struggle not only with insufficient incomes, but also with the added disadvantages of poor neighborhoods. Concentrated poverty, unemployment, and crime combine with persistent residential segregation and labor market discrimination to generate a social context that makes socioeconomic advancement more difficult.

Focusing primarily on African American poverty, however, can be problematic. The history of racial hostility in America lends a racial cast to behaviors associated with long term poverty, even though whites account for a substantial percentage of all poor persons. Condemnations of out-of-wedlock births evoke images of black promiscuity, lamentation over sporadic employment draws upon historical accusations of unwillingness to take available jobs, and public distress over crime is fueled by a racist tradition of fear of black men. The challenge is to investigate the social and structural causes of behaviors that are associated with poverty and that violate mainstream norms, without relying upon racist stereotypes.

The studies in Coping With Poverty rise to this challenge. They do not flinch from describing behaviors that many African Americans — poor or non-poor — would consider undesirable. But they reject both the liberal view that the poor are forced into adopting undesirable behaviors, and the conservative view that such behaviors are evidence that the poor choose to make bad choices. Instead, the authors focus on the social context and analyze the ways that neighborhoods, family relationships and workplaces influence beliefs and behaviors in the African American community. They document how individual outcomes are shaped by multiple aspects of the relationships among individuals, their families, and the environments in which they live and work.

This approach helps us understand that a distinctive aspect of coping with poverty in the African American community involves numerous undesirable options. A young African American man who voluntarily leaves job after job is not acquiring the stable work record necessary for promotion. But he may be leaving these jobs to avoid racial harassment and discrimination, not only because such workplaces are hard to endure but also because he realizes that the opportunity for advancement in these jobs is limited. A mother who keeps her children inside where she can supervise them and who isolates herself from her neighbors is protecting her children from the problems of a high-crime neighborhood in the best way she can. But her actions may keep her from developing close interpersonal ties with her neighbors and may decrease her ability to coalesce with other neighborhood parents on strategies to keep their children out of trouble. Her social isolation may also prevent her from learning about an available job that might eventually provide the resources needed to move her family to a safer community. These behaviors would not represent wise choices in the American mainstream, but the chapters in Coping WIth Poverty show that they do make "sense" within the social context of urban poverty.

Intellectual Context of Recent Research on Urban Poverty

William Julius Wilson, first in The Truly Disadvantaged (1987) and its analysis of the development of an urban "underclass" of concentrated African American poverty, and then in When Work Disappears (1996), brought race and space back into urban poverty research. Noting that economic trends since the early 1970s have negatively affected the employment and earnings prospects of all low-skilled workers, Wilson emphasizes that the labor market consequences were especially pernicious for African Americans. Persistent residential segregation concentrated poor minorities in the inner-cities at the same time that the civil rights revolution made it easier for middle-class minorities to move out of these neighborhoods. The result was an increased concentration of poverty in areas where residents are socially isolated, both from the economic mainstream and from middle class peers.

Wilson argues that the disappearance of employment opportunities in racially-segregated high-poverty neighborhoods is at the core of a set of interrelated economic and social problems. Structural changes in the labor market—decreases in unionization, technological innovations, reductions in the manufacturing sector, increased global competition and the consequent expansion of the import and export sectors — all lowered the wages of less-skilled workers (Danziger and Gottschalk, 1995). Because African Americans have historically had less access to education and training and lower completed years of schooling than whites, the decline in the fortunes of all less-skilled workers falls heavily on them (Holzer, 1994; Mincy, 1994). Racial discrimination also matters, according to Wilson, because it exacerbates the decline in employment caused by economic restructuring.

Widespread joblessness fosters changes in attitudes and behaviors: high levels of single-parent families, antisocial behavior, social networks that do not extend beyond the confines of the ghetto, and a lack of informal social control over the behavior and activities of children and adults. Poor children in the ghetto not only receive an inferior education in troubled public school systems, but grow up in an environment that is harmful to healthy child development and intellectual growth. Absent policy interventions and this environment, according to Wilson (1996), will contribute to higher levels of joblessness, violence, hopelessness, welfare dependency, and non-marital childbearing in the next generation.

Wilson does not deny the existence of negative "ghetto-related" behaviors that make some inner-city residents unattractive to potential employers. But his research suggests that most inner-city residents adhere to mainstream values and behaviors and that those deviating from the mainstream are reacting primarily to their environment, especially prior experiences with employers. "Inner-city black men grow bitter and resentful in the face of their employment prospects and often manifest or express these feelings in their harsh, often dehumanizing, low-wage work settings" (1996, p.144). This leads employers to "make assumptions about the inner-city black workers in general" (1996, p.137) so that many qualified "black inner-city applicants are never given the chance to prove their qualifications on an individual level because they are systematically screened out by the selective recruitment process" (1996, p. 137).

Wilson's hypotheses have motivated many studies that emphasize the nexus between individual behavioral choices, the social contexts of the inner city, and the opportunity structure. Such studies have focused on the relationships between family structure, neighborhood effects, racial discrimination, and poverty. However, they do not adequately address many of the issues that the respondents in the chapters in Coping With Poverty name as those they must confront as they seek economic sufficiency. Most poverty researchers assume that employment is central to the ability of the poor

to fulfill their responsibilities as parents, role models, and neighbors, as well as to respect themselves and their obligations to others. But the chapters demonstrate that the poor are already and simultaneously parents, relatives, neighbors, and role models, as well as individuals with self-respect and with obligations. The influence of all of these factors means that work opportunities may not be the primary factor that shapes the behavior of the poor. It also means that policy prescriptions that emphasize only employment, housing, and transportation — work and its correlates — will not address all of the barriers that keep the poor from fully participating in the economic and social mainstream.

Coping With Poverty emphasizes the social contexts of poverty that are typically missing from poverty studies and the public policy debate. Instead of seeing the poor only as individuals, the authors explain how the social contexts of neighborhoods, work and family relationships shape people's lives and behavior. Instead of assuming economic motivations for behavior, the authors examine how poor people develop mechanisms for coping with poverty: strategies that are motivated by values such as parental care and worry, obligation towards relatives and neighbors, support from and trust towards authority figures, peer relationships, and self-respect, and that draw upon the available knowledge, social support, and resources in their communities.

Communities: Family and Neighborhood as Support

The common portrayal of poor communities is that of families living fearfully and aimlessly in dilapidated buildings, neither able nor willing to overcome their isolation from each other and the larger society. This focus on absence and isolation can encourage policymakers to believe that poor communities have no structure left to build upon, no interactions to be preserved, and no points of contact between their neighborhoods and the wider world.

The chapters on community context instead depict communities in which impoverished residents create networks for resource sharing and mutual support, networks that often extend into other, less poor communities. These networks can affect policy success. For example, policy change that negatively affects some members of a support network will ripple through the lives of others, resulting in a multitude of unanticipated consequences. Policies that offer benefits to a particular individual may inflict a cost upon her support network, thus making those benefits less valuable.

Sharon Hicks-Bartlett emphasizes these points in "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The Labyrinth of Working and Parenting in a Poor Community," a discussion of the coping strategies prevalent in one African American suburb. In this impoverished community, neither afterschool care nor elder care, nor even effective police and fire protection, are provided by government. The lack of jobs in the neighborhood, and

the lack of transportation to jobs outside the neighborhood, means that most families have too little income to purchase these services.

Hicks-Bartlett's chapter shows how danger, scarcity, and obligation impose upon parental choices. When violence is common, mothers focus on their children's safety, even keeping them under adult supervision past the age where children could, in safer environments, care for themselves. When mothers depend on others for transportation or baby-sitting, they are unwilling to take jobs that might require them to ask for even more help. When the most reliable resource families have is their sense of mutual responsibility, they see decisions about paid work or non-paid caretaking in terms of their effects on the family support system, rather than only on individual well-being.

Getting some policy changes, like welfare-to-work programs, to succeed in such neighborhoods will inflict serious practical costs. Work requirements take away one option for family survival: the division of labor among different members of a support system. By requiring that unpaid care be abandoned in favor of paid work, such reforms prevent residents from exchanging time and personal attention for a sense of safety, or to support someone else's wage-earning. If wages are not high enough to allow families to purchase what they have lost, then paid employment will decrease their standard of living and increase their sense of vulnerability.

The vulnerability of poor communities is also a key focus of Gina Barclay-McLaughlin's chapter on long-term residents of a housing project in the inner city, "Communal Isolation: Narrowing the Pathways to Goal Attainment and Work." Her interviewees speak about ways in which a sense of responsibility for one's neighbors can nurture children's dreams and aspirations. Communal support from neighbors, teachers, and adult mentors, who watched out for each other and helped to raise each others' children, was as much a part of the housing project of their childhood as the poverty they experienced.

The respondents identify the prevalence of crime and drugs in the housing project, and the security measures used to combat crime, as central factors in the weakening of communal support today. Fear of what kids will do if neighbors try to correct their behavior; fear of adults who may be on drugs; the loss of shared space for neighbors to build camaraderie, all inhibit the interpersonal relationships at the heart of communal support. At the same time, residents contemplate moving to higher-quality scattered-site public housing elsewhere with regret. While such moves may be necessary to avoid the crime and fear that rules the projects, they do not allow residents to recreate the community they give up.

Barclay-McLaughlin's chapter suggests that problem definition is central to policy

formulation. Thinking about crime as a problem that hurts individual victims, versus one that prevents community interactions, can lead to different solutions. In the first case, punishing criminals and/or ensuring individual safety is the right response. In the second case, strengthening communal support is a parallel goal. As a result, even strategies effective at reducing crime — an intimidating police presence, greater latitude for police searches and arrests, and out-migration – might be undesirable because they diminish community trust. Instead, training residents to monitor behavior in the projects, subsidizing pushcart vendors to bring more legitimate activity onto the streets, or encouraging police to lead community activities might enhance safety while encouraging the rebirth of communal support.

Of course, the intertwining of kin with kin and neighbor with neighbor has negative aspects as well. The gangs that Barclay-McLaughlin's respondents fear are made up of neighborhood youth; the relatives who support Hicks-Bartlett's respondents demand support in turn. This mix of influences is highlighted in Mary Pattillo-McCoy's chapter, "Negotiating Adolescence in a Black Middle-Class Neighborhood." The teenagers she profiles all have parents who are educated and employed; they attend magnet or parochial schools, and have career ambitions their families support. Community and extended family support have been important for all of them. But all also have been drawn, through neighborhood friends, into less positive relationships.

As Pattillo-McCoy points out, within the same family, and even within the same person, "street" and "decent" lifestyles coexist. The middle-class background of these adolescents gives them opportunities that are unavailable to many of their poor peers. Resources and expectations, both from within the family and from institutions like churches and schools, matter. But neither is enough to buffer these teenagers from the friendships and their sense of identification with their less fortunate kin and neighbors. Friendships do not stop when one friend has a child out of wedlock. Income shared with others is not less necessary because it is earned from drug dealing. A son's friend is not unworthy one day because he belongs to a gang, but worthy the next when he begins college.

The policy context illuminated by this research is complex. In some ways, helping lower-middle-class parents isolate themselves from their less successful friends and relatives might enhance their control over their children's acquaintances and choices. A greater range of school choices, increased drug enforcement, and attacks on the racial segregation that limits their housing choices could all facilitate this separation. But these policies would collide with another feature of the context: those who provide less positive models for children are often also siblings, cousins or neighbors, who play an important emotional, and sometimes an important economic, role in "decent" families.

The central place of support networks, as documented in these chapters, shows how context can play a critical role in compliance with and acceptance of social policy. It is not that people with larger or smaller support networks will be more likely to work rather than receive welfare, to move into scattered-site housing rather than stay in a housing project, or support tougher crime legislation. Rather, context changes the causal process behind decision-making: people enmeshed in support networks are more likely to base their decisions to work or receive welfare on how their decision will affect others rather than on individual calculations. Understanding context is thus particularly appropriate for predicting which obstacles and frames will be encountered by policy changes, and which are most likely to matter.

Viewed from this perspective, the context of policy includes, but is much more than "place": it also incorporates the beliefs and practices that people carry with them and that structure their response to policy. Interpretations created out of common experiences and histories matter a great deal. A good way to examine context from this perspective is by looking at employment.

Employment: From Removing Barriers to Coping with Obstacles

Jobs mean much more than earnings in American culture: they are also markers of one's social position, self-respect, sense of contribution, and aspirations and dreams. Job loss in the inner-city, racism on the job, and restricted opportunities to pursue one's vocational ambitions thus hurt African Americans in multiple ways. The inability to earn a living not only keeps families in poverty but attacks one's sense of self; it underscores racist messages that tell African Americans that they are incapable, unintelligent, or unmotivated.

Statistical studies of employment tend to overlook the ways in which families and schools support or discourage career ambitions; the persistence of beliefs about jobs that no longer fit a changing job market; and the ways in which employment ambitions are thwarted and advancement constrained even for the successfully employed. Opportunities — education, job openings, promotion potential — are important, but individuals also need empowerment and support to make use of them: from a teacher who helps a student negotiate obstacles, from a friend who helps an unemployed man make sense of the work world, from a supervisor who understands how subtle racism and unjust working conditions isolate and discourage her black employees.

Carla O'Connor's chapter, "Dreamkeeping in the Inner City: Diminishing the Divide Between Aspirations and Expectations," details the ways in which the aspirations of ambitious young women growing up in the midst of inner-city poverty are supported, or derailed. Her respondents dream of careers that would enable them to live better lives. But only two of the six young women have access to people who can give them

the information and the assistance to reach their goals and overcome obstacles, and who encourage their efforts. The others are stymied in their ambitions when teachers, caretakers and extended family communicate more modest expectations and are unable to provide academic tutoring or information about negotiating problems like paying for school or applying to college. Their ambitions remain dreams that they do not expect to attain.

O'Connor's portrait does not suggest that these ambitions would be fulfilled if only families and teachers paid more attention to children. As she points out, the neglect of ambitions is a social product of families who have not had experience or education enough to make them knowledgeable about how to help children, and of schools that are too overburdened to give special tutoring and assistance to more than a few of the most prepared students. The problem is one of the distribution of human capital and material resources, not merely of personal will. At the same time, O'Connor's work shows that resources alone might not suffice: resources delivered outside of the supportive relationship with family or trusted teachers might not give students the self-confidence, the self-esteem, or optimism they need.

The interaction between information and the context in which it is delivered is underscored in a different way in Alford A. Young Jr.'s chapter, "On the Outside Looking In: Low-Income Black Men's Conceptions of Work Opportunity and the Good Job." Young focuses on low-income, unemployed black men who face a working world that they do not understand. Without families to provide academic help or access to job networks, friends with consistent records of employment, or a school experience that prepared them for employment, they make inferences from information that is often outdated or, taken out of context. Thus they value their manual skills and base their job aspirations on finding this kind of work. They dream of owning a business that would allow them to escape the disrespect and dependence they experienced in the few jobs they found. And they cannot think of viable strategies to obtain employment other than being out in the street, hoping an opportunity will find them.

Young's chapter shows how context shapes beliefs and guides individual action. Because men "know" that unionized, semi- or unskilled labor once provided stable factory work for their neighborhoods and families, they base their evaluations of the "good job" on this history, even though economic changes have made such evaluations obsolete. Similarly, having grown up in a world where exposure to new technologies was limited, these young men have no way of understanding the educational or credentialing demands of a high-tech workplace. Instead, they talk about meeting its demands by having an eager and aggressive work attitude. As Young suggests, such misreadings of the labor market will affect how these men respond to work or training opportunities, even if such opportunities become available.

Young concludes that relying simply on the availability of jobs to affect such changes may not be enough. The men he interviewed want to start in a stable job with benefits, because their comparison job is unstable, dangerous, but often profitable illegitimate work. They look for wages high enough to support a family because, for many, the birth of a child has motivated them to find work. Thus, it is not clear how these men would respond to increased opportunities for work that did not satisfy these conditions.

From one perspective, this is certainly an unreasonable attitude. Most did not learn skills that would merit well-paid jobs. Other workers who lack skills accept less desirable jobs until they acquire the skills or experience necessary to get a better one; these men should do the same. But this perspective only makes sense if one believes that one can be promoted from inferior jobs to better ones. If workers doubt that an "inferior" job will increase their skills or improve their promotion prospects, the rationale for accepting the job becomes much weaker.

Doubts about whether job ladders will work for them find some justification in the African American experience. As Andrew L. Reaves shows in the chapter "Black Male Employment and Self-Sufficiency," even successfully employed African American men experience working conditions with limited chances for promotion and job satisfaction. The men he interviewed did not give up working in response to multiple examples of discrimination. But they moved from job to job seeking fair treatment. They restrict their own efforts when they feel that employers take advantage of their willingness to work hard. They feel isolated from co-workers of different races or gender, which makes their work experience unhappy and hinders the formation of networks. They face so much abuse from managers that they sometimes pass up a chance for promotion. Because they have more labor market contact than the men in Young's chapter, the workers Reaves interviews know enough to see that improving their skills might allow them to move to a less discriminatory line of work; others have union jobs that provide at least some stability. They have more reason to persevere, but the difference between the labor market difficulties faced by these two groups of men is one of degree and not of kind.

The strategies adopted by the workers in Reaves' chapter underscore the importance of the employment context. Glaring instances of racism are easier to measure than the subtle denials of opportunity and self-limiting adaptations that Reaves describes. But subtle racism is no less damaging, especially when coping with it requires confronting one's second-class status and accommodating to it. When policymakers make employment policy without recognizing the full range of workplace injustices, they risk blaming African Americans for not trying hard enough at work after they are hired, seeing isolation on the job as a choice rather than a response, or dismissing the unwillingness to try for a promotion as lack of ambition.

Parenting: From Enforcing Responsibility to Enabling Care

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996 enshrined in law a vision of parenting that focuses primarily on economic provision. Time limits were placed on the receipt of cash assistance by caretaking parents, and increasing percentages of the caseload were required to work or be enrolled in work-related programs. Child support enforcement efforts were increased. Such efforts, Congress stated, were necessary because "promotion of responsible fatherhood and motherhood is integral to successful child rearing and the well-being of children" (PRWORA, Title I, Sec. 101 (3)).

Neither the legislation nor the political rhetoric that accompanied it acknowledged that parenting decisions involve more than providing an adequate income. As central as economic decisions are, parenting is more complicated than earning enough to support one's children: it involves decisions about safeguarding their health and physical security, nurturing their emotional and intellectual development, strengthening their bonds to their families, and making choices about their well-being. Decisions about work and welfare receipt are influenced not only by a parent's employment history, education, job market conditions and welfare requirements, but also by decisions about children's medical needs, by neighborhood quality and schooling decisions, and by assessments — mistaken or not — of what will provide the best life for the family.

While not prepared specifically as commentary on PRWORA, two chapters in Coping With Poverty illuminate some of the pitfalls that it may face. The mothers profiled in "Mother, Worker, Welfare Recipient: Welfare Reform and the Multiple Roles of Low-Income Women," by Ariel Kalil, Heidi Schweingruber, Marijata Daniel-Echols, and Ashli Breen, not only share PRWORA's concern with responsible parenting, but also agree that paid employment might improve their parenting. However, their experience with available jobs sometimes points away from employment. Leaving welfare made medical care for children much more problematic. The fear of poor quality child care, especially given financial constraints, kept other mothers from working. The long hours required for mothers to support their children on a low-wage job meant less time with children, and thus less emotional nurturance and less control over their children's behavior.

Kalil et al.'s discussions with young mothers show that these problems are seen as parenting problems, not employment problems. The difference in perspective is more than semantic. If the standard of comparison were simply whether work raised family income, a combination of work supports and welfare sanctions could convince most women to choose work. But if mothers instead apply a calculus that emphasizes parenting, the benefits and costs of working will be modified by the extent to which

they affect her parenting tasks. For instance, if mothers believe that good quality child care is available only during the day, they might reject a night shift job with good fringe benefits and subsidies for child care in favor of a day job with lower wages, health, and child care benefits. A mother might also leave a "good job" because a child gets involved with the "wrong crowd" after school, or refuse to cooperate on child support because it might disrupt her relationship with in-laws who babysit for her. Such decisions seem irrational from a purely financial standpoint, but make sense in her parental role.

The importance of considering parenting dimensions is also evident in Waldo E. Johnson's chapter, "Work Preparation and Labor Market Experience Among Urban, Poor, Nonresident Fathers." These fathers agree that responsible fatherhood requires them to assume financial responsibility for their children. This belief can backfire, however, when they are unable to provide their share of child support and hence feel unable to parent in non-economic ways — participating in their children's physical care, teaching or spending time with them. Their and their partners' sense that they are failed providers leads them to avoid their children out of embarrassment, and their partners to deny access in response. In some cases, the fathers admit, losing access to their children can prod them to work harder to provide support. But when fathers cannot find work or earn enough to provide support, their children end up with neither financial nor emotional nurturing from their fathers.

By simply reinforcing the obligation to pay without instituting any policies to increase the ability to pay, PRWORA reinforces the absent father problem, at least for this segment of the population. It will discourage some men who cannot pay support from being close to their children, lest they be discovered and sanctioned for the failure to pay. In addition, by enhancing the belief that parental responsibility is primarily economic, it unwittingly downgrades the other dimensions of responsible parenting.

Johnson also points out that fathers and mothers are not exclusively parents: they are the children of their own parents and may be adolescents themselves. These multiple roles affect the ways these fathers parent. Just as many mothers in both the Kalil et al. and the Johnson study must live with their parents or depend upon them for babysitting or other services, many of the fathers continue to share housing with their families of origin, and/or rely on them in between jobs, even though their families are usually poor as well. In return, they assume a continuing responsibility to contribute to the family income when they can. Failure to pay child support, in other words, may be a response to other, equally pressing family responsibilities.

The context of policy thus extends beyond those directly targeted by a policy's provisions. It encompasses their support systems and their neighborhoods. Not only does

a mother's poverty determine which child care alternatives are affordable, her neighborhood determines which alternatives are within reach: poor neighborhoods rarely have the customer base to support quality child care centers. Yet, the knowledge that available day care alternatives are inadequate leads some mothers to believe that responsible parenting means not leaving children in the care of strangers. A father's sense of the need to contribute to his own mother's budget will vary depending on whether he lives in her home, whether she is in financial need, and whether she contributes to the support of his children. Thus not only his own, but his mother's poverty, and not only his, but his mother's sense of family responsibility, affects his ability to pay child support and to parent his children.

Understanding these contexts enlarges the set of reasons for potential policy failure: not merely irresponsibility or economic irrationality, but also different conceptions of responsibility and contending responsibilities. It expands the range of places to look for policy effects: not only at benefit rolls, wages, or child support collections, but also at children's relationships with both parents, and at family strategies for managing economic pressure. And it increases the lessons that can be learned from policy success: not only how to encourage mothers to work or fathers to pay, but also how a successful policy helps mothers and fathers to manage competing responsibilities, or to change their definitions of responsible parenting.

Conclusion

If poverty policies are to address the decisions that affect self-sufficiency, they must recognize and value the coping strategies the poor have developed. The chapters in Coping With Poverty bring the perspectives of the poor to poverty policy. In doing so, they exemplify the type of research that can make policy for the poor, and particularly for African American poor, more sensitive and more appropriate to those that policy serves.

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