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American Understandings of U.S. Economic Inequality: Redistribution and Resistance

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Title:

American Understandings of U.S. Economic Inequality:
Redistribution and Resistance

A Dissertation Presented

by

JACKLYN A. STEIN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
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American Understandings of U.S. Economic Inequality: Redistribution and Resistance

A Dissertation

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DEDICATION

To all the people working to shed light on inequality and pursue justice.

To the people who shared their stories with me: thank you for giving me the foundation on which to build this dissertation.

To Naomi: for the guidance, coaching, and mentorship without which this dissertation would not have been possible. Thank you for pushing me when I needed it and supporting me in finding my own path.

To Matt: for being my thought partner, best friend, editor, cheerleader, transcriptionist and co-voyager on this sometimes-fraught journey.
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ABSTRACT

AMERICAN UNDERSTANDINGS OF U.S. ECONOMIC INEQUALITY:

REDISTRIBUTION AND RESISTANCE

SEPTEMBER 2021

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Why has economic inequality in the U.S. continued to grow despite widespread and strong public opinion in favor of reducing it? In this dissertation, I argue that Americans are upset by current levels of economic inequality and support downward redistribution as a means to reduce it. At the same time, many have hesitations about or resistance to the mechanisms through which such redistribution might be carried out. This resistance, I found, varied across respondents' class and race (and, to some extent, gender). Across groups, respondents' desires for change were stymied by a social and political context of differential visibility that serves the interests of the already powerful—including cues about class, racial and gendered inequality, the lives of the rich or the poor, the work of the government, policies themselves, and respondents' own relative privilege and disadvantage. Although elite commentators often focus on (mis)perceptions about economic inequality among less powerful groups, the (mis)perceptions among the more powerful groups in my project were equally, if not more, striking, especially given their relatively greater political power. I approached this dissertation as a re-visit to Jennifer Hochschild's 1981 project (*What's Fair?*), returning to her site, engaging with similar questions, and using an interview approach modeled after hers. Hochschild limited her investigation to low- and high-income Whites. I added Black respondents in both income groups and extended the analysis to take into account race and gender in addition to class. In-depth interviews allowed me to explore people's reasoning in the context of their lives. I conducted 122 hours of interviews with 42 respondents who were high- and low-income, White and Black, women and men. My findings reinforce the suggestion among policy feedback scholars that understanding American opinions about economic inequality requires attention not only to the ways public opinion *shapes* policy, but also to the ways those opinions are *shaped by* policy. Thus, questions about why the American public does not take action in their own best interests must also engage with questions about the forces that keep U.S. systems from responding to a widespread public desire for greater economic equality.

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INTRODUCTION

The current moment

The coronavirus pandemic thrust into public view the economic divides that have been widening in American society for a long time. Long before the pandemic, economic inequality had translated into gaps in access to health care, food, transportation, housing, and education, which, in turn, had translated into gaps not just in quality of life, but quantity as well. In some regions of the U.S. people in wealthier—and Whiter—neighborhoods are expected to live decades longer than those in poorer or more minority neighborhoods (Health Resources & Services Administration 2019). The speed of the virus' spread and its repercussions have accelerated the pace of this translation, creating a convergence in time where the ongoing advantages of some and disadvantages of others—forces that, in non-pandemic times, have been such a continuous hum that many had ignored them as background noise—have suddenly become compressed into a critical moment. All at once, millions of Americans who had been just scraping by or falling ever farther into debt were pushed past the breaking point. Their otherwise-invisible hardships were suddenly and forcefully spotlighted by their sheer synchronous volume, dramatically exemplified by charts of record-breaking spikes in unemployment claims.

Low-income workers, many of whom were already living precariously from paycheck to paycheck, have become the first to lose their incomes (and any health insurance that might have come with it). And those who have continued working—because they have no paid leave or because their jobs have been deemed essential and they cannot afford to stop—face some of the highest exposure to the virus because they

cannot practice social distancing (Tomaskovic-Devey, Dominguez-Villegas, and Hoyt 2020). One report estimates that 57% of nursing home workers, 69% of grocery store workers and 74% of cleaning employees are low-wage workers (Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2020). People of color, who are over-represented among low-wage workers, have been hit disproportionately hard both economically and physically (Eligon et al. 2020).

Meanwhile, many higher-income Americans were more able to work at home—with internet access and jobs that can be done remotely—protecting both their incomes and their physical safety. Even as they scrambled to adapt to a new reality (children out of school, physical isolation) and cope with mounting fear and anxiety, they stood on the shoulders of those below them on the economic ladder to make their sheltering at home possible. As those with the means to do so resisted going to stores, those without such means picked and packaged food, stocked grocery store shelves, packed and shipped a surge in online orders, and delivered take-out food, groceries, and medicines. Weeks into their retreats into private spaces, one New York Times opinion writer wrote, “white-collar workers on lockdown discovered” that they had been “counting on people without health care to endanger themselves” so that they could stay in the safety of their homes (Bennet 2020).

The spread of this new virus did not create these dramatically unequal circumstances—economic inequality in the U.S. has been worsening for decades—but the virus’ spread has been abetted by these circumstances and is exacerbating their impacts (Tensley 2020). As the life-and-death relevance of economic inequality is once again thrust into public view, this dissertation explores how Americans understood these

unequal circumstances—and the policies proposed to address them—in the decade leading up to the coronavirus pandemic.

This Dissertation

Americans—according to many measures over many years—are worried about rising economic inequality and want to see it reduced. And yet, as the veneer of a booming economy has been peeled back by this pandemic, it has revealed an economic and social chasm that has continued to grow despite consistent and widespread popular sentiment in favor of its reduction. What are we missing about how Americans understand economic inequality that might help to explain this puzzle of simultaneous distress and apparent complacency?

With this puzzle in mind, I began this project with the goal of understanding how Americans make sense of the growing economic inequality in the U.S. and how they translated their understandings into opinions about policy. These are questions that have been asked and explored for a long time. Thus, as I waded into a rich and vibrant field of existing research, I tried to take a different tack. In an era of big data, I went small—going deep rather than broad—to probe at the areas that previous research suggested might help us answer these questions. I sat with people from high- and low-income households and talked with them at length—asking a set of questions, but also allowing them to muse and think aloud, discover and reflect on their own uncertainties and contradictions, and to contextualize their responses in their own lived experiences. Forty years ago, Jennifer Hochschild (1981) probed at similar questions in a similar way, and I modeled my study as a revisit to hers—to see what new insights could be gained now that decades marked by dramatic increases in economic inequality had passed.

I didn't find all the answers. But I did find evidence that suggests promising avenues for action and further investigation. Some of my findings lend support to existing arguments based primarily on survey and polling data. For example, I found that, as Spencer Piston (2018) has argued, people think a lot about class when they think about inequality. And their views of the rich and the poor tip them distinctly in favor of redistribution. Also, as Leslie McCall has argued (e.g., 2013, 2016), respondents prioritized equity of opportunity over equality of outcomes, but understood inequity in outcomes (especially as they were passed intergenerationally) as undercutting equity of opportunity.

Through in-depth interviewing, I also uncovered some patterns that had been less visible in research based on those broader-rather-than-deeper approaches. In particular, I learned some things about when and in what ways economic inequality was visible to people, who they saw as the winners and losers in the current system, and what they understood as the mechanisms through which these inequalities were sustained or worsened. The people I spoke with saw economic inequality counteracting, and contradicting, American notions of meritocracy—rewarding those already born into circumstances that helped them thrive and punishing those who already had the disadvantage of being born without economic or social resources.

Despite their frustration with existing inequalities, respondents found reasons to resist redistribution and morally justify inaction. The insights I gained into the character and sources of resistance to traditionally redistributive policy provide particularly useful material for informing future, nationally representative research. Resistance manifested in distinct ways between high- and low-income households—both of which supported

redistribution—based on divergent experiences in lives socially and spatially segregated by class and race. Respondents’ judgements and legitimations—of themselves and of others—were influenced by what was visible to them in these separate spaces. Some policies and their impacts were more visible to one or the other group. Likewise, respondents had differential access and exposure to the lives of the rich and poor and relationships between the two. These different experiences shaped respondents’ moral judgements and legitimations of themselves and of others—and, in turn, shaped their views of what should be done and who should be held responsible.

Public trust in government has been at historic lows, and distrust among low-income Americans has been particularly scrutinized (and, sometimes, disparaged), but my research suggests it deserves a closer, more empathetic look. To many of the low-income Americans I spoke with, their most salient encounters with government were negative. Many recounted direct and indirect experiences with highly visible, means-tested social welfare programs that were widely regarded not only as insufficient, but as controlling, punitive, degrading, or discriminatory. They were frustrated by the well-documented social stigma attached to these programs (e.g., Edin and Lein 1997; Halpern-Meekin et al. 2015; Lens 2008; Piven and Cloward 2012; Rank 1994), which they repudiated with evidence of their own moral worth. These programs—which respondents correctly perceived as designed by legislators overwhelmingly drawn from among the wealthy (Carnes 2013) and unresponsive to the opinions of the poor (Bartels 2016; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014)—required applications, follow-up appointments, and often, visits to several different offices. In contrast, redistributive policy mechanisms that are buried in the tax code (e.g., the Earned Income Tax Credit) require those who qualify

only to file their taxes—something associated with work and therefore, less stigmatized (Halpern-Meehin et al. 2015) and less visible. Among low-income respondents, this kind of downwardly-redistributive policy went completely unmentioned, despite a widespread frustration with taxation in general (also something whose costs were more visible to low income respondents than the benefits). In general, low-income respondents distrusted government because they felt it was unresponsive to their interests, run by those whose self-interest conflicted with their own, and otherwise beholden to the interests of the rich.

High-income Americans' resistance to redistribution also deserves a closer look. This group has received less attention from scholars who have sought to understand sources of political inaction to counteract economic inequality (but see Reeves 2018), but because of their high rates of political participation, their resistance is particularly consequential. Few high-income respondents in my project were overtly opposed to traditional redistributive policy—and, in fact, most were overtly in favor—but some had mixed feelings, and most either did not feel implicated in the creation or upholding of inequitable economic systems or they felt they had little power to change those systems. As with low-income respondents, issues of visibility and self-perceptions of moral worth were key. Although their relative privilege compared to the poor was visible to nearly all high-income respondents, linkages between their own advantages and the disadvantages of the poor were much less so. The visibility of these connections was complicated by the “submerged” nature of many upwardly redistributive policies in the tax code (Mettler 2011; Reeves 2018) but also by respondents' own self-protective desires to uphold their sense of moral worth. Many characterized themselves as part of the solution—willing to make sacrifices to create more equity—but not as part of the problem. Many contributed

to local efforts and initiatives to improve the lives of the poor, but ultimately, most acquiesced to the policy status quo, both their economically privileged positions and sense of moral worth intact.

Class, race, and gender

Class comparison provides the key frame for this analysis, with an understanding that class is deeply entangled with race and with gender (Collins 2002; Glenn 1999). I recruited respondents who varied by class (high-income/low-income), race (White/Black), and gender (women/men)—as described in more detail below. In my small sample, as in much larger samples, patterns across these groups were messy and variable. Nevertheless, as my analysis progressed, respondents' class positions emerged as a clear dividing line in the ways they perceived economic inequality and thought about ways to address it. High- and low-income respondents lived materially different—and often spatially and socially segregated—lives that provided different vantage points from which to view the lives of the rich and the poor and the mechanisms and consequences of economic inequality. What was visible to respondents contributed to shaping their moral perceptions of themselves and others, which in turn shaped their perceptions of inequality and policy designed to address it.

These class divisions often overlapped with differences in perspective by respondents' race in expected ways, given the established findings that American views on poverty—and consequently views on redistribution—are intertwined with race and views on race (e.g., DiTomaso 2013; Fox 2004; Gilens 1999; Quadagno 1994; Winter 2008). First, because of historical, structural, and systemic racism and White supremacy, race is entangled with class. High-income Black respondents' lives were less class segregated from their low-income racial peers than were the lives of their high-income

White counterparts. Every high-income Black respondent I spoke with had either grown up poor themselves or with close relatives or peers who were poor. In contrast, although some high-income White respondents had cross-class connections (as co-workers, patients, children's classmates), only one recounted growing up poor or with poor family or friends. Secondly, and related, White and Black respondents viewed the connection between racial oppression (current and past) and current economic inequalities in different ways. Black respondents expressed views of this connection that were more specific, systems-focused, and historically-situated than those expressed by White respondents.

Gender dynamics, too, infused respondents' *experiences* of economic inequality, however their *analyses* of the primary forces shaping economic inequality did not center around gender to the same degree that they did around class and race. The literature offers some evidence of gendered differences in American opinions about extreme incomes (e.g., Burak 2013), but in my analysis, gender neither featured as a key factor differentiating opinions about economic inequality nor a key focus of respondents as they explained economic inequality.

This is not to say that manifestations of inequality in respondents' everyday lives were not often refracted through the lens of gendered systems and structures (Fording, Soss, and Schram 2011), because they often were. For example, the gendered and raced image of the welfare queen was an upspoken backdrop for defending or impugning the morality of the poor (Hancock 2004). The rich were often described in both gendered and raced terms (i.e., White men). Also, low-income respondents' interactions with state institutions were often gender segregated—with women predominantly interacting with

and receiving means-tested social assistance while men's interactions with the state more commonly involved carceral and employment institutions (Haney 2004). Among high-income respondents, gender and race together shaped women's experiences of economically consequential discrimination in realms dominated by White masculine norms and power.

The extent to which respondents attended to gendered economic inequalities in their analyses varied across their own gender and class positions. Women were far more likely to talk unprompted about these inequalities than were men. More than half of women respondents described gendered economic inequalities unprompted by my specific questions on the topic (including two-thirds of high-income women and half of low-income women) while only 4 of 23 men did so. However, while many women did, unprompted, raise the topic of gender inequality in the context of economic and/or racial inequality, only a few really focused there.

There were exceptions, but in general, gendered systems and structures were not as central to respondents' discussions of economic inequality as were class and race—and thus, gender receives less focus in my analysis. This pattern of attention to gendered inequalities likely reflects my analytical lens, but it might also be a finding that reflects the relatively lower societal visibility of and discourse about manifestations of gendered inequalities—particularly those that overlap with economic and racial inequality.

Revisiting Hochschild

In the late 1970s, seeking to understand why the majority of Americans failed to vote “itself out of its economic disadvantage” (Hochschild 1981:2), Jennifer Hochschild turned to in-depth interviewing. Rather than asking people to choose from a fixed set of

policy options or opinion metrics, she asked them to talk about and rationalize their ideas of fairness. What norms of distributive justice do wealthy and poor Americans hold, she asked, and what do those norms imply for their beliefs about the redistribution of wealth?

I approached this dissertation as a re-visit to Hochschild's project, returning to her site, engaging with similar questions, and using an interview approach modeled after hers. This kind of re-engagement with qualitative work is unusual and offered a unique opportunity to explore if and how opinions have changed as the economic context has changed dramatically. Hochschild limited her investigation to low- and high-income White respondents in New Haven, Connecticut. In my revisit I went back to New Haven but added Black respondents in both income groups and extended the analysis of inequality to take into account race and gender in addition to class.

Setting the stage for my analysis, the decades since Hochschild conducted her study have seen soaring increases in economic inequality in the U.S. There is much written about this, but one measure of this change is in the share of national income going to the top 1% of income earners compared to the bottom 50% of income earners. In 1980, the top 1% received about 10% of national income while the bottom 50% received about 20% (Saez and Zucman 2019). By 2018, the top 1% (2.4 million adults) received 20% of national income, while the bottom 50% (122 million adults) received only 12% (ibid). In other words, in the time since Hochschild's study, Americans in the bottom half of the income distribution went from collectively having twice as much income as the top 1% to collectively having about half as much income as the top 1%, despite having 50 times more people than that top group. Although it is not clear how aware most Americans are of the magnitude of this change (e.g., Norton and Ariely 2011), it is clear that the idea of

the top 1% has become a pervasive concept in public discourse and a popular target of public dissatisfaction (Keister 2014).

Given these dramatic changes in inequality, my findings were remarkably similar to Hochschild's—although the differences are important—reinforcing the argument made by some that opinions about economic inequality are generally decoupled from the magnitude of inequality itself (McCall 2013) and suggesting the durability of the patterns Hochschild uncovered. Like Hochschild's respondents, the people I spoke with were conflicted, pulled “in equal, but opposite, directions” (Hochschild 1981:186) by their dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs and their hesitations about existing forms of redistribution. Hochschild argued, “most respondents certainly do not support the redistribution of wealth, but they also do not exactly oppose it. They do both and therefore neither” (Hochschild 1981:186). In contrast, I argue that, for the most part, the people I spoke with *did* support redistribution, but they also had hesitations about it. The end result was the same—frustration and discouragement among the low income and ambivalence and acquiescence among the high income—but this subtle distinction has important implications for policy. Following Spencer Piston (2018) and Leslie McCall (2013), I argue that Americans' underlying support for redistribution may be undermined by political communication about redistributive policy that fails to transparently lay out the mechanisms and the groups that reap the benefits and pay the costs.

In 1981, 90% of New Haven residents were either Black (31%) or White (58%; U.S. Census Bureau 1981). By 2019, Black New-Haveners were still 32% of the population, but the percentage of White residents had fallen to 30% and another 30% were Latinx. Hochschild deliberately limited her sample to White respondents “to keep

the focus on economic and social, not racial, differences” (Hochschild 1981:316). Neither race nor gender was prominent in her analysis. Like Hochschild, I focused my analysis on economic difference among respondents, but unlike Hochschild, I structured my study to include Black as well as White respondents to better understand how race intersected with class and gender in shaping opinions about economic inequality (as noted above).

Methods/Data

I designed this project to re-engage Hochschild’s findings, revisiting her study site, and adapting her methodology. Hochschild interviewed 28 White respondents divided into 16 low-income respondents and 12 high-income respondents—half women and men in each group. She interviewed each respondent for six hours (three sessions of 2 hours each). I reduced the number of interview sessions to two so that I could interview more people and draw a more racially diverse sample. I used Hochschild’s interview questions (published in the back of her book) as a baseline and adapted them to incorporate current topics.

Over the course of a year and a half, I conducted 122 hours of interviews with 42 people, most of whom lived in New Haven (a few lived in the immediately neighboring towns). I interviewed people who were low and high income, White and Black, women and men. My goal, with in-depth interviews, was to capture not just opinions, but also understandings and interpretations that were embedded in the context of people’s experiences—something difficult to do in polling or surveys (Walsh 2009; Williamson 2017). I asked open-ended questions and probed for clarification and detail.

Opening the door to the experiential context of people’s opinions provides an opportunity to access depth but can also contribute analytical and emotional complexity. Social life is incredibly messy, and I sometimes struggled to fit people’s thoughts and

lives into tidy categories without feeling that I was oversimplifying or being intellectually dishonest. I dealt with this tension by presenting my analysis primarily in the form of a small number of elaborated cases in each chapter—attempting to keep respondents’ thoughts connected to their context. The patterns I outline in this dissertation represent my best attempt to accurately represent the people who shared their time and thoughts with me. Of course, to present these stories, complexity had to be simplified, messiness was tidied, and many people and many variations and topics have had to be left out.

Recruitment and Sampling

I constructed my sample to include similar numbers of participants across income, gender, and race categories as a way of deliberately gathering opinions from people in an array of social positions. I sought high-income respondents with annual household incomes above \$100,000 and low-income respondents with annual household incomes below \$40,000. Among the 19 high-income respondents, there were five Black women (hereafter, HIBW), four White women (HIWW), five Black men (HIBM), and five White men (HIWM). Among the 23 low-income respondents, there were five Black women (LIBW), five White women (LIWW), seven Black men (LIBM), and six White men (LIWM). With such small numbers, I do not extrapolate from the distribution of opinions across these categories of respondents to the broader population. Instead, my goal is to use the depth and context that these interviews provide to generate insights and hypotheses based on the patterns I found among this small group.

I recruited participants through a mix of snowball sampling and direct recruitment by mail and phone call (based on a registered voter list with household income estimates). At first, I tried to recruit all participants by mailing letters to households in

high and low-income neighborhoods (as Hochschild had done). I quickly realized that many letters to low income households were returned and phone numbers listed in voter registration rolls for these households were inaccurate or out of date. I continued to use letters to recruit higher-income participants (followed by snowball sampling) but turned to snowball sampling as my main strategy for finding lower-income individuals.

To recruit high income participants, I mailed 190 letters and was able to recruit 10 respondents through those letters or follow up calls. I found seven others through snowball sampling. I found the final two high income respondents through targeted outreach based on demographic characteristics. Most people I contacted did not respond. Of those who did (or those who answered their phones when I called) many said they didn't have the time to participate. Even for those who did agree to an interview, time was an ever-present challenge and something I learned to present carefully when trying to recruit. For example, it quickly became clear that four hours (the targeted amount of time and the time I generally spent with low-income respondents) was more than most high-income respondents would agree to. I started proposing 2 hours of interview time (divided into two 1-hour interviews) and had more success. A handful of respondents deviated from this pattern. One respondent agreed to only a single 1-hour interview, one joined me for a single 2-hour interview, and one agreed to a second interview that never came to fruition (I gave up after many failed attempts to schedule and re-schedule). Because of the difficulty in convincing high-income respondents to join me for interviews and what I assumed would be social sensitivity around disclosing income to a stranger, I didn't ask about respondents' incomes before the interviews. I eventually excluded two interviewees whose household incomes were well below \$100,000 a year.

Recruiting low-income respondents was somewhat easier than recruiting high-income respondents, but also had its own challenges. Through a grant from the National Science Foundation, I was able to offer financial incentives to low-income participants (\$25 per hour of interview, up to 4 hours) that I had not offered to high-income participants and this helped with recruitment. Nearly everyone I reached out to agreed to participate. I started my snowball sampling for low-income participants with two leads—one was a referral from a colleague and one was a friend-of-a-friend. I struggled the most to find low-income white men to interview, perhaps in part because of demographics—in 2017, 70% of New Haven’s population was non-white (Abraham et al. 2019)—and in part because of segregated social networks.

Categorizing Income, Race, and Gender

In this project, I sought the perspectives of people who lived high and low—rather than near the middle—in the income distribution. I hoped to capture opinions from those whose economic experiences might be as different as possible, to understand how those different experiences might shape their perspectives. Like Hochschild, I use respondents’ self-reported household incomes and occupations to differentiate between “high-income” and “low-income” respondents. I also asked respondents to self-describe their class status and will return to this later in the chapter. Beyond this, I do not attempt to operationalize social class in this analysis, nor to make claims theorizing or defining class. This is not to say that class is not relevant to this analysis, but rather that, in this analysis, I am setting aside discussions of how to capture and measure class and focusing instead on differences across income groups.

The median household income in New Haven in 2017 was about \$39,000, while the median household income in the Greater New Haven (GNH) area (which includes New Haven and 13 surrounding towns) was about \$70,000 (Abraham et al. 2019). About 30% of New Haven households had incomes between \$50,000 - \$100,000, with about 40% below that range and 30% above. The household incomes of the people I interviewed fell almost entirely outside of that middle range—either below \$50,000 or above \$100,000.

All 19 of the “high-income” respondents I interviewed had household incomes near or above \$100,000 (in the top 20% of households in GNH, by income) and six had incomes at or above \$200,000. Of the 23 “low-income” respondents, all but three lived in households with incomes below New Haven’s \$39,000 median (some well below). Two of the remaining three lived in households with incomes below \$50,000 and one had a variable income (based on how much work he could find) that fluctuated above and below \$50,000.

I expanded on Hochschild’s all-White sample by including respondents who were Black or African American.¹ I selected for these groups through snowball sampling and using a voter list that included demographic characteristics to target recruitment letters. In the interviews, I asked respondents to self-identify their race and nearly all identified as either Black/African American or White. Three low-income respondents identified as mixed race, (Black/Native American, White/Native American, and White/”Hispanic”) and I categorized them according to their Black/White identities.

1. Many respondents indicated that they had no preference between “Black” or “African American.” Of those who did indicate a preference, most chose “Black” and that is what I will use throughout this dissertation.

I did not ask respondents to self-identify their gender or pronouns but instead categorized them binarily based on their gender presentation.

Respondent's household characteristics

Low- and high-income respondents as groups generally lived in different kinds of circumstances.

Of the high-income respondents, all but one was married and the majority lived in two-income households. Most (again, all but one) owned their homes and two also mentioned income from rental property.² Unfortunately, I did not ask about household wealth or assets. High income respondents' average age was 50 and all but one had children (most had at least one child living with them).

Low-income respondents were generally younger—41 years old on average. In general, income and age tend to be correlated in the U.S.; people between ages 45-65 have higher average incomes than people between ages 18-45 (Semega et al. 2019). Although the youngest high-income respondent was 42, eight low-income respondents were less than 40-years-old, five were young men in their 20s, three of whom lived with their parents (two were community-college students and one worked part time) and this group brought down the average age among low-income respondents.³

Patterns of housing and family structure were more varied for low-income respondents compared to high-income respondents. The majority were single or

2. I did not ask whether respondents owned their homes outright or were still in the process of paying off mortgages or loans. Thus, I was unable to distinguish between those who might have owned their homes debt free and those, like Sandra, who, when I asked if she owned her home, said this: "Well, the bank owns it {laughs}, but we're paying the bank. Yes, we're buying our property. {laughs} I always tell my son (he says, we own a house) 'Babe, we don't own nothing yet, we're in debt, No, we don't own it, let's be clear, the bank owns it, we're paying the bank.'"

3. These age differences between high- and low-income groups mean that some of what I capture as class differences might instead reflect cohort differences that I cannot assess with the sample I have.

separated. Among the six that lived with partners, none had two stable incomes. Precarious employment was common and, in some cases, public assistance was the entire income of one or both partners. About half (11) of the low-income respondents had children living with them. Those included all six respondents who were living with partners (two of whom were married to each other, although I interviewed them separately), another four who were single parents (all women—one had some support from her children’s father) and one, a LIBM, who shared parenting with a separate-living partner. Only two (the married couple) owned their home, but they were trying to sell it because they couldn’t afford the mortgage. Most rented. Six received some sort of housing subsidy—either through the state or (in one case) through an employer. The three youngest interviewees (men in their early 20s) lived with their parents—one contributed to rent and household expenses. Three others had unstable housing—one was couch surfing, one was in and out of homelessness, and a third lived in a hotel with her son and her brother because she couldn’t afford the up-front costs of renting an apartment.

About the interviews

With most interviewees (35), I broke the interview into two sessions—which gave me and the interviewee time to reflect on our first conversation and bring those reflections into our second conversation. In some cases, I wasn’t able to schedule a second interview (e.g., the person was too busy—often among the high-income) and in other cases, we exhausted the interview questions in the first session (more common among the low-income). As noted earlier, I offered an incentive to low-income respondents (\$25/hour for up to 4 hours of time, funded by a National Science Foundation grant), but not to high-income respondents. Based on my experiences with

recruitment (noted above) I generally proposed shorter interviews to potential higher income respondents (two 1-hour interviews whereas I proposed two 2-hour interviews to low-income respondents). As a result, my total interview time per high income respondent averaged close to two hours, while total interview time for low-income respondents averaged closer to three and a half hours. I asked the same key questions of both groups.

Unlike Hochschild, who interviewed most of her respondents in their homes, I met very few respondents in their homes (two high income women, two low-income women, and one low-income man). Through an acquaintance (to whom I am deeply grateful), I was able to use a small meeting room in a downtown community-oriented startup business to conduct interviews. Thus, I had a space that was both private and quiet, but also within a more public, staffed space that made both me and respondents more comfortable. It had bathrooms and a kitchenette, so I could offer interviewees coffee or water while we talked. Furthermore, it was downtown, which meant it was relatively convenient to access through either public transportation or driving. Although I offered to meet people in other places, including their homes, most chose to meet me at this downtown space. This meant that I got less of a glimpse into the lives of interviewees than Hochschild did, besides what they told me during the interviews, but I also believe it made most more comfortable than inviting me into their homes.

I met roughly two-thirds of the interviewees in that small, unassuming meeting room. Of the one-third I interviewed elsewhere, most were professionals from the high-income group who had their own offices (e.g., lawyers, counselors, principals, managers, small business owners) and this is where we conducted those interviews. In one home

interview, a high-income woman asked me to follow her around her kitchen and dining room while she “puttered” on a weekend morning, decorating and preparing for winter holidays. In a few cases, I interviewed low-income respondents outside of the downtown space - at work, at the local public library, at home, or—in one case—at the home of a friend (who, unlike the respondent, still had power because she had paid her electricity bill).

About New Haven

New Haven is good place to study inequality. The city is the lowest-income town in a region with wide income disparities but hosts Yale, an elite private university, and provides many high-wage jobs to people who live in the surrounding towns (Abraham et al. 2019).⁴ Disparities abound both within New Haven and between New Haven and the surrounding towns. For example, New Haven’s median household income in 2017 was \$39,000 while that of an abutting town, Woodbridge, was three and a half times as much (\$138,000).

Racial and economic disparities are closely intertwined in the region, as in the country. New Haven is much more racially diverse than its surrounding towns, with a population that is 30 percent White, 32 percent Black, 30 percent Latinx and 8 percent other races. More than half of the region’s Black and Latino residents live in New Haven. A comparison based on historic redlining maps showed that areas that had received the lowest redlining grades still have the lowest homeownership levels and that the those

4. Nearly all the data reported here come from the Greater New Haven Community Index 2019, published by DataHaven (a New Haven Based non-profit whose mission is to collect, interpret, and share public data about the region “for effective decision-making” [datahaven.org]).

with the highest redlining grades were still predominantly White. The Greater New Haven Community Index reported:

In New Haven County, the probability of a low-income white child growing up to be within the top 20 percent of households by income (19 percent) is almost twice that of a high-income Black child (12 percent), and nearly five times that of a low-income Black child (4 percent) (Abraham et al. 2019:56).

Schools in the Greater New Haven region show gaps in graduation rates, standardized test performance, and rates of suspension by race, eligibility for free or reduced-price meals, and special education and ELL status (ibid). School segregation, especially across towns—but also within—is extreme. In the 14 public school districts in the Greater New Haven area, 20% of the students are Black, 46% are White and 27% are Latino. In New Haven itself, Black and Latino students are over-represented in the public schools while White students are under-represented. Thirty-seven percent of K-12 public school students are Black, 13% are White, and 46% are Latino. The New Haven school district alone – the lowest-median-income town in the region – educates 68% of the region’s Black students.

Since 1980, when Hochschild conducted her interviews, an increasing proportion of Greater New Haven residents live in neighborhoods at the ends of the income spectrum (in 1980, 60% lived in middle-income neighborhoods compared to 47% in 2017).⁵ Costs in the region have outpaced people’s ability to keep up. In New Haven in 2017, 48% of residents were low-income (their incomes were less than 200% of the federal poverty line). That same year, the median New Haven renter’s household income fell \$17,000 short of the minimum income needed to afford 2-bedroom housing,

5. Middle Income was defined as 0.75x to 1.24x the Average Family Income (Abraham et al. 2019:42).

according to HUD affordability guidelines.⁶ In 2018, 41% of New Haven adults reported that they were just getting by or finding it difficult to manage financially.

Self-perceptions of social class

For sampling and comparisons in analysis, I operationalized class in terms of respondents' occupations and self-reported incomes, but I also expected that respondents' perceptions of class—their own and others—might influence their thoughts about economic inequality and redistributive policy (as Piston, 2018, has argued). I asked each respondent at some point in the interview to describe or label their own class status. Their responses reflected perceptions of themselves and others as losers, winners, or neutral bystanders in a game almost universally perceived as rigged by someone else. They also reflected—and reinforced—the class or income categories I had placed them in, with pretty clear differences between the self-depictions of people I had categorized as low income and high income. In my analysis, I found that respondents' perceptions of the rich and the poor and their own status relative to those groups shaped their views of economic inequality—its causes and consequences, who was to blame, and what might be done about it. As a prelude to that analysis, I summarize some of these self-perceptions here.

I asked respondents to describe their own social class status, typically, somewhere in the middle of the interview, after we had already been talking about economic inequality, and—in many cases—about the rich and the poor. The question often took some form of me asking respondents, if they had to pick a class or social class status to describe their household, what would they pick? I deliberately did not provide options—

6. The HUD guidelines say housing costs should total no more than 30% of household income.

leaving it open ended—and some respondents expressed confusion about what their options were.

Unfortunately, I did not ask about wealth or net worth, which is even more unequally distributed than income, and likely influenced respondents' decisions about their class identifications. I also did not directly ask about the kinds of material and immaterial resources provided by respondents' families that contribute to intergenerational transmission of class status, to the “stickiness” at the top and the bottom of the income and wealth distributions (Chetty et al. 2014; Pfeffer and Killewald 2015; Reeves 2018), and especially to enduring racial disparities in wealth and opportunity (Oliver and Shapiro 2006).

I did ask about half of respondents whether they felt they were economically better or worse off than their parents—thinking that this might influence their perceptions of their current status. In general, low-income respondents felt they were worse off than their parents had been, and high-income respondents felt they were better off than their parents had been. The one exception to this pattern was high-income White men: those I asked (3 of 5) felt they were slightly worse off than their parents, either in terms of income or in terms of what their incomes could buy (e.g., a house or a “more comfortable lifestyle”).

Respondents' opinions about their own class status largely diverged by income group, although there was variation within each group (notably by race). Most high-income respondents claimed some version of middle-class status while most low-income respondents described themselves as poor or near poor.

Perceptions of class status were influenced by the visibility of “rich” and “poor” people in respondents’ social environments. Most respondents had social networks segregated by class and race (as is generally well-documented in the U.S.). Members of both income groups referenced the poor and the rich as well as the middle class as they framed their assessments of their own status. Both high- and low-income groups referenced the “middle class,” but—despite the longstanding popularity of claiming that status (e.g., [Hout 2008](#))—only higher-income respondents claimed it. Lower income respondents referred to the middle class primarily to draw a contrast to their current lives—to highlight their lack of access to something often portrayed as nearly universal. Both high-income respondents’ claims to middle-class status and low-income respondents’ disavowal of it reflect arguments that the centrality of middle-class identity disguises real divisions (e.g., [Demott 1990](#); [Ehrenreich 2020](#); [Shenker-Osorio 2013](#)). Interestingly, sometimes both high- and low-income respondents used the idea of being “comfortable” seemingly as a stand in for middle class status—with high-income respondents describing their positions as such and low-income respondents aspiring to be “comfortable.”

High-income class identity

Despite household incomes that placed them in the top 20% of households in New Haven, about a third of high-income respondents identified as either middle or lower-middle class. A similar proportion identified as some version of “upper middle class.” Many respondents used these actual terms, but others linked their income and class status to an imagined “middle” in other ways, for example, referring to their income as “above the median” or “above average.” Rachel Sherman (2017) has written about her wealthy

respondents as striving to frame themselves in the “symbolic middle”—describing their lives as “ordinary” as a way of distancing themselves from widely depicted and critiqued portrayals of extravagance. Although my high-income respondents generally had much less income and wealth than did Sherman’s, their self-perceptions felt similar, framing themselves as “ordinary” and their consumption as reasonable rather than excessive.

High-income respondents who saw themselves to be in the middle or lower-middle class often referenced rich and poor and saw themselves in between. For example, one respondent described herself as, “in between” because, she said “I’m not poor poor, I’m not rich rich.” In contrast, respondents who claimed some form of upper middle-class status framed their positions as between the middle and the rich. For example, one respondent (Tom, HIWM) said, “we’re not the richest people,” contrasting himself to “the superrich” elsewhere in New Haven, “but I mean we’re in the nicest neighborhood of the city, probably.” Like many respondents, he positions himself below “the superrich” while acknowledging that his situation was better than many. Thus, he responded to my question about his class status by saying “What’s after upper-middle class—rich? ... I’ll say, I guess, upper-middle class.”

A couple of respondents claimed upper middle-class status reluctantly—arguing that “the economists” or “government standards” would place them in that category, but that their feelings of economic struggle made them feel that the label didn’t fit.

Respondents’ backgrounds, unsurprisingly, seemed to influence their perspectives. For example, Carla (HIBW) was raised by a single mom (“I was conceived in college”) who eventually not only graduated from college, but “got three degrees.” Carla also graduated from college and also went on to earn “two, three other degrees.”

Her household income was around \$300,000 a year and, of this, Carla said “I do fine.” But she explained that she felt that the “government standards” that placed her in the “upper middle class” “didn’t feel right because, “It comes in, but it goes out. I don’t think I’m extravagant with it, but it still goes out.” Despite doing “fine” she seems to feel that her life does not match what she would expect an “upper middle class” life to feel like and therefore, contests what she considered the government standard of placing her in an “upper” income category.

In contrast, Curtis (HIBM), whose household income was similar to Carla’s (about \$300,000 a year) characterized his current circumstances as “upper middle class” because “I don’t want for anything.” Curtis characterized his family growing up as “working poor”—describing experiences as a child when there wasn’t food in the house or there was no heat because they had run out of oil and couldn’t afford more. “Now, my children don’t have to deal with that kind of stuff,” he said. Curtis anchors his claim to upper middle-class status on his experiences with poverty growing up. His claim on that class status is one he makes with a sense of pride—especially as he describes hardships he faced that his children do not have to face.

Only one respondent suggested that the term “rich” might apply to her. In our interview, Sandra (HIBW) expressed discomfort in correcting her son’s claim that her family was “middle class,” saying “I actually think we’re probably like upper middle class.” But then later, as she recounted her household income (\$275,000), she recalled saying to her husband, “we’re rich.” Still later, when I asked her to name her class status, she said “We’re upper-middle class. Rich, probably” and then laughed (it seemed, in surprise at hearing herself say that.)

Two high-income respondents gave answers that did not make reference to the middle: one (the highest-income respondent) indicated that his household income put him in “the top 2% of American earnings” and another (the lowest-income of the high-income respondents) said he saw himself as “working class” because “I am poor with financial management.”

There was a loose association between reported household income and class identification: all of the respondents with household incomes close to or above \$200k per year put themselves in the “upper-middle” or above-the-middle categories, while the majority of respondents whose annual household incomes were between \$100k and \$175k categorized themselves as either middle class or lower-middle class. Race complicated these self-perceptions. Three high-income White respondents who had household incomes between \$125–\$160k per year also included themselves among the upper-middle class. Black respondents with similar—and in one case, higher—incomes than those three respondents categorized themselves as middle class or lower middle class, suggesting—as many respondents indicated, that money and race together influence access to societal resources. Of the four high-income respondents who identified as lower-middle class, all were Black with household incomes between \$97,000 and \$170,000. The highest income of those respondents, in another part of the interview, responded to a question about societal treatment of the poor by including herself among that group:

I was going to say I consider myself to be part of the poor, if you look at the big picture. ... I might be part of that poor ... even though I don't thankfully need welfare at this time.

Low-income class identity

Most of the low-income people I spoke with considered themselves to be poor or in poverty or just a step above that status, in contrast to popular conceptions of the near-universality of middle class identity in the U.S. Like high-income respondents, low-income respondents placed themselves in between two other groups. They were not on the very bottom (which, for most people, was symbolized by homelessness), but they were also not middle class.

Not quite poor

Many low-income respondents saw themselves near the bottom of the economic ladder—but not quite *at* the bottom. This characterization might have been part of a self-protective mechanism to keep from feeling that they were in “last place” (Kuziemko et al. 2014) or it might have been something that emerged based on what was visible to them in their everyday lives.

The lives of people better off than themselves were constantly visible to low-income respondents but primarily through the media, and these were often the people they discussed when talking about the rich. Typically, they described people whose lives they had seen depicted on television, in newspapers, or the internet, and often named specific individuals including politicians, celebrities, famous business executives, or sports figures. A few had social connections to people who had much more income or wealth than they themselves did, but this was a minority.⁷

7. This was in contrast to high-income respondents who were less likely to name specific individuals when identifying the rich and more likely to name categories of people, largely by occupation. One particularly notable difference between high- and low-income respondents was the near absence, among low income respondents of financial-sector occupations that were commonly named by high-income respondents as being among the rich (e.g., “Wall Street people,” hedge fund managers, bankers, money managers, “real-estate tycoons,” “investment people”).

Every low-income respondent also had a reference point for someone at the bottom, which served to both anchor their sympathy and boost their sense of relative position. The visibility of this group to low-income respondents was much more up-close than was the visibility of the rich. For many respondents, this reference point was the highly-visible homeless population of New Haven that could be seen in the city's central park or along the streets as people passed through downtown. Most respondents who framed their social class status as one step above the bottom implicitly or explicitly referenced this population. For example, Jeremy (LIWM)—who worked as a laborer in landscaping, lived with his girlfriend and her young child, supported two teenaged children, and had a household income of about \$35,000—said,

We're poor, don't get me wrong, I'm poor. I understand that part, but as long as I have the ability to try to make my life better, I'm going to try to make my life better. There's people that are poorer than me. Every time I want to get on my pity pot, I could just drive down the street. Someone has it worst off. You know?

Jeremy explains how he uses the visibility of people who are homeless to shore up his sense of his own position in both moral and material terms. He is able to argue that, despite his hardships, he is not in “last place” either materially (because he is housed) or morally (because he is “try[ing] to make my life better”). Like most low-income respondents, Jeremy's efforts to improve his own situation are a central part of his moral identity.⁸ Elsewhere in the interview, when I had asked him to describe his social class status, Jeremy had characterized himself as “*hard* working class” (his emphasis) and he carried forward this effort-grounded identity into our conversation about “the poor,” where he seamlessly both includes and differentiates himself from that group.

8. A similar example was Lauren (LIWW), who said she was “broke” but not “poor” because poor meant “you stop trying.”

Angela (LIBW) was married with two kids and was unemployed due to a disability. Her household income was about \$17,500 a year plus a housing subsidy. She referred to the homeless as the truly poor. Her own class status, she described this way, “I’m not poor but I’m not middle class either so I guess I would be like in the middle.” “I don’t have it in my pocket right now,” she said, but that was different from someone who “has to sleep under a bridge or a person that has to go in the shelter and can’t watch TV because they don’t have \$3 to pay for a bed.” People in those circumstances, subject to the curfews and regulations of the shelters, she said “that’s poor.”

Katie’s (LIWW) reference point was a little different, but nevertheless she characterized herself as “a step above really poor.” She worked as a teacher’s aide, was married with three children and had a household income about \$45,000.

If there's like a step above really poor? That would be me. We scrape by. So, I'm not middle class. But I don't think I'm at the bottom of poor. I'm kind of like at the top of poor, honestly. [laughs] Because we do struggle so much. It's not like we just pay our bills and “oh we can't get steak this week.” It's more like “can I get what I need this week?” So, if I make up my own tiers, I would say like upper-level poor? [laughs uncomfortably] It's not funny. I'm just laughing that I don't know how to describe it.

Although she didn’t name the homeless explicitly as her downward reference, Katie seems to be making the same kind of upward-downward comparison that other low-income respondents made. Although she felt she was not “at the bottom of poor,” looking upward, her feelings of “struggle” and that she “scraped by” made her feel that she was also “not middle class.”

Not middle class

Most references to the middle-class among this group were made to distinguish what they felt their own position was not. It was more common among the low-income respondents who were White to reflect on a childhood that was closer to middle-class or

at least more economically comfortable. A common theme among these respondents was that things used to be better: a middle-class or at least a middle-class-like existence, they argued, used to be accessible and had somehow become less so. These perspectives were less common among low-income Black respondents, who were more likely to have grown up in circumstances similar to what they currently experienced. Often, these respondents used their descriptions of middle-class life as depictions of aspiration and as contrasts to their own experiences.

The White respondents who reflected back on what had felt to them to be their own middle class (or middle-class-like) upbringing, focused their depictions on sufficiency—carefully balanced between scarcity and excess. For example, Katie (LIWW)—who had described herself as “a step above really poor”—started her description of her middle-class childhood noting that her father had “a decent-paying job,” then went on,

We had a house. Each of my parents had a car. We took one vacation a year.... I wasn't spoiled, but I didn't really go without what I needed, and I got a lot of what I wanted. To me ... that is like textbook middle class. ... You can pay your bills and not be completely stressed out.

Unlike Katie, Emily (LIWW) said her family growing up was “considered poor” but she said, “we never felt poor. ... If you were to look at us, you would have thought we were middle class.” And her description shared a lot in common with Katie’s:

We didn't have brand new things like everyone else in the neighborhood, but we still had color TV. We still had cable. My brothers shared one room, we shared another. My parents had their own room. We never went hungry.

Emily contrasted her own current living situation (she was living in a hotel with her teenaged son and brother while she tried to save up for a deposit on an apartment) to the middle-class feel of her upbringing:

I think, to me, middle class looks like, at 50 I should probably have a house and a reliable—more than a reliable car that I share with my brother. You know, the dining room ... I just feel that those are the only things ... that I really need. I don't need the vacation—although the vacations are nice.

Both Katie and Emily talked about the presences (house, car, TV, vacation) and the absences (stress, hunger) that they felt characterized middle-class life. Those things served as markers of the kind of economic security Ryan (LIWM) directly described as part of his view of what it meant to be middle class.

You're financially pretty secure and if something bad happens, you could withstand it pretty easily, whereas, if you're in poverty, you can't, because it's such a struggle every day. You know, anything bad is just another bad thing, rather than like a catastrophic one-time event. I think that's one way to look at middle class.

Low-income respondents' visions of middle-class life reflected their perceptions that this moderate state of economic well-being had become unreasonably inaccessible. Between the perceived elevated costs of this middle-class life and the decreased availability of jobs that paid enough to meet those costs, many respondents felt that the declining accessibility of middle-classness was one of the tangible indicators of inequality.

Chapters and arguments

I started this project with the goal of understanding how Americans make sense of the growing economic inequality in the U.S. and how they translated their understandings into opinions about policy. In Chapters 1–3, I demonstrate three critical aspects of that sense-making. First, in Chapter 1, I argue that respondents saw current economic inequalities as the results of an American economic system that distributed rewards and benefits unjustly. They felt that individuals' economic trajectories were unduly shaped by the circumstances people inherited or were born into rather than by their own efforts or merit. Furthermore, many respondents felt that current economic and social systems in

the US magnified rather than reduced the inequality of people's starting circumstances, compounding inherited advantages and disadvantages. Surprisingly, this baseline conception of a non-meritocratic system was widely shared across respondents.

This perception—that American economic systems failed to reward people fairly for their efforts—was intertwined with respondents' moral judgements of the rich and the poor and the relationship between those groups, as I describe in Chapter 2. Respondents were particularly upset by the suffering of the poor and many were frustrated or angry that this suffering of some co-existed with the wealth and excesses of others. They felt that neither the luxury of the rich nor the hardship of the poor were entirely the results of those individuals' efforts or merit. Thus, questioning the meritocratic origins of gaps in material circumstances, respondents pushed back against stereotypes impugning the morals of the poor and raised questions about the morality of the rich. Many portrayed the poor in a morally favorable light, as those who had been born into unlucky circumstances, people who worked hard but did not reap economic rewards. In contrast, most respondents offered negative moral judgements of the rich. They saw rich people as disproportionate holders of societal power who perpetuated their own gains by rigging societal rules in their own favor. At the same time, respondents had mixed feelings about both groups—sometimes blaming the poor for bad decisions or a lack of self-reliance and sometimes holding up the rich for admiration or sympathizing with their resistance to give up some of their holdings.

In Chapter 3, I illustrate some of the ways racialized experiences and understandings of race influenced and were embedded in respondents' understandings of economic inequality. These patterns were messy and often varied by the individual's

particular background and exposure. I argue that variations in respondents' ways of understanding current patterns of racialized economic inequality reflect silences in widespread American narratives about economic inequality. These leave many Americans with a limited set of tools to draw upon when thinking about the ways racial inequality is linked to economic inequality. These omissions support divergent understandings that ultimately serve to uphold economic inequality.

How did respondents' understandings of economic inequality translate into policy opinions? This is where I turn in Chapters 4 and 5. Despite hesitations, most respondents, both- high and low-income supported some form of downward redistribution. They all, generally, felt that some people had resources to spare and should give up some of those resources so that those who did not have enough to meet their basic needs could do so. These sentiments reflect what both Piston (2018) and McCall (2016) have argued: that Americans are interested in redistribution that is clearly targeted in terms of who will pay and who will benefit. Although there were some notable exceptions (e.g., one HIWM strongly in favor of a universal basic income), most respondents favored redistribution focused on increasing equity of access to a set of basic needs (and they largely agreed on the categories of these: education, housing, healthcare, and employment) rather than direct redistribution of income, something McCall characterizes as “opportunity-enhancing” strategies (McCall 2016:432). McCall (2016) argues that even though these types of policy might seem “commonsensical,” they are rare.

Where high- and low-income respondents diverged was in the forms of their resistance to redistribution. In Chapter 4, I argue that low-income respondents resisted redistribution because their experiences with government-funded programs led them to a

profound distrust of government. They felt that the government was controlled by the rich and worked to keep people like themselves down. This made any policy solution feel implausible if not impossible. Furthermore, experiences of scarcity—combined with negative encounters with government mandates, and perhaps unfamiliarity with the lives of the rich—seemed to make low-income respondents reluctant to *demand* contributions from that group, despite their overwhelming sentiment that such contributions would be the morally just thing to do.

I turn to high-income respondents in Chapter 5 and argue that their resistance to redistribution was less overt than among low-income respondents—hidden, it seemed, even from themselves. Focused on the power of the rich, most high-income respondents saw themselves as beneficiaries of an unjust system that they did not feel implicated in creating or upholding and that they did not feel empowered to change.

In the conclusion, I reflect on these findings in the current context and suggest some implications of this work for future research.

CHAPTER 1

ILLEGITIMACY OF INEQUALITY: MERITOCRACY AS MYTH

When I asked my interviewees about their thoughts on the fairness of the American economy, they often explained that, although they believed in—and even valued—income differentiation, they nevertheless felt that current inequalities between the rich and the poor—in experiences, opportunities, and outcomes—were both illegitimate and unjust.

For most respondents, the heart of their dissatisfaction was their perception that American economic systems failed to reward people fairly for their efforts. Individuals' economic trajectories seemed to be unfairly decoupled from hard work or skill. Although most agreed that hard work and effort are important factors in economic success, they argued that effort and skill were not the primary determining forces of an individual's economic well-being as American “bootstrap” narratives had led them to believe. Many commented or provided examples of people (including themselves) who appeared to work very hard and yet continued to struggle financially and also of people who appeared to not work hard at all and yet reaped enormous financial rewards.

Instead of reflecting merit or hard work, most respondents argued that economic rewards depended heavily on the circumstances into which individuals were born—their inherited circumstances including race, gender, and social class. Thus, to many, the income and wealth differences between the rich and the poor were not the “just desserts” of a system that fairly rewarded varied levels of effort, ability and talent. Rather, these gaps in income and wealth, they argued, were the outcomes of an unfair system in which only some were lucky enough to be born into circumstances where they had access to

education, connections, and resources and many were left out, regardless of their efforts. By arguing that a person's economic position depended more heavily on one's circumstances at birth than on their merit, most respondents pushed back against American narratives of meritocracy and suggested that both the wealth of the rich and the poverty of the poor were the undeserved outcomes of an unjust system.

Furthermore, many respondents blamed current economic and social systems in the U.S. for magnifying rather than reducing the inequality of people's starting circumstances, and therefore compounding the impacts of inherited advantages and disadvantages. Instead of providing a system of equal opportunities that would mitigate inequalities in starting positions, respondents argued that American systems distributed economic opportunities in a way that rewarded those who already had advantages and punished those who were already disadvantaged.

Surprisingly, this general pattern of belief held for most respondents, across gender, race, and income, although there were important differences between groups that I will explore later. This chapter attempts to trace the outlines of that broad, shared sentiment while also beginning to surface some of those differences. The majority of the chapter is made up of the cases of a few respondents (Julie, a low-income White woman, LIWW; Sam, a low-income Black man, LIBM; and Patrick, a high-income White man, HIWM) that I selected to illustrate both the similarities and differences across groups. I also selected these respondents because they articulated these core ideas more explicitly—and sometimes in greater detail and at greater length—than other respondents who made similar arguments but often in less-direct ways. I have noted the ways in

which these respondents demonstrate a broader pattern and ways in which they were relatively unique.

Compounding advantage and disadvantage – Julie (LIWW)

Like many respondents, Julie felt that the current state of economic inequality in the U.S. was unjustified because the processes by which Americans become rich or poor seemed to her unmeritocratic. Instead of being the outcomes of individual effort, Julie felt that both affluence and poverty were often much more determined by “structural and familial advantages” and disadvantages that were the inherited circumstances of individuals’ lives. This was a common theme among my respondents, and Julie was particularly keyed into these ideas. She saw herself as both unfairly hindered by her inherited economic disadvantages and unfairly helped by her inherited social advantages.

“Working poor” with “cultural advantages” – Julie’s Background

Julie was in her early 40s when we spoke and worked for a local non-profit, making about \$30,000 a year and living on her own. Her parents had not gone to college; her mother had made it through high school and her father had dropped out but gotten a GED while serving in the military. She recalled that, on a single income (her father’s) her family had been able to own a home (“not the best house in town”), have medical care, and have “two cars in the garage.” Throughout our interviews, she alluded to (but didn’t specify) a medical condition she dealt with that seemed to have been both difficult and expensive to treat. Her experience trying to access and afford care for this condition shaped her views about economic inequality. She described her politics as “hard left” and mentioned positively some of Bernie Sanders’ positions (our interviews took place in February of 2016). Julie had gone to college as a “first-generation, Pell-Grant” student,

but the medical condition (for which she had no “family support or insurance coverage”) wiped out her savings and derailed her studies and she did not graduate.

Julie described herself as “working poor,” based on “economics” including “what I’m making and what sort of things I can afford in terms of healthcare or transportation or education.” At the same time, she described herself as having “certain cultural advantages” based on her race, body type, education, and socialization that she said made her more socially and economically mobile compared to others with a similar income.

Julie’s particular concern with economic inequality—and that of many respondents—was that she felt people could work hard and follow the social rules of being “a responsible person” and yet be unable to have “a certain quality of life that’s not undignified.” What fueled her sense of injustice was the condition of people “at the bottom” in a “society with a lot of resources floating around.” For example, she told the story of a coworker who had previously been working for a major national retail chain where they kept her hours below 35 each week so that she was not eligible to enroll in the benefits that would be available to her if she were full time. According to Julie, the coworker had explained to her employer that she wanted to increase her hours in order to get health insurance for her young son. Instead, Julie said, the employer suggested that the worker enroll her child in Husky, the state Medicaid health insurance.

They just told her to go on to State programs and she wanted - she wanted to do what everybody tells and shames poor people into doing, which is, well, if the government program isn't filling your needs, then you have to get a real job. So, here she gets a real job and she's working, working, working - even with an underage child that she probably was arranging childcare for. She literally couldn't earn her way into this attainable thing that she was supposed to be able to get if she 'just worked hard enough' and 'had different cultural values.'”

This kind of story was a touchpoint for Julie—living proof that hard work was not the ticket to economic mobility that it was promised to be. Many respondents had stories like

these about people who worked hard but still struggled to meet what many considered their basic needs. Among low-income respondents like Julie, these were stories of their own lives or those of people relatively close to them.

Inherited disadvantages

Julie's educational experiences had been another key source of disillusionment about meritocratic class mobility and economic opportunity. Revealing her hopes for what college could have been, she said, "It's not this classless third liminal space where suddenly if I just go, I suddenly have all the resources and advantages of the middle- to upper-middle class person." Instead, Julie said, her experience emphasized to her the differences in "preparation and expectations, and also resources ... between me and other, more-traditional middle-class classmates." Those differences included everything from having access to "summer enrichment programs" to "knowing that you can take more risk because you know that you can - even if it's as simple as you can go home to mom and dad. As opposed to, if this doesn't work, I could literally end up living in a car and that's assuming that I have a car."

Julie argued that these differences in social and economic resources between people born into differently-resourced families undercut meritocracy and instead perpetuated the inequality of inherited advantages and disadvantages. "You can be in the same lecture hall and getting A plusses and the C student next to you knows a VP at Time Warner and so they're ... [laughs]." She trails off, implying that the less academically-prepared student with better connections is more likely to land a job or an internship than the higher-scoring but less well-connected student. Notably, she implies but does not

state that she was the “higher-scoring” student in that scenario—a nod to her own unrewarded merit.

Julie argued that “structural and familial advantages” like those held by her college classmates “feel to people like, ‘look my hard work was rewarded.’” But, she insisted, that perspective ignores many taken-for-granted inherited advantages,

like well, but you were able to not take a job during college, or you were able to take a free [unpaid] internship for a year in Manhattan, or you could go to the doctor when you were sick or ... even things like you had parents who weren't working three jobs and were able to be around for you to help you with homework. Those are all things that really do add up.

She didn't discount hard work but felt that inherited economic circumstances—that provided advantages and opportunity for some—made a significant difference in individuals' economic trajectories and often went unacknowledged.

Educational access was a key example for Julie, one of several she gave to argue that disparities in familial economic resources translated into intergenerational transmission of inequitable access to economic opportunity and security. Families that had access to resources could shore up the fortunes of the next generation while those families without resources to share had little buffer against economic misfortune. While some were “getting resources from mom,” Julie said, others were “sending money back ... to help mom.” When I asked Julie how, in general, she thought people became rich or poor, she responded by talking about these kinds of differential inheritances:

Both interest and debt compound, right? ... I know people who, for their weddings, they got a down payment on a house, right? And so that's a much different position to be in than people who are spending 10 years trying to scrape that together, along with student loans that they have that other people don't have. ... When somebody can swing 5 or 6 figures for you in the case of an emergency or a lifestyle boost, that's a much different scenario - even the difference between having somebody who says, you know, you were just in the hospital, so here's \$8,000. That's just a much different scenario than people who are living from

paycheck to paycheck and their family social networks are all living paycheck to paycheck.

These examples illustrate Julie's argument that inherited economic circumstances "roll-over ... generation after generation," "compounding" like "interest and debt" and resulting in an unequal opportunity structure that stretches backward and forward in time. "Some families in some strata and, on an aggregate, some races have been able to do that" while "other people just have never had access." The difference between being in a group that has access to opportunities such as buying property or saving for an emergency and being in a group that "never had access" was something many respondents focused on when discussing the inherited advantages and disadvantages that shaped economic outcomes.

Inherited advantages

Julie also made her argument about the over-importance of inherited circumstances for people's economic trajectories from the other side—that of inherited advantage. Although she considered herself to be among those who lack inherited economic access in many ways, she also felt that she was the beneficiary of some inherited advantages that allowed her to be more "socially mobile" than others with similar incomes but who were born and raised in different circumstances. She expressed some ambivalence about this inheritance, but nevertheless acknowledged the ways that "external markers" related to her race, gender, and "socialization" gave her "advantages"—that she implied were un-earned—in accessing some opportunities and resources. It was relatively uncommon for other low-income respondents to talk about their advantages in this way—in part because Julie was rare among that group in her experience of being able to "pass culturally" as middle class.

At the heart of Julie's argument was the idea that she was able to "appear and seem and get treated as if I am middle class," which resulted in access to opportunities that were not available to others. For example, she said, despite the fact that she had not finished an undergraduate college degree,

I had people who assume that I have graduate and professional degrees that I don't have ... because the way I dress and talk ... and they'll assume that other employees aren't college graduates when they actually *are* college graduates. And it's just—it's a decision they've made based on external markers that have no bearing.

Julie recognized that, even though she didn't have economic resources, she benefited from cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986), embodied in the way she looked and acted, that translated into favorable assumptions about her class and academic status. She went on to talk about how these assumptions—which she noted were not related to her merit ("made based on external markers that have no bearing")—paid real dividends in terms of giving her better access to opportunity than someone who did not have those forms of embodied cultural capital.

There are assumptions made about me just based on my vocabulary and appearance that other employees who are of different races or education levels just don't get. So, even though ... I certainly feel trapped in certain ways, I know that, you know, I own 20 more lottery tickets than they do, right? So, my lottery ticket is more likely to come up. Like if some magical miracle occurs, it's more likely to happen to like a smiley, thin, white lady who knows how to use big words than it is for an overweight person of color in their 50s who's a single parent and isn't dressing or talking a certain way. Even though we may have the same intellectual capacity and even the same backstory, but I would have to get lucky and they would have to get lucky, but they would have to get so much luckier than I would in most situations. So, we're both screwed, but if a miracle happened, the miracle would most likely come to me because I'm one of those quote-unquote "people like us."

Using the tropes of luck and miracles allows Julie to minimize her sense of feeling systematically privileged and reinforces her identity as economically disadvantaged. She is not as direct here in talking about the unearned nature of her advantages as she was

when she made her argument about her disadvantages. Nevertheless, she made the point that she did have advantages compared to others and that those advantages were based on “assumptions” or “external markers” in implied contrast to effort or merit.

Doing Class

Even as Julie argued that her treatment by the powerful as “people like us” is tied to “external markers” over which she had no control (such as race), she also emphasized the importance of a sort of class performance that involved certain expectations about how to “dress and talk.” She noted her awareness of these rules and her efforts to abide by them. For example, she said she was “really obsessive...about dental care” despite not having dental insurance.

I know that that's a huge thing - is to not be missing any teeth. And so, I'm just crazy about preventative dental care and brushing and all this stuff. Because I know, just from knowing people, that the minute you lose a tooth, even if you're White, you just don't pass in certain ways anymore with people with certain biases because they're looking for certain class markers.

Here, Julie lays out three factors that she sees as linked to her “cultural” advantages and that she returned to throughout the interview: the “biases” of the powerful, her efforts to perform “certain class markers,” and the impact of her race on how that performance was received. She reveals her understanding of the mechanisms of class mobility by explaining her awareness of her own precarious grasp on some kinds of class privilege.

As someone who saw herself on both sides of an equation of unjust resource distribution, Julie navigated a constant tension between acknowledging her unearned advantages, illustrating her unearned disadvantages, and maintaining her identity as someone who “was bright” and worked hard. This tension was present throughout Julie’s interview, but is particularly well illustrated in an instance when Julie had been talking

about how she knew people who were struggling economically and who blamed themselves for those struggles instead of blaming a “rigged system.” What should they be blaming? I asked. As Julie tried to explain the factors that make up someone’s inherited circumstances, she used her own life as an example—talking about forces outside of her control, but also slipping in a note about her own merit:

It’s pervasive. It’s a million little things ... You can’t just say, well this person ... doesn’t get routed towards college. It’s everything ... from ... my father dropped out of high school and my mother just got a [high school] education, but my dad would read to me every single night and so ... I was reading before I was enrolled in school, so I already had a leg up. It was because I was bright, as well, but it would not have happened if I had not had a dad who’d get home in time to be there by the time I went to bed and who knew enough to know this was an important ritual to do, and it wasn’t just about watching TV with me ... and it’s not because my dad is just smarter or more sophisticated than your average person living in the ghetto somewhere, it’s a million different things that you’re exposed to.

Julie tried to make sense of her social advantages in the context of her disadvantaged class background and identity. Here, as throughout the interview, she swings back and forth between noting forces outside of her control that contributed to her current advantages (a father who had had early access to reading who then passed that on to her) or to her disadvantages (her parents’ education), but also tries to make sense of the role of individual merit (“I was bright as well” and a father who “knew enough to know this was ... important”). She diverges from and pushes back against common meritocratic narratives, but also finds herself struggling to explain the “million little things” that make up the forces that she sees as having aligned in her favor.

Compounding: race and entitlement

These “million little things,” Julie suggested, often added up to her gaining access to opportunity or resources because she was seen by the powerful as “people like us.”

This access, in turn, compounded her advantage, Julie explained, by giving her a “very basic middle-class sense of entitlement” that led her to feel justified in demanding even better access.

To explain, Julie gave an example comparing her own attempts to access limited resources allocated to helping the poor with those of her economic peers. Unlike some of her economic peers, she said, this sense of entitlement made her more likely to push back against acts of exclusion commonly experienced by people seeking help from social safety net systems. When trying to “access what little we have in terms of publicly-funded resources, like energy assistance, or going to the public health clinic or whatever,” Julie said, the poor are often “treated just terribly.” She went on to explain the difference between her “self-righteous” and “aspirationally middle class” response and that of her peers who didn’t have that same sense of entitlement.

They don't have that very basic middle-class sense of entitlement to say, “you can't treat me that way” or “no, that's not what the paperwork says. I filled out the paperwork the right way. I will get a public interest lawyer if you do this.” ... They don't have to just say, “well this is just the way always things are” or, “I must have screwed up.” As opposed to saying, “well no, maybe these people screwed up and if they screwed up then that's wrong and I should have some sort of recourse even if it means I have to get legal representation” or whatever. And part of that is because, so what kind of legal representation is available to poor people, right? [laughs]

What kept her peers from making these kinds of demands, Julie argued, was a sense of “internalized shame” born of false meritocratic narratives that say, “if you just work hard enough and are smart enough and are resourceful enough,” you won’t be left “empty-handed.” In contrast, Julie suggested, her experience of positive social reception and related sense of entitlement buffered her against this internalized shame. It allowed her to interpret her own poverty, she said, as “something [that] went wrong,” something “structural” to which she could respond, “I know this isn’t me.”

Hers was “that good sort of entitlement,” Julie said, one that embraced an expectation that “if I work hard, like maybe I won't be a millionaire living in a fancy suburb, but I shouldn't be living like this.” It facilitated a self-perception of her own value, she suggested, and thus led to further access, compounding the initial advantage of being seen as “people like us.”

Importantly, Julie noted that even a sense of entitlement like hers runs up against the hard reality of the limited availability of the resources themselves (“what kind of legal representation is available to poor people...?”). In “many cases ... people don't imagine using resources that realistically, they've never seen anybody use because they're not really there.” Given these limited resources, Julie argued, people who look and speak like her—even if they are poor—have better access both because of external perceptions and their own self perceptions of deservingness.

Race is a key factor in both sets of perceptions, according to Julie. It was something she brought up throughout our interview as an aspect of unearned advantage that shaped her access to economic opportunity and mobility. Her reflections on the impact of race in her own life and in the lives of her economic peers reinforced her conviction that inequalities in economic outcomes are non-meritocratic and therefore unjust.

For example, despite growing up in a family with fewer resources than those of her middle-class college classmates, Julie argued that race was an important factor in her ability to be treated as middle class and feel entitled to such treatment. “White ... people, even if you're poor... can still be aspirationally middle class,” she said, because of societal messages (presumably from other White people) about “what you deserve and

what to expect if you're putting in work." Such entitlement might also come from watching "what your teachers at your much better public schools are doing" as a racialized model of middle-class success.⁹

Julie also talked about how her Whiteness contributed to her ability to gain access and "pass" in certain spaces—spaces that she implies (but does not state) are controlled by powerful White people.

If you're very poor and you're White and you can figure out how to pass culturally and you can sort of 'win the lotto' in these ways, you can eventually get to a point where you're not dealing with sort-of micro-second discrimination, right? Like it takes longer before people— maybe you're already in the door before they realize that maybe there are differences."

Again, Julie invoked luck ("win the lotto")—as do many White and/or high-income respondents when talking about privilege—which suggested her acknowledgement of the un-earned nature of these advantages while also distancing herself from the ways they are systematic and intentional.

At the same time, she acknowledged the advantages she gained due to her race, however uncomfortable she was discussing them directly. When talking about her advantages during the interview, Julie repeatedly made unprompted direct or implied comparisons to the experiences of her colleagues or friends who are people of color. Here's a typical example, where she notes race among a litany of other factors in her ability to do what she calls "cultural class-passing."

The advantages that I see above others— At the most basic level, if you put me up against somebody else who makes what I make, the reality is that I'm going to be more mobile in lots of situations because I have been socialized a certain way, I don't have a certain kind of accent, I look a certain way when I wear a dress, I've been taught what fork to use. You know, so I can pass culturally - there's sort of

9. In 2015/16, 80% of public elementary and secondary school teachers were White while only 49% of students in public elementary and secondary schools were White. (National Center for Education Statistics 2019b, 2019a)

that cultural class-passing where I have that advantage that, say, our custodian at work doesn't have. So, I can go places that she can't because she's an African American woman of a certain age who just was socialized differently, but is incredibly intelligent and a great resource on the job. As much as I don't benefit from certain types of things, I do benefit from the type of privilege that's just the sort of 'one of us' type stuff.

Here, Julie returns to cultural capital—reiterating the idea that she can pass as “one of us” among an unnamed (and racially unspecified) group of opportunity gatekeepers. In this case, as in others, she nods to race as one of several factors—including her performance of class—that allows her to “pass culturally.” In this instance, she doesn't explicitly name her race, but notes it by commenting on the race of the person to whom she compares herself—a common pattern of speech among White Americans when talking about race (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 2009).

Directly and indirectly, Julie argues that her social and material inheritance allowed her to “appear and seem and get treated as if I am middle class,” giving her access to spaces and opportunities that were not available to others. Throughout our discussion, Julie suggested that these inherited advantages were just as unearned as her inherited disadvantages, although she never quite comes out and says it. Among this inheritance, Julie suggested, is a learned ability to perform the language of dominant culture—and to therefore be treated as “one of us.” And she argued that her race is a major factor contributing to the acceptance of that performance among those who hold power. Furthermore, Julie argued, these kinds of social and material inheritances serve as a mechanism by which advantage and disadvantage are compounded over time. Thus, according to Julie, these patterns of access are not simply part of her own and her peers' experiences but are also part of an un-earned and inequitable legacy that is passed along and magnified across generations.

Left empty-handed

Julie started out our interview stating that she felt that the economy was “absolutely not” fair, despite the fact that “I could parade all sorts of people in here from the upper tiers who could tell you it's a meritocracy.” It might feel to those people that “[their] hard work was rewarded,” but Julie argued that unacknowledged “structural and familial advantages ... really do add up” in a way that the economic opportunities available to people depend heavily on inherited circumstances over which they had no control—not just on their effort.

To Julie and to many other respondents, the linkage between access to opportunity and inherited circumstances was too tight, while that between individual effort and economic outcomes seemed far too loose. Together, these perceptions made current economic disparities seem unfair and unjustified. The same amount of effort or skill, Julie argued, would pay off in very different ways depending on an individual's social and economic inheritance. Furthermore, people who had access based on their own inherited circumstances could also more easily share access with their own children, and so on, such that “every form of wealth, whether it's social or monetary or property or whatever, or educational, it compounds interest just like debt does.” Dominant societal narratives suggested that only those unwilling to work hard would be “left empty-handed,” but Julie felt that her own experience and the experiences of those around her belied that story.

“It's set up for the rich to get richer and the poor to stay poor” – Sam (LIBM)

Sam viewed the current state of economic inequality as illegitimate because he felt that the system was rigged in favor of the rich, creating unequal opportunities for

economic advancement that were not linked to merit or hard work but to birth circumstances—particularly race and class. Like Julie, Sam thought that inherited advantages and disadvantages not only led to unequal economic opportunities, but that this inequality of opportunity was magnified or compounded by social rules that rewarded the already advantaged and punished the already disadvantaged.

Sam's background

Sam was in his early 40s when I interviewed him, working in a temporary seasonal job as a metal worker making \$18/hour (he thought he should be making \$30). He had been raised by a single, working mother “in the projects.” Sam had attended college for a year and decided it wasn’t a good fit for him, but he had pursued and acquired training and certification in a variety of trades. He had four children, two of whom lived with him, and two (one a teen starting college and one “older”) whom he continued to support when he could. He rented a condo (which he dreamed of buying) with a long-term girlfriend (who was likely the mother of his two younger children, although he never stated this and I didn’t ask). She was the one, he said, who managed all their household finances.

When I asked Sam to tell me his household income, he said, “I couldn't even tell you. ... I just pass the checks over. She does the finances, so I don't really know what's going on with the money.” When I asked him to estimate, he guessed that his girlfriend made maybe \$40,000 from several different jobs including being a hairstylist and running a bar. Sam’s own income fluctuated throughout the year, depending on his employment, which was highly variable. He guessed that he made maybe \$26,000.¹⁰ He expressed

10. I was unsure what to make of Sam’s estimates of his and his girlfriend’s income. Although his own

constant concern about the insufficiency of his wages, the precarity of his employment, and the unaffordability of some of the “basics” like healthcare. He described himself as financially “struggling” and “living check to check.”

Inherited advantage and disadvantage lead to unequal economic opportunities

Like Julie and others, Sam felt that economic opportunity was not distributed equitably or meritocratically—that one’s chances of achieving economic success were too dependent on one’s position at birth and too independent of how hard one worked. He questioned the idea that the rich had earned their positions based on effort or merit. Someone who ends up as a “super-rich billionaire,” he said, had not likely worked their way up “from the bottom.” Instead, “most likely somebody in their family already had the money.” Closer to the other end of the economic spectrum, Sam argued that people like him who work hard and “hustle” continue to just scrape by. “Why am I struggling? I’m going to work 40 hours a week, I’m busting my tail, and I’m still kind of living from check to check.” He questioned both the morals and the merit of an imagined executive who is “not doing a thing, making billions of dollars, hand over fist” while someone working for that company was “gonna go home with this roody-poo check, can barely get by. Living check to check, can’t pay [their] bills.” We’ll hear more about Sam’s moral judgements of the rich and the poor in Chapter 2.

Sam also talked about the ways he saw existing systems magnifying or compounding economic advantage and disadvantage across generations, noting, like Julie and most other respondents, the interdependence between race and class (gender is also

hourly wage—and the mismatch between that and what he thought he should be paid—was something he paid attention to, he did seem to be genuinely unaware of the bigger picture of his household income. One exception was that he commented several times that his girlfriend made more money than he did—something he seemed unhappy about.

present throughout, implicitly, but Sam never explicitly comments on it until I ask). As a Black man born into a poor family and raised by a single, working mother, Sam felt that the economic deck had been stacked against him from birth. He gave the example of credit scores:

You gonna need that [good credit score] in the future, especially with the Blacks, because we're coming out with a 430, born. Then the white kids coming out with a 760. That's just facts.¹¹

Black Americans' economic disadvantage from the get-go, Sam argued, was magnified by unequal access to critical financial education (something I also heard from other low-income Black respondents). For example, he recalled receiving some advice, maybe in his late 20s, to “save your money, get an account, get some credit cards going on.” That, Sam said, was information he could have used at a younger age but had not been available to him.

Yeah, I wasn't informed. It wasn't what they told us in school back then. They didn't really give us that. As far as economics and how to save money, I mean, they told you how to write a check and something like that. But they wasn't giving us no information in the inner-city schools like that. Like, listen, you need to know what's going on with your credit score because you ain't gonna be ready to get a loan for anything, a home, or business, or anything. They didn't teach us that then.

Sam argued that being born poor and Black was an inherited disadvantage that was only magnified by a system of unequal education that meant schools like his “inner-city” school provided less economic information to its students. If he had received that education earlier, he said, he would be in a much better financial situation. “If I knew that before, the way I hustle and hold down, I'd have been golden right now.”

11. A growing literature supports Sam's claim—finding that credit scores differ significantly by race (with people who are Black or Latinx having significantly lower scores), even when income is taken into account and that, even for a given credit score, credit outcomes differ significantly by race (see, for example Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System 2007; Nelson 2010).

A rigged system controlled by a wealthy elite

Sam saw himself as a hard worker, someone with “hustle.” His struggles to find a stable, well-paying job—in addition to the stories of friends and neighbors—convinced him that plenty of people in the American economic system were putting in hard work that was not met with the economic rewards that are the promise of the American Dream.

I'm 41 years old, I'm working this seasonal position. I have all sorts of trades out there. I done went to school for everything just so I could make myself more marketable in the work field ... everything that you can do in trade I've pretty much done put my hands on ... And I'm trying and I still can't really find a job.

As for many respondents, Sam took issue with economic inequality because he felt that differences in individuals' economic positions were not the reflections of merit or skill that mainstream American narratives portray. His ongoing struggle to find gainful employment, despite his efforts, reinforced the disconnect he saw between merit and economic reward.

Unlike Julie (much of whose commentary implied but did not directly name opportunity gatekeepers), Sam characterized the non-meritocratic nature of American economic systems as the fault of a particular group that hoarded benefits and resources for themselves. As we'll see in later chapters, he, like other low-income respondents, blamed the rich, corporations, and the government as a sort of unholy alliance that kept people like him down. To Sam, the economic system was rigged not just *against* some and *for* others, but *by* the already rich and powerful for their own benefit.

Multiplying advantage and disadvantage

Like Julie and others, Sam argued that current societal systems and structures multiplied—rather than mitigated—the power of inherited advantages and disadvantages. He used carceral systems as a key example (as did many Black respondents, as we'll see

in Chapter 3). Like others, Sam talked about how those with more money received better treatment in these systems—which functioned non-meritocratically, driven by profit-seeking rather than justice.

Money, the government, these corporate people come in town on their jets just going, “Hey, listen ... jails are not full. We are not getting the money that we need. We need to get more people, bottoms in here. So, we need to speed this process up.”

Contrary to meritocratic myths, Sam argued that structures like the carceral system rewarded existing power and resources with more of the same, meanwhile circumscribing the opportunities of people like himself—regardless of their merits—who did not have existing racial and economic advantage.

You know the rich is gonna get away with murder. They get away with so much stuff here that a poor person would never get away with. You know, poor people are expendable to America.

Differential treatment of the rich and the poor convinced Sam that money and the power that came with it determined outcomes and opportunities in American society, regardless of merit. In such a skewed system, Sam explained, people like himself were strongly encouraged to take “offers” of jail time when accused of a crime, rather than defend their innocence. Even when “you know you didn’t do it,” he said, there was little interest among those in the system in “trying to figure out if I’m guilty or not” because “they [the prison] gonna get, what, \$50–60,000 they get, whatever, a year for” each incarceration. Just as in his job search, here Sam argues that people’s outcomes were more tightly linked to the circumstances they had been born into than to their own efforts or actions.

Sam, like Julie, argued that this unjust system builds on itself—continually magnifying the differences between those with divergent inherited circumstances. Sam explained, when people are incarcerated, “They didn’t give you no education. They didn’t

give you any type of training. They didn't help you with your drug addiction.” They “kick you back out [with] nothing. You starting all over with the shoes you got on your feet.”

But starting over without inherited advantages, Sam argued, is nearly impossible in the current system.

You're going home. Now, your people's already in a struggle with what's going on with them. Now, you're home. You need clothes, you need food, you need this. “You know what, we don't got it.” What you do? Go back out on the street again. You know what happen. You get locked back up again. Another \$40–50,000, whatever they get. So on, and so forth.

The picture Sam paints is of a system in which those who have historically benefited economically have the power to control the rules and the lives of those who have not, and where the losses to those already excluded by that system serve to further magnify the gains of those already at the top.

“This is what it is”

Despite Sam’s resistance to internalizing widespread stereotypes about people like himself, he nevertheless seemed frustrated and exhausted by the constant evidence he saw of his own relative disadvantage in a system of unjust inequality. He felt constantly reminded of his own position in America’s social and economic hierarchy. For example, he described driving to his neighborhood where “your street’s getting plowed last” and being stopped by police on his way home from a job where he made less money than he would have liked.

And plenty of times I was like, “Fuck, I want a better life.” I mean, this is crazy. I can't even drive down the street. I'm getting stopped, I'm getting harassed. I mean, I live here, I have no choice but to come down this street, because I live right there. It's like, “Let me get right there. Wait up, officer.” Come on man. I'm trying to go home, man. I'm already pissed I only made 80 bucks all day working this job. I'm trying to stay away from you. I got the kids' mother, she's yelling ... give a guy a break here, man. And then they don't want to give you no money. Then

the girl's upset, she can't get what she want. The kids can't get what they want. You're feeling less than. That's crazy.

Many of the pieces of economic inequality that Sam described intersect in this depiction. Despite his efforts and training, he is paid less than what he thinks would be fair, which strains his relationship and his sense of self—and all of this is going on in the background as he is then racially profiled in his own neighborhood.

Sam's daily existence sometimes felt so far from American meritocratic stories about the quality of life that could come from anyone's hard work that it was hard for him not to feel hopeless. For Sam, as for many Black respondents (as we'll see in Chapter 3), racialized inequalities, in particular, gave lie to those stories. "This is their country," Sam said (meaning, White people's).

We've been treated like second-class citizens since this country was founded. Even third-class, fuck second. ... Wouldn't even call us humans at one point. So that was only like a hundred and something years ago, man. Racism, everything, is still so strong here.

To protect his own well-being (physical, mental, and emotional) Sam made a deliberate choice to try to "learn how to play the game," knowing that the rules had been rigged against him. It was a survival tactic to try to "move on" from his feelings of frustration. He described this choice as he talked about giving advice to his children about being cautious in mimicking the behaviors of their White friends.

You don't know how to play the game you won't get nothing. And that's just what it is, I don't hate on any situation. I have biracial kids. So, I'm like, this is what it is, and I tell them, "Listen, you can't do what this one does." Most likely this is gonna happen for them, this [something else] is gonna happen to you. You gotta know how to deal with it and move on. Don't rub people the wrong way.

Sam is giving survival advice as he warns his children to not "rub people the wrong way." The situation may not be fair, but it "is what it is," and the way to make it through

is to understand the rules—even if they are unjust and rigged against you—and “move on.”

Concluding thoughts about Sam

Sam’s response to my initial question about his perception of the fairness of the American economy—”Absolutely not. ... The way it's set up, it's set up for the rich to get richer and the poor to stay poor”—succinctly captures his view of the illegitimacy of economic inequalities in the U.S. Not only does hard work *not* lead to the kinds of end someone like Sam wants—a stable, well-paid job; health insurance for him and his family; enough money to support his children—but people born into economically and socially advantaged positions seemed to Sam to be constantly accruing and consolidating power, simultaneously compounding their advantages at the expense of people like him.

“The scales were tipped in my favor long before I was born by generations of family being lucky” – Patrick (HIWM)

Patrick’s background

Patrick was in his late 40s and working as a partner in a software development startup business when we spoke. His household income the previous year had been \$160,000. He and his wife owned a single-family home, where they lived with their two early-elementary-aged children. His wife worked at Yale and had a steady income. Patrick described the income he received from his business as “really unpredictable,” but said he thought the current year was looking “good” and that he might have a similar household income this year.

Inherited privilege - safety nets and access to opportunity

Although, Patrick noted, “my family has never been ... what I would call rich,” he nevertheless felt that he had been “the beneficiary of unfair advantage and non-

meritocratic advantage” that had given him better access to economic opportunities than many. He argued that access to economic opportunity in the U.S. was based on “unfair rules” that perpetuated “privileges that are inherited” rather than rewarding hard work or skill. He considered himself to be among those who had inherited such privileges. As he put it, “the scales were tipped in my favor long before I was born by generations of family being lucky.”

Like Julie, Patrick invoked “luck” when talking about his advantages, as did many respondents who discussed ways they had experienced advantaged access to opportunity. In Patrick’s case, talking about “generations of family being lucky” seems to minimize the extent to which his family’s status was gained through a systematic and deliberately inequitable distribution of resources. Nevertheless, Patrick also consistently argued that he had been born with “benefits” that gave him more access and allowed him more “chances” than he would have had if he had been born to a poorer family or had not been White. Among those benefits, Patrick noted, were parents who had the social and economic means to “groom” their children for similar “success” to their own. His parents had both been professors—beneficiaries of a racially-segregated “20th century ... focus on education as a means to advancement,” and they went “out of their way to make sure their children [got] those same opportunities.” For example, Patrick said, “going to college was just unquestioned” for him. In fact, Patrick attended Yale, and commented that his admission to the elite Ivy League school was “made...easier” by the fact that his father and grandfather had both attended that university and that his grandfather was “a very active alumnus.” He worked to disentangle this inherited advantage from his own

merit, noting that if “[an]other kid had the exact same credentials as me but didn't have that association, that kid didn't get into Yale and I did.”

In addition to providing access to opportunity that was not available to others, Patrick argued that his inherited circumstances also provided a type of safety net, protecting him from some of the economic and social costs that other people faced. Despite making “lots of mistakes,” Patrick said he was given “a lot of second chances” based on how he looked and spoke and who his parents were. As a result, those mistakes “didn't hurt me the way I think if I'd been ... poor and Black or Hispanic [they] might well have.” As an example, Patrick compared his own experience to that of an intern at his company (“a terrific computer programmer”) who was Latinx. Patrick didn't provide much detail, but said he thought the intern might have been “thrown out of Yale.” In contrast, Patrick said, “I should have been thrown out of Yale for some of the things I did, but I wasn't.” Patrick speculated that someone like this intern was likely treated more harshly because of his race. He might have “[come] across as just a little angrier or just *appeared* angrier because of skin color,” and Patrick noted that he, himself, “might well have fared a lot worse” had he not been White.

Doing class

In more “subtle” ways, too, Patrick argued that his inherited circumstances opened economic doors for him that might remain shut for others. Just as Julie argued that she had learned or inherited manners of self-presentation that allowed her to be seen as “one of us,” Patrick, too, referenced the benefits of his unearned cultural capital—ways he had learned to do class—including “manners of speech” that had given him

access to information or opportunity by making him seem “more acceptable” to opportunity gatekeepers.

My parents were academics and English professors, and so one learns to speak a certain way in a certain context that makes one more acceptable or seem more, and it happens automatically. When you get nervous, you start speaking more formally or whatever. Those kinds of very subtle skills make enormous differences in outcomes, I have to imagine.

Patrick highlighted advantages he had received that were about perceptions or connections, suggesting, as he does here, that the interpretation of a behavior as a positive attribute (i.e., “subtle skills”) depended on what might “*seem* more” acceptable to gatekeepers (my emphasis). This is similar to his interpretation that a Black or Brown person who had similar behaviors to his own in college might have “*appeared* angrier” to a set of unnamed gatekeepers “because of skin color.”

Thus, Patrick suggested, from the beginning of his life, his access to opportunity was shaped by a set of rules that operated to unfairly privilege people born into circumstances like his own, regardless of their effort or innate talents. Just as Julie had argued that “a million little things” all added up to create advantage and disadvantage, the skewed opportunity structure Patrick described is based not only on wealth, but also on privileging those who have ascriptive traits, inherited connections, or learned behaviors that have been associated with the gatekeepers of wealth.

Compounding advantage

Patrick also talked about how his birth advantages built upon themselves, leading to further advantages. The benefits of Patrick’s admission to Yale and his opportunity to complete his degree without being “thrown out” (despite behaviors that he suggested

might have resulted in that outcome) were multiplied by the assumptions that were then made about him as a graduate of an elite institution.

I could kind of count on getting a good job, count on being given the benefit of the doubt when being considered for a job because “oh, he went to Yale so he must be smart.” It just seems to me that it's probably unknowable what that kind of advantage does for you. Because, when people react that way to you, you believe it and you're like, “I must be smart, so of course I can do the job, of course I'm entitled to be here.” So many very subtle things come with the approbation that just having that credential gives you.

Patrick described the ways his inherited advantages built on one another—iteratively resulting in positive assumptions and credentials that gave him increasing access to opportunity. Part of the compounding process that both he and Julie described is the sense of entitlement that comes with “approbation” and being “given the benefit of the doubt” in most situations.

That people were given opportunities based on assumptions rather than actual merit was a commonly-mentioned theme among respondents, but Patrick and Julie were unusual in their detailed discussions of the ways they personally benefitted both from the assumptions and from the associated feelings of entitlement.

“Everybody knows they didn’t earn it”

Although quick to name his own advantages in the American economy, Patrick, like most respondents, suggested throughout his interview that it was people who had more economic resources than he did who were both the primary beneficiaries of the unfair systems he described and those chiefly responsible for holding those systems in place. A key part of his critique of current economic inequalities was, like those of others, a challenge to the idea that the rich had gotten into their positions through merit.

You don't see Wall Street fat cats, to use a cliché, pounding on the table saying, “I earned that,” because everybody knows they didn't earn it. They just got

themselves into a position where the rules of our society enable them to re-channel the river so that it flows into their bank account. That's not fair.

Focusing on the culpability of the rich was not unique to high-income respondents like Patrick but was notable among that group because of their own economically privileged positions relative to those of low-income respondents.

In fact, both high- and low-income respondents characterized the illegitimacy of economic inequality in surprisingly similar ways. For example, when I asked Patrick what he thought about the idea that most people in America who work hard could “get ahead” or make themselves economically “comfortable,” he argued that hard work had become decoupled from economic rewards, favoring the already rich. To make his point, he contrasted the experience of hedge-funder John Paulson¹² with a hypothetical hotel housekeeper:

Some weeks I'm sure [Paulson works] 80 and 90-hour weeks when he's about to gain or lose a billion dollars but, for the most part, it's just simply not humanly possible to work twice as hard as the hotel housekeeper because your body will break (even if you were sitting at a desk) and your health would break. These folks don't work that hard. Again, I saw them at my college reunion. They're chilling and they're drinking their wine and having a good time. The idea that they are— It's basically a restoration of an aristocracy that the country was founded against. That's really frustrating to see.

Patrick expresses more first-hand familiarity with the lives of the rich than did low-income respondents, but here he expresses a similar frustration: with the dominant “idea” that people who make more money have simply worked harder than others. To Patrick—and to many respondents—the non-meritocratic distribution of economic opportunity and rewards was clearly visible (e.g., “it’s simply not humanly possible to work twice as hard

12. According to Wikipedia, John Paulson is “an American investor, hedge fund manager and philanthropist. He leads Paulson & Co., a New York-based investment management firm he founded in 1994. He has been called ‘one of the most prominent names in high finance’ and ‘a man who made one of the biggest fortunes in Wall Street history.’”

as the hotel housekeeper”). People at the bottom of the economic ladder could work very hard for little economic reward (“I think it’s very easy to work extremely hard and get nowhere in this country or have very little to show for it”) while a similar amount of effort put forth by people at the top of the economic ladder seemed to lead to enormous payoffs.

Conclusions about Patrick

Patrick argued that distributions of economic resources and opportunity in the U.S. were based on “unfair rules” and an “unfair setup of our society” that “tipped” the “scales” in favor of some—based primarily on inherited resources and circumstances—while leaving others “to work extremely hard and get nowhere.” He saw himself as a “beneficiary” of these “skewed” rules and systems—gaining access to an Ivy League school as a third-generation alumnus, being given the “benefit of the doubt” in terms of jobs and other opportunities based on his Whiteness and other social class markers—which distressed him. He acknowledged his advantages, but primarily blamed economic elites—not people like himself—for the perpetuation of these systems.

Conclusion

I was not surprised to find that the people I interviewed were dissatisfied with the way economic opportunity and resources are distributed in American society. What I sought to understand were the details of that dissatisfaction. How did they describe what they saw as the problem? What were the manifestations and mechanisms of the inequality they described? How did they make sense of their own lives in this context? Where did their own experiences fit into the system as they understood it?

The views of the respondents included in this chapter broadly represent many of the major themes I heard across my respondents. I chose these cases in part because of the ways these respondents directly articulated points that other respondents made in less direct ways. Respondents' experiences and social positions shaped their views, so I sought variation by class, race, and gender. But my project is not a comparative statistical analysis. So, the selection of cases in each chapter is not so much intended as a representative sampling as it is a mosaic of lives and opinions that, when viewed together, sketches a composite portrait of a larger whole.

The broad strokes of respondents' understandings and qualms with current economic systems (with a few exceptions) were remarkably similar. At the core of most respondents' dissatisfaction was a sense that access to economic opportunity—and therefore economic rewards—was strongly dependent on circumstances that were largely outside of individual control. Instead of being the outcomes of individual effort or merit, many respondents felt that both affluence and poverty were often much more determined by a person's inherited starting circumstances (including familial economic and social resources, race, and gender), with the deck stacked in favor of those born into socially or economically advantaged positions. The same amount of effort or skill, many argued, would pay off in very different ways depending on an individual's starting position.

Respondents did not dismiss the value of hard work, but instead suggested that hard work alone was not enough to create economic mobility or equality. Most respondents had stories or experiences—personal or otherwise—that contradicted dominant societal narratives that suggest that only those unwilling to work hard would be “left empty-handed” (as Julie put it). They described real or imagined individuals

(including themselves) who worked hard but continued to struggle economically. They were distressed by the condition of people near the bottom of the income spectrum, especially, for some, when contrasted to what they perceived to be the excesses of people at the top. Most respondents felt that the lives of the poor were unnecessarily difficult, complicated by circumstances outside of their control that left them with limited opportunities.

Furthermore, most respondents felt that inherited or unearned advantages or disadvantages accumulated or “compounded,” both within and across generations, leaving those who had started ahead farther ahead and those who started behind farther behind. Those who had better access based on their own inherited circumstances (including themselves) often had more social and material resources to create similar opportunities for their own children. This led many to feel that American economic systems ultimately functioned to keep people in their places, economically, rather than supporting the economic mobility that is often considered part of the American Dream.

The advantages respondents described were both economic and social. For example, family income could help pay for college or medical expenses, make a down payment on a house, or allow someone to take an unpaid professional development opportunity. Family social networks or customs might help gain access to elite institutions, jobs, or information about opportunities. Some respondents noted that forms of cultural capital (e.g., learned behaviors associated with social class) and racial privilege combined to enable them to be perceived as insiders by gatekeepers of economic opportunity, and to feel a sense of entitlement to that perception.

When thinking about their own advantages or the advantages of others, some respondents invoked the idea of luck. They sometimes used it to distance themselves from the systematic nature of their advantages—for example, Patrick’s comments on “generations of [his] family being lucky” elides the social and legal ways families like his were privileged over others. But they also used luck, as Frank (2016) suggests, as a challenge to meritocracy, by acknowledging how much “external chance events and environmental factors” influence outcomes “independently of people’s virtues or flaws” (Frank 2016:9). Both Julie’s and Patrick’s use of the idea of luck seemed intended in this latter way—to suggest that they had done nothing in particular to earn their advantaged status. Nevertheless, it is worth noting the subtle double work done by this idea—both a denial and acknowledgement of advantage—particularly for those individuals who use it as they try to reconcile their own privileges with their sense of moral worth.

Every respondent—to varying degrees, sometimes prompted, sometimes not—noted that economic advantages and disadvantages were linked to race. In discussion, most respondents acknowledged race as one of the critical pieces of the inherited circumstances that influenced one’s access to economic opportunity and resources. Black respondents were both more likely to mention differences in economic experiences by race and also tended to discuss these patterns at greater length than White respondents. However, it was common for White respondents to mention their own advantaged access to opportunity due to race when prompted and some brought it up repeatedly throughout the interview. I return to respondents’ understanding of racialized economic inequality in Chapter 3.

There was a somewhat different pattern in terms of understandings of gender in economic inequality. As I mentioned earlier, women were far more likely than men to talk unprompted about gendered economic inequalities (and high-income women more than low-income). Many women drew a direct link between their gender and their own economic circumstances. They talked about facing pay disparities or discrimination in hiring or promotions, being held back by gendered stereotypes (e.g., the “angry Black woman”), or just generally having to work harder to navigate a culture and systems controlled by powerful men.

Despite this relatively widespread recounting among women respondents, most did not frame gendered struggles for economic access and equity as central to their arguments about economic inequality. That is, they focused much less on gender than they did on class or race. For example, Julie’s direct references to gender were few in comparison to those referencing class or race. Indirectly, she referenced gender repeatedly, but never did so directly until I asked. She described her childhood in a household supported by her father’s single income; she noted that her social acceptance came in part because “I look a certain way when I wear a dress;” she commented that some people have less advantage because they need to send “money back ... to help mom;” and she primarily gave examples of other women who were her economic peers—several of whom she noted were single mothers. Her ongoing allusions to unnamed gatekeepers of power neither included race nor gender markers, although both are implied. When I asked her directly how she thought gender impacted her economic trajectory, she was brief.

I think gender has made it more difficult. ... I've noticed that, in places where I feel like I'm taken most seriously, it's usually when I'm surrounded with other

women, whether they're my age or older. There's less sort of jockeying around status or things like that.

Julie was in the minority of my women respondents who didn't discuss gender explicitly until prompted, but her repeated implicit references to gendered experiences and her greater focus on class and race were typical.

Very few men said anything about gendered economic inequality until prompted, and then offered a mixed assessment. About half of the men made brief references to economic inequalities that disadvantaged women—for example, noting disparities in pay. A handful of Black men (both low and high income) questioned the role of gender in economic inequality relative to race, some saying gender wasn't such “a big deal” anymore, others arguing that women had particular types of advantages, and some wondering how race and gender intersected. For example, Aaron (HIBM) responded this way:

So, I do know that women earn X cents on the dollar which is not the full dollar. And men earn the full dollar, presumably in these studies. So, I just take it for granted that I guess I'm a guy, but I think, I'm a black guy, so am I part of that group that's making the full dollar? I don't know.

Aaron's confusion about the relative influence of his own race and gender in terms of his income reflects a literature that shows a complex and changing landscape where race and gender together have historically been the primary characteristics by which jobs were allocated (e.g., Acker 2006; Branch 2011) and where racialized and gendered conceptions of skill continue to shape the distribution of economic access in the labor market (e.g., Branch and Hanley 2017).

In this chapter, and throughout this dissertation, I focus on class and race—reflecting the primary lenses of my respondents, acknowledging the constant intersections of gender with these other two forces.

In this chapter, I have captured some of the key ideas I heard from respondents as they challenged the legitimacy of current economic inequalities in the U.S. Chapter 2 explores another facet of these ideas. There, I show that moral views of the rich and the poor—a bit of which were captured in this chapter—were anchoring ideas for respondents as they made sense of economic inequality and their own moral and material positions within the systems they described.

CHAPTER 2
MORAL VIEWS OF RICH AND POOR:
ECONOMIC INEQUALITY AS MORAL RELATIONSHIP

Introduction

Moral judgements about class groups and the relationships between those groups were key to respondents' understandings of economic inequality. Across incomes, respondents spontaneously talked about class groups—specifically about the rich and the poor—and they used a moral discourse that framed the rich negatively and the poor positively. They drew symbolic boundaries between those groups and suggested a material relationship between them that had moral implications.

The moral language that low- and high-income respondents used to describe the rich and the poor was similar across respondent incomes. They used the language of effort and work to portray the poor as morally virtuous hard workers whose efforts were under-compensated and to question the moral legitimacy of the economic rewards garnered by the rich. They portrayed the consumption of the poor as reasonable and therefore morally legitimate—using language invoking basic needs—in contrast with descriptions of the rich that suggested a morally illegitimate form of consumption—focused on greed, excess, and indulgence. These tropes echo those that Rachel Sherman (2017) found among her affluent respondents who sought moral legitimacy by framing their consumption as reasonable rather than luxurious or excessive. Through these portrayals, my respondents argued that distributions of economic resources were misaligned with moral worthiness—what Sayer (2002) describes as “a disjunction between economic valuation and ethical valuation” (p1). People who were morally

suspect nevertheless seemed to accrue economic rewards while many people who were seen as morally virtuous seemed to struggle with economic insufficiency.

Most respondents' moral portrayals of the rich or the poor were relational rather than independent. Many respondents suggested that there was a material relationship—in addition to a moral one—between the wealth of the rich and the poverty of the poor. Some explicitly blamed the rich for actions that harmed the poor. Others saw the rich as taking more than they needed and leaving less for everyone else. Even those who did not link the rich and the poor in an explicit material relationship did link them in a moral relationship, portraying the excessive consumption of the rich as a moral transgression *because* it was in the context of widespread poverty.

One place where high- and low-income respondents differed in these moral portrayals was in the ways that they placed themselves into the moral relationships they depicted between the rich and the poor. Respondents used moral depictions to draw symbolic boundaries between groups and to assert moral claims about proper relations between those groups (e.g., Kidder and Martin 2012; Lamont 2000). As I noted in the introduction to this dissertation, most low-income respondents described themselves as poor or near poor. Although this identification seemed surprising given popular claims to middle-class status, it makes sense in the context of the moral discourse among my respondents that favored positive portrayals of the poor. Thus, for low-income respondents, portraying the poor in a positive moral light also served to shore up their own moral identities.

In contrast, high-income respondents, generally, grouped themselves neither with the poor nor with the rich. Thus, high-income respondents took a different approach than

did low-income respondents in asserting their own moral worth. They emphasized their connections to the poor—whether those were material or emotional—and their differences from the rich. While low-income respondents spoke in fairly binary class terms, high-income respondents characterized their own position as one in the middle. They struggled to make sense of their own moral positions—and to hold on to their own sense of moral worth—in a system that they argued was controlled by a group with more power and resources than they had and primarily harmed people with less power and resources than themselves.

High- and low-income respondents’ articulations of moral views about class groups were thus simultaneously sense-making about others and sense-making about themselves.

The findings in this chapter contribute to recent scholarship about the role Americans’ opinions of class groups play in shaping their views of economic inequality, and particularly speak to—and are informed by—Spencer Piston’s recent work. Piston (2018) argues that—contrary to what he calls “reigning myths” about public opinion toward the rich and the poor—the majority of Americans express sympathy toward the poor and resentment toward the rich. Instead of following the logic of individualism—in which both groups would be perceived to have “exactly what they deserve”—Piston finds that majorities of Americans report that the poor have less than they deserve and that the rich have more than they deserve (Piston 2018:45).¹³ He argues that these types of attitudes toward class groups—as opposed to the class identity or position of

13. Although, as Piston notes, substantial proportions reported that each group had “about the right amount of money” (20-35% in the case of the poor and 30-45% in the case of the rich). Also, he demonstrates that sentiments about the poor and the rich are linked to American preferences for economic redistribution, something I will address in Chapters 4 and 5.

respondents—has received little attention in scholarship focused on public opinion. Like Piston, my research contributes to filling in this gap. I find that respondents spontaneously talked about the rich and the poor as I asked questions about economic inequality. My data corroborate his findings about positive sentiments toward the poor and negative sentiments toward the rich. I also extend the insights of Piston’s analysis by adding the kind of depth that comes with qualitative research—illuminating the moral logic respondents use to justify these sentiments about class groups.

My findings also speak to some of the areas Piston suggests should receive closer attention—in particular, the relationship between attitudes toward the rich and the poor and attitudes toward economic inequality. Piston argues that these two sets of attitudes are often treated as “interchangeable, but they have different properties” (Piston 2018:151). For example, he notes that Americans mention the rich and the poor far more frequently than they mention inequality (or related terms) when they are talking about what they like or dislike about political parties. I find that respondents’ discussions of the rich and the poor were part of the moral discourse they used to talk about economic inequality. Inequality was an abstract concept that most respondents made sense of by talking about the groups they saw implicated in that relationship.

This separation between opinions about inequality itself and the groups involved was another thing Piston argued could use closer examination—and a place where my research offers some insight. He notes, “some people who express tolerance for income inequality in principle also report that poor people have less than they deserve or that rich people have more” (Piston 2018:151). My respondents generally supported the idea of income differentiation and their tolerance for the magnitude of that differentiation was

related to their views of the moral legitimacy of those at the high and low ends of the economic spectrum. They interpreted the size of the economic gap between the rich and the poor through a moral lens that included judgements of “deservingness” based on effort or merit and patterns of consumption considered to be legitimate or illegitimate. Thus, for many, the size of the gap was a concern insofar as it was seen as reflecting economic rewards to a group seen as morally undeserving and a lack of those rewards to a group seen as morally deserving. For example, Katie (LIWW), whom we’ll meet later in this chapter, explained, “I could care less [sic] if someone gets fricking 70 million dollars to sell their shoes if I could feed my family and make my car payment and not stress on my rent.” Just as Rachel Sherman (2017) found among her respondents, my respondents contrasted the moral *legitimacy* of consumption linked to basic or universal needs with the moral *illegitimacy* of consumption considered excessive or extravagant. Respondents prioritized or foregrounded these perceptions of moral legitimacy based on merit and consumption and used this as a lens through which to look at economic inequality more broadly.

Katie’s example also illustrates one of the ways my findings complicate Piston’s. He argues that sympathy for the poor and resentment of the rich appear to be independent of one another in terms of statistical correlations between the two. My qualitative data didn’t allow me to measure these types of correlations, but they did suggest a connection between the ways respondents perceived these two groups. My respondents described the moral positions of the rich and the poor relationally—the material position of the former was seen as morally untenable, in part because of the contrasting material position of the latter. If, as Katie suggested, those at the bottom could meet their basic needs (portrayed

as morally legitimate) then the excesses of the rich might be seen as less of a moral transgression. Many respondents went further than Katie to suggest that the material hardship of the poor was caused by the pursuit of excess among the rich—arguing that the relationship between the two groups was not simply a moral contrast, but a material one.

This chapter explores these arguments in two sections: the first focuses on low-income respondents' views and the second on high-income respondents' views. I selected respondents to illustrate the similarities and differences in moral discourse within and across these income groups—and each section includes White and Black respondents, women and men.

Low-income views of rich and poor

Low-income respondents, like most respondents, saw the lives of the rich and the poor as linked in material ways that had moral implications. They used a discourse that contrasted the consumption of the rich and the poor in ways that emphasized moral corruption among the former and moral virtue among the latter. Many argued that the rich and corporations took more than was necessary and, by doing so, created insufficiency and hardship for people like themselves who struggled to meet basic needs. Thus, they saw economic inequality as reflecting a non-meritocratic material and moral relationship with the rich and the poor on opposite sides of a moral spectrum. They framed the poor in a morally positive light—as hard workers, people struggling against hardships not of their own making—and included themselves among this group. The rich they saw as morally corrupt: taking more than their fair share of resources and leaving little for others—profiting off of the suffering of the poor.

“Exploiting the poorer folks to get ahead” – Barbara (LIBW)

Like most respondents, Barbara used moral language around effort and consumption to frame the rich negatively and the poor positively. She talked about poor people working hard just to “maintain” a life with basic dignities. In contrast she portrayed the rich as having more than they needed—resources, furthermore, “not necessarily” gained through effort or work. She was among the respondents who framed her moral judgements in an argument about a direct material relationship between the rich and the poor—arguing that companies and CEOs used their unearned power to take even more for themselves, making unnecessary profit by overcharging poor people who were barely making ends meet. In her framing, the poor have the moral high ground—working and struggling—while the rich are engaged in behaviors that she judged to be morally questionable. This was a common framing among low-income respondents.

In her late fifties when we spoke, Barbara (LIBW) was recently divorced and struggling with a dramatically reduced income. Her three sons lived with her (ranging in age from 16 to 20) in a three-bedroom apartment.¹⁴ She estimated her part-time salary as a building maintenance person at about \$9,000 a year and characterized her income this way; “Dismal. Awful. Disastrous. Stress. If I drank, I’d be drunk now.” Earlier in her life, Barbara had taken courses toward an associate degree, but had not completed it. She had had some part-time jobs in the past, but her former husband’s salary had been enough to support their lifestyle and she had primarily focused on raising her children. Barbara expressed a lot of sympathy for the poor, in part, it seemed, because of her own financial

14. It sounded like she was likely getting some help from the children’s father, who worked as an administrator at a local college, but we didn’t discuss the details. It seemed that divorce negotiations were still going on when we spoke.

hardships. Although she said that before the divorce she had “a little twinge of being middle class,” she described her current social class status as “down in the dumps. Low income.”

Barbara described the poor in language that reinforced their position as morally deserving—implicitly pushing back against common narratives to the contrary. When I asked her a question I asked most respondents—if she felt that poor people had worked less hard than others—Barbara’s answer was a definitive “No.” She followed up: “Some are working four or five jobs [just] to maintain.” When I asked her if she felt that, generally, people end up where they deserve to be economically, she also responded in the negative, describing people who worked hard but still struggled to make ends meet.

I don't think they end up where they deserve to be. You take a job to survive. ... people work 20 years and they hate their job, but they have to pay their mortgage. ... They're stuck. You have to get a job no matter what and pay these bills.

Barbara depicts the poor in a morally positive light—they are hard workers, doing what they need to do to survive in difficult circumstances. “They’re stuck” despite their hard work, she argued, not because of their lack of it.

On the other hand, when I asked about the work effort of the rich compared to others, Barbara questioned their moral desert, saying that the rich had “not necessarily” worked harder than others. Like other respondents, she invoked inheritance as a moral contrast to work among the rich: “A lot of it is off of grand-pop's money that they inherited or whatever or luck ... it doesn't necessarily have to be you worked your way through.”

Barbara further questioned the moral position of the rich by accusing them of enriching themselves by hurting others—something I heard from many respondents. Not only had the rich potentially worked less hard than the poor to get into their positions,

Barbara argued, they used those positions to increase their own gains at the expense of the poor—profiting off of the hardship of people who were already hurting. She gave the example of the local electric utility (the “UI”): “The people in charge of the UI company” were “making billions and still nickel-and-diming me to death for \$20 over. They’re going to shut the lights off. It’s ridiculous.” She implies that the company is being greedy—being inflexible about small costs (“nickel-and-diming”) and threatening people’s basic needs (“they’re going to shut the lights off”) because they are focused on maximizing their profits and “making billions.”

To Barbara, the moral transgression was that the company was making more than it needed (she imagined it “could survive” with much less profit), and yet it was “still squeezing your little poor people,” including her.

You have to pay these extravagant prices ... these big big bills, and they're just getting richer and you're getting squashed out and stressed out trying to maintain.

The idea of excess is prominent here—key to Barbara and others’ moral judgements of the rich—reflecting Sherman’s observations about the moral illegitimacy of extravagance (Sherman 2017). Barbara argued that those who already had economic resources also had the power to take even more—more than was necessary—“getting richer” by charging “extravagant prices” that “squashed” people with fewer resources. With such practices, Barbara argued, companies were “exploiting the poorer folks to get ahead.”

Barbara wasn’t just contrasting moral heroes and villains as she describes these scenarios, but also linking the economic fates of those two groups—one group was getting ahead *because* of the harm they did to the other group. She returned to this point to specifically target executive salaries:

You're paying all these \$3 million to sign on a CEO ... and even this poor woman is paying \$400 a month for utility, \$300 for gas, \$80 to watch TV, cable—that's the bare minimum. They really have to make \$15 million a year?

There are layers of moral judgement here. By invoking a “bare minimum,” Barbara defends the moral upstandingness of the poor—who are sometimes attacked for living luxurious lives on taxpayer “handouts”—and, in contrast, she questions the morals of a CEO who demands a \$3 million signing bonus and a \$15 million salary. The moral infraction, Barbara suggests, is not simply in this contrast between the excess of the CEO's pay and the inability of the poor woman to afford the “bare minimum,” but also because the former seems to come at the expense of the latter.

The moral standing of the rich is further lowered for Barbara and others by what they portray as the use, by the rich, of those potentially-ill-earned gains to bend social and political rules in their own favor and against the interests of the poor. For example, she said, “politician[s] will be influenced by” money from corporations.

Because when you go to ... decide on pork bellies, you gotta let that corporation build on top of my house because they gave you three million dollars, you know. And it's going to be hidden somehow.

Barbara makes clear who the winners and losers are in this scenario (“that corporation” that will “build on top of my house”) and suggests with her language that these transactions are underhanded and illegitimate (“it's going to be hidden somehow”). Nevertheless, she argues that the people who are hurt by these acts—by implication, morally-upstanding ordinary people—have little recourse against the actions of the moneyed powerful.

No. It's not fair. ... And you go before some committee in Washington and they talk to whoever and keep moving on ... And they still got their billions and we're still down here with peanuts and still struggling. So not fair. And is there stop gaps? What do you do about that? How can you—the old boys are making the money, so the old boys are not going to vote to say, “we need to be fair.”

Not only do the rich “exploit” the poor to “get ahead,” Barbara argued, but they use their money and power to influence the system to benefit people like themselves and harm the poor. This idea—that the rich have an unfair amount of power and that they use it to cheat “the system” (especially, to avoid taxation) or bend the rules to their own benefit—was a common element of moral discourse about the rich that I heard from a lot of respondents, both high and low income.

Barbara uses moral language to make sense of the inequality in power and resources she sees between the rich and the poor—and to make sense of her own position in that relationship. As we spoke, she implicitly grouped herself with the poor—whom she portrayed as morally righteous—switching between the first person (“nickel-and-diming me to death for \$20”; “build on top of my house”), the second person (“you’re getting squashed out”), and third person (“they’re stuck”) as she gave examples of morally-virtuous poor people hurt by the morally-corrupt rich. Thus, her moral portrayal served several purposes: drawing symbolic boundaries between the rich and the poor, asserting a moral and material relationship between those groups, and upholding her own sense of moral worth by associating herself with the morally righteous poor.

As was the case with many low-income respondents, Barbara’s depiction was notably binary. Although she nodded to a middle position with her own former “twinge” of middle-class status, that group was largely absent from the scene. This was, perhaps, because moral stories tend to revolve around a tension between two moral poles. Low-income respondents’ depictions of themselves as virtuous and unjustly suffering at the hands of the rich did not require another party in the story (as did high income respondents’ stories, as we’ll see later). It might also be an artifact of my questioning,

which focused on the rich and the poor. But it also likely reflected the social and economic segregation and differential visibility between high- and low-income respondents. The lives of high-income respondents (in, say, the top 20% of national incomes) felt just as out of reach to many low-income respondents as were the lives of the top one or two percent. And many low-income respondents didn't have anybody in their social networks from either group. Furthermore, as Rachel Sherman argues, widespread American stories about the morally illegitimate extravagant behaviors of the rich tend to hide or legitimate the material inequalities that are less visible in public behavior.

The rich “manipulate the system” and the poor “suffer from it” – Jeremy (LIWM)

Throughout our interview, Jeremy portrayed the rich as moral villains who greedily took more than their fair share and used their ill-gotten power to further skew the system in their own favor—leaving morally-virtuous hard-working poor people like Jeremy to “suffer” with broken bodies, hungry families, and constant financial struggles.

Jeremy was in his early 40s when we talked. He had a GED and was working as a landscaper, making about \$35,000 a year. He had two older daughters (who did not live with him) for whom he still paid child support. He lived with his girlfriend (who was Black), who had three children of her own, including a young son who lived with them (“I love him to death”). Earlier in his life, Jeremy said he had spent 10 years in prison. “I was a screw up,” he said, but that was “the last time I went to prison. I used that to change my life.”

I briefly introduced Jeremy in the introduction to this dissertation. Recall his sentiments about being near poor, but not at the bottom:

We're poor, don't get me wrong, I'm poor. I understand that part, but as long as I have the ability to try to make my life better, I'm going to try to make my life better. There's people that are poorer than me. Every time I want to get on my pity pot, I could just drive down the street. Someone has it worst off. You know?

Although he wasn't the "worst off," Jeremy's financial situation was precarious, and he was constantly anxious about making ends meet. Without side jobs and "if my girlfriend wasn't getting assistance, I'd be homeless," he said (although I didn't learn the specifics of how much and what kind of assistance she was receiving).

Jeremy focused much of his attention in our interview vilifying the rich and corporations for their unjust treatment of people like himself—whom he portrayed as morally-righteous hard workers. His depiction of the poor was dominated by discussions of his own experiences and feelings of moral indignation, but he occasionally referred to others who had also been "beaten to a pulp" by a system run by the rich. For example, he talked about the ways American legal systems had "different rules for different people," allowing the rich to get away with "legalized robbery"—only "getting slapped on the wrist" for "robbing millions of dollars"—while "a kid who did that in the street, hustled his way up ... he'd get life in jail." Like other respondents, Jeremy argued that the "hustles" of the poor and the rich were the "same stuff"—only the rich "know how to manipulate their situation" to avoid punishment. "Only difference between the rich and the some of us... we got caught and they didn't."

The relationship Jeremy depicts is both a moral contrast—the underhanded "manipulation" by the rich juxtaposed with the morally-virtuous effort narrative of "a kid" who "hustled his way up"—and a material relationship. When the rich manipulate the system, he said, "at the end of the day me and you suffer from it." He spent much of the interview providing examples of this relationship, in which he consistently framed

himself in the morally-righteous language of effort, integrity, and scarcity (in contrast to his framing of the rich as entitled, corrupt, and excessive). For example, recall his definition of his own social class status as “*hard* working class” (his emphasis) not just “working class.” “I earn with my back,” he said, “we give them an honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay, and that’s how we survive.”

Jeremy’s moral framing of himself included two common elements used by many respondents to talk about the moral worthiness of the poor: hard work and insufficiency. He invoked both in a story he recounted about a time when he “almost lost” two fingers at work and was at home on workers’ compensation leave.¹⁵ The compensation was not enough to get by, he said, indicating this insufficiency by noting, “refrigerator’s empty.” So, when an old employer called and asked if Jeremy could come shovel snow, he felt he had “no other choice.” “I went ... and I’m out there with one hand and I’m shoveling.”

Jeremy blamed people with power and money for dictating the terms of his employment such that “I’m getting paid less than what I deserve” while they lived (morally illegitimate) lives of luxury. “You’re worried about keeping your pool going,” he imagined saying to his boss, meanwhile, “I’m worried about putting food on the table.” His repeated reference to food invoked a basic need—in contrast to his regular invocations of the luxury or excess of the rich—which he sometimes combined with references to another morally-positive frame: family. For example, although he knew his pay was “not just,” he said, “I just accept it because I gotta feed my kids.”

A defining moral story for Jeremy about the relationship between the rich and the poor was about his parents’ impoverishment at the end of their lives. He felt that his

15. In Connecticut, worker’s compensation is 75% of the worker’s average weekly wage.

parents had “worked hard ... their whole life” and had followed society’s rules, and yet he felt they had been betrayed at the end of their lives by the profit-seeking interests of corporations and the government.¹⁶ He characterized his parents as epitomes of American economic morality—people who “believed in the American dream: if you work hard you will achieve something.”

My parents worked hard ... paid every bill on time. They paid for social security. They paid for pensions. They had medical coverage. They paid for everything on time. They even went without just to put food on the table and make sure their bills were paid.

Jeremy pitted his parents’ moral virtue—framed in terms of their sacrifices and hewing to the social rules of self-reliance—against the greed and duplicitousness of those in power. Both parents worked for the same large corporation “their whole life,” he said, but “when they got sick, they turned their back on them.”

I watched the system take everything from them. I watched them deplete their bank sources, and then after that they took the house, and they made sure when they died ... they came here poor, they left poor.

He explained that his parents were in a nursing home when “the state” “kicked them off their Medicaid.” His resentment of the powerful was clear as he described his meetings with people from “the state of Connecticut” about that situation:

They weren't interested in— they had their representative, and I was there, and they used these big words, and all they meant was, “We're taking your stuff.” ... I said “Ma'am you don't have to use these big words. I understand very well what you're saying. You want to get paid, we don't got it. Where do we go from here?”

Jeremy describes the representatives of “the system” as callous, elite, and greedy. They “weren’t interested” in the lives of the people they were impacting, they just “want to get paid.” Focused on money, they were abandoning his parents who, in his mind, had done

16. Like many low-income respondents, Jeremy saw the rich, corporations, and the government as a collaborative force keeping people like him down (more on this in Chapter 4).

everything right according to the American social contract and now could not care for themselves. His comment about people using “these big words” suggests both his sense that his family was being victimized by elites and his feelings of resentment toward those elites.

Ultimately, Jeremy’s account included his own feelings of unjust economic victimization at the hands of the powerful. He recounted coming home from work one day and finding that his mother—who could not move around on her own and was a “two-man lift”—had been discharged from the nursing home and dropped off at his “not handicap accessible” home.

Who had to take care of that? Me. ... I couldn't watch my mom that way. ... I had to clean her. I had to take care of her. I was working. They were like, “Oh, go find somebody, pay them ten dollars an hour to take care of your— “ I can't. At the time I'm making twelve dollars an hour.

As he recounts this story, Jeremy is filled with moral recrimination—against his parents’ private employer, against the state. In this final moral injustice, he—who is already struggling at the hands of his own employer who is “getting rich” off his labor while paying him “less than what I deserve”—is left to do additional work to make up for the broken promises of the morally-derelict powerful who have “turned their back[s]” on his deserving parents in their time of need. Meanwhile, he said bitterly, those “guys that's owning the company, of course they could put their parents in the best of care.”

“I could care less if someone gets fricking 70 million dollars to sell their shoes if I could feed my family” – Katie (LIWW)

Katie—who, I briefly quoted in the introduction to this chapter—had mixed feelings about both the rich and the poor. She considered herself to be “a step above really poor” because “we do struggle so much” but “I'm not destitute.” Like other low-

income respondents, she presented a fairly binary view of American economic distributions, saying, “there is really no middle class anymore ... you're either really rich or you have nothing.” She considered herself among those who would have been “working class” or “middle class” were it not for what she and others perceived as the squashing of the middle at the hands of the rich. This perception was central to Katie’s moral arguments framing the poor and near-poor as morally-virtuous unjust victims of the greed of the rich.

I don’t know what happened. ... I just feel like the middle-class people, who I feel like years ago was most of America, just slowly got pushed down and pushed down and pushed down because the rich people wanted more money.

When we spoke, Katie was in her late 30s working as a teachers’ assistant. She rented a house (from family) with her husband and three children (including two stepchildren). Her husband ran his own business (although I didn’t learn what it was), of which Katie said, “we barely pay the bills to make his business run, let alone make money.” She estimated that her household income was about \$45,000 a year. Katie had completed “about two and a half years” in college—studying early childhood education—and wanted to complete her degree, but said, “I cannot afford it.” She and her family received subsidized health insurance through the state Medicaid program, and her struggles to navigate that system—as we’ll see in later chapters—underscored her feelings of economic marginalization.

Like other low-income respondents, Katie used the language of effort and consumption to frame herself as morally righteous and to draw a symbolic boundary between people like herself and the morally-questionable rich.

I’ll work as much as I can, and I work hard. Like, I don’t care what I’m doing, whatever my job is, I do it. If I’m cleaning a toilet, I’m cleaning that toilet. If I’m

taking care of your kid, I'm taking care of that child. You know, so— but that never is reflected in your paycheck, ever. Nowhere I've ever been anyway.

Katie portrayed herself as a morally-virtuous hard worker and argued that economic rewards were misaligned with moral worthiness (“that never is reflected in your paycheck”). She implicitly contrasted this portrayal of herself with a common moral critique of the rich as snobbish by signaling her non-elitism (expressed here in her willingness to clean a toilet). Her moral self-portrayal included an explicit argument for her own fair mindedness. She told a story about a coworker who had “the same position, the same job title” as her own, but whose job required harder work, according to Katie. “What she does is so hard ... she works her butt off. ... To me, I'm being extremely fair because I'm saying she deserves more money than me.”

In contrast to this morally-righteous self-portrayal, Katie questioned the morals of “people that make too much money” who—in her mind—failed to have the same kind of fair-minded acknowledgement of others’ deservingness.

I think there's a lot of people that make too much money, for sure. And I feel kind of hypocritical saying that because they work and they deserve money, but when there's so much ... economic stress and so many people struggling ... why, really do you have to make that much? ... Scale back ... And I feel bad, because that would change their way of life, but so they can't go out to dinner every night [sarcastic pity tone]. ... Like I feel like I'm almost bitter at this point saying it out loud. ... It's difficult to just be a normal hard-working American. You're in a hamster wheel. And I feel like these people are not. Whoever they are. Nothing against them. But, when you make so much money and people may be technically working harder than you can't even pay their rent, there is definitely something wrong.

Katie’s commentary is laced with moral judgement and echoes the sentiments of others who criticized the excesses of the rich in the context of the struggles of the poor. She invokes that paragon of moral goodness, “a normal hard-working American,” and implicitly includes herself in that group. She frames this group as morally righteous both

in terms of their effort and in terms of their consumption (the basic need of “pay[ing] their rent”). In contrast, she morally impugns the immoderation of anonymous others who have the luxury to “go out to dinner every night” and hesitantly questions their effort (“people may be technically worker harder than you”) as she distances herself from them (“these people... whoever they are”).

Even as she draws these moral contrasts, Katie’s mixed feelings about the rich are clear. She swings back and forth between feeling they make “too much money,” but then feeling that “they deserve money,” wanting them to “scale back,” but then “feel[ing] bad, because that would change their way of life,” being frustrated at feeling “in a hamster wheel” while they “are not” but then holding “nothing against them.” Katie struggled to reconcile her feelings of moral injustice (“there is definitely something wrong”) with her belief in dominant American moral narratives about meritocracy, the sanctity of private ownership, and independence.

To the extent that she did reconcile these feelings to herself, Katie did so by arguing that her moral judgements of the rich emerged from her concern for the poor rather than from envy or particular animus. In other words, unlike some respondents who argued that it was morally untenable to be extremely rich, regardless of the context (e.g., “no one needs that much money”), Katie was like many respondents, who argued that what made the wealth of the rich morally unacceptable was the co-existing poverty of the poor.

I could care less [sic] if someone gets fricking 70 million dollars to sell their shoes if I could feed my family and make my car payment and not stress on my rent. And I'm not talking about extravagant here. I just want to be able to pay my bills without having to think. I would love to set up automatic payment on everything. Just, it's paid it's done. ... Do we have something left to do something fun? Great, awesome. ... If everybody can just get on a base to make it, to have

enough to get what they need, then honestly, I don't care what anybody else does. Just do whatever. You want to spend ridiculous amounts of money and get your face done, go ahead. Meanwhile I'm trying to figure out what can I buy for groceries this week.

Katie's selection of examples here (selling shoes vs. feeding family; "get your face done" vs. buying groceries) belies her repeated disavowals of enmity for the rich and reinforces the moral contrast she draws between herself and that group.

Despite these feelings, Katie was reluctant to explicitly blame the rich for causing the suffering of the poor the way others—like Barbara and Jeremy—did. Instead, she was indirect—for example, using passive language about middle-class people getting “pushed down” not *by*, but *because* “the rich people wanted more money.” Even as her language suggested a direct relationship where one group subjugated another, she denied this narrative, saying, “I don't know what happened.” This was possibly part of Katie's self-portrayal as morally virtuous, perhaps reflecting a feeling that a good person would have “malice toward none.”¹⁷ As we will see in Chapter 3, Katie made this desire for positive self-portrayal more explicit when we talked about race: “I'm a pretty honest person, so ... it's just killing me ... because I feel ... like I'm being prejudiced.”

Even Katie, though, did directly blame corporations and CEOs for taking more than their fair share and leaving others with insufficient resources. She gave the example of a former job she had as a shift supervisor at a fast-food chain.

I remember working there and it felt like I was making decent money, and now you look at those places and there's no way ... I couldn't survive on what they're paying now. ...

So ... where's that money going? To the corporate... and the big CEOs. ... Back then I felt like I could work my way up quicker and get more money. And now I feel like it's stalled because the companies are just, “oh no no, this is our money

17. From Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address, March 4, 1865.

and we need it, and we'll just give you a little tiny bit more so that we have people to work.”

Katie’s willingness to critique corporations directly is perhaps not surprising given that polling research shows that the American public is broadly critical of the power of and the profits made by major corporations (Pew Research Center 2019). Nevertheless, this might have been Katie’s most direct statement of the moral and material relationship between the rich and the poor. The material circumstances (“I couldn’t survive on what they’re paying now”) of a morally virtuous person (someone who wants to “work my way up”) are directly impacted by “the corporate ... and the big CEOs,” who, she suggests, hold on to the majority of the profits, sharing only “a little tiny bit.”

Even while she struggled with ambivalence, Katie nevertheless portrayed a moral divergence between the rich and the poor. Some people have more than they need, which she argues is a morally questionable position given that others have less than they need. Although she expressed an uncommon reluctance to explicitly blame the rich for the hardships of the poor (perhaps in defense of her own moral self-concept), her language and the examples she chose convey this moral judgement.

“You so greedy” – Sam (LIBM)

Sam (LIBM) spent much of his interview making moral arguments about the rich and the poor. As we saw in Chapter 1, he painted a picture of American society wherein the rich are in control, stacking the economic deck in their own favor, pulling the levers of government, and conspiring to keep everyone else out of their ranks. Meanwhile, he argued, the poor in this system continue to struggle to meet their basic needs, unable to find well-paying jobs or afford healthcare for themselves or their children.

Recall that Sam was in his early 40s when we spoke, working in a temporary seasonal job as a metal worker making \$18/hour. He expressed constant concern over the precarity of his employment and the insufficiency of his wages—which were not enough, Sam argued, to afford the “basics.” For example, minutes into our interview, he commented on how expensive it was to afford “medical for you and your four kids.” He lived with his girlfriend (who managed the household finances) and two children, and he also supported his two older children—one a teen in college and one older—when he could (“I help out when I help out”). Between him and his girlfriend, Sam estimated a household income of maybe \$66,000. He described himself as financially “struggling” and “kind of living from check to check.”¹⁸

Everywhere he looked, Sam said, he saw the rich and corporations making tons of money and hoarding it rather than sharing it to “make the country a lot more stronger.” He didn’t fault companies for wanting to make money, but he blamed them for tipping the scales too much in their own favor—something he saw as both unfair and immoral. The rich got tax breaks while people like him, Sam argued, had unsustainable amounts of taxes taken out of their paychecks. Corporate executives have “enough money for ten generations to survive” while the minimum wage was too low to cover even “basic things.” “I don’t get it,” Sam said, “why these businesses are making so much money when they can’t pay their employees more, or even help them out with a better medical plan.”

18. See my note in Chapter 1 about estimating Sam’s income.

As did many respondents, especially the low-income, Sam questioned the moral virtue of corporations and the rich for having excess and luxury while others suffered in poverty.

Banks and GM and these people, they've got the government backing them. Big casinos ... they should pay people. They're making billions of dollars a year. There shouldn't even be no homeless people around. There's too much money out here for anybody in America to really be struggling.

Many respondents echoed this sentiment: there should be plenty to go around, but, through corrupt or immoral actions, some end up with more than they need and others with too little. As we'll see in Chapter 4, low-income respondents like Sam often included government among those they blamed for upholding these illegitimate and immoral inequities—for allowing such situations to continue, or, worse, for supporting these systems. As Sam argued, “the government let the private enterprise do what they do.”

Sam was explicit in arguing that the insidiousness he depicted in the actions of the rich or corporations was deliberate. For example, as we saw in Chapter 1, he targeted the carceral system for moral recrimination as an example of illegitimate economic inequality being perpetuated by the rich for their own benefit. He was frustrated with what he perceived as a system of not simply unjust but intentional inequality. He blamed the rich, big businesses, and the government for working together to keep the poor from accessing opportunities and resources to improve their lives.

To Sam, the moral depravity of these deliberate acts of oppression was made worse by efforts on the part of these groups to hide those acts behind “smokescreens” designed to distract and obfuscate. To make his point, he alluded to a controversial

taxpayer-funded sports stadium (also mentioned by others) and sports franchises in general.

I believe that what they're doing with the sports stadiums, like I told you, was just a way of controlling— keeping your mind off things, like I said. You don't need an \$80 billion whatever, \$80 million football stadium. But they only doing that, like I said, so they covering up whatever else that they doing. So, while you're rooting and rahing for your favorite team, man these guys over here making billions of dollars under your nose.

You worrying about what Lebron James's doing, they worrying about what Cheney's doing, or something, what's that guy's name? The Russian dude. [JS: Putin?] Putin. They're over there dealing with Putin and billions and sending your kids off to these wars over here. You don't even know what the war is about.

Sam's moral judgement of the rich was based not only on what he saw as an immoral excess in the face of suffering but also on his perception that the rich used their extra money and power to take more and more from those with the least resources. All the while, he argued, that money and power allowed them to hide their devious behavior behind popular distractions.

Sam returned to this idea in our second interview to make a moral contrast between the rich and the poor. He repudiated common stereotypes that accused the poor of cheating social welfare systems, arguing that those stories were among the distractions promoted by “big businesses” to turn attention away from their own wrongdoing.

They sell you those smokescreens ... to think about the people that share in poverty with [you] ... “Never mind us, look at them.” And they make you focus on that, so it'll keep the focus off what they're doing. They're taking. They're robbing you blind, but they going, “No, look at this guy, man. He took a few extra hundred dollars when he didn't deserve it.” And you all pissed off at that guy, when the billionaire that's sittin' up in the seat over there is taking your grandma's pension, the 401K, raping her medical benefits. You're not paying attention to that, 'cause it's all a smokescreen to keep your mind off them, and [on] to your neighbor, and wondering what your neighbor is doing.

Like others, Sam defended the moral worthiness of the poor through a moral and material contrast with the rich. Sure, he said, both groups might be taking something they “didn't

deserve,” but one is taking “a few extra hundred bucks” and the other is a “billionaire ... taking your grandma’s pension.”

“We get the worst of everything”

As with other low-income respondents, Sam included himself in his positive moral portrayals of the poor. “I mean, I’m not out here digging through ... trash cans, or nothing like that,” he said, but, “there ain’t no middle ... I’m not even close to the middle.” Even though, he said, he drove a nice car (a BMW) and lived “in a nice house” (that he rented), “I’m still poor, period.”

Although, like most low-income respondents, Sam separated himself from the poorest of the poor, he portrayed those below him on the economic ladder with sympathy and in a morally positive light.

They’re struggling and they need help. Not just from the government, but from people in general. You see your fellow man broke down, you try to help him out. You don’t just step over them.

Some of this sympathy seemed to come from close personal connection. “I know a lot of friends that I went to school with, and they ended up falling off and using drugs and homeless.” As we saw in Chapter 1, Sam argued that people often ended up “struggling” economically despite their efforts or merit—facing challenging inherited circumstances and ongoing unjust inequities in access to opportunity.

The poor definitely get treated unfairly. That’s a definite, you know. They get the shitty end of the stick, we get the worst food, we get the worst healthcare. We get the worst of everything. You’re the last.

Sam’s inclusion of himself among this group manifests here as he seamlessly shifted from using “they” to “we” as he described his perception of the unfair treatment of the poor.

Sam considered this inequitable treatment of the poor to be immoral, and he blamed the rich for perpetuating these inequities out of greed. He used an example also given by a few other low-income respondents, arguing that banks were “so greedy” that they would allow houses and land to sit empty or abandoned rather than compromising their profits for the good of the community.

I see land out here for waste, but then I see hundreds of people sleeping on the Green with nowhere to go. Homes that are empty. Banks ain't making no money off it, the property value is decreasing. Somebody could be in that home, but you so greedy, you want so much money that you're not willing just to take a smaller portion so that family can— Give that home to a family and help the economy out, or something like that. You don't wanna do that. You'd rather just let that house just sit there, hope some crack head come in there and burn it up so you can collect the insurance money off of it.

Again, Sam morally contrasts the excess and greed of the rich with the moral righteousness of the poor. Like others, he invokes the idea of “family” to frame the poor in a morally positive light. They have few options (“nowhere to go”), he suggests, while the rich not only have excess, but use the power linked to that excess in “greedy” and selfish ways. Instead of “help[ing] the economy” or the community, the rich allow people to suffer, he argues, because they are unwilling to “take a smaller portion.” He invokes a “crack head”—someone who might elsewhere be included among the morally questionable poor—to criticize the rich, linking the greed of the rich not just to the hardships of the poor, but to broader societal ills. The moral depravity of the rich, Sam and others argued, went beyond failing to help those who are in need to profiting off the desperation of the poor.

High income views of rich and poor

Like low-income respondents, high-income respondents also described economic inequalities in terms of a moral and material relationship between the rich and the poor. They used a similar moral discourse to that used by low-income respondents to negatively frame the rich and positively frame the poor. Also, like low-income respondents, high-income respondents worked to express their sympathy for and solidarity with the poor and also their differences and separation from the rich. Indeed, high-income respondents appeared to use the former to justify the latter.

A common way that high-income respondents asserted their differences from the rich was to emphasize their sympathy for the poor. Both high- and low-income respondents' moral accusations against the rich included neglect or abuse of the poor or at least a lack of sympathy for their plight. High-income respondents contrasted themselves with these portrayals by emphasizing their sympathy for the poor. They also contrasted themselves with the rich by emphasizing their moderate (and non-excessive) consumption, economic constraint, and their effort. Like low-income respondents, high-income respondents often invoked morally-positive ideas of family when talking about spending or saving their money.

Unlike low-income respondents, who grouped their own moral and material position within a morally virtuous portrayal of the poor, high-income respondents framed themselves in a moral and material middle ground—better off than the poor, but not as well-off as the rich. Their depictions of economic inequality suggested a moral and material relationship between the rich and the poor in which they—in the middle—were,

at worst, neutral bystanders, and at best, morally-positive allies of the poor against the moral depravity of the rich.

“Everybody knows it’s wrong for a CEO to make as much as a thousand of the line level workers in his or her corporation” – Patrick (HIWM)

Patrick—whom we met in Chapter 1—provides a good example of the ways high-income respondents tended to express some of the same negative moral sentiments about the rich and positive moral sentiments about the poor as did low-income respondents, but with different framing of their own position: a morally neutral middle ground, allied with the poor and distinct from the rich.

As a reminder, Patrick was working as a founding partner in a software development startup when we spoke. He was in his late 40s and lived with his wife (who also worked outside the home) and two early-elementary-aged children in a single-family home they owned. His household income was about \$160,000 a year.

Patrick characterized his own social class status as “upper middle class,” although he self-consciously reflected that he had heard from a history professor friend that “everybody” is “brought up to think you’re middle class in America.” When I asked him how he decided on this characterization, he compared upward (as did many high-income respondents), saying he felt he was on “the line between that [upper middle class] and rich” with the “demarcation point between me and the rich” being “wealth, in the sense of money that has no particular plans around it.” For the moment, he said, “we’re breaking even. We’re putting money away for retirement—but I wouldn’t call it wealth—and college for our daughters.” However, becoming rich was something he could imagine happening in the future. “My business could take a turn for the worse and I’m back on the

job market or it could take a turn for the better and I'm building wealth and then I would have to call myself rich.”

Blaming upward

Although quick to name his own advantages in the American economy, Patrick, like most respondents, targeted his moral judgement at the rich, suggesting throughout his interview that it was people who had more economic resources than he did who were both the primary beneficiaries of the unfair systems he described and those chiefly responsible for holding those systems in place.

Patrick saw himself as a beneficiary of the skewed systems he described, but he cast himself as outside of that “elite” group, thus preserving his own moral self-perception. He framed economic inequality as an issue primarily involving groups above and below him on the economic spectrum, impacting him only collaterally. He blamed the rich for creating and upholding a system that he felt made life harder for the poor and even for those he considered to be the middle class.

Patrick walked a fine line, acknowledging the ways he benefitted from a system of unfair access to economic opportunity while blaming the economic “elite” for perpetuating that system. Like other high-income respondents, his understanding of his own position consistently included a perspective that he was better off than some, but not as well off as those who were rigging the system in their own favor. For example, when he told me about his family legacy of admission to Yale, he prefaced it with a note about his family’s non-elite status.

While I'm not from what I'd call an elite family or anything of like the American aristocracy or anything ... nevertheless, my father and his father both went to Yale so for sure it made it easier for me to get in.

Like many high-income respondents, Patrick's social network included people with incomes much higher than his own, which contributed to his own perception of not being among the economic "elite." Even at Yale, he saw himself as among a cadre of "middle class" students who "came from houses where they shared a bedroom with a brother or sister in a classic American middle-class neighborhood with sidewalks and not much space between the houses." In contrast to that group, Patrick said, his classmates also included "a slightly smaller amount" of students "who were from fancier backgrounds and went on European ski vacations and lived a life of greater privilege." Patrick's language throughout the interview—as it did here—implied moral judgement of the rich and also emphasized his moral and material separation from that group.

Moral contrast between rich and poor

Like many respondents, Patrick drew a moral contrast between the rich and the poor when talking about economic inequality. The concepts he drew upon in making this contrast were similar to those I heard from other respondents (both high- and low-income)—in particular, the ideas of effort and basic needs.

I think the experience of being rich is an easy one generally. ... The experience of being poor is a pretty difficult one. ... If you are hungry, you need to get food no matter how you get it, that kind of thing. ... It's very easy for a rich person to seem good ... but not necessarily actually be that good.

Like many respondents, Patrick questions the morals of the rich by denigrating their effort (their experience is "easy"). Furthermore, like Sam, Patrick suggests that the rich are deceptive ("it's very easy ... to seem good ... but not ... actually be that good"). In contrast, Patrick morally elevates the poor, both by invoking reasonable or moderate consumption through basic needs language ("you need to get food") and by asserting their effort in general ("being poor is ... pretty difficult").

Like Katie and other respondents, Patrick portrayed the position of the rich as morally untenable not necessarily in absolute terms, but in relational terms—in the contrasting material resources of the rich and the poor. For example, he said, “everybody knows it's wrong for a CEO to make as much as a thousand [times] of the line level workers in his or her corporation.” He argued that people like CEOs “don’t need more,” and by holding onto those resources, they were keeping money away from “systems that make life better for everyone in the country.”

Patrick echoed Sam’s implication here, linking the moral turpitude of the rich to broader societal ills and not only the hardship of the poor. It would be “better for everyone” if the rich took less for themselves. Patrick accused the rich of a kind of immoral societal theft, arguing that the profit of private corporations “doesn't belong to them” because it was built through public investment in “infrastructure and the roads, and the public education.” In focusing on the harm to a broader “public,” Patrick implied what Sam made explicit—a greed or selfishness among the rich that came at the expense of “everyone” else. With this focus, Patrick also included himself among those hurt by the rich—and thus separated himself from that group.

Like most respondents, Patrick’s moral condemnation of the rich included his argument that the rich had disproportionate political power and used it selfishly to their own benefit. “We've allowed corporate America to dictate policy through money, money in politics.” That influence, he argued, meant corporations could engage in what he called “legal gambling through Wall Street.” The result was “people getting paid or collecting absurd, absurd incomes or payouts from obviously absolutely villainous behavior.” His language when speaking about the rich was often laced with moral recrimination.

Moral and material separation from the rich

Notably, people in Patrick's own economic position were largely absent from his moral depictions—visible only as collateral beneficiaries of a system skewed in favor of the rich and against the poor. For example, when he made his argument (in Chapter 1) that “it’s just simply not humanly possible to work twice as hard as the hotel housekeeper,” he compared that hypothetical housekeeper’s work effort to billionaire John Paulson rather than to his own effort, despite the fact that his own household income was more than twice that of a two-income household of hotel housekeepers.¹⁹

When Patrick did include people like himself in the moral equation between the rich and the poor, it was often to assert the moral neutrality of his own group. He translated his self-understanding of being in a middle-class position into his moral depictions of economic relationships between the rich and the poor. For example, as he talked about his own daily experiences as they related to the rich and the poor, he commented on his separation from both groups and depicted his own position as “average.”

The poor, I don't know them very much because I didn't go to college with them, but my daughter goes to school with some of them and I see them every day on the street around me ... in my neighborhood, which is maybe—zip code-wise—pretty well off for New Haven, although I think it's very average for America. Although there are houses like mine that suggest upper-middle-class comfort if not absolute wealth.

Here, Patrick noted his own separation from the poor, both in terms of social networks (“I don’t know them very much”) and in terms of material experiences (“upper-middle-class comfort if not absolute wealth”). But he also separates himself from the rich. Maybe his

19. The average hotel housekeeper annual salary in CT was about \$30,000 in 2020 (indeed.com, salary.com).

neighborhood is “pretty well-off for New Haven,” but he is careful to note, “it’s very average for America.”

This is one of a few places where Patrick—like other high-income respondents—*acknowledged* the difference between his own life and that of the poor but *emphasized* the difference between his own life and that of the rich. For example, just before this comment about his lack of familiarity with the poor, he had been answering my question about whom he thought of when he thought of the rich. As he did so, he repeatedly asserted his separation from that group.

I worked with financiers in New York and again, some of my classmates from college are those people [the rich]. They have many multiples ... exponential multiples of my own net worth so even though I definitely acknowledge that ... I'm probably in that top seven to ten percent of the American economic scale, I don't quite think of myself as rich for the reasons that we talked about last week of amassing value, amassing piles of gold.

I think of people I know in specific and I think in general people who are able—through their compensation or have already through their family heritage—built really enormous wealth ... of a kind I'm unlikely to see no matter how successful I am in my lifetime. I don't resent it per se. I don't sit there and go, “oh the rich.” I just think it's not healthy for a society to allow the distance between them ... the distance between the successful in our culture and in our economy and the rest—for there to be a gap.

Patrick seems to define the rich almost entirely in terms of the contrast to his own position, both materially and morally. The rich were people with “exponential multiples of my own net worth.” They had the kind of “enormous wealth” that “I’m unlikely to see no matter how successful I am in my lifetime.” Although he saw himself as having plenty (“I’m probably in that top seven to ten percent of the American economic scale”), he separates himself from the morally-questionable excess of the rich—drawing an implicit contrast between his own position (which he described earlier as “breaking even”) and that of those who were “amassing piles of gold” or holding “really enormous wealth.” He

asserts his self-perception as being on the right side of the moral equation when he frames the problem of economic inequality as “a gap” between the rich and “the rest”—clearly grouping himself with the latter.

Patrick’s tendency to focus on his differences from the rich (a tendency he shared with other high-income respondents) seemed to reflect the very different and segregated social networks of high- and low-income respondents: Patrick sees his rich classmates at his college reunions; his neighbors are people who are “pretty well-off for New Haven;” and, through his work, he has encountered “financiers in New York.” Meanwhile, he has almost no personal connections to people who are poor. Thus, it is easier for him to see the ways his life is different from the lives of those who have more than he does than it is for him to see the ways his life is different from the lives of those who have less.

Emphasizing his differences from the rich while minimizing his differences from the poor helped Patrick assert his own moral neutrality. Although he acknowledged his own position as a “beneficiary of unfair advantage and non-meritocratic advantage” (see Chapter 1), he repeatedly downplayed these advantages compared to those he linked to the rich. This was visible in his response to my question about how he felt his life was impacted by economic inequality.

Not too much, because I’m lucky. I’d probably be taxed more if things were the way I think they should be. I might have a little more money year in/year out, but I’m upper middle class. It’s nothing like what even my college friends, who are now wealth managers, benefit from.

When Patrick thought about the impact of inequality on his own life, he nodded to a distinction between himself and the poor (“I’m lucky”) but again emphasized the

distinction between himself and the rich. He “might have a little more money” in the current system than he would if things were “the way I think they should be,” but his own benefits were “nothing” compared to his rich college friends.

Patrick did worry that these circumstances would change and that, in the long run, people like him and his children would be more impacted as societal safety nets were eroded by what he considered the immoral actions of the rich.

How it affects me is that I think I probably have the tiny short-term gain that I don't care about that much—that I would be happy to kiss goodbye for the sake of more confidence that our infrastructure and our system, our safety net ...

... it's really about capitalism. ... Unfettered capitalism is a disaster ... and so I feel like those are the areas in which I get the short benefit and ... I'm afraid I'm getting the shaft long term because I'm not able to participate in a system as well run as the one my parents grew up under.

Here, again, he emphasized his own morally neutral—or even morally virtuous—position as someone willing to “kiss goodbye” the “tiny short-term gain” he saw himself receiving from current inequities, and casting his lot in with the rest of the non-rich as someone “getting the shaft long term.” Condemning the current system of “unfettered capitalism” as a “disaster,” Patrick sees himself as someone with a vested interest in change and a minimal interest in the status quo.

At the same time, Patrick’s time horizon as he thinks about the impacts of economic inequality on his own life (he worries “especially for my kids”) contrasts with the immediacy of the concerns expressed by low-income respondents. I almost never had to ask low-income respondents this question—about how their lives were impacted by economic inequality—because their interviews were filled with examples of impacts on their own lives. By noting the minimal material impact in his own current life and focusing on the more distant impacts on his and his children’s lives, Patrick

unintentionally underscores this difference between himself and the poor even while he focuses his attention on the differences between himself and the rich.

“The top one percent needs to keep us fighting over the crumbs, so we'll be blinded and distracted by the fact that they've got all the money. ... It's designed to be this way” – Renee (HIBW)

Like most respondents, Renee morally separated the rich and the poor—framing the former in negative terms and the latter in positive ones—and like most high-income respondents, she placed herself in a middle position. She argued the poor were “mistreated,” regarded as “expendable” because it served the interests of the rich to “keep us fighting over the crumbs.” Meanwhile, she portrayed the rich as entitled, aloof, and uncaring: “You can live your whole life on a cloud,” “buy or take what you want,” and treat the poor as “disposable.” She accused the rich of treating the poor as if they “don't matter because you don't have to come in contact with them if you don't want to.”

However, even as she presented these moral critiques, Renee expressed some mixed feelings about the rich—interspersing her censure of the rich with assertions such as, “I have no problem with wealthy people.” Like a handful of other respondents, she empathized with the desire among the rich to pass on their wealth “to their kids.” “Even though,” she said, they might have made their money “in a horrible way,” nevertheless, “it's their money” and they can “choose” what “to do with it.”

Renee was in her late 40s when we spoke. She worked as a counselor in a state job, where, because of unionization, she explained, she was paid a “very livable wage” compared to what she might make in the private sector. City or state jobs “are the good jobs in New Haven,” she said, and are coveted by those “of us who think we're middle class.” Her husband had a city job, and she estimated their joint annual income at about

\$125,000. Renee and her husband owned their home and had three children, the youngest of whom was 13. She worried about paying for them to go to college, perhaps because she still had her own college debt that “I’m going to be paying till my grave.” She had started a bachelor’s degree before her children were born, then finished 20 years later, and went on to get a masters. She was also running a private counseling business on the side, off of which, she said, she was “not getting rich ... yet.” But it gave her “personal satisfaction. ... I can work for the money, but then I can come here and do what I love.”

Renee experienced cross-class exposure at an early age. The daughter of a “teenage mom,” she was adopted and raised by her “middle-class” aunt and uncle. She regularly went back and forth between the two households. “I knew when I went to visit my mom, I was going to the housing projects. When I came home, I lived on a regular street in Anytown, USA. It was a middle-class neighborhood.” “I straddled two worlds,” she said, and “I had the best of both.” Spending time in her mother’s neighborhood and watching her mother “struggle,” she said, gave her “compassion” for the poor. Meanwhile, her exposure to wealthy classmates in private school helped her to imagine “something different” for her own life. Her “exposure” to these different worlds made it “so I can talk to anyone, I can fit in anywhere.”

Like other respondents, Renee portrayed the poor in a positive moral light. She framed the poor as people with merit who were “stuck” with few material resources because they were denied access to opportunity (often at the hands of the rich). One example she gave was particularly illustrative—talking about the “talent and skill” of a kid selling drugs on the street—and is worth quoting at length:

You don't know how smart that kid that's selling cocaine on the corner is. How mathematically in his head he's doing all these ... fractions and all this chemistry

just to get the drug just right and ... you don't know how bright that kid is. That's a talent and a skill, but they don't have the opportunity to use it in a productive manner or positive manner. So, if that child was all of a sudden in a competition for a NASA job ... I mean the sky would be limitless.

... And I'm not saying that every poor kid sells drugs, but I'm saying for the one that does, how smart is he? What kind of businessman is he? What are his customer service skills? No one looks at that. ... He's got a product, which he manages to break it down so that he can make a profit. ... He's [doing] customer service, customer retention. We could do so much with that. That's raw potential. You know, but we don't look at that. All we see is, "oh, he's a bad kid." ... Teach him something. Put him in business school. Let him get that degree. You know, take that business mind. Work with it. But no, we lock him up.

Renee inverts a common stereotype often upheld for moral condemnation—the drug dealer. Instead of denouncing a hypothetical “kid that’s selling cocaine on the corner,” she lauds him as someone filled with socially-valued merit: smart, talented, and business savvy. What keeps him from using that “raw potential” to contribute to society, she argues, is not his lack of merit, but rather a lack of “opportunity to use it in a productive manner.” She further framed this hypothetical poor person as morally virtuous, using the idea of basic needs to explain why he might be selling drugs in the first place. Maybe, she suggests,

He learned this as a survival technique because his mom was addicted, so he had to sell drugs to keep the lights on. He had to sell drugs to feed his siblings. ... I know kids that sell drugs to their own mother just to keep the money in the household, because if he didn't sell it to her, she was going to get it from somebody else. And what does that do to the psyche? You know what I'm saying?

Like other respondents, Renee combines moral ideas about reasonable consumption (he was trying “to keep the lights on”) with ideas of family (“he had ... to feed his siblings”) to defend the moral virtue of the poor. She also drew upon the ideas of self-sacrifice (the kid doing damage to his own “psyche”) and constraint or lack of choice, similar to the way Jeremy talked about his parents going “without” in order to feed their families and pay their bills.

Beyond this stereotype, Renee generally talked about the poor with similar sympathy and moral endorsement. For example, she talked about the hardships of people who “just can't live on what they're being paid.” She gave the example of a friend:

[She] can't even afford to go to the doctor because she doesn't get enough hours or make enough money, but she can't afford the copays on her health insurance and she can't afford to be penalized for not signing up, so it's a catch-22. People are absolutely stuck.

In contrast to the moral virtue she attributed to the poor and to people like her friend, who were “absolutely stuck,” Renee portrayed the “people at the top” as immoral, benefitting from and upholding a system “designed” to keep poor people “out of the race.” “We should be angry at the people at the top,” she said, for insidiously keeping “us fighting over the crumbs, so we'll be blinded and distracted by the fact that they've got all the money.”

This class infighting among the non-rich that benefitted the rich, Renee said, was exacerbated by racial tension. She blamed “the people up top” for fueling those tensions with “propaganda” that encouraged “the poor, embittered white person to say, ‘Okay, they're taking all of our jobs. They're taking all of our benefits.’” Meanwhile, “the people up top are looking down, ‘Okay, they're doing exactly what we need them to do.’”

Renee depicts the rich as both morally corrupt and coldly calculating—deliberately increasing their own gains by causing pain for others. She further accused them of selfishly isolating themselves, so they wouldn't have to see the people whose lives they harmed.

Upper class folks ... they don't have to be exposed to other people because they have this little vacuum that they live in with all their wealthy friends, so who cares.

According to Renee, people who are “already comfortable” felt that the problems of those who were not were “somebody else’s problem.” “Those people don't matter because you don't have to come in contact with them if you don't want to. ... You can live your whole life on a cloud.”

Renee argued that this asymmetrical exposure reflected differential power that implicated both race and class. The rich could avoid contact with others while everyone else was always being “thrust into their world” whether they liked it or not. As an example, she talked about the experience of taking her son to a private school for admissions testing, where he felt “so isolated.”

No one at the school where he took the test looked like him. But that's our reality. That's why I tell people, we are constantly thrust into a white world, but they never have to be thrust into ours. So, you ask about the wealthy? They don't have to come into our world, but we constantly have to be thrust into their world - if we want to be successful. And that's where I think the problem really lies. We shouldn't have to do it that way. Everything should be for everyone. And it's not.

As with most Black respondents, Renee talked about economic and racial inequality as intertwined phenomena. The people “at the top” were not just rich, they were usually also White. The consolidation of power among this group undermined an equitable distribution of social and economic resources: “Everything should be for everyone. And it’s not.”

Like others, Renee accused the rich of hoarding resources and opportunities for themselves and restricting access for anyone who might want to share in their fortunes. She argued that the rich used their power to unfairly secure political and economic benefits. For example, she argued that private, well-endowed Yale University had been “in bed with the Mayor” and that meant that the university, “who owns half of New Haven,” was “allowed to not pay taxes.” Like other respondents, she resented that “the

rest of us that are working and paying taxes” would “have to pick up the slack” for that loss of revenue.

Furthermore, Renee said, the rich used their power to immorally evade punishment for behaviors for which the poor were regularly penalized. Again, her analysis reflects intertwined race and class inequality (something I discuss in the next chapter).

If they're smoking crack in the city of New Haven, “oh, he's a crack addict, he's a bum!” ... Now, you have little rich kids doing the same thing—all partying hard ... we think that's cute, but when it's our kids doing it in the city, “oh no, they're problem kids, they're troublemakers! they're druggies and alcoholics” you know, so, yeah, they're treated differently, and they're viewed differently. Propaganda again, propaganda. When they do it, it's cute. When our folks do it, ugh, it's disgusting.

The rich, Renee argued, controlled messaging or “propaganda,” and thus could frame the terms of debate such that “rich kids doing the same thing” as “our kids ... in the city” were both “viewed” and “treated” less harshly. Her comments echo those we heard from Sam in Chapter 1: “the rich is gonna get away with murder. They get away with so much stuff here that a poor person would never get away with.”

The power of the rich meant that they didn't have to participate in or abide by social rules, Renee argued. When I asked her my question about whether American society treated rich people fairly, she rejected the premise of the question. The rich could buy whatever treatment they wanted.

Do we treat them fairly? ... When you have, you don't have to be treated any way, because you go and buy or take what you want. So, it's not a matter of like how we treat them. When you have money... it changes things. ... If they want something, they go and buy it. If they need something, they get it. Whatever service they want, if you don't give it to them, they'll go to the next person and get the service. You know? So, it's not about how they've been treated.

Renee's tone suggests her moral recrimination of the rich. Their ability to get what they want was not something she admired but rather something to be derided. The implication—although not explicitly stated here—is that others are harmed by this ability of the rich to “buy or take what [they] want.”

Differentiating from the rich, solidarity with the poor

Renee's comments about the rich emphasize her moral judgement of that group and also her own feelings of separation from them. Like other high-income respondents, Renee often framed her own position as a moral middle ground, different from both rich and poor, but also tended to focus more on her moral and material differences from the rich than on noting her differences from the poor. At one point, when thinking about her own political power, Renee grouped herself directly with the poor:

I really don't think my vote matters all that much and I'm realizing that that's some baggage that I carry with me from being— seeing the poor and seeing how things don't really work for us. Even though I straddled two worlds, it's like the votes never really seem to go in our favor. The politicians all lie until they get into office and then it's all the same bullshit. “Oh, I'll work for the people” and they're never really for the people.

Renee is in a fairly unique position of feeling both very much part of the poor community of her mother's household and of the “middle class” community of the aunt and uncle who raised her. We can see this as she shifts her language from “being” to “seeing” as she comments on her exposure to the poor, then finishes her sentence speaking in the first person (“things don't really work for us”).

In another instance, her emphasis on difference from the rich and solidarity with the poor is even more explicit. She was talking about the importance of access to educational opportunities, something that nearly every respondent agreed was very

important for economic equality. It would be great, she said, if everyone could have access to free, “or at least affordable,” higher education, but “America is not that way.”

They would never want poor children to have the same access as rich children, because then it would change the game. ... Because if we both went to Harvard and we both got great educations, then we'd be competing for the same jobs. ... So, if every college is on the same line and every college is free, then, we don't need an Ivy League. You know what I'm saying? What do we need that for? What is this elitist thing we're doing? It wouldn't be necessary.

Again, after framing the issue as differential access between “poor children” and “rich children,” Renee uses the first-person point of view to pose the hypothetical scenario, “if we both went to Harvard.” She explicitly frames herself on the side of the “poor children,” and in contrast to an “elitist” group that, she suggests, blocks access to education in order to hold onto opportunities for themselves. As in her earlier examples, her “we” implicitly invokes both race and class, as I discuss later.

Elitism is a common moral critique of the rich (e.g., Sherman 2017). Renee, like other high-income respondents, framed herself in direct contrast to this—holding up her familiarity with and sympathy for the poor as evidence of her non-elitism and, therefore, her moral difference from the rich. She repeatedly distained the rich for snobby behavior, including avoiding contact with the poor (as we saw earlier). She also accused the rich of thinking of themselves as “better than” other people. “I believe that when you come from a place of money, you don't always feel like people are equal to you or as good as you.” In contrast, Renee talked about the way she navigated “two worlds” growing up and said she “didn't really make much of” class differences.

I had friends and they would come stay with me at my mom's house in the projects, but they were from Cheshire.²⁰ I could remember one friend in particular and her house had those, remember *Hart to Hart* from the 80s or whatever that show was? ... The gates opened up and they had the monogrammed letters on the

20. A predominantly White, high-income town in the Greater New Haven area.

gates. She had a house like that. I didn't think anything of it. We were just friends. That's what I instill in my children. There's no such thing as this one's better or that.

Renee emphasizes her indifference to class here, even as she remembers this particular friend's house decades after the fact.

Like other high-income Black respondents, Renee also described experiences of social and racial exclusion that reinforced her own perception of her differences from the rich and her solidarity with the poor. She talked about these experiences in terms of “fair treatment,” which, she said, “we don’t have.” To her, “fair treatment” meant “to stop making assumptions about people” and instead “treating everyone as if they're worthy of whatever service or whatever respect you have.” Renee felt that her higher-income Black family was constantly subject to such “assumptions” that are about “race, but it's also class.” Her feeling of solidarity with the poor, it seemed, came in part from her experience that her material means did not translate into full social access. For example, on vacation, she said, they might stop into a restaurant and “it will be all Caucasians.”

The looks on people's faces. ... It's almost like, “What are you doing here?” And so, it's like, well my money's green, so let's just make it work. ... If I have the money to walk into your establishment, what's the problem?

In another vacation example, she recounted taking her kids to an “expensive water park” that she had to “scrape and save” to afford—implying differences in her material position from both the rich (for whom it might be easy to afford) and the poor (for whom such a thing might be unattainable). Because of the size of their family, she said, they didn’t stay in “the regular rooms” but rented a space on the side that was “more expensive.”

You could see on that side of the world, people were kind of like, “Hmmm.” There was a question of “Are they rooming over here?” As opposed to if we were on the regular side with the regular hotel. Those little things, because those are more expensive, people automatically look at you like, “What are they doing here?” or assuming that we probably can't afford to be there.

She said she regularly encountered assumptions about her family's class status because of their race. "Maybe people are thinking, 'Can they really afford this?' ... just because I'm black or because we're a black family."

These experiences were not isolated incidents. In yet another instance, Renee recounted an experience where her son, who attended a predominantly-White school in another town (through an "open choice program") had repeatedly visited a White friend's house, but, she said, the friend's parents kept "making excuses" about why the friend couldn't visit her son at her home. After refusing to let her son go "back to his house until he comes to ours," she said, "finally the kid's like, 'oh my dad said he has to do a drive-through of the neighborhood.'" Renee argued that people in the town where her son went to school assumed that the kids bussed in from New Haven "are poor, their parents are probably uneducated."

Like they're doing us a favor by letting our kid go to school in this district with more money. And that's not the reality at all. You know, his parents are educated, we own our home, we don't live in the ghetto. But those are ... preconceived notions that they want to believe.

In this recounting, Renee differentiated herself from the poverty of the poor ("his parents are educated, we own our own home, we don't live in the ghetto") and from the elitism of the rich whom she accuses of looking down on people they feel they are doing "a favor" by not excluding them from their "district with more money." She added a note to soften her assertion of difference from the poor and reinforce her difference from the rich.

If we did live in the ghetto, I wouldn't let anything happen to your son before I let it happen to mine, so even if I was poor and we did have a bad neighborhood that we lived in, you wouldn't trust me with your child, but I can trust you with mine? Who knows what all the molestation, god knows what else, goes on out there in your suburb? But you've made all these judgements about me without even knowing where we live or how we live or who we are.

With these stories, Renee asserts her difference from what she depicts as the elitist, snobby, racist assumptions of the rich in two ways. First, she portrays herself as subjected to those assumptions. Second, she emphasizes her own distance from those assumptions by depicting her own empathy with the poor (even “if we did live in the ghetto, I wouldn’t let anything happen to your son”). Notably, she retaliates in kind—deploying stereotypes about the suburbs—against what she feels are unjust stereotypes about people who live in the city.

Empathy for the rich

Despite Renee’s actively negative portrayals of the rich as selfish, elitist, uncaring, and corrupt, there was one area in which she described herself as having common interest with the rich: in defending their ability to pass their fortunes onto their children. “I’m thinking if their family worked for it or earned it, even though they did it in a horrible way, it’s their money.” She was a rare respondent to explicitly argue that, even if their means of acquiring money was morally questionable (“they did it in a horrible way”), they should be able to pass their wealth on to the next generation. “Wealth to me is generational. Dang, somebody did something right, or wrong, to get it, but they got it, you know, so, why not?” She justified this belief by invoking the morally righteous idea of family: arguing for the universality of the desire to make one’s own children’s lives more economically comfortable.

I would love it if my kids could live off the interest of my money as opposed to having to break their backs or kill themselves the way I do or did. Go to school late in life and have to struggle with raising a family and going to school. ... I would love if my children get their degrees straight through instead of realizing 20 years later, “I should’ve finished school.” I’m a mother, that’s what life is, you just want your children to do better than you did.

Thinking about her own children, she said, “Did they work for it? Did they earn it? No. Do they deserve it? Yes, because *we* worked for it.” Given her negative portrayals of “people at the top,” it was surprising that Renee did not try to differentiate between the moral legitimacy of her own desire to pass on wealth compared to those she described as making money in a potentially “horrible way.” In fact, she explicitly argued that whether somebody “did something right or wrong to get” their wealth, they should be able to pass it on. Throughout my interviews, respondents—both high- and low-income—invoked their children as moral justifications for their behaviors. For high-income respondents like Renee, children were often used to justify holding onto more of their income.

At the same time, Renee’s defense of inherited wealth was embedded in and extrapolated from her own experience. Her defense of the rich seemed to emerge from a feeling of scarcity: a desire to avoid having something upon which she felt only a tenuous grasp taken from her.

Renee’s defense of the rich here aligned with her general tendency to critique the rich for behaviors or attitudes rather than for distributional inequities (a distinction emphasized by Sherman, 2017). She did not argue, as others did, that there was anything wrong with people having large amounts of money. Instead, she critiqued the social closure that she argued was enacted by the rich, and she did not seem to see the act of passing wealth down across generations as part of this social closure—or perhaps she made an exception because of her own vested interest in the act. She did think of inheritance as a primary source of wealth.

A lot of people who have gotten to be rich didn't get to be rich, they were born that way. ... A lot of times it's the money, the homes are passed down, it's generational. Then you do have people who maybe go to school and then they

come get great jobs on Wall Street ... but how often does that really happen? You know, there's not a whole lot of stories like that.

However, rather than contesting this mechanism through which others argued wealth remained concentrated in the hands of a few, Renee defended it. She felt that her struggles to carve out a “middle-class” life for her family were sufficient justification for her to “build wealth for [her] children.”

Renee did not discuss the impact of race and racism in her desire to ease her children’s economic trajectories, but recent research suggests that this would be a justifiable concern. A study using data from “nearly the entire U.S. population from 1989–2015” found that, even controlling for parental income, wealth, education, and neighborhood, Black boys—even those born to parents in the top 1 percent—have substantially higher rates of downward mobility than White boys across generations.

Indeed, a black child born to parents in the top quintile is roughly as likely to fall to the bottom family income quintile as he or she is to remain in the top quintile; in contrast, white children are nearly five times as likely to remain in the top quintile as they are to fall to the bottom quintile. (Chetty et al. 2019:3)

Interpreted in light of these findings, Renee was perhaps arguing that, through a variety of mechanisms, White Americans have long been able to pass down wealth across generations and she did not see this generational transfer as problematic as long as she was allowed to do the same.

A few years after I interviewed Renee, Ashton Lattimore, a Harvard graduate (and a Black woman) wrote something that seemed to echo, in some ways, Renee’s sentiments. Lattimore argued that ending so-called “legacy” admissions to elite colleges was best for the “collective good” and a “fairer world,” but nevertheless “adds one more thing to the pile of privileges that people of color can’t pass down to our children as easily as untold generations of whites have done.” “It’s frustrating,” she wrote, “but not entirely

surprising that legacy admissions stand to be eliminated just as people of color might begin to reap the benefits.”

For underrepresented black, Latino and Native American alumni, the prospect of our children finally being able to lay claim to the legacy advantage after hundreds of years of being shut out feels hard-won and precious. (Lattimore 2018)

I can imagine Renee saying something similar about her desire to leave wealth to her children—that ability felt “hard-won and precious” and is something “untold generations of whites have done.” She wasn’t even sure if she would be able to “build wealth for [her] children ... in [her] lifetime,” but she wanted a chance to do so, and her moral views of the rich seemed shaped by this desire.²¹

“I feel like I’m carrying these people. ... Where are all the rich people, why aren’t they carrying them?” – Chad (HIWM)

Chad (HIWM) framed the moral juxtaposition he saw between the rich and the poor in a slightly different way than did other respondents. Like others, he saw the rich as immoral—in part because he accused them of making the lives of the poor unsustainable by taking too much and sharing too little. But unlike others, he framed his anger at the rich less in terms of the harm done to the poor and more in terms of the harm done to people like himself (the “middle class”). Most high-income respondents framed themselves as morally-neutral collateral beneficiaries of a system rigged by the rich in their own favor and against the poor. Chad, too, exempted himself from blame in the moral relationship between the rich and poor and took a step further—elevating his own moral status by framing himself as part of a morally-virtuous group who was collaterally harmed by the actions of the rich against the poor.

21. I delve deeper into respondents’ views of the intersection of racial and economic inequality in the next chapter.

In his early 50s when we spoke, Chad worked as a manager in a branch of city services. He had a master's degree and was married with two children. He and his wife owned their home and had a combined household income of about \$175,000 a year. His children attended private school, which Chad noted was financially sustainable only because "we're being helped" by family. "We could do it" without that help, he said, "but ... we wouldn't have the same quality of life." At the same time, Chad expressed a sense of financial security, identifying as "solidly middle class" and saying, "we travel, we have money, we own a house. We basically don't have money issues. I'm not sweating ... money at all."

Talking about his income, Chad positioned himself in a moral middle ground, noting his differences from those who were paid less than he was but dwelling on his sense of relative deprivation compared to his better-paid peers and acquaintances. Despite his sense of financial security, "I make less than I deserve," he said, and was "embarrassed" by how little he made in comparison to his peers. "There are lots of people I know ... that make more than they deserve." Like other respondents, he blamed political corruption for these inequities in pay, arguing that many of the jobs he considered to be overpaid came through "political patronage." Even as he bemoaned his own salary relative to those who made more, he also noted that many people who made less than he did were "grossly underpaid." However, rather than focusing on his own better circumstances compared to that latter group, Chad positioned himself as among those harmed by their underpayment. City residents like him, he argued, were harmed because low wages meant "we don't have enough teachers and we don't have enough paraprofessionals and we don't have enough nurses." Thus, Chad morally positioned

himself in solidarity with those who are underpaid and in juxtaposition to people in better financial positions than his own.

Chad felt that the American story of being able to work one's way to financial success regardless of starting position was "bullshit," and instead he framed the rich as people who had been "extremely lucky" rather than meritorious.

I think mostly people that make it are—they fall into a spot and they get extremely lucky. ... The only way to make money is ... if you're given money. ... You're not going to save and save—I mean, yeah, you could live under your means ... spend your entire life like saving... but I don't think that someone in today's world ... with going to school ... it would take a lifetime. It would take a lifetime to pay for your school debt ... [for] someone that has nothing. ... I mean, rents are too high, food is too high, you know, our taxes in the city are outrageous.

Here, Chad frames the rich and the poor in morally relative terms that echo the sentiments of other respondents—both high and low income. He invokes luck as a challenge to meritocracy, suggesting that the economic position of the rich is unearned. People who "make it" have been "extremely lucky" or have been "given money." In contrast, he frames "someone who has nothing" in a morally positive light, suggesting that the economic position of the poor—or at least the non-rich—is not a reflection of a lack of merit. Although he doesn't use the trope of hard work here, he does use another socially valued behavior—saving—to dispute the idea that "someone that has nothing" could rise up economically simply through merit.

Chad doesn't include himself in this portrayal—contrasting those who have "made it" with someone who "has nothing"—suggesting that he does not see himself fitting into this moral picture. This is particularly notable because the things he lists—being "given money" and paying for "school debt"—are among the things he mentioned as features of his own life. "My family was extremely fortunate," he said, when he

discussed the familial financial assistance he received to help fund his children's private education and how he had "no debt coming out of college."

Later, Chad made it clear that the relationship he saw between the rich and the poor was both moral and material. Like other high-income respondents, he expressed frustration and anger with the rich and corporations for creating hardship among the poor. But he diverged from other high-income respondents in framing "middle-class" people like himself as bearing the brunt of the moral negligence of the rich.

Massive corporations like Amazon and Walmart ... are like shirking their— like they have part-time workers and then don't offer them— the rest of us that are paying taxes have to pay for their health care. So, I'd rather see like people that [work] part-time get like prorated health care so that ... those corporations pay for that health care ...

... And I feel like I'm carrying these people. Like I'm middle class and I'm supposed to be carrying all these people and where are all the rich people, why aren't they carrying them? Why the hell should I be paying tax for Jeff Bezos because he's got all these people part-time like working, or he's paying them all crappy wages, you know?

And so then ... like all the problems that they create because they're, you know, poor and whatever. So yeah, I feel like the people on top are just not paying their fair share ... And like why should a CEO make 45 times more than his workers, or her workers, you know? What are they possibly doing that's worth that kind of money?

Chad blames the rich and corporations for creating hardships for the poor (paying "crappy wages" and not providing health insurance) and links those hardships to morally-negative excesses among "the people on top." He echoes many respondents when he asks, about CEOs, "What are they possibly doing that's worth that kind of money?" But, unlike other high-income respondents, who were generally sympathetic to the poor, Chad uniquely frames the poor as a social burden ("all the problems that they create"), and more specifically, as a burden on taxpayers like himself. Thus, although he joined his fellow high-income respondents in accusing the rich of "shirking their" social

responsibilities or obligations, he diverged from them in how he felt his own life was impacted by this moral transgression.

Although Chad, like other respondents, frames himself in a middle position between the rich and the poor, unlike other respondents, Chad elevates his own position in the moral order, comparing himself favorably to both the poor and the rich.

I get really ... sad about where I live because I feel like I'm trying really hard and like even when like I buy cheese in the store and I'm thinking shit, I have to buy cheese where other people can go and just get free cheese ... And like so the poor people get like free cheese, which god bless 'em, you know, but ... you start to kind of get— You know, I'm just trying to hang on to what I have I guess, too. Everybody's trying to hang on to what they have and like rich people are ... better able to hang on to what they have. They're like not really part of the game.

Looking both above and below him on the economic ladder, Chad depicts groups that are less morally deserving than people like himself who are “trying really hard.” His comments echo what Kidder and Martin (2012) found in their interview-based research about “tax talk.” They argue that respondents talked about tax policy in moral terms, “drawing moral boundaries between groups and asserting a moral claim about the proper relations between those groups” (Kidder and Martin 2012:124). Specifically, like Chad, their “respondents saw themselves as morally deserving and hard-working people, squeezed between the undeserving poor and the undeserving rich” (Kidder and Martin 2012:138).

Chad was unlike other high-income respondents I spoke with in the way he positioned himself morally above both the poor and the rich. In this commentary, he moved from separating himself from the poor (“I have to buy cheese where other people can go and just get free cheese”) to expressing a sense of solidarity with that group against the rich (“I’m just trying to hang on to what I have I guess, too...and like rich people are... better able to hang on to what they have”). His expression invoking

economic precarity (“just trying to hang on to what I have”) was a surprising juxtaposition given his earlier commentary about “not sweating money at all.”

This seeming contradiction between Chad’s economic comfort and his feeling of precarity reflects a tendency among many high-income respondents, as we’ve seen, to compare upward when thinking about their own economic positions—a tendency that seemed to reflect the class segregation of their social networks. In fact, Chad mentioned during our interview that he had only recently come to think of his income as inadequate because of conversations with his acquaintances and economic peers. Why did he think his income was inadequate? I asked. His response was vague:

I think based on like quality of life and like ... the amount of education I have and – and what I do. Yeah. That's a good question. Because I also think we could run these kind of situations [his particular public service] with volunteers if we had to, so. But it's mostly probably based on other people.

Here, Chad suggests that his social network, more than his sense of his own merit, is what leads him to think he ought to be paid more. “A lot of people have left recently and they're like telling me ... I guess I didn't realize like how much people were really making in like the suburbs.”

The fact that both low- and high-income respondents both tended to look upward when placing blame for economic inequality—combined with social and physical segregation by class—created a way for high-income respondents like Chad to ignore their own relative privilege and instead frame themselves as suffering alongside the poor at the hands of the rich. In such a situation, Chad could say,

I’ve never been so disconnected with my bill paying. Everything is on auto-pay ... completely on auto pilot, you know? ... I hardly ever check. ... I haven't checked my bills in months, you know?

without being aware that someone like Katie dreamed of being “able to pay my bills without having to think. I would love to set up automatic payment on everything.” The difference between Katie and Chad’s economic circumstances translate into different material consequences of economic inequality on their lives, but similar opinions about the rich. Both feel, as Chad put it, that the rich are “better able to hang on to what they have.”

“Nobody gets that far in business without being a mean cruel somebody” – Shawn (HIBM)

Shawn (HIBM) morally separated himself from both the rich and the poor, placing himself in a moral middle position. He described his own economic position as “comfortable,” which he used to separate himself from what he characterized as the excesses of the rich and the hardships, and sometimes failures, of the poor. He discussed his own economic position in meritocratic terms and accused both the rich and the poor of moral corruption in their behaviors.

Shawn (HIBM) was 72 when we spoke. He was the pastor of a church—where we met for our interviews—in a neighborhood where more than half of the residents were Black (56%, compared to 31% in New Haven) or low-income (54%, compared to 48% in New Haven). He had several advanced degrees: a PhD in religious studies, a Master of Divinity, and a Doctor of Ministry. He was married, owned a home, and had three grown children who lived elsewhere. He described his income as “over \$100,000 a year” including “housing allowance and my salary,” and said this was his total household income. He referred to an earlier period in his life when he had less money, telling a story of giving his kids “a button-up sweater” one Christmas, “because I couldn’t afford

anything else,” and how he had “cried like a baby, because I felt bad” relative to friends whose kids received “a multitude of toys.”

Moral condemnation of the rich

Shawn judged the rich for what he considered immoral behavior. He suggested that, to become and stay rich, people had to “manipulate” others, “stomp on people,” be “mean” or “cruel,” or “forget” everyone else and refuse to “share.” These condemnations of the rich were predominantly relational—focused on how the rich treated others in such a way that maximized their own gain at the expense of everyone else.

Immoral and selfish behavior among the rich was a driving force sustaining economic inequality, according to Shawn. This reasoning is evident in his response to my first question—about how he viewed the fairness of the American economy.

Is it fair? No. No, it isn't fair. And it's not fair because the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. It's not fair because, on all levels of the spectrum, the unions fight for \$50 an hour for an auto worker, but won't fight for \$15 an hour for a fast-food worker at McDonalds. ... Not fair because people, once they get, they have a tendency to forget those coming behind them. ... You know, “I've got mine, let them get theirs.” ... We just get for ourselves and once we get it, we have a tendency to go off into the sunset and forget about everybody else. So, it is not fair. Business makes billions of dollars a year. They don't turn around and share corporate profit with the workers. Very few. ... That's extremely, extremely, extremely, extremely rare. ... So, no it's not fair.

Shawn's explanation for the common observation, “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer,” is that people are selfish—pursuing their own gains and “forget[ting] about everyone else.” As we talked more, I asked, “So you're saying people are getting excessive profits?” Shawn said,

Absolutely. There is no wealth sharing. Capitalistic system is based on: he who has, gets. And it's his responsibility to either get more— but if he shares his wealth and distributes it out evenly across the board, he is not going to have it.

As here, where he takes issue with the rich primarily for their failure to “share” with others, he often framed his moral judgements of the rich in relation to the poor. For example, he drew a repeated parallel between the rich and the poor in terms of the common narrative—typically directed only at the poor—of people who “take advantage of” or “abuse the system.”

The Bible says the poor— we're always gonna have with us, so there's always gonna be hustlers, always gonna be people who will abuse the system. Madoff. That guy made billions of dollars, but he abused the system. Is there any difference between him and the woman on welfare who is milking the system? None whatsoever. You look at Madoff from a whole different perspective than you do this woman here.

I think Donald Trump is a hustler. Okay? He is a businessman—I give him credit—but nobody gets that far in business without being a mean cruel somebody, cuz you gotta cut throats, you gotta stomp on some people, you have to hurt some people so that people will fear you and won't go against you. Absolute fact. So, is he any different than a kid out here on the corner who's hustling, selling drugs? Only thing is, what he does is legal. What the kid does, it's not legal.

Reframing the “welfare queen” trope, Shawn turns a common moral critique of the poor against the rich—invoking famous rich people (Bernard Madoff and Donald Trump) and accusing them of “abus[ing] the system” and causing societal harm.²² He goes further to suggest that being or becoming rich might require morally corrupt behavior (“nobody gets that far in business without being a mean cruel somebody”). He also implies something I heard from other respondents: that these immoral behaviors among the rich go unpunished because that group has undue influence on the levers of power that determine what is or is not “legal.”

22. Bernard Madoff was convicted in 2009 of defrauding investors through an elaborate multi-billion-dollar Ponzi scheme.

This same implication—of potentially nefarious influence by the rich over systems that allow them to benefit at others’ expense—was visible when Shawn questioned the role of meritocracy in U.S. economic systems. Although his moral critique of the rich was more about behavior than about a failure of meritocracy, he did make a handful of references to people who “didn’t work for it but got it” and others who worked hard “and never make it.” Donald Trump was a favorite target. When I asked if there were some people whom he felt made more or less money than they deserved, he said, “Probably so, but that’s only because of the system, the way it’s set up.” For example:

Donald Trump is worth \$8 billion. His son has never had to work a day in his life. He is set for life. Does he deserve that? Did he work for that? Not deserve it - did he work for that? Or was it given to him? Donald Trump got started because his father gave him \$1 million. And he was astute enough, smart enough, that he invested it. And he was - whether it’s scrupulous or unscrupulous enough to make deals. Boom, he’s where he’s at now. Did he deserve that?

Shawn often took this tack—of asking rhetorical questions that implied his opinions, rather than stating them. In this example, his framing of someone who “has never had to work a day in his life” references a common trope and suggests condemnation even as he waffles between conflating and separating deservingness and work. This is the closest Shawn came to condemning the rich on meritocratic terms rather than on behavioral terms—and even here, the potentially “unscrupulous” behavior is front and center. Through these rhetorical questions, Shawn indirectly explains his moral view of the rich—they may have merit (“astute enough, smart enough”), but they might also have been “given” some of what they have, and they might have had to be “unscrupulous” to get into their positions.

Notably, Shawn also expressed some mixed feelings about the rich—commenting that those who benefit from the ways “our system is set up” might simply be doing what

is allowed. Furthermore, he seemed to suggest, those systems are upheld by everybody else who is “silly enough” to engage in them despite getting “no benefit from it.” For example, at one point, we were talking about funding programs to support the poor and he again drew his parallel between rich and poor people who “take advantage” of various systems:

Again, you're gonna have people down here on the lower level who're gonna take advantage ... you gotta weed them out, you gotta straighten them out; you also got people up here on the upper level who're gonna do the same thing, you gotta weed them out, take them out.

But then, he went on, thinking about those people “on the upper level,”

It's like ... does a CEO need to make \$50 million a year? Is it fair to give a basketball player a \$50 million contract for 5 years, or 3 years, or an 8-year \$120 million contract? What is he gonna do with that money? So, then he goes, he buys a huge house. It's like Prince. ... This guy's got a compound ... People don't know ... he's giving, he's throwing block parties. At various times he's given stuff to people, he's running [zooming?] across the country to help people, he just don't want nobody to know about it. Say he got a \$10 million mansion on ... an island ... Do I knock the brother for having that? No. Knock yourself out. Even if I don't know that he gave anything to anybody, I don't knock him for it, cuz our system is set up, that says, if you do this, you can make this, if you earn this, you can do this, and we're silly enough to buy all their records, and scream and holler for them, and we get no benefit from it.

Shawn starts out suggesting that the people who take advantage of the system, whether they are rich or poor, need to be “weed[ed] ... out.” When he then turned to talk about the multi-million-dollar contracts for CEOs and basketball players, it seemed that he was continuing this thought, especially as he suggested that a basketball player might take the money and buy “a huge house.” So, it was a bit surprising when he turned to talk about Prince and his “\$10 million mansion,” saying he did not “knock” Prince for having such a luxury, even if the performer hadn't given “anything to anybody.” I'm not sure what to make of this. Perhaps Shawn is saying that this system is not fair, but the people who benefit from it are playing by the rules that exist and those who “get no benefit from it”

uphold it by continuing to participate. He went on to note his own refusal to participate, saying he would go to a professional basketball game if someone gave him a free ticket, but “I’m not paying you a hundred some odd dollars to go see you throw a hoop up, no way.” As we’ll see, this was one of many examples Shawn gave that served to separate himself from both the rich and the poor.

Sympathy for the poor

Embedded in many of Shawn’s responses about the rich is his sympathetic framing of the poor relative to that group. For example, in his initial response—about the rich getting richer and the poor poorer—he frames the poor as underpaid workers left behind by people who have made their fortunes and then gone “off into the sunset” and forgotten “about everybody else.” Shawn generally framed the poor in a positive moral light, arguing that their poverty was primarily a societal failure to provide sufficient support to help people “do what they need to do” rather than a reflection of individual shortcomings.

People fall behind because they don't have the help, they don't know where to go to get the help, and it brings about discouragement and despondency and despair. And then they settle for whatever.

Here, Shawn alluded to a common accusation against the poor—individual complacency (“they settle for whatever”)—but suggests that the root of that behavior is external to the individual. He emphasized that a person’s economic success—and not just their hardships—depended on circumstances beyond the individual. “We get ahead because there are people around us who help us to achieve—who support us.”

At the same time, Shawn called upon individualistic meritocratic tropes about the poor more than other high-income respondents did. For example, he immediately followed the above statement about people who “settle for whatever” with this:

They've gotta have a resolve in them to say, I'm not gonna accept it, so they gotta keep on searching, gotta keep on looking, gotta keep on striving. And once they do that, then it will either come to them, they will find it, it will happen.

Although Shawn invokes this idea of individual “striving” here in a way that might seem to blame the poor for not having enough “resolve” to find their way out of poverty, I took this comment in the context of something he said in our first interview, suggesting that he traced back these individual “mindset” issues to societal messaging. We were talking about where he might start if he could make societal changes, and he suggested that “we have to look at why” a person might fail to “strive.” In his response, he suggested that what “we do as a society” influences those behaviors.

We have to look at why is it that a person would go off and drink all day long and not work? What happened to that person, that individual, that man, that woman as a child that instilled the characteristics in them that they now have become an habitual drug user or an habitual alcoholic? Or an habitual abuser? What causes people to live in sheer poverty? Why is it that someone will have a home, and won't have lights in there, but have a 55-inch TV? What's kicking in their mind? What did we do as a society to instill in them the morals the values of what is or what isn't, and then so they could build on it? Whom have we told that you can make it?

Shawn runs through a list of common judgements against the poor—things he seemed to disapprove of—but ultimately suggests that these behaviors that he considers to be socially unproductive might be rooted in a larger collective responsibility.

To explain, Shawn went on to answer his own question—“whom have we told that you can make it?”—by recounting a story of being told by a high school counselor that he “wasn’t smart enough to go to college.” He implied that, as a young Black man, his behavior of “sitting in class bored half to death” and neglecting his homework was interpreted as a lack of smarts rather than the boredom of a smart kid. He “bought into” this interpretation and didn’t head off to college, only to discover “when I got out there” that there were “people who were not as smart as I was but had achieved some things in

life.” With this new perspective, he said, he decided to go “back to school” and “spent 20-some years going to school.”

My bachelors, my masters, my D.Vid., Ph.D. religious studies. And went on. Because something clicked inside my brain that said that I can. But just think that if we told every kid, you can do this.

In telling this story, Shawn simultaneously advances his own moral position as someone who has worked hard and defends the moral standing of the poor. Even as he repeats common stereotypes about the poor, there is a clear contrast between the sympathy in his framing of the poor as people who are discouraged and desperate and the moral critique in his framing of the rich who “cut throats” and “stomp on people.”

Separating from rich and poor: the comfortable moral middle

Like other high-income respondents, Shawn portrayed his own economic position in a positive moral light relative to both the rich and the poor. He framed his own circumstances as being in the middle—invoking the idea of being “comfortable” as a way of signaling that he was better-off than those living in poverty, but not as excessive and luxurious as the rich.

Shawn started our interview characterizing his own position this way: “I’ve been blessed. I’m not a rich man by any means, but I am comfortable in my living.” Later, when I asked him if he felt that anybody born into any situation “can work hard and get ahead,” he was one of the few respondents who answered in the affirmative. As he explained, he returned to this idea of being comfortable.

I’m going to have to say, “yes, you can”, but the question comes in on that “ahead.” What does that mean? I worked hard, so I’ve achieved some things. But I’ve risen to the level, to the point where I’m probably going to be at, so does that equate me as not being successful as a guy like, say Donald Trump, where he’s worth billions and I’m not even worth millions? ... I feel like I’m perhaps more successful than he is, because I’m comfortable with who I am and where I am. I

don't have to wheel and deal and manipulate to get anything in life because I've been blessed.

As Shawn explains his belief in meritocracy, he uses the idea of the morally corrupt rich to elevate his own moral position by contrast. Not only had he come to his economic position because he had “worked hard,” he argued, but his own moral standing was further elevated by his willingness to stop at “comfortable” rather than pursuing the kind of excess that required the rich to “wheel and deal and manipulate.”

Like other high-income respondents, Shawn was focused on separating himself from the rich and defending his own relative moral virtue. As he answered my question about meritocracy—which was about “anybody born in any situation”—he, like other high-income respondents, looked upward on the economic ladder, comparing himself favorably to the rich. Given Shawn’s sympathy for the poor and his concern for the community he and his church served, I might have expected him to talk about the struggles of people born into poverty. But this exchange came on the heels of Shawn talking about the lack of “wealth sharing” and profit-at-all-cost incentives within the “capitalistic system,” so he had the rich on his mind. Nevertheless, he went on to frame his—morally virtuous—choice to be “comfortable” in terms that invoked both the rich and the poor:

Because for me to be anything more, I would have to have a mega-church ... people literally bring in hundreds of thousands of dollars ... a month. ... Pay me a salary that would equate to me riding around in a Bentley or having on diamonds and jewelry or having a house with a gated— So, and then it's what do I do with that wealth once I attain it? Not even me attain it - what do I do with the wealth that the church attains? Do I take it and put in on my back? Do I take it and make sure that I'm compensated? I took ours and we have a development corp, to make sure this place is kept up A1. So, again, I've achieved, I've done. But again, does that relate to where the Kennedys are or the Rockefellers—who are getting money by virtue of a trust that's set up because their forefathers made millions of dollars that equated into billions of dollars in today's time?

Again, Shawn invokes the rich to create a contrast to his own moral virtue, but he seemed to wrestle with the competing social messages that frame wealth as a sign of success (“does that relate to where the Kennedys are”) versus as a sign of moral corruption (and frugality as the indicator of moral virtue). He implicitly contrasts what he has “achieved” by “work[ing] hard” with famously wealthy families “who are getting money by virtue of a trust.”

His discussion of his own choices to eschew the excesses of others in his position (“riding around in a Bentley or having on diamonds”) is a clear condemnation of the behaviors of the rich and an elevation of his own resistance to that temptation. Instead of “tak[ing]” as much as he can get and “put[ting] it on my back,” Shawn is proud to note the re-investment he has made in his community—setting up a “development corp” that will “make sure this place is kept up A1.” Elsewhere in the interview, he described how this “development corp” built housing and sold it to people in the community:

At a rate where they can afford it, and then put people in their own homes. Take 'em out of the projects, take 'em away from renting, put 'em in their own homes, and let them understand what the American dream is.

As Shawn described his investments in the church and the surrounding community, he continually emphasized the ways these investments separated him from the morally-corrupt behavior of the rich. Although he seemed proud of these investments (e.g., he described in detail specific improvements to the church building, including several spacious offices for his use), he was concerned that some people saw them as extravagant: “Everybody looks at that like ‘[the Pastor] is rolling in dough.’” Shawn was eager to counter these perceptions. He argued that he had not been extravagant and invoked his own sacrifices by noting that had been able to make the investments in the building because he had chosen not to pay himself more.

I could have gotten more and not have done this building, packed the people in there and been satisfied and would have been able to get more. But again, who would I have helped? When I die, what am I going to do with it? I got it set up so I have enough insurance so, if something happens to me, my wife is comfortable for the rest of her life. We're able to survive on a daily basis. ... I'm not a greedy person, so it doesn't take much to make me happy. ... I don't do things to impress people and I'm not impressed by the fact that you can go out here and get this that or the other. Never have been. Because you have to pay for that. I don't.

Shawn's moral self-positioning repeatedly references common moral critiques of the rich—extravagance, greed, showiness—in contrast to being “comfortable” and not doing “things to impress people.” The poor are implicitly present as those who lose at the expense of the extravagance of the rich—and those who are “helped” when those with money decline the extravagances Shawn declaims.

To Shawn, choosing to remain in his “comfortable” economic position allowed him to “help” the poor (placing both him and the poor in a morally positive position) while separating himself from the rich (placing him in a morally positive position relative to the morally corrupt rich). He characterized this moral middle position perhaps most directly in his response to a question I asked about his thoughts on regulating the incomes of the rich through taxation or caps.

Take it from the top and go back down. I think you have the right to earn whatever you want to earn, but I think you ought to be taxed more. ... I think you ought to pay more ... in order to make sure that that money ... goes into a process where it helps out those less fortunate. Either you are taxed more, or that you automatically give into something that takes care of the people less fortunate than you.

He added,

The opposite side of it is, those that are helped have to be in a position where they are showing that they are striving to pull themselves out of the barrel. 'Cause I don't want someone sitting in the barrel, eating shrimp and steak, and I'm up here in the middle, and I can't buy a piece of filet mignon, or afford a house, but because you got food stamps you can walk in and buy [that].

From “up here in the middle,” Shawn criticizes the rich for failing to help “people less fortunate” than themselves—in contrast to his own self-depiction as someone who invests in his community. But he also invokes a common—and stereotypical—criticism of the poor: as people who may not be “striving” to improve their lives. He presents this as a contrast to his meritocratic portrayal of his own achievements. Thus, he defines his own position as distinct from both groups: a moral middle ground.

Reconciling moral worth and moral obligation – Deborah (HIWW)

Deborah (HIWW), like many respondents, was sympathetic to the poor and critical of the rich—and she framed both of these sentiments in moral terms. She struggled with her own moral self-perception, arguing that differences between the opportunities she had and those available to others were not primarily based on merit or effort, but more on luck and circumstance. However, she was unsure of what to do with these arguments—particularly how to reconcile them with a sense of moral worthiness.

Deborah was 48 when we spoke, working as a surgeon at a local large hospital that was a major employer in the city. She was married with two teenaged children and living in a single-family home in one of New Haven’s higher-income neighborhoods. Her annual household income was over \$400,000.²³

Morally contrasting rich and poor

Like others, Deborah morally contrasted the rich and the poor—making a relational argument that was critical of the former and sympathetic to the latter. As a healthcare provider, Deborah had many intimate encounters with people whose incomes

23. This is an estimate based on contextual details Deborah provided during our interview. Unlike with other respondents, I did not get Deborah’s self-reported salary in our first interview and I was unsuccessful at trying to schedule a second interview with her. This estimate aligns with data on average surgeon salaries listed on various websites like ziprecruiter.com and salary.com.

were much lower than hers—people who were her patients or her colleagues and sometimes both—and this gave her a particularly sympathetic perspective toward the poor. During our interview, she talked about several patients who were paid so little that they had to have second jobs and therefore did not have time or energy to take care of their health. Among these patients were people who worked at the same hospital as she did, making the connection between their insufficient wages and their health problems particularly visible to her. One patient, she said,

works two jobs because one of his jobs is in a Central Supply orderly position and it's not sufficient. So, he has to work a second job, which makes him tired all the time, so he actually doesn't exercise. And as I've known him and tried to prepare him for [an operation he needs], he keeps gaining weight and I say [it's not going to be possible] if you keep gaining weight. And then he says, "But I'm too tired to exercise after I finish my two jobs." ... Is it his fault that his job pays him so little that he has to have a second one? No. It's not his fault. The pay is too low.

This patient's health problems, Deborah argues, are not because of some individual failure on his part, but because of something outside of his control—he is being paid too little. She emphasizes his moral virtue as a worker and implicitly pushes back against common stereotypes that suggest that the health problems more common among the poor are the result of individual choices and laziness.

Deborah drew a moral contrast between people in the situation of this patient and people like the hospital CEO. Like many respondents, she questioned whether economic resources were distributed meritocratically and argued that there was a disconnect between an individual's level of effort or merit and their economic circumstances. To make her point, Deborah drew a contrast between what she saw as the excessive pay of the hospital CEO and that of the bottom-level workers.

I just don't know why CEOs should get so much money. I feel like, do they really do that much work? What is their value to the corporation that they are CEO to?

How is that significantly more important than, I guess, the main worker bees?... Look at the hospital CEO ... you know she makes over \$2.5 million a year. ...

And then you have, literally, a person in central supply who is critical to the flow of even an operating room. ... Why is his job less important in terms of running a hospital? What about the housekeeper who has to clean up the bathroom that someone threw up in? Why is he not really valued, because if you don't keep an environment clean the hospital is going to have higher infection rates and worse scores for Medicare? ... He should really be given a lot of money to clean up someone's throw up. ... And it's one of the least valued jobs in the hospital. ... And you know those people are like the poorest people in New Haven who are doing those jobs.

Looking around her workplace (“that's what I know and what I see”) as a way of making sense of broader societal inequalities, Deborah questions the moral standing of the CEO (“do they really do that much work?”) and bolsters that of the lowest paid workers (“he should be given a lot of money to clean up someone’s throw up”) by juxtaposing their effort and pay. It seemed immoral to her for someone to “get so much money” for work of questionable “value” while others whose work she considered “critical” were in the lowest-paid and “least valued jobs.”

Reflecting on self: reconciling moral worth and moral obligation

Within this moral relationship between the overpaid CEO and her underpaid coworkers, Deborah struggled to reconcile her own moral and material position. She described her own salary as “inflated” but didn’t seem to link it to the situation of her impoverished coworkers in the same way as she had with the CEO’s salary. She seemed to shield herself from this consideration by noting that despite her “huge salary,” “we have trouble living on it”—like other respondents, acknowledging her privilege but focusing on her struggles. “But,” she pivots back, those struggles, “that’s our own fault,” she said, revealing her conflicted feelings about her own economic position.

[Having trouble living on your salary is] not your own fault if you make \$40,000 a year. It's your own fault if you make \$450,000. ... Maybe we're not careful. But we're pretty careful. But maybe we could be more careful.

In this moment—having moved from focusing on the salary of the CEO and now, instead, making an explicit contrast between her salary and that of someone in the position of one of her colleagues or patients—she does what many of the high-income respondents do: she briefly acknowledges her own relative privilege compared to someone who makes a tenth of her income—and expresses her sympathy for that person's struggle (“it's not your own fault...”)—but then she turns to focus on the limits of her own resources. Focusing on her need to be “careful” with her money, Deborah turns the lens away from the difference between her salary and that of an orderly at her hospital and suggests that she, too, faces constraint. Her assertion that her family is “pretty careful” additionally serves to position her as morally worthy of her income (the implicit contrast is with the extravagance of the rich). Deborah's comments reflect Rachel Sherman's argument that framing their own expenditures as “reasonable consumption” is one of the ways that the wealthy make claims on being “morally worthy of their wealth” (Sherman 2017:56–57).

Like many high-income respondents, Deborah struggled to reconcile her moral elevation of the poor—and her questioning of the meritocracy of their positions—with her own feelings of deservingness. This tension is evident in her response to my question about comparing her own economic path to those of others. I asked, had her path been harder or easier?

I think it's been easier because I had a lot of opportunity. I grew up in an upper middle-class family. I'm the daughter of an internist [a physician] and, um, you know, we didn't have a lot compared to the guys in finance where I grew up, but we had a lot of resources. I went to a really good high school. I went to a really good college and I went to a really good medical school. So, I'm really lucky. So

then naturally, as I worked hard through each of those things, it just—you know, not that I never worked hard— but that I was there and there was opportunity from that.

So that's all I can say is that, you know it's like you go to a really good high school, you get into a really good college, and so I can tell you maybe someone else worked just as hard in New Haven (didn't live where I lived) and didn't have that opportunity. Maybe they got the same exact grades as I did, but they didn't go to my college, maybe they never even heard about it. Maybe their guidance counselor didn't tell them about it. I don't know. How is that fair?

At first, Deborah repeats a pattern I saw among many high-income respondents (especially White respondents)—acknowledging her “easier” path, her access to opportunity, and her “luck,” but also carefully noting her hard work and her family’s relative position as having less than some others (“we didn’t have a lot compared to the guys in finance”). She thus positions herself in the moral and material middle: better off than some, worse off than others, her moral virtue reflected in having “worked hard.” Each comment about a potentially unfair advantage is matched by a comment defending her moral worth.

Then, Deborah seemed to shift her perspective from defending her own moral position to maybe a structural or a systemic view. This shift seemed to allow her the space to question the fairness of the situation wherein “someone else” who might have “worked just as hard” and even “got[ten] the same grades” might not have had the same opportunities as her for a variety of reasons outside of their control. Looking from this perspective at the larger system, Deborah finds a way to acknowledge an injustice that has benefitted her without necessarily implicating her own moral standing. It is another version of the moral middle. Like other high-income respondents (although perhaps more implicitly than others), Deborah depicts herself as a collateral beneficiary of an unfair

system rather than as a participant. This allows her to feel moral outrage over a system she thinks is unjust without feeling a sense of moral obligation to change it.

Conclusions

As we saw in Chapter 1, respondents argued that economic inequalities were illegitimate because they were based in non-meritocratic systems of inherited opportunity resources. In this chapter, I show that respondents explained these systems in moral terms—arguing that these “rigged” systems were upheld by the morally corrupt rich and hurt the morally-upstanding poor. Across incomes, respondents used moral discourses about the rich and the poor, and the relationship between them, both to make sense of economic inequality and to understand and rationalize their own moral and material position within the relationships they described.

High- and low-income respondents drew upon similar discourses to one another as they framed the rich in negative moral terms and the poor in positive ones. They often criticized the behaviors and attitudes of the rich—especially excessive consumption, greed, or selfishness. They portrayed the poor as hard working, unfairly treated, and struggling to meet basic needs. Some used meritocratic arguments to contrast the moral virtue of the rich and the poor in terms of effort and—as we saw in Chapter 1—to argue that economic position was less a reflection of moral righteousness than of inherited circumstances.

However, to assert their own moral worth relative to that of the rich and the poor, the two groups used somewhat different tactics. Having framed the rich in negative moral terms, both groups emphasized their separation from that group. Low-income respondents asserted their moral worth by grouping themselves within their positive moral portrayals of the poor, invoking their effort, hardships, and reasonable

consumption. In contrast, high-income respondents often acknowledged their “comfort” relative to the poor but focused their claims to moral worth on their differences from the rich. Indeed, many seemed to emphasize their sympathy for the poor as one of the key differences between themselves and the immoral rich. When forced to face their own economically privileged position, they minimized their sense of privilege by emphasizing their personal hardships and hard work (Phillips and Lowery 2020). Thus, high-income respondents characterized their moral and material positions as being in the middle—bystanders who sometimes benefitted and sometimes were harmed by what they characterized as a charged struggle taking place primarily between groups above and below them on the economic spectrum.

A moral and material relationship between the rich and the poor was central to most respondents’ conceptualizations of economic inequality. They described the actions, advantages or disadvantages, and resources of the rich and poor explicitly or implicitly relative to one another. Despite these widely-held relational understandings of economic inequalities, we will see in the next chapter that, in conversations about the role of race in those inequalities, White respondents abandoned these relational descriptions. When thinking about the rich and the poor, nearly all respondents found ways to morally or materially separate themselves from the morally-villainized rich, but such separation was more difficult for White respondents when talking about racialized economic inequality.

CHAPTER 3

RECONCILING RACIAL AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

“White Americans have long known that in a country where black people have been kept disproportionately poor and prevented from building wealth, rules and policies involving money can be nearly as effective for maintaining the color line as legal segregation. You do not have to have laws forcing segregated housing and schools if white Americans, using their generational wealth and higher incomes, can simply buy their way into expensive enclaves with exclusive public schools that are out of the price range of most black Americans.”

Nikole Hannah-Jones (2020)

Introduction

Racial inequality is a defining and enduring feature of economic inequality in the U.S. Income and wealth disparities between Black and White households today are about the same as they were in the 1950s (Kuhn, Schularick, and Steins 2018). As noted in Chapter 2, even among children born to parents in the top income quintile, a Black child is equally as likely to end up in the bottom income quintile as to stay in the top while a White child is five times as likely to stay in the top quintile as they are to fall to the bottom (Chetty et al. 2020).

Every respondent, either when directly asked or somewhere else during the interview, asserted or acknowledged that a person’s perceived race impacted their economic trajectory in some way. But the ways and the extent to which respondents included race when thinking about economic inequality varied considerably across respondents’ class and race.

Black respondents were much more likely to talk about inequalities related to race throughout our discussion about inequalities related to income or wealth. For most Black respondents, these topics were very much part of the same conversation. For example, as

we saw in Chapter 2, Black respondents often talked about the rich as either implicitly or explicitly White.

White respondents, in contrast, often *mentioned* racial inequality when talking about economic inequality—even when I had not prompted them to do so—but many treated racial inequality as a separate conversation that was linked, but not integral, to economic inequality more generally.

One manifestation of the difference in how Black and White respondents separated or integrated these two conversations—about racial and economic inequality—is the difference between whether and how these two groups used a relational lens as they described who is harmed and who benefits from these systems of inequality. As we saw in Chapter 2, nearly all respondents suggested a relationship between the rich and the poor—whether moral or material. Some argued that the rich gained at the expense of the poor. Others argued that the excess of the rich was morally questionable in the context of the insufficiency of the poor. Still others blamed the rich for their exclusion of the poor.

When talking about racialized economic inequality, most Black respondents carried forward that same relational analysis—depicting a system where some benefit through harm done to others—but White respondents (especially the high income) started leaving out one side of that relational equation. While many Black respondents, high and low income, described racialized economic inequality in terms of both what was and is denied to Blacks as well as what was and is gained by Whites through that denial, White respondents focused almost exclusively on the former, leaving unspoken or unexamined the beneficiaries and perpetrators of these systems (including themselves).

This omission of the powerful when talking about the role of race in economic inequality was particularly notable among high-income White respondents—and in sharp contrast to their focus during discussions of the relationship between the rich and the poor. In Chapter 2, we saw high-income respondents, regardless of race, target the powerful for moral recrimination in part as a way to separate themselves, morally, from the rich. They framed themselves in the moral middle—better off than the poor, but without the power or resources of the rich. White respondents talked about power differentials between themselves and people with greater economic resources, but often described those people entirely in economic rather than racial terms. However, when it came to analyzing racial economic inequality, it was harder for White respondents to frame themselves as separate from the perpetrators of racial injustice while also looking through a relational lens. Both high- and low-income respondents struggled to deny the benefits of the racial position they shared with many of the rich. Low-income White respondents focused on their own subjugation and lack of power. High-income White respondents focused on the hardships suffered by Black Americans while often glossing over—or leaving out entirely—an analysis of those who benefit from those hardships.

I argue that these differences between White and Black respondents in their relational analysis of racialized economic inequality reflect several forces—including, but going beyond, a motivation to preserve their own self-concept as morally worthy. Black and White respondents also expressed very different knowledge or awareness of specific mechanisms of racialized economic inequality—both past and present—and these differences influenced their understanding of current inequalities. White respondents' descriptions of current and past racialized economic inequality were vague and generic.

Black respondents' descriptions were specific and grounded in both personal and historical accounts. These differences between White and Black respondents seemed to emerge from two sources: 1) the racial and class segregation of their social networks, and 2) the critical omissions and inaccuracies in mainstream American narratives about current and historical racial oppression. Thus, White respondents struggled to see or understand the ways they benefit from racial economic inequality in part because they were psychologically better off not seeing it, in part because of the racial and economic segregation of their lives, and in part because of missing or inaccurate information in societal narratives about American racial history and racial economic inequality.

Widespread narratives about economic inequality that are silent or misleading with regard to race leave many Americans with a limited set of analyses to draw upon when thinking about the ways racial inequality is linked to economic inequality. These variations in respondents' ways of understanding current and historical patterns of racialized economic inequality, I argue, reveal a systemic collective negligence that serves to uphold existing systems of power.

Methodological notes and chapter organization

In *What's Fair?*, Jennifer Hochschild made a deliberate choice to interview only White respondents, "in order to minimize communication barriers between the respondents and myself and to keep the focus on economic and social, not racial, differences" (Hochschild 1981:316). She limited her sample by race, it seems, not because she did not think race mattered to people's opinions about economic inequality, but precisely because she thought it mattered quite a bit—as evidenced by her subsequent decades-long engagement with race and class differences in experiences and expectations

related to social and economic mobility. As I revisit *What's Fair?*, I extend its findings by including both Black and White respondents in my sample and comparing their opinions in this analysis.

I will not attempt to synthesize Hochschild's body of work subsequent to *What's Fair?* except to note two things: 1) *What's Fair?* was unique in its use of in-depth, qualitative methodology to engage with these issues, and 2) Hochschild's subsequent work suggests that racial differences within and across class—both in experiences and opinions—are integral to understanding Americans' opinions of economic inequality. Black and White, high- and low-income respondents have many consequential differences of opinion regarding their own and others' economic mobility.

This chapter captures some of the variation among respondents by race and class (and sometimes gender) in their views of racialized economic inequality. I have organized the sections into approximate race and class groupings (low-income Black respondents, low-income White respondents, High-income Black respondents, and high-income White respondents). The patterns I outline are sometimes messy and there was considerable variation associated with individuals' backgrounds and cross-race and cross-class exposure. I occasionally include someone from a different race or class grouping to make my point by providing that contrast.

One particular challenge in presenting the data in this chapter is the challenge of presenting an absence or silence. Black respondents often talked about topics or made arguments that were simply absent in my interviews with White respondents and this is a difficult thing to illustrate with interview data. There were exceptions—for example, where White respondents offered a relational analysis of racialized economic harm and

benefit—and I include these as indicators of the kinds of statements I did not hear other White respondents making.

Black respondents: the power of Whiteness/Relational understandings of Power

“I learned as a child that to be ‘safe’, it was important to recognize the power of whiteness, even to fear it, and to avoid encounter” (hooks 2005:23)

When talking about economic inequality, Black respondents (especially low-income) often spoke about the power of the rich and the “power of whiteness” as inextricably intertwined. For many, the entanglements between whiteness, wealth, and power were so obvious that, although they sometimes stated this explicitly, more often these entanglements showed up as implicit assumptions rather than explicit statements. These references, even when implicit, pointed to the power of whiteness within a racialized economic power structure. As we will see, this was very different from the silence, obscuring, or lack of acknowledgement among White respondents about the beneficiaries or maintainers of that power structure.

This section captures two related themes I heard from Black respondents about social and economic power concentrated in the hands of White people: 1) economic power, and 2) the power to define societal priorities. Not only did each of these themes receive far more attention from Black than White respondents (if they were brought up at all by White respondents), but also the ways that Black respondents talked about these issues was markedly different from how most White respondents spoke about race and economic inequality. Black respondents regularly integrated conversations about race, power, and economic inequality, whereas White respondents (as we will see in subsequent sections) tended to treat conversations about racial inequality in a more compartmentalized way. Black respondents also spoke about power with a more

relational analysis than did White respondents—linking the denial of power for some to the concentration or consolidation of power for others. In contrast, White respondents tended to focus more on social treatment than on power when talking about race (as opposed to when they spoke about class)—often leaving the gatekeepers of power and the gains of those gatekeepers unnamed and unexamined. In other words, while White respondents often noted some of their own racialized advantages, they usually neglected a larger analysis of the ways racialized oppression was both in service of and enabled by the “power of whiteness.”

White Economic Power

Darrell²⁴ (LIBM) explained that economic inequality meant that “the power is not even. People with money have the most power.” Instead of using that power to “bring up” the broader “community,” he argued that “everyone’s out for themselves.” In his examples, it becomes clear that he identifies the powerful as both rich and White. In one example, he said, “the way power is distributed,” a “white person that owns a business” is “going to put what they feel is right for their people into their stores.” Maybe that would mean “organic foods, maybe it’ll be at higher prices, it would be fancier stores, things like that.” In contrast, “you’re not going to find many organic foods in black-owned stores nowadays.”

Now, is this where the money comes into play? I don't know, I don't own a store. But, as far as the economy and what I see, if a white person owns Gourmet [a local natural foods store], he has unlimited amount of money. He has all the fancy foods, organics, but they're higher priced, so now you're not only deterring the black, the lesser communities away because they don't have the money to actually pay. ... You're going to turn those people away from that, so it's like, alright, how

24. Darrell was 20 when we spoke. He had a high-school education. He was in and out of homelessness. After a series of temporary jobs, he was unemployed and doing volunteer work at a local community-oriented business.

can I put this? You're not being fair. Knowing that everyone doesn't have the same income or whatever the case is. ... It's too expensive.

Darrell's example illustrates the way he saw the entanglement between racial and economic inequality. His discussion of "fancy foods" seemed to reference both the luxury of the powerful and the basic needs of the poor. This became especially clear when he later expressed his concerns about the health effects of eating the more widely available options from "big food businesses" who "are not actually telling you what's in your food." Like other respondents who referenced the imperative to "feed their families" as a basic need, Darrell references food as something fundamental, suggesting that the concentration of money and power among Whites affects even the most basic aspects of people's lives.²⁵

In another example, Darrell argued again that White people used their social and economic power to shape society in their own interest. In this case, he used the example of educational curriculum.

Even with schools, the money you put into schools— [you should] open up a class to where each ethnicity can learn about their ethnicity. Not just the European culture, not just what you want them to learn. It is things like that that really bother me as far as the economy and the way money and power is divided and what it's used for. ... If the black kid's born here, let him learn where he come from. It's the same. That's equal to me. That has nothing to do with money, but that's the way the money is being used. ... We're using their money, so we're learning what they want us to learn.

It seems self-evident to Darrell to whom he referred when he said, "we're using *their* money," especially as he suggests that "European culture" is "what they want us to learn." When he says, "that has nothing to do with money," he seems to be expressing

25. Food insecurity is strongly correlated with race. One analysis suggests that Black and Latinx households were twice as likely to experience food insecurity compared to White households. Public health research links structural racism to health behaviors and outcomes, including food insecurity (e.g., Burke et al. 2018; Odoms-Young 2018).

frustration with the way money and power and race overlap in American society. He seems to mean it *shouldn't* have anything to do with money, but, as he said, “that’s the way the money is being used.” This was one of several examples Darrell gave that demonstrated his frustration with what he felt was White people’s control over the economy.

Other low-income Black respondents had similar understandings of White economic power, despite differences in their particular circumstances. For example, Sam (LIBM), whom we met in Chapter 1, was different from Darrell in that he was 20-years older, had a higher income, a stable living situation, and he was a father. But the two men expressed remarkably similar views. Like Darrell, Sam argued that people are self-interested. Thus, because White people had power, Sam suggested, they were likely to give opportunities to other White people. Illustrating the way he saw the linkages between race, power, and economic success, in response to one of my generic questions that did not specifically reference race—do people born in different circumstances have equal opportunities to succeed in the U.S.?—Sam answered with an analogy to a parent choosing between helping their own child or someone else’s:

Nah. ... I’ve got some friends that's very successful, white, black, all of that. But, when I think about it, I'm just gonna put— This is their country. Let's say if you had a kid and its friend was over ... and it was the last piece of chicken or something ... Who do you think you're going to give it to? I mean, your kid's hungry, that kid's hungry. You're gonna be like ... I mean, you could be a good person and split it ... but most likely you're gonna give that opportunity to your kid. ... The other person, we'll get to you later, but right now— And that's what they're doing, they're protecting [their own].

As with Darrell, Sam does not feel the need to specify whom he means when he says, “this is *their* country.” Also note the relational nature of his comment. His analogy includes someone being excluded (your kid’s friend), but primarily focuses on those who

control the terms of inclusion and resource distribution: the implicit “they.” Darrell had said something remarkably similar: “white people made jobs. But most white people made jobs for themselves.” Surprisingly, Sam’s portrayal is sympathetic to those in power (a parent wanting to feed their child) even as it is critical (“you *could* be a good person and split it with your friend, but ...” [my emphasis]).

Many other low-income Black respondents expressed similar sentiments about the economic power of whiteness and White people, often focusing on ownership or control of resources. For example, Gloria²⁶ (LIBF) made clear that she felt that “the white man” controlled the economy.

You don't see— nobody own no black companies, real black companies, light, gas, anything. ... They may work in the building, may be part of the CEO, but they don't own nothing. ... It's just facts.²⁷

Like Sam and Darrell, Gloria saw the American economy dominated by White people’s control over resources. She went on, elaborating her point and adding a gendered analysis. Even if you “own your own business. ... Heck, you could start your own company,” she said, but that loan you got from the bank? “The main head of the bank ... that you went to is a white man, you get what I’m saying?” No matter what, she said, “you’re still getting your money from the White man ... and you’re going to pay your money to the White man.”

26. Gloria was 45 when we spoke. She was a single mom with three kids (a 29-year-old autistic son and two elementary-school-aged daughters). She couldn’t work because she had had a back injury and a stroke, so her income came entirely from government assistance programs. She had been “fighting for Social Security for the longest” to try to get disability benefits but said, “they haven’t even gave me a chance.” She continued to be denied benefits on the ground that she was “eligible” to work. Her household income was about \$15,600 a year.

27. In the conclusion to this chapter, I comment on Black respondents’ use of variations of the phrase, “it’s just facts.”

Gloria joined Darrell and Sam in arguing that the problem with this racialized concentration of power is that Whites used it to promote their own interests at the expense of others.

We are trying to do things, what white people have done and ... when we try to do it, it's not working. And whenever we do try to know what they do, they try to make sure that we don't do it to get ahead.

Many Black respondents made this type of argument: that racially-concentrated power led to “protecting” that power (in Sam’s words), through the exclusion or oppression of others. Sam took Gloria’s argument a step further, asserting that the powerful not only “make sure that we don’t ... get ahead” (as Gloria said) but that they also disguise this oppression by promoting narratives of undeservingness. For example, when I asked Sam about what influenced the perspective he was sharing about economic inequality, he recounted learning about “the Black Wall Street²⁸ situation” and said, it “really opened my eyes.”

Once they saw that the blacks had started their own little town and their own economic structure, had their banks and business. ... Once they seen them making it, they got afraid and went over there and burned it down. ... It was crazy. So anytime the Blacks or the poor or whoever try to build something up, it's like they come and then break it down, and then sell it back to the masses as, “Look, you see these people are lazy,” or, “This is why they don't deserve this.” But every time they try to pick theyself up to do something, you took it away from them, and then made it seem like they weren't fit to have the things that they have.

As we have heard from Sam in earlier chapters, he directly takes on widespread racialized narratives of meritocracy here. He depicts a system rigged by the powerful in their own favor not only through the direct denial of opportunity and resources (“you

28. Referring to the prosperous predominantly-Black Greenwood district in Tulsa, OK where, in 1921, hundreds of residents were murdered and buildings burned by White mobs (Fain 2017). “The Black Wall Street Massacre happened in 1921 and was one of the worst race riots in the history of the United States where more than 35 square blocks of a predominantly black neighborhood were destroyed in two days of rioting leaving between 150-300 people dead” (Huddleston Jr 2020). Fresh attention was drawn to this event when President Trump held a rally in Tulsa in 2020 (Davidson 2020).

took it away from them”), but also through narratives that insidiously attribute current racial and economic power inequalities to the supposed shortcomings of those harmed by the system. Sam suggested, here and elsewhere, that the power to control these narratives and “sell” them “back to the masses” is also concentrated in the same White hands that had the power to perpetuate the oppression in the first place—something I also heard from other Black respondents, as we’ll see in the next section.

To many low-income Black respondents, the economic oppression or exclusion of people like themselves was both in service of and enabled by the economic power of Whites. In contrast, as we shall see, although most White respondents acknowledged that they benefitted from assumptions made about them because of their race, few explained their racial advantage as something enabled by White control over economic resources. Nor did they suggest—as many Black respondents did—that this control of economic resources enabled further consolidation of that monopolistic power.

Power to control social and economic priorities

Several Black respondents (mostly low-income women) saw White social and economic power in the ability to define which societal issues deserved attention—which should be considered normal, and which were a crisis. Specifically, these respondents argued that violence, drug addiction, and poverty had created considerable problems for Black communities, but had not been considered major problems by those in power (whom respondents implied were White) until White people were impacted.

Kelly²⁹ (LIBF), for example, argued that poverty didn’t seem to be a concern of the American government or broader society until it appeared to impact large numbers of

29. Kelly was in her late thirties when we spoke, working as a research assistant at Yale and was trying to

White people. At this point in our conversation, she had been talking about her own struggles and those of others living in poverty. Those kinds of struggles, she said,

didn't seem to be that important until white people really started being affected by some of the things that black people have always been affected with money. ... Until they started living in public housing, I didn't see policies for changes. It was fine with Blacks and minorities but, "Oh, what? Mr. Peters lives next door now? Oh no, we're going to fix that."

Kelly's final note of sarcasm emphasizes her frustration at feeling like a societal afterthought. Although she doesn't name those with the power to define what is "important,"—her clear implication is that it is White people. Furthermore, as Sam and Darrell did, Kelly argues that this group of the powerful wields that power primarily in their own interest. She came back to this topic later in our interview, making her point even more explicitly.

Yeah, we were selling crack to each other. Crack. We were all cracked out. Until meth started getting to them White neighborhoods. They was blowing up they houses. *Now*, there's a really big task force.

That's how I feel. Like, we could kill ourselves. We're doing their jobs, but when it affects their home life, all these policy makers, their niece, their cousin, their aunt, their uncle, their such and such and such and such. You know, when somebody has to move in with them because this that and the third ... now they're like "hmm. too close to home, let's do something."

As she emphasizes here, Kelly feels like it is not just her quality of life, but her life itself that is disregarded by those in power ("we could kill ourselves"). This is despite the fact, she implies, that she and other people of color do much of the work that supports the lives of the White and powerful ("we're doing their jobs"). She articulates a feeling of being doubly powerless: she doesn't have the social or economic resources to change her own

complete a bachelor's degree part-time. She made about \$36,000 a year, but her hours had recently been cut back, costing her \$220 a month. She was a single mom of three children (two in elementary school and one daughter in her 20s), and she was constantly struggling to pay her bills.

situation and she feels that those who do have the power and resources do not care about people like her.

Kelly's feelings of being disregarded were exacerbated by the racial and economic segregation of her life (Massey and Denton 1993; Quillian 2012). When she talked about the struggles of poverty, she said, "I'm only talking about minorities ... because that's all I know."

I mean it's not to say for White America ... I never lived side by side by them. They always seem to have the best advantages you know. So, I can't speak for them. I'm just speaking for Black Americans, then maybe Hispanics.

The segregation in Kelly's life left her feeling literally cast aside by a society uninterested in improving the lives of people like her.

Angela³⁰ (LIBF) made comments similar to Kelly's, arguing that problems of poverty that disproportionately affect people of color go largely unaddressed as long as White people are unaffected. Like other Black respondents, Angela explicitly linked race and economic power. At the same time, the Whiteness of those in power seemed so obvious to her and other Black respondents that many references remained implicit. Nevertheless, even implicit references among Black respondents to the race of the powerful contrast markedly with the near total lack of acknowledgement of the powerful at all among White respondents (as we'll see) during our exchanges about race.

Housing and neighborhood safety were concerns for Angela, who lived in "a nice neighborhood" (one of the towns bordering New Haven) but had grown up "in the

30. Angela was in her late 40s. She worked in retail until a few years earlier when she hurt her back in a car accident and became unable to work at that kind of job. Subsequently, her income came entirely from government housing, food, and cash assistance. She was married and had two "grown" children. She noted that she had been offered a scholarship to college but didn't go because she had her two children before graduating high school. She dreamed of helping her grandchildren attend college. Her annual household income was \$17,500.

projects.” Reflecting back, she described the economic and racial segregation she saw while living in one of those housing systems: “The economic system even then ... put all the Blacks in all these high rises. I can’t even tell you one white family that lived in the high-rises.” She argued that “a lot of people have no other choice but to live” in these settings (which she called “the ghetto”) and that those neighborhoods were neglected by the police because of their racial makeup.

If you notice, in the ghetto there's a package [liquor] store on every corner. Drug dealers. The cops don't come until— and I'm not racist so don't understand me wrong— the cops don't come until a White person gets busted or White person gets shot. “Let them kill themselves” ... and then they're trying to be “ghetto fabulous.” You live in the projects with a Lexus parked outside? Well, who's not going to know you're a drug dealer? But the cops think that's okay.

Like Kelly, Angela implied that those who have the power to determine who “gets busted” and what is “okay” are White—or at least only care about those who are White. Also like Kelly, Angela feels that the lives of poor people of color who live in these neighborhoods are treated by those in power as less valuable, even expendable (“let them kill themselves”). She argued that the primary concern of those in power was to keep these groups out of the wealthy, mostly-White suburbs, commenting sarcastically, “Don’t let them come out here to Woodbridge!”

To Angela, this derision and dismissal of poor people of color was particularly unjust because, she argued, the wealth and power of those who now excluded and oppressed had been generated by exploiting the labor of those very groups who were now excluded. For example, as we discussed popular critiques of government support for the poor as “handouts,” she said,

I don't think it's a handout what they're giving. ... If you want to get history right America was built on the sweat of black people's brows. ... So, the government is not really giving; they're giving back what was taken because we didn't give it to them. They took it.

Like Kelly's "we're doing their jobs," Angela's analysis is relational: White people gained power by exploiting the labor of Blacks and others and now used that power to further subjugate those groups.

This type of analysis was primarily offered by low-income Black women, but one of the higher-income Black men voiced a very similar opinion, arguing that the current national focus on opioid addiction reflected a prioritization of concerns that affect White people. Aaron (HIBM) described how "substance abuse issues" had become a "huge issue in Connecticut right now." They had become "more noteworthy," he argued, "primarily ... because of where it's occurring: in more suburban areas."

You know, people have been dying from smoking crack on the streets or whatever for a long time, and well that was a *particular* population. The population - the demographics of the population has changed and now - whoo it's a national issue. We're going to throw some money at it! [sarcastic tone]

I mean, you know, Chicago ... what's going on in Chicago by way of gun violence is unprecedented, this year, maybe last year. It's ridiculous! Sandy Hook. Sandy Hook got a lo-o-o-o-t of money. Not that it wasn't warranted, because that was a tragic situation ... it's tragic to see all these young kids die, but you see my point.

Throughout this comment, Aaron makes implicit references to class and race, arguing, like Kelly and Angela, that the lives of people who are poor and non-White are considered less valuable by American society.³¹ Only when White people are affected (those who live in "more suburban areas" like "Sandy Hook" compared to the "particular population" associated with "smoking crack on the streets" or dying of "gun violence" in

31. "Crack" (or smokable) cocaine users are more likely to be poor (Palamar et al. 2015). The majority of people arrested for crack possession are Black and there is a significant sentencing disparity between crack and powdered cocaine (two forms of the same substance) of 18:1 (American Civil Liberties Union n.d.).

Chicago), do these problems become “more noteworthy,” become “a national issue,” and get more money.³²

Kelly, Angela, and Aaron argue that predominantly-Black communities where poverty is concentrated are socially and economically harmed by the willful neglect of those in power (who are understood to be White) to define these hardships as major concerns. Like Sam, Darrell, and Gloria, these respondents depict a relational understanding of race and inequality—one where the economic and social power of Whites is protected (while the lives of people who are Black and poor are harmed) through these acts of neglect and alternative prioritization.

Low-Income White Respondents: Grappling with economic hardship and racial privilege

In contrast to the integrated and relational ways Black respondents talked about race, power, and economic inequality, White respondents generally compartmentalized racial economic inequality from economic inequality more broadly. They also shifted from the relational depictions they presented when talking about inequalities between rich and poor Americans to a focus that largely ignored those who gained from systems of racialized economic oppression. This section captures a pattern among low-income White respondents in particular where their experiences of economic hardship made it difficult for them to see the structural advantages they shared with the White powerful. I'll discuss the patterns I saw among high-income White respondents later in this chapter.

32. This has become a more common narrative both in academic and public discourse (e.g., Mitchell and Bromfield 2019).

Early in our interview Andrea (LIWF) framed her perspective for me in terms of class, gender, and race.³³ In response to my initial question about the fairness of American economic systems, she said, “I would say that the economic system is biased in a very classist, gender-specific way.” Although she specified only gender and class in that initial statement, she went on to describe her background and experience that included race. She had grown up, she said, in a neighborhood with “super mixed races,” a “working economic, blue collar neighborhood” where she had exposure to “both ends” of the economic spectrum. “I’ve been friends with the richest kid in the school and the poorest kid in the school.” Although she “sort of fell towards ... the poorest kid in the school demographic,” she said, “people made assumptions about me because I’m white and well spoken.” Those assumptions gave her access to “friends who grew up with silver spoons.”

With these well-heeled friends as anchors, Andrea’s self-perception seemed much more shaped by her experience of economic hardship and class and gender discrimination than by her experience of racial privilege. She felt constantly judged and dismissed as “less than” because of her class and gender—overlooked and underemployed.

Andrea mentioned race again, unprompted, several times during our interview—although each time was just a mention and carried little reflection on her own racial position. For example, she argued that “the gap” or “spreading of whatever used to be in

33. Andrea was in her early 40s and single. Her income was about \$20,000/year. She worked as an artist and educator. Her employment seemed precarious and she felt constantly financially “unstable.” She described her education as “lots of college, no paper.” She alluded to a recent move from a “poor” neighborhood where she had lived for over a decade and that she described as “ideal” and “wonderful” to her current neighborhood where people had higher incomes. There, most people had “at least one degree, nice cars” and [scornfully] “it was never too saucy with non-white flavor.” Although she had a “beautiful large apartment” in her new neighborhood, “people are wary of neighbors and it’s this sort of nose-up ten degrees kind of thing.” She didn’t explain her move and expressed disdain for the luxury and snobbery of her neighbors.

the middle ... to the further ends ... creates this tension” that “sort of seeps its way into gender bias and definitely socioeconomic class issues. Race issues.” And when she described what she imagined as fair, she said, “there would be, regardless of race, gender, or whatever ... you have opportunities.” She talked about having “never finished school” because she saw it as “one more construct by the rich white man.”

We had our most in-depth exchange about race when I brought it up explicitly, and then, it became clear that Andrea’s feelings of economic hardship made it hard for her to see her own racial advantages. How, if at all, I asked, did she think her race might have impacted her economic trajectory? Her response acknowledged her potential advantages, but was vague:

I feel like I've probably been ... I'm probably given more opportunities than if I was a black woman or a Hispanic woman. I've seen my girlfriends, who are of other races, their struggle. If they're poor, their struggles are a little bit different than mine.

Up until this point of the conversation, Andrea has primarily focused on her own hardship and this is a bit of a turn for her to acknowledge that her situation might be even slightly better than someone else’s. Because of her vague response, I probed, asking, “In what way?”

Just hearing about the things that— If I have had a shitty boss situation as a white woman and their shitty boss situation as a black woman or a Puerto Rican woman—little different. Little different. So, I feel that like, well, if you wanna see who struggles the hardest? Mixed-race black and Latino [sic] woman working in a service job. That right there [taps table] is the biggest struggle. [laughs]

So, I'm like, okay, I'm like, alright, I've got some white on my side, there's a couple doors there, there's a couple white doors that people don't want to talk about the race thing. I'm like, oh I'll talk about it. Because I could— I could see the pain that— you know these are my sisters! I see your pain, girl. That's terrible.

Like, okay, but I don't feel that has really opened any doors. I just think that there have been people who felt like my color could make them identify with me over someone who looked like a different color. That's it.

Andrea claims to understand that her race might give her an advantage over other low-income women, but she seems reluctant and/or unprepared to engage that conversation. Once I raise the topic, she seems to feel a social pressure to acknowledge that “a couple” proverbial “doors” might *exist* for her because of her race that might not be there for others, but she almost immediately notes that those doors have not been *open* to her. She repeatedly notes, non-specifically, that her experience is “different” from that of women of a different race, but rather than pointing to how that difference might be in her favor, Andrea, like other White respondents, focuses instead on how that difference results in hardship for people of color. She notes that Black and Brown women in service occupations have “the biggest struggle” while minimizing any benefits she might gain (“I don’t think it’s put a penny in my pocket”). Even as she approached the idea of her own gain (“I’ve got some white on my side”), she pivots to turn it into a positive statement about her own empathy and willingness to discuss race (“oh, I’ll talk about it. ... I see your pain”).

Her response suggested that she has had some conversations on the topic, but she might not want to engage or might not understand the mechanisms through which her race might have led her to have had better economic opportunities. For example, she describes one mechanism—being positively racially profiled (“there have been people who felt like my color could make them identify with me over someone who looked like a different color”)—but seems either unaware or unwilling to think about the ways that such profiling might lead to better opportunities (e.g., in housing, hiring, or avoiding incarceration) that would impact her economic situation.

What was most visible to Andrea—even in terms of race—was her own hardships rather than her advantages. This was reinforced a few minutes later, when Andrea brought up race again as we talked about her experience applying for public assistance.

Different times I've had to get heating assistance, so they match payments or something, because I couldn't afford to heat my house. ...But, as a kid... We grew up on assistance. It was terrible, going through all those lines. Or even trying to get medical assistance, oh my god, it's so demeaning. That's a place where being white does not come to your white advantage.

JS: [Tell me more.]

Oh my god, twice I went to apply for heating assistance in New Haven over the last four years. First person there, last person to be seen. Only white person. Really? Are you kidding me? Oh, this isn't related, I'm sure. [sarcastically] Because I've had an appointment for three weeks. Really? Oh. And all the tra la las come in, don't have an appointment, la la la, make nice nice with the receptionist. "Go right in. Go right in." Oh. Okay. Lost my paperwork twice. You make assumptions about me. Okay, that's cool [again, sarcastically].

Like nearly every person I spoke with who had received public assistance, Andrea's experience applying for benefits was frustrating and demeaning. These kinds of experiences, it seems, tended to make those applying for benefits feel like they were competing with one another for a meager but well-guarded prize. Andrea is no exception, and here she expressed her bitterness over the difficulty of this experience. She sees herself as the only White person and feels that she has been racially discriminated against (such perceptions of anti-White bias are increasingly common, e.g., Earle and Hodson 2020; Kolber 2017; Norton and Sommers 2011). But she doesn't translate this experience into an understanding of how Black and Brown people might feel in her own everyday world, where other White people "felt like my color could make them identify with me over someone who looked like a different color." When her race has given her advantages, she dismisses it. When she feels that her race has given her a disadvantage, it makes her angry.

Katie (LIWW), whom we met in Chapter 2, provides a different perspective on this same pattern of struggling to reconcile her own experience of economic hardship with her awareness of prejudice and discrimination against people of color.³⁴ Unlike Andrea, who didn't really discuss race until I explicitly brought it up, Katie started our interview talking about her feelings of experiencing racial discrimination in applying for public assistance. In response to my first question—was the economy fair?—Katie said, “No.” When I asked for more detail, she squirmed, then said,

It's funny because the consent form said there's some of it might be uncomfortable. Because I don't want to make the wrong impression on you, but I feel like a lot of people don't get help that need it. And a lot of the times it has to do with the color of their skin [grimaces, laughs uncomfortably].

After I explained that my job was to listen to what she had to say, she went on:

I'm so not, in any way, that, like you know, I don't judge people, I'm not racist, whatever, it's just things I've seen. Especially because we're— my family and I are struggling. And I see other people who, maybe don't need as much help. And it's like, why do they get it?

Katie's apparent answer to her rhetorical “why do they get it?” question is that there are racial quotas in place because, she said, “so many people of different colors have been treated unfairly.” Thus, she argued, benefits offices “have to have a certain amount of people of this race have that and this and this. And I feel like that's what it's more focused on than, ‘Okay who really needs the help?’”

Unlike Andrea, who was unapologetically angry at what she seemed to see as anti-White bias, Katie's tone throughout the interview is apologetic and confessional. She says she feels “horrible” about expressing these views but doesn't see an alternative

34. Recall, from Chapter 2: Katie was in her late 30s working as a teachers' assistant. She rented a house (from family) with her husband and three children (including two step-children). She estimated that her household income was about \$45,000 a year. Katie had completed a couple years of college but couldn't afford to finish her degree.

interpretation of “things I’ve seen.” She was caught up in her family’s own economic hardship and struggled to see beyond it. When she thought about the people of color who seemed to be receiving help ahead of her, she imagined they had an easier time getting benefits. But she didn’t blame them. “It’s not their fault” she said. Instead, she blamed a history of racism and discrimination: “I think it’s just all the people who’ve ever treated anybody other than a white person like crap and they’re trying to make up for it.” Notably, her use of “all the people” suggests an individualistic lens, as if the history of racial oppression in the U.S. is about particular individuals who treat others poorly. Katie exempts herself from this group by focusing on individuals and by declaring herself “not racist.” Such an individual focus also allows Katie, like Andrea and other White respondents, to focus on the harm done (being “treated ... like crap”) and exclude relational considerations of whatever benefits might be gained by those perpetrating said harm.

Katie does note that her race may have benefitted her economically, but only when I ask her directly if there are any ways she felt she ever received any special benefits, privileges, or things that made her path easier.

The job I have now, I feel— I’m not saying it’s why I got the job. I’m saying if I was a different color, maybe not. Just because of the town I work in, it doesn’t have many other people other than white, honestly. So, if I had to say something like that, I could check on that as an example, because one of my really good friends, who is— I don’t know what the right term is anymore— She’s African American? She works there. She has a degree. But she feels— ... Like she never says she’s treated unfairly because of her color, but the stories she tells me— ... It always makes me think like, I wonder if I was her if I would have even gotten this position. Without my degree and whatnot. But still being the same person inside, but I still wonder, maybe that was one of the considerations that I would “fit in.” I’m just being honest.

Here, Katie seemed willing to consider the possibility that being White helped her get her current job because of the way she might have been seen to “fit in.” However, from the

beginning, she insists that, if race were in play, the mechanism was not her advantage (“I’m not saying it’s why I got the job”) but someone else’s disadvantage (“if I was a different color, maybe not”). Her lack of a college degree (she’s completed some courses but cannot afford to finish) had been an ongoing frustration for her and she repeatedly mentioned that this had hindered her professional advancement. As she tried to make sense of how her race might factor into her economic trajectory, she seemed to stumble upon the realization that her race might have helped her get a job without that credential while her Black peer may have needed the credential to gain the same kind of employment. (I heard this idea—that a Black person would have to work twice as hard to be in the same position as a White person—from several Black respondents.)

In this context, Katie’s defensive comment, “I’m just being honest,” suggests that she felt like talking about racial advantage or disadvantage, or perhaps race itself, *at all*—as opposed to saying particular things—might be considered inappropriate. She seemed just as defensive here, talking about potential discrimination against people of color as she did earlier, when she was talking about potential discrimination against Whites. Her discomfort in knowing how to reference the race of one of her “really good friends” also suggests her concern that race is a loaded—and socially taboo—topic. Katie drew on several common tropes used by Whites as evidence of their non-racist views, including color-blindness and friendships or closeness with Black people (Bonilla-Silva 2009).

In our second interview, Katie acknowledged that White people might benefit from racism. We had been talking about the rich and the poor, and I asked if she thought some groups were more likely to be rich or more likely to be poor in American society. She independently brought up race.

Unfortunately, yes because— I feel like racism is a huge part of that, and ... there are stereotypes. I've even said it in here and I've felt bad, but— I feel like white people have a better chance of getting jobs strictly because of stereotypes.

Here, again, Katie said she feels “bad” naming benefits gained by White people— although it is not clear whether her “bad” feelings come from being among the beneficiaries of this system or from naming something she feels is a taboo topic. She acknowledged a relational dynamic—noting the “better chance” White people have “because of stereotypes” about people of color—but continued to separate her discussion of harms to some and benefits to others. Here, as Katie acknowledged benefits to Whites, she mentioned “stereotypes” and “racism” but not the people harmed by those forces. “White people have a better chance” *than whom?* Then, when she went on to talk about this latter group—who she referred to here only as “they”—she switched and doesn’t mention those who are benefitting.

In general, I feel like race plays a big part in a lot of it. I know I said in the past that I feel like they get more help, but I also feel like they— they get more trouble, I don't know how— or they get less opportunities maybe I should say.

Just as earlier, Katie again made a relative statement (“they get less opportunities”) and again omits the comparison group. “[L]ess opportunities” *than whom?* Even as she seemed to try to acknowledge a relational dynamic, Katie can’t seem to bring herself to state it outright.

Katie isn’t sure what to make of her experiences. She seemed to genuinely believe that people of color have faced discrimination and continue to “get less opportunities.” And yet, as a White person, she felt frustrated and mistreated by government benefit systems. For that, she was not sure whom to blame, but the most immediately visible options are the people with whom she felt she was competing for those benefits (and

those widely available in popular narratives, Gilens 1999)—those whom she felt “get more help.”

Katie is likely drawing upon a broader societal narrative that suggests that people of color are less deserving of the kinds of public assistance she is trying to get. She is also expressing a frustration I heard from almost every respondent who had applied for public assistance, regardless of race—a sense that one was not seen as a whole person by those systems. It seems possible that if Katie had felt that her own needs were being met, then she might not have felt in competition with her economic peers and thus might have relied less on social narratives blaming racial others for taking her share of the pie. Instead, her experience applying for public assistance was demeaning, discouraging, and frustrating, and the most readily available narratives to help her understand these experiences led her to feel that she was competing with—and losing to—people of color.

Katie and Andrea’s views of racialized economic inequality are refracted through the gendered experience of seeking support from government safety net programs (gendered because of the way those programs are structured). We’ll hear more from Katie about this experience in Chapter 4, but it is worth noting here that many of my conversations with low-income women, both White and Black, included sections where they talked about their experiences applying for—or using—this kind of assistance and feeling shamed, degraded, punished, and disrespected in the process. While Katie and Andrea look to their other-race economic peers as having an easier time or “cutting in line” (as Arlie Hochschild 2016, describes it), I also heard from low-income Black women who accused their economic peers—usually without mentioning race—of taking benefits they seemed not to need (e.g., Kelly, whom we’ll also hear from in Chapter 4).

These situations recall Renee's comments from Chapter 2, when she argued that "the people at the top" kept "us fighting over the crumbs, so we'll be blinded and distracted by the fact that they've got all the money." In particular, she argued that those "at the top" encouraged racial tensions because they kept poor people "out of the race." Rather than looking to who has "all the money," she said, those tensions encouraged "the poor, embittered white person to say, 'Okay, they're taking all of our jobs. They're taking all of our benefits.'"

Race is "involved in a lot of stuff"

Jeremy (LIWM), whom we met in Chapter 2, offers a differently-gendered illustration of the pattern we saw with Katie and Andrea: a low-income White respondent focused on, and perhaps overwhelmed by, his own economic hardships in a way that seemed to lead him to ignore his racial advantages.³⁵ He also demonstrates a second pattern I found among White respondents—that of compartmentalizing or separating conversations about racial inequality from economic inequality rather than treating the two as manifestations of linked systems (as Black respondents did).

Jeremy's commentary about racialized economic inequality in some ways exemplified the compartmentalization of race in White respondents' conversations about economic inequality. Race was not woven throughout Jeremy's understanding of economic inequality. Although he was the low-income White man respondent with the most to say about race and racism, nearly all of his commentary on the subject was

35. Recall from Chapter 2: Jeremy was in his early 40s. He had a GED and was working as a landscaper ("busting my hump" and "not getting paid what I'm worth"), making about \$35,000 a year. Earlier in his life, he spent 10 years in prison. He had two older daughters (who did not live with him) for whom he still paid child support. He lived with his girlfriend (who was Black), who had three children of her own, including a young son who lived with them. His girlfriend received some form of state "assistance," without which, Jeremy said, they would "be homeless."

contained within a single six-minute section of our interview—one that followed me asking explicitly about race and economic inequality. This was despite the fact that he was in an interracial relationship with a Black woman and that he felt that his “skin color” had helped him get or keep certain jobs—both of which he mentioned for the first time during this six-minute time span (after nearly three hours of conversation).

About an hour into our second 2-hour interview session (three-quarters of the way through our overall interview time), I asked if Jeremy if he had any thoughts about whether gender or race affects people’s economic trajectories in the U.S. At that point, he noted that race is “involved in a lot of stuff” and launched into six minutes of commentary about race. It was as if he switched into a special gear or opened a conversational compartment where he kept his thoughts about race—whether or not they were specifically related to economic inequality. He talked about racism in general (for example, commenting that “race plays a big issue in a lot of things”) and about racism in his own life (for example saying, “I’ve experienced racism from the Black and the White side” when talking about how his interracial relationship is perceived). Throughout, he attempted to assert a positive moral identity as non-racist. It seemed that he thought race was important (or at least he thought he should say that race was important), but he didn’t know how to explain or hadn’t thought about the particular ways in which it might be linked to income and wealth inequality.

He drew on some of the standard “colorblind” tropes (Bonilla-Silva 2009), for example noting that he grew up in a “diverse” neighborhood.

I wasn't raised racist. I was raised that we're all equal. My mother taught me that at a young age. She sat us down, fed us all off the same spoon. My godparents are Spanish. Some people that I'm close to, we're brothers. My girlfriend, she's black. So, I'm not raised that way. I don't see color.

Notably, after describing his girlfriend as black, he concludes, “I don't see color.”

Despite his use of these standard tropes, Jeremy seemed less uncomfortable talking about race than did other White respondents. In fact, there was a quality to the way he talked in this section that made it sound like this was not the first time he was telling these stories or expressing these opinions. This might be a result of Jeremy's relatively greater contact with people of color compared to his White, male, low-income peers (including being in an interracial relationship).

As Jeremy tried to explain the ways he imagined race playing a role in people's economic opportunities and outcomes, stereotypes were among the first things that came to his mind—something I also observed among other White respondents. However, Jeremy struggled to trace the economic consequences of these racial stereotypes. Instead, he recounted racial stereotypes related to economics and then tried to dispute them based on his own experience.

A lot of people think a lot of black people, they love being on Welfare. That's not true. The lawns that I cut, on the side, all my customers are black. They own houses, they work for a living, know what I mean?

Jeremy implies the harm done by racialized stereotypes about welfare dependency, but he doesn't trace out their consequences. It is not clear here to what degree his disputation of these stereotypes is simply him recounting his experience and to what degree he is still working to establish his positive moral identity with regard to race.

Given Jeremy's apparent struggle to understand the economic consequences of racial inequality, I was surprised when—right in the middle of our brief discussion about race—he provided an example of such a consequence—and moreover, one linked to his own economic experience.

Even with the construction jobs, not just black people, even some Hispanics, they get held back. The white operator gets the job, but the black or Hispanic guy could do it, you know what I mean? I seen it. I probably got a job a few times because of my skin color [over a] black guy, you know what I mean?

I had a job at a landscaping company and the Black guy was training me, and he got fired 'cause they said he had a record, right? But my record is just as long as his. I'm just saying, I'm just keeping it honest with you. ... That's just my experience.

Here, Jeremy was suddenly not only describing a situation where he felt racial discrimination impacted people's economic trajectories, but he also went a step further to point out how his Whiteness had likely given him an opportunity that somebody else did not get. He volunteered this information without me really probing, although, as I have noted, it was strangely late in the interview and only in the context of him answering my explicit question about racial inequality.

This was a striking moment where Jeremy acknowledged some advantage he might have had because, throughout the rest of the interview, Jeremy consistently framed himself as among those being held down. For example, in our first interview, I had asked him if he felt that, compared to other people, it had been easier or harder for him to have economic opportunity. Unhesitatingly, he had answered, "I think it's been the story of my life, everything's been hard. Basically, it's been harder." His identity was tied to this struggle and, unprompted, he did not think of the economic advantages he might have, only the disadvantages.

As he recounted an instance of his own potentially racialized advantage, Jeremy sounded defensive. His "I'm just keeping it honest with you" echoed Katie's nearly identical comment ("I'm just being honest") as she told a similar story of her own racialized advantage. These two low-income White respondents seemed to have adopted the "colorblind" idea that talking about race at all—even acknowledging one's own

advantages—is socially unacceptable. Perhaps they also were trying to disavow the implications of having potentially gained access unfairly. Either way, their claims to honesty appeared to be attempts to re-assert their moral standing.

After briefly commenting on his racial advantage, Jeremy pivots away from this uncomfortable topic and back to talking about stereotypes and making the case for his own lack of racism. He then went on to talk about experiencing “racism from the Black and the White side” as people judged his interracial relationship. In Jeremy’s final thoughts in our conversation about race, he returns to his own family’s disadvantage, closing out this conversation by returning to his own narrative of hardship.

Jeremy felt his economic hardship as all-consuming. Being a hard-working laborer was central to his identity. Our interview was dominated by stories of the economic misdeeds of others that came at his or his family’s expense—bosses who paid too little; fellow laborers who “milk the clock sometimes;” employers who “turned their back” on loyal workers when they got sick. So, it was not surprising that, as a White man, race and racism were not key elements of his understanding of economic inequality, despite the fact that he seemed to have more social contact with people who had experienced racial discrimination than some of his White, low-income, male peers. With his identity so tied to being the one facing hardship, he did not, unprompted, think of the economic advantages he might have, only the disadvantages.

Concluding thoughts:

Racist and meritocratic narratives that blame the poor for failing to work their way out of their hardships and create racialized stigma around social safety net use seemed to push low-income White respondents away from what might otherwise have

been a more relational analysis of racialized economic inequality. Andrea, Katie, and Jeremy all saw themselves as facing unjust hardship at the hands of a powerful elite. But to these low-income White respondents, racializing that group of the powerful as White seemed to pose a risk of further stigmatizing themselves: if they had a racial advantage, that might provide yet another excuse for them to be blamed for their own continued hardship. They seemed to see no other way to reject this narrative than to insist that their Whiteness gave them little advantage. These respondents did note the hardships of their Black and Brown economic peers, but they did so typically only when prompted, suggesting little real engagement on their part and perhaps only social desirability bias.

Black (High-Income) Respondents: Power of Whiteness to control criminalization and incarceration

Think about that for a second. What's the education system do for inner-city black kids? Why is it that always, there's always some kind of deficiency in the programming in inner-city black schools—or schools for predominantly black people? Why is that always that way? Isn't that kind of ironic to you? Seriously. ... Isn't it kind of ironic that the population of the prison system is predominantly black people and we're only 12% of the population of America? Isn't that kind of ironic to you? [laughs] Seriously. (Curtis, HIBM)

Several Black respondents, both high- and low-income, pointed to the disproportionate incarceration of Black men as a key manifestation of the entanglement of race, gender, power, and economic inequality described by many Black respondents. These opinions reflect a larger, national trend wherein Black Americans are more likely than White Americans to say, 1) that the criminal justice system treats Blacks less fairly than Whites and, 2) that the criminal justice system's treatment of minorities is a serious problem (Dunn 2020).³⁶

36. After protests in the summer of 2020, the partisan gap in opinions about the criminal justice system was much larger than the racial gap. According to a June 2020 Pew Research Center poll: overall, 41% of

For example, within a few minutes of beginning our interview, and in response to my initial question about whether or not American economic systems were fair, Renee (HIBW whom we met in Chapter 2) talked about reading Michelle Alexander’s “really awesome” bestselling book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, and said, “So you see how the drug laws have been designed to kind of keep certain people oppressed.”³⁷ She went on to give the example of Connecticut’s DUI laws, which, she said, “allows for people with ... first or second DUIs to go home doing half their time on a bracelet.”

And oddly enough the majority of the people who go through the program are Caucasian. So, it's very interesting that we have an overcrowded prison system with mostly petty drug offenses. People of color who— most of their offenses are not life threatening, you know they're petty drug crimes, little petty criminals. So, then you take the person who has a DUI, who could possibly have killed someone with their vehicle, and by the time they get incarcerated it's not their first DUI. So, we want to free these people and leave everybody else with all these, you know, huge sentences incarcerated, unnecessarily clogging up our legal system, financially, our prisons are overcrowded, everything. So, it's just, you know, like I said, by design. ... It's the people who are making the laws.

Although Renee didn’t specify the race of “the people who are making the laws,” she made clear that the people who are protected by those laws are White and those who are punished by them are “people of color.” She highlights the injustice she sees by contrasting the offense of a hypothetical, White DUI defendant who “could possibly have killed someone” but is allowed to go “free” with “little petty criminals” who are people of color and whose “offenses are not life threatening” but who are nevertheless given “huge sentences.” She argued against the idea that the system is somehow

White and 85% of Black respondents said the criminal justice system’s treatment of minorities is a very big problem. When broken down by partisanship: about 16% of Whites who lean Republican agreed. Of Democratic-leaning respondents: 74% of Whites agreed and 89% of Blacks (Dunn 2020).

37. Recall that Renee was in her late 40s, had a master’s degree, worked a “state job” as a counselor, was married with three children, owned a home, and had a household income of \$125,000.

malfunctioning, asserting instead that it has been “designed” to enact the kind of racial injustice she describes. “And it works. It works to keep those who are in power in power, it works to keep those who are already wealthy, wealthy.”

Similarly, Shawn (HIBM), whom we also met in Chapter 2, argued that the incarceration of poor Black and Brown men was part of a deliberate and systematic effort to maintain the existing racial and economic power structure.³⁸ He explained, using the example of what he called “the so-called war on drugs.” “There never was a war on drugs,” he said, “it was a joke.” It seemed totally improbable to him that

we can drop a bomb from 35,000 feet in the air and watch it go all the way down to the ground to hit its target, but we can't find out where the drugs are coming from in this country.

”Really,” he said sarcastically, “I'm that stupid.” Instead, Shawn argued,

The war on drugs is to keep certain classified people into imprisonment or under the ladder so that now the minority can still maintain their goal on a level. I'm not a racist, I'm a realist, but white males in this country are scared to death.

Shawn's argument is relational: keeping some people down allows others to “maintain” their own positions. However, he said, demographic changes threaten those power arrangements. “It's going to be more black and brown in this country than it is white males,” and those groups “are going to emerge out and in power.” To Shawn, racial inequities in criminalization and incarceration were systemic mechanisms to forestall that future and to maintain the current power structure. He gave an example to illustrate his point, recounting a time when he went to court to hear the sentencing for a young Black man he knew.

38. Recall that Shawn was 72, a church pastor in a neighborhood where more than half of the residents were Black or low-income. He had several advanced degrees, was married, owned a home, and had three grown children who lived elsewhere. He described his household income as “a little better” than \$100,000 a year.

I sat in the courts once, and watched a young kid come in, a white kid come in, this is his fifth arrest and violation for buying and selling drugs. He gets a half-way house. Young black kid comes up, who I went there for, who it's his first time before the judge, he gets 3-5 years. And I almost lost it in the courtroom cuz I wanted to stand up and say, "excuse me, what planet are we on? Is it Mars, or what did we do to offend you that bad?" ... I walked out of there shaking my head. ... The system's geared to do that. Reagan's war on drugs. There's no war on drugs; that was to get the black male off the street. Get him out of the way, so that he cannot achieve or accelerate.

Frustrated by many such stories, from his own experience and heard from others, Shawn argued that American criminalization and justice systems are deliberately "geared" to limit what Black males, in particular, can "achieve" in order to reduce competition for scarce resources with a White "minority." He was not alone in this opinion. I heard similar stories from other Black respondents (both high and low income) and many, like Shawn, interpreted the disproportionate incarceration of Black and Brown men as manifestations of a system structured to maintain power for some by withholding it from others.

The relational nature of the inequalities Shawn described was particularly visible as he talked about the profits made by prisons and affiliated systems and the contrasting poverty of prisoners. Like others, he felt that racial inequities in criminalization and imprisonment were held in place or motivated by a drive for profit. Racial and economic inequality were linked, in other words, not only because systemic racism denied Black Americans economic opportunity (which many White respondents acknowledged), but also because the oppression or suppression of Black Americans was profitable (something that wasn't mentioned by most White respondents). Rich White people gained when poor Black people lost.

Prison is a business. It is one of the most profitable businesses in America. ... Put a guy in jail, you have free labor. He works for pennies a day. So, he produces your license plates, he produces a lot of materials that come out of there, that go

to other businesses, that sell 'em and make a profit off it. ... and they charge the state and the government to maintain that individual in a system, in a 6x9 cell, for what? For having 5 ounces of cocaine on them. 12 ounces of marijuana on 'em. So, he goes through a system and a judge looks at him and says, "you're black, you're a problem, you gotta go to jail."

To Shawn, as for many Black respondents, economic and racial inequality intertwine visibly in the prison system, where the powerful can serve their own profit interests by defining who and what is "a problem," allowing them to make money off of someone else's nearly "free labor" while also "get[ting] him out of the way" as someone who might compete for power and resources.

Sam's (LIBM) comments about the prison system (some of which were captured in Chapter 1) were similar to Shawn and Renee's, but his position as both poor and Black left him feeling particularly targeted by the systems they described. Although high-income Black respondents expressed a sense of being personally affected by racialized economic inequality (as we'll see in the next section) —including regular experiences with profiling and discrimination—only low-income Black respondents described feeling that their own lives were of little value to those in power.

For example, recall Sam's comments in Chapter 1 about how "poor people are expendable to America." He went on,

We're cattle. We got more jails in America than they got anywhere in the country [sic] man. ... And little, small Connecticut, we're stockpiling African Americans and Latinos ... and they're like cattle, wasn't giving them no chance.

Sam's comments about being treated as sub-human, "expendable" "cattle" echo the ways Kelly and Angela talked about the lives of poor Black people like themselves being disregarded by those in power ("we could kill ourselves" and "cops don't come until a ... White person gets shot").

This argument is also relational, linking the “stockpiling” of people of color to the profits of the already powerful. Recall, from Chapter 1, Sam’s comments about the profit made by corporations off of incarceration (“these corporate people come in town on their jets just going, ‘Hey, listen ... jails are not full. We are not getting the money that we need. We need to get more people, bottoms in here’”). He argued that people like him (low income and Black), when accused of a crime, were strongly encouraged to take “offers” of jail time rather than defend their innocence. Even when “you know you didn’t do it,” he said, nobody seemed interested in “trying to figure out if I’m guilty or not” because “they [the prison] gonna get, what, \$50–60,000 they get, whatever, a year for” each incarceration.

Furthermore, Sam argued, the hardship of those incarcerated also translates into gains for the powerful through laws and social conventions that make it hard for people who have been incarcerated to find paid work once they get out.

You got guys that's working for the prison system. ... And you're paying these guys a dollar or something a day to mop, clean, do their thing, you give them all seven bucks a week, or eight bucks a week or whatever the case may be. But when they get home, they apply for that same type of job and you tell them “no.” Why would you tell them no for a job that, okay because you're locked up, we'll pay you seven bucks and when you get out here the job is worth \$20 now. No, you can't have it, you can't work for the state because you got a criminal record. But you didn't have a problem with me when I was locked up.

... They're saving so much money doing this because they don't got to hire people from the outside to do these things. They got the inmates to do it. ... But when they come out [and] say, “Listen, I did all these programs, what do I need to do to make money, to get back out and be productive?” And you go, “No, because you got a criminal record.” I don't get that.

Sam paints a clear picture of a system that impoverishes some while benefitting others—a system driven by profit-maximization rather than justice. Like others, he argues that the already-powerful set the rules in their own favor—defining a person as employable in

certain circumstances (when it benefits them) and not in others. Like Shawn, Sam argues that fear of losing power among Whites upholds this system.

America's getting so diverse. ... A lot of Europeans and Americans are afraid of that. That they're gonna lose control, and that privilege. And they don't wanna lose that privilege. They want to always have that privilege over everyone else. ... They're terrified of that. God forbid they gotta share. No way.

These types of relational arguments depicted the hardships of poor people of color as a direct result of profits and gains for a powerful White minority. Respondents like Sam framed the forces maintaining that system in terms of a fear of loss of power rather than an active desire to do harm. This framing implicates White people, broadly, as the beneficiaries of a system that bestows social and economic power regardless of malevolent intent or “racist” beliefs. Few White respondents made this kind of relational argument, especially in terms of power and not just in terms of individualized social treatment.

**High-income White and Black respondents:
encounters with poverty and grappling with history**

Black respondents' integrated engagement with race when talking about economic inequality and White respondents' compartmentalization of those conversations cut across class. I saw similar patterns whether I was talking with high- or low-income respondents. Similarly, across class, Black respondents expressed a more relational analysis of racialized economic inequality than did White respondents.

However, a couple patterns were unique to my conversations with high-income respondents. First, high-income Black respondents tended to live and move in less class- and race-segregated spaces than did high-income White respondents—and these differences seemed to shape each group's views about racialized economic inequality. Second, while both White and Black high-income respondents linked current racialized

economic inequalities to American racial history, the ways they did this were distinct. In particular, Black respondents were much more specific while White respondents seemed to lack knowledge about laws and practices that did and do uphold racial inequality—especially in the years between the end of the Civil War and the present day. These differences in experience and knowledge seemed to leave high-income White respondents particularly hamstrung as they tried to articulate an understanding of racialized economic inequality and make sense of their own role in it.

As we saw in Chapter 2, high-income respondents, in general, discussed economic inequality in ways that reflected their sympathy for the poor and their social and economic distance from the rich. Since Black respondents integrated considerations of race when talking about economic inequality, those who were high-income often noted the Whiteness of the rich as an additional factor separating themselves from that group. White high-income respondents, on the other hand, also worked to separate themselves from the rich, but in their case, they avoided racialization of the rich as a way to emphasize this separation and avoid self-implication.

Racial differences in encounters with poverty: high-income White and Black respondents

High-income Black respondents, in general, had much more cross-race and cross-class contact than any of the other respondent groups—which was both a factor *of* and drew their attention *to* the overlaps between racial inequality and economic inequality. They could see—and were constantly being reminded through personal interactions and public incidents—that their combination of race and class status was considered anomalous. Furthermore—and also a factor of present and past racialized economic inequality—many had personal ties to people living in poverty. Those relationships

underscored to these respondents both their own luck at escaping the same fate and the ways that their impoverished race peers were economically trapped by structural and systemic forces beyond their individual control.

The sharpest contrast to the more race- and class-integrated lives of high-income Black respondents was the relative race and class isolation of high-income White respondents. These contrasts highlight the way race correlates with very different social and economic inheritances even for people currently in similar economic circumstances.

A good example of this difference between high-income Black respondents and high-income White respondents is the contrast between Gene (HIBM) and Josh (HIWM). Josh came from a family of inherited wealth—where every generation (back to the 1600s) “had property to leave to the next generation.” “We had more money than probably most of the people in the town that I grew up in,” he said, and, in that town, he “saw people ... living the lives that they chose” rather than lives dictated by necessity.

Gene likely saw similar things in his immediate surroundings growing up. His parents both had graduate degrees, his dad was an executive, and he grew up in the suburbs: “a majority area, where most of my friends were white and Jewish.” But as a Black man, he was only one degree removed from a very different reality. Gene’s parents had moved from the city to the suburbs, where Gene was “away from my cousins and that kind of stuff.” While Gene thrived in a place where he was supported in acting on his parents’ values of “you do well in school, you’re going to take some risk and challenge ... you’ll get ahead,” he was very aware of his cousins, back in the city, who “were getting into fights” while his uncle “got into drugs.” With “no safety net,” Gene said, these family members “end[ed] up suffering.”

Gene was like many high-income respondents in his expressions of concern for the poor and distress about economic inequality, more broadly. He expressed a more personal commitment than many to sacrifice some of his income to address issues of economic inequality. However, he was unlike many high-income White respondents in the way he described his motivation as stemming from feeling directly affected by inequality because of poverty in his own family.

[Inequality] affects me directly because ... there's poor people in my family. ... So, I see the impact, I live the impact of what it means to be poor and not want to be poor. To oversimplify it. Right? Things happen. You turn to drugs, you know. You turn to crime. You give up. And you just become less healthy. ...

And not only that, it's happening to really good people who come from good families with great values. So, it's not this sort of, these biases ... or prejudice that kind of creeps up where we'll say, you know, Black people steal. [laughs] You know, or they're just that way. I mean these are happening to good people that are close relatives that just didn't have some of the opportunities that I did. So, because of that, I feel it. I can't hide from it. It's in my face.

Despite describing his own social class status as “probably like the top 2% of American earnings,” Gene also says he “live[s] the impact of what it means to be poor and not want to be poor.” This kind of statement of the personal impact of poverty was not something I generally heard from high-income White respondents.

In contrast, poverty and economic inequality were visible to Josh (HIWM) all around the city (as they were to many New Haveners), but residential segregation by race and income made it so that poverty was something adjacent to Josh’s life and not something he felt “confronted with.”

Josh expressed both sympathy and distress about the conditions of the poor—and, like Gene, argued that poverty had structural rather than individual roots—but he also commented that his exposure to people living in poverty was “mostly indirectly.” How did economic inequality impact his life? I asked.

I mean, beyond just like driving through New Haven? I mean, I see it ... when I drive home, I see, you know, elderly people with bags of groceries walking, you know, across Whalley Avenue and you know, they had to ... go to the grocery store and they're on foot. They don't have a car, so yes, that's poverty.

And I ... consider some kids in my kids' classrooms that have, you know, behavioral problems ... that I think are related to their ... economic circumstances because it adds stress to their parents and you know, maybe there's ... more volatility in their households. ... So, I guess it's mostly indirectly but ... like many people, I'm surrounded by fairly like-minded ... people among the same incomes so just in my ... actual living, you know, I don't—I'm not confronted with it. It's just ... I live in New Haven, so I'm next to it.

Although he doesn't mention race explicitly here, Josh mentioned later on that when he thought about people who are poor, "it's mainly racially segregated poverty in New Haven" that came to his mind. Thus, despite living near—and even sharing a public school with—people who differ from him in class and race, Josh expressed a much less personal connection to poverty than did Gene.

Gene was pained by his family's suffering in a personal way that seemed to motivate his desire for change. He seemed to be thinking of his uncle when he explained that he thought there was currently a "lost generation" of people—particularly Black people—who had been denied the opportunity to build wealth and the knowledge to navigate in the economy. As he explained his argument that the government had a responsibility to "back" people in that situation "until [they] learn how to do it on [their] own," his language turns personal.

And the government should do that. That's really what affirmative action's about, right? I'm going to back you until you— and that's where the civil rights movement kind of failed us. We weren't really ready to back ourselves.

JS: [and when you say we...?]

I mean black people. ... Yeah, I still say "we" [laughs].

Gene indicates his personalization of the issue by including himself—using the first-person plural—among the group who wasn’t “really ready to back ourselves.” As an economically successful entrepreneur who described his income as “real money,” Gene is clearly not referring to his own household’s economic circumstances. Nevertheless, his racialized experience links him to people across class lines—both through his own family and through his common experiences of racism. I heard this use of “we” and “us” from several high-income Black men as they discussed the problems facing Black people living in poverty. Gene’s personal experience helps him argue against widespread societal narratives suggesting that poverty—and specifically racialized poverty—is about individual failure rather than structural limitations.

Part of what the contrast between Gene and Josh highlights is the way race correlates with very different social and economic inheritances even for people in similar current economic circumstances (in fact, Gene’s current income was several times that of Josh’s). These inheritances included the outcomes of past and present policies as well as practices that promote access to wealth (e.g., via home ownership) and economic opportunity (e.g., via jobs or loans) among White people while denying it to Black people.

“I’m being treated as if I’m black and poor. ... I’m black, but I’m not poor.”

Sandra (HIBW) offers another example of the ways Black respondents recounted being “confronted with” racialized economic inequality that were outside the experiences of most White respondents. Sandra was born into “a poor family” and recounted being “treated unfairly” in school because “there was this idea of what it meant for us to be black and poor.” She could also see the constraints on her relatives’ economic lives both

in terms of how they had been racially “tracked” in school (“they weren't gonna be in advanced classes”) and in terms of how their economic opportunities were shaped by things “out of their control” including inherited circumstances (e.g., their parents’ education and employment) and economically and racially segregated lives. Sandra saw herself as “one of the lucky ones” who, through the “fate and chance and happenstance” of her particular circumstances, “made it.” Because of this, she continued to think of her friends and relatives who had not had her “exceptional story” and argued that a path like hers should be but was not “available to everybody.”

Even in Sandra’s current life—where she was a professor, married, and had a household income of \$275,000—she regularly encountered reminders of poverty and racial economic inequality through personal experiences of discrimination. For example, in her response to my question about whether she thought American society treated poor people fairly, she turned to her own encounters being treated as if she was poor because she is Black. There’s not “such a clear line between ... the poor and not poor,” she said. “A lot of the ways in which poor people are treated in this country ... it can happen to somebody in the middle class.” As she continued her thought, it became clear that the “somebody in the middle class” she was referring to is likely a Black person. She gave an example of her experience:

If I’m in a grocery store and shop ... people assume that I’m black and poor, and that I’m going to steal something, but ... I’m black but I’m not poor ... but I’m being treated as if I’m black and poor, and it’s not fair, and not that a poor black person should be treated that way.

Sandra's experience of being "treated as if I'm black and poor" is a common one.³⁹ Race is often treated as a proxy for class such that even a high-income Black person like Sandra is assumed to be poor. She does not want to be treated as if she is "going to steal something" and, in reflecting on her feelings about being treated that way, she adds that she doesn't think "that a poor black person should be treated that way" either. She examines how poor people are treated, in part because of her own impoverished background, but also because—even in her current life—she personally encounters that treatment.⁴⁰

White respondents did not offer accounts of encountering the kind of treatment that would encourage such examination. Generally, the opposite was true, as we will see in the next section.

(Mis)understanding racialized economic inequality: "collective willful ignorance"

"One is astonished in the study of history at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over. We must not remember that Daniel Webster got drunk and only remember that he was a splendid constitutional lawyer. We must forget that George Washington was a slave owner, or that Thomas Jefferson had mulatto children, or that Alexander Hamilton had Negro blood, and simply remember the things we regard as creditable and inspiring. The difficulty, of course, with this philosophy is that history loses its value as an incentive and example; it paints perfect men and noble nations, but it does not tell the truth." W.E.B. Du Bois - The Propaganda of History (1998)

"An important, often overlooked, facet of economic inequality in the United States is that it is a product of historical and present-day forms of racism—labor, housing, and other policies and practices—that have systematically disadvantaged racial/ethnic minorities in their pursuit of economic opportunities." (Kraus, Rucker, and Richeson 2017:10329)

39. Numerous stories like Sandra's have been in public media (e.g., Holmes 2020). Also, other respondents recounted similar experiences.

40. As we'll see later, Sandra framed this example in a relational way—thinking about both those on the sending and the receiving ends of the treatment she described.

A key factor in White respondents' struggles to explain the ways race has and does factor into Americans' economic outcomes seemed to be what Kraus et al. have termed a "collective willful ignorance" about America's racial history and current state of racial economic inequality (Kraus et al. 2019). In general, Americans overestimate racial economic equality, demonstrating "a systematic tendency to perceive greater progress toward racial economic equality than has actually been achieved" (Kraus et al. 2017:10329). High-income White Americans' overestimates are particularly far from the truth—more inaccurate than those of lower-income White Americans and those of Black Americans of all incomes (Kraus et al. 2017). Kraus and colleagues argue that these misperceptions reflect Americans' "unyielding belief in a specific, optimistic narrative regarding racial progress" (2019:900).

Among my high-income White respondents in particular, this dominant narrative was anchored in omission. Many expressed little to no understanding of the history of racialized oppression between emancipation and the present. They seemed to have no readily-available narratives to draw upon that illuminated the mechanisms of current racial economic inequality nor that linked current inequalities to the racially-unequal systems and structures of the past. They also didn't express an awareness of their own lack of information on these fronts—and seemed unlikely to seek it out.

These gaps in knowledge and awareness among high-income White respondents seemed to be further reinforced by the relatively high levels of race and class segregation in their lives. Together, these factors left high-income White respondents particularly ill-equipped to act on their concerns about racial economic inequality. Instead, some clung to what Kraus et al. (2019) call "overly optimistic and unfounded" narratives of racial

progress and/or they turned away from structural explanations of racial economic inequality and toward more individualistic or culture-blaming arguments.

Seeing and not seeing race

Patrick (HIWM), whom we have heard from several times, provides a good example of these patterns. He both attended to and minimized the importance of race as he expressed his concerns about economic inequality. In his response to my opening question about the fairness of the American economic system (with no mention of race), he independently brought up the idea of racialized economic inequality. After starting out describing himself as “someone on the upside of the unfair scale,” he explained, “I think there are a lot of unfairnesses built into it, skin color being one of them, but I hope that that's diminished slightly as a barrier—simple skin color.” Here, Patrick seems to raise the issue of the impact of race on economic outcomes and minimize it in the same breath. He went on for a few minutes, describing how he felt that “the experiences a person has are incredibly powerful in determining ... economic outcome,” and returned to his own racial advantage a few times during that initial monologue. These included his comments, noted in Chapter 1, about making “lots of mistakes” but getting “a lot of second chances” in part because of his race.

Throughout the interview, Patrick wrestles with the importance of race as a factor in Americans' economic outcomes—alternately expressing optimism that American society had “continued to improve,” and concern about “backsliding” under the administration of President Donald Trump. Patrick offers little evidence to support his hope or optimism about the declining impact of racism, leaving those sentiments feeling a bit like wishful thinking on the part of someone who acknowledges—but is

uncomfortable with—his own racial privilege. Kraus et al. (2017) suggests that these kinds of wishful sentiments, drawing from “prevailing narratives of societal racial progress ... are likely to play a causal role in maintaining a collective, systemic blindness to vast racial disparities in many domains of contemporary American life” including income and wealth (2017:10330).

Indeed, Patrick demonstrated an interesting lack of attention to racialized economic inequality as he described his choices about educational options for his daughters. His older daughter attended (and his younger daughter “will attend”) public elementary school that he described as racially- and class-mixed. He said that he and his wife “wrestle” with deciding to keep their kids in public school (“a commitment we make”) while “we see neighbors constantly, who are friends of ours, who share our values to a point, pulling their kids out at one point or another.” As if to explain the pros and cons of these educational choices, Patrick said, “it’s different for boys at the school” and described the school’s population in terms of race and income:

Fifty-fifty low income, upper middle income, I’d say and pretty much that is highly correlated with ethnicity; Caucasian and African American, very small Hispanic population and the income and the ethnic correlations are high, very high.

He implied, but did not state, that this demography itself was a reason that parents might pull their children out. But, Patrick continued, “our older daughter has a wonderful cohort of girls from the upper-middle, college-educated, white side” of the neighborhood that feeds the school:

They’re all high achieving, lots of enrichment in the family and the summers and the vacations and family trips, college educated, blah, blah, blah. ... A lot of people with graduate degrees. My wife and I are probably the least educated among the parent cohort, least credentialed. It’s easy for us right now because she has that cohort ... so we try not to be judgmental when people pull their kid out of the school and put them in private school.

Patrick was so focused here on whether or not to pass judgement on his economic peers who make the choice to send their children to private school that he seemed to miss the opportunity to reflect on the fact that what made the decision “easy” for him at the moment was that his daughter’s group of friends was relatively racially and economically homogeneous. He didn’t express regret that his daughter did not have a more diverse set of friends given the diversity of her school. In fact, he seemed to suggest that, if her set of friends were more diverse, it might have been harder for him to make the decision to keep her in her school. He also didn’t express an awareness of the greater range of options he had—by virtue of his income—compared with the parents of some of his daughter’s classmates.

These omissions are particularly notable when Patrick later mentions that something he “values” about living where he does is his lack of being “sheltered” from seeing these class and race differences. He mentioned this in the context of answering my question about whom he thought of when he thought of the very rich or the very poor.

[Living in] New Haven means you're not sheltered from seeing the poor and in New Haven, again it's the correlation with being of color—whatever the correct term is—is high although it's by no means absolute. There are a lot of Caucasian poor. They're right in front of me all day ... not all day long, but a lot, in my neighborhood, which is maybe zip code-wise, pretty well off for New Haven. Although I think it's very average for America. Although there are houses like mine that suggest upper middle-class comfort if not absolute wealth. People walk through. People walk by the house who are clearly— people come through the park. So, I feel like that's something I value about New Haven is that you don't feel completely sheltered the way you might if you lived in a quieter part of Woodbridge or something.⁴¹

Patrick mentions race here, unprompted, and seemed to want to suggest his awareness of the connection between racial and economic inequality. But he sounds unfamiliar with

41. We saw part of this quote in Chapter 2. Woodbridge—which Angela (LIBW) also referenced earlier—is known for being predominantly White and high income.

this territory, and perhaps nervous about saying the “wrong” thing about a charged topic. Rather than talking about the connection between racial and economic inequality—as he seemed to want to do—instead Patrick finds himself racially stereotyping the poor (although he catches himself and notes, “there are a lot of Caucasian poor.”) Right before this, Patrick had described the rich without mentioning race at all—they were “financiers,” “classmates from college,” and people “amassing piles of gold.” It is only when he turns to the poor, whom he admits he doesn’t “know very much” that he references “the correlation with being of color.”

Patrick seemed to be trying to differentiate himself, morally, from rich White people who might isolate themselves from race and class diversity by describing his own willingness to live without being “sheltered from seeing the poor.” But his struggle to articulate his point suggested that his life was more “sheltered” than he would have liked to admit.

Despite this struggle, Patrick—like many high-income White respondents—seemed willing, if ill equipped, to consider and engage in conversations about racial economic inequality. This was especially the case—for Patrick and others—when his personal and familial well-being were not implicated. For example, when we talked about government support to the poor, he pushed back against the common argument that money was being “wasted” on people who didn’t need help.

In general ... I think so much of that language can be code for basically racism, like ‘shiftless people of color don’t want to work and paying them not to work just supports that tendency’ and that’s racism. It’s not true. It’s obviously not true.

When questions of his own position were not in consideration, Patrick seemed more comfortable talking about race. Here, he seemed to feel that he was on the morally right side of this situation. Kraus et al. (2017) suggest that self-protective motivations

influenced different perceptions about racial economic inequality, depending on the context of the conversation. They found that when high-income White Americans were cued to think about a Black individual or family who was *similar* to them “in terms of goals, talents, attributes and skills,” they were more likely to overestimate White-Black economic *equality* (i.e., to be excessively optimistic) because acknowledging economic gaps by race in that scenario would be “especially threatening to the perception” that their own position was fair or just. However, when they were cued to think about racial discrimination, potentially tempering their misplaced optimism, White Americans were more likely to make more accurate estimates of actual racial economic inequality.

These psychological motivations toward self-preservation are likely further exacerbated by social structural factors—particularly, segregation by race and class in schools, neighborhoods and social networks. High-income White respondents were the most isolated by race and class of any of the income and race groups in my sample. Kraus et al. (2017) argue that people learn accurate information about the mechanisms and magnitude of racial economic inequality in part through “a meaningful amount of intergroup contact or exposure.”

In other words, Patrick and other high income White respondents likely struggled to see or understand racial economic inequality in part because they were psychologically better off not seeing it, in part because their lives were racially and economically segregated, and in part because of missing information in our broader societal conversation about racial economic inequality.

Miss(ing) Information: Omissions in White understandings of racial economic inequality

The pattern of missing information was particularly visible in the striking differences in specificity when high-income White and Black respondents talked about the historical legacy of slavery and systemic racism in relationship to current racial economic inequality. In particular, high-income White respondents acknowledged, generally, historical racism as linked to current racial economic inequality, but largely struggled to describe, or left unexamined, the specific mechanisms (especially the structural and systemic mechanisms like laws and policies) linking past racial inequality to current racial economic inequality. As in the previous case (using Patrick as an example) of acknowledging racial economic inequality more generally, this pattern seemed to reflect both the desire to avoid self-implication, but also a straightforward lack of knowledge.

Two patterns are notable here. First, high-income White respondents, while often acknowledging the economic legacy of slavery and subsequent legalized oppression of Black people, were often vague—compared to high-income Black respondents—in describing the mechanisms of this legacy. Second, most high-income White respondents, when they did discuss this history, focused primarily on the people hurt by these systems and rarely mentioned those who benefitted.

Here, I use the examples of Tom and Keith (both HIWM), who had quite different understandings of and sentiments toward economic inequality, but whose descriptions of the historical roots of racialized economic inequality were remarkably similar. Their vague and non-relational analyses of the historical roots, despite their different

orientations to economic inequality itself, further illustrate a broader pattern of missing information in mainstream American discourses about racialized economic inequality.

Tom (HIWM) was a rare respondent who said, initially, that he thought the American economic system was generally fair.⁴² “There are adequate opportunities for all to get a job or a living.” Nevertheless, he said, “I do believe that there is income inequality,” but he was “not sure” whether or not it was a problem. He characterized himself as a “math science guy” and someone who “just think[s] about things more clearly” than his peers. As such, although economic inequality seemed “negative” to him, he reserved his judgement, feeling that a “deeper analysis” into the “contributing factors” was necessary.

Tom raised the issue of racialized economic inequality only later, when I reflected back to him my understanding of his initially-expressed opinion. I summarized his earlier opinion this way: “all different types of people in the U.S. have fairly equal opportunities economically.” Hearing this, he said, “I might hedge on that a little.”

In general, I think your average or typical American has opportunities, but I recognize that different ethnicities or races or population centers have different levels of opportunity compared to others. I mean it's pretty obvious, white males probably have the greatest level of opportunity compared to every other possible group, and certainly blacks or other poor populations have less opportunity, I recognize that.

He went on to explain that he felt there were “many” mechanisms behind these differences in opportunity, but one that was “a big contributor ... maybe more than many others” was “lack of education or awareness.” He alluded to factors beyond an individual’s control, blaming a dearth of “good guidance.” At the same time, he noted,

42. Tom was in his late 40s, he had a master’s degree and worked as an IT project manager. He owned a home, where he lived with his wife and young daughter. Their household income was about \$190,000.

“I’m aware of the other barriers: discrimination, prejudice, those kind of things,” but said he thought “those are harder problems to solve.”

Tom didn’t raise the idea of a historical legacy behind these inequalities until our second interview, when I asked him specifically whether or not he thought race was connected to income and wealth differences in the U.S.

For sure, historically, I mean going back to slavery ... that's probably a direct explanation of why blacks have always been behind, y'know, economically in this country. That they've just never been able to break free of those roots and/or the impressions that non-blacks have had of them in order to give them the opportunity and that's why they've been held back. So, for sure. Or it's that history there that explains it. And for sure even today I mean there's still ongoing prejudice and discrimination.

... I would certainly agree that um your race has a [small laugh] direct relationship to y'know your income state.

Tom acknowledges a “history” wherein Black Americans were “held back” and not given “opportunity.” He feels that current racialized economic inequalities can “probably” be explained by looking back to this history. The mechanisms he names (“prejudice and discrimination,” “impressions”) suggest a fairly vague and simultaneously individualistic lens. The only perpetrators mentioned are “non-blacks” who hold presumably-unfair “impressions” and therefore fail to “give ... opportunity.” Indicating only a vague process (“going back to slavery”) he seems unaware of—or is unable to name—the systematic linkages between historical racial oppression and current economic inequalities (e.g., laws and policies that denied Black people all sorts of economic opportunities from education to home ownership to jobs to business loans).

These are not part of a widely-available narrative in the U.S. In fact, as many argue, the opposite is true: national discourse is dominated by “narratives highlighting America’s path toward, if not achievement of, racial equality” (Kraus et al. 2019; see also

Hannah-Jones 2020; Loewen 2018; Reeves 2018). In this context and without this understanding, Tom, like other respondents, turns to individualistic arguments about culture—explanations that seem to place the blame on Black people themselves for not being “able to break free of those roots and/or the impressions that non-blacks have had of them.” As Unzueta and Lowery (2008) argue, individualized conceptions of racism avoid awareness of White privilege and therefore allow Whites to protect a positive self-image.

Indeed, when Tom had earlier described his own economic opportunities compared with those of others, he struggled to reconcile his positive self-image as “a hard worker” with his acknowledgement of his racialized advantage:

I'm a white male, so right off the bat, I recognize life it's probably been easier for me than many other classes in society. I do think I've been a hard worker through my life, I mean my parents pushed me when I was young and that's stuck with me, and I think the specific choices I made or were encouraged to make along the way helped.

Like other White respondents, he acknowledged and immediately turned away from his unearned advantages linked to race and gender to focus on his own merit.

Despite his focus on individual merit, Tom suggested that he did not blame Black people themselves for the disproportionate and concentrated poverty they face.

Nevertheless, he struggled to be more specific about what he did think the causal forces were.

I guess if you start out poor [uncomfortable laugh] it's easier to stay poor. But even ... I perceive that, as a remnant of slavery, where slaves were kind of, they lived one place and others lived another place, this idea of ... blacks living in concentrated segregated areas has persisted. ... Maybe that's the cultural part, so it's not just “they started poor now they're still poor,” it's that it's been tough to integrate and I guess on that point current or past prejudice is probably the biggest factor there.

Tom could see the racialized segregation in his city, but as he tried to explain it, he found himself back again with no more specific an argument than “current or past prejudice.” The barriers, Tom suggested, are erected by unspecified others, including segregation that made it “tough to integrate” and “has persisted.” His language here, as before, is passive—those who made it “tough to integrate” or those who perpetuate ongoing “prejudice and discrimination” remain un-named and unexamined. He notes that “blacks have always been behind” but makes no mention of who has always been ahead. Even when he did briefly mention “non-blacks” and their “impressions,” they were not really the actors, but more like an obstacle to be overcome. Throughout our interviews, Tom, like many White respondents, depicts no relationship in which someone or some group is benefitting from the hardships he describes.

It is not surprising, given his one-sided telling, that Tom is at a loss to name more systemic forces—laws and policies—pieces of history that both led to and continue to perpetuate the kind of legalized residential segregation visible in places like New Haven. This struggle is notable for a respondent like Tom, who talked about himself as a fairly informed citizen. He had a master’s degree and made many references to being a critical consumer of news. Tom’s lack of a narrative around mechanisms linking past racial inequality to present racial economic inequality, like Patrick’s, point to critical absences in broader societal narratives and understandings of past and present racial economic inequality. Of course, like Patrick and other high-income White respondents, Tom was also likely motivated by self-perception. To acknowledge and understand the legacy and mechanisms of historical racial inequality, he would be forced to draw into question the moral legitimacy of his own economic position.

Compared to Tom's "math science guy" orientation and "moderate" political leanings, Keith (also a HIWM) presented himself as much more emotionally driven and solidly "a Democrat".⁴³ Keith was also almost 20-years older than Tom and recounted being somewhat "radical" "back in the '60s," including reckoning with racial and economic inequality as a "white guy" Peace Corps volunteer in a country where the population was primarily Black. In contrast to Tom's uncertainty about whether or not economic inequality was a problem, Keith seemed genuinely troubled by it. When I asked him if he thought income differences were a problem for society, he said, "Well, I think it's probably *the* problem. I do" (his emphasis).

These differences from Tom, along with Keith's expressions of deep concern about racialized economic inequality, led me to expect that Keith would articulate a clearer understanding of the linkages between past and present racialized economic inequality. It was striking then that his explanations reflected a similar lack of knowledge and narrative as did Tom's. Despite their differences in perspective, Keith's struggle to explain the history of racialized economic inequality was remarkably similar to Tom's in his vague references to slavery and use of language that seemed to blame individuals for their own poverty.

Keith and I had a few exchanges during our first interview when he (like most respondents) readily acknowledged the existence of racialized economic inequality, often unprompted by me.⁴⁴ It wasn't until our second interview, when I asked him explicitly to

43. Keith worked as a psychologist. He was 67 when we spoke. He lived with his wife and they had two grown children who lived elsewhere. His annual household income was about \$125,000. During our interview he said, "I don't own a house." Although it is common to use the language "own a house" even while paying a mortgage, it was not clear to me if he meant he was renting a place to live or if he meant he had not paid off a home mortgage.

44. For example, early in our interview, he singled out "slavery" as one place to lay blame for current economic inequalities and the problems they cause. "We have suffered the consequences of that ... as a

tell me how, if at all, he thought race was connected to income and wealth differences, that he attempted to trace historical linkages. At that point, his answers were remarkably similar to Tom's.

Well, I suppose, first, they're linked historically, in ways that we've just never been able to uncouple [small laugh], so that, so that black people in America just started with the most terrible disadvantages that anyone can imagine, having come over as slaves and being reviled for their color, and that has, has set the stage for something that's been very very difficult to ... to overcome.

Even though Keith's expressions are more emotive than were Tom's ("the most terrible disadvantages than anyone can imagine," "reviled for their color") his depiction is, nevertheless, remarkably like Tom's in its lack of specificity and its focus entirely on the people who had the "disadvantages" without any mention of those who created the disadvantages and the barriers.

Like other White respondents, Keith seemed uncomfortable talking about racial inequality. He lost his train of thought, rambled and meandered in his answers. When I probed about his previous response, asking "Are there current things that maintain that difference, or is it primarily about a situation that happened in the past?" Keith struggled to compose a coherent answer. "I think it's probably both," he said. "I don't think there's anything inherent that makes black people more lazy or more willing to accept a dole or something like that." Having asserted his belief that racial inequality was not about inherent problems with Black people themselves, he seemed to search for an alternative explanation, but did not seem to have one readily available.

There's got to be some reason, you're the sociologist, you know more about this than I do, there's got to be some reason why Italians and Irish and Poles and Russians and Asians come to the United States and may indeed struggle in

nation for so long." Later in that same interview, when I asked if he felt that there were "any groups in society that are more likely to be rich than others," he said "Well, obviously white people." "There are more minority people who are poor than white people who are poor. ... I think those things matter."

poverty for a long time, a generation, two, but it gets better and better, and indeed it has no doubt for blacks as well, it's gotten better, but still, here's where our biggest problem is. I can only point to color, to people's feelings about that, to the difference that that makes out in the world for black people. I just— just sort of keep coming, coming back to that.

I think it's very powerful in America. It's probably very powerful in the world ... and it's gotten to be so unspoken because it's so politically incorrect, but I think it's just so much at work ... so yeah, things are better, but it's still at work in ways that I think have great cost for people.

Keith struggles to think of a mechanism other than discrimination, and even that he struggles to name, talking about people's feelings about "color" and "the difference that that makes out in the world for black people." He feels that the way race works in America has "great cost for people," but doesn't seem to know how to explain it. In fact, despite his earlier commentary that "black people in America just started with the most terrible disadvantages that anyone can imagine," he genuinely seems confused as to why voluntary immigrants "struggle in poverty for a long time ... but it gets better and better" while people who were forcibly brought to the country in bondage have not had the same outcomes.

Keith struggled to explain how the history of slavery has "set us on a course that's been very hard to alter." Despite different sentiments toward economic inequality than Tom, Keith finds himself, like Tom, without language or ideas to explain what he thinks is currently happening with regard to race.

Compartmentalizing race

"Oh, I think it's a huge problem. It's a huge problem for the people who have barriers."

Lena (HIWW) provides a useful example of the ways White respondents—and those who were high-income in particular—compartmentalized rather than integrated conversations about race and economic inequality. Lena's only direct mention of race

came in our second interview, when I asked her if she thought race was tied to income and wealth differences in the U.S. This was particularly notable because, throughout our interview, she brought up scenarios that invoked racialized economic inequality without mentioning race.

Lena thought a lot about inequalities between New Haven's neighborhoods and alluded to her own involvement in projects that "bridge some of those areas." She lived in East Rock (a neighborhood with one of the highest percentages of White people in New Haven—62%) and repeatedly made comparisons to Newhallville (the neighborhood with the lowest percentage of White people—3%). Early in our first interview, she gave an example—talking about "a huge disparity in home values" between neighborhoods—and seemed to be approaching a conversation about redlining practices, but without mentioning race.

Even if you were able to get approval for a mortgage for a more modest, more affordable neighborhood like, I think the banks are less likely to ... you know, you might not get such a favorable mortgage because of the history of the neighborhood or the surrounding properties.

Lena vaguely mentioned the "history of the neighborhood or the surrounding properties" but doesn't specify further. Given the context of our conversation in New Haven, it seemed likely that she was talking about neighborhoods that differed by race and class, but she didn't make this explicit. She went on to compare her own situation to someone in another neighborhood—using Newhallville as her comparison—but again, did not mention race.

And, you know, we were able to buy into here because, you know, our parents chipped in a little bit and— nothing extravagant, but we just had that extra, you know, just a little extra help with that to get us started. I mean, those kind of opportunities are not equally spread out across the city at all. You know, if you're growing up in Newhallville and your parents are renting and your family doesn't have that kind of equity built up and the house next door may be, it may be up for

sale at a very affordable price, but it— you know, it’s not necessarily— like even if you were able to invest in there— so people invest in those neighborhoods in more of an extraction-type scenario where they’re absentee landlords and, you know, they just kind of harvest the rents but don’t necessarily create any equity for the neighborhood.

Lena appeared to be trying to make a point about racial economic inequality—and her own advantage (which, of course, she is careful to note was “nothing extravagant”)—but her point is vague and muted because she avoided explicit mentions of race or poverty. She argued here, and elsewhere, that people in neighborhoods like Newhalville were stuck in circumstances of exploitation, whether by “predatory landlords,” “failed public housing,” “divestment in ... public infrastructure,” or “policing strategies” that physically “trap people” where “most shootings happen.” Her examples—especially in the context of a city that she acknowledged was “so segregated”—continually suggest racialized economic inequality without explicitly describing it as such.

When I asked about what had influenced her views on the topics we were discussing, this compartmentalization was even clearer. She talked about a brief time living in West Oakland (in California’s Bay Area)—a neighborhood with a long history of African American culture, struggle, and displacement—and said she lived there during a period of “pretty extreme poverty” and “in the middle of the crack epidemic.”⁴⁵ She said, “that made me feel a lot of compassion towards my neighbors, because I got to know them,” but again, she made no explicit mention of race. As part of this same answer—about influences—Lena also talked about traveling internationally, including

45. West Oakland is a neighborhood with a history as a thriving African-American center which was subsequently one of many such neighborhoods that suffered from racialized destruction and displacement through freeway building and “urban renewal” projects and the construction of public housing projects that racially concentrated poverty, and later became a center of Black Panther resistance in the 1960s. (Anthropological Studies Center n.d.; Murch 2010; Self 2000)

visiting family in Europe, and being glad to come back to the US, where a history of “income inequality” isn’t as much “part of the landscape.”

I’m always grateful to come back to the US, actually, because I feel like ... you really can kind of talk to everybody or find some kind of common meeting ground with anybody, whether it’s a homeless person or like a super-rich person. That is really possible here and in other places, it’s— you know, even spending time in Europe where there’s the whole infrastructure of the feudal system that is just part of the landscape. So, I’m always like, you know, the castles are really— it’s very beautiful, it’s fun to visit as a tourist, but I’m always kind of glad to come back here and not always have that reminder of like, the king and the peasants, kind of. So, it’s pretty amazing that we live in a place that doesn’t have that same kind of history. In terms of income inequality.

It was surprising to hear Lena say this—about “not always” having “that reminder of like, the king and the peasants”—just a minute or so after talking about her experiences living in racially- and economically-segregated Oakland and in the context of an interview where she had talked about the visible inequality in her own city. The American history of dispossession, slavery, forced labor, and exclusion were so not part of widespread American narratives that Lena could completely overlook them, even when directly talking about history and subjugation. Her comments were particularly surprising because she described herself as aware of current inequalities and said, “It’s something I care about a lot.” Although current racial and economic inequality “doesn’t affect my personal safety,” she said,

I feel touched by it just living in New Haven, because you see it as you want your whole city to be— I mean, you see potential for the whole city. It’s a great city and then it’s just frustrating to see these kind of lines. It shouldn’t be so segregated. There shouldn’t be like, the kind of poverty that you see. The kind of violence. You know, kids ... being in really bad circumstances and that’s— you know, it’s maybe a small percentage, but— you don’t want to hear about kids getting shot.

In fact, Lena did seem to “care.” Throughout our interview, she gave many examples of the kinds of hardships and inequalities she saw children, in particular, suffering that

suggested that she regularly attended to these issues. Even still, she manages, throughout the interview, to talk about racial economic inequality without talking about race.

In our second interview session (near the end), I finally asked Lena explicitly about whether she saw race playing a role in economic inequality. Notably, she didn't reference any of the examples she had given earlier (e.g., about neighborhood segregation or difficulty getting bank loans), but, like other high-income White respondents, she made vague references to history and treatment.

I mean, I think it's, you know, just—Historically, that's such a— it's such a huge part of our history, like you just have to start out with that. Certain people were slaves. Certain people came over as agricultural labor. So, their whole ... you know, how we kind of all grew up together, we all came from really different places in our collective history. So, yeah, I think that's really—I think people are treated very different based on their race ... and also their culture.

She went on, giving a more specific example:

And I see that in—I mean, I think it starts in school. You know, kids are kind of disciplined in different ways ... I mean, you can see it in the high school, because the high school is tracked, and so, at the upper level, there's this little pod of mostly-white or kind of international, but from sort of educated families. And then, I mean, it's like totally color-coded. So that just tells you, it's systematic. People—you know, if you're poor and you're a minority, you're more likely to get stuck into one of the lower tracks in the high school. Maybe you went to a school—that probably started much earlier, where, maybe you're not prepared to go into the higher track by the time you get to high school, but I mean, you just look at stuff like that and it's really—I think it tells you, you know, there's a problem there.

Lena's reference to historical racial inequality is similar to Tom's and Keith's—vague and non-relational. She argues that it is a “huge part of our history,” but then has very little to say about it. She mentions slavery and “different” treatment based on race, but makes no mention of those doing the treating or owning the slaves. She is able to be more specific as she moves into her example about present-day racial inequality—and her commentary about the “little pod of mostly-white” students is an interesting echo of

Patrick's description of his children's school. Her involvement with her children's school and her attention to inequality helps her see that "there's a problem there" and even to describe it as "systematic" and "color-coded," but she trails off as she tries to describe how those systems work—like the others, seeming to lack either the language or the information to make a clearer argument.

Specific, but still not relational

Josh (HIWM), whom we met earlier in this chapter, expressed a more specific understanding of a racially-particular economic inheritance. Even still, Josh, like most other White respondents, neglects a relational analysis, primarily focusing on the harm done to Blacks rather than the benefits accruing to Whites. He argued that current racialized economic inequalities can be traced back over generations:

Blacks had— they had no wealth, and you know, with them being enslaved and then any gains they made during reconstruction were rolled back. And then we had civil— you know, so that people finally woke up in the 50s, that blacks do not have the same opportunity and so there were laws. And now we're waking up to the fact that we've just arrested all these poor black men.

... It's just kind of this generational— it's just compounded over generations ... because of our economic— our social system that ... didn't give the same opportunities ... for African Americans. ... They didn't have the same access to loans for housing ... they didn't have access to the same kind of government jobs earlier in the century. And so, you can say that it's more fair now, and it really is, but that doesn't escape the fact that for 350, 400 years of our history here, you know, they were treated very unfairly.

Josh is more specific than most other White respondents in naming systemic mechanisms through which the legacy of slavery and reconstruction translated into racialized economic inequalities that "compounded over generations." However, although he is clearly more comfortable discussing the mechanisms and consequences of racial inequality than were Tom, Keith, or Lena, Josh, like the others, focuses on the harm done to Black Americans and leaves those who perpetuate and benefit from that harm vague or

unnamed. Specifically, while he uses the first-person plural possessive in a couple places when mentioning the perpetrators of harm (“we’ve just arrested all these poor Black men” or “our social system”), for the most part he uses passive voice to describe the harms sustained by Black folks (they “had no wealth”, “didn’t have access”, “were treated very unfairly”, gains “were rolled back”) leaving the perpetrators generally unidentified. Also, as I noted earlier, Josh expressed an overly optimistic perspective about current racial inequalities (“you can say that it’s more fair now, and it really is”).

The tendency toward a non-relational perspective among high-income White respondents was recently captured succinctly by Chana Joffe-Walt in a 2020 podcast examining the power of White parents in the history of school segregation after *Brown v. Board of Education*.

When we look to diagnose the problems of our public schools, we look at what is in front of us right now. We look forward. Nobody looks backwards to history. And so, the question is not how do we stop white families from hoarding all the resources. Instead, the question is, what’s going on with the Black kids? (Nice White Parents podcast, Episode 3)

Similarly, my high-income White respondents seemed to be asking the wrong question, in part because they failed to look closely at history. Instead of asking how to stop White people “from hoarding all the resources,” these respondents ask, “what’s going on with” Black people.

Black Respondents: specific and relational

As we have seen throughout this chapter, Black respondents’ discussions of economic inequality regularly integrated discussions of racial inequality, and they talked about current and past racial inequality in different ways than did White respondents. Discussions of the historical roots of current racialized economic inequality—although

only brought up by some respondents—were a place of particularly sharp contrast between White and Black respondents, highlighting major gaps in knowledge and awareness among White respondents. Here, I use the examples of Gene and Curtis (both HIBM) to illustrate the contrast between their specificity and relational analysis when talking about the historical backdrop of current racialized economic inequality compared to the vague and non-relational analysis of the high-income White respondents presented above.

Gene (HIBM) is very specific about the way the legacy of slavery translates into economic inequalities. For example, he traced current economic and racial inequalities in the U.S. back to an original “land grab” where those who had power “took” things that “nobody owned” and created laws in their own favor that established that “you could use those goods as a form of wealth,” and “over generations ... laws that say that you can bequeath those assets to” your heirs, who become the next generation of “beneficiaries of that particular land grab.”

And then, outside of that sort of system, you have people who were enslaved, right? Or you had women who had fewer rights because of the norms at that particular time. That, from the very beginning, never got a chance to participate in that land grab. And that is a certain agreement that is woven into our Constitution.

It’s not just how people feel about each other, he argues, but laws put in place “from the very beginning” that excluded some people from “participating” in a basic form of wealth accumulation while enabling that accumulation for others. Gene does not directly describe the race of those who participated in the “land grab” he depicts (instead, he talks about “fore founders” and people who landed “on Plymouth Rock”), but he nevertheless describes a scenario in which some people were “beneficiaries” while others were denied the “chance to participate.” Gene’s even cursory reference to laws “woven into our

Constitution” is both more concrete and more systems-focused than White respondents’ explanations, such as Keith’s “people’s feelings” or Tom’s “current or past prejudice.”

Later, Gene gets even more specific about the legacy of slavery:

I do really think that everybody would agree that there's groups of people that were brought here against their will and were set up not necessarily to fail but not to succeed. Those are facts. ... A large percentage of people who are black and brown are descendants of slaves in America. Those slaves, those ancestors going back multiple generations weren't allowed to have nuclear families, weren't allowed to own anything, weren't allowed to learn how to read, weren't allowed to learn how to gather, weren't allowed to walk by themselves or allowed to learn how to cooperate.

... Not only that, you were promised 40 acres and a mule. They said, ‘you know what, we changed our mind on that as well.’ Then they wonder why you have a system outside of a system. You have crime and you have lawlessness and you have all the poverty. You have all these things that are circumstantial. They want to ascribe it to the color of their skin, but the truth is that any group brought here under those conditions would end up in the same place.⁴⁶

At first, Gene’s comments are similar to Keith’s reference to the way “black people in America just started with the most terrible disadvantages,” but Gene adds a level of detail that I generally didn’t hear from White respondents. He traced the particular inheritance of slavery and subsequent legalized discrimination to the current economic circumstances of many Black and Brown Americans. To Gene, the lack of more widespread understanding of these particular pieces of history—and their relational nature—is frustrating:

That's the part that quite frankly makes a lot of black people just angry and fed up, is how can you not agree that, objectively, you got a start that I didn't get? You were afforded basic rights that I was never afforded. To me, those are facts.

46. Only three respondents (Darrell, Angela, and Gene) referenced this broken promise to emancipated slaves—commonly known as “40 acres and a mule”—and they were all Black. (For more about “40 acres and a mule” and links to calls for reparations, see Conley 2002; Darity 2008; Gates Jr 2007, 2013)

I don't think that high-income White respondents intended to minimize the impact of the historical legacy of racial inequality on current economic inequalities, but rather that they didn't know or didn't have the conceptual repertoire to explain more specifically what they suspected was the case. Among my interviewees, there were few, if any, that I think would have disputed the factual nature of Gene's assertions. (Perhaps I had a particularly liberal and self-selecting group.) Rather than reflecting individual flaws, their omissions reflect a structural and systemic exclusion of narratives and historical information about the laws, policies, and practices that created and reinforce racialized economic inequality (especially during and after reconstruction). Such narratives are less widely available to people who are not actively seeking them out than are narratives that focus on more individual acts of prejudice. Gene's view blamed systems, including laws and social structures, rather than individuals, whereas many White respondents who did not take this historical perspective framed their commentary about racialized economic inequality in terms of individual actions—by those on both the winning and the losing side of the economic equation.

There were other examples like Gene. Curtis (HIBM) spoke relationally and specifically about intergenerational racial wealth inequality—giving the example of the life insurance industry that, he said, “has taken advantage of black folks.” He explained, “life insurance is a form of wealth creation,” but insurance companies “didn't explain it to us that way.” Instead, they profited by selling policies to Black families that would pay for burial and not much else, “perpetuating this whole notion of burial insurance and calling it life insurance.” While they could have helped Black families start to build wealth through “education” around the difference between the two types of policies,

Curtis argued the life insurance industry (“the most lucrative industry in the world”) instead launched a “very targeted” campaign focused on selling high-margin “burial policies” to Black communities. “Way back when ... they used to call them the nigger policies.” Companies placed ads on television stations popular among Black people: “They come on BET, they come on TV1.” “So, an agent used to come around, they used to collect the premiums and you know, some guys would walk with the money.” “The life insurance companies have done us a disservice,” Curtis said, “we’re dealt with in that manner by most systems.”

Knowledgeable and relational accounts like Gene’s and Curtis’s contrast with what I heard, in general, from White respondents (although I will share some exceptions in the next section). Black respondents talked about racialized oppression in a relational way—some people’s wealth was built on other people’s “sweat.” It’s not just that some people were denied opportunity and resources (passive voice—as many Whites describe it), but somebody “took” those opportunities and resources for themselves.

White exceptions: Material benefits of Whiteness

Some White respondents did talk about racialized economic inequality using specific detail and in relational ways, but these respondents were exceptions. They help to illustrate the kinds of narratives that were missing from most White respondents’ comments.

Meg (HIWW) was a rare White respondent who named a material link between her own economic comfort and the economic hardships faced by Black people.⁴⁷ When I

47. Meg was 45 and worked as a social science researcher. She was married and both she and her husband had PhDs. They owned their home and had two school-aged children living with them. Their household income was \$140,000.

asked her how she thought her economic trajectory might have been different if she had been born Black instead of White, wealth was the first thing she mentioned. She said her parents both came from wealthy families whose wealth was built in industries “predicated on people in Africa or Blacks in America not having those things.”

Both my parents, kind of the privilege or the wealth that they have comes from circumstances: one, colonialism, two, slavery, that were— if I had been black it would have been impossible.

Without that familial wealth, Meg said, she wouldn’t have been able to put a down payment on her house. She likely wouldn’t have had the kind of educational opportunities she had had. The intangible impacts were even larger. “I think being white comes with really deep and often unexamined kind of sense of entitlement and confidence.” (Here, she echoed Julie’s comments from Chapter 1). When thinking about the entanglement of racial inequality and economic inequality, Meg emphasized the generational nature of access to wealth.

When I say material resources, I don't just mean access to money ... it's not income it's wealth, it's not just wealth it's wealth like over generations. ... it's not easy to change just by giving people higher incomes, because they don't have the wealth, and even if they have the wealth, they don't have five generations of wealth, which kind of gives you this sense of being able to take risks and this sense of, “this is my world.”

Even without naming specific pieces of racial history, Meg links current racialized economic inequalities “over generations” to those of the past, something that was rare among White respondents.

Meg’s comment—framing her opportunities as “predicated on” Black people being denied opportunity—was the only comment of its kind that I heard from White respondents. Many respondents talked about benefits or advantages they had over others, by virtue of their Whiteness, but the subtle difference there—between acknowledging

that one had something that others did not and suggesting that one had something *because* others did not—was powerful. She makes this unique and potent statement that it is not just that some people were denied access to opportunity, but that that denial is what created the opportunities and resources for others like her. The uniqueness of Meg’s statement helps to illustrate some of what is not being said—what I did not hear from other White respondents.⁴⁸

Ryan’s (LIWM) comments were not quite as striking as Meg’s, but in them he made it clear that he felt that he—as a White man—benefitted while other people were harmed by the way racism impacted economic opportunities.⁴⁹ Although (or perhaps because) he felt he was in a position of relative hardship, he thought “somebody else” with the same circumstances “but different skin color, would be in a much worse situation than I am.”

In many of his comments about racialized inequality, Ryan echoed what I heard from several other White respondents: it is not that the people who economically succeed have necessarily made better choices, but that the same choices made by people differently situated in society (“because of their skin color or location”) are rewarded or punished in very different ways, with powerful economic consequences.

In those earlier comments, Ryan used a passive formulation that was similar to what I heard from other White respondents, but later—near the end of our interviews—

48. Notably, Meg was not born in the U.S., was in an inter-racial marriage, and had mixed-race children. I am avoiding more specificity to maintain her anonymity.

49. Ryan was 55. He had a master’s degree. He had a chronic health condition that left him in ongoing pain and kept him from working for pay (but he did not qualify for Social Security Disability payments because he had been a graduate student, and not contributing FICA taxes, for the four years before he applied for Disability). He was a regular volunteer tutor with a program that served New Haven students. He lived in a shared house with 13 other people (“it’s kind of like a boarding house.”). He was an artist and occasionally sold a piece of art. Otherwise, his entire income was \$900/month in Social Security Income (\$10,800/year).

when I asked him directly about how race or gender had affected his economic trajectory, he used more active language: “Because of me being a white male, I had more opportunity.”

I’ve been given things that I know women have to struggle for, people of different color or different race or ethnicity have to struggle for, just because that’s the way the system was set up.

Although other respondents talked about being “beneficiaries” of advantages, this kind of formulation—“I’ve been given things that [others] have to struggle for”—was something I rarely heard from White respondents, although I certainly heard many talk about their own racial advantages. Our social narratives seem to so denigrate the idea of being “given” something as opposed to “earning” it that many were hesitant to use such language.

Conclusions

“Negro poverty is not white poverty. ... These differences are not racial differences. They are solely and simply the consequence of ancient brutality, past injustice and present prejudice. They are anguishing to observe. For the Negro they are a constant reminder of oppression. For the white they are a constant reminder of guilt. But they must be faced, and they must be dealt with, and they must be overcome; if we are ever to reach the time when the only difference between Negroes and whites is the color of their skin.”

*President Lyndon B. Johnson, Commencement speech at Howard University,
June 4, 1965 (1966:637)*

Respondents’ perspectives about and attention to racialized economic inequality varied by race, class, and gender. In general, White respondents compartmentalized conversations about the intersection of race and economic inequality—many did not address the topic with more than a mention until I explicitly prompted them. Meanwhile, Black respondents regularly integrated conversations about race, power, and economic inequality. Black respondents also spoke about racial inequality with a more relational analysis than did White respondents—linking the denial of power for some to the

concentration or consolidation of power for others. In contrast, White respondents tended to focus more on non-systemic forms of social “treatment” (such as bias and discrimination) than on systemic differences in power when talking about race (as opposed to when they spoke about class). In this way, White respondents often left the gatekeepers of power and the gains of those gatekeepers unnamed and unexamined—and Whiteness as the “unmarked category against which difference is constructed” (Lipsitz 1995:369). Finally, while both White and Black respondents linked current racial inequality to historical racial inequality, White respondents did so in ways that were often halting, cursory, and vague. Many expressed little, if any, understanding of the history of racial oppression between emancipation and the present. In the moments when they did acknowledge this history, White respondents often focused almost entirely on the harm done to Black Americans, with little or no discussion of those who had perpetrated or benefitted from that harm.

The race and class isolation of respondents’ lives likely played a role in reinforcing these patterns—especially among the high income. Access to historical information and narratives about current and past inequality is embedded within social networks that are notoriously racially segregated. This social segregation is both the consequence of legal and structural residential segregation and also a self-reinforcing perpetuator of that “cycle of segregation” (Krysan and Crowder 2017). Without cross-racial contact, Kraus et al. 2019 argue, people miss out on “the opportunity to acquire accurate perceptions of the lived experiences of people who do not share one’s own status.” Because intergroup contact is so rare, especially for high-income White Americans, such contact “is often accompanied by significant psychological discomfort

and difficulties in navigation that further reduce the information sharing essential to accurate conceptions of the racial patterns of economic inequality” (Kraus et al. 2019:911).

High-income White respondents (especially men) appeared to have some of the least race- and class-integrated lives. Josh’s description captured the way many high-income White men described their exposure to race and class difference—something he was “next to” but not “confronted with.” The high-income White women I interviewed had more intergroup exposure—sometimes through jobs that served low-income New Haveners, sometimes through engagement with their children’s public schools, and in two cases (Meg and Robin) through their own inter-racial marriages.

High-income Black respondents seemed to have the most race- and class-integrated lives of any of the groups I spoke with. Patterns of intersecting racial and economic segregation meant this group, in particular, navigated professional, familial, and community spaces that cut across race and class (Pattillo 2013). This cross-race and cross-class contact was both a factor *of* and drew their attention *to* the overlaps between racial inequality and economic inequality. Many had personal ties to people living in poverty—as a result of present and past racialized economic inequality. As a consequence, high-income Black respondents seemed to feel more personally impacted by racialized poverty and economic inequality than did their economic peers who were White. This heightened awareness was further reinforced by societal conflation of race and class such that high-income Black people are often profiled in such a way that they are assumed to be poor. They could see—and were constantly being reminded through

personal interactions and public incidents—the ways constructions of race and class were used to exclude some and elevate others.

White respondents, whether high- or low-income, seemed reluctant to discuss the power wielded by White people. Among the low-income, their everyday economic hardships seemed to make it harder for them to see and reckon with their racial privilege. Those hardships demanded their attention while their racial advantage was something they could largely ignore. Race came to their attention primarily when they perceived that it caused them hardship rather than benefit. Psychologists have argued that forces that make life easier (“tailwinds”) are much less salient or visible to people than forces that make life harder (“headwinds”) (e.g., Davidai and Gilovich 2016). “Barriers and hindrances command attention because they have to be overcome; benefits and resources can often be simply enjoyed and largely ignored” (Davidai and Gilovich 2016:835). This phenomenon was visible throughout my interviews and seemed particularly relevant in the case of low-income White respondents.

High-income White respondents, whether consciously or unconsciously, avoided self-implication—both in terms of separating themselves from the powerful and in terms of minimizing discussion of gains to people like themselves. While they did generally acknowledge that they had had better opportunities or had received better treatment because of their race, they seemed more comfortable talking about the harm faced by communities of color rather than the benefits gained by White people. Or they were more comfortable speaking generally about racial advantage and disadvantage but not how that applied to their own lives. It seemed that it felt safer to them to treat racism as if it is done by others and/or in the past—as suggested by their vague and non-relational references to

slavery. With these references, high-income White respondents seemed to want to indicate their awareness of historical racial injustice while also distancing themselves from it. Instead, they seemed to unwittingly reveal their own lack of awareness and therefore, their own complicity. These tendencies toward avoiding self-implication were part of a larger pattern wherein even the higher-income White respondents that I spoke with did not consider themselves to be really among the “winners” in the U.S. economy. Someone else was winning, and they saw themselves as only collateral beneficiaries of that system.

The fact that high-income White respondents had the mental and emotional space to grapple at all with historical racialized economic inequality might have been, in part, a reflection of the very benefits they had gained from that system, including the kind of “comfort” many referenced. Gene (HIBM) argued that people who “make a lot of money ... have the freedom to think,” whereas “poor people in some ways are using all of their energy to simply survive. ... They’re literally just trying to eat and be healthy and take care of their family.” Indeed, low-income respondents often seemed consumed by their own struggles—their concerns about economic inequality were so personal—such that there seemed to be less space in their consciousness to contemplate the hardships of others.

Moreover, for low-income White Americans, interlocking systems of race, gender, and class inequality create a “paradox of privilege” (Moss 2003) in the conflict between their marginal economic status and the hegemonic narratives of Whiteness. They are the subjects of social scorn, challenging the social and symbolic boundaries of Whiteness (Wray 2006). Among my respondents, this group’s limited access to the

“wages of whiteness” (Roediger 2007) seemed to fuel their perceptions of being in direct competition with their racially-different economic peers. Their feelings of exclusion from mainstream respectability seemed to lead low-income White respondents to want to highlight their differences from these peers, turning their attention away from the oppression they shared and the resulting benefits accruing to the powerful.

Black respondents saw entanglements between Whiteness, wealth, and power as obvious, but they also understood that these connections were at best ignored and at worst contested in mainstream White America. Perhaps in response to this, I heard variations on the phrase “these are facts” from many Black respondents as they talked explicitly about racialized economic inequality.

White high-income respondents, in general, seemed ill-informed about the kinds of facts Black respondents discussed—those linking historical and present-day racial economic inequality. These White respondents talked about this history in general and vague ways that made it seem that they didn’t have readily available narratives they could draw upon nor the historical knowledge they would need to make sense of the social phenomena they were trying to explain. I agree with the many scholars and commentators who argue that this negligence of or even lying about (to borrow James Loewen’s language and W.E.B. Du Bois’ implication) American racial history is dangerous and has “dire implications” (Kraus et al. 2019). Americans vastly under-estimate both current and past racial wealth gaps—a misperception that is likely to undermine efforts targeted to closing those gaps (Kraus et al. 2019; Shapiro 2017). It is easy to imagine that this kind of “willful ignorance of racial economic inequality” (Kraus et al. 2019:913) is connected

to a similar ignorance of racial history in the U.S. (Nelson, Adams, and Salter 2013; Strickhouser, Zell, and Harris 2019).

At the same time, it seemed that many of the White respondents I spoke with might have drawn upon an alternative narrative or a better understanding of history if one had been readily available to them. Yes, they failed to learn this information that is widely available to those seeking it, but the history in question should not be specialized knowledge only available to those motivated and equipped to seek it out. The failure of this particular group of individuals points to systemic issues. The “gauzy way white Americans tend to view history, particularly the history of racial inequality” (Hannah-Jones 2020) is at least in part the result of “lies” that are part of both official and unofficial narratives about American racial history (Loewen 2018).

Acknowledging the absence of mainstream narratives that more accurately represent this history does not absolve individuals—such as the high-income White respondents in this study—but focuses on a more collective, and structural, complicity. This was captured well by Bryan Stevenson as he reflected on the 2015 shooting of nine Black people in a Charleston, South Carolina church by a “white supremacist”:

The question I ask is not how could this young man be affected by these historic failures, by this ideology, the question is how could he not? We're all affected by it. ... [N]o one should be shocked that those ideas are in his head when they are reinforced in countless ways day in and day out in our everyday living, including in the ways that the positions of power and influence are still largely owned and occupied disproportionately by people who are white.

Stevenson argued, as have others, that these ideologies are upheld, in part, by “our failure to deal more honestly with our history of racial injustice” (Johnson 2015).

Gender is an important part of this history—with race and gender operating as joint systems of economic oppression (Branch and Hanley 2014; Browne 1999; Collins

2000). Legally and socially, Black women in the U.S. are disproportionately targeted for criminalization, punishment, and surveillance—and this “convergence of criminal and civil surveillance regimes creates and maintains the dominant racial, class, and gender hierarchy” (Crenshaw 2013:25). Labor and citizenship—constructs integrally tied to economic access—have “been constituted in ways that privilege white men and give them power over racialized minorities and women” (Glenn 2002:1). Racialized divisions of labor have and do limit Black women to “devalued work,” while “employers have benefitted from interracial animosity” encouraged by pitting Black and White women against each other in competition for jobs (Branch 2011:90; Glenn 1992). Gendered ideologies have long undergirded racialized violence (e.g., Crenshaw 2013; Equal Justice Initiative 2017).

Among my respondents, the intersecting history of gender, race, and class inequality went almost completely unmentioned by men. The respondents who discussed, or even mentioned, overlapping gender and racial inequality were overwhelmingly women. Nevertheless, both men and women—in the cases where they described people with privilege and power in society, including themselves—often referenced both race and gender (specifically, referencing White men). But only a handful of respondents (four out of five high-income Black women) spent any time focusing on the economic implications of intersecting race and gender inequality. These respondents recounted particular (and painful) experiences facing discrimination, micro-aggressions, or other forms of exclusion based on their race and gender.

Although it was a focus for only a minority of respondents, gender was present throughout the interviews—especially in terms of the experiences respondents drew upon

to inform their opinions. As we have seen in this chapter—and as we’ll see again in the next section about policy opinions—the topics that respondents brought up, based on their experiences, were gendered. For example, low-income women (both White and Black) talked about experiences applying for and receiving state assistance (e.g., WIC, SNAP, cash assistance, rental assistance, and health insurance), reflecting the gendered and racialized structure of American welfare policy (Gilens 2009; Orloff 1996; Quadagno 1994). Women (both high- and low-income) talked about the entanglements between their work to care for their children and their own economic trajectories.

The differences between White and Black respondents in their understanding, awareness, and knowledge about racialized economic inequality reflect a systemic and structural collective negligence that undermines efforts to seriously address growing inequality in wealth and income. At the beginning of this project—and informed by scholarship demonstrating a clear link between racial attitudes and opinions about welfare policy (e.g., Gilens 2009)—I suspected that racial attitudes played a key role in American ambivalence about policy designed to reduce economic inequality. Although I certainly found differences in racial attitudes among my respondents, what were more prominent were gaps in knowledge and narrative. These gaps came from a variety of sources, including social and spatial segregation, formal and informal education, and media portrayals, each reinforcing the other (Entman and Rojecki 2001; Gilens 2009; Krysan and Crowder 2017; Loewen 2018; Massey and Denton 1993). It seemed that White respondents’ social network segregation perpetuated a lack of knowledge that both emerged from and was fueled by hegemonic historical narratives related to racialized inequality. These factors combined with societal favoring of “colorblind” narratives and

avoidance of race in public discourse, contributing to White respondents' discomfort in talking about issues of race. Just as Krysan and Crowder (2017) described a self-reinforcing "cycle of segregation" between social segregation and residential segregation, the patterns among my respondents pointed to a self-reinforcing cycle of social segregation, lack of knowledge, and discomfort with topics related to race. Breaking this cycle requires us to "deal honestly with this history" (Bryan Stevenson in Johnson 2015).

* * *

INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTERS 4 & 5:

WHAT TO DO? SUPPORT AND RESISTANCE TO REDISTRIBUTION

As we have seen in the previous chapters, my respondents—across class, race, and gender—expressed concern about economic inequality and a desire to see more equitable distributions of wealth and income. For the most part, they agreed on an overarching story that people’s economic outcomes were not necessarily the results of their merit or effort but were often tied more closely to inherited circumstances. We also saw some notable differences across class, race, and gender in the ways respondents made sense of economic and racialized inequality.

When our conversations turned to *what to do* about economic inequality, two major patterns emerged. First, support for downward economic redistribution, broadly conceived, was widespread. Respondents generally wanted to see the rich contribute more to improving the lives and circumstances of the poor. Second, and at the same time, most respondents—either explicitly or implicitly—also resisted redistribution, although the contours of this resistance diverged across class. The following two chapters (Chapters 4 & 5) illuminate these patterns.

Support for redistribution

All respondents thought more should be done to support the poor—and there was widespread agreement on what areas needed improvement: access to education, housing, healthcare and meaningful and gainful employment. Most wanted to see the rich give up some of their holdings in to support these improvements in the lives of the poor.

Support for redistribution seemed to both emerge from and feed into respondents’ sympathy for the poor and their antipathy for the rich (Piston 2018). As we saw in Chapter 2, most respondents felt that the rich had more resources than they needed and

that they thus had a moral obligation to share their wealth in order to improve the lives of those who are struggling. There was a widespread perception of malfeasance among the rich—whether that was ill gotten gains made at the expense of the poor, hoarding of resources, tax evasion, or political manipulation. Even those respondents who thought the wealthy had a legitimate claim to their holdings—seeing them as having “earned” or “deserved” what they have—felt that the suffering of those with *less than enough* cast a moral shadow and placed a moral obligation on those with *more than enough* to give up some of that excess to alleviate the suffering and hardships of those in poverty. Thus, although some redistributive sentiments were motivated by blaming one group (the rich) for the hardships of the other (the poor), this belief was not a necessary correlate of support for redistribution. Many respondents felt that the magnitude of the economic divide, itself, should justify some form of “giving back” from those with abundant resources to those who were scraping by.

Resistance to redistribution

Resistance or reluctance to redistribution took different forms among high- and low-income respondents, shaped by their divergent experiences. Low-income respondents were more reluctant than high-income respondents to take from the rich. They had little real exposure to the lives of people in the top 20% of U.S. income or wealth, but plenty of experiences with scarcity and lack of control in their own economic lives—leading many to resist the idea of taking from anyone against their will. Adding to this resistance was their distrust of the government, seeing it as a perpetuator of inequality. High-income respondents were more willing to take from the rich, in part because they were more familiar with what they felt was the excess held by that group. And they generally expressed a willingness to contribute to downward redistribution

themselves, but were either resistant to acknowledging or unable to see their own complicity in existing systems of inequality and the power they had within those systems to change them.

For low-income respondents, resistance to taking from the rich overlapped with their own exposure to that group and was entangled with a distrust of government. Most felt that government was controlled by the rich and that, together, those entities worked to keep poor people poor. With this baseline, any policy solution to economic inequality felt implausible if not impossible to these respondents. Awareness of the durability of their own position—rather than misplaced optimism about their own economic prospects—shaped these attitudes. Low-income respondents were painfully aware that their voices carry less weight in the U.S. political system (which is backed up by data - e.g., Bartels 2016; Gilens 2012; Page and Gilens 2017). They felt keenly the impact of inherited circumstances on people's economic positions. Thus, although poor and low-income interviewees were generally strong supporters of redistribution—expressing a set of strong and relatively coherent demands—they also felt cynical about government intervention and thus discouraged about the prospects for change.

High-income Americans' resistance to redistribution has received less attention from scholars who have sought to understand sources of political inaction to counteract economic inequality (but see Reeves 2018), but because of their high rates of political participation, their resistance is particularly consequential. Few high-income respondents in my project were overtly opposed to traditional redistributive policy—and, in fact, most were overtly in favor—but some had mixed feelings, and most either did not feel implicated in the creation or upholding of inequitable economic systems or they felt they

had little power to change those systems. Their resistance was implicit—embedded in their failure to acknowledge—and possibly to even be aware of—their own role in perpetuating economic inequality, including benefitting from upwardly-redistributive policy. They tended to frame themselves as willing participants in solutions to economic inequality—for example, amenable to increases in their own taxes—but not as contributors to the problems they described.

Despite high-income respondents' suggestions that greater contributions from people like themselves might help ameliorate some inequality—they seemed unwilling to consider that the absence of those contributions might support its perpetuation. Although all were sympathetic to the poor, few suggested that the lives of the poor might be harder *because of* the actions (or inaction) of people like themselves. Instead, high-income respondents focused their attention on people with greater material resources than their own and the ways that group benefitted from and upheld systems of inequality. With their lens focused above them, high-income respondents felt politically disempowered, neglecting their own relatively greater power compared to that of low-income respondents. In this way, high-income respondents continued to benefit and even uphold current systems of inequality while portraying themselves (to themselves as well, it seemed) as morally righteous in their opposition to the status quo and their willingness to contribute to change.

Issues of visibility

Both high- and low-income respondents seemed unaware of the benefits they received through the tax code—what Suzanne Mettler has termed the “submerged state.” For low-income respondents, the Earned Income Tax Credit was such a benefit. High-income respondents received an array of benefits through the tax code—including the

Home Mortgage Interest Deduction and tax-free college savings accounts. In both cases (high- and low-income) the end result of this unawareness was similar: resistance to redistribution. Low-income respondents remained untrusting of the government, despite the significant investment made by that government (through the EITC) towards improving the well-being of the poor. High-income respondents remained surprisingly unaware of the ways they were siphoning off the very funds they expressed a willingness to contribute (in additional taxation) through these benefits buried in the tax code.

In these ways, respondents' lack of understanding of their own receipt of government assistance through the tax code—on both ends of the income spectrum—muted what might have been stronger redistributive sentiments. Low-income respondents might have seen these policies as positive government actions and high-income respondents might have seen them as unnecessary supports to their already comfortable lives.

Visibility also played a second role in shaping the opinions of high- and low-income respondents—and in this case in divergent ways. Because of their economically segregated social networks, low-income respondents were much more familiar with other low-income people and high-income respondents were much more familiar with other high-income people. In both cases, respondents were critical of people closer to their own economic status: low-income respondents criticized their economic peers for taking advantage of the system and high-income respondents were sharply critical of the rich for hoarding economic resources. Likewise, low-income respondents were more empathetic to the rich and high-income respondent to the poor. In this case, these sets of segregated

visibilities led low-income respondents to be more reluctant about redistribution, while it led high-income respondents to be more supportive of it.

Race

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on differences across class/income groups. But, as we have seen throughout this dissertation so far, race strongly shaped respondents' experiences with and exposure to inequality. Wealth and poverty are racialized (and gendered) experiences in the U.S. and these experiences shaped people's opinions. The patterns I described in Chapter 3—of differences in understandings of the entanglement of racial and economic inequality between White and Black respondents—were also reflected in respondents' discussions of policy solutions to economic inequality and their own power to make change. Racialized experiences were a constant touch point for Black respondents as they talked about policy, while they were more of an unspoken backdrop for White respondents. For example, awareness of the American government's role in perpetuating racial oppression, combined with current experiences of discrimination, reinforced low-income Black respondents' distrust of a government that has been an active part of their oppression for centuries. For high-income Black respondents, awareness of the entanglement between racial and economic inequality combined with social proximity to poverty undergirded their support for redistributive policy—especially targeted to the Black poor.

Black respondents' position among the high income—and therefore, their relationships to and opinions of policy and systems that perpetuate inequality—was materially and socially different from those of White respondents. Even among the income group I focus on in Chapter 5—the top half of the income distribution among the high-income people I interviewed—several Black respondents were just one generation

removed from poverty while none of the White respondents shared that experience. As noted in Chapter 2, some recent research has shown that even when raised in high-income families with equivalent incomes and even in the same neighborhoods, Black men are far less likely to retain their family's economic status than are White men, and are far more likely to fall down the economic ladder (Chetty et al. 2020). Thus, high income Black respondents' opinions were likely shaped by being closer to poverty in a network and familial sense than were their White economic peers, and also through an awareness that downward mobility in their or the next generation was not uncommon.

The cases

In these two chapters, I present respondents in a somewhat more holistic form than in earlier chapters in order to contextualize their opinions about policy.

Respondents' policy views are embedded within their understandings of economic inequality, more generally. Thus, some of what you will see here will echo what we've already seen in earlier chapters. Chapter 4 focuses on low-income respondents and Chapter 5 focuses on high-income respondents.

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CHAPTER 4

VISIBILITY OF INVISIBILITY: LOW-INCOME RESPONDENTS' POLICY VIEWS

“In effect, American social policies have reproduced racial hierarchy and the American welfare state has been an instrument more often of social stratification than of social equality.” Linda Fae Williams (2003:3)

“The political lesson to be learned about Medicaid and other public assistance programs (i.e., ‘welfare’) is that they may alienate more than they activate participants.”
Robert Hudson (2015:889)

“There's no need to ... tax the big people for they money if you're not going to do right by it.” Gloria (LIBW)

Introduction

The suffering of the poor was particularly visible to low-income respondents—it was their own and it was in their communities. In contrast, what they could see and imagine of the lives of the rich seemed unnecessarily luxurious. Although many held onto the hope that their own efforts might eventually lead to more economically comfortable lives, they also believed (as we saw earlier) that wealth and poverty often had a lot more to do with inherited, rather than earned, circumstances. Many also believed that their own economic struggles were linked to, if not caused by, the pursuit of economic gains among the rich.

As we have seen, most respondents felt that economic conditions in the U.S. were such that some people had far more than they needed, and others had less than what was required to meet what most considered to be their basic needs. This sentiment—sometimes fortified by a sense that the greed or malfeasance of the rich contributed to the poverty of the poor—led many low-income respondents to argue that the rich had a moral obligation to use some of their holdings to reduce the “economic stress” in the lives of the poor.

However, when low-income respondents discussed ways to address economic inequality, their distrust of government—a feeling that government was controlled by the rich and worked to keep people down—made any policy solution feel implausible if not impossible.

Respondents' perceptions of government action were rooted in their direct and indirect experiences with highly visible, means-tested social welfare programs that were widely regarded as controlling, punitive, degrading, and discriminatory. Interactions with these agencies fueled a perception among low-income respondents that government support programs focused inflexibly on meeting bureaucratic rules rather than attending to the real lives of the poor. This led some respondents to argue that government not only fails to meet the needs of many of those who could use help, but also fosters a system of skewed incentives that keeps people from improving their own lives. The actions of the government were seen by many as not only ineffective in terms of poverty reduction, but even actively oppressive.

The lack of control that low-income respondents felt in their own lives—both through their experience with government programs and more broadly as socially and economically marginalized members of society—ironically engendered a kind of empathy for the rich. Although most low-income respondents felt that the rich had a moral obligation to give up some of what they had to help the poor, they also hesitated to support government policy that would force the rich to do so. These sentiments seemed to emerge from respondents' own senses of scarcity and feelings of resentment about having so little control over their own economic lives.

Distrust of government, empathy for the rich

This chapter makes three primary arguments. One is that low-income respondents support downward redistribution in principle, but they are pulled away from supporting redistributive policy in practice by their distrust of government, including their feeling (shared by the high-income) that the rich wield too much power in that arena. The second is that low-income respondents' distrust of government is more reasonable than elite commentary often makes it out to be. Third, for some low-income respondents, distrust of government, resentment of being constantly subjected to social control, and experiences of ongoing scarcity fostered a surprising empathy for the rich (in their resistance to redistribution), despite low-income respondents' critical views of that group. Thus, among low-income respondents, both sympathy and antipathy for the rich seemed to foster resistance to policies like redistributive taxation, despite their support for downward redistribution in principle.

Although most low-income respondents would have liked to see the rich share more of their wealth to improve the lives of the poor, few had any hope that such redistribution would happen or that—channeled through the government—it would make any meaningful difference in their lives. Most distrusted the government and the rich in nearly equal measure. Some respondents hardly distinguished between the two entities—feeling that both were run by the rich and powerful to serve primarily the interests of those groups. Even those who did see government and corporations as separate entities with separate aims nevertheless felt that the rich and powerful who ran corporations had disproportionate power and representation in government.

Distrust of government by low-income Americans is often dismissed as the result of ignorance or misunderstanding, but the experiences of respondents I spoke with

suggest otherwise. The poor feel what research has demonstrated. In fact, government is less responsive (if not entirely *unresponsive*) to the needs and interests of the poor compared to those of the rich (Bartels 2016; Gilens 2012). Government policy has long been part of the unwelcome regulation and control of the lives of the poor (e.g., Hays 2003; Piven and Cloward 1993). Lawmakers who design and structure programs to assist the poor are almost entirely drawn from among the wealthy (Carnes 2013), creating a “vicious cycle” in which the rules of these programs are guided by “negative images of target groups” and are then “implemented in ways that reinforce negative group outcomes and reputations” (Fording et al. 2011:1652).

Low-income respondents’ regular interactions—and struggles—with the most visible government support programs reinforce their feelings that their lives and needs are not only of minimal concern to policymakers, but also that these very programs are being used as tools of social stratification (Herd and Moynihan 2019; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2008; Williams 2003). They argued that government programs offered meager assistance surrounded by so many restrictions that they felt as if the programs were designed to keep people in poverty rather than help them out of it. These feelings are echoed by researchers who describe social welfare program design that “often seems more focused on excluding the ineligible than on including the eligible” (Herd and Moynihan 2020:1). A 2018 report by the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities found that the structure of one of the three major federal poverty-alleviation programs, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (a cash-assistance program), “exacerbate, rather than reduce, deep poverty” (Floyd, Burnside, and Schott 2018). Other researchers argue that the U.S. social safety net for those in poverty only provides about half of the income

support that would be needed to have everyone able to meet “basic needs” (Jusko 2016). Furthermore—and as many respondents who received benefits argued—the “fall off” rules can be so steep that “increased earnings may be associated with less income, overall” (Jusko 2016:7), perpetuating the poverty of those receiving assistance.

Respondents’ experiences of feeling controlled and surveilled are also echoed across the literature. Some researchers have described welfare systems as parallel systems of correctional control, mirroring systems of incarceration, but segregated by gender.

Like their predominantly male counterparts under correctional control, poor women on welfare are subject to a disciplinary regime where penalties for noncompliance loom large and resources to counter social and economic marginality remain difficult to access. (Fording et al. 2011:1649–50)

Low-income respondents’ experiences reflected both the gendered and racialized nature of these parallel “disciplinary regime[s].” Welfare program rules and structures meant that, generally—although not exclusively—women were more likely to describe experiences applying for direct assistance—for childcare, cash assistance, health insurance, disability, or financial aid—while work and wages took up more airtime among men, as did experiences with the so-called criminal justice system.

People experiencing “social and economic marginality” also had to contend with systemic racial profiling and racial stereotypes. As we’ll see, respondents like Darrell—a low-income black man who had no criminal record—felt he had to specifically address the assumption that he might have such a record as he tried to find a job. Katie and Andrea (LIWW)—in response to their own feelings of being disciplined and punished rather than helped—turned to racial stereotypes to make sense of their circumstances, arguing that their Whiteness gave them a disadvantage in applying for government support.

Visibility, stigma, and the “submerged state”

Direct assistance programs—that required people to apply, demonstrate their need and deservingness, and submit to sometimes demeaning scrutiny and surveillance—were far more visible to low-income respondents (and to the general public) than programs of the “submerged state” (Mettler 2010, 2011) that invisibly offer assistance through the tax code. Such “submerged state” programs targeted to the low-income (e.g., the Earned Income Tax Credit, EITC, or the Child Tax Credit, CTC) were doubly invisible—neither commented on by those who likely received them nor those who did not.⁵⁰ Compared to mean-tested direct assistance programs, receipt of these kinds of benefits come through the much more universal—and distinctly less stigmatized—process of filing a tax return.

While the non-stigmatized nature of this form of government assistance facilitates a sense of social inclusion among those who receive it (Sykes et al. 2015), it also makes such assistance invisible to those who might otherwise advocate for it. For example, Mettler (2010) cites an Obama-era tax credit, the Making Work Pay Tax Credit, that “reduced income taxes for 95 percent of all working Americans” but—a year later—was only correctly recognized by a small minority of the public.

These kinds of misunderstandings of policies hidden in the tax code are widespread and not limited to low-income Americans. High-income respondents were equally susceptible to overlooking government actions that worked in their favor. Indeed, the differential visibility of various government actions is built into the very design of these policies. On both ends of the income spectrum, among my interviewees, respondents’ lack of understanding of their own receipt of government assistance through

50. As we’ll see in Chapter 5, such programs targeted to higher-income Americans are equally invisible to them.

the tax code muted what might have been stronger redistributive sentiments. Low-income respondents might have seen these policies as positive government actions and high-income respondents might have seen them as unnecessary supports to their already comfortable lives.

Setting aside the strengths and weaknesses of programs designed to alleviate poverty and inequality, the American government has a long history of creating and reinforcing differential access to income and wealth through the selective inclusion and exclusion of groups in policies related to housing, incarceration, healthcare, education and financial institutions (any number of references could be cited here—c.f., Alexander 2012; Glenn 2004; Oliver and Shapiro 2006). In other words, critiques of government by low-income respondents cannot be dismissed as misunderstandings or simply the opinions of the uninformed. Low-income Americans—especially low-income people of color—have valid and evidence-based reasons to distrust government.

Most respondents struck an uneasy balance between this distrust of government and their desire for the government to do more to tackle economic inequality. Some research suggests that this pattern—wherein concerns about inequality both undermine trust in government and increase desire for government action—might also hold more broadly among the American public. For example, Kuziemko et al. (2015) find that providing information about the growth of economic inequality in the U.S. and the impact of redistributive taxation pulls respondents' views of redistribution in opposing directions. "It appears to make respondents see more areas of society where government intervention may be needed but simultaneously make them trust government less" (Kuziemko et al. 2015:1492). Seeing high levels of economic inequality appears to

decrease Americans' already-low trust in government, the researchers suggest, because they might "blame the government, perhaps thinking that if politicians 'let things get this bad' they cannot be trusted to fix it" (Kuziemko et al. 2015:1481). At the same time, the same information "significantly moves people toward wanting a more active government" (Kuziemko et al. 2015:1492). Many low-income respondents were in this uneasy place and uncertain how to reconcile these sentiments.

The cases

The bulk of this chapter is made up of four cases that I will use to develop my key arguments about low-income respondents and their thoughts about how to address economic inequality in the U.S. As I noted in the introduction to this section, these cases are more biographically holistic than those in earlier chapters in order to better capture and represent the context of people's lives that shape their views of policy.

We have met all of these respondents—Darrell (LIBM), Katie (LIWW), Jeremy (LIWM), and Kelly (LIBW)—in earlier chapters. I selected these four respondents for two reasons. First, they have a range of experiences and opinions that reflect some of the common themes I heard from low-income respondents as we discussed economic inequality in the U.S. Additionally, I chose these cases for their demographic diversity—specifically their gender and race—which shaped respondents' experiences with and opinions about economic inequality and the government programs designed to address it. There are two women and two men, two Black respondents and two White. Although these respondents' experiences and opinions reflect some of the most common themes, there are many experiences and opinions that are not captured in these four cases—a necessary act of omission and reduction for the sake of time and space.

Darrell (LIBM)

Background

Darrell was 24 when we spoke. He had no regular income, and faced an ongoing struggle to find gainful employment, with the “good jobs ... few and far between.” For the past couple of years, he had been engineering music at a local community-serving recording studio that he was able to use for free. He came to the studio every day (“I do not miss a day”) and dreamed of one day “actually making an income” through his music.

When I asked about his social class status, he said “it would definitely be mid-lower-class. I came from the projects and had nothing really.” He had left home as an early teenager, as his parents were going through a divorce, and he hadn’t finished high school. Like many other respondents, he expressed concern about the homeless (and the poor generally), but his concern was acute, and he let me know—although only part way through our first interview—that he was, himself, experiencing homelessness.

Darrell’s experience and his concern about his economic peers animated his criticism of the rich and his desire to see that group contribute to improving the lives of the poor, but they also fueled his distrust of government-based policy solutions. Pulled in these opposing directions, Darrell turned to narratives of individual agency—focusing on effort and attitude, things that felt within his realm of control. He was frustrated with his own lack of autonomy in a life circumscribed by scarcity and subjugation. He seemed to translate that frustration into a surprising empathy for the rich in their resistance to redistribution.

Mixed feelings about rich and redistribution

“I believe everybody should have at least ... somewhere to stay or some sort of food source. We have plenty of food in the United States to feed the homeless. We have plenty of food in the United States to feed all of Africa and we choose not to. That's the real problem. We choose not to when we can.”

Against this backdrop of hardship, Darrell expressed mixed feelings about the rich and by extension, about redistribution. As with other respondents, Darrell's views of the rich were closely tied to his views about the legitimacy of economic inequality. On the one hand, Darrell tended to favor societal narratives of meritocracy. Although he was rarely admiring of the rich, he did refer to them in terms that suggested his belief in their merit. For example:

People that have money now worked for it. Or their parents worked for it, or whatever the case is. People that don't have money, their parents were less fortunate—their parents either didn't have the knowledge or didn't have the work ethic to produce what they needed for their children to sustain in the next life.

The rich, Darrell suggests here, either worked for it or benefitted from parents who had cultural capital (“knowledge” or “work ethic”). He suggests that the money of current generations came through such merit, whether that of the current or of a previous generation. Unlike other respondents who grappled with inherited resources—and generally felt that the inherited circumstances of current generations were a basis for unjustified inequality—Darrell stuck to his meritocratic argument and suggested that someone in the past *must* have worked hard for the current generation to be doing well. Thus, he said, although the resulting inequalities might not be fair to the current generation, they were inevitable.

It comes from the people that were before you; your parents, your grandparents, their parents and so back. They put themselves in a position to where their kids won't ever need ... so that's the grind from the generations before you that put you right. As far as that, I believe there are certain unfairities with the newer

generations coming up not knowing how their grandparents and those before them did it. ... I mean your parents did something along the line that didn't go as well for them or they weren't able to save - or less fortunate. And, I'm not saying that's fair, but it happens.

Darrell navigates a thin line here—seeming to argue that inequalities emerge from differences in merit, but simultaneously suggesting that current inequalities based on previous-generations' actions might not be fair. At the same time, he expressed a kind of disengagement with the idea of fairness—suggesting that fairness is not necessarily something one should expect (“I’m not saying that’s fair, but it happens”) or worry over. Throughout our interview, Darrell returned to this theme—the inevitability of unfairness and the disutility of focusing on it. For example, elsewhere in the interview, he said, “It's just not meant for everybody to be at the same level” and—talking about his experiences with discrimination in hiring— “it is what it is.” These sentiments contributed to his focus on individual accountability, as we’ll see later.

Frustration with the rich: “People with money are doing very little to help the people with no money”

Despite his unusually sanguine attitude toward the rich, Darrell was nevertheless sharply critical of what he saw as a failure to use their resources in a way that was more downwardly redistributive. In fact, Darrell suggested that this lack of action among the rich on behalf of the poor contradicted core American values. Thinking about people who are homeless, Darrell abandons his repeated insistence that a focus on fairness is misplaced and expresses frustration with “people with money.”

When it comes to the terms of, okay, America is the land of the free, equal rights and all that—it's not true. It's not true at all. There is, as it is, millions of homeless people here. There are millions of people with money here who could actually make a difference but choose not to. So that's actually a problem that I see now is that the people with money are doing very little to help the people with no money.

So, if you want to talk about unfair, that would be unfair to me. Because if you have it, why not?

Darrell's seeming equanimity is shaken when he considers the plight of the people who are homeless, especially in contrast to the imagined lives of those with resources "who could make a difference but choose not to." Like all of my respondents, Darrell was sympathetic toward the poor and aggrieved by the highly-visible suffering of the homeless. When I asked him what his answer was to his own "why not?" question, he suggested that people were just being self-interested.

I guess you could say it wouldn't benefit them. Taking a homeless person off the street isn't putting money in your pockets. It isn't bringing your kids food. ... If it's not beneficial to them, they won't do it. That basically comes with your morals and what you believe in.

Darrell questions the morals of people who have "money" and "power," positioning himself on the moral high ground by arguing (as did many lower-income respondents) that, if he had more economic resources, then he would feel a "responsibility to do something," in part because "I done been homeless, I done been foodless, I done been there."

It's getting cold. I see people out here without hoodies, without proper shoes, without anything. Now, me, where my morals come from ... I would take into my own responsibility to do something. If I have an extra coat, I would honestly give someone the coat off my back if they didn't have it. But it's people's different morals, different money. The power. Now, the power is not even. People with money have the most power, especially when it comes to providing and doing. You have that power. People with businesses have that power to do these things but they don't.

Like many respondents, Darrell expressed criticism and frustration with the rich for what he saw as their moral and material failure to alleviate the suffering of the poor, especially given that he (like others) saw the greater material resources of the rich linked to greater societal power. Furthermore, although he did not necessarily see the rich as having

attained their position illegitimately, he did think the lives of the rich were easier and required less work. “They don't have to struggle or go through anything that the average person is going through.” To Darrell, this perception of ease in the lives of the rich, contrasted with the struggles of the poor, added to his frustration about the former’s lack of action on behalf of the latter.

In defense of millionaires - empathy through scarcity

Darrell’s frustration uneasily coexisted with a defense of or empathy for the rich.

As he imagines their lives:

You could be away from everything; you could be away from all this homeless stuff. You have a home, you have a big, fancy house. You got five cars in your garage, family dog, ten bedrooms. ... and then you've got to come out day after day after day and see everyone struggling, see everyone fighting to live ... and you could sit there and witness that and not do nothing about it. That—I don't think it makes you a bad person, but I feel like if you can, you should.

Despite what are clearly strong feelings, he stops short of demanding that those with excess resources contribute to improving the lives of those whose resources he feels are insufficient. His suggestion that someone with the means who chooses to “do nothing” is not a “bad person” comes as a surprise, given his earlier moralistic tone. He seems torn here, as do many respondents, wanting the rich to do more to improve the lives of the poor but not wanting to demand or force them to do so.

It would definitely be nice for the people that have more money to do more, but I don't expect them to. Because they worked for it. That's their money, you can't expect them to do something. You can't expect anyone to do something.

Although he clearly thinks those who can “should” give up some of what they have to help those with less, in the end, it seems, his belief in the meritocracy of unequal resources and the sanctity of private property competes with his moral outrage. He

immediately went on to give an illuminating example to illustrate his point about why we “can’t expect anyone to do something.”

It's like if you go in to work at Subway [the sandwich shop]. Okay, you get off work, now your boy or one of your friends [says] “Hey, can I get a couple dollars?” You know, at the end of the day, you work for minimum wage, like “Damn, man. I wish I could. But I don't even have it for myself.” A lot of times, that's what I hear. And that attitude right there—I’m not saying on a grand scale, because obviously Subway vs. a millionaire—that's the same attitude that millionaire has. He went out and did this. He made that money. Whatever the case is. If he don't want to share it, he doesn't have to share it.

In this example, Darrell uses an experience he is familiar with—the life of a minimum-wage fast-food worker—to empathize with an experience he is wholly unfamiliar with—the life of a millionaire. He cannot imagine having so much money that he could easily share and still have enough for himself. When he thinks of taking “responsibility to do something,” Darrell imagines giving someone “the coat off my back.” He finds empathy for millionaires in his own experience of scarcity.

Darrell’s experience of scarcity is not only about material resources, but also about power and autonomy—and that experience, too, seemed to ironically bolster his defense of the rich. It was common for low-income respondents to feel a lack of control—over their employment, their pay, their taxes, their schedules, their purchasing decisions—and their frustration with this lack of autonomy translated into a strong loss-aversion that seemed to give them empathy for anyone who didn’t want to be forced to give up some of what they had. Darrell was not alone in this combination of feelings: the desire to see the rich “do more” or “give back” and the hesitancy to “expect” or mandate this behavior—I heard varieties of these sentiments from several respondents—especially from low-income respondents.

Undermining Redistribution: Powerlessness and Defensive Individualism

Popular narratives suggest that empathetic sentiments like Darrell's (which tended to lean respondents away from downward redistribution) come from low-income respondents' misperception of the reality of their own economic mobility—that they imagine that they, too, might be rich one day and don't want to have their wealth taken from them. What I generally heard from respondents, however, was not a misplaced optimism about their own economic futures, but a sense of powerlessness—a powerlessness that is backed by research that shows that U.S. economic and political systems are far less responsive to the opinions of the poor than they are to the desires of the wealthy (e.g., Bartels 2016; Gilens 2012). Far from imagining their own wealthy futures, most low-income respondents were fighting off despair about their own economic prospects.

Respondents had different reactions to these feelings of powerlessness—ranging from anger and resentment to disengagement. Darrell turned to tropes of individual agency. Throughout our interview, he repeatedly expressed his belief in self-reliance and the importance of individual attitude and mindset. For example, when he pushed back at my questions about economic fairness, he argued that focusing on fairness led to “reliance on everyone else instead of looking inward to solve your own problems.” This individualistic mindset felt like a coping strategy—a grasping at a sense of agency in the face of feelings of powerlessness against systemic forces of racism and poverty. Such individualistic narratives are widespread, focusing attention away from structural and systemic forces. In her study of job-seeking behaviors among low-income young Black men, Sandra Susan Smith argues that this kind of “defensive individualism” is a common

response among the Black poor, who find themselves persistently blamed for their own hardships.

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 (Smith 2007:22).

The men Smith interviewed responded to the distrust and “non-cooperation” of their peers—patterns rooted in racist discourses and structures—by “defensively” embracing these individualistic discourses and thus, blaming their own individual weaknesses or failures for their inability to find jobs. This focus on individualism is a double-edged sword—simultaneously self-defeating and self-protective. By locating accountability in individuals, people blame themselves for their failures, but also feel a sense of control, even empowered to change their circumstances.

Darrell, for example, was frustrated and discouraged in his attempts to find steady work but seemed to find some hope in a combination of individualist tropes—not giving up in the face of failure and having the right attitude. As he tries to make sense of his experiences with structural barriers, we can see him turning (defensively) to these individualistic tropes.

As he described his difficulties in finding gainful employment, Darrell notes the racism he faced. He explained, “I have no background record. I have no felonies, nothing like that” (alluding to the economic challenges of disproportionate criminalization faced by many other Black men). He said, it’s “not that the jobs were hard to get,” but that racism and discrimination meant that jobs were hard to keep. Darrell gave the example of a delivery job he had for a few months, working full-time through a temp agency, “going there every day, busting my ass to work.” At some point, “I guess college had just let out

for summer break” he said, and, with all the “white kids running around” Darrell recalls, “I stop being called into work. I stopped getting paid. Nobody was returning my calls. ... I’m stuck out here, like wondering... where’s my next job going to be?” Darrell felt he was unfairly displaced by “White kids” because that’s “the way the businesses work ... being predominantly White.”

Darrell felt powerless in this system—at the whim of powerful White people who dictated the rules of economic engagement in ways that he felt were unjust.

They want you to do this, that and the third and be a certain way. Like, I mean, before I cut my hair, I actually had dreds... and I couldn't get a job because I had dreds. That's crazy. So, you tell me I got to cut my hair and everything I believe in to work for you? ... And then, to get laid off, you know, that's just like - what did I do? Now, I don't even have my integrity, you know what I mean, because I cut my hair to work for you. So, basically, it's just things like that that big organizations do to minority people that I can't really get behind.

Darrell’s feelings of powerlessness are palpable here—feeling that he had to give up “everything I believe in” to get a precarious job from which he could easily be dismissed. As before, when he discussed the power imbalance between rich and poor, Darrell expresses frustration at the power of corporations that could demand that he “be a certain way,” with no reciprocal obligation to meet his demands or needs. Adding to his discouragement, Darrell noted that even after years with the first Black president in the White House, “it’s the same thing”

You talk about employment is raising, this that and the third, okay. I'm still—I mean, I'm doing whatever I got to do—still haven't found a job. ... So, it's like ... what is really going on here?

Darrell’s response to his “what is really going on here?” question echoes that to his “why not?” question about the rich who fail to help the poor: “you can’t do nothing about it.” “The sad truth” Darrell concludes, is that “everyone’s out for themselves.” He has little hope that government, or politicians, or business leaders will make decisions that will

improve his life or the lives of the poor. Instead, Darrell seemed to turn to individualism as a way of feeling some agency amidst his hopelessness. The situation wasn't going to change, he said, one just had to have the right attitude and "move on." "There may be some places that discriminate," Darrell said, and "there are going to be people that are racist," the only thing you can control, he argued is how you respond. To illustrate his point, he gave the example of his experience working as a door-to-door canvasser:

There were people that opened the door, called me all types of N words. All types of unpleasant things. But it's how you move on about that. I can't get mad and want to fight somebody ... But move on, go knock on the next door, you know what I mean? Keep a smile on your face. Move on. Go knock on the next door. You're not going get a positive response from everybody. ... At some point in time, you're going to find someone that wants to talk to you.

A focus on systemic racism or unlikely policy solutions is not helpful to Darrell in this scenario, so instead, he draws upon the hopeful narrative that—despite structural barriers—if you have the right attitude and you persevere, eventually, you will get a break.

I don't want to be in this place called homelessness. I want to be able to walk into my house, greet my dog, have a family - all this that and the third - and I'm not going to do that by just sitting on my ass.

Distrust and suspicion of government: "I just don't know the government well enough to be like 'I trust you'"

Like many of the respondents I spoke with, and like many of Hochschild's respondents, Darrell distrusted the government. Taxes taken, to him, felt disconnected from the services provided. His proposed solution (if he "had the opportunity to run this country ... or at least be involved in like politics") provides some insight into the nature of his distrust of government intervention for redistribution. The themes he raises—an inability to see tax dollars at work in his community and a reluctance to take resources

from people other than through voluntary contributions—were themes I heard from many low-income respondents.

Darrell proposed a redistributive system that was remarkably like taxation. People would sign up on a website, he explained, to donate a dollar or two out of every paycheck. Then, they could vote on how that money would be spent:

Do you want your money to go towards the homeless? Do you want your money to go towards ...healthier food? Do you want your money to go towards - even a people's bank - like a regular bank for just the people, not run by the government?

Darrell argued that his system would be different from government-based taxation in two ways: it would be transparent, and it would be voluntary. People who made these donations, he explained, would be able to go onto the website and see what was being done with their money. This would make it “legitimate” in a way he felt that current taxation was not.

Now, for me, this is a legitimate thing that you, as a taxpayer, can look into and be like, “oh, this is where my money went” okay? ... Okay - we built a new building on Humphrey street ... What is this building doing? How much is this building generating? ... What is it doing for your community? Okay, now what our building is doing is taking homeless people off the streets, okay?

What was visible and meaningful to Darrell was what he could see in his own immediate surroundings. Like many other low-income respondents, Darrell felt like money was taken by the government, but he didn’t feel that he could see any government money improving his life or that of his community. Many low-income people described abandoned houses, run-down playgrounds, unplowed streets, slow emergency response as ongoing visible reminders of the lack of government investment in the lives of people like themselves. Darrell contrasts his proposed system to what he feels is the lack of transparency in government taxation:

Okay, they say it's going there, but where's it going? Can you really check on this? Can you really make sure? They took it out of your check so can you make sure it goes where you say it's going to go?

In addition to being transparent, Darrell argued, the system had to be voluntary—another issue he had with redistribution via government taxation. As a poor Black man, he felt he had little control over his earnings and couldn't imagine having enough that being mandated to give some up would seem fair. For example, he recalled working for a temp agency and having the agency “take half your money.”

Like many low-income respondents, Darrell didn't often distinguish between government and corporations. To him, they were part of the same powerful, moneyed force that limited his options and capitalized on his suffering: “doing nothing but taking from you.” For example, Darrell was particularly concerned about food quality and this extended quote traces the conspiratorial connections he saw between government and corporations.

There's fault for these people doing this, knowing the effects of it, and now these people are going to capitalize on it, to get more money off you. ... let's just say atrazine [a commonly used herbicide] gives you cancer. Now, the cancer industry is going to make money off of you. Now, you have cancer, now you're giving your money to these people for medicine ... it's an industry where they need to make money off of your sickness. So, they're going to keep you sick rather than fix you just so they can keep getting that dollar from you. And there's doctors that know what's wrong with you the exact moment you walk in, but they won't tell you that. ... now you're on four different drugs that you got to pay for. And it's happening over and over again. Now, you getting Medicare taxed out your money, you're getting social security, and everything else, I mean, it's being taxed out of your money when they're doing this to you. So, when will you wake up and realize that this system ain't doing nothing but taking from you?

Although Darrell expresses a fairly extreme and specific version of conspiracy between government and corporations, this general sentiment—that corporations and government worked together to maintain their own power and hold people down—was common among low-income respondents. Also, Darrell's concern about medical exploitation in

particular has resonance with a long history of government-supported medical experimentation on Black populations and ongoing disparities in access to and treatment during medical care (e.g., Tuchman 2020; Washington 2006) although he did not explicitly make this linkage.

Darrell was critical of the rich, but it seemed that his (and other low-income respondents') resistance to progressive taxation came from two very different places. On the one hand, he had a strange empathy for the rich based on his own experience of scarcity and resenting being forced to give up any of what he felt he had earned. On the other hand, his view of the power held by corporations and a government controlled by the rich undercut his support for policies like redistributive taxation because he felt such a thing could never work: "you can't do nothing about it."

Katie (LIWW)

Background

We heard from Katie in earlier chapters. She is a white teacher's aide in her late 30s. She's married, has three kids. She and her husband, together, make about \$45,000 a year. As with other low-income respondents, Katie wanted to see more economic redistribution to "spread out" the resources such that there would not be such extremes of wealth and poverty. But her experiences struggling for financial stability and seeking help from the government led her to distrust the government as a redistributor. This distrust was complicated by her mixed feelings about the rich (which I explored in Chapter 2). Although she disavowed any antipathy for the rich, generally, she was unhesitatingly critical of a subset of that group: politicians, whom she saw as enriching themselves by siphoning off money from hard-working taxpayers like her. Her perception

of the government as run by selfish profit-seekers undercut any hope she had that government policy would or could ameliorate economic inequality.

Spread out the wealth

Like Darrell, Katie had mixed feelings about the relationship between the rich and the poor. Recall, from an earlier chapter, her concern about saying that “a lot of people ... make too much money” because perhaps “they work and they deserve money.” At the same time, Katie wondered, what about the “hard working people” who “can’t even pay their rent” and might be “maybe, technically, working harder” than someone who can afford to “go out to dinner every night”? Although she didn’t directly blame the rich for the hardships of the poor, as did some other respondents, Katie did suspect that “the middle class ... got pushed down ... because the rich people wanted more money.” The end result of this downward push, she suggested, was that people like her, who might have been working- or middle-class if not for the actions of the rich, were instead “a step above really poor.”

Although Katie is hesitant to blame the rich for the plight of the poor, she nevertheless felt that the current contrast in circumstances between the rich and poor was unjust. Why, she asked, did some people “have to make that much” when there are “so many people struggling”? When she thought of people who make “too much money,” Katie named athletes, “certain doctors” (“like plastic surgeons, like things that are not necessary. Not for people with accidents and stuff like that”), politicians, and the presidents and CEOs of corporations. She wanted to see political leaders act to “spread [wealth & income] out more” and “find a way to cap” excessive incomes. Specifically targeting the incomes of politicians, she said:

To be like, alright...this is what you guys can make, because we need the rest for this area. ... They're making way more than they need to survive. ... "You don't need to make more than this" ... and we'll channel all that money to other places.

She argued that, even with limits on their incomes, people "could still make a good living," but there would be more money to put "into other things to help people get jobs and healthcare and food and [help the] ... homeless people in our country." Here, we can see Katie, like Darrell, justifying her call for redistribution based on contrasting the circumstances of those who have "way more than they need to survive" with those who are struggling to meet more basic needs (housing, food, healthcare, and jobs).

Resistance to redistribution via taxation: Where do those taxes go?

Taxes were less palatable to Katie than were salary caps as a mechanism of redistribution, but she nevertheless felt that it would be fair for "the people who make more money" to be "charged more." At the same time, she didn't trust the government to collect and distribute tax money fairly. Like many other low-income respondents, Katie felt that the government was run by the rich and she, therefore, had little hope that a government policy to rein in the excesses of the rich would work. Based on what was visible to her—the coexistence of underfunded public services and people continuing to live luxurious lives—it seemed that the rich were finding ways to avoid paying what they owed in taxes (a common sentiment).

From what I know, they say the more money you make, the more taxes you get taken out. I don't really know how true that is ... On paper it seems to be that way, but it seems not to work that way in the end, somehow. I don't know if they hide money or if—I really don't know because that's what's supposed to be happening and it doesn't. ... What happens to all that? Where do those taxes go? So, if they really are getting taxed more, then why isn't it there? ... Obviously they're taxed. Like it's against the law not to, but I don't think all that money is getting taxed ... So, if everything got taxed the proper way, then, yeah, the people who make more money are getting charged more and I think that's fair.

She added:

... If people who make a lot of money are taxed like they are supposed to then they wouldn't have as much as they have. It's like they constantly still just have what they have. And I just don't know how. ... So, yeah it just feels like it's just not quite right.

In principle, Katie supports the idea of redistribution via taxation (“I think that’s fair”), but she doesn’t see evidence of it working. She continues to struggle economically and the “people who make a lot of money... still just have what they have.” Like many respondents, she suspected the rich of cheating (“I don’t know if they hide money”) but thought they were too powerful to be held accountable. Her confidence in the effectiveness of redistributive taxation was further eroded, like Darrell’s was, by what she saw as a lack of transparency (“what happens to all that? Where do those taxes go? ... why isn’t it there?”).

Resistance to redistribution: government takes too much and doesn’t use it well

Like most Americans, Katie felt that her own household’s tax burden was too high, that that of the rich was too low, and that insufficient amounts of tax revenue were being spent to alleviate the suffering of the poor (Bartels 2016; Piston 2018). Katie resented the taxation on her husband’s small business because she felt that tax money was being sponged up by selfish politicians. “There’s money there,” she said, to help those who can’t afford healthcare or are homeless, but “it’s not being distributed properly.”

I feel like the wrong people get that money. ... A lot of politicians seem to make all this money. Where's that money come from? It comes from our taxes most of the time. ... You don't need to make a million dollars a year to be whatever, a politician. Why don't you make, \$750,000 and then that's \$350,000 [sic] that could go towards something else?

When Katie thinks about tax money that could be spent to help people like her and those who are worse off, she immediately thinks of two things. First, taxes on her husband’s

business feel excessive and unsustainable to her. Second, politicians seem to her to have tons of money. In Katie's mind, that adds up to politicians taking too much for themselves rather than using that money to meet social needs. Like other respondents, she said that she wouldn't mind paying the taxes she pays if she didn't feel like there was a disconnect between what she pays into the system and what she sees coming out of it.

If we saw results, I would be totally fine with it. You know, it would stink that your paycheck's smaller, but if your paycheck is smaller and you're getting the help you need, then it's like... it washes itself out almost. So, yeah ... if that money really proved to help programs which helped people and we saw ... a decrease in unemployment and a decrease in homelessness and an increase in college graduates and they could tie it right back to "oh this is where the tax money went", then that's great. That's fine with me.

But Katie and other low-income respondents don't feel that they are seeing those kinds of "results" from tax-funded programs. Instead, what is most visible to them is their sense of being underserved by government programs—their struggle to receive what felt like minimal help—while politicians seem to have more than they need and little incentive to change a system rigged in their favor.

Feeling unseen or ignored by government

Katie's questions about the efficacy of tax-funded services to support the poor came from her own experience of applying for and receiving these types of supports. When she asked "what happens to all that" tax money, she might have been thinking about her frustration that the eligibility guidelines for government assistance programs seemed unresponsive to the actual circumstances of her life. Katie explained that, in her current job, she received a paycheck 10 months out of the year. Her husband ran his own business and his income fluctuated. Katie was frustrated at the inability (or

unwillingness) of assistance programs—from financial aid to subsidized health insurance—to account for what she considered “grey areas” in her household income.

They just tried to cancel [our subsidized health insurance] because ... there's no room to bend. Like, you answer this question and it's like yes or no, but that's not my answer. You know what I mean, like, how much do you make a year? I tell them, but they assume I left out something. So, I only work, technically 10 months out of the year, because I work in a school. So, they are taking the number I give them weekly and timesing it by 52 weeks. It's incorrect. You know what I mean? It's things like that that get frustrating, so I don't think it's fair.

Katie thought of herself as a deserving recipient of government supports. She and her husband both worked, and she was seeking help to pay for health insurance for her family and to get financial aid for school so she could finish her bachelor's degree. Applying for benefits was a stigmatizing experience for many, and Katie's struggles to qualify, despite what she considered her legitimate need, made her feel like her concerns were invisible to or ignored by the government.

There's so many grey areas—like I am having a hard time getting any financial aid because all they see is that my husband owns his own business. They don't see that he's barely paying the bills, let alone making money ... they don't hear nothing, and they don't want to change anything, and it's very frustrating ... There needs to be flexibility.

The experience was demoralizing and left Katie feeling invisible to, or worse, persecuted by the government programs she hoped would help her. Frustrated by this experience, Katie questions the government's intentions and ability to improve the circumstances of people like her.

Surveillance vs. Support: Bureaucratic disentanglement and reluctance toward redistribution⁵¹

Katie and other low-income respondents' distrust of government assistance programs seems to emerge from their experiences of the "penal logics" (Wacquant 2009) that guide social welfare provision as systems of discipline rather than systems of support. Interfacing with government assistance programs was nearly universally seen as frustrating and demeaning—as if applicants were being punished for needing help. Although all low-income respondents felt that the assistance was dearly needed, they also felt, generally, that benefits were too meager—providing barely enough for someone to get by, but too little to actually help them improve their lives. Several argued that government programs felt like they were designed to keep people in poverty rather than to lift them out of it. Many complained of regulations that discouraged what respondents considered to be positive behaviors: saving money, being married, working, or going to school. As noted earlier, social policy research corroborates these perceptions.

Respondents also complained that, while they felt excessively disciplined and surveilled by these systems, people with less legitimate needs appeared to receive assistance with ease. For example, recall Katie's comment: "my family and I are struggling. And I see other people who maybe don't need as much help. And it's like, why do they get it?" These common sentiments led to some apparently contradictory demands: respondents seemed to want to reduce the level of bureaucracy in welfare provision (so they could access benefits more easily) but also increase surveillance on

51. The phrase bureaucratic disentanglement comes from Michael Lipsky, who defined it as a process through which the denial of support is through "largely obscure 'bureaucratic' actions and inactions of public authorities." (Lipsky 1984:3). The obscurity of these actions and inactions encourages the placement of blame elsewhere .

“the few that are lazy” who “take advantage of the help that is out there.” Katie blamed these lazy few for being “part of the reason that we are still struggling.”

Katie’s comments, as we saw in Chapter 3, were explicitly racialized—arguing that something like a racial quota system allocated benefits by race instead of by need. Recall that she opened our interview by talking about how she felt that “a lot of people don’t get help that need it. And a lot of the times it has to do with the color of their skin.” Katie and other White respondents (recall Andrea, LIWW, from Chapter 3) drew upon these racialized narratives to explain their struggles in receiving adequate support through the social safety net, but they were not alone. Many low-income respondents, both Black and White, expressed their distrust in government welfare systems in stereotypical terms related to the widespread and racialized narratives of the “undeserving” poor.

Across race, low-income respondents who interacted with these systems expressed their feelings of being overly surveilled while simultaneously demanding more surveillance of their less-deserving economic peers. These demands are not as contradictory as they at first seem. For example, Katie’s complaint that programs refuse to take into account the actual circumstances of her life—including the “grey areas”—is essentially the same complaint as when she argues that the lives of people who “don’t need as much help” receive insufficient attention. Unlike people who are high-income (and especially those who are White and men), low-income Americans are generally not treated like individuals with differentiated lives, experiences, and circumstances. Instead, as Katie and other low-income respondents argued, their individual circumstances—or even the challenges they shared with their economic peers—were largely ignored by

government systems built by economic elites and structured around mistaken stereotypes of the poor.

To Katie and others, eligibility determinations felt simultaneously over-bureaucratized and capricious. Low-income respondents often felt at the mercy of the front-line workers in these government assistance programs. Researchers who have studied those front-line workers corroborate the perceptions of Katie and others and show that their concerns are not simply the complaints of a disgruntled group of handout-seekers but rather are among the consequences of policies that charge overloaded agencies and workers with the dual and conflicting duties of surveillance and support (e.g., Lens 2008; Watkins-Hayes 2009). For example, in studying instances of sanctions applied by front line workers, Lens found that rules guiding their work “reinforce[d] and amplifie[d] negative tendencies to view welfare clients homogeneously ... even as the scheme requires individualized and complex judgments” (Lens 2008:217). “Sanctions are not individualized but applied broadly” and “workers use bureaucratic shortcuts that avoid a full assessment of clients’ [circumstances]” (Lens 2008:215–16). Lens argues that the structure of social welfare systems encourages “an engrained skepticism” of clients that my respondents felt and resented.

The adoption of this encouraged skepticism among benefits workers might, itself, be a defensive response to circumstances where they, too, have little control. These workers, Lens suggests, are possibly daunted or discouraged by “the enormity of the task of welfare agencies” including the “well documented” “hardships endured by the welfare poor” and the lack of power and resources the workers realistically have at their disposal to help. A focus on “eligibility-compliance culture is less complicated than a focus on

helping clients obtain self-sufficiency” when resources are limited. “Sanctions can be used to assign blame and to absolve the worker of any responsibility for a client’s failure” (Lens 2008:216).

When Katie turns to blame her economic peers for contributing to her difficulties in getting help, she is encouraged to do so by the structure of benefit programs that blame her for her hardship and pit her against her peers in competing for scarce resources. As Esping-Andersen argues, “The welfare state is not just a mechanism that intervenes in, and possibly corrects, the structure of inequality; it is, in its own right, a system of stratification. It is an active force in the ordering of social relations” (Esping-Andersen 1990:23). Given this system of stratification, it is common for recipients of mean-tested benefits to feel they have to justify their deservingness of those benefits—distinguishing themselves from others who are often characterized as lazy or with less acute or legitimate needs (e.g., Halpern-Meekin et al. 2015; Hays 2003; Sykes et al. 2015; Watkins-Hayes 2009). The “implicit message” of these systems is “that failure stems from a client’s unwillingness to work, not from an agency that is not helping” (Lens 2008:201).

Katie relied on government support, but also distrusted it. In her interactions with government benefit programs, she felt stereotyped and dismissed. Her eligibility for these supports, it seemed to her, was determined based on rules that were simultaneously over-bureaucratized and dependent on the capricious judgement of frontline workers who failed to see her as an individual. Even as she wished for more resources to be available through some form of redistribution, she also worried that government might not use those resources in way that would actually improve her life. She felt that her own

struggles and needs went un-acknowledged by government organizations while the circumstances of her economically disadvantaged peers were under-scrutinized. Together, this collection of experiences and sentiments aligned with widespread narratives of government waste and welfare “cheats” in a way that led Katie (and other low-income respondents) to be reluctant to support government-led redistribution.

Jeremy (LIWM)

Background

Jeremy felt that American economic and political systems were stacked against “hard working” people like him by everyone above him on the economic ladder—from his managers to corporate CEOs to his representative in congress. He distrusted government, corporations, and the rich in equal measure. To him, they were inextricably entangled through shared moral corruption and selfishness—looking out for their own interests rather than those of “the people.” He wanted to see people with more economic resources contribute more in taxes to improve the lives of those with the fewest resources, but—given his feelings about the power and moral corruption of government and the rich—he could not imagine a way that such a system would ever work.

We met Jeremy in Chapter 2 as he expressed his frustration and bitterness over what he felt was the cruel and unjust abandonment of his hard-working parents at the end of their lives. He worked as a laborer—primarily doing landscaping work. He lived with his girlfriend (who received some state assistance) and her young son. He also had 2 other “step kids” and two teenaged biological children (for whom he was paying about \$8,000 a year in child support). His salary was about \$35,000. He hadn’t finished high school but had earned a GED. When we spoke, he was just about to start a new

landscaping job working for the city. “The best thing about this,” he said, “is if I get by the probation period, I got medical [insurance].”

The impossibility of redistribution: “if you're at a higher pay bracket you should be able to pay a higher tax rate. ... But it won't ever work.”

Like many low-income respondents, Jeremy's feelings about downwardly redistributive policy were mixed. He favored ideas that had a direct link between limiting the rich and helping the poor over ideas where that link was less explicit. For example, he didn't believe in putting caps on income, but he felt that there should be some limits on how people made money such that others were not exploited in the process.

You should be able to make as much money as you want, but the right way. Don't rob and steal ... and all this other stuff and all these Ponzi schemes and all that. If you're able to make it, you should be able to make it.

At the same time, he thought it was fair to tax those with more resources at a higher rate in order to spend that money on resources such as “education and job training” for low-income Americans. However, the few times he talked about such policies he immediately foreclosed their possibility by talking about how they wouldn't “ever work” given the power of corporations to “manipulate the system.”

If you're at a higher pay bracket you should be able to pay a higher tax rate, you know? But it won't ever work. You know why it doesn't ever work? Because, especially with these companies, the way they manipulate the system. “Okay, you tax us high we'll send our jobs out here.” So, they get around it so they don't get taxed, so they get all these breaks and ... this grant and that grant. Then by the time you know it, this guy's a multi-millionaire paying zero taxes.

Thus, according to Jeremy and many other low-income respondents, redistribution was a nice idea, but had little chance of becoming a practical reality. These respondents saw political, social, and economic power concentrated in the hands of corporations, the government, and the rich—groups Jeremy and others saw as inextricably entangled.

These groups had the power to “get around” any rules that might limit their own material gains.

Distrust of government

Another reason for Jeremy’s distrust and skepticism of redistributive policy was what he saw as the wasteful spending that was the outgrowth of the disproportionate influence of the rich and powerful in government. Government officials “wasted” taxpayer dollars on things that “don’t work” or that seemed to ignore the needs of the poor Jeremy said, because there was little consequence for their own lives to doing so. The poor were the ones hurt by this waste of “our money,” while government officials were “still getting the same [pay]check no matter what.” As examples, Jeremy commented on two recent and highly visible public expenditures.

The people that are holding our money, our treasurers, our government, our governor, like, you're just spending it. How about the baseball field they got at Hartford? They wasted our money. It's still not operational. ... I don't know the exact number ... It [the cost] just goes up and it's still not ready and it's supposed to been ready last year. Waste. It's just, why are you ... building a stadium with our money? Who's gonna go see that team? Nobody. ... And it's like, they don't care. It's not their money. They're still getting the same check no matter what.

In another example, Jeremy complained that the governor had wasted a recent windfall that came to the state from Volkswagen “for their manipulating the pollution thing” by spending the money building charging stations for electric cars, something he thought of as unaffordable to “average” Americans.⁵²

How many people can afford an electric car? I can't afford an electric car. You're using our tax money and the money you just got to build stuff that the average American ... can't afford. ... Wasteful spending.

52. In 2016, Volkswagen paid a major settlement after it was revealed to have installed devices in its cars sold in the U.S. that “cheated” on emissions tests (e.g., Atiyeh 2019).

These expenditures seemed wasteful to Jeremy and other low-income respondents because they imagined their own communities as the alternative recipients of those dollars. Closer-to-home needs were both highly visible and felt far more urgent to low-income respondents than expenditures on things that seemed very distant from their lives.

Critique of government redistribution: they don't understand and "they don't care"

At the same time, Jeremy and other low-income respondents were also critical of government expenditures that were taking place in their communities. Many (as we have and will see in this chapter) were frustrated by programs targeted to the poor that seemed to them to ignore the circumstances of actual people. I heard from Jeremy, as from others, a sense that government bureaucracy reduced people to data points, numbers on paper, leaving them feeling simultaneously invisible and subjugated.

Jeremy explained his perspective using the example of his struggle searching for gainful employment and his experience with the state-supported job-searching service. In general, as he looked for work, Jeremy felt that his skill and experience were ignored or invisible to prospective employers, who preferred someone who said "the right things on paper" or was more "book smart." As we learned elsewhere, being a hard worker was a core part of Jeremy's identity, and the fact that his hard work was not translating into financial stability anchored his belief that the American economic system was unjust.

You can stay stuck in a certain financial bracket for a long time. You can try to do all you can, but [if] nobody gives you an opportunity, then you'll stay stuck. It's like, for me an example is I got qualifications but just getting the interview is the hardest part of it all. ... A guy might not know as much as me, but be more book smart than me, and don't actually have the physical training as me, but he'll get—Like I've been passed over for a foreman job like three or four times.

Jeremy felt that he was not being seen as a whole person, a common sentiment that I heard from low-income respondents. "I might be qualified for the job. Get to know

somebody personally before you judge them. You're just seeing me for a piece of paper.”

It was particularly discouraging to Jeremy, then, when he sought help through one of the state-funded job seeker programs and found himself similarly struggling because “they only want numbers.” His experience confirmed his suspicion that government didn’t really care about helping people like him improve their lives.

This is what they're doing. Let's go with the education part. They pump so much money, grants, whatever, whatever, and they only want numbers. They don't go for the people that [are] really going to use it. They'll take the numbers first. All right, we got 100 people, and instead of screening them all, because once they get the grant money, the grant money is spent. ... We want numbers. They consider numbers success. No, it's not. How many people [who] graduated actually got a job after you helped them with that?

Frontline bureaucrats only seemed to care about checking off the boxes, Jeremy argued, not working with people to figure out their needs and how best to help them. Like Katie and others, Jeremy felt that people like him, who “asked for help” from the government were not seen as individuals. As a consequence, he said, taxpayer money was being wasted on people who were “not following through” while people like him who “show[ed] up every day” didn’t receive the kind of help he thought he needed. The problem, he and others argued, was that these programs were not set up to look at people’s actual lives.

You can say whatever you want on paper. Meet me on an individual basis. Get a feel for me. Talk to me. ... Let's not throw this money away. You know what I mean? ... Get to know me. I mean, me and you are having a conversation right now and you're getting to know me a little better. How long would that take?

This plea, to be seen as an individual, a whole person, came up over and over again among low-income respondents and was the primary critique of existing forms of government-based redistribution. To be clear, none of these respondents thought that government should stop or reduce investments in these programs—and, in fact, many

thought they should increase. But most felt that current investments were being mis-spent—simultaneously fostering dependence among those who didn't need help and neglecting the needs of those who did. Jeremy's discussion of welfare supports is a good example of this. He argued that government "should" help people meet their basic needs who otherwise could not, but that the government's lack of attention or concern for understanding or helping people meant that these kinds of supports ended up "enabling" dependency and "keeping us down."

With the welfare and all that stuff. There's people that really need it, don't get me wrong, they need it. They struggle and they can't get by, they really need it. But what about the person that's been up there 20 years? But they [the government] don't care, they just sign off, sign off. They're not helping, they're not training. They're not like, you know what? What would you like to do besides sit home and just collect money? Why ain't they meeting with somebody every month like listen, how many job applications you put in?

Jeremy references a popular stereotype: the public assistance beneficiary who does nothing but "sit home and just collect money," but in doing so, he critiques the government as much as the mythologized system-rider. Like his complaint about the job-search program that was only concerned with the "numbers" and not with helping people, Jeremy blames the government's lack of concern for people's well-being for "enabling" behavior that he sees as unproductive. He makes this critique of government more explicit when I ask him why he thinks the system works the way he describes.

Because it's the system. They need to keep people here [gestures low], so they can be here [gestures high]. If you don't inspire to be nothing, then you'll be right here, and everybody else, we can keep pushing our agendas forward. The poor stay poor as long as you keep keeping me on Welfare because I ain't gotta worry about nothing. Tax dollars are paying for it. Not saying that I don't need it, but tax dollars are paying for it, but I ain't got no motivation no more, I'm just gonna stay home. Meanwhile someone over there, guess what? This job is here, this opportunity is here, we're gonna help you get along and then, they're bringing your family through the system. They're up here, they're gonna stay up here. But guess what? I'm gonna keep these people on Welfare to keep them down here. So, it's another form of, you know, just keeping us down. You know what I mean?

Just keep 'em down. Oh, we'll give them some Welfare. That's okay. Quiet them up a little bit.

When Jeremy looks at the social welfare system, he sees a system rigged by those with power to “keep pushing [their] agendas forward” by holding others down. He argues that social welfare systems serve this oppressive purpose by sapping the motivation of the poor, keeping them “quiet” and complacent so they “don’t inspire to be nothing.”

Meanwhile, these same systems help those with power “stay up” in those positions.

Several other low-income respondents across race and gender said similar things.

Although this deeply-cynical view—that social welfare programs *intentionally* “keep [people] down” or “quiet them up”—was not that of the majority of low-income respondents, the sentiment of distrust and suspicion of government motives in programs ostensibly designed to help the poor was widespread.

Feeling unheard and unseen: “We should have a say so in what they're doing, but we don’t”

Compounding the sentiment I heard from low-income respondents like Jeremy—that government is not concerned about their lives or their struggles—was a widespread perception that people like themselves had little power to change things in government.

These people are in charge of us, they’re the ones making all the big money decisions. They’re spending our money. We should have a say so in what they’re doing, but we don’t, even though they tell us it’s a democracy.

Jeremy saw the government not only as corrupted by money and power, but also as a corrupting force. Even someone well-intentioned, he argued, who had “walked” a “hard road ... to get” to their position in politics would eventually become “content” as their pay increased and would start ignoring the voices of the poor.

They give you all the promises in the world until they get into office. ... Once they get into office, they become content. ... Then you forget. You're in this office to help the people. [Instead,] you're just up there making bogus promises.

To Jeremy and other low-income respondents, the publicly-visible ease in the lives of politicians—when contrasted with these respondents' own everyday struggles—confirmed that rather than working “for the American people” they were protecting their own interests.

The government is what it is. We elect them, allegedly, right? We elect them and that's their job, so why don't, when the budgets in crisis, why don't their pay decrease? Their pay don't decrease. “Oh, we gotta do something, but we're gonna cut this program, that program, this program.” No, cut your pay because you did a terrible job spending our money, you know? They don't do that. If they're making, say, whatever, say they're making, \$200,000 a year. They still get their 200,000 while our budget keeps going in the hole. You didn't do nothing to deserve that.

Jeremy looks around and sees no evidence of politicians being responsive to the needs of people like him—quite the opposite, in fact. Thus, he saw no point in trying to change the system—and no mechanism through which he had any hope of doing so. People like him, Jeremy said, “Don't have no control over it and we can't do nothing about it.”

We're not heard. I see people protesting. They can protest until they turn pink, blue, purple, fall down in the street, they're not heard. [People] say “Oh, why you don't protest?” For what?

Jeremy felt totally subjugated by a system that he was powerless to change. He saw a completely non-porous boundary between himself and the government. While he had to keep “jumping through hoops,” to try to find gainful employment he said, those with coveted government jobs “keep passing [them] down” to their own kids even though “I might be more qualified.” “I don't mind jumping through hoops,” he said, but “we're all supposed to be treated equal and it's not happening.”

Kelly (LIBW)

Background

Kelly's support for redistribution came in the form of her feelings that the rich had more money than they needed (and therefore, that they could afford to give much of it away) and that people who were poor (like her) needed help in order to get out of poverty. At the same time, her experiences of scarcity and her strong belief in individualism made her reluctant to take from the rich. This reluctance was magnified by her distrust of government. She saw the government not just as inefficient and wasteful, but also as part of a system of social control that worked to oppress people who are poor and/or Black. Kelly struggled to reconcile these competing sentiments even as she struggled to make it through each month with insufficient resources.

We met and heard from Kelly in Chapter 3. She was 38 years old and a single mother of three (two school-aged and one in her early twenties), working for Yale as part of a community outreach partnership, and also taking classes toward her bachelor's degree on the side. Her income was \$36,000 a year ("I don't think *they* think that's poverty but it's poverty, yeah") and she was in a constant state of financial struggle. Her pay had recently been cut, costing her \$220 a month and "throwing a monkey wrench into my whole life." As she explained this recent pay cut "due to some policy changes" she said, "even just talking to you right now I just feel like crying."

Mixed feelings about rich and poor, government and redistribution: "I couldn't figure out what stance to jump to"

Kelly had sympathy and antipathy for both the rich and the poor and this gave her very muddled feelings about redistribution. Like many low-income respondents, she

believed strongly in personal responsibility. There was a palpable tension, throughout our interview, between her belief in this dominant American narrative (manifested in her blaming herself and her economic peers for their own hardships) and her beliefs in systemic inequalities based in her lived experience (manifested as arguments that government and corporations deliberately harmed the poor).

Like other low-income respondents, Kelly's sympathy for the poor came from her own experience of poverty and economic hardship. When we spoke, Kelly was scrambling to deal with the recent cut to her pay. Between food, utilities, transportation, and childcare, she was not able to make ends meet. For example, we did our second interview at the house of one of her friends because, she explained, "I can't afford to turn my gas on." Kelly's situation challenged her belief in meritocracy. Recall her despairing comments from earlier:

You can work so hard and not have nothing. Did I lie to [my son] today? Yes, I did. I told him if he was a good boy, if he does the right thing, his outcome is nice. But I was no criminal. I went to school. I graduated high school. I went to work. I went to college. I didn't mooch off the system.

Kelly wanted to believe that she and others could work their way out of their economic hardships, but she also felt that her own hard work had not resulted in financial security and she wasn't sure that it ever would. She didn't know where to place the blame for her situation and she vacillated between self-critique ("absolutely it is my fault because I know better") and blaming the government for its failure to improve the lives of the poor.

Like many low-income respondents, Kelly believed government assistance was necessary to help some people (including herself) meet their basic needs and improve their circumstances. And she wanted to see the rich and corporations give more money away, do more for their lowest paid workers, and stop practices that "take advantage" of

people. However, she was quite ambivalent about both of these sentiments—regularly expressing strong viewpoints on both sides.

For example, she railed against private tax preparation companies that “take advantage” of the “desperate” poor and argued for increased government regulation of such businesses “to hold them accountable to what they’re doing.”⁵³ At the same time, she expressed sympathy for the rich, defending CEOs who make “billions of dollars” as “deserving” and empathizing with a desire to pay less in taxes. Then again, Kelly argued that “even the poorest is contributing” to the CEO’s wealth and that, therefore, rich executives should “give that money away right now.” Like Darrell and others, Kelly felt that the rich should be making voluntary contributions to improve the lives of the poor, but she was reluctant to mandate those contributions through taxation.

Kelly also expressed mixed feelings about government-run programs to help the poor (echoing the sentiments of many low-income respondents)—feelings that gave her additional pause about taxing the rich. On the one hand, she felt that government supports were “so needed” to help some people meet their basic needs. At the same time, she felt that the structure and inflexibility of these programs failed to lift people out of poverty—and worse, seemed to her to be designed to keep poor people poor.

The rich have enough to share: “They’re living a beeeea—uuu—tiful life”

Unlike other low-income respondents, Kelly didn’t express resentment toward the rich—for example, not generally blaming the rich for the hardships of the poor—but she

53. Kelly’s complaint about private tax preparation companies taking advantage of poor filers is backed up by research showing “a pattern of exploitation” by national tax preparation chains that target low-income communities and charge excessive fees for EITC filing (Weinstein and Patten 2016; White 2016).

did see the rich and corporations as having a capacity and a responsibility to help the poor that she felt was insufficiently mobilized.

Kelly was unusual among my respondents in expressing no qualms with executive pay and generally feeling that those incomes were the result of some sort of merit. Recall her comments from an earlier chapter:

If I went to school ... and work my way up to become a CEO or COO, or if I just came from a well-to-do family and I worked my way up to be—because I don't think they just give out that position—damn it, why I can't get paid?

Getting into such a position requires effort, Kelly implies (“I don’t think they just give out that position”), and therefore, she felt, the rewards are earned. Also, she seemed to express, like Darrell, empathy through her experiences of scarcity. Her recent loss of income outside of her control might have underscored her empathetic “damn it, why I can’t get paid?”

At the same time, she also believed that “hard work and education” were necessary, but not sufficient conditions for someone to become “super rich.” “Hard work will get you into a different economic status,” but to become “wealthy is sheer luck.” Like other respondents, Kelly made comments about the particular privilege and power of the rich to hold onto their resources, but she was less animated about this than others—even disinterested.

Isn’t there— I don’t follow that, but there's certain types of situations set up for them to keep their money. I heard they pay less taxes. I heard they get all these cutbacks because they're rich.

Kelly’s distancing language here is distinct from other respondents who were often angry at the rich for what those respondents perceived as an abuse of power used to rig the system in their own favor (and from what other researchers suggest is a widespread American resentment toward the rich - e.g., Piston 2018).

Even though she didn't see the rich as having made their gains through nefarious means (as did many of her peers)—Kelly nevertheless imagined the lives of the rich as luxurious enough to have plenty to share with those who had much less, and she criticized them for failing to give away more of their holdings during their lifetimes (as opposed to after their deaths). For example, she talked about “Mark Zuckerman [sic], Facebook founder and CEO” and his wife pledging to donate most of their Facebook shares after their deaths.

Think about it, right? ... They're living a beeeea--uuu---tiful life. ... they're going to live wonderfully together and they're not going to use that money when they die. So, the gesture is great, right? The gesture is beautiful. But who's to use that money? And if you are a billionaire, so if you just leave 1% of that to your kids, they're still well off. Like Bill Gates [saying], “I'm only leaving 7% to my kids”. Okay, yeah, \$56 Billion. So, it don't even make sense ... it sound good in theory, but it don't even make sense. Give some of that— give that money away right now. Because you know how much it costs you to live, so give the majority of that away right now.

Like other respondents (both high and low income), Kelly argues that the rich have more than they need and, therefore, have enough to live well, pass something onto their kids, and still give away “the majority” of their wealth. She also suggested that the companies headed by such executives (“paying the CEO billions of dollars”) could afford to “put money aside” and furthermore “should have programs ... to help those employees” who are economically struggling. “If,” she added “you’re not going to pay them more, if there’s no union and stuff like that.” She thus suggested that the economic hardship faced by the workers in such companies is not simply a problem the companies should feel an obligation to ameliorate, but might have been caused by company policy (i.e., low wages) in the first place. Although she briefly worried about the impacts of her suggested changes (“I hate to hurt the infrastructure of their business”) she decided, “they are not hurting. ... What is hurting is the people are getting poorer.”

Resistance to government and taxation: “I don’t know if I [would] want to pay all those taxes.”

I followed up on Kelly’s comment to ask what this meant for her feelings about taxing the rich, expecting that the feelings she expressed here might translate into some demand for redistributive taxation. Instead, her doubts about both the intentions and efficacy of government spending to support the poor seemed to immediately eclipse her demands against the holdings of the rich. This kind of empathetic response to the rich in the face of taxation was one I heard from several low-income respondents.

I don't know. I still don't know. Because if I had a million dollars, damn it ... I don't know if I want to pay all those taxes. I'll be finding loopholes like a mo'er, right? But then, I do want to help. I do feel that—a very real obligation to help. But then who do I help? Do I help the people who just - who apply for social security early? Oh, like there's one girl I know...

Kelly then described an encounter she had with an acquaintance who she saw walking around downtown one day.

She was like... ‘I’m on disability ‘cause I hurt my foot.’ But damn it ... I see her walk from Dunkin Donuts every day—she’s just fine. But she got disability [benefits]. She's less than 50 years old. And I'm just like - girl get a job as a secretary, if your foot's hurting! Like, I don't even understand it, so no, I don't want to pay extra taxes to help someone like her ... But, if I found someone like me, I would want to help, you know. So, I don't know.”

Like some other low-income respondents, Kelly pairs her defense of the rich with a critique of the poor, both underscored by a lack of faith in government. Kelly’s hesitation about tax expenditures to help the poor sounds a lot like what I heard from other respondents—that these programs allocated money and benefits inefficiently, helping people who don’t really need it while neglecting the needs of those who do. And like other respondents who expressed this criticism, Kelly, too, seemed to argue that this inefficiency was rooted, in part, in the failure of government to understand the lives of

the poor. She explained using the example of a talk she had recently attended as part of her job—about financial management among the poor.

I'm that person that those numbers are supposed to represent. And they're off. ... When they compile all this data, they don't come where we come from, so when they're there looking at the data ... they also have to figure out why it's such ... because they have no contact [context?].⁵⁴ Sitting in someone's family room for two hours really doesn't put you in touch with what's going on. So, I think they get assumptions from the data, but the data is wrong in the first place.

Kelly thinks that the government could help people more effectively if they better understood people's lives, looked at what's "really going on." "The government needs to step up and ... really come out into the community." Like many low-income respondents, Kelly argued that a more intimate understanding of the lives of the poor would mean government programs could more efficiently serve those people who really needed help.

Government does not help people out of poverty: "It just further sinks them down"

Kelly argued that the structure of government anti-poverty programs, rather than helping people out of poverty, served to keep people in a position of interminable dependence on government support. In her own life, she felt that government assistance programs' unreasonable and inflexible rules seemed designed to trap her in poverty rather than to provide a path out. For example, she was frustrated that the state childcare assistance program (which helped her pay for childcare while she was at work) wouldn't help her pay for childcare while she attended her college classes in pursuit of a bachelor's degree. She explained her situation by recounting what she wrote in a letter to the administrator of the childcare program:

In a couple of years, I will no longer even qualify for your program if you do this [subsidize childcare while she's in class]. But if I stay right here, I'm stagnant and I'll be using your program for the next so many years.

54. It was hard to discern, even listening back multiple times, what she said here.

If the government really wanted her to become financially independent, Kelly argued, it would support her pursuit of a bachelor's degree so she could increase her earnings and would no longer need assistance to pay for childcare. But, she explained, she was told "no ... they can't bend that rule." This refusal was particularly frustrating to Kelly because, she said, the state *would* have paid for childcare if she were in a certificate program for something like CNA training, which she thought of as a generally dead-end job where "you're never going to see any raises."

Giving them a CNA class or truck driving class was not an out. It was not opening up, it just further sinks them down. So, the government needs to step up and really get some programs together.

Thus, Kelly saw government expenditures to support the poor as inappropriately allocated—spent on programs that don't actually help get people out of poverty while unavailable for programs and activities that she thought would help people improve their circumstances.

In addition to failing to provide a means of exit from poverty, Kelly was also frustrated that government anti-poverty programs seemed disconnected from the humanity of the people that the programs were supposed to be helping. It was as if they had been designed to "strip your dignity" rather than to enable economic mobility. As an example, Kelly recounted talking to a representative of a state assistance program as she tried to figure out how to absorb the recent cut to her hours and pay.

This lady at the state told me to get a roommate. Well, how am I going to get a roommate with two children, right? Because then they can bring anybody they want into the house and, next thing I know, somebody trying to sleep with my son or daughter. You'd be thinking, when something's on the news, they'd be saying, what kind of mother did they have? They wouldn't be figuring, what was the mother's income, what was the household composition? Why'd she have to make this choice, right? Things like that. And that's stressful.

It was “stressful” to Kelly that the person who was supposed to be helping her was suggesting an option that Kelly felt was unreasonable—and furthermore, that Kelly thought she would be blamed for (“what kind of mother did they have” who would make such a choice?). This latter fear was justifiable, given widely promulgated stereotypes of Black motherhood. Worse, she said, taking the route the social service worker proposed had the potential to be condemned and subject to still further surveillance by the state.

By any means necessary, you have to feed your kids, right? So, you have to move somebody else—that man or that woman—into your house. And you can't tell the state what you're doing because, oh does he work part time? Then you don't get any food stamps. You have to sublet your room and if they find out you're doing it, their income is [counted as] a part of yours.

People trying to get help from the government were stuck between desperate circumstances and inflexible rules, Kelly suggested. Her experiences led her to feel that government benefits did more to keep the poor impoverished than to help them make their way toward financial stability. Other low-income respondents who encountered the state through means-tested assistance such as SSI (supplemental security income) made similar arguments—for example, saying that the structure of the aid they received (including the way the benefits were reduced based on income and savings) made it nearly impossible to save and also made it hard to transition into work (because the penalty to their assistance would cancel out any gains from minimum-wage level employment).

Designed to keep people down: “They knew what they were doing”

Kelly blamed government for not only failing to help people out of poverty, but for creating some of the problems of poverty in the first place. This was a double-strike against government in her mind: evidence of government failing to help people move out

of the circumstances that she felt it was partly responsible for putting them in in the first place. “They have a big responsibility” for the problems of poverty, she said.

They’ve been giving out state dollars for generations, for years. They don’t put a cap on how long you can live inside public housing, so they created some of this mess. So, they really need to clean it up.

From Kelly’s perspective—as from the perspective of some other Black respondents—this was not simply benign neglect, but rather an intentional effort to marginalize and suppress.

They set up projects for us. ... They set up the welfare system and so forth. And ... I want to say, they knew what they were doing. If you set up to just give people money monthly ... for 10 years, then they have their daughter and they do it. Then they have *their* daughter ... but you didn’t give them any way to come out of that. So you seen a person had a need. You gave them money. Of course they’re going to be okay with that.

If someone give you lunch money every single day, [are you] going to say ‘oh, bing! let me just make my own lunch?’ No. ... you’re going to start filling up that time with other stuff and it’s not making your own lunch. So that’s what they did. They gave you money and they give you food stamps every month. “Oh, I don’t need to go hard and try to be self-sufficient because this person is promising me to do it every month! ... I’m not even going to try—let me just stay right here so I won’t fail.” Yeah, that’s their [the government’s] fault.

Despite her earlier comment about taxation that appeared to blame her impoverished peers for mis-using the system (“I don’t want to pay extra taxes to help someone like her”), here, Kelly pushes back against the stereotype of the lazy poor person who wastes taxpayer money. Instead of blaming the recipients of these programs, Kelly squarely blames the government for setting up a system that “didn’t give [people] any way to come out of” poverty and instead fostered dependence on the state. Kelly suggests that most people stuck in similar circumstances might make the same choices—to “stay right here” taking “money and ... food stamps every month” rather than risk “fail[ure].” Government traps people in these circumstances, Kelly suggests, not because of

carelessness or oversight, but through deliberate action. “They knew what they were doing.”

Many low-income respondents shared some version of the view that government programs were more effective at keeping people impoverished than at lifting them out of poverty, but Kelly’s argument—that government run social welfare programs were part of a deliberate effort to trap people in poverty (especially people of color)—seemed more common among Black respondents (including some who were high-income).

Government help is needed: “They left people essentially starving”

Despite her criticism, Kelly was not interested in doing away with government-funded social welfare supports (“God knows, it’s so needed”). In fact, her grievances against government-run social welfare programs included a sharp criticism of the way some supports were eliminated or reduced as a result of the Clinton-era welfare reforms.⁵⁵

They didn't put anything in place. And then literally - you know how a waiter just pulls the cloth on the table and everything remains the same? It seem like they thought that they was going to do that—pull the money up and people were just going to figure out to manage some way. But it's not the case.

All that was offered, Kelly said, were options like CNA training that “diminish your body and soul” without paying the bills. She argued that the government should have focused on things like housing “the people who need housing” and getting childcare “if you choose to go to school.” Of course, she said, in the latter case, “they would have to validate if they’re getting the grades,” but even people who were “not cutting the grade”

55. 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act.

would get “a warning” and “a chance” before the program would “reduce your benefits.”

Instead, Kelly said,

They just ... took [the benefits] away. They didn't do it right. ... They left people essentially starving. Yeah, of course you're starving if you don't have what you need, right?

Just as she condemned the government for fostering dependence by “just giv[ing] people money” without providing “any way to come out” of their circumstances, Kelly is equally critical of the way she saw the 1996 welfare reform as simply taking those same supports away rather than putting in place programs that would help people improve their lives.

She continued to emphasize her belief in individual agency and meritocracy, noting that she “would want to monitor these people” who were receiving government benefits—to make sure people were not simply taking advantage of the system. At the same time, she noted, “the system doesn't give you so much to be milking, I guess. ... You know, it's like beating a dead horse.”

Kelly's blame of the government for exacerbating, if not creating, what she considers to be a problem of dependence and generational poverty simultaneously bolsters her support for government action (“they created some of this mess. So, they really need to clean it up.”) and undermines her faith in the efficacy of such action (“they didn't do it right”; “they knew what they were doing”). These mixed sentiments were common among my respondents.

Conclusion

Low-income respondents supported redistribution, but distrusted the systems designed to carry it out. They felt their own efforts and struggles to be unfairly dismissed by society and by the government programs that simultaneously treated them as

underserving and failed to help them. As mechanisms for redistribution, these programs were seen as deeply flawed—inefficient and ineffective or worse, part of a government design to keep poor people down.

The common grievances between White and Black low-income respondents were notable, as were the ways some White respondents interpreted these common grievances as being to the benefit of people of color and at the expense of Whites.

Gendered experiences framed respondents' perspectives on the government. Women more likely to use examples from their attempts to access social safety net programs and men somewhat more likely to focus on wages and employment. But they shared numerous critiques based on these different experiences.

Across race and gender, low-income respondents were counterintuitively empathetic with the desires of the rich to avoid downward redistribution. Low-income respondents often felt a lack of control—over their employment, their pay, their taxes, their schedules, their purchasing decisions—and their frustration with this lack of autonomy translated into a strong loss-aversion that seemed to give them empathy for anyone who didn't want to be forced to give up some of what they had.

At the same time, these respondents felt resentful of the rich and wanted to see them (voluntarily) pay more—or at least their “fair share”—but these respondents had little hope that increased taxes on the rich would actually improve their own lives. Their interactions with state assistance programs led them to feel that the government did not care about them, or worse, wanted to curtail their economic mobility. This perception was only reinforced by the predominance of the wealthy among lawmakers (Carnes 2013), leading many low-income respondents to feel that the money that otherwise would be

used to help people like them is either pocketed by corrupt politicians or re-directed to serve the interests of governmental elites.

These respondents were painfully aware that their voices carry less weight in the American political system (which is backed up by data, e.g., Bartels 2016; Gilens 2012; Page and Gilens 2017) and generally felt that the concerns of people like them were far from the minds of those who controlled government resources. What was most visible to them—punitive and degrading public assistance programs, blight and neglect in their neighborhoods, their children’s struggling schools, slower responses from emergency and other public services, unequal treatment in the legal system—made them feel that government statements of concern for the poor were lies made by self-serving politicians who were under the sway of the rich and powerful.

This distrust of government made any policy solution feel implausible if not impossible. Rather than failing to understand their own position (e.g., the poor have been accused of protecting the rich under the false impression that they, too, might be rich someday), it was their awareness of the durability of their own position that seemed to lead to a kind of disempowered cynicism.

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CHAPTER 5

SYMPATHY AND ITS LIMITS: RECONCILING MORAL WORTH AND MORAL OBLIGATION (HIGH INCOME POLICY VIEWS)

Like Hochschild, I find that higher income respondents' sentiments about economic inequality allow them to simultaneously benefit from privilege and condemn it. Hochschild argued that her respondents struggled to reconcile competing norms and beliefs and found that none of the available policy options or socially available narratives could harmonize their discordant sentiments. Thus, overwhelmingly, they acquiesced to the status quo – dissatisfied with the current state of affairs but seeing no satisfying alternative. Acquiescence allowed them to express moral outrage over the state of economic inequality, but ultimately to throw up their hands and feel there was nothing to be done, leaving their own economically privileged positions intact (Hochschild 1981).

In my interviews, high income respondents came to a position similar to Hochschild's high-income interviewees, but they arrived there through a somewhat different path. The availability of a socially-identified villain that arrived on the scene in the intervening decades since Hochschild's study—the One Percent—allowed the high-income people I interviewed to largely factor themselves out of the equation of culpability for the current state of economic inequality. Compared to the One Percent, most respondents either did not feel implicated in the creation or upholding of inequitable economic systems or they felt they had little power to change those systems. The combination of feeling sympathy for the poor, resentment for the (richer than them) rich, and a willingness to sacrifice as part of the solution allowed high-income respondents to

feel morally righteous without actually addressing their own role in upholding inequality or creating a sense of moral obligation to act.

A note about the respondents in this chapter

High income respondents had a range of incomes and expressed a range of sentiments. I've captured here some of the views of some of these respondents. This is not a representative sample—these four respondents were among those with incomes in the upper half of the distribution among the high-income people I interviewed. I deliberately focus on this upper end of the spectrum in part to maximize the contrast between this group and the low-income group, and also because the opinions of this group often remain under-examined. I've also selected these respondents for their demographic diversity—there are two women and two men, two Black and two White respondents.

Uneasy reconciliation: personal privilege and concern about economic inequality

The respondents whose views I capture in this chapter generally acknowledged the relative social and economic advantages of their positions compared to those of the poor. They were sympathetic to the poor and upset by economic inequality. They all acknowledged, directly or indirectly, that American economic and social systems boosted their own interests over those of people with fewer resources—and some articulated an understanding that such a boost came at the expense of the interests of the poor. Unlike some of the respondents in the lower half of the high-income group, all of these respondents thought of their incomes as sufficient, even abundant. They all supported redistribution, including an increase in their own taxes.

Although they all seemed comfortable talking about their own advantages—or the relative ease of their lives—compared to the poor, these respondents all struggled to reconcile their understandings of their own economic position with their understandings of economic inequality. They all saw themselves as beneficiaries of a system stacked against the poor and in favor of the rich, but they didn't see themselves as having agency within that system. They all expressed a willingness to pay more in taxes as a way of investing in equalizing opportunities for the poor. But, often, they didn't see the mechanisms of the “submerged state” that reduced their tax burdens at the expense of programs that might create those kinds of opportunities. They were more comfortable talking about themselves as part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

Where they did attend to government spending, these respondents were often frustrated that such spending did not seem to be improving the lives of the poor. Or they felt that the government was mired in disagreement that made change feel unattainable. They did not feel completely disregarded by the political process, as did lower-income respondents, but neither did they feel agentic. When I asked them to think about these issues, they obliged, but soon returned to their busy lives where, among other things, they worked to pass on their own class status to their children.

“If you just continue to tax me and [the CEO] ... you could maybe stop taxing them” – Deborah (HIWW)

Deborah worked as a surgeon at the Yale New Haven Hospital. She was in her late 40s when we spoke, married with two teenaged children and living in a single-family

home in one of New Haven's higher-income neighborhoods. Her annual household income was over \$400,000.⁵⁶

Deborah used the social and economic hierarchy at the hospital as a way of understanding and critiquing American economic inequality. She expressed sympathy for patients (who were sometimes also co-workers) whose incomes she saw as “too low” to allow them to take care of their health. She railed against what she saw as the excessive income of the hospital CEO. And she struggled to understand her own moral position between those two groups. She considered her own salary to be “inflated,” but also noted that “we have trouble living on it.”

Support for redistribution: Contrasting bottom and top; uncertainty about middle

Deborah felt that the excesses of some were linked to the insufficiencies of others and this fueled her support for some form of redistribution. To her, the injustice of economic inequality was not poverty or wealth itself, but the contrast and coexistence of the two. She, like many high-income respondents, saw herself in the middle of this situation—recognizing that she had more than others, and willing to sacrifice some of what she had, but frustrated that those who had much more abundant resources weren't doing more. She would have liked to see executives give up some of their salaries—which she implied were excessive—so that the people at the bottom had enough to meet their basic needs. Instead, she saw the rich gaining or at least maintaining their positions at the expense of the poor. For example, she talked about the insufficiency of the minimum wage and the differential impacts such a wage had for workers vs. owners.

56. This is an estimate based on contextual details Deborah provided during our interview. Unlike with other respondents, I did not get Deborah's self-reported salary in our first interview and I was unsuccessful at trying to schedule a second interview with her. This estimate aligns with data on average surgeon salaries listed on various websites like ziprecruiter.com and salary.com.

I think minimum wage for a long time has been way too low. It's not a livable amount and it really does— it allows the owner of the business to therefore profit disproportionately to the worker— To even survive, [it] is not enough to live on.

Like most respondents, Deborah was not against profit, nor did she support the equalization of incomes. But she thought it was “not fair at all” that owners could make “disproportionate” profit while failing to pay their workers “enough to live on.”

In her own workplace, she said, hospital executives were “always” threatening cuts—things that would make workers’ lives harder—while seeming to be unwilling to give up anything themselves. They were “always saying, ‘Oh, we're going to cut back. There's going to be less this and thats. There's going to be lack of pay.’” Deborah argued, if the CEO “just gave part of her salary back ... they wouldn't have to do it like that.” Instead, she explained,

They ask people from all over the community to actually donate money, to give back out of their paycheck. ... Myself and everybody else ... I find that amazing. ... It's like really? I want to know why [the CEO has] not given like \$500,000.

Like other high-income respondents, Deborah sees herself literally and figuratively in the middle of a situation whose primary players are above and below her. She is frustrated to be asked to “give back”—although she is willing to do so—because she locates the source of the problem in the people above her on the economic ladder. It is *their* disproportionate share, she suggests, that leaves too little for the people at the bottom. But, despite being upset at this situation, she sees no clear path for someone like her to make change.

No one really wants to hear that [the CEO] should give back 10% of her pay and let it trickle down to the lower-level employees. ... That's radical [exaggerated tone]. ... No, I don't think the corporate structure would want to hear that.

Deborah does not consider herself to be “radical” and, in fact, described herself as “a pretty apolitical person.” Although she is clearly upset by the inequities she describes,

she does not see herself as having the influence or knowledge to make change other than in the realm of her own personal life. When we started our interview, she commented that she “thought it was a little weird to interview me” because,

I'm a pretty apolitical person. I don't actually listen to the news very much because I find it depressing, so I don't really give it a lot of thought. I just kind of get up and do my job and come home and try to be with my kids. ... I mean I know it exists and it's pretty sad and I see it every day in my work and I know how it has a trickle-down effect for everybody in terms of their health—if they can't buy good food, they are going to be unhealthy and so forth and so on.

Deborah's observations about economic inequality at her workplace suggest that her claim to not “give it a lot of thought” might be an attempt to reconcile her observations about inequities that she finds upsetting with her uncertainty about her own role in those inequities and her power to change the structures and systems that hold them in place.

Part of the solution: Personally willing but not personally implicated

Deborah struggled to navigate her competing feelings about her own potential role in mitigating the impacts of economic inequality. She, like most high-income respondents, talked about her willingness to contribute to initiatives (governmental or otherwise) that might increase opportunities and improve the lives and prospects of the poor. At the same time, she was rare among high-income respondents in the way she raised questions about her own hesitation—and that of economically similar others—in the face of concrete opportunities to contribute to the kinds of change she supported.

Deborah was surprisingly willing to turn her lens on herself as we talked about the prospect of reducing economic inequality. For example, when I asked her if she thought the government had a responsibility for changing the way pay is distributed (after our discussion of her patient whose pay she described as “too low”), she said:

It's hard to imagine that the government would be able to legislate down to that level. But they could do things like see that minimum wage starts higher and they could say that someone who makes x amount of money pays no taxes. And someone who makes a lot of money pays an enormous amount of tax.

It wasn't clear where she fit into this tax scheme, but then she went on,

And if we look at the recent tax bracket ... the taxes cap out. So, for example, if you're going to pay Medicare tax, it stops at like a hundred, 150 thousand dollars. And then you don't have to pay any more Medicare tax after that. So, someone like myself can stop paying Medicare tax, like over the summer, starting in January. And then for six months out of the year I'm not paying any Medicare tax. Whereas someone who never makes it to \$100,000 is paying that tax all year. Where, if you just continue to tax me and [the CEO] all the time, you could maybe stop taxing them.⁵⁷

Unlike the ways she separated herself from her CEO elsewhere in our conversation, here, Deborah put herself in the same category (“if you just continue to tax me and [the CEO]...”), suggesting that she and the CEO were both benefitting at the expense of lower-income Americans. She argues that lifting the cap on this payroll tax is one example of how the government could begin to tackle economic inequality.

With this suggestion, she demonstrated her awareness of her own advantaged position and also implied that she was willing to be taxed more in the interest of contributing to a more equitable future. But she stopped short of advocating for this change directly. When I asked her if she would be comfortable with such a change in tax policy, she said “I think there's no way to prevent inequity unless you have something like that.” In other words, it seemed, she was wrestling with competing discomforts—the discomfort of knowing she was participating in and contributing to an inequitable system and the discomfort of making a personal sacrifice.

57. Of the two payroll taxes (Medicare and Social Security), it is the Social Security tax that has a cap, the “maximum taxable earnings,” beyond which earnings are not subject to Social Security tax. Nevertheless, the principle of Deborah’s argument still applies. For reference, the maximum taxable earnings cap was \$118,500 when I interviewed Deborah in late 2015. In 2020, it was \$137,700.

The place where Deborah most directly confronted this tension was when she thought about philanthropy. She brought this up after I asked her why, if she thought “we could make it better,” we didn’t do so. “Probably,” she said, “some sort of—you know, some greed.” To explain, rather than returning to the example of the CEO, which I anticipated, she instead turned her own record of charitable donations. She had been donating \$1000 each year to a major charity through a program at the hospital (“they take it out of my paycheck before I see my paycheck and so it’s cleanly pre-tax”). Recently, she explained, she had been contacted by a hospital representative about raising her donation to \$1,500 in order to secure a matching gift from the hospital. The representative told her, Deborah recounted,

In our department, of 25 physicians, I’ve been the leader in how much I gave. Nobody else gave as much. The whole entire department of 50 people, together, gave \$7000. So, if I gave \$1000 ... everybody else together gave \$6000. That’s pretty profound.

Against this backdrop, she described her response:

And I said, “oh that sounds interesting.” But I haven’t done it yet, because I’m like wow ... first of all, where does it end? Next year they’ll have it again and again and again and so it’s like... part of me is like, well, I don’t have a 529 that’s flush for my son yet. So, again, that’s greed. I could give more. I may not even feel it. But what’s holding me back from just clicking that box? ... it’s probably greed. When you get right down to it.⁵⁸

Just as she did when she was making sense of her own educational opportunities in Chapter 2, in this example Deborah revealed a range of sentiments that she struggled to reconcile. Even though, earlier, she had been talking about ways the government could create more equity by taxing people like her more heavily, here, she runs through two tax breaks that overwhelmingly benefit high income earners like her (tax deductions for

58. A 529 Plan is a “tax-advantaged savings plan designed to encourage saving for future education costs” (U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission 2018).

philanthropy and tax-advantaged educational savings accounts) without a comment about those tax advantages. She seems torn between positioning herself, individually, as someone who is being generous (“the leader in how much I gave”), and as someone who “could give more” and who “may not even feel it.” She condemns her own “greed” for not increasing her donation but moderates that self-condemnation by invoking her child’s needs (saving for her son’s college education)—the kind of spending that is often considered more morally legitimate than spending on self (Sherman 2017). Focused at the individual level, Deborah feels faced with difficult choices that leave her struggling to understand her own sense of personal implication and personal empowerment to make change.

This individual-level focus, that Deborah shared with many respondents left her feeling neither influential nor hopeful about systemic change. For example, when I asked her what she thought about support programs for people who are low-income, she said there were programs in New Haven that she thought were making a difference in the lives of people who hadn’t had the kinds of opportunities she had, but that they were “too limited” because “we can’t fund them all right now.” She went on to name programs run by non-profits—and typically funded by donations—not government safety net programs:

Like the United Way ... or ... like Squash Haven and New Heights, where they teach a kid a sport and do academic support for homework in an after-school program. So, they are giving them team building skills, homework help, all this other stuff. So, yeah, that's important because then, those kids have different role models and have different opportunities.

Even as Deborah worried about the lack of funding for these programs that she believed in, she didn’t seem to have considered a more collective version of funding. So, I asked her directly if she thought the funding model for such programs ought to be changed,

from gathering funding from individual donors to perhaps being funded through the government. She immediately responded in the affirmative: “Make the government pay for it. Yeah, I think that would be helpful because then otherwise it's too limited. We don't have enough of it.” After saying this, Deborah immediately moved on to present other ideas for change (e.g., offering better salaries and “really good support services” to teachers of “inner city kids”), not dwelling on the complications or possibilities of government funding—or her role in contributing to or bringing about such funding. The possibility that the government could “pay for it,” seems to move her out of the uncomfortable position of questioning her own accountability.

Ultimately, Deborah goes about her life, feeling a tug of moral outrage, but neither feeling personally implicated nor personally empowered to make change. She is discouraged and upset by the situation of her coworkers and patients but doesn't know what she can do about it. She finds the news “depressing” and so doesn't “really give it a lot of thought.” So, she goes about her busy life (“I have so much to do”) and hopes that someone else will do something to change things.

Justifying inaction

Despite her animated discontent as she contrasted the suffering of her colleagues or patients with the extravagance of her CEO—and as she grappled with her own role and obligations within the system of economic inequality she described—Deborah ultimately capitulated to the status quo, accepting the forces that uphold inequality as “human nature.” Thus, as Hochschild argued, Deborah, like other high-income respondents, “justifies personal inaction” on the grounds that the forces upholding “the unfair status quo” are “immutable,” and therefore, that “one would simply be whistling into the wind

to endorse major changes” (Hochschild 2016:246). Holding onto her genuine discontent with the current state of economic inequality and the hardships of the poor, Deborah could see herself as “empathetic with the poor...without feeling responsible to seek greater equality.” She could simultaneously “retain [her] privileged status and ... condemn privilege” (Hochschild 2016:246).

When I asked her why she thought there was the kind of income and race stratification she described at her workplace, Deborah’s response had an air of inevitability. “I think it's all the way society has evolved,” she said. As an example, she compared herself to a hypothetical person “from the projects.” That person might have attended “the same school” as Deborah, but likely “didn't have the same opportunities.” “The guidance counselor probably didn't tell him to do this or that, or maybe his grades weren't any good because he didn't have someone pushing him at home.” His parents, maybe “didn't care or were too tired to worry.”

So, I don't know. What happens is, that guy is going to get a job cleaning the floors in the hospital and I'm going to get a job being a doctor in the hospital.

So then, how do you go from there? You know? And so, it all starts where it started. It started when we formed this country, right? So, we had the slave owners and the ... slaves. So, it's just how it started. That's not any different from Rome or anything else. ... So, part of it is, probably, some level of human nature. There are always haves and have nots, it's just that, as we become a more intelligent society, you'd think we'd be able to sort of sort that out. We could make it better.

Deborah explained the root causes of the inequality she sees around her with a tone of resignation. As with Hochschild’s respondents, she “may sincerely wish things were otherwise,” but she understood the forces at play to be beyond her influence, making her resignation reasonable rather than irresponsible. For example, she explained the gap between her own circumstances and someone like the hospital custodian as the result of a

set of unchangeable forces linked to “human nature.” Even as she referenced the history of American slavery as potential context for current inequality, she did so in passive-voice language (“it’s just how it started”) that obscured the beneficiaries of that system and suggested its inevitability (“there are always haves and have nots”). By arguing that the forces that upheld inequality were outside of anyone’s control—she expressed sympathy for the poor while distancing herself from personal responsibility.

Disengagement

JS: Is it uncomfortable in a place like New Haven to make more money than other people?

Deborah: “Well no, because you’re not living directly next door to these people, right? So, you don’t have to feel their pain.”

Deborah is pretty unique, in our class-segregated society, as a high-income person—and especially as a White person—in the relationships she has with low-income people through her clinical practice. Her window into their lives motivates her sympathy and her willingness to increase her own taxes in order to reduce theirs (and perhaps her recognition of the linkages between the two). But, ultimately, she feels politically ineffective—either to convince the wealthy executives at her own hospital to give up some of their pay or to convince others like her to fund programs that she thinks would make a difference in the lives of her less-fortunate neighbors. So, like some of Hochschild’s high-income respondents, she disengages, calling herself “apolitical” and focusing her attention on the private affairs of her own nuclear family.

The consequences of her disengagement are minimal for Deborah and others in her position. When she is upset about the plight of her patients, she can turn her anger against her millionaire CEO. Although she does not actively advocate for the kind of

taxation she thinks would create more economic equity, she can feel satisfied that she supports the idea. The tension she feels about saving for her son's college education instead of contributing more to charity is somewhat assuaged by her knowledge that she is the top contributor in her department.

Americans with incomes like Deborah's are in a tough position. Although much popular and academic attention has been paid to the top 1% of income earners (e.g., Saez and Zucman 2019), some—like Reeves (2018)—argue that those in the top 20% have also been the “beneficiaries” of growing inequality over the past several decades and need to be held to account. At the same time, researchers like Jacob Hacker (Hacker 2019) have argued that even families with high incomes face increasing income instability and insecurity. These trends complicate the position of high-income respondents like Deborah and brings to light how closer-to-home insecurities might receive more attention than issues of economic inequality that ultimately land in their favor.

“I’m not greedy or ruthless or anything like that” – Gene (HIBM)

We met Gene (HIBM) in an earlier chapter. He was the highest income respondent in my sample with a household income over \$800,000 a year (what he described as “real money”). He described himself as an entrepreneur who “trained as a banker.” He owned a home, where he lived with his wife, two kids, and “three cars.” In his words: “I mean, you know, I’m doing okay.”

Supporting redistribution: sympathy for the poor

Despite his elevated economic position, Gene was sympathetic toward the poor and surprisingly supportive of redistribution. He argued that the country had a moral obligation to make sure that people with the fewest resources can meet their basic needs, even if it meant people like him having “a little less.”

If we have excess as a country, we're morally obligated to take care of— so people just get taken care of. It may not make you feel great, but it's good for all of us. Fundamentally, I believe in the greatest good for the greatest number of people to a degree. ... There should be some cooperation around that. I may have a little less. I'd still get more, but I don't have to have so much more that other people have nothing. That doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me.

Gene makes clear that he—like nearly every person I interviewed—continued to believe in economic differentiation (“I’d still get more”), but that such differentiation needed to have limits. The litmus test for how much differentiation to allow, for Gene, as for other respondents, was how little the people at the bottom had. No one should be left with “nothing.”

For Gene, this sentiment was reinforced by a personal connection to people living in poverty. As I noted in Chapter 3, cross class exposure was more common among high-income Black respondents than similar income White respondents. Recall his comments from that chapter about how having “poor people in my family” shaped his opinion:

I live the impact of what it means to be poor and not want to be poor... it's happening to really good people who come from good families with great values... that just didn't have some of the opportunities that I did. So, because of that, I feel it. I can't hide from it. It's in my face.

Based on this intimate view, Gene argues that poverty is not an individual or moral failure, but a lack of opportunity. He was like many high-income respondents in crediting his inherited circumstances—in combination with his own individual effort or skill—with setting his economic path. Raised by parents who “stayed together... got graduate

degrees...had good jobs...[and] moved to the suburbs,” Gene said, “circumstantially, I was in a place where I could” focus on values such as “do[ing] well in school” and “where people around me were supportive of it. ... everybody else was doing that [too]. That's the difference.”

While Gene’s circumstances rewarded his efforts to work hard, he saw the difficult circumstances of people like those in his extended family leaving them discouraged and hopeless—something also echoed in the sentiments of the low-income respondents captured in the previous chapter. Gene described his relatives as:

People who try to work hard, didn't get ahead, and stopped trying hard. And then they turn to other things. ... So, they're good people kind of turned bad based on circumstance.

Like other respondents, both high- and low-income, Gene argued that inherited circumstances played an outsized role in shaping people’s economic trajectories. Poverty and wealth were more often about “luck” or “circumstance” and only “sometimes it’s hard work.” “Good people” are born into difficult circumstances such that even those who “work hard, didn’t get ahead.” “They try,” he said—pushing back against societal narratives of the lazy poor—“but there's no safety net.” As a consequence, “things happen. You turn to drugs, you know. You turn to crime. You give up.” It’s only the rare exception, “a small minority of people,” Gene said, who can “find a way out.”

According to Gene, common judgements of the poor were based on things that “wealthy people don't understand about poor people.” People who are poor, he said, “ultimately ... care about the same things [as everyone else]. I don’t think their values are any different.” Recall this quote from Chapter 3:

Poor people in some ways are using all of their energy to simply survive, right? So, they don't get a chance to think about how to make that next dollar beyond the

survival. They're literally just trying to eat and be healthy and take care of their family.

Rich people— when you make a billion dollars— It doesn't have to be that much. When you make a lot of money, they have the freedom to think. To slow down and literally think and strategize and schmooze and figure out how to get their kids in a better [situation]... that's what I think wealthy people don't understand about poor people: ... They care about the exact same thing, but they don't have the freedom to think about it. ... or the resources to do anything about it.

Gene's intimate connection to both poverty and wealth gives him a unique perspective.

He can trace the ways material resources shape access to immaterial resources and how both types of resources can constrain or broaden the choices that are available to people.

Notably, even as Gene expresses his sympathy toward the poor here, his language also distances himself from the rich. These descriptions of having time, energy, and resources likely apply to his own life, as well, given that—elsewhere in the interview—he referred to himself as having “real money.” But here, when criticizing the rich for what they “don't understand about poor people,” he referred to the rich using third-person pronouns (“they have the freedom to think”, “their kids”) and starts off with an example income an order of magnitude larger than his own (although he immediately adjusts). This distancing from the rich was a general pattern I saw among high income respondents (discussed in Chapter 2), but Gene's race and his familiarity with the poverty of his own relatives likely also contributed to his perception and portrayal of separation between himself and the rich.

Support for redistribution: government fails the people

How did things come to be this way? Gene argued that government laws and policy established economic inequality at the founding of the country and continue to uphold it. “Our fore founders were very thoughtful about how ... we set this up.” Recall,

from an earlier chapter, his tracing of current economic and racialized inequality back to an initial “land grab” when the powerful put “laws in place” that said, “you could own” what had been acquired by “taking” and “that you could use those goods as a form of wealth.” The rest unfolded from there, according to Gene:

The ownership laws then work in your favor. Even though you *took* [what you now claimed to own], right? Even though nobody owned it. And then, over generations, right, there's laws that say that you can bequeath those assets to people who are beneficiaries of that particular land grab.

Thus, Gene argued, the country was “built on the premise that there are some people that aren't going to be able to participate in the economic system.” “That is a certain agreement that is woven into our constitution.” While past laws and policies established these inequalities, Gene said, current laws and policies reinforce and uphold them.

So, what's causing the widening gap? ... I think it's policy. There's policies that reward the rich and I think that punish the poor. ... There's tax policies that say, you know, look, you pay a very low tax rate if you take risk with your money. If you invest in assets, you know, you get depreciation, which reduces your net income. ... So, you may make a huge wage but, because you invested in a building, or have a mortgage and own property, you save more of your money. If you're poor, you don't have that.

As someone who self-described as being in “the top 2% of American earnings, probably” and someone with a history in banking, Gene is more specific than most respondents in describing the way he sees tax policy currently benefitting the rich. Gene saw such policies as places where “government fails the people” and he argued for a government responsibility to regulate the excesses of the rich and corporations even as he defended capitalism.

I think that capitalism honestly solves particular issues. This idea that you can work as hard as you want, be as thoughtful as you can in order to create new goods and services that benefit more people, capitalism is the engine that makes that happen. I fundamentally believe that. It will solve basic problems, but not to the extent that it is so unregulated that certain people don't get a chance to participate or are so far on the outside that you have India or South Africa. You

have really these human rights horrors taking place right under your nose as you have extremely wealthy people going about their business. ... We cannot let business get so big that it exploits people.

In the face of corporations and the rich “exploiting marginalized citizens,” Gene argued, “the government needs to step up. I think they could do a better job.” Unlike other respondents, Gene placed very little blame at the feet of the rich, who, he argued were “just doing what was allowed.” Instead, he insisted, it was the responsibility of “the government... to come in and take a stance.” Although, he said, “I’m fiscally conservative. I’m more of a capitalist,” nevertheless, “I also believe that capitalism doesn't solve all problems.”

On issues like education, poverty, inequality, the government has to come in and take a stance. I personally am willing to pay a price to make that better. I don't mind paying higher taxes. I feel like it's my responsibility if I ... make a little bit more to make sure that more people who look like me have some opportunity. Even though I understand the argument on the other side very well and actually ascribe to it. Ethically, I believe ... is it fair for me to access a right to healthcare and 18 million or 30 million other human beings *not* have a right to healthcare? I think that's a problem.

Despite his strong capitalist identity, Gene ultimately feels that he has a moral “responsibility” to contribute to creating opportunity and access for people who have much less than he does—and in particular, given his understanding of historical racial inequities, for “people who look like me.”

Gene seemed frustrated that while he was “personally willing to pay a price to make [things] better,” politicians and politics prevented “government intervention” that might “balance the playing field” for “certain people here in America that just really didn't get a chance to participate in whatever we had the opportunity to participate in.” This lack of action, according to Gene, was a failure of leadership:

You have this problem where politicians, that's what I'm saying, the policies and the politicians say things to their people to get votes, but they're selling stuff that's not good for them. Leadership is failing them.

To put such policies in place, Gene argued, required a kind of elusive political agreement.

I believe, if we can agree that I don't need to make a certain amount of money and I can give up 3% so that it goes to people who can kind of help strengthen our middle class, I'm willing to do that. But that's an agreement. Like do we agree on that? And we don't. I don't think as politicians, we don't agree that I'm willing to give up a little bit so that other people can do a little bit better.

Like many high-income respondents, Gene seemed frustrated that policies he would have liked to see put in place—and that he said was willing to contribute to—were things that had little political traction. He argued that redistributive policies weren't simply about “I'm giving up something in order to help others,” which often were seen as “sacrifices that wealthy people, taxpayers are unwilling to accept.” Instead, he said, ensuring “that the inequality gap is not so wide” could be “good for everybody.”

I can sell more goods and services. I can actually become more wealthy. But that's actually a good thing because you have more people who are part of the system.

Gene lays out a vision for a more equitable future where people like him continue to be wealthy, but others are not so poor that there is “unrest” and “people begin to buck the system” as a way of “saying, ‘I've got nothing left.’”

Personal willingness vs. personal implication

Gene emphasized his personal willingness to contribute to improving the lives of people left out of the American economic system and his sense of moral obligation to do so—but notably absent from his commentary was a sense of personal implication in the problem of economic inequality in the first place. Although Gene noted, earlier that “policies that reward the rich and ... punish the poor” were “causing the widening gap” in economic inequality, unlike many respondents, he didn't see the gains of the rich as

necessarily tied to the losses of the poor. One example of this is our discussion of CEO pay, which he said was “probably not” correlated with “people being poor.” I asked if he thought, as others did, that excessive CEO pay contributed to economic inequality.

I think it's a little bit of a red herring. I think the fact that CEOs make a lot of money has very little to do with why people are poor. I just really believe that. Yes, do they make too much money? Maybe, but is there any correlation between them making too much money and people being poor? I would say probably not.

When I asked him to explain further, he seemed to struggle to find his argument. “It becomes political,” he said. “You have to tie your cause to something,” so people look around and say:

There's excess. We don't have enough and then there's excess. The bank is exploiting marginalized citizens or less advantaged citizens through the mortgage crisis ... these “elite” is enriching themselves on the backs of poor people.

Yes, people were saying that, I confirmed. Did he not think this was the case?

What I'm saying is it's legal. There are some gray areas, you know, and there's some egregious tactics that sort of walk a fine line or are slick, but it's fairly legal. ... It's easy to say these people ... decided to get rich by exploiting us, but ... What they're saying on the other side is I'm just doing my job. I happen to work in an industry where I can get rich doing that.

Now, what makes people upset is there's a whole lobby behind it to keep the rules in place and to change the game and all that kind of stuff. But I don't think it's ... There's no CEO sitting in a room with a master plan that's saying we can go make money on those people over there, okay?

Gene starts out defending the rich—even those using “egregious tactics”—as people who are “just doing [their] job.” His implication seemed to be that politics and the government were to blame for allowing such tactics to be “legal,” and not the executives or those who got rich using such tactics. But then, he drew a connection between those two realms, noting that people were “upset” by efforts (presumably by the rich) to “lobby...to keep the rules in place.” Notably, he stated, but then ignored, something that most respondents emphasized: the power of the rich in terms of lobbying for rules in their favor. Having

undercut his own defense of the rich, Gene pivoted, turning the conversation from one about tactics and unequal outcomes to one about intentions. In the end, he seemed to argue that the lack of malicious intent (“no CEO stating in a room with a master plan”) made corporate actions at least morally neutral.

Many respondents, as we’ve seen in earlier chapters, saw the rich as morally suspect—if not morally corrupt—and it seemed as if Gene was responding to this implicit criticism—arguing for the moral credibility of people in his economic position. Although he felt that people in his position could and perhaps should “give up” some of their holdings to provide more balanced economic opportunities, he argued strongly against the idea that people like him were somehow responsible for causing the economic suffering he hoped to alleviate.

Instead, Gene blamed the government. We ended our conversation about CEO pay with him explaining how popular narratives about the mortgage crisis of 2007–2010 were wrong to blame banks and bankers when “the failure is on the government. That’s my problem and not the people exploiting it.” The details are “really, really complicated” Gene said, but basically, the government set the rules about what was legal, the banks followed those rules, “then they get rich. Then, when the bottom falls out of it, the people begin to say it’s the banks. Then the bankers are saying I’m just doing what was allowed.”

Gene used a similar moral argument when I asked him, at another point in the interview, about whether or not he thought his income was fair. “Yeah,” he said,

Because ... I work really hard and, me personally, I donate money when I can. And I’m not in pursuit of money for the sake of money, so, you know, I’m not greedy or ruthless or anything like that. So, I mean, from that perspective—and I obtained it legally. So, from that perspective, it’s fair.

Gene based his assessment of the fairness of his income almost entirely in personal moral or merit terms that seem separate from our discussions of the role of circumstance in his economic trajectory, the economic gap between the rich and the poor, or any ethical obligations between those groups. I might have received a different response from him and others had I used a term other than “fair,” which many people took issue with. Nevertheless, like nearly all other high-income respondents, in this response—and throughout the interview—Gene does not see his own economic access translating into someone else’s economic exclusion.

“No one deserves to be worth \$40 billion” – Josh (HIWM)

Josh worked in communications at a non-profit foundation and his household income was about \$200,000 a year. He lived with his wife and kids in a home they owned. We met Josh in an earlier chapter—recall that he had described his family as one where “back to the 1600s ... every generation has been able to pass property to the next generation.” Also, he talked about being “surrounded by fairly like-minded...people among the same incomes” in New Haven and so not being directly “confronted” by poverty or economic inequality, but at the same time seeing it all around him “mostly indirectly.” “I live in New Haven, so I’m next to it.”

Like many respondents, Josh felt that both the wealth of the rich and the poverty of the poor were strongly influenced by people’s inherited circumstances, more so than their effort, skill, or talent. He believed in income differentiation—that some people could and should make more than others—but felt that some people had more wealth than was deserved or reasonable and that those private holdings detracted from a possible

greater public good. He was distressed by both the circumstances and the societal treatment of the poor, feeling that many people who lacked economic resources were stuck in situations that were not only harmful to those individuals, but to society more broadly. The combination of these sentiments led Josh to support redistributive policy. Like many, he advocated for higher taxes on the rich and for that money to be spent supporting the poor.

Illegitimate Inequality: Unearned advantages and disadvantages; redistribution

Josh, like many respondents, felt that the luck of inherited circumstances played an outsized role in shaping the economic trajectories of both the rich and the poor—that skill and hard work were necessary, but not sufficient for someone to be economically successful. He made this point at the very beginning of our interview, explaining why he felt “the economic system is not fair.”

Two people could be equally skilled, but their compensation is really dependent on circumstance and fortune, good luck. ...I mean, people's wealth, it really is more dependent on who they know rather than what they can do.

He went on, adding that skill and intelligence mattered, but that the impact of those factors, in terms of “access to wealth” was “contingent” on connections and circumstances:

If you're ... highly skilled, highly intelligent and know the right people, then your chances are much better off than if you don't know the same people. So, I mean, to me, your access to wealth is really contingent on your— what family you came from ... how well off they were and so really the circumstances you were born into, I think.

Based on this sentiment—that circumstances outside of individuals' control drove people's paths to wealth or poverty—Josh was distressed about the hardships faced by the poor, especially in a context where he saw “plenty of people” with “excess capital.”

Josh felt that it was a “roll of the dice” that determined who would be “unlucky to be born into a poor family.” In such a situation, Josh argued,

We have a moral responsibility to use the excess capital that our system has created to give people just the basic living wage, to just have the dignity to buy food and have a house without having to sell drugs or prostitute themselves, which is what the lower class does in our city and all across the country.

It was not only that the gap between the excess of some and the impoverishment of others felt morally untenable to Josh. The “moral responsibility” came from more than a sense of charity or shared humanity. He argued that the extreme wealth of a few relied on the contributions of many. “The super billions in the hands of one or two people... represents a collective energy and collective resources.”

For example, Josh said, “everybody’s labor” contributed to the success of someone like (Facebook founder and CEO) Mark Zuckerberg, but the “rewards” go to “private individuals” like Zuckerberg who “wants to create a foundation where he’s not even going to have to pay taxes on that money and [he can] direct how that money is being used.” Instead, Josh argued, “I think there should be more public discussion over how those resources are used.”

Despite his arguments in favor of collective decision making about wealth generated through private companies, Josh emphasized that he believed “in the market” and in income differentiation. “I don’t think it’s a problem for people to be rewarded and be rewarded more than others,” he said. At the same time, “I do think it’s a problem when 125 families are donating most of the money to the elections.” The political inequality under a system with the current magnitude of income and wealth disparities, Josh argued, meant that policies like the “progressive tax system” that “is how we got out of the Great Depression” could be “rolled back through a really organized strategy begun among the

very wealthy.” Thus, the concentration of wealth in a few private hands “takes resources out of our system that could be used to just allow people to have basic dignity in their lives.” Systems to provide this kind of “basic dignity,” Josh argued, “should be” built “on the backs of our collective wealth” rather than through philanthropy directed by the decisions of private wealthy individuals.

Sympathy for the poor

Josh expressed a deep sympathy for the poor and a distress about the hardships faced by that group and he advocated for more direct redistribution that would put “more dollars...directly into the pocket of the poor” rather than into programs that focus on “managing...how that poor person is living or what they're supposed to do.”

Josh was most upset by what he considered to be a lack of access, among the poor, to “basic dignity.” He pushed back against prominent stereotypes of the poor, saying “most poor people are working hard and ...they just don't make enough to get by.” Being poor, he said, is not about “something flawed in their character ... I think it's entirely circumstances.” Many programs set up to help the poor, he argued, actually “make it hard to be poor,” structuring “interventions” based on “so much judgement.” He was frustrated by programs that “punished” and denied “basic freedom” to people who “for whatever reason... can't [work].” He included, among those programs, the prison system, which he argued kept “people entrapped in poverty,” creating “barriers” that kept them from “advancing.” He argued for a different approach to “our public safety net.”

I don't think we need to fix people. I just think we need to treat them with dignity, and I think we should start there...because the lack of dignity is even—to me, is like the worst problem. ... Why are 15-year-olds killing each other over something somebody said? Well, they don't feel like they have— there's a lack of humanity that they feel. So that to me is like, you know, just like at least ... like trying to restore dignity would be my goal if I had a magic wand.

Although it was common for respondents—especially low-income respondents—to argue that assistance programs for the poor were demeaning and punitive, Josh’s argument about not needing “to fix people” was fairly unique. He expressed a less-individualistic perspective than many others. Restoring dignity, according to Josh, would involve helping people who were struggling to get “a roof and food and clothing without having to go prove to someone, to some case worker that they’re getting their life together.” He advocated for “a cash supplement” that “everyone can access” for a time, whether working or not.

It would be like the dole in England. I mean, I don't know how they do it there but ... it's something that, because everyone can access it at a time, like even ...English, middle class kids access it. That's one of the reasons why I think it works, because everyone has—everyone knows someone who's used it and so they've benefitted. Whereas our welfare system here, it's only “those poor people” that have used it and so that's why I don't like it because, you know, it doesn't affect me, or it wouldn't affect me because I would never use it.

The universality of such a program would remove stigma, Josh argued, and could be paid for by having “a much more progressive tax system.” Such a program, he said, would also mean “you could do away with a lot of government programs” that he felt were not actually “helping move people on in their life.” Even as Josh criticized existing programs, he made clear that, like most others, “I don't want to say that we should ... cut services,” but he felt there could be “a better way of delivering [those] service[s].”

So many of our resources right now go to programs that employ people [as service providers] but I mean, I don't see them moving people - I don't see them ...helping move people on in their life. It's just more of like a box that they check. It's a hurdle they have to go over in order to move on with their life.

He used his own experience as an example. He had been on unemployment twice, he said, and “it was a great benefit.” “I knew I could get another job,” he said, but he had gone to the service providers because it was required in order to “get the unemployment

check.” What he saw, he argued, was that people there had much deeper needs than could be met with the services offered.

And people there that would struggle to get a job, there's no way that the services that are offered there are going to get them any kind of leg up in getting a job. To me, it's just a bunch of waste ... Any numbers that they have for who they're getting employed, they're people that don't need the help, you know? They can get jobs on their own. So [the service is] getting credit for, you know, something that they're not doing. And the people that do need to help, they're not helping. I don't know if they *can* help them.

Josh argued that “more dollars ... go[ing] directly into the pocket of the poor person” would make a better contribution to creating the conditions for “dignity” than the current systems of “fragmented” social services that seemed to him to be designed “in ways that are convenient for the service provider but not for the people that we're serving.” He went on to articulate a number of other strong redistributive policy preferences, including an argument that “we should collectivize the money that's used for public education and distribute the money based on the need.”

What you want to happen is the schools in inner city New Haven, they would get more resources and become great schools and then maybe more people would move into that neighborhood that - so it's not just poor people moving into that neighborhood. Or at the very least, they have an opportunity that - because you need more resources for some— for kids that have more— you just need more teachers or more, you know, people helping those kids.

“Less money” would go to schools in “a wealthy suburb” under this scheme, Josh said, and that would be fine by him. This was already the case at the school his kids attended “our school is less funded than the inner-city schools.”

Yes, I would [be comfortable with that]. Because what do parents do in those communities? ... They put their money into the public school. I mean ... parents in our school did.

Undeserving rich

Like other respondents, Josh's argument for redistribution was based in his sympathy for the poor and his perception that the rich had "excess capital." It was supported by his belief that an individual's economic prospects are strongly shaped by factors outside of their control. Despite this strong support—wanting to see the rich pay much higher taxes and using that money to ease hardship in the lives of the poor—Josh was not antipathetic to the rich. Like many high-income respondents, he considered some people in his social network to be among the rich—including classmates with whom he had graduated from college. Josh did not characterize the rich as exploitative or malicious, but nevertheless felt they had too much—more than they, or anyone, deserved. That excess did not rightfully belong to any individual, he argued, because it was the result of "everyone's" efforts and should, instead, be considered "collective wealth" to be used to make sure everyone had access to "basic dignity."

No one deserves to be worth \$40 billion. ... and so even, you know, Bill Gates, brilliant man ... I don't think he's entitled to that much wealth. I just think that that's— you know, that should be collectivized. And I don't think that removes incentives away, you know, so you can make \$2 million a year. I think that's still an incentive. I don't think that, you know, you need the super billions in the hands of one or two people. That money ... that represents a collective energy and collective resources.

To Josh, individual brilliance was not enough to lead people to economic success and thus, economic rewards should not be held "in the hands of one or two people." "No idea exists only in one person's head," he said. Even someone who is "clearly brilliant" is "refining other people's ideas and ... working in groups." Maybe "they were the leaders," he said, but they also needed luck, resources, and connections to get to their position. For example, he said, someone like Steve Jobs might have "dropped out of college," but he "had connections" and "resources." "He was calling up, you know, the founder of

Hewlett-Packard when he was in high school, went over to his house and you know, getting little transistors to work on.” Although Josh didn’t seem to resent people like Jobs or Gates, he did feel that society gave the rich too much credit.

I think our society kind of has an inflated sense of who they are. ... They're just human beings, again, just like everybody else. They had a good idea; they were at the right place at the right time. You know, there's a lot of luck that's involved in being in the right place at the right time. ... We glorify them too much. ... We give them more credit sometimes than they deserve, you know? ... I don't know if I want to say that's not fair, but it's not deserved, the glory isn't.

The result of this undeserved glory, according to Josh, was a system that “socializes risk and rewards private individuals, exorbitantly so.” To counteract this, Josh argued, “we need a far more progressive tax system.”

Because then ... what can't—I mean, at least in this area, what couldn't you do on \$200,000 a year? Very little. I mean ... that's a very good income. But there's, you know, plenty of people making above that. I'm not saying scale everyone's income back to \$200,000 but, you know, we need a far more progressive tax system. And what—to me, the damage of disparities is that it—it takes resources out of our system that could be used to just allow people to have basic dignity in their lives. I'm not saying that people should have handouts, but just so that they can have dignity and then would be able to, you know, have the mental health to be able to get up out - you know, get out of bed in the morning without just wanting to use drugs or you know.

Whether it's the \$2 million he allowed to Bill Gates or the \$200,000 for someone in his area, Josh argued that redistribution of income made sense because, to him, “plenty of people” have more than they need while others had less than what was necessary to meet their most basic needs. Many high- and low-income respondents made a variety of this argument—that the gap between the excess of some and the impoverishment of others was morally untenable. Josh was frustrated and disappointed that more of the rich didn't advocate for this position.

I went to college with kids that are ... really rich now and you know, we were basically the same in classes, you know, so I don't see them as that different from me in terms of - I mean, I see them different in their values, like that they—I

guess if they— well, it's hard to say. I mean, I don't know. I don't know what - I mean, I don't want to - I can't - it's hard for me to judge anybody based on - you know, they made a lot of money so ... they are accruing the benefits of the system, you know, good for them. I wish they would advocate to have that money taxed like - you know, like a Warren Buffet.

There is a defeated and confused quality to Josh's frustration as he considers his peers who are "accruing the benefits of the system" he just criticized. He had made a case that people in such a position are "tak[ing] resources out of our system" that could be used to reduce what he considered the unnecessary hardship in the lives of the poor. The implication—although never explicitly stated— is that the rich are morally in the wrong. At the same time, Josh does not want to be seen to "judge" individuals. Just as he saw the profits of successful companies as part of a "collective wealth," he seemed to see the individuals holding onto those profits as part of a societal, not an individual, problem. Facing that problem, he feels disempowered, reduced to "wish[ing]" the situation were different.

Defending Moral Worth

Like many high-income respondents, Josh morally positioned himself in the middle—between the poor, who he saw as unfairly "punished" by society and the rich, who he saw as reaping both undeserved rewards and "glory." He was pained by the suffering of the former, but felt disempowered relative to the latter—leaving him distressed, but ultimately acquiescing to the existing system, feeling powerless to change it. Josh spoke passionately about the hardships of the poor—with what seemed to be a deep and genuine sympathy and distress, and he also talked about the moral obligations of the "super rich" straightforwardly. But, when our discussion moved closer to his own

economic circumstances, he struggled a bit more to make sense of his own position relative to those two groups.

When making his case for progressive taxation, Josh framed his own position—whether consciously or unconsciously—in the middle, suggesting that the real struggle for resources was between those above him and those below him. He suggested that, “at least in this area,” \$200,000 a year was “a very good income.” He didn’t, then, point out that this was his household income (I learned that later, at the end of the interview), but his choice was notable. By choosing his own income, he simultaneously framed himself as privileged compared to some (“What couldn’t you do on \$200,000 a year?”), but also as reasonable, and even virtuous compared to the “plenty of people making above that.” Placing himself in this middle ground, Josh essentially removes himself from the equation of economic inequality. He reinforced this later, suggesting that the progressive taxation he argued for would hardly impact his life in economic terms, he said.

It [would] have zero effect on my life. Well, here's how it would affect my life. If we had a more progressive tax system that enabled more people to live with dignity, it would improve New Haven and that would improve my life. ... I wouldn't be as concerned about, say, like having my kids ride their bikes ... through an impoverished neighborhood where they might get mugged now because they're filled with, you know, poor people where, you know, you're more likely to have crime for people mugging someone, because they need money. So, in that way, it would improve my life. But in terms of my own circumstances, you know, a more progressive tax system would raise my taxes marginally, you know? And I would be happy to pay it.

Throughout our interview, Josh sought this middle ground, moving between acknowledging the advantages of his birth circumstances and sometimes minimizing them at the same time as he grappled with his own moral positioning. For example, describing the circumstances in which he was raised, he said, “I didn’t live in, you know,

great wealth but ... we had more money than probably most of the people in the town that I grew up in.” When I asked him to describe his current social class status, he said,

I would say it’s— well ... it’s above average income, you know? ... it may even be more than... than twice [the average] actually, I don’t know ... But it’s— among my peers, it’s— we’re probably right in the middle.⁵⁹

He notes that his income is “above average,” briefly acknowledging his position relative to those below him (“may even be more than ... twice [the average]”), but immediately turns his lens upward, comparing himself to his “peers,” among whom he places himself “in the middle.” Josh described some of these peers, including those with whom he graduated from college, as “really rich now.”

So, among peers that I graduated with, there are some— some people just dropped, you know, \$1.5 million on an apartment in New York. I’m not like that. One of the reasons why I like living in New Haven is because it’s very affordable.

He continued,

But you know, it’s ... there’s disparity, you know... there’s tremendous disparity in New Haven. But to me, the disparity is really between like New Haven and Greenwich, you know? ... That’s the big disparity. And to me ... that kind of— that’s a disparity that ... just creates ... wealth. It’s just not being used efficiently for ... bettering people’s lives.

Acknowledging that “there’s tremendous disparity in New Haven,” Josh nods to the gap between someone like him (who finds New Haven “very affordable”) and someone like Julie (LIWW—who argued that for her, affording housing in New Haven is “not quite Boston or New York or San Francisco bad,” but nevertheless, “a real crush”). But, just as he turns the lens upward in naming his social class status, here too, he turns from the disparity between him and someone below him to focus his attention on the gap between him and those above him, arguing that the “big disparity” is between people like him and

59. Only about 9% of the households in the U.S. have income greater than \$200,000, and they have almost 45% of all pre-tax income (Tax Policy Center 2018).

people who live in Greenwich (a Connecticut town south of New Haven long known as a wealthy enclave and consistently ranked among the wealthiest US cities).

Josh did, throughout the interview, straightforwardly discuss his advantages, as when he argued that having a family with economic resources provided a “safety net” that others didn’t have access to.

Why should we have a safety net for ... disadvantaged people? Well ... because people like me and others like me, we have a safety net and it's called our family and our family has the income for a— you know, I can screw up. I can not work—I can not work for a year and you know, have the support of my family members.

Josh explained that he had only “woken up ... recently” to his “easier opportunity” that came from his “White privilege and being a man.” He could more readily describe the economic advantages he had compared to someone with a different family background, but when doing that, he struggled to reconcile those advantages with his sense of moral worthiness—illustrating the complexity of facing economic inequality for someone in his circumstances. This extended quote provides an example of his attempts to deal with this complexity. I asked him if he thought he had had an easier or harder time than others—in terms of economic opportunity. In his response, he rambled a bit, tracing his path and trying to make sense of his own thoughts:

I had great opportunities. ... I had ... a great college education and I didn't know what I want to do after I graduated from college. ... I graduated at the same time that the internet was starting and so for my— for people in my kind of generation, you know, it was really easy to go to an internet company and get a good-paying job. ... Anybody with a college education could, it felt like. ... Then I didn't want to do that, but I made enough money doing that so that I could ... take time off and I started getting into writing. I wanted to become a journalist, so I just started ... submitting articles and ... got them published and so ... then I became a newspaper writer. ...

Now those jobs were very competitive ... and so I had to really work to get them. I mean I didn't—I wasn't just handed—you know, I had to work on my writing

and ... that was something that was emphasized all the way through my schooling.

He went on, taking stock:

So, did I get an unfair advantage? For the journalism, no. No. Like that to me was— I mean, to the extent that it was unfair that I was from a family of means and I got— they paid for my college education. I didn't have any debt when I graduated. That was a big advantage. So, I was able to save money instead of paying off college debt. So that when my wife and I moved here, I could buy a house, you know? And I didn't have to—I could take a really low-paying journalism job and still have a house, you know, we had an apartment in it, so with extra income. So, I mean, I don't think I got— I mean, I was never like— was I ever like given anything? You know, one summer, because of a family connection, I got a job in New York. But everything else, I've had to like, you know, apply, interview.

Josh didn't know how to—or perhaps didn't want to—answer his own question of whether or not he had “an unfair advantage.” He was torn between his growing realization of the impact of his inherited circumstances on his economic trajectory (“I was able to save money instead of paying of college debt”) and his desire to feel morally worthy of this position—a desire to have his effort validated (“I had to really work to get [those jobs]”). Josh had said earlier “the biggest luck ... the roll of the dice ... is ... what family are you born into?” As he tried to compare his own opportunities to those of others, the rippling and compounding ramifications of that dice roll were hard for him to grapple with.⁶⁰

Disempowerment

Feeling that power rested primarily in those above him on the economic ladder, Josh felt disempowered to change the systems that distressed him, but that ultimately

60. As noted earlier, behavioral economists tell us that barriers or “headwinds” are much more psychologically available to us than “tailwinds” that invisibly help us along the way (Davidai and Gilovich 2016). Given that—and despite his struggle to do so—it's notable that Josh was able to trace as many “tailwinds” as he did throughout the interview.

only impacted his life “indirectly.” Like other high-income respondents, he was simultaneously upset—even sometimes angry—by societal treatment of the poor, but also resigned to the status quo. Although he believed that the responsibility for change rested with “the people,” he didn’t feel particularly empowered—or maybe responsible?—to make those changes. Like many respondents, Josh didn’t feel represented by government decisions, “because the superrich have their lobbyists writing our laws right now.” In this sentiment, which he shared with many high- and low-income respondents, he repeated the upward-looking tendency I saw among the high-income. He focused, like other high-income respondents, on his relatively low political power compared to the “superrich” rather than his relatively high political power compared to the poor.

These feelings of disempowerment and uncertainty about his own role seemed to lead Josh to frame the problems he saw with economic inequality in ways that suggested inevitability. Recall his comment about his “really rich” peers and Josh’s “wish” that “they would advocate to have that money taxed,” but his resistance to “judge anyone” for not doing so. Similarly, although he expressed his belief “in the market,” he described the problems it created for people struggling to find gainful employment, but without questioning the forces behind it.

It's very confusing times. ...The market has become so ... efficient. It's found cheap labor sources outside of our country and there are— you know, there are not enough paying jobs for people to do.

Josh argued that this, “structural unemployment or structural underemployment” created a “moral responsibility” to make sure that people could meet their basic needs without work—redistribution he supported—but, like Hochschild’s high-income respondents, he didn’t challenge the “immutable forces” of the market. Similarly, near the beginning of

our interview, when I asked Josh for his initial thoughts about the gap in income and wealth between the rich and poor, he said “I do think about it quite a bit.”

I think that ... in our system and really in our society— in Western society that we have inherited for the past, you know, millennia, there's a hierarchy and there's a class-based hierarchy and even though we have a democracy, we inherited the hierarchy with the aspirational qualities of our democracy so that people - everyone can have— should have access. ... But no one ever talks about eliminating the hierarchy, they always talk about moving up the ladder. So that is so endemic to our system that I don't see— I mean, as a hierarchy— is hierarchy a problem? I think it's hard to say that it is because it's just— it's the way that humans organize themselves.

There's a resigned inevitability to this—although we might aspire to a democracy where “everyone can have— should have access” hierarchy is “just the way that humans organize themselves.”

“I should pay taxes. Wealthy people should pay taxes” – Sandra (HIBW)

We met Sandra in earlier chapters. She was one of the few African-American faculty members at Yale (about 3-4% of faculty). When I interviewed her, her annual household income was about \$275,000, which, to her, felt “like tons of money” given that she “grew up... in a very different world” where “the majority of people were poor.” A connection to and awareness of this “different world” shaped her perspective on wealth and poverty as she moved along in her education and career trajectory. She was frustrated that luck of birth was a “determining factor” in “how we live our lives.” Everybody, she argued, should “be able to live with humanity and dignity and with health care and enough food to feed your family. That should not be something that the wealthy have a monopoly over.”

Support for redistribution - illegitimacy of inequality

Sandra was strongly in favor of redistribution, sympathetic to the poor (who “work hard” but “just don’t get rewarded”), and critical of the rich for keeping a “monopoly” over resources that could otherwise be used to “create ... a social system that actually works” for everyone. Like other respondents, she saw existing economic inequality as illegitimate, believing that birth circumstances mattered more than effort or merit in shaping people’s economic trajectories. She agreed with many respondents—especially the low income—that “the system is, in some ways, stacked against people who are poor.” Pushing back against a common narrative, she said “no, I don’t think if you work hard, you’ll get ahead.”

I think there are some people who work really hard and the get paid shit, right? So, it doesn't really matter how hard you work ... if you're cleaning toilets all day, that's hard labor if you ask me, but you may not be getting paid very much and you don't have health insurance and so you're going to go in debt if your kid has to go to the hospital. Or if you're doing childcare as a nanny, you don't have health insurance. You don't get sick days. You might get paid—you're working hard, trust me, I know you're working hard—but you may not be getting ahead. ...

Particularly, I think it matters where you ... come in. So, like, if you're born into a family that's poor ... you're going to have to work twice as hard to get ahead, because you're ... working out of a ditch, right? If you come into a middle-class family— you know, you might not actually have to work so hard to get ahead, right? You're already ahead, just because of the nature of where you were born.

Some people are born “already ahead” regardless of their work or effort, Sandra argued, and the current economic system exacerbated that inequality. “The system is not set up in a way to help those who have less. It’s actually set up for the people who have the most to have more.” The idea that “everybody has equal opportunity,” is a “kind of mythology.” People’s economic trajectories, she explained, depended heavily on their starting circumstances which, themselves, had been established through exploitation and injustice.

Everybody has this kind of mythology that everybody has equal opportunity and equal access. And if that was the case, then maybe things would look very different. But the reality is that people don't have equal opportunity or equal access. Yes, we were a country that ... has deep roots in democracy and a discourse of equality. ... But it's also a country that's built on slavery, where, you know, people got wealthy exploiting other people's labor. ... based on dehumanizing people and not seeing people as of value or worth beyond... the wealth that their labor can produce.

Sandra—like other high-income Black respondents—applied both a relational and a historical lens to economic inequality and saw racial inequality as integral to those discussions. Her support for redistribution explicitly included this framing.

I believe in reparations. Like, give people some money, like you know, for ancestors of slavery, for people who were in Japanese internment, Native Americans who had their land stripped. Not just some casino... like how do you invest, economically and strategically in those communities?

Even history aside (and she didn't think it should be set aside), Sandra argued that current disparities were large enough to justify redistribution from those who "have too much" to those who "don't have enough."

We live in a world where people don't have enough, and people have too much. I think if there are people with too much, then we take it and we give it to the people who don't have enough. That just, to me, ethically seems right. And, so yeah, they worked hard for it and maybe we shouldn't take it, but I don't want to live in a world where people who actually work hard don't get enough. So, I believe: Take it. Tax 'em.

Sandra argued that downward redistribution is "ethically" justified by the gap between the rich and poor, regardless of the legitimacy of the holdings of those who have the most resources. Like other respondents, she found the disparity, itself, to be morally untenable. She nodded to the counter argument that "maybe we shouldn't take it" because "they worked hard for it," but ultimately seemed to feel that the injustice of "a world where people who actually work hard don't get enough" was greater than that of taking money from someone who may have "worked hard for it" but, nevertheless, has "too much."

Many other respondents struggled to reconcile these two values, potentially due to a stronger sense of individualism. They valued an individual's right to keep what they had "worked hard for," but then didn't know what to do about those other individuals who also "work hard" but "don't get enough." Sandra, in contrast, argued that societal well-being justified a collective responsibility, "we all have to be committed to making sure people have enough."

Although she targeted the rich as she argued for redistribution, she did not exempt herself from responsibility. "Yeah, I feel like the wealthy should be - like I should pay taxes, wealthy people should pay taxes. I think there should be a death tax, like all of those things [laughs]." Such taxation would mean "that we have more money," Sandra argued, to work toward creating "a system that works for everybody."

Views of the rich - not paying a fair share

Sandra argued that people in her own economic position shared a responsibility to contribute to creating a system that is more "fair" because their own economic success was not the result of being more "deserving" but rather because they had been "more lucky than other people." She criticized "our kind of capitalist model" for allowing the rich to shirk this responsibility by "figur[ing] out how not to pay taxes."

I don't think it's fair how people are taxed ... who can get around the taxes. People who tend to have more money tend to have access to tax lawyers or accountants who can help them figure out how not to pay taxes. And poor people, who don't have access to accountants, you know, pay their taxes to the fullest, right?

Here, as elsewhere, Sandra frames her argument in terms of systems—contrasting the "access" of the rich and poor to resources rather than focusing on their behaviors as individuals. Like Sandra, many respondents criticized systemic problems with the tax structure (e.g., "loopholes") that allowed the rich to lower, or eliminate, their tax bills.

But, unlike Sandra, many respondents also characterized the tax avoidance of the rich as a problem of behavior, rather than distribution. Rachel Sherman (2017) argues that such a focus on “what people do and how they feel, not what they have” creates a sense that there is a “legitimate” way to inhabit wealth, which “draws attention away from institutions and social processes such as the systematic unequal distribution of resources” (Sherman 2017:233). Many high-income respondents wrestled with reconciling these different claims to moral legitimacy—like Josh, not wanting to “judge” the rich for what they have, and so, instead “wish[ing]” they would take different actions.

Sandra, instead, seemed to focus more on distributions of resources and less on individual behaviors. She felt that individuals were just as undeserving of being poor as they were of being rich. “It's nobody's fault it you're born poor or you're born Black or you're born rich and wealthy right?” The “common sense” question, given that situation, is “how do you make things fair?” She argued that allowing the rich to circumvent taxation not only undermined societal efforts toward distributional fairness, but also reinforced the social and economic power of the rich (including by creating a perception of “legitimate entitlement” through their behavior). She held up philanthropy as a particularly egregious example of this process.

I just don't think people should be like really really really really really rich ... I guess one of my biggest critiques about our kind of capitalist model is that, you know, wealthy people are expected to be - do philanthropy. And so, it's like out of the goodness of their heart, they're going to give money to the less fortunate and the needy - and I'm like no, just take the money! [laughs] Tax them! ... Because actually the fact is, a lot of people are giving philanthropy because they're trying to avoid taxes, right?

The benefits of such a system to the rich compound, Sandra argues, because, not only are they “avoid[ing] taxes” and seen to be doing something morally good, but they also get to make private decisions about how that money gets spent (they “get to pick and choose

who they want to benefit”) rather than being subject to the kind of collective decision making that happens around tax revenues. Thus, instead of “creating a society where people have equal opportunity” Sandra argues, such a system means that “people who are ... lucky enough to be born [with resources]” will help out “a few people” who are born without such resources “instead of saying, well how can we make sure all the [poor] people have access right?”

If you're really committed to these ideals of democracy and equality, then how do you do that in a way that is systematic? And philanthropy isn't the way to do that. It's like, you actually need to pay taxes. And then, as a community, we can decide how those taxes should be used and ... who's going to benefit from this, that there's a common pot that this is going into and some people actually should pay more. Because I think it's just unethical for some people to have— for the 1% to have all the money that they have.

Sandra was less concerned about government intervention than she was about living in a system where some people had to do without “the basics,” just because they were “unlucky” to be born into a poor family. She returns to her distributional argument here—regardless of how much the rich give away through philanthropy, “it’s just unethical” for them “to have all the money that they have.”

Personalized perspective: A life of luxury

Sandra had a unique perspective among my respondents in that her current economic position was dramatically different from how she had grown up. Such a dramatic change in economic position was not the case for most respondents—and is not the case for most Americans (e.g., Chetty et al. 2017). Although a few other high-income respondents had grown up in low-income families, the gap between Sandra’s current financial circumstances and those in which she grew up seemed larger than for most respondents. This combination of reference points seemed to draw her attention to the

privileges of her current life, rather than—as we saw for other high-income respondents—to her relative lack of resources compared to those with greater incomes. One example of the way this shaped her perspective came as she described her perception of the economic gap in the U.S. She started with the “1%,” but then quickly turned to reflect on her own experience.

Definitely there's a gap [laughs] between the haves and the have nots or the top 1% and everybody else. ... I don't know what the pie is, but whenever I see that pie chart of how much accumulated wealth the top 1% has compared to everybody else, I'm shocked and horrified [laughs]. ... I mean it's clear to me ... because ... I grew up in a poor household, but now I'm like— it's hard for me to think, “oh my god. I'm in like the up—” like my husband and I we were talking to our kids ... My son said, “oh we're middle class” and we looked at each other and we're like, I actually think we're probably like upper middle class [snorts/laughs] right?

Although she differentiated herself from the “top 1%” in her shock and horror at their “accumulated wealth,” Sandra turned quickly to place herself alongside them—among the “haves” relative to her own background—even as she found herself uncomfortable with that class status in such a way that made it hard for her to “think” or even name it. Grounded in her reflections on her own upbringing, the benefits of her current access to resources were very visible to her. She went on, framing the gap between “the haves and the have nots” in terms of her own childhood experiences versus those of her children.

And I can see the differences in terms of quality of life. ... Yes, it's real. ... Does it matter? Yes, I think it matters in terms of the way people are able to live their lives with stress or without stress. So, when I think about my life now and what my kids have to worry about ... or what I had to do without ... versus what they have to do without. It's very clear to me that, like quality of life, your health, your mental health is all affected by whether you're in the haves or the have nots. In terms of what kinds of education you get, where do you actually get to live ... the kind of job that you have ... whether you can have childcare that is going to be useful and helpful for your kids.

Comparing her own experiences to those of her children provided Sandra with a very tangible anchor for understanding the benefits to her own “quality of life” by virtue of

being among “the haves.” She repeatedly took this perspective during the interview: counting her own economic blessings. For example, when I asked her if her income allowed her to live the kind of life she wanted, she said “Oh, I do, I live that way.” She went on to explain that her husband’s income, alone, was “three times the median family income.”

I'm like, “we're rich.” {laughter} But I grew up ... in a very different world. I don't need to make more money. ... The biggest thing about our income, for us, means that we actually live in a neighborhood where we don't have to send our kids to private school. That's huge ... our real estate taxes are expensive—a huge chunk of our income basically goes to being able to live in a neighborhood where we both can walk to work, and our kids can go to public schools. And it's richly diverse. And we're like, that's what we feel like is our luxury that we spend all of our money on. We could live in the suburbs and have to have 2 cars ... our kids would be the only brown kids out there, but we don't want to be in that world.

Sandra readily acknowledged the ease she had in her life as a result of her income (and, once again, integrated her commentary about race and class). She did not, as did other high-income respondents, emphasize her own individual merit or effort as a way of staking a claim to being morally worthy of her income. In fact, she did the opposite, pointing out the ways she had been “lucky” compared to others, despite being born into “a poor family.” She noted that her story could be seen as “the American story ...

You're Black and you're female and you were poor, and look, you made it. Is that something particular about me that I made it, or does it say something particular about the people who don't make it?

Her answer to both questions was no. “People fail and succeed for a host of reasons,” she said, but “fate and luck dictate a lot ... and they’re ... out of our control.” She explained, contrasting her own experience growing up “poor in the South” with her cousins “in the north.”

I grew up in a small town and there were certain things that my parents didn't have to worry about. So, I do think that region and environment matters in the sense that like, I went to a school where the majority of people graduated from

high school even if they didn't go to college. ... There was a kind of culture of okay, you finish high school. ... But I think, in some places, where I had cousins who grew up in the north, there were other ways to acquire wealth and status that wasn't linked to finishing school or high school.

Sandra went on to explain that she was “one of the lucky ones... who was able to make my way in” to the advanced placement courses rather than being “tracked” with the other “Black kids” out of the “advanced classes.” She was born into a family where some of her relatives had “gone to college ... so that was something we could see as a possibility” compared to somebody “in a family where nobody’s done that.” Sandra described her path as bolstered by “fate and chance and happenstance” and argued that “it shouldn’t be that way.” “There should be a formula,” she said, “a path that’s available to everybody” so that “it’s not just hit and miss, and it’s not just the one exceptional story.”

Reconciling Privilege

Sandra acknowledges her own “exceptional story” and continues—throughout the interview—to express sympathy for the undeserved hardships of the poor. She advocates for redistributive taxation (including of people like her) to contribute to making something like her own path “available to everybody.” However, like most high-income respondents, while she readily contrasts her own circumstances with those of the poor, she doesn’t seem to link her own position (as someone living with “luxury”) to that of someone struggling to “live with humanity and dignity.”

Absences are hard to capture, but one of Sandra’s responses, early on in our first interview (about 15 minutes in), caught my attention because she directly juxtaposed her own standard for an acceptable minimum income with that of someone to whom she was directly connected—her child’s daycare provider—without reflecting on the economic relationship between herself and that worker.

When you start trying to look at people who are kind of working poor or working class— what they think about as getting ahead ... it's not always the same as how middle class or wealthy people think about getting ahead. ... I'm now in the middle class where there's a threshold where I couldn't imagine making less than, but then I know people who, like their threshold of what they could imagine making is like so low. I think, "oh my god" [whispers] "oh my god." Like, when I think about the people who work in the daycare where my kid goes. I'm like, really, you just make \$25,000 a year and you don't have health insurance? Or you don't have a retirement plan? But that's my— what I know as possible, so that's what I've been striving for, but for them, it's like, "Well I have a 9 to 5. I'm making over \$20,000." Like, you know, what their getting ahead looks like is very different from what I think getting ahead is.

It was an odd moment where Sandra openly acknowledges that the income of her child's daycare provider is shockingly low to her, but she doesn't seem to link that person's poverty to her own prosperity. She went on to talk about how difficult it was for low-income people to find jobs that paid enough, were stable, offered health insurance, and offered raises or promotions that would keep people from "being stuck" and "falling behind." She seemed to take the same tack as she had when talking about tax avoidance, characterizing it as a systemic, rather than an individual issue that needed to be tackled by putting money into a "common pot." And, later in the interview, she made clear that she believed in taxing people like her in order to improve the prospects of people like the childcare workers she mentions.

At the same time, I would have expected her to make an explicit link, at some point, between her economic situation and that of the working poor for whom she expressed so much sympathy. She was critical of the rich for holding a "monopoly" on the resources that might otherwise allow people "to live with humanity and dignity and with health care and enough food to feed your family." She commented on policies "shoring up people who were already economically stable, at the expense of poor people." She argued that current capitalist systems worked in such a way that:

People can only win big if somebody else loses ... Winning big means lots of people have to lose ... To be able to dominate the market ... means that people have to be exploited, labor has to be exploited.

In other words, Sandra did make arguments that linked the winning of some to the losing of others, but, like other high-income respondents, she didn't seem to see herself as part of that equation. It was in this unspoken way that she separated herself from the rich. She did not see herself among those "winning big," nor as one of the holders of "monopoly." She, and other high-income respondents, are, in some ways backed up on this position by data. For example, Saez and Zucman (2019) argue that "the main fault line" in terms of income in America "is between the 1% and everybody else" (Saez and Zucman 2019:6). But others, notably Reeves (2018), argue that "the upper middle class has been having it pretty good" and passing their good fortune onto their children with "the greatest class persistence ... at the top" of the income spectrum (Reeves 2018:4,11). The "obsession with the upper class" Reeves argues, has allowed the upper middle class "to convince ourselves we are in the same boat as the rest of America: but it is not true" (Reeves 2018:4).

As a Black woman, Sandra's omission of herself from among those "winning big" is understandable. Despite her economic privilege, she continued to face discrimination based on her race and gender. Recall her story, in Chapter 3, about being profiled and followed around grocery stores, where "people assume ... that I'm going to steal something." She also talked about the difference in the salary offers she and her (White) husband received. Despite similar academic backgrounds and accomplishments, he repeatedly "got paid more money than me." "Race and gender matter," she said, "in terms of how people make decisions about how people are gonna get paid, and who's valued and who's not valued." Recent research has also reinforced the importance of

acknowledging that being wealthy and Black is still very different from being wealthy and White. As noted in Chapter 2, research by Chetty et al. (2020) shows the far greater likelihood of downward economic mobility across generations in Black families than in White—even among the highest income and among those from similar neighborhoods. America’s long history of both legally and extra-legally denying Black Americans opportunities to build wealth means that wealth, itself, is a major dividing line between even high-income White and Black folks. Sandra considered herself, now, to be among the “haves,” but she was in a very different situation from Josh, for example, whose family wealth stretched back over generations.

In other words, Sandra had justifiable reasons to separate herself from among the societal “winners” in terms of economic inequality. At the same time, her explicit acknowledgement of her own economic advantages and her sympathy for the poor made it somewhat surprising that she didn’t see herself as part of the equation between the low pay of her child’s caregiver and the excesses of the rich. She didn’t express concern—as I might have expected her to—about her role in that caregiver’s economic experience. For example, she didn’t talk about paying more for childcare or about what might be happening with those careworkers’ own children. She drew my attention to this absence when, a few minutes later, she recounted telling her son about how “lucky” and “privileged” he was to have help from his parents in doing his homework.

I said, you know, you're very lucky because actually, I have a job where I can come home and help you prepare for your project and help you study. But like the majority of people ... your friends, their parents work till 5 o'clock, some of them work till 7 o'clock and they can't afford to pay somebody to come and sit with their kid from 5-7 and help tutor them with homework. So, I said you're very lucky and you're very privileged.

As Sandra invokes a hypothetical other person who might be paid to care for her child, I was reminded of the childcare workers she mentioned earlier and about how they might be in the position she is describing to her son: perhaps leaving their own child because their need for income necessitates that they spend that time helping someone else's child. Sandra doesn't seem to make this connection, although she is careful, again, to acknowledge her (and her son's) privileged position. This was particularly interesting because she went on to contrast her son's position to her own when she was a child, offering the perspective of someone without that privilege.

When I was a kid, nobody helped me with my homework. My parents were at work and there was no tutor that was going to get paid. So, it made a difference in terms of my grades. So, it makes a difference if your parents can afford to have support, right? If your parents can't, it affects your grades long term. It affects what people think you're capable of, whether it's true or not, right?

Sandra recounts her own experience in a household where her parents couldn't afford the kinds of services she implies she might be able to afford for her son—and she notes the long-term consequences (“it affects what people think you're capable of”), but even if she considers that might also be the story of the children of people she employs to care for her child, she doesn't seem to see herself in a role that might influence that situation.

Like other high-income respondents, Sandra expressed an understanding that she was “lucky” compared with others and, therefore, had a responsibility to contribute to improving the situations of those who had less. Also like other high-income respondents, she acknowledged this responsibility without acknowledging or perhaps without thinking about the ways that her own privilege might be creating or upholding the disadvantages of others. In this way, Sandra was not unusual, although she did stand out in other ways. In addition to her unique economic trajectory, she was also the only respondent to

consider her own status as “rich, probably.” She also offered some of the most clear and unequivocal support of redistribution among my respondents, including implicating herself as someone who had an ethical responsibility.

Sandra seemed among the most likely to acknowledge her own role in perpetuating economic inequality and that of people like her. Her not doing so suggests less about her than about the general lack of public discussion regarding the responsibility of the upper middle class in terms of upholding and counteracting economic inequality. This is not surprising, Reeves (2018) argues, because “the upper middle class also has a huge influence on public discourse, counting among its members most journalists, think tank scholars, TV editors, professors, and pundits in the land” (Reeves 2018:9–10). Thus, they are in a much more powerful position to advocate for redistribution than are the people at the bottom, but they first have to recognize—and then to fight against—the mechanisms through which they benefit at others’ expense.

Conclusions: Sympathy without responsibility

“There's a reason why we've made the least progress when it comes to civil rights in terms of housing and schools. And that is because that is civil rights made personal. This is not whether or not you can go to a restaurant or not, but it's who's going to live next to you and whose kids are going to sit in the classroom with your own kids.” Nikole Hannah-Jones on Code Switch podcast (Gutierrez et al. 2018)

“We can't have it both ways. Nice white parents can't grab every advantage for our own children and also maintain our identities as good citizens who believe in equitable schools. ... We can choose to hoard resources and segregate ourselves and flee the moment things feel uncomfortable. Or we can choose to be the people we say we are. But we can't have both. We can choose to remember the goal of public schools is not to cater only to us, to keep us happy, but to serve every child. We've never had that school system. But we could. We could demand it. We might not. But we should know it's within our power to help create it.”

Chana Joffe-Walt, Nice White Parents podcast (Snyder and Joffe-Walt 2020)

Despite their support for redistributive taxation as a way of tackling economic inequality, high income respondents generally seemed to acquiesce or capitulate to the status quo. Most argued in favor of higher rates of taxation on people like themselves and on the rich—with revenues targeted to improve the lives of the poor—but it is unclear how, if at all, they translated those sentiments into action. For example, I didn't ask, but none of the high-income respondents volunteered that they had done any particular advocacy on this issue (e.g., calling their representatives). Instead, our conversations suggested that—withstanding what seemed like genuine and strongly-held beliefs—these respondents were resigned to things staying as they were. They were not happy about it, but the reality was that—despite the emotional toll it seemed to take—economic inequality did little harm to their immediate lives. Thus, these issues were not necessarily at the forefront of their minds when they were not being interviewed about them.

Even those who did think regularly about issues of economic inequality seemed to feel disempowered by a sense of individual isolation or a perception of their lack of political power compared to the rich. They didn't seem to feel that they were part of a group that would share their beliefs, which likely made the barrier between sentiment and action feel even larger. For example, Josh talked about how some of his peers were rich and how he wished they would advocate for progressive taxation—but assumed they did not. He was also frustrated that “the superrich have their lobbyists writing our laws right now.” Likewise, Deborah's discovery that she was the largest contributor to her unit's charity fundraising seemed to discourage, rather than encourage her, to give more. And she argued that “no one really wants to hear that [the CEO] should give back 10% of her

pay and let it trickle down to the lower-level employees.” She considered her idea to be “a radical statement.”

Deborah’s case also highlights something else about this sense of isolation: while these respondents seemed willing to contribute or “give up more”—they wanted that commitment to be part of a collective action where there would be an “agreement” (Gene) about using “collective resources” (Josh) that “we can decide” how to use “as a community” (Sandra). Leaving it up to individuals, they seemed to argue, would be ineffective not only because the scale of the problem required the kind of resources only available at a governmental level, but also because it would be hard for anyone, individually, to choose to give more to a collective good when, for example, they hadn’t finished filling their child’s college-savings account.

The necessity of spending money to shore up their children’s future status was a repeated theme among high-income respondents—one that often animated their feelings of financial constraint and their implicit or explicit legitimation for inaction related to economic inequality. While spending or saving money for *oneself* in the face of upsetting levels of economic inequality might feel morally illegitimate, spending for one’s “family” or children does not have the same moral baggage (Sherman 2017). Indeed, quite the opposite. Sherman found that, among her wealthy interviewees, the needs of children and the invocation of family were categories that bestowed moral legitimacy on expenditures. Although most of my respondents had fewer financial resources than did Sherman’s, they, too used the needs of their children and families to justify or legitimate their actions or expenditures.

Like their low-income counterparts, high-income respondents all took issue with various forms of government spending. At the same time, high-income respondents nearly all also felt that some sort of government action was necessary to tackle a problem of the scale and magnitude of current economic inequality. Most emphasized their willingness to contribute to those government efforts despite their hesitations about government expenditures.

High income respondents were also more likely to say they felt represented by government than were low-income respondents, but many still focused on their lack of political voice compared to the rich rather than their greater political voice compared to the poor. Few articulated an awareness that people like themselves, with incomes above \$100,000, have substantially more influence on the decisions of their elected representatives than do people with lower incomes (Bartels 2016). The focus of many on individuals and individual choices—rather than social or collective action—also left them doubting their own influence and not feeling particularly hopeful about systemic change.

Ultimately, high income respondents did not see themselves as personally implicated in upholding economic inequality. They saw themselves as beneficiaries of a system that favored those who “have more” over those who “have less,” but not necessarily as contributors or perpetrators of that system. The problem, they seemed to argue, was a system that distributed resources unfairly—one that many argued was controlled by the very rich. Perhaps they were, as Patrick said, “on the upside of the unfair scale,” but they seemed to see themselves as passive or ancillary beneficiaries of a skewed system set up by others to primarily benefit those others—and certainly not as responsible for holding that system in place.

Instead, where most high-income respondents saw their role in this system was as part of the solution. They spoke strongly about redistribution—and about their willingness to personally pay more. Many spoke about a moral or ethical obligation they felt to improve the lives of the poor. Supporting such ideas seemed to help these respondents reconcile their deeply-felt concerns about the unjust hardships faced by the poor with their recognition of the contrasting ease in their own lives. These high-income respondents seemed to be in a similar conundrum to Hochschild's respondents who felt “torn between what ought to be and what apparently must be” (Hochschild 1981:242) and turned to a similar solution.

For the wealthy, the gap between facts and values usually justifies personal inaction even in the face of an unfair status quo. They can see themselves as empathetic with the poor, even ‘socialistic,’ without feeling responsible to seek greater equality. This is not hypocrisy; they may sincerely wish things were otherwise, but because the market, or human nature, or political corruption are immutable forces, one would simply be whistling into the wind to endorse major changes. Maintaining tension between real world judgements of fact and utopian values permits them both to retain their privileged status and to condemn privilege.

My respondents, too, seemed to “sincerely wish things were otherwise,” and, like Hochschild's respondents, they also felt they would be “whistling into the wind” to try to push back against the interests of the One Percent. The perceived “immutable forces” had changed—a new villain was available to blame—but not the end result: personal inaction. Thus, the high-income respondents in my project ended up in a similar position to those Hochschild interviewed—able “both to retain their privileged status and condemn privilege” at the same time.

But, as Chana Joffe-Walt argued in a podcast about the power of “Nice White Parents” in America's public-school systems, these respondents “can't have it both ways.” It is not that the high-income respondents I spoke with were wrong in perceiving

that they have less power than the One Percent. Their misperception was in their imagining of their own lack of power as a collective—both to contribute to worsening economic inequality and to ameliorating it.

* * *

CONCLUSION

“Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.” —James Baldwin

Why has economic inequality in the U.S. continued to grow despite widespread and strong public opinion in favor of reducing it? In this dissertation, I argue that Americans are upset by current levels of economic inequality and support downward redistribution as a means to reduce it. At the same time, many have hesitations about or resistance to the mechanisms through which such redistribution might be carried out. The patterns of hesitation and resistance I found varied across class, race, and gender groups and were linked to patterns of visibility rooted in existing inequalities. Although misperceptions about inequality—that grew out of these patterns of visibility and invisibility—among less powerful groups (including the low-income and people of color) have often been the focus of attention among elite commentators, the misperceptions among the more powerful groups in my project were equally, if not more, striking. In both cases, Americans’ desire for change seemed stymied by a landscape of visibility and invisibility that serves the interests of the most economically powerful.

Across class, race, and gender, the people I interviewed were upset by economic inequality and supported downward redistribution as a means to reduce it. That is, they wanted to see the rich give up more of their holdings and they wanted to see those resources used to improve the lives of the poor. Although they generally supported some amount of income and wealth inequality, they saw current levels as illegitimate. These inequalities, they argued, contradicted American ideals of meritocracy (ideals they all seemed to implicitly support). Economic rewards flowed to those who had been born into fortunate circumstances, they argued—compounding rather than ameliorating inequalities

over which individuals had little control. Respondents felt that systems were stacked against people born without economic or social resources, whose efforts or merit often went under- or unrewarded. Furthermore, they argued, current U.S. social and economic structures and systems exacerbate rather than ameliorate these inequalities—allowing them to build, accumulate, and compound within and across generations.

Opinions about class groups featured prominently in my interviews, across respondent incomes. Respondents often discussed economic inequality using moral discourse about class groups (specifically the rich and the poor). They regularly depicted material inequalities as moral relationships or moral contrasts between the rich and the poor. As Piston (2018) has argued, their views of the poor were generally sympathetic and those of the rich were often antipathetic, contrary to widespread “reigning myths” that suggest otherwise. Respondents also used these moral understandings of the rich and the poor to define and elevate their own moral positions—particularly to draw boundaries between themselves and the rich (who they portrayed as morally corrupt) and to connect themselves to the poor (who they portrayed as morally righteous).

Race and racial inequality were also common themes in my interviews and revealed divergent patterns of belief and discourse between Black and White respondents. Although most respondents saw racial and economic inequality as intertwined, White and Black respondents expressed very different understandings of that entanglement. For most Black respondents, racial inequality was a prominent, if not the defining feature of American economic inequality—the two topics were very much part of the same conversation. White respondents were more likely to separate or compartmentalize

conversations about racialized economic inequality—often mentioning it unprompted, but rarely discussing it in any depth without my probing.

White and Black respondents also had very different levels of knowledge about American racial history. In particular, White respondents expressed much less awareness of the linkages between that history and current racialized economic inequality than did Black respondents. Many White respondents' understandings reflected dominant American narratives. They pointed to slavery as an evil of the past, then often skipped from emancipation to the present day—sometimes pausing at the civil rights movement of the 1960s—arguing implicitly and sometimes explicitly that racism was no longer a driving force behind present-day inequality. This blind spot or negligence or denial protected White respondents' sense of moral legitimacy even as it undermined their support for the kinds of redistributive policy that would otherwise have been aligned with their expressed values favoring increased equality (Kraus et al. 2019, 2017). 2020 brought a real shift in terms of widespread social narratives about race and “racial progress”—and I imagine the opinions of many of these respondents may have likewise shifted, as I will discuss later.

When our conversations turned to *what to do* about economic inequality, two major patterns emerged. First, support for downward economic redistribution, broadly conceived, was widespread. Respondents generally wanted to see the rich contribute more to improving the lives and circumstances of the poor. Second, and at the same time, most respondents—either explicitly or implicitly—also resisted redistribution.

Nearly all respondents thought more should be done to support the poor—and there was widespread agreement on what areas needed improvement: access to education,

housing, healthcare and meaningful and gainful employment. Most wanted to see the rich give up some of their holdings in order to improve the lives of the poor in these areas.

These sentiments reflect what both Piston (2018) and McCall (2016) have argued: that Americans are interested in redistribution that is transparent about who will pay (the rich) and who will benefit (the poor). The transparency is key, both argue. McCall gives the example of state-level measures that raised taxes on high-income households “in order to fund popular services, such as education, health care, and public safety” (McCall 2016:432). The key to passing these measures, according to McCall, was making “explicit” the “tradeoff between raising taxes—only on the affluent—and funding opportunity-enhancing programs” (McCall 2016:432). Without this explicitness, such policies face “a fairly severe transparency problem”:

Exactly how are higher taxes on the rich going to translate into greater educational and job opportunities for the rest of the population? On the basis of what history are Americans to put their trust in taxing the rich as the solution to declining opportunities? (McCall 2016:431)

My respondents voiced these very concerns—validating Piston and McCall’s arguments for the importance of transparency. McCall argues that “opportunity-enhancing policies” are more popular than the programs that are more traditionally associated with— and more visible to the public as—government redistribution such as cash assistance. However, although they might seem “commonsensical,” she notes, they are rare. As I will discuss later, the rarity of these policies—despite their popularity—might reflect a demonstrated lack of responsiveness among political elites to the needs of the non-economically powerful.

At the same time as they supported redistribution, most respondents also had hesitations or resistance—both implicit and explicit—about the mechanisms by which

such redistribution might be carried out. Respondents found reasons—despite their frustration with existing inequalities—to resist redistribution and morally justify inaction. Resistance manifested in distinct ways between the two income groups based on divergent experiences in lives socially and spatially segregated by class and race. Their judgements and legitimations—of themselves and of others—were influenced by what was visible to them in these separate spaces (Phillips et al. 2020). Some policies and their impacts were more visible to one or the other group. Likewise, respondents had differential access and exposure to the lives of the rich and poor and relationships between the two. These different experiences shaped respondents’ moral judgements and legitimations of themselves and of others—and, in turn, shaped their views of what should be done and who should be held responsible.

Low-income respondents’ resistance was characterized by a distrust of the government and an unexpected empathy for the rich. These respondents had little real exposure to the lives of people in the top 20% of U.S. income or wealth, and they had plenty of experiences with scarcity and lack of control in their own economic lives (including in their interactions with government-funded support programs). This combination seemed to lead many to resist the idea of taking from anyone—including the rich—against their will. This was despite the fact that low-income respondents, like most respondents, felt the rich were not contributing enough to improve the lives of the poor. This resistance was further fueled by a widespread distrust of the government, which many saw as beholden to the rich and a perpetuator of inequality.

The resistance of high-income respondents to redistributive policy was less overt, but arguably more powerful than that of low-income respondents—given the greater

political, economic, and social pull of this group. They were critical of the rich and also more familiar with the excesses of that group than were low-income respondents. As people who saw their own lives as “comfortable,” high income respondents argued that those above them on the economic ladder had more than enough to share. Thus, these respondents were more willing than some low-income respondents to demand that the rich give up some of their holdings. They also generally expressed their own willingness to contribute to downward redistribution, but they seemed unaware or uncomfortable with the reality of their own complicity in current upwardly redistributive policies. Focused on the relatively greater political, economic, and social power of the rich, high-income respondents often failed to recognize their own relative power compared to that of the poor. In this way, they continued to benefit from an economic status quo they railed against but took little action to change.

Reflections on J. Hochschild – 40 years later

“It is extraordinarily difficult to decide whether a respondent ‘really’ supports redistribution or not—and may be the most important finding on this subject. Respondents cannot make up their minds because redistribution pulls them in equal, but opposite, directions. ... most respondents certainly do not support the redistribution of wealth, but they also do not exactly oppose it. They do both and therefore neither.”
(Hochschild 1981:186)

“I conclude merely by pointing out that the raw materials of opposition exist at least among some residents of one city. Many of the poor and a surprising number of the rich do not seek redistribution, but are so ambivalent about their own distributive beliefs that they do not oppose redistribution as much as they fail to support any system of distributive justice very fully. They sometimes seek equality; at other times, they seek differentiation; too often, they do not know what they want or even how to decide what the possibilities are.” (Hochschild 1981:283)

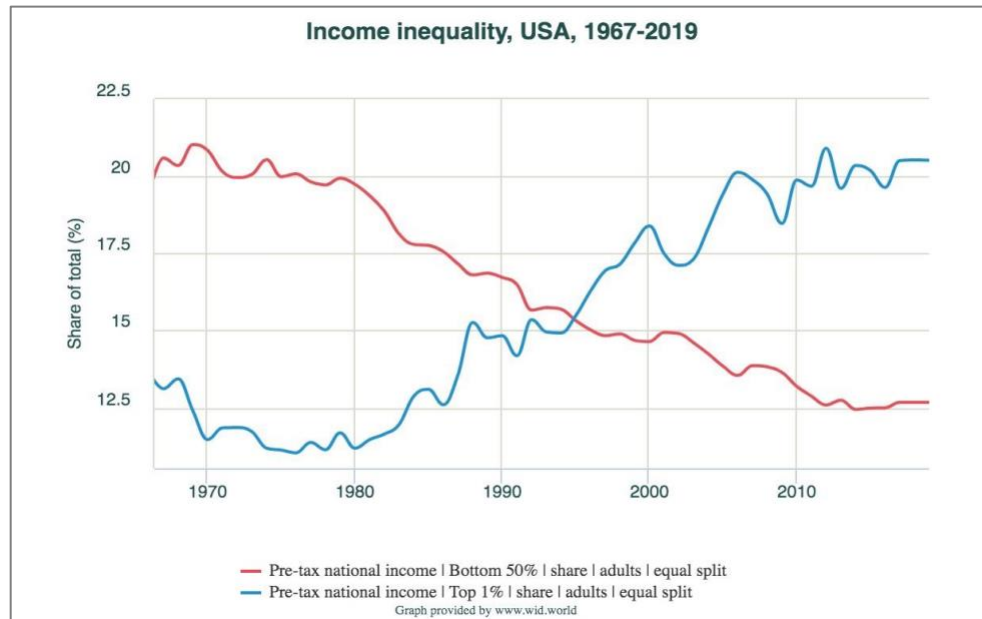
I began this project, in part, as a “revisit” to an investigation of American opinions about economic inequality and with a qualitative design similar to that undertaken by Jennifer Hochschild in the second half of the 1970s. The four decades

Conclusion

between her study and mine saw a major divergence in the fortunes of people at the top of the income ladder and those in the bottom half.

One way to encapsulate the “metamorphosis of the US economy” (Saez and Zucman 2019) between the time of Hochschild’s study and that of my own is through a figure comparing the share of national income going to the top 1% and the bottom 50% (see Figure 1):

Figure 1: Share of total income 1967-2019, bottom 50% and top 1% (World Inequality Database 2020)



Economists Saez and Zucman describe this “metamorphosis” this way:

In 1980, the top 1% earned a bit more than 10% of the nation’s income... while the bottom 50% share was around 20%. Today, it’s almost the opposite: the top 1% captures more than 20% of national income and the working class barely 12%. *In other words, the 1% earns almost twice as much income as the entire working-class population, a group 50 times larger demographically.* And the increase in the share of the pie going to 2.4 million adults has been similar in magnitude to the loss suffered by more than 100 million Americans. (Saez and Zucman 2019:6, emphasis added)

Conclusion

This major change in economic fortunes served as the backdrop against which I sought to see how, if at all, American opinions about economic inequality and redistributive policy had changed.

Another important difference in context between my study and Hochschild's was the demographics of New Haven and of our samples. About a third of New Haveners were Black when both Hochschild and I conducted our interviews. However, the population of White residents decreased from almost 60% (U.S. Census Bureau 1981) at the time of Hochschild's interviews to 30% when I conducted mine (another 30% were Latinx). While Hochschild deliberately limited her sample to White respondents "to keep the focus on economic and social, not racial, differences" (Hochschild 1981:316), I structured my study to include Black as well as White respondents to better understand how race intersected with class and gender in shaping opinions about economic inequality. In Hochschild's analysis, neither race nor gender was prominent (although she deeply engaged with race her future work), whereas I found that race and opinions about race and racism were deeply implicated in opinions about economic inequality.

Supporting redistribution

Given these dramatic changes in context, my findings were remarkably similar to Hochschild's in many ways, reinforcing the argument made by some that opinions about economic inequality are generally decoupled from the magnitude of inequality itself (McCall 2013) and suggesting the durability of the patterns Hochschild uncovered. Like Hochschild's respondents, the people I spoke with were conflicted, pulled "in equal, but opposite, directions" (Hochschild 1981:186) by their dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs and their hesitations about existing forms of redistribution. Respondents in my

project also expressed many sentiments similar to those in Hochschild's project: they were unhappy with economic inequality, upset that the rich didn't pay more in taxes, sympathetic to the poor, distrustful of the government.

However, on the critical subject of downward redistribution, my respondents' opinions differed significantly from Hochschild's. Among Hochschild's key findings was the profound ambivalence respondents expressed about their own distributive beliefs. They "certainly do not support the redistribution of wealth" she wrote, "but they also do not exactly oppose it" (Hochschild 1981:186). They "are so ambivalent about their own distributive beliefs that they do not oppose redistribution as much as they fail to support any system of distributive justice very fully" (Hochschild 1981:283). In contrast to Hochschild's respondents' profound ambivalence, the people I spoke with were overwhelmingly (although not universally) in favor of some sort of downward redistribution. Yes, they had hesitations and resistance that mitigated their full-throated support, but over the 122 hours of interviews I analyzed for this project, what I heard over and over again was a desire for some sort of downward redistribution of income and wealth.

I argue that, for the most part, the people I spoke with *did* support redistribution, but they *also* had hesitations about it. The end result seems similar to what Hochschild found—frustration and discouragement among the low income and ambivalence and acquiescence among the high income—but this subtle distinction has important implications for policy. In particular, I argue that ambivalence is not the primary force undermining Americans' support for redistribution, but rather that their hesitation and

resistance is fueled by a lack of transparency and visibility regarding the mechanisms of redistribution and the groups that reap the benefits and pay the costs.

The rise of the 1%

Many things might explain this shift of opinions in favor of redistribution. One factor of particular relevance is the rise of the 1% not just as an income group, but as figures in the public imagination. The growing share of national income going to this group has become a topic of increased public attention since the divide between—and the terminology of—the 1% and the 99% was thrust into public view by the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2010. With the 1% on the scene, both high- and low-income respondents in my project had a common villain and were united in their calls to redistribute the holdings of that group.

The pulling away of the 1% also meant that, in relative terms, my respondents were further down the economic ladder than they would have been at the time when Hochschild conducted her interviews (adjusting their incomes for inflation, of course). For example, all of Hochschild's high-income respondents had household incomes in the top 5% of income receivers at the time of her interviews. But, with those same incomes (adjusted for inflation), half of her high-income respondents would have fallen out of the top 5% by the time of my interviews, not because of a change in their incomes, but because of a change in the distribution—namely the growth in incomes at the very top. Thus, despite similar *absolute* incomes (adjusted for inflation) to Hochschild's respondents, the respondents in my study (both high- and low-income) were further down the relative economic ladder, mostly because the people at the top of the ladder had pulled away from everyone else so dramatically.

Awareness of this slippage in relative position among my respondents—both low- and high-income—shaped their opinions about economic inequality and redistributive policy. Among low-income respondents, this awareness showed up in their identification as poor (as opposed to middle class) and their descriptions of their ideals of middle-class life as increasingly out of reach. They blamed the rich for upholding systems that made the lives of the poor harder.

For high-income respondents, the stretching out at the top of the distribution moved people in their own economic positions toward the middle of the distribution—and their self-perceptions seemed to align with this shift. Notably, these respondents were not all in the same economic boat as one another—with incomes that ranged from the lower limit of the top 20% of Americans to some easily within the top 5%. Neither of these categories would seem to be how many people would define the “middle” of a range, but several factors seemed to solidify this group’s perception of middle-ness. The public visibility of the 1% and the related call to solidarity among the “99%” was one such factor. An awareness of the slippage in their relative positions combined with growing economic insecurity among highly educated professionals in the context of a “hyperdynamic, free-agent economy” (Hacker 2019) likely also solidified their self-perceptions as being in the “middle.” A key consequence of this self-perception was a tendency to focus away from people in their own economic positions when thinking about responsibility, accountability, or power to change or interrupt systems that perpetuate and augment economic inequality.

It is easy to imagine that, for high-income respondents, decreased attention on people in their own position and increased attention on the 1% would perhaps lead them

to feel more supportive of redistributive policy. Many of these respondents talked about their own willingness—and even sense of obligation—to pay more in taxes to improve the lives of the poor, but most emphasized the contributions that would need to be made by people at the top. Their sentiments reflect those of Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson: “the real economic schism separates the overwhelming majority of Americans, including most highly educated ones, from the tiny slice that has reaped the lion’s share of economic growth” (Hacker and Pierson 2010:290).

This group of respondents might then understandably struggle to make sense of their own economic and political position. Even though they have been experiencing decreasing fortunes relative to the top income receivers, they nevertheless continue to be in a position of greater power and privilege compared to people in the bottom 50%. Saez and Zucman reflected this in-between position when they characterized the “upper middle class (the top 10% excluding the top 1%)” in their argument for a new system of progressive taxation targeting top income receivers. “It’s important to distinguish” that group, they wrote, from “the rich (the top 1%).” They are “in entirely different leagues” (Saez and Zucman 2019:5). At the same time, they note, people in the “upper middle class”—which they estimated to be about 22 million adults in 2019—are “certainly not to be pitied.”

With an average income of \$220,000 and everything that goes with it—spacious suburban houses, expensive private schools for their children, well-funded pensions, and good health insurance—they are not struggling. But as a group they do not have much in common with the 1% (the 2.4 million richest Americans), whose members make \$1.5 million in income a year on average. (Saez and Zucman 2019:5)

Given the pattern of skyrocketing growth in the incomes of the people in the top 1% over the past several decades, Hochschild’s high-income respondents might have felt that they

had—and likely actually did have—more “in common” with people “at the top of the income pyramid” than did my high-income respondents. This reality likely contributed to the differences in our findings in support for downward redistribution. However, the rise of the 1%—and the increased public attention to that group—also seemed to have a countervailing effect on my high-income respondents. Even as they increasingly saw the concentration of income, wealth, and power among the rich as problematic and wanted to see it curtailed through policy—they seemed to increasingly discount their own power to push for those sorts of policy changes.

Implications

“The catch-22 of winner-take-all politics is that the only viable and defensible route to fixing our broken political system runs through our broken political system.”
—*Winner-Take-All Politics* (Hacker and Pierson 2010:289)

I began this project seeking to capture a sense of how Americans understand economic inequality in the U.S. I hoped that the insights I gained might shed light on the longstanding puzzle of why, in the face of growing inequality that continues to benefit a tiny slice of the population over all others, Americans did not demand change—despite abundant evidence of their dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs. What I learned compliments, extends, and informs the existing body of research on these topics.

My findings suggest that we might better understand the opinions of the American public related to economic inequality if we attend not only to the ways public opinion *shapes* political and social contexts, but also to the ways those opinions are *shaped by* that context. Such a shift in perspective might mean pairing our questions about why the American public does not take action in their own best interests with questions about the forces in our political systems that keep those systems from responding to a widespread

public desire to see reductions in economic inequality. Likewise, we might ask how existing political systems and structures influence public opinion by shaping what is visible and understandable to the public versus what is invisible or obfuscated.

In this last section, I reflect on a few areas of this interchange between people's opinions about economic inequality and the political and social context in which they form those opinions—focusing on those areas that emerged as particularly relevant in this project.

Political Representation

One answer to the question of why Americans fail to implement downwardly redistributive policy that might reduce the economic inequality they decry is that they are not being well represented by the people and systems charged with responding to their interests.

I emerge from this analysis with a new understanding of the questions I originally asked. I began this project seeking to learn how to change the minds of Americans who were upset with economic inequality—and on the losing end of policies that uphold it—and yet failed to support policies that would favor both their ideological position and their pocketbooks. What I learned is that Americans do favor downwardly redistributive policy and generally think that taking from the rich and giving to the poor is a good idea. What holds them back from acting on those beliefs has less to do with their support for redistribution and more to do with how the American political system responds. The fact of growing economic inequality, in the face of widespread public desire to reverse it, fueled my respondents' existing distrust of the government—particularly, their beliefs that the political system was beholden to the rich and powerful. Thus, an underlying

contributor to many respondents' reluctance toward redistributive policy was their feeling that the very people who benefit from inequality controlled the mechanisms that might be used to ameliorate it. These feelings are not unreasonable.

Respondents' perceptions that growing inequality was both a consequence and a cause of inequitable political representation was based in fact. Plenty of research (both old and new) on political representation suggests that—where politicians are responding to public sentiment at all—the interests of the highest income groups tend to be best represented (e.g., Bartels 2016; Gilens 2012; Page and Gilens 2017; Piston 2018; Wilson 1999). Furthermore, most political actors come from among the wealthy themselves (Carnes 2013). Respondents' awareness of this representational inequity fed a self-reinforcing loop wherein the more they perceived the concentration of economic and political power among the rich, the angrier and more frustrated they felt, but also the more disillusioned and discouraged they felt about the possibility that their experiences or even actions mattered for making change. Although most told me they voted (I was interviewing them in a presidential election year), both high- and low-income respondents seemed to retreat from any deeper political engagement—frustrated by a system that they perceived as getting worse and moving farther from their ideals.

Policy Feedback

Inequitable political representation also deserves closer examination as a *cause* of misperceptions about redistributive policy in cases where Americans *have* actually appeared to vote against their own self-interest.

Piston (2018) argues that one reason we do not see more downwardly redistributive policy, despite widespread public support for such policy, is that politicians

face strong incentives to serve the interests of the wealthy (who are generally not in favor of downward redistribution) without losing “votes from the public” who generally favor such policies (Piston 2018:138). They solve this dilemma, Piston argues, by framing policies in ways that “downplay class considerations,” seeking to “mollify the public” by distracting from and obscuring the distributive consequences of these policies (Piston 2018:124,138). Although much of the public supports distributing resources to the poor and taking them from the rich, the absence of “clear cues” about how the poor or the rich will benefit or be harmed by a given policy makes it difficult for them to apply those sentiments to their political decisions. Thus, Piston argues, although there is clear evidence that class group attitudes of sympathy toward the poor and resentment toward the rich are widespread and that they “bolster support for downward redistribution,”

Elites can disrupt the connection between class group attitudes and political preferences by keeping the public confused and in the dark. In turn, this lets public officials off the hook—free to pursue policies that do little to diminish the growing gap between the richest and the rest. (Piston 2018:142)

Scholars of “policy feedback” agree, and argue that part of what keeps “the public confused and in the dark” is the design of policies themselves, and not just the messaging that surrounds them. Policies “carry embedded messages” in their design that often include “mechanisms that deceive, block or divert citizens’ ability to understand and participate in politics” (Schneider and Ingram 2019:211). These design mechanisms allow elected officials to continue to channel benefits to the powerful while avoiding “consequences damaging to re-election” (Schneider and Ingram 2019:210). For example, upwardly redistributive benefits are hidden in a complex tax code—and require no special application process—making them hard for the public to see and understand and fostering the perception that they are not “expenditures” of taxpayer money (Mettler

2011). Meanwhile, some benefits targeted to the poor—and particularly to women—are made difficult to access because the processes have been structured to be punitive and surveillance-filled, making them far more visible to the public and fostering the perception that these benefits are “expenditures” and even drains on taxpayer coffers.

Indeed, while all of my respondents were aware of highly visible, direct assistance government programs to help the poor (e.g., “welfare” programs such as SNAP and TANF), neither high- nor low-income respondents seemed aware of the benefits they each might receive through the tax code. The result was that their sentiments in favor of downward redistribution were muted by the hidden nature of the government assistance they received.

For example—although most tax expenditures go to the affluent—one benefit to poor Americans in the tax code is the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). It is possibly the “largest cash transfer to the poor” (Sykes et al. 2015) and is regarded by advocates as “the most effective anti-poverty policy existing today” (Shanks-Booth and Mettler 2019:319). Yet, the EITC went almost entirely unmentioned among my respondents of either income group. Its position in the tax code “shrouds government’s role in aiding people” such that even those who are helped by the EITC “benefit from government but are not aware of it” (Shanks-Booth and Mettler 2019:319). In this way, despite the increase in EITC benefits over recent decades it “fails to mitigate recipients’ frustrations with government” (Shanks-Booth and Mettler 2019:319).⁶¹ Had this benefit been more

61. What are probably more visible to low-income tax filers than the benefits of the EITC are the audits conducted of those who file for it—something likely to further sour opinion about government. As Herd & Moynihan report “about 500,000 Earned Income Tax Credit audits take place each year, primarily by mail, with approximately four of five benefit disallowances a result of undelivered mail, nonresponse, or insufficient response, rather than evidence of wrongdoing. The long-term cost is that 30–40 percent of those audited do not claim the benefit in later years, despite their eligibility” (Herd and Moynihan 2020:4).

visible to them, low-income respondents might have increased their trust in government—and thus, in the possibility of downwardly redistributive policy.⁶²

High-income respondents seemed similarly unaware of the array of benefits they received through the tax code and—as with low-income respondents—this lack of awareness muted what might have been stronger redistributive sentiments among this group. One such benefit that has received particular attention as economic inequality has worsened is the Home Mortgage Interest Deduction (MID). Almost all of the high-income respondents “owned” homes and likely had mortgages. Yet none mentioned the way they might benefit from this “enormous entitlement in the tax code”—the biggest chunk of a collection of federal homeowner subsidies that overwhelmingly benefit the wealthy and the upper middle class and that Matthew Desmond has called “the engine of American inequality” (Desmond 2017). The way the MID is strategically hidden in the tax code thus allowed high-income respondents to remain unaware of a mechanism by which they were siphoning off the very tax dollars they said they were willing to contribute toward alleviating the inequality they decried. Although “the mortgage-interest deduction overwhelmingly benefits the sorts of upper-middle-class voters who make up the donor base of both parties” Desmond notes, those voters “generally fail to acknowledge themselves to be beneficiaries of federal largess.” This combination of the invisibility of their own gains through tax policy and of their own political power kept high-income respondents from being stronger advocates for the kinds of downwardly redistributive policy they seemed to support.

62. In contrast to the relative invisibility of the EITC to many low-income respondents, for-profit tax preparation companies are well aware of the size of the EITC benefit and often target low-income communities. There, they charge excessive fees that effectively channel as much as 20% of a family’s benefit away from the family and into the company’s own profits (White 2016).

In general, the hidden nature of government assistance through the tax code muted what might have been stronger redistributive sentiments among my respondents. Low-income respondents might have increased their trust in government had the federal government's support of the poor through the EITC been more visible to them. High-income respondents might have seen the tax breaks they received as unnecessary supports to their already comfortable lives and as contrary to their stated desires for a more downwardly redistributive tax code.

These kinds of impacts on political engagement through “policy feedback” are “designed to be self-reinforcing,” giving “advantaged populations ... positive experiences and views of government” that encourage mobilization and participation in politics while treating disadvantaged populations with “neglect,” “punishments and burdens” that encourage them to “withdraw, accepting what is allocated to them without much mobilization or participation” (Schneider and Ingram 2019:229). I saw these patterns among my respondents. Although all, as I have noted, expressed frustration and discouragement about the responsiveness of government to their desires for more equitable economic distributions, higher-income respondents were more likely than low-income respondents to express positive sentiments about government and to say that they thought their voices, opinions, and political participation mattered. Low-income respondents were more likely than high-income respondents to express disillusionment with the political process. This sense of disillusionment overlapped with a generalized distrust of government born out of repeated encounters with the most visible government-funded programs that were widely regarded not only as insufficient, but as controlling, punitive, and degrading.

In other words, my respondents felt understandably frustrated and disenfranchised by the very thing that researchers highlight—the disconnect between widespread public support for downward redistribution and the policies enacted by political elites that maintain current levels of inequality or even exacerbate them. Unfortunately, this led many to disengage. Low-income respondents generally felt that their opinions and lives were disregarded (treated as “expendable,” as one respondent put it) by political elites. High-income respondents felt less disenfranchised, but many seemed convinced that their voices, too, counted for little compared with those of the rich.

Counteracting distraction and mollification

Piston suggests that academics and activists might work to counteract the distraction and mollification of the public by exposing the distributive consequences of policies—specifically, by talking about class rather than obscuring it. To start, he argues, those who want change can reject “one of the defining myths of our time”—“the belief that most Americans do not support downward economic distribution” (Piston 2018:56). Activists interested in more economic equity would “do well to view the American public not as an inevitable enemy but as a potential ally” (Piston 2018:151).

Daylighting the distributive consequences of policies might have the additional benefit of helping high-income Americans see the ways they benefit from current policy at the expense of the poor. Richard Reeves (2018) argues that, despite their “huge influence on public discourse” and their desire for reduced inequality, members of the top 20% fail to be stronger advocates for redistributive policy because they misperceive the power of their own positions. For example, many high-income respondents expressed a desire to see more opportunities available to the poor, but they rarely expressed a

recognition that those opportunities might be unavailable for their lower-income neighbors *because* higher-income people like themselves have captured those opportunities for themselves and their kin.

Focusing on the increasing difference between themselves and the top 1%, Reeves argues, has allowed the upper middle class “to convince ourselves we are in the same boat as the rest of America; but it is not true” (2018:4). The feelings and experiences of increasing insecurity among upper-middle-class Americans (highlighted, for example, by Hacker 2019), relative to the rich, incentivizes behavior that worsens inequality. The larger the gap in quality of life and outcomes between the top 20% of income earners and the bottom 80%, Reeves suggests, the greater the incentive for those in the top 20% to invest in their own children to keep them from slipping down the class ladder. This creates a “vicious cycle” where parents in the top 20%—afraid of the consequences for their children of a “fall out of the upper middle class”—contribute to increasing inequality by “doing whatever we can, including hoarding opportunities, to reduce their [children’s] risk of being downwardly mobile” (Reeves 2018:76).

If we succeed, there will be more class persistence at the top. And as we become more confident of success, we will feel less inclined to pay for redistributive measures. This means, in turn, an increase in inequality (Reeves 2018:76).

Many high-income respondents in my study talked about the efforts they made to secure their children’s futures—from shoring up tax-free college savings accounts to paying for private schools to buying houses as inheritance investments. Most did not talk about these efforts as potential contributors to inequality—seeming unaware, or perhaps in denial about, the broader consequences of “dream hoarding” (to borrow Reeve’s term). Reeves suggests that an alternative approach upper-middle-class parents might take to securing

their children's futures would be to invest in redistribution such that downward class mobility would not be so devastating nor the "fall" so "precipitous."

My intuition is that upper middle-class adults would be more supportive of redistributive policies and institutions if they were less certain where their own children—and by extension, grandchildren—were going to end up. If those at the top believe their children are at real risk of downward social mobility, maybe they will be more open to policies that ensure a softer landing for those who do fall (Reeves 2018:74).

Making the distributive consequences of policies more visible might help higher-income Americans better see this "vicious cycle" and their own contributions to it—including the power they have to advocate for change.

Advancing Economic Equity—Intersections of class, race, and gender inequality

"In a diverse society, how do you enact politics that may advance racial equality without reinforcing racial divisions that are counterproductive and hurt you politically?"
—Omar Wasow (in Powell 2020)

The issues of visibility and obfuscation that keep "the public confused and in the dark" about economic policy also shape and are shaped by American perceptions and misperceptions about how racial, gender, and economic inequalities intersect. Americans' relationship with race and gender complicates their understandings of economic inequality. My data suggest that action to reduce or counteract economic inequality is hindered by a lack of understanding—particularly among White and men respondents—about the ways that economic inequality (and their own place within it) is inextricably bound up with racial and gender inequality.

In this context, policies with an explicit focus on racial and gender equity—rather than being seen as "universal"—might be perceived by the general public as pitting the interests of the targeted groups against the interests of others in a zero-sum conflict. This

has led some commentators to suggest that, given these beliefs, pursuing racial economic equity might be more effectively done by promoting policies that are not explicitly targeted to disadvantaged groups, but nevertheless, disproportionately help them. At the same time, demands to surface and address White supremacy and patriarchy directly have gained momentum in recent years.

My findings provide some support to both paths. My respondents were most unified (across race, class, and gender groups) in their calls for downwardly redistributive policy when it was framed in the most universal terms. However, the divisions between these groups in their opinions about more targeted policy seemed to emerge from the forces I've noted that obscure the intersections between racialized, gendered, and economic inequality. Together, these findings raise questions about the path forward in terms of reducing economic inequalities across groups: whether to propose universal policies that might be more politically palatable given current realities or to address the resistance to targeted policies more directly—through a more head-on reckoning with the intersectional nature of race, gender, and class inequality.

“Race-neutral” Policies

Generating much “productive controversy,” William Julius Wilson argued some time ago that, racial equity for the “truly disadvantaged” might better be served through ostensibly “nonracial solutions” that “address the substantive inequality that exists” and has accumulated and compounded over generations—rather than through policies that focus only on reducing current discrimination without addressing the gap in resources created through historical inequity (Wilson 1987). Such a “hidden agenda”—as Wilson called it—would “improve the life chances of truly disadvantaged groups” by making

“universal programs ... the dominant and most visible aspects” of reforms, thus “emphasizing programs to which the more advantaged groups of all races and class backgrounds can positively relate” (Wilson 1987). Wilson later revised this view, arguing “we should not shy away from an explicit discussion of the specific issues of race and poverty” but instead should frame policy in a way that would “facilitate a frank discussion” of those issues and the “urgent need to address them.”

The framing ... should not only generate a sense of fairness and justice to combat inequality, but should also make people aware that our country would be better off if these problems were seriously addressed and eradicated (Wilson 2011).

Wilson’s arguments resurfaced as commentators made sense of the results of the 2020 national election in the U.S.—at the end of a tumultuous year where longstanding inequalities across race, gender, and class became starkly visible to many. Supporting Wilson’s arguments for foregrounding “universal” policies, New York Times opinion columnist David Leonhardt argued that electoral results like the repeated defeat of affirmative action suggest that attempts to reduce racial inequity might be better served by policies that are “economically populist and race-neutral on their face while disproportionately helping Black and Latino Americans” (Leonhardt 2020). He lists Medicaid expansion and “baby bonds” as examples.⁶³ Another such policy—one that saw support in the November 2020 election—is an increase in the minimum wage. Given the popularity of minimum wage increases and the fact that they disproportionately benefit women and people of color (Huizar and Gebreselassie 2016; Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2020), Matthew Yglesias argues, “it’s not clear that” supporting such “race-neutral”

63. Baby bonds are federal grants for children, recently advocated and popularized by Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey.

policies present “an actual tradeoff in terms of achieving more racial equity” (Yglesias 2020).

More universal policies targeted to decreasing economic inequality might have the added benefit of fostering a recognition of the impacts of class, race, and gender inequalities in society as a whole, not just among the populations who are seen to be the targets of specific oppressive systems and structures. Misperceptions that there are some people who are not impacted by these inequalities facilitate feelings of separation rather than solidarity. For example, high-income respondents were angry and frustrated, but ultimately felt their lives were little impacted by the economic inequalities they declaimed. White respondents expressed a minimal understanding of racialized inequality—and, although they expressed concern, they demonstrated almost no understanding of the implications of that inequality for their own lives. Men sometimes recognized gendered economic inequality (for example, in pay), but—as in these other instances—saw it as a problem that was not their own.

Misperceptions like these suggest avenues for potential advocacy to foster a recognition of the impacts of these inequalities on American society as a whole. For example, a recent report by the corporate consulting firm McKinsey & Company argued that closing the racial wealth gap in the U.S. would boost the *overall* American economy (Noel et al. 2019). The COVID 19 pandemic of 2020 revealed how much American society relies on “essential” workers who tend to be low-income, women, and people of color—and thus how protecting and supporting those groups supports American society and the U.S. economy as a whole (Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2020).

In other words, promoting the widespread benefits to addressing racial, economic, and gender injustice is not as deceptive as the language of a “hidden agenda” might imply. Instead, this framing could be seen as a correction to the pervasive idea that the economic well-being of Americans in the bottom 99% of incomes are in competition with one another.

Reckoning with racial history

“If we're going to change the attitudes of the judges who are making sentencing decisions, and police officers who are unfairly suspecting young men of color, and employers and educators who are suspending and expelling kids of color at disproportionately high rates, if we're going to make a difference in overcoming the implicit bias that we all have, we're going to have to deal honestly with this history and have to consciously work on freeing ourselves from this history.”

Bryan Stevenson (in Johnson 2015)

It was clear in my analysis that a widespread ignorance or denial of the impact of American racial history on present-day inequality—particularly among White respondents—prevented respondents from understanding and feeling committed to addressing economic inequality. The events of 2020 have left me wondering where this work of reckoning with America’s racial history meets the strategy of fostering support for economic justice through an emphasis on race- or gender- “neutral” policy.

In the months leading up to the 2020 presidential election, many commentators suggested that Americans were on the cusp of an historic reckoning with their country’s racial history. The seemingly-sudden racial awakening among many White Americans in the summer of 2020—responding to the killing of George Floyd and the protests that followed—led simultaneously to puzzlement (NPR’s *Code Switch* podcast asked, “Why now, white people?”) and hope that the surge of support for racial justice would be “a movement, not a moment.” Mainstream institutions as high up as the Federal Reserve (that would normally shy away from such commentary) nodded to “issues of racial

equity”—in the Fed’s case, by proposing new rules for the Community Reinvestment Act that explicitly acknowledge “systemic inequities in credit access” (Cheung 2020).

The social upheaval of a raging pandemic, massive economic distress, and a hotly contested election, Jennifer A. Richeson wrote, burned through the “gauzy nostalgia” and “willful ignorance” that characterized the views of many Americans about racial inequality, making it difficult for them to “avoid seeing the chasm between myth and reality” (Richeson 2020). The overtly racialized tactics and rhetoric of the Trump administration, Ibram X. Kendi argued, “held up a mirror to” the racism of American society in a way that made it “too blatant for Americans to” continue “to ignore or deny” (Kendi 2020). George Packer argued that “The country is at a low point. But we may be on the cusp of an era of radical reform.” “Our collapse is so complete that the field lies open—the philosophical questions brought on by despair allow us to reimagine what kind of country we can be” (Packer 2020).

The results of the 2020 election suggest that this opening, if there is one, is a small crack rather than a wide portal—and that conversations, even in this window of opportunity, will need to turn toward building a sense of commonality and solidarity. The tightness of the presidential race highlighted partisan divisions and polarization that overshadow the many points of commonality—including in opinions about many issues related to economic and racial inequality. At the same time, national conversations about race—at least among a subset of Americans—have shifted. I imagine that if I were to interview the same respondents again now, I might hear White respondents drawing a clearer connection between historical racial inequity and current economic inequalities.

The invisibility of gendered inequities

I do not feel the same confidence that the intersections of gender inequality with racial and economic inequality would be more visible or salient to respondents now than they were at the time of my interviews. In those interviews, the overlap between gender inequality and racial and class inequality seemed particularly invisible to respondents. Women were more likely to comment on and describe current gendered discrimination and inequities—especially in terms of pay—than were men (although there was some variation among women by race and class). But even among women, few expressed an understanding of the history of gendered inequities that had been systematically built into laws and policies and the ways those reverberate into the present moment.

Men respondents independently acknowledged gendered economic inequality even less frequently than White respondents independently acknowledged racialized economic inequality. While most White respondents at least minimally acknowledged the potential intersections of racial and economic inequality without my prompting, this was not the case among men respondents, who rarely acknowledged gendered inequities without prompting.

Why was gender inequality and its intersections relatively invisible to my respondents? One possible answer comes from the social psychology of the way successful “exemplars” from historically marginalized groups are interpreted as evidence of reduced structural barriers facing members of those groups. One set of researchers (Georgeac and Rattan 2019b) found that when Americans perceive growing representation of women in top leadership positions (e.g., as Fortune 500 CEOs or board members), they tend to “overgeneralize the extent to which women have access to equal

opportunities, which then decreases their concern with gender inequality in pay and other domains.” The authors note that women’s representation in top leadership positions has received much attention as a central “indicator of gender equality in the workplace, as well as a key policy objective” (Georgeac and Rattan 2019a:2). Thus, moderate changes in the gender composition of U.S. corporate leadership over the past several decades have been heavily publicized. Georgeac and Rattan’s experimental work demonstrates that, in this kind of context where there appears to be progress toward gender equity at top levels, Americans express less concern about facts presented to them about persisting gender inequities in a variety of domains. This reduction in concern about gender-based inequities occurred even as respondents maintained their level of concern about “gender-unrelated wealth inequality in the U.S.”

Another likely contributor to the lack of attention among my respondents to gendered economic inequality relates to policy feedback and visibility. Among the ways gendered inequities have been perpetuated are through the social and legal restriction of women to labor in the realm of “private life” (where work is both unpaid and socially unacknowledged) or—particularly in the case of women of color—to occupations that have been deliberately hidden from public view (e.g., Branch 2011; Glenn 2002). As such, “the fact that the country’s shittiest, lowest-paying jobs are held by women” (as journalist Lisa Miller put it in early 2020) is something that seems to remain hidden in plain sight (Miller 2020). As with racial inequities that have long been part of American society, but suddenly gained attention in the upheavals of 2020, commentators have argued that the COVID-19 “pandemic is underscoring generations of inequitable social policy” as it relates to gender as well (Kashen, Glynn, and Novello 2020).

This blow to the economy will not be felt equally but rather will fall most heavily on women of color. U.S. policies and norms have long pushed women of color into the workforce—into jobs that pay less and purposefully have fewer workplace protections—while setting up barriers, and in some cases supports, to keep white women out of the workforce. The choices made by policymakers—primarily white men of means—have deliberately failed to establish a robust care infrastructure and family-supporting workplace policies and have not addressed the nation’s outdated mismatch between school and work schedules. All of these factors contribute to the vicious cycle of racism and sexism, whereby not having good childcare and workplace policies in place is both a cause and effect of discriminatory cultural norms and the gender and racial imbalance in resources and formal positions of power. (P. 15)

Part of what upholds this “vicious cycle” is not only the invisibility of policies that perpetuate this “gender and racial imbalance in resources and formal positions of power,” but also the invisibility of the ways that those inequalities harm society more broadly. Regarding the latter, researchers have underscored moral and normative arguments for greater equity by noting the ways gendered and racial inequalities harm countries’ economies (e.g., Kashen et al. 2020; Noel et al. 2019; Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2020; Wodon and de la Brière 2018). Lost potential due to inequality can be literally invisible. Writing as a Black scientist and advocate for climate justice in the months after George Floyd was killed by a White police officer, Ayana Elizabeth Johnson captured some of this lost potential as she described how “racism is hurting my work.” She built on Toni Morrison’s assertion that distraction is “the very serious function of racism.”

Even at its most benign, racism is incredibly time-consuming. Black people don't want to be protesting for our basic rights to live and breathe. We don't want to be constantly justifying our existence. Racism, injustice and police brutality are awful on their own, but they are additionally pernicious because of the brain power and creative hours they steal from us. I think of one black friend of mine who wanted to be an astronomer but gave up that dream because organizing for social justice was more pressing. Consider the discoveries not made, the books not written, the ecosystems not protected, the art not created, the gardens not tended (Johnson 2020).

Creating Visibility

“Invisibility makes privilege powerful.” (Phillips and Lowery 2020)

My respondents strongly supported downward redistribution and also resisted it. Among the broadest conclusions I draw from this research is that respondents’ resistance to downwardly redistributive policy was grounded in what was visible or invisible to them. And those people and entities with the most power to shape what is visible to Americans are also those who are most served by the kind of obfuscation that upholds the status quo. This conundrum is one of the fundamental challenges to tackling economic inequality that emerged from my data.

It seems that people might process cues and information about economic inequality in ways that are akin to the ways they process literally (not just metaphorically) visual information (Jachimowicz et al. 2020; Phillips et al. 2020). My research suggests that differential visibility of a variety of cues and differential access to information needed to understand those cues served to uphold the inequitable economic status quo—despite public sentiment against it. In my findings, people’s opinions were influenced by the visibility of cues about class, racial and gendered inequality, the lives of the rich or the poor, the work of the government, policies themselves, and respondents’ own relative privilege and disadvantage. And the visibility of each of those things was, in turn, shaped by inequitable systems including social, physical, and informational segregation by race, class, and gender—systems that served to obscure rather than clarify.

However, obfuscatory systems periodically crack—allowing the public to briefly gaze into “the chasm between myth and reality” (Richeson 2020) that theretofore, many had been unable or unwilling to see. The “financial crisis” of 2007–2008 might have been

Conclusion

one such moment when the public gained a glimpse of the predatory actions of financial institutions and the dire consequences for the people on whom they preyed. Out of that moment of crisis—and in that moment of visibility—came a wave of reform. A new federal agency with broad power to protect consumers (the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, CFPB) was created. The rules later released by the CFPB reflected an understanding that obfuscation and a lack of transparency served the interests of the powerful—creating profits for those who already had access to resources at the expense of those who did not. The new rules amended the Truth in Lending Act—requiring that banks issuing mortgages or credit cards make clear to their customers what the costs to those customers would be.

I am concluding this project in 2020, at what many consider to be another such moment. In this case a confluence of forces created cracks in the veneer of American equality myths—and particularly in myths about racial equality—large enough that many Americans could no longer fail to see those myths for what they were. One thing my project underscores is that American denial of the fundamentally intertwined nature of economic, racial, and gendered inequality in the U.S. serves to uphold policies that perpetuate or worsen economic inequality. The upheavals of 2020 posed the most significant challenges to that denial in generations. Perhaps we will begin to face what needs to be changed.

* * *

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