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“Whatever I Have to Do That’s Right:” Culture and the Precariousness of Personhood in a Poor Urban Neighborhood

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Abstract

This article presents a person-centered case study of one woman’s struggles to realize a meaningful sense of personhood in a low-income urban neighborhood in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. An analysis of longitudinal ethnographic data for this case reveals how everyday aspirations toward a morally resonant lived-sense of personhood were informed by a core assemblage of three cultural models: “providing” and “being there” as a parent and doing so within a framework of “defensive individualism”. This assemblage of cultural models was particularly compelling because of a combination of the embodied residue of childhood experiences and moments of “moral breakdown” in adult life. The experiences of moral breakdown were particularly meaningful because recurrent episodes of material hardship that constantly threatened to upend past efforts to realize a meaningful sense of personhood in everyday life and, in turn, generated a constant effort to reclaim and repair the symbolic markers of an achieved personhood that had been lost. These observations point to a precariousness of personhood that seemed to further motivate an investment in a self-definition in terms of this combination of cultural models.

Keywords

culture; poverty; personhood; moral breakdown; motivation

“I don’t consider myself in poverty or you know, low class or middle-class or high-class, I’m just doing what I have to do, legally, to survive...I want to take care of my kids, take care of my family, whatever I have to do that’s *right*.”

– Heather Mills (a pseudonym, emphasis added)

How do people like Heather Mills, a 28-year old, employed, African-American woman and divorced mother of two young children living in one of the low-income neighborhoods of Milwaukee, Wisconsin manage to take care of themselves and their children when income from employment and other social supports is often inadequate? What does she mean when she says that she is taking care of her family in a way “that’s right” such that she is not “in poverty”? To answer these questions, we need to explore not only the pragmatic strategies Heather might deploy to enable her to survive economically given the structural constraints she encounters, but also the symbolically elaborated meanings that help frame the contours of the potential actions she might take that confer a sense of both dignity and moral

acceptability. In other words, we would need to explore the material *and* cultural dimensions of her everyday pursuits within a socially and economically marginal, post-industrial urban neighborhood of the United States.

Recently there has been a reconsideration of culture in poverty studies that seeks to move beyond the culture-structure antinomy of earlier work (Appadurai 2004; Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010). In spite of this productive work retheorizing culture at a collective level, how culture matters for individual lives remains an important, but under-investigated area of research. How we deploy a theory of culture that does not reproduce the long recognized problematic trope of the “over-socialized cultural dope” (Garfinkel 1967) is particularly central in this regard. The theory of “cultural repertoires” is one approach that attempts to bridge the gap between culture as a collectively held system of symbolic meaning and agentic, individual action (Hannerz 1969; Swidler 1986, 2001). This approach views culture at an individual-level in terms of assemblages of publicly accessible cultural models that people learn and that become part of their personal repertoires or a sort of cultural “tool-kit” to be called upon by the actor when needed to negotiate particular situations. Some of the variation in the way people cope with and escape conditions of socioeconomic insecurity may reflect variation in personal repertoires of collectively available cultural schemas and models (Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010).

But, as some critics have noted (e.g., Quinn 1997), the cultural repertoires approach does not adequately consider why particular cultural resources that individuals might have available become so emotionally compelling, meaningful, and motivating, while others less so. Quinn (1987, 2013) and Hollan (2014) reflect a long line of thought in psychological anthropology that stresses how the psychodynamic residue of social-emotional experiences in infancy and childhood as important sources of the motivational force of culture (see also Levine 2010). More recent work has examined how ongoing experiences of “moral breakdown” in adults’ everyday projects aimed at realizing a valued sense of personhood can also matter (Zigon 2007).

This article uses a person-centered framework (Hollan 2001; Levy and Hollan 2014) to explore how assemblages of cultural models that make up individual repertoires become emotionally compelling and durable guides for meaning and action, often to such a degree that they become the “ground projects” that fundamentally root one’s experience of personhood within their lifeworld (Mattingly 2014; Rubin this issue). To meet this goal, the article presents an ethnographically informed case-study of Heather’s struggles to realize her core ground projects of being a good mother and a financially autonomous adult within an enduring lifeworld characterized by recurrent economic insecurity. The analysis demonstrates that the emotionally laden experiences surrounding everyday attempts to realize these projects, and her motivations to overcome the obstacles she encountered along the way, were shaped by a combination of the intrapsychic residues from recurrent emotionally fraught childhood experiences and also moments of moral breakdown that had occurred at many critical junctures of her life.

The Return of “Culture” as an Explanatory Device in Urban Poverty Studies

To begin our discussion of the return of culture in poverty studies, it is important to review why culture, as a theoretical device that might explain differences in social and behavioral patterns between the residents of poor and those of wealthier urban neighborhoods, has been so sharply criticized. There are three main criticisms. First, these theories often present the problematic image of the urban poor as subcultural isolates who act as “cultural dopes” (Garfinkel 1967), capable only of reproducing “the stable features of the society [or subculture] by acting in compliance with the preestablished and legitimate [at least for the subculture] alternatives of action that the common culture provides” (68). Such accounts dehumanize social agents by denying their practical capabilities of making reasonable and morally responsible judgments in order to fashion survival strategies that may not make sense to wealthier segments of society, but do within conditions of extreme social and economic marginality (Stack 1974, Rapp 1987; Goode 2002). As an alternative, critical approaches of human action among the urban poor embrace the image of the human individual as an “active, skilful [*sic.*], interpretive, reflexive agent” as opposed to the “passive, socially and environmentally determined subject portrayed in classical social theory” (Pleasant 1999, 124). Second, cultural approaches often deny the urban poor the capacity for political consciousness and agency (Goode and Maskovsky 2000; Appadurai 2004). Finally, cultural approaches have tended to deemphasize the pathologies created by societal structures that harm the poor through forms of structural violence, while also limiting the opportunities and choices of the urban poor to pursue better lives and outcomes, placing the blame instead on the lifestyles and cultural preferences of the urban poor themselves (Farmer 2004; Goode 2002; Goode and Maskovsky 2000).

While recent critical studies of urban poverty reinsert the image of the skillful, reflexive human agent into their accounts, they downplay the equally human construction of more enduring cultural worlds or collectively held systems of symbolic representation that help structure, stabilize, and give meaning to the otherwise fleeting social relations, experiences, and endeavors that accompany everyday life (Arendt 1958; Searle 1995, 2010; Strauss and Quinn 1997). A more complete account of human action would recognize the way people draw upon the cultural resources available to them as guides and frameworks that enable them to deploy meaningful and often morally resonant strategies for survival and social belonging. In addition, such accounts need to recognize that the sources of the motivational force of culture in human action that often stem from unconscious, non-reflexive, and embodied processes that are themselves often the sediments of individual developmental histories and contemporary dilemmas that accompany moral being-in-the-world (D’Andrade and Strauss 1992; Hollan 2014; Quinn 2015; Strauss and Quinn 1998; Zigon 2007). What is needed is a theoretical account of culture that brings these elements together.

Cultural meanings and the structuring of cultural disjuncture

How can we define “culture” as it matters for individual action? Studies using the cultural repertoires approach define culture as collections of publicly accessible, intersubjective symbolic units that, when learned as cognitive schemas, “allow individuals to structure and give meaning to common behaviors and social situations that that provide individuals with a

guide for what appropriate behavior looks like” in particular circumstances (Smith 2010: 32). Individual schemas become cultural schemas or more elaborate cultural models to the extent that they come to be shared as a result of common experiences with the “regular occurrences of the humanly created world” (Strauss and Quinn 1998:6). This more “particulate” notion of culture (D’Andrade 1996) suggests that collections of cultural schemas can be assembled differently among residents in different communities, leading to locally shared repertoires that may share some elements with those in other communities while others elements will be highly community specific. Structural processes play an important role in shaping local assemblies of cultural understandings that social actors have available such that the way actors are structurally positioned “affects the cultural resources they have access to and deploy” (Smith 2010: 32).

Cultural models alone do not determine the meaningfulness of individual experience. Rather, meanings emerge, in part, or from the interaction of schemas and the things encountered in the world in the course of everyday experience (Strauss and Quinn 1998). Moreover, while early culture theories of these meaning generating interactions emphasized their conjunctive and coherent aspects, more contemporary work has shown that these interactions can also be disjunctive and incoherent (Appadurai 1996, Strauss and Quinn 1998). Further, structural inequalities may generate much of the difference between the conjunctive and disjunctive in the generation of cultural meanings.

As an example, consider Nelson and Edin’s (2013) and Edin and Kalafas’s (2005) studies of low-income mothers and fathers in poor neighborhoods across a number of cities in the United States. They found two widely shared cultural schemas that informed a general sense of what defined good, responsible parenting among their study participants, a schema of “providing” and a schema of “being there.” Edin and Kalafas (2005) give the example from one of their study participants, Dominique,

For Dominique, the essence of a good mother is someone “who pays *attention* to her children, someone who’s *there* for their children, supportive of them, does her best to provide for them.” But she says, in essence, good mothering is really about being there. “You don’t have to be a super mom, just be there for them ... You don’t have to have a fancy this or a fancy that, just togetherness with your children” (141, emphasis in the original).

As this quote suggests, the realization of “being there” and “providing” for one’s children in everyday life often exist in relations of tension and disjuncture (Lowe and Weisner 2004; Lowe 2016; Rubin, this issue). Structural conditions associated with labor markets limit most of the possibilities of earning income that enables many parents to provide for their families to employment outside of the home. In low-income neighborhoods where daytime work opportunities at decent wages are scarce, working outside of the home is often for long hours, during odd shifts, and possibly at multiple jobs to make ends meet (Yoshikawa, Weisner, and Lowe 2005). For married or co-resident parents, these structural constraints in the United States may mean splitting providing and being there in normatively gendered patterns (e.g., men “provide” and women are home “being there” for their children) or working different shifts as a dual-earner household (Strauss 1992; Presser 1988). In areas of high male-unemployment, female-headed families often attempt to combine “providing” and

“being there” as the mother’s responsibility, which becomes an additional site of disjuncture and stress that is not always adequately resolved by the availability of local child care services (Edin and Kalafas 2005; Lowe and Weisner 2004; Rubin this issue).

Given these encounters of structurally produced disjuncture in experiences of parenting, many among the urban poor deploy a strategy of cultivated, extensive alternative support networks among kith and kin (Stack 1974). The formation and use of potentially supportive social relationships, however, is often moderated by the salience of a third cultural model, one of “defensive individualism” and self-reliance that has been described as part of the cultural repertoires among the urban poor in the United States (Smith 2007, 2010). This model is particularly salient as a result of poor people’s awareness of their position within larger political discourses. For example, Smith (2007) found that job seekers and other members of their social networks adopted the widely available cultural understanding of individualism and self-reliance to understand both joblessness and persistent poverty in their community. But, these unemployed African-American men and women were aware of the way they were often targeted by the politicians and pundits to discuss both the pathological causes of poverty and what could be done about it. In reaction to these political discourses, her study participants adopted a schema of defensive individualism. Smith (2007) writes,

Within the context of poverty, friends, relatives, acquaintances, and institutions in their social milieu blamed the black poor and jobless for their persistent joblessness, deploying discourses of joblessness that privileged individual’s moral shortcomings and stressed personal responsibility and self-sufficiency as a panacea. Cognizant of how they were viewed and of how their joblessness was understood, job-seekers became defensive individualists. (Smith 2007, 22)

The people Smith studied were reluctant to offer aid to or seek support from members of their own networks, as they feared that possible non-normative, “street” or “ghetto” (Anderson 1990) dispositions of these others might harm their own reputations as reliable workers. As a result, they approached others who might need or be able to offer help with some degree of distrust and suspicion; at least until those seeking support demonstrated clear signs of trustworthiness by taking personal responsibility for their lack of employment (also Smith 2010).

The sources of the motivational force of cultural experience

While repertoires of culture and the personal understandings people develop from them may act as a sort of “tool kit” that can help frame and guide action, as well as provide an array of strategies that might help people manage structurally induced dilemmas and disjuncture, they are not the only sources that motivate action (D’Andrade and Strauss 1992; Hollan 1997; Strauss and Quinn 1998). Moreover, given that people may have multiple schemas that could help in negotiating particular sites of disjuncture and practical dilemma, a theory of cultural repertoires as articulated here is inadequate to explain why some schemas become part of a person’s repertoire as opposed to others. Of course, for many, this is precisely where the contemporary view of the actor as an active, skillful, interpretive, and reflexive agent may come into play. Structural conditions may introduce constraints on action that make particular cultural schemas attractive to the agents because they fit well

with the strategies agents develop around persistent structural limitations that they encounter (Derné 1994; Goode 2002). Such a view presents humans primarily as reflexive, reasoning beings and the motivational force of cultural experience as mainly emerging from the practical and political demands of the strategic maneuvers of individual agents.

Naomi Quinn has argued that such a view does not adequately account for why people's investment in the particular cultural schemas that they deploy are so emotionally laden, often ambivalent, compelling, and differentially so for different individuals in the same community (Hollan 1997; 2014; Quinn 1997: 191). To account for these, a more dynamic view of the human psyche is needed. Quinn argues that psychodynamic explanations offer important insights into the emotional and motivational dimensions of our cultural lives (Strauss and Quinn 1997; Quinn 2015). The embodied residue of emotionally fraught experiences across the life course can produce enduring "less conscious, less organized parts of our minds and memories [t]hat are stirred in our encounters with others" and which help to determine which of the available cultural models are used to manifest and articulate those ground projects that give human lives meaning in particular social, political, and economic contexts (Hollan 2014, 191).

For example, the attachment of many in the United States to cultural models that emphasize individualist autonomy may be motivated by the mostly unconscious residue of emotionally fraught dependency conflicts throughout the early decades of life. Quinn (1997) has argued that for many adults in the United States the emotional tone and motivationally compelling nature of a widespread cultural models for love and marriage may stem from psychodynamic patterns that develop around both the cultural organization and the individual experience of infantile attachment to one's caretakers. In addition, Beatrice Whiting (1978, also Weisner 2001) identified structurally induced conflicts over dependency as a key feature of childhood for many in the United States. These conflicts depend, on the one hand, on enacting cultural schemas or models for the development of autonomy by effusively encouraging children to act independently and self-reliantly in their social worlds. On the other hand, children are strongly expected to accept a certain type of "dominant-dependency" on powerful adults like teachers and parents, upon whom they are also structurally dependent for a wide range of personal needs. So, many children in the United States are sent at an early age to schools where they are emotionally rewarded for displays of autonomy, particularly in relation to their peers. Children are simultaneously encouraged and emotionally rewarded for "seeking out and being dependent on adult affections and rewards," particularly those of parents, teachers, and other powerful adults (Weisner 2001: 272). Whiting (1978) found that this conflict was particularly prominent among middle-class families. More recent ethnographic work suggests that among the working classes there is a greater emphasis on independence and autonomy in children's lives, with less adult direction of and control over children's everyday activities at home and in the neighborhood (Lareau 2003; Anderson 2001). Nevertheless, poor and working class children are still typically expected to accept the strong assertion of authority by adults, particularly among their older kin. By the time they are young adults in the United States, many come to identify strongly with the ideal of self-reliance, individualism, and autonomy (Gerson 2010). Yet, for young women in particular, concerns about whether they should become economically dependent on others in adult life, such as a husband, remain emotionally fraught issues.

Finally, the experiences of moral being-in-the-world can also be a significant source of motivation, particular everyday moments of “moral breakdown” (Zigon 2007). Drawing from phenomenology, this view argues that people who are socialized into particular social worlds generally master them in the sense that, when acting in them, often take-as-granted their moral standing in those worlds. For this reason, people are not always conscious agents, rationally finding strategies to accomplish their goals. Most of the time, people experience the flow of their own activity as being consonant with moralities present in their social worlds. People do become consciously aware of their moral positioning, or their present consonance with cultural scripts for how one ought to be in the world, during moments or experiences of “moral breakdown,” those “moments that shake one out of the everydayness of being moral” (Zigon 2007, 132). In these moments people come to feel sharply and think intensively about their personal standing in the social world and engage in various strategies for returning to, reasserting, or rebuilding their moral standing in symbolic, social-relational, and experiential terms. Some of these strategies might include reasoning and choice, but other coping strategies are possible (Zigon 2007). The importance of moments of moral breakdown for studies of urban poverty is that they provide windows into conscious problem solving and agency, against the more general background of non-reflexive, skilled moral being-in-the-world. While the episodes of conscious reflection that accompany moral breakdown may have practical and political aspects, they will also involve the way cultural resources are drawn on to define pursuits that reflect broader moral considerations that are symbolically elaborated and socially produced (cf., Kahneman 2011).

The Present Study: Toward a Person-Centered View of Coping with Poverty

There is a need to understand how culture matters for the ways people cope with poverty and economic disadvantage that recognizes that multiple sources of motivation for orienting one’s self within particular culturally elaborated frameworks and modes of being. Some of these will include conscious political-economic agency, but how certain symbolic themes resonate with other experiential processes, particularly those developed through emotionally charged, often disjunctive experiences throughout the life course also matter. It is the combination of these that often shape the way people pursue not just economic and political interests but the full range of being-in-the-world that may be meaningful to them, both consciously and unconsciously, and that define the experience of personhood in the social worlds. Psychological anthropologists have long examined how the regularly reoccurring and often ambivalent dilemmas of infantile and childhood experience might matter. But the analysis presented in this article explores how moments of moral breakdown can also be important.

This study takes a person-centered approach. While the typical goal of ethnography is to describe the general patterns of the social and cultural aspects of everyday life within particular sites of investigation, person-centered ethnography is an approach that tries to capture more experience-near dimensions of human lives, with an emphasis on the subjective and psychological aspects of everyday experience (Hollan 1997; 2001; Levy and Hollan 2014; Levine 1982). A person-centered approach, while including an emphasis on specific individual lives and subjectivities, also recognizes that “personhood” must also include the moral dimensions of experience (Hollan 2001). A person-centered analysis of a

single case followed over nearly two years allows for an appreciation of how individuals who are embedded within particular structural locations draw on a range of cultural resources, strategies, and embodied skills to pursue those “ground projects” (Mattingly 2014:9) that give their lives meaning while also negotiating the various obstacles that limit their possibilities for realizing these projects in full.

The discussion that follows explores the subjective experiences associated with one woman’s struggles to meet the practical demands of family and household economic needs while negotiating potential sources of financial support. These struggles are framed within a larger project of fashioning a meaningful and morally resonant sense of personhood that is shaped by the broader social and cultural themes as described in the qualitative studies of Smith (2007, 2010), Edin and Kalafas (2005), and Gerson (2010). This strategy enables an exploration of how cultural models for “providing,” “being there,” and “defensive individualism/self-reliance” become meaningful within the context of particular lived experiences, where actors with particular goals, strategies, and intentions must negotiate constraints and opportunities in their life worlds. This analytic strategy also enables an exploration of the individual sources of emotional and motivational force for cultural models, rather than simply assume these, as is typical of more standard ethnographic approaches (Hollan 1997).

The case explored here is that of Heather Mills (a pseudonym), one of 44 women who, along with the other members of her household, participated in the longitudinal New Hope Ethnographic Study (NHES) that took place between the spring of 1998 and 2001 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (see Lowe and Weisner 2004; Yoshikawa, Weisner and Lowe 2005). The longitudinal study of the ethnographic sample was part of a larger assessment of the New Hope antipoverty demonstration project that had been active in two low-income neighborhoods between 1994 and 1998 (see Bos, Huston, Granger et al., 1999). The NHES was a team-ethnography, with several fieldworkers who were assigned a subset of families to visit about every other month for the duration of the family’s participation in the study. Each visit consisted of guided, semi-structured interviews where study participants were invited to talk about how things had been going in their lives lately. Fieldworkers used a guide that prompted them to ask about a number of domains of family life, including household finances, the children’s lives, childcare and schools, broader family support networks, the women’s experiences with employment, their experiences with state welfare services, subsidies, and supports, their relationships with the children’s fathers and other men, health issues, and the participants’ hopes and aspirations. After each visit, fieldworkers would compile fieldnotes, with specific notes organized into these domains. Heather was visited about eleven times between the spring of 1998 and summer of 2000.

Heather and about half of the other NHES families lived in a predominantly African-American “Northside” Milwaukee neighborhood for most of the period of the study. The remaining families lived in an ethnically-mixed “Southside” neighborhood that is an enclave for working-class immigrants, primarily Latinos from Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Central America. The Northside neighborhood in which Heather lived is in many ways typical of social-spatially segregated neighborhoods in many cities of the United States (Massey and Denton 1993). Table 1 shows select demographic characteristics from the 2000 US census

for the Northside neighborhood where the New Hope offices were located. It is important to note that this Northside neighborhood was a transitional zone between wealthier, whiter neighborhoods to the west and southwest and poorer, much more predominantly African-American neighborhoods just to the east and northeast. For a description of the sharp shift in visual markers of disparity one finds in the built environment between the wealthier neighborhoods to the west and the poorer, Northside neighborhoods of Milwaukee see Yoshikawa, Weisner, and Lowe (2005:1–2).

When she enrolled in the study in 1998, Heather was a 28-year-old divorced mother of two young children. She was a high-school graduate, had taken some college courses, but did not complete a degree. She lived alone with her small children and worked two jobs, a day-job at a “drop-in” childcare center and a night job at a residential care facility for youths. Heather’s annual income from both jobs was about \$22,000, about \$9,000 more than the official poverty threshold for a family of three in 1997 (\$12,931). Heather had been divorced from her first husband for about two years in 1998; since that time she became involved with another man, Leon (a pseudonym), and was in the first trimester of a pregnancy with their first child. They were engaged to marry, but no date had been set. Leon was living and working in Chicago as a truck driver. He would visit Heather when he had the time off from work. While Heather’s story cannot represent all of the experiences of the participants in the New Hope study, her case is typical of many of those participants residing in the Northside neighborhood.

Findings

An assemblage of the cultural schemas “providing,” “being there,” and “individualism”

During one of the earliest field visits, Heather reported a particularly difficult period of financial strain that occurred about one year earlier. She was divorced for about a year at that time and had initially worked two jobs in order to earn enough to form a new household and to provide for her kids. But she worried that she was not available for her children when working so much. So she quit one of her jobs. She described the felt financial consequences for that decision as follows:

Last summer I had only worked one job, but it was hard. Man it was hard, I had my rent, I had my car note, I had the kids’ expenses and I had my expenses. I’m not really expensive but I, whenever I want something I want it. I want it right then and there. It doesn’t have to be expensive or anything. I just like to be comfortable in knowing that if I need anything or if my kids need anything and I’m just sitting there with no money at all. That just like the worst feeling to me ... because I can imagine what my mother felt. My mother raised four kids by herself and she was working part-time and going to school part time. And my brothers were not understanding at all. It was hard enough trying to study to be a nurse, plus she’s trying to work so they can have a decent Christmas, Easter, whatever. I know that she...my mother had a hard time, and – I don’t know – I think that if I can avoid that situation. [NHES Fieldnotes Sept. 9, 1998]

In this quotation, Heather is clearly referencing a cultural schema that associated “good parenting” with adequately providing for one’s children, not just in terms of their basic needs, but also in terms of the little extras such as having a “good Christmas” that convey a sense of social inclusion and belonging (Mistry and Lowe 2005; Mistry, Lowe, Benner, and Chien 2008). We also get a sense in Heather’s statement of the embodied residue of emotionally fraught encounters with economic inadequacy in her childhood household. She described her struggles to provide for her children as “the worst feeling,” which related to her childhood experiences of her own mother’s struggles to provide for her and her brothers. While there is some sense here of Heather’s dependency on her mother as the household’s sole provider, she was also concerned about the way her brothers judged their mother’s inability to provide a “decent Christmas, Easter, whatever.” So, there is both a psychodynamic element here and something more. Heather appears to be remembering a moral breakdown, a moment when the taken-for-granted nature of Heather’s mother’s ability to provide for her children failed. This moment seemed to have troubled Heather because she felt that the breakdown had not been her mother’s fault, but was a reflection of a disjuncture between her mother’s desire to both provide for her children and to pursue an educational opportunity that would lead to a better standard of living in the future.

Heather was keen to avoid the same situation and discussed several strategies for striking a balance between the disjunctive demands of both providing for her children while also being there for them. Heather’s solution was to take a part-time job during the day at a daycare center where her children could stay and a full time night shift job at a group home for children where Heather’s children were able to sleep at night. Heather was proud of her ability to find a workable solution. She commented at the time that the best part of being a single mother was,

that I can do it, you know. I found that I have been in some tight situations. Every time when I thought I was at my breaking point, I was lifting up. I rose above it and survived for the better. I know I have the strength to handle anything. [NHES Fieldnotes Sept. 9, 1998]

At the same time, Heather hoped that a better solution would present itself. She said,

With me working third-shift, [as] oppose[d] to staying home and sleeping in their own bed, they have to go and sleep on the couch, you know. I don’t like that at all! That is one thing that I am praying really hard about too. That God will bless me in a way that I don’t have to work anymore. [NHES Fieldnotes Sept. 9, 1998]

One strategy that Heather and the fieldworker discussed was to seek support from that state’s welfare services, Wisconsin Works – or W2 as it is known locally – so she could work less and have some additional sources of financial support. But this presented another moral dilemma for Heather that she was very keen to avoid. Heather said,

I never want to be on welfare. Because it seems that when I went to court that day that woman [who represented Heather in a child support case before the court] wanted me to say that, “well I have W2 ... I’m trying to get a job. I’ve been on the job net every day.” She seemed like she rather I say that so she could say that she was taking care of me with her tax money, with your taxes. I’m not giving you, or

anybody the opportunity to say that. If I'm going to be part of a statistic, I want to be part of a good statistic you know? I don't consider myself in poverty or you know, low class or middle-class or high-class, I'm just doing what I have to do, legally, to survive...I want to take care of my kids, take care of my family, whatever I have to do that's right. [NHES Fieldnotes Sept. 9, 1998]

Here is a clear reference to the cultural model of individualism and self-reliance that is so widespread in the United States. But, as Smith (2007, 2010) found in her work in Michigan and California, Heather's taking personal responsibility for the care of her children as opposed to depending on the state's welfare services was defensive in nature. She was not going to allow others in the community to judge her by saying that she was dependent on them, thereby contributing to a "bad statistic" as a member of the set of welfare-reliant families. She would be part of a "good statistic" by taking personal responsibility to care of her children on her own.

Moral breakdown and Heather's ambivalent acceptance of her fiancé's financial support

In that early conversation, one could see Heather's embrace of the schema of individualism as a defensive strategic choice that enabled her to maintain a sense of dignity and positive moral standing in the community. Her strong attachment to individualism, in addition to the cultural schemas of providing and being there for her children, would be a theme that she returned to again and again over the course of the next two years. This schema was not only a guide for action, but also a deeply felt and motivating source of self-definition. For example, while working and earning her own income was an important theme across this period, Heather complained about the quality of her jobs. One of her main concerns was that she found that she was going to work because she needed to go. She also found her coworkers petty and her bosses at times overbearing. She dreamed of finding work that reflected more of what she wanted to do, or that she could do voluntarily, without worrying about the income. For example, early in the study she described really wanting to do volunteer work, possibly as a motivational speaker for teens. Later in the study, she complained about wanting more autonomy at work and discussed starting her own child care business where she could be her own boss.

But themes of individualism and self-reliance, inflected with a deep ambivalence over economic dependency, were prominent in regard to her discomfort with accepting financial support from her fiancé, Leon, over the first year of the study. When Heather first entered the study, she reported that Leon regularly offered to help by paying Heather's rent, but she was uncomfortable taking his support. Heather reported that accepting his help made her feel as though she owed him; it left her feeling as if she was not in control of her own household finances. She did not like feeling so ambivalent about Leon's offers of financial support. Her discomfort had little to do with Leon personally, but stemmed from her experience of having lost so much when she divorced her first husband. In particular, Heather felt that she had lost an entire household – particularly symbolized by its furnishings – that she had built as the central feature of providing for her children during the marriage. Since the divorce, she had worked hard to earn the money she needed to rebuild a household for herself and her children. She was not ready to lose control over that to Leon.

This pattern continued for much of the next year. Their baby was born in January 1999 and Leon moved into Heather's apartment for a month to help out, commuting to his job in Chicago during this time. While they were living together, Leon helped to pay for the phone bill, groceries, and for some of the baby's needs. But, Heather would not allow him to pay the rent. Heather was taking about two months of maternity leave and would rely on the child support payments she was receiving from her ex-husband of \$184 a week to cover the rent and other expenses.

In March, Leon returned to Chicago to be closer to work and Heather returned to work at both of her jobs. Leon provided some support for the phone bill, groceries and other regular purchases for the baby. But, Heather would still not accept money for rent. She wanted Leon to appreciate that she was capable of taking care of her own needs. She wanted to remain in control of her earnings and how she spent them. The extra support could have been helpful. Heather had spent too much that past Christmas and had fallen behind on some of her utility bills, particularly the phone and gas bills. Since she was on an unpaid maternity leave for the first few months, she was still behind and anxious to catch up. Rather than allowing Leon to help her out, Heather relied on the income from her two jobs and an anticipated windfall of about \$1500.00 that she expected back from filing her income taxes.

During the ethnographic visit in May, Heather's finances were strained. She had decided that she would leave her part-time day-job at the childcare center and believed that she would receive \$400 in vacation pay after leaving. But she found out that she was three weeks short of the amount of time she needed to be eligible. So, she did not receive the \$400 that she was counting on to pay her bills at the start of the month. In addition, she owed her father \$600 to repay airplane tickets that he had purchased for her and her children to visit him in June. Heather also received an unexpectedly high phone bill of \$400. She believed that a neighbor had tapped into her line and made expensive long distance calls. Finally, her car broke down again and her health insurance jumped by \$110 a month. She borrowed the \$400 for the phone from her mother and paid her back immediately with the check from her full-time night job. But this left her short in terms of paying the rent and the other bills. Heather's stress was audible in her voice as she explained that the unexpected expenses threw off her finances and her life leaving her feeling "out of balance."

Yet, in spite of the acute financial strain, Heather said she would not turn to Leon for help,

I won't take any money from Leon. I won't let him pay my rent or anything. When he comes, he can buy food, or get things for the baby. But I pay my own bills. I never want to be in the situation like I was before...having to start with nothing
[NHES Fieldnotes May 7, 1999]

For Heather, "starting with nothing" was strongly tied to her ability to work and earn the money she needed to rebuild and refurnish a household for herself and her children. She reflected back on the period immediately after the divorce,

Oh if you could of seen me then. I moved into this apartment with nothing. I had some old wicker furniture my mother gave me. Two chairs that were broken and you couldn't sit on, and one bed frame. Now look, I have all of this. I've worked

really hard to get where I am and I am blessed. Sometimes I have to remind myself, but God has really blessed me. [NHES Fieldnotes May 7, 1999]

As this last quote suggests, her apartment and its furnishings were particularly salient symbols of what she had lost in the divorce and what she had built over the two years since. This may be why Heather was so uncomfortable allowing Leon pay the rent during the first year of the study. In the fall of 1998, Leon did cover Heather's rent for a couple of months, but Heather asked him to stop. She said it made her feel dependent on him, and she did not like that feeling because it placed everything she had built since the divorce at risk. She was proud of her accomplishment of recovering from the loss of the household she had during her marriage, and allowing Leon to pay the rent or moving in with him in Chicago placed her recovery of autonomy and her visible achievements, as symbolized by her apartment and furnishings, at risk.

Throughout the first year of the study Heather asserted her desire to provide for her children on her own, without relying on Leon's support. Heather did accept support from her mother, her brothers, and her father. But, Heather wanted to avoid another breakdown in the life she had thought she had when was dependent on her first husband. Now that she had built a new foundation for a new life through her own efforts, she was deeply conflicted about losing it again should her relationship with Leon also fall apart.

It is important to note that Heather's ambivalence about Leon's financial help did not reflect a failure to value widely held cultural models of marriage (Quinn 1987; Swidler 2001) or of the sensible strategy of combining households with a romantic partner to cut down on costs. Heather and Leon did plan to marry and Leon invited Heather and her children to move in with him in Chicago. Back in January of that year, Heather discussed Leon's offer and why she rejected it. She said she was not acting out of spite. Rather, she did not see the point of making a lateral move in symbolic terms. She did not see the point of moving to Chicago, a cold city like Milwaukee, and give up all of her supportive relatives and friends. If she was going to move somewhere with Leon, it would be to a warm city in the south. Heather also did not see the point of moving from one small apartment to another. She wanted to buy a house. If Heather and Leon were going to live together and marry, then their material lifestyle would need to approximate middle-class ideals more closely (e.g., Dressler 1996, Edin and Kalafas 2005).

By the summer, Heather was finally ready to move with Leon and to build a new life as a couple. In September 1999, they moved to Florida where they hoped to find good jobs, a house, and a better life. But, the distance from family and the overt racism they experienced in Florida drove them back to Milwaukee in the spring of 2000. They found an apartment together in a neighborhood they liked and hoped to buy a house there someday. Leon was primarily responsible for providing for the household and Heather stayed home to be with the children. With Leon's income as an independent truck driver, Heather and the children had a much better standard of living than before. They had filled their place with new furniture and new toys and bikes for the children.

But Heather's ambivalence about relying on Leon for their financial support remained. In the final visit with the NHES fieldworker in August of 2000, Heather described feeling sad and

depressed over another period of financial strain and the embodiment of the dilemma between wanting to share in providing for the household and in being there for their young children. “I have to get a job!” Heather exclaimed. She was feeling uneasy about Leon’s shouldering of all of the family’s financial needs. Moreover, since her two older children were not his, she was uncomfortable asking him to buy little extra things for them such as a video game for her son’s birthday. Finally, in spite of Leon’s income of about \$1400 a week, they were still having trouble staying on top of all of their bills, having fallen behind on the cable T.V. bill and her car payment. She and Leon wanted to catch up.

While Heather wanted to find a job to contribute more to the family’s finances, she and Leon were not comfortable putting their young children into child care. They did not trust that strangers would care for their children well, and might even abuse them. She also wanted to be there to drive the older children to school in the morning, and working might not allow for that. Leon shared Heather’s opinion of placing their children in the care of others. So, Heather was again stuck in a dilemma of choosing to adequately be there to provide care for their children and to earn some money of her own that she could use for whatever she felt she and her children wanted or needed.

Discussion

We saw in Heather Mills’ case that life in a socioeconomically marginal neighborhood of Milwaukee presented recurring dilemmas over the two years she participated in the NHES. Heather drew on cultural understandings of good parenting by providing and being there for her children and also understandings of individualism, self-reliance, and personal responsibility to organize her response to the dilemmas she encountered in her everyday experiences. One dilemma was indeed political; a single mother who grew up in a poor family in a poor Northside neighborhood, Heather was not going to give others a chance to say that they were taking care of her with their taxes, making her a “bad statistic.” Her commitment to a model of individualism did have a “defensive” dimension (Smith 2007).

Heather was a divorced single mother of young children, living in a community where unemployment was high and wages low, making men’s potential contributions of child support unreliable and informal support from other relatives uncertain. She confronted a dilemma of finding a way to both take care of her children and provide enough income to meet the family’s needs for social decency. The way her understandings of the cultural models for providing, “being there”, and individualism framed and guided her experiences can also be understood as a productive response to these practical realities.

But, these two points do not adequately capture the strong emotional and motivational commitments Heather had to be a model of “good parenting” that combined the symbolic elements of providing, being there, and individualism together into a self-understanding that endured for the entire two-year period of the NHES. These cultural understandings mattered most to Heather not simply as pragmatic devices that enabled her to solve particular dilemmas. They mattered because they were enmeshed in other deeply motivating, embodied dimensions of these self-understandings. They gave symbolic form to the embodied and meaningfully enacted ground projects that informed Heather’s everyday sense

of being a morally “right” person in the world. That is that informed her felt sense of being both a good parent and a capable autonomous adult.

Part of her attachments to the enactment of these cultural models may be related to enduring psychodynamic processes that had their origins in Heather’s experiences growing up. These embodied residues may be partly the result of culturally shaped childhood dependency conflicts that are common the United States (Gerson 2010; Quinn 1997; Whiting 1979). But, there is also evidence here for embodied psychodynamic processes that stem from Heather’s unique experiences of economic inadequacy while growing up, where she experienced both empathy for her mother who, in spite of her best efforts and intentions, could not always provide adequately for the family and a desire to avoid revisiting these painful experiences with her own children.

The pain, depression, and anxiety that accompany the embodied dimension of Heather’s story are intertwined with moments of moral breakdown and attempts to rebuild and repair the damage they created in her sense of moral standing in the world, or of her lived-sense of personhood are important in Heather’s case. These are the experiences she returns to over time to justify her commitment to an ethic of providing and being there for her children, while doing so as an autonomous, self-sufficient adult. The frequency of these experiences is tied to the unreliability and inadequacy of material resource flows into Heather’s households, including her childhood home and even after she combined households with Leon by the end of the study. These, in turn, are a product of living within one of the many impoverished, spatially segregated post-industrial urban neighborhoods that are ubiquitous in the United States.

This all points to a precariousness of personhood for people living in poor urban neighborhoods: while Heather shows skilled capabilities for enacting a model of being a good parent in a sense that resonates with understandings that are probably shared by most parents in the United States, the dilemmas she confronted as a result of life in a socioeconomically marginal community regularly shook her out of a non-reflexive, everyday sense of being moral on a regular, if not constant basis. The effort of trying to recover from these emotionally distressing moments of moral breakdown were taxing, often leaving Heather feeling exhausted, sad, and depressed. But her commitment to her children, and to her project of taking care of them as best she could, kept her going. As she noted toward the close of the ethnographic study, “I promised myself that I would never put my happiness in front of my children’s. If they are not happy, then I am not happy” [NHES Fieldnotes 3/21/2000].

Conclusion

By taking a person-centered approach, this article shows how an assemblage of cultural models, as reported in other sources and contexts (Edin and Kalafas 2005; Edin and Nelson 2013; Smith 2007; 2010; Quinn 1987), were available as guides and sources of meaning that helped Heather organize her social projects and give them durability over a two-year period. We can also see that these understandings were not compelling for Heather simply because they enabled her to strategically negotiate the structurally produced limitations and recurrent

dilemmas of disjuncture and societal judgment that she encountered as a resident of a socially and economical marginal Milwaukee neighborhood. Heather connected the emotionally laden valence of those models that she experienced as particularly motivating guides not just for action but also for moral being-in-the-world to experiences of dependency conflict and moral breakdown during her childhood and in her adult life. It is important to recognize that these conflicts and moments of moral breakdown themselves are a reflection of structurally produced inequalities in Heather's life-world. This suggests that Heather's moments of impoverishment were not simply those of economic opportunity or socio-political inclusion and agency, but also a precariousness of the possibilities of sustaining an embodied, taken-for-granted sense of moral being-in-the-world.

This suggests that it is not just the presence of particular cultural models as assemblages that make up the cultural repertoires of different people living in poor neighborhood that might explain the variation in the way that they negotiate the shared constraints imposed on them by structural conditions. Some of this variability will also be found in the way shared cultural models come to be emotionally compelling and motivational guides for meaning and action. The insights from this paper and psychological anthropology suggest that we need to attend to both the formation of psychodynamic sediments from the experiences that obtain across the life course and also the dynamic experiences of moral being-in-the-world that obtain in everyday life if we are to understand how culture matters as a resource for negotiating everyday life in socioeconomically marginal neighborhoods.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Northside New Hope Neighborhood and Milwaukee County in 2000

	Northside Neighborhood	Milwaukee County
Population 2000	35150	940164
% Males	48.2	47.9
% Females	51.8	52.1
Median Age	27.7	33.7
% African-American	52.8	25.5
% White	36.3	67.4
% Other	12.9	9.5
% Latino	5.6	8.8
% Foreign Born	7.6	6.8
% never married	48.2	35.6
% married	30.5	44.8
% separated or divorced	15.4	12.6
Number of Family Households with Own Children under 18	4546	111465
% Married Couple Family Households	39	58
% Female householder, no husband	53	35
Median Family Income	\$28,518	\$47,175
% Families with children under 18 below poverty	38.4	18.5
% Female headed with children households below poverty	53.8	38.8
Unemployment	8.8	4.5

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary