American Family Diaries

CAN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH HELP SHAPE PUBLIC POLICY?

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APARNA MATHUR, DIRECTOR AND EDITOR • JENNIFER M. SILVA, EDITOR • NICHOLAS EBERSTADT • BRUCE D. MEYER • ROBERT A. MOFFITT • SALLY SATEL • W. BRADFORD WILCOX

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Policy research on poverty and mobility in the United States is dominated by quantitative methodologies that rely heavily on large-scale, representative surveys and administrative data. By reducing large, diverse sets of information about people’s beliefs and behavior into numerical relationships between variables—for example, the likelihood of getting married by educational level or the probability of being out of the workforce by age and gender—quantitative research aims to predict human behavior. Underlying goals of quantitative research include generalizability, efficiency, replicability, and transparency. The relatively new emergence of big data—extremely large data sets capturing human behavior and interactions across a wide array of domains—aims to let the numbers speak for themselves, allowing us to understand and predict patterns and trends in human behavior without researcher bias.1

And yet, as quantitative data sets grow larger and capture more realms of human experience and as techniques for analysis grow faster and more complex, we find ourselves turning hungrily to qualitative work—whether it be Matthew Desmond’s *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (Crown Books, 2016), Robert D. Putnam’s *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (Simon & Schuster, 2015), J. D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of Family and Culture in Crisis* (HarperCollins, 2016), or Kathryn Edin and H. Luke Shaefer’s *$2 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America* (Mariner Books, 2016). We search for stories, not numbers, that can help us understand what it is like to be poor, why people fall into poverty and stay there, and how poor people themselves make sense of their plights.

Qualitative research rests on a logic of discovery, employing techniques such as ethnographic observation and in-depth interviewing to try to understand the world through the eyes of the population being studied. Rather than attempt to disprove or verify a theory about what motivates people to act the way they do, qualitative research aims to generate new theories beginning from the systems of meaning created and shared by people in their everyday lives.2 Instead of searching for correlations between pre-existing variables, the logic of discovery allows the researcher to generate the lists of relevant categories through open-ended, flexible, and semi-structured questions. By immersing ourselves in the lives of the people we study, we seek to uncover the universe of meanings that animate their behaviors and orient their decision-making—usually in ways that cannot be presumed in advance. In doing so, qualitative researchers unearth the mechanisms that drive the demographic patterns we observe when relying on quantitative data.3

In this volume, scholars and practitioners write from a variety of worldviews and experiences about how qualitative research can help understand drivers of poverty and barriers to social mobility. Robert A. Moffitt, a renowned quantitative researcher, explains the limitations of large-scale survey and administrative data and randomized controlled trials in understanding the behavior of the poor, detailing how these methods do not allow us to gather enough information on the mechanisms shaping behavior—“why individuals make the decisions they do, in what context, and how they see the opportunities and constraints that lead to their decisions.”

Similarly, sociologist Jennifer M. Silva draws on her own experience as an in-depth interviewer to demonstrate how her preconceived notions about what drives the political beliefs and behaviors of the economically disadvantaged were completely turned on their head when she conducted fieldwork in Pennsylvania coal country. Moffitt and Silva demonstrate that qualitative research provides crucial insights into
human meaning systems and behavior that could not be obtained from other methods. They both point to the promise of linking qualitative and quantitative data sets, perhaps testing the generalizability of qualitative discoveries through large-scale survey research and administrative data. Well-intentioned policies could fail to reach, or even appeal to, the very populations they intend to help if they make faulty or incomplete assumptions about what motivates people’s behavior.

As W. Bradford Wilcox argues, qualitative research helps make sense of puzzling statistics and rapid demographic change. He cleverly identifies four contemporary developments in American family trends that have confounded many progressives’ predictions about how 21st-century families would look. That is, despite claims of the rapid decline in the nuclear family, the 21st century has ushered in the decline of teen pregnancy, falling divorce rates, a growing class divide in marriage, and the high satisfaction of couples with conservative or traditional family arrangements. Given that previous predictions about family formation were wrong, Wilcox calls for qualitative research on these “shifts that we are now documenting statistically but are not explaining as they are experienced by young adults in the United States.”

Although she resists calling herself an ethnographer, Sally Satel also emphasizes the essential role of qualitative research—listening to people’s own accounts of their lives—in challenging dominant ideology surrounding addiction and recovery. While medicine and public health practices today generally understand addicts as suffering from a “chronic, relapsing disease of the brain,” Satel uses recovering addicts’ narratives to demonstrate that focusing on what is happening mechanistically in the brain occludes “crucial realities about the lives of addicts themselves.”

Extending this theme of understanding people’s behavior in social contexts, Nicholas Eberstadt unapologetically calls attention to the failure of current statistics to make sense of the current crisis of male nonwork. Eberstadt views its ability to capture particularities and nuances as the strength of qualitative research; he writes powerfully: “There are roughly seven million stories nowadays of how American men in their prime somehow ended up neither working nor looking for work, yet the Census Bureau and BLS [Bureau of Labor Statistics] pigeonhole all these life stories into less than a dozen designated slots.” Urging researchers to resist standardizing their findings, he instead calls for “careful, detailed, and empathetic description of the daily lives of some of the many millions of individuals swept up in this grim drama.”

Eberstadt emphasizes the necessity of empathy and trust in truly understanding why increasing numbers of prime-aged men are staying out of the workforce. However, Bruce D. Meyer, perhaps the most skeptical of qualitative methods in our volume, questions whether empathy and trust might hinder rather than foster valid, reliable research on the thoughts and behaviors of the poor. He writes:

Motivations and attempts to build a relationship with respondents can distort responses in subtle ways. . . . Empathy may make it difficult to question responses that are not entirely accurate.

The most disadvantaged frequently face situations in which they need to alter the truth to get by, whether asking a friend for money, talking with a welfare caseworker, or explaining difficulties to a stranger.

Can an interviewer be empathetic and trustworthy on the one hand and skeptical and critical on the other? Meyer points to the important idea that people’s accounts of the world are not always accurate reflections of behavior.

All these chapters raise crucial questions about the usefulness and methodologies for conducting qualitative research in policymaking contexts. To be sure, qualitative research signals a departure from the scientific gold standard of replicability and generalizability, often embracing smaller, nonrandom samples and deep immersion in particular places. It requires careful distinctions between people’s accounts of the world—the mental maps that give their lives meaning and order—and their actions, although such accounts of the world can orient their future actions. While those in the social sciences tend to think of qualitative research as less legitimate because of these characteristics, experts in qualitative methodology argue
that rigor does not come from large samples or representativeness, but rather from the depth of meaning researchers capture.\(^6\)

Furthermore, qualitative researchers contend that small samples need not lead to biased results, as researchers can explicitly look for cases that challenge their theoretical presumptions and purposely sample different kinds of people in a community to not reduce a complex phenomenon into too simple a story.\(^7\) Such efforts are crucial to creating policies that fit the needs of more people in a community. Debates about how to be transparent about the process of data analysis and how to collect the most informative and unbiased data\(^8\) continue to create a path forward for more integration of qualitative methods in policy research.

An important perspective to keep in mind as we move further in our data exploration process is the possible complementarity between qualitative and quantitative research methods. Can qualitative research allow us to improve the types of data we collect and questions we ask in traditional surveys? Can surveys and administrative data highlight which populations and mechanisms are missed in quantitative study, thus helping us understand the populations, areas, and demographics that are most beneficial to interview and study qualitatively? Are we missing questions that we should be asking respondents to receive a more complete understanding of their motivations and behaviors? Can we match qualitative data with administrative data to test its accuracy, cross-checking assumptions and validity across quantitative and qualitative sources?

Ultimately, we ask these questions not to choose one direction or the other. We do not want to pit the merits of quantitative research against those of qualitative methods. Rather, we ask these questions to use all research methodologies optimally, striking a collective balance to as many gaps in the current body of knowledge as we can. In the age of big data, we may find the need to start with small, but relevant, questions.

— Aparna Mathur and Jennifer M. Silva, Editors
Notes


5. Frye, “Cultural Meanings and the Aggregation of Actions.”


Social science research and policy-oriented research in particular have been dramatically transformed in the past 50 years. Two revolutions in data collection and analysis have occurred over that period. One was the development of large-scale, population-representative household surveys that gather information on hundreds of key socioeconomic variables, with sufficient sample sizes to estimate population-level statistics and correlations with relative precision. Among the most well-known data sets are the Current Population Survey and the National Health Interview Survey. Both have been repeated over time with comparable questions and made possible the analysis of trends in inequality, poverty, family functioning, and dozens of other key social indicators.

The information that these data sets provide cannot be underestimated. In addition, the development of panel household surveys, in which the same families are interviewed repeatedly over time, usually intended to be population representative, further revolutionized our understanding of the dynamics of low-income Americans’ lives, following changes in their employment, income, family structure, and migration.

The second revolutionary development was the advent of large-scale computing, which allowed these data sets to be analyzed with breathtaking speed. With the simultaneous development of large-capacity storage, data sets can now be downloaded in minutes, stored, and analyzed in hours. Individual-level household survey data and fast analysis methods have yielded an unanticipated accumulation of knowledge.

Not unrelated to these developments has been the rise of social experiments or randomized control trials (RCT). In an RCT, individuals or families are randomized into two groups, an experimental and a control group. The experimental group is offered some new policy, and the control group is not. Because of randomization, the subjects should exhibit approximately the same behavior except for the new policy received by the experimental group. Hence, any differences in the two groups’ earnings, income, work effort, or other outcomes at the end of the experiment can be interpreted as caused by the policy, not by some other difference in individual characteristics.

Proposals for social experiments began with Guy and Alice Orcutt’s suggestion and the subsequent implementation of the 1960s and 1970s negative income tax experiments. Since then, RCTs have proliferated. RCTs are important for analyzing the impacts of social policies directed toward the low-income population and are generally regarded as providing the best estimates of a policy’s true causal effect. RCTs require large-scale data collection, large sample sizes, and appropriate methods of computation.

But social scientists have also realized that revolutions in data collection and causal analysis have limitations. For present purposes—to compare

The Role of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research in Learning About the Low-Income Population

Robert A. Moffitt
ethnographic and qualitative research—a major limitation of large-scale household surveys is, in fact, that they cannot collect enough information on families to fully understand the lives of the poor. Most surveys can maintain participation for only two or three hours at most, and this is not enough time to collect much information. (Generally, only a few hundred variables can be collected, which, it turns out, is not many.) In addition, because they aim to be objective, the questions are formally defined and typically not open-ended. Household surveys can provide a large correlation matrix of several hundred variables, but this is not enough to understand the context of individual lives or the complex social realities in which they live.  

RCTs have a similar limitation because they are almost impossible to use to answer questions about mechanisms—why individuals make the decisions they do, in what context, and how they see the opportunities and constraints that lead to their decisions. Without an understanding of mechanisms, RCTs cannot be generalized to real-world applications where the mechanisms may differ. Early RCT research is replete with examples of experiments that cost millions of dollars but yielded null or unexpected findings, and the analysts could not explain why those findings occurred. Instead, the best modern RCTs typically have qualitative subsamples as the experiment’s enrollees are asked about their experience with the treatment (or lack of, for the control group) to shed light on mechanisms.

Ethnographic and qualitative research can address surveys’ and RCTs’ limitations. The degree to which they can do so depends in part on the approach used, which can range from open-ended household survey questions to in-depth interviews with subsamples of survey respondents, focus groups, pure qualitative longitudinal studies of moderate duration, and long-term participant-observation studies.

In any form, qualitative research aims to gather information in an open-ended format, which allows the researcher to gather information about context, motivation, perceptions, beliefs, values, information, and the entire social environment in which individuals live, face choices, and make decisions. The volume of information collected in most ethnographic studies vastly exceeds anything any household survey could conceive, even if the researcher spends only a few days with the subject.

This chapter illustrates the types of discoveries that can be made with qualitative research through three examples focused on a particular population: low-income individuals and families that are experiencing poverty and hardship. Low-income families face many challenges that are difficult to fully ascertain with survey and quantitative research, yet developing antipoverty policies that effectively address those challenges is high on most governments’ agendas.

All three studies use qualitative interviewing and some elements of participant observation. The first is a study of the work world for young men in New York City and is pertinent to long-standing questions about employment and the labor market among the disadvantaged population. The second is a study of low-income families’ financial lives—how they balance their budgets, deal with shortfalls, and manage their economic lives. The third is a study directly aimed at a well-known policy program, the earned income tax credit (EITC). The study sought to understand the EITC’s role in unskilled workers’ lives. It also has important information on the financial lives of low-income working families. All three studies therefore focus on the working poor portion of the US population. These studies illustrate the richness that good qualitative studies can provide.

The main limitation of ethnographic research is the mirror image of household surveys’ limitations: Resources are insufficient for large sample sizes. Most participant-observation ethnographic studies have fewer than 50 participants, and some, which rely more on qualitative interviewing, can have up to 200 or more. At those sample sizes, the variances of the outcomes of interest are far too large to estimate any population-level statistic with sufficient precision because there are too many idiosyncratic differences across participants.

Recruiting families to participate in a qualitative study is also typically a challenge because it is too expensive to walk down the street and randomly
knock on doors the way large-scale surveys gather their samples. It requires far too many doors to obtain enough families of the type targeted for a qualitative study. Instead, most qualitative studies either find families to study through a narrow sampling frame (e.g., from welfare rolls) or use “convenience” samples by going to a venue (e.g., a food bank) where low-income people are likely to show up, asking them if they would participate. The consequence is that the sample may be nonrepresentative in unknown ways, which makes the problem of low sample size worse.

In addition, recruiting families to participate in a qualitative study can be challenging because it requires the researcher to be highly involved in the participants’ personal lives. Many families are not interested in that level of participation. This can create selectivity in the types of families that agree to participate in qualitative studies, on top of the selectivity problems already discussed.

The best qualitative studies make a conscious attempt to address the problem of nonrepresentative results by enrolling a variety of families, drawing different types of participants with different characteristics, or going to different convenience sample locations or sources to invite participation. However, to some extent, this works against the sample size problem because it can spread the sample across multiple types too thinly, resulting in even smaller sample sizes for families of a given type. All in all, even with these methods, ethnographic samples are never large enough to generalize much beyond their sampling frames to obtain statistical reliability.6

However, this does not mean that ethnographic and qualitative research is not of great value. Given the in-depth nature of the data collection process, discoveries can be made that would be impossible with household surveys or administrative data. Those discoveries can lead to hypotheses for the effects of policies, which could not be obtained otherwise. In turn, this can lead to further research—including research using large-scale household surveys—to examine the findings’ generalizability. The three illustrations in this chapter demonstrate the discovery potential of qualitative and ethnographic research.

### Working Young Men and Women in New York City

The conventional view of the poor’s decision to work comes from the simple economic model based on the choice between working for a salary versus not working and subsisting on welfare, help from family, or income from illegal activity. This view presumes those decisions are based on relative income gains from choosing the first rather than the second. A large body of economic research supports this view by showing that the greater the benefit offered, the more likely individuals are to choose welfare, and the greater their skill levels (and hence the earnings they can achieve by working) and the demand for jobs, the more likely they are to choose work.7 Important economic considerations such as the availability of childcare and whether health insurance is offered are also important.8

But what are the poor’s real preferences and attitudes toward welfare and work? Do they view welfare as an easy option that allows them to not work and as inherently preferable to work? Qualitative studies of welfare recipients, such as that by Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein, are informative of low-income families’ attitudes toward welfare.9 But what are their attitudes toward work? What do we know about those who choose work over welfare? What are their lives like? How attractive is that alternative to them?

In the second half of the 1990s, Katherine Newman followed 200 men and women living in New York City who were not on welfare and instead worked at fast-food restaurants.10 The late 1990s were similar to the present: low unemployment rates, a booming economy with rapidly rising aggregate employment levels, and plentiful jobs—but, as today, stagnant real wages at the bottom of the distribution.

While jobs were plentiful, the types of jobs Newman’s subjects held were unpleasant. They were customer-based, meaning employees deferred to customers even when subjected to abuse by those customers. The physical conditions were unpleasant, with the smell of grease and other cooking odors seeping into clothes and hair. Supervisors were often harsh, treating their employees demeaningly during
the workday and penalizing them for being a few minutes late, even though one worker had to take an hour bus ride at 5:30 a.m. across crowded streets.

At the minimum hourly wage rate, even full-time, year-round work did not raise their family incomes above the poverty line. Interestingly, Newman found that most workers could not work as many hours as they wanted; their supervisors offered them only fixed hours, even when they requested more.

Newman explored the values of the workers in her sample in-depth. An interesting set of complex and mixed emotions emerged. On the one hand, the workers deplored the demeaning and degrading working conditions, long bus rides, and low pay. In addition, they reported high levels of social stigma; working at “flipping burger” jobs made them the butts of many jokes.

On the other hand, the individuals in Newman’s sample were happy to be working and have steady jobs. They reported satisfaction from being part of the work world, even with its struggles. Having a steady job was a source of pride and reward. Interestingly, her subjects also noted that, because they were working, they had less leisure time to spend with friends and others in their neighborhoods—but this was often regarded as a positive development because many in those neighborhoods were not working. Newman’s subjects reported that, after obtaining steady jobs, they became more socially separated from those without jobs, and this was a source of satisfaction for them.

The study also examined the individuals’ attempts to obtain more schooling and move up the job ladder. All of them recognized that working at fast-food restaurants would not result in upward mobility. The men and women Newman talked to did not have a problem with values; they realized that they needed more schooling and more credentials to obtain better jobs and that they needed to move to better jobs in general.

But they experienced continual frustration in their attempts. Most could not afford to quit working and go to school full time. The occasional individual in the sample had the discipline to go to night school three or four hours a night and obtain a certificate, but they were the exception, especially for those with childcare duties. Many of the individuals applied for dozens of jobs and took civil service tests for government jobs, but competition was usually too stiff to land a job.

Yet, a few individuals in her sample were able to move up. Some obtained extra education while working, but this required having below-average obligations at home. A few found better jobs through personal contacts they made in the restaurants. Moreover, a small number moved to supervisory and even management jobs in the fast-food industry, although this was rare.

What policies would help the men and women in Newman’s sample? The EITC could provide needed additional income and a valuable supplement to these workers. (See the third study below.) However, in principle, the workers needed better schooling and access to better training and jobs. Most individuals in Newman’s sample had a high school degree but had to work immediately after high school to provide money for themselves, their spouses, and their children. They could not afford college. Many struggled with attempts to obtain credentials and more skilled jobs, and most found the barriers formidable.

This level of detail about the working poor and their struggles to improve their situation could not be obtained through household survey methods or administrative data. Nor could survey data alone provide sufficient information to devise effective human capital policies that address the real-world barriers the low-income working population face.

The Financial Lives of the Low-Income Working Population

The conventional view of families with low-skilled workers is that the basic problem with managing their budgets is that their wages are simply too low. Consequently, they cannot afford high-quality housing, a healthy diet, and nice clothes, and they rarely have time for entertainment. Because of their low income, they must use all their income for necessities and cannot save anything. The conventional picture also stresses job instability as a major problem—high turnover, frequent job changes, and terminations.
Major elements of this picture need to be revised, or at least given more nuance, in light of new qualitative research. Jonathan Morduch and Rachel Schneider conducted a study of 235 households in four sites around the country, which they visited frequently over 12 months, collecting highly detailed information on their financial lives. The sample was not extremely poor; only about a quarter had incomes below the official government poverty line (about $25,000 for a family of four), and all families had at least one worker. But their incomes were not high, with the majority below twice the poverty line ($50,000 for a family of four). In other words, most had incomes between $25,000 and $50,000.

Morduch and Schneider found several surprising aspects of the households’ economic lives. First, they found that volatility of earnings among their sample was indeed high but that about two-thirds of that volatility was from volatile earnings within jobs they held, not from job turnover. This is opposite to the conventional image and suggests that job characteristics, more than job turnover, create earnings instability. A second, related finding was that a lot of family income volatility was the result of an earner leaving or entering the household. Thus, family instability led to income instability much of the time.

Additionally surprising, a great deal of the families’ economic instability was not income related at all, but expenditure related. The families in the Morduch-Schneider sample often had sudden expenditure needs such as an automobile repair or a child’s illness. Because an automobile was essential to get to work, families had to pay to fix the car and did so in various ways, including simply not paying their other bills for a while (e.g., rent). The problem was exacerbated by the fact that the cheap cars most families could afford broke down frequently.

Their health insurance plans, too, were inferior, with high deductibles and copays, meaning they often had large out-of-pocket expenditures for medical care. Their housing was often poor quality, and the families often had to pay for sudden repairs themselves because their landlords were slow to do repairs, if they did them at all. So the implication of these findings is that even by eliminating income instability (e.g., if one could magically make these families’ incomes the same every month), one would not eliminate much of the instability and crises in their economic lives.

Another source of instability in the financial lives of the Morduch-Schneider sample came from saving and debt. The sample’s families were strategic about smoothing their consumption by debt and its relief. Anticipation of a large EITC refund, for example, was seen as a reason to accumulate debt in the weeks and months just before the check arrived. Anticipation of new jobs, pay raises, other possible sources of new income, and reductions in expenses also led families to accumulate debt in advance. However, the families never completely got out of debt and instead were engaged in a repeating cycle of accumulating debt, paying it down, accumulating new debt, and so on.

A few families in the Morduch-Schneider sample were able to save for the future. Most often it was saving a few hundred dollars for a car down payment or the deposit on a new apartment. The families never participated in long-term saving for education-related investments. Their saving horizons were usually no more than a few months and for some specific purpose in a short period.

More familiar from other studies was Morduch and Schneider’s finding that families often coped with economic turbulence by asking for help from friends and family. However, as many other qualitative researchers have documented, this source of assistance is fraught with problems, as it complicates interpersonal relationships and creates friction and tension in the extended family. It also can worsen the economic situation of the family or friend who lends the money, as they are also typically financially insecure.

The financial lives of the families in the Morduch-Schneider sample, the coping mechanisms they attempted, and their strategies for managing expenses and strategically juggling debt would be impossible to gather from any feasible household survey. But it is unclear what policies would address the difficulties these families faced. Just increasing the EITC would certainly ease their financial stress to some degree but
would not address other sources of instability. Being qualified for higher-paying, more stable jobs would obviously help, but how is this accomplished other than through additional education, which is not part of the picture for these families?

Morduch and Schneider discuss policies related to better employer practices, fairer and more beneficial financial services for low-income families, better regulation of financial products, and assistance with cash-flow challenges. But no single policy is likely to address all the problems families of this type face.

The Role of the EITC in Unskilled Workers’ Lives

The EITC, which provides a tax credit to low-income families, has been the subject of a large volume of quantitative analysis. It has been found to increase work effort among low-income mothers and lower the US poverty rate substantially. It also provides important countercyclical support during recessions.

Consumer Expenditure Survey data show that families spend more money in the spring around tax time on durables, suggesting that EITC checks are used for large purchases, down payments, and other expenses for which a significant single payment is often required. They may also use the EITC to reduce unsecured debt. It has also been shown to have favorable effects on child health.

But what is the role of the EITC in low-income working families’ lives? Does it provide important income support? Do they understand its rules? Why do families prefer a lump-sum refund in the spring rather than having it appear in their paychecks over the year? Is it ever used for investments in education or training? How can we find out more about what they use it for?

Sarah Halpern-Meekin et al. provide qualitative evidence on some of these questions. The authors talked to 115 Boston families from the city’s low-income neighborhoods, all which received at least $1,000 in EITC payments in their most recent tax return. The authors first asked the families general questions about their finances. Consistent with the findings of Morduch and Schneider, the authors found that these poor working families had difficulty meeting basic needs even if their incomes were moderately high and even if they were above the government poverty line (and some even had college degrees). They struggled to provide basic food, clothing, and housing for their families, let alone the occasional entertainment event, and these items could be considered only after childcare and transportation expenses were paid.

Their incomes were subject to instability and shocks that made it difficult to stick to stable family budgets. Their weekly schedules for work, childcare, and other activities were unpredictable and changed from week to week. Many received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Medicaid funds, but because these are in-kind transfers and not cash transfers, the families routinely suffered from a lack of cash to meet other basic needs. A few tried to save money as a precautionary measure in case of later job loss or other emergency needs but without a great deal of success. Some received short-term help from kin and friends, but not all had those sources to rely on. The families continually took on debt when they experienced negative income shocks.

The EITC was intricately woven into the tapestry of their budget balancing acts. Families knew approximately when the EITC would arrive, and they often took on new debt in anticipation of its receipt (e.g., letting their heating bills pile up), knowing they could pay off the debt after receiving their IRS check. However, few actually took out formal loans in anticipation because they did not have good enough credit scores; most used credit cards instead.

Families also used the EITC to pay off other debt, make a down payment on a car or repair, or purchase a piece of furniture, a refrigerator, or a washer or dryer. A few tried to save some of their EITC, but this was uncommon. Also, while a few tried to use it for educational expenses, this was rare, and the families did not use the money to move to a better neighborhood or enroll their children in private schools, as this was viewed as lower priority than reducing debt, purchasing consumer durables, and meeting other short-term needs. Despite these important uses of the EITC, the families’ overall financial patterns
were the same boom-and-bust cycle chronicled by Morduch and Schneider: Debt accumulated over a year, then was paid off at EITC time, then more debt was accumulated thereafter, and so on, in a never-ending cycle.

One of the authors’ findings was contrary to Sendhil Shafir and Eldar Mullainathan’s “bandwidth” theory, which suggests that low-income families’ lives are so chaotic that they cannot cognitively deal with crises as they occur and cannot make rational, purposeful decisions.22 Halpern-Meekin et al. found, on the contrary, that families were fully rational and quite aware of their financial issues, barriers, the boom-and-bust cycle, and the need to have a strategy to manage it.23 They made plans that did not always work out but were based fully on their expectations of possible future events. Also contrary to Shafir and Mullainathan’s theory, families did not consume all their EITC check on frivolous and short-term needs; they used it strategically to pay down debt and make new durables investments—and all this was anticipated in advance.

Halpern-Meekin et al. also noted that the families greatly valued receiving assistance in return for work instead of nonwork, as in traditional welfare. Receiving a credit in return for work promoted feelings of social inclusion and citizenship, meaning they felt more a part of mainstream American society. It affirmed that work, as described by Newman, is highly valued by disadvantaged families and eagerly sought after.24 The fact that the EITC was folded into their tax refund and not as a separate “welfare” check also made a major difference in its perception.25

The authors end by noting that the EITC does not solve all the working poor’s problems. Their financial lives are still turbulent and full of instability. They have no “floor,” no minimum safety net that will catch them if things go awry for even a short period. They are still under great stress and anxiety because of possible major negative events and crises and the absence of coping alternatives and mechanisms that could prevent extreme, even if temporary, hardship. The EITC assists greatly in relieving that stress once a year but does not solve the underlying problems of instability during the rest of the year.

Once again, as with the other two studies, insights were gleaned from this study that could never have been obtained by conventional household surveys or from administrative data. While many data sources have shown the work levels of EITC recipients, its impact on their incomes, and even a sampling of the items they spent their EITC on, traditional quantitative data collection methods could not have obtained the rich picture of the working poor’s financial lives and the role the EITC plays in those lives.

Conclusions

The three studies reviewed in this chapter illustrate the potential contribution of qualitative work to our understanding of social problems, especially those of disadvantaged and low-income populations. Most researchers are not part of that population and have not experienced it firsthand and therefore often use intuition or theoretical perspectives to form beliefs about the behavior of families in those populations. Researchers then apply those perspectives to large-scale quantitative data. However, that does not provide researchers with a deep understanding of these families. Only qualitative data gathered through interviewing or ethnographic methods can provide a picture of the socioeconomic context in which low-income families live, the constraints they operate under, and the reasons for their choices.

This does not of course imply quantitative data are not important as well, only that the two data collection methods should be viewed as complements. There is a long debate in social science about the relative superiority of fieldwork versus formal surveys.26 Mature social science recognizes that multiple methods and approaches are superior to any single method.27

For example, the three qualitative studies reviewed suffer potentially from the drawbacks discussed in the introduction: small sample sizes, a focus on only particular and special populations, and the possible selectivity of those who agreed to be enrolled in the study. Quantitative studies—which attempt to measure the behaviors and forces revealed by qualitative work but
on a larger scale, with larger sample sizes, and which examine a more representative sample of different types of families and are less selective—could be used to examine the findings' generalizability.

In a particularly comprehensive and insightful analysis, Sam Sieber laid out an internally consistent pathway to the alternating and complementary use of qualitative and quantitative methods in answering important social questions and how research programs should be designed to include both methods with feedback loops and hypothesis generation and testing.28 An ideal research design, according to Sieber, enlists a collaborative team of quantitative and qualitative researchers who sequentially conduct studies of each type. Qualitative studies are developed, which address puzzles and unknown mechanisms thrown up by large-scale quantitative studies. Discoveries are then examined for generalizability and on a larger scale by subsequent quantitative work, and the new quantitative work generates new puzzles and reveals behaviors of which cause is unknown, generating the need for new qualitative research.

This ideal is rarely achieved in practice, but something close to it could be achieved if qualitative and quantitative researchers exchanged findings and developed new studies of each type that address issues revealed by studies of the other type. Regrettably, there is too little communication among researchers of different types in most policy research areas, probably resulting from the siloed nature of academic institutions, which hinders progress in this dimension.

The insights from qualitative and ethnographic studies are crucial for developing social policy. As Holloway et al. state, many social scientists and academics go to Washington to craft policies assisting the poor without any detailed knowledge of the poor’s actual problems.29 They craft policies from afar based on theoretical models that are not informed by ground-level knowledge. Consequently, and perhaps not surprisingly, many of those policies fail.

While the three studies reviewed here do not suggest any obvious and simple policy solutions, policymakers rarely take into account the complexity of the lives of the poor, as revealed by the studies. Far from being an abstract methodological issue, using qualitative methods directly affects developing social policies that work.
Notes


3. Many other limitations of surveys are not relevant to this discussion. One is misreporting of income and program participation, which can be partly addressed by using administrative data. But administrative data fare even worse on the dimension discussed here; they have even fewer variables than surveys do. Bruce D. Meyer, Wallace K. C. Mok, and James X. Sullivan, “The Under-Reporting of Transfers in Household Surveys: Its Nature and Consequences” (working paper, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, July 2009).


5. Sometimes information on these items is gathered directly through conversational or even formal questioning, while in other cases information is gathered more through inferring motivations, perceptions, and beliefs from observed behavior.


15. This could lead to eviction. Interestingly, families avoided payday lenders, using them as only a last resort. Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York: Broadway Books, 2017).


23. Halpern-Meekin et al., *It’s Not Like I’m Poor*.


25. Interestingly, the families said they did not want to receive the EITC over the year because it would inevitably be used to deal with short-term crises and expenses and not for the large one-time uses possible with a lump sum. Thus, they appreciated the forced-saving aspect of receiving it annually as a lump sum. Halpern-Meekin et al., *It’s Not Like I’m Poor*.


Using Qualitative Methods to Uncover the Hidden Mechanisms of Poverty and Inequality

Jennifer M. Silva

Some of the most powerful lessons I have learned about the potentials and challenges of qualitative research stem from my postdoctoral fellowship years, when I conducted in-depth interviews and ethnography for the political scientist Robert Putnam’s book *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis.* Much of the evidence in *Our Kids* consists of rigorous quantitative data that reveal growing class gaps across a wide range of predictors of adult success among children, such as family structure, parental investments of time and money, extracurricular activities, and trust. My role on the team involved traveling across the country—from southern California to Oregon to Texas to Ohio—interviewing young adults and their parents from different socioeconomic backgrounds about their lives. The team carefully prepared a set of interview questions about piano lessons, family dinners, and church attendance, hoping to add some depth and color to the statistics on the decline of opportunity for lower-income youth.

In my first interview, I met Mary Sue, an 18-year-old who was living at her grandparents’ ranch-style house in Port Clinton, Ohio. Mary Sue was working at the reception desk at one of the popular tourist hotels. Over breakfast, she talked extensively about the trauma of her parents’ divorce when she was young. Mary Sue explained that her mother turned to stripping to pay the rent on their apartment, leaving Mary Sue alone for hours on end. Her father then married a woman who would hit her, not feed her, and put up baby gates to keep her confined in one room. Mary Sue confessed that her best friend as a child was a yellow mouse who lived in her apartment. She named the mouse “America” because it was the color of American cheese. Over the next two hours, I heard a harrowing tale of physical and emotional abuse (her stepmother later went to prison for seven years for neglect), trouble with the law (Mary Sue was sent to a juvenile detention center after she was caught selling marijuana, and she finished high school through a dubious online program), and a deep distrust for anyone and everyone (thrown into sharp relief by the burn scars on her arms from when a man she was casually dating assaulted her in the middle of the night).

The sociologist Kristin Luker writes that sometimes ethnographers do not know what they are looking for until they are halfway through data collection—because they are looking for something that does not yet have a name. In this case, I quickly abandoned our initial interview questions, since asking about piano lessons and family dinners seemed a little absurd. In fact, we could not even follow our plan to interview young adults and their parents because many working-class kids were estranged from, or did not even know, their own fathers.

The example of Mary Sue powerfully illustrates how we went into the research simply expecting to bolster our quantitative data with some lively stories; instead, we uncovered a much more complex but often untold story about how economic distress, family trauma, and distrust intersect...
for disadvantaged youth during the transition to adulthood.

This chapter explores how qualitative research methods—namely, in-depth interviewing and ethnography—can be harnessed to better understand the processes and mechanisms that drive poverty and inequality. Drawing on my own fieldwork experience and the work of leading poverty and social policy researchers, I demonstrate that qualitative methods allow us to grasp the often unknown meanings that underlie disadvantaged people’s behavior. I then consider the epistemological differences that underlie quantitative and qualitative work, offering suggestions for how these approaches can work together to provide a comprehensive, rigorous account of the barriers people living in poverty face. I provide an in-depth case study from my own work on social class and disengagement to show how narratives, when systematically analyzed, can provide nuanced answers to enduring puzzles. Finally, I conclude by raising possibilities for future research.

**Centering Meaning-Making**

Statistics, while vital for understanding large-scale patterns of inequality and mobility, tend to isolate individuals from their social environment, explaining behavior using prediction and quantification. Qualitative research, including ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews, can provide crucial insights into the demographic patterns we observe when relying on survey data. That is, we can use qualitative methods to systematically understand the mechanisms that connect culture and behavior in ways that cannot be assumed in advance.

As the American sociologist Howard Becker explains, the promise of qualitative research methods lies in their ability to allow the researcher to unearth “what people think they are doing, what meanings they give to the objects and events and people in their lives and experience.” This approach to knowledge insists that we should not “invent the viewpoint of the actor, and should only attribute to actors ideas about the world they actually hold, if we want to understand their actions, reasons, and motives.” People’s analyses of their own lives and circumstances are often fraught with contradictions and vagueness. Yet, if we remain “as undecided as the actors we study,” discovering people’s own understandings of reality rather than attempting to fit them into neat, clear-cut survey categories, we could “become aware of things [we] had not anticipated which may have a bearing on [our] subject.” In this way, qualitative research can deepen existing knowledge and serve as a vehicle for new scientific discoveries.

Qualitative research is particularly well suited for studies that begin with “a puzzle, paradox, or conundrum about the social world that in one way or another upsets our expectations, and for which there is no ready answer.” For example, the poverty scholar Kathryn Edin has spent decades examining the romantic worlds of low-income men and women—investigating why low-income mothers bear children without getting married first or why low-income unwed fathers often appear apathetic and even absent, failing to be involved in their children’s lives. From the 1980s onward, the popular media, politicians, and casual observers routinely expressed frustration and bewilderment toward unmarried mothers, questioning how they could be so irresponsible as to bring a child into the world without the economic and social foundation of marriage.

Two main questions drove the debates: Why will these women not marry the fathers of their children? Why can they not just wait until they are more stable and mature to have children? Examining unwed motherhood through this lens, antipoverty policy in the United States focused on making unmarried motherhood less attractive to women—imposing work requirements and a five-year lifetime limit on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families benefits—and promoting marriage as a pathway out of poverty.

However, one problem with this approach, as Edin and Maria Kefalas argue in *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage*, is that it failed to take into account the *meanings* that these women attach to motherhood. After spending several years living alongside low-income, young, and unmarried mothers in the slums of Philadelphia and
the surrounding areas and immersing themselves in the women's day-to-day lives, Edin and Kefalas concluded that these women were not giving up on marriage. Rather, they viewed marriage as a luxury and a lifelong commitment.

This positive view of marriage led them to believe that it was better to have children outside of marriage than to fail at marriage and get divorced. As Edin and Kefalas note, “Most poor women we spoke with say that it is better to have children outside of marriage than to marry foolishly and risk divorce, for divorce desecrates the institution of marriage.” Instead of seeing marriage as an escape route from poverty, the participants also emphasized that poverty itself made long-term relationships more difficult to sustain.

The most striking finding of Edin and Kefalas' study concerned the centrality of the mother-child relationship, in which having children early lent a sense of deep accomplishment and fulfilment to these women's lives. Children symbolized a “necessity, an absolutely essential part of a young woman’s life, the chief source of identity and meaning”—their one chance to make up for the lack of opportunity, connection, and hope that characterizes other parts of their lives.

For these disadvantaged youth, a pregnancy offers young women who say their lives are “going nowhere fast” a chance to grasp at a better future. Choosing to end a pregnancy is thus like abandoning hope. Whereas outsiders generally view childbearing in such circumstances as irresponsible and self-destructive, within the social milieu of these down-and-out neighborhoods the norms work in reverse, the choice to have a child despite the obstacles that lie ahead is a compelling demonstration of young women's maturity and high moral stature. Pregnancy offers a unique chance to demonstrate these virtues to her family and friends and the community at large.

By this logic, if policymakers fail to address the lack of other visible sources of meaning and accomplishment in poor women's lives, then early and unmarried childbearing among low-income women will likely continue. Additionally, by taking their accounts of the world seriously, Edin and Kefalas shed light on why low-income women seem to make choices that contravene both their own self-interest and their children's future well-being. That is, they deepen our understanding of “self-interest” and “future well-being” by underscoring the centrality of meaning to self-worth and hope.

The stories people tell about themselves are not just chronological or factual but also fundamentally moral. When we listen to people tell their stories during in-depth interviews, identifying some life events as formative and pivotal and others as unimportant, we witness them crafting a story of discovering and bearing witness to what makes a life worth living. Narratives accomplish crucial tasks in people's biographies, such as marking future progress, interpreting failures and setbacks, and ascribing moral worth to their lives. The frames of meaning that organize and animate people's worldviews—whether we think their stories are valid, factually accurate, or sensible—can affect their actions, mental health, and relationships when people act as if these perceptions are true.

Indeed, scholars have demonstrated how shifting social, public, and cultural narratives influence demographic change in a vast array of substantive domains, including marriage, divorce, fertility, political participation, and religious involvement. Well-intentioned policies could fail to reach or appeal to important populations if they make assumptions about the systems of meaning that underlie behavior.

The Logic of Qualitative Research

Rather than pit quantitative and qualitative research methodologies against each other, I see these two approaches as complementary tools that should be constantly in dialogue. Yet recognizing the fundamental differences of the epistemological logic underpinning these two methodological approaches is crucial. As Mario Small observes, researchers often encourage their students to mimic survey research language in their ethnographic work to gain professional legitimacy: “Today, many researchers in these
fields encourage their students to ensure that their small samples are ‘unbiased’ or that their single-case studies are ‘representative’ or ‘not selected on the dependent variable.” Small argues, “‘Bias’ is the wrong term. What an in-depth interviewer with three dozen respondents faces is not a ‘bias’ problem but a set of cases with particular characteristics that, rather than being ‘controlled away,’ should be understood, developed, and incorporated into her understanding of the cases at hand.”

That is, qualitative research should embrace, rather than attempt to cover up, the nuance and particularities embedded in specific contexts and places. This approach could uncover new and surprising interactions between social contexts and processes of meaning-making that would be obscured by large surveys that abstract away from individual experience.

To elaborate, unlike quantitative researchers, qualitative researchers do not begin with an exhaustive frame of everyone they want to generalize about—whether a database of schools, low-income women, or unwed mothers. Instead, qualitative researchers seek out what Luker calls “data outcroppings,” rich research sites where they can watch the phenomena we are interested in unfolding. Luker explains:

[Survey researchers] want to know the distribution of a population among known categories, as estimated from a properly drawn sample with a known error factor. [Qualitative] researchers, on the other hand, want to discover the relevant categories at work, not the distribution of some larger population across categories that we have a priori chosen. We have turned to our kind of research because we have a question that canonical social science can’t take on, or can’t take on very well.

Rather than prioritizing statistical generalizability, Luker explains, qualitative researchers should embrace a model of logical generalizability. For example, are the cases qualitative researchers have selected different from other cases in ways that might shape what they find? If so, then they can continue to build up their array of cases, searching for what they logically missed and being upfront and transparent about cases that do not fit their analysis. In this way, qualitative researchers can begin to systematically trace the mechanisms that connect culture and behavior, tying fragments of localized data to higher levels of analytical abstraction.

Qualitative researchers often carefully protect the identities of their research sites, mainly to not put their informants at risk. Nevertheless, researchers can be transparent about the characteristics of the people in their sample, the demographic profile of the research site, the questions asked in the interview guide, and how they generated their concepts and verified the conceptual relationships they advance. In this way, future research can build on previous findings and refine the categories of analysis. This approach also allows researchers to uncover new categories of analysis that they can then test for generalizability using other methods, such as surveys or experiments.

**Case Study: Pain and Politics in Working-Class Lives**

My own qualitative research examines how economically disadvantaged people understand their own struggles and how they view family, work, and civic engagement—key institutions for escaping poverty. I begin with an enduring puzzle in American politics: American nonvoters are disproportionately younger, poorer, less educated, and more racially and ethnically diverse. People with lower levels of income and education are also less likely to contact a public official, join a civic and political organization, or donate to a political campaign. Moreover, instead of fostering solidarity, living through the Great Recession of 2008 actually deepened divisions among those fighting to survive, turning some white workers against racial minorities, immigrants, and the poor. Thus, the groups that would seem to gain the most from mobilizing politically appear the least motivated to act in their own collective interest.

As a qualitative researcher, I begin with the premise that making sense of these paradoxes requires doing away with the tendency to think about people’s political motivations and interests as predetermined...
or self-evident. Instead, we need to dig deep into the substance of people’s worldviews, the processes through which they arrive at such views, the stories that make politics resonate with their life experiences, and the mechanisms that connect their views of the world to political action—or lack thereof.

In her study of dozens of political groups across Wisconsin, the political scientist Katherine Cramer recently argued that surveys allow us to see how different kinds of people think and where their opinions fall on an attitude scale. However, they do not allow us to see how people arrive at these positions. Rather, the stories people tell about who they are, what they have been through, and how their lives should have been connect independent and dependent variables. As Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels demonstrate, most voters cast ballots based on how “someone like me” should feel, approaching politics through emotion and identity rather than through particular policy details. Simply put, if we want to understand why people seemingly act against their own self-interests, we first need to uncover how they imagine the “self” and how this self relates to the larger social world.

My book, *We’re Still Here: Pain and Politics in the Heart of America*, draws on 108 in-depth interviews I conducted with black, Latino, and white working-class people in the anthracite coal region of Pennsylvania. The anthracite industry peaked during World War I, employing 175,000 men and supporting a population of about one million. Employment in anthracite mining fell to 17,000 by 1961 and to just 2,000 by 1974. Today, abandoned strip mines and mine dumps dominate the landscape. Neighborhoods that once had a church on every corner now boast tattoo parlors, liquor stores, vape shops, and dollar stores.

The coal region prides itself on a long history of conflict between miners and mineowners, high levels of union membership, and loyalty to the Democratic Party. But as Thomas Keil and Jacqueline Keil explain, these values are no longer “generated on the shop-floors” or in “the structures of daily life,” weakening the link between labor and the Democratic Party. In the southern counties of the coal region, politicians who advocate pro-business, anti-welfare policies have gained widespread support over the past several decades. Banners declaring “Blue Lives Matter” and “Trump Digs Coal” adorn neat window boxes of red geraniums and white and blue petunias as souped-up pickup trucks sporting gun racks and Confederate flags roar along winding two-lane highways. The coal region thus beckoned as a place where previously taken-for-granted ideas about identity, loyalty, civic duty, and political party affiliation might have to be reimagined in ways that have implications for political engagement.

Against this backdrop, I spent hundreds of hours interviewing longtime white residents and black and Latino newcomers, investigating how they connect—or do not connect—their everyday struggles, triumphs, hopes, and fears to politics. Instead of asking people to fill out surveys, I tagged along as they confronted the challenges of everyday life—whether trying to find a ride to pick up their kids at Head Start, struggling to locate an empty bed in drug and alcohol rehab, selling gun bingo tickets to raise money for a school field trip, or figuring out how to buy their daughter a fish tank for Christmas when their lights had just been shut off.

During the interviews, I asked people questions about their childhoods, including their family structure, the jobs their parents held, and their experiences in school, organized religion, and sports. I asked them to self-identify their race and gender. I asked them to walk me through their memories of difficult and happy times. I explored their generational history, including the memories and stories that had been passed down about their parents and grandparents, especially their involvement in unions, politics, and the military. I asked about their own work history and whether they had considered leaving the area for more opportunity. They walked me through a typical day and gave me an account of their monthly earnings and bills. I also asked about their mental and physical health and whether they had medical, nutrition, or housing assistance. Probing more deeply, I questioned how they would compare themselves to their parents and grandparents.

After I established this basic sense of who they were, I asked them to describe the problems in the area, such
as drugs, racism, and crime. I also asked about involvement in civic organizations, such as volunteer fire companies, ethnic clubs, and youth sports leagues. I explored where they received their news about current events and how they felt about social movements such as Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street.

Although my interview guide questions focused mainly on political attitudes and behaviors, the conversations I had with these men and women moved my study far beyond voting and into an intricate maze of family troubles, addiction, joblessness, racism, violence, incarceration, and early death. I witnessed how the decline of the American dream was being lived and felt, and I listened as they forged political ideas out of realms of experience that are not usually considered political at all. To my surprise, I found that coming to terms with pain—and convincing themselves that transcending pain promises a moral reward—does tremendous work in organizing the stories of the working-class people in the coal region. Detached from institutions and distrustful of other people, I found that they create imaginative bridges between painful experiences and political identity in ways that make their suffering feel productive and honorable while solidifying their detachment and alienation from American society.

To reach this conclusion, I created a set of initial codes that allowed me to grasp what was happening in the thousands of pages of interview transcripts. I first categorized the participants by age; self-identified race, gender, and sexuality; marital status; place of origin; occupation; education level; whether they had registered to vote; and whom they planned to vote for in 2016. As I dug deeper into the actions and meanings in the interview transcripts, I moved beyond simple categories and into the specific language and topics that interviewees themselves brought up as salient: histories of addiction and sexual abuse, whether they described themselves as suffering from mental illnesses such as anxiety or depression, and whether they felt optimistic or gloomy about their futures.

I examined how narratives of pain were copresent with narratives of political engagement or withdrawal and how the ways in which pain and politics connected were both similar and dissimilar by group identity. In that process I was able to build out, using the interview transcripts as raw material, how people connected their life histories to their politics. These insights into the “mental maps”28 the coal region residents employed to make sense of the world would not have been possible without process-oriented approaches such as in-depth interviewing and observations.

Looking back, several themes were familiar to me: racial resentment, fake news, and economic anxiety. But the links I uncovered between narratives of personal suffering, especially within the family, and political beliefs emerged only after puzzling over the interview transcripts and reading them line by line. As pain became a sensitizing concept, a central organizing idea that recurred across the transcripts, I began to build a glossary of pain in its many manifestations, tracing how participants’ self-described emotional, existential, and physical pain connected to their political stances and analogies.

To provide an example, Shelly, a 33-year-old white woman, lives in a declining town where coal mining jobs have been replaced by service jobs in education, health care, and retail that are largely nonunion, pay low wages, and offer few benefits. Shelly is a coal miner’s granddaughter. Her grandfather was “born in 1916 and was an old angry Polish and Irish man, just very mean,” and most of her family has lived in the coal region for generations. Her mother was just 13 when Shelly was born, and her father was 21. Their shotgun marriage lasted only a few months. Shelly grew up in a trailer with her mother and stepfather, Curtis, an “angry truck driver,” and four younger siblings.

One of her earliest memories involves watching her stepfather rape her mother’s close friend, Pam.

Curtis, my stepdad, was pouring the drinks, and the next thing you know I was peeking through the door and Curt had Pam by the neck and slammed her down on the bed and hit her. Then after that, I remember my mom’s jaw being wired shut. And I remember the conversation about that when my mom’s friend was like, “He raped me, why are you going to stay with him and he broke your jaw,” and my mom looked over her shoulder and seen me sitting there playing and my mom said, “little pigs have big ears,” and Pam
was like, “I don’t care. How are you going to let him do this?” My mom screamed really loud, “You can get the fuck out of my house.” But after that my mom said we are not to speak of it ever again.

Curtis began sexually abusing Shelly when she was 4. Shelly told her mother, but she did not believe her. At age 8, she “testified in my own rape case” when school officials uncovered the abuse. Shelly moved in with her biological father and stepmother. “The evil stepmom, Cinderella story, that exists, that is real,” Shelly said. The nightmare of abuse spiraled.

And I knew she [the stepmother] was cheating on my dad, and she wanted to make sure I never told my dad. She used to do things like when I was thirteen she would give me money to go downtown and hang out with my friends and be like, “Can you get me a bag of weed?” She goes and calls my dad and says that I stole money out of her purse for drugs and cigarettes and that she had proof. Then she pulled her pipe out and told my dad it was mine and that she found it in my stuff. So what do you think happened? Dad’s head popped off. That was the first time dad made me get on my hands and knees and he beat me with the guitar strap.

As she entered her teens, Shelly was taken away from her parents and put into a group home for girls. Shelly married her high school sweetheart, who was enlisting in the Army. They moved to an Army base, where she gave birth to a daughter. Shelly decided to make a trip home for the first time in more than a decade so that her mother could meet her new granddaughter. During their reunion, she remembers: “My mom looked at [my stepfather], and my mom looked at me, and she just started crying cuz that was the moment she realized her husband had been having sex with her four-year-old daughter. I took my kid, I packed up all her stuff, I ran out the door. I drove off and I never spoke to my mom again.” Six years later, Shelly received a phone call that her mom died.

And when I walked away from her, she spiraled completely out of control and I never went back and she was always waiting for that phone call. She was always waiting. And my mom’s friends told me, “You know your mom used to sit all day long as soon as her cell phone would go dead she’d freak out, Michelle’s [Shelly’s] gonna call me one day.” I never called. Never called. . . . That is when I spiraled into my addiction, that’s when I didn’t care anymore. That’s when life said, “We’re gonna catch up with you. You didn’t kill these people, you called them out, you forgave them, but now you’re gonna punish yourself.” And I did. I ripped my whole life apart, because I didn’t know how to cope with what I did.

Shelly developed a raging heroin addiction, which she hid from her husband and two children while living on the Army base. Meanwhile, she discovered her husband was cheating on her and descended further into despair: “I’d find his burner phone and I would see the messages and I would see the pictures and instead of talking to him about it, I would shut down, I would use drugs, I would go shopping, I would have promiscuous sex with people.” Finally, after her young daughter saw her crawling up the steps one day, high on heroin, Shelly locked herself in a hotel for five days. She “started sweating and shaking and puking and crying” until she had detoxed herself. Afterward, she confessed everything to her husband, who “couldn’t handle it. He needed perfect.” He got full custody in the divorce “because I was high around my child.”

Today, Shelly lives with a new boyfriend. She rarely leaves the house and does not work. When I ask her what she does for money, she shrugs: “I mean, granted now I could probably get full disability. I have PTSD and severe anxiety and all that other kind of stuff, and I could be hopped up on all kinds of medication according to Pennsylvania.” She launches into a thoughtful discussion of how she has made the shattered trust, pain, and betrayals of her young life meaningful.

There’s a doctor on YouTube, he was talking about how he’d seen a magazine and the article was “How Do Lobsters Grow.” And it says that lobsters are soft mushy creatures that live inside a tough rigid shell. And what happens when the lobster starts to grow,
the shell doesn’t expand, the lobster does, so the lobster starts to swell and starts to feel right, starts to feel uncomfortable, starts to feel under stress. So the lobster goes off, sheds the shell, grows a little bit, produces a new shell, goes out into the world and deals with life. He says that if lobsters had doctors they would never grow, cuz the moment the lobster would start to feel uncomfortable, the lobster would go to the doctor, prescribe it this, prescribe it that, and the lobster would never experience what true growth is. So the trigger for growth in a lobster is feeling uncomfortable, so what is the difference between people?

In other words, Shelly decides that suffering is a positive experience—even for children trapped in situations that are not “positive”—because stress is a catalyst for growth. Avoiding pain leaves one vulnerable and unprepared for life’s inevitable traumas.

So you take these kids out of these stressful situations where it may not be a positive thing, but they’re growing, and you seclude them and you medicate them and you put them in these little isolated bubbles and you don’t allow their brains to learn how to deal with misfiring and mishaps, they don’t learn how to naturally cope with and deal with the things that are happening with their bodies.

She continues heatedly: “And then you’re blaming society, why? You need to be stressed out. I’m a recovering addict, heroin addict. I didn’t take medicine to get off the drug, I didn’t take anything to get off the drug. I sat my happy little ass in that bedroom and I sweated it out, and I suffered it out, I stressed it out. Because I am not ever going to feel that way again. The best system for growth in life is stress.” In this account, avoiding suffering, blaming others for one’s misfortune, and evading responsibility will only make you more vulnerable in the end. Resilience takes the form of a celebration of pain.

Growing up, Shelly learned in excruciatingly painful ways that trusting others is dangerous. She harnesses this pain to make sense of politics at a national level. Shelly registered as a Democrat when she turned 18, just like her parents and grandparents. But she now abstains from voting as a way to distance herself from her family past, linking their dependence on government benefits to the chaos and cruelty she was raised on: “My family is so f*cked up on drugs and they live off the state. I want my hands out of this shit show.” Shelly describes herself as “more worried about survival than the shit show of politics.” The two realms—survival and politics—are completely distinct in her mind. She ended our discussion by connecting her distrust to politics on the following humorous yet unnerving note: “Am I gonna put my life or my child’s life in the hands of somebody that can’t keep their stories straight? I’m not, and I’m not going to put my life or my child’s life in the hands of somebody that uses that much orange spray tan.”

Shelly cuts herself off from family members who have caused her pain by deciding that dependence is a sign of weakness and isolation is the safest way to survive. This leads her to reject any kind of antipoverty program or policy. She retreats inward, disconnecting herself from the larger community in favor of YouTube. Instead of trying to address the causes of her suffering, she instead glorifies it, making it a central piece of her identity. Turning serious, she builds a narrative bridge between her early childhood trauma and her decision to disengage from politics. Like many of the white women in my study, she then treats this view of the world as if it were true, snuffing out the possibility of her own efficacy in ways that can have real consequences for her future, the economy, and American democracy.

If we want to design social programs that reach people like Shelly, we need to reach her in a way that resonates with her view of the world, and we need to better understand how cultural worldviews and social structures shape human behavior. Importantly, the stories Shelly and others tell are not just emotionally powerful. Instead, by abandoning statistical representativeness and generalizability as the main goal of this research, I was able to connect intimate pain to politics in a way I could not have discovered using other methods.
Conclusions

To be sure, in-depth interviewing requires a great deal of resources. It took me nearly a year of attending community forums, fundraisers, church services, and football games to build enough trust in the coal region to not be seen as threatening. As many of my informants spend their days inside their homes, with the lights shut off and the shades drawn, I could not have simply knocked on their doors and asked them to speak with me; they likely would not have even opened the door or would have quickly slammed it in my face. It was expensive to drive around the coal region every day, buy food and gift cards for research participants, and hire professional transcriptionists for the interview recordings. It also proved difficult to keep in touch with my informants over time, as the unstable nature of living in poverty made them frequently change apartments, partners, and cell phone numbers. And there were days when hearing stories of suffering and despair left me exhausted and emotionally raw, and I would wonder if I had the strength to go back into the field the next day.

But when I heard Shelly's lobster story, my immediate reaction was that no matter how hard I tried or how many academic books I read, I never could have imagined that she would make sense of her life and plan her future around the lobster story. Learning how she viewed the world required taking the time to gain her trust and listen to tell her own story on her own terms. The distrust and instability that mark disadvantaged people’s lives like Shelly’s would also leave them difficult to reach by survey, making their interview data particularly compelling and rare.

Going forward, researchers should continue to develop ways to trace how people’s experiences and worldviews interact with structural opportunities and constraints over time, thus linking micro accounts of the world to demographic patterns. It would also be fruitful to investigate the cultural and institutional underpinnings of the stories that people tell. We can think critically about how narratives could be organized in ways that leave people more vulnerable to poverty or in ways that are more protective or proactive. The stories we tell ourselves can connect and empower us, just as they can leave us alone and in despair. Under what conditions would and does suffering create other kinds of responses?

In this vein, considering the role of institutions, both local and national, in mediating between individual, personal narratives and collective action is crucial. In my work, individual pain management becomes a necessity in a system in which family and community ties are fragile, trust is low, and economic insecurity is rampant. If we can embed thick, nuanced, and multidimensional accounts of stories from interviews within the communities, institutions, and histories in which their stories arise, then we can untangle the complex web of morals, loyalties, emotions, and betrayals that animate struggling people like Shelly’s and others’ behaviors, worldviews, and politics. This crucial understanding can help us reach vulnerable people in ways that offer dignity, hope, and opportunity.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Simone Polillo for helpful comments on this manuscript.
Notes

8. Luker, Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences, 55.
18. Luker, Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences, 102.
24. Silva, We’re Still Here.
27. Thomas J. Keil and Jacqueline M. Keil, Anthracite's Demise and the Post-Coal Economy of Northeastern Pennsylvania (Lanham,


Solving Four Family Puzzles

W. Bradford Wilcox

In the 1990s, many assumed American families would move in an ever more progressive direction. The cultural fallout of the 1960s and 1970s and the economic fallout of the 1970s and 1980s would push American families away from stable, nuclear families headed by a married couple. We would see more divorce, more teen childbearing, more family diversity, and more marital happiness for husbands and wives who adapted to the zeitgeist and followed an egalitarian family script.

The feminist family historian Stephanie Coontz offered a crystalline summary of this mindset in her book *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America’s Changing Families*: “Just as working mothers are here to stay, diversity in family forms and marriage arrangements is also going to remain a fact of life.” Likewise, the expectation was that, among those who do marry, a more progressive approach to marriage would be ideal. In Coontz’s words:

We have every reason to believe that new values about marriage and sex roles will make it easier for parents to sustain and enrich their relationships, especially when these values are reinforced by institutions such as flextime, parental leaves, and better child care facilities.\(^2\)

But the trajectory of family change in America since the 1990s has not taken us in a ceaselessly progressive direction. That is not to say that we have gone back to a 1950s-style *Leave It to Beaver* model of family life. The nature and character of American family life have grown more complex and pluralistic in important ways. But it has not moved in a ceaselessly progressive direction. And the character of contemporary family life does not, in important respects, comport with the progressive imagination’s assumptions about which families work best.

Four sets of findings about contemporary families in the United States suggest how contemporary family life has moved in directions, or arrived at destinations, that confound earlier progressive expectations about the telos of American family life. First, after peaking around 1990, the teen pregnancy rate has fallen more than 60 percent.\(^3\) In other words, teen pregnancy (and nonmarital childbearing) is down. Second, after peaking around 1980, the divorce rate has fallen by more than 20 percent.\(^4\) In other words, divorce is down.

Third, since the 1990s, marriage has grown stronger and more stable among the upper-middle class, even as it has weakened among the working class.\(^5\) In other words, the United States is witnessing a growing class divide in marriage between the college educated and less educated. Fourth, perhaps to the surprise of family scholars and scholarly organizations, such as the Council on Contemporary Families that touts the superiority of families organized around progressive ideals,\(^6\) the most stable, happy marriages in America are those headed by cultural conservatives, not progressives.\(^7\)

These trends and findings are some of the most interesting developments in contemporary family life in the United States. And yet we know little about what is driving these changes and developments. We do not know how public policy, culture, economics, and civil society figure in these developments.

What we need now are excellent ethnographies focusing on these aspects of American family life; that is, we need scholars who live with and among
different types of families and young adults, interviewing them about their values, outlook, norms, and behaviors. They do all this with an eye to observing, narrating, and explaining their experience of relationships and family life today.

Ethnography allows us to get behind the numbers to understand how and why our family fabric is changing. This is particularly important with the many dramatic shifts in family life and relationships among young adults—shifts that we are documenting statistically but are not explaining as they are experienced by young adults in the United States. This is how ethnography can play an important role in helping us catch up in understanding and interpreting what is happening to American families and relationships in the 21st century. In turn, good ethnographic research would also help policymakers and civic organizations seeking to strengthen the quality and stability of American family life.

The work that sociologists Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas did in the 2000s is an excellent example of the work that needs to be done today. Starting in the 1970s, surveys and quantitative research documented the dramatic rise of nonmarital childbearing and single parenthood, an increase that was concentrated among lower-income women. But we did not have a good qualitative sense of why poor women were having children outside of marriage, often on their own. It took Edin and Kefalas’ Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage to provide scholars, policymakers, journalists, religious and civic leaders, and the general public with a compelling ethnographic portrait of low-income single mothers to fully explain the economic, policy, and cultural factors driving the rise of single motherhood in American society.

Edin and Kefalas spent years living with and interviewing young women and men in predominantly low-income neighborhoods in Camden and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Among other things, they showed that an absence of good educational and professional opportunities for lower-income women made nonmarital childbearing comparatively attractive to them as a source of meaning, direction, and purpose. Edin and Kefalas also explained how the precariousness of men’s work in lower-income neighborhoods in Philadelphia and Camden made marrying the men in their lives less appealing to poor women, especially because those men were more likely to get caught up in substance abuse or infidelity. In all these ways, their work showed how some of the bigger economic dynamics explored by William Julius Wilson in When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor actually played out in the lives of ordinary low-income couples in urban America.

Finally, Edin and Kefalas’ book helped us understand how increased expectations for marriage and the rising status of women—two trends widely covered in the literature—made marriage less necessary and appealing to many low-income women. All in all, Promises I Can Keep helped us make sense of the rise and character of nonmarital childbearing and single motherhood among the poor in America. Now, we need ethnographies to make sense of four other important developments in American family life.

**Falling (Nonmarital and Teen) Fertility**

The first development I address here, fertility, bears directly on the trends Edin and Kefalas explored. Specifically, when they wrote Promises I Can Keep, nonmarital childbearing seemed to be rising inexorably; that is, the ratio of children born outside of marriage had risen, almost year-to-year, from the 1960s to 2005, when they published their book. But in the aftermath of the Great Recession, the share of kids born outside of marriage, for the first time in many years, ticked downward, albeit modestly.

After peaking at 41 percent in 2009, the share of children born outside of marriage fell to 39.8 percent in 2017, the lowest level since 2007. Indeed, if you look at trends in marital and nonmarital fertility, as poverty scholar Angela Rachidi did, you see that declines in fertility in America since the Great Recession have been concentrated among the unmarried much more so than the married. In fact, by 2016, the married fertility rate had returned to its 2007 level of more than 89 births per 1,000 women age 15-44. But the nonmarital fertility rate has kept falling since the
Great Recession, even as the economy has expanded. The nonmarital fertility rate went from 51.8 in 2007 to 42.4 in 2016. In other words, the dramatic and continuing decline in fertility that the United States has witnessed over the past decade has been concentrated among unmarried women.

In particular, falling fertility has disproportionately affected teen, 20-something, Hispanic, African American, and lower-income women. For instance, the teen pregnancy rate has fallen more than 60 percent since 1990. Given these trends, economist Lyman Stone estimates that there are more than four million “missing babies” as a consequence of the Great Recession’s economic and cultural fallout. What is also striking about childbearing in the United States now is that the total fertility rate continues to fall even as the economy improves, and this decline is being driven by young, unmarried women.

So we know that fertility is falling, especially among unmarried, lower-income, and minority young women. But we do not know precisely why it is falling, nor do we know how young adults in their teens and 20s are thinking about childbearing vis-à-vis marriage, education, work, and their own economic status.

There are some preliminary signs, for instance, that increased access to long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs), such as IUDs and injections, may be playing a role in this childbearing shift. Likewise, the growing time and attention young adults devote to social media, gaming, and pornography are crowding out their ability to and interest in having real sex, which has obvious implications for fertility. What we now need is a new book—a new ethnographic study of the changing contours of fertility in the United States.

It might be called *Pregnancy Postponed: Why Poor Women Are Postponing or Forgoing Motherhood* and would be the successor book to Edin and Kefalas’ *Promises I Can Keep*. After all, many young women in the same demographic that Edin and Kefalas spotlighted are not having babies today. We need to understand why so many unmarried, poor, young, and minority women are postponing or forgoing childbearing. Ethnographers should spend time with Hispanic, black, and white young adults from families in which parents do not have a college education to determine how they are experiencing romantic relationships; how they think about marriage and parenthood, especially vis-à-vis work and education; and how technologies—from birth control to smartphones—are affecting their romantic and family lives.

Four sets of questions are particularly important to consider in this ethnographic effort.

1. Is fertility down among younger, unmarried, and lower-income women because work is increasingly precarious—either in their lives or among the men in their lives? In other words, have a growing share of women in this demographic come to see childbearing as a bad economic option for themselves and any kids they might have? Do they fundamentally look at childbearing now through the lens of the job market?

2. How does public policy loom in the imagination of young women and men on childbearing? As the first generation to come of age in the wake of welfare reform, does the reduced availability of cash welfare shape their attitudes to having a child without a partner or outside of marriage? Or does the lack of publicly provided paid parental leave make 20-something women more reluctant to have children?

3. Does falling fertility in this demographic seem attributable, to an important extent, to shifts in generational culture? Do concerns about commitment, a “culture of caution,” less dating, and sex appear to be salient in how young adults talk about, think about, and experience childbearing? In other words, do the cultural shifts chronicled by the psychologist Jean Twenge in her book, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*, appear to play an important role in falling fertility among young, unmarried women in the US?
4. Do young women report that the growing availability of LARCs makes unintended childbearing a much smaller concern or reality for them?

Questions such as these need to be answered for us to understand why fertility is falling and what it means for family, economic, and public life. We know, for instance, that declines in births have reduced spending on Medicaid, food stamps, child support enforcement, and other means-tested programs by the billions since the Great Recession. Meanwhile, if fertility keeps falling, long-term economic and fiscal costs will likely be associated with declines in the size of the American labor force that are likely to ensue in a world where American fertility is well below replacement levels.18

**Divorce Is Down**

In the 1970s, as the divorce rate rose by about 50 percent, from 15 divorces per 1,000 married women in 1970 to 22.8 divorces per 1,000 married women in 1979, most observers did not expect a dramatic reversal of marital stability in America. But that is what we have seen. Since 1980, the divorce rate has fallen to 16.1—almost the 1970 level.19

In real terms, this means that married Americans’ odds of divorce for first marriages have fallen from about 50 percent in the 1970s to about 39 percent today.20 This is a marked decline in divorce and an indication that the institution of marriage has stabilized after the tumult of the 1960s and 1970s.

But scholars do not know exactly why marriage has stabilized, nor do they know how husbands and wives view divorce today. Research on the divorce decline suggests that marriage has become more selective, with more educated and affluent Americans making up an increasingly disproportionate share of those married.21 In particular, the marriage rate has fallen by about half since 1970, with marriage rates dropping much more among those without a college degree.22 So part of the story may be that marriage is stabilizing because the people who are marrying today have more of the socioeconomic resources that make contemporary family life stable and face fewer stresses that can lead to divorce.

Others argue that delays in the age at first marriage mean that couples are more mature and make better matches; this trend in delayed marriage, then, is supposed to account for the divorce decline.23 Still other scholars would suggest that more educated Americans have become increasingly cognizant of the dangers of divorce for themselves and their children and, hence, have become more cautious about divorce.24 Indeed, a *New York Times* story titled “How Divorce Lost Its Groove” suggests that many of today’s married parents are taking a more cautious approach to divorce for fear of causing harm to their kids and losing status in the eyes of their married friends and peers.25 For instance, even though children of divorce are more likely to divorce themselves, this is less true today than it used to be.26

What we do not yet have is a good ethnography of divorce in contemporary America to make sense of these trends and subsequent explanatory claims and to help us understand how ordinary married Americans think about marriage and divorce. What is clear, however, is that the soulmate model of marriage that dominated 1970s thinking, a model that privileged a more adult-centered view of marriage and discounted the importance of marital permanence, has fallen out of favor among many husbands and wives. Accordingly, we need an ethnography that tells us what new model of marriage has replaced it and if this new model is related to class, age, marital commitment, or perhaps something else—such as gender relations. Divorce could also be declining because men are behaving better; that is, they are doing more housework and more childcare, and they are more emotionally engaged in family life.27

More specifically, in pursuing an ethnographic study of divorce in America today, I think scholars should visit the schools, athletic events, religious institutions, and homes where the upper-middle class congregates to determine how they are thinking about and experiencing married life. They should probe their thoughts and feelings about the value of marriage for themselves and their children, the cues they receive from their peers about how to deal with
marital difficulties, and their perceptions about social media’s depiction of marriage in their social circles.

Four sets of questions will be especially important to address in this work.

1. Do socioeconomic differences in income, work-family strains, men’s employment status, or related factors appear to explain ordinary people’s attitudes toward and experience with divorce, especially the class divide in divorce?

2. How large do concerns about child well-being loom in married parent’s thinking about divorce? Are such concerns the largest barriers to divorce among married people today? Which groups are most likely to express concerns about children and divorce—for instance, the college educated, conservatives, immigrants, and religious husbands and wives?

3. What marriage model do today’s husbands and wives embrace? Does a soulmate model of marriage still hold sway for many—that is, a model that puts a premium on the emotional and romantic quality of the relationship and minimizes the importance of marital permanence, come what may? Or are husbands and wives now reverting to a more institutional model of marriage, in which they see marriage as a vehicle for realizing many goods (romance, friendship, child-rearing, financial security and success, etc.) and marital permanence as an important norm to secure those goods?

4. How do married Americans’ views of divorce vary in their public ethics and private expectations? Are they publicly tolerant of divorce but privately intolerant of it for themselves and their friends and family members? How do they negotiate this public and private split?

Ethnographic research that would answer these questions would help us understand why divorce has declined so much in recent years and the relative role that economics and culture play in explaining the shift. Such research might also suggest public policies that would reinforce today’s trend toward greater marital stability.

Public Policy and the Marriage Divide

Today, marriage is strongest among Americans who are college educated and more affluent. A majority of Americans with a college degree will get and stay married, and, for those who have children, a clear majority of their children will be raised in an intact married family.

By contrast, marriage is in retreat not just among the poor but increasingly in the working class too. If we use education as a proxy for class and define working-class adults as those adults who have a high school degree or some college but not a four-year college degree, what we see is that only a minority of working-class adults age 25–60 are in intact marriages, compared to a majority of their fellow citizens who are college educated.

About three-quarters of teenagers in college-educated families live in intact families headed by their own parents, compared to just one in two teenagers being raised in working-class families.

Standard accounts of the marriage divide in America favor, on the left, economic factors and, on the right, cultural factors. Progressives, such as sociologist Andrew Cherlin, are more likely to point the finger at economic changes, as shifts in the labor market have made decent-paying, full-time work for men less available since the 1970s, even as they increased the return to work for more educated men.

Conservatives, such as the family law scholar Amy Wax, are more likely to blame cultural shifts that have undercut traditional norms about sex, marriage, and parenthood in ways that disparately affect poor and working-class Americans. My own view is that changes in culture and economics have both had a hand in fueling America’s marriage divide and, more specifically, in making stable marriage less common among working-class families.

But social welfare policy could also be implicated in America’s growing marriage divide, especially in
the recent retreat from marriage among the American working class. In particular, shifts over the past 30 years in social welfare programs and policies may help explain why marriage is in retreat among not just the poor but also the working class. As the economist Robert Moffitt has noted, as income thresholds for programs such as Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Application Program (SNAP), and the earned income tax credit (EITC) have risen, means-tested tax and transfer programs are increasingly serving Americans who are living above the poverty level, especially between 100 and 200 percent of it. In other words, more working-class families, not just poor families, are being served by and participating in means-tested programs and policies.

This is relevant in understanding the marriage divide in America and the retreat from marriage among the working class because means-tested tax and transfer programs and policies often end up penalizing marriage. Indeed, families headed by poor and now increasingly working-class Americans often face the loss of some or all of their benefits if they marry. In fact, my colleagues and I recently found that couples with young children in the second family income quintile were more likely to face marriage penalties associated with Medicaid, food stamps, and cash welfare than were families in the bottom income quintile. This suggests that, as social welfare policy has increasingly targeted working-class families with incomes above the poverty line, they are more likely to be discouraged from tying the knot by marriage penalties that can run as high as 10–30 percent of their real income.

To be sure, some low-income couples face a penalty—especially vis-à-vis the EITC—for being single. Depending on the program or tax credit, the number of children, and the earning patterns of each partner, means-tested programs and policies can penalize or privilege marriage. For this reason, understanding how working-class couples perceive these programs and policies is important.

Yet we do not have any good ethnographic evidence speaking to how social welfare programs and policies affect working-class marriage decisions. Some quantitative evidence suggests that Medicaid penalties, for instance, discourage marriage among young working-class families. But we do not know how people in the working class perceive these programs vis-à-vis marriage and family formation. Ethnographers should convene focus groups with working-class Americans, talk to tax preparers, and spend time with Americans whose household income is between $25,000 and $50,000 to determine how perceptions of marriage penalties and benefits are influencing decisions about marriage, childbearing, and family stability.

In particular, I think an ethnography on social welfare policy and the working class should address the following four sets of questions.

1. What do young working-class couples think about the relationship between means-tested programs—including the EITC, Medicaid, SNAP, Pell Grants, and childcare subsidies—and marriage? Do they think their access to such programs will be affected by marrying or their marital status?

2. Are decisions and discussions about marriage shaped by concerns about marriage penalties—especially in the wake of a pregnancy? That is, do working-class couples report that they have postponed or forgone marriage because of concerns about losing benefits or support from social welfare programs?

3. How does culture moderate any impact of social welfare programs on marriage decisions? Does religion, views of marriage, or concerns about children condition the impact of perceived financial penalties on marriage decisions? Likewise, how does family income and the division of earning seem to affect marriage decisions? That is, how do patterns of earnings between partners condition how working-class couples think about the impact of marriage penalties on their marriage decisions?

4. Do perceptions of marriage penalties among working-class couples correspond to reality? Do working-class couples tend to overestimate
or underestimate the marriage penalties they face for being married?

Good ethnographic research exploring the impact, if any, of marriage penalties on working-class family life would help determine how such penalties related to means-tested programs and policies may influence actual decisions about marriage and childbearing in this group. Such research would also help inform policymakers on how best to address marriage penalties.

The U-Curve in Marital Happiness by Ideology

Writing in the New York Times, columnist Nicholas Kristof recently said, “Conservatives thunder about ‘family values’ but don’t practice them.” Indeed, Kristof wrote that it is actually “liberals [who] practice the values that conservatives preach.”39 His primary evidence: Red states often do worse than blue states with family-related outcomes such as divorce and teen pregnancy. In making this argument, Kristof was drawing on the work of family law scholars Naomi Cahn and June Carbone’s Red Families v. Blue Families: Legal Polarization and the Creation of Culture, which makes the case that blue states have more successful and stable families than red states do.40

Growing academic research and media coverage also suggest or speculate that progressive couples are more likely to enjoy stable two-parent families and happier marriages, compared to other couples or conservative couples.41 Recall, for example, what Coontz wrote:

We have every reason to believe that new values about marriage and sex roles will make it easier for parents to sustain and enrich their relationships, especially when these values are reinforced by institutions such as flextime, parental leaves, and better child care facilities.42

There is only one problem with this line of argument: It is those Americans who subscribe to “old values” about family life who are most likely to have stable marriages; furthermore, they also report some of the highest levels of marital quality today. My work indicates, for instance, that marital stability is higher among Americans who report that they are Republicans.43 On average, counties that lean Republican also have higher levels of family stability compared to counties that lean Democratic.44 In general then, family stability is higher for conservatives and Republicans than it is for independents, moderates, and Democrats.

On marital happiness, research that my colleagues and I have done indicates there is a J-curve in marital happiness by religion and gender ideology.45 Specifically, some of the happiest wives are those who report the most traditional gender attitudes—so long as they are religious. Interestingly, however, the most progressive wives are also happier than average—almost as happy as the most conservative wives—so long as they and their husbands are secular. American women who fall in the middle, religiously and ideologically, are less happy in their marriages.

When it comes to political ideology and marital happiness, there is more of a U-curve, with conservatives reporting the most happiness, moderates the least happiness, and strong liberals higher-than-average happiness that comes close to the conservative pattern.46 At least with marital happiness, then, it looks like Americans who occupy opposite ends of the ideological spectrum enjoy the happiest marriages.

These findings raise interesting and unanswered questions about contemporary family life in America. In particular, why do married Americans who hold diametrically opposed gender and political attitudes report happier marriages than do their more moderate peers? Why is family stability markedly higher among conservatives than it is among liberals? Good ethnographic research is needed to further probe and understand these ideological currents in contemporary American family life.

Ethnographers should explore how liberals, moderates, and conservatives talk about family life online, how their distinctive social networks reinforce particular patterns of family life, what the expectations for fathers and husbands are in these different groups, and how income and work operate for these distinct ideological groups. They can do this by tracking online
activity, conducting focus groups, speaking individually with members of these three groups, and visiting Republican- and Democrat-affiliated groups in the 2020 presidential election.

I propose four specific sets of questions to inform this ethnographic research.

1. Research suggests that education is associated with ideological consistency. Is the relative advantage that the most conservative and liberal spouses tend to enjoy related to higher levels of education and the capacity to organize married life along a more consistent ideological schema?

2. Even though they differ in fundamental ways, do the most conservative and liberal husbands take a more engaged approach to family life than their moderate-minded peers? Is it engagement, rather than ideology per se, that fosters greater-quality marriages for them and their spouses—and explains the U-curve?47

3. Is the comparative advantage that conservative couples enjoy related to religion? That is, are conservatives more likely to view their marriages through the prism of religious faith and to be connected to religious social networks that lend wise counsel, social support, and social control to their marriages?

4. Do traditional familial or gender themes dominate how conservative husbands and wives talk and think about their marriages? That is, is the conservative comparative advantage related to their distinctive views about gender roles in marriage, or are they more related to their distinctive commitment to marriage per se?

The answers to these questions are important both for understanding the nature and character of contemporary family life and correcting false impressions about conservatives conveyed in some academic and media circles. Moreover, if male familial involvement and familism are revealed to be key drivers of contemporary marital quality, policymakers, religious and civic leaders, and journalists could do more to highlight their contemporary value for today’s marriages.

**Conclusion**

In the 21st century, American family life continues to move in interesting, important, and complex directions. In this chapter, I have highlighted four particularly important new developments worth studying: falling fertility, declining divorce, the growing marriage divide, and the U-curve in marital happiness by ideology.

But we do not fully understand how these trends are playing out in the United States. Insofar as these developments directly bear on the quality and stability of family life, the welfare of children, the size and scope of government expenditures, and the future health of our economy, it is imperative that ethnographic scholarship tells us how and why these trends are unfolding. Accordingly, I hope that think tanks, universities, the federal government, and foundations will encourage and sponsor the important ethnographic work needed for understanding the most important new developments in contemporary American family life.
Notes

19. Schweizer, “Divorce Rate in the U.S.”


42. Coontz, The Way We Really Are.


com/2015/07/01/upshot/intact-families-continued-the-red-county-advantage.html.

45. Wilcox, Carroll, and DeRose, “Religious Men Can Be Devoted Dads, Too.”


47. My recent research speculates that the most progressive and religiously conservative couples both set high expectations for male familial involvement, expectations that often translate to better marriages. See Wilcox, Carroll, and DeRose, “Religious Men Can Be Devoted Dads, Too.”
Why Do People Use Drugs?

Sally Satel

I am an addiction psychiatrist, and I believe my patients are among the most misunderstood groups in medicine and public health. According to conventional wisdom, the afflicted suffer a “chronic, relapsing disease of the brain” that precludes decision-making and for which formal treatment is almost always required. Such people are “enslaved” by morphine molecules that their doctors prescribed them.

Yet when one talks to people who abuse opioids—from heroin to prescription pain relievers, such as OxyContin, Percocet, or Vicodin—the orthodoxies enumerated above tend to fall apart.

If our goal is to understand addiction, we will be limited in our progress unless we examine why people use drugs. What are their motivations, what are the conditions under which their use intensifies and recedes, and what are the dimensions of self-control? Mechanistic explanations based on brain science are not so much wrong as they are woefully incomplete; they cannot do justice to the phenomena. If we want to help patients sustain recovery, stave off addiction in the first place, and design quality treatment programs and wise policy, face-to-face engagement yields great insight. The brain, it turns out, is the least pragmatic explanatory framework.

My point is not to privilege anecdotal information. It should not supersede epidemiological or clinical trial data on addiction. At the same time, non-systematic, self-reported experience should not be dismissed as arbitrary or trivial. All three forms of knowledge—large-scale surveys and check-the-box questionnaires, experimental inquiries, and case studies or individual interviews—are complementary. Gathering information from those intimately involved in addiction adds dimension, nuance, and color to more formally gathered data and helps generate hypotheses for testing.

The dominant narratives surrounding addiction today are highly medicalized. As such, they obscure the experiential elements of addiction. Let us start with the dominant narrative about drug addiction of all kinds, not just opioid—namely, that it is a brain disease. The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) introduced this concept in the mid-1990s, and it is now the dominant view of addiction in the field. Being afflicted means that the person cannot choose, control his or her life, or be held accountable. “Once you’ve got [addiction], you can’t just tell the addict, ‘Stop,’ any more than you can tell the smoker ‘Don’t have emphysema,’” said a former head of NIDA.

According to the agency’s current head, the “brain [of an addicted person] is no longer able to produce something needed for our functioning and that healthy people take for granted, free will.” Add in brain imaging, which seems to serve up visual proof that addiction is a brain disease, and you have reified addiction as “hijacking” neural circuitry that has come to denote an all-or-nothing process, likened to a “switch in the brain” that, once flipped, affords no retreat for the addict.

But neurobiology is not destiny: The disruptions in neural mechanisms associated with addiction do indeed constrain a person’s capacity for choice, but they do not destroy it. One of the most powerful examples of the ability of “addicted brains” to respond to carrots and sticks is the story of Vietnam veterans. In 1970, high-grade heroin and opium flooded Southeast Asia. Military physicians in Vietnam estimated that nearly half of all US Army–enlisted men
serving there had tried opium or heroin, and between 10 and 25 percent of them were addicted. Deaths from overdose soared. In May 1971, the crisis reached the front page of the *New York Times*: “G.I. Heroin Addiction Epidemic in Vietnam.”

Fearful that the newly discharged veterans would join the ranks of junkies already bedeviling inner cities, President Richard Nixon commanded the military to begin drug testing. No one could board a plane home until they had passed a urine test. Those who failed could attend an Army-sponsored detoxification program.

Operation Golden Flow, as the military called it, succeeded. As word of the new directive spread, most soldiers stopped using narcotics. Almost all soldiers who were detained passed the test on their second try. Once they were home, heroin lost its appeal. Opiates may have helped them endure a war’s alternating bouts of boredom and terror, but stateside, civilian life took precedence.

The sordid drug culture, the high price of heroin, and fears of arrest discouraged use, veterans told Lee Robins, the Washington University in St. Louis sociologist who evaluated the testing program from 1972 to 1974. Robins’ findings were startling. Only 5 percent of the men who became addicted in Vietnam relapsed within 10 months after returning home, and just 12 percent relapsed briefly within three years.

Individual Reasons for Use

I have been treating people with drug problems for over 20 years. Nearly everyone who has walked into one of my clinics is there because they have been threatened in some way. The usual suspects are the spouse who threatens to leave them, the boss who threatens to fire them, or the probation officer who threatens to violate them for positive drug screens. In short, this means that even addicted brains can respond to consequences. And a vast literature on so-called contingency management supports this fact.

In fact, the power of consequences can be so strong that many people stop their drug use on their own. Training the spotlight too intently on the workings of the addicted brain leaves the addicted person in the shadows, distracting us from other powerful psychological and environmental forces that exert strong influence on them.

Those other forces are most vividly illustrated by talking to people who are or have been addicted to drugs. Until Zachary S., now a journalism student in Chicago, started snorting OxyContin daily in high school, he never really noticed the relentless, critical monologue running through his head, a soundtrack of denunciation that had no off switch. “When I compared myself to others, I was miniature. When the question, ‘What’s the point?’ came up, I didn’t have a good answer. Opioids muted all these circuitous thoughts,” he recalls. Zachary S. seemed to have a special talent for appreciating the drug; his first hit left him chatty and energized, while his friends were knocked out, sprawled over the living room furniture like napping dogs.

Eventually, Zachary S. switched to heroin, shooting it several times a day on and off for a few years. He said, “And now here comes the cliché: I finally understood what it felt like to be at home in my own skin. Opioids dissolved tension for me. Like I could feel stress melt off of my bones. My nervousness, and general unease, gave way to a warm body with a cool head. What could feel better than that?” With a cool head, he studied psychology, statistics, and research design. “I could sit and read for hours and hours because the couch, thanks to heroin, was so comfortable,” he recalls. “I would read whole books in one sitting.”

Another individual, 33-year-old Zach R., is now a respected child behavior specialist in his town of Burlington, Vermont, but growing up, he was an impulsive boy. Almost every day, he got into some kind of trouble at school, and his peers duly avoided the “bad kid,” an identity he reinstated in his new junior high after his family moved from a Maryland suburb. Zach R. quickly became aware of how difficult it was to “feel connected with people.”

At age 13, he turned to peers who let him into their circle. They smoked, drank, and broke the law but were coolly rebellious and shyly admired by more cautious kids. From his new friends, Zach R. got marijuana and later the more effective opioids that
provided him with “instant relief from [his] anxieties and self-doubt, a self-doubt that might have grown into self-hate.”

When he was 17, Zach R.’s first sniff of morphine powder caused him to vomit—a common response—but within a half hour he felt “heavenly . . . It was like a cosmic engineer turned the knobs of my life’s control center to the perfect levels and then let them ride on autopilot.” This is a young man who had used acid, alcohol, cocaine, ecstasy, mushrooms, and Xanax. All were good, he admits, but for him, an opioid was the engineer he needed. He said he felt “terrified to grow older,” convinced he was never going to be able to take care of himself or hold steady relationships with family, friends, or women. “This was a persistent, overwhelming fear, something I decided only strong opiates could solve.”

Both Zachs were using drugs for reasons. This is the most important engine of addiction, yet it is easily overlooked if we follow the standard disease rhetoric. After all, it makes no sense to ask someone with pancreatic cancer or Parkinson’s disease why they have those illnesses. (At best, you will get physiological explanations.) But ask an addicted person why he or she uses, and you will get the story of their life—and important clues about what they need to recover.

The reasons that motivate prolonged use in the face of painful consequences also explain why some people refuse treatment, drop out of treatment, or relapse after a period of abstinence. Deep ambivalence besets so many addicts when they think about quitting. Not only will their original demons awaken once the anesthetic of the drugs wears off, but a fresh contingent, spawned during years of drug use, will march in to fortify their ranks. In this way, internal problems become external. Homelessness, impoverishment, and the hardness of daily living become their own reasons for taking drugs. It is a pernicious cycle.

For Kristin, who lives near Boston, the years of living as an addict brought a particularly harrowing torment: the sexual assaults she suffered when she was unconscious. “I was like, oh my God, my life’s gotten out of control. I am getting raped, I’m overdosing on the regular, something’s got to change,” she said on the radio program WBUR. “I have these moments of clarity . . . like, this has got to stop. I’m going to die.” Except that Kristin’s memories of the sexual assaults and her fear of more just added to pain she was already suppressing with heroin.

For 27-year-old Aaron, the malaise was attributable to his environment. “Everybody is bitching about bills and watching these crazy shows on reality TV and not doing anything,” he told the Guardian.13 A pall had been settling for years on McDowell County, at the southern tip of West Virginia. A miasma of apathy had settled over his town. “Around my area, I believe a lot of people use [opioids] out of boredom,” said Aaron, who started snorting OxyContin at age 13. “There’s no jobs, no way to have fun besides video games and riding four-wheelers and motorcycles. There’s nowhere to go except a run-down mall in another county.”

Individual Reasons for Recovery

If people use drugs for reasons, they relinquish them for reasons as well. “You think to yourself, is it worth it,” Zach R. said. Yet the media’s standard redemptive arc—girl (or boy) meets drug, falls in love with drug, and breaks up with drug—misses crucial details. We hear a heartwarming story, but we are often left to imagine how the triumphant end was achieved: “Susan was addicted to OxyContin . . . and now she is fine. Sam overdosed on three separate occasions . . . and now he is learning computer programming at community college.” Those elisions represent hidden lodes of precious information, but until they are mined, the transition from addiction to health will continue to look, deceptively, as either a miracle or the product of a medical cure. In reality, some factor or amalgam of forces tip the balance between the rewards and costs of consumption.

In Pathways from Heroin Addiction: Recovery Without Treatment, sociologist Patrick Biernacki collected recovery narratives from 101 former heroin addicts.14 All matured out of their addiction by mid-adulthood, which is the rule among addicts, and none of them attended formal treatment—again, quite common. Nonetheless, their stories illuminate the broad array
of forces and motives that impel addicts to change, be it on their own or with professional help.

One of the most striking of Biernacki’s accounts involved a former Marine who served in Vietnam and ultimately quit opioids to revive his capacity for moral outrage. When he was on morphine during the war, he had his own supply because he had been wounded. “I had a feeling of somewhat peacefulness, that I was detached somewhat from the emotional part of seeing what I was seeing and I kept using,” he said.

After returning to San Francisco, the veteran was still using medical morphine in the form of syrettes, disposable tubes with an attached hypodermic needle and a single dose of morphine to be infused under the skin. He was surprised to see the city roiled by protests against US involvement and attended an anti-war rally to see what it was like.

When he heard the marchers denouncing veterans, it made a big impression on him, perhaps because he was already feeling somewhat guilty over his role in the war. “I knew we were killers but I also knew it wasn’t all of our responsibility,” the veteran said. “I got angry. . . . If they were right, then my buddies died for nothing. . . . If they were right, then my buddies died for nothing. Then the Vietnamese died for nothing. And I remember feeling that anger, and it was very hard for me to feel anything when I was [on morphine]—any emotion.” He threw the rest of his morphine away, visited his hometown in an eastern city to manage withdrawal with the help of old friends, and became involved in veterans’ advocacy. “The anger just seemed to get on top of the need for the drug,” he said.

Maia, 23 years old, decided to quit using drugs when she found herself about to violate her own ethical code by gratifying a man in exchange for heroin. On a broiling August day, she went to Lower East Side and bought heroin that was too weak. When she got back to Queens, she begged Beaver, the boyfriend of a woman she knew, for a better brand. “The idea of seducing Beaver was so beyond what I normally considered that it immediately forced me to contemplate what would have been previously unthinkable, that I was a debased addict,” she wrote in her 2016 memoir, *Unbroken Brain: A Revolutionary New Way of Understanding Addiction.*

Then something in her began to shift. She looked around as if seeing her apartment for the first time and was nauseated. “The cat litter hadn’t been changed in far too long, and it gave off an evil stench. Everything was covered in a layer of grime—cat hair clotted with dust atop soiled laundry; burnt, shattered crack pipes on yellowing newspapers. The lens through which I saw the world shattered and suddenly everything I thought was certain, everything I thought I knew about drugs in my life, was no longer sure. That’s when I decided I needed help.”

Tony, a British musician-turned-junky-turned-author, reflecting on his teens and twenties, said so many moments should have counted as his rock bottom, but were instead a trap door. “The night I took an emaciated and bloody girl to the ER after she [overdosed] shooting cocaine, and the ambulance guys alerted the cops, who grabbed me in the waiting room and beat the shit out of me: I pissed blood for a week and a half. The abscesses, my teeth falling out, screaming at my ex-wife because she refused to have sex with our drug dealer in exchange for a $40 bag of heroin when we were dope-sick and broke,” he told an interviewer. The list goes on. “When there was finally no more money, no more credit with my dealers, no more belongings to pawn, and nowhere further to sink. I found myself in a treatment center at age 22.”

But Tony skipped out and resumed the cycle. He could not quit until there was a reason to quit. “Getting clean for me was less about hitting a rock bottom than about yo-yoing in and out of the depths. And looking around during one of those brief moments of being ‘up,’ I decided that my life didn’t have to inevitably spiral down again.”

When he met a woman named Vanessa, he decided to stay “up” and, in 2002, at age 24, entered her East London music scene where the drugs, ecstasy, and cocaine were built for experience. They made his steady diet of intravenous heroin and clinic methadone seem gloomy. “The combination of falling in love and rediscovering the joys of music were huge factors in my eventual decision to quit opiates altogether [but] probably the biggest of all—was my impending fatherhood.” Tony quit one year later.
Quit phases vary. A series of relapses is common. The addict stops, makes some gains, and then backslides. They might enter treatment, drop out, or refuse it altogether. They might stutter along in this manner, incrementally adjusting to the idea of relinquishing drugs for good until they finally stop or get help. The early months, sometimes years, of recovery can be quite difficult. It is one foot after the other, forcing one’s self to commit to a structured plan of personal and professional resurrection operating on the blind faith that the outlines of a pragmatic new life will eventually come into focus. Until then, existence can seem rote and bland.

Role of Narrative

My aim in this chapter was to illustrate why personal narratives are so important in understanding addiction. The nation has experienced an opioid crisis that evolved over the past two decades and now appears to be morphing, depending on geographical area, into a methamphetamine surge. The same factors that drive addiction of all kinds—the psychological needs met by drugs, their normalization in the community, and their availability and cost—all play important roles. Personal experiences help us understand why users may refuse treatment or drop out well before completion: Their ambivalence about relinquishing opioids, or any other intoxicant, is understandably strong in light of how difficult it can be to face life unmedicated.

Addiction is a phenomenon that emerges out of the person, the drug, and the context. Of course, the brain mediates drug effects, but the problem with over-medicalizing addiction is that it distracts us from crucial realities about the lives of addicts themselves. I say this as a physician who prescribes methadone and buprenorphine, two opiate-related anti-addiction medications that suppress withdrawal symptoms and lessen drug craving. These medications are vital for some patients, allowing them to break the cycle of persistent use. Stabilization is a prerequisite, but patients must then embark on the difficult and lengthy work of recovering, repairing, and reimagining their lives.

Finally, personal immersion helps demystify what I call the alchemy of recovery, which is both contextual and subjective. A swirl of circumstances surrounds the addicted individual. And when even a few of them change, quitting and recovery look more attractive and achievable to the individual. That may happen spontaneously in the face of new rewards, such as when a new relationship comes along or a child is born, or in the face of new threats, such as a spouse threatening to leave.

These shifting dynamics can motivate addicts to quit on their own, contrary to assertions that addicts cannot just stop. Still, many cannot quit unaided; in that case, treatment can become the necessary catalyst to help them deploy their intrinsic capacity for choice and control.
Notes


10. Robins, Helzer, and Davis, “Narcotic Use in Southeast Asia and Afterward.”


Understanding America’s “Men Without Work” Problem: The Role for Ethnographic Insights

Nicholas Eberstadt

Modern America is beset by a crisis of male non-work. The crisis has been quietly gathering for over half a century. According to the latest Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) monthly jobs report at this writing (for May 2019), the work rate for men of prime working age (25–54) was 86.5 percent, and the work rate for men age 20–64 was 80.8 percent. In 1939, according to the 1940 US Census, the corresponding rates were 86.4 percent and 81.3 percent, respectively (Table 1). Thus, today’s male employment crisis is a problem of Great Depression–scale proportions.

Unlike the Great Depression, however, only a small fraction of today’s non-employed preretirement-age men are actually unemployed. Nowadays, the overwhelming majority (four-fifths of prime working-age male nonworkers as of May 2019) are out of the labor force altogether; that is, they are neither working nor seeking work. Nearly seven million US men between the ages of 25 and 54 are not in labor force (NILF): one in nine prime-age American males.

This ongoing crisis has attracted curiously little public or official attention, especially considering the gravity of the situation. Even the populist earthquake in politics in 2016 somehow failed to train a political spotlight on this central affliction in our national condition. Observers may debate why this should be the

Table 1. US Male “Work Rates”: Right Now vs. Great Depression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year and Source</th>
<th>Employment to Population Ratio, Men Age 20–64 (Percentage of Civilian Noninstitutional Population)</th>
<th>Employment to Population Ratio, Men Age 25–54 (Percentage of Civilian Noninstitutional Population)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April 2019 Bureau of Labor Statistics</td>
<td>80.8</td>
<td>86.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940 Census</td>
<td>81.3</td>
<td>86.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

case—but one of the reasons is the inadequacies of our official information systems: their surprisingly poor capacity to cast light on a domestic social dysfunction that has been gradually worsening for half a century and more. Indeed, the “men without work” problem exposes a number of blind spots in the US official statistical system: inadequacies in labor market data, consumption information, disability and social welfare benefit recipience, criminal justice statistics, and more. Lacking such information, America’s deciding classes—in the academy, in think tanks, in the halls of government, and in whatever journalism is supposed to be called nowadays—have been largely caught unaware by this gathering crisis in their own nation. (Yes, this cluelessness in itself is revealing of the great stratification that has transformed America over the past two generations—of the tremendous social gap that now separates those who write and speechify for a living from the “little people”—but this is a tale for another time.)

We desperately need to enhance the understanding of our “men without work” problem. But how? One way—arguably the easiest and most expeditious way—would be through careful, detailed, and empathetic description of the daily lives of some of the many millions of individuals swept up in this grim drama. Accounts of the human dimension of the “men without work” crisis by acute and sensitive observers, reporting from some of the many communities across America most severely afflicted by the problem, would be a relatively rapid and inexpensive way to address the current knowledge (and understanding) void for the concerned public—and to educate officialdom about the steps needed to develop statistical capabilities for tracking and eventually ameliorating the many dimensions of this crisis.

The academically preferred term for the work required here is “ethnographic research.” But this moniker may be a little too hifalutin and assistant-professor-ish. Ethnography is a shout-out to a particular corpus of academic study, a literature certainly with its merit. But one does not need to be a minted academic “ethnographer” to be capable of providing invaluable “participant observation” on the real existing plight of the marginalized and vulnerable in our real existing America.

Among triumphs in this genre over the past half-century or so, Elliot Liebow’s Tally’s Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men was indeed produced by an aspiring anthropologist and arguable “ethnographer.” But Susan Sheehan’s unforgettable A Welfare Mother3 was written by a New Yorker staff writer with just a BA degree, and J. D. Vance’s extraordinary Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis4 is “only” an autobiography.

Sheehan and Vance may or may not know what “thick description” is supposed to be, or who Clifford Geertz was. But their works vividly inform us about not only the circumstances, expectations, motivations, and outlooks of its protagonists but also the contexts of their daily lives, the particularities and constraints with which the dramatis personae must cope and contend. Irrespective of their academic credentials, we would be well served by another dozen (or for that matter, another hundred!) Sheehans and Vances, training sharp and humane eyes on Americans’ troubles that our nation’s deciders know little about.

**Crucial Areas of Missing Knowledge**

There are numerous aspects of the “men without work” crisis that our current official statistical system is inadequate in depicting and some it is completely incapable of illuminating. These are areas where human narrative can help most. Here are some of the most critical missing pieces in our knowledge about, and understanding of, this crisis.

**Reasons for Male Nonwork.** The central question in the great flight from work by American men in the modern era is: Why? We can document the trends and levels in this long-term exodus from the workplace with some confidence. But the information our statistical systems currently provide on the reported reasons for this mass retreat out of the labor market by the men in question themselves is woefully superficial.

The information vacuum has encouraged considerable unsubstantiated or inadequately substantiated
assertions in academic and policy circles about the "true" causes for the long-term decline in male labor force participation, with little or no reference to the actual views of the millions of men affected about their own experiences. This explains the continuing popularity in parts of Washington and the academy, of the "there simply isn't any work" thesis, delivered with varying degrees of sophistication and professed even in the face of recent BLS labor market surveys reporting 7.5 million unfilled job openings in the US.6

Researchers have astonishingly little official information at hand on NILF men's own self-assessments or explanations for their absence from the workforce. Practically the only data series touching on this question comes from the Census Bureau Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC), which includes a single question for adult interviewees, at the behest of the BLS, on the "main reason" one is not looking for work if out of the workforce.

The most recent results for prime-age male NILFs can be seen in Table 2. According to ASEC 2017, barely 9 percent of the 7.4 million prime-age men not looking for work in 2016 reported that they were out of the labor market because they could not find any jobs.7 In other words, less than one-tenth of prime-age NILFs described their own circumstances as comporting with the classic definition of the "discouraged worker."

But the Census Bureau's online reference tables drawn from the ASEC data on this issue (the "POV-24" series) present just five alternatives for explaining why a person should not be in the labor force. The ASEC questionnaire offers slightly more options than this to the NILF interviewee: a total of 11 possible answers, out of which five relate to possible willingness to work but inability to find a job.8

Consider what this means: There are roughly seven million stories nowadays of how American men in their prime somehow ended up neither working nor looking for work, yet the Census Bureau and BLS pigeonhole all these life stories into less than a dozen designated slots. It hardly needs saying that such a Procrustean categorization of those stories can only be deeply dissatisfying for anyone seriously interested in understanding the dynamics of male nonwork.

Whatever one calls such intrinsically qualitative contributions, biographers deeply familiar with these grown but workless men's lives could valuably fill this breach. In particular, we should want to learn more about the subgroup of NILF men sometimes known as NEET (those neither employed nor in education or training).

We would need to glean from these accounts the path of events that led these men into worklessness and the nature of the worklessness they experience. How and why exactly did they leave the labor force? How long have they been NILF? Have they ever reentered the workforce since leaving it? Do they do so repeatedly? If so, how and why? How do health problems—personal or familial—figure into the picture? What about other family obligations? And from the moment they awaken to the moment they go to sleep, how do these NEET men spend their time?


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Ill or Disabled</th>
<th>Retired</th>
<th>Home or Family Reasons</th>
<th>Could Not Find Work</th>
<th>School or Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25–54</td>
<td>7,391</td>
<td>3,507</td>
<td>766</td>
<td>851</td>
<td>664</td>
<td>1,604</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scarcely less important than the recounting of the particulars of his circumstances and routines is an introduction to the NEET man’s mentality. What are his hopes and aspirations? What role does employment play in his conception of who he is or who he should be? What is his rationale (or rationalization) for not earning a living on his own? Does he regard his life condition as tolerable, sufficient, hopeless, pleasant, or some admixture of these? Does he regard himself as a hostage to fate in a world he cannot change or as an actor with some agency in his own life story? What about work ethic? Does he feel stigma? Is his work situation different from that of older male family members? If so, how does he explain or reconcile the differences?

Such in-depth biographies may uncover much we are not looking for in advance. But they will most certainly cast light on a key issue in the modern American “men without work” crisis—namely, the willingness of the NEET man to work in the first place.

**Standard of Living and Wealth.** Personal familiarity with the NEET man will allow his biographer to describe his material and financial circumstances in a far more informative manner than researchers can attempt to do at present with available official statistics.

At the moment, government statistics on consumption patterns, financial assets, liabilities, and net wealth for the NILF or NEET man are limited in the extreme. The BLS Consumer Expenditure Survey, the main source of government information on household spending patterns and purchasing power, does not identify whether nonworkers are unemployed or out of the labor force. The BLS Consumer Expenditure Survey, the main source of government information on household spending patterns and purchasing power, does not identify whether nonworkers are unemployed or out of the labor force. The same is true for the Department of Energy’s Residential Energy Consumption Survey, a valuable source of information on home size and condition, vehicle ownership, and possession of various appliances and conveniences, which asks no questions at all about work status. As for the Federal Reserve Board’s Survey of Consumer Finances, the government’s main statistical tool for assessing patterns of household finance, indebtedness, and wealth, it cannot allow interviewees to self-identify as nonworking, nondisabled, non-retirees who are not seeking a job.

A trusted biographer should be able to inform the reader about both objective and subjective dimensions of the NILF or NEET man’s living standards and financial condition. We might hope the biographer could tell us about what he spends and how he spends, what he possesses and what he lacks, and what luxuries he enjoys and what necessities he finds out of reach. We might also hope to learn something about his budgeting habits (or lack of them) and his ability or inability to deal with sudden unexpected expenses or charges.

If he has assets and wealth, what are their main components? Likewise, what about his main debts and liabilities? Does he live in a rented or owned home? If the latter, how and by whom? Does he ever face the risk of eviction or foreclosure? What about bankruptcy or other crises in personal finance? Overall, is his financial situation stable and secure in the biographer’s view? What about the NILF or NEET man’s view of his own economic security? What about his material and financial trajectory? What would empirical evidence suggest? Would the NILF or NEET man see things the same way?

In describing the NILF or NEET man’s material and financial circumstances, the biographer must be alert to the distinction between poverty and misery. Most social scientists and policy researchers today are not mindful of this important difference, so they commonly confuse the two. Poverty pertains to the lack of resources and its consequences. Misery pertains to the degradation of the human condition or spirit. Poverty does not necessarily lead to misery, and misery can abound in homes that are neither poor nor even close to poor. Misery is perhaps more prevalent in modern America than poverty per se—possibly even far more prevalent. Yet the US official information system lacks even the most rudimentary capabilities for tracking or even describing the misery so many in its population must cope with. Qualitative studies of contemporary Americans’ lives may help us reclaim memory of this distinction—a distinction that was plain and widely known to many generations of our forebears.
Disability and Dependence. A major point of contention today in academic and policy research on the long-term US decline in male labor force participation rates concerns the significance of perverse incentives from government social welfare programs in general and disability insurance programs in particular. While some argue these programs have facilitated the male retreat from the workforce and that these guarantees have given rise to adverse and unintended consequences, others maintain that the evidence for such claims is weak. They argue that social benefits for the NILF or NEET man are far from generous and that other factors (such as structural economic change and declining demand for less-skilled labor) are primarily responsible for the male flight from the workforce.

From a methodological standpoint, designing a social science study to show causation rather than just correlation or conjecture between social benefit or disability program expansion and NILF or NEET growth would be a daunting prospect under the best of circumstances, insofar as conventional statistical techniques cannot “prove” causal relationships between any two measured factors. Circumstances are far from ideal today with the availability and quality of US official information on the recipience of official social welfare benefits and disability benefits, and data limitations have contributed to flawed analyses on the potential impact of supply-side effects.

For example, a 2016 White House Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) study of declining male labor force participation rates argued that disability programs could have played only a limited role. Long-term decline was supported by arguing that about only two million of America’s seven million prime-age male NILFs were enrolled in the Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefit program in late 2014. Missing from this assessment was any recognition that SSDI is but one of a panoply of government disability benefits administered (and dispensed) in parallel but without coordination or even contact between many of these varied programs. A partial but not exhaustive list of these programs would include SSDI, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), veterans

### Table 3. Reported Recipience of Disability Benefits for Prime-Age Working Men 25–54 and Their Households: SIPP Survey, 1985 and 2013 (Present)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Prime Male Disability Benefit</th>
<th>Two or More Prime Male Disability Benefits</th>
<th>Disability Benefit, Household Level</th>
<th>Two Disability Benefits, Household Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>NILF</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>NILF</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

benefits, workers’ compensation, and state-level disability benefits.

As it happens, there is no central administrative authority in the US keeping track of the volume of official disability benefits annually dispensed in our nation or the number of recipients obtaining moneys or services from these many programs. This astonishing fact means we cannot even correlate the rise of disability benefits with the rise of the male NILF and NEET populations. An imperfect approximation, however, may be had from the Census Bureau’s Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), which reports, among other things, the government programs benefits respondents say they receive. Table 3 tabulates benefits from only some of the many government disability programs in America: SSDI, SSI, veterans benefits, and some state-level disability programs.

Even so, these numbers show that well over half of prime-age NILF men reported obtaining one or more of these disability benefits in 2013, and two-thirds of prime-age NILF men in 2013 lived in homes supported in part by these disability benefits. Further, one in seven NILF men that year reported obtaining benefits from two or more of these disability programs, and one in six households with prime-age NILF men obtained two or more of these disability benefits.

Generally speaking, self-reported figures on government benefit programs fall short of the totals administrative data indicate in those same programs—so the total proportion of NILF men and NILF households benefiting from disability payments was likely higher than Table 3 indicates. Nonetheless, SIPP data show that the growing population of NILF men and NILF households becomes much more likely to seek and obtain disability benefits over the decades between 1985 and 2013. (The same was also true for NILF men and means-tested government benefits, including Medicaid, SNAP or food stamps, and many others.)

Given the weakness of the quantitative data on disability and social welfare benefits, in-person qualitative investigation could be much more fruitful as a means to understanding the complex relationship between labor market exit and welfare dependence (broadly construed) for the NILF or NEET man. Here again biographers can establish both objective and subjective perspectives: how disability payments and allied benefits figure into the NEET or NILF household’s way of life and how they comport with or shape the NEET or NILF man’s mentality, outlook, identity, and all the rest. The mechanics of interactions with the disability or social welfare systems may matter greatly in all this and are probably worth describing in some detail.

Are NILF and NEET men on government benefits capable of working but satisficing on an alternative of suboptimal nonwork income and consumption path? Or are they hampered by physical, emotional, and other challenges (including possibly addiction) that preclude them from functioning in the paid labor market? This is a deep and terribly important question today, for which existing government statistical information provides only tantalizing hints at answers.

The late Alan Krueger, Princeton economist and CEA chief under President Obama, pointed out in 2017 that nearly half of all prime-age NILF men reported taking some sort of pain medication daily (drawing on respondent answers to the BLS American Time Use Survey 2013 Well-Being Supplement). But we must ask: What sort of pain are they medicating? Physical? Psychological? Metaphysical? Are NILF and NEET men out of the labor force because they are suffering? Or are they suffering because they are out of the workforce? Careful investigators may be able to cast light on these and related questions—and may be especially useful for authoritative judgments in this realm if they have medical qualifications and clinical training.

Criminality and Mass Felonization. One obvious and increasingly inexplicable lacuna in US social statistics is the near-total absence of information on the population of men and women who have been arrested or sentenced in the American criminal justice system. These are not small populations. As of 2016, the total number of Americans with an arrest record was 110 million—over 40 percent of all US adults. That same year, over 90 million criminal history records for living Americans were cataloged in the Interstate Identification Index that law enforcement officials use.
Although the US government attempts no estimates for the size of the US population sentenced to one or more felony conviction, a team of university-based demographers has attempted to reconstruct postwar trends for this group. They concluded that America’s felonized population soared from less than two million in 1948 to nearly 20 million in 2010 (Figure 1). While the phenomenon of mass incarceration and the roughly 2.5 million Americans behind bars occasion considerable public policy discussion today, back-of-the-envelope calculations suggest that such prisoners may account for only a 10th of the total felonized population of the United States today—the overwhelming majority of felons and ex-felons being adult men in society at large.

An adult’s life chances are affected by arrest, felony arrest, felony conviction, and incarceration—with increasingly severe lifetime consequences for each step along the path further into the institutions of crime and punishment. Despite the scandalously little quantitative information from official sources to document the systematic disadvantages these enormous swaths of the US public face, some bits of data are available on the labor force profiles of prime-age men by their involvement with the justice system.

Preliminary indications are that a prime-age man, irrespective of his education or ethnicity, is much more likely to be out of the labor force if he has been incarcerated than if he has “only” been arrested. He is also more likely to be NILF if he has been arrested than if he has had no trouble with the law. But since the Census Bureau, BLS, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the rest of the great US apparatus for generating information of life conditions in modern America continue to neglect the collection of data about justice system history, the special patterns of life particular to arrested and sentenced Americans remain enshrouded in statistical darkness.

Biographers of the NILF and the NEET man can penetrate this darkness. A large share of the prime-age male NEET population has a felony

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**Figure 1. Estimated Population of Felons and Ex-Felons in the US, 1948–2010**

**Prison Records**
- Currently in Prison or on Parole
- Past Prison Experience

**Felony Records**
- Current Felony Supervision
- Past Felony Supervision

conviction in its background, and an even larger share has arrest records. What infractions are in the NILF or NEET man’s biography? To what degree does criminality of various shades continue to characterize his behavior? What role, if any, do drugs and addiction play in this tableau? How does the felonized NILF or NEET man support himself? What sorts of barriers to employment does he face? What role do disability benefits and means-tested government benefits play in his home budget? What are the felonized NILF or NEET man’s living arrangements and family situation—and how have criminality and sentencing affected them? (The impact on relations with his children, if any, should be of special interest here.)

What about the subjective side of the ledger: his state of mind, self-image, and hopes for the future? How decisively has his experiences with the criminal justice system shaped his identity? And to what extent does his mentality seem to account for his absence in the labor market?

Conclusion

Fashioning an informative biography of the NILF or NEET prime-age man will be a work of art—not of science. It will be indispensable to bear this in mind in formulating the assignment and in conducting and completing the work. There will be a temptation to standardize and mass produce family diaries to obtain the widest coverage possible for a limited research budget. But such a research strategy raises risks of superficiality and mediocrity.

It will take a unique person to execute a successful biography of the NILF or NEET man. Some of the skills that person will need can be learned, but the human touch required cannot be taught. Empathy, patience, and a keen eye are necessary conditions for success in this undertaking, but they are not sufficient conditions. Plainly put, a successful biography will not be possible unless the biographer wins the biographee’s trust. And this probably means this project overall will be quintessentially individualistic—and inescapably idiosyncratic.
Notes


11. Federal Reserve, “Codebook for 2016 Survey of Consumer Finances,” https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/files/codebk2016.txt. I looked at x-variable X6670, which asked: “We are interested in your (husband/wife/partner/spouse)’s present job status. (Are you/Is he/Is she/Is he or she) working now, temporarily laid off, unemployed and looking for work, on sick leave, disabled and unable to work, retired, a student, a homemaker, or something else?”


Learning About the Poor Using Ethnography, Household Surveys, and Administrative Data

Bruce D. Meyer

Despite decades of work, researchers have not accurately accounted for who is poor, what is the nature of the poor’s predicament, what led to their situation, and what programs or policies improve their circumstances. Many researchers have suggested that ethnography is the key to answering some of these questions. Indeed, many excellent ethnographers have provided valuable insights, such as Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein who delineate the strategies single mothers used to support themselves and their children before welfare reform. In addition, Jennifer Romich and Thomas Wiesner describe how families use the earned income tax credit.

In this chapter, I suggest that ethnography can play an important role in this research agenda but also argue that many questions seemingly best addressed by ethnographic methods may be more easily and accurately answered by innovatively combining survey and administrative data. I begin by describing ethnography’s strengths and weaknesses and the problem of measurement error. I then describe how linked administrative and survey data can answer many tough questions on the homeless and extreme poverty. I conclude with suggestions for capitalizing on the best aspects of ethnography and other research approaches.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Ethnography

Ethnography has many strengths. It can obtain hard-to-elicit information. In particular, ethnographers have succeeded in asking intrusive questions that require respondents’ trust to obtain good answers. These questions could involve illegal or socially sanctioned behavior, a topic that Edin and Lein cover. The hard-to-elicit information might also reflect individuals’ motivations—a topic Eberstadt emphasizes.

In this case, a researcher may learn how people explain their decisions to not work or to have a child outside of marriage. Ethnography can help survey researchers improve their questions, for example, by asking new questions and allowing people to respond in a way that traditional surveys do not allow. Another advantage of ethnography is the ability to suggest hypotheses to be further tested, as Robert Moffitt emphasizes. One example includes the mechanisms people use to manage their incomes and expenses when they are highly variable.

Ethnography also has notable weaknesses. Almost universally practiced, ethnography delivers a small, highly nonrepresentative sample from which generalization may be difficult. The unstructured interviews that are typically used may not ultimately elicit answers to some of the questions motivating the interviews in the first place.

And importantly, ethnography suffers from a lack of replicability. Replicability has long been recognized as a fundamental feature of good research in many disciplines. With some survey data, researchers may not be able to verify details of a given sample, but they may be able to replicate the approach with a different sample to check the main results. But
with ethnographic studies, a more limited version of replication is often harder because sampling relies on specific idiosyncratic relationships, such as those between neighbors or referrals by acquaintances, producing samples that another researcher cannot easily reproduce.

Measurement Error and Bias in Surveys and Ethnographies

An important though less emphasized drawback of surveys and ethnographies is potential bias due to measurement errors. Research results from either source should not be taken at face value. Evidence clearly shows that the problem of biased responses is particularly important for studies of the disadvantaged. We should expect some of the problems that plague conventional surveys to be potentially even more severe in ethnographies of the poor.

In flagship US household surveys, such as the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (CPS) or Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), systematic errors leading to large biases are present. This problem is evident despite a long list of advantages these structured and codified studies have over ethnographic methods. The CPS methodology has been refined over 70 years and the SIPP’s over 35 years.

The Census Bureau takes many steps to address data quality. For example, Joanne Pascale, in describing the comprehensive research program developed to improve the CPS health insurance questions, reports:

Numerous small-scale studies—both qualitative and quantitative—were fielded and analyzed, and results were fed into subsequent small-scale tests in an iterative fashion. The research approach was to identify features of the questionnaire that were potentially contributing to measurement error, explore and modify those features, and test against the status quo to assess empirical evidence for improvements due to the changes. After a decade of this testing, a fundamentally redesigned questionnaire was crafted.9

The typical CPS field representative has had several years of experience and has received “extensive training on interviewing skills, such as how to handle non-interview situations, how to probe for information, ask questions as worded, and implement face-to-face and telephone techniques.”10 Both the CPS and SIPP surveys have had reinterview programs in which a share of respondent households were interviewed a second time, usually by a supervisor, to check the accuracy of the original interview responses. Phone interviews and laptop data entry from in-person interviews are recorded and can be later examined.

Despite the US Census Bureau’s professionalism and rigor, the CPS and SIPP have substantial errors in some key questions. Focusing on transfers important to those with low income, Bruce Meyer, Wallace Mok, and James Sullivan find that the shares of paid benefits captured in the CPS and SIPP are low and have declined sharply over time.11 In recent years, they find that the CPS is missing 50 percent of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) dollars, 42 percent of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) dollars, 32 percent of unemployment insurance dollars, and 54 percent of workers’ compensation dollars. The missing dollars in the SIPP are lower than in the CPS for TANF and SNAP but higher for unemployment insurance and workers’ compensation. Furthermore, underreporting has sharply worsened over time in the CPS and SIPP, even counting as reported imputed responses, which tend to be less accurate than true reports.

These patterns are also evident in studies that link individual program records to surveys, such as Graton Gathright and Tyler Crabb who examine Social Security and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) reporting in the SIPP. Additionally, Bruce Meyer, Nikolas Mittag, and Robert Goerge examine SNAP reporting in the American Community Survey (ACS), the CPS, and the SIPP.12 Comparing survey reports to administrative data from New York State, Meyer and Mittag find that 63 percent of public assistance recipients in the CPS and 44 percent of recipients in the SIPP do not report receipt of benefits.13 The corresponding numbers for SNAP recipients are 43 and 19 percent in the CPS and SIPP, respectively. Crucially,
measurement error in the poor’s income is not just noise. It has a nonzero mean and thus leads to large biases in many analyses.

These errors affect substantive conclusions about poverty and any measured poverty reduction due to transfer programs. Meyer and Mittag link CPS micro-data to New York administrative micro-data for the beneficiaries of four government transfer programs and find that unreported transfers exceed the recorded income of those with pretax income below half the poverty line. Adam Bee and Joshua Mitchell find that approximately half of pension payments are not reported in the CPS and that accounting for this and other underreporting reduces the elderly poverty rate by over 2 percentage points (about 24 percent). Bruce Meyer and Derek Wu examine the poverty reduction effects of several transfer programs in the SIPP, which has the least underreporting of the major surveys, and find that the survey data miss more than half the poverty reduction of several programs among single parents.

Ethnographies are typically more informal enterprises with few, if any, of the quality checks present in Census Bureau household surveys. If we obtain such skewed responses in a more rigorous and scrutinized situation, we should realize that ethnographic evidence should be viewed with at least the same skepticism applied to many formal survey statistics. This is not to say that ethnographers do not have high standards and impeccable motivations. They undoubtedly do. But even well-intentioned formal interviewers are unable to accurately elicit many basic features of the poor’s economic conditions.

Interviewing those with the greatest disadvantages presents additional difficulties. Motivations and attempts to build a relationship with respondents can distort responses in subtle ways. While a trusting relationship may encourage a respondent to reveal things he or she would not otherwise say, it can also compromise the interviewer. Empathy may make it difficult to question responses that are not entirely accurate.

The most disadvantaged frequently face situations in which they need to alter the truth to get by, whether asking a friend for money, talking with a welfare caseworker, or explaining difficulties to a stranger. The hard objective and scientific approach of formal surveys may do a better job eliciting accurate information. With surveys, we can check individual survey responses through data linkage; we frequently learn that they are not accurate. That way of checking answers is not possible with ethnographies.

**Skepticism and $2-a-Day Poverty**

We should view all data skeptically. We should not presume that any data are without bias. Ethnographic data are likely to have some of the same flaws as household survey data, plus some additional handicaps. If the focus is unusual situations, such as those with very low income, then such “outliers” are crucial to research. Unfortunately, outliers in many situations tend to be observations that are most likely erroneous.

Consider the literature on $2-a-day poverty, sometimes called “extreme poverty.” In a bestselling, award-winning book and in follow-up work, Kathryn Edin and Luke Shaefer argue that the number of families with children living on $2 a day is high and has risen dramatically in recent decades.

The research is a mixture of ethnography and analysis of nationally representative household surveys—a commendable combination. However, when one further examines the data, using the linked data described below, one finds that claims of high rates and sharp growth do not hold up. Specifically, Bruce Meyer et al. link administrative data on earnings and program receipt with the survey data used in the $2-a-day poverty literature and find that the share of those living on extremely low incomes is a tiny fraction of that claimed; in fact, it is hard to find any families with children in the data that fit the descriptions given.

While there are multiple interpretations of this disagreement between the ethnographic and linked data—a failure to generalize, an overdramatization of ethnographic evidence, and a willingness to accept unbelievable stories—the fact remains that key claims of the $2-a-day literature are not true. The ethnography provides a vivid picture of the lives of families getting by on little income, how they ended up so
poor, their aspirations, and how they survive. But the example suggests that ethnographies can also have substantial biases that lead to erroneous conclusions. Because the ethnography’s details cannot be directly verified, the clearest conflict between the $2-a-day claims and what one finds in more accurate data is between the survey data taken at face value (with its reporting errors) and what the linked survey and administrative data provide.

The Promise of Linked Survey and Administrative Data as a Research Tool

At the Census Bureau, we are working on an unprecedented new project that assembles and links survey and administrative data on income, program receipt, expenditures, and closely related information. We call the project the Comprehensive Income Dataset (CID). The project links several Census Bureau surveys including the CPS, SIPP, ACS, and Consumer Expenditure (CE) Survey to tax records and means-tested social insurance program records, such as public and subsidized housing data from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Social Security retirement and disability payments, SSI from the Social Security Administration, Veterans Affairs means-tested pensions and disability benefits, TANF, and SNAP (formerly food stamps) benefits from about half the states.

Our goal is to assemble a nearly complete set of administrative income sources and related information to assess material disadvantage. Although the Census Bureau has not obtained all the necessary interagency data use agreements, the process is ongoing, and the remaining missing sources are likely small. We can obtain a comprehensive picture of the population’s income sources and programs received. We believe the CID will allow us to answer fundamental questions about poverty, including who is poor, under a variety of measures differing on what income or consumption sources are included and which poverty cutoffs are considered.

In assessing who is poor and validating our definitions, we will examine many markers of disadvantage. In doing so, we hope to identify the population that is most materially deprived. We will have information on:

- Household expenditures and consumption to assess the quantities and types of housing, food, transportation, clothing, and other goods and services consumed (in the CE Survey);

- Housing conditions, such as holes in walls and floors, broken windows, electrical problems, leaky plumbing or roofs, pests, and so forth. (in the SIPP) and other housing characteristics (in the CE Survey and potentially the American Housing Survey);

- The ownership of basic and other appliances (in the SIPP and CE Survey);

- Assets owned such as a home that can be lived in, a car that can be driven, and financial resources that can be drawn on (in the SIPP and the CE Survey); and

- Responses to questions (in the SIPP) about hardships faced, such as difficulty paying utility bills or rent and not having enough food.

We have already found that a majority of those in the bottom few percentage of the reported income distribution have badly measured income, and a large share have incomes several multiples higher than their reported incomes, with housing characteristics and freedom from economic hardship similar to the middle class. The demographic makeup of those truly at the bottom is quite different from those who reported being at the bottom in the SIPP and CPS.

Implicit in the advocacy of assembling and using linked data is the presumption that, in many domains, administrative data will be more accurate than traditional survey responses or ethnography will be. While administrative data are not without error—most commonly incompleteness—for questions of income and program receipt, traditional survey data are so frequently erroneous that administrative data sources are likely much more accurate. In other areas, such
as health information and criminal histories that are potentially obtained through administrative data, again administrative data are likely to be more accurate.

Learning Who Is Poor and How the Safety Net Supports Them

Armed with better measures of poverty, we will be able to better answer questions such as: What are the characteristics of those who are most materially deprived? How do they look in terms of family structure, employment, education, age, and other characteristics? With the administrative data, we will be able to identify who receives what government programs and whether recipients are among the families most in need. We will be able to answer: Who does the safety net miss? Are those who do not receive assistance less disadvantaged, and are there identifiable families that are especially deprived and missed by the safety net?

A further question is: Who participates in multiple welfare or social insurance programs? Multiple program receipt appears to be the norm among low-income populations. Nicholas Eberstadt also raised the need to know the patterns of multiple program receipt. For example, the overlaps among recipients of TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, and housing benefits all appear to be high.

Given the large number of overlapping programs and high frequency of reporting errors, the chances of getting the inventory right for a given household in survey data (or likely ethnography) are low. With the linked administrative and survey data, we could see if those who receive multiple benefits have a high level of disadvantage according to many other indicators, including inability to pay bills and low consumption. We can examine if non-recipients can maintain a moderate or high level of consumption and if they need to rely on savings or credit that allow them to get by in bad times.

Alternatively, we may learn that families that appear to be eligible non-recipients are not as deprived and thus may not participate. It is likely that a large share of non-receipt characterized by those eligible for transfer programs is really non-reported receipt in the error-ridden survey responses.

The Economic Situation of the Disadvantaged

More generally, the CID-linked data are a valuable source to assess the bottom’s standard of living by examining income, consumption, assets, liabilities, and the hardship measures and indicators of material well-being discussed above. Individual histories of employment and earnings can also be studied using tax data on employment and earnings. Linked data can also improve household surveys.

Determining Barriers to Success

Understanding why certain individuals are poor requires knowing what barriers inhibit their success. Usually this idea is conceived of as barriers to employment, but the idea is more general and could be applied to barriers to success as an employee, homemaker, caregiver, or other roles. The SIPP covers important domains, including lack of education, disability, housing problems, some information on job displacement, and limited information on drug and alcohol abuse.

In his discussion of the decline in male labor force participation, Eberstadt provides a helpful list of potential barriers to employment that could be investigated through ethnography. These topics include “disability and dependence” and “criminality and mass felonization.” While not currently part of the CID data set, in the future, it may be possible to link survey data and administrative income and program receipt data to medical claims data to learn about mental health and substance abuse. Linking to crime data to understand criminal histories that may be a barrier to employment or an alternative income source is also something that could be done in the near future. I suggest other topics below that could be examined by expanded survey questions.

Changing the Role of Surveys

This volume is about imagining better data to better understand the nature of poverty and related
policy choices, so let me think big for a minute and discuss data that require changes in major surveys’ content, which takes time and money. Some of our major household surveys could shift away from asking detailed income questions if such information is better obtained from government records. Reducing the burden of existing surveys would leave room to ask some of the questions Eberstadt and Moffitt proposed that cannot be answered by currently available linked or potentially linkable data in the near future.

For example, Eberstadt suggests a class of questions about people’s hopes, aspirations, and frustrations. He poses other questions about the stigma of nonwork and people’s work ethic. These questions are less traditional but might illuminate barriers to employment and financial success that people face. We might also add questions about family commitments such as the need to be a caregiver or family dysfunction and abuse that might make success difficult. Eberstadt also notes that information on reasons for nonwork is slim in census surveys, thus suggesting that a more detailed probing of reason for nonwork would be informative.

Reaching the Most Disadvantaged Individuals

If linked survey and administrative data are going to be used to understand the least-advantaged populations in the country, the data must include them. There is good evidence that the main Census Bureau surveys do a good job of recording those with low incomes, though there clearly is undercounting of some important demographic groups.

Two recent studies use a new administrative data-based approach to examine whether the CPS and SIPP cover the entire income distribution. These studies link tax returns to the addresses of respondent and nonrespondent households. They find that income distribution at the bottom is nearly identical for nonrespondents and respondents. While this approach only examines whether low-income households that appear in tax records are equally represented among respondents and nonrespondents, it is more direct evidence than has been obtained from other approaches.

UsingLinked Data to Learn About the Homeless

Linked data (such as the CID) may offer welcome insights into the homeless, likely the most disadvantaged group in our country and certainly an understudied one. This is an ideal group for ethnographic research. Most household surveys omit (or largely omit) the homeless. Some specialized surveys have given us valuable insights into the homeless. For example, Martha Burt et al. provide a wealth of information, but the study is over 20 years old.

However, recent and ongoing research shows that the homeless can be studied using linked administrative data. For example, Stephen Metraux et al. examine the earnings of the homeless over more than two decades by successfully linking New York City Department of Homeless Services data to earnings records from the Social Security Administration.

National information on major components of the homeless population can be obtained from two Census Bureau sources, allowing researchers to generalize their results to the entire US. A large share of those interviewed can be linked over time to administrative data and other sources.

The ACS includes the homeless sleeping in transitional shelters. It asks extensive questions about income and demographics and some limited questions about mental and physical disabilities. These shelter homeless are about two-thirds of the overall homeless at any point in time (and presumably a larger share of those ever homeless). About 70 percent of those sampled are linkable to administrative records. One finds that a significant share of those in a shelter have had formal earnings recorded in a tax return in that year, and the vast majority receive government benefits, most often SNAP or Medicaid. One can trace their earnings and benefit receipt over 10 years with these data and look at their movement across the country and their longevity.

The 2010 Decennial Census includes both those sleeping in shelters and those who are unsheltered (the street homeless). The demographic characteristics are limited, including only age, gender, race, and Hispanic origin. While the shelter homeless can
be linked at a high rate to administrative data, the unsheltered are more problematic, as most cannot be linked to other data sources. Nevertheless, a substantial share—though not a majority—of unsheltered homeless can be linked to other data sources on income and program receipt, providing a window into this hard-to-study population.

In addition, linking administrative data to local shelter homeless data that are longitudinal is also possible. The Census Bureau has long histories of Homeless Management Information System data for several large cities including Los Angeles, California; Chicago, Illinois; and Houston, Texas. Researchers have begun to use such information to learn about the homeless. For example, Metraux et al. examine the employment patterns of the sheltered homeless in New York City. It would be valuable to learn about other aspects of this population, such as drug and alcohol use, mental illness, difficulties in finding and keeping work, connections to other individuals, and histories of living arrangements. Ethnography will play a vital role in this research. Linked survey and administrative data likely will too.

### Conclusions

In conclusion, ethnography has a valuable role in asking intrusive questions and suggesting hypotheses to be tested. However, impediments may mean that the goals of the ethnographies Moffitt and Eberstadt proposed are hard to realize.

This chapter suggests that not all statements from ethnographies should be taken at face value given the potential for biased measurement in all types of surveys, both quantitative and qualitative. Many of the topics that surveys have been incapable of addressing can be examined with linked survey and administrative data. The content of household surveys should shift toward the topics often left to ethnography, while many quantitative questions on topics such as income and program receipt can be answered by linked administrative and survey data.

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Notes


4. Edin and Lein, Making Ends Meet.

5. Eberstadt, “Understanding America’s ‘Men Without Work’ Problem.”


20. We will miss income that is informal and not reported to tax authorities or the Census Bureau. We may be able to infer such missing income from information on expenditures and assets.


22. I have in mind incomplete coverage of a complex set of programs (such as public and subsidized housing) or missing data that come from one contributor of administrative records (defined by program or geography, for example) being omitted over time.


25. Take-up will always be hard to determine, especially without linked data; survey data rarely have the information used to determine eligibility, and administrative data have it only for recipients, if at all.


27. Eberstadt, “Understanding America’s ‘Men Without Work’ Problem.”


29. Eberstadt, “Understanding America’s ‘Men Without Work’ Problem.”


32. While many poor individuals do not appear in tax records, the low-income working population is highly represented due to the advantages of claiming the earned income tax credit, which requires filing a tax return.


34. The CPS and SIPP include small numbers of individuals in homeless shelters, but they are not close to being fully covered in the sample frame.


38. While non-linking is not random, the survey data include survey measures of many of the outcomes of interest, such as income and program receipt. Thus, adjustment for non-linking, such as inverse probability weighting that uses those variables, is likely to
eliminate a large share of any bias when examining administrative income or program receipt as outcomes.

About the Authors

Nicholas Eberstadt holds the Henry Wendt Chair in Political Economy at the American Enterprise Institute, where he researches and writes extensively on global demographics and economic development. Domestically, he focuses on poverty and social well-being. Eberstadt is also a senior adviser to the National Bureau of Asian Research. His many books and monographs include *Men Without Work: America’s Invisible Crisis* (Templeton Press, 2016), *The Poverty of “The Poverty Rate”: Measure and Mismeasure of Want in Modern America* (AEI Press, 2008), *The Tyranny of Numbers: Mismeasurement and Misrule* (AEI Press, 1995), and *Poverty in China* (IDI, 1979). He has offered invited testimony before Congress on numerous occasions and has served as consultant or adviser for a variety of units in the US government. Eberstadt has a PhD in political economy and government, an MPA from the Kennedy School of Government, and an AB from Harvard University. In addition, he holds a master of science from the London School of Economics. In 2012, he was awarded the prestigious Bradley Prize.

Aparna Mathur is a resident scholar in economic policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, where she researches income inequality and mobility, tax policy, labor markets, and small businesses. She also directs the AEI-Brookings Project on Paid Family and Medical Leave, for which she was recognized in the 2017 Politico 50 list. Before joining AEI, Mathur was an instructor in economics at the University of Maryland. She also has been an adjunct professor at Georgetown University’s School of Public Policy (now the McCourt School of Public Policy). She has been published in several top scholarly journals and in the popular press on issues of policy relevance. Her work has been cited in academic journals and leading news outlets such as *Bloomberg Businessweek, Financial Times, the Economist,* and the *Wall Street Journal.* She has testified several times before Congress, and government organizations such as the Congressional Research Service and the Congressional Budget Office have cited her work in their reports to Congress. The holder of a PhD and an MA in economics from the University of Maryland, College Park, Mathur also has an MA in economics from the Delhi School of Economics and a BA from Hindu College at Delhi University in India.

Bruce D. Meyer is the McCormick Foundation Professor at the University of Chicago’s Harris School of Public Policy, where he has been since 2004. He is a research associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research, a visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, and a part-time employee of the US Census Bureau. He studies poverty and inequality, tax policy, the accuracy of household surveys, and government safety-net programs such as unemployment insurance, workers’ compensation, food stamps, and Medicaid. From 1987 to 2004, Meyer was a professor in the economics department at Northwestern University. He received a BA and MA in economics from Northwestern University in 1981 and a PhD in economics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1987.

Robert A. Moffitt is Krieger-Eisenhower Professor of Economics at Johns Hopkins University and holds a joint appointment with the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. His research is on the economics of poverty and welfare programs for the poor and the economics of the labor market. He is a past Guggenheim Fellow, a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the National Academy of Sciences, a fellow of the Econometric Society, a recipient of a MERIT Award from the National Institutes of Health, and a past chief editor of the flagship journal of the American Economic Association, the *American Economic Review.*
Sally Satel is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and the staff psychiatrist at a local methadone clinic in Washington, DC. She was an assistant professor of psychiatry at Yale University from 1988 to 1993 and remains a lecturer at Yale. From 1993 to 1994, she was a Robert Wood Johnson policy fellow with the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee. She has written widely in academic journals on psychiatry and medicine and has published articles on cultural aspects of medicine and science in numerous magazines and journals. She has testified before Congress on veterans’ issues, mental health policy, drug courts, and health disparities. Satel is author of *PC, M.D.: How Political Correctness Is Corrupting Medicine* (Basic Books, 2001) and *Drug Treatment: The Case for Coercion* (AEI Press, 1999). She is coauthor of *The Health Disparity Myth: Diagnosing the Treatment Gap* (AEI Press, 2006) and *One Nation Under Therapy: How Helping the Culture Is Eroding Self-Reliance* (St. Martin’s Press, 2005) and editor of *When Altruism Isn’t Enough: The Case for Compensating Kidney Donors* (AEI Press, 2009). Her recent book, coauthored with Emory University psychologist Scott Lilienfeld, is *Brainwashed: The Seductive Appeal of Mindless Neuroscience* (Basic Books, 2013). *Brainwashed* was a finalist for the 2013 Los Angeles Times Book Prize in Science.

Jennifer M. Silva joined the O’Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University in 2019. Previously, she taught sociology at Bucknell University. She was also a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University, where she studied the impact of economic insecurity on social connectedness and civic engagement. Silva has authored two books exploring American working-class culture, including *We’re Still Here: Pain and Politics in the Heart of America* (Oxford University Press, 2019) and *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (Oxford University Press, 2013). Her research has been covered by the New York Times, New Yorker, Boston Globe, Chronicle of Higher Education, Atlantic, Slate, Boston Review, Marketplace, and On Point. She earned a PhD and MA in sociology from the University of Virginia.

W. Bradford Wilcox is director of the National Marriage Project and professor of sociology at the University of Virginia. He is also a visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and the author of many books, including *Soul Mates: Religion, Sex, Love, and Marriage Among African Americans and Latinos* (Oxford University Press, 2016). His research on family life is regularly featured in the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and other media outlets. Wilcox has a master’s degree and a doctorate in sociology from Princeton University and a bachelor’s degree in government from the University of Virginia.