

Katherine S. Newman, Catherine Ellis (1999) “‘There’s No Shame in My Game’: Status and Stigma among Harlem’s Working Poor”

Main Point: Joining the workplace, and obtaining an identity that one obtains by joining it, is perhaps the greatest step that an individual can make towards becoming part of the American mainstream and culture. However, for minorities from inner city areas, various obstacles stand to keep them on the negative side of the all-important unemployed/employed divide. Sometimes, low-paying, low dignity “McJobs” are their only way of joining the ranks of the working class. Newman and Ellis take their findings from a two-year study of fast food workers in Harlem, and try not only to find what stigma drives individuals from these jobs, but also what kind of resolve and motivation it takes to maintain them.

Central Issues and Concepts:

- A stigma, or a social mark of disgrace that prevents a person entering mainstream society, not only exists for those without legal jobs, but for those with low end “McJobs” as well. Employees working in these situations face ridicule from their peers because of the jobs’ low wages, high turnover, and enforced deference.
- McJobs are isolating in nature because they go against the idea of autonomy which is so prominent in American pop culture. Employees are often made targets by customers in tough neighborhoods because they are the only ones that people in low stratification situations feel that have some power over. However, even though society insists that no self-respecting person would simply just take the abuse, employees have no choice but to simply shrug off the insults hurled at them.
- While “McJob” workers most likely wouldn’t say that they have highly valued jobs by societies standards, they take pride in “doing the right thing.” They take pride in the fact that they have jobs and their critics and surrounding figures do not. This motivation is reinforced by managers who have come from the same situations as the staff and offer their own experience and community.
- Within the community of hard-working, low-income earners is a sentiment that no one deserves a free ride, similar to that of an American, conservative Republican. This stems from the idea that if they can work, and they can support themselves without “aid,” why can’t others?

Two Key Quotes:

“They take these jobs because in so many inner-city communities, there is nothing better in the offing. In general they have already tried to get better jobs and have failed, landing at the door of Burger Barn as a last resort.” (263)

“Those who choose to earn a living in the legitimate job market receive few material rewards for their effort, but they can claim moral legitimacy from the traditional American work ethic. They can’t flash large rolls of cash before the eyes of their neighbors, but they can pride themselves on ‘doing the right thing,’ avoiding the dangers of the drug trade and the sloth of welfare recipients.” (269)

Two Questions:

- This article concludes by pointing out that although family values encourage individuals to get jobs, sometimes family takes a backseat to the requirements a job. Since there are many in inner-city communities who have children to care for and not enough supervision for them, when does accepting “aid” become “the right thing to do?”
- Is there anything that the government could do to mirror the effects of the WPA (Works Progress Administration formed as part of the New Deal program) and perhaps bring pride, happiness, and healthiness to low income jobs, today?