**Getting Ahead
Graduate Results**
CharityTracker
Sept. 2013–June 2017

Getting Ahead Graduate Report   432 Graduates • 112 Average Days Between Assessments • 86% Model Fidelity Average
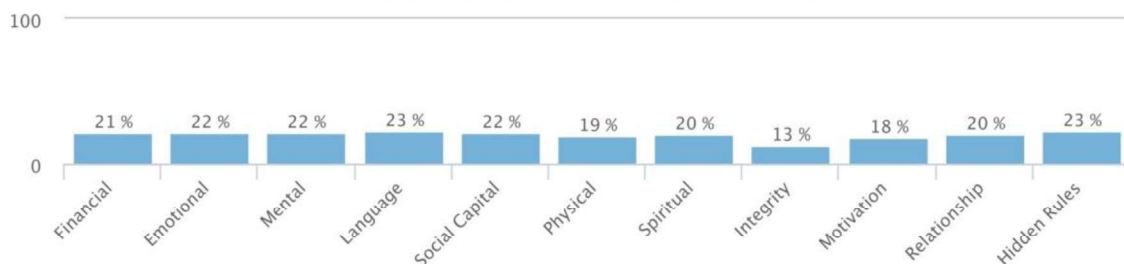
| Date: Sept. 11, 2013 - June 30, 2017 | Network: **ALL** | State: **ALL** | Site: **ALL** |

## Resource Increase by Graduates

(baseline to most recent assessment – 260 Graduates)

Financial	Emotional	Mental	Language	Social Capital	Physical	Spiritual	Integrity	Motivation	Relationship	Hidden Rules
21%	22%	22%	23%	22%	19%	20%	13%	18%	20%	23%

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Stability Increase by Graduates

(baseline to most recent assessment – 208 Graduates)
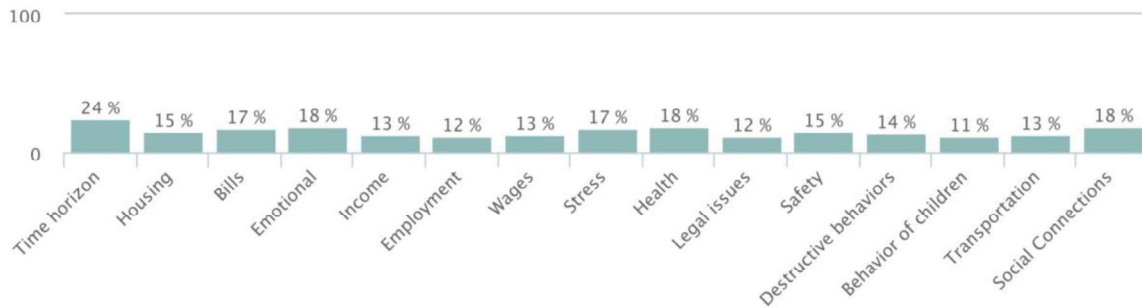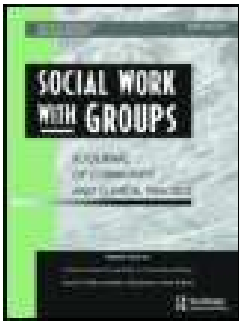

Time horizon	Housing	Bills	Emotional	Income	Employ-ment	Wages	Stress	Health	Legal issues	Safety	Destructive behaviors	Behavior of children	Transportation	Social Connections
24%	15%	17%	18%	13%	12%	13%	17%	18%	12%	15%	14%	11%	13%	18%

ROI Indicators for Graduates

(baseline to most recent assessment – 71 Graduates)
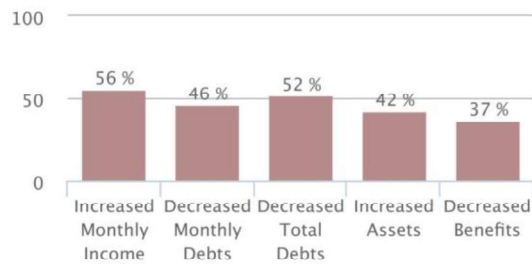
	Baseline	Most Recent Assessment	Difference	Percentage of Difference
Increased Monthly Income	$77,270	$82,586	$5,316	6 %
Decreased Monthly Debts	$57,251	$55,024	$-2,226	-3 %
Decreased Total Debts	$603,507	$543,673	$-59,834	-9 %
Increased Assets	$301,280	$365,112	$63,832	21 %
Decreased Benefits	$24,689	$27,150	$2,461	9 %

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A Group-Based Intervention for Persons Living in Poverty: Psychosocial Improvements Noted among Participants of "Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-by World"

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Published online: 20 Jul 2016.

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A Group-Based Intervention for Persons Living in Poverty: Psychosocial Improvements Noted among Participants of "Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-by World"

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ABSTRACT

This study reviews the results of a national study of Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World ("GA"), a widely used group-based intervention for helping persons in poverty assess their resources and create a plan for increasing them. Findings from a national study of a diverse sample (N = 215) suggest that the program is facilitating positive changes in poverty-related knowledge, perceived stress, mental health and well-being, social support, hope, and goal-directed behavior and planning. Implications of these findings for practice and future research are discussed.

In the United States, nearly 15% of the population lives in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Once falling into poverty, it is difficult to increase economic class, even for future generations (Aaronson & Mazumder, 2008; Corak, 2013). Poverty is perpetuated in the United States due to structural barriers affecting individuals with low incomes and resources, such as decreased opportunity for quality basic education and for any advanced education, barriers to physical and mental health care, lack of public transportation systems and affordable housing, labor market challenges, and policies that often give advantage to the wealthy (Corak, 2013). Besides structural factors contributing to the perpetuation of poverty, many individuals in poverty also have individual barriers to economic mobility such as mental health problems, chemical dependency, learning disabilities, physical health problems, or low educational attainment that prevent obtaining or maintaining stable employment (Dworskey & Courtney, 2007; Taylor & Barusch, 2004). People in poverty are often trapped in a vicious cycle; notably, individual barriers can be worsened by macrolevel barriers because seeking interventions to overcome these problems relies on the possession of reliable transportation, money for treatment, knowledge of how to navigate sometimes complicated systems of care, and job benefits such as paid time off (or at minimum, the ability to leave work without being fired) to attend

appointments. Thus, macrobarriers often worsen or facilitate the maintenance of microlevel problems, and microlevel problems prohibit overcoming macrolevel challenges.

Social interventions for people living in poverty are vast and varied in their approach; many focus primarily on assisting individuals with obtaining/maintaining employment or supplementing wages (e.g., federal benefit programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or state welfare-to-work employment programs funded through TANF block grants), whereas others focus on improving child outcomes (Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting programs) or improving housing stability (Section 8 or other housing programs that limit housing costs to 30% of income). Because of the negative consequences of poverty and the systemic and individual barriers to economic mobility that exist, effective interventions for improving the quality of life, increasing knowledge of poverty, and ultimately increasing capacity for raising economic status are also important.

Although caused primarily by structural problems, living in poverty is predictive of a host of negative consequences for the individual, including increased stress (Mirowsky & Ross, 2003), reduced self-efficacy (Dahling, Melloy, & Thompson, 2013), smaller social support networks (Cattell, 2001), and problems with health and overall functioning (Bravemen, Cubbin, Egerter, Williams, & Pamuk, 2010; Mirowsky & Ross, 2003). Additionally, because of complex relationships between stress, self-efficacy, social support, and health/functioning, many of these factors perpetuate one another and therefore could further complicate ability to rise above poverty or overcome additional barriers to economic mobility (Cattell, 2001; Dahling et al., 2013; Milfort, Bond, McGurk, & Drake, 2015; Moskowitz, Vittinghoff, & Schmidt, 2012; Seefeldt & Orzol, 2005). Thus, interventions that address these factors could help improve an individual's chances of exiting poverty or at minimum, reduce time living in poverty or severity of poverty experienced.

Group interventions, in particular, can be useful for meeting the needs of this population; well-functioning, cohesive groups can facilitate positive changes in self-confidence and efficacy due to the group process alone (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Groups can be powerful for people who are often oppressed (such as individuals living in poverty), giving them a voice and a sense of social belonging they may not normally feel (Toseland & Rivas, 2005). Group-work models that have been used previously with this population include mutual aid groups, to increase sharing of information, support, and social connection (Cohen & Graybeal, 2007; Shulman, 1986), as well as self-directed social action groups, to investigate sources of oppression and inequality and create movement for social change (Fleming & Ward, 2013). Although these two group models have often been used separately, some scholars recommend combining the two models for groups of people who

need the support offered by mutual aid groups but also could benefit from social activism and change (Breton, 2012; Cohen & Mullender, 2006; Roy & Pullen-Sansfacon, 2016). Consequently, the most effective groups for people in poverty might be those that address the micro-, mezzo-, and macrolevels of the social work continuum.

One intervention currently being used with people living in poverty that uses a combined mutual aid and self-directed group model is Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-by World (GA; DeVol, 2013a, 2013b), a manualized, capacity-building curriculum for people in poverty. Widely used by many front-line agencies working with people in poverty, GA has expanded rapidly in its use (even internationally—GA is currently being used in Mexico, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the Czech Republic, among others) without much empirical study of its efficacy or the mechanisms by which it may be helping people. Several small-scale local studies conducted in single sites across the United States, primarily qualitative studies, have indicated that potential benefits of GA may be related to improved mental health, increased efficacy, increased social support, and personal goal setting (Brisson, 2011; Hora-Schwobe, 2009; Jindra, Jindra, & Bazata, 2013). Thus, this study sought to quantitatively measure potential changes in these constructs across a diverse sample of GA participants. Do GA participants experience improvements in mental health, self-efficacy, social support, and goal setting? It is hypothesized that they do experience psychosocial improvements throughout participation in the program.

Method

The intervention

GA (DeVol, 2013a, 2013b) is a manualized curriculum that is currently being used by a variety of agencies across the United States and internationally as a way to help people living in poverty learn about how poverty affects them and their communities, identify needed resources to help them begin to improve their economic class, and set goals for beginning to increase those resources. It is a 45-hour workshop that enables participants to investigate their own experiences of poverty, explore the effects of poverty on their communities, and examine issues in their communities that affect poverty. Topics include a personal assessment of resources, the causes of poverty and inequality, a community assessment (discussion of local strengths, resources, barriers, and factors that perpetuate poverty or inhibit economic mobility), and a personalized plan for building resources. Although groups are typically facilitated by two people—at least one is a trained facilitator and the other is a graduate of the program and someone who has experienced poverty firsthand—groups are supposed to use a "flat" structure for GA so participants are equal in status and power to the facilitators (DeVol, 2013a, 2013b).

The process by which GA groups are facilitated is emphasized by its author as equally important as the content of the curriculum itself (DeVol, 2013a). It uses a strengths-based, empowerment approach and emphasizes that people living in poverty are the experts on their own lives and on the community's treatment of them. As evidence of viewing participants as the experts, participants are to be paid for their time in GA because they are not only expending a great deal of time and energy being present and active for 45 hours but are also providing the organization much information about the experience of poverty in that particular area. GA emphasizes and educates on the systemic explanations for poverty, so participants are aware of the many outside factors that contribute to the perpetuation of poverty, yet tries to instill hope and understanding of concrete individual strategies for improving the possibility of rising in economic class. People of different economic classes are involved in the group to increase participants' social capital (DeVol, 2013a).

All organizations facilitating GA groups are informed that the program is to be voluntary and "agenda free," meaning the group is to be client centered and have no outcomes or goals predetermined by the facilitating site, with participants (called "investigators") in charge of their own goals, participation, and learning (DeVol, 2013a). Groups are to be diverse, not just in demographics, but also in experiences with poverty and length of time living in poverty to allow for rich and challenging group dialogue. As part of the program, participants are guided through conducting a self-assessment of their own resources and are assisted with developing a personalized plan for building those resources. Although GA uses a workbook, "mental models" are used to visually display participants' experiences to reach participants regardless of literacy level. These mental models are drawings and visual representations of concepts being discussed that are created in and by the group (DeVol, 2013a, 2013b). Figure 1 provides two examples of mental models created in GA groups.

Study design

This study used a one-group pretest–posttest design. A list of all known U.S. sites facilitating English speaking adult GA groups was obtained from the creator of the intervention, along with information on sites' responses to model fidelity questions. Sites comprised professional agencies serving individuals in poverty, such as homeless shelters, food banks, or agencies responsible for administering TANF benefits, as well as some churches. Only sites following the GA model exactly as directed were invited to participate in the evaluation. Twenty-seven sites were found to be eligible and were invited to participate, representing all known GA sites planning to facilitate adult groups during the evaluation period of August 1, 2014 to July 31, 2015. Nineteen sites agreed to participate in this evaluation (a 70% participation rate).

Figure 1. Examples of Mental Models.
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Once agreeing, each site was mailed instructions and surveys. Instructions given asked the GA facilitator to read the invitation to participate/instructions to participants upon beginning GA and invite them to complete a baseline survey. Consenting participants completed the survey and put it in an envelope so it could be returned to the researcher without anyone from the site seeing the responses. Similar procedures were followed for the follow-up instrument, completed by participants in their last GA session. Code

numbers were assigned to participants so no identifying info was obtained. All research procedures were approved by the Indiana University Institutional Review Board.

Measures

Psychosocial measures

Psychosocial constructs measured in this project were stress, mental health/ well-being, hope, self-efficacy, and social support. Stress was measured using the 14-item Cohen's Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). Mental health/well-being was measured using the Mental Health Continuum–Short Form (Keyes, 2005), which comprises 14 items and contains three subscales to measure specific aspects of mental health and well-being; positive affect/mood, social well-being, and psychological well-being. Hope was measured using the 6-item State Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1996). This instrument is able to detect potential changes in overall hope using Snyder's cognitive model of hope; it contains two subscales, one measuring goal-directed energy and one measuring planning activities to accomplish goals. Self-efficacy, or belief in one's own ability to deal with difficult tasks or adversity, was measured using the 10-item General Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995). The 40-item Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983) was used to measure potential changes in social support throughout participation in GA. Previous research (see Brookings & Bolton, 1988) has found that this instrument contains four subscales to measure different types of social support- appraisal (perceived availability of having someone with whom to talk about important things), tangible (having someone who can give material assistance when needed), self-esteem (having someone to whom one can feel they compare positively), and belonging (feeling that one belongs to a social group). All of these scales have been found to have adequate reliability and validity across a number of general and clinical samples in previous research (Brookings & Bolton, 1988; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Cohen et al., 1983; Hewitt, Flett, & Mosher, 1992; Keyes, 2005; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995; Snyder et al., 1996).

Overall functioning

Participants were asked to report how many days out of the last month they had poor physical health, poor mental health, and how many days their health had prevented them from performing their usual activities.

Poverty-related knowledge

Statements measuring poverty-related knowledge and financial literacy were derived from the Getting Ahead Assessment Instrument (Bazata, 2014) and had possible scores ranging from 0 (*definitely false*) to 3 (*definitely true*).

These questions were designed to measure changes in knowledge about important components of the GA curriculum, including knowledge about self-sufficiency wages in their areas, how much rent they can afford, legal caps on interest rates, and financial predators and how to avoid them.

Findings

Investigator demographics

All participants from all GA groups held at the consenting sites were invited to participate in this evaluation. In total, there were 332 participants who completed baseline surveys and 215 participants who also completed the follow-up survey (a 65% completion rate). Only individuals who completed both surveys were included in these analyses. Because responses were anonymous and sites did not report the overall number of people enrolled in each group, it is unknown whether some GA participants self-selected out of the evaluation or what percentage of eligible participants the total sample represented. See Table 1 for demographics.

Psychosocial benefits

To examine changes occurring throughout participation in GA, mean scores at follow-up were compared to mean baseline scores using paired samples t tests, and effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d_{rm}. This effect size measure was selected because it takes the correlation between pre- and posttest scores into consideration (Morris & DeShon, 2002). All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 23.0. Participants missing data on any specific measure were excluded from that particular analysis. Findings from this evaluation demonstrated statistically significant psychosocial improvements while in GA, including scores on measures of perceived stress, mental health and well-being, hope, goal-directed energy and planning, and social support while in GA. Additionally, there were observed improvements in functioning while in GA. See Table 2 for a visual display of the findings and details described below.

Stress

The Cronbach's alpha was .74 at baseline and .68 at follow-up, indicating some potential measurement problems with this scale in this particular sample. Analysis of each scale item was conducted to determine if a single item was interfering with overall scale reliability and found that one item, "Have you been unable to control irritations in your life?," needed to be removed to improve scale reliability. With this item removed, scale reliability improved to an alpha of .80 at baseline and .76 at follow-up, indicating adequate scale reliability. Total possible range of scores was 0 to 52, with higher scores

Table 1. Demographic information of participants.

Demographic Category		n (%)	Average
Race	White	141 (65.6%)	
	Black	34 (15.8%)	
	Latino	19 (8.8%)	
	Other	20 (9.3%)	
Age			37.64
	18–25	50 (23.4%)	
	26–35	60 (28.0%)	
	36–45	36 (16.8%)	
	46–55	40 (18.7%)	
	56–65	24 (11.2%)	
	66+	4 (1.9%)	
Gender	Female	147 (68.7%)	
	Male	67 (31.3%)	
Marital status	Single/never married	105 (48.8%)	
	Married/partnered	47 (21.9%)	
	Divorced	30 (14.0%)	
	Separated	26 (12.1%)	
	Widowed	3 (1.4%)	
Employment status	Employed full-time	49 (23.7%)	
	Employed part-time	31 (14.9%)	
	Student	7 (3.4%)	
	Unemployed	120 (55.8%)	
Monthly Income	$0	47 (22.2%)	
	$1–500	50 (23.6%)	
	$501–1000	51 (24.1%)	
	$1001–1500	33 (15.6%)	
	$1501–2000	8 (3.8%)	
	$2001–2500	9 (4.2%)	
	$2501–3000	7 (3.3%)	
	$3001+	7 (3.3%)	
Number of people in household supported by income			2.48

indicating higher perceived stress. Between beginning and completing GA, participants reported a statistically significant decrease in perceived stress from a mean of 27.7 to 25.1, $t(196) = 6.97$, $p \leq .001$, $d_{rm} = .44$.

Mental health and well-being

Reliability testing demonstrated that these subscales had adequate internal reliability (alphas ranged from .83 to .89 for all subscales at baseline and follow-up). There were statistically significant improvements in scores noted for each of these subscales. Positive affect increased from 9.9 to 10.8, $t(207) = -4.0$, $p \leq .001$, $d_{rm} = -.28$ social well-being increased from 11.1 to 13.2, $t(198) = -5.5$, $p \leq .001$, $d_{rm} = -.39$, and psychological well-being increased from 19.6 to 21.8, $t(206) = -4.9$, $p \leq .001$, $d_{rm} = -.35$.

Hope

Total hope score increased throughout participation in GA from 32.9 to 37.3, $t(210) = -7.0$, $p \leq .001$, $d_{rm} = -.48$. The agency subscale, which measures

Table 2. Changes in scores on measures of psychosocial well-being.

Scale Name (Range of Potential Scores)	Average Baseline Score	Average Follow-up Score	t	d_{rm}
Perceived Stress Scale (0–52)	27.7	25.1	6.7***	.49
Mental Health Continuum- Short Form				
Positive Affect Subscale (0–15)	9.9	10.8	−4.0***	−.28
Social Well-being Subscale (0–25)	11.1	13.2	−5.5***	−.39
Psychological Well-being Subscale (0–30)	19.6	21.8	−4.9***	−.35
State Hope Scale (6–48)	32.9	37.3	−7.0***	−.48
Agency Subscale (3–24)	15.6	18.4	−7.4***	−.52
Pathways Subscale (3–24)	17.3	18.9	−5.2***	−.36
General Self-Efficacy Scale (10–40)	29.5	31.9	−5.8***	−.42
Interpersonal Support Evaluation List				
Appraisal Support Subscale (0–30)	17.3	19.6	−6.1***	−.44
Tangible Support Subscale (0–30)	16.6	18.6	−4.7***	−.34
Self-Esteem Support Subscale (0–30)	17.3	19.3	−6.3***	−.47
Belonging Support Subscale (0–30)	17.8	19.9	−5.5***	−.39
Overall functioning				
Poor physical health in previous month (0–30)	8.4	7.3	1.6	.11
Days of poor mental health in previous month (0–30)	12.8	9.1	5.1***	.36
# of Days health prevented usual activities (0–30)	7.7	5.5	3.3***	.23

***$p \leq .001$.

goal-directed energy, increased from 15.6 to 18.4, $t(211) = −7.4$, $p \leq .001$, $d_{rm} = −.52$, and the pathways subscale, which measured goal-related planning, increased from 17.3 to 18.9, $t(211) = −5.2$, $p \leq .001$, $d_{rm} = −.36$.

Self-efficacy

Cronbach's alphas were .93 at baseline and .90 at follow-up, indicating excellent internal reliability of the scale in the current sample. Possible range of scores was 10 to 40, with higher scores indicating higher self-efficacy. Scores increased significantly for the GA participants from 29.5 at baseline to 31.9 at follow-up, $t(193) = −5.8$, $p \leq .001$, $d_{rm} = −.42$.

Social support

All of these subscales had adequate internal reliability in the current sample (alphas ranged from .78 – .88 at baseline and .77 – .88 at follow-up). Participants had increased scores for all four of these types of social support between beginning and ending GA. Scores increased for appraisal support from 17.3 to 19.6 from baseline to follow-up, $t(191) = −6.1$, $p \leq .001$, $d_{rm} = −.44$. Scores increased on tangible support from 16.6 to 18.6 on this subscale, $t(194) = −4.7$, $p \leq .001$, $d_{rm} = −.34$. For self-esteem support, scores changed from 17.3 to 19.3 during participation in GA, $t(186) = −6.3$, $p \leq .001$, $d_{rm} = −.47$. Lastly, belonging support increased from 17.8 to 19.9 throughout participation in GA, $t(195) = −5.5$, $p \leq .001$, $d_{rm} = −.39$.

Table 3. Poverty-related knowledge.

Question	Average Score at Baseline (Range of 0–3)	Average Score at Follow-up (Range of 0–3)	t	d_{rm}
I know the self-sufficiency wage, or how to find the self-sufficiency wage, in my area.	1.4	2.1	−8.5***	−.60
I know how much rent I can afford based on my income.	2.2	2.5	−5.5***	−.39
I know what a financial predator is and how to avoid them.	1.7	2.5	−11.6***	−.84
I know the maximum interest rate that I can be charged on a loan in my state.	0.8	1.6	−9.9***	−.69
I know how much debt I have.	1.7	2.1	−5.9***	−.41
I have a plan to reduce my debt.	1.6	2.0	−5.6***	−.39
I can explain how the economy affects my daily life.	1.3	2.0	−9.0***	−.63

***$p \leq .001$.

Overall functioning

Statistically significant improvements were noted in responses for two of the three questions, indicating improvements in days of poor mental health and the number of days health problems prevented usual activities. Upon entering GA, participants reported an average of 12.8 days of poor mental health and 7.7 days their health had prevented usual activities. At the end of GA, participants reported 9.1 days of poor mental health and 5.5 days their health had prevented participation in usual activities over the previous month, $t(200) = 5.10$, $p \leq .001$, $d_{rm} = .36$ and $t(200) = 3.28$, $p = .001$, $d_{rm} = .23$, respectively. Although not statistically significant, physical health also improved; participants reported 8.4 days of poor physical health at baseline and 7.3 days at follow-up, $t(202) = 1.55$, $p = .12$, $d_{rm} = .11$.

Poverty-related knowledge

Participants significantly improved in perceived poverty-related knowledge and financial literacy for most of the items measured (See Table 3 for scores for specific items). Items with the strongest effect sizes included self-reported improvements in knowledge about financial predators and how to avoid them, baseline $M = 1.7$, follow-up $M = 2.5$, $t(204) = -11.6$, $p \leq .001$, $d_{rm} = -.84$, the maximum interest rate they can legally be charged for a loan in their state, baseline $M = .08$, follow-up $M = 1.6$, $t(209) = -9.9$, $p \leq .001$, $d_{rm} = -.69$, how the economy affects them, baseline $M = 1.3$, follow-up $M = 2.0$, $t(209) = -9.0$, $p \leq .001$, $d_{rm} = -.63$ and the amount of income considered a self-sufficiency wage in their area, baseline $M = 1.4$, follow-up $M = 2.1$, $t(204) = -8.5$, $p \leq .001$, $d_{rm} = -.60$.

Discussion

The findings of this study have important implications for agencies serving individuals living in poverty. First, the findings demonstrate that GA appears

to be facilitating knowledge gains about poverty and how to begin to "get ahead" when living in poverty. Participants are leaving the program with more knowledge about how to avoid financial predators, what kind of rent they can afford, and what kind of interest they can legally be charged. They are leaving with increased knowledge of themselves and the resources they need to move forward economically and with an individualized plan for beginning to increase their resources. This increased knowledge is important because financial literacy often correlates with better financial decision making (Hilgert, Hogarth, & Beverly, 2003).

Although improvements for most variables measured were modest, psychosocial and functioning improvements were consistent across nearly every variable measured; these findings provide preliminary quantitative evidence that GA appears to be facilitating at least short-term improvements in mental health and well-being, goal-directed behavior, hope, and social support above and beyond any knowledge gains that occur during the program. These changes, particularly the changes in hope, could be quite powerful in the long run for people who are often at the bottom of the social and economic ladder. Additionally, research on the psychology of living in poverty suggests that changes in psychological well-being, such as those observed in this study, may not only improve quality of life but may also bring about positive changes in goal-directed behavior and patterns of economic choice (Haushofer & Fehr, 2014). Thus, participants in GA might be more inclined to attempt to overcome obstacles and pursue their goals due to learning about poverty and its systemic sources and feeling better about themselves and prospects for the future.

These outcomes bring more questions, though, specifically about the role of the group process in participants' learning and psychosocial changes. This research did not include any measure of the group as a whole, so it is unknown exactly which aspect(s) of the group process might have most affected these outcomes. However, participants were asked an open-ended question at follow-up about what they found most helpful about GA, and these responses were examined to try to provide insight about the role of the group in the observed outcomes. Responses to this question could be captured under four themes; gaining education about poverty and available resources, increasing their understanding of themselves, gaining support from other people, and growing in their desire to get involved in their communities. These four themes reflect GA's combined mutual aid and social action focus, demonstrating that the program appears to be affecting individual change and motivation to bring about social change. These findings support other literature suggesting that hybrid group models featuring mutual aid and social action foci can be effective in social work to help participants gain support, self-awareness, and knowledge while also gaining more understanding of their circumstances in the broader social context

(Breton, 2012; Cohen & Mullender, 2006; Roy & Pullen-Sansfacon, 2016). Future research should examine the group as a whole to investigate which specific components of the group process lead to improved outcomes for participants.

Limitations

The sample in this assessment was a convenience sample, so it is unknown whether the participants in these GA groups are representative of all GA participants. However, this sample represented all known English speaking adult participants that completed GA at all U.S. sites during the 1- year evaluation period and therefore the results should apply to similar groups of GA participants at similar types of sites. Also, because this study did not use an experimental design, causation of the outcomes by GA can only be suggested and not fully presumed. Future study of GA using experimental design is necessary to further establish causation between the intervention and improved outcomes. This research should also examine the role of the group as a whole on the observed outcomes.

Implications for future research

Besides utilizing experimental design and examining the role of the group as a whole in future studies of GA, future research should also examine whether the psychosocial gains observed in the current study translate into behavioral outcomes. Do improvements in mental health, self-efficacy, goal-directed behavior, hope, and social support lead to changes in job searching, education seeking, and overcoming barriers to economic stability such as mental health problems, chemical dependency, and intimate partner violence? With so many structural barriers to overcoming poverty, do these individual changes help perpetuate long-term motivation and perseverance that can help someone living in poverty begin to climb over the barriers? Also, because the current evaluation only examined whether these gains occurred throughout participation in GA, future studies should examine participants long-term after completion of the program to determine if those gains continue after GA is done.

Implications for practice

Like many groups of people living in poverty, the group of participants in this evaluation presented with many barriers to economic mobility and stability. Participants reported difficulty finding adequate employment, trouble finding transportation, and lacking affordable housing. Many of these are related to structural barriers that often prevent people from "getting

ahead" in the first place, like lack of available jobs, lack of income-based housing, and lack of low-interest loans and credit repair assistance. Also, a number of participants reported mental health problems, chemical dependency, or physical health problems that were barriers to economic stability and mobility; barriers such as these take much time and energy to overcome and require availability of health care services. Organizations providing GA should try to help participants meet basic needs and overcome these barriers either by providing services in-house when possible or by partnering with other agencies in the community. Without access to needed services, people living in poverty who have barriers to mobility and stability will find it impossible to "get ahead."
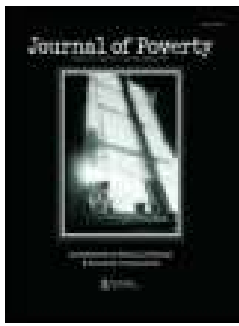
Acknowledgment

Funding

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Connecting Poverty, Culture, and Cognition: The Bridges Out of Poverty Process

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Connecting Poverty, Culture, and Cognition: The Bridges Out of Poverty Process

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights how one nonprofit organization deals with the controversial issue of culture and poverty through its interactions with low-income individuals. Through interviews and participant observation, we analyze its curriculum and process, which focuses on helping participants become more reflexive by analyzing their past life and potential futures through a social class analysis. At the same time, we discuss a key theoretical debate over culture and action/agency. Specifically, we examine the distinction between practical and discursive consciousness (or declarative and non-declarative culture), and issues of agency. We show how this theoretical process is accomplished in the organization by providing people with the opportunity to change their habits, skills, "cultured capacities" and "repertoires," which can help them get out of poverty. We also show other factors, such as social support, are crucial and how the overall process works more for some than for others.

Although there has been a massive amount of writing on poverty by sociologists, topics related to culture and the person, such as agency, motivation, self-efficacy, and connections to culture have often been gingerly sidestepped and undertheorized. Some of this is due to the legacy of the 1960s culture of poverty debates, as scholars have overextended the initially reasonable critiques of this concept (Patterson, 2010; Small, Harding, & Lamont, 2010; Vaisey, 2010). Although these factors have been studied by some sociologists (e.g., Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Wilson, 1996), honest and in-depth discussions of how people work toward upward mobility and how they respond to interventions that are designed to help them are still not given much consideration in the sociology and social work literature.

To help remedy this, we discuss a national antipoverty organization, Bridges Out of Poverty ("Bridges" hereafter) that helps people move toward upward mobility. After summarizing its curriculum, we describe how the program attempts to help participants construct a different "future story." We then ask, "How do people respond to a particular intervention designed

to reconsider their thoughts about their circumstances and behaviors?" We consider the impact of Bridges' activities on the people it serves and highlight three ways it affects people. First, we find that many participants learn to label past and current experiences of living in poverty, and second, it offers them new options that could enable them to overcome poverty in the long run, while also helping them practice these new behaviors and make plans for change. Third, the group support is crucial for the participants. We then also pose the related question, "Why does this kind of process work for some but not others?" Here, we illustrate cases in which the Bridges curriculum is ineffective and show how these participants' lives are characterized by fewer personal resources (e.g. self-efficacy) and a functioning social support system. We contextualize our findings with recent theoretical developments on the link between culture and action.

Culture, Cognition, and the Emerging Role of Nonprofits

Given ongoing major national discussions over poverty, what helps people "get ahead" and how can institutions use these insights? Common answers include the availability of jobs and cognitive factors such as deficits in education and job skills, but recent research indicates that numerous noncognitive factors are often just as or more important (Heckman, 2011), such as variations in social developmental aptitudes, effortful control (Lengua et al., 2014), planning skills (Crook & Evans, 2014), grit (Duckworth & Gross, 2014), motivation and perseverance (Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001), and overlapping factors like integrity, resourcefulness, and ambition (Tough, 2012), all of which influence a person's agency. These factors are connected to the cultural patterns and networks that people are socialized into, which takes us into the rich work on cultural and social capital, and how these factors affect mobility (Bourdieu, 2011; Lareau, 2011; Rivera, 2012; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2008). The focus of Bridges is on socioeconomic class differences, and they help people understand the importance of these factors and how they are related to their lives, as we see below.

Although some acknowledge the role of self and collective efficacy and cultural patterns in people's experiences of poverty (Boardman, Finch, Ellison, Williams, & Jackson, 2001; Sampson et al., 1997; Wilson, 1996), the focus of these studies is largely on how poverty undermines these factors on the individual (Wilson, 1996) or collective levels (Sampson et al., 1997), rather than on how upward mobility actually works (Horowitz, 2011), or how people respond to programs designed to help them get out of poverty. This is the piece of the puzzle we want to focus on. We argue that programs like Bridges help us see what is involved in the process of change at local and microlevels and, most importantly, from the perspectives of those who struggle with poverty themselves. Broadly similar programs that teach "life skills" exist around the country, and though they may not handle social class differences as directly as Bridges,

many in effect teach practices that ideally give people more life options. One can include numerous mentoring and coaching programs in communities and in social service organizations such as Catholic Charities, Love Inc. (many with forms of case management), specific programs used nationally (e.g. "family development," Circles, STRIVE, LIFT), or a number of other popular and varied programs that focus on finances and try to hammer on middle-class values of planning, saving, and cost cutting, such as courses tied to individual development accounts (IDAs). Among other things, these programs attempt to help those dealing with poverty "navigate" the middle-class world better. They are designed to allow entry into that world, by focusing on the rules of the middle-class practice that one needs to know to thrive in the dominant culture or take steps in that direction. In essence, these organizations play a mediating role between the contrasting worlds of the poor and that of the neoliberal world of work and institutions.

This key piece of the inequality puzzle, however, is controversial and often avoided by scholars, which is in stark contrast to the popularity of these programs at local levels. Ever since the culture of poverty debates in the 1960s, there has been a strong taboo against connecting culture and behavior to poverty (Khan, 2012, p. 368; Small et al., 2010). Even in newer work on culture and poverty, actual practices and habits and their connections with poverty are played down, partly out of a fear of "blaming the victim" or in fear of political fallout from the culture of poverty debates (Patterson, 2010), and also because of a hesitance to address differing subcultural norms and practices and social class differences (Fosse & Patterson, 2015; Patterson, 2014). That is, concepts of agency that involve self-reflexivity and daily habits and ethics are often simply left out of consideration, as Laidlaw (2002) observes.[1] In addition, the programs' focus on what people can actually do to get out of poverty may imply that poverty is a person's own fault, and that middle-class values and practices are better than that of lower class, violating (rather selective) preferences for relativism among academics, and also popular academic discourses on victimization. There is a problem, however, as anthropologist Richard Shweder (2003) argues, when "victimization becomes the dominant account of suffering" which "depersonalizes the sufferer," who is encouraged to think and act as a passive victim with few personal capabilities. Shweder argues that people "need to be aware of whatever degree of personal control they have over their own conditions" (pp. 128–9). Peter Hall and Michèle Lamont (2013), in their recent volume on social resilience in neoliberal times, call for studies of social processes that "allow individuals to negotiate new environments in flexible and ambitious ways" (p. 23). Programs like Bridges are a prime example of this.

To highlight these issues and processes, we will first focus on how Bridges fosters reflexivity and influences participants to start the process of change toward improving their lives. That is, we show how participants connect discursive culture to practical consciousness and gain a deeper understanding of

their situations while doing so. We also show that participants are made aware of new models of action (such as "formal register"), and how they learn to practice them. We then tackle the (related) question of why Bridges works for some but not for others. Our research question is related to debates over how culture works on people. Ann Swidler (2001) highlights "cultural repertoire," consisting of habits, styles, and skills, which are held together by a "larger worldview," a "configuration of codes, contexts and institutions" that links culture and action (pp. 79, 180). *Repertoire* describes the ability to shift into a new mode at various times, but it can be ephemeral or temporary, like expatriates who learn a second culture though never really claim it as their own. Her overall idea of culture as a "toolkit" posits that culture structures "the patterns" that normally form action, by enhancing or delimiting people's "strategies of action" (Swidler, 2001, pp. 69, 82). However, she does not view the actor as directly motivated by goals and values, and the approach has been criticized as using a "weaker" form of culture (Vaisey, 2009). Recently Lizardo and Strand (2010) have taken an in-depth look at Swidler's (2001) toolkit theory, comparing it with what they call the "strong practice theory perspective" in cultural sociology. In essence, they argue that even though both approaches show important differences, they complement each other and can be used together to explain certain phenomena:

> Both toolkit and strong practice theories agree that most culture is implicit and exists at the levels of skills, habits, fast dispositions and implicit classificatory schemes. However, empirical applications of the toolkit approach have primarily dealt with agents own *discursive* accounts of how they manage to integrate divergent 'bits' of explicit culture into their everyday attempts to craft strategies of action. Strong practice theory on the other hand, focuses on global patterns of behavioral coherence that are seen to be the result of choices made in the *practical* state, of which any discursive justification or explanation would be a very poor (predictive) source of information. (Lizardo & Strand, 2010, p. 215)

This distinction between discursive and practical consciousness is key, because they are utilized at some times more than others. In "stable" times, discursive consciousness relies on objectified structures "to generate lines of action" and is employed when justifying an action or when using "vocabularies of motive." In "unstable" times, however, after a period of unsuccessfully holding on to the older patterns, "cognitively costly" searches for "novel explicit cultural patterns" are begun. Conversely, practical consciousness is characterized by an "'ontological complicity' between embodied habits and skills and objectified institutional orders" in stable circumstances and by "the acquisition of new habits and skills" or a "readjustment of future expectations" in unstable times (Lizardo & Strand, 2010, pp. 215–223). In other words, we rely on already existing structures (e.g., reliance on family) in stable times, but in unstable times, we may look for other sources of support or ideas (new friends, religions, jobs, other institutions) that we may not have utilized before. The distinction

between discursive and practical consciousness is a basic construct of "dual-process theory" (Vaisey, 2009).[2]

This helps us understand how people plan and take steps for life change, called "life course agency" (Hitlin & Elder, 2007, pp. 182–183). *Life course agency* implies that people are "constructing changing images of where they think they are going, where they want to go, and how they can get there" that also enables actors to "loosen themselves from past patterns of interaction and reframe their relations to existing constraints" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, pp. 984, 1010). In Bridges' terms, this is "constructing a future story," a concrete plan to begin changing one's life, which matches well with recent research on agency (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015). Part of this process involves increased reflexivity[3] (Archer, 2007). It also encompasses self-efficacy, "the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes" regarding various aspects of well-being and behavior. Self-efficacy often "determines how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences" (Bandura, 1977, p. 141).[4]

Case and Method

Because we are interested in how people respond to a particular intervention designed to reconsider their thoughts about their circumstances and behaviors, we chose an organization that addresses these issues. We considered Bridges to be an ideal case to study our research question. We did participant observation for 2 years (primarily attending Getting Ahead [GA] classes, but also trainings, meetings, and other activities), and conducted and analyzed 39 interviews of graduates of the program (after they had completed the class), all in a midwestern U.S. city. Participant observation allowed us to record actual behavior and changes. At the same time, by analyzing interviews, we were able to gather what participants say about the program (after they had completed it), how and why they responded to it, and how they then attempted to change their lives, examining how the process works and what happens when it does not. Thus, we think that the combination of participant observation and interviews helps us tackle the question from different angles as the recent methodological debate over ethnography versus in-depth interviews reveals (Lamont & Swidler, 2014).

We utilized case study research (Eisenhardt, 1989; Ragin & Becker, 1992) to understand how participants respond to this intervention. In this context, the various interviews were analyzed with respect to the influence Bridges had on them. We analyzed the first 10 interviews, coming up with a set of codes for each. Once we coded these first few interviews, we compared and contrasted them, coming up with a set of shared codes, such as perception of GA, personal background, experiences with poverty, progress after the completion of GA, among others. We then analyzed the rest of the interviews,

coding each of them, and then contrasted them with the codes established from the first few interviews, in an iterative process involving induction and deduction. The interviews were all taped and analyzed.

As criteria for being successful versus not successful (the outcome we are interested in) we rated the various participants on how far they have come with accomplishing the goals they set for themselves (coming up with a plan for future progress was part of the Bridges curriculum, as described above). For some this was finding employment or stable housing, for others it was improving their saving habits or credit score or going back to school. We thus rated individuals as successful (18), modestly successful (17), or not successful (4) based on whether they able to follow through with their individual plans. This also means that there is no absolute standard for success, but what counts are the changes each individual has made.

Description of Participants

The sample in this study consisted of 10 male and 29 female participants of various ages from the early twenties to their sixties. The majority (24) of the participants interviewed were African American, some were White (13), with only two Latinas, which mirrors the GA participants overall. The participants also differ in their experiences with poverty in childhood and adolescence: Whereas many (19) clearly have a background of generational poverty (i.e., their parents and sometimes grandparents experienced poverty), some of the participants (14) came from working-poor or middle-class families, and descended into poverty due to unfortunate circumstances such as living in an abusive relationship or mental health issues. The backgrounds of the remaining six participants were either a mix of generational and situational poverty (e.g., after a divorce, one parent stayed poor, and another was better off) or it did not become clear in the course of the interview.

The Getting Ahead Curriculum and Classes

Out of Poverty nonprofit utilizes a "Getting Ahead" course, "networking meetings" and other activities to encourage participants to consider their "mental map" and associated behaviors that go with it, set goals, and work toward a more stable life. The course consists of 15 classes of at most 3 hours each. A facilitator and a cofacilitator are teaching the class together, with one or both of them having a background of poverty or being an earlier graduate of the class. The course is offered at different organizations, usually non-profits such as the YWCA, Goodwill, or homeless centers, but also other organizations like schools. The course and its main workbook, *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World* (DeVol, 2004), focus on understanding the "hidden rules of economic class," the 11 different kinds of "resources" (financial,

emotional, mental, formal register, spiritual, integrity and trust, physical, support systems, relational, motivation and persistence, and knowledge of hidden rules), and how to create a plan to build these resources "for a better life." Translating this into sociological language, one can match many of these resources with the various "capitals" (human, social, financial) commonly used in social science (Ellis, 2000).

In general, Bridges uses a collaborative, participative model where the participant "coinvestigators" are asked to consider differences in how people in poverty, the middle class, and wealth structure and orient their lives, dwelling especially on the "hidden rules" of class. It can be an emotional process, as participants examine their own experience of economic class in America, and how they are often disadvantaged by the dominant practices (e.g., language codes, assumptions one has a car, or insurance). Other aspects of the curriculum give participants insights and tools for understanding their own personal journey, revealing where trauma, relationships, poor choices, and other dynamics, sometimes within their control, sometimes not, have affected their lives. One key is that no one is telling them where they went wrong or who is responsible, for it is left to the discovery of each person to put his or her life into perspective. Once that process happens, the hope is that it opens the door to setting out on a different path. Thus, the class in essence encourages participants to offer a self-critique of their lives, their background, and a concrete plan of where they are going in the future. As one of the facilitators in a class we attended repeatedly said, "We are not here to tell you what you need to do, but help you find out for yourselves." However, far from being focused on individual behavior only, the class also analyzes participants' communities and wider socioeconomic structures and obstacles, with modules addressing inequality, transportation, affordable housing, and issues of exploitation. Combining the two perspectives, participants create a personal and community plan that could include political/social action. Bridges is also attempting to strengthen its links with area employers through an "employer resource network" to help participants (usually with spotty work backgrounds) obtain and retain jobs. After the class has finished, graduates are encouraged to use the newly acquired skills, practices, and insights to follow through with the plan they developed for themselves during the class, which could mean completing a Graduate Equivalency Diploma, looking for work, going to back to college, handling one's finances better, dealing with substance abuse issues, or becoming more involved in community issues. Participants were also encouraged through networking meetings to interact with people from other social classes, thereby increasing their bridging capital.

Analysis: Providing the Conditions for Reflexivity and Change

How does the Bridges process affect its participants? To understand this question, we trace how participants respond to Bridges through interviews, combined with participant observation of GA classes. Below we argue that many

Bridges participants are (1) gaining insight into their backgrounds with the help of theoretical models and (2) often acquire new skills and practices. As we will see, what participants gain through Bridges also differs according to whether participants originated from generational poverty or experienced situational poverty. At the same time, we also highlight the group processes that contribute to this. Overall, we are making a distinction between those who seem to benefit from the Bridges curriculum and those who do not (or to a lesser degree). To this end, we want to examine the contributions of "cultural tools" and "practical consciousness" in this realm (Lizardo & Strand, 2010).

"Putting a Name on It": Labeling

First—and perhaps most importantly—Bridges helps participants make connections between their existing habits, skills and patterns of actions, and thought styles they grew up with or have acquired throughout their lives (what Lizardo & Strand, 2010, call "practical consciousness") and the "discursive knowledge" (or "declarative consciousness") of different social classes. That is, the class provides what could be called the "conditions for reflexivity." In general, class facilitators encourage participants to compare the contrasting orientations of the middle class with those from lower incomes. Although this can verge on negative stereotyping, most of these distinctions emerged from the participants themselves, were not forced by the two facilitators of the course (at least one of whom comes from poverty), and were allowed to be debated or countered.[5] For example, participants pointed out that those in poverty often concentrate strongly on relationships, entertainment, and living in the moment, whereas those in the middle class are focused more on achievements. They discuss whether they may need to change friendships or networks, to improve their situations. Participants and facilitators also talked about contrasts between present and future orientation. In this class setting the comparisons are necessarily simplistic but in general match what various scholars have said about the diversity and different orientations of groups in poverty (Archer, 2007; Hannerz, 2004; Harding, 2007; Salcedo & Rasse, 2012; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2008).

One's social class is manifested in everyday "practical consciousness" and is largely unconscious or nondeclarative. For those participants who can make use of the Bridges curriculum, the GA class makes it become declarative and opens up other models that were not plausible before. Being able to describe an experience with words (declarative culture) enables one to critically reflect on it (Freire, 2000) and to envision a different future (Mische, 2012). This process is part of what Archer (2007) calls reflexivity.

Those participants whom we termed "successful" or "moderately successful" gained a deeper understanding of their past and aspects of their lives that could be changed and then subsequently undertook steps to improve their

situations such as finding a new job, or going back to school, or even just improve their saving habits and their credit score. However, in most cases, even what we call "successful" involves improvements that are modest, which is partly due to the huge barriers people face when they want to improve their social class standing. One would think that this would happen only for those from generational poverty, but even those from situational poverty often gained important insights into how past behavioral patterns (e.g., being part of an abusive relationship or hanging out with the wrong crowd) contributed to their current situations.

This realization and critical reflection of where one is at, including the associated mismatches between one's circumstances and practices, was directly observed at GA. On one fall evening, the goal of the class is to fill out a worksheet that evaluates one's "financial resources" such as whether they are working, have debt, transportation and insurance. At first we do it all together, and Cherianne, the facilitator, tells the participants to put a check mark wherever it applies. Then someone says, "We can do it our-selves," and Cherianne responds,

> Okay, this is what you have to do until you leave—fill out the survey with all the resources, marking where you are at, and at the end, fill in your score in all these areas. You can take a break now, go out for a smoke, get some more cheesecake or coffee, but by the time you leave it has to be done.

Next to one of the researchers, a young African American male in his early twenties says, "This is bad, yes, I need a break" and leaves the room, most likely for a smoke or just some fresh air. Other people get up, go outside, chat a bit or get more coffee, but then one by one come back and start working on their lists. We notice how the atmosphere in the room changes from people going in and out and making jokes to working with concentration on their surveys, consider-ing their situations, and becoming more self-reflective. In this and subsequent classes, participants also seemed to become more relaxed with each other, sharing insights as they immersed themselves in the material.

Getting participants to step back from their lives and consider where they are and what role or responsibility they have for their lives is the first aim of the GA class. In theoretical terms, it involves enabling the participants to become reflexive and framing the nondiscursive "practical consciousness" of their everyday lives in terms of the wider categories of the different class models and practices that they may only be dimly aware of ("discursive knowledge"). And indeed, the change noticed in the participants once they started digging deeply and with concentration into their lives was stark. For some, what one facilitator succinctly called a "letting go of the fate mentality" happens during GA classes (but not for all, as we see below). Participants reflect on their situations and life histories and realize that there are other and perhaps better ways to live. Gradually they get a better assessment of

where they presently stand and in which areas they need to and are capable of making improvements.

However, some GA participants more than others realize that their existing "practical consciousness" prevents them from adapting to the reality of social life and improving their situations. That is, not all of them realize that they are in a precarious position, and not all are capable of deep reflexivity and of reforming their practical consciousness, due to existing insecurities, trauma histories, and limitations, which we discuss more below. To illustrate how this works in ideal cases, we want to highlight the example of Claire, a woman we categorized as "successful." She is a red-haired White middle-aged woman who grew up in generational poverty and is currently residing in a Catholic Worker house, where she has found a sort of permanent home, but is also planning to go back to school the coming fall. She told us about her life, starting with her childhood experiences:

> I grew up in poverty. Very poor. We moved 12 times in a year one time. I got pregnant at 14, got married, had my first child at 15. Went hungry a lot. I remember as children we would take half of our food home so we could feed our parents because we had the free lunch. We always went to school hungry. Summers were spent working in the fields picking food and then we would can so we had something for the winter. Almost always there was at least one utility off. We never had heat electric and water all at the same time. It was always a struggle. You adapt if you don't know anything different. Unfortunately, I took a lot of that with me while I was raising my children. Now I'm watching my children do the same things and be in the system and getting food stamps and welfare.

The above quote reveals how the "practical consciousness" of growing up in poverty stayed with her and influenced her throughout her adulthood, eventually affecting her children. At a later age in her life, she actively tried to improve her circumstances by attempting to "get an education" though, in her own view, she never really left poverty behind because even when doing well (working three jobs and owning a house), she did not plan for the future and suffered during the recent recession when she lost jobs and had nothing to fall back on. GA enlightened and helped her precisely because she could put her experience of generational poverty and her past attitudes into words (called the "Aha-moment" in GA classes):

> Yes, my Aha-moment was learning about generational poverty was like the wake-up call. Then I look at it and I'm like I have 5 grandkids and I don't want them to grow up in poverty. I want them to learn how to live this life and I don't want them to think it's okay, that it's acceptable to not strive for better.

And even though at the time of the interview she still did not have full-time employment, she was planning to go back to school, and her life is now relatively stable and she is content:

> Now I am living in a community with Catholic Workers. It's a very spiritual community. I asked God to help me with this and he just picked me up and put me right in it. I'm literally surrounded by it. I feel like I'm filling up with goodness. Financially, I work at a grocery co-op. I get a stipend. It's not much only $100 per month. But I have a little bit of an income. It's not where I would want to be but it's definitely a start.

In other words, she is an example of someone who could translate her "practical consciousness" into a "cultural tool," enabling her to critically reflect on the former. This process of "putting a name on it" could be observed among many other graduates directly and was told in later interviews, such as with an African American mother of three (Anna, "moderately successful") in her thirties, who focuses on being a good mother and her children's educational success, improved her physical health due to Bridges, plans to take up college again, and later on found full-time employment:

> For me, my Aha moment was because I make these changes in my life. I don't know how to put words to it or say this is what I did. I always learn in a backwards pattern. I would say, "oh, that's what you call what I did." So I was able to learn a few things naturally but I didn't know how to put it in words. That was really good for me it made me feel better.

Learning and Practicing

Second, those participants on whom Bridges had a positive effect learned how to utilize new "cultural tools" and connect them to "practical consciousness" (Lizardo, 2013; Lizardo & Strand, 2010), in effect giving them new models for dealing with life situations. In class, this happens mostly at first in theory, but as the weeks go on, some participants also learn how to apply the newly found insights and skills to their lives. Thus, Bridges provides participants with the conditions not only for reflexivity (as above), but also the conditions to learn about and to practice new models of living.

Through this process, Bridges participants can start distancing themselves from former patterns associated with living in poverty. They became aware of and learned new skills, which when practiced can become aspects of a new practical consciousness. In effect, participants see that dominant middle-class society utilizes a set of patterns, such as formal language and register in job settings, a focus on education, and measured spending practices, and that adopting some of these patterns will help get them out of poverty, similar to what Patterson and Rivers (2015) report among inner-city youth in job training programs. Participants and facilitators also talked about differing orientations to time depending on social class, and how one has to adjust one's orientation to time by focusing on the future when desiring a steady job and building savings. Furthermore, the course itself requires participants to come to class regularly, on time, and to engage with the homework, their

fellow classmates and the instructors. In one class, participants gathered for a meal at an upscale local restaurant that required "good manners," which was mentioned by one interviewee as being very helpful.

We can see this process in GA classes, and it is also seen by following up through interviews with those who have already completed the class. In Claire's case (above), the class not only contributed to her reflexivity but also gave her the tools and skills to change the underlying mind-set that—as she told us—pushed her back into poverty as soon as her circumstances changed. Elena, an older African American ("moderately successful") with a background of generational poverty, also illustrated the process of learning about register and of improving her spending and saving habits as she tried to implement some of what she learned:

> They show you how to get yourself out of poverty and some of the ways that you can do that, middle-class rules and things like that, which come out in things like when you present yourself when you go to a job interview and things like that. It don't matter if you're going for a secretary job or a Burger King job you should still, not because you're going to Burger King, "okay I can wear the faded jeans" versus if I'm going for the secretary job I'll put on my panty hose or you know things like that. I learned a lot about that, it now makes sense to me that the person interviewing you actually looks at the way you dress and how you talk and your body language and things like that. That was one of the important parts of the class to me to really know the difference of how to present myself when I'm going out to different occasions.... That's something that I really picked up on and that I do use in my everyday living now with my kids and in my household. (...) I would try to get away to build my finances, how could I go around building my finances, and what goals I need to set for myself to build my finances, or what things I need to eliminate. We got like in the classes, some people would say, well even though they have income they couldn't make it because they would go through these check places, and get a no. They figure out, they rent things from Rent-a-Center, that can cost you money, and you figure out how much money you're paying Rent-a-Center when you can actually try to save that money, put it in an envelope, save what you put on bills, save what you put on households, other stuff.

Similarly, take the example of Heather (categorized as "successful," with a background in generational poverty), an older African American woman who for most of her adult life had been a cook, lacks educational resources and struggles with financial difficulties. When she heard of GA, she was enrolled in a local community college. At the time of the interview, and with the support of Bridges, she was working toward establishing her own catering business (besides working other jobs). She also told us about gaining helpful information about the various social classes and related practical skills gained through her participation in GA. The quotes below show how she learned about new models and then starts implementing some of what she learned (which also included becoming better at saving and cutting unnecessary consumption):

When you go out in public, you have to know how to deal with people. So yes, any caliber people whether they are professionals I will be able to deal with them and talk with them well enough not using broken English and if I do, I keep talking … I listen and I repeat things I see on TV to help me and just to continue. It helped me because when we took this test [on different class patterns] I said, I don't want to feel like, I don't want to use the words dumb or ignorant, but like I don't know. But every move was a positive move. You just do your best. We found out that it wasn't such a wrong answer when you took the test from the beginning and when you took it again at the end. It showed that you understand the different classes of people and so on and so forth. (…) So Bridges helped me greatly to just come on out and just stop being in that shell and … It's where you put your mind. Clean those clothes up that you have, take care of you hygiene, settle you self with somebody who want to help you. Settle you self so when you do go looking for something you know that this is a job for you. This is your day. This is your day and you claim that. I'm coming out of this. I don't care I've got this far. I was able to get this far and I'm gonna continue and I'm gonna reach the top where I want to be.

Another interviewee that made progress is Daniela ("successful"), a young African American mother of three. Despite being a felon and having stints of homelessness, she had gone back to school and was also working two part-time jobs at the time of the interview. She recounted learning that how she speaks to professors differs from how she talks with her friends. She learned how to budget her finances, is now more careful where she spends her money and later on started working at the local Bridges office. Likewise, Tricia (also counted as "successful,, and with a background of situational poverty), an early participant in Bridges, also attributes a lot of her motivation to the organization. Currently, she is "back in school," works, and describes herself as an "entrepreneur of one" and as "happier" than ever before. However, she stresses that GA is really only the first step toward change, and that it should be followed by other programs.

The process of "rehabituation" or "embodied reskilling" has been very undertheorized in sociology (Lizardo & Strand, 2010, pp. 222–223), though a few have touched on it, such as Lizardo (2013), who mentions how "doctrine, symbol and ritual are consciously used to establish a radical break with past non-declarative habits and simultaneously are put the task of, via repetition, re-embodying a new set of implicit skill" (p. 31), or Wacquant (2004, pp. 95–99) who in a "pugilistic" context describes the process of embodying new skills as one learns a new habitus. Along these lines, Heather tells us how some experiences she had in a Bridges setting help increase her self-confidence and skills:

Well even, I was asked, "would I be a table leader?" (lead discussion at a networking meeting). And boy, that feathered my head, made me feel so good. That I was able to talk and introduce and always sharing just doing the opening up to introduce yourself and some people are very shy. And just being in a crowd of people, just coming out,

just gettin' out. I know that I'm going somewhere, I don't have to wonder. And the class helped to bring that out, Bridges helped to bring that out.

One anthropologist, reading an early draft of this article, described the Bridges experience in ritual process terms. The class becomes a liminal state between the past life of the participant and a possible new stage and status. The postclass life is where the new outlook is tested and often met with numerous challenges and setbacks. It is during this postclass process where people really learn how to use and habituate the new practices in new contexts such as jobs. In the Bridges context, the postclass process has involved networking meetings, with more recent attempts to communicate with and help employers learn how to work with employees with spotty work histories and personal challenges (Bradley, 2003).

Sharing and Supporting

Third, many participants mentioned that the group context was an important part of GA classes, in combination with the processes above. We found that, for some, the group processes and social networks found in GA classes and the subsequent networking meetings can encourage self-reflexivity, self-efficacy (more on this later), agency, and the adoption of the new habits and skills (described under Points 1 and 2). For example, Sandra, a White woman in her fifties (who also was placed in the category of those who were successful in their attempts to change their lives), tells us about the group process she experienced originally as a participant and then later on observed in GA classes she cofacilitated:

> Number one, I loved the camaraderie—loved the fact that the girls really turned into a sisterhood. We really got personal and there were times where there were tears and there were times when there was joy and laughter, you know, and we had a wonderful time and we did an assignment once and cutting out articles in the newspaper that would apply to poverty. I enjoyed that. That was wonderful.

In other parts of the interview, she connects the opening up that ideally happens in the group to the ability to revisit one's life story, as she calls it, which for some is not an easy endeavor. She became very reflexive of her own background and life history in the course of the class and translated the new material into real accomplishments (the first one her graduation from GA).

The role of social support during the class was mentioned by many interviewees and also observed directly during several of the classes we visited (though more so by those with a background of generational poverty than by those with coming from situational poverty). This was very visible in one case, with a large shift in enthusiasm from the first through the fifth time it met. For this group, at what was thought to be the second meeting, we heard that this was in reality only the first meeting, because nobody had

shown up the first night (unlike most classes, this one was court ordered, consisting of people with drug offenses). Upon entering the class for the third week, we saw people eating together, and sensed camaraderie had developed. One Bridges office staff worker, who joined the class because she wanted to see for herself what the course was all about, prepared coffee for everyone (she brought her own coffee machine from home), which made people feel waited on and welcomed. This atmosphere continued through the upcoming weeks.

Immobility: The Role of Personal Capacities and Resources

As we have seen above, Bridges provides a group environment entailing conditions for reflexivity, the learning of new models and new information, and the practice of skills associated with the new models. Although we have presented cases we consider successful and moderately successful above, we can also gain insight into the process by contrasting them with what happens when the processes do not work well, that is, when people cannot follow through with the changes they envisioned themselves making.

Whereas Bridges provides the "conditions" for reflexivity and the learning of new models, information, and skills, the participants bring the "capacities" to use this environment with them to various degrees. Based on our research, we found that capacities consist of existing personal resources and a supportive social network (other than the Bridges group). Graduates' existing personal resources comprise one's general outlook, the degree of self-reflexivity, existing self-efficacy and skills, optimism and hope for the future, all aspects of "practical consciousness." These resources, which are then built on in the class, enable them to gain something from the new models and/or to connect the new models and insights learned in GA to existing skills, habits, and thought patterns. Concurrently, supportive personal networks are important because they can support individuals' efforts to persist in their efforts to change and to adopt new skills.

For some of those whose interviews revealed a higher degree of personal resources, we also found more social support from parents, grandparents, and even siblings while growing up, compared to those who did not. Experienced social support prior, during and after GA was thus tied to one's degree of personal resources, in the sense that it enables people to see their own future in a more positive light and deal with setbacks.

When comparing our interviewees with each other, we found a few cases in which a "capacity for reflexivity" existed without the "learning of new skills," or vice versa (see below). Among most of our interviewees whom we termed as "successful" (including Sandra, Claire, and Heather above), the two occurred together. That is, someone who becomes reflexive of his or her background is also more likely to take in and then adopt more of the skills

taught in Bridges than someone who does not develop any reflexivity throughout the class. We also discovered a few cases in which neither reflexivity nor skills were acquired, and in this section we describe the background and characteristics of cases which do not fit the "successful or moderately successful cases" described above.

Dolores, for example, only marginally profited from the class in the area of skills and did not become more reflexive of past and present patterns (we categorized her as "unsuccessful" in following through with her plans to improve her life). She arrived late to our interview and seemed to have a hard time focusing throughout it, which may be due to her being tired and possibly depressed (along with the possibility of continued drug use or withdrawal symptoms). She took a GA class mandated by the drug court, which ended a few months before the interview took place. Growing up in poverty with several siblings, she does not describe her childhood negatively or as characterized by abuse but says that they all "turned out well." However, she also mentions that her parents, even though both worked, still struggled financially, and that she did not have a lot of support from family members while growing up. In addition, her present life is not so rosy. She had a hard time holding on to jobs prior to GA, which was mostly due to her drug use, but encountered problems even afterwards:

> I was hired, I was great, I didn't care about doing drugs, I was able to function every day and I just knew that is was going to be the type of job that I need because people there … for some reason they didn't like, and I was well they don't like me, I mean I get along with everybody, working, I was hard, it was much to do, it was tiresome, and they say I wasn't hired, I went there for three months, I was never absent and of course it was like a team survey and they said I didn't have to come back and I was like … What in the world, I mean, why not? It really hurt and I was like, now what? I can't work and I was something else we'll find you something and it didn't happen, and I let her know, lady, employer at the agency, I wasn't even asking, I wasn't, she said, Dolores, they said you didn't fit, I mean and was that it?(…)

In general, Dolores' answers indicate a low degree of self-reflexivity and of self-efficacy, a relatively pessimistic outlook for the future and lack of confidence, and a low fit between her and her work environment. At the time of the interview, she was planning to start her own cleaning business, and said that it was "looking good," though she did not tell me about having a concrete plan other than planning to take a business class at some point in the future.

When we analyzed her interview, we realized that Dolores is not really making a connection between the content of GA and her past (nondeclarative or practical) behavior, skills, and knowledge. She did talk positively about the class, however, and focused on a few practical skills she gained, such as an improvement in her public speaking skills and the ability to

complete something she started. And even though she says she enjoyed the class and mentions that it resembled family, she did not establish deep friendships in it. Unlike other participants, she also did not have a strong support network, which we think is related to her current family situation as well as her familial background. Another participant, Louis, became more reflexive of past maladaptive patterns, wanted to change, and also learned some new information (e.g., about payday lenders) but did not adopt many of the skills presented (such as language register or work habits). A Black male in his thirties, he had grown up in poverty, had started to use drugs early, and had been using drugs for some time and was court ordered to attend the class. He came to class without much of the middle-class cultural repertoire. Thus, one can say that some find it harder to take advantage of the tools because, as Wacquant (2004) mentions about aspiring inner-city boxers, they have lacked a background that provides a "regularity of life, a sense of discipline, and physical and mental asceticism" (p. 44). In sum, social support and existing personal resources, such as optimism, self-efficacy, and self-reflexivity, determined whether participants could gain something from Bridges, regardless of whether they had a background of generational or situational poverty (see Table 1)

There were differences, however, in what those from situational and generational poverty learned from the class. Those from situational poverty started out with more resources, as some of them already had a job or were going back to school They focused more on gaining insight into their trajectories and on specific information that could be gained through the class (e.g., insights about how to improve one's health or financial assets). Compared to those with a background of generational poverty, they focused less on improving one's general cultural repertoire or on the role of the group in giving social support when recalling the class, probably because they already possessed more features of the needed middle class cultural repertoire and more knowledge of it.

In addition, many participants (from generational and situational poverty) also have additional personal barriers including disabilities, mental illnesses, or substance abuse problems, which also mean that people sometimes

Table 1. Success After Bridges by Experienced Poverty Type.

Success after Bridges by Poverty Type	Situational Poverty	Generational Poverty	
Total 39	14	19	A Mix or Unclear 6
Successful Total 18	8	8	2
Moderately successful Total 17	6	8	3
Not successful Total 4	0	3	1

struggle to get any benefit from GA. In this vein, we found cases where the class neither contributed to reflexivity nor to learning about or adoption of practical skills, though this scenario seemed to be tied to physical or mental health issues. One man had a stroke not too long after going through GA, one woman suffered from a brain aneurysm, and a middle-age woman dealt with schizophrenia. (None of these participants really made any changes in their lives).

Other barriers, of course, remain, even if reflexivity, cultural tools, and future plans improve. When jobs are limited, or past felonies, credit problems, or discrimination make jobs hard to get, or when health, transportation, or family problems remain, making improvements is not easy, which may explain why even cases we termed successful were only moderately so (e.g., stories of Heather or Claire).

Conclusion and Implications

Programs like Bridges help us understand what is involved in taking initial steps to improve one's life and potentially escape poverty. These programs, to put it in cultural theory terms, work as a tool that allow people to consider adopting new identities and the "cultural competencies to both perform the behaviors associated with the identities and to have the identity performances accepted by others" (Miles, 2014, p. 223). When this process changes "practical consciousness," it involves an increase in self-confidence, a revisiting of older and malfunctioning patterns, a sense of getting at one's purpose, and the learning of new behavioral patterns, and thus contributes to participants' success in improving their lives. When it is purely "discursive," it involves getting some information and knowledge out of the class but does not entail an actual change in habits and skills, leading to no real change in the lives of participants. The bonding that happens in a class mediates the "practical consciousness" aspects because for many it increases a sense of self-efficacy, self-confidence and hope, and potentially agency overall.

These processes are a crucial first element in the battle against poverty, but in the wider social scientific literature on poverty, they are often neglected. Yet there are a myriad of nonprofits out there that do this kind of relational work (Benjamin, 2012), and stratification scholars should be eager to examine these kinds of processes (Miles, 2014, p. 223). Bridges' unique contribution is exactly that it focuses on these processes of self-reflexivity and learning about and practicing new models, though more formal evaluations will be needed to study whether programs like it definitively contribute to long-term improvement.[6]

The processes that contribute to generational poverty begin in early childhood; often involve family patterns, neighborhoods, and peers; and need to be addressed at all those levels. Programs such as the Harlem Children's

Zone, which is slowly expanding to other areas, understand that cultural forces and patterns are important, and they attempt to work with families and children on, among other things, daily habits, interactional patterns, and education. Top-down policies that simply focus on cognitive or technical skills or provide training for jobs or education would have a stronger impact if combined with larger efforts that address noncognitive skills, especially the "resources" or various kinds of "capitals" (human, social, cultural), as James Heckman (2011) argues. One needs to consider the whole environment around individuals and families and consider the specific biographies of people (Jindra, 2014) to see how they will be affected by programs like Bridges that allow people to examine what influences them and then attempts to give them the tools to allow important life changes.

Many academics argue for policy changes to lower poverty and inequality. Yet this "top-down" view often ignores or underestimates the challenges presented by the life situations of those who haven't been socialized into the historically particular mode of middle class productivity or of those who for various reasons find it difficult to keep up with it. Changing structures or offering opportunities does little to help people if they find it hard to take advantage of those opportunities. This is where nonprofits like Bridges (or many others across the country that offer mentoring or coaching) step in. We face not only structural issues with fewer high-paying jobs, but also intense cultural divisions (Jindra, 2014) that are heightened by segregation and isolation (Sampson, 2012). Breaking down these barriers and giving people more tools to use can be an important part of the battle against poverty and inequality.

Notes

1. Some have studied the complex relationships between cognition, goals, context, structural constraints, and mobility by pointing out the role of culture in forming expectations and goals for the future while considering the constraints people face for mobility (Abramson, 2012; Frye, 2012), for example, how educational ideals and expectations matter for poor and non-poor youth (Vaisey, 2010).
2. There are some similarities here with discussions in anthropology over the differential roles of nonconscious, habitual behavior and that of conscious choice and change (Robbins, 2007; Zigon, 2009). Some, however, criticize dual-process theory for not sufficiently considering the concept of active deliberation (Leschziner & Green, 2013; Mische, 2012).
3. Broadly conceived, *reflexivity* means having an "internal conversation" with oneself (Archer, 2007, p. 2).
4. This concept has been shown to be fruitful in diverse aspects of health such as the adherence to treatment (Burke, Dunbar-Jacob, & Hill, 1997), or coping with stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).
5. The early Bridges materials, written by Ruby Payne, received criticism for their generalizations (Froyum, 2010), but the materials have responded to this criticism and been

improved, and some of the criticism of Bridges, we argue below, is because some scholars reject any discussion of cultural or class differences.

6. This case can be representative of similar nonprofits, some of which we mention above, but with the diversity of nonprofits doing relational work, we hesitate to generalize about processes of change, since that is a wide, diffuse area (e.g., addictions). There is of course much work on personal transformation, much of it of the self-help variety, but our work is more focused on interactions with institutional environments, such as work. The process we describe encompasses a more sociological or social psychological approach to change.

Acknowledgments

Funding

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Poverty and the Controversial Work of Nonprofits

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Abstract There has been a significant shift among antipoverty nonprofits toward what we call "relational work,"which involves working with clients over time on life changes. Some scholars discuss this, often in negative terms, as part of a broader neoliberal trend. We argue that relational work is an important and unavoidable part of ongoing efforts against poverty and homelessness. We also discuss the broader theoretical context that make scholars suspicious of this kind of antipoverty work, and argue for a multifaceted approach topoverty that includes attention to relational work and the agency of clients.

Keywords Poverty · Nonprofits · Sociology · Social work · Policy · Development

To reduce poverty, should one change people or change social structures? These are usually two very different discussions, occurring at different places. The sociologists and anthropologists who write about poverty tend to propose changes in political/economic structures to reduce poverty and inequality, from measured policy changes to a more radical but often vague restructuring of the "system" proposed by Occupy and other activists. On the ground, however, local nonprofits work with people in a daily battle against poverty, doing what we call "relational work" over the long term.

Unfortunately, many in the former group talk down the work of those in the latter group, since they believe a focus on changing the lives of the poor takes attention off of needed structural changes. When looking at the relational work of nonprofits, they tend to see it critically as evidence of a weak government welfare state. This debate, which we'll detail later, can be described as transforming society vs transforming the self. Both are important, but the latter gets little scholarly attention among poverty scholars and there is little work on the actual processes that get people out of poverty.

Relational Work

Among the thousands of organizations working to alleviate poverty, there has been a significant trend toward relational work over the last ten years.[1] Relational work can range from the common "case management" approach of social work that tries to help in certain areas of life (e.g. employability, finances, relationships, health), to more informal approaches involving mentoring or coaching, which can be called "developmental relationships."[2] It can be one-on-one or group oriented, involving ongoing classes. Often, clients have deeper underlying issues that need to be addressed, such as substance or physical abuse, making more individualized attention a necessity. The common thread between these processes is ongoing meetings or contact between a nonprofit and a client, with some set of goals involved, which also distinguishes it from straight charity

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[1] Michael Jindra and Ines W. Jindra, "The Rise of Antipoverty Relational Work," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, March 17, 2015, http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/the_rise_of_antipoverty_relational_work.

[2] Junlei Li and Megan M. Julian, "Developmental Relationships as the Active Ingredient," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 82, no. 2 (2012): 157–66; Lehn M. Benjamin and David C. Campbell, "Programs Aren't Everything," *Stanford Social Innovation Review,* Spring 2014.

work with relatively brief and often anonymous interactions between the giver and recipient of aid.

This trend toward ongoing relational work is a major shift in philosophy and practice for four of the largest national organizations that provide direct aid to the poor, the Salvation Army, Catholic Charities, and St. Vincent DePaul, and the food bank network Feeding America. All have begun programs that, instead of just counting the number of people served, look at how many they can move out of poverty. The Salvation Army's program, for instance, is for "families with a desire to take action" and involves meeting with a social worker on a regular basis for activities such as one-on-one counseling or life skills training. It has long done relational work through their adult rehabilitation centers, but this program marks a major shift in their financial assistance programs that provide help with utility bills, rent or other needs. Previously this aid was given out with little interaction between staff and client. Catholic Charities' program involves forming an "individual opportunity plan" for clients, or "asset development," financial literacy, and other programs that are intended to empower people (e.g. for jobs), and help them make smart choices about finances.[3] Feeding America, the major food bank network in the US, is also looking at ways to make a dent in long-term poverty by modifying the food pantry meal program process to "help clients achieve more stable and self-sufficient lives" through focusing on employment, health and housing. One could say that nonprofits are trying to shift from services *for* the poor to services *with* them.

These agencies are among the biggest of the national organizations, but there are a multitude of other agencies involved in relational work focused on reducing poverty, from community action agencies to faith-based organizations,[4] including Habitat for Humanity, Bridges Out of Poverty, Love INC, STRIVE, LIFT, or Circles, plus thousands of local independent ones, with some government agencies joining in, such as the Atlanta Housing Authority.[5] LIFT, for instance, lets a "member" set a life goal and then try to accomplish it with the help of an "advocate." The Habitat process involves many classes and meetings designed to ensure the new homeowner remains financially stable. The many mentoring programs include the longstanding Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs, and the more recent "My Brother's Keeper" program promoted by President Obama. One can get a good sense of the massive numbers of diverse agencies doing relational work by going to 211 websites/directories for most communities in the US and

Canada (http://www.211search.org). The trend toward relational work has also been influenced by books like Robert Lupton's popular *Toxic Charity,* which argues that the simple giving of food or money "creates dependence and conflict, not independence and respect" while an empowerment model involves "shared responsibility, mutual support and accountability."[6]

Relational Work in the Community

The national trend helps us see the diversity of these kinds of organizations, but one must go to particular places to see how relational work happens. Over the last five years, we have been studying how nonprofits work with the poor using relational work. Take the example of Julie (a composite character), with three children, who is facing a disconnection notice from her electric company because she is behind on the bill. She stops at the local nonprofit that helps people avoid disconnections. They get details on her situation, including income, benefits and expenses, in order to see if she is getting all the aid she is eligible for, whether she has high expenses and needs budgeting help, or if she needs help getting a job. They also gauge whether she would be a good candidate for the family development program, which consists of monthly meetings to consider how one's life is going, what goals to set, and how to get there. Julie later begins a family development program and at the first meeting fills out a matrix consisting of 12 different "life areas" (e.g. income, housing, support systems) where she marks how she is doing on a five-point scale ranging from "thriving" to "crisis." During the ensuing monthly meetings, Julie and the counselor discuss how she is meeting her goals, whether they should be revised, and any problems that arise. She attends classes on various topics, such as budgeting, utilities, or food issues. The counselor may visit her at her home or workplace. Ideally, Julie will be the one actively pursuing solutions, and the counselor will be there to assist. Often, a client will need steady encouragement to pursue goals, such as education or jobs, and to overcome setbacks. Many are in rather chaotic life situations, and a counselor can give them the support to move ahead with plans that could eventually get them out of frequent crisis situations.

Relational work is much more diverse than formal case management approaches, however. At many places it is more motivational and empowerment-oriented, and takes place in group settings more than in one-to-one meetings. At Bridges Out of Poverty, their class curriculum uses co-facilitators to help participants reflect on their lives, how they fit in a wider economic class structure, and where they may want to go in

[3] Catholic Charities USA, "2014 Help and Hope Report," 2014, https://www.scribd.com/doc/239814913/2014-Help-and-Hope-Report.
[4] Julie Adkins, Laurie Occhipinti, and Tara Hefferan, *Not by Faith Alone: Social Services, Social Justice, and Faith-Based Organizations in the United States* (Lexington Books, 2010); Steven Rathgeb Smith, "Social Services," in *The State of Nonprofit America*, ed. Lester M. Salamon, 2nd ed. (Brookings Institution Press, 2012), 192–228.
[5] Howard Husock, "Atlanta's Public-Housing Revolution," *City Journal,* Autumn 2010.
[6] Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How the Church Hurts Those They Help and How to Reverse It* (HarperCollins, 2011), 28–29.

the future. In effect, they help people become reflexive, a process known to help people change their lives.[7]

Residential facilities for those without housing or for victims of domestic abuse offer even more intense opportunities for relational and community work. Shelters for the homeless have shifted away from simply providing nightly beds toward approaches that attempt to help people get out of homelessness in the long run, as in the more recent move to "housing first" approaches. Relational work can also involve home visits, as with programs to support young single mothers, or other mentoring programs. In essence, programs like Head Start's "home visits" are teaching young women how to be better mothers, though they do not say that directly. There are also a burgeoning number of organizations which help people do budgeting, reduce spending, and make wise financial decisions amidst the temptations of a highly consumerist society. "Asset building" organizations are also blossoming, prompted by national efforts to increase low savings rate and wealth among low income populations, with nonprofits like the Corporation for Enterprise Development leading the charge.

In essence, these organizations or programs play a mediating role between the contrasting worlds of the poor and that of the increasingly neoliberal world of work and institutions, and they do it in different ways. Success in U.S. institutions often demands a certain middle-class daily practice that can be learned, for example, by college students from the working class who made adjustments to be successful.[8] The "Getting Ahead" classes of Bridges Out of Poverty help people better "navigate" this middle class world by focusing on the implicit rules of middle class behavior that one needs to follow to thrive in the dominant culture. At these organizations, the focus is not on how circumstances hinder you from getting anywhere, but on how one can make positive changes. This is meant to ensure that residents start thinking of themselves not as victims who dwell on their situations, but as active agents with a sense of control over what happens, through their understanding of past hurts, problems and maladaptive patterns. Rather than being a totally individualistic process, this ideally happens in a sea of interdependence, of relationships to case workers, other staff, and to

fellow participants and involving other family members as appropriate.

Critics

This trend, however, is not without its critics. Some fear that the increased work of nonprofits represents a gutting of the universal government safety net, arguing that nonprofits offer only a patchwork approach since not everyone has access to them. The critics see their increased importance as a sign of a creeping "neoliberalism" that emphasizes market forces and strengthens work requirements while placing greater responsibility upon low-income populations.[9] They worry that that these programs unjustly blame the poor for their predicament, and put the onus on them rather than on structural conditions (e.g. the lack of good paying jobs, poor schools, racism) that cause poverty in the first place. The focus on behavior, work, and self-sufficiency ends up "punishing" or "disciplining" the poor in order to decrease their reliance on government benefits or other aid.[10] Because some of these programs highlight particular outlooks on punctuality, speech practices, and future orientation associated with work and education, some dislike how they legitimize middle class values[11] and see assumptions about the behavior of the poor that harks back to the "culture of poverty" debates in the 1960s.[12]

Though these are important issues, these critics do not gain much traction outside the halls of academe. For one, the criticisms often come out of a particular "left libertarian" perspective that argues for higher unconditional welfare payments and blanches at any programs, conditions, or requirements that focus on changing or transforming the recipients. In this view, the autonomy of the person must be preserved, and their way of life should not need to change. Rather, the structures of the political economy need to be addressed. In others words, these scholars emphasize an emancipatory "negative freedom" which valorizes minimizing restraints on

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[7] Margaret Archer, *Making Our Way through the World: Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Ines W. Jindra and Michael Jindra, "Connecting Poverty, Culture, and Cognition: The Bridges Out of Poverty Process" *Journal of Poverty*, 2016.

[8] Wolfgang Lehmann, "Habitus Transformation and Hidden Injuries Successful Working-Class University Students," *Sociology of Education* 87, no. 1 (January 1, 2014): 1–15.

[9] e.g. P. Joassart-Marcelli, "For Whom and For What? An Investigation of the Roles of Nonprofits as Providers to the Neediest," in *The State of Nonprofit America*, ed. Lester M. Salamon, 2nd ed. (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), 657–681; Susan Starr Sered and Maureen Norton-Hawk, *Can't Catch a Break: Gender, Jail, Drugs, and the Limits of Personal Responsibility* (Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 2014).

[10] Much of this discussion also revolves around government welfare reform. Scholars here include Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, Loic Wacquant, and the recent work of Soss, Fording and Schram, *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[11] Katariina Mäkinen, "The Individualization of Class: A Case of Working Life Coaching," *The Sociological Review* 62, no. 4 (2014): 821–842.

[12] Michael Jindra, "The Dilemma of Equality and Diversity," *Current Anthropology* 55, no. 3 (2014): 316–34.

behavior out of concerns with oppression and exploitation in contrast to "positive freedom" approaches (using philosopher Isaiah Berlin's classic distinction) that aim toward specific ends and involves encouraging some life practices over others. This "thin morality" is focused on autonomy and equality[13] but the moral language of virtues and character that is common to everyday life is ruled out of bounds.[14] They are thus uncomfortable with more relational approaches that help people change daily practices or lifestyles.

These critical works often draw on the work of social theorists Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu on power, where the nonprofits represent institutional power through their focus on the responsibility and accountability of the clients. They ignore the fact that Foucault, later in his career, "changed his mind" from his earlier exclusive focus on domination[15] and wrote more on ethics, including what he called the "technologies of the self" that enable a type of freedom.[16] Highlighting the meditation of the Stoics, the asceticism of the early Christians, or monastic practices of confession and penance, he discussed how these techniques allow individuals by themselves or with others to affect "their bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being," with the goal of self-transformation towards (among other things) greater "purity" and "happiness."[17]

These intense reflexive processes can be found in a range of contemporary contexts and traditions, as newer work in the anthropology of ethics points out,[18] but they have rarely been discussed in the context of programs that attempt to combat poverty, homelessness or other social problems. At "Grace" Ministries, a faith-based residential center for the homeless, the explicitly formative practices involve interpreting mistakes, conflicts and vulnerabilities in Christian terms, with a focus on God's grace as a way to seek restoration and guidance through

community self-evaluations and other reflexive practices like devotions, ultimately leading to a more stable life, including self-sufficiency.[19] Places like Grace also help people become more responsible family members, with family stability playing a key role in lessening inequality both now and for future generations.[20] Bridges, in a more secular context, promotes a certain reflexivity that promotes an "agentic practice" that allows for upward mobility, which comes more naturally in upper-class milieus,[21] but often needs the mediation of social contexts like nonprofits where a lower class habitus exists.

The shift toward this kind of relational work also matches well with the recent academic upsurge in interest on noncognitive and social skills, such as self-efficacy and executive function, by James Heckman and others.[22] These skills are not innate to individuals, as earlier believed, but can be learned. They depend on positive environments to develop, so instability and stress affects them. As Walter Mischel, known for his "marshmallow" experiments on self-control argues, adults need activities that "minimize loneliness, provide social support and strengthen the individual's ties and connectedness to other people."[23] Newer fields such as behavioral economics and network theory teach us even more about how intensely we are influenced by others, all pointing at the potential of relational work.

Transforming the Self, Transforming Society

The larger, controversial questions involved here goes back to the early days of social work in the late nineteenth century, and reflects perennial questions about human action, ethics and beliefs about the poor. The primary contrast is between approaches that stress the transformation of the self versus those that stress the transformation of society. The former includes varied approaches that are often religious or quasi-religious, including the Greek and Christian practices discussed by Foucault, spiritual/training regimens in the broader

[13] Philip S. Gorski, "Recovered Goods: Durkheimian Sociology as Virtue Ethics," in *The Post-Secular in Question: Religion in Contemporary Society*, ed. Philip S. Gorski et al. (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 100.
[14] James Laidlaw, *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
[15] Michel Foucault, *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, Vol. 1: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 2000), 177.
[16] Foucault, *Ethics*; Laidlaw, *The Subject of Virtue*, 92–137; Cheryl Mattingly, "Two Virtue Ethics and the Anthropology of Morality," *Anthropological Theory* 12, no. 2 (2012): 161–184.
[17] Foucault, *Ethics*, 204. Foucault's work is complex, and we can't do justice to the varied treatments of concepts such as "pastoral power," or "monastic discipline" here, but see Laidlaw (note 14) for a good summary of how Foucault's work evolved, including the implications for notions of virtue, ethics and freedom.
[18] James Laidlaw, "For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 8, no. 2 (2002): 324–27; Joel Robbins, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society* (Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 2004).

[19] Michael Jindra and Ines W. Jindra, "Utilizing Relational Work and Technologies of the Self against Poverty" (Unpublished Manuscript).
[20] Robert I. Lerman and W. Bradford Wilcox, "For Richer, For Poorer: How Family Structures Economic Success in America" (Institute for Family Studies, 2014), http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/IFS-ForRicherForPoorer-Final_Web.pdf.
[21] Claire Maxwell and Peter Aggleton, "Agentic Practice and Privileging Orientations among Privately Educated Young Women," *The Sociological Review*, 2014.
[22] James J. Heckman, *Giving Kids a Fair Chance* (Boston: MIT Press, 2013).
[23] Walter Mischel, *The Marshmallow Test: Understanding Self-Control and How to Master It* (New York: Random House, 2014), 239.

Nietzschean project,[24] Western Buddhism,[25] and contemporary self-help approaches such as "mindfulness" that draw on the above traditions. The transformation of society through social movements and activism, on the other hand, is stressed much more strongly among those on the political left who are suspicious of approaches involving changes in individuals. This latter slant is found in broader journalistic and academic accounts of the lives of the poor—such as those by Barbara Ehrenreich—because of the way they frame their subjects, as heroic, "noble victims"[26] who deal with their situations the best they can, but can't do a whole lot to get out of poverty. This victimization frame is common among academics and not always helpful when it relieves people of any responsibility for their situation, as anthropologist Richard Shweder argues.[27] Concepts like effortful control, resilience, or transformation that (some) individuals can develop are left out, along with cultural and class differences as contributors to poverty. Even Annette Lareau, in her very insightful work on contrasting social class family patterns, shies away from the obvious implication that teaching new class patterns would help.[28] Ehrenreich goes so far as to rip a helpful program like Bridges, and flippantly suggests that instead of trying to develop soft skills, one should simply get a job with the activist organization ACORN.[29] The academic associations most concerned with poverty, such as the Society for the Study of Social Problems and the Society for the Anthropology of North America, also share this unwillingness to address social problems at different levels and from different viewpoints. Their publications and conference presentations are almost uniformly of the structuralist bent, with repeated condemnations of welfare reform and little interest in how people actually make changes that help them leave poverty. The denigration of relational work here is ironic, since critics have usually achieved their own career success through a very specific pattern of hard work and focus.

Those of a more conservative bent often make a similar mistake in assuming that a free market will create jobs and provide opportunities that people will naturally take advantage of. They also underestimate how people's backgrounds often prevent them from making the sensible decisions and habits that allow prosperity in middle class terms, and thus how they need help. Mere job training often won't do it, since soft skills are also crucial. Some need a socialization process that their backgrounds haven't given them. As part of the process, this requires digging into sensitive areas of class and culture, and of giving people the tools that most of the middle class already has. Here, cultural sociologists have made great strides in understanding how cognition connects cultural patterns to practices and thus how these patterns and behaviors can change.[30]

To have a more complete view of poverty and social problems in general, one must take in structural, cultural and individual/agency factors[31] which will involve interdisciplinary approaches that take scholars outside their comfort zone. For instance, as sociologists Hitlin and Johnson argue,[32] we must include social psychological models of the life course to reveal how people can change their lives. More broadly, the approach of critical realism, with its complex understanding of the interrelationship between structures and persons that includes "biology, existential condition, individual personality, immediate environmental situation and larger social structural environments" shows promise.[33] Those more rare scholars that look seriously at both structures and persons include Isabel Sawhill ("balancing personal and public responsibilities") and Robert Cherry ("third way"

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[24] Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2013).

[25] David Loy, *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory* (Wisdom Publications Inc., 2003).

[26] Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* (Harpers, 1999). For critiques of these approaches, see Robert Cherry, "Helping Black Men Thrive," *National Journal*, Spring 2015, 56–70.

[27] Richard. A. Shweder, *Why Do Men Barbecue? Recipes for Cultural Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ Press, 2003), 128–29.

[28] Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life, with an Update a Decade Later* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

[29] Barbara Ehrenreich, "A Homespun Safety Net," *New York Times*, July 12, 2009.

[30] Jindra and Jindra, "Connecting Poverty, Culture, and Cognition: The Bridges Out of Poverty Process." *Journal of Poverty*, 2016.

[31] Corey Abramson, "From 'Either-Or' to 'When and How': A Context-Dependent Model of Culture in Action," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 42, no. 2 (2012): 155–80; Margaret Archer, "Structure, Culture and Agency," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Culture*, ed. Mark D. Jacobs and Nancy Weiss Hanrahan (John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 17–34; Nicole M. Stephens, Hazel Rose Markus, and Stephanie A. Fryberg, "Social Class Disparities in Health and Education: Reducing Inequality by Applying a Sociocultural Self Model of Behavior.," *Psychological Review* 119, no. 4 (2012): 723; Orlando Patterson and Ethan Fosse, eds., *The Cultural Matrix: Understanding Black Youth* (Harvard University Press, 2015).

[32] Steven Hitlin and Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson, "Reconceptualizing Agency within the Life Course: The Power of Looking Ahead," *American Journal of Sociology* 120, no. 5 (2015): 1429–72.

[33] Christian Smith, *To Flourish or Destruct: A Personalist Theory of Human Goods, Motivations, Failure, and Evil* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 254–55; Suzanne Fitzpatrick, "Explaining Homelessness: A Critical Realist Perspective," *Housing, Theory and Society* 22, no. 1 (2005): 1–17.

policies).[34] These same debates play out in international contexts, where one can contrast more multidimensional approaches to change[35] with those who are more cynical about personal transformation since problems are viewed as mostly structural.[36]

People and Nonprofits

Given the complexity of these influences and causes, it makes sense that different antipoverty organizations focus on different pieces of the puzzle, with different nonprofits in essence oriented to the different groups of the poor, such as more itinerant males, or single mothers. Activist organizations take on structural issues and barriers like racism and exploitation, nonprofits such as STRIVE tackle class and subcultural differences, and places like Grace Ministries concentrate more on the unique individual in his or her social context. Ideally, organizations will include some aspect of all these approaches, such as Bridges Out of Poverty, with its analysis of community barriers, exploitation and other structural forces, its focus on the tools needed to overcome social and cultural class barriers, and its encouragement of reflexivity that encourages individuals to consider their lives.[37] Undergirding this is often a moral ethos that commands help for those who are struggling. They work face-to-face with people every day and concentrate on issues that clients themselves may have some control over, which tend to be personal, familial, and communal, not structural.

Nonprofits have their disadvantages, of course. They vary in quality, understanding and sensitivity toward their clients, and can have confusing overlaps in services, forcing those seeking help to run around to several locations, with varying policies and requirements, to receive help. They can have inconsistent funding and suffer from frequent staff turnover that affects their programs, and some geographical areas have a stronger presence than others, unlike universal government programs.

Overall, however, nonprofits serve as perhaps the strongest link between the lives of the poor and the wider society they are often alienated from, and their work is crucial in allowing people to have more options. Many of their clients have multiple issues: low education, poor health, histories of neglect or abuse, little work experience, single parenthood without support from a partner, low self-efficacy and "executive functioning,"[38] unstable personal situations, and family/neighborhood cultures that are disconnected from middle class worlds of work and institutions. At the same time, they need to manage connections with complicated institutions such as government agencies, utilities and banks, along with the idiosyncratic needs of potential employers. These nonprofits help people adjust to the neoliberal world of work and institutions that most people must navigate to thrive. They serve diverse clientele–some have disabilities (mental, personality, physical) that limit their ability to work and function, while others will be able to work and thrive given the right support. Thus some nonprofits focus on day to day needs, while others do more intensive work to help people become self-sufficient.

Nonprofits that work with the poor simply do not have the luxury of removing the human agent, which happens with accounts that lay all blame for poverty on structural forces external to individuals. Those that only blame the "structures" underestimate how challenging it is for some people to get and keep stable jobs. Changing the structures or offering more opportunities may do little to help segments of the population with the greatest personal challenges, such as those we see seeking help at nonprofits. Some policies, such as universal health care coverage, provide stability to those struggling and may be all the help that some need. But others, without the stable background and socialization that is needed to work as part of an organization, will still struggle. The debate between transforming society vs the person is not an either/or debate. Staff at most nonprofits see the need for improvements in the "system" whether through improvements in jobs, benefits or more radical changes. But they know many people won't be able to take advantage of better social structures without personal transformations.

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