

The Consumer Culture of Poverty: Behavioral Research Findings and Their Implications in an Ethnographic Context

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In an industrial society groups are stratified in terms of the material assets or resources they control, the benefits and privileges they receive from these resources, the cultural experiences they have accumulated from historical and existing economic and political arrangements, and the influence they yield because of those arrangements. (Wilson, 1)

The devastation to the city of New Orleans from hurricane Katrina sent shock waves around the world. Vivid images of ruined homes, flooded streets, and crowded emergency shelters were broadcast widely, causing even developing nations in the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa to send donations to US relief agencies. However Shelby Steele, writing in the *St. Petersburg Times*, states that “another kind of human wretchedness was on display. In the people traversing waist-deep water and languishing on rooftops were the markers of a deep and static poverty. The despair over the storm that was so evident in people’s faces seemed to come out of an older despair, one that had always been there” (1).

Steele suggests that this tragic situation was exacerbated by the reactions of a largely impoverished citizenry who lacked the necessary coping skills to overcome such calamities. He comments further that “here was poverty with an element of surrender in it that seemed to confirm . . . that the modern world is beyond our reach” (1). As a consequence, the circumstances of the impoverished were considerably worsened because of “faulty” judgments about where and how to live, when to leave and where to go, and what to bring and how to act once they got there. Of course, more affluent persons had more and better options after evacuation, leaving their less affluent counterparts to scramble for the limited FEMA resources that were so badly managed and distributed.

These natural disasters often reveal the underbelly of society, with an emphasis on differences between haves and have-nots. Candidates for the causes of human misery vary from a lack of adequate funding for social or physical services to personal character weaknesses that lead to joblessness and poverty. The extant consumer-behavior literature provides some discussion of structural

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and individual explanations for poverty (e.g., Hill and Stamey), along with some historical perspectives (e.g., Hill, Hirschman, and Bauman). The purpose of this article is to bring a subset of this scholarship together in order to examine the concept and reality of the consumer culture of poverty as derived from ethnographic and qualitative investigations of various subpopulations of poor American consumers. The next section presents a literature review, followed by descriptions of the research that inform our paradigm. The consumer culture of poverty then is provided, and the article closes with implications for American cultural studies.

Consumer Culture

The concept of a consumer culture has historical roots in the writing of Thorstein Veblen and his use of “conspicuous consumption” to describe material possessions as status markers for the developing leisure class. It was the Industrial Revolution that gave rise to the modern culture of consumption through the widespread distribution of a broad range of consumer products at prices affordable to the expanding middle class. As a consequence, our values, aspirations, and behaviors moved away from citizenship, religion, or military rank for guidance to our standing in the material world: “It is partially through the use of goods and services that we [now] formulate social identities and display these identities” (Slater 31). Grant McCracken concurs with this perspective for postmodern society, and he suggests that consumer products represent signal objects for the self as well as others.

According to Sharon Zukin and Jennifer Maguire, this expansive view of consumer culture over time reveals an intimate connection between our sense of self and the ability to consume. B. Hoeppe notes, “If Descartes’ famous maxim were to be updated for [today], it might become ‘I have therefore I am’” (6). Such a perspective focuses attention on the social and symbolic aspects of consumer behavior that derive from

actions associated with acquisition, possession, consumption, and disposition of goods and services (see Arnould and Thompson). Our lived experience and relative access to this material abundance are mediated by markets that value exchange partners according to their economic resources (Hill, “Compassionate Love, Agape, and Altruism”). Thus, consumers frame their cognitions, emotions, and intentions about future opportunities based upon positive and negative interactions with the marketplace that occur across the consumption cycle.

The role of marketing and advertising in the development and expansion of our consumer culture has received critical attention from a variety of interdisciplinary scholars such as E. G. Garvey; M. Bud, S. Craig, and C. Steinman; G. Ritzer; and A. A. Berger. From their perspectives, businesses have transformed western culture through the use of powerful messages that link essential human needs, from sex to play to personal success, with consumption opportunities. Total spending on marketing activities annually exceeds one trillion dollars. As Douglas Pressman reveals, “This is double Americans’ combined spending on all public and private education, from kindergarten through graduate school. It also works out to around four thousand dollars a year for each man, woman, and child in the country. Four thousand dollars, in turn, is triple the annual per capita Gross Domestic Product of the so-called low—and medium-income countries, where 85% of the world’s people live” (558).

The Culture of Poverty Thesis

According to Elizabeth Chin, the widespread dissemination of marketing messages within contemporary consumer societies creates the illusion of availability that does not exist for many citizens. Much recent scholarship has revealed that a variety of groups are left out of the material abundance that is available within the larger society, due, in part, to their race, gender, and/or relative poverty (e.g., Hill and Dhanda; Hill and

Adrangi). This context is consistent with the perspective of Oscar Lewis, who first proposed the *culture of poverty* thesis (*Five Families*). His conceptualization refers to a subculture of people living in poverty who respond to their lack of resources with a distinct set of negative beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (also see Morris). Based on work by Ronald Paul Hill and Debra Lynn Stephens as well as Mario Luis Small and Katherine Newman, their negativity is the result of inequity, alienation, loss of self-esteem/self-efficacy, and poor mental and physical health. In some cases, an oppositional culture, such as urban gangs, emerges that exacerbates differences between haves and have-nots (Farkas, Lleras, and Maczuga).

While detractors have taken umbrage with his use of the term “culture” in reference to poverty communities (see Leeds for an example), the primary disparity between Oscar Lewis and other scholars is whether what the poor see as valuable is what their more affluent counterparts see as valuable. For instance, Lewis suggests that impoverished consumers are fully aware of middle-class ideals but do not behave according to their dictates. Other researchers, such as R. K. Jones and Y. Lou, and C. A. Valentine, believe that values are similar across socio-economic status, but that perceived differences are caused primarily by a variety of restrictions on consumption. Interestingly, D. Harvey and M. H. Reed maintain that Lewis never meant to imply that the poor live pathological lives, but instead channel their feelings to develop positive adaptive mechanisms that allow them to overcome material constraints. In his own words, Lewis contends that the culture of poverty “represents an effort to cope with feelings of hopelessness and despair” that motivates consumers to seek “local solutions for problems not met by existing institutions and agencies” (*Anthropological Essays* 69). The survival strategies of these consumers have been described as *heroic* by Jo Beall, even when their activities are considered illicit (see Hill, “Criminal Receiving”).

Scholarship within the consumer behavior field concurs with this thesis. In fact, R. J. Holloway and R. N. Cardozo recognized early on that

impoverished consumers “have developed shopping strategies to obtain the best assortment of products they can within budgets limited in size and flexibility” (55). Alan Andreasen takes this approach further by suggesting that even excessive debt obligations of the impoverished are “a result of careful calculations of the consequences of their actions” in their quest to maximize material abundance (40). Hill and Stephens reinforce these findings in an examination of the coping strategies of welfare mothers. The authors show that the restrictions faced by these women are often overcome using resource strengths such as social capital within their communities that greatly expand available goods and services beyond the normal limitations inherent to their economic and cultural deficits.

The next section presents details of additional research that inform this study through a unique methodological approach that brings the consumer culture of the impoverished into focus.

Ethnographic Research Contexts

The qualitative investigations that provide input into the development of the consumer culture of poverty are part of a stream of research on the material lives of impoverished consumers. This work chronicles the beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and survival strategies of such groups as the homeless, welfare mothers, impoverished juvenile delinquents, and the rural poor. To summarize these findings, composites of five impoverished subpopulations were developed using short stories based on ethnographic data collected by the first author and others drawing upon such methods as interviews, field notes, participant observation, and nonparticipant observation (Hill, *Surviving in a Material World*). Findings from the original research were employed to mold the focal characters and their consumer lives, and every example of their interaction with the consumer culture is data-driven. The resulting stories provide rich contextual descriptions of the lived experience of these people consistent with

John Van Mannen's ("An End to Innocence") view of ethnography as a storytelling institution. If successful, such representations bring the lived experience of an unfamiliar group to an interested audience in a way that allows it to see, hear, and feel what it is like to exist in a different world (Van Mannen, *Tales of the Field*). And the success often derives from the depiction of critical events in the lives of cultural members that define their relationships with the larger community.

The first story is based on Hill and Stamey, which chronicles an investigation by Stamey consisting of a thousand-plus contact hours with more than a hundred homeless persons living in various locations outside the social welfare system. Drawing upon the study findings we present the trials and tribulations of Jack, a man who recently became homeless. He spends his first homeless night in a municipal shelter but finds the experience threatening and demoralizing. He moves outside, living under a bridge on a landing until arsonists destroy his possessions, and then into a homeless community that resembles the shantytowns of the Great Depression. His final residence is an abandoned building that he shares discreetly with two other homeless men.

The second short story is grounded in a work by Hill ("Homeless Women, Special Possessions, and the Meaning of 'Home'")—a year-long investigation that entailed the first author working one day a week at a homeless shelter for women and their children—and it focuses attention on Zoë and her family's experience of homelessness. After a difficult childhood, Zoë becomes pregnant with her second child and moves in with the father of this offspring. Unfortunately, his employer reduces his work status to part-time, and the resultant drop in income leads them to leave their modest home. After a series of stays with relatives, Zoë and her children are forced to live in shelters where many of their original possessions are lost and new ones obtained. These shelters present much peril, and she ultimately must fend for herself and her children.

Hill ("Homeless Children") and Julie Ozanne, Ronald Paul Hill, and Newell Wright inform the third story, which draws upon the above-

mentioned project relating to the homeless shelter for women and children, and a second project involving performance of the role of "Life Skills Consultant" by the first author to a group of incarcerated juvenile delinquents over a period of six months. This story profiles the life of Fast Eddie, a late teen living in a poor community. Eddie grows up in an unstable environment where he is forced to move from one place to the next during his early childhood. His father is a distant and violent man who comes in and out of his life. His mother is warm and caring but submissive, and Eddie takes advantage of her nature as he matures into a teenager. Over time his relationship with material possessions goes from joyful anticipation to apathy to anger at his relative poverty. Eddie falls in with a "fast crowd," and they commit property crimes to gain access to the material world.

The consumer lives of Anita and her children portrayed in the fourth story are based primarily on Hill and Stephens' report of a study that included nine months of work by a coauthor on projects as a Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED) instructor as well as in-depth interviews with welfare (Aid to Families with Dependent Children [AFDC]) mothers. Anita struggles as a child of a welfare recipient and vows not to live that life. However, her existence takes a radical turn when she becomes pregnant as a teenager, quits school, and marries. The first few years of this union go smoothly and her family grows to five persons. Unfortunately, her husband's employer lays him off and the only viable option for a new job is out of town. He takes the position and works diligently, but is fired after a physical confrontation with his boss, leaving Anita without much income. She eventually joins the welfare rolls only to find that the level of support is too low for her family to survive.

Renee Gravois Lee, Julie Ozanne, and Ronald Paul Hill inform the rural-poverty fifth story, which draws upon a two-year-long research project conducted by Renee Lee in the Appalachian Mountains with women seeking healthcare services. The story centers on Tammy and her mother and their lives in a former coal-mining

town. When Tammy was a youngster, her family had most of what they needed to get by. However, by the time Tammy's own children were young adults, the mines closed permanently, and the financial basis of the town collapsed. Jobs became scarce and supporting services within the town dried up. Tammy's mother eventually took ill, and they struggled to get adequate medical attention within a reasonable distance from their home. Their situation continued to deteriorate until they gained access to an alternative healthcare delivery system that valued social over economic capital.

These stories were treated as text and used as the primary data source in several previous investigations. The data were analyzed by (1) creating an understanding of the intersections of the material culture and the consumer culture of poverty within each story, (2) organizing findings for each story with an emphasis on contextually-based information contained within the data, (3) developing thematic categories that depict particular aspects of the material culture of the poor across characters and situations, and (4) exploring the relationships among the themes in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the material lives of impoverished consumers. A gestalt of the results across these investigations is presented in the next section as a series of related thematic categories summarizing the consumer culture of poverty as lived experience.

Themes of the Consumer Culture of Poverty

Loss/Lack of Familial/ Friendship Love

What is particularly striking about discovery across these ethnographic representations is the central role played by the loss/lack of intimate as well as other-centered love on consumption adequacy. In most cases, this situation is exacerbated by the experience of other-centered disdain or hostility. The quality of life of the focal characters,

their families, and their community members are significantly reduced as a consequence, resulting in a variety of negative emotional reactions and behaviors that often fail to improve their circumstances in the face of this adversity.

The starting point of their emotional and material demise is the loss/lack of familial and friendship love. (Tammy, the woman from Appalachia, is to some extent an exception.) For example, Jack, the homeless man, exhausts his inner circle of friends and family to the point where none will have any further contact with him. In desperation, he seeks respite at a municipal shelter in an effort to secure basic foodstuffs and a safe living arrangement for the night. As a teenager, Eddie suffers from emotional and physical abuse as well as material neglect at the hands of his father, and he turns to his neighborhood peers for solace. Unfortunately, they encourage his juvenile delinquency in order to advance their material status, and Eddie eventually is incarcerated.

The best example of such loss/lack may come from the story of Zoë, who was ultimately forced into living at various homeless shelters with her children. Her earliest experiences of family life are quite positive and consistent with the middle-class vision of parental love. However, this situation deteriorates over time to the point where both her father and mother become neglectful of their children. Consider the following excerpts from Zoë's story:

Family problems reached a critical point over a decade ago when she was just ten years old. Her parents had been fighting more often than usual, and Zoë's father stayed home less and less. One day, during a particularly violent argument between her parents, her father began hitting her mother. All three of the children were reduced to tears at this sight, and they begged their father to stop. After a few more minutes passed, neighbors began banging on the door and threatened to call the police. Her father stopped abruptly and left, and Zoë hadn't seen him since. In fact, he never even returned for his clothing.

(Hill, *Surviving in a Material World* 35)

The absence of her father transformed their family from a cohesive unit to an assortment

of people who went their separate ways. Zoë's mother started staying out late at night with her friends, and she occasionally would allow strange men to sleep in her bedroom. This erratic and irresponsible behavior made Zoë furious at first, but she learned to keep her feelings to herself. As long as she had her bedroom door locked and her siblings inside, she felt some degree of comfort and safety from her mother's escapades. (35–36)

Zoë and her siblings are removed from their mother's care as a result of this neglect and placed in foster homes over several years. During this period her initial anxieties mature into anger and depression, and she is uninterested in listening to her mother's warnings or commands after they are reunited. Zoë quickly falls in step with a fast crowd at school, experimenting with drugs and sex to alleviate her emotional pain. She becomes pregnant, and this experience is the wakeup call she needs to straighten out her life. Zoë meets and falls in love with a young man soon after her baby is born, but their financial circumstances quickly deteriorate. Unfortunately, no one in her extended family is willing to provide her with more than a short-term material fix for this dilemma. Consider the following passages involving interactions with her mother and her grandmother:

Six months later, Zoë discovered she was pregnant again. She told her mother immediately, expecting her mother to be excited about the birth of a true love child. However, her mother reacted angrily, telling Zoë that there was no room in their overcrowded apartment for another baby. Besides, she could no longer afford to pay for the extra food and clothing as well as the diapers and other baby products Zoë's children would need.

(Hill, *Surviving in a Material World* 40)

When they arrived at her grandmother's doorstep, the woman was just finishing her morning coffee. She was a rather distant person who had battled her own demons all of her life. None of her family had ever come to her for long-term support in the past, including when her own daughter (Zoë's mother) was institutionalized. To Zoë's

relief, she listened to her troubles and agreed to let her stay the night. However, Zoë and the girls would have to leave the next morning. The place was just too small to accommodate four people. (42)

As a result of this lack of familial support, Zoë is forced to take her children to a municipal shelter in the city where most of her remaining possessions are stolen. She vows not to return and moves to a private shelter run by a religious order. Circumstances improve, only to be disrupted by their policy on limited stays. Once again, Zoë turns to her family, but they are unable or unwilling to come to her aid:

Unfortunately, after six weeks at the shelter Zoë was asked to leave to make room for another family. Zoë was told that she was almost two weeks beyond the one-month time limit and that other needy families were waiting their turn for shelter. Zoë pleaded that she had no place else to go. Her man had been laid off from his factory job a week ago, and he was forced to move back home with his mother. She had called all of her adult relatives, and none was able to come to her aid.

(Hill, *Surviving in a Material World* 54)

Helplessly Falling into Greater Poverty

The characters representing various impoverished subpopulations initially experience their descent into poverty as something that is beyond their control. This is not to say that they hold themselves completely blameless for their situations or that they place the blame elsewhere; nor does it suggest that they came from locations in our society of relative affluence and face economic constraints for the first time. Instead, they are caught up in circumstances originating much earlier that set the course toward increasing poverty and the loss of cherished possessions. They often are aware of several pivotal events that sent strong signals of their material demise, but they are at a loss as to what to do about them. It is as if they

are adrift on a leaky lifeboat slowly moving out to sea without an oar.

One of the best examples of this downward spiral involves the process of becoming homeless (see Wasson and Hill). Most individuals and families who become homeless do not find the experience to be sudden or unexpected. Typically the person or persons move from a self-sufficient dwelling such as an apartment, because they can no longer afford to pay the bills, to doubling up with friends or relatives. However, after a while they “overstay their welcome” as a result of overcrowding or other interpersonal problems, and they are forced to move to government-controlled housing, public or private homeless shelters, or the streets. Once they exit their own homes, they find it difficult to shape their living conditions or control their destiny. Not surprisingly, many newly homeless people become anxious and withdrawn as they face the inevitable erosion of their personal property and freedom.

The experiences of Jack are very telling in this regard. The story opens one morning after a series of interpersonal conflicts leave him living outside in his car.

Jack woke up in the back seat of his 1981 Ford Mustang, which was parked at the end of the street next to a neighborhood park. His memory of the events of the previous evening was kind of fuzzy. He was living temporarily with a friend he had known since high school. He had lost his apartment a year before, and his parents tired of his “behavior problems” after about ten months and kicked him out. His friend Tim was his last hope. (11)

Jack remembered seeing Tim’s wife come out of the bathroom after her shower yesterday afternoon. He was lying on their couch, finishing the last few bottles of a 12-pack of beer he purchased earlier that day. Jack said something to her that he thought was kind of clever, but she reacted by turning back around and locking herself in the bathroom. When Tim came home a few minutes later, he told Jack it was time for him to leave. (11)

Jack realizes that he cannot live in a car in his old neighborhood much longer without attracting unwanted attention, but he is unable to divine an acceptable alternative. Tim was the only friend willing to let him stay for a while, and his older brother and parents have a restraining order against him that forbids any contact. His only other sibling, a sister, moved to another state two years ago without providing him with her new address or phone number. Jack recalls the last time he was in contact with his family; his mother had tearfully handed him a piece of paper with the name and address of a public shelter in town for homeless men. At the time, Jack was insulted by the gesture, but he begins to realize that this facility may be his only housing option and reluctantly agrees to give it a try.

Consumption Restrictions and Meager Possessions

Impoverished consumers face a number of significant restrictions that impede their ability to fulfill basic needs. From clothing to foodstuffs to shelter from the elements, these individuals often must consume goods and services that would be deemed unacceptable to middle-class citizens under ordinary conditions. Ronald Paul Hill and Mark Stamey use the term “secondary consumers” to describe their material lives, and it includes a lengthy list of scavenging and recycling activities to acquire discarded goods. Examples are eating restaurant meals from trash bins, living in abandoned apartment buildings, and wearing donated clothing from local charities.

One result of such material restrictions is that the homeless often are limited to a few cherished or utilitarian possessions that they are able to find safe storage for or keep with them at all times. While the lack of income always is an issue, institutional or logistical constraints also make accumulation of such items problematical (see Hill, “Homeless Women, Special Possessions, and the Meaning of ‘Home’”). This is particularly true over time as the individual or family must move from one location to another seeking accommodation.

Zoë provides a vivid and revealing case-in-point. She grows up under dire circumstances after the breakup of her parents, and her material world takes a turn for the worse. The situation improves somewhat during early adulthood until the father of her second daughter has his wages reduced due to cutbacks by his employer at a local factory. Zoë has no alternative but to move into a municipal shelter for women and children and, as the following excerpt demonstrates, their material circumstances are quite spartan:

Zoë was assigned living area number forty-five, and she was handed sheets and blankets for two beds, three pillows, some towels, a small tube of toothpaste, and a toothbrush for personal hygiene. Since the facility was not responsible for the loss of her possessions, she was advised to keep them with her at all times. Her mind wandered to a scene where she was bathing her children in a shower stall with their suitcase somehow in attendance. How could that possibly work?

(Hill, *Surviving in a Material World* 45)

With her family and cargo in tow, Zoë walked down the hallway to the living quarters in search of number forty-five. As she entered the room, its size and the level of commotion caught her by surprise. There were ten rows of enclosed areas at least five deep. It took Zoë several minutes to locate her dwelling since the ordering of the living areas was not readily apparent. She noted immediately that all four shelters surrounding her abode were occupied, and she began to feel claustrophobic. Zoë quickly made the two beds using the sheets and blankets provided. Both were lumpy and worn, and the sheets themselves were threadbare in several places. When this task was completed, she changed the clothing of both daughters and removed the money and identification papers from her suitcase. (45–45)

Role of the Media

The media play an essential role in communicating the standards for material accumulation within our consumer culture. Soon after

impoverished children learn from the media what is available within the larger material world, they develop a great sense of need or desire for a wide variety of goods and services. Over time they establish a baseline standard of living against which they measure their relative affluence. In our ethnographic contexts involving children, they come up short, with no indication that the future may offer a substantial improvement in typical consumption opportunities. For instance, Tammy expresses concern about how her children will respond to the decaying condition of their coal-mining community given their beliefs about what is available elsewhere.

Zoë comes to comprehend the restricted consumer existence of herself and her siblings, when compared with media portrayals of family meals, as they “hunt” throughout their home in the morning looking for something to eat. Anita, once on welfare and with an adult understanding of the resulting consumer restrictions, attempts to blunt her children’s developing interest in the material world. For example, she ends their regular trips to a local shopping mall, one of the few enjoyable distractions from their otherwise grueling lives, because of their insistence that Anita buy them products she cannot afford. However, she does not succeed in stemming their demands because media images of the joys from material abundance during childhood are so widespread, lending credibility and authenticity to their requests.

Eddie’s struggle to rise above the culture of poverty within his community provides a powerful example of material benchmarking against cultural norms. Following his incarceration, he finally has time to stop and reflect upon the circumstances that led to his eventual arrest. Eddie’s thoughts often turn to daydreams about various events in his life, especially the best of times when he could buy anything he wanted and was considered a success by his peers because of his relative affluence. The following excerpt of a memory from his youth demonstrates the role of the media in the formation of his material desires:

Eddie liked the [television] advertisements as much as the shows themselves, especially

during the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas. While the programs portrayed the importance of family during the holidays, the commercials demonstrated that the real meaning was in material goods. An endless parade of toys, games, clothes, videos, and other items too numerous to mention danced before his eyes, and he looked at them in eager anticipation. He was fully aware that they were available to good girls and boys, and Eddie felt entitled to his fair share.

(Hill, *Surviving in a Material World* 67)

Unfortunately, Eddie never experienced holidays like the TV families did. Church groups from more affluent communities donated most of the foodstuffs that they consumed at these meals, and they consisted of a variety of canned and packaged meats, vegetables, and starches. The food wasn't bad, but it certainly did not live up to his fantasies of an old-fashioned holiday feast. Gift-giving at Christmas was even more disappointing. Eddie would make lengthy lists of desired items that he had seen on television, and he would send them to Santa Claus for delivery. During the best of times he would receive one of the smaller toys he had requested, or an item of clothing that his mother felt he needed such as socks or shoes. (67–68)

Reactions to the Loss/ Lack of Support

The men and women in these stories experience primarily negative emotional reactions to the loss/lack of support from significant as well as distant others. They are typically caught up in powerful circumstances originating much earlier that set their course toward increasing poverty. Focal characters feel trapped in a downward spiral, unable even to return to their previous (inadequate) material lives. However, rather than eliciting altruism from society, they usually are forced to join a stigmatized group such as the *rural poor*, branding them as unworthy of respect. The result is greater restrictions on their ability to consume or provide for their families.

Taken together, these feelings include deprivation, anger, frustration, shame, humiliation, inferiority, and loss of control that lead focal characters to become increasingly alienated from mainstream consumer society. As a child growing up in a poor community, Eddie goes from excitement to numbness to anger over the material abundance paraded before his eyes by the media, eventually stealing cars in order to acquire what he cannot otherwise have. Zoë is anxious and confused by the lack of help she experiences, and she becomes livid at the treatment received after acquiring the label *homeless*. Tammy becomes increasingly angry as she watches the treatment received by her mother on two different occasions from healthcare workers at a medical clinic.

In the following passages, Anita reveals her experience as a *welfare mother*, including her anger at the inadequate support provided by the social welfare system, her humiliation from its public utilization, and the negative reactions of her children:

She tried to reason with her caseworker during their periodic meetings on the status of her support. Anita would present to this woman an accounting of the money and benefits she received against her fixed bills and other necessities. Since it was clear to both of them that her income was insufficient, why couldn't her support level be raised? Why was the system designed without the flexibility to help people meet their most basic needs? Anita was left feeling angry and frustrated.

(Hill, *Surviving in a Material World* 95)

As if getting and keeping her benefits weren't enough trouble, using them also was difficult. When Anita went shopping for groceries, typically with her children in tow, she painstakingly selected products to maximize the use of her food stamps. However, she invariably would have some ineligible items among her selections, and the clerk would let her know using a sarcastic or arrogant tone. One time when she was at a supermarket outside her own neighborhood, the attending clerk shouted across the store to the manager that she needed food stamp change. (96)

To make matters worse, Anita's children were beginning to experience their own negative consequences as a result of this deprivation. The nurse who came monthly to the school reported to Anita that her children were underweight and looked anemic. She recommended several changes to their diet as well as an expensive multivitamin, but Anita knew that both were impossible given the financial restrictions she faced. This first year on the welfare rolls was the most grueling in her life, and she felt like she was falling down a deep hole with no discernable bottom. (97)

Fighting a Deviant Label and Community Support

Once they have the opportunity to reflect upon their situations, Ronald Paul Hill and Mark Stamey suggest that many among the poor eschew their deviant label and engage in activities that restore self-esteem. Sometimes this change emerges from anger or rage at the circumstances that entrap them; other times it is spawned by a renewed sense of pride in the fundamental building blocks of who they are and from where they came. Regardless, impoverished consumers often experience a metamorphosis that results in a redefinition of the self, empowering them to adopt a new set of attitudes and behavior patterns they had not considered previously. With this arsenal as the basis for their self-definition, they are prepared to re-engage society on their own terms.

Jack exemplifies the emergence of a renewed, more positive self-identity following an angry outburst over recent indignities suffered at the municipal shelter. He enters that facility feeling he has nowhere else to go, and he is subjected to several humiliations in exchange for shelter and food. However, Jack quickly realizes that the price he is forced to pay is too high for what he ultimately receives, and he decides to live life on his own terms in a neighborhood park. This decision helps him recoup some of his dignity and sense of self when he takes control of his future.

As the ensuing passage makes clear, part of the process requires Jack to differentiate himself from the homeless people he observes at the shelter:

He started the car, pulled away from the curb, and shouted obscenities as loud as he could into the air. As Jack drove along, rage filled his entire body. [In the municipal shelter] he had been treated like a child, fed like a dog, herded like cattle, vomited on by a drug addict and his car had been vandalized. He could think of nothing good about this experience.

(Hill, *Surviving in a Material World* 18)

Jack realized that shelters were not for him. The people who inhabited shelters were the truly desperate—unable to fend for themselves and without hope. He was *not* like them. He would find a way to survive by his own wits and abilities, and he would live life according to his own rules. (18)

While the poor may seek to restore themselves psychologically as well as materially through their own resources, they often find this task nearly impossible. The pervasive sense of isolation and desolation that permeates their living environments exacerbates their poverty, and the institutional support services that are designed to buoy them in times of severe stress often fail to do so. Nonetheless, a spirit of community may help provide the needed support for their rise from the collapse of consumption opportunities and freedoms (Hill, *Surviving in a Material World*). Leadership in this regard comes from the joining together of people like themselves or from outsiders who are committed to seeking and finding solutions to poverty. Reciprocity typically plays a central role among these individuals, and they often share with each other in order to create a critical mass of needed goods and services.

After his possessions were destroyed by arsonists, Jack finds that living under the bridge becomes untenable and he wanders back into the city in hopes of finding greater material opportunities. He is rummaging through large-capacity garbage containers behind a group of restaurants when he hears a voice giving him directions on how to *dumpster dive* properly. The voice belongs

to a small, disheveled man who invites Jack to return with him to a homeless community composed of people like them who come together for support and protection. The passage below opens with a narrative on the lifestyle within the community as described by Jack's new acquaintance, followed by Jack's description of the initial treatment by others he encounters there:

Some lived outside under the stars, but most had constructed their own homes out of materials scavenged from construction sites around the city. People respected each other's privacy, but they often shared food, drink, and extra clothing. While no formal authority existed to keep order, stealing, threatening behavior, or use of drugs resulted in swift expulsion by the group as a whole. Virtually everybody had some kind of job, from full-time employment to part-time recycling of cans and bottles scavenged locally. (26)

Jack was introduced to some men standing around a kettledrum preparing breakfast. Most nodded politely, and one even extended his hand to shake. Jack was a bit taken aback by this gesture of friendship, and he tried to remember the last time someone greeted him with respect. He slowly extended his hand and asked politely for some food. Jack was the first person served, and he sat down quietly at a picnic table next to the grill and began eating his meal with relish. (26)

A different community is experienced by Tammy, whose personal and shared resources in her small coal-mining town are well developed. Tammy's awareness of her current and future circumstances is the result of a long-term struggle with her mother's illness. Given the rural nature of her community and the unemployment brought on by the loss of its largest employer, the medical support necessary to diagnose and treat her mother's sickness is unavailable locally. In the end, the failure of the formal medical system gives rise to an alternative treatment and delivery system that is community-based. The strengths of herself, her mother, and the larger community are revealed through her mother's

illness, and Tammy grows to accept and appreciate the social fabric of the town and its meaning to the future of the citizens' material lives.

As Tammy sat alongside the bed holding her mother's hand, she reflected on what things would be like without this woman's presence as a family member and a community advocate. Her mother was the matriarch of the clan—the person who brought everyone together for Sunday dinners, the holidays, and other special occasions. Even during the difficult financial period that followed the closing of the mines, she was able to marshal the resources of the collective group to make sure that no one went without food, clothing, shelter, or transportation. Sharing was a given among them, and this reciprocity helped them truly appreciate one another. Her mother made sure that they learned this important lesson well.

(Hill, *Surviving in a Material World* 131)

As Tammy looked down into the face of her mother, she couldn't help but smile. The torch had passed from mother to daughter and the exchange had been seamless. Tammy imagined that in a few years she would have the same reputation as her mother within their community. The situation in their town may never improve, but her family, friends, and neighbors were here to stay, and they were going to do everything in their power to improve their lives. When it came to helping others, Tammy had an excellent teacher in her mother. She hoped that her own daughter would be a willing pupil and exercise a leadership role in their town when her time came. (132–33)

Tenuous Present/Uncertain Future

Even if the poor are able to marshal the full power of the resources within their communities, their ability to prosper materially remains in doubt. The simple fact is that these resources are severely limited, suggesting that their most creative utilization and development would still leave poor community members with unmet essential needs. As a result, many current efforts eventually

fall short, demonstrating that the ability of the poor to survive, much less thrive materially, is unlikely. With the tenuous nature of their present consumer lives, the opportunity to envision a positive future is constrained. At best the prospect of living a material life similar to their more affluent counterparts is uncertain; at worst their future is as restricted as their past and they begin to feel like they are falling back into self-defeating patterns of behavior.

Work by J. W. Sharff parallels this perspective. She conducted research in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in the Lower East Side of Manhattan to explore how poor people struggle with material deprivation. In this New York community, she discovers individuals with real strength and ethnic pride who work to advance the quality of life of others within their neighborhood. She also finds that many of their activities, which are considered inappropriate by the broader society, are sensible and effective strategies when viewed within the context of their restricted consumer existences. Nevertheless, Sharff believes that all of this toil is unlikely to make up for the structural changes in the larger economy that eliminated well-paying manufacturing and union jobs and replaced them with low-level service positions at below-poverty-level wages. She finds that most of the poor inhabitants are unable to rise above their depressed circumstances, resulting in widespread drug abuse, violence, and early pregnancies.

The closing section of Fast Eddie's story provides a glimpse into the tenuous nature of the material lives of the poor from a long-term perspective. Eddie exists in a restricted living environment that lacks the ability to support his material needs in a socially acceptable fashion.

As the days passed, the initial euphoria about his future prospects evaporated and was replaced with a dark resignation. Most of the schools he hoped to attend were beyond his financial reach, and his ability to secure a loan to cover tuition and expenses was severely constrained because of his felony conviction. The managers of the clothing stores in the mall almost laughed at his equivalency diploma, treating him like an

educational second-class citizen. The few that were desperate enough to give him an application withdrew their offers when his background check identified him as a convicted car thief.

(Hill, *Surviving in a Material World* 82)

Eddie felt that he was at one of the lowest points in his life. After all of his work at Saint Peter's [reform school] he was no better off than he was before he left the neighborhood. Eddie was unable to move forward—none of the options he fantasized about during the latter part of his detention were viable alternatives. He also was uncomfortable going backward—living his previous life would most likely result in real jail time that would make his prior incarceration look like a picnic. (82)

After living in this limbo state for awhile, Eddie drifted back to the streets, seeking comfort by reestablishing relationships with the friends he had recently abandoned. Without money he was seriously constrained in what he could do, and he was dependent upon the successful criminals in his neighborhood, who had taken his place while he was away, for their benevolence. He hoped he could avoid returning to a life of crime, but what else could he do? There was nowhere left to turn. (82)

Eddie initially experiences great difficulty adapting to life within the reform program. The strict regimen and the loss of personal freedoms are very disconcerting to him, and he feels a sense of panic now that his former peers and material possessions are no longer available for support. He rebels against this system on a few occasions, but he eventually follows the rules in order to avoid dismissal and transfer to a more rigid detention facility. As Eddie increasingly engages this insular community, he begins to experience successes that bolster his sense of self and his perception of his potential within the larger society after release. Unfortunately, the resources within the community to which he is returned are inadequate, and Eddie is drawn back to a life of crime.

Consumer Culture Implications

Media are omnipresent in our society, inundating citizens across socio-economic subgroups with messages of widespread opportunities for acquiring and using goods and services. Recent scholarship by Robin Coulter, Gerald Zaltman, and Keith Coulter reveals that the average American consumer is bombarded with thousands of advertisements each day, providing a rich mosaic of our material culture. Given the powerful and consistent ways that consumption is presented, the similarity in needs and desires of societal members expressed here should come as no surprise (see Jones and Lou). Yet this research also shows vast disparities among people in *access* to this abundance, emphasizing *restrictions* on the material lives of impoverished consumers. Ronald Paul Hill ("Stalking the Poverty Consumer") suggests that approximately twelve percent of our country exists below the official poverty line, with about double this number facing significant consumer hardships. In point of fact, nearly sixty percent of the total citizenry expend more than they earn in order to obtain what they can from this cornucopia of material possessions.

In the face of the above statistics and the findings of this investigation, the majority of the population would appear to benefit from less information on how to "buy" happiness rather than more. However, stemming the tide of mass advertising in our profit-driven and materialistic culture represents an impossible task. With so much consumer abundance around us, perhaps our public school system should address the psychological and sociological mechanisms behind marketing campaigns and require classes that teach young adults how to make wise purchase decisions, decisions which are fiscally and personally responsible.

The well-researched concept of *information overload* may be broadened to inform the larger issue of *opportunity overload* (see Lurie for an excellent recent discussion of information overload). The depth and breadth of product-based information available within our consumer

culture defy comprehension, immersing the population with both relevant and irrelevant data points about product options to guide their decisionmaking. The impoverished consumers chronicled in this study, on the other hand, are faced with *opportunity restriction*, because they are without the resources necessary to exploit the same information-rich environment to acquire desired goods and services.

Of course, more affluent consumers may experience negative consequences as they navigate the material culture, many of which have received considerable attention in the academic literature, such as emotional stress by Adam Duhachek, distorted body images by Mary Martin and James Gentry, and substance abuse by Elizabeth Hirschman. Nevertheless, their encounters mostly exist along a more positive continuum that ranges primarily from satisfaction to delight. Indeed, Elizabeth Hirschman and Morris Holbrook provide extensive support that consumer behavior may have hedonic elements that evoke our fantasies and playful nature (see Holbrook and Hirschman for an example). Once again, our research shows that have-nots within our consumer culture are considerably less likely to enjoy the many beneficial aspects of such experiential consumption, often resulting in a variety of negative emotional states for these impoverished consumers that cloud their perceptions of future possibilities.

An important outcome of our findings involving consumption experiences is that the historical models of consumer behavior (see Rau and Samiee for a review) may be less relevant for a significant number of Americans as well as nearly half of all humankind (Hill and Adrangi). While primary stages such as need assessment, acquisition, utilization, and disposition are likely to fit regardless of the socio-economic subgroup under consideration, the diverse ways poor citizens experience them may well vary according to their level of access to the resources necessary to engage the marketplace. Therefore, the centerpiece of the distinctions between haves and have-nots includes restrictions noted in this article that inequitably delimit consumption options, influencing the

character and outcome of every facet of the traditional consumer-behavior process for the less affluent (see Hill and Stephens for possible research agendas). The time has arrived to bring greater heterogeneity into our conceptualizations of the modern consumer culture that include the impact of significant resource deficits.

With the exception of the role of the media, the themes discussed previously have direct implications for creating a system of safeguards to prevent citizens from plummeting into poverty and homelessness. Programs such as job training and placement, mentoring, childcare, contraceptive counseling, mental/physical healthcare, subsidized housing, and support for a living wage could emanate from a joint effort among government, business, private social service agencies, and religious organizations. While prevention is the ultimate goal, it is also necessary to have social safety nets in place, such as shelters, that serve as rehabilitation centers for those who need a place to regroup when all other options are exhausted. Our continued failure to meet such basic needs exacerbates a plethora of social ills such as drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, child neglect, and violent crime, requiring billions of dollars in tax revenue from more affluent citizens to maintain the status quo.

A better and more just world for all American consumers will not come easily or soon as it requires a massive allocation of new resources or a reallocation of resources now being used elsewhere, and both alternatives would call for a sea of change in national priorities. Thus, the more realistic plan may well be to tackle the problem on a gradual basis, keeping our collective eye on the eventual target of an acceptable standard of living for all American consumers.

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