

The American Dream: Using Robert Merton’s Strain Theory to Understand the Beliefs and Coping Responses of Homeless Individuals

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the extent to which individuals experiencing homelessness in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, believe in the American Dream. Robert Merton’s strain theory is used to categorize the ways in which these individuals cope with their inability to achieve the Dream. We conducted a four-year ethnographic study of the homeless population in Myrtle Beach, including 180 interviews with people who are homeless and numerous conversations with service providers. A large portion of our homeless participants showed support for the ideology of the American Dream, despite their current struggles. Many of these participants believe that their hard work would eventually lead to future success. Moreover, conformity to the American Dream ideology and its associated work ethic is commonly supported by service providers working with the homeless community.

INTRODUCTION

Historian James Truslow Adams coined the term “the American Dream” in his 1931 book, *The Epic of America*. Adams envisioned America as a meritocracy in which everyone could see the rewards of their work. He argued that “...it is not a dream of motorcars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable and be regarded by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (Adams 1931:404). Although Adams sought to situate the American Dream in terms of personal fulfillment, public perception of the Dream quickly evolved into one in which economic success was the goal (Merton 1938; Hochschild 1995; Rosenfeld and Messner 2013: ch. 4).

The American Dream ideology portrays the United States as a place of opportunity, where all one must do is work hard and well-deserved rewards will follow. This ideology is alive and well among both wealthy and economically- disadvantaged individuals in the

Sociological Imagination

The Journal of the Wisconsin Sociological Association

United States (Lucio, Jefferson, and Peck 2016; Belmi et al. 2020). Wealthy individuals may believe that they are smarter or work harder than those who have less than they do (Belmi et al. 2020), while the poor may continue to persevere with the hope that their hard work will pay off in the end (Lucio et al. 2106). Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, through wars, depressions, and recessions, the Dream has endured (Hauhart 2015). The American Dream is highly individualistic and structured as a competition with winners and losers (Hauhart 2015). The losers, in this ideology, are not the ones who begin their lives with disadvantages that they cannot overcome, but rather they are individuals who are not smart enough or do not work hard enough to achieve all that the American Dream has to offer (Merton 1938). The winner-take-all philosophy of the Dream means that little attention is paid to the losers in the competition of life.

The American Dream is widely embraced across political party lines and is often used by American presidents to send a unifying message to the public (Wolak and Peterson 2020). To bolster the economy, politicians promote pursuit of the American Dream, and the consumption that accompanies it, as a civic duty, an expression of freedom, an indicator of financial and social success, and the key to happiness (Ivanova 2011). Circumstances of birth that could affect pursuit of the Dream—such as socioeconomic status, race, and sex—are largely ignored by policymakers and the public alike.

The mass media and the advertising industry contribute to this ideology by portraying the success promised by the Dream as a highly desirable and attainable lifestyle for all (Ivanova 2011; Hauhart 2015; Rosenberger 2016). For example, rags-to-riches stories on television and in movies—such as *Aladdin* (Clements and Musker 1992), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Burton 2005), and *Cinderella* (Geronimi, Jackson, and Luske 1950)—show children that if they work hard enough, they can overcome any obstacle (Lucio et al. 2016). The message is that anybody, regardless of their circumstances of birth, can succeed.

For over half of a century, the American Dream has been symbolized by a family living in a house in the suburbs and associated with the values of personal responsibility, hard work, and success (Ehrenreich 2009; McGinnis 2009; Ivanova 2011; Lucio et al. 2016). Today, however, it appears that Adams' vision is far from being reached. Although, at the time of our study (2016-2019), the US economy was strong and unemployment was low, economic inequality was at an all-time high. Even employed individuals with post-high school degrees were finding that a middle-class lifestyle, complete with the house in the suburbs and family vacations, was becoming more difficult to attain or sustain (Saez 2013).

In this paper, we explore how those at the bottom, for whom the American Dream has completely failed in practice, feel about their prospects for the future. We apply Robert Merton's (1938) strain theory to 180 sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals' responses in interviews conducted over a four-year period in Myrtle Beach, SC. Our goal is to understand how their homelessness is related to their belief in the American Dream.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Attitudes Towards the American Dream

Current academic research on individuals' belief in the American Dream is fairly sparse, and there is a need for more (Hauhart 2015). The research that has been conducted on the

Sociological Imagination

The Journal of the Wisconsin Sociological Association

American Dream largely focuses on immigrants or racial or ethnic minorities. There has been little research on whether belief in the American Dream is affected by socioeconomic status within these groups or others, and there is no research on whether people who are homeless believe in the American Dream.

When comparing industrialized countries, Toro et al. (2007) found that the United Kingdom and the United States have the highest proportions of chronically homeless residents. The United States was unique in its dearth of spending on social welfare programs compared to other countries and the lack of empathy for the poor expressed by its citizenry (Toro et al. 2007). A decade after the study by Toro and colleagues (2007), the United Nations commissioned a report to better understand the extremity of wealth inequality and the ignoring of poverty's impact in US society. Philip Alston, the UN's Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, noted that "the American Dream is quickly becoming the American illusion as the U.S now has the lowest social mobility of any of the rich countries" (Alston 2017:12).

Despite the skepticism of Alston's report, recent polls show that most Americans believe in the American Dream. A 2017 Pew Research Center poll asked respondents whether they had achieved the "American Dream." More than four in five (83%) believed that they had either achieved or were on their way to achieving the Dream. This belief was most prevalent among non-Hispanic Whites and those with college degrees. According to a synopsis of the survey's results, "Whites (41%) [were] more likely than [B]lacks (17%) or Hispanics (32%) to say they [had] achieved the American [D]ream. But more [B]lacks (62%) and Hispanics (51%) than Whites (42%) [said] they [were] on their way to achieving it" (Smith 2017). Surprisingly, only 17% of the respondents reported that they did not believe the Dream was in their reach (Smith 2017). In the same study, respondents were asked what the American Dream meant to them. Answers to this question included having a comfortable retirement, having a comfortable family life, making positive contributions to their community, owning a home, and having choices in how they live. Becoming wealthy seems to have largely fallen out of the American Dream ideology, with only 15% of those with a high school education or less and 9% of those with some college or more responding that this is important (Smith 2017).

A recent study conducted by National Public Radio (NPR) asked questions similar to the Pew Research Center poll but broke down the results by income (Neel 2020). The NPR study finds that 56% of low-income Americans agreed that they had either achieved the Dream or were on their way to achieving it (Neel 2020). The percentage of middle-income Americans agreeing with this statement jumped to 82, and virtually all upper-income respondents believed they had achieved the Dream or it was within reach (Neel 2020). This survey also asked respondents what it takes to be successful. Most respondents believed that hard work is the key to success. (87% of low-income and 93% of high-income respondents felt this way [Neel 2020].) In contrast, over half of the respondents believed attaining a middle-class lifestyle is harder today than in the past (Neel 2020). The responses to these surveys typify how the American Dream is infused into American culture. Respondents to national polls seem to feel that if they are comfortable and financially secure, they have achieved the American Dream, and if the Dream has not been achieved, hard work is the key to future success.

Sociological Imagination

The Journal of the Wisconsin Sociological Association

Academic research has found similar results, along with evidence that belief in the American Dream is held even by those who are failing to reach their goals (Alesina and Giuliano 2009; Chetty et al. 2017). Despite extensive research showing that upward mobility and the American Dream are less achievable today than in the past (Chetty et al. 2017), studies have found that inequality does not negate Americans' belief in the American Dream. Alberto Alesina and Paola Giuliano (2009) find that the presence of greater inequality in a society has the opposite effect on its poor: strengthening this belief rather than erasing it. Rather than frustrating them, inequality gives them a belief in future opportunities. Another study, by Lucio and colleagues (2016), finds the American Dream is firmly embraced by low-income individuals and families. The low-income respondents in this study expressed values and aspirations similar to those typically expressed by members of the middle class. For participants in this study, achievement of the American Dream is characterized by financial and familial stability, homeownership, and upward mobility (Lucio et al. 2016).

Poverty is often thought to be a result of individual characteristics such as laziness, complacency, and poor decision-making (Ali et al. 2018), and this belief has been internalized by many individuals on the lowest rungs of the economic ladder. In research illustrating this, Salamon and MacTavish (2017) find that residents in rural trailer parks often viewed mobile home ownership as a first step in realizing the American Dream. Respondents living in trailer parks believed that, with hard work, they could achieve social mobility by eventually moving out of the trailer park and into a traditional home. Moreover, when most of the respondents in this study were unable to achieve the American Dream of conventional home ownership by moving out of the trailer park, they tended to blame themselves.

For those living in poverty, moving somewhere else is often thought to be the solution to their problems (Hauhart 2015; Bryerton 2016a, 2016b). Bryerton (2016a, 2016b) finds that the residents of a high-poverty community acknowledged structural constraints imposed by living in a poor community, yet they believed that with perseverance, hard work, and a change in residence, these barriers could be overcome. Moreover, many of the residents distanced or disassociated themselves from other residents by attributing the struggles of others to those individuals' poor decisions. When faced with their own setbacks, residents did not give up on the American Dream, but rather they felt they would achieve their dreams if they just worked harder.

If the Dream is to be believed, an individual who fails in, or falls out of the labor market is largely responsible for their own plight. They must have made some mistake or failed to live up to their full potential (Wasserman and Clair 2010; Ramanuj 2019). The message of the Dream is that the way for individuals to succeed is to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps," even if they have no straps to pull up. Regardless of the structural realities of poverty (unequal schools segregated by race and class, a shortage of affordable housing, inadequate physical and mental health care, and a dysfunctional split labor market, with some jobs paying very high wages and others paying little), US citizens across the socioeconomic spectrum largely believe in the Dream (Heike 2014; Lucio et al. 2016).

Belief in the Dream and in the idea that hard work is the path to success is reinforced by countless self-help books, such as *The Secret* (Byrne 2006), which promises that if individuals think positively and are diligent in their efforts, the American Dream can be a reality for all. This promise, and the belief in that promise, have created a culture that

Sociological Imagination

The Journal of the Wisconsin Sociological Association

dismisses poverty and homelessness as personal problems and ignores structural obstacles to success (Ehrenreich 2009). Ignoring structural barriers to upward mobility not only stigmatizes those who are unsuccessful but can also reinforce a culture that thoughtlessly accepts a system of inequality and an unbalanced opportunity structure (Kluegal and Smith 2017). One manifestation of such a culture is that many Americans who hold meritocratic ideals nonetheless reject investment in public education or social services if they feel it will disadvantage them personally (Hochschild 2001).

Robert Merton's Strain Theory

Robert Merton (1938) argued that the pursuit of the American Dream was (even in 1938) behind Americans' drive and motivation to achieve material prosperity. Merton explored the structural inequalities that are built into the social system. He contrasted the goals Americans are told to achieve by their culture with the structural limitations on achieving those goals faced by the working classes. Merton found that money is the key benchmark by which individuals define and measure success. He asserted that most people are prevented from achieving the American Dream as it is so defined. Even if each individual works as hard as they are capable, there is not enough room at the top for everyone to become wealthy, or even to achieve the less ambitious American Dream of owning a house in the suburbs with a picket fence. Even if there was room, there would be structural impediments, such as the vast disparities in public education and the criminal justice system, as well as a split labor market where highly-skilled and less-skilled jobs have vastly different rates of pay. The American social structure is not set up as a community where everyone is capable of having all they need to achieve the American Dream.

Robert Merton's strain theory is concerned with how individuals react when the American Dream is out of reach. Notwithstanding its age, this theory is useful for exploring ways that people respond to obstacles when they finally understand that not everyone can have all that they desire and for which they work. Merton asserted that people respond to their failure to achieve in different ways, depending on the degree to which they think the current system of inequality is legitimate. If a person views the system as "fair," they are likely to react differently than if they believe the system is unjust (Braithwaite 1980).

The first coping mechanism Merton described is conformity. This is the most common reaction to the strain resulting from non-achievement of perceived success and is important for maintaining social cohesion (Merton 1938). Most people, Merton argued, have internalized the belief that working hard is the path to success. Conformists will continue to believe in the Dream and work towards it even when faced with disappointing outcomes of their efforts. A person who is experiencing homelessness might continue to seek work, hoping for a better life. If they are employed at a job that does not provide a sufficient income to afford housing, they will continue to persevere, hoping for better opportunities in the long run.

Ritualists give up on the goals of the American Dream, but they continue to work in legitimate occupations. They know they will never have enough money or the status and power that is associated with wealth, but they will go through the motions and accept their place in life. They work in a ritualized manner without the hope of ever achieving a higher social status (Merton 1938). A homeless person who has a job may keep their job because

Sociological Imagination

The Journal of the Wisconsin Sociological Association

that is what they think they should do, while understanding that this job will never be sufficient to afford housing.

The third coping strategy is rebellion. When people rebel, they not only reject the goal of conventional success, but they also reject the means to achieve the goal. They have either failed to internalize the values of the Dream or have given up on it. Rebels have no desire to try to achieve something they do not believe in. They will try to replace the original goal with something new and come up with a unique way to achieve the new goal. An example of a rebel would be a religious prophet or cult leader.

Another coping strategy is innovation. Innovators believe in the Dream but do not work within the traditional means of achieving it. Understanding that the income they will receive working in a manual labor or service sector job will not allow them to meet their goals, individuals might seek nonconforming or illegal means to achieve their goals (Merton 1938). For instance, someone living in a low-income neighborhood, with few employment options, might choose to earn money through selling illegal drugs or gambling. Innovators are not always poor. A middle-class person, who is working in an office but perceiving their coworkers or superiors as being more successful and well paid, may decide to embezzle money from their employer. This extra income will allow them to “succeed” relative to others in their peer group, line of work, or neighborhood.

Merton refers to those who just give up and drop out of society without trying to replace conventional goals with anything else as retreatists. They do not seek the American Dream, nor do they work toward what they feel is an irrational goal. The result, according to Merton, is a state of anomie; individuals do not seek to connect themselves to mainstream society or work within the existing social structures to get ahead.

Merton’s theory is a useful framework for understanding the responses of individuals experiencing homelessness because, for them, the American Dream could seem out of reach. This theory would suggest that they have an elevated likelihood of rebellion or retreatism, given that those marginalized by the social system may be likely to see it as unjust or unfair. We think it less likely that homeless individuals would fall into the innovation category, because that would require them to continue to accept the ideology of the Dream, which is unlikely if they see the social system as unjust.

In this paper we use Merton’s theory to understand the responses of individuals who are experiencing homelessness. We explore the following questions: 1) Do individuals who are experiencing homelessness maintain a belief in the American Dream? 2) Do they continue to plug away at achieving the American Dream through legitimate means or give up on the American Dream in one of the ways described by Merton? Having a home is a key component of “succeeding” in the American Dream ideology. Because none of our survey participants have a home and many are likely to see the system as unjust, we hypothesize that many of the participants will have given up on the Dream. We further hypothesize that most individuals will fall into the retreatist or rebellion categories.

DATA AND METHODS

This paper is derived from data collected during a four-year ethnographic study of individuals experiencing homelessness and service providers working with this set of

Sociological Imagination

The Journal of the Wisconsin Sociological Association

individuals The following section describes how our research process and inquiries developed over this period and how we came to focus on understanding homeless individuals' beliefs in the American Dream. Prior to beginning our study, we reviewed relevant literature published over the past decade. We found very few studies that asked homeless individuals to describe their daily needs and ability to meet these needs. Most of the academic and professional literature focuses on the physical and mental health and drug use behavior of individuals experiencing homelessness and service providers' perceptions of processes and outcomes of programs to reduce homelessness.

Because of the dearth of research on the needs of the homeless from their perspective, we began this work using grounded theory. Grounded theory is a methodology used in qualitative research in which the collection and analysis of data inform the research questions (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The goal was to understand the needs of the homeless, but we were not sure what we would find. We used inductive rather than deductive methods, modeling our research on the methods articulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967). These authors argue that social science theory should be circular. Sociological research should be used to inform social theory and, in turn, this theory would explain observed social interaction. We began with an initial survey and adjusted the survey over time, based on the answers from previous surveys.

We started by administering a needs assessment survey to individuals experiencing homelessness, which includes questions on demographics such as age, race, and gender. The surveys also include questions pertaining to the respondent's mental and physical health, criminal record, and employment history and what the respondent thought would be helpful in meeting their goals for the future. As we coded the interviews, we identified themes articulated by the respondents. After themes were identified, we created new questions to further explore those topics.

In addition to collecting survey data, we volunteered over 1,000 hours at various organizations serving individuals experiencing homelessness over the course of the four-year study. This allowed us to interact informally with homeless individuals and the people working in the shelters, food pantries, soup kitchens, and social service agencies serving them. Following each volunteer experience, we recorded our observations. This resulted in over 300 pages of field notes. We also formally interviewed 14 individuals working for social service agencies and two local politicians regarding what they believed to be the major challenges and gaps in services for people experiencing homelessness.

The results in this paper are derived primarily from the needs assessment segment of our study. Participants taking the survey had to meet two criteria: being over age 18 and homeless. We operationalized being "homeless" as lacking a permanent, habitable place to stay. For example, two people we interviewed were staying in sheds on someone else's property, and other participants were staying in motels that billed by the night or the week or in a homeless shelter. Although the individuals staying in motels or homeless shelters technically had a roof over their heads, they were considered homeless for the purposes of this study because they cycled between these motels and the street depending on how much money they had at a given time. Participants were not paid, but we did give them small gift bags: backpacks with socks, t-shirts, water bottles, and other small tokens.

Sociological Imagination

The Journal of the Wisconsin Sociological Association

The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Coastal Carolina University. Between September 2016 and November 2019, we, along with our students, interviewed sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals using convenience sampling. The sheltered homeless participants were interviewed in the local men's and women's shelters, while the unsheltered homeless participants were interviewed in area soup kitchens and food pantries. Most of the interviews took between 15 and 30 minutes, but some interviews took as long as an hour. Some questions were skipped if there was not enough time to complete the entire survey or if a participant grew tired of answering questions. In addition, six participants were interviewed on more than one occasion, and, in these cases, their surveys were combined to create a single case.

Before conducting each survey, we asked respondents where they slept the night before and where they had slept in the prior month. If they were without permanent housing, we asked them if they would agree to be interviewed. We approached 210 individuals, and 194 agreed to participate in our study. The results included in this study are based on the responses from 180 individuals who responded to the open-ended questions in the survey.

We found that respondents were, for the most part, eager to speak with us. This was particularly true in the men's shelter after the first year. We, along with our students, had been an almost daily presence in the shelter and had provided funding for a bike share program, based on a need we found in the initial round of surveys. This presence provided residents with a sense of familiarity and trust in us. Over time the men's shelter residents became increasingly willing to engage in conversation. At the start of this project, we wanted to record the interviews, but most of the respondents were not comfortable with being recorded, so we relied on our handwritten notes taken during the interview and afterwards. To increase the reliability of taking written notes rather than using recordings, we sought to have two notetakers at each interview. The notes were then compared for consistency. The responses in this paper reflect common themes from the interviews. All respondents are given pseudonyms, and comments are altered in cases where there is a possibility that the participants' statements could identify them.

One of the common themes that stood out in the initial round of interviews is that many of the homeless respondents and the service providers believed that, if an individual worked hard enough, they could transition out of homelessness and into a middle-class lifestyle of steady employment, stable housing, and well-functioning social relationships. Using this information, we asked questions in the second round of interviews specifically about beliefs in the "American Dream" and what it means to the respondents.

Upon completing 194 surveys, we independently recoded all of the interviews looking for themes associated with the idea of the American Dream. The responses tended to fall neatly into four of the five categories of response to social strain identified by Robert Merton's theory. (We will further describe how we operationalized the classification of participants into Merton's categories in the results section.) Once we agreed on the category for each individual, we further analyzed the responses of the 180 individuals who answered questions about their belief in the American Dream and/or their goals for the future.

The following section outlines the demographic characteristics of participants, their beliefs in the American Dream, and their responses to the strain of not currently being included in the Dream, within the context of the response categories in Merton's strain

Sociological Imagination

The Journal of the Wisconsin Sociological Association

theory. It also summarizes the extent to which the participants perceive the obstacles they face in achieving the Dream.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics regarding Survey Respondents ($n = 180$)

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender		
<i>Male</i>	147	81.7
<i>Female</i>	33	18.3
Place Interviewed		
<i>Men's Shelter</i>	133	73.9
<i>Women's shelter</i>	20	11.1
<i>Street/soup kitchen</i>	27	15.0
Race/Ethnicity		
<i>Black</i>	40	22.2
<i>Non-Hispanic White</i>	126	70.0
<i>Other</i>	14	7.8
Educational Attainment		
<i>< High School Diploma</i>	33	18.3
<i>High School Diploma</i>	70	38.9
<i>Some College/Trade School</i>	62	34.4
<i>Bachelor's Degree</i>	9	5.0
<i>Missing</i>	6	3.3
Age in Years		
<i>19-24</i>	13	7.2
<i>25-34</i>	42	23.3
<i>35-44</i>	36	20.0
<i>45-54</i>	39	21.7
<i>55-64</i>	46	25.6
<i>65-73</i>	4	2.2

Table Note. For age, minimum = 19, maximum = 73, and mean = 43.9 years.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics

The table above displays the demographic characteristics of the homeless individuals we interviewed. Eighty-five percent of the participants were staying in a shelter, while 15% were staying on the street or in a garage or shed on someone else's property. Due to the number of people who stayed at the men's shelter (90) compared to the women's shelter (20) and the greater prevalence of homeless males in the Myrtle Beach area, most of our respondents (81.7%) were male. About 57% of respondents had a high school education or less and 5.0%

Sociological Imagination

The Journal of the Wisconsin Sociological Association

reported that they had graduated from college. The youngest person interviewed had just turned 19 and the oldest was 73. Most survey respondents were Black (22.2%) or non-Hispanic White (70.0%).

According to the 2018 annual Point in Time count of the homeless, the percentage of homeless individuals in South Carolina who were Black or Hispanic was higher than the percentage we surveyed (SC Interagency Council on Homelessness 2018). Thus, members of disadvantaged minority groups are underrepresented in our sample and non-Hispanic Whites are overrepresented relative to the SC homeless population as a whole, though not necessarily relative to the Myrtle Beach homeless population (SC Interagency Council on Homelessness 2018). Those we interviewed at the shelters were representative of the sheltered population, however, as at one point we reached saturation, having interviewed everyone who was staying in the men's and women's shelters at the time.

Summary of Findings about Respondents' Ideologies

The American Dream is persistently and deeply imbedded in American culture. The notion that individuals are solely responsible for their plight is the most common theme we heard articulated while working with and interviewing individuals experiencing homelessness and service providers. The root causes of the extraordinarily large number of people without stable housing in Myrtle Beach are structural. Issues such as a lack of affordable housing, adequate health care, employment paying a living wage, and sufficient education shoulder much of the blame for homelessness in this area. But this typically was not emphasized or acknowledged by our participants.

While coding and analyzing data from the interviews, we hypothesized that most of the participants would fall into either the retreatist or rebellion category. It seemed logical that people who had lost everything, including the ability to house themselves, would either give up or formulate alternate goals. Our assumptions were incorrect, as detailed in the following.

Detailed Findings on How Respondents' Beliefs Relate to Merton's Categories

Conformity. One hundred of the homeless respondents, or over half, expressed high hopes for the future and were categorized as conformists. Respondents were put in the conformist category if they were optimistic that in five years, they would be much better off—in *conventional terms*—than they were at the time of the interview. At the time of the interview, they were working towards meeting their objectives *using conventional means*, and they believed that their goals were achievable. These respondents mentioned goals for the future such as school, marriage, a house, a job, or plans to own their own business. Some of them directly articulated a belief in the American Dream. A key part of the Dream for over half of the conformists is the idea of either starting a new family or being reunited with their family members. When asked about services needed in the area, the conformists often mentioned services that would help them secure jobs, resolve legal issues, or continue their education. For many respondents, like Tony, achieving the American Dream meant being “normal.” Tony stated, “In five years, I want to be in a house living a normal life. I want to be normal.”

When we interviewed Joshua, a 28-year-old White male, he had been staying in the men's shelter for four days. He told us that before he arrived at the shelter, he was working

Sociological Imagination

The Journal of the Wisconsin Sociological Association

part time, making \$18.00 per hour, and staying in a pay-by-the-week motel. He was unable to work full time because of a recent car accident. One night Joshua fell asleep in his car outside of his hotel room. The police arrested him and towed his car. When he was released from jail, he could not get back into his motel room because the key to the room was in his wallet and the wallet was in his car. He told us, “The police made me homeless. I did not show up for work because of this arrest. I lost my job.” At the time of his interview, he was not looking for housing because he was still saving to get his car out of impoundment.

To most people who have never been homeless, living in a pay-by-the-week motel would not seem very secure or stable. For Joshua, however, this was the most stable home he had known since he was a child. When asked where he would be in five years, Joshua replied, “Working for a major employer and having my own business.” Joshua—who had a high school diploma, a criminal record, and injuries from a car accident and was currently unemployed—saw a bright future. Although he believed that he was going to work for a major employer and have his own business concurrently, either of these would be a difficult goal for someone in his position to achieve within five years. Joshua laid the blame for his current situation not on a system that legitimates inequality and limits opportunities for upward mobility, but on the police officer who arrested him. He believed that once he got through this tough spot, everything would work out in the end.

Marco (22) had been diagnosed with multiple personality disorder. When he was interviewed at the men’s shelter, he had only been staying there for a few days. He had just finished spending time in a rehabilitation center, recovering from an addiction to narcotics. He said that he worked full time but was paid under the table, because most legitimate employers would not hire him due to his criminal record. When asked where he was going to be in five years, he responded, “I am going to get a master’s degree in accounting.” A criminal record, however, might render him ineligible for federal financial aid, and most universities in South Carolina will not accept students with a serious record. Marco, however, either did not know of these obstacles or thought that they did not apply to him or that he could overcome them.

We interviewed Sarah, a 32-year-old woman who had been homeless for eight years, at the women’s shelter. She became homeless after she and her children ran away from an abusive husband. Social services put the children in foster care six years ago because Sarah could not provide housing for them. Sarah used the hospital as her primary means of health care and said that the hospital had ruined her credit because she could not pay her bills. She did not have a driver’s license, making transportation difficult. Sarah wanted a job in retail but had a criminal record for shoplifting, which made her ineligible for most retail work. When she was asked whether she believed in the American Dream, she responded, “Yes. If you really want something, no matter how big or small, nothing is impossible. Even sitting here (in the shelter) I am farther in life than I ever have been before.” When asked where she will be in five years, she sighed, “Not in Myrtle Beach. I will have a stable job somewhere and be able to drive a car. I will have a house but will probably have to rent it.” Sarah’s responses show the resilience of the American Dream ideology. She expressed a “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” mentality. Although her credit was poor and her children were in foster care, she took solace in having a roof over her head and no longer living with abuse.

Sociological Imagination

The Journal of the Wisconsin Sociological Association

Dean (42) was staying in the men's shelter. He was pretty upbeat when we spoke to him but complained of a plate in his heel and chronic back pain. He could not go to the doctor because he did not have insurance and was unemployed. Dean stated that he was having some issues with his mental health. When we asked him what he needed, he said, "Rehab that deals with mental health. You can stop taking drugs, but the sadness always comes back." Despite his problems and lack of insurance to take care of his mental and physical health needs, when Dean was asked where he would be in five years, he stated, "Married to the most beautiful girl in the world, have a trailer on [the] intercostal waterway, a big ass dog, cat, and a baby." When he was asked what would help him meet his goals, he replied, "Health care. Hopefully I can get it in rehab." Regardless of the problems Dean was currently experiencing, he believed that eventually, if he worked hard enough, his dreams could become a reality.

Michael (34) had been homeless for two months when he was interviewed at the men's shelter. He lost his housing when he could not pay his rent. He worked full time in construction. When asked what services were needed in the area, he replied that there needed to be classes to teach about *The Secret* (Byrne 2006), to help motivate people. He reported that he set five goals to accomplish every morning and accomplished them by the end of the day. In five years, he planned to be living in Atlanta, in a house, running his own business, and offering positivity and mental health classes at a homeless shelter.

Conformity was the only approach reinforced by social service providers working with the homeless community. The main program at the shelter where we conducted most of the interviews was titled, "Back to Work, Back to Life." This program is designed to help clients confront and overcome individual-level issues that were causing their homelessness (e.g., addiction, divorce, separation from family, mental or physical illness). Clients are offered services to address these issues through counseling, training, workshops, and personal growth opportunities (New Directions 2020).

Although shelter staff members worked very hard to help their clients, there was little acknowledgement that almost half of the residents were not mentally or physically well enough to work, or that over half of the employed residents held part-time, minimum- or low-wage jobs that did not pay enough to enable them to afford housing and other necessities (e.g., food and transportation). In our four years at the shelter, we heard very few of the service providers discussing the structural barriers identified by clients (e.g., the criminalization of homelessness; the scarcity of low-income housing and living-wage employment opportunities) and saw little effort being made to address these barriers. According to one of the shelter's board members, the shelter was run based on the notion of "toxic charity," which claims that people will not push themselves to go further in their lives if they are given a handout. The board member was so impressed by this philosophy that she brought in Robert Lupton, the author of the book *Toxic Charity: How the Church Hurts Those They Help (and How to Reverse It)* (2011), to speak to the shelter's caseworkers. The caseworkers may have pushed clients to get a job due to a sincere belief that work is the key to success. It may also be true that, because they have so much work to do and so little time to do it, pushing clients to universally become employed is the easiest way to get their jobs done. For caseworkers and clients, becoming employed is a concrete way to show "success."

Sociological Imagination

The Journal of the Wisconsin Sociological Association

Conformists who are unable to achieve the American Dream will often blame themselves. An example of this self-blame comes John (68), who replied as follows when asked how he ended up being homeless:

I worked as a school counselor for 30 years. I guess I could have tried for better jobs, or gone to more school, but I liked my job. The problem is that I retired. I get social security, so I have an income. The problem is, if I use my social security check for rent, there is not enough left for food and other things I need, so I ended up here.

However, it was not retirement alone that led to a loss of housing. When he was 63, John was asked by his ailing parents to move to Myrtle Beach to help them. John decided to take early retirement and move. For a couple of years, he stayed with his parents, helping with meals, housework, and driving them to and from doctor's appointments. His parents were renting their residence, so when they died John was left with a social security check and nowhere to live.

The result of an ideology that promotes work as a solution to homelessness is that even individuals who see their hard work going nowhere are more likely to blame themselves than the structural constraints they face. John believed in the American Dream. When he was interviewed, he had only been staying in the shelter for a few weeks. His eyes had a haunted, disbelieving look. He was confused as to how it could be possible for him to end up in a homeless shelter after trying his entire life to do the "right" thing. Even though he knew he had done his part to keep the Dream alive, he blamed himself for his predicament. In his view, he must have either made a wrong decision or not worked hard enough.

John is just one example of the way that the "American Dream" works in the United States to keep people working and working hard. This ideology promotes the idea that all one must do to succeed is to try harder. If individuals are determined and apply themselves in school and their occupations, then everything will work out in the end. This ideology was the dominant theme in our interactions with shelter caseworkers and board members. Getting a job is stressed above everything else and is promoted as a solution to all of the problems of the homeless.

The respondents who believed most strongly in the American Dream appeared to disregard structural obstacles to achieving it, such as the lack of affordable housing affecting John. Some thought that they could achieve the Dream if their circumstances were different. Thus, it was not a matter of access to affordable housing, healthcare, or a living wage that was the problem, but it was where they were located or that they were working for the wrong companies. Seven of the men we interviewed aspired to own and operate their own businesses within five years. This is consistent with the finding of Lucio and colleagues (2016) that their low-income interview subjects valued stability and control in their work. Our finding that conformists believed their chances of success would increase if they were located elsewhere also aligns with the findings of these authors. Several conformists moved to Myrtle Beach in search of a better job, and others planned to leave Myrtle Beach to fulfill their goals.

Sociological Imagination

The Journal of the Wisconsin Sociological Association

Ritualists. The next most common group in this study consisted of ritualists. Fifty-seven individuals were identified as ritualists (31.7%). The ritualists were less likely to be employed than the conformists (28.1% vs. 38.8% employed in these groups, respectively) but were about as likely to be looking for work. They appeared to be more realistic than the conformists about what they might be able to achieve. When asked where they would be in five years, ritualists mentioned staying alive, living in an apartment (rather than a house), or spending time with family. They were also the more likely than members of other groups to discuss the structural obstacles in their paths, such as lack of access to affordable housing, health care, and transportation, as well as the consequences of arrest records.

Sam, a 50-year-old White male, is a typical example of a ritualist. Sam had been homeless for about six months and stated that he was not currently looking for housing. He had a job at a local restaurant. When he was asked why he was not looking for housing, he stated that he was trying to save money, because “a thousand dollars a month is not enough to live on.” In five years, Sam wanted to be a drug and alcohol counselor but said, “I’ll probably still be living in the shelter then.”

Some ritualists, such as Tommy, a 55-year-old Black male staying in the shelter, were doing what they thought they should, apparently without any real thoughts about the future. Tommy was working as a janitor in a church. He believed that a lack of adequate transportation was detrimental to the homeless community. He reported that he had diabetes and high blood pressure but did not go to the doctor because he lacked health insurance or enough money to pay a doctor. When we asked him what he needed, he said, “health insurance and a better job.” He had no idea where he would be in five years.

Retreatism. Only 19 (10.6%) of the respondents described giving up on the American Dream. To fit in this category, individuals also needed to indicate that they did not believe in the traditional means of success or plan to follow traditional ways of living (e.g., working in a legitimate occupation, living independently, etc.). Most retreatists in our study were dependent on drugs, and almost 60% of them were living on the street. In comparison, about 95% and 84%, respectively, of conformists and ritualists were living in a shelter. Only two of the 19 retreatists (10.5%) were employed. Retreatists’ plans typically did not extend past being alive or leaving the shelter. Eight of the 19 who were categorized as retreatist expected to die within the next five years.

Although retreatists comprised a small percentage of our participants, city officials appeared to believe that they are typical of the homeless population in general. The stereotype of the homeless drop out was perpetuated by one city official who told us, “I believe in the toxic charity model. If you keep giving charity to these people, they will never learn to be independent.” Several officials and service providers made statements along the lines of, “Many of ‘them’ choose to be homeless. They don’t want to work.” Stereotypes, however, are often contrary to reality.

Diego, a 42-year-old non-Hispanic White male, was interviewed outside of a soup kitchen. He had been unsheltered for much of the past decade. He did not work and attributed his unemployment to his lack of a driver’s license and his criminal record. On a scale of one to ten, Diego assessed his health as a five but then said that he does not go to the doctor because he does not get sick. Recently he had been taken by ambulance to the hospital after

Sociological Imagination

The Journal of the Wisconsin Sociological Association

he overdosed on drugs. Diego was resigned to his plight. "I'm honestly too old to try and get my act together, so honestly, in five years I will be right where I am, sadly."

Carlos, a 73-year-old Hispanic man interviewed at the men's shelter, had less than a high school education. He never had a problem with the law and did not have a criminal record. When he was interviewed, he had been homeless for seven months, and this was not his first experience with homelessness. To emphasize that being homeless did not make him a "bad" person, he asserted that he never smoked cigarettes and did not take any illegal drugs. Carlos was not looking for housing because he felt that the shelter offered him everything he needed. He appeared content with his situation. He did not work, but he also was not sad or upset about his life. When we asked him where he would be in five years, Carlos said that he would be happy if he was still alive.

Carlos had given up on the Dream and also on the means to achieve the Dream, but this did not seem to bother him. This might reflect the fact that he was not educated in a US state, but rather in a US territory. It is possible that his socialization was different than what it would have been had he grown up in South Carolina. Additionally, at age 73, he also may have been thinking realistically. It is possible that the Dream had eluded him for so long that he was now content to accept whatever life offered him: in this case, a roof over his head.

By the time we interviewed Jeremy (29) in a homeless encampment, he had given up on ever being able to conform to traditional standards of living. For the last several years, he had been moving from one wooded area to another each night to sleep. He expressed that most of his mental and physical sustenance came from heroin and other drugs he was using, which he said kept him from feeling hungry or sad. Jeremy had no familial ties; he had never been married and had no children. He could not use any social services because there was a drug-related warrant out for his arrest. Jeremy seemed despondent about the future. When asked about working, he said, "I don't want to work. F*** them...the heroin got ahold of me. I can't beat it, so why fight it?" His reply, when asked about where he would be in the future, summed up his attitude: "Soon I'll be dead or in jail. Hopefully dead because my life is shit. I did not want to be in this mess I'm in." Jeremy was depressed about his life circumstances but did not see himself changing any time soon.

Rebellion. Both rebels and retreatists indicated that they reject both traditional goals of success, as defined by mainstream culture, and the means to achieve these goals. To be categorized as a rebel, however, participants were required to indicate that they planned to achieve a type of success defined in an untraditional manner. The four individuals in the rebel group were all male. They were substantially younger than respondents in the other categories, with an average age of 34.5, versus 42.8, 45.4, and 47.9, respectively, for conformists, ritualists, and retreatists. Two of the rebels were staying at the men's shelter and the other two were unsheltered and interviewed at a soup kitchen. Three of the four had criminal records. None were employed.

Three of the four men who were classified as rebels did not have a phone or any sort of identification. None of the three seemed to be in any hurry to find replacements for their social security card, driver's license, or other identity document. Jack, who was staying in the men's shelter, was adamant that he would never again have an identity document. He stated,

Sociological Imagination

The Journal of the Wisconsin Sociological Association

I am not looking for housing. I only do side jobs sometimes under the table. I am sovereign. I do better in the woods than in a house. I do not have a social security card. I am my own person. I'm trying to save a little money and go to Florida to chase hurricanes.

Jack seemed reasonably content to live in the shelter or on the street and take whatever services the city offered. When asked what services should be offered in the area to better help the homeless, he replied, "I would take tax money, buy ten acres, and let people work the land for a place to stay and money." Although he did say that he liked the woods, he also enjoyed staying in the shelter. When he was asked when he would leave, he replied, "I don't know. I like it here. I love the people here." Jack also did not go to the doctor, claiming, "I don't trust doctors. Sometimes I see a lady who gives me natural remedies." He went on to tell us that this lady had healed his neck at some point in the past.

Jack is typical of the individuals categorized as rebels in this analysis. None of the rebels had much interest in finding stable employment or housing. All four of the individuals in this group had given up on finding happiness through traditional means and were wary of many of the social institutions that most Americans trust. They did, however, have goals for the future, even if those goals were untraditional.

Christopher (32) was taking oxycodone that he bought illicitly for back spasms. When we spoke to him, he was living on the street and had been homeless for over a year. He was not working and did not seem too worried about this. His goal in life was to "live on a concert street in Puerto Rico." When we asked him what his biggest obstacle was, he thought about it for a minute and then said, "Getting a girl I need and one I can get." To Christopher, working was not as important as having fun and living life. He wanted to be successful and happy, but his version of success did not include a picket fence. His goals consisted of being out of pain, having a relationship, and living on a street with live music.

Innovators. We did not find any respondents who would fit into the innovator category. This makes sense, however, in the context of our interviews. Most of our interviews were conducted in institutionalized settings. It is unlikely that someone who was thinking of working their way out of homeless using unconventional (possibly criminal) means would be so bold as to admit this to someone they did not know.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Studies have shown that the United States has the greatest economic inequality of all advanced industrialized countries while simultaneously having the most meager social safety net (Hauhart 2015; Schaeffer 2020). Studies have also shown that most Americans believe in the American Dream (Bryerton 2016a, 2016b; Smith 2017). Most people, regardless of their social class, believe that if they have not already achieved the Dream, it is within their reach. Although we did not find any prior studies focusing on the beliefs of the homeless about the American Dream, studies showing low-income individuals trust in the Dream are consistent with our findings. As did respondents in the Pew Research (Smith 2017) and NPR (Neel 2020) polls, most of the homeless individuals we interviewed believed that the American Dream was reachable for them. In addition, as found in other studies focusing on the

Sociological Imagination

The Journal of the Wisconsin Sociological Association

American Dream (Hauhart 2015; Bryerton 2016a, 2016b), many of our respondents thought that moving elsewhere was key to realizing their goals.

Merton's theory is useful in understanding the attitudes and beliefs of the participants in our study. We expected to find that many of our participants would land in the retreatist or rebellion categories, because the American Dream seems so out of reach for them. Instead, we found the opposite. Many participants were working or looking for work, and their belief in the American Dream was strong. Some who were not focused on work seemed to have legitimate reasons for this. We were surprised at the number of participants with insurmountable physical and mental disabilities who were still focused on employment as the key to becoming housed.

The overarching narrative of most of our interviews is belief in the American Dream and belief that hard work is the key to success. Several people who worked with the homeless in various capacities made remarks such as, "They need to get a job," or "People need to try harder." Many of our homeless participants also appeared to believe—similarly to those studied by Byerton (2016a, 2016b)—in the redemptive qualities of work and blamed others, often in circumstances similar to their own, for not trying hard enough. For example, James, a shelter resident, observed: "The problem with most of these guys is that they are lazy. They just don't want to work." There was very little discussion from our respondents of the lack of available affordable housing or the insufficiency of income from low-wage jobs to cover living expenses.

The fact that so many individuals believed in the American Dream despite being homeless should not have surprised us, given our nation's culture. Work was the only avenue to success and housing articulated by service providers, politicians, and most survey respondents. However, in a social environment that makes obtaining and maintaining work difficult, it is remarkable that some of our homeless participants were able to hold full time jobs at all. Most of the homeless respondents either had difficulty finding employment because they were not employable (due to physical or mental disabilities, criminal records, etc.) or were trapped in a secondary market of day labor and seasonal, service sector jobs. Over half of the homeless respondents discussed having problems with their mental or physical health, and over two-thirds reported issues revolving around the lack of adequate transportation. For those respondents who were working at the time of their interviews or had income from other sources such as social security or disability, access to affordable housing options was practically nonexistent. Despite these structural obstacles, many respondents, as well as service providers and public servants, promoted the idea that responsibility for achieving the success of the "American Dream" falls solely on the individual. If one works hard and perseveres, they will be successful. The prevailing belief is that if a person tows the line and follows the rules, they can succeed in whatever they work towards, regardless of their current circumstances.

One limitation of this study is that many of the interviews were conducted in a homeless shelter that was not tolerant of issues such as addiction. In order to both conform to the shelter's norms and its zero tolerance policy toward drug and alcohol use, the responses may have focused on the goals that the shelter advocated, such as employment. Another limitation may have been our inability to match respondents to interviewers with similar characteristics. It might have been helpful to match participants to interviewers of the same race,

Sociological Imagination

The Journal of the Wisconsin Sociological Association

approximate age, and gender, so that the respondents would feel more connected to or comfortable with those interviewing them. Another limitation is that this study's results may not be widely generalizable. Myrtle Beach's homeless population, from which our interviewees were drawn, may not represent homeless populations in broader areas, such as South Carolina or the nation as a whole. Furthermore, most of the homeless population in the Myrtle Beach area is not sheltered, but we did not have a secure location in which to talk to the unsheltered population. Thus, most of our respondents were drawn from the subset of the homeless population that was more likely to be actively seeking help in becoming housed.

Finally, our study is limited by its reliance on self reports of interviewees. As with all self-reported data, it is possible that participants' actual attitudes or behaviors are not reflected accurately in their answers. They may be telling the interviewer what they think the interviewer wants to hear, rather than the truth. Based on the ideology articulated by service providers, it is likely that many homeless individuals think that people higher on the social hierarchy (such as the interviewers) want to hear them express a belief in self-reliance and the American Dream in general.

We believe that the resilience and determination expressed by study participants should be acknowledged by policymakers. If policymakers and the public understood the severe limitations of many of our participants, combined with their eagerness to work their way out of homelessness, negative stereotypes might be reduced.

We found that many service providers believed in the toxic charity model, which promotes the idea that if homeless individuals would just "get a job," their problems would be solved. As one social service provider argued, "Maybe if they sleep on the floor, they will be motivated to get a job." This model creates real obstacles to finding effective solutions to homelessness and may increase stereotypes and further stigmatize the homeless.

When policymakers hold stereotyped, stigmatizing beliefs and attitudes about homelessness and the homeless population, they are likely to focus on individualistic causes of homelessness and offer inadequate solutions after homelessness occurs. If policymakers want to create viable, cost-effective solutions, they will examine what they can do to eliminate structural, systemic barriers to obtaining housing. Public policy should focus on achieving universal housing, improving elementary and secondary education, and enhancing access to affordable mental and physical health care and employment paying a living wage.

The US emphasis on personal responsibility and hard work as key components of the American Dream translates into widespread ignorance of structural advantages or disadvantages in place from the time a child is born. It would be useful for future studies to further explore the extent to which homeless individuals understand how social structures and the American Dream ideology have affected their actions, decisions, beliefs, and goals for the future. The American Dream as an ideology is alive and well in the Myrtle Beach homeless community; the accessibility of the Dream is another story.

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